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**Title:** Sharing Social Identities and Solidarity. A Study on the Example of Polish Civil Protest Movements

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**Citation style:** Bartoszek Adam, Cekiera Rafał. (2019). Sharing Social Identities and Solidarity. A Study on the Example of Polish Civil Protest Movements. In B. Tejerina, C. M. de Almeida and I. Perugorría (Eds.), Sharing Society. The Impact of Collaborative Collective Actions in the Transformation of Contemporary Societies (pp. 552-561). Bilbao, Universidad del Pais Vasco - Euskal Herriko Uniberstitatea.



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## Sharing Social Identities and Solidarity. A Study on the Example of Polish Civil Protest Movements

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**Abstract:** *We will discuss the theoretical mechanisms of behaviour that constitute a form of “sharing society” and are defined as “identity sharing”. The authors propose to identify factors that induce some people to an act of social solidarity with excluded or culturally marginalized people under the pressure of dominant political practices. In the empirical aspect, the project is inscribed in the specific determinants of cultural homogeneity and Poles national ethnocentrism as the foundations of the political conservatism of the ruling right wing in Poland. In these conditions, we can operationalize indicators of “civic solidarity” and manifestations of practices of “identity sharing” that characterize the attitudes of people protesting against neo-authoritarian attacks of the power camp on free media, independent courts, or cultural minorities (including refugees) in their politics. Do the manifestations of “identity sharing” have the ability to overcome the social fears of people who are divided by differences in worldviews – or maybe they strengthen them? These problems will be theoretically analysed using a conceptual framework referring to the following: motives of R. Girard’s mimetic rivalry theory; theories of J. Haidt’s social morality and ethical intuitions; the effects of sharing identity in the inclusive social networks (R. Putnam); dramatic models of the public scene and the role of a stranger for social actors (E. Goffman); the symbolic experience of a community of values for structuring the conflict of identities (A. Giddens, Z. Bauman). The conclusions will be illustrated by examples of local (Polish) acts of solidarity initiated spontaneously by the participants of civic forms of protest against the language of cultural domination and political stigmatization of cultural opponents. We will examine the hypothesis – important for the final conclusions – that “identity sharing” requires the presence in a common space of actors making gestures of “solidarity” and social media are a secondary and necessary but not sufficient tool to generate such practices.*

**Keywords:** *sharing identities, solidarity, social movements, civil protest, Poland*

### 1. Introduction

This study presents the base for a theoretical discussion on the mechanisms of behaviors constituting the form of “sharing the society” defined here as “sharing the identities.” The paper delves into the factors encouraging people to initiate public solidarity acts with excluded people or groups who are culturally marginalized under the pressure of the dominant political practices. Even though, social exclusion may be considered as a form enhancement of community group identity, which focuses on the primary cultural environment to protect its value. The investigation dissects variables politically exploited by the rulers in the discourse of power, which are used in crossing the barrier of the symbolic domination over the civil, ethical and worldview rights of minorities. This discourse, in the conditions of media politics’



networking, is aimed at profiling the electorate's attitudes towards opposition community as identity foreign and narrative hostile to the interests of the majority.

It is essential to highlight in the empirical understanding that the analysis of "sharing the social identities" civic attitudes is set in the conditions of cultural and national ethnocentrism, marking the Polish society. Poland as a post-communist country is symbolized by a solidarity social and political upheaval towards freedom and democracy from the eighties of the former century. However, it also constitutes a peculiar social and cultural organism in the European Union. The Political system unitariness, mono-ethnicity and cultural homogeneity, 97% of the population are the ethnic Poles and Catholics (Rykała 2011), constitute the basis for the Right' conservatism currently rules in Poland. Recent studies of social awareness in one of the small Polish towns have substantiated the belief that right-wing neo-authoritarianism refers to a deficient perception of democracy. It is described as the law of the political majority, for governing a society subordinated to a vision of its leader, establishing a political community of simple Poles towards foreign influential groups and elites (Gdula 2017:34). As a result of the media narrative, the government combines "patriotic moralism" with a sense of threat to shared national values and interests by foreign patterns. The neo-authoritarianism of political discourse shapes the social beliefs that one do not needs to feel solidarity or compassion for foreigners. The authority gains its legitimacy from staging the social drama, referring to anti-elitism and the dignity of ordinary people rather than from the populism (Gdula 2017:36-38). Acts of "civic solidarity" and manifestations of "sharing the identities" practices are becoming a form of protest against the neo-authoritarian politics, practiced by excluding the minorities and stigmatizing the ruling party's opponents as the enemies of Polish patriotism.

In the context of right-wing neo-authoritarianism attack on liberal social environments, the practices of sharing the identities are essential not only for shaping a participatory civic culture. The activating forms of civic protest are the expression of a clash of inclusive attitudes, open to customs and worldviews, with the local community's cultural conservatism, closed on multicultural patterns.

## **2. Theories of Social Identity and Deficits of the Bridging Capital in Poland**

The Polish society, as Central and Eastern Europe post-communist country, is an example of problems with a consolidation of democratic political institutions. There are numerous disputes regarding the tensions scale in the systemic transformation process; the extent of economic and social exclusion; "winners" and "losers" division in the social structure as the consequences of the "vacuum" in the social bond (Pawlak 2015) and its impact in in shaping the "generic distrust" attitudes in the collective mentality of Poles. Piotr Sztompka, who studies this cultural syndrome on the Polish society states: "If distrust is rooted in rational evidence (even if subjectively exaggerated or biased) and spreading in society as a culture of suspicion, the changing of such a condition, weakening distrust and rebuilding trust is very hard" (Sztompka 2015:130). Deficits of generic trust in people belonging to different groups and levels of social structure are barriers in activating the bridging social capital.

Referring to the research by Robert D. Putnam team on the traditions of Italian democracy

(1993), it can be concluded, that Polish society demonstrates a significant similarity to the southern Italian regions. It is characterized by a high level of ritual Catholicism, a dominance of familiar binding capital and low resources of bridging initiatives and social support for non-governmental organizations. The conservative government of the Law and Justice party uses the passivity of society towards the associations and organizations activities which defending the civil rights. The attitude of the governmental authorities was reversed towards civil society: they reduce the civic dialogue, have the reluctance to support part of the third sector and has occurred alongside the limitation of financially support from the EU funds (2016 Report:93).

When comparing the resources of binding and bridging social capital in the European Union countries Claire Wallace and Florian Pichler, distinguished five types of countries, ranking the links between informal social networks, social support, and participation in association organizations. The first type is Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands; societies with high bonding capital and high bridge capital; the second including Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria is characterized by high bonding capital and low bridging capital; while Poland (and Spain, Malta, Romania, Italy, and Hungary) belongs to the fifth type with low bond capital and low level of bridging capital (Wallace, Pichler 2007:46). The problem of social vacuum in defining the civic identity may be linked with significant deficits of involvement in activities for the common good, through the forms that go beyond the micro-scale of the primary groups' bonds.

Instrumental relations shape the individual's identity in the public bond space based on a limited trust in the legal regulations and institutional practices. As a result, people with low cultural or social capital resource experience a strong ontological security deficit and embrace the attitude of civic passivity or political apathy towards the principles of democratic participation Anthony Giddens, the author of the concept of ontological security as an element of the social identity of the individual, defines it as an emotional phenomenon that includes "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens 1990:92). Giddens indicates significant participation of religiosity in building trust in the normative regulation of social practices while analyzing the process of constructing the social identity in the conditions of institutional pressure and threats in the sphere of post-modern culture (Giddens 1991:243). In the classic theory of the social constructing the individual identity, Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner assume adaptive settling in the participant of social networks in group relations through the mechanism of its cultural categorization. The identification effect imposed on its primary group and external groups provides an individual with a reference system for different statuses and values. Its emergence in the social environment triggers the individual's readiness to distinguish and favor the "own" group and discriminate against traits and representatives of the "foreign" group (Tajfel, Turner 1979:42-43).

Presently, the identity of individuals is preferably saturated with the process of self-identification then with the assigned status. This conclusion stems from the theory of the liquid modernity by Zygmunt Bauman, who paid particular attention to the problem of taking root in the new cultural structures of people migrating between different societies. The dynamics of economic migrations, which are also a common experience of Poles leaving for work in the countries of Western Europe, is growing. Only in the UK in 2016 there were 984000 people of Polish origin (Hawkins, Mouses 2016:3). Furthermore, as a result of pre-polarization, the social status of the part of the younger generation from middle classes is decomposed. It is therefore processual



or, following Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton biographically and reflexively shaped, in a discursive-structural context (Taylor, Littleton 2006:26). The discussion of these phenomena leads to the question concerning the importance of interactional and situational factors in the construction of individual social identity. The issue is the discursive space for building the identity of individuals rooted in a culture saturated with a sense of distrust to the socio-economic system institutions. They feel numerous threats to their social security, from neoliberal work and marketing agencies, strengthening the economic exploitation of human capital.

### **3. Social Identity and Competition of Ethical Institutions and Mimetic Lust**

Linking the individuals' identity with the resources of their social capital appeared to be a significant research perspective. John B. Davis, among others, drew attention to it, analyzing the significance of capitals forms for reducing identity conflicts resulting from cognitive dissonance (Davis 2014). The author analyses the premises inducing individuals to cross the boundaries of instrumental categorization of partners and build trust in pluralistic axiological relations. He wonders: "Why are people, who are different, able to trust one another and cooperate? In 'self-categorizing' themselves in role terms, they see themselves according to how their roles connect rather than in terms of individual interest" (Davis 2014:103). He indicates two levels of conflicts important to the participant identity in social groups. Regardless of the instrumental reasons for rivalry as well as conflict definition of goals, the individual refers to the conflicts of groups activated in her environment, which motivate one to take actions to reduce its significance for own membership in the preferred groups. Hence social conflicts are transferred to the level of internal conflicts as well as solved thus support maintaining trust and readiness to cooperate with the members of the group with whom the given identity identifies oneself.

Building the identity in conditions of inter-group normative conflicts, experiencing the effects of stigmatization denotes a dynamic connection of the axiological and emotional dimension of moral bonds shaping the partners' obligations to mutual loyalty. It is propounded to refer to Jonathan Haidt's theory of moral intuition in the diagnosis of the strength of these ties and their significance for the rationality of ethical choices. According to it, the foundation of the social morality of individuals is located in the emotional reactions of the body, which reacts to ethical offenses against cultural behavior patterns. According to Haidt, human moral sensitivity and ethical assessment are not the domain of purely rationalist argumentation; it is downright the opposite. A pictorial metaphor describes the social-intuitionist model, comparing a moralizing organism to a dog guided by emotional intuition: "Moral justifications are like the tail waving a dog guided by intuition" – since "intuitions appear as the first and strategic reasoning – the second" (Haidt 2014:81, 83).

The inclusion of moral intuitions is influenced by the individual's belonging to a specific cultural community. Social rooting is the foundation of personal identity, since the essence of communal beings, one gains protection and psychosocial well-being by being with others. However pragmatic conclusions from J. Haidt's theory may appear controversial, they present a settling in normative practices. The strength of individual's identity identification with the community renders that "we are ready to believe almost everything that speaks for the rightness of our group" and "we lie, deceive and justify so convincingly that we honestly believe

in our integrity” (Haidt 2014:120, 124).

The identity practices of categorizing and joining into the communities rationalizing the conflicts of groups, and their political representations, are one of the forms of organizing the cultural tensions. There are other mechanisms of regulating competition between people pointed by the anthropology of social conflicts. For instance, the theory of mimetic rivalry developed by René Girard appears as a particularly important and universal diagnosis of these mechanisms. It applies not only to the phenomena of axiological-ideological or political confrontation. Whole contemporary culture with its commercialization and consumption pressure activates the imitative mechanisms of imitative competition around the desire of various goods. The dynamism of the rival imitative parties engages others excluded from the access to the yearned products and increases the normative chaos in the conflicted community (Girard 2006:61-80). Losing confidence in others, perceived as aggressive and manipulating ethical commitments rivals, leads to assigning them the foreign values, hostile identities and finally activates the mechanism of the scapegoat. Inability to achieve the social exchange on the satisfactory level, beneficial to groups considered as unauthorized, directs collective emotions on the culturally “strangers”, perceived in the public discourse as the perpetrators of social evil, injustice or existential threats to the common good. Various social environments label and present “scapegoats” of their anger and resentments in discursive figures: a leftist, homosexual, Jew, Gypsy, post-communist, immigrant or other concealed conspiracy power to explain the intricacies of social life to frustrated people. Images of “scapegoats” stigmatize “strangers” and indicate who threatens the symbolic unity and existential prosperity of the national, religious or ideological community. Girard writes that imitative desire is the basis of social violence directed at every culture, especially towards the marginalized (Girard 1987:21-33). Girard perceives the problem of moral purification from the mimetic desire as an opportunity to understand the collective nature of the sources of rivalry and personal responsibility for blaming other people for motivations that lead ones to hurt their neighbors.

This motive may be the base for the practices of sharing social identity in the process of civil protest against acts of stigmatizing the individuals pointed out by politicians as a threat to the national or religious community while fulfilling the instrumental function of “scapegoats”. It appears as the moral and social attacks of the weaker, excluded from the rights to equality, dignity or justice and support. It creates a morally competitive rivalry and does not allow the civic community to understand the evil resulting from collective aggression.

#### **4. Sharing the Identity as the Civic Sensitivity to the Common Good**

Mechanism of sharing the social identity will be derived from the acts of inter-group or intercultural interaction. They lead individuals to compassionate moral foundations and motivate them to solidarity gestures with excluded or stigmatized victims of collective aggression. The practice of civil resistance will be presented by a few examples of spectacular action in response to both political pressure and media discourse imposed on the public by the conservative government ruling in Poland.

The actions taken in various places, including the territory out of cities, connect by the belief





in the ethical imperative of undertaking them; vary by the specific content and the number of people involved. It includes one-person, dramatic gestures. One of the tragic examples is the self-immolation of Piotr Szczyński in Warsaw, who called for reactions to the direction of policy pursued by the rulers, made a dramatic act of self-annihilation, leaving a manifesto with the words “I, am a simple man, one of the crowds like you, call you all – do not wait any longer” (OKO.press 2017). The message has been taken (and put on a banner) by another person whose protest has echoed in Poland to a great extent – Gabriela Lazarek from a small Cieszyn, 36 000 inhabitants, the owner of a hairdressing salon. She goes every day to the city market, frequently alone, protesting against breaking the constitution and allowing the hate. This protest has a symbolic significance – through its determination Lazarek is a testimony for many who agree that society is not entirely passive and apathetic (Karpiński 2017). An ethical imperative of reaction to the dominant aggressive political discourse also had a mass character conducted in the Internet. Following the assassination of the Mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz during the charity collection of the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity, one of the Internet users proposed a fundraiser via Facebook, for which the president was killed. Its effects have been surprising to all observers: over a few days more than 264 thousands of people engaged in the fundraiser, paid about 3.8 million Euros. The initiator, Patrycja Krzymińska, launched a different collection a few weeks later in consultation with the Gdańsk authorities – to redeem the founding of the European Solidarity Center. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage deprived this institution, for political reasons, over one-third of its budget. Consequently, it was successful – almost 1.5 million Euros has been raised in an instant. Implications have been made, that the donations did not result only from understanding the need, furthermore exposed a manifestation against the political pressure of power on an independent culture.

The spontaneous movements, following the migration crisis, present the forms of actions, applying in particular into the outlined theoretical perspective of sharing the social identities. Their generator was, on the one hand, ethical discord to be closed to the drama of the newcomers in Europe, searching for salvation and improved decent living conditions. On the other hand, it displays the protest against a categorical politics of closing to the adoption of solidarity policy and attacking the refugees as culturally alien by Polish authority. Not only has the politically efficient fear management contributed to the victory of the right-wing camp in the parliamentary election of 2015 but also dramatically changed the attitude of Poles towards those fleeing war and persecution (Cekiera 2017). However, the anti-lingering narrative imposed by the authorities triggered counter-reaction in several environments. The opposition to the process of infiltration of refugees, i.e., describing them as “‘slightly less human’ than the members of their group” (Tarnowska 2011:169), combined in the shared activities of the leftist circles with people justifying their protest with the faithfulness of the Catholic doctrine. This phenomenon is confirmed also in the described Girard’s theory.

An example of the organization combining all of the above types can be the Civic Initiative Witaj established in Bielsko-Biała (originally called “People from Bielsko-Biała for Aleppo”). Its creation is a consequence of participation one of the residents (Szymon Kułakowski) in Civil March for Aleppo at the turn of 2016 and 2017. Under this banner, several people managed to organize a large concert in the city market during which the dramatic situation of the Syrian fleeing the war was highlighted accompanying by the fundraiser was made. It is important to emphasize the span of the support incorporating several circles, from the anarchist provenance of “Food not Bombs” to Caritas of the Bielsko-Żywiecka Diocese (Cekiera 2018:139)

supported the event. The spontaneously formed group began to co-organize successive events familiarizing the local community with the refugees' problems going beyond the migration crisis. Resistance was expressed against the governmental policy "no refugees" and refusal of the authorities to accept the refugee family in Bielsko-Biała. Simultaneously, other potential areas of activities were sought. To present just a few examples out of many, the action "To Women's Refugees on Women's Day" was organized –the collection of cosmetics and hygiene products for women and girls staying in refugee centers in Poland (03.2017); money for refugees during amateur theatre groups was collected (11.03.2017). In parallel with these activities, the educational activities were conducted organizing the lectures of experts (22.02.2017, 9.04.2018) or workshops for volunteers (24.11.2017).

Once the group has been formed and experienced in organizing numerous events, it changed its name "People from Bielsko-Biała for Aleppo" to "Civic Initiative Witaj." It was not just a matter of nomenclature. This entailed reformulating the accents on what is possible and available in the immediate surrounding. As one of the founders of the Jadwiga Jarosz Initiative said, "changing the name brings with it a focus on the needs of the local community. We cooperate with foreigners living in Bielsko-Biała to know their needs" (bielsko.biala.pl. 2017).

The manifestation of the attitude transformation from ethical commitment, by recognizing the needs of emigrants at the level of human and social solidarity to a willingness to meet their representatives. This form of active "sharing the identity" of the citizen and the inhabitant of the city has been an organized party together with a large group of immigrants from Ukraine in Bielsko-Biała. Firstly they organized a multicultural picnic in a city park (20.05.2018) and traditional Ukrainian holiday "Kupała Night" on the city market (6-7.07.2018). Concurrently, an educational activity was not neglected, an example of this is the invitation to Bielsko-Biała Banina Foundation with the performance "Kyiv, Ukraine" with Ukrainian student, Solomija Mardarovych and coming from Syria Radwan Al Johmani performing the script is based on their war experience and leaving of their countries. At the end of 2018, The Initiative Witaj invited over 50 people from Chechnya (including 40 children) stays in a refugee center in the east of Poland for a few days filled with attractions to Bielsko-Biała, To co-organize this event the Initiative managed to invite the President of Bielsko-Biała, local enterprises, the Auchan hypermarket, Razem Party, Caritas of Bielsko-Żywiecka Diocese. Additionally to the direct consequences of these actions, the concern about people in a difficult situation, such events facilitate intercultural education; contribute to overthrow the stereotypes and construction of the meeting culture – instead of the imposed culture of fear.

For social movements, the critical moment is to transform the feeling of solidarity into action (Castells 2013:25–26). The Civic Initiative Witaj may constitute a great exemplification of efficient sharing the social identity and successful transformation from emotional reaction to the function of social change motors. The example of the Initiative may also be an excellent illustration of the thesis that contemporary social movements are "not only movements of protest and indignation, but they are also above all the producers of new meanings, symbolic systems, and values that are the basis for cultural change" (Kubicki 2015:27).





## 5. Conclusions

The presented mechanism of sharing the social identities constitutes the original analysing proffer of the unit and group actions resisting against the dominant discourse of state authorities, perceived as a violation of cultural minority rights. They appeared to have the characteristics of authentic civic dissent based on the reflexes of solidarity and moral intuition rather than follow from the unproven political strategy of the opposition. Citizens' acts of resistance are forms of spontaneous reactions to the stigmatization of certain groups or social environment in Poland, political instrumentalised by the rulers to perpetuate their dominant position. The movements of civic protest formed spontaneously in defence of various social environments who were given the role of scapegoats.

The presented cases of measures to support the attacked minorities by creating forms of "sharing the identity" in the public space are a kind of reaction to the feeling of limiting the influence of citizens on the rules of state management. It is an attempt to overcome passivity and powerlessness stemming from the sense of superficiality of democratic governments. They are the micro-social initiatives of civic groups against the neo-authoritarian violation of constitutional safeguarding the rights of equality and justice. The effectiveness of such a formula of resistance should also be analysed by mobilizing the dormant invisible and silent resources of civil society.

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## 7. Methodological Appendix

The presented study was based on the method of a qualitative research. The presented theoretical framework was used to analyse the case study of civic resistance practices and activities, that were assigned the character of “sharing the social identities”. The case selection was made by – on one hand – their social significance and indicators characterizing the types of actions defined as “forms of civic resistance” referring to the aspects of social identity. The research material was the body of press texts, the references of which are in the empirical part.



## **8. Biographical Notes**

Adam Bartoszek – sociologist, the professor at the University of Silesia in Katowice; chairman of the Katowice Department Polish Sociological Association. He is a researcher of public opinion and social communication, ethnic identities, and socio-cultural capitals. He is the author and co-author of books as: *Social and Cultural Capital of the Young Intelligentsia and the Demands Towards the Market* (2003); *Identity of Young Silesians. Between Local Patriotism and Europeanism* (2009); *Polish Elderly Housing Environment in Multi-Disciplinary Research* (2013); and articles at last: *Responsibility as a Societal Identity and power game*. In: *Responsibility. A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*, B. Bokus (ed.), Lexem. 2013; *The Crisis of the Public Debate in Polish Democracy and Pop Politics*. In: *Przegląd Socjologiczny* Vol. 67 No. 2 (2018) Łódź.

Rafał Cekiera – PhD in social science, lecturer in Institute of Sociology, University of Silesia. Author of books *“The pitfalls of emigration lightness – the experience of temporality in the narratives of young Polish post-accession EU emigrants”* (*“O pułapkach emigracyjnej lekkości. Doświadczenie tymczasowości w narracjach młodych polskich emigrantów poakcesyjnych”*, NOMOS, 2014) and *„The worries and the hopes. A sociological analysis of the entries to votives’ book in the St. Wendelin chapel in Rudzica”* (*“Zgryzoty i nadzieje. Socjologiczna analiza wpisów do ksiąg wotywnych w kaplicy św. Wendelina w Rudzicy”*, TMR, 2016). He is interested in the sociology of migration, religion, and culture.