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Influence of Parenthood on Ethnic Identity: A Qualitative Study Among Parents of Children with Mixed Ethnic Backgrounds in Estonia

Wpływ rodzicielstwa na tożsamość etniczną.
Badanie jakościowe wśród rodziców dzieci
o mieszanym pochodzeniu etnicznym w Estonii

ABSTRACT

Families formed by parents with different ethnic backgrounds are a growing group around the world. This article examines the influence of parenthood on the awareness of ethnic identity among parents of mixed-background children in Estonia. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted separately among mothers and fathers.

The results show that parenthood is a life event that influences the awareness of ethnic identity in this group of parents. Reflecting on the child's future activates parents' ethnic identity processing. Thinking

KEYWORDS

ethnic identity,
parenthood, mixed
families, mixed-
background individuals,
social identity

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

tożsamość etniczna,
rodzicielstwo,
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about ethnic identity includes psychological, but also more practical and tangible arguments related to their and their children's life. The parents' increased interest in issues of ethnic identity was often related to their children's prospects. The findings suggest that parents' ethnic identity is influenced by one or more of the following mechanisms related to children's prospects: raised awareness, enhanced communication, and the development of a multi-ethnic identity.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies on parenthood and ethnic identity among parents of children with mixed ancestry in Estonia.

ABSTRAKT

Rodziny tworzone przez rodziców o różnym pochodzeniu etnicznym stanowią coraz liczniejszą grupę na całym świecie. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje wpływ rodzicielstwa na świadomość tożsamości etnicznej wśród rodziców dzieci o mieszanym pochodzeniu etnicznym w Estonii. Dane do badań zostały zebrane za pomocą wywiadów częściowo ustrukturyzowanych, przeprowadzonych osobno wśród matek i ojców.

Wyniki badań pokazują, że rodzicielstwo jest wydarzeniem życiowym, które wpływa na świadomość tożsamości etnicznej w tej grupie rodziców. Rozważania dotyczące przyszłości dziecka aktywizują u rodziców refleksję nad tożsamością etniczną. Reflektowanie nad tożsamością etniczną obejmuje zarówno argumenty psychologiczne, jak i bardziej praktyczne i namacalne, związane z życiem rodziców i ich dzieci. Rosnące zainteresowanie rodziców tożsamością etniczną wynika często właśnie z namysłu nad perspektywami, jakie otwierają się przed ich dziećmi. Wyniki badań wskazują, że na tożsamość etniczną rodziców wpływa jeden lub więcej z następujących mechanizmów powiązanych z perspektywami rozwojowymi ich dzieci: podniesienie świadomości, wzmocnienie komunikacji oraz rozwój tożsamości wieloetnicznej.

Według naszej wiedzy, jest to jedno z pierwszych badań dotyczących kwestii rodzicielstwa i tożsamości etnicznej, jakie zostały przeprowadzone w Estonii wśród rodziców dzieci o mieszanym pochodzeniu etnicznym.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyze the mechanisms between the shifting awareness of ethnic identity and parenting among parents of children with mixed ancestry in Estonia. We have studied a group of mixed families, where one parent is foreign-born and the

other is native-born. This group of parents remains understudied, as research on ethnic identity formation and development have traditionally focused on families where both parents are foreign-born, or where at least one parent is a second-generation immigrant (Feliciano, Rumbaut 2018).

In addition, research on ethnic identity and immigration has usually focused on disadvantaged groups, which has eclipsed the study of newly arrived individuals that have higher levels of income and education or are perceived as culturally less distant (Gaspar 2010). However, the importance of this group is increasing, as research shows that the number of relationships between native-born and foreign-born individuals is growing in the more globalized world (Sowa-Behtane 2017).

Research on ethnic identity has also often concentrated on adolescents and young adults (Cheon et al. 2020; Crocetti 2017; Phinney, Devich-Navarro 1997; Umaña-Taylor, Fine 2004). These studies focus more on such stages of identity development as foreclosure and identity exploration. Much less attention has been paid to more mature groups, where the stage of affirmation is perceived to be more common (Schwartz et al. 2014).

This study aims to fill in the gaps about the role of parenting as a significant event that influences ethnic identity awareness in mixed families.

Theoretical framework

Identity is a complex notion that, in simple terms, tries to establish who individuals think they are (Koczan 2014). A person can have multiple individual and social identities. The latter are identities shared with other people who also feel themselves to be members of the same group (J.C. Turner, Reynolds 2012). Social identity theory notes that belonging results from individuals' knowledge of membership in their group and the emotional value that they attach to it (Tajfel, Turner 2004). Nevertheless, beyond self-assignment to a certain group, social identities usually require the recognition of that assignment by other people, who may or may not be members of the same group. Other group members can validate those attributes, or assign different ones to members of a specific ethnic group (Horowitz 1975).

When these attributes are both rigid and assigned indiscriminately to all members of an ethnic group in a particular context, they may become stereotypes (J.C. Turner, Reynolds 2012), which can sometimes also have a negative impact on individuals' psychological development and wellbeing (Haslam et al. 2009; Rumbaut 1995) and on their disposition towards sociability (Gonzales-Backen 2013). In contrast, a positive sense of identity also has a positive impact on individuals' self-esteem and social attitudes (Haslam et al. 2009), and can even lead to positive academic and professional outcomes (Akerlof, Kranton 2000).

Like other social identities, ethnic identity (EI) can change throughout an individual's lifespan (Crocetti 2017; Marcia 1966; Phinney 1989). After birth and throughout the years of early childhood, individuals start acquiring identity markers such as language skills and cultural or religious practices from their parents and from the community in which they live (Gonzales-Backen 2013). These aspects are usually refined during school years, when children and adolescents tend to acquire a certain vision of history and start understanding values and norms in a particular society from peers and other people they consider to be important (Isaacs 1975). The literature suggests that individuals' awareness of social and ethnic identity usually begins before they reach their teenage years, a stage that some authors refer to as foreclosure (Phinney 1989). During this stage, individuals become aware of what identity attributes are valued and accepted by wider society through interaction with their peers. Identity exploration is the stage that follows foreclosure, and is itself succeeded by the stage of identity achievement or resolution, in which individuals experience a confident sense of their own ethnicity (Gonzales-Backen 2013). As mentioned previously, identity formation is not a linear process.

Different identities may become more important at certain times of an individual's life. For example, belonging to a fandom or urban tribe may be more important during teenage years; national identity may be more important during early adult years, e.g., in countries where military service is mandatory; whereas profession tends to be more relevant throughout adulthood, particularly for mature individuals (Horowitz 1975; Turner 1982). Some studies suggest that people in their thirties and older (including some immigrant groups) tend

to be centered on other social identities, such as profession and social status, rather than ethnic identity (Feliciano, Rumbaut 2018).

Ethnic identity may or may not be salient for individuals depending on their experiences, and on whether this identity has any influence on their interactions with other people (Song 2021). In this respect, elements such as having a different appearance or cultural distance with the host society can play an important role.

As an example, studies show that in some Western countries, individuals of mixed ancestry who have a different appearance sometimes struggle to claim affiliation with the majority group, which affects the way they experience and develop their sense of ethnic identity (Song, Liebler 2022). As opposed to this, immigrant groups that are perceived as more phenotypically and culturally similar are not subject to this stress (Gaspar 2010). This can be an advantage for the latter group but may also obscure ethnic identity-related issues they might come across during certain life events, such as forming a family with a partner from a different group, and subsequently parenthood.

There is little information on the impact of parenthood as a life event that shapes ethnic identity, particularly the identity of parents in mixed families. Research on parenthood and ethnic identity has mostly focused on the notion of parental investment in their children: the efforts made by parents to develop their children's social and cognitive skills to provide them with competitive advantages in their future (Campbell et al. 2019).

One explanation for the lack of research could be that parents in mixed families are an understudied group in general, especially when one of the parents is foreign-born and the other has the ethnic identity of the majority group. The literature indicates that some of the reasons behind this are (i) the traditional notion of relationships between foreigners and nationals as an indicator of a high level of integration (Song 2009) and, (ii) the regard of mixed-ancestry partners as global citizens who transcend ethnic identity when they have higher levels of education and income, e.g. Eurostars, free-movers (Gaspar 2010).

Methods

Participants

Interviews with forty parents from mixed partnerships were conducted between January and November 2022. Mixed partnership means here that one parent was an Estonian-born Estonian, and the other parent was a foreign-born non-Estonian. In the absence of special organizations for mixed ethnic background families, parents were initially approached through social media groups for foreigners living in Estonia. This was combined with a snowball recruiting technique, where participating parents referred other participants who met the criteria.

Table 1 presents a summary description of the respondents based on gender, Estonian and foreign-born background, and age group. This background information was collected from participants through a control questionnaire that was sent to them after the interview.

Table 1. Composition of the sample of respondents

	Male	Female	Total
25–35 years	7	9	16
36–45 years	11	8	19
46–55 years	3	2	5
Estonian born respondents	5	15	20
Other EU born respondents	4	4	8
Non-EU born respondents	11	1	12
Living with a partner in same household	17	17	34

Most respondents had one child, while five respondents had two children and three respondents had three or more children. Out of a total of twenty-six children, nineteen were between zero and seven years of age; four were between eight and ten years old; and three were between the ages of twelve and fifteen.

The socioeconomic data showed that participants were generally highly educated, with twenty-seven of them holding a Master's or doctoral degree. Ten respondents had Bachelor's degrees, and three had vocational or high-school education.

Twenty-one of the participants worked either in the business or in the programming sector of the Estonian IT industry; eight worked in the science and education sector; and the remainder worked in the medical service, the public sector, or other areas. Two participants were on parental leave during the time of the interviews.

Interviews

The parents were interviewed separately using semi-structured interview techniques. Interviews were conducted online at agreed times based on the participants' availability. One participant agreed to be interviewed in person. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Most of the participants were interviewed at home or at work. Many used their work breaks to participate in the interviews, and some agreed to be interviewed in the evening after work, or on weekends when they were at home.

All interviews were conducted using videoconferencing software with audio recording capabilities, i.e., Zoom or Teams. Audio recordings were transcribed using the MS Word transcription functionality.

Before each interview, the participants expressed their consent for the interview to be recorded and transcribed for analysis. They were also again informed that the interviews would be confidential, which was already mentioned to them the first time they were contacted.

Most of the interviews were conducted in English. However, five interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this language facilitated better communication between the interviewing researcher and the interviewees. These participants' remarks were translated into English for the purposes of this study.

Analyses

We used thematic analyses to analyze the transcribed interviews. Parenthood is the focus of our study and analyses resulted in different codes that were classified according to sub-themes that show different parenting-related identity mechanisms, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Codes and keywords for parenting and ethnic identity analyses

Increased awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of responsibility for teaching the child • Expression of ethnic identity components (e.g., language, cultural/religious practices) • Own values • Language/traditions/cultural practices (e.g., religion, food, music) • National holidays • Access to family and community networks (in-country and abroad) • Consumption of the original country's media.
Enhanced communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced verbal/emotional communication • Development of emotional ties (e.g., with family/community/wider society) • Tangible benefits (e.g., multilingualism, global mobility, enhanced creativity, better jobs, cosmopolitan capital)
Multi-ethnic identity development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of multicultural identity/multi-ethnicity • Multicultural/multi-ethnic family/household (e.g., when describing them) • Affiliation to the partner's group • Adoption of components of the partner's group (e.g., cultural practices, language, style of communication).

We also coded categories of importance of ethnic identity among the participants, as well as any life events that they considered influential for their awareness of ethnic identity.

Finally, when transcribing quotes for this article, elements that could lead to participants' identification, e.g., gender, nationality markers, were modified to maintain their confidentiality.

Results

Many respondents remarked that they recognized different social identities to which they feel they belonged at this point in their lives:

I'm a specialist. I'm a (parent), I'm a (partner), I'm a (person of my gender), I'm a friend, I'm (my parent's child) and by nationality I consider myself (from my ethnic group). So there are several layers (and) in certain periods of my life, probably one is more important than the other one (EF7).

Some respondents mentioned that they feel that currently parenthood, profession, marital status, or being part of a community that shares the same interests/hobbies were more relevant social identities than ethnic identity:

On a conscious level, I don't think that my ethnic identity occupies a very high place in my own ranking. It certainly doesn't seem to occupy my conscious thoughts that often, whereas you know, being a (parent) occupies a lot of my conscious thoughts as does being a (partner) as well, and being an employee (FM10).

When I live abroad, I don't need to communicate with people (from my ethnic group) ... (I'd rather) look for people who do the same job or do (my preferred hobby) (EF8).

In addition, for some interviewees, ethnic identity seemed to be a somewhat old-fashioned concept that they preferred to see replaced by a more open and international mindset, including the notion of global citizenship. This was a term that some participants used to describe themselves, feeling that they had acquired what authors call cosmopolitan capital: the academic and professional competences and skills to work and live internationally (Weenink 2008):

(Because of my academic background) I have an international mindset What I've learned and believe is that when cultures are open to the word, they also evolve, whereas when a culture is contained in its own bubble it's destined to die at one point (EF4).

Before, I was really proud to be (from my ethnic group). Then after being (abroad) in school for two years, I still felt very proud, but I no longer felt it was as significant in the world. I felt more like a global citizen rather than only (from my ethnic group) (EF6).

Focusing on ethnic identity elicited participants' answers, which we have classified into three main categories:

(1) Ethnic identity is not important

Interviewees in the first category considered ethnic identity irrelevant, as it has almost never played a significant role in their lives up to now. These participants were also among those who initially found it more difficult to precisely articulate their answers:

Ethnic identity has never been important for me. I'm not patriotic. I'd be happy to be (from a different country than where I used to live), as I like the people there and their character and the way they treat employees there (EF9).

I don't know (what ethnic identity is). I can't say that I belong in any group. The first thing that comes to my mind when thinking about it is what kind of food I eat (EF19).

(2) *Ethnic identity is not very important*

The second group of participants were those for whom ethnic identity was not too important in general, and felt that it is relevant only under certain circumstances during such life events as living abroad:

As a foreigner living in a foreign country, I do find myself running into obstacles ... but as long as I don't come across some sort of an obstacle, I really don't think much about ethnic identity in myself or others at all (FM10).

(3) *Ethnic identity is important*

As opposed to the first two groups, ethnic identity was important to participants in the third category, for whom it appeared to be a salient trait that influenced the way in which they experienced the world and interacted with people around them:

I have struggled with (ethnic identity) since childhood, since I was born and grew up in (a country) but spoke (a different language) at home and was exposed to a different media and culture ... I feel uncomfortable interacting with both groups (where I live) as I always feel in-between. In both groups, I find things that are unacceptable and things I identify with. (Ethnic identity) is always on my mind and although my experiences have been mostly positive, whenever I enter a new interaction with a person, I don't know what they will think. And usually there is no problem but still, there's always that additional stress (EF12).

I'm from a multicultural background. My parents are from (two different places) and I grew up in (a big city in a different country) ... When people ask me where I'm from, I say I'm (from there) but often, I have to explain a little bit the complexity of the different influences I grew up with ... I think I feel I have a richer experience (because of this), but sometimes I don't like it. It is difficult for me and difficult for the people I interact with (FF2).

Parenthood and ethnic identity

When participants were asked about life events that influenced their awareness of ethnic identity, most of them provided chronological answers.

When I was going to school, I started to realize that the food was different than what I ate at home ... we would celebrate (national holidays) and people tried to cherish the memory of some events. (However), these were not part of my own history and identity (FF2: EI important).

Some respondents talked about living abroad (mostly during university years) as the first event they could identify as having any influence on their awareness of ethnic identity:

I spent some months (abroad) when I was (in my early twenties). This made me think about myself in more ethnic terms or perceive myself differently. It's probably changed now, but at the time I felt that people from (my ethnic group) were perceived not always in a good way (EF14: EI not important).

Establishing a partnership with a foreigner before becoming a parent was also considered to be an event that influenced ethnic identity awareness. For some, this life event led to the development of a sense of affiliation to their partner's ethnic identity, whereas for others, it resulted in the affirmation of their own ethnic identity:

I do feel a little bit like I am (from my partner's ethnic group). It's difficult to put in words, but I think it's because of our worldview. My appearance has also changed a bit, and I picked up some traditions that now I cherish (EF6: EI important).

I feel that I behave more (like a person from my partner's ethnic group) when I'm around (my partner's) family ... It's not something I had to learn. I think it just happened (EF19: EI not important).

Thanks to the fact that my (partner) is from a different country and that I've had the opportunity of living in a different community, I've realized that I am (from my ethnic group) (EF9: EI important).

In most interviews, parenthood was the life event that prompted the participants to reflect on their ethnic identity. We can distinguish three particular non-exclusive mechanisms of actualization of ethnic identity related to parenthood, which are described below.

(i) *Raised awareness due to the responsibility of being a role model and a teacher of a particular culture*

Many participants across both strong and weak identity categories voiced the opinion that parenthood heightened the importance they placed on their ethnic identity, which since this event had become a more relevant social identity for them at this point in their lives. This happened mainly due to the need to pass on their ethnic culture to the child. The parent felt the responsibility of their new role as a teacher:

My sense of (ethnic) identity was modified after I lived (abroad) for some years but even more so since I've had (children) ... I feel that I need to teach

(them) what family means for me and what my values are, which sometimes are a bit different from my partner's (FM15: EI important).

I've never felt too strongly (about my ethnic identity), even after I started living abroad, it was not important for me to have a strong bond (with my ethnic group) ... that has changed since I've had a child, as I feel responsible for providing (them) with an identity and values that now I feel are important for me (FM8: EI not too important).

(My children have) taught me a lot about myself in general. In the past, I didn't take (my ethnic group's) cultural traditions very seriously ... but now I celebrate them more (than ever before) and introduce them quite a bit to (them), as (they) have a foreign (parent) (EF9: EI not important).

Part of the role was related to ensuring that their children felt like they belonged to their ethnic group despite having parents with different backgrounds:

I see many positive things in (my partner's ethnic group) but I also see things that I want my child to do and feel the same way as (the children of my ethnic group). This has led me to reaffirm my own sense of identity and select those elements that I want my child to learn, as if it was a small package (FM8: EI not too important).

(ii) Enhanced communication

Participants from both strong and weak identity groups said that parenthood has led them to affirm their sense of ethnic identity due to the need for communication and belonging.

They gave a variety of reasons for this, ranging from individual emotional, communicative and affective aspects, through more tangible things that, based on their perception, could bring global benefits both to themselves and their children in the future. One of these mechanisms was ensuring effective verbal and emotional communication, as well as strong emotional bonds with their children through the development of ethnic identity:

If I didn't communicate (my identity) to my (children), if I didn't speak to (them) in (my language) on a daily basis, and spend quality time together, they would end up absorbing (my partner's identity) only and I fear that if that happened, we would grow apart to some extent. They wouldn't be able to understand not only my language, but also my way of communicating and expressing myself (FM11: EI not too important).

The second mechanism was seen by some participants as an element that could provide their children with what some authors called

cosmopolitan capital (Weenink 2008): a competitive advantage in working and living internationally and consequently, improving their academic and/or professional prospects:

I teach my children (my language and culture) so that they understand what kind of person I am. ... That's really nice and I think it's always good for them to have another perspective. Maybe it's good for their future jobs as well because (my language) is not a European language. Not many people can speak it almost like a native (FF16: EI not too important).

Some respondents even expressed their readiness to adapt their ethnic identity according to their children's needs to achieve this objective:

I will (adapt my ethnic identity) according to the needs of my (children) ... and when (they) understand that (they) have a complex and international background, probably we can move on and live in other countries that would add to their rainbow cultural bag (FF1: EI important).

(iii) *Development of a multi-ethnic identity*

The participants did not report changes in ethnic identity affiliation due to parenthood. For those few participants who have experienced this process, it happened earlier in life and for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, many interviewees said that they feel that their ethnic identity has incorporated foreign elements more intensely as a result of being part of a multi-ethnic family:

Our family has two cultures. ... I have internalized much of (my partner's) culture both for my family and for myself. The same thing has happened to my partner with (my culture). We're multicultural individually and also as a family. Both cultures are always present in our home (FM8: EI not too important).

The longer I live (abroad) the more I feel in-between (ethnic identities). However, I hope that celebrating (my ethnic group's) traditions with my (children) and my (partner) will give me the opportunity to continue maintaining (my original ethnic identity) (FM14: EI important).

Discussion and conclusions

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies on the development of ethnic identity conducted among parents of mixed-background (foreign-national) individuals in Estonia. This has been an understudied

group that researchers should investigate further and across different geographical contexts, as they represent an antecedent of multi-ethnic background individuals (Sam, Berry 2010; Song, Liebler 2022).

We explored the influence of parenthood on the awareness of ethnic identity of parents from ethnically mixed partnerships in Estonia. Despite the different values that participants assigned to ethnic identity, the results of this qualitative research revealed that for most respondents, becoming a parent had consciously or unconsciously influenced the way they perceived and experienced their ethnic identity. In this respect, three mechanisms of identity change have been identified: (i) increased awareness of ethnic identity due to the responsibility of being a role model and a teacher of a particular culture, (ii) communication enhancement, which occurs in order to ensure successful verbal and emotional communication, and even more pragmatic prospects for their children and themselves and, (iii) the development of a sense of a multi-ethnic identity. These mechanisms are non-exclusive, as some participants may use one or more of them, and they represent an important finding due to the following reasons:

The literature indicates that attachment to ethnic identity tends to decrease during adulthood (including in groups classified as second-generation immigrant groups), when other social identities become more central with life events such as parenthood (Feliciano, Rumbaut 2018). However, the first two outcomes suggest that, while other adult groups are perhaps more focused on other social identities, such as socio-economic status, for our study group of parents, ethnic identity became important after parenthood to the extent that they found themselves cultivating and practicing certain elements of their ethnic identities more intensely than before. Even the responses of those participants who declared that ethnic identity had not been important showed that it played a role after becoming a parent of a mixed-background child, as expressed by the fact that they fell in with one or more of the mechanisms that were found in this study. This finding indicates that ethnic identity is shaped by parenting and may remain a relevant dimension of mixed families, even if their members are highly educated and perceive themselves as global citizens. In this respect, this study responds to the calls made by other studies to further investigate the role of ethnic identity among foreign-national families (Gaspar 2010; Song 2009; Sowa-Behtane 2017).

The research showed also that some of the interviewed parents had rather practical views on ethnic identity. This finding suggests that certain groups in contemporary societies might seek to belong to ethnic groups not only based on cognitive processes resulting in emotional bonds (Tajfel, Turner, 2004), but also to seek more tangible advantages from ethnic identities such as “cosmopolitan capital” (Weenink 2008), which might be useful for further research.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that most participants were highly educated and worked mainly in international settings. It would therefore be worthwhile for future research to examine whether attitudes towards ethnic identity differ among groups of parents of mixed-background children who belong to groups with lower levels of income and education.

Also, many of the parents interviewed had children under the age of seven, which means that parenthood was a relatively recent event in their lives. The answers from several parents with older children suggest that their dedication to fostering ethnic identity might not be as intense as their children enter adolescence. It would be useful to explore any changes in the views of participants after a few years, as well as the reasons behind this in a longitudinal study.

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