Ethnic Identity, Psychology of

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the definitions, development, and key correlates of ethnic identity. Ethnic and multiple identities are discussed primarily from the perspective of social and acculturation psychology, which traditionally employ a sociocognitive approach. In addition, a discursive approach to these phenomena is presented and discussed. Ethnicity is a matter of subjective belief in common ancestry but individuals use different criteria for defining their ethnic identity to construct it situationally. In this article, different theories, methodologies, and single studies on ethnic identity and intergroup relations are linked to individual, interactive, and societal levels of analysis.

Defining Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity will here be discussed primarily from the perspective of social, acculturation, and discursive psychology. Before that, two major concepts are discussed, ethnicity and identity, as they have been given numerous different definitions within the social sciences.

The term 'ethnicity' has its roots primarily in anthropology and ethnology. Ethnicity refers to a sense of belonging to a particular (assumed) ancestry and origin (Liebkind, 2006). An ethnic group is thought to exist whenever the belief in common descent is used to bind people together to some degree. This sense of origin is often accomplished by defining ethnicity in terms of metaphors of kinship: ethnicity is family writ large. What makes an ethnic group specific is this genealogical dimension. While ethnic group is sometimes used to refer only to those in less powerful positions, ethnicity refers to everybody; all people are members of (at least) one ethnic group, although ethnic group membership has more often been studied in minority than in majority groups. The majority/minority distinction has also been criticized, not least because it tends to confound relative group size with status or power. However, within social psychology, this distinction is widely used, acknowledging that numerical asymmetries often, although not necessarily, coincide with status or power asymmetries.

Even though identity has the reputation of being one of the slipperiest concepts in the social scientist's lexicon, it can be fruitful in conceptualizing ways in which people conceive themselves and are characterized by others. Identity is all about the intricacies, dilemmas, contradictions, and imperatives of the relationship between individuals and their social environment (Verkuyten, 2005). People's identities can be seen to have two components, personal identity and social identity, and the latter derives from the recognition of and value attached to membership in various groups (Tajfel, 1981). Research on self-awareness shows that people can distinguish personal from social identity and that the momentary dominance of one or the other depends on the situation and shapes behavior.

Ethnicity is often seen as an essential part of identity, but the salience of ethnicity varies situationally as well as during the lifetime of an individual. Ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of self in terms of membership in a particular ethnic group. Although ethnic identity is sometimes used to refer simply to one's self-label or group affiliation, it is generally seen as embracing various aspects, such as self-identification, feelings of belongingness and commitment to a group, a sense of shared values, and attitudes toward one's own ethnic group (Liebkind, 2006).

Ethnic identity differs from other social identities because ethnicity is a matter of subjective belief in common ancestry. The notion of where one came from provides people with an important sense of an enduring identity and feelings of connectedness (Verkuyten, 2005). Different criteria such as physical similarities, cultural characteristics, language, religion, and historical events and myths can all play a role in the definition and justification of a common origin. However, ethnic identity is not necessarily tied to culture: a sense of ethnic identity can remain strong, although cultural changes take place (Verkuyten, 2005).

Subjective beliefs in common origin, descent, and history are socially constructed and therefore always subject to reinterpretations, adjustments, and change. As all social identities depend crucially on acknowledgement and acceptance by others, also ethnic identity is sustainable to the extent that it is expressed and affirmed in social interaction (Verkuyten, 2005). However, although ethnic identities are malleable, they are not complete fabrications. A person's ethnicity is ascribed in the sense that one cannot choose the ethnic group into which one is born, but it is achieved to the extent that the meaning it acquires for one's total identity can be a matter of choice. The fact is that the ascribed aspect of ethnicity can be played down to the extent that ethnic identity is made equal to other social identities, but transmitted as it is in primary socialization, ethnicity is often a relatively pervasive part of identity (Liebkind, 2006).

Levels of Analysis in and Different Perspectives on the Study of Ethnic Identity

Three levels of analysis have typically been distinguished in the study of ethnic identity: individual, interactive, and societal. The first level involves intraindividual (psychological)

processes and personal characteristics, and the focus can be, for example, on pride in and identification with one's ethnic group. The second level is the level of interaction and it refers to the dynamics of everyday contacts in different situations. The emphasis is here on the emergence and maintenance of ethnic identity in situated interaction and ethnic identity is examined in terms of an ongoing process of social definitions and negotiations. The first and second levels are the ones most often studied by social psychologists. The third level of analysis is the societal level and it is made up of political, ideological, cultural, and economic features. Here, ethnic identity is investigated, for example, in relation to legislation, dominant discourses, and the power and status differences between ethnic groups. Social psychologists frequently take also this level into account when studying ethnic identity, then often focusing specifically on intergroup relations and how they are affected by prevailing intergroup attitudes in society. The level of interaction mediates between the other two; it is in interactions that societal relations, beliefs, norms, and values are reproduced, changed, or challenged, and it is in interactions that a sense of self and ethnic identity is formed. Through these interactions, the institutionalized practices, group statuses, and labels affect the way people define and position themselves. Simultaneously, people can challenge and respond to these social structures and expectations, and actively struggle to establish and affirm their own sense of ethnic identity in interactions (Verkuyten, 2005). The emergent and changing qualities of ethnic identity thus coexist with people's relatively stable sense of their self.

There are many different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of ethnic identity. One approach can be described as sociocognitive, and it informs us about the cognitive, evaluative, and emotional dimensions of ethnic identity (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Tajfel, 1981). Within acculturation psychology, ethnic identity is perceived to be that aspect of acculturation, which concerns the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture, while acculturation is a broader construct, encompassing a wide range of behaviors, attitudes, and values that change with contact between cultures (Phinney et al., 2001). A third perspective is that of discursive psychology and it contributes to the understanding of identities as contextually and interactionally constructed and negotiated phenomena (e.g., Verkuyten and de Wolf, 2002). These general perspectives complement each other and offer together a broad understanding of ethnic identity. Next, the development of ethnic identity will be briefly discussed, followed by some examples of research on ethnic identity and intergroup relations within the acculturative and other sociocognitive approaches and, finally, discursive approaches.

The Development of Ethnic Identity

Traditionally, ethnic identity development has been treated as part of a broader process of linear development. In this perspective, an ethnic identity is developed and modified as children become aware of other groups and of the cultural/ethnic differences between themselves and others, and attempt to understand the meaning of their ethnicity within the larger setting.

According to the stage model of ethnic identity, developed in the United States by Jean Phinney (1989), ethnic identity begins in a rudimentary form in childhood and remains largely unexamined; that is, children have not thought through for themselves the meaning of their ethnic group membership. Ethnic identity becomes especially central during adolescence when ethnic minority adolescents must negotiate the identity formation process in terms of ① interpersonal relationships and ② occupation as well as ③ contend with their minority group status within the majority culture and ④ define how this aspect of their identity informs who they are and who they will become. The optimal outcome of the ethnic identity formation process during childhood and adolescence is the achievement of a secure and confident sense of one's ethnic group memberships. Through the joint processes of exploration and commitment, individuals are expected to move in adolescence from ethnic identity diffusion (lack of a clear identity) to either foreclosure (a commitment without exploration) or moratorium (a period of exploration) and to ethnic identity achievement, involving a firm commitment to one's ethnic group(s) based on an exploration that has led to a clear understanding of ethnicity. By adulthood, most people have acquired a relatively stable and secure sense of themselves as ethnic group members, that is, an achieved ethnic identity (Phinney and Ong, 2007). Although ethnic identity formation has been mainly considered as a major developmental task of adolescence, the process may continue in cycles that involve further exploration or rethinking of the meaning of one's ethnicity.

The development of ethnic identity does not happen in a social vacuum; social identities, intergroup attitudes, and interactions influence each other reciprocally. Social identity processes have implications for intergroup relations because one has a need for a positive self-concept and, as a consequence, there will be bias in social comparisons with other groups to look for ways in which one's own group can be favorably distinguished from other groups (Tajfel, 1981). This group-serving tendency – intergroup bias – can take the form of favoring one's in-group and/or derogating out-groups and sometimes the strength of identification with one's in-group correlates positively with in-group favoritism and/or out-group derogation (e.g., Hodson et al., 2003). However, others assume a negative relationship between in-group identification and in-group favoritism and/or out-group derogation; research on ethnic identity development in adolescents and young adults suggests that strong ethnic identities constitute markers of maturity, consideration of intergroup differences, and are ultimately associated with less intergroup bias (e.g., Wittig, 2008). Thus, a strong ethnic identification among minority members may in some contexts imply positive and in other negative attitudes toward the national out-group.

These mixed results may be due to substantial differences in the ways ethnic identity is measured. Besides the cognitive, emotional, evaluative, and behavioral dimensions of identification measured in various combinations, Roccas et al. (2008) distinguish between four conceptually distinct modes of social identification: importance (how much I view the group as part of who I am), commitment (how much I want to benefit the group), superiority (how much I view my group as superior to other groups), and deference (how much I honor and

submit to the group's norms, symbols, and leaders), with all of them having different antecedents and consequences. Another reason for the mixed results may be that ethnic identities are sometimes reduced to a fixed and singular ethnic identity. Yet it is especially the development of complex and flexible identities (including both national and one or more ethnic components), positive intergroup attitudes, and positive intergroup interactions that are the essence of the development of adaptive social identities among adolescents.

The Complex Structure of Multiple Identities

The development of and changes in ethnic identity represent parts of an individual's larger identity project. Especially for ethnic minority individuals, multiple categories are readily available. For them, ethnic identity and identity as a member of the dominant society (national identity) can be thought of as two dimensions of group identity that vary independently, resulting in varying degrees in multiple identities and in- and out-group differentiation (Liebkind, 2006). In acculturation research, an immigrant's ethnic and national identities are thought of as two dimensions of group identity that vary independently; that is, each identity can be either secure or undeveloped. An individual who retains a strong ethnic identity while also identifying with the new society is considered to have an integrated (or bicultural) identity. One who has a strong ethnic identity but does not identify with the new culture has a separated identity, while one who gives up an ethnic identity and identifies only with the new culture has an assimilated identity. The individual who identifies with neither has a marginalized identity. Actual identity categories and the strength of identification with them depend on a number of factors, including characteristics of immigrant groups and of the places where they have settled (Liebkind, 2006; Phinney et al., 2001). A person can also identify simultaneously with multiple minority and/or majority groups and thus show various degrees of social identity complexity or adopt different modes of identity representation at different times, either during different periods of life or under different conditions or emotional states (Roccas and Brewer, 2002).

The multiply identified individuals face two challenges: how to balance the importance of different group memberships, and how to integrate them (Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). Although having multiple important identities may increase the likelihood of conflict between them, multiple ethnic and national identities may also coexist successfully (e.g., Phinney et al., 2001; Verkuyten, 2005). However, interference between multiple central identities are likely if the cultures associated with them differ; Martinovic and Verkuyten (2012) found that the negative relationship between religious and national identification was strong among Turkish Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands who perceived incompatibility between Western and Islamic values and ways of life.

When different social identities do not converge, there are different ways in which the individual may structure the representations of the in-groups to reconcile the competing identities (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Even when considering only one ethnic identity at the time together with the national identity, the content of the resulting combined identity may include varying proportions of those two components, and these components may be either parallel or hierarchical; immigrants may perceive their own ethnic group and the national out-group as subgroups of a common national in-group (e.g., Verkuyten, 2005). Multiple identification is, however, possible only if the superordinate identity is sufficiently inclusive and facilitates successful intergroup interaction. Also, multiply identified individuals can claim membership in two or more groups only to the extent that they are accepted by others as members of those groups. One major problem is that members of majority and minority groups may have different preferences for the content of the superordinate identity, that is, what that identity and the relations between the subgroups within it should look like. Although both majorities and minorities may prefer identity integration as a goal, majority members may mean a more assimilative identity and minority members may mean a more separate identity with the term (e.g., Verkuyten, 2005).

Ethnic Identity, Well-Being, and the Consequences of Perceived Discrimination

According to a meta-analysis among ethnic minorities in North America (Smith and Silva, 2011), ethnic identification is more strongly related to positive than to compromised well-being. In addition, bicultural identities are both typical and beneficial for psychological well-being (e.g., Berry et al., 2006). Moreover, secure and positive bicultural identity is found to be associated not only with better well-being but also with more positive attitudes toward out-groups (Phinney and Alipuria, 1996).

However, the relationship between ethnic identity and adaptation and well-being is likely to be moderated by a number of additional factors related to social context, such as national policies, local circumstances within the community, and personal relationships. A consistent and robust finding among adults and adolescents alike is that perceived discrimination has direct and strong impact on the psychological well-being and health of immigrants. Perceived discrimination also affects the ways minority group members identify with both minority and majority groups.

However, individuals react differently to the same circumstances; while some may downplay or reject their own ethnic identity, others may assert their pride in their cultural group as a way of dealing with negative attitudes. The different identity reactions available for ethnic minority members to cope with the experience of being discriminated against include (1) seeking to assimilate into the majority by increasing national identification, (2) developing a so-called reactive ethnicity, or (3) reducing national identification. The Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al., 1999) argues, and research has attested, that increasing group identification in response to perceived discrimination can reduce the detrimental effects of perceived discrimination on psychological well-being as the disadvantaged group provides a sense of acceptance and belonging. In some studies, however,

the relationship between perceived discrimination, ethnic identity, and well-being has not been obtained (e.g., Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). Different factors, such as the lack of cohesion in the immigrant community or initially high identification may prevent immigrants from increasing their identification with the minority group. Instead, ethnic minority individuals may react to perceived discrimination by withdrawing themselves from the superordinate national group, followed by negative out-group attitudes. Thus, as suggested by the Rejection-Dis-Identification Model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009), perceived discrimination may in some contexts prevent minority members from developing a sense of belonging to a national superordinate group. However, causal chains are reciprocal; the level of national identification influences changes in ethnic identity as a reaction to perceived discrimination. Fuller-Rowell et al. (2013) found in their longitudinal study that perceived discrimination in the first year of college decreased ethnic identity commitment across the college years among participants with a weaker national identity, but increased ethnic identity commitment among participants with a stronger national identity. Higher levels of national identity were also associated with greater increases in ethnic identity commitment over time.

However, no single model can fully and universally account for the complex interplay between ethnic identity, perceived discrimination, and well-being. In some studies, high in-group identifiers have been found to be harmed more by perceived discrimination, in others high in-group identification has reduced the psychological costs of discrimination and often it has no effect at all (Pascoe and Richman, 2009).

Negotiating Ethnic Identity

Examining ethnic identities on the level of interactions means studying the actual social processes in which people define and negotiate their complex identities in a specific context. When ethnic identities are studied within discursive psychology, the focus is on what people do with their talk and how they do it, for example, in how people make sense of their identities and how groups are discursively formed through talk (e.g., Verkuyten and de Wolf, 2002). Within this approach, ethnic identity is thus conceptualized as a discursive construct and analyzed contextually in terms of discursive action. One can, for instance, examine how social categories are constructed and used in social interaction and with what consequences. For example, classifications used to categorize various immigrant groups can have implications for how they are treated (Goodman and Speer, 2007).

Discursive studies on ethnicity have focused not only on majority group members' constructions of group distinctions and identities, but also on ethnic minority identities. Verkuyten and de Wolf (2002) showed how Chinese people living in the Netherlands used a variety of discursive and cultural resources when constructing and accounting for their ethnic identities in three different ways: The first way called 'being' was ontological in that a biological model was often used in this discourse, where ethnicity was determined by ancestry. In the second discourse, characterized by emotional motivations and called 'feeling', ethnicity was based on the person's own feelings of belonging to the ethnic group. This feeling, in turn, was explained as a result of early socialization. The third discourse was all about 'doing,' that is, the focus was on ways of acting that are typical for this particular ethnic group, for example, language and specific behaviors. Other examples of discursive research on ethnic minorities include Malhi et al. (2009) who found that South Asian-Canadian women preferred hybrid, multicultural identities over monocultural identities when describing themselves, and Ali and Sonn (2010) who explored how Cypriot Turkish people in Australia constructed multihyphenated identities by using different discourses, that is, those of modern Muslims, of language, of phenotype and ancestry, and of generation. Ali and Sonn (2010) concluded that these discourses highlighted both the current sociopolitical context and collective history and constructing hyphenated identities functioned as an act of self-determination and a way of resisting assimilation.

Constructions of ethnic identities are always situated by nature, relevant to a particular time and place. Varjonen et al. (2013) examined the way a group of ethnic Finnish migrants constructed their ethnic identities before and after migrating from Russia to Finland and found that the main interpretative repertoires used when constructing identities both in Russia and in Finland were the biological repertoire, the repertoire of socialization and the repertoire of intergroup relations. Although the process of ethnic migration is officially based on criteria of ethnic Finnish ancestry, Finland turned out to be the very place where the participants stated that being Finnish was impossible. Before migration, participants mostly presented themselves as Finns, whereas after migration Finnish identity was explicitly problematized and a larger variety of self-labels was used.

In Conclusion

Whether one adopts a cognitive or discursive approach, successful integration of multiple identities can be seen as providing means for the individual to construct for himself or herself both insider and outsider positions in relation to more than one ethnic group. Ethnicity can be an important part of anyone's identity, although research on ethnic identity has focused mainly on minority members. This is due to increasing international migration, which has prompted a need for identity negotiations concerning cultural maintenance vs assimilation and minority members' possibilities to combine ethnic and national identities. Clearly, minority groups have less power than majorities to influence the outcome of such negotiations. However, the way a superordinate national identity is defined within a society affects the sense of belonging of minority and majority members alike.

As noted above, ethnic identities are relational, situational, and constantly negotiated in flexible ways. Furthermore, constructing ethnic identity in social interaction does not exclude a relatively stable sense of oneself as a member of one or more ethnic groups, developed over the life span. National majority groups sometimes use essentialist – and therefore exclusionist – criteria for defining the content and boundaries of national identity, depicting ethnic identity as a rather unchangeable

phenomenon. However, also ethnic minority groups sometimes use essentialist arguments about their own 'authentic' identity in order to resist assimilation and to express a wish to preserve their heritage identity. Thus, essentialist arguments – or any other arguments members of minority and majority groups may use in defining their ethnic identities – are neither 'good' nor 'bad' as such. Which arguments people will use in defining themselves in interaction depends on where and with whom they are, and who they want to be in that particular situation. The authors therefore emphasize the deeply social nature of ethnic identity. In addition, as multiple identities are both increasingly typical and often beneficial for psychological well-being, there is no reason to reduce ethnic identity to a fixed and singular entity but to encourage the development of complex and flexible identities that include both national and one or more ethnic components.

See also: Acculturation; Critical Psychology; Culture and the Self: Implications for Psychological Theory; Ethnicity and Migration in Europe; Identity and Identification, Social Psychology of; Immigration: Social Psychological Aspects; Intergroup Relations; Levels of Analysis in Social Psychology; Racism: Social Psychological Perspectives; Social Constructionism; Social Identity in Social Psychology; Xenophobia: Social Psychological Aspects.

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