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Between us, neighbours... Stranger, foreigner – students' attitude towards Ukrainian citizens

KEYWORDS

our, stranger, foreigner, stereotype, social distance

ABSTRACT

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The article presents a part of research on the students' attitude towards foreigners, in particular Ukrainian citizens. In Poland it is currently the largest group of foreigners, as well as the largest group of foreign students studying at Polish universities. The text contains references to the sociological concept of "foreign", especially to G. Simmel's, and also to the category of "stereotype", which is usually associated with the perception of different nationalities. The presented fragment of research compares the attitude of students to the stereotype of a Ukrainian, which has been acknowledged and consolidated in Poland over the years of common history. Respondents also rated functioning of Ukrainian acquaintances at the university and in the dorm. Respondents in their opinion claim that the group of Ukrainians is large, but it is almost invisible at the university. This is due to the low access of foreigners to student life and isolation among "their own". The attitude of Polish youth is certainly significant for this type of behavior. Polish students, despite declarations, do not make enough effort to get to know and maintain closer contacts with colleagues from Ukraine.

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Introduction

This article reflects upon the “stranger” category and presents a fragment of the research on the attitude amongst the young generation of students to Ukrainians, study colleagues but also Ukrainian citizens, who are increasingly coming to Bydgoszcz. Bydgoszcz is the 9th largest city in Poland. Bydgoszcz, in which Poles, Germans and Jews lived side by side, after the war turned into a relatively homogeneous town in terms of nationality with a large number of immigrants from other regions of the country. In the 90s, a large group of Vietnamese moved to the city, and after joining the European Union and the increase in educational migration, more foreigners of varying national origin appeared. For several years, especially after the war in Donbas, there has been an increasing inflow of Ukrainian citizens, who have become the largest group of foreigners in Bydgoszcz. Poland has never been a country to which people of other nationalities migrated en masse, it is a country still nationally uniform, and this fact, since the times of the Polish People’s Republic, has been presented by the ruling camps as its value. It polarizes society towards “our” and “stranger”, while in the modern world there is no way for both the individual and the whole state to function without an attitude of openness towards “alien” foreigners.

“Stranger”, “foreigner” as social categories

The beginnings of thinking about the social category of “alien”, date back to the beginning of the 20th century and are associated with the German sociologist Georg Simmel. According to G. Simmel, a “stranger” is someone known, spatially close, but culturally different, remaining in the “guest” – “host” relationship, in which the latter means a specific community called the “our” (Bera, Korczyński, 2012: 35). If we name “our” only the group which we fully identify with, then every opposite one will be called “stranger”. Primarily however, “otherness”/“strangeness” is strictly related to the concept of intolerance, exclusion, racism, stigmatization, discrimination and xenophobia. Those terms can be considered as a group of concepts that have the same cultural and moral roots based on foreignness. Becoming a “stranger” arises when we are followers of a different god, customs, ideology (Pilch, 2013: 243–244). At the same time, as Z. Bauman pointed out, in today’s world there is no place to escape from the “other/stranger”, therefore it becomes a permanent/constant/regular element of everyday life (2016: 82–83). Perhaps that is why E. Levinas believed that “the

other” is a unique person, who should be included in our life and what is more we should even take responsibility for him (Kapuściński, 2006: 31). The terms “stranger and “other” that are often used interchangeably in everyday life, are considered synonyms, because everyday situations do not always require precise naming. Society creates its individual system of categories designated as normal and typical defining the characteristics belonging to “We”. Thereby all other disparities or actions outside the designated features are labeled as “others” and “strangers” creating the category “They” (Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2009: 84). This relationship between ours and strangers is often based on fear, apprehensions about the unknown or different. Ambivalence is apparent in the perception of “strangers”; we see them as another, unknown and at the same time similar to us – “close” (Tarczyński, 2014: 123). To draw the line between strangeness and otherness S. Grabias emphasizes positive and negative emotional feelings that accompany the assessment. The significance of otherness depends on the situation; some features say that something or someone is different from us at the level of objectively noticeable differences that we can see, understand or not, but are not accompanied by negative reactions. In a situation where the same differences in other conditions and assessment of another person ignite negative emotions and behaviors, then otherness is no longer a neutral category, it becomes a “strangeness” and another person becomes a “stranger” (Grabias, 2019: 4). The division into “our” and “strangers” is a permanent element of social life, independent of place and time. This division causes polarization of emotions; “our” is assigned positive feelings, “strangers”- negative, while ignoring their own negatives, as well as positives of “strangers”. This categorization also affects behavior towards these groups (Tarnowska et al., 2010: 120–121; also Pilch, 2013).

According to G. Simmel, a “foreigner”, no matter how charming and good, remains just a stranger (2006: 581), or according to another author, “he looks different, speaks an incomprehensible language, and even smells strange” (Polk, 2000: 9). G. Simmel believed that a foreigner remains a “stranger” as long as he is considered a “person without a place of his own.” It is a “foreign body”, which despite everything is an organic member of the group, living within it, but under special conditions and it constitute a compound of closeness and distance (2006: 583). “There is no way,” says A. Zajączkowski, about conscious self-determination in cultural terms and identifying ourselves with a certain system of values as long as we are “our own”. It is only the presence of a stranger that allows us to define ourselves and this occurs as a result of a critical observation of the stranger, including him in terms of our own cultural values, and thus evaluating him, i.e. creating his ethnic stereotype (1974: 284).

The importance of the stereotype in the approach to “strangers”

In the national awareness most of the feelings and judgments of “strangers” are built on stereotypes. According to Sztompka factors that form the attitude towards foreigners are stereotypes referring to the exaggerated features and alterity between groups but also identification of group’s general features in each member separately (2006: 300). Stereotypes are usually distinguished by negative, simplified features, which are most often disseminated by the media. They often refer to a visible, noticeable feature that define social identity, which is attributed to the entire social group (Wojciszke, 2002: 68; Czapka, 2009: 19). I. Pospiszyl emphasizes that the information passed by stereotypes is characterized by unverified, undifferentiated, poor content with a strong emotional undercurrent. On the basis of which groups are assigned general features regardless of the attributes of individuals. The main danger is that stereotypes, despite new information, may be characterized as permanent and immutable and when combined with each other they create the possibility of a new ideology (Pospiszyl, 2008: 51). According to M. Wenzel attitudes towards foreigners are conditioned by psychological traits, i.e. the degree of acceptance of racial and cultural diversity. On the other hand, opinions on the benefits or risks of staying foreigners in the country play an important role. Opinions are formed on the basis of personal experiences and stereotypical ideas about the “stranger” (2009: 1). People often attribute to the “strangers” living in the present features of people or ethnic groups from the past. This is on what national stereotypes are based, often as simplifications in whole or in part, they are contrary to the facts and do not take into account individual contacts with foreigners. What’s more they have emotional undercurrent and they evaluate positively or negatively given groups. J. Błuszkowski says that national stereotypes are (in simplified terms) permanent and rigid judgments against nations related to verbal stimuli activated by words/names (2003: 72). According to P. Sztompka, national stereotypes are transforming into negative superstitions (2006: 351). It is a biased labeling mechanism based on the description of other nationalities through words with a negative connotation. This type of approach causes their use in everyday life to the point when they become a substitute for a proper name. That results in adopting negative attitudes towards representatives of “labeled” groups. M. Budyta-Budzyńska gives examples of the stereotypical description of other nations known to the Polish society: Ukrainians are described as Banderites, “rezuny” (that is, murderers, killers); Germans are Nazis, fascists; Russians are Soviets, Bolsheviks (2010: 20). Scandinavians are cold, Englishmen are phlegmatic,

French are the best lovers. Blacks are lazy, Chinese are cunning and sly, Jews have talents for business (Sztompka, 2006: 300).

Foreigners can be different. We do not like loud behaving Germans and Arabs. We are surprised by the culinary tastes of the French. We leniently tolerate Italians who are cheerful as children. We observe the short, always polite Japanese with respect and distance. Vietnamese people trading on the market trigger compassion combined with contempt. Aggressive Russians, of whom we hear that they form groups that force protection money on traders and shoot using Kalashnikovs, create a climate of fear and hostility. Intrusive Romanians demanding donations, and stubborn Gypsies, who insist on foretelling future, cause anger and resentment

(Hamer, 1994: 103–105). More than 20 years have passed since this text was written. Are the conclusions of H. Hamer regarding the perception of foreigners by Poles still current?

Attitude of Poles to foreigners (selected CBOS reports)

Selected CBOS reports from 2006 to 2016 indicated that Poles' sympathy refers in a broad sense to the West, while animosity is expressed towards Eastern nations. In 2016, there is a noticeable tendency that suggests a positive attitude towards a nation with a higher standard of living, while the lower the standard of living generates a weaker positive attitude. Between 2006 and 2016 Poles' sympathy towards Italians and Czechs did not change. The Spanish joined the group of well-liked nations, what, according to M. Strzeszewski, was related to hiring Poles to work. In 2016, Slovaks and English joined the liked Italians and Czechs. The message from 2016 CBOS survey indicates that attitudes towards many foreign nations have worsened. The reason for this phenomenon are factors related to the immigration crisis and all kinds of terrorist attacks. Changes in attitudes have a negative impact on the perception of Poland's direct neighbors, especially Belarusians, Lithuanians, Germans and Ukrainians (Strzeszewski, 2006; Omyła-Rudzka, 2016). Since 2006 Poles have felt greatest animosity towards Arabic communities and since 2016 also toward Roma communities.

In studies on the attitude of Poles towards other nations a repetitive pattern can be noticed, which indicates positive feelings towards a nation that is considered richer, more developed and global and negative feelings towards poorer countries. "Generally, we have positive feelings for foreigners, who not only want nothing from us but are also wealthy and we can benefit from contact with them", wrote H. Hamer over 20 years ago. "On the other hand, negative feelings, we leave for poor people, who make life difficult, forcing us to think about some particular solutions for their

problems” (1994: 190), the author continues, and it seems that the attitude of Poles towards foreigners has not changed significantly. Stereotypes continue as a result of the “principle of least effort” (Walter, Cookie, 2000: 117), which comprise of insisting and placing faith in the first and simplest generalization as long as it is possible. The effort is limited to choosing the right stereotype for the given situation.

In 2018, CBOS research showed a deterioration of attitude towards neighbors, Poles are still very fond of the Czechs and Slovaks and a bit less of Lithuanians. They keep the longest distance from Russians. Over the past 25 years, there has been a phenomenon of unification of attitude towards other nations. Attitudes towards nations that were once very well-liked, for example Italians, French and Americans, got worse, while towards disliked, these are Germans, Ukrainians and Jews improved. But in 2018 there is a noticeable deterioration in attitudes towards Germans, French and Ukrainians. In 2019 dislike towards Ukrainians (41%) out-balances sympathy (31%) (CBOS, 2019: 4).

Factors that have influence on the attitude towards another nation are most of all shared historical events and current affairs related to politics and economy. Changes in attitude towards another nation are also conditioned by the possibility and frequency of meetings with foreigners, as well as, as mentioned before, the national stereotypes we use in the country. The image of citizens from neighboring countries is shaped by many years of historical experience concerning various spheres of everyday life (Goněc, 2016: 110).

Ukrainians in Bydgoszcz

Ukrainians have been the largest group of immigrants in Poland for many years now. Ukraine is a 29th most populous country in the world, as it has over 45 million inhabitants. In the years 2010–2012, migrants from Ukraine most often chose Poland, because of close connection with Poland, that is primarily history, similar culture and customs, most recently because of the political situation in Ukraine. The popularity of migratory movements is also affected by the proximity, which facilitates trips (primarily for work). In addition to economic migration, education is the most common reason for coming to Poland. In 2019, the number of long-term residence cards increased by 12% and exceeded 200,000 people. The data do not include persons residing temporarily in the country on the basis of a visa or visa-free regime. Usually these are seasonal workers, and their number may exceed 1 million (UDSC, 2019). It is also a nation which among foreigners buys the most real estate in Poland.

For several years students from Ukraine and Belarus have been the dominant group of foreigners at Polish universities. 39.2 thousands of Ukrainians received education in Poland in the 2018/19 academic year. This phenomenon is called “Ukrainization” of Polish universities (Rożnowski, 2014: 144). In particular for students from poorer countries an educational migration, as stated by S. Ruda, gives the opportunity to obtain education and competences, also allows achieving a higher social status and better living conditions than in their own country. Students can use the competencies and skills gained away from home to improve the situation of their homeland (Ruda, 2014: 23).

Poland and Ukraine share common history. Relations between nations are formed by political and economic contacts, but also by stereotypes that continue in social consciousness. In Ukraine people still have vivid memories of nobility slaughtering thousands of rebellious Orthodox and Greek Catholic. On the other hand, Poles remember Ukrainian retaliation (even though it was in the 17th and 18th centuries). What's more events before and during World War II, when relations between the two nations were very tense and hostile, are still recalled by citizens from time to time. These historical events, along with the social and psychological (individual) background, have an impact on present-day relations. The problem is that young generations, who have no direct experience of past events, base their opinions on myths and irrational prejudices. According to T. Pilch, younger generations have two approaches to the idea of Ukraine. The first is associated with literary descriptions of the beautiful landscape and simple people, the second comes directly from the image shaped by the media, that is Ukrainians fighting against Poles, bad Ukrainians (Pilch, 2006: 139).

The ubiquitous media have a huge meaning (what was already mentioned), as they often spread negative stereotypes of a foreigner, which contributes to building identity and a sense of unity towards others, foreigners. T. Pilch emphasizes that the stereotype “creates the bipolar consciousness of “our” and “stranger” by strengthening tribal bonds”. This mechanism often serves political manipulation, creating enemies and the excluded people or scapegoats, especially in crisis situations (2007: 140).

What is the attitude of Polish students towards students from Ukraine?¹

The subject of the presented research results was the UKW students' perception of foreigners from Ukraine. The research was carried out using a diagnostic

¹ Fragments of research conducted by K. Kościńska, in cooperation with the author of the article, were used for the purposes of the thesis prepared under the author's direction and observation of participating Master's students in pedagogy specializing in social pedagogy with the organization and revitalization of the local community of 2017/2018.

poll and participant observation. The research area was chosen deliberately, as more and more Ukrainian citizens study from year to year at small universities. This is especially noticeable during procedure for allocating places in the dormitory. People coming from abroad to study deprive Polish citizens of a place in the dormitory as they get it before Polish citizens. Many Poles cannot afford to rent a room, that is why it creates animosity towards foreigners. Among UKU students, two attitudes towards students from Ukraine were noted. Some students are against foreigners, the other group is in favor of foreigners coming to Poland to study.

While creating a tool, a research was taken into consideration, which concerned characteristics of a given nation, its advantages and disadvantages, values and external features describing primarily the Ukrainian nationality in Bydgoszcz. This research was run in the beginning of the 21st century by M. Popławski (2002). Poles described themselves as hospitable, resourceful, religious, hardworking, cheerful, quarrelsome and patriots. However, according to the same research, the Ukrainian is: aggressive, fierce, binge drinker, clever, not very cultural and dishonest (2002: 103–105). These features were verified by a diagnostic survey conducted among 150 students of the University of Bydgoszcz (75 women and 75 men). 84.68% of the research sample are people who regularly go abroad and have contacts abroad. Bydgoszcz students were asked about the characteristics of Ukrainians (referring to Popławski's research). In the first place with the highest number of indications was the statement that Ukrainians drink a lot of alcohol (58), Ukrainians are beautiful and well-groomed women (41), in third place was the belief that Ukrainians are stubborn (28). Among the answers it was also noted that the only purpose of the arrival of Ukrainian women to Poland was to find a husband (24), the diligence of Ukrainians (14) was emphasized.

Among the positive personality traits of the citizens of Ukraine, Bydgoszcz students pointed out kindness, hospitality, cheerfulness, diligence, religiosity, integrity, neatness, honesty, responsibility, entrepreneurship. Negative traits include alcohol abuse, lack of education, backwardness, lack of entrepreneurship, lack of responsibility, insincerity, dishonesty, laziness, lack of tolerance, inhospitality and dishonesty (given in order of place on the scale). Despite the ambivalent attitude of students towards Ukrainians, the positive image prevails. 57.26% of the research sample met Ukrainian citizens but does not maintain contact with them, while 27.42% have friends among Ukrainian citizens, 10.48% students of this group have no contact with Ukraine and its citizens. Amongst UKW students there are also people who think that there are too many Ukrainian citizens in Poland (25.81%,

a significant proportion of respondents). Students have nothing against the fact that Ukrainian citizens would be their classmates, work colleagues, neighbors, teachers, even a priest in a parish or a spouse and boss. The largest percentage of respondents is against the Ukrainian being a member of local authorities (against 45.97%, pro 29.03%).

The vast majority of the research sample (60.48%) believes that people from Ukraine have abilities to take up any job in Poland, while 22.58% of students claim that only some jobs. 8.87% are against employing Ukrainians and the same number has no opinion on this subject. 26.16% of students think that Ukrainian citizens should come to Poland only for tourist or educational purposes and 16.94% believe that Poland benefits from the citizens of Ukraine. As the reason for the arrival of Ukrainians to Poland, students stated: earnings (117 responses), education (87), escape from the political situation in the country (78), for matrimonial purposes and to obtain citizenship (33), and finally for tourist purposes (only 5). Only 12.9% of students are positive about financial assistance for students from Ukraine, while 52.42% are definitely against it. The same students notice discrimination against people from less developed countries (51.61%), while 29.03% do not note such behavior.

Respondents, asked about sources of information about Ukrainians, indicate on the media, historical experiences and stereotypes functioning in the family home. The least indications concerned their own experiences from meetings and contacts with Ukrainian citizens. More than half of respondents (52.42%) notice the mechanism that more frequent contacts with Ukrainians affect the milder treatment of foreigners. The same students declare that they base their own opinions about the citizens of Ukraine primarily on their own experience, only later on the opinions of family and friends, the media and works of culture. Students are convinced that there are stereotypes in Polish society that affect social behavior and attitudes towards Ukrainians.

Most students also believe that migration from Ukraine has an adverse effect on Poland and Poles. As it contributes to an increase in unemployment or in crime, religious problems, threats to national identity, terrorism, buying out Polish property, begging, diseases and is considered as a burden for the state budget. In the opinion of only about 12% of respondents, the stay of Ukrainians in Poland has no negative effects (12.9%) and it can benefit of "cultural enrichment" due to contacts with "strangers". At the same time there was a concern related to the important sociological phenomenon of the creation of enclaves of foreigners, clusters of people who do not know Poland, language and thus not identifying with the existing norms, the system of values and the law that is applicable not

only to Polish citizens. This phenomenon is important for social functioning both from the perspective of social work and social pedagogy. This scenario is the only negative consequence of admitting foreigners and Ukrainians to Poland given by students.

The positive aspects of Ukrainian citizens staying in Poland include the exchange of experiences, the existence of cheap labor, which on the one hand is a problem for unskilled Poles looking for a job, on the other hand profit for those, who have the opportunity to employ cheaper workers. The arrival of foreigners to the country is an opportunity to enrich culture, learn foreign languages, learn about a new cuisine, develop tourism, invest and create new jobs as well as develop trade. This relatively positive attitude of Bydgoszcz students towards students from Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens is the result of direct contacts. Mutual perception of nations depends, as stated in the research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in 2013, on conversations with foreigners, regardless of whether we visited their country or not (Fomina et al., 2013: 23–26). This conclusion was also confirmed by the research from Bydgoszcz. Students, like the majority of the population, do not have knowledge about the number of foreigners coming to Poland, which is why they are not aware of the scale of the phenomenon of increasing migration. In UKW students' eyes group of Ukrainians studying in is almost invisible, despite being very large. This is due to the low involvement of foreigners in student life and isolation among "their own". Undoubtedly the attitude of Polish students is important for this type of behavior, who, despite declarations, do not make the effort to meet and maintain closer contacts with students from Ukraine. We can also risk a conclusion referring to the theory that Polish society presents an attitude of openness only to certain foreigners. This attitude may also be related to the disagreement of Polish students on the privileges that foreigners have at the university (e.g. dormitory, scholarships, etc.). Students are not hostile to foreigners from Ukraine, they are rather indifferent or and keep distance towards them. Social distance, a term introduced by R.E. Park, means the degree of distance between "our" and "stranger", which include spatial and emotional relations going from close, friendly, intimate relations to antipathy, hatred and condemnation. For R.E. Bogardus social distance is the level of sympathy and intimacy or reluctance and avoidance of relationships with specific individuals or social groups (Bera, Korczyński, 2012: 50; Błuszkowski, 2003: 207; Tarczyński, 2014: 18). Social distance can be divided into two categories: cognitive and emotional. Emotional distance refers to the attitude towards "others" and the emotional experiences that is present during a meeting with them: sympathy, openness, empathy or kindness, referred to as "towards" attitudes. Opposing attitude is characterized

by negative emotions of dislike, hostility, dislike, and contempt. Opposing is the attitude “away” that is characterized by negative emotions of dislike, hostility, and contempt. On the other hand, cognitive distance refers to positive knowledge that is possessed in real terms and to the pursuit of knowledge acquisition. This often results in interest in a new culture and a desire to understand it (Bera, Korczyński, 2012: 50; Tarczyński, 2014: 18). Both types of distance can be distinguished in relation to foreigners.

The positive side of the growing group of foreigners in Poland is the fact that the opinion of others (primarily relatives and friends) and stereotypes are less and less important in perception of foreigners. Personal contacts and also individual experiences are becoming more crucial. M. Ząbek has rightly noticed that migrants and contacts with other people's culture are needed, because without them our own culture cannot develop. As the author assures we must base on this need for contact with “strangers” (2002: 19). Moreover, we should empathically remember the situation of foreigners who change their living environment, social and cultural environment, leave their family, relatives, friends (the most important support group) and come to strangers while becoming “strangers” themselves (Kawczyńska-Butrym, 2014: 139).

The important thing is attitude and also approach of the young generation to foreigners, as they are the ones who face the most long-term challenges of the modern world. In addition, young people have a natural need to establish relationships and explore the world, so adults should not suppress this need. Results of many years of research indicate that parents are the authority for young Poles. If parents dream of a good future for their children and want them to become citizens of the world, then it is necessary to emphasize openness, tolerance and the belief that the value is diversity and the ability to coexist and cooperate with “ours” with “strangers” during their children education.

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