

## **Identity: Why does it Move us so much?**

*Not long ago I visited Wien together with some of my friends. We went to some museums, theatre performances and did some sightseeing. Most of the time we had nice discussions, but suddenly a very sensitive topic came up. Being the only Czech in our group, I was asked the question: “Who was the last Queen in your history?” I started to laugh and answered that there has never been any queen in the Czech history. And my friends were really very surprised. “How is it possible? And who was Maria Theresia according to you? She was officially the Queen of the Bohemian Kingdom and was crowned in ...”*

*A big discussion started and I really could not persuade my friends that Maria Theresia was not a Czech queen – or more precisely that she is not perceived as a Czech queen. The discussion was rather difficult and maybe a bit less friendly than before, but I found also one very positive aspect of this experience – I started to think about the issue of “identity” which was the basic topic of the whole discussion.*

### **Defining Identity**

If we take the psychological definitions of the term *identity*, we can look at it from three basic perspectives, according to Milan NAKONEČNÝ: identity can be understood as the sense of one’s own *continuity* in time (it is myself and not my neighbour or enemy, it is me developing in time), *authenticity* (it is my behaviour, my decision making, my roles and opinions) and *identification* with another group or idea (I belong to this or that group). The last meaning of the term is the most important one in intercultural relationships.

We all feel that we are members of groups we consider *ours* (this is the in-group feeling). We feel that we are members of our family (and not any other family in the world, although we might sometimes like to be members of another one), of a school or peer group, of a

village or city community (someone does not like people from small villages, they on the other hand think that she or he is just another haughty person from Praha), and of course one also feels a member of an ethnic group (I am Czech, probably with some Jewish roots and family members of a foreign nationality).

Identification with my in-groups gives me the possibility to live in society and besides that, it is also a training field for my social skills. And what about the feelings towards people from other groups? They are usually “the others” (this is the out-group feeling), different, and this perspective helps me to identify myself with my own groups of which I feel to be a member. The feeling of in- and out-group gives me a possibility to create and build my own identity. At the same time it creates space for potential tensions which can grow into an extreme feeling, such as xenophobia.

### **The Petals of a Daisy**

We can imagine identity as a daisy. Each group we feel to be member of is a petal of the daisy. The whole flower then, is our identity. The aim is to have more than just one daisy petal and to be also aware of it. This image is important for the next steps in thinking about the issue of identity. In his book *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Richard W. BRISLIN points out that there are three basic levels of how we relate to members of out-groups: the affective, cognitive and conative level.

The *affective* level gives us the information about what we feel towards other people. This level can be very different from the second, the *cognitive* level, which shows us which kind of information we have about the members of some out-groups.

The third level, the *conative* one can often be the crucial one. It concerns the behaviour we use towards others. Our actions can range from the stance of profound passivity, which creates space for prejudice and indifference, to the stance of conscious and engaged presence in society.

Let us take the next step now. We talked already about the feeling of identity and how it is linked to the distinction between out-group and in-group feelings. We also tried to suggest some differences among the three levels of attitude towards members of out-groups.

## The Role of Emotions

One question, however, still remains open. To explain it further, I will avail myself of an example from a seminar I was leading together with a colleague of mine. The theme of the seminar was *identity* and the participants were teachers from various secondary schools. It was a very homogeneous group, since all of them were from the Czech Republic and worked in Czech schools which are ethnically still very homogeneous. The only non-Czech was my colleague, who was Dutch. The first hours of the seminar passed in a very friendly atmosphere: we were talking about identity in general and about the way how we can describe attitudes towards people from out-groups. All participants could surprisingly easily agree on most of what was being said.

However, we wanted to provoke some deeper discussions and therefore raised the issue of the Sudeten Germans. (After the Second World War almost the entire Sudeten German minority, around two and a half million people, was expelled from Czechoslovakia. The issue is still very sensitive in the Czech Republic.) We used the method



of a role play for going deeper into the matter. The group of participants was divided into two sub-groups. One group was requested to play the role of the current inhabitants of a village in the border area. The original German speaking inhabitants of the village had been expelled after the Second World War. Most of the present inhabitants or their ancestors moved to the village in the 1950s and do not have any relations to the original inhabitants.

The other sub-group got the role of a delegation of the original Sudeten German inhabitants who are visiting the village in 2003. The aim of the visit was to continue the activities that had started in 1990 (for example a reconstruction of the local church financed by the Sudeten German side). The delegation had one specific request: to erect a small monument together with the Czech partners remembering the names of Sudeten Germans who were killed in 1945 during the expulsion from their homes. The Czech participants were shocked by this task. They had the very deep feeling that the aim of this task was to provoke the feeling of guilt. In the end we had to cancel the role play and to talk about the reasons behind these strong feelings.

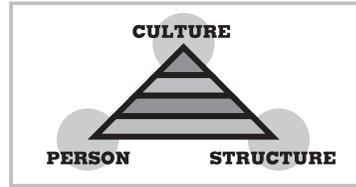
This example shows us how deep our feelings can be and what potential they have to influence our behaviour. We cannot take a rational decision not to feel our fears, guilt and anger. We have to accept our emotions but we also have to understand them. Understanding emotions and training ourselves in looking at things from a different perspective gives us an opportunity to change our behaviour. But what are the roots of our deep feelings and where do they come from?

### **The Person–Structure–Culture Triangle**

Let me introduce a concept of Karl-Heinz BITTL, explaining the cultural differences and their levels. BITTL has been active in the field of intercultural pedagogy for more than twenty-five years. He has been engaged in projects run by FBF (*Frankisches Bildungswerk für Friedensarbeit*) and EICCC (*European Institute Conflict – Culture – Co-operation*).

Culture is one of the corners of the triangle in the following picture;

it is meant to be a part of the triangle person–structure–culture, not only in the sense of national or ethnic group. There are also cultures of skinheads, anarchists, workers from a small village, etc.:



A *person* is an individual with her or his personal qualities, life story, behaviour and feeling of identities. *Structure* – the person lives in certain concrete structures – e.g. family, school class, labour circumstances or state. The structure creates also circumstances, rules and explanations. In the triangle, *culture* is the silent voice, which says what is right and what is wrong, legitimising behaviour, attitudes and opinions.

### **Three Whispering Voices**

Furthermore, we can imagine that this voice whispers at three different levels. The most superficial says which meals and music are good, what we should wear when going to the theatre or when hiking in the mountains. After 1990 it was a big shock to many Czechs when the first Western tourists came to Praha and went to the National Theatre wearing jeans. This was totally unacceptable from a Czech perspective. There are big cultural differences at this level, but it seems relatively easy to discuss them.

The voice goes a level deeper where it says what is right and what is wrong. It is the level where judgements find their source. We all imagine what is normal and common and what should be done. Each member of a culture has this feeling. A problem appears when two very different ideas clash.

Another situation to illustrate this: As a Czech you are going to go to the Netherlands for a business trip and you have made an appointment with your Dutch colleague back in January. Now it is May, you know that you should meet him on Friday 10<sup>th</sup>, but it has been already a long time since you agreed and many things could have changed, so you are a bit uncertain. You try to write him an email and ask again if everything is alright.

There is no answer, no reaction and the date of your departure has come. Should you go? Or did something happen and the meeting is

cancelled? But in spite of everything you still have the feeling that you should go, so you arrive to the meeting point and your “impossible” Dutch colleague is waiting there for you. Of course. From a Dutch perspective there is no doubt that the appointment once agreed is not cancelled. At the same time, from a Czech perspective there can be doubts in such a situation.

The deepest level is the level of basic pre-understandings. Pre-understanding is the picture you have in your mind coming to the door and opening it. You are very sure that there is another room behind the door and you take the further step. It would be a big surprise if there was nothing of that kind. We all have such pre-understandings in many deep pictures, ideas and ways of behaviour.

A good example is communication. There are two basic styles of communication: explicit and implicit. Cultures using explicit communication are able to describe things in a very pregnant way: they describe concrete situations and assign names to things. Implicit cultures use rather pictures, images, feelings and they use a concrete example only very rarely.

When a seminar with people from both explicit and implicit cultures takes place and participants are asked how they are, a very interesting situation occurs. Those from the explicit culture will talk about the journey or about what they did yesterday before arriving. The participants from the implicit culture will most probably use metaphors, they will use sentences like “I feel like a tree in the autumn” but they are unlikely to use a concrete example from their every-day life.

What do these two groups think about each other? These opinions are often not very flattering. The implicits think that the others are very superficial and the explicit may think that the others are rather indifferent. It is only a small example of how these deep things work and move us. There are studies examining the mentioned cultural differences from among whose I would like to recommend especially *Allemaal Andersdenkenden* written by Geert HOFSTEDE.

## **Intercultural Encounters**

In the preceding paragraphs we have presented the basic concepts concerning identity. One important question, however, still remains unsolved: what shall we do with them? Several things should be kept in mind. Theoretical concepts are always useful tools for understanding reality better. Their aim is to reflect practical situations. As long as they are just theories on paper, they will not help us in dealing with concrete situations. Their value can be proved only in real life, in intercultural encounters. We need to learn by doing and experiencing.

We have different reasons for being interested in intercultural issues as well. Some are just interested in the issue as such and want to learn more about themselves and others. In such a case these concepts can help to understand the situation better and can broaden perspectives. Others have a practical reason for their interest. They work with people from another background, from another group. In their work they encounter religious and cultural differences. They have to cope with difficult situations which determine their need to find tools for dealing with them. Here we reach a level of new social skills, experience and learning, which requires a lot of time and energy. One needs to change some of her or his attitudes and patterns of behaviour, which is often rather difficult. In this practical, intercultural situation it is advisable to get some training in intercultural competences.

Whether one's interest is rather theoretical or practical, one simple exercise can be particularly helpful when discussing identity. Take a sheet of paper and draw a daisy with at least seven petals. And then try to remember which groups you have ever felt yourself to be a member of and paint a symbol of the group on a petal. In the end you will have a nice picture of your own colourful identity. We all are members of more than just one group. And we all have an experience of tolerance regarding our own identities. This experience can be useful also in coping with others, members of other out-groups.

## Queen Maria Theresia

Let me finally return to our visit to Wien. “Maria Theresia was officially the Queen of the Bohemian Kingdom.” I remember that sentence being painful. “Well, it is alright, if you really think it. I do not feel it that way, but taking the historical facts into account I have to agree.”

Identity is crucial to tolerance. The first step is always to understand oneself better and to be aware of one’s own identity. It is obvious that I myself have to be tolerant to my various identities and should be able to reflect and experience this tolerance. Understanding myself can help me open my eyes for a better understanding of other people from other cultures (other regions, religious groups, other parts of the world or other parts of my hometown).

What happens then? Perhaps I will not feel the urge to judge so much and so often, and when someone has “strange” opinions I can only wonder and try to understand where these opinions come from. Of course, this procedure is relevant mainly when talking about the personal level. In a discussion on how different groups in society are organised and how they interact we would have to widen our concepts and take into also other elements which this article has not been concerned with.

### Suggested Reading

NAKONEČNÝ Milan, *Sociální psychologie*. Portál, 1999.

HOFSTEDE Geert, *Allemaal Andersdenkenden*.

BRISLIN Richard W., *Cross-Cultural Encounters*.

LOSCHKE Helga, *Interkulturelle Pädagogik*.

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