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The Politics of a National Identity Survey: Polishness, Whiteness, and Racial Exclusion

Krzysztof Jaskulowski* 

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

*Corresponding author. Email: krzysztofja@interia.pl

Abstract

This article analyses a popular survey on national identity in Poland. However, the analysis of the survey is a pretext to remind one of the limitations of crude quantitative methods and to look at the Polish national identity itself. The article shows that the survey questions are far from unambiguous, and respondents might attribute different meanings to them. The survey does not “measure” national identity existing in the world, rather it serves to maintain the hegemonic concept of Polishness. It diminishes the significance of Catholicism and the perceived biological dimension of Polishness. It ignores public sentiment linking Whiteness and Polishness, contributing to maintaining the dominant image of Polishness as free of racism. Under the guise of objective research, the survey is one of the elements sustaining the image of a relatively open and inclusive Polishness. Referring to my own qualitative research and recent literature on the topic, I argue that Polish identity must be seen in terms of selective racism without racism—that is, it is an identity based on racial premises but which at the same time neglects its racial character.

Keywords: Poland; national identity; racism; exclusion

Introduction

In the modern era, the world is divided into states legitimized by nationalist ideology, and the nation is the basic object of loyalty and emotional attachment for individuals (Anderson 1991; Billig 1995; Hall 2017; Smith 2010). Considering the importance of national identities in the contemporary world, it is not surprising that they are the subject of intensive discussion and attempts to “measure” their nature (Smith 1991; Theiss-Morse 2012; Wodak, Reisigl, De Cillia, and Liebhart 1998). “Measuring” national identities generally focuses on two issues: inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness of national identity (the question of national boundaries) and the nature of attachment to the nation (patriotism vs. nationalism) (Gal 2019; Theiss-Morse 2012). This article focuses on the first issue by critically analysing a survey concerning the criteria of membership in the Polish nation, which has been conducted regularly for 30 years by one of the main opinion polls instituted in Poland. The survey was conducted four times in total, in 1988, 1998, 2008, and 2018 (Kantar Public 2018; TNS OBOP 2008). The results of the last survey were made public for the first time in November 2018 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Polish nation-state, which is officially described with teleological logic as the rebirth of independence (Kamusella 2017a). This demonstrates the social significance of the survey, which is one of the main sources of knowledge about the nature of Polish national identity for the general public and is discussed in the press, academic literature, and various public forums (Kantar Public 2018; Karkowska 2019; Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; WBS 2008).

My aim is to critically explore the assumptions of the survey, focusing primarily on the list and form of survey items in the context of the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of Polish national identity (Gal 2019). However, the analysis is a pretext for raising three broader issues. First, as a concrete

example, I note the limitations of crude quantitative methods, which have low sensitivity to the intricate lay meanings that the respondents themselves attribute to national identity (Bryman 1995; Maxwell 2019). However, the main subject of the article is less the methodology and more the Polish identity itself, particularly its boundaries. Second, referring to the nationalism studies literature and my own qualitative research on Polishness, I demonstrate that survey items can be understood very differently by respondents. I argue that it is disputable whether differences in answers reflect differences in people's attitudes and not differences in their interpretations of the items (Fowler 1995). The ambiguity of the items' meanings might lead to underestimating the role of Catholicism in defining Polishness, overlooking the exclusiveness of cultural factors, and overestimating the inclusiveness of the subjective criterion. Third, I demonstrate that the survey unjustly ignores the racial character of Polish national identity. I claim that the survey does not "measure" Polish identity so much as it helps to maintain the hegemonic belief that Poland unlike the United States or Western Europe, is free of racism. Referring to recent research on the Black experience in Poland and my own qualitative research, I argue that Whiteness plays some role in defining membership in the Polish nation, although this is commonly denied in journalism and Polish academic literature (Grott 2014; Kłoskowska 2003; Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Siciński 1997; Ząbek 2009). In this context, I write about racism without racism—that is, implicit acceptance of Whiteness as a normative and central feature of Polishness, combined with simultaneous denial and suppression of racism from public consciousness. However, I argue that Polish national identity must be seen not so much as a static and singular social *Ding an Sich* with clear boundaries, but rather it must be defined in terms of plural and dynamic processes depending on the context (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Hall 1992; Theiss-Morse 2012). While the criterion of Whiteness seems to be well-embedded (although rarely recognized) in Polish society, it is contextual and selective; it is invoked only in certain contexts and in relation to certain groups.

I present my arguments in four sections. First, to introduce a broader context, I briefly discuss the history of the survey. In the following section I critically analyse the list and form of the survey items, focusing on their meaning as regards the inclusivity and exclusivity of Polish national identity, drawing on my qualitative research. This section is divided into two subsections, the first briefly discussing the methodology of my research, the second focusing on data analysis pertaining to the social criteria of Polishness and its openness and closedness. In the third section, I discuss the absence of biological factors as criteria of Polishness in the surveys. I explain that this omission is not a coincidence, but an effect of a rather widespread belief in Poland that the country is free of racism. The criticism of ignoring racism in the analysis of Polish identity is an introduction to the fourth section. In the last section, referring to the latest literature and my own qualitative research, I consider the role of racial criteria in defining Polishness. To sum up, my article uses concrete examples to demonstrate the limitations of crude quantitative methods that only glance over the complexities of the lay meanings that the respondents themselves attribute to reality. Above all, it shows that contrary to conventional understanding, there exist salient racial and racist criteria in how respondents define Polishness. In this context, the seemingly objective survey less measures Polish identity than it contributes to masking its racial dimensions.

Opinion Poll on Social Criteria of Polishness

In June 1988, the Public Opinion Research Centre (OBOP) conducted a survey designed by sociologists from the University of Warsaw on Polish national identity. The OBOP was the oldest public opinion research institute in Poland. It was established on the wave of post-Stalinist thought in 1958 within the structure of state television. In 1994, during the post-communist transformation, it was detached and transformed into a commercial company. Then in 1998, it was privatized and became part of the international research group Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS Nipo) operating under the name TNS OBOP. In 2010, TNS OBOP merged with another public opinion institute called Pentor. Pentor was established in 1991 as the first private opinion poll institute in Poland. In 2005, it

became part of the international corporation Research International, and since 2009 it has been part of the global research network TNS. As a result of the merger of TNS OBOP and TNS Pentor, TNS Polska was established, which currently operates within the Kantar Group (Kantar Public 2018; TNS OBOP 2008).

Despite the changes in ownership and names of the institute, the survey initiated by the OBOP in 1988 was conducted regularly and repeated every 10 years in 1998, 2008, and 2018, becoming one of the main sources of information for a wide audience on the nature of Polish national identity (Kantar Public 2018; Karkowska 2019; TNS OBOP 2008). More precisely, in subsequent years the survey was repeated, focusing on only one question from the 1988 survey, which at that time was part of a broader sociological project. In 1988, the first question of the questionnaire concerned “the social criteria of Polishness” (Kantar Public 2018; Nowicka and Łodziński 2001), and this question was also asked in subsequent years. The question was: “If you were to consider someone Polish, what would be important in your opinion, and what would be less important?” Respondents were presented with a list of ten features that were considered to be “Polishness criteria functioning in public discourse” (Kantar Public 2018: 2). These were the following characteristics:

- 1) having citizenship in the People’s Republic of Poland (later changed to “having Polish citizenship”),
- 2) living permanently in Poland,
- 3) having Catholic faith,
- 4) being born in Poland,
- 5) having knowledge of Polish culture and history,
- 6) speaking the Polish language,
- 7) having at least one parent of Polish nationality,
- 8) making special contributions to Poland,
- 9) following Polish customs,
- 10) feeling that you are Polish.

According to survey reports, these criteria can be ordered in terms of the extent to which their fulfilment depends on the individual (TNS OBOP 2008). The criteria “being born in Poland” and “having at least one parent of Polish nationality” were considered independent of the individual. The criteria “having Catholic faith,” “having Polish citizenship,” and “speaking the Polish language” are claimed to be more flexible and to some extent depend on the individual. As it is argued, you can change your faith, acquire citizenship, and learn the language. The criteria “having knowledge of Polish culture and history,” “making special contribution to Poland,” and “following Polish customs” are regarded as being dependent “to a large extent on the individuals themselves” (TNS OBOP 2008, 3). The criterion “feeling that you are Polish” is entirely a matter of individual choice (TNS OBOP 2008). A similar arrangement of these criteria on the scale of openness and closedness can be found in the academic literature (Karkowska 2019; Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Pierzchała 2011; Wysocki 2017). The survey was intended not only to diagnose the character of Polish identity but also to determine its degree of openness.

Survey Items in the Context of the Openness and Closedness of Polish Identity

Pierre Bourdieu (1993) argued that opinion polls assume that people have defined and consistent views on issues that they often do not think about. Research on everyday nationalism suggests that in the modern world, national identities have become trivialized, an unnoticeable and self-explanatory context of everyday life for so-called ordinary people (Billig 1995; Brubaker 1996; Hall 1992; Skey and Antonsich 2017). Even social researchers often unknowingly consider a nation as something that was taken for granted and not subject to problematization, which is manifested by methodological nationalism—that is, unreflexive acceptance of national frameworks in the analysis

of social phenomena (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Given that national identity is often seen as something natural and self-evident, it can be assumed that only in exceptional situations do most people reflect on their national identity. It can be argued that in Poland, such a situation took place in 2015–16 during the crisis of refugees' rights protection (Fotaki 2019). In 2015, the number of refugees and migrants coming to the European Union (EU) from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) increased significantly (Crawley et al. 2018). In May 2015, the EU adopted a relocation plan that aimed to parcel out some refugees between member states. According to the arrangements agreed upon by the liberal-conservative government of Ewa Kopacz, Poland was to receive several thousand refugees (Horolets et al. 2019). However, the right-wing nationalist government of Law and Justice (PiS), formed in autumn 2015, rejected the relocation plan. PiS, the right-wing press, and some Catholic clergy triggered a moral panic against refugees identified as Muslims (Górak-Sosnowska and Pachocka 2019). They presented Muslims as a threat to the very existence of the Polish nation (Narkowicz 2018; Pędziwiatr 2017). The right wing created an atmosphere of increased awareness of the importance of national identity. It can be said that the time of the perceived national crisis was a kind of ethnomethodological experiment that undermined the self-evidence and taken-for-granted-ness of the nation, undermined the “natural order of the world,” and made people think about their understanding of the national identity (Fox 2017).

Method

During the crisis, and together with my team, I conducted qualitative research on attitudes toward migrants in Poland in the context of understanding Polishness (Jaskulowski 2019). The research relied on a series of case studies in various locations and involved semi-structured interviews with local inhabitants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility. Indeed, given that this technique combines predetermined questions with open questions, informants had the opportunity to raise themes that they considered important and that were not included in our list of specific questions (Brinkman and Kvale 2018). The interviews aimed to explore people's attitudes toward economic migrants, especially highly-skilled migrants. However, when asked about migrants, the local residents interviewed often wanted to talk about Muslim refugees, especially regarding their resettlement to Poland in the framework of the European Union relocation scheme from 2015. They were also quite eager to reflect on Polish national identity and national boundaries in this context, as many of them believed that Muslim refugees pose a security threat and may even undermine the very existence of the Polish nation (Jaskulowski 2019).

Overall, 191 individual semi-structured interviews and two group interviews with a total of 12 participants were collected between 2015 and 2017 (Jaskulowski 2019). Considering the requirements of qualitative research, the sample was very extensive, guaranteeing that saturation was reached (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). The selection of the research participants was also guided by maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the sample included interviewees of both sexes manifesting considerable diversity in terms of age (from 18 to 67 years old), education (primary, secondary, tertiary, doctoral), place of residence (metropolitan city, town, village) and social class (from underclass to upper middle class). All of the respondents have Polish citizenship and defined themselves as Poles. In accordance with ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from each interviewee, having been told that they would not have to answer any questions they deemed uncomfortable, and could withdraw from the interview at any time. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants consented to the use of their verbatim responses for academic purposes under the condition that their identities would not be revealed. Thus, in this study I do not provide any real personal names or more precise information on age, place of residence, or education to avoid breaching the respondents' confidentiality (Surmiak 2018, 2019). I regard anonymity and confidentiality as extremely important, as the interviews concerned sensitive topics including stereotypes, prejudices, and racism (Jaskulowski 2019).

Data Analysis

Interviews shed light on attitudes toward various types of migrants in the context of national identities boundaries and revealed three criteria of Polishness which are not included in the OBOP/TNS Kantar survey. First is the understanding of national symbols such as the flag or emblem. For example, one of the informants explained that if someone wants to be recognized as a Pole, they must “respect our national symbols, know for example our anthem, know the main symbols.” It can be argued that this criterion coincides with item 5 on the survey (knowledge of Polish culture and history). However, the criterion of knowledge of symbols seems to be weaker (i.e., easier to meet). Understanding the meaning of the emblem does not necessarily involve any deeper knowledge of Polish history or culture. Secondly, the interviewees also pointed to the importance of loyalty to Poland, which should be manifested in some actions for Poland. Although this activity was understood differently (from declarative readiness to sacrifice one’s life to everyday civic activity), the interviewees clearly indicated that Polishness also has a behavioural dimension, which is not included in the survey. Thus, one of the informants elucidated that for him, being a Pole requires living in Poland and not leaving the country even when circumstances are inauspicious: “It means [...] facing reality and struggling with it.” He stressed that a Pole should “work for Poland” and “defend Poland,” for example, “against vilification in the media.” Moreover, he or she should work for the common good,” for instance, “by engaging in charity.” Third, the interviewees’ statements revealed the importance of race in defining Polishness, although this issue was rarely raised explicitly, and interviewees refused to accept that they could be racist. Thus, one informant said, “I am absolutely not racist, but the White man is so much more secure [...] people with a different skin tone are so much stranger.” Some interviewees defined Polishness in terms of Whiteness. Under the influence of Islamophobic discourse, they regarded a darker skin colour as a signifier of dangerous otherness, which they identified with “Muslim civilization.” However, the issue of race requires a broader discussion to which I will devote a separate section.

In the light of my qualitative research, doubts also arise regarding not only the list of socially significant criteria but also the meaning of the particular Polishness criteria in the survey. The survey, as a standardized research tool used to collect quantitatively comparable data, assumes that the meaning of the questions is clear, obvious, and unambiguous to respondents (Fowler 1995). However, in the case of the analysed survey, the meaning of the four criteria is far from unambiguous, especially in the context of the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of the Polish national identity.

First, take a look at item 10, “feeling that you are Polish.” As I already mentioned, it is assumed that respondents who mark this criterion think that Polishness is a matter of individual choice. However, the word “feeling” might mean for respondents that there is some deeper and stable psychological basis for Polishness. In my qualitative research, interviewees rarely claimed that national belonging was a matter of free choice depending mainly on the will of the individual. Although many informants stressed the importance of the subjective factor, at the same time they thought that the sense of Polishness does not arise *ex nihilo*. Such a way of thinking was evident in the following claim: “I would say that the feeling of belonging. It is kind of an effect created by ... upbringing, awareness, and the values that man ... believes [...] It [religion] is important. Poland is a Catholic country ... I am a Catholic and it seems to me that this is part of our culture.” Some stated that the sense of Polishness appears and accompanies objective criteria of national membership such as language, culture, or customs. In other words, for some of them the feeling of Polishness was the result of a deep understanding of Polish culture and using the Polish language; it was the final stage of cultural assimilation, not a declaration of will. In other words, the choice of the criterion “feeling that you are Polish” does not necessarily mean that the respondent is in favour of a voluntarist concept of national belonging (Smith 2010, 39–42). It is illegitimate to assume in advance that the meaning of this criterion unambiguously and obviously indicates the understanding of national belonging in voluntarist terms.

Second, the cultural criterion is also questionable concerning its openness. I use the term “cultural criterion” to denote three survey items: 5) knowledge of Polish culture and history, 6)

speaking the Polish language, and 9) following Polish customs. The choice of these criteria is interpreted as proof of a relatively open understanding of Polishness. It is assumed that “the “newcomer” can gain knowledge of Polish culture and history, learn the Polish language, and start following Polish customs. To a large extent, it all depends on their will and effort. It is implicitly supposed that the meaning of categories of culture, history, language, or customs are obvious and unambiguous. However, both in the light of the theoretical literature on nationalism and my own qualitative research, the issue is more complex. National culture as a criterion for inclusion can be understood very differently. For example, Will Kymlicka argues that national culture can be understood in a “thin” or “thick” (ethnographic) way (Kymlicka 2001). A “thin” understanding of culture means that in order to be accepted as a member of a nation, it is sufficient to know, for example, basic historical dates and follow a few select customs. A “thick” concept of national culture means that in order to belong to a nation, the individual must acquire the entire way of life of the nation, which makes it difficult if not impossible for many “newcomers” to fulfil this condition. In other words, the criterion of culture might also have an exclusionary character.

The exclusionary nature of the national culture is well grasped by the notion of neo-racism or cultural racism describing the change of rhetoric toward migrants (Balibar 1991; Blaut 1992; Stolcke 1995). Due to the discrediting of racism in Europe, anti-immigrant sentiments are expressed in a cultural idiom—for example, the right wing evokes the alleged radical cultural otherness of migrants, which means that they will never be able to integrate and always remain “others.” In this type of rhetoric, national culture has a similar function to that of race, serving to create an impenetrable symbolic boundary between “us” and “them” (Stolcke 1995; Wollenberg 2014). Similarly, in my research, some interviewees understood national culture in a way that limited its openness. For example, they pointed out that in order to be considered a Pole, a migrant must fully understand Polish culture. However, in order to fully understand Polish culture, one has to be brought up in it from childhood, so only the future generations of migrants can be considered Poles, which shows that the process of inclusion into the Polish nation is considered difficult and long-lasting. One of the informants argued that inclusion in the nation is difficult if not impossible to achieve: “Well, it would have to be a [...] long-lasting, long-term process, which would have to last, I suspect, several centuries [...] it is a process so long-term that I cannot imagine it. But I think that, like so many things, it is possible.” As he continued to explain, a newcomer can never become a Pole themselves: “I think only his great-grandchildren will become.” Moreover, according to the majority of interviewees, some categories (e.g., Muslims) are so different that they will never be able to understand Polish culture and will always remain strangers even if they would like to be regarded as Poles. As one of the informants noted: “Just take the Quran, read a few sentences from the Quran, and you can see how this faith [is different] from our Christian one [...]. And everything becomes clear [...] I happened to read the Quran and the holy scriptures; they do not really fit us religiously and culturally.”

Third, the survey assumes that citizenship is a matter of individual choice, that one can acquire new citizenship. The survey implicitly refers to the dichotomy of civic/ethnic nationalism widely spread in the academic literature and journalism (Ignatieff 1993; Kamusella 2017b; Kohn 1944). This dichotomy has been repeatedly criticized for many questionable assumptions, including the premise that civic nationalism defining national belonging in terms of citizenship is open. Many authors have pointed out that the path to citizenship is often long, tedious, and inaccessible to most foreigners (Brubaker 1999; Kuzio 2002; Kymlicka 2001; Yack, 1999). Regarding Poland, the condition for acquiring citizenship is generally permanent residence in Poland (from 2–10 years depending on the type of stay) and *de facto* employment in the country as well as confirmed knowledge of the Polish language. However, the survey did not ask about the knowledge of legal regulations, and respondents could associate different meanings and ideas with citizenship. It cannot be assumed *a priori* that they are familiar with the citizenship law. For example, in my qualitative research, for some interviewees, citizenship was linked with a long and tedious process of cultural integration or even assimilation, which was understood as a difficult and lengthy process

and was regarded as inaccessible for Muslim migrants. Their way of thinking is reflected in the outline of the migration policy prepared by the PiS government, which says that citizenship should be available only to a few migrants who fully assimilate into the Polish system of values including religious values (MSWiA 2019).

The fourth concerns item 3, namely the Catholic faith. This criterion is defined as an indicator of “traditional” Polishness—that is, a belief in the fundamental connectedness between Polish national identity and Catholicism (TNS OBOP 2008; Kantar Public 2018). However, this connection is less traditional than modern, as it was formed at the end of the 19th century under the influence of Polish ethno-authoritarian nationalism represented by National Democracy (ND) (Porter-Szűcs 2017). At first, the ND was a secular movement and rather hostile to religion, but with time it recognized the social significance of Catholicism. This new approach to Catholicism was spelled out by the main ideologist of the ND, Roman Dmowski, in a brochure entitled *The Church, the Nation, and the State* (1927). As Dmowski (1927) wrote:

“Catholicism is not an addition to Polishness [...] but is at the core of its essence [...]. The attempt to separate Catholicism from Polishness, to separate the nation from religion and from the Church, is the destruction of the very essence of the nation [...] the Polish nation does not deny its members the right to believe in something other than the Catholic faith [...] but does not grant them the right to conduct politics that are incompatible with the nature and Catholic needs of the nation, or against Catholicism.” (13; 25)

Today, PiS perceives the role of Catholicism in a similar way. During my research, some interviewees also underlined the historical and social role of Catholicism in Poland, explaining that every Pole should respect its special status. “Shit, we have such a long tradition of being Christian [...] the state,” explained one of the informants. “We have so many years of tradition that it cannot be erased simply by a single European Union decree or something.” In light of this, the survey question about the Catholic faith seems to be too narrow because it does not take into account that for some respondents, it is not so much faith that is important but, for example, celebrating Catholic holidays or accepting the special status of the Church in Poland—even if it is not accompanied by any personal religious faith. In other words, such criteria as “following Polish customs” (item 9) or “having knowledge of Polish culture and history” (item 5) can also have a religious dimension for some respondents. Accordingly, in the tradition of Dmowski, some respondents might recognize that a Pole does not have to be a Catholic believer; it is sufficient that they are a non-believing church-goer or a non-believing non-church-goer who nevertheless supports the dominant role of the Church and the Catholic system of values because they recognize the significance of Catholicism for Polish culture and history. In a word, the simple criterion “Catholic faith” is misleading; it is not a good indicator of the popularity of the conviction of the relationship between Polishness and Catholicism. As one of the interviewees stressed, religion (Catholicism by default) is important for Polishness, although he himself is a non-believer: “Yes, of course, religion is in the case of Poland particularly connected with history. I am not talking about myself, but yes, of course, religion is very important.” Not mentioning this fact about the religious criterion is often exclusionary. In my research, many informants referred to this criterion in order to definitively exclude Muslims, particularly from the MENA area, who are allegedly essentially different from “us”, Poles who were brought up in Catholic culture and whose nation was historically shaped under the influence of Catholicism.

Racism Without Racism

As I previously mentioned, in the analysed survey there are no questions about race at all. Although it is difficult to talk about race, in the popular imagination biological criteria are often used to classify people and combine them into groups that are perceived as having a separate identity

(Fairbanks 2015). As many analyses demonstrate, various national identities are constructed around racial differences, and it is difficult to assume in advance that biological factors in Poland do not play any role in the social processes of constructing Polish identity (Gilroy 2000; Hall 2017). However, as I have already noted, the nature of racism in the modern world is changing. Due to the discrediting of racism and its contemporary lack of social acceptability, it now takes on more latent forms that do not directly refer to biological factors. In this context, researchers write about symbolic racism, cultural racism, racism without racism, or neo-racism. For example, Étienne Balibar (1991, 21) argues that many notions in public discourse, such as “cultural difference” or “immigration,” provide substitutes for the concept of race, because they stigmatize others, create rigid hierarchies, and justify discrimination. As he explains, “It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but ‘only’ the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions.” In this context, the statements by the informants quoted previously, highlighting the impossibility of surmounting cultural boundaries, can be interpreted as a form of neo-racism. However, in the interviews references were also made to biological factors, especially to Whiteness, which has become a signifier of “our” culture. When writing about racism without racism, I do not mean to replace race with cultural criteria in referring to biological factors, or deny that these criteria are important in defining Polishness. In other words, although Polishness is combined with Whiteness, this fact tends to be overlooked in the general consciousness (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020). The hegemonic conception of Polishness creates an illusion—supported by the analyzed survey—that Polish national identity is free of biological and cultural racism.

The survey results themselves could suggest a significance of racial factors. All subsequent surveys revealed that for a significant percentage of respondents, having at least one parent of Polish nationality is an important criterion of Polishness (for example, in 2018, 84% of respondents considered this criterion to be very important or rather important, and in the previous years it was from 79% to 81%). Considering the social structure of Poland—a relatively small percentage of visibly different migrants (the increase in the number of migrants in recent years is mainly related to economic migration from Ukraine)—racial criteria might play a role in defining Polishness. In other words, it can be assumed that in a culturally homogeneous Polish society, biological criteria must have some relevance in creating boundaries between us and them, that by default a Pole is White, or that for many respondents a Polish parent is by default a Pole with white skin. Unfortunately, the survey did not address this issue, helping to maintain the conviction in the public space that biological factors are irrelevant in defining Polishness.

The lack of questions about racial criteria in the survey is not contingent, but it results from a fairly widespread belief in Poland that the country is free from racism. For example, two prominent Polish sociologists, Ewa Nowicka and Sławomir Łodziński (2001), argue:

“The racial problem has never existed in our society. Poland has never been a colonial country, the arrivals of physically different foreigners were sporadic, and only the inhabitants of big cities could have had contact with them. In Poland racist ideology did not develop in wide social circles, and the reluctance towards other national and ethnic groups was based more on social premises, historical experiences than on some clear beliefs about the specificity of human groups.” (153)

This quotation perfectly sums up the arguments put forward by various authors in favour of the alleged absence of racism in Poland (Grott 2014; Kłoskowska 2003; Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Siciński 1997; Ząbek 2009; cf. Nowicka 2018). The issue of racism in Poland is usually discussed in the context of the history of the eugenics movement in the first half of the 20th century. It is argued, however, that the fascination with racial hygiene and racial science in Poland was fairly short-term, as the country’s experience of World War II quickly led to the concept of race being discredited and

disappearing from Polish public and academic life (Gawin 2018). It is quite commonly accepted in Polish literature that racism in Poland has never been a problem for three basic reasons. Firstly, it is claimed that Poland, unlike Western European countries, did not participate in the colonization of Africa or Asia. Poland did not have overseas colonies, and there was no ideology justifying colonial conquests or a history of exploitation of colonial populations, so there was no basis for racism to develop. However, as Bolaji Balogun (2018) recently showed, the notions of colonization, racism, and White superiority cannot be reduced to European imperial powers such as France or the United Kingdom but must be also extended to the less powerful European nation-states such as Poland. Analysing the activities of the Polish Colonial Society in the interwar period, he demonstrated the role of racial imaginaries in Polish politics. His analysis “revealed the colonial inheritance of racialised governance and postcolonial conditions that manifest themselves in contemporary racisms” (Balogun 2018, 2524; Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020).

Secondly, it is often argued that the Black population in Poland was and is few in number, and therefore there have been no conditions for the formation of racism (Kłoskowska 2003). In fact, despite migration, the Black population remains a small percentage of Polish society. However, the small percentage of the Black population does not exclude the existence of racist stereotypes. One example is a popular book by Henryk Sienkiewicz entitled “In Desert and Wilderness” originally published in 1911, which is on the list of readings in primary school. The book tells the story of the Polish boy’s adventures in Africa and is permeated with the ideology of the White man’s superiority and full of racist stereotypes (e.g., Black people are depicted as devoid of morality and compared to animals or children). For example, one of the characters explained the alleged nature of Black people: “Among the Blacks there are honest souls, though as a rule you cannot depend upon their gratitude; they are children who forget what happened the day before” (Sienkiewicz 1917, 316). Although Sienkiewicz’s historical novels are considered to be key to shaping the understanding of Polishness, there is a consensus regarding his Africa novel’s “irrelevance to the politics of Polish identity” (Klobucka 2001, 249), and the racism of this novel is ignored—for example, the main centre of literature studies in Poland published a monograph devoted to Sienkiewicz in 2019 in which the word racism is not mentioned at all (Szleszyński and Rudkowska 2019). Further, new studies show that Black or darker skinned people experience racist prejudice in Poland (Balogun 2019). Racism cannot be reduced to attitudes toward Black people or people of African descent, but it includes prejudices toward Jews, Muslims, and Roma. For example, in the case of the latter group, Nowicka’s research shows that Roma are sometimes perceived as racially different and are also subject to racial stereotypes—accused of laziness or having an unpleasant smell (Nowicka 1995).

Thirdly, Polish authors argue that the existing forms of prejudice in Poland were not and are not racist. In this context, the issue of anti-Semitism is often discussed, which, as some authors argue, was an inalienable element of Polish nationalism. It is claimed that the Polish identity was formed in opposition to the Jews, who constituted a significant other (Michlic 2006). However, anti-Semitism was interpreted mainly as a phenomenon of economic and cultural basis (Grott 2014). In other words, it is argued that in contrast to, for example, German racist anti-Semitism, in Poland the discrimination toward Jews was allegedly due to the fact that the latter dominated trade, cities, and free professions. The Polish middle class, which was emerging in the 19th century, had to compete with culturally different Jews, which led to the creation of negative anti-Jewish stereotypes. Stereotypes were therefore economic, not racial, and were a cultural expression of the economic interests of the Polish middle class. For example, the ideologists of the ND, which was largely representative of the middle classes, talked about the incomplete social structure of Polish society and proclaimed the need for an economic fight against Jews (e.g., a boycott of Jewish trade). However, it can be argued that, from the very beginning, the attitude of nationalists toward Jews was marked by at least cultural racism. Nationalists rejected the possibility of the assimilation of Jews into Polish society. In fact, they referred not so much to racial differences as to cultural differences. In their view, Jews had such a different culture that they would never become part of the Polish nation, which resembles contemporary Islamophobic rhetoric (Dmowski 1934 [1902]).

The essentialized notion of culture played a similar role here as the category of race; namely, it served to exclude a certain category of people. However, with the radicalisation of the 1930s, explicit biological language appeared in nationalist texts. For example, the aforementioned Roman Dmowski, in his sensational 1931 novel *Inheritance*, telling the story of a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy against Poland, presents Jews as a clearly distinct group in terms of physical characteristics (Dmowski 1931). Moreover, in the 1930s, radicalising Polish ethno-authoritarian nationalists also resorted to physical violence. For example, they beat Jewish students at universities and customers of Jewish shops.

Selective Racism

The importance of racial criteria has also become apparent during the aforementioned refugee rights protection crisis. Right-wing discourse identified refugees with Muslims, who were presented as an existential threat to the very existence of the Polish nation. It drew on essentialised cultural differences and sometimes implicitly presented refugees as people with a dark complexion, emphasising their difference from “us” Poles (White by default). In this discourse, the dark colour became an indicator of dangerous otherness. Some right-wing politicians also used openly racist rhetoric, for example Kaczyński, who warned that refugees spread “dangerous diseases, parasites, or protozoa” (Krzyżanowski 2018).

The anti-refugee rhetoric founds resonance in society and was one of the reasons for the victory of PiS in the 2015 general election. In a short time, the percentage of those opposed to taking in refugees increased from 21% in May 2015 to 53% in December 2015 (Cieślińska and Dziekońska, 2019). The ease of mobilization of Polish society against refugees in the name of defending national identity could indicate the significance of racial boundaries in Poland. This significance is also evidenced by my qualitative research, during which most interviewees reproduced official images of Muslims as threatening others. In accordance with the logic of cultural racism, they attributed essential cultural characteristics to Muslims. They also tended to naturalise cultural differences. In their eyes, the individual becomes a Muslim not as a result of religious socialisation but as a result of birth. Many interviewees animalised Muslims by attributing to them features that placed them closer to the animal world than to the human one. Moreover, some assumed by default that a Muslim refugee could be recognized by their darker skin colour. For example, one informant compared Syrian refugees to “filthy animals” and claimed that “it’s hard to distinguish them from the Roma because they’re very similar.”

Some authors have pointed out that the anti-Muslim pattern resembles anti-Semitic clichés and similarities (Bobako 2017; Narkowicz 2018; Pędziwiatr 2017). However, my qualitative research has shown that, although both forms of prejudice (anti-Muslim and anti-Semitism) have common features, they also differ in many respects. For example, the interviewees did not attribute to Muslims high intelligence, agency, control over money and economy, or conspiratorial plots (traditional elements of anti-Semitism). Moreover, informants never referred explicitly to examples of Jews, which of course does not exclude their unconsciously drawing on anti-Semitic clichés. Instead, they compared Muslim refugees to Roma and projected anti-Roma stereotypes onto refugees. For instance, in their opinion, Muslims, like the Roma, are reluctant to work, scrounge welfare benefits, are prone to crime, do not want to assimilate, and provocatively demonstrate their cultural otherness. The interviewees placed refugees, similarly to the Roma, outside the Polish national boundaries, referring to their essentialised cultural differences. However, for some interviewees, a visible sign of this otherness was a darker skin colour; refugees, like the Roma, are physically different from “us” Poles. In the interviewees’ statements, cultural otherness was combined with physical difference. There were also some dissimilarities between Islamophobia and Romophobia. For example, the Roma were considered radically different and constituted an individual threat (a Roma stereotype of a criminal who could beat or steal) but were

not imagined as a collective threat to the very existence of the Polish nation, in contrast to Muslim refugees.

Studies on the experiences of Black people in Poland, works on the Polish colonial project, and the susceptibility of Polish society to Islamophobic slogans (taking into account the way in which the boundaries between “we” Poles and “they” Muslim refugees are constructed), indicate the significance of the racial criteria of Polishness. Although some authors suggest an essential link between Polishness and Whiteness, it is necessary to understand these links in a more nuanced way. Otherwise, we could fall into the trap of cultural racism that essentialises national or cultural identities, overlooking their internal heterogeneity. In other words, Poles are not racist because they are Poles, but some Poles link Polishness with Whiteness in some contexts. We must remember that theoretical analyses of identity indicate that it is not a static social fact but a dynamic, contextual, and situational process of identification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Hall 1992). For example, from the perspective of social identity theory, individuals do not just have an identity, but in different contexts and situations, they invoke different identity categories. Identity is a dynamic and contextual process of categorization and identification; in one context, for instance, Whiteness might be meaningless, and in another it might be significant because, for example, its relevance will be accentuated by hegemonic social actors with the power to impose their own definitions of identity.

My qualitative research also indicates that Whiteness has such a selective significance in the definition of Polishness by interviewees. More specifically, my research suggests contextual and selective reference to racial criterion. In other words, the Whiteness criterion has been activated with regard to certain groups and in certain situations, for example, with regard to refugees from MENA countries during the so-called migration crisis, but not with regard to Asians or Muslim Turks or some Blacks, who are generally accepted, even by interviewees who are strongly opposed to taking refugees. Despite their physical differences, they are accepted because they are not perceived as a threat and because they perform useful economic functions (e.g., retail trade and food service). For example, one of the informants explained who might be recognized as a Pole: “Well, White, anyway, yeah? A man from this cultural background, rather Christian, yes?” In this way, he identified Whiteness with Polish culture and Christianity (used here as a synecdoche of Catholicism). Nevertheless, the same respondent explained that every Pole should take part in political life, and gave an example of a Black MP in the Polish parliament: “Such an example for me is, I don’t know, but of course it does not always work that way, there is some MP named Godson, I don’t know what race he is, I don’t know if he is a ‘Murzyn,’ or what to call him. But I think you can easily call him a Pole.” On the one hand, the informant emphasized White skin as an indicator of Polishness. On the other hand, he accepted the Black MP as a Pole, although he used pejorative language, calling him “Murzyn,” which many individuals, especially Black people living in Poland, find offensive. Thus, a Black MP can be considered a Pole despite his “visible” otherness, because he possesses a large amount of human capital. However, a refugee from Syria is excluded because he or she is not only visibly different, but is also defined as having a low amount of human capital (i.e. allegedly lacking education and unwilling to work, instead relying on benefits), as well as posing a threat according to the stereotype of a Muslim terrorist. The targets of racialising were groups that were perceived by informants as radically different and threatening or having low human capital. In other words, Whiteness is not a static feature of Polish national identity, but it seems to be a category evoked only in certain situations and in relation to certain groups. The question arises: when and in what circumstances is Whiteness invoked as a defining feature of Polishness, and in relation to which groups? Is the racialisation of certain groups (especially Muslims from the MENA area and Black people) a permanent element of social construction of the Polishness boundaries, or is there de-racialisation in certain contexts? It is difficult to answer these questions at the moment, but one thing is certain: research on Polish identity cannot ignore the question of racial identity.

Conclusions

My article uses a concrete example of a survey on the social criteria of Polishness to demonstrate the limitations of its crude quantitative methods, which have difficulty grasping the intricate meanings that respondents attribute to national identity. More importantly, the survey analysis was a pretext to look at the nature of Polish national identity in the context of its openness and closedness. My main conclusion is that the survey does not so much “measure” the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of Polish national identity, as it is one of the ways of maintaining the illusion that biological factors do not play any role in how Poles define Polishness. Instead, I demonstrate that methodological inaccuracies in this popular survey have serious social consequences, as the authority of objective quantification is unknowingly and unintentionally used to support the hegemonic concept of Polishness and to mask its racial dimensions. The survey, under the guise of objective research, contributes to maintaining the conviction that the national identity is not racialized, which is consistent with the conventional and traditional understanding of Polish identity. In the article, contrary to conventional wisdom and referring to my own qualitative research and the latest literature, I argue that Polish identity to some extent revolves around Whiteness. I argue that this racial dimension is selective, processual, and contextual. I suggest that race cannot be perceived as an immanent and constant feature of Polish national identity. In other words, Poles are not racist because they are Poles, but some Poles link Polishness with Whiteness in some contexts. However, due to the lack of research, my reflections on the importance of physical factors in defining Polishness are preliminary and hypothetical. More systematic analyses of Polish identity are needed, which cannot ignore racial premises of Polishness.

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