

Ethnic discrimination – secondary school students’ narratives about possible conflict outcomes

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Ethnic or ethnicity-based discrimination is a differential treatment based on ethnicity that disadvantages an ethnic group, thus negatively influencing life experiences and chances of its members (Gillborn, 2003). It appears in all spheres of life, including education, where school staff or peers can be perpetrators of discrimination. In that case ethnic discrimination encompasses intentional or unintentional behavior such as physical altercations (e.g., pushing or stealing from), verbal harassment (e.g., racial/ethnic jokes and making fun of), avoidance or isolation, threats and intimidation, and lack of respect for other cultures (e.g., not attempting to pronounce a name correctly) (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Salamé, 2004; Wing, 2007). Ethnic discrimination can also be institutional, when school policies can actively or passively set ground for interethnic conflicts and unfavorable position of certain groups (e.g. absence of ethnic minority groups from school curriculum or colorblind attitudes or administrations) (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Salamé, 2004). Certain characteristics of school (e.g., ethnic composition of the student population) can also be associated with higher prevalence of ethnic discrimination and conflicts (Graham, 2018). Henze and associates (2002) offered the three-tier model of ethnic conflicts – The Iceberg Model of Racial or Ethnic Conflict (IMREC). According to IMREC, slurs or physical violence based on ethnicity lay at the top of the iceberg given that they are the most easily detectable forms of conflict. The second tier involves less overt forms of conflicts, such as group avoidance, group exclusion, and unequal treatment across groups. Finally, the foundation of the model encompasses the underlying factors contributing to racial or ethnic conflicts, such as segregation, institutionalized and individual racism, intentional or unintentional transmission of harmful beliefs across generations and inequality in distribution of resources.

Experience of ethnic discrimination in school has a negative impact on both academic and socioemotional outcomes, such as adolescents’ sense of school belonging, self-esteem, depressive symptoms and academic achievement (Benner et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2003). Interethnic conflicts in schools can also negatively affect overall school climate, creating an unsafe environment and legitimizing violence across groups (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Salamé, 2004). They can even destabilize entire communities which already have a history of interethnic tensions. Therefore, it is extremely important, especially in current times of interethnic conflicts escalating worldwide, to explore how youth interpret ethnic discrimination and conflicts and what outcomes they can imagine. This research focused on the

ways secondary school students from Serbia interpreted the fictionalized scenarios about ethnic discrimination and bullying perpetrated by peers in schools and consequently what outcomes to this situation they envisaged.

Methods

This study was conducted within the project “Narrativization of ethnic identities of adolescents from culturally dominant and minority backgrounds, and the role of the school context” (NIdeA), supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (grant number 1518). For this specific study the vignette method was chosen because it proved to be suitable for exploring youth’ interpretative processes about complex and sensitive topics due to its projective nature, which makes it less threatening and invasive compared to methods that entail direct narration of personal experience (Jović, 2023). Scenarios that are viewed by participants as highly conceivable are more likely to produce thick data, so special attention was paid to the preparatory phase. Cognitive interviews with seven secondary school students were conducted and the vignette and the prompt were polished so as to be understandable and as close as possible to students’ real experience. Then eleven students participated in piloting the vignette and after they wrote their narratives a short focus group was conducted to collect more feedback. Final version of the vignette was administered to students from seven secondary schools located in multiethnic regions of Serbia (N = 85, 67% male, $M_{age} = 16$, 41.1% identified as minorities with Hungarian and Roma being the most represented) First, they were invited to read a vignette about a new student who came to their school and who experienced ethnicity-based discrimination and bullying. Then they were asked to write about the way(s) in which that situation concluded (what was happening, how that student felt, who else was involved, etc.).

After students’ narratives were typed into MAXQDA, inductive thematic analysis was applied (Boyatzis, 1998). Narratives contained one to six sentences and those more elaborated embraced up to four themes. In total 85 narratives were analyzed, and 131 coded segments were derived.

Results

Analysis revealed six major endings of the fictionalized story: a) No resolution (present in 3 narratives), b) Escalation (32), c) Retribution (19), d) Withdrawal (18), e) Reconciliation (55), and f) Building new friendships (2). Escalation diverged into two paths – either the discriminated student continued to be a victim which usually culminated in physical violence, or the discriminated student reacted violently, in some cases organizing revenge. Retribution typically followed escalation, although in some cases the school staff punished the act of verbal violence against the new student immediately. The theme Withdrawal refers to cases of mental suffering, withdrawing from the peer group and isolation, in some cases ending with the change of the class or the school. Students often imagined reconciliation that was either achieved by a constructive conversation between students or through mediation of school staff and/or parents. Finally, two

students narrated about the discriminated student finding new friends and thus overcoming experience of ethnic discrimination.

Although we might say that negative scenarios prevail, in the case of Retribution it is not clear what happened after students got punished – if perpetrators stopped bullying the newcomer or if they continued bullying but using more subtle (e.g. IMREC second tier) methods. In addition, it is positive that teachers, school psychologists and principals are seen as resources for resolution of cases of ethnic discrimination (elaborated in 42 narratives). These strategies are in line with recommendations for a positive conflict resolution – that negotiation and legitimate power should be used (Isajiw, 2000). In addition to personal ways of construing conflict situations and outcomes, these narratives can help us better understand the school climate and ways schools typically react to ethnic violence.

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