



Investigating the Values of Politics, Education and Family of Polish Students

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The focus of this paper is the socio-cultural background factors that affect the skills connected with intercultural competence and the understanding of the idea of intercultural competence in Poland. The study of intercultural competence has expanded greatly in recent decades and expanded into a multidisciplinary field of study. However, there is little research on Poland and the transition from a closed society to being part of the multicultural world. Not only is Poland reorienting its political and economic structure, but also the structure of its society. It is engaging in the global phenomena of the cultural project. From being a closed country with eastward looking connections, Poland is now a western facing nation which is integrating with other nations both inside and outside Europe.

The term 'intercultural' is attributed to Edward Hall (1959) *The Silent Language*. Since that time, research into the skills connected with intercultural competence has been driven by the need to deal with a greatly expanding and connected world. Proponents of skill based intercultural learning stress the need for developing competence to deal with the situations faced by foreign travel, business and social contacts.

Michael Byram (1997) developed the 5 *savoirs* or knowledge a learner should obtain: *savoir etre* which is possessing an attitude of curiosity and openness; *savoirs* which are knowledge based understanding of social groups; *savoir comprendre* which is the skill of interpreting and relating to others; *savoir apprendre/faire* which are the skills of discovery and interaction; and *savoir s'engager* which is critical cultural awareness of one's own and the target's practices and products. (pp. 91-101) Stella Ting-Toomey (1999) suggests that the main focus should be on an individual's identity and encourages: self-awareness, mindfulness and identity negotiation of any given intercultural situation.



The key factor in both these approaches is that the skills necessary for developing intercultural understanding are acquired and learnt. The socialisation process begins in the learners earliest years and lasts throughout their entire life as they face new situations and adjust their value system to fit. It is not a process which is only associated with the formal training that is now associated with the development of intercultural communicative competence. Current training techniques focus on the utilisation of Self-Awareness Inventories, which are generally designed to interpret learner responses and create a profile of the learner's intercultural competence. The use of such scales and the scoring of results produce a profile of the student at the present time. With training it is hoped that the student will become more aware of their cultural self and improve when they take the test again. However, the tests ignore the background of the learner as they are the product of the environment in which they live, work and are educated. What is important is to understand why a student behaves and reacts in the manner they do.

Cultural Identity

The process of socialisation is directly connected with the learning and understanding of values. When we consider the culture model presented by Trompenhaars (2009) which focuses on culture as a system of values (see figure 1), it is understandable that these values are directly influenced by our process of socialisation. The values of our parents, our educators, the national media, work colleagues and politicians directly affect how we see ourselves in relation to others and how we decide who "one of us" is. It is the desire to belong and be part of the 'in-group' that drives us to adapt and mimic elements of cultural behaviour. The alternative is to belong to the 'out-group' and relate to others as an outsider. For most people, the latter is not a desirable option and they follow of trends and norms of behaviour that indicate in-group membership.

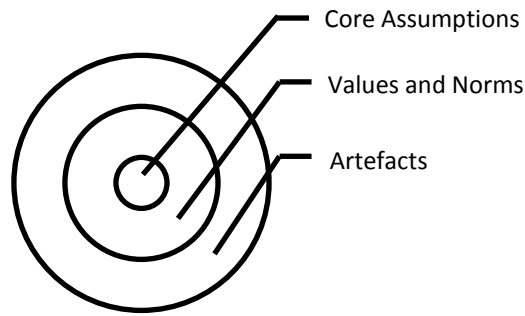


Figure 1 The Culture Onion

Hofstede's (2005) research illustrates clearly the relevant differences between national societies and certain value attitudes. According to Hofstede, culture is seen as being the software of the mind. This approach sees all the actions of an individual as being explained by a programming of behaviour, acquired through socialisation. The value dimensions of Power-Distance, Individuality, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance and Long-Term Orientation propose specific conclusions and hypotheses about how the members of given nations are programmed by cultural phenomena (see figure 2).

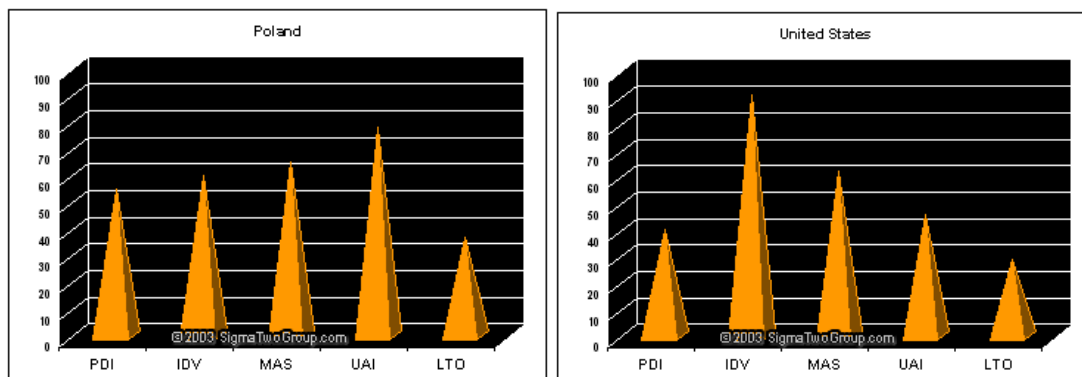


Figure 2 Hofstede Dimensions: Poland and USA

The relationship we have with the values Hofstede outlines begin in our early life where we are taught and shown how to behave in society. Our parents criticise and punish us for unacceptable behaviour, whilst at school we are taught to follow generally acceptable rules. The media work to creating our attitudes and visions of the world beyond our experience and categorise 'others' into friends and foes. In essence, we are 'culturalised' at this stage as socialisation is a process of being introduced to culture and culturally accepted behaviour. The development of who we are is the development of



our culturality: our personality is created in a culturally accepted way and we create cultural identities. These cultural identities are formed by our socio-cultural background and this is what needs to be measured in order to understand why we react as we do in certain situations. Only with this knowledge can we work out techniques to deal with ourselves in intercultural situations.

In this way, the five value dimensions which are discussed in Hofstede's work can be shown as being influenced by three areas: politics, education and family. These three areas are conduits for value shaping and play a central role in our socio-cultural background. The conduits are closely interrelated and form a continuous process of influence and development. Politics, not only referring to the government but also to policy, directly creates the framework in which education takes place. Educators are bound by the laws of the land and the curriculum and teach accordingly. The family, or society as whole, is the product of the educational system and this in turn influences the political system via elections etc. Similarly, the circle can be reversed with politics influencing family via laws and family influencing education via expectations of certain norms being upheld. Religion is deliberately left out of the model as it is a conduit which works in the other three areas and not individually.

In any cultural encounter, whether intra- or inter-cultural, the key concepts are *Mindfulness* and *Self-Awareness*. The actors need to be mindful of the context of the event and self-aware of their position in the event. This view is neatly summed up by the idea of Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey 1999). Ting-Toomey suggests that in the development of ICC a student progresses through 4 steps: Unconscious Incompetence, Conscious Incompetence, Conscious Competence and Unconscious Competence. The idea of identity valuation is one of the central concepts of ICC. In an intercultural event it is essential for the interlocutor to understand and relate to the context of the situation. This is also reflected by Bourdieu, as quoted by Hall (2002), and the notion of habitus:

Habitus as a system of dispositions to be and to do is a potentiality, a desire to be which, in a certain way, seeks to create the conditions most favourable to what it is. [...] The notion of habitus restores to the agent a generating, unifying,



constructing classifying power, while recalling that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but of a socialised body, investing in its practice socially constructed organising principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience. (p. 38)

The social situation and context of communication is a minefield which requires different patterns of communication and behaviour. Each situation places demands on a person's ability even within their own comfort culture setting. In everyone's daily life cultural negotiation takes place in situations such as the family environment, relationships, work community etc. which require different language usage and contexts. Ting-Toomey presents two areas of identity: Primary identity is influenced by gender, ethnic, cultural and personal aspects; and Situation Identity is a negotiation of the role, relationship, interaction and facework aspect of various communication events.

Cultural identity, and our ability to interact with other cultures, is determined by the norms and values we possess as a society and as an individual. The process of socialisation is complemented by *Culturalisation* which is the development of our knowledge and understanding of other cultures. Furthermore, like an individual develops a personality through living and interacting with society, we can also consider the development of *Culturality*. Socio-cultural background factors and the context of our life choices influence our cultural personality, both within our own cultural environment and without. It is our relationship to society's values and the conduits transmitting culture which lead us to become culturally aware. The understanding of the way in which a person relates to a given intercultural situation may be greatly enhanced by the realisation that it is not only the present that impacts on our actions, but our engrained cultural history.

The Findings of the Socio-Cultural Background Survey

Hofstede's claim that culture is the software of the mind forms the basis for this research. It is not sufficient for us to realise that we have value differences and attempt to acknowledge and statistically analyse these differences as Hofstede does. We need



to be able to understand the background reasons for the Hofstede's results. Each of the three conduits influences the learner's cultural identity in a different direction. This can affect the values which are transmitted and the understanding of key concepts in intercultural communicative competence.

The corpus for the study is 119 students from the PWSZ sector of education in Poland. These students represent Tarnow, a medium sized city of 120,000, and Krosno, a small city of 50,000. Both institutions also have a high proportion of students from more rural backgrounds as the PWSZ sector is designed for students who are unable or do not wish to attend the established universities in Poland's main cities. Most recently, the division between the large population centres and their educated elites was illustrated by the results of the 2010 presidential election. The winning party, Platforma Obywatelskiej (PO) or Civic Platform, won most of its support in the larger population centres and the more advanced western areas of Poland – so called "Poland A". In contrast the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), or Law and Order, candidate won a majority of support in the smaller centres and rural east of the country – "Poland B". The political difference in these two areas of Poland and between the two candidates illustrates the interest of this study. The PO party stands for greater European and international cooperation in contrast to PiS which has a nationalistic stance on matters concerning European integration. Therefore, the students at the PWSZ level can be said to originate from backgrounds that support PiS ideals.

Students were given a two surveys – one a general questionnaire and the second a self-awareness inventory (SAI). The general questionnaire required information about the individual's background such as: age; place of being raised and current residence; language skills; foreign visits; and use of internet and other media. The inventory is adapted from and based on established SAI, such as the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory by Kelley and Meyers (2003), the Intercultural Development Inventory by Hammer (1989) and Olson and Kroeger's (2001) "Global Competency and Intercultural Sensitivity Survey". The 36 questions, in the inventory asks the respondent to reflect on a position they are personally imagined to hold, using the personal pronoun to put the respondent at the heart of the issue rather than adjudging from afar. Each of the



questions are categorised to Politics, Education or Family creating 3 series of 12 questions. The inventory scoring is based on a 5 point Likert scale with scores for each question response, which are then collated in one of the three categories. Median scores have been calculated for the 36 individual questions and the three categories.

Table 1 Results of Inventory

	Tarnow	Krosno
Politics	43.80	43.18
Education	44.38	44.51
Family	41.17	40.90

Maximum score for each category = 60

The initial results from the survey indicate that there is no clear conduit for the relation of cultural material (see table 1). Most surprisingly, family is scored low which may indicate that the common belief of the power of family in Polish society is misplaced. Rather than being *the* guide in forming values, the results suggest that family has a different role to play. Moreover, the position of politics and education does support Hofstede who suggests a high Power-Distance relationship and a low Individuality score for Polish society. This creates a hierarchical structure to society with great emphasis placed on the idea of belonging and following the norms which generally exists outside the home. For example, in school and work places the use of academic titles as forms of address confirms the importance of an educational hierarchy. Hofstede states:

In the collectivist society a diploma is an honor to the holder [...] and entitles the holder to associate with members of higher-status groups – for example, to get a more attractive marriage partner. It is to a certain extent ‘a ticket to ride.’” (2005, p. 99)

In the field of politics, the same is true with a high dependence on the government to guide and inform the behaviour of society. After flooding in the south-eastern area of Poland where the survey was conducted, the government was often held accountable for the inaction of local rescue services and the lack of organisation. On the streets the complaint which was often heard placed the blame for the disaster and the failure to forecast accurately directly at the office of the Prime Minister. Despite the accusations



being politically motivated, the fact that they resonated with the thoughts of the local people illustrate how there is a dependence on those in power to provide security and organisation in their lives.

Most importantly, in both politics and education the idea of a hierarchy creates the belief that the politicians or educators should have the answers to any question which is asked. The fact that the Prime Minister and the relevant authorities were found wanting after the flooding indicates to the population that they are unfit to govern. Similarly, a teacher who is asked a question but fails to provide an adequate response or who says “I don’t know” is often considered to be a poor teacher. Understanding that politics and education have an important effect on the transmission of cultural values allows for further evaluation of specific questions from these categories.

Table 2 Selected Results of Inventory Questions – Politics, Education and Family

	Tarnow	Krosno
1. I think that integration in the global community is a positive thing, even if this means we will lose some of our national identity (Pol)	4.30	2.90
2. I am of the opinion that people of whatever race are equally valuable (Pol)	4.5	4.5
3. I do not really notice cultural differences (Edu)	4.0	4.0
4. I feel most comfortable living and working in a community where people look and act like me (R) (Edu)	3.10	2.90
5. I believe that I could live a fulfilling life in another culture (Fam)	1.70	3.60
6. I could live anywhere and enjoy life (Fam)	3.75	3.80

5 Definitely Agree; 4 Tend to Agree; 3 Somewhat Agree; 2 Tend to Disagree; 1 Definitely Disagree
(R) 1 Definitely Agree; 2 Tend to Agree; 3 Somewhat Agree; 4 Tend to Disagree; 5 Definitely Disagree

Politics

In the area of politics, the student responses indicate clearly they understand the issues of multiculturalism (see table 2). They clearly agree that people of different races are equally valuable. This response is not surprising given that we criticise people who hold racist views and values. Even if their tolerance has never been tested due to the lack of ethnic diversity in Poland, their answer for the question indicates a clear understanding



of political correctness. Moreover, acceptance of 'the other' is a central tenant of intercultural competence.

However there is some disagreement between the students from Tarnow and Krosno on the issue of further integration in the global community and loss of national identity. Tarnow students are generally positive about further integration in contrast to Krosno. Despite the fact that Krosno is the smaller city it is a border city with communication routes to Slovakia and Hungary. Moreover, the students of PWSZ Krosno have an established and successful Erasmus programme. These two factors mean that Krosno, despite its size, is culturally connected and there is more experience of integration amongst the student populace. However, the result for this question should not be read negatively. It indicates that the students do not reject integration, but are wary and alert to the issues that such a process may have on their own national and local identity.

Tarnow, in contrast, is a larger city but very much in the shadow of Krakow, the region's capital to the west, and Rzeszow, a more developed industrial and academic centre to the east. Tarnow's post-war mostly Jewish intelligentsia were either deported during the Holocaust or chose not to return at the end of the war in 1945. This deprived Tarnow of an academic centre and resulted in a worker city which was greatly expanded under communism. The urbanisation of Tarnow's population has resulted in a vacuum where Tarnow has been largely bypassed by cultural connections and development. Since the collapse of communism the city authorities have been keen to develop and promote cultural links, leading to a positive vision of integration at any cost.

The two results are not altogether surprising. For Krosno, cultural integration is a reality not a theoretical project or a way to compete with the larger neighbours. In Tarnow, the promotion of city's multicultural heritage and increasing celebrations connected with its Austro-Hungarian and Jewish history is a way to attract tourism and investment. Again we can observe the situation of political guidance with the local authorities in both Tarnow and Krosno actively promoting a multicultural agenda with summer festivals that celebrate each cities history and connections.



Education

The reality of the development of intercultural competence can be seen in the responses to questions 3 and 4 (see table 2). The students admit that they are unable to notice cultural differences, which is not surprising when we consider their lack of intercultural contact. Moreover, both Tarnow and Krosno students generally suggest their desire to work and live in a homogeneous group. Both these questions illustrate one of the largest issues that a nation such as Poland has to face in the progression towards intercultural competence. Poland is an ethnically homogeneous nation with 98% of the population declaring themselves to be Polish. The lack of ethnic diversity results in intercultural communication only occurring during visits abroad or in large tourist centres such as Warsaw or Krakow. This indicates that the development of intercultural communication competence is, at best, a theoretical project for many Polish learners.

However, in conjunction with the question 1 and 2 a different conclusion can be drawn. The indications are that the students are very much aware of the cultural project which is developing around them and the fact that Poland is a part of this project. They are willing to express acceptance of ethnic difference and understand that being a part of a greater integrated cultural community will require some loss or readjustment of self-identity. These realisations are no different to other nations in Europe or the wider world and show progression towards intercultural competence. Yet, unlike in the UK, USA or other west European nations, the project will remain theoretical until such a time where Polish cities develop multiethnic communities and neighbourhoods become ethnically diverse.

Family

The issue of family, although scored low as a cultural conduit, does play an important part in the development of intercultural competence. The importance and emotional role of family in the process of culturalisation cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is even hard to evaluate the role that family may tacitly play in the development of values. The ability to adapt to new environments and situations is a central skill. Our comfort culture



is always going to be the easiest for us to live and work in as it is familiar and generates security. Results from questions 5 and 6 in table 2 indicate the connection between the students and their home environment.

The large difference in results between Tarnow and Krosno can again be explained by the depth of the intercultural project. It is a further illustration of the theoretical nature of the project and the uncertainty about what being part of the project entails. To Krosno students it can be argued that the experience of students on Erasmus programmes and the close cross-border links with Slovakia and Hungary have enabled them to witness first hand life in another culture. Despite the fact that the students express concern over integration, it can be said that the student's experiences of meeting different cultures has shown them the similarities between cultures and provided them with certain skills necessary for adapting. After all, they have to adapt to having multicultural class mates and this contact allays fears of difference.

For students in Tarnow, the fear is of the unknown. Due to a lack of experience and cultural meetings the students are uncertain about what life in a foreign environment entails. Even if the students have taken time abroad, to the USA or the UK, it most probably has been to friends and family thus creating a secure environment in which to live. Indeed, diaspora Polish communities in the USA and the UK are renowned for creating familiar environments with shops and services similar to those at home. This need for security and familiarity is supported by Hofstede's score for Uncertainty Avoidance which shows that Polish people are unwilling to embrace the unknown.

Areas for consideration

The initial results of the survey present five points for further consideration. Firstly, the lack of clear distinction between the three conduits of culture is an area of interest. There are certain parallels between Hofstede's scores and the findings of the survey. Yet, the role of family, often seen as a powerful influence in Polish society, appears to have a less formative role.

Secondly, the student's responses clearly indicate an understanding of the multicultural world in which Poland is a part. Since the collapse of communism there has been a



reorientation of Polish politics and economy towards a western model. The mental disposition of the population has also had to change and as the results of the 2010 Presidential Election illustrate there is a difference between the large west Poland centres and the more rural east. However, even in the rural areas the notion of political correctness and acceptance of racial and ethnic differences is understood.

The third point to consider is the road towards further integration. In communities where integration is developed there is an understanding of the procedures and processes involved. It is not a rejection of intercultural communication but an expression of a desire to proceed at a pace and to interpret the rules suitable to the local population. Both these points are an important step on the development of intercultural competence.

However, the fourth and fifth areas point to a certain amount of uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the intercultural project. The student responses to the majority of the questions asked in the inventory were scored "I somewhat agree" suggesting neither a firm positive or negative opinion. Furthermore, certain paired questions had both positive and negative responses from individual students. For example, the students responded positively to the question asking if they are good at understanding people from different cultures, but that they cannot understand other people's worldview.

This ambiguity stems from the difference between the cultural project being a theoretical and a practical exercise. Polish students positively show that they possess the understanding and the central skills required to develop intercultural competence. They are mindful and self-aware of intercultural events and contexts. However, having the skills and desires means very little unless they are put to practical use. In large Polish cities the development of tourism and business is increasing the number of cultures creating more diverse communities. By contrast, smaller cities and rural Poland has less direct experience of diversity. Only the future will enable the students to utilise the skills they possess.



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