

Intercultural Communication between Germans and Poles at the European University Viadrina



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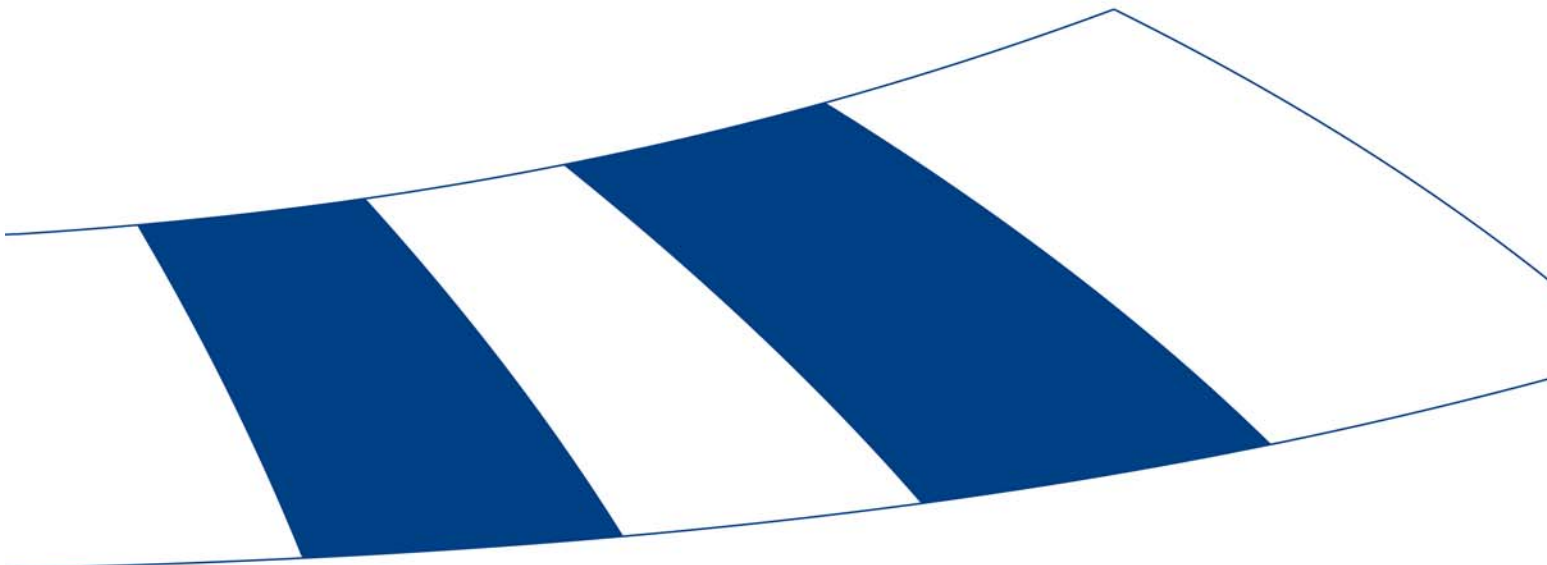
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Abstract

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The European University Viadrina at Frankfurt (Oder) is, due to its location on the German-Polish border and its high rate of international students (40 %), a place predestined to explore the subject of intercultural communication. However, the students in fact do not notice the interculturalism in their everyday lives. German and Polish students form two big groups which are distant from one another and the communicative interaction is very limited. As former studies have already asserted, the contact hypothesis works only under special conditions (Amir 1976). The origins of the group formation and the mutual lack of interest are complex. This study especially considers one of all possible aspects and analyses it: failed communication caused by cultural differences. With the analysis of the Critical Incidents, several characteristic fields of culturally-caused conflicts between German and Polish students were able to be identified.

Keywords

intercultural communication; German; Polish;  hier noch 2-3 weitere Keywords für die Suchmaschinen eintragen

Introduction

Multiple factors shape the relationship of the neighbouring states of Germany and Poland: language barriers, different economic and social situations across the German-Polish border, and an intense history affected by territorial assaults and war. As a result, however, of the international understanding which has mainly been taking place over the last 15 years, a great number of cross-border initiatives have sprung up, creating a new basis for neighbourly relationships and mutual perception both left and right of the River Oder. Public funds in their millions flow into German-Polish educational, exchange and cultural projects. The European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice, founded in 1992 as a joint German-Polish University, is a German-Polish exemplary project. The probably most 'eastern' of German universities is one of the few new universities established after the political changes; its buildings are situated so close to Poland that one can see the neighbouring city of Słubice from its windows. The young university was given various guidelines by the State of Brandenburg and was supposed to become an important forum for German-Polish cooperation (compare EUV 1993), first and foremost accompanied by the core thought of working together with Polish universities. Altogether, this new university in Brandenburg became a sign of hope for European integration; on the one side through its international student body, especially with a high number coming from Poland, and on the other side by its internationally based course offer with integrated language courses and obligatory periods spent abroad.

As a result of its particular location and its innovative character, this small university has drawn plenty of attention. Heads of State, celebrated office bearers and dignitaries, as well as famous scientists have since its foundation always used the opportunity to express their thoughts on Europe here. Not only the university's location, but certainly also as result of the politically involved director's, Gesine Schwan, popularity and public appearances, often closely followed by the media, as well as her personal achievements in German-Polish relations motivated journalists to fashion the Viadrina into a showpiece for 'good' trans-border relationships. For example, in 2004 during the ceremony for the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, the former German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, called the Viadrina and its closely connected Collegium Polonicum in Słubice a model example of a German-Polish project (Schröder 2004).

One important element of the university's intercultural concept lies in its statutory set compilation of students. In the winter term 2006/07 5001 students were enrolled at the Viadrina. 3332 of these were German citizens, 1190 Polish citizens and 479 were from other countries (altogether 76). Seen proportionally since the Viadrina's foundation and also generally aimed for, around 60 % are Germans, around 30 % Poles and 10 % are students belonging to other nationalities. With a share of about 40 %, the Viadrina is Germany's state university with the highest percentage of foreign students.

It was the founders' implicit expectation that intercultural competence would develop solely through the contact to members of other cultures. One other hope was that the students at this university would get to know each other better, form friendships, and thus become long-term mediators between the different cultures. This idea is based on the classical and simple contact hypothesis, which presumes that interaction between individuals from various groups or nationalities helps reduce tension between them (Newcomb 1957). Social scientists had however disproved the contact hypothesis long before the university's foundation. According to newer research, Newcomb's described reactions can only happen under certain, reasonable conditions. If these are not present, intercultural contact can lead to the opposite effect, namely to increase tension or even to its escalation (Amir 1976). According to Rippl, it's not the simple contact which is decisive for a change of attitude, but the, concrete contact experience "and the contact situation" (Rippl 1995). Bosse and Harms have made similar observations, they report about an intercultural project which took place at the University of Hamburg:

"Unfortunately, it can't be assumed that diverse intercultural contact possibilities on a campus result automatically in an intercultural community among students, or that a period of time spent abroad by a German student leads automatically to a politically strived increase of international competence." (Bosse & Harms 2004, 2)

As is made clear in this research, it seems that contrary to the founders' hopes, the 'microcosm' of this cross-border university represents the same distance between Germans and Poles as found in the entire German-Polish border area.

Political initiatives, contact set at the top and good will alone do not appear to be enough. Despite the many things in common, the geographical proximity and quite a number of mutual historical and cultural influences, as well as historically caused mixing between Germans and Poles (Escher & Vietig 2002) a lot of misunderstanding and friction keep reoccurring as a result of this interaction (also compare Schmitt & Stickel (eds) 1997, Roth (ed.) 2001, Allinger 2006, Fischer 2006). The results from an intercultural study carried out on the culturally based differences in German-Czech cooperation can also be transferred here in a German-Polish context. Many enthusiastically begun bi-national projects fail because of "culturally based misunderstanding" and "a deep unchangeable lack of understanding based upon years of mutual experiences" (Thomas 2000 oder 2005: Seitenzahlen, bitte mit Literaturverzeichnis abgleichen).

The European University Viadrina is, because of its position on the border, its cooperation partners and its personal German-Polish compilation able to offer almost 'clinical conditions' to research German-Polish everyday situations (compare Glaum & Rinker 2002). In order to examine the intercultural communication between Germans and Poles in real-life situations, it appeared to me, because of its characteristic as a 'bi-national' institution, to be a particularly suitable field of research. In my study, I have concentrated on several aspects of the intercultural communication between Germans and Poles. Thus, the main goal of the study is to examine commonplace inter-relationships between German and Polish students in order to find out the origins of potential conflicts in communication. The presented paper summarises the most important questions and results of my research (more in Hiller 2007a oder b?)

Methods

In research examining cultural differences, the question of how to find a suitable method to 'cleanly' gather and present them in a scientific way keeps popping up. Basically, in attempting to describe cultures, there is a danger of simplifying and generalising and therefore not doing justice to the complex reality. The great challenge in comparing cultures is how to avoid across-the-board attributions of national characteristics, and to prevent reducing different societies into generalised characteristics (compare Hansen 1995). A balance has to be achieved, so that an objective presentation of cultural particularities without enforcing old stereotypes or prejudices or bringing new ones into circulation. Probably many researchers retreat from carrying out intercultural studies on comparing cultures as a result of this problem.

The alternative is to deconstruct cultural differences, which is often practiced by international organizations. Looking at cultural differences is there deemed to be negative, which is why – as also noted by Moosmüller – and above all – the following must be applied: “The driving force is globalism. Connecting is good, separating bad” (Moosmüller 2004, 61). Accordingly, cultural influences are seen as obstructive and limiting and preferably either ignored or suppressed.

If one, however, were not to focus on differences and problems in intercultural research – and I agree here with Moosmüller – “the chance is destroyed of working on concealed, deeply rooted cultural differences, and of getting rid of the interferences which they cause” (Moosmüller 2004, 61). Seen from this point of view, the research presented here should be cognitive, and contribute to filling important gaps in this field, in which there are still many unanswered questions. I have been aware of walking the tightrope from the beginning, in examining cultural differences in an academic surrounding (compare Hiller 2006).

The analysis of Critical Incidents lies in the centre of the empirical part. Critical Incidents deal generally with the description of critical situations, where the original communicational intention fails. An event can be categorised as a Critical Incident if it fulfills the following criteria: precondition is that representatives of diverse cultural backgrounds interact. At least one of the interactive partners feels the situation is “conflicting, unclear or ambivalent” (Fiedler, Mitchell & Triandis 1971, 97). Bolten also points out Critical Incidents as case studies, which document the “breaching of normal assumptions and plausible expectations in intra- or intercultural behaviour” (Bolten 2002, 5). After collecting data consisting of problem-centred interviews (Witzel 2000), the detailed analysis of Critical Incidents was considered to be the most appropriate method to describe cultural differences between German and Polish students.

The aim of analysing Critical Incidents was to find possible cultural reasons for causing problems in communication. The starting material of the empirical research was 19 interviews with both German and Polish Viadrina students and from these the Critical Incidents were extracted according to certain criteria. In order to identify the Critical Incidents I reintroduced the term *Indicator*. This is a communicative pointer, alluding to a breakdown of communication, a crisis or an adverse expectation. In the interviews the subjects made many comments which could be attributed to the category of an expert opinion. According to Meuser & Nagel (1997) the following persons can be described as experts:

“An expert is a status given by the researcher because of their recognisable interest in a certain field; someone becomes an expert in and because of their role as an interviewee. (...) A person becomes an expert because we for whatever reason assume that they have knowledge of something, which although they may not solely possess, it is not something which every man or woman in this field has at their disposal.” (Meuser & Nagel 1997, 483-484)

In order to evaluate relevant causes for breakdown in communication between German and Polish students, around 30 Critical Incidents and expert opinions were assigned to thematic fields. This showed that there are several thematic areas which prove to be critical or conflict-loaded between them.

The analysis of the Critical Incidents is based on the following procedures:

- An interview quotation presenting a case history or a Critical Incident and forming the basis of the particular analysis.
- The Indicators indicating the appearance of Critical Incidents, identified by being underlined.
- The Critical Incident is next analysed. The analysis is focused on the question of what caused the incident to be classified as critical, and how far the cultural backgrounds of the persons concerned can be used as an explanation. The objective meaning of the actors in relation to the questionable situation should also be reconstructed so that the hermeneutic approach can be supported (compare Oevermann 2001). To this effect, the Indicators are explained and an attempt is made to classify the event into the speaker’s culturally based context of expectation.
- In addition to quotations from technical literature, expert opinions and reports from further critical situations of interaction from the whole corpus or the area of examination are quoted, which substantiate the results of the analysis or complement any further aspects.
- The conclusions of the analysis are summarised in the individual chapters, according to theme. A complete overview of the results and the inferred thesis completes the empirical part.

At the beginning of my research, by exploratory conversations with university members from various areas connected with teaching and administration, as well as with students, I obtained a first overview of German-Polish relations at the Viadrina. Further information about the situation at the university was acquired from other sources on the European University Viadrina (compare Pickel 1998, Gröppel-Klein et al. 2003, Gröppel-Klein, Germelmann & Glaum 2005, John 2001).

Hypotheses

The aim of analyzing the Critical Incidents was to identify the causes for interruption in the specific intercultural communicative situations. The basic assumption hereby is that if the students know little about the culture of the other, communicative situations often proceed in an unsatisfying manner and do not spark an interest for further involvement with the members of the other culture.

Culture is understood as a common basis within a cultural society of knowledge on values, way of looking at the world, norms, conventions and a group-specific knowledge of culture (Goodenough 1964, Habermas 1981, Rehbein (ed.) 1985, Knapp & Knapp-Potthoff 1990, Bolten 1995, Posner 2003). To this group-specific knowledge of culture belong not only culturally specific values and conventions, but also an understood knowledge that is familiar among members of a cultural group because of similar situations. By first recognising this concept of culture, which is manifested by behaviour, thought and communication, can another culture be classified or 'understood'. At the same time, in an everyday setting in communicating with members of another culture, deficits in knowledge can evoke misunderstanding and frustration.

The question arises here if there are relevant areas of discussion in an everyday interaction which lead to such forms of miscommunication. This would then evoke certain discussions or comments being wrongly interpreted, not understood or tolerated as a result of various unknown cultural concepts for the persons involved (compare Knapp & Knapp-Potthoff 1990, Müller-Jacquier 2000). Another question arising from my ascertainties was if, while evaluating the material, particular themes which highlight cultural differences in concepts and values held by German and Polish students could take a definite form.

Lying in the middle of the aforementioned empirical research are the following questions:

- How does the cultural interaction between the German and Polish students in an everyday university situation look?
- How are the causes of the claimed Critical Incidents based on cultural differences?
- Are there various culturally-based conceptions, expectations and modes of behaviour which lead to Critical Incidents taking place when German and Polish students meet?
- Can certain themes be identified where the communication between German and Polish students often becomes difficult?
- Does the research material give any information on the areas which the students from both countries know too little about one another?

Results

The first phase of my research contained an inventory of the intercultural interaction at the European University Viadrina. The first research phase concluded as follows:

The European University Viadrina at Frankfurt (Oder) could be a perfect place to experience interculturality as an enriching factor of the university life. The intercultural dimension is an important feature of the university's identity, and it is used as one of the main attractions in acquiring new students. At the same time, the European University Viadrina is a symbolic place often used in politics as an example for the amelioration in German-Polish relation.

In this international academic environment the acquisition of intercultural competence is taken to be a given. However, the students in fact do not notice the interculturality in their every-day-life. German and Polish students form two large groups which feel distant from one another and the communicative interaction is very limited. As former studies have already asserted, the "contact hypothesis" (Newcomb 1957) also

does not work at the Viadrina. It is not sufficient to put students together in lectures to motivate them to get to know each other. If interculturality is supposed to be experienced by many of them as an enriching factor of the university life, special measures should be created to promote this (also compare Otten 2006).

The origins of the group formation and the mutual lack of interest are complex. In addition to psychological phenomena, such as preferring one's own group, (compare Tajfel (ed.) 1982, Rippl 1995) institutional and structural reasons certainly also play a role in the researched context, as well as insufficient language skills being a barrier. Analysing the Critical Incidents confirmed the assumption that many critical or conflicting situations lead back to cultural causes. These are explained by referring to social, historical and cultural backgrounds, which make it clear that in certain areas of their lives German and Polish students have different values, concepts or knowledge. These were able to be assessed as culturally based differences.

In analysing the Critical Incidents, several areas took a definite form as causes for critical situations, misunderstanding or conflicts between German and Polish students in everyday life at the university, and as result several characteristic fields of conflicts between German and Polish students could be identified. The results can be summarised in ten conclusions, which are presented in the following and briefly commented on.

10 conclusions to intercultural areas of conflict between German and Polish students

Area of conflict: religion

The largest number of Critical Incidents and expert opinions resulted from the complex theme of religion. Many of the interviewed students commented on the theme of religion without being asked, and there are obviously big differences in attitude and behaviour concerning this theme which were recognized by both sides. It can be concluded from this that this is an area of conflict between the German and Polish students.

- Conclusion 1: The attitude towards church and religion differs clearly between German and Polish students and turns out to be a source of prejudice, misunderstanding and conflict.

Area of conflict: moral values and the concept of partnership

Example cases of the theme of 'Moral Perception' were analysed among the young Germans and Poles which shed light on their attitudes towards sexuality, partnership and marriage. The religious background also plays an important role here. Individual aspects on this whole complex theme, such as cohabitation, open atheism, etc., are viewed in Poland along more traditional lines (and therefore as "conservative values") and thus form a big contrast to current German attitudes. This is also noticed by the students themselves, and conflicts can arise in German-Polish partner relationships, if the Polish partner has strong catholic values and the German was brought up as an atheist. In some points, however, the attitudes of both the German and Polish youths were very similar, e.g. in evaluating sex before marriage. The deduced theses to this area are:

- Conclusion 2: From a German perspective, Polish Students in general are deeply affected by moral values which are much more conservative than the values young Germans share. This can be explained by the influence of the Catholic Church which is much stronger in Polish society than in German society.
- Conclusion 3: The concept of partnership and marriage is different in Germany and Poland. In Poland, people usually get married significantly earlier than in Germany, and the Polish rates of divorce are distinctly lower. This is not only caused by moral and economic reasons but also by the high importance of family ties in Polish society.

Area of conflict: family

In the interaction between German and Polish students, a diverse concept of family was often a theme. This can be manifested in thought, feeling and behaviour. The differentiating concept of thought is linked to the Polish word for family *rodzina* which has a different association than the German word. On an emotional level, young Poles see the family as being more important than their friends, but most young Germans have the opposite opinion. Homesickness can also lead to a contact barrier for outsiders, which is why many Polish students prefer to live in the Polish halls of residence, as this familiar surrounding most closely creates a substitute family.

- Conclusion 4: Compared to young Germans, young Poles have a drastically different concept of family. Altogether, family relationships are more highly valued by Poles than by Germans and young Poles generally feel a stronger tie to their family as Germans of the same age.

Area of conflict: solidarity and networking

Many German students noticed that their Polish fellow students stick together much more and mutual support seems to be very important. Even jobs are passed on among friends without leaving a negative feeling of 'nepotism', whereas in Germany, where this kind of favouritism also exists, it is considered to be reprehensible. This Polish behaviour often leads here to irritation. In general the German students are more individually orientated. The Polish tendency to form groups presents another factor which makes the contact between the two groups more difficult to bridge.

- Conclusion 5: Both networking and solidarity are more germane to the Polish students than to the Germans. All in all, among the Polish students, tighter relationships and a greater tendency to mutual help could be observed.

Area of conflict: gender

The understanding of sexual roles is here a theme especially for the female German students. In various everyday situations they noticed that their fellow Polish students behave, on this point, differently. This concerns various areas of life, from politeness (especially from men towards women), how women dress and make themselves up, as well as sexually equal ways of speaking, and of acknowledging women in leading positions, etc. Most of the examples used refer to how Polish men view women that is different in the female students' perception to how German men do.

- Conclusion 6: The attitude towards gender roles differs between German and Polish students. Especially the image of women is perceived in a different way. This leads in many cases to alienation, irritation and/ or conflicts.

Area of conflict: humour/ taboos/ conversation subjects

Several of the students interviewed had realised that they were not always able to laugh along when members of the other nationality made jokes. This was partly because a common basis, in other words a cultural context knowledge, was missing, and also because there are different senses of humour in Germany and in Poland. Both German as well as Polish students remarked that certain jokes could be used to offend each other, leading back to various taboos. Another student noticed the absence of common conversational topics, which on the one hand points to an altogether different way of looking at life, but on the other hand to the diverse way that young Germans and Poles spend their free-time.

- Conclusion 7: Humour is affected by culture. As the students themselves realised, they often consider different things to be funny. Furthermore, many jokes and allusions can only be understood if one disposes of a deeper knowledge of the cultural context (Area of conflict: humour).
- Conclusion 8: Some taboos exist in Poland but not in Germany and vice versa. Breaking a taboo by a member of the other culture can lead to unpleasant situations and irritation (Area of conflict: taboos).
- Conclusion 9: Communication between German and Polish students can be confounded by a lack of knowledge of the cultural context of the other: the topics of conversation, which are supposed to be entertaining or interesting, are narrowly connected with the different cultural background, socialisation, education, as well as with different preferences regarding leisure activities (Area of conflict: conversation subjects).

Area of conflict: hierarchies

Several German, as well as Polish students observed great differences in the behaviour of the German teachers and professors compared to the behaviour of the teachers and professors in Poland. Many Polish students found this to be pleasantly surprising, but partly difficult to understand, and also irritating and unsettling. Particularly new students had difficulty coping with an unknown comportment as regards people in authority.

- Conclusion 10: The relationship between students and professors is much more hierarchical in Poland than in Germany. In Poland, lecturers and professors are treated with great respect and enjoy great au-

thority. The Polish education system is much more affected by hierarchical structures than the German one.

Discussion

The European University Viadrina, on the edge of Germany, is burdened with ambitious plans. The young people who study there should build a bridge between Germany and Poland based solely on their friendships. A large number of observers, however, see the German-Polish communication as critical. Whether it is voices from the first five years of this university era or from recent observations, most people concerned have realized that the communication between the German and Polish students is far from what one had hoped. Other intercultural projects have made similar experiences (also compare Bosse & Harms 2004). The majority prefer to be with members of their own national group. Earlier research has already drawn attention to the national separation among the students at the Viadrina (Pickel 1998, John 2001, Glaum & Rinker 2002, Gröppel-Klein et al. 2003). As presented in a cross-sectional study, the motivation to form friendships with the other group becomes smaller during the length of study, convergence hardly takes place (Gröppel-Klein et al. 2003, Gröppel-Klein, Germelmann & Glaum 2005). If first-termers of economic studies beginning in 1997/98 are compared with those beginning in 2003/04, a reduction in cultural openness can be ascertained, despite an increase in effort of European integration. Fewer contact takes place, the Polish find the Germans abrasive, and are more antagonistic towards the Germans than comparable students in 1997/98 (Gröppel-Klein, Germelmann & Glaum 2005). All in all, the contact between Germans and Poles has diminished or worsened. Pickel (1998) and Gröppel-Klein et al. (2003) allege that many students who sought contact at the beginning had since withdrawn. The question of the causes for this however has been disregarded in the cited studies. The presented empirical results provide new insights on this subject.

The study shows that relevant cultural differences exist between members of two neighbouring countries, even if they share the same age, social status and Christian-European origin. The cultural differences described above influence the students' communicative interactions in their everyday university lives. Analysing the Critical Incidents shows that many misunderstandings and problems in communication can be attributed to cultural imprint.

The aforementioned conclusions to the areas of conflict are based on the everyday experiences of the students at the European University Viadrina. Similar results were gained from the areas of German-Polish economic communication (Fischer 2006) and pupil exchange programmes (Allinger 2006). It can be assumed that they, subject to a sensitive and critically challenged association with generalisations, exhibit enlightening and useable background knowledge for German-Polish encounters in other contexts.

The analysis made it obvious that German and Polish students dispose of diverse values, concepts and even knowledge in certain areas of their lives. In this research these were categorised as culturally based. Culture is here understood as something which constitutes itself when individuals interact and supply each other with a general cultural knowledge from interpretations with which they use from their living environment (compare Bolten 2002, 6). Within this cultural pool of knowledge, certain things are classified as "everyday", "normal" or "natural". Estrangement, irritation or conflicts arise when the behaviour or the attitude of others collide with one's own cultural system of values or when concepts are different. A consequence of this can be a lack of understanding, as mutual agreement is promoted by common lifestyles, e.g. the national school system, the Catholic Church as a setter of morals, or films which the whole generation has seen.

It becomes clear here how much the Polish students are influenced by the Catholic Church in their values. It must be considered, however, that Polish society is currently undergoing a phase of fast transformation (compare Świda-Ziemia 2005). It cannot yet be foreseen how much or how long the conservative values of Polish society will continue to have such an influence.

It would be deemed positive while establishing any future bi- or multi-cultural institutions to bear in mind that there is a problematic dimension of interculturalism that reaches beyond idealism and the wish for European (or global) unity. It would be a commendable idea if such institutions developed strategies to sensitize the participants on an intercultural level and to motivate them to intercultural communication. A course would have to be offered that deals with the promotion of intercultural competence, but also medi-


ates cultural knowledge above the cultural backgrounds of those who encounter each other every day. In the case of the European University Viadrina this could be an obligatory seminar, which gives the students (and administrative staff) relevant basis knowledge about the neighbouring culture. Bi-cultural tutor groups, excursions and working on common projects have proven to be a successful measure. Should this not happen automatically, the teaching staff could encourage such activities by setting suitable guidelines.

Furnham and Bochner suggest preparing the students in an intercultural context in Social-Skills-Training, which could prevent misunderstanding and conflicts on a communicative level (compare Furnham & Bochner 1986, 204). Several German universities now offer their students intercultural training courses of which the effect has been positively confirmed in numerous appraisals (e.g. compare Kinast 2003). These courses present the possibility of making the students aware of the risks and chances that intercultural contact can bring. Several measures to promote intercultural communication have also been initiated as a result of this research at the Viadrina: as this research was being undertaken, a series of workshops on intercultural training were brought to life by the university management and the international office, and already by the end of the summer term 2007 several hundred students had participated. Experience and evaluation on these workshops have been described in detail in another source (Hiller 2006, 2007a).

Finally it is important to awaken interest in communicative exchange without having to force it. At the same time, the students should be made aware of which enrichment (also in learning) intercultural contact can offer, as according to Isserstedt and Schnitzer the enriched side-effects of intercultural contact between German and foreign students "has up to now been mainly overlooked and not sufficiently systematically used" (Isserstedt & Schnitzer 2002, 57).

Further research is needed for this, if one is to successfully describe cultural differences without using stereotypes as a fixed constant. Furthermore, in order to evaluate and optimise the procurement of intercultural communication and competence, new approaches must be developed. Altogether, increased scientific chaperonage and evaluation of intercultural projects is necessary.

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