

# THE POLISH MINORITY GROUP IN CANADA AND ITS HIERARCHY OF CORE VALUES

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the ethnic identity of the Polish minority group living in Canada in the last two decades, that is, after 1989 when Poland replaced the Communist system and Poles were allowed to freely leave the country. On the basis of the survey distributed among representatives of two generations of Poles in Canada, I examine how the participants position themselves with respect to core values of ethnicity-language, religion, and culture. The results of my study show that respondents themselves break the stereotypical vision of Polish identity in which language matters are central. They explicitly indicate respecting Polish traditions and customs as the most fundamental token of Polish ethnic identity, placing the value of the Polish language — identified by speaking Polish and teaching children Polish — in second and third positions. The ethno-cultural orientation which they present can be accounted for in two fundamental ways: 1) the socio-historical past of the community and 2) the specific characteristics of Canada as a country of settlement.

**Key words:** Ethnic identity, Polish minority group, Polish Canadians, language shift, core values of ethnicity, ethnicity

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite l'identité ethnique de la minorité linguistique polonaise du Canada dans les deux dernières décennies, à partir de l'expulsion en 1968 des communistes et la fin de leur contrôle sur le voyage et des contacts extérieurs. À partir d'une enquête distribuée parmi des représentants de deux générations de Polonais vivant au Canada, l'auteur examine les valeurs des informants à l'égard des traits saillants de l'ethnicité — langue, religion et culture. Les résultats de la présente étude montrent que les informants mêmes brisent la vision stéréotypique de l'identité polonaise qui insiste que la langue soit centrale. Ceux-ci indiquent que le respect des traditions polonaises est la preuve principale de l'identité ethnique, plaçant la langue, soit sa pratique et son instruction, en deuxième et troisième lieux. Leur orientation ethno-culturelle peut s'expliquer et par le passé socio-culturel de la communauté et par les caractéristiques spécifiques du Canada comme pays d'adoption.

**Mots-clés :** Identité ethnique, minorité polonaise, Canadiens polonais, transfert linguistique, valeur identitaires, ethnicité

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine the problem of Polish-Canadian ethnic identity from the point of view of the representatives of the first and the second generation of Polish immigrants in Canada. I attempt to investigate how the ethnic self-identity of this group has changed in the last two decades. This article presents one part of a broader sociolinguistic project examining the Polish immigrant minority group and the language spoken by this group in the Greater Toronto Area (Lustanski 2005).

While general aspects of ethnic identity have been extensively explored in sociolinguistics (e.g., Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977; Fishman 1989, 1999; Clyne 1991; Edwards 1992, 2003), relatively little quantitative research has been conducted that investigates in depth the perceptions of ethnic group members themselves regarding language and ethnic identity maintenance (Feuerverger 1991:660). Also, there are as yet no studies of ethnic identity among Polish immigrants in Canada. With the exception of Grabowski's work, there has been little or no sociolinguistic research on the Polish language in Canada (Grabowski 1975, 1976, 1988).

Ethnicity interacts with a wide array of sociocultural and sociopsychological variables and is embedded within an intricate set of sociocultural relationships, processes, and identities (Wolfram 2003:2). For this reason, I investigate the relationship of ethnicity with basic markers of ethnic identity, such as culture, tradition, and religion. I conceptualize language as one of several dimensions used in the construction of ethnic identity, a dimension that is subject to deliberate modification to varying degrees (Sekowska 1994:134).

On the basis of the survey distributed among representatives of two generations of Poles in Canada (Lustanski 2005), the immigrants' generation and the generation of young Polish Canadians, I examine how the participants position themselves and others with respect to their ethnic identity. I explore their self-reports regarding core values of ethnicity — language, religion, and culture — in the context of the historical past and the contemporary situation of the community (Smolicz 1992). I look for answers to the questions of what connects Polish Canadians to each other, and why this is the case.

In hitherto published works about ethnic identity, Poles have been noticed as a very religious ethno-linguistic community (Verdoodt 1977; Smolicz 1981; Sekowska 1994; Oakes 2001). In this article I try to revise this opinion and find an answer to the question whether a "culture-first" approach (Crystal 2000) instead of "language-first" and "religion-first" view could be currently applied to the description of "Polishness".

As mentioned, the Polish-Canadian community has been the subject of very little sociolinguistic research and there have not been any studies that discuss the problem of attitudes towards core values of ethnicity among Polish Canadians. For this reason, at various points, I compare my findings with parallel research conducted in Australia (Smolicz and Secombe 1987), France (Bartol-Jarosinska 1994), the United Kingdom (Sekowska 1994), and the U.S.A. (Sandberg 1974; Cohen 1990). I believe that in the past the Polish community in Canada did not differ from

the other Polish communities of similar size and social situation, but in the last two decades it has been in the process of transition from the ethno-linguistic to the ethno-cultural orientation.<sup>1</sup>

In order to obtain a broader perspective on the selected ethnic issues, I also attempt to find some aspects of ethnic identity common to second generations of both Polish Canadians and Italian Canadians (Giampapa 2001; Vizmuller-Zocco 2002). Furthermore, I try to explore the identity markers of another linguistic community — Malaysian Tamil (Naji and David 2003). I begin by exploring some of the theoretical tenets that form the foundation of my research on ethnic self-identity.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Identity itself is a multi-faceted phenomenon. In postmodernist works, the discussion of ethnicities and identities has shifted away from the notion that these concepts are fixed and constructed in isolation towards the notion that they are ever-changing, complex, and always in negotiation (Norton Peirce 1995). As Ryan notes (1997:42):

The construction of identity ... is not an individual or exclusively personal thing. Selves are neither made nor change in isolation. Rather the process of identity formation is dialogical in nature. Who we are and what we become is tied very closely to the social circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Thus, ethnic identity, which is obviously concerned with cultural origins and cultural behaviour, is a socially constructed act and describes one's social relationships to the world. It is as much about "being" as it is about "becoming" (Hall 1990).

Despite the fact that "acts of identity" are always negotiated, they are constructed from certain fundamental components. For Fishman, ethnicity pertains to "peopleness", that is, actions, views, or attributions pertaining to and belonging to a more or less well-defined group of people. The group's actions and views are manifested through a number of symbols, such as language, religion, customs, culture, etc. (Fishman 1989:216). It should be noted that these symbols of ethnicity have many meanings and are exploited in various ways, depending on the character of the group. For example, to describe the ethnic identity of the Tamil community, Naji and David (2003:95) list the following markers of identity: (a) dietary habits, (b) use of traditional clothes, (c) celebration of Indian festivals, (d) lifestyle, and (e) choice of marriage partner. All of them pertain to the group's actions but it is obvious that not all of them are universal and that they could be applied just as effectively to other communities.

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<sup>1</sup>The only study that has referred to Polish Canadians as an ethno-cultural group is by Radecki and Heydenkorn (1976). However, the authors discuss the Polish-Canadian group from the sociological perspective only and they do not concern themselves with Smolicz's core values which take both sociological and linguistic factors into account. See also Dubisz (1994), Radecki (1979), and Heydenkorn (1979).

Smolicz, whose research regarding ethnic identities of minority groups in Australia corresponds to Znaniecki's (1968) concepts of the humanistic coefficient and systems of cultural values, points to that which he identifies as the main factors which determine the construction of a nation's identity. Smolicz's notion of "core values" serves as the point of departure for the current study (1981:75–77):

Core values can be regarded as forming one of the most fundamental components of a group's culture. They generally represent the heartland of the ideological system and act as identifying values which are symbolic of the group and its membership. . . . Whenever people feel that there is a direct link between their identity as a group and what they regard as the most crucial and distinguishing element of their culture, the element concerned becomes a core value for the group.

For the Polish minority group in Australia, Smolicz indicates three fundamental (core) values: language, religion, and culture. He argues that (1988:114):

core values provide the indispensable link between the group's cultural and social systems; in their absence both systems would suffer eventual disintegration. Indeed, it is through core values that social groups can be identified as distinctive ethnic, religious, scientific or other cultural communities.

Within this framework, there are two basic ways to investigate ethnic identification: respondents' self-identification and respondents' attitudes toward specific cultural values (Sekowska 1994:124). In the end, through data analysis using these two approaches, a fairly clear-cut image of ethnic identity can be obtained.

### 3. DATA COLLECTION

I developed a survey that was distributed among representatives of two generations of Poles living in Canada: a group of Polish immigrants (called also "first-generation Polish immigrants") and a group of second-generation of immigrants (called "young Polish Canadians"). Workers at the company MCM2001 in Toronto represented the first generation. The respondents' group consisted of 33 people: 1 woman and 32 men.<sup>2</sup> The immigrant group are Poles born mostly between 1940 and 1969 in Poland, who came into Canada as adults, mostly between 1987 and 1993 (22 people). According to the motive criteria of immigration, they represent two types of immigrant waves: post-Solidarity and economic (Dubisz 1997:29).

Students from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade at the M. Copernicus Polish School in Mississauga represented the second generation. In the survey, 182 young Polish Canadians participated: 109 girls and 73 boys. Among the second-generation respondents, born between 1986 and 1988, 114 were born outside Canada (102 in Poland) but arrived in Canada before they fully acquired the Polish language (1990–1995). The rest of the young representatives were born in Canada.

<sup>2</sup>The company's profile — woodworking — explains the proportion of men to women hired. I am aware of the potentially significant under-representation of women's responses; however, I decided to present their answers but without any attempts to compare those answers with those given by the male respondents.

Every speaker filled out a personal questionnaire which first of all aimed to examine the respondents' opinions about the Polish language, their language competence, their participation in Polish organizations, ethnic self-identity, and so on. In this article, I focus on analyzing the latter aspect of the survey, Polish ethnic self-identity. Since speaking and aural comprehension abilities among the second generation of Poles are much more advanced than their reading and writing abilities, the questionnaires were composed both in Polish and in English. Together, 215 surveys were analyzed.

My research was deliberately conducted with people belonging to two particular local groups: a Polish Saturday school and a Polish company. The members of these communicative communities interact a lot, keep close social ties, and have comparable lifestyles. They share many characteristics, were not randomly chosen, and their opinions can be accounted for in light of the same socio-cultural factors. Aside from the generation/age variable, at some points in the analysis I consider the gender and place-of-birth factors and try to explain how the notion of ethnic identity varies across those variables that are commonly discussed in sociolinguistics.

#### 4. SELF-IDENTIFICATION: FIRST VS. SECOND GENERATION

As mentioned in the previous section, some questions in the personal survey addressed the respondents' self-identification. The actual question given in the survey was the following:

12. Czy czujesz się Polakiem/Polką?

*Do you feel Polish?*

- tak (yes)
- nie, czuję się Kanadyjczykiem/-ką (no, I feel Canadian)
- częściowo (partly)

As shown in Table 1, 90% of the immigrants surveyed provided an affirmative answer to the first question "Do you feel Polish?" Only two people responded to the question with "partly" and one respondent did not give an answer. In comparison with the responses of the immigrant generation, considerably fewer respondents representing the second generation of Poles view themselves as Polish, accounting for 78% (vs. 90%) of the replies. Among the young Polish Canadians, 17% declare hyphenated identity, whereas 3% of the group refuse a Polish identity for the Canadian one. Note that more young men than women self-identify as Canadian, 5% and 1%, respectively. It can be said that the girls have a significantly stronger affinity for their ethnic roots than their male peers. On the other hand, the numbers are quite small and it is very risky to give a credible interpretation of this data.

Table 1 shows that there is a relationship between the factors of birth and self-evaluation of ethnicity. Even if the young respondents firmly picked a Polish identity over a Canadian one (69% vs. 3%), the group born in Canada demonstrates a stronger tendency to hyphenated identity than the group of respondents

TABLE 1

Self-evaluation of ethnicity, by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		
							Poland	Canada	Total
Total N:	1	32	33	109	73	182	102	68	170 <sup>b</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	60	40	100	60	40	100
a. Polish	100	90	90	78	79	78	83	72	79
b. Canadian	—	—	—	1	5	3	3	4	3
c. Pol.-Can.	—	6	6	20	12	17	12	23	16
d. Not answered	—	3	4	—	3	1	2	0	1

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>In fact, there were 182 second-generation respondents. However, 12 did not indicate their place of birth and so are not part of this discussion; they represent only 6.5% of the total N.

born in Poland. This group gave nearly twice as many (c) answers as the participants who were born in Poland (23% vs. 12%).

Nevertheless, when one takes into account the fact that second-generation respondents grew up in the English-speaking world, these self-declarations can be interpreted as showing quite positive effects of Canadian multicultural and multilingual programs. It is in a direct contradiction to, for example, the American "straight line theory", which argues that the life of American ethnic groups is marked by a continuing process of acculturation and assimilation that is not likely to be preserved in the future (Sandberg 1974:8).

We should bear in mind, however, that answers to the question about self-identification as Polish expressed in the self-declarations of second-generation immigrants are not confirmed by any specific social or cultural activities in which they actually participate. A similar problem emerges in the research regarding the Tamil community whose participants were asked to determine the importance of celebrating Indian festivals. For 94% of young Tamil respondents, celebrating these holidays is "extremely important/important", but it is not known what proportion of them actually participate in these events (Naji and David 2003).

The representatives of both groups were asked for a reason for their self-identification with "Polishness", as the following question shows:

13. Jeśli tak, dlaczego?

If "yes", why?

- Urodziłem/-am się w Polsce.

(I was born in Poland.)

- Rodzice są Polakami./Jedno z rodziców jest Polakiem.

(My parents are Polish./My mother/father is Polish.)

- Jestem przywiązany/-na do polskiej tradycji i zwyczajów.  
(*I respect Polish traditions and habits.*)
- Interesuję się polską kulturą.  
(*I am interested in Polish culture: literature, music, film, etc.*)
- Interesuję się polskimi sprawami.  
(*I am interested in Polish affairs.*)
- Należę do polskiej organizacji.  
(*I belong to a Polish organization.*)
- Czytam i piszę po polsku.  
(*I can read and write in Polish.*)

Among seven answers to choose from (Table 2), the young respondents admitted that having Polish parents is the fundamental factor determining being Polish (75%). In second position, following Polish traditions and customs was indicated (65%), and in the third place, the ability to read and write in Polish was chosen (60%). Overall, the place of birth is an indicator of being Polish for only half of the number of representatives of the second generation of Polish immigrants. Interest in Polish affairs was the least important factor deciding about Polish self-identification (24%).

TABLE 2

Reasons for self-identification with Polishness, by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		
							Pol.	Cda	Total
Total N:	1	32	33	104	63	167	93	64	157 <sup>b</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	62	38	100	60	40	100
a. Born in Poland	100	81	82	51	60	50	93	0	55
b. Polish parents	—	75	73	81	84	75	71	95	81
c. Respect for Polish traditions and customs	—	69	67	73	70	65	73	67	71
d. Interests in Polish culture	100	53	54	47	31	38	40	44	41
e. Interests in Polish affairs	100	50	51	25	27	24	26	26	26
f. Participation in Polish organizations	—	21	21	36	27	30	27	41	32
g. Ability to read and write in Polish	100	65	67	67	60	60	66	66	66

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Ten young participants in the survey who answered this question were either (a) not born in Poland or in Canada or (b) did not provide any information about their place of birth.

For the young female students the ability to read and write in Polish is the more important reason for self-identification (67%) than for the male students (60%).

They also lead the boys in their participation in Polish organizations, their interest in Polish culture, and showing respect for Polish ethnic traditions. These findings can be explained on the grounds that women are more family-oriented, take a more active role in creating and preserving family traditions (cf. Trudgill 1983; Brouwer and van Hout 1992) and pay more attention to the issues of culture and traditions.

In terms of place of birth, the data reveals a noteworthy pattern: for the respondents born in Poland, the fact of being born there is definitely the most important reason for self-identification with Polishness (93% of the answers), whereas for the respondents born in Canada, having Polish parents is the extremely dominant cause for being Polish (95%). I think that this "place of birth" factor plays a very significant role in second-generation self-identification. One might say that the young respondents born in Canada made a choice by default: having Polish parents is for them the most decisive factor because they had no privilege to be born in Poland. It seems probable that if I had more respondents born in Poland, I would come up with the proportionally higher percentage of answer (a) to that question.

The first-generation Poles living in Toronto present a different ordering of reasons for being Polish. The place of birth is the first and most important criterion of "Polishness" (82%), while parents' Polish background is the second one (73%). It is interesting that respecting Polish customs and the ability to read and write in Polish are treated equally (both marked by 67% of respondents).

As Bartol-Jarosinska's (1994) research demonstrates, the first two factors are dominant also in the opinions provided by Polish-French people living in France. The answers are convergent with respect to both the first and second generations of Polish immigrants. She believes that people born in Poland, as Polish immigrants, maintain that place of birth is the most crucial criterion for feeling Polish, whereas the French having Polish origins indicate being born into a Polish family first, declaring at the same time respect for Polish traditions and customs (p. 151).

The order of received answers in both generations, given not only by Polish Canadians but also by the Polish French, elicits the fundamental features of ethnic identity separating the two different generations. The immigrant group respondents identify themselves with their place of birth, Poland, which symbolizes their past: their childhood, adolescence, and, to some extent, adulthood. In Poland, they grew up in a very Polish-specific cultural background, received (most of) their education in Polish schools, developed friendships, and started their families. Thoughts about Poland engage them emotionally, especially given that they have not been able to live a similar lifestyle upon immigration. Thus, it is not surprising that Poland *per se* becomes a kind of ideal country with which most of the first-generation immigrants identify.

Conversely, for the young Polish Canadians, Polishness is mainly determined by having Polish parents, not by their place of birth because, even if some of them were born in Poland, the most significant periods of their lives have been spent in Canada. They know Poland through their parents' recollections rather than through their own experiences. That is why the young Polish-Canadians' feeling of "Polish-



ness” comes predominantly from being children of Polish parents and respecting Polish customs and traditions, which are closely related to growing up in Polish families. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the ability to read and write in Polish is for them a more remarkable token of Polishness than being born in Poland.

## 5. WHAT SHOULD ONE DO TO BE POLISH?

### 5.1. Attitudes towards language vs. culture

Past studies of Polish ethnic identity in the United States and Australia show that in Polish culture, language and religion have the status of central values (Kloskowska 1990:208-238). Smolicz believes that Poles provide a good example of a culture where the native tongue has the status of a core value. He maintains that for Poles language has been considered a core value ever since it was banned in the nineteenth century, when Poland was portioned amongst its three powerful neighbours: Austria, Prussia, and Russia. It was forbidden to speak the language at school and parents who organized Polish classes for their children were often threatened with jail or deportation to Siberia. The attempt to extirpate the mother tongue succeeded in elevating the Polish language to a symbol for the survival of the group as a separate entity and for the preservation of its culture (Smolicz 1988:138-139).

In another study, Verdoodt (1977) points out that the particular language attitudes among the numerous Polish immigrant workers who came to France in 1920s and 1930s won them special rights in their adopted country. The Poles were permitted to create bilingual, private elementary schools or to obtain school lessons in Polish after the normal school hours. As Verdoodt says, “Let us underline here that the Polish migrants, strange it may sound, have received rights denied to the indigenous population” (p. 247). It shows that Poles really assigned great importance to their language — for instance, in 1929 there were 584 schools in France where Polish was taught — even after 1918, when Poland became free and the language was no longer threatened.

Sekowska (1994), who conducted her research in the United Kingdom in the 1980s among Polish combatant immigrants, economic immigrants, and the second generation of Poles, also declares that for her respondents the Polish language is the fundamental component of ethnicity (p. 126). Thus far, sociolinguistic works maintain the opinion that an “indissoluble link” was forged between the Polish people and their language, even as Polish is no longer persecuted or otherwise threatened with disappearance (Oakes 2001:2).

However, the analysis of my surveys *does not* support this thesis at all. The ethnic identity of my respondents as determined by their attitudes towards the core values of ethnic consciousness, although obviously constructed from the fundamental components of language, tradition, and religion, is stratified in a strikingly different way. The respondents were asked the following question:

19. Polski emigrant, by zachować polskość, powinien ... Proszę podkreślić jedną, najważniejszą odpowiedź.

What should you do to be Polish? Please mark only one the most important answer.

- uczyć dzieci polskiego  
(teach the children Polish)
- podtrzymywać polskie tradycje  
(respect Polish traditions)
- mówić po polsku  
(speak in Polish)
- zachować religię katolicką  
(keep Roman-Catholic faith)

As the respondents see it, to be Polish, one should first of all respect Polish traditions (Table 3). Note that both generations share this belief: 40% of the immigrant group and 45% of the young Polish Canadians (the distribution of the data according to the place of birth factor also reveals the same tendency).

**TABLE 3**  
Hierarchy of ethnic values by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		Total
							Poland	Canada	
Total N:	1	31	32 <sup>b</sup>	107	70	177	98	67	165 <sup>c</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	60	39	99	60	40	100
a. Respect of Polish traditions	—	42	40	45	46	45	53	51	52
b. Teaching children Polish	—	30	30	15	9	14	17	15	16
c. Speaking Polish	100	16	19	30	39	34	41	34	38
d. Keeping Roman-Catholic faith	—	13	12	6	4	7	8	7	8

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Of the 33 participants, one did not respond to this question.

<sup>c</sup>Of the 177 responses, 165 identified their place of birth.

Although the respondents were asked to indicate only one answer, a few of them had more than one response. In each of these cases, they pointed to the language criterion among the other answers, which demonstrates a sort of scattering of language value. Looking at the data, it should be noted that in the opinion of the second-generation, speaking Polish is more essential (34% of the answers) than teaching Polish to children (14%), whereas the immigrant generation submits the stratification in reverse order: 30% of them declare teaching children Polish to be of greater value than speaking it (19%). For the immigrant group, the transferring of the mother language to the next generation is a more powerful symbol of the retention of the language.

Why is the evidence presented above significant? Anderson (1979:68) maintains that:

The degree to which an ethnic group feels that its identity is being eroded is related to the emphasis which the group traditionally places on language, religion and/or customs as the keynote to group identity. In other words, if an ethnic group has tended to emphasize maintenance of its own traditional language, loss of that language will be equated largely with loss of group identity.

It can be predicted that if there are no new waves of Polish immigrants into Polish diaspora communities the Polish language is bound to lose its communicative functions and, similar to Irish communities (cf. Harris 1991), be reduced almost entirely to nothing but a token of identity expression for the vast majority of Polish families.

According to Statistics Canada, although Polish still remains on the list of the ten most frequently used home languages other than English or French (taking the seventh place), in 1996, almost 38% of people with Polish as mother tongue spoke English most often in the home domain. Similar data is presented by Jedwab (2000:20–21) who maintains that the overall rate of language shift to an official language has decreased from 42% to 38% over the 1991–1996 period. This can be accounted for by the fact that a number of Polish immigrants who had come to Canada in the very late 1980s did not have a chance to participate in the census in 1991 because many of them were waiting for permanent residency at that time. Overall, since the Polish migration rate has decreased noticeably in last two decades (Slany 2002:174), there is very little probability of reinforcing the native language in the Polish minority group in Canada.

Based on these findings, it could be inferred that a language shift is slowly but surely taking place in favour of English. At this point, the question emerges whether it is possible for an ethnic group to lose its traditional mother tongue eventually without losing its sense of identity (Anderson 1979). Naji and David argue that that shifting away from the ethnic language does not mean that the community has lost its sense of ethnic characteristics. They maintain that:

Language is but one aspect of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. Ethnicity can still be maintained by use of other symbols. For Malaysian Tamils, ethnic identity [as expressed through food and Indian lifestyle] remains strong although the ethnic language is not widely used outside the home domain.

(Naji and David 2003:101–102)

The case of the Polish minority group illustrates that the function of identity appears to be gradually transferred from the Polish language to other values of ethnicity. It means that the Polish minority, at least that living in Canada, would not be defined as ethno-linguistic, but rather ethno-traditional.

A recent study seems to support this thesis: language is “not theoretically a *sine qua non* for maintaining ethnic-group culture” (Herberg 1989:101) and it is “neither

a necessary nor sufficient condition for ethnic group membership" (Fishman 1999). Herberg refers to the possibility that language may be more central for some groups than for others. In another study, Edwards (1992) believes that this raises doubts about the "core-value" concept of Smolicz. He believes it is "both unlikely and unparsimonious to assert that some groups value their language less. What is *more* likely is that some groups find themselves in different circumstances, requiring different adaptations" (p. 134).

In the discussion on the place of language in maintaining ethnic identity, it is worth mentioning the sociological notion of *Polonia* commonly used in Polish studies. This term, taken from Latin, refers to all generations of Poles abroad. It describes people who have Polish origins and are aware of them, maintain the Polish tradition and culture, and have some understanding of Polish national affairs. Even if they were neither born in Poland nor speak Polish, they are labelled as *Polonia* (Kubiak 1976:51). Consequently, in the concept of *Polonia* the language value is not taken into account at all, with awareness of Polish ethnicity being the pivotal factor in identifying one's "Polishness".

In summary, to prove any of these theories regarding the Polish minority group in Canada, there is a need to do broader research than that already done. The analysis of my surveys, for instance, quite clearly shows that the native language does not take the chief place on the list of basic markers of Polish self-identity. Instead, the relationship between language and ethnic identity is neither static nor predictable, varying over time and from one ethnic group to the next. In some cases, language is considered of the greatest importance for a group's identity; in other cases, it is seemingly overlooked or taken for granted.

## 5.2. Attitudes towards religion

Table 3 presents the respondents' position regarding the Catholic religion as a basic value of Polish identity. It is evident that during the twentieth century, the basic indicator of Polishness was the Catholic religion. For example, Cohen (1990), who explores the labour movement's activities in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, notes that both first- and second-generation Poles placed the church at the centre of their ethnic identities. She notes that, "For the immigrant with memories of Poland, the church represented all that was left behind. . . . For second-generation Poles, the parish defined their Polishness." Parochial schools, as well, became a way of preserving Polishness for subsequent generations, "as the guardian of the Polish parish's, and hence community's, future" (p. 85).

Furthermore, the Communist system in Poland, in power between 1945 and 1989, attempted to minimize the influence of the Church, which resulted in a resurgence of the Catholic faith and made religion the fundamental value of Polish culture for the whole Polish nation in Poland. Those who were then leaving the country kept this attitude about religion and effectively grafted it onto Polish communities living abroad.

Despite the fact that Polish immigrants are still noticed by others as very reli-

gious and devoted to the Church, the data show that keeping the Roman-Catholic faith is the least significant reported component of Polish ethnicity. Only 11% of the immigrants and 7% of the young Polish Canadians say that religion determines Polish identity. The respondents' opinion can be explained by the fact that in the last decades neither the Polish language nor the Catholic religion have been persecuted. However, if one takes into account the fact that the Catholic religion, likewise the Polish language in Canada, is isolated and not reinforced by new immigrant waves, in some way it threatens to lose its very Polish character.

## 6. CONTACTS WITH POLAND

The respondents were also asked whether they keep any contact with Poland, as the following question demonstrates:

### 14. Czy utrzymujesz kontakt z Polską?

*Do you keep any contact with Poland?*

- tak                       nie  
(yes)                              (no)

The results, shown in Table 4, show that representatives of both generations give an almost equal positive response to the question (94% of all answers presented by the immigrants and 95% by the second generations).

**TABLE 4**  
Keeping contact with Poland, by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		Total
							Poland	Canada	
Total N:	1	32	33	108	73	181	102	67	169 <sup>b</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	60	40	100	60	40	100
a. Yes (+)	100	93	94	97	92	95	96	93	95
b. No (-)	—	6	6	2	8	5	4	7	5

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Of the 181 who responded, 169 identified their country of origin.

We observe that although it does not seem statistically significant, the young Polish Canadians declare even more often than the Polish immigrants that they keep contact with the country of origin. The explanation for this is not very complicated considering the fact that immigrant parents are usually anxious about keeping strong ties with relatives in Poland. Because they have little time, they encourage their children to talk on the phone to *babcia* ('grandma') and their cousins living in Poland. Nowadays, contact among family members living in separate countries is facilitated by the Internet, changing the character and the frequency of the contacts.

It should also be noted that young generations lead the contacts with the native country using the Web. Furthermore, for many Polish families in Canada, spending their vacation time in Poland is very common. Even if the parents have to stay in Canada because of work, they send their children to Poland.

15. Jeśli tak, jaki charakter mają te kontakty?

If "yes" in which way?

- Odwiedzam rodzinę i znajomych.

(I visit my family and friends.)

- Koresponduje.

(I correspond.)

- Jeżdżę w interesach.

(I go for business.)

- Inne.

(Other.).....

As shown in Table 5, the respondents maintain contact with Poland mostly by visiting the country (60% of the second generation and 59% of the first one). Giampapa (2001), who interviewed young Italian Canadians, notices that his respondents treat trips to Italy as a powerful metaphor for ethnic identity (p. 308). Thus, it can be generalized that trips to the parents' country are a symbolic journey of re-discovering roots, making every kind of contact with the country of origins a declaration of ethnic identity. Therefore, ties with the "homeland" can be considered to be a significant component of ethnic identity.

TABLE 5

Ways of keeping contact with Poland, by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		Total
							Poland	Canada	
Total N:	1	30	31 <sup>b</sup>	105	63	168	97	63	160 <sup>c</sup>
% of total N:	3	96	99	61	38	99	60	40	100
a. Visiting Poland (family & friends)	100	56	59	64	57	60	78	82	80
b. Writing letters	100	40	43	21	16	19	35	17	32
c. Going to transact	—	3	3	2	6	3	6	1	4
d. Others	—	3	9	20	14	18	29	17	28

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Out of 33 respondents, 31 answered this question.

<sup>c</sup>Of the 172 respondents to this question, 160 identified their country of origin.

## 7. PEER INTERACTIONS

In the survey, I asked the respondents the following question concerning peer interactions:

17. Czy szukasz kontaktów z Polakami zamieszkałymi w Kanadzie?

*Do you seek any contacts with Poles in Canada?*

- tak  
(yes)
- nie  
(no)
- zdaje się na przypadek  
(only if I happen to meet them.)

My study shows that the immigrant generation respondents who came to Canada as adults have more difficulties entering into friendships with Poles in Canada than the young Polish Canadians who either were born here or arrived in Canada as little children (Table 6). A basic reason is distrust among Polish immigrants. On the one hand, one sees the necessity to settle rapidly in the new country, to find a well-paid job to maintain their families and to acquire a good social status. All of this does not help in the making of friendships. While similar immigrant histories and experiences consolidate Polish groups outside the country of descent, this unification seems only apparent and results in rather more superficial than solid relationships. Nevertheless, even if they have problems with entering into friendships with other Poles, the immigrant generation members look for contacts with Poles living in Canada more frequently (65% of the answers) than the representatives of the second generation (53%).

**TABLE 6**

Seeking of contacts with Polish people in Canada, by generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		Total
							Poland	Canada	
Total N:	1	31	32 <sup>b</sup>	108	73	181	102	67	169 <sup>c</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	60	40	100	60	40	100
a. Yes (+)	100	64	65	58	46	53	55	51	54
b. No (-)	-	13	13	4	12	8	10	6	8
c. Happen to meet them	-	22	22	37	41	39	38	43	40

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Out of 33 respondents, 32 answered this question.

<sup>c</sup>of the 181 who responded, 169 provided their country of origin.

The immigrant respondents seek their fellow countrymen more often for the simple reason they keep in mind a similar vision of Poland and, going through a comparable immigrant experience, face the similar linguistic and social barriers. In contrast, the second-generation respondents tend to identify with the new country's culture rather than with their parents' culture. Since they communicate fluently in English, their first language, they are able to create their own identities in the multicultural Canadian mosaic. Furthermore, the young Polish Canadians express their desire to reclaim and enhance not only their 'Polishness' but also their double ethnic identity. They position themselves and negotiate their two identities through peer contacts, even if these contacts do not take place in the Polish language.

## 8. WHAT CONNECTS POLISH CANADIANS?

The previous section discussed the issues of separateness of the immigrant respondents. Edwards (2003) notices that the issues of group identity, most pronounced in immigrant or minority-group situations, are social rather than linguistic in nature, "reminding us of a broader set of relationships which embed the individual in his or her society" (pp. 32–33). The people whom I interviewed are conscious of the slightly different pictures of themselves, which is reflected in the data analyzed in this section.

This is an actual question given to my respondents in the survey:

18. Co najbardziej przyciąga do siebie Polaków na emigracji? Proszę podkreślić jedną, najważniejszą odpowiedź.

*What connects Polish Canadians? Please mark only one, most important answer.*

- podobna sytuacja życiowa i społeczna  
(a similar life and social position/circumstances)
- typowo polska mentalność  
(the Polish mentality)
- możliwość rozmawiania po polsku  
(the possibility of conversing in Polish)
- przywiązanie do kraju  
(attachment to Poland)

Question 18 ("What connects Polish Canadians?") elicited very interesting judgments. According to almost half of the immigrant-group representatives (Table 7), a similar social position is the most significant criterion which influences the unity of all Polish immigrants in Canada (33% of all answers). However, in the opinion of the young Polish Canadians, this factor is the least decisive (16%).

These beliefs are not very surprising if one considers the fact that a person who has never gone through immigrant life is not able to understand it. It is obvious that in some way all immigrant children participate in the immigrant history of their parents, however, some aspects of the immigrant experience are non-transferable. In my study, the immigrant children maintain (31%) that Polish people living outside Poland are mainly connected on the basis of having "Polish mentality" which



**TABLE 7**  
 What connects Polish Canadians? By generation and sex<sup>a</sup>

	1st generation			2nd generation					
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	Born in		
							Pol.	Cda	Total
Total N:	1	31	32 <sup>b</sup>	104	70	174	97	66	163 <sup>c</sup>
% of total N:	3	97	100	60	40	100	59	41	100
a. Similar social position	100	29	33	14	16	16	16	16	16
b. Polish mentality	—	29	30	27	34	31	33	30	32
c. Possibility of conversation in Polish	—	22	23	23	26	25	26	28	27
d. Attachment to homeland	—	13	14	33	22	28	33	24	30

<sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all entries are percentages.

<sup>b</sup>Out of 33 respondents, 32 answered this question.

<sup>c</sup>Out of 174 respondents, 163 provided their country of origin.

is defined by the specific way of thinking and the attitude to reality. This “Polish mentality” is something separate from the common struggles and the social status shared by the immigrant respondents. We can judge that the Polish mentality as perceived by the second generation is shaped by this group’s particular social experience: the interaction of “the Canadian” with “the traditionally Polish”. It is not necessarily what the first-generation immigrants would consider to be the “Polish way of thinking”. In short, the children of immigrants have a distinct idea of not only what it is that connects them to each other but also what connects their parents to each other.

Poles living in France gave different answers to the same question concerning the Polish French. When asked, “What connects the Polish French?”, in the first place they indicated the possibility of conversation in Polish. Attachment to Poland came only second (Bartol-Jarosinska 1994:147). The different stratification of answers is not surprising because the Polish-French community is the biggest Polish-origin minority group living in the Western Europe, so there is no hindrance to conversation in Polish (Dubisz 1997:32–36). However, the Polish migrant community in France is more dispersed than the Polish community inhabiting Canada, where Polish-background people live mostly in big cities. Moreover, the differences between the respondents’ answers also depend on the speaker variable. My respondents belong to strictly defined local groups, where they have many opportunities to talk to each other in Polish. Thus, it is not surprising that they chose different criteria as important for the connections between Poles in Canada than the informants in France did.

## 9. SUMMARY

This article highlights the complex problem of self-identification in the first and the second generations of Polish immigrants living in the Greater Toronto Area. It is the respondents themselves who break the stereotypical vision of Polish identity in which language issues are central. This article elicits a different self-image of Poles than has been hitherto described in the published works regarding ethnic identification matters. It should be pointed out that there is a shortage of current research dedicated to the Polish language minority group in Canada, particularly regarding the language-identity nexus.<sup>3</sup> In further research, the problem of the gender distribution among the immigrant generation needs to be addressed, a factor unexplored in the current study. In addition to the factors of generation/age, gender and place of birth among the young generation discussed in this article, further research should take into account other important sociolinguistic variables such as education and social status. The influence of these factors on self-identity is virtually unknown.

In analyzing the “acts of identity” and self-declarations of the representatives of minority groups, one needs to take into consideration the historical conditions of life within ethnic communities. I believe that significant modifications to the notion of Polish ethnic identity can be reliably understood in the context of immigrant motivations to leave the country of origin. There were many historical periods as that of the 1945–1989 communist era or the 1795–1918 time of dependency upon Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary where circumstances forced Polish people to leave their homeland and living abroad allowed them to keep alive a form of “Polishness” which was banned in Poland. In contrast, most of the recent immigrants left Poland of their own free will, mainly for economic reasons.

It should be said that in the diaspora the symbolic charge of language, religion, and culture generally increases because the question of joining a new ethnic group, which never arose in the homeland, cannot be avoided. While in the homeland few people ever consider the question of whether these values should be retained, immigrant groups must actively answer the questions of group and self-identity as they settle in a new environment (Oakes 2001). Nonetheless, it appears that the core components of ethnic identity attain different values for the community if they are not threatened in the homeland. As observed in the Polish case, when in the past the language and religion were persecuted in Poland, Polish people — both those living in and outside of Poland — gave language and religion the first place in the hierarchy of identity values. Moreover, since the Polish group in Canada can easily maintain its mother tongue, similar to other minority groups, Polish Canadians do not pay much attention to the language value *per se*. This idea supports the claims by Giles *et al.* (1977:30) that, within a particular speech community and especially under conditions of ethnic threat, language plays an important role in demarcating the group. In short, when this threat is removed, language tends to lose its central

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<sup>3</sup>Vizmuller-Zocco reports a similar observation referring to Italian Canadians (2002:91–99).

role in group identification.

Overall, the last two decades are characterized by some crucial changes in the definition of "Polishness" among Poles living abroad. Both generations of Polish immigrants in Canada indicate respecting Polish traditions and customs as the most fundamental token of Polish ethnic identity, situating the Polish language value (speaking Polish and teaching children Polish) in the second and third positions. The Catholic religion factor takes the last place. Contacts with other people of Polish origin people are treated as a symbol of Polishness, but this criterion is rather subordinated to the main indicators of Polish ethnic identity. These findings lead to the conclusion that nowadays the Polish minority group in Canada could be defined as an ethno-cultural community in which the native language takes on symbolic rather than communicative functions (Clyne 1991; Oakes 2001). In the book *Race and Ethnicity*, Driedger takes into account six factors that tend to differentiate group adherence to culture: language use, endogamy, choice of friends, and participation in religion, parochial schools, and voluntary organizations. Driedger (2003:126) argues that Poles in Canada do not support their culture very actively. Undoubtedly, there is a true need to further research these issues in the hope of eventually validating the thesis regarding the ethno-cultural or ethno-linguistic character of the Polish community.

I suggest that the ethnic self-identity of the Polish community could be best determined by specific features of Canada as a country of settlement. As mentioned above, the teaching of minority languages in Canada, including Polish, receives financial support from various governmental programs, facilitating language maintenance in minority groups. On the other hand, the Canadian society is becoming linguistically unified quite rapidly (Chambers 1998:265; [www.yorku.ca/jamesw/Canada.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/jamesw/Canada.pdf)). Most immigrants can speak at least one official language within a short time of arrival, and their children usually grow up bilingual, speaking just like native Canadians of their age and social stratum. The next generation — the second generation Canadians — is indistinguishable linguistically from mainstream society. It is perhaps unsurprising that rather than language, it is Polish culture alone that makes a noticeable contribution to Canada as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. The current Polish minority group in this country may find itself in specific circumstances, requiring adaptations that are quite different from those of earlier immigrants (Edwards 1992:134). The uniqueness of these adaptations may be of great importance to the shift from the ethno-linguistic characterizations of self-identity to the ethno-cultural ones.

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