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Online Publication Date: 01 January 2002


To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/13691830120103930
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691830120103930

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Reconfiguring East–West identities: cross-generational discourses in German and Polish border communities

Ulrike H. Meinhof and Dariusz Galasiński

Abstract This article takes its data from one of two sets of communities studied as part of a British ESRC project into discursive constructions of identity. In this paper we argue three interrelated points. Firstly, we show the ways in which different elicitation formats of interviewee responses foreground variable aspects in people’s identification. Secondly, we show how similar elicitation methods produced different criss-crossings of identification which render summary generalisations about identities in these communities problematic. Thirdly, we highlight the fluid and often paradoxical nature of multiple identifications across the different layers with which people choose to engage.

KEYWORDS: IDENTITY; DISCOURSE; NARRATIVE; CONTEXT; POLISH-GERMAN BORDER

Introduction

The significance of national borders in peoples’ identity constructions has been emphasised by writers in various disciplines – from political science to human geography to linguistics (Anderson and Bort 1996; Anderson and O’Dowd 1999; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Eskelinen et al. 1999; Galasiński and Meinhof 2002; Kockel 1999; Kürti and Langman 1997; Paasi 2001; Wilson and Donnan 1998). Borders, and especially conflictual borders with shifting demarcations, foreground and thematise difference in peoples’ lives. Where there are communities on either side of a border, such ‘difference’ does not just work itself out on the imaginary level of clashes between different ‘banal’ constructions of national identity (Billig 1995) and stereotypical notions of otherness, but in the everyday and institutionalised life of the people in the communities on either side. Living on the other side of a border means looking at, but not necessarily being part of that otherness. The border communities of Guben and Gubin which we will discuss in this paper are instances of stubborn segregation and separateness in full sight of their neighbours. The more complex possibilities arising from the multitudinous coexistences in cities (Robins 1993, 2001) form part of the official bilateral rhetoric (e.g. in the promotion of a Euro-City and a Euro-region), but do not (yet?) find many echoes in the discourses of the people living there.

This article takes its data from one of two sets of communities studied as part of a British ESRC project which has since developed into a new major European research project into European identity under the European Union’s (EU) Fifth Framework Programme with a consortium of six universities. Common to all the investigations which we undertook, including the one into Guben/Gubin which is the focus of this article, were the following consistent features.

Firstly, all communities are located on either side of historically highly
conflictual and contested borders, running on a North–South axis from the German–Polish border as redrawn after the end of World War II along the German–Czech, Austrian–Hungarian, Austrian–Slovenian, down to the Italian–Slovenian border, and including communities on either side of the former East–West German border (Meinhof and Galasiński 2000). Today, as a result of better relations between the nation-states in question and German unification, these communities are no longer closed off from one another. However, with the exception of the German–German set, the border between them still constitutes the boundary between, on the one side, current EU nations who are all signatories of the Schengen Agreement and thus committed to open borders amongst themselves, and, on the other side, the first wave of nations hoping to be granted entry to both the EU and ‘Schengen’ territory. Our specific case-study of Guben and Gubin thus forms part of a larger pattern within a potentially expanding Europe.

Secondly, in each community we investigated a minimum of five sets of three-generation families who had either spent their entire lives there, or who had settled there immediately after the end of World War II. The members of these families were interviewed separately, or in husband and wife or sibling pairs, but never mixed between generations, to allow each generation to tell ‘their stories’ independently from the older or the younger one. During the life-span of these three generations, their communities had undergone fundamental changes in their socio-political environment. We were interested to see how, from the vantage point of the present day, these changes affected the public definition of peoples’ identities such as their nationhood and their belonging to different state and social systems. In the case of Guben and Gubin two fundamental reorientations happened. Until 1945, Guben on both sides of the River Neisse was one German town. After 1945 the town was split into a German (Guben) and a Polish (Gubin) part with a total change-over in population. Many of the Germans who had lived in what was now renamed as Gubin resettled on the western side of the Neisse, which now formed the eastern border of the GDR, whereas new Polish inhabitants, many of them in turn dislocated from their home regions further east, settled in the Polish part. Although both states became members of the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact, the relationship between them and concomitantly, mutual accessibility across the border, went through periods of relative closeness as well as hostility. From 1990 on – that is, after German unification and the collapse of the Soviet Union – official emphasis has been on collaboration and on inter-regional and transnational harmony.

In this paper we will argue three interrelated points. First, and exemplified through extracts from one interview with a middle-aged German woman, we will show the ways in which different elicitation formats foreground variable aspects in people’s identification across the spectrum of local and transnational identities. Depending on the different triggers we used in structuring our interviews, as well as the contextual contingencies of the ensuing narratives, we received different and sometimes internally contradictory types of responses. Secondly, we will show how similar elicitation methods – in this instance a direct question about identity across this spectrum at local, regional, national, transregional and transnational levels – produced in each individual instance different criss-crossings of identification which render summary generalisations about identities in these communities problematicat. There were, however, some notable differences between the German and the Polish informants as well as
some comparability within rather than across the generational groups in this respect which we shall point to in our discussion. Taken together our analysis will highlight the fluid and often paradoxical nature of multiple identifications across the different layers which people choose to engage with – our third point.

**Asking identity questions**

Our interactions with our informants were based on three different ways of eliciting data, which proved an important element in deciding on the relative significance of types of identity construction: photographic triggers, self-selection of topic and, towards the end of the interview, a self-identification question followed by other types of direct questioning. The reason for such an indirect way of approaching identity construction initially lay in our underlying theoretical assumption about the nature of identity, namely that cultural identities are discursively constructed, context-interdependent, and hence flexible processes, rather than fixed entities which remain the same under all circumstances (e.g. Barker and Galasiński 2001; Hall 1996; Wodak *et al.* 1999). We assumed that when asking a direct question about someone’s identity or identities we would only access the consciously held attitudes and beliefs of our informants, or indeed be given what interviewees would like us to think their attitudes and beliefs consist of. By contrast, in approaching identity construction from a discourse analytical perspective we refocused the analysis onto the processes whereby individuals create identification through the contents and forms of their narratives and ways of speaking. Furthermore, the ways in which our informants drew social, political and geographical boundaries, how they divided in-groups from out-groups, created closeness and distance to the different geo-political spaces, and hence constructed a sense of belonging or distance, gave us important insights into the ways in which people align themselves under different contextual conditions. Some of these contextual conditions we triggered initially through the use of photographs from the three historical phases in the life of the respondent families. Using this highly indirect method of initialising the conversations about peoples’ experiences and memories gave us the additional opportunity to avoid the introduction of salient linguistic labels such as GDR, West Germany, Guben for both today’s and pre-45 Guben, or of culturally sensitive pronunciations such as ‘Gubin’ with a stress on the first (Polish pronunciation) or on the second syllable (German version). This was of vital importance to our discourse analytical methods of data interpretation where we attached considerable significance to the linguistic and thematic choices (or avoidances) made by our informants within different narrative contexts. Responding to photographs rather than questions allowed our informants to self-select the labels for the spatio-temporal area they were looking at, and self-select the topics with which they wanted to engage. It also became feasible, and indeed the usual pattern, for informants to move away from the spatio-temporal anchor of the image and onto other themes of their choice. Thus the narratives themselves created their own internal contexts. For a more detailed discussion of these important methodological issues, see Meinhof and Galasiński (2000).

However, we also wanted to tap into people’s more consciously held beliefs about their identities in relation to or demarcation from the different layers available in the present day. Hence, towards the very end of our interviews,
issues of identity and identification were directly addressed and interviewees were asked to say whether or not they had more or less strongly positive or negative feelings about belonging to the different collectivities offered up by their town, region, nation or by transregional or transnational communities, which then included a reference to Europe. The inclusion of a self-identification question towards the end of the interview and some more direct questions about what people consciously believed and felt about their own identities thus provided us with an additional data set which complemented but also contrasted with the previous less explicit modes, even within the same informant’s discourse. With our data and their analysis we also hope to complement and, where necessary, qualify large quantitative studies into identity layering such as the Eurobarometer survey which uses questionnaires and statistical methods for evaluation (cf. also Ingelhart and Reif 1991).

Researching cultural identity in Europe

For post-1990 Eastern Germany, and for Poland in the foreseeable future, the European Union in particular has been and is offering a new transnational collective identity on a Western model. Our interest was to ask whether traditional ethno-political boundaries between East and West are still valid in the perception of people who are living on either side of the border between Germany and Poland. At the transnational level we were first of all interested in whether and how ‘Europe’ and/or the European Union would appear in our informants’ discourses and in what contexts. What does Europe or being European actually mean to our informants, and where are the boundaries of that Europe?

Secondly, we were interested in seeing how European discourses would relate to other collective discourses of nation-state, regions or town. Where we found evidence of such multi-layering of identity, we would ask thirdly about the interconnection between these layers within the narratives of individual informants: whether they are perceived as complementary, as antagonistic, or as both in different narrative contexts.

A strongly felt European identity might, for example, indicate a weakening of traditional national divisions between nation-states amongst the people of the existing EU with or without its ascendant nations. It could equally imply a dissolution of other historical divisions such as those between Western European and Eastern European nations, including a weakening of ethnic identity markers with long and often problematic traditions such as, for example, ‘Germanic’ or ‘Slavonic’. But it may mean neither of these: ‘being European’ might simply be one possible identity formation within circles of mutually compatible other more or less inclusive forms of identification from the most local to the most global (see the different contributions in Herrmann et al. 2002, especially by those Bruter, Castano and Meinhof).

In analysing the results in relation to the different elicitation methods we used, several important points need to be made:

- First, in using photographs of key locations and symbols of Guben and Gubin, we found that those triggers, which to us suggested a European dimension (especially images of EU-related projects in the area) were interpreted by our informants as purely inter-regional and cross-national and virtually never as
European. Positive, negative or indifferent reactions to these triggers were thus directly encoded as corresponding discourses about the respective ‘Other’ – the Germans or the Poles on the other side of the river.

- Secondly, Europe or issues relating directly to Europe were rarely mentioned by anyone without any prompting. This is in sharp contrast to the frequent occurrence of local, regional and inter-regional reference points in the case of our German, and national and intra-regional reference points in the case of our Polish informants.

- Thirdly, it was only in the self-identification section of our data that Europe featured in any significant way. But here the meaning with which Europe became invested again varied, sometimes focusing more on a cultural (European traditions) or a civic (EU and EU institutions) dimension but equally often straddling both of these.

Geographical demarcations showed a similar flexibility in our informants’ discourses. Sometimes German references to being European stopped at the border to Poland and emphasis was placed on the EU as a Western (even just north-western) group of nations excluding Poland (as we will see in an interview extract below), sometimes its emphasis was specifically on the Eastern expansion. For Poles the meaning of Europe shifted from a notion of a Europe for which Poland is the very centre (return to the ‘heart of Europe’) to a Europe of the West and particularly a Germanic West which, though economically desirable, was nevertheless imbued with anxieties about rights which might accrue to non-Poles as a result of European Union integration. In several cases reference to the identical phenomenon – such as, for example, attitudes to the Euro, or as in the example below to Euro-inspired projects – shifted across all of these levels within the same conversation.

In the next section of this paper we would like to demonstrate this variation according to elicitation method by quoting three exemplary extracts taken from a 75-minute interview with one middle-aged German woman who was born in pre-45 eastern Guben, and who after the division had settled with her mother in the western part, today’s Guben.¹

‘A true Guben woman, who was born in Guben, well, in what’s now Gubin.’

In the first extract GM is responding to a picture cue: a pamphlet entitled ‘Modellprojekt Eurostadt Guben–Gubin’ (model project Euro-city Guben–Gubin) which lists different collaborative projects at different stages of realisation, which are partly supported by the EU and the regional administrations on both sides of the border,

Extract 1: Responding to a visual cue at institutional level.

GM: Yes, yes (laughs) The model project European town Guben and Gubin ... Well, what can one say? Against the political mainstream ... I’d say, yes, I have to put it very carefully ... Well, then let me tell you that we are sick of hearing it. Mum will tell you the same, my sister and my family, We are true Gubeners and we are sick of hearing it. One is sick of hearing it. I am telling you this and I restrain myself in this institution because I am working here after all, I am employed here, and I have to ... I am employed here and I restrain myself in this issue here in this institution.

UM: Yes.
GM: If only one of the deputies who are so keen on it would listen to what the citizens on the street say, they are sick of hearing it... It’s being forced politically, the citizen doesn’t support it, well, to a large extent and those are the old Gubeners.

In this first extract, Mrs GM gives an unsolicited account of where her main identity lies, namely that she is a woman from Guben. This self-identification is sparked off by an official pamphlet advertising what is to her a deeply undesirable project, namely that of linking the two towns by various sets of projects. These include, amongst others, already existing infrastructural projects such as the shared waste-water plant built in Gubin but with Western aid, a new border crossing which at the time of the interview (autumn 1999) was in the process of being built, and (in the words of an Expo 2000 leaflet) the plan for joint use of the historical island... in the Neisse (Polish territory) by the construction of two bridges from the German and Polish side and creation of a public park as a recreation and meeting centre in order to promote the cultural cooperation between both people.

This project not only upsets her and her family personally but, she claims, all the old Gubeners. Note her linguistic manoeuvres of constructing an in-group: from the smaller ‘we’ which includes her mum, her sister and her family she moves to an abstract generality ‘one is sick of hearing it’ to the ‘citizen in the street’. She thus claims that her dislike of the project is shared by the people of Guben in general, though she finally qualifies this to those who are genuinely ‘Gubenians’. The out-group, i.e. those who support the project are said to be ‘the political mainstream’, her colleagues in the municipal administration, and the deputies, and those others who are not genuinely Gubenians.

UM: Could you repeat that please? You are proud to be the only true Gubener.
GM: Yes, in the management of the town of Guben, the Guben town administration, I am the only true Gubener.
UM: I like that so much, it would make a good final sentence.
GM: A true Guben woman, who was born in Guben, well, in what’s now Gubin.

The pamphlet, issued by her own administration, thus sets in motion all the rejection that she feels for this enforced collaboration between the two cities and nations.

However, in the next extract, a different narrative context brings out a much more ambivalent assessment of the very same project.

Extract 2: Moving across flexible boundaries: from the institutional to the personal.

UM: Yes, it’s difficult to get it going once the young people have left because one needs the people. Maybe that’s behind those European projects, maybe one tries to promote the east to establish new markets.
GM: Yes, one tries to, it’s just that Gubin has the same problem, they have got a lot of unemployed people too, and they had to close their shoe factory and several other things, and these ideas to create a town centre on both sides but there aren’t any citizens—
UM: To populate = it.
GM: = To populate it, and to bring life to it, that’s the problem that no-one wants to acknowledge, you know... 
UM: I’ve heard a little bit about this island project and that seems to be going
in the same directions that it is being pushed by the officials. It’s not that the Gubeners think, ‘oh, wouldn’t it be nice to go to this island’.

GM: But they do, yes, but I am going there from the Polish side [laughs].

UM: I mean, it’s a very beautiful island.

GM: Yes, and it was so nice for Mum, when the island was opened to the Gubeners for the first time, I think in 1997, and the army built a makeshift bridge and we were able to go there from our side.

UM: Really.

GM: And I had Mum with me of course, and we walked all around and she was able to sit there, yes, that was great.

UM: And the theatre that’s here. It’s lovely, isn’t it, but maybe it’s foolish to think that there’d be enough money to ever rebuild it.

GM: Yes, many would want that.

In this second extract the issue of the shared city centre is again touched upon, initially under the same institutional frame of a European project. This causes GM to reiterate the problematic aspects of such a plan. However, when the interviewer repeats the argument previously given by GM, namely that the island project is simply being pushed by officials but not embraced by the population, GM contradicts her: first by pointing out that it’s easy to go to the island from Gubin (i.e. since the bridge to the island from the Polish side was rebuilt with western money in the 1990s). But it is the evocation of the beauty of the island by the interviewer which suddenly changes GM’s accounts away from the critical analysis of the political and institutional conditions she had given up to that point onto the anecdotal – thinking of a happy day when during a special collaborative festival (Neisse-fest) a temporary bridge was erected from the western side and when she and her mother were able to go there directly ‘from our side’. Such moves between a rejection of (often EU-driven) projects at instructional level and yet a parallel embracing of cultural or recreational values made possible as a result of these ventures occurs frequently in our data (for a similar discussion in relation to the Euro currency see Meinhof 2002). Hence under such contextual conditions where different experiences and memories come into play in the construction of our informants’ narratives, we find much more complex and often self-contradictory layering.

In the last extract from the same interview GM responds to the direct interview question about her preferences in identification, with a specific mention of the EU as a possible identifier.

Extract 3: Responding to a direct question about identification with the EU.

UM: And what about the EU, this idea of Europe, what do you think about that, if you consider the Western alliance first and not think about the enlargement to the East just yet?

GM: Er, it’s going to be good, this united Europe and well, I think it has to, it would be, yes, it should develop, yes, it would definitely be good in terms of economics although I am saying that every state should keep its borders.

UM: You’d prefer that, even when looking at the West?

GM: Yes, but I don’t mean the Federal Republic but the adjoining countries.

UM: Of course, that’s what I was referring to as well. Thus, you’d like every state to have secure borders?

GM: No, not the security, but the border as Germany.
UM: As Germany.
GM: Yes, well, the border as Germany.
UM: And if you had to establish a hierarchy, you’d consider yourself a Gubener and then a German?
GM: That’s right (laughs). And then a European. Yes.

GM’s account of how she sees her own identity is straightforward: she is pro-European as long as it is a Western alliance, pro-united Germany, and especially pro-Guben. Hence her model resembles the nesting circles of the ‘doll-in-the-doll’ model (Meinhof 2002). However, if one looks at the breaks in her otherwise highly articulate speech patterns, it is easy to see that there are some very substantial hesitations, which are then further qualified by her insistence on the need to retain national borders.

Constructing multiple identities

This sensitivity to context in narratives constructing identity can not only be observed at the level of story trigger. In this next part of our paper we would like to concentrate on the role which Europe plays in our informants’ discourses. We begin with a series of extracts from our Polish data, followed by those from the German data. As we pointed out before, Europe only featured in the most directive parts of the interview where we specifically thematised identity questions at various local, national and transnational levels.

There is a sharp difference between our Polish and our German informants as regards the perception of and the attitudes towards different identities offered up by the nation-state, the regions, the home-town and the transnational community of Europe.

The Polish stories

For the people living in Polish Guben, their overriding construction of identity is the national identity of being Polish. This Polish identity is almost always related to some ‘Other’ and for ‘Other’ read mainly ‘the Germans’. The European Union in this context is a group of nation-states, dominated by Germany and thus arousing highly ambivalent feelings. Even the constructions at the non-national level are almost always ‘nationalised’: the people of Guben are simply Poles living in Guben. There is some sense of local identity but it is subsumed by the more important national identification: being from Guben means to be Polish and any Gubinian identity forms part of that more salient national identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that none of the Polish citizens of Guben ever experienced a united (though German) Guben on both sides of the river, there is no sense of a lost or potential future community which might subsume those two towns under the umbrella of a transnational structure. Official attempts at inter-regional, bi-national, and European level which suggest a Euro-region of Neisse-Spree, or a Euro-city Guben–Guben, do not unsettle in any way the perceived division between those structures which matter: namely that between Poland on the one side and Germany on the other.

Here are two extracts from the narratives of members of the youngest generation:
DG: Do you think that in one way or another one could speak of Guben and Gubin as of one town?

AH: Absolutely no.

DG: Why absolutely?

AH: Because here it’s Guben and over there it’s Gubin. Here it’s Poland and over there it’s Germany.

LF: Germans are always, in my view, punctual and orderly and have always been, I mean everything had to be in its place and Poles can tell Germans and simply when he sees him at least I feel that when I can see a German I don’t simply know that it’s a German, but I can feel it’s a German. It’s like he had it written on his back. And Poles and Germans, Guben and Gubin in my view should never be one town in the future.

DG: Why not?

LF: Too much separates them.

DG: Mmm.

LF: Culture, language.

The Gubinian identity for our Polish informants, though demarcated from their German neighbours in such decisive ways is not, however, accompanied by the expression of any civic pride or other form of positive emotions. One of our informants described the town as a ‘town of losers’, which had attracted people from all over Poland but with no one taking any great stake in it. The oldest generation often expressed their emotional allegiance to the home-towns in the East which they left or were forced to leave at the end of the war (for a discussion of this see Galasiński and Meinhof 2002), but even the middle or younger generation who were born in Guben or came to it as small children rarely construct a positive identity of belonging to their home-town or region. Adopting the identity of a Gubinian is a positive construction only insofar as it implies being Polish, but a negative construction insofar as it means not being something else. The extract below shows this clearly in relation to ‘being European’. The choice of a Gubin identity here is not something TS aspires to, but something he is resigned to in the absence of a different, desired choice. Provincial Gubin, constructed negatively, is something he is condemned to (TS and LS = middle generation).

DG: Who are you?

TS: Eeeeh, I would like to be a European, you know.

DG: OK. And are you?

TS: I would like to. I think I am just a person from Guben. Nothing more.

DG: [laughs] OK. Fair enough.

LS: You know this is exactly what it is. A similar thinking that for the time being we are.

TS: What kind of European am I? One needs to speak a language.

LS: Yes. Mmm. We are laughing that we are going to this Europe barefoot.

It is also noteworthy that the Europe TS is talking about is not necessarily associated with the EU; it is more reminiscent of the ‘return to Europe’, a slogan present in the Polish media after the ‘Polish revolution’ of 1989 where it referred to Europe as host of certain democratic and cultural values that Poland wanted and could espouse again.

The European Union, however, does not seem to have much to do with this
mythical Europe, even though almost universally the interviewees are in favour of joining, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Across the board the European Union is perceived from two perspectives. Firstly, the EU is a purely economic organisation that will provide Poland with certain benefits once it has become a member. On the other hand it is an organisation through which other nations, particularly Germans, could start dominating Poland, or result in Poland getting a raw deal. These two perspectives are often intertwined.

The specific historical context in which Gubin is situated is particularly conducive to perceiving the European Union as a platform from which Germans could demand the return of their lost properties in the present territories of Poland (GD = youngest generation; PH = middle generation).

GD: The inhabitants of the member-states of the European Union will have the right to buy land.

DG: Mmm.

GD: In Poland, and this seems to me a little in a sense dangerous.

DG: Why?

GD: Because after a time it could turn out that most of Poland belongs to the people of the West and we have nothing to do here because we are bought out by them.

DG: Mmm.

GD: Just the land, you know.

DG: Mmm.

GD: And this is what I am afraid of simply. Let it last for tens of years but they want to have us for themselves.

DG: Who?

GD: Well, the EU mainly, I am afraid of that from the Germans.

PH: They are assuring us here that there is no such possibility that the German might come here and take this away. But when we join the Union and when the Union’s regulations are in force, one doesn’t know, does one? He will come and show the deed and will say ‘it’s mine’.

DG: Mmm.

PH: I left it.

DG: Mmm. So are you in favour of joining the Union or against?

PH: I mean, I am of course in favour of joining the Union, right? But these matters like property should be clearly settled before joining the Union.

DG: So would you be against Germans being able to buy land here?

PH: If it were on equal rights, that I shall be able to buy land in Germany ...

DG: I see, yes.

PH: ... then no problem.

DG: I understand.

PH: But with a reservation that for example it’s now known that a German in Poland when we join the Union will be able to do everything, including work and we in 10 years’ time.

The apparent declaration that Germans could buy land in Poland as long as it is on a par with Poles buying land in Germany is immediately undermined by the assumption of the non-symmetrical rights of Poles and Germans. In other words, whatever happens PH assumes that Poles will be worse off.

These constructions of the European Union are quite typical. Firstly they are heavily nationalised – the European Union is a group of nation-states, with
Germany being the dominant one and the principal economic threat to Poland. In the narratives there is no sense that Poland would join the Union as an equal partner, there is also no sense that there is an entity called the EU that transcends the sum total of its nation-state parts. Poland is constantly constructed as the poor relative of the European Union, and Germany as a country that cannot put up a sufficient defence of its interests.

These constructions are quite typical of the entire Polish sample – right across the age spectrum. The threat of Germany coming back to Gubin, particularly strong in the case of the third generation, is then applied to the European Union as a potential platform for German endeavours in Poland.

There is also no sense of constructing ‘us’ as Europeans. The nationalisation of the European Union is good evidence of the lack of the European dimension of identities of our interviewees, which are dominated by the national identity. The interviewees are Poles, rather than Europeans; they are Poles rather than ‘Gubinians’.

There was one attempt, however, at constructing Poles in terms of trans-national identity, but that was done in terms of Slavs rather than Europeans (MS, PS = youngest generation):

PS: But somehow the French were able to agree with Germans over there on the other side, but I think there was a financial factor and there were not such animosities. After all what Germans did in the East.

MS: But remember that the French are not Slavs.

DG: Why are you saying there will never be a reconciliation?

MS: Why am I saying that? Because ...

DG: Why do you think that?

MS: ... because a German is Aryan and a Pole is a Slav. And it is so, so I don’t know, I don’t know.

DG: Sure, I am not passing judgement.

MS: It sounds so bad, but this is what I think.

The inability of reconciliation is given the ultimate evidence. Poles are Slavs and Germans are Aryan – whatever that may actually mean. As we were once somewhat shockingly told by one of our culture brokers, someone who liked both the project and its German partner, the River Neisse is a border-line between two tectonic plates. On one side there are the Slavs and on the other side there are the Germanic people and those people have nothing to do with each other. And the cross-border co-operation between Poles and Germans should not fool us and make us forget this simple fact.

It must be stressed that the explicit Slavonic self-identification occurred only once, although some of the West–East differentiations (also quite rare) could be seen as categorising the world into the world of Slavs and non-Slavs. What is important here, however, is that, rarely or not, Poles have found a transnational identity which not so much unites them with the ‘rest of Europe’ but, rather, separates them from it. The potential of the European identity is that it would create some common ground for living with the German ‘arch-enemies’. And yet, instead of claiming this common ground, Poles opt for something that divides.

If this is so, one could go further and see that the Slavonic identity is an extension of the Polish national identity that is constructed predominantly in reference to the German neighbour. If the Polish identity is constructed in
opposition to Germanness, then the Slavonic identity is a useful and politically motivated tool with which to stress the opposition in a way that the European identity (one which is associated with the European Union) cannot be.

To repeat, the identities constructed in the Polish interviews all have a clear core – Polness. The other aspects of this identity, localised or transnational, cannot be seen as sitting in parallel or under or on top of this core. They are in one way or another ancillary to the primary articulation of Polness.

The German stories

In sharp contrast to the overriding emphasis on the national discourse of Polness, and the concurrent mainly negative construction of town and region, German national identity appears in any number of contexts in our informants’ discourses. We found many different connotations, from the most positive and all-embracing to the more critical or even dismissive. The same is true for other layers of identity with the exception of the regional one, which is usually, though not always, positive. There is thus far less uniformity in the ways in which our German informants aligned themselves than in our Polish sample: we found combinations of positive or negative constructions of identity at various complementary or oppositional levels. Indeed, this lack of uniformity is one of the few generalisable outcomes across our German samples not only across the different communities, but also if one only looks at the individual communities separately. There is some more common ground between our informants if one compares individuals from the same generations within each and across some of the communities, as we will show below. We will illustrate the range of options and combinations that we encountered in all our communities by quoting from the conversations with people living in the neighbouring town to Gubin, the German town of Guben. To narrow the sample down even further, we selected examples from those informants who had a positive identification with Europe. The extracts below cover three generations, but not individuals from the same family. Each of them identifies positively with more than one entity and in each a European identity features positively. But they differ not only in the type of layering they wish to adopt, but also in the conceptualisation of their ‘imagined’ Europe.

Imagining Europe: a German is also a European

In the first extract our informant (male/oldest generation) opts for Germanness as his key identifier, but immediately goes on to embed this into the transnational context of being European.

Well, yes, I’m a German, yes, well, we, I am for German unity and most of all happy that it came about without violence, nicht? [nicht = German ‘tag’ form inviting minimal response] Of course if one is a German one has to be a European, nicht? We’re now keen on the fact that the borders are no longer so fixed, nicht? We have seen this for ourselves on our trip to France just now and there no more border controls.

Later the same informant differentiates this desirable Europe as a Western community from an expanding Europe which would include Poland:

The risk which one incurs [by Eastern expansion of the EU] from the State’s perspective is indisputable as far as criminality is concerned. And that [integration of] with Poland, I mean, Poland, here we are now on the European border, the EU border, that will stay like this for a while. I think the pre-condition that the, that Poland enters the EU is also the
Polish structure, how they are going to manage that, the preparation, and surely also the wealth differential.

In the extracts above, especially in the first one, there is an interesting switch between the personal and the impersonal pronoun. Although the connotation of the choice between ‘ich’, ‘wir’ and ‘man’ is less marked in the German language than it is in English ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘you’, or ‘one’, our informant switches from the personal ‘ich’ to the impersonal ‘man’ at that point where he appeals to what he claims as a general truth: namely, that to be German means that one has to be a European at the same time. But this Europe ends at least for the time being on the border to Poland, for reasons which are again stated as general truth (‘it is indisputable’). Only when he considers the possibility of a Polish entry to the EU does he switch back to expressing a personal opinion.

Brandenburg in Europe

By contrast, the informant in our next set of extracts (female/middle generation) specifically expresses her wish for a better connection with Poland. Her reasoning is strategic: she has instrumental reasons for wanting a united Europe, in particular because of her strong allegiance to her region, the new federal state of Brandenburg, which she sees as economically interdependent with the Polish neighbours. Emotionally, it is on the one hand the newly discovered multicultural diversity of Europe as part of a global vision which attracts her, and on the other the retention of an Eastern German (Ossi) identity rather than the adoption of a united German identity.

CH: Brandenburgian? yes I’m a Brandenburgian.
UM: Did you feel like that during GDR times?
CH: No, only now, that didn’t exist during GDR times, at that time I was a Gubenian ... Now we are Brandenburgians.

Later on in the same stretch of narrative she qualifies this further by giving reasons for these choices.

CH: Gubenian or Brandenburgian. Brandenburgian because I want to remain an ‘Ossi’ (East German).
UM: Because you ...
CH: Want to remain an Ossi.
UM: ... want to remain an Ossi. Ah so being a Brandenburgian implies also to be an Ossi?
CH: Yes, and when I say German, then it’s all ... [trails off]

Here our informant provides an unsolicited explanation for her strong identification with the former federal state of Brandenburg. To her, this signals her identity as a citizen from the former GDR. The word ‘Ossi’, which she uses, came into existence in 1989/90 together with its partner word ‘Wessie’, as a non-evaluative colloquial identifier for East or West German. Since then the words have taken on a myriad of connotations, mostly negative, and they appear in new compounds, which are even more pronouncedly negative such as ‘Jammer-Ossier’ (whiny Ossi) or ‘Besser-Wessie’ (know-all Wessie). Her deliberate and somewhat defiant use of the word ‘Ossi’ underlines the strength of the constructed identity. The incomplete utterance ‘and when I say German, then it’s
all …’ suggests a rejection of a united German identity, something which is confirmed by other sections of her discourse, but by leaving the sentence unfinished it also suggests some unease about voicing too strong a rejection of being German. Her attitude to Europe is positive, as the next extract shows but with different motivations.

UM: And Europe. Has that got a positive feel to it?

CH: Yes … it should be open towards Poland, but not because of anything particularly to do with Poland as such, but in general because it would help our region.

UM: For economic reasons?

CH: Yes, it would help us a lot. Otherwise it doesn’t matter, whether they are Poles or French, in general I like them all.

UM: Yes, but I mean the EU and the Euro, that doesn’t have to be ...

CH: … the (common) currency, that doesn’t have to be. I’m rather more against that, but otherwise I’m in general open for other people.

UM: Because you like travelling?

CH: I’m interested in that. I’m interested in the life-style, nicht? In what they do, how they live, and the people themselves … we had many of them here, we had a Frenchman here for three days, and a woman from Slovakia. Slovakia is also very beautiful, yes so it’s more for economic reasons that I would say, let’s immediately integrate Poland into the EU, that can only be good for our region, because those around Berlin, Potsdam region, they’re in a good position, that’s not feasible from here, and we don’t want to abandon our ‘Heimat’.

This identification with Europe and the region of Brandenburg, which effectively bypasses the national level, occurs several times amongst our informants. In this particular collocation, allegiance to the newly created structure of the federal state of Brandenburg implies allegiance to a former GDR identity and a negative identity construction for being post-unification German. This combination of positive identifications at regional and transnational, and a negative identification at national, level is echoed by several of our informants from the Thuringian town of Hirschberg, but in both locations it occurs only in the discourses of the middle generation.

Boring Guben, exciting Europe of cities

The last extracts in this section come from the conversation with two young Gubeners (SG and TG, a brother and sister interviewed together). Their most positive identification is that of being European but they strongly dissociate themselves from Guben (and even more so from Gubin) and the immediate region. Like in the first extract but contrary to the second, their Europe is a Western concept coinciding with the current EU territory. Interestingly, their highly personal discourse switches at that point to an impersonal formulation (‘Well, when one says Europe, one usually means the Western part, not so much the East’). But as the extracts and the unquoted parts of their conversations show, this Europe is a specifically metropolitan version – a Europe of big and attractive cities – which is part of a world of cities.

Even the otherwise negative or indifferent references to Poland become positive in a specifically metropolitan context. In another section of the same interview SG says ‘Warsaw is almost as good as Berlin’. In the following extract
SG and his sister TG are talking about the centre of Guben, which is referred to as ‘the Triangle’:

SG: Well, that’s what most call the centre, as if, well, Berlin street.
TG: Berlin Street, Frankfurt Street, that bit before the border up to the railway station.
UM: And what does one do in the triangle, at the triangle, on the triangle, in the triangle?
SG: At the triangle you do nothing, there it is usually …
TG: There are the drunkards. Well, that’s what its …
SG: … there are lots of park benches, under the trees and there the alcoholics are sitting [continues to talk about the alcoholics and the absence of a proper shopping area].
UM: And I mean would you like that? Is it that what you’re missing?
SG: No, not really, because then one would always have to stay in Guben, and this way one can go to Cottbus or Berlin. That’s not bad. But only to do shopping that’s not it either. At least not for me.
UM: And where do you like going most of all?
TG: Berlin.
UM: Berlin?
SG: When I want to go shopping?
UM: No, I mean in general when you want to get out.
SG: Well, to get out of Guben I like Berlin best of all, because there I know lots of people and one can do things. It’s not as boring as Guben.

Whereas in the above extract the expression of the informants’ preference for Berlin came up spontaneously in the context of their dislike of their own town and region, the stated preference for being a European in the next and last quote occurs in response to the self-identification question posed towards the end of our conversations to all our interviewees. As we mentioned before, European references did not occur spontaneously in the discourses of our informants, irrespective of whether Europe or the EU turned out to be a positive or a negative reference point. Without wanting to exaggerate the significance of this omission, it does suggest that European identity may not be as high up on the experiential agenda, be it positive or negative, as other more immediate and possibly more ‘lived’ alternatives are. The unambiguous choice by our informants of a European identity in response to a specific question about preferences is interesting in this respect, since it does throw light on a possible bias which questionnaires may create by thematising certain areas. In such instances a less directive mode of enquiry will provide alternative perspectives and possible correctives to the overall results.

UM: Is there anything you are more likely to identify with? Or what would be your number one, if we had to do a hit parade: who am I?
F: Europe.
UM: Ah, Europe, you think?
SG: Yes.
UM: Yes, yes, yes, you think the same. And what sort of Europe?
SG: Well, when one says Europe, one usually means the Western part, not so much the East.
UM: Ah, so more like the current EU?
SG: EU.
UM: OK, that kind of Europe. But what about this opening to the East? They’re all waiting ...
SG: No, that doesn’t interest me, really.
F: No, not me either. That doesn’t interest me ...
UM: And Brandenburg as your reference point? [Interviewees shake their head in denial] No, I see.
SG: No, not Brandenburg ... Dresden, that I could imagine, Dresden is a beautiful city.
UM: Dresden, hmm.
S: That’s also got an Eastern country next to it, the Czech Republic, that I could imagine but otherwise ... [trails off]

Summing up

The extracts in this section were meant to illustrate some of the different and unpredictable collocations of multiple identities which our German informants construct for themselves: firstly, a national identity which simultaneously implies a transnational Western one; secondly, a regional and local identity where a strong form combines with a transnational Eastern and Western concept, but bypasses the national level; and thirdly, a weak local, regional and national identity combined with a strong metropolitan transnational western construction.

However, to summarise the results in this form gives the misleading impression that, firstly, these are fixed and unambiguous categories of collective identities, and secondly that people Have or Possess these rather than construct them discursively in particular contexts. Neither of these propositions is the case.

All identity labels are problematical. Depending on the discursive contexts in which they appear, they signify differently and their evaluation might shift accordingly. Even the short extracts reproduced here made that clear. Although in the German section we only selected quotes from people who had positive identification as Europeans, the meaning of that Europe was very different for each of them. In the first example – the man from the oldest generation – it was a clearly Western construct closely related to the EU. For the woman from the middle generation it combined co-operation with Poland with a universalist culture – and life-style oriented multicultural space. For the youngest generation it was a Europe of cities – a global Western metropolitan culture. If we had added to these other examples from those informants who are expressly ambivalent in their attitudes to Europe, we could have demonstrated even more complex mappings of identity spaces. The expression of positive or negative feelings and attitudes about Europe or things European is clearly not restrictable to an abstract collectivity, but is much more concretely related to the associations which people form in particular contexts. But these are not fixed once and for all but often appear in tension with one another, even during one particular interview session. So even if one makes allowances for shifting meanings of abstract collectivities such as Germany or Poland or Europe under different contextual conditions, we cannot restrict our enquiry to the level of consciously expressed attitudes. Such a limitation would not allow for the complex and fluid ways in which people construct and confirm identifications at discursive level.
through the lexico-grammatical choices that they make in talking and narrating themselves. From these discursive constructions we may well draw different and more ambivalent conclusions than self-declaration or conscious self-assignment to particular group formations would indicate. We have shown elsewhere that the strains of coming to terms with the discredit and disappearance of the GDR created discursive breaks, discontinuities and contradictions in the narratives of former citizens, but most noticeably in those of the middle generation. We have also demonstrated that the ways in which people expressed themselves was as important as the content of their narratives (Meinhof and Galasiński 2000). Our Polish informants constructed their identities in more homogeneous fashion than our German informants, with a much more pronounced collective national identity and the perception of one overwhelming ‘Other’ in the form of the Germans. But even their discourses reveal more complexities and contradictions in the realisation of such overall constructions than the expression of opinion and belief alone would indicate (see Galasiński and Meinhof 2002; Meinhof 2002). For our German respondents with their highly problematical and deeply divided recent history, there is no collective construction of identity which combines the communities at the national or transnational level. By sharp contrast to the Polish articulation of identity as a continuing enactment of separation from the German ‘Other’, the identity constructions of our German informants did not show any such marked dividing lines. This is true for every one of the demarcations of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ that appeared in the narratives.

In this article we could only cite a few examples of the criss-crossing of positive and negative identifications which our informants created during our 60–80 minute conversations. The variability of these maps of multiple identities could easily be demonstrated by quoting extracts from our other set of communities on the former German/German border. Only the latter sentiment, a positive identity based on the region and labelled as loyalty to a new federal state, unites almost all of our informants from the former East, though this was particularly strong amongst the middle generation. The replacement of the former East German administrative units of ‘Bezirke’ by the new political structures of the federal system may well offer some form of resolution to this generation for the disturbances created by the loss of their former state, and for their unease with a united Germany. But even amongst the West German informants, the regional identity came out strongest, though in their case it was not the federal state of Bavaria but the culturally and linguistically distinctive area of Upper Franconia.

**In conclusion**

We have come to the conclusion that the most meaningful construction of identity by our Polish informants remains that of being Polish. In the case of our German informants there is, however, evidence of a multi-layering of different forms, with the national dimension considerably less important than the regional, and no more important than the town/village or even the transnational levels. In that sense post-war Germans fit better the post-modern concept of multiple and hybrid identities than their Polish neighbours. However, these multiple identities do not map as concentric circles of ever-widening mutually compatible circles. Neither the Polish nor the German data suggested that a
strong national identity by definition challenged a European one, nor was there evidence for the opposite assumption, namely that a strong national identity went hand-in-hand with a strong transnational one. The context in which the different identity markers appeared proved significant in that European or transnational identity markers other than those relating to their immediate neighbours hardly ever appeared spontaneously in any of our informants’ narratives.

These different discursive engagements with collective identities may contain the clue for the discussions in political science and social psychology about the relationship between peoples’ national and transnational identities, where one group is arguing for the antagonistic version whilst another suggests a positive correlation between different layers of identity (Ingelhart 1997; Ingelhart and Reif 1991), especially between various national and European identities (see, for example, Bruter 2002; Castano 2002; Duchesne and Frognier 1995; Mlicki and Ellemers 1996). What our research shows is that because collective identifications at regional, cross-regional, national or transnational levels are complex, potentially multi-layered and often self-contradictory, they are not placeable on oppositional scales of mutual antagonism or complementarity.

More traditional forms of identity research, such as for example the questionnaires on which the Eurobarometer is based or even the more complex experimental designs in social psychology, still seem to build on the assumption that identity or identities are stable, albeit multi-layered formations. If we wish to account for the complexities of the more fluid, and context-dependent alternatives, such methods need to be complemented by other more qualitative research designs based on the analytical approaches of ethnography and discourse analysis. With our research we can show that identity is a discursive construct, highly sensitive to the contexts in which the constructions are taking place and responsive to the ways through which narratives are solicited.

Acknowledgements

The research on which our paper is based has been made possible by an ESRC grant (ESRC000 22 2899), subsequently expanded by a grant from the European Commission’s Fifth Framework Programme (SERD-1999–00023). We would like to thank the ESRC and the European Commission for their support. We are grateful, too, to the anonymous referees whose perceptive and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper we much appreciated.

Notes

1 Editorial policy of the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies does not allow us to represent the quotes in their original languages. However, the original quotes, together with the photographs used as trigger material, are available on a dedicated section of our EU Border Identities website: http://www.borderidentities.com (publications).

2 We would like to thank the Idnet group and their June 2000 conference at the European Forum of the Schumann Centre in Fiesole for the stimulating discussion of these points. Special thanks to Thomas Risse, Michael Bruter, Laurent Licada and Emanuele Castano. See the various papers in Herrmann et al. (2002).

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