

Adolescents' Interaction with People of other Nationalities as a Condition for The Formation of National Identity: Between Separation and Unity

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ABSTRACT: The article analyzes adolescents' communication with peers of other nationalities as a prerequisite for the formation of national identity. Theoretical analysis has shown that communication based on shared meanings and social interaction is a necessary condition for human existence in a community, and that national identity is formed through participation in cultural, moral, and linguistic traditions. Empirical data revealed two sides to the experiences of adolescents. The positive side consists of curiosity about other cultures, openness to differences, common interests, and a positive attitude of foreigners towards Lithuania, which strengthens intercultural ties and pride in one's identity. However, some adolescents also experience discomfort: communication is hampered by language barriers, lack of self-confidence, formal contact lacking emotional closeness, and sensitivity to others' indifference towards Lithuania. These factors limit intercultural interaction and show that national identity in adolescence influences both openness and tendencies toward isolation. The study emphasizes that consistent intercultural education can become an important tool for strengthening adolescents' cohesion and positive national identity.

KEYWORDS: Adolescents, Nationalities, Interaction, National Identity, Communication.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is considered to be a process in which partners with different experiences meet. It is mutual interaction arising from the need for joint activity and the necessity to share meanings (Pikūnas, Palujanskienė, 2001). Human life is inseparable from other people: from a philosophical point of view, a person's existence in the world is treated as being with others. An individual's sociality is a form of spiritual expression that promotes community, the cultivation and preservation of moral and national values. Moral development is only possible when living in a community that has its own moral traditions, customs, and language (Broniukaitytė, 2002, p. 43). Therefore, national identity is naturally linked to the philosophical existence of a person – being among others, belonging to a certain cultural community. National identity, as one of the essential structural elements of society, has a significant impact on the social foundation, solidarity, and social cohesion (Richards, 2013). According to Barzelis (2012), the formation of national identity based on narrative is related to three main categories: time, space, and relationships (Fig. 1).

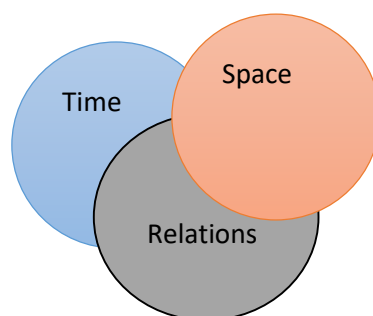


Fig. 1. Categories defining national identity (according to Barzelis, 2012)

In today's world, the space in which national identity is formed is also changing. A. J. Bellamy (2003) distinguishes between two directions of identification. Horizontal identification means the interaction and competition of national identity with other identities – religious, regional, hybrid, etc. Vertical identification is when identity is structured through a person's relationship with a higher authority (Barzelis, 2012). Today, horizontal identification is becoming increasingly relevant, as national identity manifests itself at various levels of society and in various social spheres: economics, education, religion, culture, etc.

Adolescence is perhaps the most significant period for the formation of solidarity with the nation and national identity, as it is during this period of life that individuals search for themselves and develop their self-awareness and self-esteem (Fürst, 1998; Petrulytė,

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2003; Kalpokienė, 2005; Boyd and Bee, 2011; Gonzales-Backen, 2013; Fleck and Fleck, 2013; Kriščiūnaitė-Ragelienė, 2014; Kiviruusu, Huurre, Aro, Marttunen, and Haukkala, 2015).

Psychologists distinguish the essential stages that ensure the process of joining a group and, at the same time, the formation of identity. E. Erikson (2004) emphasized two important dimensions: commitment, related to an individual's decisions on various identity issues; exploration – searching for one's identity in various areas of activity, solving problems, setting goals, and forming beliefs. Other researchers (Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, and Meeus, 2008), combining the ideas of J. Marcia (1966, 1993), created the Meeus-Crocetti model of identity (The Meeus-Crocetti model), which presents three intertwined components: commitment, depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment, considered to be the main processes of identity formation. This model can be oriented toward the active process of national identity formation, emphasizing the reconsideration of commitment to the group (Fig. 2).

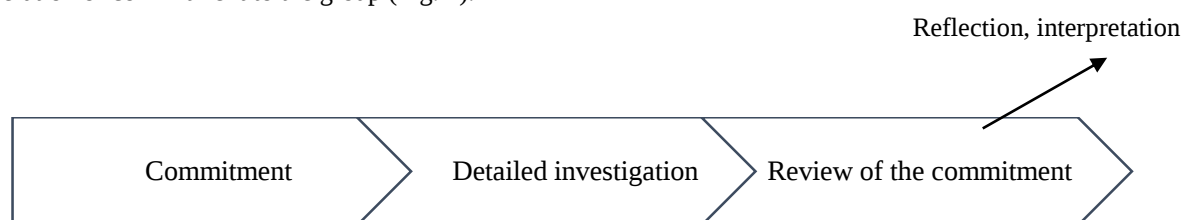


Fig. 2. Three-factor model of identity (based on Crocetti et al., 2008)

It should be noted that commitment is linked to important areas with which the individual identifies and has chosen. A thorough investigation involves participation, the implementation of commitments, and consideration of one's choices (Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, and Meeus, 2008; Pociūtė, Kairys, Urbanavičiūtė, and Liniauskaitė, 2014). The final process is the reconsideration of commitment, when answers, meaning, and value are sought, in this case by identifying with the group. At this stage, short-term negative effects may become apparent and doubts about commitments may arise (Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, and Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, and Meeus, 2010; Pociūtė, Kairys, Urbanavičiūtė, & Liniauskaitė, 2014).

It is precisely at the end of early adolescence that national consciousness and the importance of identity formation intensify, when physical maturation ends from a biological point of view, and significant changes take place in the areas of cognition and morality, independence increases, a vision of life is formed, and a sense of identity strengthens (Jovaiša, 2007). Identity is formed through social activity: it is reinforced by social activism, creativity, involvement in community life, and commitment to the national community. In this context, adolescence takes on particular significance – a period when relationships with oneself, others, and various social groups are formed. Interaction with peers of other nationalities becomes both a challenge and an opportunity: it can promote openness and cultural sensitivity, but at the same time cause anxiety and feelings of exclusion or alienation. Given the importance of communication and community for the formation of national identity, **the problem question is stated: how do adolescents communicate with peers of other nationalities?**

The aim of the research is to reveal the characteristics of adolescents' communication with peers of other nationalities.

METHODOLOGY

The participants were selected for the qualitative research using a targeted selection of typical cases. In this study, the sample size for the qualitative research was 78 essays collected from Lithuanian pupils, which were analyzed using content analysis, taking into account the criteria of scope and content fulfillment. The data collection method used—a semi-structured essay—allows for the application of minimal "frames," i.e., key statements, without restricting the participants in the research and their freedom of expression in writing. Based on their life stories, or narratives, the students revealed the expression of their national identity and the prerequisites for their educational development.

ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH DATA

The first category, "**Factors promoting communication,**" is illustrated by five subcategories (Figure 3).

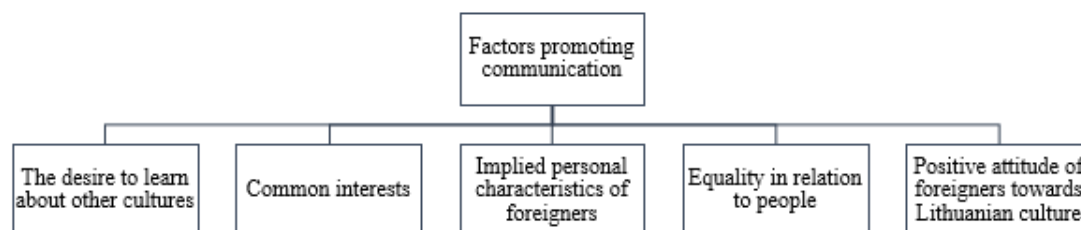


Figure 3. Characteristics of students' positive communication with peers of other nationalities

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When communicating with people of other nationalities, the *"Desire to learn about other cultures"* becomes apparent: "As I mentioned, I am tolerant. I enjoy and find it interesting to communicate not only with my compatriots, but also with people of other nationalities. Their traditions, holidays, and even food are different and interesting" (No. 117). *"Common interests"* is another subcategory that encourages communication between members of different nations: "We are united with other compatriots by our hobbies, perhaps school, music..." (No. 158). "We are united by hobbies, music, and nature, which is admired not only by Lithuanians but also by people of other nationalities. I respect people of other nationalities because they have a different outlook on life. They enjoy every day, which few Lithuanians understand" (No. 616).

In the third subcategory, *"Implied personal characteristics of people of other nationalities,"* the participants' admiration is noticeable: "It is much more difficult with people of other nationalities, but more interesting. We are united by our outlook on life, because most people of other nationalities are friendly and always willing to help without expecting anything in return. I have never heard of such Lithuanians. People of other nationalities are more sincere and friendly than Lithuanians" (No. 76).

In the fourth subcategory, *"Equality among people,"* students emphasize that when interacting with people of other nationalities, one's personal position and attitude toward other people are very important: "As a Lithuanian, I am no different from people of other nationalities. I am tolerant and understand that we are all human beings, regardless of nationality, skin or hair color, or religion" (No. 117).

Another factor encouraging communication with people of other nationalities is the *"Positive attitude of foreigners towards Lithuanian culture"* expressed by the survey participants: "I like communicating with people of other nationalities, e.g. I have a friend from Poland and it's so nice that she wants to learn Lithuanian and is trying hard to do so. She would like to speak like a real Lithuanian because she thinks that Lithuania is a beautiful and friendly country. I think about living in Lithuania and would like my children to be Lithuanian too" (No. 456).

The second category, **"Factors causing discomfort,"** consists of three subcategories (Fig. 4).

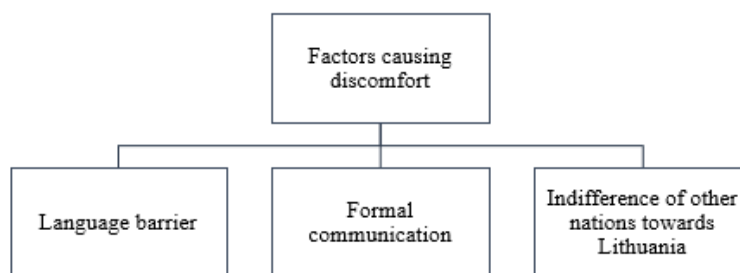


Figure 4. Barriers arising when communicating with peers of other nationalities

The first *"Language barrier"* is associated with: "I feel uncomfortable when communicating with other compatriots, and if I don't know the language, it's better not to communicate at all. We are united by something, I don't even know what" (No. 102); "I feel uncomfortable communicating with people from other nations because I don't speak their language well" (No. 275). The second subcategory, *"Formal communication"* does not reveal any inner motivation or interest: "It's just communication. I don't feel any great antipathy towards them, but if they are with us, we are with them, i.e., we will help them if they reciprocate" (No. 17). The third subcategory, *"Indifference of other nations towards Lithuania"* was revealed by the participants as follows: "I also had to communicate with people of other nations, but I couldn't feel completely myself with them, knowing that they didn't even know where my beloved homeland was located. I was ashamed of them" (No. 44).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Theoretical insights show that communication, as interaction based on shared meanings, is essential for human coexistence and community life. Because a person's existence is inherently social, national identity forms through belonging to a community that transmits moral, cultural, and linguistic traditions. As a key structural element of society, national identity strengthens social cohesion and solidarity. Its formation is dynamic and depends on time, space, and interpersonal relationships, through which individuals internalize collective narratives.

2. The study revealed that adolescents' communication with peers of other nationalities has clearly positive aspects. First of all, when interacting with people of other nationalities, adolescents demonstrate a desire to learn about other cultures, and cultural differences become not a barrier but a resource that encourages curiosity and openness. Communication is also strengthened by common interests, such as music, nature, or hobbies, which become a universal link between young people of different nationalities. The statements of adolescents also highlight and positively evaluate the personal qualities of people from other countries – friendliness, sincerity, and helpfulness, which some respondents perceive as exceptionally attractive.

3. The principle of equality also becomes an important basis for communication, with teenagers emphasizing that all people are equal regardless of nationality, race, or religion, and tolerance is seen as an essential prerequisite for communication. Finally,

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adolescents are also motivated by the positive attitude of foreigners towards Lithuania and Lithuanian culture – for some young people, this reinforces the meaning of intercultural communication and their sense of pride in their own nation. Together, these aspects show that adolescents' intercultural connections can become a significant factor in strengthening openness, mutual understanding, and positive national identity.

4. The study showed that although some adolescents value intercultural contacts, others face various emotional and communication difficulties. First of all, the most obvious obstacle is the language barrier, which causes self-doubt and avoidance of initiating contact when adolescents doubt their ability to communicate properly. This experience often leads to social isolation and avoidance of intercultural communication. The second problem that has emerged is formalized communication, where contact with foreigners is perceived as superficial, based on the logic of mutual service, but lacking deeper personal connection or genuine interest. Such communication dynamics do not create emotional closeness and do not allow intercultural trust to develop. The third cause of discomfort is related to the indifference of people of other nationalities towards Lithuania, which adolescents interpreted as a lack of appreciation for their nation or identity. Such situations caused confusion, discomfort, and even shame, preventing them from feeling comfortable in intercultural relationships. In summary, the discomfort experienced by adolescents stems from communication barriers, limited interpersonal motivation, and a sensitive relationship with their national identity, which becomes an important factor in assessing intercultural interaction.

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