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An American who Emigrated from Poland

The Significance of Education and Family Support in the Acculturation Process

By: Stephanie Pierson

Figure 1: (left) Then: Justyna Gano stands as a young child with her father in their front yard in Ludźmierz, Poland. (right) Now: Justyna stands in front of Illinois Wesleyan University, grateful for the education opportunities she has in America.

Introduction

Through part of the “Becoming American” project, I collaborated with Justyna (Koscielniak) Gano, who is a senior at Illinois Wesleyan University. She immigrated to the United States from Ludźmierz, Poland at age five with her mother. They met up with her father, who had already been living and working in the United States for about three years. Two years later, Justyna returned to Poland with her mother. At age nine, she returned to the U.S. and has lived in the Chicago area since then. She and her family members obtained permanent residency in 2011, and they hope to obtain U.S. citizenship within the next few years.

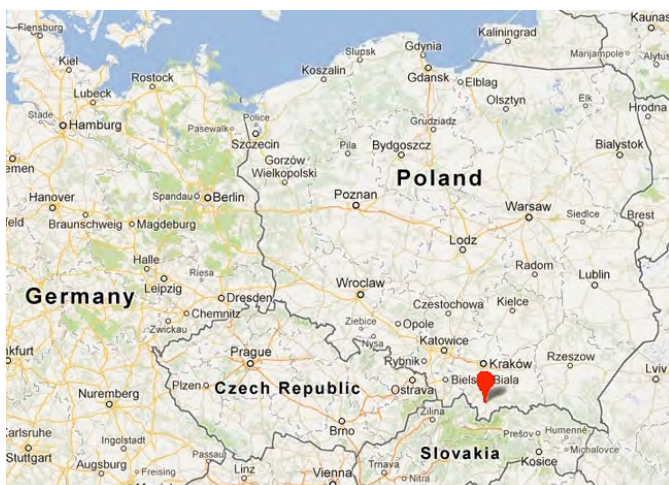


Figure 2: Justyna’s hometown, Ludźmierz, is marked in red.

This collaborative research focuses on Justyna’s acculturation process, detailing her journey to America and the challenges she and her family have faced as immigrants. It also emphasizes the importance of family support in Justyna’s search for success in America.

Assumptions and Early Hypotheses

Before meeting Justyna, I mainly based my assumptions on other Polish IWU students who I know. I guessed that she knew how to speak Polish somewhat fluently, eat and cook certain Polish foods, and celebrate Polish holidays. However, because I knew Justyna came to the United States as a young girl I expected her to culturally act like a “typical” American student. To explain, I assumed she ate American food, listened to American music, and spoke without an accent.

Much of the academic work written about Polish-American communities focuses on immigration in the early 1900s, post-World War II and in the early 1990s after the fall of Communism. A large number of Polish immigrants have come to the Chicago area in the last century, creating what is known as “Polonia,” the general name for the Polish diaspora (Pula, 1995; Bukowczyk, 1996). It is estimated from the 2000 census that 831,774 people of Polish ancestry live in Chicago, and 68,349 of those people arrived between 1989 and 1999 (Booza, 2007, p. 65, 67).

I chose to research works specifically written about Polish immigrants as well as writings about immigrants in general. Ann Hetzel Gunkel’s article “Of Polka, Pierogi and Ethnic Identity: Toward a Polish American Culture Studies” (2005) emphasizes how most scholars focus on *what* Polish American culture is but not *how* or *why* it shapes identity. According to Gunkel (2005), “The pressures of assimilation have the precise effect, however, of camouflaging, hiding, and even rejecting ethnic identity in favor of the whiteness of mainstream U.S. culture” (p. 33). She asserts that Polish Americans should not feel pressured to discontinue their traditions, as they are essential to their ethnicity. This made me question whether Justyna still felt part of the Polish community or practiced Polish customs.

Because Justyna is a student, I chose to focus on education, which is described in Geraldine Balut Coleman’s article, “Educating Polish Immigrants Chicago Style: 1980-2002” (2004). She explains how Chicago works to implement Polish bilingual programs in their school systems to help students who have low English proficiency. Other programs, known as “Saturday Schools” were founded to teach children Polish language, culture and history (Coleman, 2004, p. 36). Increasingly more Polish Americans are moving out of Chicago and into the suburbs, so enrollment is dropping for bilingual programs and Saturday Schools. However, Coleman (2004) believes, “It will be through the efforts of educators...that Polish language and Polish ancestral traditions will continue to live and thrive” (p. 37). This helped me understand the influence of the Polish community in Chicago, and how the community facilitates cultural transition.

Additionally, Andrew J. Fuligni and Allison Sidle Fuligni in “Immigrant Families and the Educational Development of Their Children” (2007) assert that immigrant families value education very highly because they believe it directly relates to success. In fact, the parents of immigrant children tend to have higher expectations of their children’s academic progress than other parents do (p. 236). The authors (2007) also note a link between family obligation and academic motivation, which puts a considerable amount of pressure on the child to do well in school (p. 238). I wondered if Justyna faced pressure from her parents, and what influence they had on her academic career.

Because the acculturation process is a significant part of any immigrant’s story, I consulted multicultural, interdisciplinary research compiled in *Immigrant Youth in Cultural Transition* (2006). Research shows that while each adolescent has a unique assimilation experience, common patterns emerge. Personal attitudes, language use, family and friend relationships, values, and instances of discrimination can influence each individual’s process (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006, p. 87). This compelled me to discover the factors in Justyna’s acculturation process, and compare her experience to other adolescent immigrants.

Ethnographic Methods

Justyna and I met multiple times over a period of approximately one month. She expressed interest in participating after hearing about the project from a close friend of mine. Our first meeting was in the Hansen Student Center on February 5, 2013. At this meeting, I simply asked her to tell her story. She explained to me why and how her family came to America, the process of becoming permanent residents, and her religious and political viewpoints. She also described her life at IWU, and told me about her husband. Our second meeting followed similarly. We met at the Hansen Student Center on February 11, 2013. She told me more details from her story, explaining what she remembered from living in Poland and the differences she noticed between Poland and the U.S. She also described

Polish stereotypes, expectations from her parents, goals she sets for herself, and how her life has improved after moving to the U.S.

After telling told me her story, we brainstormed which types of photos exemplify the most important aspects of her life. On February 19, 2013, I began taking photos of Justyna that represented her story. We took photos in the chemistry lab, and she showed me instruments she used during her research as an Eckley Scholar during the summer of 2012. She also gave me printed photos she had found in her parent's house, which I scanned after our meeting.



Figure 3: During an interview, Justyna shows me a photo of her father dancing at a cultural event in traditional Highlander dress.

At our next meeting on February 26, 2013. in the Center for Natural Sciences, Justyna explained the context of the photos she gave me to scan. She emphasized differences between her hometown and where

she lives now, showing me how rural Ludźmierz is. She also explained how

her family members are Highlanders and have a different culture and dialect than the rest of Poland. She showed me photos of her parents to elaborate on this point.

Justyna and I took more photos the following day on Illinois Wesleyan's campus. Between each photo, we discussed how our classes were going and our plans for the weekend. Taking photos was a fun activity, and Justyna laughed about how she felt like a model in a photoshoot. I also briefly took photos on March 3, 2013 of Justyna studying in her dorm room in Martin Hall, and on March 8, 2013 in the Hansen Student Center.

Because Justyna has an intensive courseload and travels home each weekend, we did not have much time to spend together outside of our meeting times. However, we tried to leave time for conversation before and after our interviews, and walked to our next destinations together afterwards.

I utilized Adobe Photoshop in conjunction with visual methods. Justyna provided photos that she had previously taken for figures 1, 8 and 9. Photos were combined in photoshop to create figure 8. The remaining photos were taken during meetings with Justyna and were altered for color and contrast. Justyna helped me choose which photos she liked best out of over 80 photos taken, and we created captions together.

Presentation of Data

The Journey

Unlike many immigrants, Justyna entered the United States twice. She does not remember her first experience in 1995 well because she was only 5 years old. In 1997, her mother returned to Poland to give birth to Justyna's brother, because as a nurse she had free healthcare in Poland. In order to return to the U.S., they needed visas, which they knew could take years. Because they wanted to reconnect with her father as soon as possible, they came into the United States illegally. They first flew to Mexico, and a Polish family they



Figure 4: Sitting in her car, Justyna reminisces about her journey to the United States. She is still in touch with the family that drove them across the Mexican border.

had never met came down from San Diego and drove them across the Mexican border. Justyna explained, “We’re white and have blonde hair. We look American. At the border they didn’t even stop us, they just waved us through.”

Justyna explained how the life of an immigrant has not been easy. She feels many people assume immigrants do not pay taxes and are lazy, but her family does not follow that stereotype. Though her father worked as a leather tanner in Poland, he worked in construction after moving to Chicago, eventually creating his own business in 2001. She emphasized that her family pays taxes, and yet, they do not reap any of the benefits because they are not citizens. Justyna’s family began their application for legal residency (also known as the “green card”) immediately after coming to the U.S. in 1999. At that time, she was able to obtain a social security number without a green card. Though her family expected to receive their green cards within a couple years, the process came to a halt after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In subsequent years, Justyna’s family had to spend a considerable amount of money on lawyer fees to help them expedite the process. Justyna, though just a young girl, often had to help translate legal documents for her parents. Her family did not become permanent residents until 2011, and at the end of this process had spent about \$8,000 per family member (approximately \$32,000 total). She believes the process of becoming a citizen should be easier for immigrants, and is thankful her parents had the resources and funds to obtain a green card for her.

Acculturation

Justyna remembers the transition to American life being relatively easy. Her family initially moved into her grandmother’s home in a Polish neighborhood in Chicago. Because Justyna was young, she picked up English relatively easily. Additionally, many of her classmates and teachers spoke Polish, so she could use her native language if necessary. When she was in 8th grade, her family moved to Lake Zurich, a suburb northwest of Chicago, which has a considerably smaller Polish population than her neighborhood in Chicago. Today, she still speaks Polish with her parents but has forgotten much of it. Her family also incorporates some Polish traditions into holidays like Christmas and Easter, and makes Polish food.

Justyna associates herself with American culture much more than Polish culture. She usually pronounces her name the Americanized way (Jus-TEEN-a rather than YUS-tin-a). She also discussed how she is much more religiously and politically liberal than most of her extended or older family members, who strictly follow Catholicism. Justyna has little desire to return to Poland. While her parents visit her relatives abroad occasionally, she is content staying in America. Justyna explained, “I’m in a happy and safe environment here in America, so I don’t want to go back. I can’t really relate to my relatives in Poland because their lives are so different from mine.”

Education, Family, and the Future

Justyna emphasized how different her life has been because she did not grow up in Poland, and the many new opportunities she has had living in America. Education is paramount to her. She explained, “I want to make my parents proud and be able to make a better life for myself. Some of my cousins only went to school until 8th grade. I’m lucky to be able to go to Illinois Wesleyan and get a good education.” Justyna said most of her time is spent studying, in the lab, or at home in Chicago. She tries to earn good grades, and will continue school in San Diego after graduating to become a nurse anesthetist. Her mother inspired her to go into the healthcare profession.

Justyna emphasized that her family is highly important to her. She is very close with them, and travels home each weekend to visit. She is grateful her parents worked diligently in hopes of giving her a better life, and she shows her gratitude to them by earning good grades in order to have a successful career. They have been an essential support system throughout her life emotionally, academically, and financially.



Figure 8: We edited Justyna into this photo of father, mother, and brother, which is one of her favorites. It was taken at the San Diego Zoo in July 2012. “My family is so important to me,” she said, “I wouldn’t be here today without them.”



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

The Importance of Education

Figure 5: Justyna beams, holding her high school diploma. The day she graduated was an important day for both her and her parents. She explained, “Graduating from high school meant I could go to college and have a good career.”

Figure 6: Justyna studies for a test on heart anatomy. She usually has at least one test a week and joked, “This is where you usually can find me.”

Figure 7: Working arduously in the lab, Justyna purifies a sample of ferrocene that she and her partner synthesized in the IWU chemistry lab. She believes her undergraduate education will be beneficial to her training as a nurse anesthetist.



Figure 9: "I can't wait for warm weather like he has!" Justyna looks forward to moving to San Diego in May 2013 to be with her husband, Paul (pictured left).

In the summer of 2012, Justyna married Paul Gano. Paul was born a U.S. citizen and has no Polish ancestry. He is in the Navy and is currently based in San Diego. Though it is difficult being apart from each other, knowing they will be together soon and staying busy has made the time go by faster. Justyna is happy she is able to continue her education in the city where he is based, and looks forward to starting the next chapter in her life. Marrying an American was a final step in her transition to becoming American herself, and it will be easier for her to gain U.S. citizenship in a couple years.

Data Analysis

Though Justyna describes herself as Polish because she was born in Poland, she sees herself as culturally American and mostly disconnected from Polish traditions. In this sense, she is not a "typical" Polish immigrant, based on the reviewed literature. Because she came to the U.S. at a young age, she did not have a strong existing connection to Polish culture. Additionally, the Polish neighborhood where she first lived in Chicago helped her transition between Polish and American culture, since most of her friends and teachers spoke both Polish and English. By the time she moved to Lake Zurich, she was completely fluent in English and familiar with American life. Had she moved to the U.S. at an older age or lived in her Polish neighborhood longer, she may feel more connected to Polish culture today.

As an immigrant, Justyna desires to take full advantage of opportunities that she would not have in Poland. Doing well in school is her highest priority because she wants to have a

successful career. Consequently, the expectations and goals she sets for herself are higher than an average American student. She also wants to do well in school to thank her parents for providing her with those opportunities. Without them, she would not be a legal resident or be able to go to college. Their encouragement and support increases her motivation.

While Justyna has faced many challenges as an immigrant, she feels very lucky. Though her parents had to work extra to afford lawyer fees to obtain green cards, many families do not have the funds at all. She also believes she faced little discrimination as an immigrant because she already “looked American.” She believes the process of becoming a U.S. citizen should be easier, or at least improved, as she knows many immigrants who are unable to obtain permanent residency or citizenship.

Conclusions

Through my collaborative research with Justyna, I found that “becoming American” is an ongoing, multifaceted process. Though Justyna still recognizes her Polish heritage, her environment and goals have made her culturally American. Being American for Justyna means having a better life, which creates disinclination toward Poland and Polish culture. Although Justyna’s personal journey is a unique story, her acculturation process was similar to other Polish immigrants who came to the U.S. at a young age.

Justyna helped me realize how difficult it is for an immigrant to become a U.S. citizen, and am surprised to learn how much money her family had to spend to obtain green cards. Justyna helped me understand the need for immigration reform in the United States. Future research may want to focus on immigrants with various financial situations, and how their stories compare. Additionally, it would be beneficial to interview an entire family, as each member has their own acculturation experiences and memories.

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