

ETHNIC AND PERSONAL IDENTITY ENHANCE LIFE SATISFACTION OF BULGARIAN AND ROMANIAN YOUTH

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Abstract: *This study compares youth in Bulgaria and Romania by examining differences in ethnic and personal identity and their relation to well-being. Participants were 178 Bulgarian and 211 Romanian youth (15-19 years) who provided data on their ethnic identity, personal identity and life satisfaction. Results showed that Bulgarians reported higher personal identity commitment and exploration, whereas no group differences were found for ethnic identity and reconsideration of commitment. A good fit was found for a path model in which strong ethnic identity and achieved personal identity (high commitment and exploration but low reconsideration of commitment) lead to enhanced well-being in both groups.*

Key words: *ethnic and personal identity, Bulgarian and Romanian youth, well-being.*

1. Introduction

In adolescence, well-being is strongly interrelated to the process of identity formation. The development of a coherent and organized sense of identity [9] is a key task in adolescence and can be captured by the interplay of ethnic identity and personal identity achievement [3]. Ethnic identity refers to the process of maintaining positive distinctiveness and feelings associated with a sense of group belonging [14], whereas personal identity can be captured by the interplay of three identity processes: *commitment* (choices made in identity relevant areas and self-confidence derived from these choices), *in-depth exploration* (the extent to which youth deal with current commitment and

reflect on their choices), and *reconsideration of commitment* (comparisons between current commitments and other possible alternatives and efforts to change present commitments). This study compares youth in Bulgaria and Romania by examining differences in ethnic and personal identity and their influence on well-being by addressing two important literature gaps. First, there is surprisingly little work on the joint influence of ethnic identity and identity commitment on well-being. Second, much work investigates only one cultural group in one country; therefore cross-national studies are rather scarce. We apply a comparative approach to investigate youth in Bulgaria and Romania because similarities (common history of

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post-communism) and differences (economic development) in these countries may be particularly salient in affecting youths' identity processes.

2. Identity and Well-Being

Erik Erikson [9] was the first to suggest that a coherent sense of identity is a core task for adolescents. Based on his seminal work, Marcia [11] proposed an identity status model that distinguished four identity statuses, based on the amount of exploration and commitment of adolescent experiences. The combination of exploration and commitment leads to four different identity statuses of *achievement* (exploration leading to identity commitments), *foreclosure* (commitments without much exploration), *moratorium* (exploration of different alternatives without clear commitments) and *diffusion* (lack of exploration of identity alternatives). Recently, more nuanced models of identity formation that take into account developmental process in identity have been proposed [10], [13]. For example, Meeus and colleagues [3] proposed a three-factor identity model focused on the developmental dynamics in identity formation by including commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment.

Closely related to personal identity is ethnic identity, as another central issue for adolescents. Ethnic identity refers to maintaining positive feelings and a positive sense of ethnic group membership [14]. Extant research has shown that both personal and ethnic identity relate to psychological well-being and adjustment. Across different groups, strong ethnic identity has been consistently found to promote enhanced levels of well-being [16-17], [19]. However, in contrast to the widely investigated relation between ethnic identity and well-being, little research has

been devoted to the joint relation of both personal and ethnic identities to psychological outcomes, a gap this study was designed to address in a sample of Bulgarian and Romanian youth.

3. The Current Study

This study was set up to examine whether youth from two neighbor countries (Bulgaria and Romania) with a similar post-communist history differ in their levels of personal and ethnic identity and how these identity domains jointly contribute to their well-being. We choose Bulgaria and Romania because both countries have undergone a dynamic period of economic and political transition following the fall of the communism in the late 1990s. These transitions were also followed by vivid increase of ethno-nationalistic feelings and strong sense of ethnic identity [18]. Therefore, we sought to investigate these relevant processes for adolescents from two intriguing contexts for the study of identity and well-being. In so doing, we address two primary research questions:

(1) Do youth in Bulgaria and Romania differ from each other with respect to their identity processes? In line with prior research (Dimitrova et al., 2013), we expect higher scores of each identity domain in Bulgarian than Romanian youth (Hypothesis 1).

(2) To what extent identity relates to psychological well-being of youth in the two countries? Consistent with prior work [16] we test a model on how youths' psychological outcomes are influenced by their personal and ethnic identity. In line with the hypothesized model and previous research, we expect direct relations between personal and ethnic identity and psychological well-being (Hypothesis 2).

4. Method

Samples and Procedure. Data were collected from a total of 178 Bulgarian and 211 Romanian adolescents with a mean age of 16.96 years ($SD = .75$). The samples were recruited from a total of four public high schools in Sofia (Bulgaria) and Brasov (Romania) from June to October 2012. Students were interviewed with a paper and pencil questionnaires in classrooms following school permissions to conduct the study.

Measures. Demographic Characteristics. Information about participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and family SES was collected.

Personal Identity. We employed the U-MICS [3-4] to assess the three-factor personal identity model in both countries. The U-MICS consists of 13 items rated on a response scale ranging from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*) such as "My education/best friend gives me certainty in life" (commitment), "I think a lot about my education/best friend" (in-depth exploration), and "I often think it would be better to try to find a different education/best friend" (reconsideration of commitment). Reliability of the U-MICS subscales, in terms of Cronbach's alphas, was found to be adequate for our samples with values in the range of $\alpha = .78$ and $\alpha = .84$.

Ethnic Identity was measured with nine-item scale [6-7] with responses given on five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*absolutely agree*). Sample items were: "I feel that I am part of my ethnic culture (e.g. Bulgarian / Romanian)"; "I am proud to be a member of my ethnic group" and "I like being Bulgarian/Romanian". Cronbach's alphas were $\alpha = .72$ (Bulgarian) and $\alpha = .85$ (Romanian).

Well-Being was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale [5], [15], using 5 items evaluated on a 7-point scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items are "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "I am satisfied with life" and showed an internal consistency of $\alpha = .72$ (Bulgarian) and $\alpha = .74$ (Romanian).

5. Results

In addressing our first hypothesis, we examined group differences in identity between Bulgarian and Romanian groups, using multivariate analyses of covariance. Next, we tested our second hypothesis concerning the relation of identity on psychological outcomes in Bulgarian and Romanian groups using a multigroup path analysis [1]. Fit indices adopted to interpret the model fit were the χ^2 test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; recommended value $\leq .08$) and the comparative fit index (CFI; recommended value $\geq .90$) [2], [12].

First, we applied a MANCOVA with group (2 levels) as independent variable, personal identity (commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment), ethnic identity and well-being as dependent variables and SES, gender and age as covariates. The multivariate test was significant, Wilks' lambda = .96, $F(1, 387) = 2.83$, $p < .01$, (partial) $\eta^2 = .036$. The analyses revealed a significant group effect for personal identity commitment and exploration. Specifically, Bulgarians reported higher personal identity commitment ($F(1, 387) = 8.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .021$) and exploration ($F(1, 387) = 7.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .018$), whereas no group differences were found for ethnic identity, reconsideration of commitment and life satisfaction.

Second, we tested our second hypothesis in a path model using AMOS [1]. Multigroup analyses testing direct relations among identity and well-being in Bulgarian and Romanian groups were

computed. The structural weights model showed an excellent fit, $\chi^2(19, N = 389) = 19.89$, $p = .069$, CFI = .995, RMSEA = .051. The associations of identity and well-being within both groups were all

statistically significant. The path model shows that strong personal identity and feelings of ethnic identity enhance well-being in both groups (Figure 1).

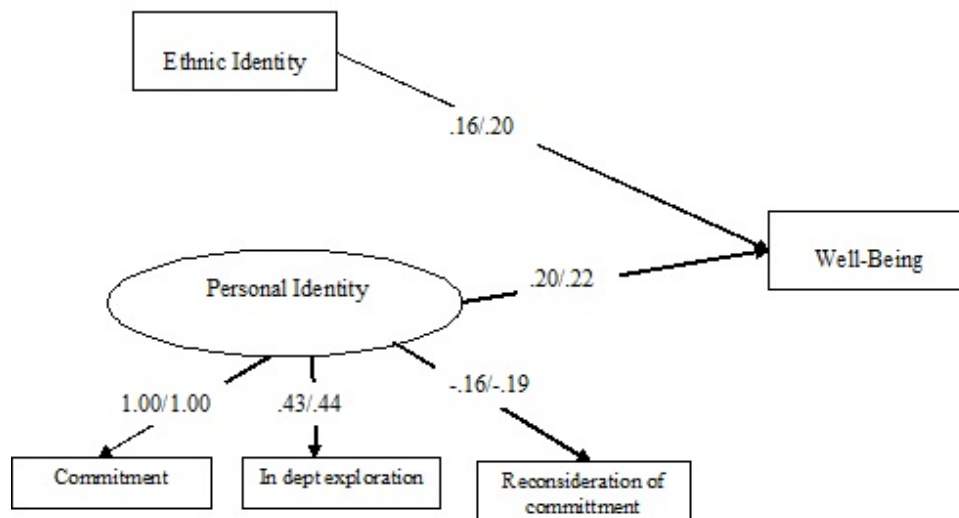


Fig. 1. Path Model for Ethnic and Personal Identity and Well-Being of Bulgarian and Romanian Youth

Note. The parameters represent standardized coefficients for the structural weights model. The loading for commitment was fixed to 0 in the unstandardized solution model. First parameter on the arrow is the coefficient for the Bulgarian sample, the second coefficient refers to the Romanian sample. $\chi^2(19, N = 389) = 19.89$, $p = .069$, CFI = .995, RMSEA = .051. All parameters are significant at $p < .001$

6. Discussion

The main objective in this study was to examine identity and well-being of youth from two former communist countries in Eastern Europe. Additionally, we sought to explore how identity influences well-being in these two groups testing direct relations between identity on psychological outcomes. With regard to our first hypothesis on group differences, only two personal identity domains differed significantly in Bulgarian and Romanian groups. Bulgarian participants, showed higher personal identity commitment and exploration, whereas no

group differences were found for ethnic identity and reconsideration of commitment. Possibly, Bulgarian rather than Romanian youth are more exposed to issues related to their identity commitment and active exploration of identity options. Arguably, the higher SES status of Bulgarian group in this study may partly account for such difference as youth may have more stimulating environment in navigating their identity options. With regard to ethnic identity, we did not find group differences in the expected direction. This finding was not in line with our predictions and past research. A previous study confirmed that for

Bulgarian youth, national attitudes toward their country and ethnic group are more important than for their Romanian counterparts [7]. The authors explain these differences in light of longer history of severe ethnic tensions and policy of assimilation and intolerance of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria compared to Romania. Therefore, Bulgarian youth may be more supportive of their ethnic identity as a reaction to perceived threat to their culture.

With regards to our second hypothesis, we found a consistent relation between identity and well-being outcomes in Bulgarian and Romanian groups. This set of findings provides additional evidence to previous studies on the relation between identity by replicating these in a sample of Bulgarian and Romanian youth. We can conclude that Romanian and Bulgarian youth develop a strong sense of personal and ethnic identity, which in turn fosters their psychological well-being. These findings also underscore important commonalities with respect to identification of youth living in two different countries – such that feelings of belonging to the ethnic culture as well as coherent sense of self, promote a greater sense of well-being.

Our findings provide a comparative perspective on identity in Bulgaria and Romania; however, there are some limitations that need to be addressed. One limitation of the present study is that our findings derive from Bulgarian and Romanian contexts. It may be advisable to sample adolescents in other countries in which youth might have different identity formation experiences. Further research is necessary to examine how aspects of commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment are represented across different conditions relevant for identity formation among youth in other countries. Additionally, future studies may include minority groups in the countries we have investigated here. Our study was concerned with mainstream

samples only, thereby limiting our ability to generalize any observed effects to other groups in these countries. Additional replication in ethnic minority groups in Bulgaria (Turkish-Bulgarian and Roma) and Romania (Roma and Hungarian) may increase our confidence in the current findings.

In conclusion, we found support for the cross-cultural generalizability of the hypothesized model on identity and well-being. Our findings point out that strong identity commitment and exploration are more salient for Bulgarian compared to Romanian youth. However, despite such group differences in identity domains, we were able to provide empirical support for a model, showing that independently of cultural background, when youth feel good about their personal sense of self and ethnic culture, they achieve better psychological well-being.

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