

What Does Identity Mean for Young People in Poland?¹

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2017.48.2.22

Abstract

This article focuses on young people in Poland and their ways of constructing identity. The research is based on fieldwork conducted in 2013–2014 among (605) Polish secondary school students. The respondents were asked to answer the “Twenty Statements Test” and, later on, to write down their own associations related to the notion of identity. The obtained data comprises answers provided by the respondents, whose places of residence are characterised by a high number of people declaring nationality other than Polish (according to the Polish National Survey of 2011) and whose places of residence are homogenous in terms of national affiliations.

The collected empirical data was sufficient to indicate six milieus in which human identity is constructed: personality, gender, family, religion, language, and “space” (i.e., people’s identifications with a region, state, or nation). The first four milieus were very frequently placed in statements produced by the secondary school students. When confronted with the question “Who are you”, the secondary school students were no longer willing to say “I’m a Pole/German/Silesian”. Perhaps the 21st century marks a time when nations or states are no longer relevant spaces of domestication and people are more willing to refer to cities or regions in their quest for identification.

Keywords: *identity, young people, nationality*

¹ The article was based on research realised as part of the grant “The Construction of New Identities under Conditions of Globalization,” financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education/National Science Centre, agreement number: 4603/b/h03/2011/40.

1. Introduction

The question “Who are you” is a question about identity. “A traditional answer is: I am my father’s son. Today the answer is: I am myself, I define myself by what I do and what I choose” (Bokszański, 2008, 19). Such messages are also conveyed by pop culture, which affirms the possibility of choice. You can be who you want, but above all, be yourself (and choose the right drink) – so goes one of the loudest messages legitimising contemporary rules of consumption.

In the context of changes related to globalisation and modernisation, the question of identity takes on particular importance. We ask about the stability, continuity, construction and importance of identity for individual and group life projects.

Research concerning young people seems to be particularly interesting, as apart from the multi-aspect processes of social changes, they experience the tensions of adolescence. This is a difficult period of building identity (Erikson 1968). Identity created individually is to help adapt to changing micro-social conditions.

Identity is a key word that opens many areas of theoretical explorations. Since the 1960s, when the notion started to appear in literature thanks to Erik Erikson, the number of studies on the subject has been growing exponentially. I adopt a constructionist perspective to present how identity is constructed among young people.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in a specific sociological laboratory in Silesia, and more precisely the Polish part. Silesia is a region of Central Europe, on the Odra River, located mostly in Poland but also in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Germany. The history of the region is very complicated due to changing national affiliation.

Poland in the 21st century is homogenous. The vast majority of citizens (94%²) are of Polish nationality, and additionally the great majority declare Roman Catholic faith. At the same time, the largest group declaring non-Polish or Polish and non-Polish nationality are Silesians (816,000 declare Silesian national and ethical

² Data from Polish National Survey 2011, <http://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechno/nsp-2011/nsp-2011-wyniki/>.

affiliation, including as many as 362,000 people who regard it as their only one), who live mostly in the Silesian province and Opole province.

Silesia and its transformations may be treated as an excellent example of reflexive modernisation (Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994). The area of Silesia itself is very diversified. The administrative division comprises three provinces: Silesian (Upper Silesia), Opole and Lower Silesian (Lower Silesia) provinces.

Upper Silesia is treated here as an example of a quickly transforming region with distinct, historically shaped processes of regional identity, expressed by a strong sense of the identification with space, cultural traditions and personality traits of indigenous inhabitants of the region, enabling dynamisation of traditional identity processes which take the form of social movements underlining its ethnical and national separateness. Upper Silesia is described as a multi-cultural region, or a region of cultural borderland, as it has changed national affiliation. It is present in social awareness as a separate region, with specific culture, within which elements of different traditions are visible.

Lower Silesia, as a result of World War II, became a region of an identity which is lost, foregone, polymorphic, but also axiologically open and thus attractive, as it easily absorbs modernity without the burden of tradition and hypotheses of emotional commitments, with a modern capital, Wrocław – a city described as a dynamically developing metropolis investing in new technologies and managed in a modern style. Lower Silesia is still building and searching for its identity (Centrum Monitoringu Społecznego, 2011).

In the presented research, Silesia is not the object of study, but it constitutes a sociological laboratory, where the experiment of describing identity can be realised thanks to the region's cultural diversity.

The questions which I ask concern the way in which young people think about identity and how they define and construct it. I assume that the multi-cultural environment and discourse about identity conducted in the media will intensify reflexivity in this area.

2.1. Twenty statements test and association test

One of the definitions of identity states that it is an answer to the question “who are you?” Identity understood in this way is examined by means of the twenty statements test (TST), designed by Manford Kuhn and Thomas McPartland (1954). Frequently used in many different contexts (e.g., ethnic, multi-cultural or gender), the test was based on the assumption that the concept of self can be expressed by language and communicated, as it is of symbolic nature. Identity is the central element of self, which is socially defined. In this context it is also significant to

assume the hierarchical alignment of identity, which acts like specific filters and, by becoming visible in certain situations, answers the question “who am I?” (in a given social context) (Foote, 1951).

Another research strategy used in the present paper was the association test. This tool is connected with Social Representation Theory (Wagner, 1999). Respondents were asked to list associations for the word “identity”. This constitutes the starting point for reconstructing the definition of this notion.

The research was conducted in comprehensive secondary schools³ in four Silesian towns characterised by a large proportion of persons declaring non-Polish nationality (Zawadzkie, Rydułtowy, Gorzów Śląski and Strzelce Opolskie), and, for the sake of contrast, in towns which are homogenous in this respect (Bierutów, Grodków, Żmigrod, Łazy, Lubin). In total, 605 tests conducted in secondary schools were qualified for analysis. The respondents were asked to answer two questions. The first one was “Who are you? Please write down 20 answers to the question starting with the phrase ‘I am’”. The second question concerned associations with the word “identity”.

2.2. Young people

Young people, or youth, constitute an interesting sociological category, which stands out due to its biological feature (age) and which is characterised by temporariness. This temporariness causes methodological difficulties, as the notion itself is not fully clear. We could characterise it by means of aspirations. Children dream of becoming teenagers, then young adults, adults miss being young, and only youth wants to be adult at last. This is surely an interesting period in the biography of an individual. Psycho-social and biological development at that time causes significant changes in appearance. The body becomes an important element of self-definition: too tall–too short, too thin–too fat, too dark–too light. The socio-cultural definition of body influences self-perception and identity creation (Świątkiewicz-Mośny, 2010). Media discourse and popular culture make us strive for a perfect figure (body), which is socially created (Bauman 1993).

One of the most important aspects underlying the crisis of adolescence is bodily changes, which Erikson (1950) calls revolutionary. The task that a teenager faces appears to be to “reconstruct and reintegrate all values related to myself gathered

³ The research was conducted at secondary schools in the mentioned towns. All students were asked to fill in the tests (TST and association test), doing so during a lesson. The sample consisted of 368 females and 237 males altogether. The youngest were 15 and the oldest 20. The average age was 17.

during childhood” (Tillman 1996, 197). It is necessary to face fears, the risk of not meeting requirements and expectations. When describing the process of growing up, Erikson emphasises the peculiar focus on “self” and permanent comparisons with others, with one’s imagination of “myself” (Erikson, 1968). The crisis of adolescence is an individual process, but it takes place in a social environment. The social context is crucial for the development process itself and its course. The kind and intensity of rebellion typical of the period of adolescence depends on socio-cultural conditions. However, young people usually adapt to social conditions after going through the time of sedition (Tillman 1996). This intensive and deep rebellion during adolescence leads to the creation of a more mature identity (reflexive, flexible identity of myself), which is critical of the surrounding world.

The period of puberty is the time when identity related to social roles is built. Natural identity is replaced by identity related to social roles and leads to creation of the “me” identity.

According to Erikson’s concept (1968), secondary school students are in the period of so-called late adolescence, which is characterised by an intensive search for the answer to the question “who am I?”

3. Results

Analysis of the research results involved two stages. Initially, frequency lists were prepared (separate for each of the two tests), which present the frequency of particular words reduced to their basic forms.

The answers to the question “who are you?” most frequently⁴ concerned gender, followed by school (“I’m a student”) and family (e.g., “I’m a son/daughter”, “sister/brother”). More than 40% of the students answered: nice (“I’m nice”). The sixth place was taken by national characteristics (“I’m a Pole”), mentioned by 40% of the secondary school students.

The frequency list of associations with the word “identity” includes first of all personality and personal data, but also family or country. More than 50% of the respondents associate identity with personality; in 50% of cases the concept of ID was mentioned. First name and surname was an association of identity for more than 30% of the students.

The second stage of analysis involved building code categories which would allow us to order the obtained answers. For the TST, the following categories were

⁴ This means that more than 50% of the respondents answer “I’m a woman/man (girl/boy)”.

distinguished: positive features (e.g., “[I’m] nice, friendly”, etc.), negative features (e.g., “[I’m] lazy, boring”, etc.), biological features (related to the body, e.g., “[I’m] tall, fat, thin”), gender, family ties (social roles played in the family, e.g., “[I’m] a daughter, son, brother, sister, granddaughter, grandson”), other ties (e.g., “[I’m] a friend, colleague”), state of mind (mental condition, emotions, e.g., “[I’m] in love, happy”), school (e.g., “[I’m] a student, secondary school pupil, junior high school graduate”), religion (e.g., “[I’m] religious, a Christian, an atheist”), hobby (“[I’m] a dancer, a basketball player, a bookworm”), being rooted in a space (e.g., “[I’m] a Pole, European, Silesian, citizen”).

The frequency of the mentioned associations and frequency analysis of TST codes indicates two dimensions for interpretation. One of them will be related to features of an individual, to individual identity. The other one concerns participation in groups and larger social communities.

4. Individual identity

The research (Świątkiewicz-Mośny, Wagner, 2013) conducted in 2011 on a group of students from Poland and the Netherlands showed that the definition of identity is principally different from self-definition. Polish and Dutch students defined themselves by concentrating on individual identity, whereas when defining the notion, they placed it in a social, group or cultural context. The presented research on secondary school students shows that the strongest association with identity is personality, character, and personal identity document. Similarly, when answering the question “Who are you?”, they mentioned positive personality traits.

Personal identity is the type of identity that authors of sociology textbooks describe as not very interesting for a sociologist. It is rather something that psychologists should deal with. For sociologists, personality remains a set of fixed features shaped by biological, mental and social components and influencing an individual’s behaviour. It is formed during the process of socialisation, which is a social process rooted in culture, and proceeds according to the applicable norms and values. Social personality is thus a creation of society and its culture, which develops on a biological foundation. It is also a consequence of the assumed social roles which are played out in a socio-cultural context. Each culture creates a certain personality ideal, which, as a normative model, determines the personality traits that are desired, expected and highly valued in society. Social behaviour and personality traits approximating the cultural personality ideal are strengthened

by positive sanctions, whereas behaviour deviating from the cultural personality model is subject to negative sanctions. Cultural personality ideals are deposited in literature and art.

The respondents defined themselves first of all by referring to positive personality traits. The most frequently used adjective was “nice” – 155 women and 72 men described themselves using this word.

Comparison of the occurrence of particular phrases within a given category shows that the girls more frequently than the boys described themselves as “nice”, “helpful”, “lazy”, “honest” and “cheerful”. The boys, on the other hand, more often used such words like “intelligent”, “good”, “clever” or “funny”. These differences could be explained by the effect of socialisation and they fit the stereotypical perception of gender: girls are nice and helpful, and boys are intelligent and clever (Świątkiewicz-Mośny, 2015).

Individual identity is the self-concept, that of oneself. The researched students describe themselves, above all, in the context of individual features, positive personality traits.

5. Social identity

Social identity is defined as “a sum of all social identifications used by an individual to define themselves” (Turner, 1982, 21). When describing themselves, the young people in the study referred to the groups in which they function. The most important of them (and those appearing most frequently in the students’ answers) was family. The young people described themselves through the roles which they play in their families (mainly in relation to parents). A common association with identity was their surname, which is closely connected with family. The family can therefore be considered one of the most important sources of identification.

The students also defined themselves in the context of school. School is the institution which influences individual biographies in a significant way through the socialisation process. Its task is to prepare students to live in a changing world, to transfer knowledge, and to teach interpersonal relationships. All these three areas are strongly connected with the value system. School and teachers attribute importance and value to the knowledge they teach.

The hidden curriculum (Martin, 1983), meaning something which is taught unintentionally, is a good example of the significant impact of school on the pupil’s identity.

The research participants define themselves as class members or students of a particular school. This identification is so important that they associate the class register number with the notion of identity. School is everyday life for students, as it is there that they spend most of their daily lives. School is also an institution which has an ambitions to educate and socialise.

In Poland, the Catholic Church is very strongly associated with national identity. This relationship is reciprocal. An example can be national holidays, which in many cases begin with a celebration in church, while church ceremonies are often attended by representatives of the authorities. Before 1989, the Catholic Church was the mainstay of national identity.

In the gathered material, references to religion appeared relatively rarely: 12.4% of the researched students associated religion with identity; 18.8% of them mentioned their confession (Christian, Catholic) or level of religiosity (I'm a believer/I'm not a believer in God) when defining themselves. It is therefore difficult to treat religion as a category which is a cognitively available differentiator. This probably results from the homogeneity of the environments that were subject to the presented research. Different confessions are present in the area covered by the study, but the dominance of the Roman Catholic denomination is clearly visible.

The category related to space turned out to be significant for 40% of the secondary school students. When asked the question "who are you?", they answered: "a Pole", "a Silesian", "a European", "an inhabitant of my town". The dominant model is a mosaic identity, characterised by lack of identification with large communities, like a nation, country or transnational communities (European Union). Those who described themselves by means of space at the auto-description level most frequently mentioned national identity ("I'm a Pole").

Apart from the mosaic identity, we can also distinguish multi-level identities (Szwed, 2005), which are multiple indications of space as a unifying element. This means a situation where a social actor claims to be, e.g., both a Pole and a European. The Silesian identification is accompanied firstly with the European identity, and only secondly with the national one. In turn, national identification is connected with self-definition: "[I'm] a citizen and a patriot".

The most frequently occurring association of identity with space is the one with the place of residence. The students who defined identity in this way also understand it in the context of very individual characteristics: of name, surname or appearance.

Associating identity with nationality is significantly less frequent. In such a case, identity is defined in terms of space – the coexisting associations are: place of residence and origin.

In turn, defining identity through the national context was also connected to a more formal perspective and documents which are a consequence of state regulations. National identity would then be associated with nation defined as a state.

The research conducted by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) in 2015 on a representative group of adult Poles related to territorial identity shows that most Polish people (51%) feel strongly bound to their place of residence, and 25% of them identify with Poland. Identification with Europe is quite rarely observed (4%). The research quoted by CBOS shows that Polish people identify with their local community less than Europeans. The studied secondary school students declare territorial affiliation less frequently than the group researched by CBOS. Space is not a source of strong and cognitively available characteristics. The world in which they function is rather dominated by individual characteristics, and this perspective constitutes a basis of self-reflexion.

The research carried out on a group of secondary school students shows that nation, state or religion are not the main points of reference for them. Social identity is built rather at the level of participation in small groups, like family or school.

6. Summary

The researched students based their self-description on individual features. There is visible integrity with the definition of identity that they constructed. Associations with this word are, above all, personality and character. The situation is similar in the case of family. Social roles played in the family were a frequent element of self-definition, and when defining identity, the students pointed to their name and family. Identity, therefore, appears to be a project rooted in everyday life. Large national or transnational communities are rarely a source of self-definition. However, if this is the case, it occurs at the national level rather than regional or transnational level. I am a Pole – this definition appeared in the case of 40% of the secondary school students from the study.

Identity for the researched young people from Silesia is, first of all, an individual, personal concept. It occurs in everyday life. Even the media discourse about Silesian identity, which was intensive in the period when the research was conducted, did not evoke reflection on regional or national identification. The issue of being Silesian is discussed on social media and internet forums. Being Silesian becomes “the reflexive project of [me], which consists in keeping consistent, although continuously updated and verified biographical narrations, takes place in the context of multiple choice mediated by abstract systems” (Giddens 1991, 68).

A consequence of globalisation and glocalisation is the emergence of new types of societies, which are characterised by individualisation, universalisation, differentiation and, above all, liquidity and changeability. “Only the notion of identity allows for a quite full analysis of the dynamics of contemporary social phenomena, abounding in the manifestations of rebellion, going away from official ideology, questioning the assigned duties, or promoting new styles of living” (Bokszański, 1988, 15–16). Identity in the (post)modern world is an intriguing topic of scientific inquiries. What is particularly emphasized is the change, whose consequences include increased reflexivity, subjectivity, possibility of constructing oneself, but also the obligation to take responsibility for one’s own biography. The multitude of possibilities makes the choice more interesting, but at the same time more difficult.

References

- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. & Giddens, A. & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bokszański, Z. (2008). *Tożsamości zbiorowe (Collective Identities)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Bokszański, Z. (1989). *Tożsamość-interakcja-grupa (Identity-Interaction-Group)*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Bokszański, Z. (1988). Tożsamość jednostki (Personal Identity). *Kultura i społeczeństwo* no. 2, pp. 15–16).
- Centrum Monitoringu Społecznego (Centre for Social Monitoring) (Wrocław 2011).
- Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E.H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Foote, N.N. (1951). Identification as the Basis for a Theory of Motivation. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 14–21.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Polish National Survey 2011. <http://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechno/nsp-2011/nsp-2011-wyniki/>
- Martin, J. (1983). “What Should We Do with a Hidden Curriculum When We Find One?” in H. Giroux and D. Purpel (eds), *The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, pp. 122–139.
- Świątkiewicz-Mośny, M. (2010). *Tożsamość napiętnowana (Spoiled Identity)*. Kraków: NOMOS.
- Świątkiewicz-Mośny, M. (2010). Ślężacy na „naszej klasie”. Społeczne reprezentacje śląskiej tożsamości – analiza forum dyskusyjnych na portalu “nasza-klasa” (The Silesians in “our class”). Social representation of Silesian identity – analysis of the “nasza klasa” website,

- in L. Dyczewski and R. Szwed (eds) *Odmiany tożsamości. Tożsamość osób, zbiorowości i instytucji*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Świątkiewicz-Mośny, M. & Wagner A. (2013). Student, czy Holender? Wzory definiowania tożsamości przez studentów polskich i holenderskich, in L. Dyczewski and K. Jurek (eds) *Rzeczywistość wielokulturowa*. Lublin-Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KUL, Centrum Europejskie Natolin.
- Świątkiewicz-Mośny, M. (2015). *Konstruowanie nowych tożsamości w warunkach globalizacji* (The Construction of New Identities under the Conditions of Globalisation). Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ.
- Tillman, K.-J. (1996). *Teorie socjalizacji* (Socialisation Theories). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PWN.
- Turner, J.C. (1982). Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group in H. Tajfel (ed), *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Polish people on their attachment to the place of residence and country, report on the study CBOS 2015, 165/2015.
- Szwed, R. (2005). Tożsamość europejska, versus tożsamość narodowa, transformacja tożsamości zbiorowych w Unii Europejskiej, in E. Hałas and K.T. Konecki (eds) *Konstruowanie jaźni i społeczeństwa. Europejskie warianty interakcjonizmu symbolicznego*, Warszawa: Scholar, pp. 310–344.
- Wagner, W. & Duveen, G., & Farr, R. & Jovchelovitch, S. & Lorenzi-Cioldi, F. & Markova, I. & Rose, D. (1999). Theory and method of social representations. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2.