

Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs

*Me - Us - Them: Ethnic Prejudices among Youth and Alternative Methods of Education.
Case of Poland*

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In *Me - Us - Them: Ethnic Prejudices among Youth and Alternative Methods of Education. The Case of Poland*, Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs sums up years of research on ethnic attitudes and multicultural education. The book is not only a source of data collected in surveys, but also a methodological and theoretical study on ethnic attitudes, as well as on experimental educational methods in modern teaching. This is one of just a few texts in Poland that evaluate the quality and efficiency of alternative educational methods in forming positive attitudes toward ethnic groups.

The complexity of constructs such as attitudes generates a number of research problems. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs analyses them in the methodological section of her book, and concludes that quantitative surveys, which reflect mainly the statistics of attitudes, do not provide sufficient answers to various important questions. The main problem concerns the evaluation of sincerity and authenticity of declared emotions and opinions. On the basis of her experiences, the author demonstrates that examining attitudes requires more sophisticated and less direct tools than merely a questionnaire. Methods should help to reduce conscious and unconscious control mechanisms applied by members of the examined groups. The author presents her own complex methodological strategy, one that combines typical quantitative surveys with verbal and nonverbal qualitative methods, such as Ethnic Identity Development Exercises (EIDE), Sentence Completion Tests (SCT) and Focus Group Interviews (FGI). Qualitative methods serve not only as a comparative background for quantitative data, but also as a tool that makes it possible to discover interdependence between variables that cannot be analysed by traditional surveys.

The key goal of the long-term research conducted by Ambrosewicz-Jacobs was to diagnose levels of ethnic prejudice and ethnocentrism among young Poles. Special attention was paid to antisemitic attitudes, a main interest area of the author; indeed, one easily notices that attitudes toward Jews are treated by Ambrosewicz-Jacobs as a separate issue. Although the study confirmed that impressions of Jews correlate with attitudes toward foreigners and ethnic minorities, in general Ambrosewicz-Jacobs examines attitudes toward different 'categories of strangers' separately, comparing the results. The concept of Jews as a minority group with a special status derives from an assumption that Jews are a separate group in both Polish history and the present reality, and that issues about Jews need to be examined with specially prepared surveys.

Studying ethnic attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudice, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs analyses the term *antisemitism* as a complex intellectual and scholarly concept with wide economic, racial, social, and theoretical dimensions. In analysing so-called 'Polish antisemitism', the author refers to a definition given by Alina Cała, researcher at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, according to which the phenomenon is an element protecting one group against the temptation to learn about another culture, and against leaving one group, crossing intercultural barriers, and joining the other group. This definition helps us to understand how it was possible in pre-war Poland to have negative stereotypes about Jews and at the same time make friends with Jewish neighbours and shop-owners. Examining attitudes toward Jews among young Poles, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs shows how modern antisemitism in Poland is also a political construct that is used in public discourse to discredit political opponents and as an element of conspiracy theory. The small number of Jews in contemporary Poland, together with the presence of negative stereotypes and attitudes toward them, prove that attitudes are not only the result

of direct contact or experience. Although few young people declare that they have had direct contact with Jews, the comparative studies show that the latter are among the least accepted groups, along with Romany and Russians. At the same time, other surveys show that Poles actually believe they are tolerant and have positive attitudes toward people of different ethnic or religious groups.

Ambrosewicz-Jacobs's study shows that to answer the question about whether young Poles are antisemites, one has to interpret statistical data very thoroughly. Comparing her studies on the stance of youth toward Jews in Poland to other studies conducted abroad, she concludes that Poles do not differ much in this respect from other inhabitants of Central Europe. She also notices that unlike in other countries, attitudes have changed for the better over the last decade. She states that Polish antisemitism does not have exceptional features; in addition, it is dependent on age and often mixed with philo-Semitism.

Ambrosewicz-Jacobs used drawings as an important projective technique in the qualitative surveys she conducted. These allowed attitudes to be expressed in a much freer way than other methods. Her technique also evoked much interesting data, confirming some theses rooted in psychodynamic theories, including one according to which the projection of the Other is the projection of the hidden face of our own identity. Her findings are supported by numerous drawings included in the text. Using the author's interpretative key that, for example, treats darkening of the face in self-portraits as a negative, distorted self-image and darkening of one's hands as a sign of aggression, enables a correlation of these features with distorted presentations of Romany and Jews.

As a cognitive schema, the stereotype of the Jew or Roma discharges aggression and directs unaccepted feelings and emotions, but the surveys confirm that these projections can be both positive and negative. People may attribute to Others not only their fears, aggression, and anxiety, but also their sense of freedom or masculinity. In Ambrosewicz-Jacobs's surveys, some students drew Jews and Romany as figures much more open than their own self-portraits. The author interprets these phenomena as a way of expressing (via the image of the Other) one's hidden needs and desires that are projected onto Others. This kind of presentation may also derive from the supposition that the Others are the ones worth learning about, as contact with them can enrich one's life.

One of the goals of Ambrosewicz-Jacobs's study was to determine the nature of attitudes toward Jews among young Poles. Sixty-four per cent of the surveyed students chose 'negative opinions of Jews in the community' and 'blaming Jews for different misfortunes and failures' as sources for anti-Jewish attitudes. This finding might indicate that antisemitic attitudes can be defined as an element of Polish group identity and that adolescent Poles are influenced by negative stereotypes and prejudices that have been constantly duplicated and transmitted by both social and family memory. Many of the surveyed students also chose 'lack of direct contact with Jews' and 'some people's hostility toward Jews' as a reason for their attitudes, a response that shows students to be aware that personality traits determine prejudice against other ethnic groups. As the author points out, the fact that 51.6 per cent of the surveyed students chose 'conflict from the past' as a reason for current negative attitudes indicates that many of them have an impression that the co-existence of Poles and Jews was not marked by friendly relations in the past. As individual interviews proved, this image, together with negative stereotypes, is being reinforced with the older generation's unfavourable opinions about Jews, antisemitic anecdotes, and some nationalistic-oriented papers and books.

In the section devoted to education, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs raises the possibility of making the Polish educational system more effective in reducing negative ethnic attitudes and stimulating the growth of tolerance levels. Although this issue is often publicly

discussed, the most important problems--for instance, the low level of teachers' competence in the area of multiculturalism--are usually overlooked.

Ambrosewicz-Jacobs examines the effectiveness of a few alternative educational projects aimed at developing positive attitudes to ethnic diversity that were conducted in experimental classes. Systematic monitoring of attitude changes within the examined group of students confirmed that ethnocentric and antisemitic attitudes were present among young Poles, but these opinions did not dominate over positive ones. Analysing sources of negative attitudes to minorities, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs included in her inquiry not only environmental factors, but also features that were important from the perspective of social psychology, such as self-esteem, feelings of being accepted by the mother, and the general attitude toward others and toward the larger environment. Verification of the hypothesis of direct dependence between positive attitude toward ethnic minorities and a high level of self-esteem is particularly important for theories of multicultural and intercultural education. This hypothesis indicates the need for further research in the field of psychology, and creates the basis for incorporating psycho-developmental and psycho-educational work-outs to multicultural education curricula.

If we treat a high level of positive attitude toward diversity as a litmus test of maturity and the democratization of a society, we have to admit that according to Ambrosewicz-Jacobs's findings, the outlook is not optimistic. Although racist attitudes represented by acceptance of race segregation and the belief in superiority of one ethnic group over others do not dominate among young Poles, surveys show that quite a strong aversion keeps many young people away from having personal contact with minorities. This situation is caused by hidden negative feelings manifested by a low level of acceptance for minorities and marginalized groups; the attitude is empowered by prejudices that have been transmitted through historical and social memory.

Drawings used in the studies confirm that the stereotype of a Jew as a figure of a religious man with side-locks, dressed in dark gabardine, is still very strong, and these images do not result from respondents' own experiences. At the same time, it is difficult to say whether the presentation of this stereotype indicates any prejudice. Drawings make it evident that students use stereotypes when they experience a sense of alienation and low self-esteem. Although the correlation between low self-esteem and a high level of prejudice is clearly present in qualitative surveys, it has not been confirmed by quantitative ones. This finding might derive from the fact that respondents intentionally or unintentionally concealed lack of self-esteem so that it was not revealed in the survey on individual levels.

Nevertheless, optimistic conclusions may be drawn from the surveys regarding the possibility of forming positive attitudes toward minorities through educational programs. The analysis and evaluation of three alternative programs run by Ambrosewicz-Jacobs within the framework of experimental, long-term surveys allowed her to trace the dynamics of attitude changes. The results of quantitative and qualitative research obtained during a two-year project show that students who participated in the alternative educational project demonstrated lower levels of prejudice than other students from control groups. It confirms the main argument of the author, mainly that specially prepared educational programs implemented by deeply involved teachers are an effective tool for preventing xenophobic and intolerant attitudes. Stressing the importance of individually prepared educational programs, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs does not deny the need for a gradual transformation in the Polish system of education. She also emphasizes the importance of building a wide network of co-operating institutions that could support educational efforts in the area of multicultural and tolerance-oriented education.

In her final conclusion, the author notices that the educational system in Poland is evolving much more slowly than its political and social counterparts. Although changes that occurred after 1989 gave teachers increased freedom in their work, the changes did

not bring about a deeper reconstruction of educational institutions. Despite progressing decentralization of the educational system in Poland, school programs are not yet adapted to local issues, nor to the needs of local communities. Learning is still adjusted mainly to the national curriculum and often ignores specific local history and heritage. Cultural diversity, which for hundreds of years was an important feature of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then of the Second Republic, was replaced after 1945 by the artificial concept of a culturally homogeneous society. After 1989, the awareness of historical and present multiculturalism of Poland has increased among Poles, bringing about some new social problems. There have been no specific educational policies related to this topic, a factor that, as Ambrosewicz-Jacobs suspects, might lead to an escalation of ethnic and racial conflicts in the near future.

Despite being an academic dissertation, Ambrosewicz-Jacobs's study will be useful not only to specialized scholars, but also to teachers and politicians responsible for educational programs, nongovernmental institution workers, and anyone interested in multicultural issues. It is not just a study that essentially broadens the methodology of social research in Poland, but is also a valuable handbook for multicultural education.

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