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Minority Ethnic Identity and Discrimination Experience in a Context of Social Transformations

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Abstract

Social transformation is always a diverse and ubiquitous process. In Lithuania social changes were related with gaining independence after a long period of occupation, when a lot of people experienced various traumatic events. Changes in the social context raises a lot of questions about ethnic identities, particularly in minority groups. These people experience various challenges: change of national language, political views and sometimes have to cope with discrimination experience as well. To explore these themes we conducted qualitative research.

Objective: to analyse how minority groups reveal their ethnic identity, experience and cope with ethnic discrimination in the context of social transformations.

Research participants: 60 Lithuanian citizens from ethnic minority groups: 30 participants of Jewish nationality and 30 of Polish nationality.

Research methods: Semi-structured interview: 10 main open questions about ethnic identity, discrimination experience in context of social transformations. Thematic analysis was used for narrative data analysis.

Results: Social transformations brought more freedom, particularly freedom to speak. With that minority groups claim that in independent Lithuania they experience more open discrimination mostly from politics and anonymous comments on the Internet. Polish minority participants tend to show their ethnic identity, but worry that discrimination can influence their social achievements. Though participants of Jews nationality sometimes fear to reveal their ethnic identity because of threats to health and life. These differences can be related with the experience of historical discrimination.

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1. Introduction

Social transformations and changes are diverse and ubiquitous process and it is still lack of researches data how social transformation influences individuals (Pinquart, Silbereisen, 2004). Social transformation can be defined as changes in typical characteristics of a society, such as change of norms, values, cultural products, and symbols

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(Calhoun, 1992). Social transformations may occur gradually, as economy and social situation growth in many Western Europe countries or may be a sudden and dramatic change of economic, political and social situations such as have happened in Eastern Europe, for example in Lithuania, with fall of former Soviet Union. The latter form of changes, sudden ones, are considered to be more challenging, because it demands more coping abilities from individuals. Abrupt social transformations happen in a relatively short time and bring a set of smaller economic and political changes (Pinquart, Silbereisen, 2004). On the one hand these changes bring political freedom and on the other people should cope with shifts in national language, the welfare system and huge changes in one's work life.

According to Ajducovic (2004), in multiethnic societies, the differences between the 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' that had no significance for society functioning under certain circumstances during harsh times of change can suddenly become of paramount importance. When instability evolves in a multiethnic country, even though the majority are not aware (Whitley, Kite, 2010), ethnic minorities could fear discrimination that the ethnic majority will use to its advantage and turn state institutions into instruments of ethnic dominance, and begin to feel insecure.

However examining the effects of perceived ethnic discrimination during time of social transformations, it is important to consider ethnic identity, for as much as relationships have been observed between aspects of ethnic identity and levels of perceived discrimination (Bombay et.al, 2014).

1.1 Ethnic identity (minority and majority)

Ethnic identity is characterized as part of a person's self-concept. Development of ethnic identity is described as a process of the construction of identity over time, due to a combination of experience and actions of the individual and includes gaining knowledge and understanding of in-group(s), as well as a sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Phinney, Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity relates to how individuals interpret and understand their ethnicity and their degree of identification with their ethnic group (Phinney, 1996) and is based on cultural traditions and values that are usually transmitted across generations.

Ethnic identity is not a monolithic construct, as various frameworks emanating from different disciplines (e.g., developmental psychology, social psychology, sociology) have identified a number of different dimensions of identity that are empirically as well as conceptually distinct (Ashmore, Deaux, McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Markstrom, Whitesell, & Galliher, 2011). In contrast to more behavioral (i.e., enculturation), affective (i.e., collective esteem/pride, in-group affect), and relational (i.e., perceived group belongingness, in-group ties) components of identity, an individual's ethnic "centrality" refers to the degree to which people consider their ethnic background to be a defining feature of the self (Berry, 1999; Cameron, 2004).

Scholars (Umana-Taylor, Shin, 2007) have suggested that ethnicity and ethnic identity is more salient for an ethnic minority than majority. This largely is based on the idea that the strength and salience of ethnicity is determined by experiences associated with one's group status in society. For ethnic minority group members this involves the struggle to gain equality, recognition and acceptance in a majority dominated society. Ethnic minority status implies less power and status often coupled with experiences of prejudices and discrimination. The findings (Syed, Juang, 2014) reinforce the idea that ethnic identity is central for ethnic minorities, as it is closely linked to their overall sense of self, which is then linked to psychological functioning.

Social identity theory tries to explain that people are motivated to develop and maintain social identities, including ethnic identity, that are positive but that clearly set their groups apart from other groups. That is, people want to see their groups as distinct from, but also better than, other groups. Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel et al., 1971) proposed that when people identify with an in-group and view other people as members of an out-group, they perceive members of the in-group in more positive terms than members of the out-group and that can be a foundation for devaluation and discrimination of other groups.

But there is some research that suggest that being intimately affected by a collective trauma can influence levels of identity centrality and perceived discrimination in subsequent generations, which seem to be associated with the increased likelihood of making appraisals of discrimination and threat in response to later intergroup encounters. The

apparent cyclical nature between past collective and personal discriminatory intergroup experiences and an increased tendency to appraise subsequent intergroup encounters as reflecting discrimination highlight the chronic nature of the ethnicity-related stress faced by many stigmatized group members (Bombay, Matheson, Anisman, 2014).

1.2 Discrimination experience

There are several important concepts that should be differentiated such as prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is an attitude, which deals with how people think and feel about members of other groups. Discrimination, in contrast, is behavior; it deals with how people *act* toward members of other groups. Discrimination consists of behaving differently toward people based solely or primarily on their membership in a social group. The term is usually used to refer to acting in an unfair or demeaning manner, but it can also refer to giving someone an undeserved advantage (Whitley, Kite, 2010). Wagner, Christ, and Pettigrew (2008) analyse representative survey and panel data from Germany to ascertain the link between prejudice and discrimination. They show on the basis of longitudinal data that prejudice is in fact an important predictor of both avoiding of ethnic minorities as well as of aggressive behavior intentions against these out-group members, though Whitley and Kite (2010) suggest that the relationship between prejudice and discrimination is not so direct and clear.

Our close environment and culture influences prejudice because members of a culture hold sets of beliefs in common, including beliefs about behaviors, values, attitudes, and opinions. An important concept is that people operate within their cultural context, but are often unaware of it (Stangor, Jonas, Stroebe, Hewstone, 1996). Yet the effects of culture are profound. As mentioned before social transformation brings new norms, social values and symbols. These changes influence people beliefs and superstitions: who is an ally, who is a stranger. The existence of prejudice and discrimination can simply be invisible to many members of the majority group. It is sometimes difficult for the majority group to accept that, for many people, prejudice and discrimination are a “lived experience” (Feagin, Sikes, 1994).

Regardless of what discrimination form was experienced it is still psychologically harmful in part because it threatens one of the core aspects of the self—an individual’s identity (Schmitt, Branscombe, 2002), which can be based on group membership according to gender, religion, ethnicity or any other number of different social categories (Tajfel, Turner, 1986). Among other pathways by which various forms of discrimination contribute to health disparities (e.g., effects on help-seeking or health care usage), discriminatory experiences engender negative health outcomes among minority group members by making their lives more stressful (Berjot, Gillet, 2011; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, Zimmerman, 2003). The Bombay et al. (2014) study showed that past discrimination leads to a greater tendency to appraise negative intergroup encounters as reflecting discrimination, this tendency would also be expected to result in higher levels of current and future perceptions of discrimination. This kind of situation would imply a mutually reinforcing relationship, wherein past discriminatory experiences are accompanied by increased sensitivity to discriminatory cues, as well as greater subsequent levels of perceived discrimination. This also revealed that ethnic identity’s centrality is associated with an increased likelihood of appraising subsequent negative intergroup scenarios that could be a result of previous discrimination and threat to people’s well-being. The study adds to the evidence that perceived discrimination can jeopardize well-being by acting as powerful stressor.

Living with prejudice and discrimination creates a threatening situation that can be difficult to deal with and individuals who are in this situation use a variety of coping strategies to do so. Crosby’s (1984) surprising finding has led to a great deal of research on what is now known as the personal/group discrimination discrepancy (PGDD), people’s belief that their group, as a whole, is more likely to be discriminated against than they, themselves, are as individuals (Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, Lalonde, 1990). It may be that the PGDD emerges because group examples more readily come to mind than do individual examples or because group information is more easily processed than is information about the self and using different comparison standards when judging their own versus the group’s level of discrimination (Whitley, Kite, 2010).

Regardless of the source and explanation of the perceived discrimination, in all cases, there is shame associated with being stigmatized (Goffman, 1963) and most people find it difficult to talk directly about the experience of

prejudice and discrimination. Nevertheless John Pachankis (2007) explains that concealing experience does not reduce the guilt and shame associated with that stigma. Moreover, the need to continuously monitor behavior so that the stigma remains undisclosed can be anxiety provoking.

1.3 Current research

Experience of ethnic identity and discrimination in Eastern European countries is especially intriguing because of the special context of social transformations. The sudden transformation from old to new political systems should have consequences for both the self-definition of the dominant society and its relation to minorities. Early research suggests that strong ethnic identity is closely connected to prejudice and discrimination of ethnic minorities (Zick, Pettigrew, Wagner, 2008). But it is still a lack of research that reveals experience from the point of view of minority groups. The aim of this study is to analysis how minority groups experience their ethnic identity and discrimination in a context of social transformations.

2.Methodology

2.1 Participants

For the study, we approached 60 people from two ethnic minority groups: Jews (30 participants) and Polish (30 participants). These groups were chosen because of several reasons. First the Polish minority group is the biggest minority group in Lithuania at the moment and people from the Jewish minority group were most affected by discrimination during period of the Second World War in general. According to the opinion poll by GfK Custom Research Baltic (2012), Lithuanians expressed distaste at the idea of having neighbours mostly of two ethnic minority groups: 51 percent of Lithuanians said that they would not want to have a Polish neighbour and some 45 percent said they did not want a Jewish neighbour.

The criterion for identifying the participants was that they think about themselves as Polish and Jews, but they should have Lithuanian citizenship and live in the country at least 18 years. All research participants' age was from 19 until 88 years (Polish minority group 19-79 years old; average 46 years, 23 women, 7 men; Jews minority group 20-88 years old, average 53,5 years old; 16 women, 14 men).

2.2 Methods and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. Semi- structured interviews had 10 open ended questions which could be divided into three parts: subjective experience of ethnic identity, discrimination and social transformation experiences. During all interviews according to the participants answers additional encouraging questions were asked. All interviews were conducted with the agreement of the participant and were recorded and lasted from 15 minutes till 2 hours.

For data analysis, thematic analysis according Boyatzis (1998) was chosen. All analysis was made step by step according to phases recommended by Braun, Clarke (2006). Data transcription and analysis was done using Atlas.ti program.

Phase 1: familiarizing with data. In this stage all interview data is transcribed and several times read by three different experts. This active reading process r searched for meanings and patterns in the data, noting the initial ideas. These transcripts were checked back if needed for additional information.

Phase 2: generating initial codes. In this stage, research questions important to the data are coded in systematic fashion across the entire data set and data are organized in a meaningful way. Codes are small meaningful units later organized in broader themes according Boyazis (1998) thematic analysis method. Three experts participated in this process. They revealed codes independently and later discussed them in groups and codes where agreed upon consensus.

Phase 3: searching for themes. When all data have been coded they are sorted into potential themes and collated by all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. In this stage visualization was used.

Phase 4: reviewing themes. During this phase all themes are discussed in a three expert group and decided which of them collapse into other. In this phase Patton's dual criteria was used – internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of themes. This work was done on two levels (Braun, Clarke, 2006): first all themes were checked in relation to coded text, second in relation to entire text. As the result of this phase, a “thematic map” was generated.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes. In this stage the essence of each theme is identified. In ongoing analysis the specific content of each theme was refined, clear definitions and names of themes were generated.

Phase 6: producing the report. In this phase the vivid, compelling extract examples were selected and final analysis related with research question and literature was done.

3. Results and analysis

3.1 Ethnic minority identity experience

Results of the analysis of participants from both minority groups revealed that the ethnic identity question is complicated and multidimensional. In both ethnic minority groups of Poles and Jews, people were talking about the complexity of ethnic identity experience. On the one hand they felt themselves as Polish or Jews but on the other they were also Lithuanians, sometimes felt as double ethnic identity, sometimes as a difference between an ethnic identity and citizenship.

Table 1. Multidimensional ethnic identity

Quotation Polish ethnic minority	Quotation Jews ethnic minority
Nevertheless nationality is Polish – Pole. So to say, Pole with Lithuanian origin.	<p><i>The first example :</i></p> <p>I: Lithuanian? Totally?</p> <p>R: Everywhere – Lithuanian, even in the passport.</p> <p>I: Mhm, though saying your mother is Jewish...</p> <p>R: So [pause] she is gone long ago. She – Jewish. So what.</p> <p>What do I know, I am saying I am Lithuanian. Let's write “Jewish” if you want, I don't care.</p> <p>I: for us is important how you treat yourself.</p> <p>R: Let it be Jewish.</p> <p><i>The second example :</i></p> <p>I have three identities. I am Jew, I am Lithuanian, and I am European.</p>

It could be that complexity of situation with ethnic identity provoke people to think and look for answers which are not simple and most of them try combine different cultures and identities. Some of participants felt deep difference between their origin culture and Lithuanian ‘I do not know Lithuanian old songs’ said Polish woman. But for others it is opportunity to embrace two cultures and enjoy them both.

Table 2. Combination of several cultures and ethnic identity

Quotation Polish ethnic minority
<p><i>First example:</i></p> <p>We live in Lithuania not in Poland. We need to adapt ourselves. But to adapt does not mean to deny. We allow children to go to Polish theatre... but they need to learn to communicate, because they are Lithuanian citizen.</p> <p><i>Second example:</i></p> <p>Then there is Olympic games, we watch them, when Polish sportsmen starts and Lithuanian as well, and we have double joy (smiling). While then it is twice as fun...</p>

Both ethnic minority groups talked about family and school influence in experience of their identity and mentioned influence of language and religion. This feeling „being different” in Jews minority group was even more emphasized because of difference in their and Lithuanian state religion and big confrontation with ethnic stereotypes, what was not mentioned in Polish minority group. One of the reasons could be that Lithuanian and Polish people share the same Catholic religion and as Algis Norvilas (2013) wrote, very often people feel so similar that sometimes define themselves as “not Lithuanians”. But also it is important to mention difficult historical events such as Holocaust during Second world war and relations between Lithuanians and Jews.

Both minority groups’ individuals mostly emphasized that they are proud of their ethnic minority identity. People with Jews ethnic identity emphasized historical importance of Jews in Christianity, and that there are a lot of people of their ethnic group with excellent knowledge or achievements. Though add that usually because of Jews difficult history most people of this nationality needed to lay more effort for achievements and that trained them as group. Polish group emphasized that „Poland opened door for Lithuania to Europe“. So both groups highlighted importance of their group input in Lithuania as country development and that was huge base for experience of pride in their ethnic identity.

It was interesting that both groups spoke freely, and did not hide their ethnic identity, but among the Jewish ethnic identity, group people said they sometimes even especially demonstrate or claim their ethnic identity or signs of it. Though this group also mentioned that there are places in which people advice to hide their ethnic identity in order to protect themselves from potential harm.

Such differences may be related with social transformations and be influenced by historical events and a long history of fear which started from the Second world war and lasted sometimes until now.

3.2. Minority identity experience in a context of social transformations

Despite differences in Polish and Jewish ethnic identity experience during Soviet time, some similarities became evident as well. First of all part of participants from both ethnic minority groups indicated that in the Soviet Union all nations were equal, first of all because the national language was „Russian“ for Lithuanians as well. According to aspects of the Soviet Union’s ideological requirement, all nations were equal.

Table 3. Soviet Union and ethnic identity (minorities and majority)

Quotation Polish ethnic minority	Quotation Jews ethnic minority
All needed to speak Russian, we all were equal.	All were friendly, lived peacefully in Soviet Union, it was such dictatorship. Soviet Union has broken – it began, differences in nationalities emerged.

Oppression of regime on the one hand made and impression that everyone was equal, but also it could be that people felt unite against government. But also it is important to bear in mind, that people tend to remember some things in a more positive light. Though in some interviews of Jews participants revealed that ethnic identity was related with a lot of secrecy in a family. Very often as children they were taught to hide their ethnic identity in community or at school or even not told at all that they were Jews in their family. And even the „Fifth graph“, where people were required to name their ethnic identity for Jews caused feelings of caution. This difference could be because of Holocaust recent experience and huge fear in a family and distrust in Soviet system and government and the soviet anti-semitism as well.

The process of gaining independence in Lithuania was very rapid as was mentioned before. Social and political change created a challenge but also new possibilities for people from different ethnic minorities. Some of them gained an opportunity to leave Lithuania to Poland or Israel and took this chance and others actively participated in

the process of the creation of Lithuania as independent country. These processes also influenced searching for answers related with various ethnic group identity questions. It seems that changes in a political and social area is related or even provokes searches on an individual level. Sometimes such a search is related with a feeling of accepting their differences but sometimes it is a requirement to make decisions in front of provocative and challenging questions.

Table 4. Challenges concerning ethnic identity and Independence in Lithuania

Quotation Jews ethnic minority

First of all I had to decide and it was very important. I had to decide about my nationality. Because... I had, I thought it would not be difficult and I would naturally choose the Lithuanian nationality. But then I had one employer, who asked 'How do you feel? Do you feel as if with you are with Lithuanian or Russian Nationality?' I answered 'Lithuanian'. 'No', he is replied, 'Listen to my question. Ok, I would ask in other words. If the War between Russia and Lithuania starts, which banner would you join?' I am saying 'I would not fight'. 'So you are not a Lithuanian' he says. I am not a Lithuanian in that sense. It seems this question is very important.

3.2 Ethnic discrimination experience

3.2.1 Ethnic minorities' understanding of discrimination

Most of both Poles and Jews had experienced discrimination through their life personally or know about such experience in their family. Though there were some people from both groups who said that they do not experience discrimination, but through interviews such experience became evident. First of all it seems difficult to talk about painful experiences and it is just natural to block such memories. But second it could be that some people do not think of it as discrimination, for example, the Holocaust is considered to be a massive murder and the word 'discrimination' is too light for it. To quote from an interview with a Jew: 'I don't want to talk about the Holocaust as the event itself which it was and I cannot name it otherwise as a massacre.'

It also became clear that more often discrimination is experienced from political comments or anonymous sources in media and less rarely in close environments. On the one hand, it is much easier to insult people anonymously in situations when people are not seen. But also, it could be that politicians by doing their career do not understand that they discriminate against minorities by making such an impression to the majority in Lithuania.

Table 5. Discrimination sources

Quotation Polish ethnic minority

R: Everything I think, we have lots of Lithuanian friends and somehow...
I: Among yourselves?
R: ... we interact super and everything is more in political level.

Quotation Jews ethnic minority

The first example:
No, I don't get into such situations. So I am not, but suppose anyone in news, or when you read any comments in website, it happens.

The second example:
What it is, what is written, but comments are awful.

It seems that when people get to know better each other less blame and discrimination on ethical backgrounds happens. And participant from both groups think, that very often background for discrimination is lack of knowledge, education and believing in stereotypes. Stereotypes are very important and participant from minority noticed that sometimes even general name such as „Polish” or „Jew” is used as insult.

But is also interesting that though there are some similarities in perceiving ethnic discrimination in ethnic minority groups also there are some differences. Polish minority groups talked that discrimination is more associated

with danger to „social or material welfare“, meanwhile Jews minority research participant related discrimination more with danger to health and life.

Table 6. The perception of discrimination

Quotation Polish ethnic minority	Quotation Jews ethnic minority
They don't know at all what I manage or not [...] Not mine knowledge, not mine capacity, not mine, but surname is mine.	<p><i>The first example:</i> At the time I tried not... no... not to entangle into some, I don't know, I had not something big, no one hit me for I am Jewish.</p> <p><i>The second example:</i> Even 6 times, as it was written recently in the newspaper, I was near the death.</p>

These differences could be related to the experience of historical discrimination. The Polish minority groups very often spoke about language knowledge as a reason for discrimination and sometimes which could be used as pretext for blocking career development. Though among Jews, almost all participants talked about a loss of family members during Holocaust and discrimination and mostly understood discrimination as a physical attack or risk of death. It seems that loss and previous experience of discrimination can lead toward situations interpreted as being very dangerous. As one Jewish participant said: “I live among Lithuanians and always feel fear though never anything happened to me”.

3.2.2 Ethnic discrimination and social transformations

As mentioned in the analysis of ethnic identity experience, there were participants, mostly from the Polish group, who said that during the Soviet Union people did not experience discrimination. It could be that oppression towards all people in Lithuania and one official Russian language made the impression that all are equal. Though from the Jewish minority group, it became clearer that discrimination was never an official issue, but more secret and hypocritical.

Table 7. Experience of discrimination in Soviet Union

Quotation Jews ethnic minority
<p><i>The first example:</i> When you gave any application, all the time somebody found you are not suitable. It seems it was one of these situations when I...</p> <p><i>The second example:</i> ... one Jewish actor was killed [...] very famous. In Minsk. So canting. Funerals with solemnity, ostensibly it was a result of the accident. But it was beforehand prepared and planes murder.</p>

It seems that people could not know what to expect from government and hiding sensible issues were surviving strategy.

Though gaining independence in Lithuania was quit abrupt. And these social transformations brought a lot of challenges. With independence state language became Lithuanian, different understanding of various historical events and all people as well as newly emerging ethnic minorities had huge challenge with it.

Table 8. Independence process in Lithuania and ethnic discrimination experience

Quotation Polish ethnic minority	Quotation Jews ethnic minority
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The first example:

Problems, indeed, started after the independence, when the children started among selves 'you are such and such Nationality, and you are such.' What it really is, I thin, stupid and smells of nationalism.

The second example:

... I have no problems with it at all. As, probably, I have no accent at all.

The first example:

I think the most difficult for him was to accept different ideology. Different attitude. Event not mentioning the language, as there was no need to know Lithuanian language in Soviet times.

The second example:... it happened to heard in first half of the year, while didn't know the Lithuanian language. And had danger to my life once when, for example, working as watcher in train station ... sometimes, I think, they said [in Lithuanian language] announcements intentionally..

To separate oneself to a new situational requirement was a huge issue for everyone. It seems it was little bit easier for people who knew the Lithuanian language and were open to discussions. The majority of participants said that these changes gave them opportunities though also brought challenges. Freedom to speak your own opinion also sometimes created an opportunity for insults and that could be a reason that some participants felt that discrimination was a newly arising phenomena related with an independent Lithuania. Additionally, it could be that difficult and traumatizing earlier experiences make people think as though others want to harm them intentionally.

So in general social transformations brought a lot of opportunities as well as challenges. On the one hand new questions about ethnic identities and citizenship arise and new ways to communicate openly about painful past experiences together with possibilities to integrate it. But on the other hand new challenges arose, for example, how to embrace differences between cultures and understand discrimination, and how not to allow a painful history to think about the future as dangerous and people as intentionally harmful.

4. Conclusions

Abrupt political and social changes in Lithuania created a context in which people received many opportunities to change their life, but brought a lot of challenges as well. With these changes many people from minority groups had many new questions about their ethnic identity: how their origins and Lithuanian cultures relate, and what is the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship, for example. The creation of an independent country brought back painful memories and fears to face them as well. It was a challenge for people to embrace their differences and accept new ways of communication for some people because language issues were not so easy. It became clear that both minority groups are proud about their ethnic identity and see many advantages of the combination of several cultures. But it seem the Polish minority group tends to show their ethnic identity more openly with very little fear, while Jews even in situations where they claim and show still feel fear from revealing such issue. Such situations could be related with a long history of secrecy related with this matter.

Social transformations also brought more freedom, particularly freedom to speak. Both minority groups claim that in independent Lithuania, they experience more open discrimination mostly from politicians and anonymous comments in the Internet and media, but not in close relations. However, there were several differences. Participants from the Polish minority group tended to worry more that discrimination can influence their social achievements, and language issues would be used as a pretext. Members of the Jewish nationality sometimes feared to reveal their ethnic identity because of threat to health and life. These differences can be related with each group's history of discrimination. These findings show an importance to discuss discrimination experience with people from minority groups and look for their special and sometimes very painful experiences in order to better understand each other in quite complicated times during social transformations.

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