

THE TERMINOLOGY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIO-ADAPTIVE PROCESSES

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Abstract

The study explores the conceptual nature of an individual's ethnic identity within the context of interconnected socio-adaptive processes. In contemporary psychological science, the relevance of this issue stems from ongoing processes of globalisation—spanning the socio-psychological, economic, and cultural spheres—which create new socio-adaptive conditions for an individual's life and activity. Under these circumstances, as societal processes become volatile and perceptions of one's environment are shaped by diverse information flows, specific transformations in the manifestations of an individual's ethnic identity are emerging. Moreover, alongside the formation and consolidation of ethnic identity, an individual's tendencies and mechanisms for adapting to the social environment also begin to change; this underscores the importance of conducting socio-psychological research into the interaction between ethnic identity and the processes of adapting to the social environment, as well as clarifying the terminology surrounding ethnic identity.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, terminology, socio-adaptive processes, primordialist approach, instrumentalism, constructivist approach.

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Համառոտագիր

Հետազոտությունը բացահայտում է անձի էթնիկ ինքնության եզրութաբանությունը սոցիալ-ադապտիվ գործընթացների փոխկապակցվածության մեջ: Ժամանակակից հոգեբանական գիտության մեջ այս հիմնախնդրի արդիականությունը պայմանավորված է ներկայիս գլոբալիզացիոն սոցիալ-հոգեբանական, տնտեսական և մշակութային գործընթացներով, որոնք նոր սոցիալ-ադապտիվ պայմաններ են ստեղծում անձի կենսագործունեության համար: Այս պայմաններում, երբ հասարակական բոլոր գործընթացները դառնում են բավականին փոփոխական և անկայուն, իսկ պատկերացումները սեփական միջավայրի մասին ձևավորվում են տեղեկատվական տարաբնույթ հոսքերի ներքո, առաջ են գալիս անձի էթնիկ ինքնության դրսևորումների որոշակի փոխակերպումներ: Ավելին, էթնիկ ինքնության ձևավորման և ամրակայման հետ զուգընթաց սկսում է փոփոխությունների ենթարկվել նաև սոցիալական միջավայրին անձի ադապտացիոն հակումները և մեխանիզմները, ինչն առավել կարևորում է էթնիկ ինքնության և սոցիալական միջավայրին անձի ադապտացիոն գործընթացների փոխազդեցությունների սոցիալ-հոգեբանական հետազոտության իրականացումն ու էթնիկ ինքնության եզրութաբանության վերհանումը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ էթնիկ ինքնություն, եզրութաբանություն, սոցիալ-ադապտիվ գործընթացներ, պրիմորդիալիստական մոտեցում, ինստրումենտալիզմ, կոնստրուկտիվ մոտեցում:

Introduction

Each ethnic group is characterised by a complex of unique traits that, collectively, are expressed through the term “ethnic identity.” Ethnic identity is a crucial component of an individual’s consciousness. In modern psychology, the concept of ethnic identity is examined within the context of socio-adaptive processes, driven by the search for orientation and stability in a changing world and the intensification of interethnic interactions. Interactions with other ethnic groups bring an individual’s ethnic identity to the fore, as the perception and formation of ethnic identity are most clearly manifested through comparison. In contemporary social psychology, ethnic identity is viewed as a key component of an individual’s social adaptation—one around which their perceptions of their place in the social world are centred and structured. The significance of addressing the concept of ethnic identity also depends on the role this phenomenon plays within the individual’s overall “Self-structure.” Many authors emphasise that identity (including ethnic identity) shapes the psychological basis of conscious behaviour and manifests in the social environment through various mechanisms of adaptation. The conceptual framework of this phenomenon encompasses the terminology and categorical apparatus of ethnopsychology, cross-cultural psychology, the social psychology of ethnic interaction, and developmental psychology. Despite the wide range of studies dedicated to various aspects of the terminology surrounding ethnic identity, many questions concerning the specific features of ethnic identity formation and the dynamics of ethnic identity within an individual’s social adaptation processes remain under-researched.

Theoretical and Methodological Bases

The concept of «ethnic identity» implies the existence of social markers or traits that serve as accepted means of differentiating between groups. These can be designated as components of ethnic identity; collectively, they serve as both representative characteristics of a given ethnic group and a basis for recognising and distinguishing other ethnic groups. Such markers include physical appearance, geographical origin, economic patterns, religion, language, and so forth. Consequently, depending on the specific theoretical and methodological approach of a study, the concept of «ethnic identity» may be understood through various components. The conceptualisation of ethnic identity has primarily evolved within the framework of three theoretical approaches. First, the primordialist approach posits that an individual’s ethnic identity is rooted in fundamental ties to a specific group or culture—ties that can be viewed as primarily biological or historical-cultural. Evolutionary influences are evident here, shaped by biological, genetic, and geographical factors. While ethnic groups are primordial in nature, they function as social rather than biological communities, given that ethnic ties are subject to historical change. The formation of an ethnic group is a long-term historical process. Within the framework of primordialism, «ethnos» is a general concept—a scientific term—intended to characterise human communities as they

manifest within a specific historical context. A shared language and territory are considered key prerequisites for the formation of an ethnic group. In effect, these characteristics can be viewed as stable ethnic components from which other traits derive. Thus, territorial commonality creates the conditions for the existence and reproduction of the ethnos and also manifests itself in economic and cultural activities (Cheryan & Tsai, 2007).

Furthermore, proponents of the primordialist approach place ethnic territory at the foundation of the formation of ethnic self-awareness, even though history records instances of spatially separated ethnic groups that continue to preserve their cultural distinctiveness and self-designation. Another enduring characteristic identified—as previously mentioned—is language, which serves as a crucial factor in the formation of an ethnos. Alongside language, elements of material and spiritual culture also matter; these include features characterised by tradition and stability, such as customs, rituals, religion, norms of behaviour, and so forth. In conclusion, it can be said that all primordialist schools of thought interpret ethnic communities as objectively existing groups characterised by biological reproduction and shared cultural values—manifested through common external cultural forms—and by the creation of shared spheres of interaction; this facilitates identification among group members and their recognition by other groups as a distinct community (Epstein & Heizler, 2015). In contrast to the primordial approach, the instrumentalist perspective on ethnic identity focuses on rational considerations. According to this view, ethnic identity can enhance the social activity of a given ethnic group, help it navigate competition, counter control by other groups, and foster greater intra-group mutual aid. The instrumentalist approach views ethnic identity as the product of political myths aimed at attaining power. Brass (1985) has conducted such studies.

Unlike the primordialist approach, instrumentalism does not examine the objective foundations of the emergence of ethnic identity; instead, it treats it as a given and focuses on the functions it serves for individuals and ethnic groups. Thus, while it shows how ethnic identity satisfies the needs of individuals or groups, instrumentalism does not investigate the objective bases of an ethnic group's existence (such as a common origin linked to a geographic territory and a shared language). In summary, from an instrumentalist perspective, the primary components of ethnic identity are the pragmatic goals of the group's existence and the means that address an individual's specific interests, thereby shaping their life within society. The constructivist approach regards consciousness as the central component of ethnic identity. Group membership depends on how an individual perceives themselves within that group. From a constructivist perspective, an ethnos is a community of people formed through socio-psychological and cultural self-identification vis-à-vis other communities—a process expressed through a national “self-image.” The ethnic community is not defined by the enumeration of specific traits inherent to the community (such as a shared historical past,

language, or origin), but by the perception of those traits. Borinca et al. (2021) cite shared origin as an example of an ethnic community characteristic; they emphasise that origin itself is not the marker of ethnic identity, but rather the perception or myth of the community's shared historical past. In this context, the concept of the "boundary" can be considered a crucial category of ethnic identity; this concept, in turn, stems from an individual's ethnic self-identification and is therefore driven by each person's motivations. In other words, individuals sharing a common geographical origin may identify with different ethnic groups, depending on which ethnic community's socio-psychological and cultural "boundaries" they regard as their own and within which "boundaries" they perceive themselves to exist. In contemporary literature, a widely adopted definition of an ethnic group and ethnic identity holds that members share a common ethnonym and a complex of characteristics—including cultural commonalities, a myth of common origin, and a collective historical memory linked to a specific territory—while also sharing a sense of solidarity. It also emphasises the subjective psychological dimension of the issue—manifested through the national "self-image," collective consciousness, and mythology—in contrast to the components of objectively defined territory and shared historical processes found in earlier theoretical approaches. It is worth noting that the theoretical approaches to ethnic identity outlined above can be synthesised and examined in conjunction, as they complement one another. This approach will allow for the maximum utilisation of the achievements of all the various approaches while simultaneously avoiding their extreme formulations (Borinca, I., Guerra, R. & Uka, 2025).

The constructivist approach to ethnic identity can also serve as a foundation for integrating other theories. The premises for this conclusion are as follows: first, a key element of the constructivist approach is its historical perspective, which allows examination of the phenomenon of ethnicity across different time periods and, consequently, through various analytical lenses. Second, a distinctive feature of the constructivist approach is the role of blood ties in the formation of ethnic identity. This factor is also emphasised, to varying degrees, in the other two theoretical approaches. Thirdly, the constructivist interpretation of ethnicity makes it possible to examine the manifestations of shifting ethnic identity—specifically, how an individual perceives themselves within a given group and how the national "self-image" is formed and transformed—aspects that are increasingly significant in research on integration trends in modern societies. Consequently, various approaches to ethnic identity need not be viewed as mutually exclusive; the constructivist perspective tends to consider these approaches in conjunction and to examine the insights gained from different schools of thought. By emphasising the role of the national self-image within the complex structure of an ethnos, the constructivist approach directs scholarly inquiry toward the study of ethnic identity. Modern psychological science identifies several major types of ethnic identity; their specific characteristics are briefly outlined below. Most individuals

possess a mono-ethnic identity that aligns with their national affiliation. Heath et al. (2023) examine this issue by exploring the interconnections between positive ethnic identity and inter-ethnic tolerance. Particular importance is placed on the ethnic nuances involved in perceiving “the other”; furthermore, the combination of a mono-ethnic identity with a different ethnic group leads to assimilation—that is, the adoption, to varying degrees, of that group’s traditions, values, and language (Hakobyan & Khachatryan, 2022). A bi-ethnic identity category is also identified, wherein an individual consciously associates with two interacting ethnic communities. In such cases, manifestations of ethnicity are linked to both ethnic groups. Such complex, cross-cultural forms of ethnic identity can have either favourable or unfavourable consequences for the individual. In the first case, it is assumed that an individual is capable of applying the experience gained from one group when interacting with another ethnic group, thereby facilitating their adaptation processes. In the second case, a weakly expressed sense of ethnic identity may be observed during interactions with both one’s own and other ethnic groups. Such borderline identification—manifesting as a marginal form of ethnic identity—can be characterised by a lack of proficiency in the languages and values of both ethnic groups, as well as by incomplete adaptation processes. In this case, the individual’s psychological manifestations of ethnicity would downplay the significance of the ethnic factor in favour of personal factors. Lee and Ahn (2013) have addressed the study of ethnic identity, identifying two primary components within its structure: the cognitive (or intellectual) and the affective (or emotional). The first component encompasses an individual’s knowledge and perceptions regarding the distinct characteristics of their own group—features that serve to differentiate the group and shape the overall image of its ethnicity. The second component involves the emotional dimension of belonging to that ethnic group, including one’s attitude toward the group and the evaluation of its characteristics.

Valcke et al. (2020) single out ethnic awareness and ethnic self-designation as constituent elements of the cognitive component. As previously noted, the foundation of ethnic identity lies in an individual’s ability to distinguish “one’s own” from “outsiders.” This distinction is possible only if the individual possesses sufficient knowledge regarding the characteristics of both their own and other ethnic groups. The forms of such distinctions—and, in a broader sense, the manifestations of ethnic identity—are determined by the level of ethnic awareness. The affective component of ethnic identity, as mentioned, is expressed through one’s attitude toward one’s own ethnic community; this attitude can be either positive or negative. In the first case, the individual derives satisfaction from the awareness of belonging to a specific ethnic group. In contrast, in the second, they seek to disassociate from their own ethnic identity and prefer to integrate into other ethnic groups.

Thus, when discussing the socio-psychological manifestations of ethnic identity, it is essential to highlight both the cognitive and emotional aspects

of an individual's ethnic self-identification. Verkuyten et al. (2024) have also addressed this issue; in addition to the aforementioned components, they identify a behavioural component within the complex of ethnic identity. In this context, it is understood as a mechanism of self-expression through which the individual affiliates with a specific ethnic group. This manifests in the structuring of systematic actions within various situations of inter-ethnic contact. In psychology, it is customary to distinguish two components of ethnic identity: one—the cognitive component—has a rational basis, while the second—the affective component—is emotional. Notably, the affective component is often grounded in the cognitive element (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Phinney (2000; 2003), for his part, clearly distinguishes between the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity. She classifies ethnicity as a purely sociological category, defining it based on objective or ascriptive characteristics of ethnic affiliation—namely, parental ethnicity, place of birth, language, and culture. In contrast, she views ethnic identity within the context of subjective identity, which is not reducible to ethnic identity **per se**. Several authors interpret ascription as an expression of a passive stance—one in which the individual does not strive for independent achievements but instead accepts the conditions “offered” to them and is content with them (Roth et al., 2023; Schwartz et al., 2009). By excluding the existence of an active, agentic “Self,” these authors shift the concept of ascription into the social realm, transforming it into a matter of socially prescribed behavioural norms. From this perspective, an individual manifests their ascriptive nature to the extent that they unconditionally accept the behavioural rules proposed and imposed by society. Therefore, while it is valid to include ascriptive traits of ethnic identity in the list of objective characteristics of ethnic affiliation, we believe we must broaden the conceptual framework around them and examine them from a socio-psychological perspective as well. A trend in contemporary socio-psychological literature is to examine an individual's ascriptive characteristics—while understood within the context of ethnic identity—in isolation. This leads to the marginalisation of the ascriptive component of ethnic identity in the socio-psychological study of personal identity. Yet, ascriptive and content-based characteristics are interconnected; they reflect the integrity of the individual's national “Self-image” and, when situated within the concept of ethnic identity, cannot be fully understood in isolation. Therefore, we propose a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon, avoiding the separation of the individual's ascriptive “Self” as a purely sociological phenomenon from ethnic identity as a purely psychological one. From this perspective, an individual's ascriptive characteristics can be subsumed under the concept of ethnic identity, as a key component of the national “self-image.” Let us elaborate on this view. While partially agreeing with T.G. Stefanenko, we can rightly view ethnic identity as a form of social ascription. First and foremost, an individual becomes aware of their ethnic affiliation based on the fact of their origin—fixed both geographically

and socially—expressed through an ascriptive self-image. We can designate this as the formal or ascriptive component of an individual's ethnic identity—a social reality objectively given to the person. However, depending on the extent to which the individual accepts this reality—or, in other words, depending on the specific nature of their ethnic identity—they may either accept or reject this ascriptive reality (Umaña-Taylor, 2011; Weber, 1922/1955).

Methodology and Methods

The study's methodological basis draws of theoretical approaches proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), Schwartz et al. (2009), and Bornica et al. (2025). The main results of the study highlight key findings through scientific methods of comparison and analysis of the terminology of ethnic identity, ethnicity, mono- and dual ethnic identity, and an individual's "Self-image" in the context of socio-adaptive processes.

Results

Thus, the concept of ethnic identity becomes the substantive component of ethnicity, which may either coincide with or differ from the formal component. In the first instance, we observe a mono-ethnic identity, where an individual acknowledges and accepts their ascriptive status and identifies with that specific ethnic group; here, the substantive component of ethnic identity aligns with the formal component. In the second instance, a dual-ethnic identity emerges when an individual, driven by specific motivations, rejects their ascriptive status and affiliates—to varying degrees—with a different ethnic group. This implies a lack of alignment between the individual's ethnic identity component and the formal component. In such cases, the study of the substantive component of ethnic identity—or ethnicity itself—assumes particular significance. The mechanisms of this study can be examined through the lens of ethnic stereotypes of adaptation, by means of which an individual characterises both their own ethnic group and others. A range of factors shaped by the social environment, and specifically by the dynamics of intergroup relations, influences the formation of an individual's ethnic identity. In this context, the development and perception of interethnic relations play a significant role, potentially fostering an individual's awareness of their ethnic identity. A fundamental prerequisite for the existence of ethnic identity is the "us-them" dichotomy. This distinction allows discussion of the ethnic identities of groups with different ethnic characteristics—identities whose boundaries originate in individuals' self-identification based on anthropological traits. Thus, characteristics of genetic and social unity serve to distinguish "us" from "others." Ethnic identity does not exist in isolation from comparison and communication; one's ethnic distinctiveness can be expressed only through interaction with another ethnic group. In other words, the "us-versus-others" comparison inherent to an ethnic group manifests as a stable attribute, yet takes on varying characteristics—such as religious or linguistic ones—depending on the

interactions between different ethnic groups. For this reason, ethnic identity can be preserved even in the absence of a shared language or territory; the Roma people, for instance, maintain their ethnic identity through comparison with other peoples and an awareness of their own distinctiveness. Ethnic identity also includes an aspect of identity that individuals consciously experience (Schwartz et al., 2009; Phinney, 2000).

The expression of the national (or ethnic) “Self” depends on how an individual defines themselves; consequently, ethnic identity occupies a significant place in the structure of personal characteristics. Moreover, the significance of the national “Self” increases substantially during critical or unstable situations, whereas under conditions of social stability, it diminishes, giving way to purely social characteristics. Ethnic identity also encompasses cultural and symbolic dimensions. Modern society is composed of various cultural spheres, the boundaries of which are defined not by territory or the existence of a state, but by the capabilities of communication systems. As a society advances, it becomes more complex; social differentiation deepens, and distinctions come to outweigh similarities. In this context, culture serves as the foundation for a shared system of signs and symbols. The establishment of a sign system that all members of an ethnic group universally understand fosters cultural cohesion within that group and reinforces the members’ awareness of their belonging to it. Thus, from a socio-psychological perspective, ethnic identity is distinguished by its formal and substantive components. The first component is understood as an individual’s ascriptive reality, while the second is the individual’s national “self-image”; when these two coincide, they form a mono-ethnic identity characterised by manifestations of positive ethnic identification. Based on the foregoing, ethnic identity can be defined as a characteristic of an individual that consists of a sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group or community and is shaped by the genetic and social foundations of that group’s social commonality. It manifests through comparisons of “us” with “others” in interactions and relationships with other ethnic groups (Borinca et al., 2025; Valcke et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The expression of the national (or ethnic) “Self” depends on how an individual defines themselves; consequently, ethnic identity occupies a significant place in the structure of personal characteristics. Moreover, the significance of the national “Self” increases substantially during critical or unstable situations, whereas under conditions of social stability, it diminishes, giving way to purely social characteristics. Ethnic identity also encompasses cultural and symbolic dimensions. Modern society is composed of various cultural spheres, the boundaries of which are defined not by territory or the existence of a state, but by the capabilities of communication systems. As a society advances, it becomes more complex; social differentiation deepens, and distinctions come to outweigh similarities. In this context, culture serves as the foundation for a shared system of signs and

symbols. The establishment of a sign system that all members of an ethnic group universally understand fosters cultural cohesion within that group. It reinforces members' awareness of their belonging. Thus, from a socio-psychological, socio-adaptive perspective, ethnic identity is distinguished by its formal and substantive components. The first component is understood as an individual's ascriptive reality, while the second is the individual's national "self-image"; when these two coincide, they form a mono-ethnic identity characterised by manifestations of positive ethnic identification. Based on the foregoing, ethnic identity can be defined as a characteristic of an individual that consists of a sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group or community and is shaped by the genetic and social foundations of that group's social commonality. It manifests through comparisons of "us" with "others" in interactions and relationships with other ethnic groups.

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