

WHO ARE POLISH FUTURE EDUCATORS? SELECTED ASPECTS OF SOCIAL IDENTIFICATIONS

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Abstract

This research presents the results of a study on selected aspects of social identity of future educators which include family identity, national, European and global identities, religious identity and professional identity. The aim of the research was to find out whether Polish pedagogy students, who in future will become educators, are able to ask and answer identity questions and reflect on their own identity. The study was conducted in a group of 364 university students of pedagogy of the University of Zielona Góra, Poland. The data was gathered with the use of a diagnostic survey technique by means of a questionnaire. The study leads to an optimistic view on future educators who reflect on their identity and can give clear answers to identity questions. This ability is essential for the future educators themselves as it adds to their personal development, but it is also crucial in the job and vocation of an educator.

Key words: *educators in Poland, metaskills, pedagogy students, social identity.*

Introduction

It can be argued that the identity of a person consists of the following two subsystems: personal identity and social identity. The former is predicated on acknowledging one's unique and individual self, the latter on acknowledging one's society as well as being part of a specific group. According to M. Jarymowicz, personal identity is related to the formation of the *Me* structure, and its contents are the individual's convictions, interests, needs, motives, values, ways of thinking and assessment criteria. Social identity is related to the formation of the *Us* structure, expressed in one's identification with other members of the society – with their goals, values and rules of conduct. It is also related with feeling connected and being aware of the community formed with them (Jarymowicz, 2000). The identification of the two identity subsystems is based on two fundamental identity questions: *who am I* as a unique person and *who am I* as a social being, as a part of the society.

The interrelations between the individual and social identity have been the foundations of scientific pursuit for many researchers. The approach postulating an inferior, instrumental character of social identity with respect to individual identity is represented in e.g. R. Ziller's approach (Ziller, 1964 in Jarymowicz, 1984). A corresponding relation included in the theory by Greenwald and Pratkanis is the opposite of the above relation between personal identity and social identity. According to these authors, social identity is developmentally superior to personal identity (Bikont, 1988). The equality of both identity systems: personal and social as well as their functions, are stressed by, amongst others, R. Brown, J. C. Turner and H. Tajfel (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

There are many different approaches to the relations between personal and social identity – in what follows the approach of A. Brzezińska has been accepted. According to this author, personal identity, related to the *Me* structure and social identity, related to the *Us* structure interact, forming interconnections. These constitute the basis for the formation of an individual's identity which is related to his or her social functions (Brzezińska, 2000).

Problem of Research

The focus of the present research was the social dimension of pedagogy students' identity. This approach lets one concentrate on who the young people who want to work as educators are. It is clear that apart from their specific skills (the substantive and methodological skill sets) they will need to use their metaskills (Taraszkiewicz, 1999). Possessing the complete set of answers to the identity question: *who am I*, is the foundation of these skills. For this reason, social identity will undoubtedly be reflected in the educational work. A reflection on identity seems especially important in the post-modern era of conflicted values, the demise of subjectivity and the collapse of authority. Z. Bokszański notices that usually a phenomenon is reflected upon when its shapes get blurry. Phenomena are not noticed or acknowledged when they exist in full light, do not cause trouble and do not force us to reflect on their meaning (Bokszański, 2005).

The idea of identity formation according to some established identity types, or the so called identity matrices, is a thing of the past. The contemporary man has the freedom of choice and autonomy in creating his or her identity. The transition from the "random world" to "personal choice world", from the world governed by submission to established rules to the world of responsibility, increased reflectivity and greater self-awareness forces the individual to accept the increased responsibility and the effort necessary to form and protect his or her identity. For this reason, the individual needs self-awareness and awareness of one's identity as well as its power to enhance self-reflection, like never before (Kwiatkowska, 2005).

Methodology of Research

This study presents empirical data on selected aspects of social identity of pedagogy students which are part of a wider analysis of the identity of future educators (Turska, in press). By analyzing the issue of social identity of pedagogy students, five specific areas, namely: family identity, national identity, European and global identity, professional identity as well as religious identity were studied. To collect the data, the diagnostic survey technique by means of a questionnaire was used. The studied group consisted of 364 students of pedagogy at the University of Zielona Góra. The information obtained reflects trends, convictions and declarations on the social identity of the studied group.

Results of Research and Discussion

Family Identity

The family environment is one of the most important contexts of children and youth socialization; it is also the area of the most intense psychosocial relations. The identification with the family as the reference group becomes especially important in the contemporary world of chaos and contradictions. It lets the individual differentiate between that which is certain from the uncertain, that which is right from wrong. The individual needs to base his or her actions, existence and identity on some stable elements of reality, on knowledge that is certain and cannot be invalidated, knowledge which does not get questioned (Witkowski, 2000).

A strong foundation in the family structure is the basis and core of an individual's identity. The knowledge of this structure, as well as a conscious effort to find information on the life and history of the relatives, is declared by 50% of the studied group. For a substantial part of the subjects (43.13%) the knowledge of family is a haphazard set of facts. The interest in the history of the ancestors is related to the sense of affiliation and identification with the family structure and the identification with this structure. Half of the group (49.99%) fully accept their families and strongly identify with the relatives. A large part of them (46.15%) declare only a partial identification with their families because they are aware of some situations and behav-

iors which to they do not accept and do not want to copy in their own lives. A small part of the group (3.86%) do not feel connected with their families. The difficulties identifying with the family legacy are connected with the difficulties which have been or are still being experienced by the family. The most important of these include: divorce, conflicts and disturbed relations in the family, alcohol addiction of one or both of the parents, death or illness of close relatives.

The quality of the functioning of the family structure is reflected in the subjects' assessment of the home atmosphere. A large part of the group (39.84%) report mutual understanding, respect and love. Almost the same percentage (42.86%) find the home atmosphere to be relatively warm and the relations between family members are reported as correct. The rest of the studied group (17.3%) report a dysfunctionality of their families and disturbed relations between the closest relatives.

A general comparison of the relationships between the respondents on the one hand and the parents on the other indicates a closer relationship with mothers (very good and good relationships – 80.22%) than fathers (very good and good relations – 55.49%). There is no question about the meaning of motherly love for the development of a child (Gurycka, 1990), however, the lack of positive relationships with the father may become a risk factor for the abnormal social functioning of a young person (Bragiel, 2001, Pougnet, Serbin, Stack & Schwartzman, 2011).

Another family-related factor which has an important role in identity formation is whether a person has siblings (Wong, Branje, VanderValk, Hawk & Meeus, 2010). A vast majority of the future educators studied (92.86%) grew and developed their identity in families where they were not the only child but had siblings. The most common model is a family with two children (53.30%), a less frequent situation was a large family with three or more children (11.54%). An overwhelming majority of the subjects (96.7%) report the relationships with siblings as positive. Some difficulties or disorders of this relationship was reported by 3.3% of the respondents.

An aspect important in forming the complete picture of the family identity of future educators is the fact that the reported relationships of the respondents were not limited to the nuclear family but included a larger set of relatives. Therefore, the family system in the broader sense influenced the identity formation of the students.

Without any doubt, the development of the identity of future educators is taking place at a time when the functioning of the family is undergoing substantial changes. In the chaos of the external world, the family becomes the safe haven of stability and closeness of relationship. This, however, is only true when the most fundamental function of the family, namely love, is fulfilled.

National Identity

Questions are often asked of what it means “to be Polish” nowadays, what the elements forming Polish identity are, which of them are crucial and which can be eliminated without detriment to the sense of being Polish, and finally, which factors influence the formation of national identity. According to L. Dyczewski “today these questions require a new and more complete answer because the reality in which we live has become less understandable and less clear, more fragmented and uncertain” (Dyczewski, 1996).

The disintegration of national identity processes can affect the young people in particular. According to J. Jestal: “From the mid-eighties we have been facing the emigration not only from Poland, but from being Polish. A part of the Polish youth treats Polish national identity as a useless baggage which hampers the adaptation to new conditions abroad, and they declare being ready to break off relations with the native country and its culture if this were to bring concrete economic profits” (Jestal, 2001).

A question arises, whether the future educators who will influence the identity formation of their wards with their views and convictions, identify with their nation. The results obtained indicate a high level of identification with the Polish nation and the acceptance for cultural heri-

tage of the ancestors (82.97%). This means that being rooted in Poland still holds an important value. A small part of the respondents (4.67%) declare no attachment to the nation, its history and traditions. This corroborates a comparative study of Polish and English as well as Finnish students which showed a high level identification of Poles with their nationality. This study also showed that the stronger the students identify with their region of origin, the higher the identification with their nation (Smith, Mączyński & Helkama, 2001).

Two thirds of the respondents (65.43%), while sharing their view on patriotism, express a mature concern for the country which is visible in their respect for the people, the tradition and history, in cultivating the culture and making conscious effort to work for the good of the country. Such a position reflects peaceful patriotism which stresses personal development in the environment of respect and dignity. This refers to both the care for one's nation and the care for the continued existence and cultivation of cultural diversity, acceptance of dissimilarity and also to enabling diffusion of cultural patterns (Ferenz, 2005). For a third of the respondents (34.57%) patriotism still has a defensive form whose aim is protection of national distinctiveness with hostile approach to any attempts at integrating with other cultures.

The behaviors expressing the respondents' patriotism which are most often indicated are cultivating tradition (57.97%), interest in the political situation of the country (24.73%), the knowledge of the history and culture of the nation (17.03%) as well as respect for national symbols (11.84%).

Being able to see both positive and negative traits of the community seems to have a strong connection with the identification of the reference group. The future educators are most proud of the history and tradition of their country and its national heroes (64.29%), ability to mobilize in face of adversity (37.91%), the achievements of other citizens (27.47%), perseverance (24.73%), diligence (23.08%) and openness (20.05%). Among the main flaws of their nation they indicate the abuse of power and lack of political culture (58.52%), breaking the law (usually theft and corruption – 34.34%), difficult economic situation of the country and the ensuing unemployment (16.21%) and poverty (18.96%) of a part of the society as well as alcohol addiction (18.41%).

In spite of the perceived flaws of the nation a vast majority of the respondents identify with the reference group. Being part of the nation rather than choosing emigration, in spite of difficulties and flaws, may be a test of the strength of this identification. Those who only care about their own particular interests easily become postmodern nomads who hold the belief *ibi patria ubi bene* - "where I am at ease, there is my country" (Prokop, 2004). For a small part of the subjects (5.22%) the lack of identification with their own nation is so drastic that they declare willingness to change citizenship.

European and Global Identity

Belonging to a nation with which the individual identifies constitutes a core necessary for identity formation. Being rooted in "little motherland" and gradually opening up to cultural diversity lets the individual broaden the group identification circles leading to the emergence of intercultural identity. According to J. Nikitorowicz, intercultural identity means being aware of those characteristics in a person which build both the distinctiveness and the similarity with others. It also entails the awareness of being the same person in spite of changing environment and one's own personal development. These are dynamic phenomena which are open to change and constant development. Intercultural identity is a multidimensional construct which combines elements of the personal system of the individual with central values of the group to which this individual belongs. Therefore, the intercultural identity entails the awareness of being part of the European and global culture (Nikitorowicz, 2002). Identification with a certain group is a vital condition for participating in the culture of this group as well as belonging to the group and loyalty to it. Excluding oneself from the cultural citizenship is equivalent to excluding oneself from a full participation in the group (Stevenson, 2000, Fligstein, Polyakova & Sandholtz, 2012).

According to A. Ross, European society, thanks to its cultural and social diversity is both a chance and a challenge to identity formation (Ross, 2008). Keeping the distinctiveness while seeking to understand other cultures becomes the foundation of the European and global identity - indeed, the motto of the European Union is "united in diversity". Nearly a third of the subjects (29.67%) have a strong sense of unity with ever wider circles of reference, describing themselves as full-fledged citizens of Europe and the world. Over a half (51.92%) of the future educators are slightly less emphatic in declaring their identification beyond national identity. A small percentage of the respondents (4.67%) definitely reject wider reference groups, thus exhibiting nationalist tendencies.

Defining one's own identity in global terms should be based on acknowledging one's own value and worth as well as the dignity of other people. This is related to the ability to overcome various differences: national, religious, moral and ideological, cultural, racial etc. For a vast majority of future educators (98.35%) people who are culturally dissimilar are not "alien" but "different". They do not pose a threat but arouse interest and the willingness to get to know and integrate with a different culture.

Future educators find it very important to base their identity on sound foundations of deeply-rooted values thanks to which the encounter with the "different" is free from fear and insecurity. Without any doubt, in view of both the European integration and globalization, a person who integrates the national, European and global identity is suitable for the role of an educator.

Religious Identity

Religious identity is one of the most important aspects of social identity (Hayward, Maselko & Meador, 2012). According to L. Dyczewski, apart from social and cultural elites, religious communities play a very important role in forming and maintaining the social and cultural systems of a nation (Dyczewski, 1993). The strong connection of religious identity with the national identity of Poles has its roots in the history of the nation which has always been closely tied to the Roman Catholic Church. The strength of this connection grew in times of danger to the nation when the church became the stronghold for upholding the independence of the nation. At the time of social change and formation of the democratic system, religion is predominantly becoming the way of spiritual growth and a form of realization of transcendent values.

In the system of values of over a half (53.03%) of the subjects, the belief in God is a very important or fundamental aspect of their life. The respondents believe that this reflects their free and conscious choice of belief system. For a tenth of the studied youth the belief in God is an expression of submission to tradition which may be related to their lack of commitment and full acceptance for the precepts of faith. A small percentage (7.97%) of the studied future educators consider the faith in God as an aspect of lesser importance in their lives.

The membership in the denominational group, however, is much less important than faith in God to the respondents. Under a fourth of them (23.9%) consider the identification with this group as very important. Therefore, the majority of future educators, while declaring their faith, distance themselves from the religious community. Most probably, personal relation with the Absolute is more important to them than traditional ceremonials. Interestingly enough, a similar finding has recently been reported by Lopez, Huynh and Fuligni (2012) for teenagers from Latin American, Asian and European backgrounds. In their study, the religious identity remained stable throughout high school, but the religious participation declined.

Professional Identity

Professional identity is understood as the membership in a group of people having the same profession, which entails using a similar system of norms, regulations, values and rules of conduct. The choice of profession and actually beginning to work in it does not automatically mean gaining professional identity because "(...) professional identity cannot be formed once and forever. Identity must always be forming and transforming; this necessity follows from the fact that we ourselves change, moving from one phase of our lives to the next, but also from the changing conditions and times in which we live – the context of our lives changes. This dynamic reality requires constant reflection on one's professional identity" (Brzezińska & Appelt, 2000, see also Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink & Hofman 2011).

The decision on the choice of education and the readiness to take up a profession are the beginning of a long process of building professional identity. Passion and dedication for the job not only give satisfaction but also lead to increase the effectiveness of the undertaken actions (Day, 2004).

The interest in pedagogy and the willingness to educate are the predominant (80.22%) reasons for choosing the discipline reported by the studied subjects. Thus, the candidates for the pedagogical profession are intrinsically motivated which means that the inspiration for their actions is the interest in working with other people, the willingness to help and seeking fulfillment through action. For one fifth of the respondents (19.78%) the choice of pedagogy as their major did not follow a mature decision on their future career. For them, studying pedagogy is a way to prolong youth, an easy way of getting higher education or an alternative choice of subject of study after the first choice failed. For those subjects, studying postpones the moment of making professional decisions. For a small fraction of the respondents (7.69%) the choice of the subject of study is connected with upholding family traditions. This group, however, stresses the importance of interest in working as an educator, autonomy of their choice and absence of pressure from the family.

For over a third of the interviewed students (35.16%) the decision on taking up pedagogy as a profession in the future is clear-cut and does not bring any doubts. The profession of an educator is the one profession that will give them sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. A slightly smaller level of resolve is indicated by almost a third of the students (30.77%). For them the process of taking a mature professional decisions has not ended yet. A fifth of the respondents (20.60%) have not made any decision and have not committed to any profession. They cannot give a clear and consistent answer to the question who they are and who they want to be. A cause for concern may be the existence of a small group of the pedagogy students (2.20%) who declare their willingness to follow the profession, but not because of their interests or predispositions, but rather because they do not see any other alternatives.

Among the studied subjects are respondents for whom the formal education does not determine their professional identity. These students (7.69%) have made the decision to practice another profession. They have decided that they do not want to be educators and do not accept the commitment entailed by their education. If these persons have formulated future plans to follow another profession, then this situation may also signify having made a mature professional decision.

The positive aspects of their future profession indicated by the interviewed students is the capacity to help (69.78%) and get in touch with other people (79.95%). These are also the factors deciding the nature of this profession. According to almost a third of the studied future educators (28.3%), the profession gives them the possibility to effect change in various aspects of the life of those who they will be taking care of. Personal development is for a part (13.74%) of the respondents another positive aspect of their chosen profession, rather than being its oppressive consequence.

The main fears connected with this future profession include: inability to help effectively (59.07%), being overwhelmed by problems (37.36%) and professional burnout (15.38%).

Conclusions

The aspects of social identity presented in this paper are characteristic of a group of academic youth who will be able to help to form future generations. Before they take on the responsibility for the identity formation of young people, they should undoubtedly demonstrate a high level of awareness of their own development and the ability to define social identifications. The study presented in this paper shows an optimistic picture of the students who, despite the danger of losing themselves in the chaos of conflicted values, contradictory sources of sense or the demise of subjectivity brought forth by post-modernity, are able to define their place in the social structure of the world.

A positive attitude to fundamental core values, sense of affiliation and unity with successive social circles of reference (from family, to global circles), despite their faults and imperfections, may save the future educators, as well as those educated by them, from the confusion of the contemporary life.

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