

Investigating Ethnic Identity Development through Storytelling: The Conceptual and Methodological Potential of Narrative Approach

Natalija Ignjatović 

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy

Jovan Radosavljević 

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy

Nataša Simić 

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy

This review paper critically reassesses the traditional quantitative approach to ethnic identity research and advocates for an alternative narrative methodology. Using Phinney's status model as a starting point, we propose a shift towards a more comprehensive narrative perspective in investigating ethnic identity development. Despite their contribution, survey-based studies face limitations in explaining the nuanced developmental process and contextual influences on identity changes, particularly ethnic exploration. Embracing ethnic labels shapes adolescents' relations with others, their experiences, actions, and available resources, involving the construction of a narrative about the meaning of belonging to a specific group. The narrative approach explores subjective significance of ethnic experiences, portraying identities as dynamic. It challenges the concept of abrupt transitions, shedding light on the gradual nature and intricacies of ethnic identity changes. Narratives offer a unique lens to understand the content of ethnic identity, revealing attitudes, beliefs, and cultural behaviours which remain unattainable when assessed using the rating-scale instruments. We examine the studies which use narratives, describe the methodology applied to the field of ethnic identity development and critically evaluate its implementation. In addition to recognizing the transformative potential of the narrative practice, the paper also acknowledges its limitations, including time and resource demands, as well as training requirements and analytical complexity. In conclusion, we suggest the exploration of new directions in ethnic identity development research, highlighting the potential benefits of integrating the qualitative methods, particularly narratives. This alternative

approach could play a significant role in fostering deeper understanding of ethnic identity in contemporary landscapes.

Keywords: ethnic identity, identity development, narrative, qualitative methodology, adolescents

The human need for belonging to a group has long been explored in social sciences. Growing interconnectedness of cultures, partly due to increased intergroup interactions and migration, has put forth theoretical considerations and research on ethnic identity in the last couple of decades. Before the 1980s, ethnic identity was often regarded as a demographic characteristic, i.e. an ethnic group label indicating shared ancestry, a common language, national origin and/or culture (Quintana, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002). Although “ticking a box on census data questionnaire” does offer some insight into an individual’s ethnic identification, such a narrow conceptualization fails to take into account the complexity of ethnic identity as a significant facet of human experience. Social, personality and developmental psychology researchers have subsequently developed broader definitions of the concept, emphasizing its different psychological aspects.

In the field of developmental psychology, ethnic identity is defined as a multidimensional and dynamic concept, which evolves over time (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Ethnic identity is a process of coordinating cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of identification with an ethnic group (Syed, 2015). One’s sense of self as a member of an ethnic group involves clarity in terms of belonging to a specific group, emotional significance associated with that belonging (positive affect, attachment), and the activities undertaken to learn about one’s own ethnicity. Traditionally, ethnic identity research has relied on quantitative methodology and rating-scale instruments, placing less emphasis on idiosyncratic meaning and significance of the lived ethnicity-related experiences. This review paper follows the line of our previous research (Ignjatović & Radosavljević, 2023), aiming to present the theoretical and methodological contributions of the alternative, narrative approach to ethnic identity development research. We aim at comparing this approach to a widely used conceptual model and the related measurement tools, drawing conclusions on the strengths and limitations of the narrative framework and, finally, considering the prospective future trajectories in the field of ethnic identity development research.

The model of ethnic identity status and its operationalization

The study of ethnic identity formation was heavily grounded in Erik Erikson’s identity framework (1968), which pinpointed adolescence and early adulthood as critical developmental periods for the formation of a positive

and coherent sense of self. Marcia (1966, 1980) expanded on Erikson's theory, proposing the identity status model. He argued that identity was formed through dynamic and interdependent processes of exploration of alternatives and commitment, resulting in four identity stages: diffusion (low exploration, low commitment), foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment), moratorium (high exploration, low commitment), and achievement (high exploration, high commitment). Building upon this work and the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Phinney formulated the ethnic identity status model (1989, 1990, 1992, 1996), centred on the extent to which individuals explored the implications of their ethnicity and the sense of pride they experienced as the members of a particular group. In her studies, Phinney identified the so-called *unexamined* status (as undifferentiated diffused and foreclosed identity statuses), *moratorium* and *achieved* ethnic identity status. The unexamined status is characterized by a lack of exploration and no clear understanding of one's ethnicity, either because there is no interest/concern or as a result of basing the views of one's ethnicity on the opinion of others. Moratorium represents active engagement in the exploration and attempts to discern the meaning of one's ethnicity. Individuals with an achieved status are clear and confident about what it means to be a member of their ethnic group; there is a sense of understanding, acceptance and internalization of one's ethnicity as an important part of one's identity.

Empirical evidence has confirmed the fact that ethnic identification unfolds over time, with ethnic identity exploration preceding commitment and pride (Phinney, 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Increased cognitive capacities, in conjunction with the new ethnic-related experiences, lay the ground for the progress through statuses, occurring predominantly during middle to late adolescence and emerging adulthood (French et al., 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006). Although longitudinal data suggest that ethnic identification increases over time, this process is not seen as an invariant sequence of stages, since individuals may regress to a less developed status as a part of the normative identity development (Syed et al., 2007).

Following the described model, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992) was introduced as an easy-to-administer, self-report instrument assessing the degree of ethnic identification. Its 12-item revised version (Roberts et al., 1999), consisting of the exploration and the commitment subscale, has shown strong validity and reliability. To this day, the MEIM has remained the most widely used tool in the field, leading to a tremendous growth in empirical evidence on ethnic identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). In 2004, another rating-scale measure named the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) was developed, in order to respond to the criticism of certain authors regarding an inadequate representation of the ethnic identity development theory in the MEIM. More recent analyses have shown that these instruments in fact encompass distinct

aspects of ethnic identity exploration – specifically, the EIS is more focused on *participation* (i.e. attending social activities or participating in cultural traditions), while the MEIM exploration items can be described as focused on *search* (less specific and referring to talking to others or thinking about one's ethnicity) (Syed et al., 2013).

Strengths and limitations of the ethnic identity status model and operationalization

The status model and the subsequently developed instruments have been crucial in advancing our knowledge on the dynamic of change during ethnic identity formation. This has provided insights into where the individuals are in the process of coming to terms with their ethnicity and strong understanding of developmental trajectories regarding ethnic identity (Pasupathi et al., 2012). Exploration and commitment are perceived as content-free, allowing us to draw conclusions on the common developmental mechanisms of youth from different ethnic groups (Syed & Azmitia, 2010). Additionally, the primary method for data collection and analysis based on quantitative measurement has shed light on the implications of ethnic identity for various aspects of psychological adjustment. For example, the achieved, positive ethnic identity has been consistently associated with psychosocial functioning (well-being and self-esteem, fewer mental disorder symptoms), academic (achievement, engagement, positive attitudes) and health outcomes, especially among ethnic minority adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Smith & Silva, 2011). Similarly, it has been shown that more integrated ethnic identity (operationalized as a higher score on MEIM) significantly contributes to one's ability to cope with racial or ethnic discrimination, buffering its detrimental effects.

Despite the compelling discoveries yielded from this line of research, some of the complexity of ethnic identity development has been left undealt with, restricted by a narrow methodological practice (Schwartz et al., 2014). A quantitative approach typically overlooks the questions of how or why the developmental change takes place and the way this process is dependent on the context through which individuals experience and make meaning of their ethnicity (Syed & McLean, 2023). A specific culture and one's position in it are expected to provide utterly different conditions for identity development compared to a member of another ethnic group, which we would not be able to grasp in the proposed manner. At the same time, the content that makes up one's ethnic identity, such as behaviours, attitudes and beliefs, remains unknown (Syed & Azmitia, 2010). The ethnic identity status approach is unable to identify the experiences that drive adolescents and emerging adults to examine, construct, reconsider and potentially alter

the view of their ethnic identity (Syed & Azmitia, 2008). In other words, it is not possible to fully appreciate what it means to belong to a certain ethnic group, with its own specific experiences, and live in a particular community based solely on the ethnic identity status an individual has achieved. To address these drawbacks, some developmental researchers have turned to an alternative, narrative approach to understanding and studying ethnic identity formation.

The narrative approach to identity

The narrative identity tradition, also stemming from Erikson's work, is rooted in McAdams' autobiographical narrative approach (2001), which perceives identities as subjectively constructed through the process of storytelling. The narrative identity allows individuals to reconstruct their autobiographical memories, linking the past, present and future into a coherent life story. Narrative is not considered to be only an account of events occurring over time; the lived experiences make their impact on identity development through the meaning that individuals ascribe to events (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In contrast with the static snapshot of the current state or status of identity development, the narrative approach sees the formation of the self as ever dynamic and evolving, "work in progress" characterized by constant re-evaluating of one's experiences in the light of new occurrences (McAdams et al., 2006). This allows the generating of a sense of temporal continuity and integration, while simultaneously recognizing the decisive points of change (McLean, 2008). Whether individuals are consciously aware of it or not, they perceive their lives through the lens of a narrative structure, wherein there are distinct chapters, rises and falls, turning points, varied protagonists, assorted challenges and diverse resolutions (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narratives are typically composed of three main elements: an initial point or beginning, a conflict, and a future direction or destination (Bruner, 1990). The essence of one's narrative is its central component – the conflict, understood as a cognitive mismatch between one's current experience and prior understanding. Adolescence is once again highlighted as the crucial stage since the development of a coherent identity is related to adolescents' growing capacity to build a more comprehensive life story beyond particular events (Habermas & Reese, 2015). During this time, cognitive advances allow individuals to reconcile disparate aspects of themselves through a unified narration, making sense of their place in the world.

Another crucial observation must be highlighted at this point: a narrative is not merely a personal expression or an account existing in a contextual vacuum, but rather a window into the way in which humans as intentional

agents construe their actions and experiences in a sociocultural setting (Brunner, 1990). Storytelling is inherently a cultural tool for mediating the self-society relationship, a product of complex relational interactions with others, societal structures and power dynamics, as well as our personal needs and aspirations (Daiute, 2014). These ideas rely on the sociocultural approach, which posits that individuals are shaped by diverse cultural systems that include institutions, practices, artefacts, experiences and representations (Cole, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). The personal and the sociohistorical are interdependent, prompting individuals to constantly reconsider and adjust their inner worlds to their respective contexts. Storytelling is, therefore, both an individual and a collective product, co-constructed in the process of sharing autobiographical events with others (Moffitt & Syed, 2021; Reese, Jack, & White, 2010).

Narrative ethnic identity

Considering that storytelling is determined by culture and the communities of discourse, embedded within a web of interpersonal relationships (McAdams, 2018), narratives seem particularly useful for exploring ethnic identity. Unlike interviews, journaling or participant observation, which likewise entail qualitative data, the narrative approach to ethnic identity is specifically and directly focused on the *stories* people tell about the subjective importance of their cultural heritage (Syed, 2015). From this perspective, ethnic identities are seen as continually shifting rather than being the predetermined or fixed aspects of the self, built through circumstances and ethnic group's actions and interpretations as a response to those circumstances (Cornell, 2000). The ethnic labels that individuals identify with carry meanings which shape their relations with others, their experiences, actions and available resources. Taking on ethnic identity always involves creating a story, whose focal point consists of what it means to be a member of a certain group. The story has a subject, an account of what happened or will happen and a value attached to the subject, thereby influencing one's feelings in relation to their group's position in the society. The narrativization process develops in three steps, occurring in no particular order: the selection, plotting, and interpretation. Selection involves choosing the past, anticipated or imagined events for the narrative. Plotting refers to different ways of connecting these events to each other and linking the events to oneself as a person of a particular ethnicity. Interpretation refers to the significance of events and the plot, exploring how specific plot and its constituent events define the individual's ethnic identity.

The narrative approach to ethnic identity research

The use of the narrative framework to data collection and analysis of ethnic identity formation has been significantly less common compared to survey-based studies; it has become somewhat more prevalent in the last 15 years. Nonetheless, its findings have contributed to major advancements in the field. In one of the first studies of this kind, Syed and Azmitia (2008) explored the ethnic identity content of emerging adults via themes in the narratives of ethnicity-related experiences. The narratives were collected by prompting research participants to recall a specific situation when they became aware of their ethnicity in the presence of a close friend. In addition to the instruction to describe this memory, the participants were given open-ended questions related to their age during the episode, who they were with, their reactions, how the situation was resolved, how they felt, and whether this episode influenced their perception of their ethnicity or ethnicity in general. Relying on the inductively generated coding scheme, the authors defined four distinct themes, capturing 95% of the stories. *Experiences of prejudice* referred to the stories discussing the experiences of prejudice, stereotypes, racism or oppression, including any derogatory remarks, social exclusion or behavioural discrimination. *Connection to culture* involved the positive accounts about the teller's ethnic or cultural heritage, e.g. appreciating culture, being involved in cultural practices, belonging, feeling accepted and "at home". *Awareness of difference* consisted of the stories about participants' distinctiveness in terms of ethnicity, race or cultural practices, which included realization of one's ethnicity and awareness of own privilege or marginality. Finally, *awareness of underrepresentation* referred to the participants recognizing the lack of numerical representation of their ethnic group in a particular context. Combining these ethnic identity content indicators with a process–status measure (MEIM), the same study showed that those with an achieved ethnic identity status most frequently told stories about prejudice/discrimination or connection to culture. On the other hand, those with the unexplored status were more likely to focus on awareness of difference or underrepresentation. These results were expanded in a longitudinal study, demonstrating that an increase in ethnic identity exploration was systematically related to the changes in narrative themes over an 18-month period (Syed & Azmitia, 2010). Those with a more developed ethnic identity shifted to the afore-mentioned stories of prejudice and connection, implying that they had a broader set of experiences which were more personally meaningful and impactful (both positively and negatively). The empirically confirmed relationship between the process of ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity content inspired a theoretical model developed by the same authors (shown in Figure 1).

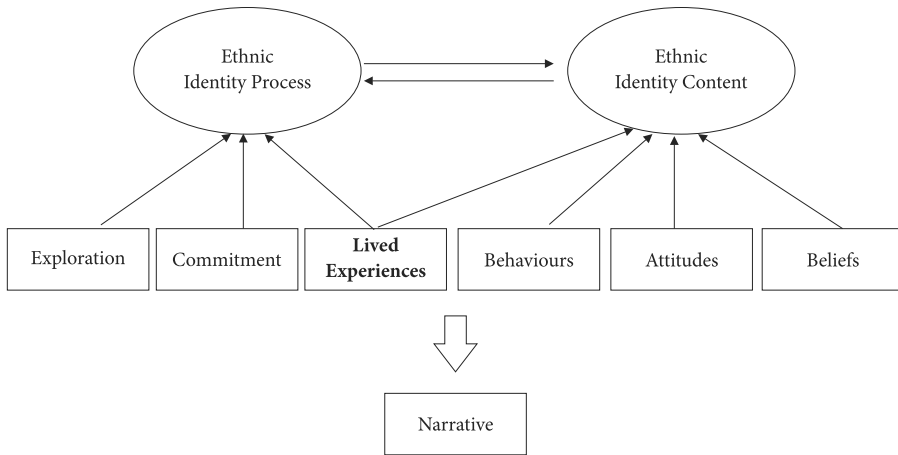


Figure 1. Theoretical model describing the link between ethnic identity process and content.

Note. This model was produced by Syed & Azmitia, in order to describe the link between identity process and content. From Syed, M. and Azmitia, M. (2010). Narrative and ethnic identity exploration: A longitudinal account of emerging adults' ethnicity-related experiences. *Developmental Psychology*, 46(1), p. 209

The narrative identity approach also sheds light on how such development takes place. Contrary to the common belief about an experiential trigger, a *turning point* which induces progress to a successive identity status, changes in ethnic identity usually unfold slowly, over a period of time (Syed, 2010). Ethnicity-related events are given significance as altering moments in one's life through the cognitive, meaning-making process reported only in the delayed, but not in the immediate account of the occurrence. In other words, our assumption about sudden transitions in ethnic identity formation is probably the result of an individual's reconstruction of past experiences and its embedding into the life story, rather than the actual mechanism through which the change occurs. Similarly, the narrative approach offers a further insight into the process of ethnic exploration. Adolescents' narratives about their ethnic identity reveal that exploration can take various forms, either as searching (learning about one's identity) or as participating (learning about identity by active involvement in specific cultural practices), verified by MEIM and EIS factor analysis (Syed et al., 2013). Moreover, these two aspects have been related to differing outcomes, the former predicting lower well-being, and the latter predicting higher well-being.

Another essential contribution of this line of research is its focus on the context, both in terms of the wider sociocultural setting, and the immediate surrounding involving personal relations with others. The narrative approach has revealed that what matters in the process of ethnic identity development

is not only ethnic density, i.e. a numerical representation of a particular ethnic group on a specific territory; individuals can perceive the degree of diversity in a vastly different manner based on the way they construe the same context (Syed, 2010). Existing research indicates that the subjective context (the meanings ascribed to one's respective context) has a stronger predicting power than the so-called objective context (e.g. census data on the relative proportion of certain ethnicity) (Syed & Juan, 2012). Furthermore, diverse positions based on socioeconomic circumstances shape the sense-making of events depicting unfairness and exclusion (Daiute et al., 2001) and pointing to the necessity of considering intersectionality in research and living experience (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2020). The less privileged, ethnic minority adolescents narrate about injustice more directly, demonstrate greater attunement to the perspective of others and flexibility in adjusting their experiences and communication style to different audiences while narrating (Jović, 2020). Youth from non-dominant ethnic communities thus show a better understanding of power structure within a society, affirming the constitutive role of context in psychological development and functioning. Finally, studies that rely on the narrative methodology also showcase how adolescents' ethnic identity narratives are related to personal interactions within their social networks. Their results suggest that almost half of ethnicity-related memories may remain untold, while the shared stories differ in content depending on whom they are told to: the accounts of discrimination are usually disclosed to peers, while the instances of learning about one's heritage are most likely expressed to parents (Syed, 2012). Recent research has confirmed that peers are particularly important in the process of narrating one's ethnicity lived experiences (Moffitt & Syed, 2021). Ethnic-racial exploration takes place through emerging adults' conversation with friends, with the content and structure of their stories being largely dependent on the ethnic minority/majority status. When talking to their ethnic minority friends, ethnic majority participants have shown more frequent engagement in conversations containing the themes of *awareness of difference*, *awareness of underrepresentation* and *not thinking about/valuing ethnicity and race*. They rarely reflected on the issue of systemic oppression or the way their identity was shaped by being a member of an ethnic majority group, with only few *positive connections to culture* codes. Not surprisingly, the members of ethnic minority groups told stories consisting of *discussion of racism/discrimination* (including personal experiences), as well as a *positive connection to culture* (including familial and community influence), showing that peer interactions can also reinforce a sense of ethnic belonging and pride. In such co-constructed narrations about ethnicity, ethnic minority youth have once again demonstrated more nuanced understanding of ethnic identity, often even taking the burden of educating their ethnic majority friends.

Narrative as a methodological tool

Narratives are simultaneously seen as a theoretical framework and as a methodological technique for understanding the ethnic identity development (Syed, 2015; Westberg, 2022). To access stories about the subjective importance of one's cultural background, researchers usually draw narrative prompts from McAdams' (2007) Life Story Interview. Participants are asked to describe life chapters and key scenes (e.g. high point, low point, turning point) or self-defining memories pertaining to their ethnicity, such as:

“Please describe an experience in which you became particularly aware of your ethnicity while in the company of close friends.” (Syed & Azmitia, 2008)

“Please describe a particular time in your life, either positive or negative, when you felt aware of your race/ethnicity. Tell us how old you were when this happened, where you were, whom you were with, what happened, and how you reacted. Include details that would help us see and feel as you did.” (Moffitt & Syed, 2021)

The prompt may also be applied in the form of the *telling memory*, which consists of the participant's memory about sharing a significant ethnicity-related memory to someone else (Syed, 2012). As a first step, participants write down an ethnicity-related memory, and, further on, they recall telling that specific memory to someone in their life.

Another useful methodological tool is the *dynamic narrative approach*, extensively described by Daiute (2014). Participants are invited to interpret an ambiguous social situation and elaborate on it from different stakeholders' perspectives. The situation is presented via a hypothetical vignette describing a fictional scenario, eliciting complex and often contradictory meanings in a subtle, non-confrontational way. This methodology was used in the afore-mentioned study by Jović (2020) about sense-making of unfairness: adolescents were presented with a vignette depicting a classic high school situation – a field trip where three individuals arrange who will share a double room with whom, and one person acts unjustly and unfairly to achieve their desire. In this story, the protagonists are presented as a clear victim and as a perpetrator. The participants' task in the study was to read the vignette describing the ambiguous circumstance and then create their own story from four different perspectives, for different audiences. The first perspective was direct – a narrative about personal experience, describing whether they had been in a similar situation. The second perspective involved taking the role of the perpetrator (culprit), where the participants had to adopt his/her perspective and write a letter to a third person, explaining what happened. The third perspective was that of the victim, also writing a letter to a third

person about the incident. Finally, the fourth perspective involved taking the stance of the victim in the case of writing a complaint letter to an authority figure. This kind of self-positioning inside the shoes of the protagonists inevitably elicits one's own experiences and worldviews about inequality, which become incorporated in the narrative, thus telling a story about their (ethnic) identity.

Regardless of the prompts used in a particular study, the narrative ethnic identity research would benefit from following certain steps in narrative acquisition, organization and analysis (Syed, 2015):

1. **Data collection:** after conducting a pilot study, participants should actively contribute their stories, either by writing them on a computer, by hand, or through oral narration. The method selection should take into account the nature of elicited memories. Specifically, for highly sensitive recollections such as discrimination, which participants may be reluctant to disclose, the written methods offering privacy are preferable over oral interviews. However, the limitation of not being able to probe further with follow-up questions in this way should be carefully considered. The number of participants should align with the study's objectives, ranging from single-case study narration to involving several hundred contributors.
2. **Data transcription:** For the handwritten or verbal accounts, transcription should be meticulous. The goal is to capture the words exactly as they were said or written, maintaining accuracy and staying true to the original stories.
3. **Coding system development:** a coding system can be formed by taking over or modifying an existing one (from previous research) or creating a completely new one. Deciding on the number of coding categories is considered one of the most challenging steps, which once again depends on the goals of the study. The coding scheme should not be too broad and overly general, rendering the few generated categories meaningless for the specific research questions. On the other hand, using too many categories carries the risk of making the scheme too narrow and specific, resulting in difficulties in achieving accordance across different researchers. The narrative literature points to four general categories of coding which should be included, regardless of the research topic: motivational themes (individual's needs, goals and strivings), affective themes (emotional valence of the narrative), structural elements (narrative coherence) and themes of integrative meaning (individual's sense making of the narrated events). Additionally, examining narrative content (what the story is about) is necessary in order to understand what makes up one's identity and, more specifically, ethnic identity.

- 4. Training the coders and data coding:** Coders should undergo extensive training on the use of the coding manual to ensure satisfactory interrater reliability. The coding team should consist of less experienced professionals (e.g. students), in addition to coding experts. This diversity is crucial to incorporate various perspectives into the analysis, thus encompassing different interpretations of the data derived from participants' stories.

At this point, it should be added that we consider that there must be a prerequisite to any such road map, a step zero of a sort: research should always be conducted in a responsible, culturally sensitive way. The cultural competence imperative is incorporated into formal education of future psychologists in certain parts of the world (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2017) in order to ensure our understanding of ethnic and racial diversity and avoid misconceptions or, even worse, discriminatory attitudes towards the participants' cultural background. Moreover, our research experience suggests that employing peer interviewers may be critical when discussing ethnicity and discrimination with the members of significantly marginalized ethnic groups, such as the Roma. Empirical evidence indicates that interviewers sharing the same cultural background are more effective in facilitating data collection, ensuring accurate representation of the community's perspectives, as well as minimizing distress among participants, thereby enhancing the overall quality and authenticity of the research findings (Bhabha et al., 2017; Condor et al., 2023). The subsequent data analysis is considered to be dependent on particular research objectives and cannot be fully defined prior to engaging with the material itself (Butina, 2015). However, it is not clear how the decision on one of the various analysis approaches is made. A possible strategy we propose is undertaking a thorough review of the participants' narratives by re-reading their stories, guided by diverse research questions of interest. This iterative process of engaging with the narratives, framed by specific inquiries, aims to facilitate a more informed and nuanced selection of analytical methods.

The strengths of the narrative approach to ethnic identity development research

Based on the conceptualization of the narrative ethnic identity and the results stemming from this line of research, we will draw some conclusions on the strengths of the narrative approach. As highlighted before, the narrative framework allows us to gain insights into the interrelated and dynamic aspects of ethnic identity, otherwise unattainable to researchers. It goes beyond static or categorical views of ethnicity development to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of how individuals come to the

understanding of what it means to be a member of their respective ethnic group. The formation of ethnic identity thus becomes **broader conceptually**, involving more than just the adoption of an ethnic label or being at a specific stage, but also encompassing the way in which developmental changes take place. The sense-making process of a specific individual is reflected in an integrated story of a lived ethnic experience, which includes the past events, current self-perception and future aspirations. The narrative approach offers a ground for the participant's ethnic story analysis. It enables researchers to examine the plot types or narrative structures and the attribution of causes to events, as well as the temporal dimension of narration: how distant events are interconnected, sequenced and paced within one's story. Furthermore, it gives us the opportunity to understand the **content** of ethnic identity, which remains invisible if we rely solely on survey data. In this way, we can become aware of what ethnic identity "looks like" – what constitutes ethnicity of a specific person, i.e. which aspects are put forth when thinking about the membership to his/her ethnic group in terms of attitudes, beliefs, cultural behaviours etc. Therefore, the narratives about the lived experiences and the individual's interpretations of these experiences help us get considerably closer to the subjective point of view compared to the traditional positivist approaches. At the same time, the narrative framework places a strong emphasis on the **context** which constantly (re)shapes the meanings individuals ascribe to their ethnicity, both in terms of interactions with one's immediate surroundings and wider sociocultural influences. Finally, applying the narrative methodology can be considered **complementary** to quantitative, rating-scale instruments (as shown in some of the studies described here), offering a more comprehensive look into the complex questions of ethnic identity development, its processes and contents.

Equally significant, albeit beyond the scope of the current review, the narrative approach to ethnic identity has significant practical implications. As explained, meanings are seen as idiosyncratic, a unique and diverse combination of cultural expressions and lived experiences, allowing individuals to have their own way of "doing" ethnic identity. This notion of heterogeneity invites us to adopt a **less pathologizing**, not-knowing stance, taking into account the varying identity configurations, while understanding that a more mature ethnic identity is not the sole developmental outcome as was once understood (Syed, 2015). Additionally, the narratives about ethnic identity are powerful tools which can **give voice** to the members of the marginalized and underrepresented groups, silenced by the systems of power, privilege and oppression (Rogers & Syed, 2021). Narrating about one's own ethnicity can be a transformational experience when youth are supported in rethinking their ethnicity and creating alternative stories, not constrained by cultural expectations and/or based on discriminatory attitudes (Kedell, 2009;

Syed & McLean, 2020). The so-called narrative practice approach which relies on this idea can be applied to educational, mental health and community settings. For instance, in an educational context the narrative practice can contribute to the development of a methodology that would comprehensively examine how ethnic minority students create a relationship with the academic curriculum content typically written from the perspective of the dominant ethnic group. Through a narrative approach, students from minority groups can be encouraged to reconsider how their sense of belonging to their ethnic group changes depending on the different content included (or not) in the curriculum and the multicultural school practices. Furthermore, interacting with ethnic minority communities and analysing the narratives from those who are minorities at the state level versus those in local communities, as well as the groups that are minorities state-wide but majorities locally, can reveal context-specific insights not accessible through quantitative methods. Finally, the narrative approach can be a significant way of exploring sensitive ethnic identity themes, particularly among the marginalized groups, where shame is easily activated. Shame associated with ethnic identity is a common theme in the psychotherapeutic process, where storytelling becomes a crucial tool for integrating the disowned aspects of the self. The therapy session transcripts can serve as valuable resources for understanding the developmental dynamics of ethnic identity, offering perspectives on the protective and risk factors for the construction of a stable and coherent sense of self. Applying the narrative methodology within these diverse contexts that adolescents and emerging adults navigate can have a profound impact on their well-being, enabling a deeper understanding of ethnic identity and fostering a greater sense of belonging and acceptance.

The limitations of the narrative approach to ethnic identity development research

Compared to conducting traditional self-report survey research, the main practical and most commonly cited disadvantage of applying the narrative methodology is that it requires a great amount of time and resources. As pointed out by Syed (2015), the narrative approach entails complex and lengthy research procedures, from the first phase of data collection up to the final stage of formulating meaningful study results. The task of training research collaborators on applying the once developed coding scheme often proves to be increasingly difficult because of the lack of or insufficient formal education on qualitative methodology. Furthermore, research planning and narrative analysis pose unique challenges due to the absence of standardized steps, with relatively vague guidelines and insights, usually garnered from researchers' experience. Similarly, the position of the researcher in terms of

ontological and epistemological assumptions and its implications for ethnic identity research have not been discussed.

Apart from these concerns, the described narrative approach is sometimes criticized because of its conceptual challenges. Firstly, can narratives be a valid measure of complex ethnic identity when we take into account that they usually consist of subjective accounts of only one significant, ethnicity-related memory as a prompt? Moreover, the narratives of pivotal, life-changing moments (the so-called “Big stories”) are considered unlikely to be shared spontaneously or even deemed artificial, typically elicited through elaborate techniques in highly controlled, quasi-experimental settings (Bamberg, 2006b; Georgakopoulou, 2006). The critics of the prototypical, biographical approach to narrative research suggest that the “Big story” is unable to capture the dynamic process of developmental change while it is ongoing; rather, participants are expected to reflect on their lives retrospectively, by orienting their memory backward, after the transformation has already taken place (Bamberg, 2006a). Secondly, the narratives per se vary vastly in terms of the nature of individual responses (e.g. format, type of memory elicited) to the same prompt, making it sometimes troublesome to compare the results or draw more general conclusions. Deppermann (2013) argues that non-narrative, perceptual, action-oriented aspects of experience which are not narrativized are conceptually excluded from being the facets of identity. Additionally, while narratives are expected to unveil the personal meanings individuals ascribe to various aspects of their ethnic identities, gathering data on their behaviours, rituals, and beliefs may prove challenging, as participants are not explicitly prompted to discuss them. The absence of the specific content in narratives, such as the omission of cultural practices, does not allow definitive conclusions; it remains ambiguous whether participants do not engage in these practices in their everyday lives or if they simply do not see them as significant within the context of their interaction with the researcher. Qualitative data on ethnic identity have also been harder to relate directly to psychological outcomes, thus giving us little information on the link between the narrative elements and commonly used measures of well-being, distress or academic functioning. Finally, although adolescents become more capable of self-reflection and perspective-taking (Blakemore & Mills, 2014), we may add that individuals vary in terms of their writing skill levels (e.g. vocabulary, fluency, elaboration), making some more adept at narrative writing than others.

Complementary and prospective research trajectories

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in exploring the structural societal factors more directly, underscoring the overly emphasized individual-level analysis present in diversity science (Syed & McLean, 2023). One framework which places the individual-structural

relation as its main focus is the *master narrative approach*. The master narrative is a cultural script readily available to the members of a specific ethnic group in the society they live in (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Syed et al., 2020). The focus is on the interaction between individual-level and societal-level narratives or, more precisely, on the way in which personal identity is influenced by and often limited to cultural values and expectations. Research questions revolve around understanding the process of dynamic engagement with the stories of collective identity and individual deviations from master narratives. The master narrative approach is expected to help us come to a more detailed and nuanced recognition of the ways in which those with varying levels of power in a society negotiate their positions and develop their ethnic identity.

The issues of power and dominance, along with moral orders, rights, and duties, are thoroughly theorized within the positioning theory. Initially developed as an ontological constructionist discursive approach by Harre and colleagues (e.g., Harre & Van Langenhove, 1999), the positioning theory drew focus on cultural contexts and collective construction of norms and social representation. The limitation of this perspective is that it makes cognitive assumptions about discourse and social action; in other words, it overlooks the action orientation of positioning in order to tap into the realm of the shared belief system, moral norms and social rules. In contrast, there is a discursive psychological approach to positioning, relying on epistemological constructivism. This approach poses a different question: not about a 'storehouse' of rules underlying people's actions, but about describing the discursive actions and rhetorical strategies used to create a sense of identity that aligns with or resists certain norms and conventions (Korobov, 2010). In line with the alternative approach to positioning, there have been voices about its complementarity with the narrative approach given that it offers a discourse-based, interactional understanding of identities (Deppermann, 2013; Hyvärinen et al., 2021). For example, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) suggest analysing three levels in narratives: how characters are positioned within the story (level 1), how the speaker/narrator positions him/herself (and is positioned) within the interactive situation (level 2), and how the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regard to the dominant discourses or master narratives (level 3).

The proponents of the "Small story" approach see a great potential for identity research in a shift towards the stories we tell in everyday settings about mundane things and recent occurrences (Bamberg, 2006b). These events, often shared immediately either through face-to-face or mediated communication, are sometimes referred to as "breaking news" by Georgakopoulou (2006), in order to highlight their ongoing and dynamic nature. In contrast to the "Big story" inquiry focused on the content (the *about* of the story), the emphasis

is placed on *the telling moment*: how narratives are constructed and managed within immediate interactions and what conversational objectives they fulfil while shared. Stories are social practices not only of what is coherent and deeply reflected upon, but also of the fragmented or that which is left unspoken (McLean et al., 2007). Thus, identities are “done” in a local interactional environment which is now available for empirical examination, rather than only theoretically posed as co-constructed with a researcher or the “imagined other” to whom the participant writes as the audience. In ethnic identity research, the “Small story” approach may be particularly effective for delving into the topics that participants might find challenging to articulate directly to an unknown researcher, such as the experiences of discrimination and ethnicity-based microaggressions, which might be more readily shared within their own social context.

Another line of research gaining popularity is the exploration of the intersection of social identities (e.g. ethnicity and gender) via storytelling (Rogers & Way, 2016). Narratives are seen as personal accounts which can reveal how various aspects of the self interact in the process of identity development and how important a certain aspect of identity is to a particular individual.

More generally, different authors suggest that the field should focus more directly on the developmental process of ethnic identity by conducting longitudinal studies, which are particularly scarce in narrative research. This would allow further insights into how stories about ethnic identity change over time, as individuals explore and gain new perspectives through the lived experiences (Syed, 2015).

Taking into consideration the ideas presented in this paper, we argue that no matter the specific focus of future studies, moving away from a narrow and rigid methodological perspective may be the most crucial thing for the advancement of our understanding of ethnic identity development. A pivotal moment in this evolution has precisely been the integration of qualitative research into the field and, more specifically, the use of narratives to tell a deep personal story of what it means to identify with one’s ethnicity. This is particularly relevant in complex socio-historical landscapes, saturated with interethnic tensions typically perpetuated top-down, from politicians and the media nowadays. Although rarely applied in Serbia, the narrative and similar approaches to identities in general and ethnic identities in particular have already shown great research and transformation potential in diverse contexts, including mental health and education (see e.g., Đorđević, 2023; Milivojević & Nikolić, 2017; Simić et al., 2017; Simić et al., 2019; Sremac & Radić, 2010). Hence, we propose an increased incorporation of this conceptual and methodological approach in the field of psychology and other social sciences, as well as in professional, educational and mental health practice.

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Istraživanje razvoja etničkog identiteta kroz pripovedanje: konceptualni i metodološki potencijal narativnog pristupa

Natalija Ignjatović 

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet

Jovan Radosavljević 

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet

Nataša Simić 

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet

Ovim preglednim radom kritički se preispituje tradicionalni kvantitativni pristup istraživanju etničkog identiteta i predstavljaju se argumenti za korišćenje alternativne narativne metodologije. Oslanjajući se na model statusa Finijeve kao polazne tačke, predlažemo prelazak ka sveobuhvatnijoj narativnoj perspektivi radi ispitivanja razvoja etničkog identiteta. Uprkos svojim doprinosima, istraživanja zasnovana na upitnicima ograničena su u pogledu objašnjavanja nijansiranog procesa razvoja i kontekstualnih uticaja na promene identiteta, naročito kada je reč o etničkoj eksploraciji. Prihvatanje etničkih odrednica oblikuje odnose adolescenata s drugima, njihova iskustva, akcije i raspoložive resurse, što podrazumeva konstrukciju narativa o značenju pripadnosti određenoj grupi. Narativnim pristupom ispituje se subjektivni značaj etničkih iskustava, prikazujući identitete kao dinamične. Koncept naglih prelaza se preispituje, dok se rasvetljava postepenost i složenost promena etničkog identiteta. Narativi nude jedinstvenu perspektivu za razumevanje sadržaja etničkog identiteta, otkrivajući stavove, verovanja i ponašanja unutar određene kulture koja ostaju nedostupna kada se procenjuju putem instrumenata koji koriste skale procene. Prikazane su studije koje uključuju narativnu metodologiju u području razvoja etničkog identiteta i kritički je procenjena njena primena. Pored prepoznavanja transformativnog potencijala narativne prakse, u radu se uzimaju u obzir njena ograničenja, uključujući vremenske zahteve, kao i zahteve u pogledu resursa, neophodne obuke istraživača i složenosti obrade rezultata. Dakle, u radu se predlaže eksplorisanje novih pravaca u istraživanju razvoja etničkog identiteta, uz isticanje potencijalne koristi uključivanja kvalitativnih metoda, posebno narativa. Ovaj alternativni pristup mogao bi igrati značajnu ulogu u produbljivanju razumevanja etničkog identiteta u savremenim kontekstima.

Ključne reči: etnički identitet, razvoj identiteta, narativi, kvalitativna metodologija, adolescenti