

Race and Identity in the Polish-African Communities of Poland.

Sarah Grunberg

Summary

In this dissertation I explore the contested terrain of race, identity and inequality traversed by the Polish-African community in contemporary Poland. Poland is a context with two unique features. First, historically Poland has had a homogenous racial environment where white ethnic Poles represent the vast majority. Second, it is undergoing rapid social and demographic transformations. These two features create a climate that is particularly unique for individuals immigrating and living in Poland, especially in the case of people of color and their families.

Within this context, I explore the emergence of two related phenomena. One is the emergence of minority identity of three groups: Black Africans, children of biracial families where one parent is (Black) African and the other (White) Polish, and a new minority, namely, (White) Polish women who are partners of Black African men. A minority identity can be defined as “a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Viladrich and Loue, 2009, p.1). White Polish women coupled with Black African men in this case constitute a minority identity through the differential and unequal treatment they experience due to their choice in partner. Minority identity co-exists with a dominant majority identity group that experiences greater privileges and higher social status (Viladrich and Loue, 2009, p.1).

All of the groups listed above form identity strategies and personal and social understandings of themselves (Howard 2000) that they use to navigate their daily lives and form worldviews. At the same time, a community emerges, formed by the macro-social context and the micro-level interactions between Black Africans, White Poles and their biracial children. Minority identity, the racial community and the processes of their mutual emergence are linked. The process of minority identity and community emergence is influenced by (a) the divergent ideologies of social inequality and of cosmopolitanism and (b) the intersection of race and gender. As such, inequality, cosmopolitanism and intersectionality are guiding frames for my research.

I ask two main sets of research questions. The first set is about identity formation.

1) What are the identity strategies of Black Africans, White Poles and biracial children? How do racial identities intersect with gender identities? What are the consequences of these identities for navigating a daily life in which the ideology of inequality is a major problem and cosmopolitanism remains an ideal?

The second set is about community formation, especially linking identity to community.

2) In what ways have communities – both physical and on-line – composed of racial minority groups emerged within this environment? How does this community, as an emergent phenomenon, influence minority identity strategies?

All told, I conducted 33 in-depth interviews, and countless informal conversations in numerous events across the three Polish-African communities between 2011 and 2015. These are detailed in the annex of the dissertation.