

Research Report
Narratives of Affiliation: EU Enlargement and National Sovereignty in Life Stories of Urban and Rural Poles

Topic of Research

The research study explored the impacts of membership in the European Union on the everyday lives of urban and rural Poles. Personal narratives helped to reveal ways of thinking about the nation, the European Union, and local regions within Poland (either urban Krakow or the rural Bieszczady Mountains).

The study involved three related areas of investigation:

- First, continuing my longitudinal study (begun in 1992), I investigated understandings about Poland, Polishness, democracy, and capitalism in relation to the decisions respondents made about work, school, and their personal relationships.
- Second, interviews also explored opinions about the European Union and the effects of membership on respondents' lives.
- Third, the study included an expanded focus on rural residents of the Bieszczady Mountains, including local leaders directly involved in development and educational projects financed by the EU.

Personal accounts collected in interviews and through participant observation help to reveal *why* people hold the opinions they do, and thus provide a basis for anticipating reactions to continuing political and economic realignments associated with EU membership.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

The study helps to advance understanding of the complex and varied reasons why Poles support or oppose EU membership. The longitudinal study shows how EU membership affects the lives of Poles at a critical age in their personal development (as full working members of society and parents to the next generation), explores how and why EU membership affects urban and rural residents differently, and traces the development and change in orientations toward democratization, market reform, the Polish nation, and Europe as respondents have matured and as postsocialist reforms have become established. Thus, the research study provides Polish and American policymakers with a valuable longitudinal record of the impact of postsocialist social changes on the lives and views of ordinary citizens, including the impact of EU membership. The study will contribute to theory of national identity that takes into account personal experience, local loyalties, and transnational affiliations.

The study also provides insight into the traits and motivations of people who take on active public roles and seek to make use of opportunities provided by EU membership not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the

economically struggling Bieszczady region. Their experiences with EU funded programs reveal the possibilities that EU membership provides, but also the challenges of actually obtaining these benefits.

Research Approach and Methodology; list of research sites

My primary source of data was digitally recorded life story interviews. Following the principals of person-centered ethnography, respondents were asked open-ended questions designed to reveal the process by which they give meaning and emotional force to public discourse and symbols in their own lives (Levy 1973, Linger 2001). Additional information was obtained via participant-observation in respondents' homes and workplaces, informal conversations, and reading Polish newspapers, periodicals, survey results, and academic studies.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Krakow and in the Bieszczady Mountains of southeast Poland. The participants in my original study attended high school in Krakow or in Lesko (a town sometimes called the gateway to the Bieszczady Mountains), but presently live in a range of locations: Warsaw, Krakow, Przemyśl, Jarosław, Lesko, Ustrzyki Dolne, a number of villages throughout Bieszczady, and outside of Poland.

All totaled, I completed nearly fifty interviews, including 18 with people who participated in individual interviews in 1993 and 1999. An additional 18 were high school classmates of my rural respondents and participated in group interviews with me in 1992 and 1993. Interview questions centered around three themes: their lives in relation to postsocialist changes in Poland; the European Union and its impact on Poland and their lives; and national identity in relation to regional and European identity. The remaining interviews were with teachers, local government officials, and directors of nonprofit organizations in the Bieszczady region. These interviews show the procedure for obtaining EU funds, reveal what motivates participants to spearhead regional development and educational programs, and ascertain participants' perceptions of the EU.

All interviews were transcribed by native speakers, and then I reviewed the transcripts. In addition, all interview transcripts and fieldnotes (totaling approximately 600 pages of single spaced, typed text) will be coded using N6 software, which allows information to be grouped on the basis of key themes, and facilitates access to all remarks about specific topics when analyzing and writing up results.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Overall, the Poles I spoke with express a guarded optimism about Poland's membership in the European Union, even including rural farmers, the group that was statistically most opposed to EU membership before accession. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that many have their doubts that Poland will benefit from EU membership. Below I discuss some key findings.

Interviews reveal further evidence of “nested identities” (something I explored in Galbraith 2004); specifically, respondents asserted that local, national, and European loyalties need not compete, and indeed that they more often complement each other. These results seem to suggest that it is necessary to rethink the assumption that transnational organizations such as the EU will weaken national identity. On the contrary, many respondents say they would expect that people who feel most attached to Europe would also be the ones most attached to the nation, and they say that their own feelings of attachment to the nation and to Europe do not compete with each other. Expressions of local attachments were weaker than I had expected, particularly among Krakow residents. For instance, even among those who expressed deep attachment to their local region, many said they place priority on their loyalty to the nation, and that national identity means the most to them. I need to look more closely at responses before I can begin to suggest why this is so, but the implications are clear; membership in the European Union does not appear to be weakening national loyalties, at least in the self-reports of this sample of Polish citizens. Longitudinally, the results are interesting, as well, because national loyalties seem to be gaining strength; I suspect this is in part a result of age and a growing ability to articulate feelings of attachment to the nation.

Qualitative research such as mine provides a context for understanding public opinion as revealed in broader surveys. For instance, borrowing from a questionnaire-based study designed to measure nested identities (McManus-Czubińska et al 2003), I included the following question in my interviews:

Which best describes how you feel?

Only Polish (not at all European).

Very much more Polish than European.

More Polish than European.

Equally Polish and European.

More European than Polish.

Only European (not at all Polish).

Because I was able to ask respondents why they answered as they did, I learned that many who said they feel equally Polish and European did so because this is an issue they have rarely, if ever, thought about. They lack a well-developed sense of national or European identity, but since they consider Poland a part of Europe, being Polish automatically means being European as well. Thus, this response in no way reflects a growing cosmopolitan, “modern” sense identity, as was suggested in the original study.

Life stories also help to reveal the complex choices people face when confronted with the often contradictory pulls of place, people and economic opportunity. I spoke with a number of people who returned to Bieszczady after completing university. Most said they returned because they could not imagine living elsewhere; they describe their attachment to place in terms of affective ties to particular landscapes and networks of friends and family, and also their

feelings of discomfort in urban settings. The thing that allows them to stay in their native place, however, is a reasonable job. Others have chosen to relocate to cities, or even abroad. All cite economic opportunity as a primary motivation for moving, but most feel some degree of emotional conflict about their separation from their native place. One respondent, who was expecting her first child, spoke of her ambivalence about living and working in England. She and her husband feel compelled to stay there because they see no opportunities for themselves in Poland, even though they dream of returning when they have earned enough to buy a home. Having a child increases their desire to return to Poland, but it also makes economic security more important. For now, they will remain in England.

Nearly everyone I spoke with in Bieszczady has considered working abroad, and many have spent weeks or months picking fruit, caring for the elderly, or cleaning in Italy, Germany, or Denmark. They say that EU membership doesn't increase opportunities for this kind of work so much as it increases the possibility to do so legally. Indeed, the freedom to cross national borders was the most often cited positive effect of EU membership that respondents said they felt in their own lives.

My conversations with farmers show that they are surprisingly open to change dictated by new European markets because they see how they can profit economically from it. Many exercise pragmatic flexibility, allowing economic interests to govern their decision-making. Many have found that conforming to EU norms has made more distant markets available for their agricultural products; as a result, they comply with EU-mandated production and health standards, become committed to ecological production methods, and change the varieties and quantities of what they produce to meet outside demand. They are also applying for subsidies despite the challenges of filling out forms, maintaining records, and paying for inspections. Many who were initially skeptical have been persuaded by the benefits their neighbors have received. One young farmer explained how hard much of this can be, especially for older farmers with minimal education. In 2004, she acted as a volunteer and helped other small farmers fill out their paperwork. In 2005, however, she spent several months picking produce in Germany and so was not available to help. The regional agency that is supposed to help farmers lacks the staff to reach everyone.

Interviews with rural residents actively seeking to improve conditions in Bieszczady (teachers, local government officials, and directors of nonprofit foundations) provide a view into what motivates this kind of civic involvement, as well as the particular challenges and rewards of seeking EU funding. While local leaders working on regional education and development projects appreciate the opportunities the European Union provides, many are put off by the EU's style of management and administration.

Future Research Agendas

Regionally specific, person-centered studies such as mine are important for revealing why people behave as they do and hold the beliefs they do. Ongoing research about local, national, and transnational identities, whether nested or otherwise, can contribute to our understanding of the ways in which group affiliations are shaped, and suggest implications for cooperation or conflict within and between nations. Particular groups within Poland that deserve further attention include farmers, long and short-term migrants to other countries, and those who work for the public good, often far beyond the formal demands of their jobs. The unifying question that unites the lives of all these groups is what causes some people to leave their native place, and what compels others to stay?

Economic migration has broad implications for social relations among and within national and ethnic groups. More extensive life story interviews with individuals who have chosen to live abroad can help reveal more about the experience of migration—the motivations for taking on long or short-term employment in another country, the impact of time abroad on identities, and the dynamics of families divided between two or more countries.

Farmers are usually considered the group most strongly tied to place, and yet many farming families are finding that temporary work abroad is necessary for them to maintain their homes in rural Bieszczady. In addition, Polish agricultural reforms are of interest for a variety of reasons. I am most interested in the possibility that an alternative model for agriculture within the global market can emerge here. Polish agriculture has been criticized for its lack of technological advancement, labor intensive practices, and the small sizes of farms. However, with growing concern about sustainability and organic production, all of these the characteristics could turn out to be advantages. My conversations with farmers in the Bieszczady Mountains suggest that this is already beginning to occur.

Some of my most interesting interviews were with people who value the local culture, landscapes, and lifestyles within Bieszczady and so are working to improve the possibilities for residents to have a decent standard of living while also preserving what is distinctive about the region. They want to make it possible for young people to have the choice of remaining if they want to.

Policy Recommendations

While policy recommendations are necessarily tentative until I analyze my data in more detail, my conversations with Bieszczady residents reveal some of their frustrations with the programs designed to help them. They do not like the lack of flexibility in budgets, and the amount of documentation they are required to provide. The way funding is regulated makes them feel that their honesty is questioned, and it limits their ability to adjust programs to better accommodate local needs. Thus, while oversight and documentation is necessary to insure that

financial aid is used properly, such paperwork should not become a deterrent for legitimate efforts.

While the EU provides new funding possibilities, these funds often come with conditions that can be difficult to meet. The EU requires that their contributions be matched by a local entity. While this is generally good policy in that it helps to gauge the degree of local commitment to a project, the neediest regions have no way of obtaining matching funds. In addition, local leaders can lack the knowledge to make a strong case for their proposed projects. A number of applicants expressed frustration that their proposals were rejected because they made minor errors in their application (in one case, they made a simple mathematical mistake in their budget) regardless of the merit of the proposed project. One nonprofit organization is losing its American donor who assumes that Europe is now “taking care” of Poland. This agency used this funding to support small initiatives by village organizations that lack the resources to apply for major funding themselves.

These challenges emphasize the necessity for greater sensitivity to local needs, especially where people have limited income and education. Perhaps local residents could be recruited to aid in identifying critical local issues and helping their neighbors to find appropriate funding for development efforts. My study suggests that there are many local leaders with the knowledge and commitment to make it more possible for local residents to remain in Bieszczady, and they will make full use of financial support given them to achieve this goal.

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