

## ETHNIC IDENTITY IN TEENAGERS

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**Abstract:** *This article presents a theoretical as well as a practical approach regarding the concept of ethnic identity in teenagers. It describes teenagers of American ethnic minorities, with their specific issues. The correlation of ethnic identity with self-esteem, social network of teenagers and elements related to discrimination are presented in this research.*

**Key words:** *adolescence, ethnic identity, self-esteem, ethnic minorities, discrimination.*

### 1. Introduction

This article represents a part of my PhD thesis and it describes the way in which ethnic identity in teenagers is outlined. In literature, there are also other components associated to this age group, such as: social and personal identity, vocational identity, gender identity, and moral-spiritual identity.

Adolescence represents an intermediary stage of passing from childhood to adulthood, which presents changes at a physical, biological level, as well as at a social and relational level. Hormone changes specific to the previous stage, namely puberty, as well as physical ones, such as growth in height, excessive hair growth, as well as social changes, such as a change in the group of mates from gymnasium to high school, all these involve changes at the level of youth identity.

Identity represents a well-organised concept of one's own person and of the world, comprising values, beliefs, and goals to which an individual devotes oneself (Harwood, Miller, & Vasta, 2010).

Each individual has a single self, but more identities that vary depending on relational contexts, such as family, group of friends, and school. Teenagers wish to find answers to fundamental questions of life, such as: "Who am I?"; "What do I do in this world?"; "What do I want to be?", through which they experience various roles, choices, and values that will subsequently create their identity. All these contexts can develop a coherent sense of life having as an end the formation of identity or not, leading to an identity crisis (Demir, Demir, & Sonmez, 2010).

Ethnic identity is a sub-component of social identity. Starting from childhood, when groups of belonging or of reference are brought to the foreground, identity starts to form, this being influenced by: family, friends, neighbours, community, and professional

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or religious categories (Iluţ, 2001).

Social identity was defined for the first time by Turner and Tajfel (1981, 1986) and it represents a part of the self concept of an individual, deriving from the quality of a member of a social group together with the value or significance given to this quality (apud Iluţ, 2001).

Usually, members of one group differentiate their own group from the others and evaluate it much more positively due to the commitment of their own self-image. Identity as a member within the group is an important source of global self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997).

Ethnic identity is given by the members of a group with the same national origin, cultural tradition, language, religion, cooking practices and preferences, and feeling of a common historical heritage; these are all learned and conveyed through socialisation (Goodman, 1992). Many times, minority groups have distinct cultural behaviours as compared to the majority.

In specialised studies on this theme, the concept of ethnocentrism is frequently conveyed. It represents the tendency to favour one's own group to the detriment of other groups.

In conclusion, ethnic identity is defined as a complex concept that implies a feeling of belonging to a group, a positive evaluation of a group, an interest in knowing a group as well as possible, and an involvement in its social activities. Minority culture can differ from the base one and it usually has a lower strength and status than the prevailing one; it is also subjected to discrimination. Possible items of ethnic identity are: pride, culture, history, traditions, customs, and cultural practices (Phinney et al., 1997).

Due to globalisation and social mobility – a demographic phenomenon with wide manifestations, teenagers live in a space much more diverse than that of their parents. Geographical migration, relocation because of a change in parents' workplace, political changes, all these have major implications on identity in adolescence. Changes in school, friends and neighbourhood, are all stressful elements for a teenager. The first negative consequences are low self-esteem, school dropout, and depression (Kroger, 2000). In the second section of the article, I will describe this aspect in more detail.

Each minority group has different reasons for having immigrated, they come from different social-economic environments, they experience different activities, such as dances, ways of spending leisure time, the way in which they live together, different lifestyles, ways of coupling, or of searching for partners.

A teenager that comes from a minority group has several alternatives in the process of identity formation due to provided alternative roles; many times though, there occur conflictual values between a prevailing culture and the values of a minority group (Phinney apud Kroger, 2000).

## **2. Discrimination and Self-Esteem in Teenagers in Minority Groups**

Adolescence represents a turning point in forming ethnic identity. Even if we are aware of certain things from childhood, it is only in adolescence that the proper confrontation with identity aspects related to cultural differences takes place because

teenagers have the capacity of interpreting ethnic and cultural information, of reflecting on the past and of speculating on the future (Harter apud Santrock, 1996).

In adolescence, the capacity of looking back to the past develops (childhood), and forward to the future (maturity) and implicitly, that of outlining identity, including ethnic identity.

In this period, we have the maturity to distinguish between black and white, with the related discriminations (black-bad, white-good). All these can lead to a value conflict, to restrictive opportunities from an educational and school point of view, to one-directional life choices, and implicitly, to a low self-esteem. For most minority youth, just as for all teenagers, models count (e.g. Barack Obama) (Hammack, 2006).

Identity concerns also the support that youth receive from important social groups for them: the social classes they belong to, and nations. This is because forming identity affects future choices, aspirations and expectations; it guides their career (Erickson, 1968).

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Self-esteem represents a global evaluation of qualities and shortcomings, and it is tightly connected to ethnic identity. Teenagers with a high self-esteem seem to engage in exploring ethnic identity much better than those who have a low self-esteem. The conflict between minorities and the majority affects the formation of teenagers' identity, because groups in a society are in a continuous competition, not only for resources, but also for the legitimacy of identities. Those with a different ethnic identity need personal and social coherence, which influences the process of forming identity (Cohler and Linde apud Hammack, 2006).

Living conditions matter in forming an identity. There are many minority groups that live in conditions under the level of subsistence. In his case the development of identity does not take place, it is absent (when at least the base needs in the Pyramid of Maslow are not satisfied, we cannot climb in hierarchy in order to satisfy needs of esteem and status). Minority youth are exposed to drugs, gangs, murder activities and they interact with adults who dropped out of school or do not have a job. Here are studies that certify that ethnic teenagers with a low self-esteem also have poor school results (Harter apud Phinney et al., 1997).

Friends and family are support networks in increasing the self-esteem of teenagers because minority teenagers are discriminated more often, rejected, marginalised, because of lack of adaptation and of language difficulties. Thus, greater the support from the family and friends is, higher the probability of positive self-esteem becomes (Vercryse and Chandler apud Kroger, 2000).

Also, teenagers who come from biracial families, because of the mixed background can encounter identification problems that affect their self-esteem too. There are studies that show that minority teenagers have to deal with stressful factors of the type of ethnic discrimination and difficulties of adapting to language. But those who have proactive coping methods (they resist stress) can also have a high self-esteem due to the

challenges of life and developed emotional stability (Roberts et al. apud Gaylord-Harden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007).

Other studies show that coloured teenagers, who have a mentor, have ethnic identities much stronger than those who lack one, especially if the mentors are personally known and not from mass-media. Such youth have remarkable school results, and are more liable to graduate from highschool and to attend university. Mentors help them to get over stressful situations generated by discrimination and racism, because they discuss their own significant experiences. These youths have the possibility to learn about social bias and developing a healthy ethnic identity (Zimmerman and Caldwell, 2012).

There are studies that certify that individuals with strong attachment to an ethnic origin group are more connected and have more solidarity to the minority group, reject the negative attitude of the majority group and manage to create a positive self-esteem, which also implies a strong ethnic identity (Phinney et al., 1997).

Individuals with a weak ethnic identity (unexplored or unengaged). When having to cope with negative remarks individuals with a weak ethnic identity can take them personally, thinking that there exist internal qualities in themselves that justify negative remarks (ignorance) (Phinney et al., 1997).

Teenagers are engaged in developing a positive and strong ethnic identity when they are encouraged to learn the history, traditions and values of their group and when they have the occasion to frequently interact with persons of the same age, who share similar experiences (Phinney et al., 1997).

There are programmes for minority teenagers, both at school and in youth organisations, for creating positive identities, in which ethnic pride can be cultivated. Thus, many teenagers, who felt alone, fearful, and vulnerable, developed their capacity to perceive themselves as capable, meritorious eager to have a healthy, productive life, to understand their needs, to explore their feelings, to destroy prejudices, and to fight alcohol consumption and drugs through supervision (Marcell, 1995).

### **3. Ethnic and Racial Minorities in Teenagers**

Most studies conducted on this theme, of ethnic identity in teenagers, are carried out on minority youth in America. Thus, Dacey and Travers (1996 apud Zimmerman and Caldwell, 2012) have conducted a study on ethnic teenagers and their life aspects, wherefrom the following resulted.

#### **3.1. Afro-American teenagers**

The most visible because of the skin colour are: the most liable to be victims of homicides; twice more liable, as teenage girls, to have a child than white teenage girls; they are frequently involved in conflicts; and they live in monoparental families. Studies certify that the presence of grandparents as a support system can be beneficial. The extended family can offer emotional support and economic responsibility for sharing earnings. Afro-American teenagers have more barriers in acquiring information and have less educational accomplishments as compared to most white teenagers

(Kerpelman et al. apud Zimmerman and Caldwell, 2012).

Afro-American teenagers have lower school attendance rates, those who graduate from highschool are proportionally fewer than the white graduates, resulting in an increased dropout rate (Wils apud Zimmerman and Caldwell, 2012). These disparities in the educational area translate into low employment rates, poverty, and mental and emotional issues (Brown and Jones apud Zimmerman and Caldwell, 2012).

Afro-American teenage girls have to cope with different standards compared to white girls and male teenagers. They are discriminated against in finding work and feel the need to detach from a negative image in society. There are discriminations related to Afro-Americans' sexuality: girls are considered athletes and boys "endowed"; and Afro-Americans are seen as less intelligent than white people (white skin being associated with financial, professional, and educational success and that of life in general).

An Afro-American teenager says: "Highschool years were difficult because of the fight related to colour, of being accepted, of having to look down, of expecting to fail every time, thinking I would cause problems. I had to fight all the time to maintain my trust. I did not know who I was [sic]".

### **3.2. Mexican teenagers**

Studies have mentioned risk behaviour issues, such as drug consumption, alcohol, unprotected sexual behaviour, failure and school dropout, and delinquency. Because of poverty, many Mexican teenagers resort to state social services, medical or emergency ones. Risk behaviours are also due to a lack of a structure of the nuclear family (they live in monoparental families). They usually speak poor English; they are divided into Chicanos (born in America, a combination between Spanish-Mexican-Indian and Anglo-Saxon influences) and Cholos (rebel teenagers that have lost their Mexican roots and belong to gangs). The father has the supreme authority, the other members of the family have to obey without too many questions, and the mother has affective and instrumental roles. They have parents with different social-economic status from managers to simple workers.

An American-Mexican teenager says: "When I got to highschool, my ethnicity had become a problem. I wished to have the face, the body and the brains of the most popular mate in the classroom, who was white and all the girls loved him. This fantasy ruined my self-esteem, all my energies were oriented in this direction of accepting myself in relation with me and the others".

### **3.3. Asian teenagers**

A segment that grows rapidly in the American population, very loyal to their families, they maintain their separate sub-culture. The Japanese are more integrated than the Chinese, they have remarkable school results, they fight for good academic results, and they are preoccupied with marks in order to be able to attend important schools.

An Asian teenager says: "Physical appearance, the way you dress is a barrier; you try to assimilate the culture in which you live, but you always have remains".

### **3.4. Turkish teenagers**

They live with many members of the family (extended family), they have a deficit in the communication process with their parents whom they see as conservative and authoritative because they restrict their freedom, they have religious principles, they choose their friends on the basis of these principles, they claim that religion offers social control, and they fear God's punishment believing that this life prepares one for the afterlife which is eternal. They wear conservative clothes and they are usually and respectful (Guneri, Sumer, & Yildirim, 1999).

### **3.5. Arabian teenagers**

Women are presented as being valued negatively, under the domination of others, in a patriarchal culture. They are perceived as weird compared to the dominant culture. Arabian girls have their heads covered (the veil is called *hijab*). They sometimes accept with difficulty this fact; they say that this veil maintains the honour of the family. They are envious of American teenagers because they have freedom and autonomy (they are allowed to go to club houses, discos, while Arabian teenage girls are not). Autonomy in a certain form occurs in Arabian boys, but not in girls. An Arab is not allowed to kiss an Arabian girl until they get married. Arabian boys learn from the words of their fathers and are privileged compared to their sisters. The bigger brother can be a moralising authority in relation with the small girl. If an Arabian girl wishes to flirt with an American, this gesture can mean a feminist revolution among Arabian girls. There are teenage girls who learn to navigate between the two cultures that seem incompatible – the American and the Arabian (Ajrouch, 2004).

### **3.6. Palestinian and Lebanese teenagers**

They live terror day by day. For them religion is more important than national origins. A Palestinian teenager says: "I remember from childhood that I had a gas mask on my face, sirens could be heard daily, my one-year old brother was put in a box and taken away. My life meant fear and anxiety. I did not know what was happening to me, I did not know the entire situation. When I was 12, I started to understand. We do not have hope, we do not have what to live for, we do not have freedom, we are discriminated, killed, humiliated. We do not have money; we do not have food... some think they will explode themselves".

A Palestinian teenage girl says: "You have to understand the enemy to win something. We have moved from one school to another: new friends, mates, they put a gas mask on me every evening, which was too tight. To defeat the enemy, you have to be in his shoes, the terrorists do not have to see our fear, if they perceive it, they win".

## **4. Objectives and Methodology**

The article contains some qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research. We applied semi-structured interviews from July 2018 - February 2019, the target group being made up of minority youth: Hungarian, Germans/Romanian Germans, Roma – girls and boys with ages between 16 and 20 years old. We applied these interviews to

highschool pupils in Brasov, in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades. These were face-to-face interviews and worked on the premise of methodological saturation. For data analysis and interpretation, the interviews were coded and introduced in the NVivo10 programme. The research had the following main objectives:

- correlations existing between ethnic identity and self-esteem;
- the description of factors influencing the development of ethnic identity;
- the description of existing sources of discrimination;
- underscoring the way in which social networks: family, mates, and friends, influence development of ethnic identity in teenagers.

## 5. Research Main Results

Following the open coding of the data obtained from interviews, I would like to specify the most important elements that appeared within them.

When describing their own identity, adolescents consider that they have defining elements both from the minority and the majority culture: “I consider that I am a cumulative person, the mother is Romanian and father is German – I took some elements from both cultures” (girl, 17 years old, german).

Discrimination in ethnic adolescents is a source of negative self-esteem and a strong sense of inferiority. Most of ethnic teenagers do not relate experiences unpleasant of the fear, shame, because of the desire not to attract the attention of the others: “Once a boy put my trash in my head, I didn’t say anything to the teacher. The other colleagues laughed, I was ashamed” (girl, 16 years old, roma ethnic group).

Discrimination usually occurs in school, in relation with colleagues. As the theory states (Clerget, 2008), the colour of the skin or hair become the subject of rejection of entourage: “There are colleagues that laugh about my ethnicity, they say to me Hungarian, I got really bad but I try not to notice” (boy, 17 years old, Hungarian).

Hungarian teenagers have problems regarding the expression of the Romanian language. They go through embarrassing moments because they can not speak grammatically and fluently correctly: “I felt different when someone asked me something and I couldn’t answer them. I have Romanian friends with whom I speak half Hungarian, half Romanian” (girl, 16 years old, Hungarian).

Ethnic adolescents adopt a different behavior depending on the situation: “At school I speak Romanian language, with my mother I speak Hungarian, with my father I speak Romanian, they talk to each other in Hungarian and Romanian language depending on the situation” (girl, 18 years old, Hungarian).

The most common discriminatory behavior is made by the jokes of colleagues: “I felt different when joking about Roma people, especially jokes at school. But all pass, I try to fight to become indifferent. I am not ashamed of my ethnicity” (boy, 17 years old, Roma).

Also teachers may have discriminatory behavior towards ethnic adolescents. This may result in lack of motivation and poor school performance among young people.

Many Roma teenagers do not recognize their ethnicity. They find it unfair to be labeled as thieves if other members do so: “We are people like everyone else, many

when they hear about Roma people, are thinking about those who steal, not everyone is like that, not everyone should be perceived like that” (boy, 18 years old, Roma).

Minority teenagers are supportive and empathize with each other, when they have the support of family and friends develop a positive self-esteem: “I have overcome all the hardship of life because of the support of friends and family. They knew how to be close to me during hard times, they gave me all the confidence and I’m proud to be part of their group” (girl, 16 years old, German).

## 6. Conclusions

After conducting the qualitative research, the following conclusions were reached.

As compared to a majority group, ethnic teenagers discover their own identity having to assimilate both values of their own culture and values of the host culture. Some go through an identity crisis, not knowing what to choose between the two cultures, others opt for one of them, that they consider superior and, consequently, they form their identity.

Ethnic minority teenagers are subjected to different acts of discrimination, which produce labelling and marginalisation. According to theory, certain physical particularities such as skin colour, height, and the nature of hair can become an object of fixed ideas of teenagers, especially when these stir rejection behaviors from a circle of friends (Clerget, 2008).

Ethnic minority teenagers encounter problems of expressing themselves in the language of the majority group. They have real inferiority complexes regarding expression. They feel labelled, stigmatised, incapacitated, and different. Because of the bullying phenomenon, in order to adapt, they speak the language of the majority group at school, and the language of their ethnic group in their family.

Many times, ethnic minority teenagers feel they are done an injustice, they feel that their mates do not understand them, they do not manage to adapt themselves to the majority group, and they wish that these groups empathise with their emotional state, but they don’t. Jokes regarding them create a negative identity.

Teachers can also display discriminating behaviour that affects formation of the self and implicitly, creates low self-esteem. The discriminating attitude leads to a lack of motivation and to poor school results.

Also, many ethnic minority teenagers do not like to be negatively discriminated on the basis of the actions of other members of the ethnic group (over-generalisations). The extrapolation of the situation of the others seems unfair to them.

But there are also minority youth who feel proud of their own ethnicity and would not change their identity. Thus, those with a positive self-esteem can deal with the situation much better than those with a negative esteem, who take these situations personally. Teenagers with a high self-esteem have good school results, attend the sports class and participate in olympiads and school competitions while those with a low self-esteem fall into a descending slope of alcohol and drug consumption and they have school failure.

Ethnic minority teenagers who have a mentor at school, among their teachers, are more adapted to the existing social reality due to a positive self-esteem, they develop harmonious social relations, and they have an optimistic life and world vision.

Ethnic minority teenagers, who identify with the group to which they belong, develop a good self-esteem and a healthy ethnic identity because they have solidarity with its members. Thus, regarding relations with friends, youth prefer to choose from the minority group because they consider that they have more solidarity with them; there are also situations in which a teenager in the minority group becomes friends with one in the majority group, creating a durable friendship. The same tendency exists also in the case of couple relations; the probability of choosing a partner in the same group being much higher than that of identifying one in the majority group.

Usually, family is central in creating an identity and self-esteem in teenagers. Therefore, youth who have affective support from their parents, brothers and sisters, manage to successfully get over the identity crisis.

Where traditions and rites of passage from childhood to adolescence are also frequently met, they create identity, because through these, new rights and obligations are gained (Clerget, 2008). For example, teenagers of Hungarian origin have specific traditions that can mark their identity: sprinkling marriageable girls, the ball of grapes, Farsung – costume party, Boritza – Hungarian dances, and the school-leaving ceremony – an event that marks the completion of school years.

Minority teenagers who participate in society integration programmes are more adapted, more optimistic and with a positive self-esteem.

Therefore, ethnic teenagers who enjoy the support of a social network, whether family, mates, school, group of friends, or teachers, have a greater probability of developing a positive self-esteem and a matching identity. Continuous support is needed for them to successfully pass move forward to a new stage, that of maturity.

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