



This paper is taken from

*Human Rights and Citizenship Education
Proceedings of the eleventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2009

edited by Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9562789-6-8

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Petrucijová, J. (2009) Identity and intergroup relations in terms of business cooperation among the Visegrad countries, in Ross, A. (ed) Human Rights and Citizenship Education. London: CiCe, pp 26 - 32

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Identity and intergroup relations in terms of business cooperation among the Visegrad countries

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Abstract

Students' personal identity and competence to live and cooperate with different people is the goal what forms the core of any education. Developing students' social capital should be an essential part of educational efforts. In our comparative study Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovakian business students' notions of cooperation were investigated with the Associative Group Analytic Method (Szalay, 1967). The concept of cooperation was connected to preferences for cooperation among students of the four nations. Results showed similarities and characteristics differences both in terms of what it means to cooperate and to whom each group prefers and not prefers to cooperate and why

In this paper we present analysis of attitudes to cooperation of students from two Czech universities of economics (capital and provincial) and compare them with the opinions of their Hungarian and Polish coevals. A general theoretical framework is hedged by different levels of possible analysis: at one level cooperation can be analysed as a cultural phenomenon and as a pattern of behaviour which is typical for a particular culture(s); at another, as a pattern of behaviour of particular types of activity(ies), including professional group activities.

Level A: Cooperation as a cultural phenomenon and as a pattern of behaviour which is typical for a particular culture(s).

The focus here is placed on the analysis of internal specifics of a concrete culture(s). In this context we distinguish cooperative or competitive cultures, collectivistic or individualistic societies. Every researcher is aware of the fact that modern societies are not homogeneous, but heterogeneous and complex. Such societies constitute a more or less integrated unit; they are, however, at the same time characterised by internal diversity, by the possibility of defining various spheres of the society's life, various social groups, etc. Within that which is referred to as the dominant culture and its dominant pattern(s), different cultural elements or cultural complexes may exist and constitute a relatively autonomous subculture. It means we perpetrate a huge simplification by reducing the variety of types of human behaviour to only one predominant pattern.ⁱ

The strategies of social communication, action and interaction (including behavioral patterns and scenarios) are cultural phenomena. They are developed in particular forms, with particular contents of socialization and enculturation processes, and are relatively specific for every particular society.ⁱⁱ This way, the main agents involved in the socialisation process (family, educational institutions, etc.) reproduce collective identities of society members: 'we learn who we are to be: we are what we have learned to be'.

Social strategies and culturally rooted patterns of behaviour have an impact on the perception of, and relations between different social and cultural groups. Even though some particular cultures may be oriented toward the developing of cooperative forms of behavior inside their own cultural group, this doesn't mean the culture shares the same strategies of social communication and interaction with other cultures (i.e. outside their own cultural group).

According to the Tajfel and Turner theory of social identity and intergroup relations (1979), members of a certain group/culture generally tend to compete (not cooperate) with other groups. When meeting the members of other cultures, they tend to perform comparisons, which primarily results in evaluating themselves positively. When comparing, they use criteria that puts their own group at an advantage and are useful to it. Positive self-assessment increases the rate of group self-awareness, its solidarity and integrity.

In preceding historical eras, collective cultural/social identities were mainly constructed on the basis of a tendency toward an ethnocentric social exclusion of otherness. Nowadays, the inclusive identity based on the tendency towards cultural relativism is the goal; therefore the issue of social capital (defined as an

attribute of a society, as a quality of relationships enabling individuals and groups to *cooperate* and act collectively) is very important. Identity with a focus on inclusiveness versus exclusiveness is seen as a conception of the multicultural world. In this way we see an effort towards cultivating inclusive identity as an integral part of the socialization role of education. In today's world of multiculturalism, an individual is expected to be prepared to deal with cultural contacts and to face possible tensions between different worlds. Cultural contact should therefore become a source of enrichment, not conflict. (Lestinen et al, 2004, p 5 – 7)

Level B: Cooperation as a pattern of behaviour of particular types of activity(ies), including professional group activities.

For example, the team work of soccer players or the team work of shop assistants differ in many ways. The cooperative acting of soccer players is strongly competitive (including the elements of aggressiveness) towards the rival team. The question is if business is cooperative/team work or individualistic work. The answer depends on the type of business. The image of a self-made man (tending even towards radical individualism) and the image of a pro-social individual (able and willing community building and team-work) are two trends of identity developing within the Visegrad context of the last fifteen years. Mentioned trends influence cross-cultural relationships both on a general level and particularly on the level of economic cooperation. The issue should be realized in the context of professional ethics, as well.

Our analysis is primarily focused on *Level B*, i.e. cooperation as a pattern of behaviour of particular types of activity(ies), including professional group activities. Analysis presented is based on the Associative Group Analysis technique and is focused on the concept of cooperation and on the questionnaire related to the same concept. This way we inquire into students' opinions and attitudes, their level of intercultural awareness and self-awareness and their 'readiness' for intercultural cooperation. At the same time we are aware of the fact that being students, our respondents are still at the beginning of the process of *professional* development and their opinions, attitudes primarily present their *general* personality traits and predicate culturally rooted opinions, attitudes, stereotypes, etc., of a particular group of the population, i.e. testify particular type(s) of collective identity(ies), which corresponds to *Level A* of our methodology.

The first step in our research is connected with the analysis of student associations, the number of associations and their weights in each country, and with the comparison of partial results. The statistical dates about students' replies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Number of associations and weights of cooperation concept

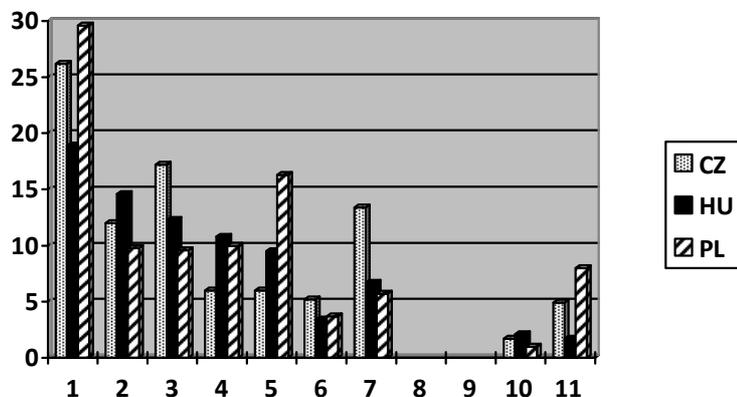
	Number of respondents	Number of associations	Average number of associations	Weights of associations
Czechs ALL	100	433	4,33	1746
Hungarians ALL	100	641	6,41	2425
Poles ALL	100	667	6,67	2507

According to *Table 1*, Polish students were the most active in their associations; the average number of associations for each student was more than 6 words. The most 'productive' group was Polish capital female-students, with an average result of 7, 56 words per student. The least 'productive' was the group of Czech male-students in the capital. The average number of their associations was only 4, 24 words. Considering the total outcome of Polish students as 100%, one could conclude that all Czech students achieved only 65% and their Hungarian coevals achieved 96%.

One of the most difficult steps of the whole associative analysis was the process of classification of all associations into several groups of categories based on comparison of country results. It showed a variety of meanings in the 'cooperation' notion. In their associations, students *de facto* answered the questions: 'What?', 'Who?' (subjects of cooperation), 'Why?' (reasons, motivation, aims of cooperation), 'How?' (means of cooperation). Simultaneously cooperation was considered as a process of acting including its particular stages: motivation, goal, means, acts, results, consequences/impacts (both positive and negative) and context.

Associations were divided into eleven groups of categories: 1. Business work, team work, communication, 2. Achievement/efficiency, 3. Relationship (close, mutual), 4. Common activity (community), 5. Pro-social behaviour, 6. Equal interests, 7. Evaluations/emotions, 8. Synonyms, 9. Others, 10. National/international, 11. Morality (*Diagram 1* below).

Diagram 1 Cooperation issue in the associations of students



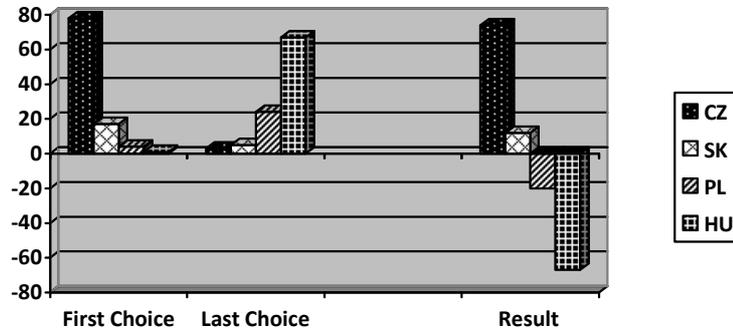
Czech, Hungarian and Polish students associate COOPERATION primarily with ‘work’ and ‘business’, i.e. a content of acting and a sphere of acting. The cooperation understood as ‘work (including team work)’ was rated more highly among Polish students (29, 6%) than among Czech (26, 2%) and Hungarian (18, 9%) students. At the same time, Polish and Hungarian students associated team work (category 1) with the ‘division of roles’, ‘division of duties’, ‘division of labour’, etc. There are no such kinds of answers among Czech students who tended to associate cooperation with ‘unity’, ‘synergy’, ‘community’ (item 4 of Table 2, even though the interpretation of cooperation as the fourth category is higher in Hungarian and Polish answers). Cooperation considered as ‘mutual support’, ‘exchange’ (item 3 ‘relationship (close, mutual)’ of the Table 2: 17, 2%, i.e. the second highest position of Czech students) was higher among Czech male students than female students, both in the capital and town, whilst the same category was put upon into the fourth position (9, 6%) by their Polish coevals. Understanding cooperation as ‘close relations’ linked to ‘friends’, ‘family’, ‘schoolmates’ is more frequent for Hungarian students (229 weights) than for Czechs (163 weights) and especially Poles (only 130 weights). The weights of such words as ‘partners’, ‘partnership’ were 118 (Czechs), 111 (Hungarians), 84 (Poles). Generally Hungarian students present average weights in each categories, but the category ‘achievement, motivation’, with 14, 6%, was in the second position of their associations (*Diagram 1* below). The results of the other respondents were: 12% - Czechs (4th position of Czech rating) and 9, 8% - Poles (3rd position of Polish rating). The second important category in the associations of Polish students was the category of pro-social behavior: 16, 3%. The distinction between Polish and Czech students was more than 10% here. But Czech students compensated for it with their opinions associated cooperation with emotions (primarily positive) and morality. In the responses of Hungarian students, positive and negative emotions as a part and content of ‘cooperation’ are equal. The category morality, with 1, 7%, is not significant at all. As a part of the category ‘evaluation/emotion’, positive emotions tip the scale in Czech and Polish associations. The category morality has its highest rate in the responses of Polish students (8%, i.e. 3, 1% more than in Czech students’ responses). There are no significant differences between city and town respondents in both countries.

After summarizing students’ associations about COOPERATION in the context of the ‘intra-group and inter-group relations’ issue we were able to conclude that students associate cooperation with a way and process of acting based on common/community acting and connected with close, mutual relationships. In analyzing the kinds and subjects of those relationships, we know that they are as often referred to as ‘neutral’ partners (possibly ‘business partners’ but maybe e.g. ‘partner of marriage’, as well) as to ‘members of family’, ‘friends’, ‘schoolmates’, etc. COOPERATION seems to them to be not only a way of professional behaviour in a particular sphere of business acting, but also a widely understood way of human behaviour which ties in members of a particular group specified as (well)- known subjects of intra-group relations. Intra-group relations are more preferable than inter-group ones. Understanding COOPERATION as national or international is in a marginal position of students’ associations (1, 7% of Czech responds, 2, 1% of Hungarians and 1, 0% of Poles).

'Partners in cooperation' issue in the opinions of selected Visegrad countries

A more detailed presentation of Czech students' opinions is given as a description of the analysis procedure used in the cases of each Visegrad country.

Diagram 2 'First and last choice of partners in cooperation' – CZ country choice (both sexes)



Students of economics in the capital: Prague is the capital; the biggest cultural and economical centre of CZ; the city with the lowest level of unemployment in CZ. It is a real multicultural city, but it is one hundred kilometers far from the Slovak, Polish and Hungarian borders.

Table 2 'Partners in cooperation – first choice' in the opinions of students in Prague

	CZ	SK	PL	HU
Both sexes	41	8	1	0

Twenty female-students in Prague prefer to cooperate with Czech partners and provide the following reasons: (1) common language and mentality – 7 answers, (2) easy communication - 6, (3) patriotism – 3, (4) common economical context – 2, (5) foresee ability of their behaviour - 2 answers.

Four of the female-students chose Slovak partners, because one of them is Slovak. The rest of the students specified their choice: easy communication and trust – 3 answers.

One female-student chose a Polish partner as reliable. None chose Hungarians and one of the students did not reply.

There were only two potential partners in cooperation chosen by male-students in Prague: Czech partners – 21 answers and Slovaks – 4. They did not choose Polish and Hungarian businessmen. The reasons for the choice of a Czech business partner were: (1) same language, mentality – 6 answers, (2) the most advanced economy – 2, (3) reliable – 2, (4) compatriot – 2, (5) knowledge of surroundings - 3, (6) xenophobia – 1, (7) foresee ability of partners' behaviour – 2 answers, (8) no reason. 'Nationality is not a reason for choice' one of the students wrote, but they still chose a CZ partner.

The reasons for the choice of the Slovak partners: (1) trust, (2) 'Slovaks are good people and traders', (3) Slovakia is developing rapidly.

'Partners in cooperation' in the opinion of students in Ostrava, which is the administrative centre of the North Moravian and Silesian region located near the border with Poland and Slovakia (i.e. real contact and experience in communication with Polish and Slovakian people is assumed). Ostrava is an important centre of heavy industry. It's a multicultural region with numerous groups of Polish and Slovakian minorities. In the last ten years it has been the region with one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country (i.e. stereotype that 'foreigners take our jobs' is very frequent).

Table 3 'Partners in cooperation – first choice' in the opinions of students in Ostrava

	CZ	SK	PL	HU
Both sexes	37	9	3	1

80% of female-students chose Czechs as preferable partners in cooperation (one of the answers is written in Slovak and the next one offers 'CZ/SK' as 'close nationalities and therefore, reliability'. The students'

reasons for their choice: 'similar culture' - 7 answers, 'advanced economy, same economic rules - 7, 'trust' - 5 answers.

12% of students would prefer to cooperate with Slovaks because they 'look for help in there own family' (i.e. one of the students is Slovak), 'advanced economy'.

One student would prefer to cooperate with a Hungarian partner to enrich her experience. One of the students chose a Polish partner because that partner would be strongly purposeful.

65% of male-students would prefer to have Czech partners because of 'the same language' (9 answers), 'trust' (2), 'diligence' (1), 'compatriot' (1), 'easier cooperation' (1), 'distance from senseless religious ideas' (1 answer).

The second group of students (24%) chose Slovaks. Their reasons are: 'reliability, trust' - 3 answers, 'rapidly growing economy'- 2. One of the students has no reason for his choice.

Two male-students would prefer to cooperate with Polish partners because 'I know them' and 'they are a religious country so I can trust them'. No student chose a Hungarian partner.

'Partners in cooperation - last choice' issue in the opinion of the Czech students

Table 4 'Partners in cooperation - last choice' rank of students in Prague

	CZ	SK	PL	HU
Both sexes	0	4	12	34

Difficulties in communication caused by a different language, mentality, and habits are the most frequent answers - 7 answers, for why female-students in Prague don't choose Hungarians as potential business partners. The next reasons are: (1) lack of experience - 2 answers, (2) lack of trust - 3, (3) in two cases, the choice is not given a reason and the rest of the respondents are rather negative and emotional in their attitudes describing potential Hungarian partners as a "shouting nation".

The reasons why four female-students avoid cooperating with Poles are: (1) lack of trust, (2) 'they are the worst', (3) I do not know, (4) no answer.

The reasons for the rejection of Slovak businessmen are: (1) tension between Czechs and Slovaks, (2) personal antipathy, (3) no answer.

Male-students' answers are very similar: 16 students, i.e. 64% of respondents refrain from cooperating with Hungarian partners. The typology of reasons is given here. The reasons like 'differences in language' - 2 answers, 'differences in culture' - 4, 'unknown surroundings' - 2, have been put into the group of objective reasons. So-called 'economic group' involves rather contradictory reasons: 1) 'Hungary is the second developed country in the offered county choice' - 1 answer, 'high transfer taxes' - 1 or 'Hungary is a poor country' - 2 answers. The last group of reasons - subjective, emotional - involves reasons like 'mistrust' - 2 answers, 'less favorite people' - 1, 'xenophobia' - 1 answer. One of the students does not give reasons for his choice.

The reasons for the last choice of possible Polish partners (32% of answers) are: (1) mistrust - 3 cases, (2) 'I dislike Poland' - 1, (3) their Catholicism - 1, (4) 'never' - 1, (5) 'I do not know them' - 1, (6) no answer.

There is no answer in the case of the last choice of a possible Slovak business partner, either.

Table 5 'Partners in cooperation - last choice' rank of students in Ostrava

	CZ	SK	PL	HU
Both sexes	3	1	12	33

72% (18 answers) of female-students assume Hungarians to be the least preferable partners in cooperation. 'Problems in communication' is a very frequent reason - 5 respondents. The next reasons are: 'differences in habits' - 4 respondents, 'the state of the economy in Hungary' - 3, 'lack of information' - 2, 'I don't have a good opinion about Hungarians' - 1. There are no arguments in 3 cases.

The reasons for last choice of Polish partners are: 'differences in culture' - 1, 'bad reputation' - 1, 'prejudices' - 1, 'bad experience' - 2.

One of the students explains making Slovak partners her last choice in this way: 'there is no profit in their ideas'.

The last choice of Czech partners in cooperation was explained with the argument: 'nothing new, unknown and exciting'.

60% of male-respondents consider Hungarians as the least plausible partner in cooperation. The main group of reasons is the differences in language - 7 respondents, in habits - 2, lack of information - 2, mistrust - 2 and 'a bad experience on a holiday' - 2 answers.

To explain the last position of the Polish partners in the country choice (28%) male-students offer rather emotional arguments like: 'I dislike them', 'I do not like religion' - 4. A few reasons are economical - 'less developed country' - 2 answers. One of the students considers the Polish partners as unreliable.

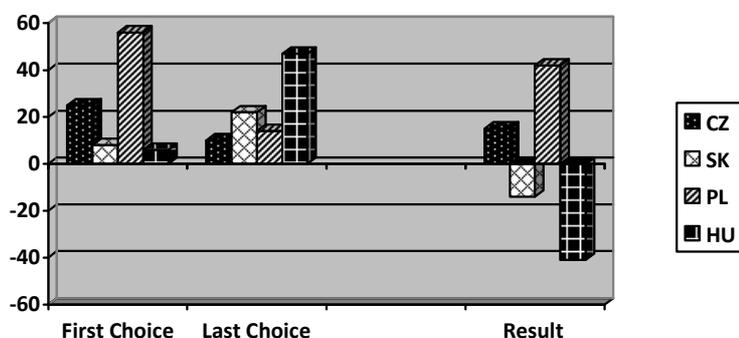
Two respondents (8%) write, that they 'do not like the Czech nation', because 'it's a nation of beer drinkers who are not considerate of other people and their interests, but want to smash up profits in any way'.

The next diagram shows relationship between the 'first and last choice of partners in cooperation' in the opinions of 100 respondents from both universities in Prague and Ostrava. According to dates the Czech students would choose business partners within their own country or would prefer to cooperate with Slovak partners as more known.

'Partners in cooperation' issue in the opinions of Polish students of economics

The same type of research held at capital and town universities in Poland. Results, including explanations, are presented below.

Diagram 3 'First and last choice of partners in cooperation' - PL country choice (both sexes)



'Partners in cooperation - first choice': 56% of Polish students would prefer to cooperate with their countrymen. Offered reasons are: (1) same language, mentality, (2) knowledge of surroundings, (3) predictability in partners' behaviour, (3) reliable - 2 answers, (4) compatriot, (5) no reason.

25% of respondents assumed Czech partners to be preferable partners in cooperation because: (1) language is similar, (2) positive traits of Czech partners or Czechs generally - 'they are very successful' (3) experience.

8% of students would choose Slovak partners and explain their choice with the reasons: (1) similarity of language and culture, (2) positive traits of Slovak partners or Slovaks generally.

The reasons of 6% of Polish students who've chosen Hungarian partners are very similar in the sense of perception of partner: 'Pole - Magiar two brothers for fighting and for drinking' - a saying'. For the first time in Polish questionnaires we read a new type argument - 'I like to get to know new cultures, languages and regions - cooperation with them would be a great chance for me to do that', tj. unknown is seen to be a challenge and means for enrichment.

There was no choice in 5 cases.

'Partners in cooperation - last choice': 7% of Polish students did not write any answer. 47% of them would not like to cooperate with Hungarian businessmen because of differences in languages and the lack of information about the culture of Hungarians, i.e. students reflect on the objective background of possible cooperation. Knowledge of a partner's language and culture is considered as essential precondition for business. At the same time economic reasons are not reflected at all.

22% of Polish students would not choose Slovaks as potential business partners. Their reasons are primarily economic ('the poorest country', 'they don't have enough know-how to contribute to business') but full of prejudices because in recent years, the indicators of successful economic growth in Slovakia have been the highest among so-called post-communist countries.

10% of the students refrain from cooperating with Czechs. Their choice is based on visions of Czech national traits like: 'volatile', 'opportunists'. In some case it's connected with an apprehension that 'Czechs don't like us.'

A rather high level of Polish respondents (14%) avoid cooperation with their countrymen because in the opinions of students, 'in general Poles are individualists, it's tough to cooperate with them', etc. Students of provincial universities are less critical than their capital coevals but at large Polish students are more critical in evaluation of own nation than their Czech coevals. Only two students in Ostrava (i.e. near the Polish frontier and maybe one of them is a Pole) were skeptical in the same manner. Based on dates it's not possible to say definitely which students (town or capital) are more 'closed' or 'open' in imagined cooperation. More town than capital students tend to avoid cooperation with Hungarians and Slovaks, but more capital than town students tend to avoid it with Czechs and their own countrymen.

The diagram below shows the relationship between the 'first and last choice of partners in cooperation' in the opinions of 100 respondents of both Polish universities

Conclusions

Having analyzed the results of the questionnaire and having compared them with the theory of intergroup relations by Tajfel and Turner, we consider the attitudes of students in their perception and reflection of home and foreign imagined partners and cultures as slightly tending towards an ethnocentric point of view. Their opinions and preferences predicate general *cultural* stereotypes more than their *professional* maturity. The open question is whether these stereotypes are typical *generational* stereotypes or typical *national* ones. The students primarily base their opinion on preferable intra-group criteria or very often on emotional, unproved reasons. This emotionality penetrates their verbal expressions, e.g. the description of Hungarians as a 'shouting nation' and their own nation as 'kind, friendly and eager to help'. Unproved reasons seem to be the grounds for stereotypes (realized or not). It's not possible to say that they are aware of current trends towards an inclusive identity and are trying to build their own identity as inclusive. For them, "different and unknown" is often the reason for rejecting contact and mistrusting, and seldom challenge for process of enrichment. Considering 'trust' and 'reliability' of partners as a precondition of 'cooperation' they identify trust with 'certainty, fidelity and reliability' and 'partner in cooperation' primarily with close persons personified in members of the family, friends, i.e. the members of the group they belong to.

At the same time, a high level of self-estimation is a positive moment for starting and developing a business relationship, except for situations when it causes an underestimation of a business partner. A higher number of students prefer "weak partners" (for winning) than "strong partners" (for self-developing, priming latent resources, increasing the level of competitiveness). Assessing Czech partners and the Czech economy as strong, they consequently prefer to choose partners outside their own group and country and in this way develop inter-group relations.

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ⁱ Culture typology theories serve as examples based on defining cultural patterns which are founded on personality types). Such an examples show both the immense heuristic importance of so-called Essentialism and its shortcomings, e.g. even though we define modern western-European countries as individualistic (on a general level) but real social policy in different countries are different: in some countries, emphasis is laid on individual identity development and protection of its interests, in others it's laid on group identity development.

ⁱⁱ For example, R. Roche's project of pro-social behaviour is in progress in such European countries as Spain, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The development of cooperative skills is an essential part of the project.