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Title: Experiences of Otherness and its Biographical Consequences

Abstract

The findings to be presented in this paper are based on an in-depth analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1981, 1983, 1984; 2012) with people (coming from different European countries) who for different reasons and because of different motives (looking for work, education, foreign spouse, escaping from predicament or suffocating milieu) have temporarily or permanently resided in another European country. An attempt will be made to consider how and to what extent being exposed to non-native (in the sense of national, or – generally – culturally specific) forms of life is likely to be a vehicle of Europeanization understood in terms of a process through which a European mental space may emerge.

The collected autobiographical interviews strongly suggest that one’s encounter with Europe (which is a semantically wider expression that refers to any country the narrators reside at least for some time), its different cultural patterns, life styles, system of relevances and values results in very intensive biographical work i.e., re-evaluating, revising, reseeing, and rejudging (cf. Strauss, 1969: 100) one’s past and future in order to yield a sense of seamless continuity of identity (Strauss, 1993: 99). It is remarkable, however, that biographical work not only involves cognitive processes, but also initiates basic changes in one’s attitude towards everyday life and certain actions which are to transform one’s life situation (Strass et.al., 1985, Kaźmierska 2008). It usually starts with questioning and even disallowing ones cultural background that entails permanent comparison (manifesting itself in a number of contrast sets narrators are introducing while telling their life history) of their country of origin, their families and local milieu and their observations abroad. This, in turn, quite often leads to a very significant biographical change: ones hitherto contemptuous and disrespected attitude toward one’s country of origin takes on a different (usually positive) relevance. Ordinary, a person living in two (or more) cultures becomes aware of conflicts and differences between them and consequently becomes painfully self-conscious (Cf. Stonequist, 1961). At the same time he or she is able to develop a sense of belonging to certain “we”-communities that is based on more intelligent, more critical and more objective worldview (Park, 1961: xvii-xviii). The focus will be on these cases in which the process of comparing two cultures is associated with (re)patriotization (when a feeling of belonging to one’s country of origin – previously trivial, considered unimportant or associated with being much tired of all limitations, shortcomings, nuisances of living in the country – takes on a new meaning) and / or adopting a place of life abroad as one’s second home and the process may follow (Kaźmierska et.al., 2011).