

Part II

LIFE CYCLE, IDENTITY AND INSTITUTIONS

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SOCIAL IDENTITY: SOME PRELIMINARY COMPARISONS BETWEEN  
FINLAND AND POLAND

1. Background of the study

The idea to study social identity, and particularly the identity of men and women, comes from an article by Z. Bokszański, who analysed the descriptions given by dating service customers of themselves and the partner they were hoping to meet. Since we do not have this kind of dating service in Finland, we drew our material from advertisements of a penfriend club: 160 advertisements written by men and 193 by women. A pilot study was first carried out on the basis of personal ads in newspapers and magazines; this data was later compared with our penfriend material. In addition, we used letters written by students pretending they were looking for a partner through newspaper ads.

In the advertisements we studied, the descriptions - women's descriptions of themselves and of men, and men's descriptions of themselves and of women - suggested that the social identity of women is somewhat contradictory, while the descriptions presented by men are more stereotyped. There were rather clear differences between women's self-image and male descriptions of women, whereas men's image of themselves was very similar to what women expected or wanted to find in men. Descriptions of men, both by men themselves and by women, tend to be far more straight-

forward than descriptions of women, whether these are by men or women.

The structures of the descriptions was similar to that found in the Polish ones. Women tended to emphasize their hobbies and leisure activities in descriptions of themselves. These are rarely mentioned in descriptions of women by men, who usually refer to women's character. Character also appears frequently in male descriptions of themselves, but men also mention their hobbies. Smoking and drinking habits were among the main dimensions that were taken up, regardless of whether the person who wrote the advertisement smoked or drank alcohol. Apparently this is some sort of a code system in personal contact ads through which people describe their so-called character and even their hobbies; that is, their social rather than personal identity.

In spring 1987, as part of this same project, I also submitted a Twenty Statements Test (IST) to some of my students; in this paper I shall primarily discuss the results of this test. Also, I shall attempt to make some preliminary comparisons between the Finnish and Polish results. The latter are based on the lecture by Z. Bokszański on The identity of Polish workers and engineers, which he presented at the University of Tampere in autumn 1986.

## 2. The method

I shall begin by briefly explaining the method I have used; at least my Finnish colleagues are probably not very familiar with it. The roots of the IST test trace back to the Iowa school, whose approach to understanding human behaviour rested mainly on Mead's concept of the self. Kuhn and his students were guided by the belief that a proper understanding of the structure of selves would be helpful in the development of a general theory of social behaviour. The chief research tool developed by the Iowa school was a pencil and paper measure of self-attitudes, known as the Twenty Statements Test (IST) [Kuhn, McPartland, 1954]. Respondents are asked to give 20 answers to the question "Who am I"? in a period of 12 minutes.

One of the criticisms against the method is that the pencil and paper measure ignores the most basic feature of human social behaviour: temporal process. B u b a n [1986] is also sharply critical of the method. He argues that for the study of interaction processes the large body of the IST research inspired by Kuhn is of virtually no value. It is true of course that pencil and paper measures such as the IST are of little utility when facing the problem of how two or more persons fit their behaviours together to form an acting social unity. But on the other hand the IST allows the individual to undertake a self-presentation procedure in an unstructured position. Through a systematic analysis of the results, certain patterned characteristics can be detected; for example, the ratio of definitive-categorical and attributive self-definitions, the occurrence of social identity elements and their characteristic combinations, and the subjective importance attributed to the individual elements [see e.g. G o r d o n, 1968]. In other words, through the IST test we get a picture of the structure of identity. To a certain extent this picture may also be cross-sectional and include references to transitory contacts and states (e.g. I am anxious about the exam we have tomorrow).

Problems of data collection. Originally my purpose was to submit the test to a total of 120 third-year students of economics. However, since the number of students of economics in one course is smaller than this at the University of Tampere, we also invited some students of business economics and social sciences to take part. All in all, we obtained 95 completed questionnaires: 19 from students of economics, 58 from students of business economics and 18 from students of social sciences. The low number of students of economics was due to the fact that part of the teachers simply forgot to ask their students to fill in the questionnaires. It was also clear that in different subjects the students' attitudes to the test was rather different: the economists were less enthusiastic about it, whereas the social scientists took the test seriously.

In a few questionnaires the responses were such that they could not be used, and some students did not write anything at all. At first I feared that the whole test did not "work" with

students, since I found some seemingly absurd statements such as "I am a meatball", "I am a refrigerator", "I am the spring and the sun", etc. However, there were not very many of these kinds of answers, and they were simply be classified as uncodable, as G o r d o n [1968] did with his own similar answers ("superman, a flower, the sea, a shell on the beach"), without attempting to interpret them. It was not until I had collected the whole material (actually for Z. Bokszański) that I realized there were several different aspects from which it could be approached.

### 3. Problems

I decided to focus on the following problem areas in my analysis of the material,

\* What kind of characterizations do students use when describing themselves in a IST test?

K u h n and M c P a r t l a n d [1954] categorized the answers to their IST test dichotomously either as consensual references or as subconsensual ones. These content categories distinguish between statements which refer to groups and classes whose limits and conditions of membership are matters of common knowledge, i.e. consensual; and those which refer to groups, classes, attributes, traits or any other matters which would require interpretation by the respondents to be precise or to place him relative to other people, i.e. subconsensual. Examples of the consensual variety are student, girl, husband, from Chicago, oldest girl, studying engineering; examples of the subconsensual category are happy, bored, pretty good student, too heavy, good wife, interesting.

The consensual (categorical representations typically associate the respondent with others, and the subconsensual) attributive generally serve to distinguish the respondent from others or at least describe him individualistically. It is therefore possible that categorical definitions represent social identity and attributive definitions personal identity. Social identity can be conceptualized as the individual's major role and social type

categorizations. There are also research results which suggest that social identity elements are being "replaced" by personal identity elements: Pataki [1987] found in his study of Hungarians a clear shift from categorialdefinitive self-definitions towards attributive ones. This trend was characteristic above all of university and high-school students. Pataki explains this by arguing that students have not yet accommodated themselves to the order and roles of the social division of labour; they are to a great extent affected by the international subculture of youth and its expressive sphere. He also considers it likely that this trend might underlie the phenomenon usually termed as the increase of identity dilemmas or loss of identity.

Do the students first use categorial self-definitions and then move on to attributive ones? Kuhn and McPartland say that from the ordering of the responses on the page, it was evident that respondents tended to exhaust all of the consensual references they would make before making subconsensual references - if indeed they made any.

Do the answers by male and female students differ in any essential respects? Do women tend to describe themselves relative to something; do men refer to more "absolute" categories?

In a sense this question is a sequel of our analysis of the penfriend ads, where we found that the social identity of women is somewhat contradictory and that the descriptions of men are more stereotyped. Other differences have also been reported. Gilligan [1982] discovered that in response to the request to describe themselves, all the women described a relationship, depicting their identity in the connection of future mother, present wife, adopted child, or past lover. In the women's descriptions identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care. For men, the tone of identity is different, clearer, more direct, more distinct and sharp-edged. Replacing women's verbs of attachment, men have adjectives of separation. Thus the male "I" is defined in separation and seen as having "real contacts and deep emotions or otherwise, wishing for them". Roos [1987] has made similar discoveries in his studies of Finnish biographies: women's



biographies often focus on descriptions of the family members, whereas men often present a consistent, clear account of their adversities and achievements, strictly in the first person; other people remain in minor roles.

In addition to the problems described above, we were also interested in what is known as actor-observer divergence. Jones and Nisbett [1971] argue that there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational/external causes, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions or the causes internal to the actors. In other words, personality traits are things other people have, i.e. each individual perceives all other individuals as having more stable personality traits than he possesses himself. However, the individual sees himself as acting in accord with the demands and opportunities inherent in each new situation. In our study we attempted to trace signs of actor-observer divergence in the letters written by 11 male and 34 female students to the penfriend club. They were asked to imagine that they were actually looking for a partner through the club, and to describe themselves and the kind of partner they would like to meet.

#### 4. Results

Studying formed an important cornerstone of the students' identity; it was mentioned by the majority (88%) of the respondents. On the other hand, when the students were asked to describe themselves, various personal characteristics were by far the most important category; about one third of all the characterizations fell under this category.

In my study I have attempted as far as possible to use the same categories as Bokszański has in his Polish study. However, I must repeat that my comparisons are still somewhat tentative; one particular factor which should be borne in mind is that the Polish results concern workers and engineers, while the Finnish results are based on studies of students. Even within one country different groups tend to respond in slightly different ways

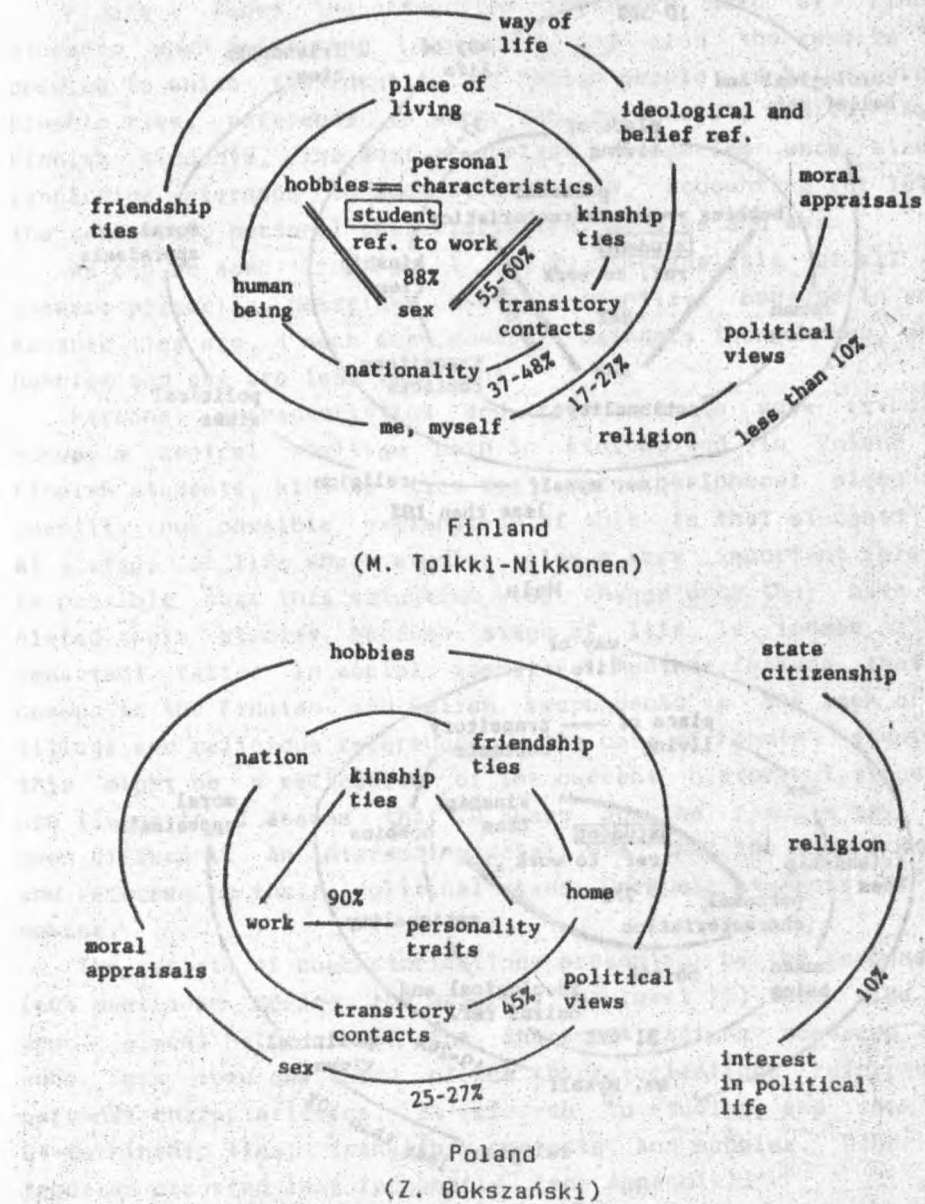


Fig. 1. Identity categories: Finnish students and Polish workers and engineers

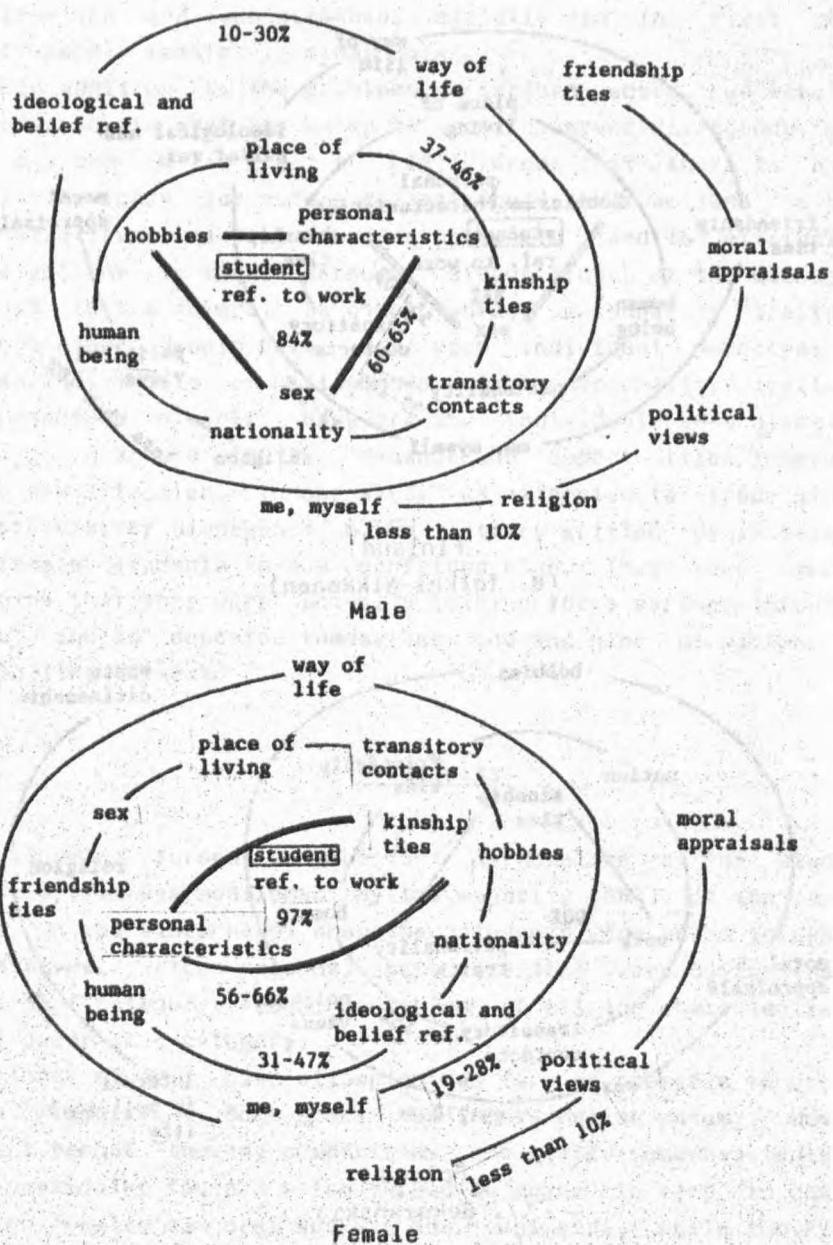


Fig. 2. Identity categories: Finnish female and male students



[cf. e.g. P a t a k i, 1987]; it has also been found that students do not always reply in the same way as other people.

Figure 1 shows the categories that were used by Finnish students when describing themselves, and also the results according to which the identity of Polish people is built around kinship ties, reference to work and personality traits. Among Finnish students, the most important categories were studies (including reference to occupational role, accounting for 18% in the category), personal characteristics, hobbies and sex.

As can be seen from Fig. 1 and 2, the analysis of all the answers primarily describes the male identity, because in women kinship ties are a much more central category than in men, while hobbies and sex are less important.

Personal characteristics and reference to work (studies) occupy a central position both in Finland and in Poland. In Finnish students, kinship ties are a more peripheral element of identity; one possible explanation of this is that students are at a stage of life where studies play a very important role. It is possible that this situation will change once they have completed their studies, because stage of life is indeed a very important factor in social identity. Another feature that is common to the Finnish and Polish respondents is the lack of political and religious references. In the case of Finnish students, this might be a reflection of the current historical stage we are living in: I assume that 20 years ago the results may have been different. An interesting detail was that the few students who referred to their political stand were all students of economics.

The variety of characterizations presented by the respondents (60% mentioned 20 and the majority of least 15) was wide indeed. Almost half of all the characterizations occurred only once. Less than one third of the characterizations referred to personal characteristics, 12% referred to studies and work and 8% to kinship ties, transitory contacts and hobbies. Other categories occurred less frequently (see Appendix).

On the basis of our material it is difficult to answer any other questions except this basic issue of how the students describe themselves, although the ordering of the responses was

more or less in accordance with our expectations: consensual/categorical definitions came first and subconsensual/attributive self-definitions after them. However, the respondents did not exhaust all the consensual references before making subconsensual ones. The most typical deviation from the normal order was a reversion from subconsensual definitions to consensual definitions.

We also found some signs of actor-observer divergence. That is, there was a slight tendency for the students to describe themselves in their letters by reference to situational factors. Their descriptions of themselves could not be reduced to static bodies of personality traits in the same way as their descriptions of the kind of partner they would like to meet.

Did the identities of men and women differ from each other? Did women use relative categories in describing themselves? As we have already seen, the identities of men and woman centre around slightly different elements. If it is accepted that the central role of kinship and friendship ties in self-definitions is indicative of relative descriptions, then we may conclude that women did indeed describe themselves in more relative terms than men.

### 5. What do the results indicate?

How does the integration of various identity elements occur, whether in the case of role identity or group identity? Does the individual integrate the knowledge he has obtained on his roles and group membership into a unified cognitive system in the course of identity construction, or does he acquire it in a specific patterned form?

Pataki [1987] points out that we have the concepts of identity repertoire [Berger, 1966], identity types [Berger, Luckman, 1966], library of identity scripts [Tajfel, 1981], identity model [Robertson, Holznér, 1980], and identity project [Harré, 1983], which, all refer to the same empirical fact. The latter's essence is

that the identities or identity elements take a complete patterned and model-like shape in the existing culture, thus becoming the content of socialization and the subject of individual identity construction.

Thus in the prevailing culture of any society there are not only separated, individual role patterns, group presentations and social categories, but also more integrated and model-like identity patterns. These patterns are organic parts of the cultural objectifications of society and thus components of the symbolic "codes" of that society. In that capacity they offer substantial models for the individuals to elaborate their identities that suit their positions. Individuals living in modern society must work out and maintain their identities more and more by their own efforts, by more or less conscious selections from different options, by facing rival identity patterns and while living in that medium.

Against this background, I would argue that the results of our study on the penfriend ads, according to which there are contradictory elements in the social identity of women, may be interpreted as indicating that women know their options. By contrast, men's image of women is static. In other words, the social identity of women has changed, but these new self-images do not correspond to reality.

In modern societies there are alternative role-taking possibilities. One student of business economics wrote: "The answer to the question, Who am I?, depends completely on the role I have taken on today". The social identity of students would seem to be more or less transitional (even mutable?), which is suggested by the numerous transitory and transitional references. On the other hand, about half of all the characterizations were attributive. The social science students in particular used attributive categories to describe themselves, and existential, individuating categories (me, an individual, an existing being, myself) and references to membership of an abstract one (a person, a human being). Are the elements of social identity disappearing from the students's self-definitions? Whether or not this is possibly happening in the case of other groups as well

is a question we cannot answer on the basis of the present material. There is however some evidence which would seem to suggest a change: in the 1950s, K u h n and M c P a r t l a n d [1954] argued that "The consensual (more directly socially anchored) component of the self-conception is the more salient component. Stated differently, consensually supported self-attitudes are at the top of the hierarchy of self-attitudes".

In the IST tests carried out with students, there was no tendency for personal characteristics to concentrate in certain conventional traits in the same way as in the penfriend club ads. A possible explanation here is that people in search of a spouse (such as those who write personal contact ads) are inclined to describe themselves and the partner they hope to find in terms of what are normally regarded as typical gender-based characteristics. Thus in our ads the writers described themselves most often as honest, credible, trustworthy, tender, fond of children; they also have a sense of humor and hold the family and home in high regard. If one had to name certain traits that recur at least a few times in the students' responses, it would seem that the students of economics are determined, ambitious, selfish and either diligent or lazy; the social science students say they are empathic.

According to the penfriend ads, "good" women should take an interest in dancing, literature, music, evenings at home, outdoor life, needlework and travel; "good" men should take an interest in music, literature, cars, outdoor activities, films and evenings at home. Our students of economics were mainly interested in all sorts of sports (from glider flying, skiing and shooting to various kinds of team games); female students preferred various outdoor activities, travel, and sports. Social science students - the few who mentioned any hobbies - said they liked going to the movies, reading and spectator sports. These "accumulating" traits and hobbies are probably part of the stereotype of a student of a certain subject rather than of his actual personal identity.



## Appendix

Frequency of categories used by students  
in TSI self-descriptions

Detail	N = 63 men	%	N = 32 women	%	N = 95 all	%
Personal characteristics	263	29	124	25	387	28
Students, reference to work	99	11	73	15	172	12
Kinship ties	54	6	54	11	108	8
Hobbies	93	10	19	4	112	8
Transitory contacts, situational ref	65	7	41	8	106	8
Sex	38		19		57	
Way of life	36		21		57	
Nationality	38		16		54	
Uncodable	39		14		53	
Age	32		19		51	
Human being	32		14		46	
Place of residence	28		14		42	
Ideological ref	22		15		37	
Me, myself	13		17		30	
Physical appearance	13		8		21	
Political views	17		3		20	
Friendship ties	8		8		16	
Home	3		7		10	
Religion	6		-		6	
I don't know who I am	-		4		4	
Moral appraisals	1		-		1	
	890		490		1 390	



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TOŻSAMOŚĆ SPOŁECZNA:  
WSTĘPNE PORÓWNANIE FINSKO-POLSKIE

Przedstawione badania mają swoje źródła w studium społecznej tożsamości mężczyzn i kobiet w świetle osobistych kontaktów. Ustalono, że tożsamość społeczna kobiet jest jakby wewnętrznie sprzeczna, podczas gdy opisy przedstawione przez mężczyzn są bardziej stereotypowe. Struktura opisów jest bardzo zbliżona do polskich autocharakterystyk, analizowanych przez Z. Bokszańskiego. 100 fińskich studentów wypełniło kwestionariusze testu 20 zdań wiosną 1987 r.

Na podstawie tego materiału w artykule podano autocharakterystyki studentów, użycie kategorii i autodefinicji czyli społeczne i osobiste definicje tożsamości, różnice między mężczyznami i kobietami. Rezultaty testu 20 zdań (IST) pokazują, że studenci opisują siebie głównie przy pomocy czterech kategorii: praca (studencka i zawodowa), cechy osobiste, hobby i płęć. Odniesienia moralne, polityczne i religijne należą do kategorii peryferyjnych. Studia i cechy osobiste są wymieniane zarówno przez mężczyzn, jak i kobiety, ale mężczyźni głównie podawali hobby i płęć, podczas gdy kobiety - więzi rodzinne. Kobiety również definiowały, bardziej niż mężczyźni, w terminach relatywnych. Jednakże na pytanie o najważniejszą kategorię autodefinicji odpowiadano, że jest nią cecha osobista, tzw. charakter. We wszystkich społeczeństwach i kulturach znaleźć można modele tożsamości, które stanowią komponenty symbolicznych "kodów" dominującej kultury danego społeczeństwa. Jednym z takich wzorów jest praca, bądź świadomy wybór własnej drogi.

W badaniu ogłoszeń poświęconych poszukiwaniu partnerów (przyjaciół) silniejszy nacisk kładziono na społeczną niż na indywidualną tożsamość - na to co zwykle traktuje się jako typowe cechy płci, podczas gdy w wypowiedziach studentów nacisk położono na indywidualną tożsamość. Pojawia się pytanie czy elementy tożsamości społecznej w studenckich autodefinicjach rzeczywiście zanikają?