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## BECOMING AN ETHNIC SUBJECT. CULTURAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper offers an alternative theoretical consideration of ethnic identification in psychology. Mainstream social psychological theories are largely positivist and individualistic. New possibilities of theoretical understanding open up as the relational and symbolic nature of ethnicity enters psychological inquiry. This paper takes culture and self as two conceptual domains of social identification, following a meta-theoretical position of cultural psychology. The central focus is the cultural development of the person in social context of a given culture, specifically their ethnic identification, to which end, it looks at several processual aspects. First, ethnic culture is approached as a guiding principle and practice in everyday understanding and experience of one's own ethnicity. Second, ethnic identification is considered a social and personal act of meaning making, which happens in a given social context, through practical activity and the discursive positioning of a person. Third, since rather than considered a conscious aspect of belonging, ethnicity is assumed and taken for granted, ruptures are considered as destabilizing events that create an opportunity for ethnic meaning reinterpretation and developmental transition. In the meaning making process, symbolic resources are conceived of as primary self-configuring tools, which are also culture-configuring. Ethnic meaning making is theorized as a central social-psychological process through which ethnic culture and a person as an ethnic subject emerge in historical perspective. Finally, the uniqueness of a singular person in the shared ethnic culture is conceptualized based on symbolic distancing from the immediate social context, through the model of knitting personal and socio-historical semiotic threads.

### KEYWORDS

cultural psychology, ethnic identification, subjectivity, meaning making, symbolic resource, rupture

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## Introduction

The usual theoretical tools for thinking about ethnicity – categorization, identity, difference – are merely particular, and not exceptional tools for conceptualizing the relationship between a person and their ethnic community, a conclusion already reached by contemporary social theory on ethnicity (Brubaker 2002; Brubaker, Cooper 2000). Psychology, however, has remained unaffected by social theory due to its focus on basic psychological processes of social identification (Reicher, Hopkins 2001)<sup>2</sup>. However, there is no necessity to ethnicity being comprehended with the use of these specific tools. This paper thus presents the question: are there other ways of understanding the psychology of ethnicity today? An alternative theoretical conceptualization would illuminate the way for alternative practices.

Theorization of the problem of ethnic identification can be situated in the relationship between culture and self, whereby a person becomes the subject of ethnic socialization. Since the issue of the essentially relational, but also symbolic nature of ethnic identification is highly neglected in mainstream social psychology, the aim of this paper is to elaborate an interpretivist and relationist theoretical position in psychology with regards to this phenomenon, by using an assemblage of theoretical resources from the conceptual repertoire of cultural psychology. The cultural-psychological framework provides a broader perspective on the mutual relation and positioning of a person within culture, from which issue divergent and variable consequences for one's personal experience and relationships with other people.

The paper first gives general remarks about the cultural-psychological perspective, followed by a general account of the relationship between culture and self, as the two main domains of theoretical analysis of social identification. The central part specifies the theoretical considerations of cultural psychology on the problem of ethnic identification: it provides a step-by-step analysis of different aspects of the evolution of ethnic identification within a particular social context, simultaneously taking into account the dynamic relationship between the social and the psychic. Ruptures, symbolic resources, and meaning making processes take leading roles in the emergence of a person as an ethnic subject. Finally, the conclusion is intended to summarize and tie together the main points of the paper.

## General Remarks

Cultural psychology represents an alternative psychological understanding of the human condition, which, taking an interpretivist critical approach, stands in

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2 Positivism in psychology has been challenged by the group of discursive theorists (Davies, Harré 1990; Harré 1979; Wetherell 2008), some of whom had been members of the original laboratory where the most relevant *Social Identity Theory* has emerged from (e.g., Michael Billig). Not to disrupt the main line of argument in this paper, we decided not to include the overview of such attempts, in preparation of another publication.

opposition to the mainstream positivist trend in psychology. Cultural psychology emerged at about the same time as its mainstream counterpart, but contrary to it, aims at interpreting cultural-historical conditions of socio-psychological phenomena (Barbu 1960; Benson 2001; Cole 1996; Shweder 1991; Valsiner 2007; Vygotsky 1997). This is why cultural psychology can also be qualified as a different paradigm. Its roots reach all the way to Wilhelm Wundt, the founding father of formally recognized and institutionally established experimental psychology, but also of the marginalized and historically repressed cultural interpretivist branch of psychology, known as *Völkerpsychologie* (Jovanović 2019).

The point of differentiation of this psychological reasoning from others is *social context*, not culture in a narrow sense.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it should not be identified with cross-cultural psychology, but rather with its anthropological variant: its emphasis on social context, practices, and interaction is inspired by works of cultural and social anthropologists, as well as important figures in the history of experimental social psychology, who also recognized the significance of social context for psychological research (Israel, Tajfel 1972; Reicher, Hopkins 2001).

Apart from interest in the social context, from its beginnings, cultural psychology has dealt with *cultural development*, i.e., the development of human beings' interaction with their social environment (Vygotsky 1997). The interactive development of a person occurs as a process of dynamic adjustment,<sup>4</sup> characterized by complexity, non-linearity, disruption, and contradiction, which results in qualitatively new forms of psychological functioning on the higher levels of ontological development. The primary role in facilitating development belongs to linguistically and materially mediated social interaction, through which the caregivers, i.e., the competent others, teach the child how to act in a socially meaningful manner (Rogoff 2003). Gradually, by gaining personal sense, the child's verbal and non-verbal behavior, initially meaningful only to its social environment, become part of the child's psychic world (Vygotsky 1962). These social and psychological processes are called *mediation and appropriation*, and they represent two sides of the same developmental process in which the child simultaneously becomes a socialized and unique person (Rogoff 2003; Wertsch 1985). From this basic standpoint, it follows that a person is actively involved in their own socio-cultural development through the process of cultural-personal co-construction (Valsiner 2012). Consequently, each person is an integral part of shared culture, but is also unique, because there are no two

3 For more on the definitions of culture, see Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952.

4 What is specific for cultural psychology in comparison to evolutionary psychology is that it considers cultural development qualitatively different from biological and evolutionary development (Vygotsky 1997). What differentiates a human being from other animals is life in a culture which is trans-generationally transmitted, and changeable in biologically unpredictable ways. Social adjustment of a human being is also changeable and unpredictable, and, therefore, insusceptible to natural scientific laws. According to Lev Vygotsky, the key feature of cultural development is revolutionary, not just evolutionary progress (ibid.).

identical cultural developmental processes in the interplay with the cultural environment (Zittoun 2012). Nor is the cultural environment homogeneous, but rather a synthesis of different and changing cultural niches. Additionally, the same cultural content can have different meanings to different persons (Vygotsky 1962), which is the point where psychology meets anthropology.

Cultural psychology as a meta-theoretical position takes an interest in the whole complexity of the human condition, not only particular processes or behaviors, and is, therefore, marked by heterogeneity (Valsiner 2012). The main philosophical influence on cultural psychology comes from symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and semiotics (Bakhtin 1982; Dewey 1922; Mead 1934; Wittgenstein 1958). Inspired by philosophy, three general directions of cultural psychology can be distinguished (according to Ratner 1999): a symbolic approach, activity theory, and individual approach. Carl Ratner, one of today's most relevant cultural psychologists, elaborates four main, mutually-conditioning principles of cultural psychology (*ibid.*: 21–25):

1. *Psychological phenomena are essentially cultural.* Psychological processes form through participation of an individual in social life. They embody characteristics of social life forms, and generate behavior that reflects features of social relations. This principle combines sociological and psychological perspectives on the human condition.
2. *The cultural essence of psychological phenomena consists of practical social activity.* Individuals are primarily involved in social life through their participation in socio-cultural practices, which represent culturally and institutionally organized behaviors aimed at fulfilling the practical needs of everyday life (e.g., playing, working, giving birth, learning, managing, being medically treated etc.). The emphasis is on practical activity, rather than on general mental processes. The psyche is thus able to appear multiple, have sundry thoughts, sensations, feelings, experiences and behaviors, always regulated by social rules. This is the main focus of the cultural-psychological studies conducted by Michael Cole, Barbara Rogoff, Yrjö Engeström, etc.
3. *Psychological phenomena are organized through social concepts and symbols.* Symbols, as well as psychological functions, appear on two levels: primarily on the social, and second on the psychological. The transition from one level to another occurs through the process of symbolic mediation. Among the most prominent cultural psychologists with this focus of research are Richard Shweder, James Wertsch, and Tania Zittoun.
4. *Individuals actively make meaningful social activities, concepts, and psychic phenomena.* Individuals have agency, or the capability to act, but only within the limits of available social activities. Active participation and the individual's freedom to act in a cultural world is the main focus of the Danish cultural psychologist Jaan Valsiner, founder of the most current scientific journal for cultural psychology.

Since the renewal of cultural psychology in the nineteen nineties, various lines and aspects of research have developed (Valsiner 2012). Research is carried out using different units of analysis (practical activity, symbolic mediation, social interaction, discursive positioning, cultural objects and resources, personal narratives etc.), and different levels of analysis (micro, mezzo, macro level), but also on different types of cultural development (ontogenetic or phylogenetic). The overall problem is a synthesis of the different approaches, but the general goal is to approach research phenomena as complex ensembles of meaningful units in a dialectic relationship (ibid.). Cultural psychologists agree upon the premise that cultural-psychological phenomena are and should be treated as holistic, relational, complex, and contradictory, but also always contextual and symbolic. The missing piece from this comprehensive account of human conduct is a coherent set of relevant scientific methods, corresponding to complex units of analysis (Valsiner 2009, 2012), as well as research directions that can question the status quo and incite social change (Engeström, Mietinen 1999).

## Culture and Self

In cultural psychology, cultural worlds are conceptualized as intentional worlds, inhabited and pervaded by human meanings and purposes (Shweder 1991). These worlds are the products of human agency, which is dynamic and constructive in that it is involved in the cultural production through everyday social interactions. Nevertheless, it is also constrained within a cultural framework. For its part, culture is not conceptualized as homogeneous, stereotypical, and static entity (Adams, Markus 2004), but as “explicit and implicit *patterns* of historically derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts; cultural patterns may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action” (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952: 357). Therefore, culture is not concerned only with reflexive and conscious institutional patterns, but also with those that regulate and give structure to everyday activities. Cultural patterns are at the same time sedimented products of collective human history and historically contingent. The world people inhabit is always already patterned, yet remains to be forged.

By focusing on subjective cultural features only, there is a risk of culture being seen exclusively as ideological reality that regulates our lives from above (Adams, Markus 2004; Bruner 1990). Inversely, cultural patterns are material as much as they are, so to say, mental, since the two domains are not clearly delimited. The world of objects is saturated by personal meanings, and the mental world is mediated by material objects. Cultural patterns are ideas and their objectifications in the given social structures, practices, institutions, and artifacts we encounter through our daily lives.

Now that we have established the definition of culture suitable for psychological analysis, we turn to the definition of self that is suitable for socio-cultural analysis. In this paper, the self is defined as a situational *position* that functions

as a frame of reference or central point, from which a person can act in their environment, according to variable feeling of agency; on the other hand, this position is more or less stable and coherent, given the narrative possibilities for creating autobiography, which correspond to the demands of certain social and historical context (Bakhurst, Shanker 2001; Benson 2001; Harré 1979). That kind of self is conceptualized as variable, fluid, and unstable, but with the capability to act in the social world, and whose possibilities of self-interpretation/ reflection depend upon available resources within the given socio-cultural framework. Resources or tools are the products of culture, which determines and regulates the possibility of self-creation. The primary function of the self is to *locate* us within different fields of experience and quotidian situations, on the crossroads of social possibilities and opportunities. The cultural self is dialogical and extensive, because it is distributed across different aspects that are not only mental or corporeal, but also inclusive of other people, personal belongings and preferences, routines etc. (Benson 2001; Hermans 2001; James 1890). Those aspects are not given outside the self, they are constitutive of it (Mead 1934). The dialogical self represents the potential of the self to be produced through dialogue of its different positions embodied in different cultural practices and narratives (Hermans et al. 1992). Not only is it dialogical, but it is also performative in the sense that it is embodied in practical social activities and essentially *able* to occupy multiple positions that bear differential possibilities (du Toit 1997; Hermans 2001). Therefore, the cultural self is inevitably political and potentially transformative.

### Social Identification in Cultural Code

By adopting the cultural-psychological framework, this article aims to understand the way people identify through positioning in discursive interactions (Wortham 2001), as well as the cultural shaping of that positioning, which takes place through symbolic and material mediation (Holland et al. 1998). In other words, people are not carriers of certain social identities; they participate in activities and stories that shape them in certain ways and are intelligible to other people. The socio-cultural interpretive framework provides a perspective on the person as social actor in cultural worlds and events, where they meet and interact with other people (Vagan 2011; Wertsch 1993; Wortham 2001). Cultural elements constrain, and thus define personal identifications through a process of symbolic mediation (Wertsch 2007). Cultural elements are appropriated into symbolic resources for one's self-construction (Zittoun et al. 2003). Myriad cultural artifacts provide people with agency and identity by expanding and restricting human activity (Cole 1996). Therefore, who we are or how we experience our self depends on the practical social activities and interactions in which we participate and on the symbolic resources we use on those occasions.

Now, to be a member of a particular cultural community is to identify with it, to participate in its practices, to be actively involved in the production of

its culture by using its artifacts and languages (Vagan 2011). The usage of artifacts, however, is usually unconscious and implicit, because it takes place daily, through taken-for-granted practices and rituals, such as brushing teeth or saying a prayer before a meal. Cultural mediators determine the degree of freedom of self-construction (Wertsch 2007). There are not infinite ways to identify ourselves because in a given society there are not infinite artifacts to mediate those identifications, nor are they even all equally available to all members. The very foundation of our self-definition is limited by potential cultural worlds of who we *can be* in a given society, in a given period of time, in a given situation, and with certain people (Bruner 1986; Vagan 2011). The domain of the *potential* is defined by available ways of being in a society, given social positions, but also by the way we relate to them (Taylor 1985).

This discussion touches upon the dual nature of cultural artifacts (Cole 1996). On one side, the world is abundant with pre-given cultural artifacts. On the other, we selectively use certain artifacts in the process of interpersonal self-construction and self-positioning. Appropriated or consumed, artifacts are resources organically incorporated into our personal experiences and activities and becoming their integral part (Vygotsky 1997; Wertsch 1993, 2007; Zittoun et al. 2003). Therefore, artifacts are both cultural and personal construction tools.

The most widespread tool is language, which explicitly articulates our experience and our sense of self. Various linguistic tools are used for the process of identification (Hermans 2001), although the primary one is dialogue, as it is only through dialogue that we learn to use other linguistic tools (Nelson 2003). In order to understand what version of self is performed by certain self-referring statements, we need to go behind the verbal statement into the realm of assumed knowledge which underlies the discursive positioning by which we self-identify (Bruner 1986). What frame of reference, meaning dimensions or lay theories are taken for granted in the process of self-identifying? To be able to understand narrative and social activities through which people identify, we need to become familiar with the characteristics of *figured worlds* invoked in their personal stories (Vagan 2011). Those stories are socially constructed realms of interpretation in which only certain actors and positions are recognized, only certain activities have significance, and only certain outcomes are valued (Holland et al. 1998). Figured worlds are cultures whose interpretive repertoires we use in verbalization of our most intimate experience. By participating in those worlds, we gain resources to conceptualize who we are, what our role is in the here and now, what we strive for, and how we can change (Haug et al. 1999; Wertsch 1993).

Undoubtedly, language is the basic symbolic tool for the construction of an individual position in social activity, but different languages are used within the different social communities we inhabit (Hermans 2001).<sup>5</sup> Each person belongs

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5 By which we do not mean national languages, but colloquial and conventional languages of various informal communities and cultures. For example, a person can say

to numerous communities or collectives and the languages of all those collectives are at their disposal. In that sense, when we speak about ourselves, we always speak using the language of a given collective and, in fact, that is how the collective speaks through us (Bakhtin 1973, according to Hermans et al. 1992). The significance of belonging to a group does not manifest as a cognitive representation of a group in our minds or a “social identity” (Tajfel 1974), but as a collective language we use in our articulation of who we are. Our self is dialogical by way of speaking multiple collective languages which shape what we (actually) say (Hermans 2001). It is not that each ‘I’ in society carries a unique inner ‘identity’, but is rather a polyglot who can take up any number of positions by using various collective languages (Hermans et al. 1992).

Cultural worlds, as well as cultural artifacts, do not only exist in an ideological sphere, but are rather constantly enacted through activities, socially organized around positions of status, impact, and power (Holland et al. 1998). They are always practiced and at the service of people as social actors, who continuously exploit them in their participation in social life. These considerations bring to the fore a radically anti-dualist perspective of cultural psychology and reliance on social context as space of interaction of the social and personal. As such, cultural psychology converges with an interactionist approach to ethnicity (Bart 1997), but it is not limited to processes of recognition and categorization only. Cultural psychology concentrates on the processes of symbolic penetration of the cultural into the individual. Although social context can, depending on the unit of analysis, be approached on macro, mezzo, and micro levels, this paper focuses on micro-genetic analysis in a specific life situation. It analyzes the complex interplay on that level between social and personal identification with social context, cultural knowledge and values, and the concrete cultural activity and social interaction through mediation and appropriation of cultural tools. Unlike mainstream social identity theory in psychology, which generates knowledge on social identity processes as general psychological, i.e., individualistic, processes, this paper aims at a contextually specific theorization about *how* ethnic identification emerges from the *interaction* between a person and their social environment. The premise of the interpretative analysis is the alignment of the general and particular levels, and therefore the cultural content of ethnic identification is treated equally important as psychological processes of ethnic identification (cf. Geertz 1993). The following section applies this general theoretical formulation of the relationship between the cultural and the personal to the specific problem of ethnic identification.

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that he is a “true neutral”, unlike his mother who is “lawful good”, which is only understandable in terms of Dungeons and Dragons character alignment, i.e., represents a collective language of Dungeons and Dragons fans.



## Ethnic Identification: Emerging Subjectivity in the Socio-Cultural Context

### Ethnic Culture

In order to *be*, one has to be *somewhere* (Benson 2001). Being or existing means positioning oneself in different spaces – corporeal, social, mental, personal, spiritual, cosmic, semantic, virtual... which all set the stage for one's place in the world. Place is a personal space that defines one's existence. It is not an abstract position, but one determined by coordinates within the system of physical and symbolic relations. Every attempt at designation of that position – the answer to the question “who am I?” – demands a minimal distance from that very position (Zittoun 2012). Therefore, a necessary condition of existence is place; and a necessary condition of identification is symbolic distancing from that place, i.e., symbolic mediation.

As individuals, we are immersed in dynamic conventional networks of meaning; managing them is easier if they are familiar to us, such as the networks we grew up in, or ones in which we feel at home (Bourdieu 1977). Ethnic culture is one such network, residing along *liminality* between the literal and the metaphoric, the real and the imaginary, the permanent and the temporal, the actual and the possible. It represents the system of meanings organized by certain central principles and values, “from which are deduced or to which are attached a large number of more or less explicit rules about how to live a good life” (Dahinden & Zittoun 2013: 5).<sup>6</sup> Those rules regulate the relationships between various groups of people, such as men and women, juniors and seniors, people of different ethnicities. They also regulate how people relate towards objects, such as traditional dress, flags, religious ornaments, and symbols like anthems, emblems, and gestures. Further, daily life is affected by these rules, in particular moments of transition in life and rites of passage. Finally, these rules regulate one's relation to oneself.

These rules or norms become concrete through language enacted in stories, anecdotes, proverbs and sayings, thus remaining meaningful and understandable in content to ordinary people and future generations. For example, conceiving ethnic belonging through the language of ‘family’, shapes its understanding in terms of health, development, kinship, proximity, ancestry and name, but also in terms of neighborliness, friendship and enmity (Benson 2001). A more specific example from the local context is the so-called Vidovdan narrative, in which Serbianness is defined in terms of loyalty and betrayal<sup>7</sup> (Čolović 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The rules and norms can be institutionalized within state apparatus, especially within ethno-national states like almost all post-Yugoslav countries. This can be done through national legislation regarding the status of ethnic membership of the citizens. These formal institutional aspects are not to be confused with ordinary everyday ones. This paper chooses to theorize ethnic rather than national identification.

<sup>7</sup> Vidovdan (June 28<sup>th</sup> by Gregorian calendar) is Serbian national and religious holiday with a special importance for Kosovo mythology, since that was the date when the

Nevertheless, culture is not only established on the level of normative ideals, but is also always enacted (Harré 1998). Through practical symbolic and physical activity in their everyday lives, people (re)activate cultural principles and norms, or folk wisdom (Dahinden & Zittoun 2013). For example, a young man might celebrate Ratko Mladić<sup>8</sup> as a war hero by posting something to that effect on a social network or by drawing graffiti, which is then seen by thousands of other people. A person can mobilize an ethnic element in a narrowly personal sense, without being aware of its social meaning. The mentioned young man might actually not know exactly who Ratko Mladić is or what role he played in history, posting content online about Mladić merely to be closer to his friends, feel more valued and accepted. A person could even mobilize an ethnic element entirely without reflection or any personal attachment to it. Therefore, an ethnic element can be used and reinforced through mere practice, although multiple layers of underlying meanings and use consequences would nevertheless still be reinforced.

It follows from the definition of ethnic culture that it necessarily intersects with other practices and discourses that define other group memberships. In other words, ethnic narratives and practices are in a direct relation with gender norms and practices, national definitions and interests, age-related norms, and educational obligations and roles. For example, in the nationalist slogan “She to bear children, he to protect” (“Ona da rada, on da brani”), the ethnic and gender dimensions intersect, determining the differences in roles and obligations of a Serbian woman and man. Additionally, this kind of ethnic positioning of a woman is directly related to her body and reproductive capacity, also tied to the political question of demographics. Another example can be found in school curricula, regarding the historical interpretation of the Bosnian War (1992-1995). If a student questions the number of Muslim men killed in Srebrenica in 1995<sup>9</sup>, he may be considered not to have appropriately learned the lesson. Opposing ethnic norms institutionalized through the education system becomes part of being seen as “bad student”. We can see how the idea of the ethnic shifts with the cultural and institutional framework.

### Ethnic Identification

The question arising from previous considerations is, how does an ethnic identification take place? By taking this question at face value and by taking seriously

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Battle of Kosovo took place in 1389. The Battle of Kosovo is one of the most prominent symbolic resources that Serbian nationalists have used during the Yugoslav Wars (1991-1999), up until today.

8 Ratko Mladić is a Bosnian Serb, colonel-general of the Army of Republika Srpska during the Yugoslav Wars, and a convicted war criminal since 2017.

9 Questioning the number of victims on each side during the Yugoslav Wars (Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian) is one of the main resources for the relativization of war crimes, since there are many sources of contradictory information, and many victims are still declared missing.

the selection of the term ‘identification’, rather than ‘identity’, ‘self’ or something else, we can infer that ethnic identification is not something a person *is*, but something that *happens* to them in a given context. In other words, ethnic identification is a complex *act* of meaning making which mutually configures the ethnic culture and the subjectivity of a person. It is integrative, relational, practical, and transforms cultural resources into performances (Wetherell 2008: 74). Identification of a person as a member of an ethnic community is the outcome of interactional, seldom reflexive discursive positioning (Davies, Harré 1990). It follows from this definition that ethnic identification is necessarily situational, but only on one level. By a series of repeated similar interactions and a person’s positioning within an ethnic culture, they can develop a stable self-narrative about their ethnic belonging. With the definition of self from the previous section in mind, stability and coherence of self-identification over time depends upon the availability of certain cultural resources for the construction of self (Bakhurst, Shanker 2001). The durability, persistence, and stability of the self are conditioned by the possibility of generalization from the situational context, which is dependent on the symbolic resources of a given social context and time, as well as the capacity for personal reflection.

Further, apart from performative and relational, identification is also personal. Even though it is always in symbolic mediation or a process of co-construction (Valsiner et al. 1997), it can appear as utterly subtle, intimate personal experience, even bodily sensation. Therefore, certain sounds, smells, and flavors can be associated with an ethnic culture and can initiate a strong feeling of ethnic belonging. On the other hand, some images, stories, or memory flashes can cause revulsion, disgust, terror, and tears. Again, the possibility of experiencing, as well as the quality of experience are determined by cultural elements and norms in a given situation, and the capability of a person to distance themselves and reflect upon the meaning and relevance of what is happening. For example, there is much less space for negotiation of meaning for self and society in a war, where the events are constantly life-threatening, roles and duties are rigidly defined by military hierarchy, than in a friendly discussion over coffee about whether the war in Bosnia was ethnic or civil. The impact on personal experience is different and can also be left out: not everything becomes personally relevant.

### Ruptures and Symbolic Resources

Let us try to be even more specific as we pose the subsequent question: in which contexts does ethnic identification take place? Ethnic culture, among others, is already given, but mostly implicitly. Simply put, in order for our social interactions to unfold smoothly, most of the conventional meanings we use are taken for granted (Bourdieu 1991; Zittoun et al. 2003). In other words, we are not aware of those meanings even though we constantly use them as symbolic resources in the navigation of our social life. Becoming aware of the daily usage of cultural elements calls for a certain *event* to happen, which interrupts

the regular continuity of our experience and requires (re)interpretation. Such events create *ruptures* in the ongoing meaning making and ordinary social interactions (Zittoun et al. 2003). The ruptures can take place at the level of inner experience, when meeting the other person or a strange object, due to physical or imaginary displacement (ibid.: 417). Rupture is a moment of becoming aware of our ethnicity, regardless of occasion. They challenge the process of symbolic meaning making, but also create opportunity for a developmental transition (Zittoun 2006). Symbolic resources stand out as key mediators of the provoked developmental change, as they are used in order to achieve a certain goal in a given social, cultural and historical context (Zittoun et al. 2003). That can be a new interpretation of an event, other people, or oneself. In any case, the new psychic formation implies better adjustment to the social environment. In that case, the symbolic activity of a person becomes mediated in such a way that its features reflect the features of the resource used, and it becomes entangled with a person's interaction with real or imaginary other people, institutions, traditions, who are projected into the here and now (ibid.). Unlike social representations, which transcend the activity of a person (Moscovici 2001), symbolic resources have a concrete actual embodiment in the social activity of a person, and they regulate the person's emotional experience and self-understanding in new ways (Zittoun et al. 2003). The developmental progress does not necessarily imply that a person will be *more* familiarized or identified with their ethnicity, as some other psychological theories propose (Phinney 1993), but rather that the person's relation towards the ethnic culture and community will be *changed*, i.e., qualitatively different than previously, and that they will *feel and act* differently, in accordance with that change. Let us not forget that the choice of symbolic elements used and the specific transformation of one's view on ethnicity does not depend on that person only, but indeed mainly on the socio-cultural constraints within a given context. This includes demands from other people (parents, teachers, peers), social institutions (the state, the school, the media), but also the characteristics of the cultural element itself (whether a gesture, an object, a language), and the psychological capacities of a person (Duveen 2002; Zittoun et al. 2003).

### Ethnic Meaning Making

The next question is, what is it that people do when using (ethnic) symbolic resources (Gillespie, Zittoun 2010)? There are at least two answers to that question from the cultural-psychological perspective: they *create meaning* and *establish boundaries* in order to make the world around them readable, valuable, manageable (Bruner 1990; Dahinden, Zittoun 2013). Specifically, creating meanings and setting boundaries make it easier for people to navigate the complex networks in which they are positioned and to live a good and virtuous life. Through the process of meaning making, individual activity becomes involved in the socio-cultural dynamics within a given context. This process makes possible the immediate communication of a person with other people,

by reminiscing about past times and spaces, and imagining future ones (Dahinden, Zittoun 2013). The objectification of ethnic meanings in the available texts, images, gestures around us translate into specific symbolically mediated shapes, colors, smells and other sensations, which provide the basic condition of organizing and understanding the complex and chaotic world around us, but also our own place in it (Bruner 1990; Valsiner 1998; Vygotsky 1962). Thus, ethnic culture or system of meanings, as shared conventions about certain norms and values, become appropriated as personal experience. Only through appropriation of ethnic cultural elements does a person begin to understand themselves as a member of an ethnic community and their place in an ethnic culture. That process is always socially guided practice (Rogoff 2003; Valsiner 1998). And the meanings created can be compared with ones already established, prompted, or constrained by them. The outcome of ethnic meaning making depends upon the already mentioned rupture, which disturbs the inter- or intrapersonal status quo (Dahinden, Zittoun 2013).

On a collective level, ethnic meaning making is part of ethnic history making, where people can have different roles vis-à-vis the usage of ethnic elements. For example, subversive usage of a symbol will more likely problematize than reinforce the symbol. On the other hand, ethnicity is always entangled with the broader game of political and social forces that dictate possibilities and limits of the use of cultural elements: government institutions, national and international legislation, political and ideological movements, mass media – all participate in the production of symbolic repertoires for promoting certain interpretations and practices, while disregarding others (*ibid.*). Therefore, ethnic meanings are determined in the interplay between the personal, interpersonal, and the cultural, in the complex network of power, through setting boundaries in a dynamic movement between *what is not, what can be, what cannot be* (Valsiner 2007). Ethnic identification is positioning within that game.

### The Position of a Subject

Finally, in a configuration of socially contextualized ethnic identification, how does a person emerge? How can we conceptualize the uniqueness of a single person in a shared socio-cultural milieu? If we imagine cultural and social history in constant flux of (re)production of meanings and tensions in which individuals also participate through guided cultural practices (Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1997), unique personal subjectivity appears as a *possibility of distancing* from the immediate context, from the *here and now* (Zittoun 2012). Again, in order to answer the basic question of identification – “who am I?” – one has to occupy the position outside the immediate, implicit, taken for granted participation in the production of culture and society. The appearance of such a position is supported by cultural and social discourses, as well as personal experience. Self-understanding in terms of ethnic belonging is constituted through the *knitting model* – continuous creation of personal patterns from the semiotic threads of social and personal history (*ibid.*).

A dynamic, star-like model (ibid.) represents a viable interpretative path for the current emergence of subjectivity from the social and cultural configurations in a specific situation. In this paper, it has been applied to the phenomenon of ethnic identification. The mutually constituting elements of the star are the specific situation (orientation in time and space), real or imaginary others, the intersection and mutual dependency between personal strivings of a person and social norms activated (the relation of inherent tension), the possibility of the tension resolution by distancing from the situation and creating meaning out of it, and, finally, the activity of a person who leaves traces of their relations with the world. The pattern of traces in time constitutes the unique trajectory of one's life course. The activity of a person, whether reflected or not, conforming to social norms or not, represents the expression of their subjectivity (ibid.: 268).

In a particular time and space, one's personal history, made up from series of interconnected autobiographical events, intersects with the history of an ethnic community, given in the form of relevant cultural elements, actors, institutions, which are structural, but also present in the specific situation. One's personal experience of ethnic identification, as an aspect of one's subjectivity, appears in a unique way of dealing with the present situation. The broader perspective of a series of relevant situations provides an insight into developmental dynamics between a person and their ethnic community. That dynamic is determined by a dialectic relationship between an individual and society, which is characterized by tension and contradiction, and not by linear movement towards accord. Capturing this dynamic requires suspension of identity logic for understanding the relationship between person and society, because neither society nor the person remains the same over time, and an individual is never just a simple exemplar of an ethnic community.

The question of temporality now becomes relevant. The irreversibility of time flow makes each point in a stream of consciousness unique in its present-time position (James 1890). In the very next moment, that point is no longer immediately experienced, its position already subject to transformation in the configuration of past, present, and imagined future (Boyer, Wertsch 2009). A transformation of this kind is necessary for the perception of a society, other people, and self as stable in the constant flux of time. It is provided by the resources of culture we use to mark the events and experiences by leaving traces behind our existence – proverbs, lullabies, tattoos, graffiti, jewelry, photographs (Zittoun 2012). The translation of traces, but also complex systems of meaning, into our minds, enables us to think, feel, understand, create, act, to *live* in a society (Valsiner 2007; Vygotsky 1997).

According to Tania Zittoun, the emergence of subjectivity represents the transformation of a person into subject. It is simultaneously socially constituted and capable of distancing from the constitutive practices, in order to *remember, reflect, and imagine* (Zittoun 2012). The first thread of creation of subjectivity are social and cultural discourses that locate us in certain socio-cultural time and space. The second thread is the sum of our past personal experiences: that

which we have done, felt, suffered, that which we believe in, and hope for. In the knitting produced from these two threads, unique patterns appear. They are unique, based on the fact that there are no two persons with the same socio-cultural encounters, nor are there two persons with the same lifepath.

However, knitting does not unfold by the logic of internal determination. The patterns which constitute unique subjectivity are established on the loops of socio-cultural and personal threads, but also in the *gaps* that enable the visibility of loops and patterns (*ibid.*). These gaps hold unactualized possibilities, what is repressed, but also present in its absence. Thus, emerging subjectivity is equally the product of creation as of non-realization, actualization as much as possibility, repetition as much as originality.

## Conclusion

Theorizing psychology of ethnic belonging is important, at least where ethnicity is a (crucial) part of national politics and everyday life, which is the case in the post-Yugoslav region. Psychological scientific inquiry usually takes what people think, feel, and do as mere evidence, failing to interrogate the mechanisms by which socialization processes lead to certain psychological functioning. Moreover, it fails to interrogate the mechanisms that allow people to participate in society, which consequently results in confirmation and further reinforcement of the status quo (Reicher, Hopkins 2001).

This leads to the conclusion that we now have the theoretical tools to escape conservative theorizing of ethnicity or nationality in psychology. Those tools have been at hand the whole time, remaining intact in the collision between the positivist and interpretivist perspectives in psychology. However, cultural phenomena demand that context be taken into consideration, and psychological research interest calls for a more complex and variegated view on human experience and activity. What people think, feel, and do is the question of social as much as it is the question of personal (lack of) ability.

The new kind of theorization allows us to understand the relationship between a person and their ethnicity as a process of socially guided participation of the person in ethnic culture. It enables us to conceive of the person as the *subject* of ethnic socialization in both senses: as subjected being and the center of (free) activity (Althusser 1994). However, it is also open for various kinds of empirical investigation. Therefore, the very theoretical ambiguity, as well as its connection with contextualized everyday life, unsettles theoretical understanding, keeping it open for reformulation and practical application.

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## Postajanje etničkim subjektom. Kulturno-psihološka teorija etničke identifikacije

### Apstrakt

Ovaj rad nudi alternativno teorijsko razmatranje etničke identifikacije u psihologiji. Glavne socijalno-psihološke teorije već su razmatrane kao pozitivističke i individualističke. Nove mogućnosti teorijskog razumevanja otvaraju se kada se u psihološko izučavanje uvedu relacionala i simbolička priroda etniciteta. Ovaj rad uzima kulturu i sopstvo kao dva konceptualna domena socijalne identifikacije, koji slede iz meta-teorijske pozicije kulturne psihologije. Glavni fokus rada je kulturni razvoj osobe u socijalnom kontekstu date kulture, specifično njene etničke identifikacije, u cilju čega posmatra nekoliko procesualnih aspekata. Prvo, etničkoj kulturi se pristupa kao vodećem principu i praksi u svakodnevnom razumevanju i iskustvu sopstvenog etniciteta. Drugo, etnička identifikacije se smatra socijalnim i ličnim aktom kreiranja značenja, koji se dešava u datom socijalnom kontekstu, kroz praktičnu aktivnost i diskurzivno pozicioniranje osobe. Treće, s obzirom da se etnicitet ne razmatra kao svesni

aspekt pripadnosti, već se podrazumeva i uzima zdravo za gotovo, rupture se razmatraju kao destabilizujući događaji koji stvaraju prilike za reinterpretaciju etničkih značenja i razvojne promene. U procesu kreiranja značenja, simbolički resursi se smatraju primarnim samo-konstruišućim oruđima, koji su istovremeno konstruišući za kulturu. Kreiranje etničkih značenja se teoretizuje kao centralni socijalno-psihološki proces kroz koji etnička kultura i osoba kao etnički subjekat nastaju u istorijskoj perspektivi. Na kraju, jedinstvenost singularne osobe u zajedničkoj etničkoj kulturi konceptualizuje se na osnovu simboličkog distanciranja od neposrednog socijalnog konteksta kroz model pletenja ličnih i socio-istorijskih semiotičkih niti.

**Ključne reči:** kulturna psihologija, etnička identifikacija, subjektivnost, kreiranje značenja, simbolički resursi, ruptures