Gender Specificities of Ethnic Identity Transformation in Cross-National Interaction of the Russian

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Abstract. The transformation of ethnic identity in the course of migration transition has a profound impact on psychological adjustment of migrant to inhabitancy in a new region. The survey is aimed at studying into a gender aspect of ethnic identity transformation in the process of migration. The paper summarizes the results of the survey on people of the Caucasian and Central Asia descent living in Russia. The techniques used include individual in-depth interviews and subsequent group discussions. New concepts into the socio-psychological discourse are introduced: "soft patriarchy", as well as primary and secondary (basic) ethnic identity. The findings allow the authors to argue that changes in ethnic identity can be considered at two levels: formalized relations and interpersonal relations.

1. Introduction

Till the 1950s, socio-psychological studies into migrants focused on the structure of migration flows and their economic and demographic parameters. Since the 1960s the focus has been shifted (thanks to women’s and human rights activist groups and socio-political movements) to “gender studies”. On a world-wide scale, the number of female migrants has reached 50% [1], which approximately constitutes 2% of our planet population [2]. Barbara Ehrenreich defined this as “the female underbelly of globalization” [3]. In the Russian Federation women make up almost 33% of all the migrants, and we believe that the increasing number of women is a worldwide feature [4]. Changes in gender structure of migration greatly affect many aspects of civil life on a whole, for example, as Y. P. Zinchenko and his colleagues argued: “An individual’s gender identity is built upon meanings and social categories attributed to males and females in his or her culture” [5]. The following researchers contributing to the issues of female migration are worth mentioning: M. Morokvasic [6], N. Piper [7], H. Zlotnik [8], N. Oishi [1], A. V. Tolstokorova [9], E. Yu. Mescherkina [10] and others.

The transformation of ethnic identity in the course of migration transition has a profound impact on psychological adjustment of migrant to inhabitancy in a new region. The migrant’s social success in a host poly-ethnic region and, consequently, his feeling of security greatly depends on flexibility of his ethnic identification. Ethnic identity as a multimodal phenomenon incorporates a multitude of components (linguistic community, gender interaction, spirituality, axiological settings, traditions, etc.) which are in a dialectical interaction and bear a socio-historical, conditional character.

Acculturation of foreign-born individuals in new life conditions can be divided into two levels:
—At the level of socialization and formalization (working relationships, interactions with authorities and social institutions);
—Interpersonal, informal communication (partner relationships, family, friendship).

At the first level, acculturation is realized through behavior, by way of imitation, without the individual’s in-depth involvement into the process—this is a “primary”, relatively rapid integration into a new ethnos. Observing all social rules accepted in a new social group the individual minimizes threats and risks of interethnic conflicts. As the results of our study show the majority of immigrants are able to meet these challenges, reflecting the behavioral patterns and group
interactions of the ethnic majority. This social mimicry testifies to the fact that migrants have a primordial sensation of threat, insecurity, fear of self-revelation and the following social ostracism—these ideas are voiced by almost all the migrants-respondents, but in the course of social integration and a longer period of stay in the host country, these fears become less pronounced. The main reasons for these sensations are xenophobia and nationalism which are quite common among representatives of lower classes of the host society. Socio-psychological conflict resides in the fact that without the opportunity to engage in a well-paid and status-associated job migrants have to get in contact with most hostile social layers of the society, and women are the worst affected. This aggravates social tension on either side of ethnic “barricades”: host population view migrants as their competitors on the labor market, and migrants make judgments about host population on the basis of a narrow social sampling. In situations of conflict and confrontation the choice of the migrants’ majority is to unite against a common threat from native citizens resulting in social segregation on grounds of ethnicity and risk of interethnic clashes. Comfortable interaction in a poly-ethnic region is directly associated with a sense of security irrespective of gender.

These facts allow us to suppose that judging the transition of national identity and the integrity of immigrants based solely on behavioral level (social mimicry) is insufficient for creating a complete socio-psychological picture. It is important to investigate what we define as a secondary adaptation, i.e. informal communication at an interpersonal level—with friends, family members, etc.—as it is in this cluster that ethic attitudes and values alter rather slowly since they are linked to “the core” of the individual. In the course of informal communication where the risks of social rejection are minimal, the individual has greater opportunities to realize his/her fullest personality. This type of acculturation is accompanied by social imitation, consequently, it has a more durable, resilient character.

2. Methods

In the grant framework, in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted. The study consisted of two stages: an individual in-depth interview and the focus-group discussion in the respondents’ ethnic-friendly environment. The aim of the analysis was to study ethnic identity transformation at the informal level (migrants’ perceptions of partnering relationships as well as changes in a gender aspect of ethnic identity). The given aspect of ethnic personality code is most prolonged and constant since it involves siblings’ relations and basic personal values, hence it is more difficult to copy, and its changes are rather slow. The sampling involved 50 volunteers, Kazakhstan-, Armenia-, Azerbaijan- and Uzbekistan-born respondents from mono-ethnic regions of post-Soviet republics. The subjects, males and females aged 21-45, were equalized by gender. The period of stay varies from 6 month to 28 years. In both cases a male psychologist, the host population representative, acted as a moderator.

3. Results

Practically all the respondents mentioned differences in gender perceptions accepted in their motherland (conventional, patriarchic, anti-feminine, and male-oriented) and in the Russian Federation. About 95% of female migrants noted that they had reviewed, or were in the process of reviewing traditional allocation of gender roles moving to “soft patriarchy” (any woman can have more rights, but a man is still the master of the family; divorce is a great tragedy for a woman but it is not her fault, etc.). It should be noted that single females are more likely to be prepared for these changes than married women. The female respondents shared the ideas of “soft patriarchy” (as we defined this concept) during individual interviews only. They did not express these views during group discussions—they were afraid of being criticized and judged by male compatriots. The concept of security with regard to migrants is linked to both the external threat from dominant ethnic majority and intra-ethnic threat associated with social criticism from the referent group of countrymen. The first group requires alteration of ethnic code; the second one can take it for betrayal, i.e. migrants face a double threat: interethnic and intra-ethnic. According to A. I. Dontsov
and E. B. Perelygina words, “a great deal depends on the subjects of trust relationships, and every personality and the society on the whole can act as such” [11]. In the course of migration, the newly formed socio-psychological personality capital (new attitudes and values, stereotypes, behavior norms, etc.) is not always actively accepted in the native ethnos, sometimes, it can come under fire. As a result, interethnic tension translates into intra-personal conflict.

Despite the female sampling tendency towards “soft patriarchy”, all of them recognize only the mono-ethnic marriage; none of the respondents has ever heard of the couple consisting of the Russian husband and the orient wife (the idea of “soft patriarchy” has its limits in the female mind). They believe males belonging to their native culture will be more reliable, secure, putting family interests first—even if they have extramarital affairs. In case of divorce the father will not leave children and financially support his first family. Drawing cross-cultural parallels one can say that a Russian woman perceives marrying to a foreigner (American, European, etc.) as a certain success strategy including social ascent; for orient women this strategy is unacceptable. At that, they treat migration to Russia as a success. We see the reasons for this in “clannishness” of their social structure and its vertical orientation; in a tough hierarchy typical of Orient and Middle Asian culture, the stronger these tendencies are presented, the less individuality is valued, and the more social pressure is. Within this cultural tradition, the people belonging to this ethnos provide a basic sense of personality security.

Despite of gender, the focus group representatives criticized premarital sex, but during personal interviews, male respondents thought they might have premarital love affairs but they would not marry the girl with such an experience. Two married females told about their husbands’ infidelity, in both cases they blamed themselves for failing to protect their families and husbands (even taking into account the fact that both marriages were arranged by their parents). Our counseling practices with people of Caucasian and Middle Asian descent have repeatedly confirmed this trait—a wife’s deep remorse for husbands’ infidelity, sometimes the idea of “guilt” entails not only spouse identity but also maternal identity: “if my husband has been false to me, it would mean that I was not only a bad wife, but also a bad mother”. These cultural beliefs about the institution of the family are quite typical of Muslim families where marriage is seen as the delegation of custodial power of a bride’ parents to her husband’ family custody, hence, submission to husband and his family and protection and a sense of security in return. Women often become prisoners of these gender roles: in this culture, semantics of femininity does not imply women’s freedom and independence; close, clan-type family makes any protests and resistance useless. Any conflict provokes social isolation and misunderstanding of the people around.

The male respondents also produced some interest remarks: admitting ethnic differences between native and host cultures, for the most part, noting that “it is better to date with Russian girls, but to set a family with a girl of the same nationality”, they rarely tolerated mixed marriages to the Russian girls; they described the latter as more scandalous, capricious, and disobedient. The attitude to such men within the diaspora does not change for the better. One can say that it is prescribed in orient mentality that a woman is obliged while a man has a right. In the course of migration, these beliefs undergo transformations but even two generations ahead bear these settings (the respondents agreed that they taught their children the same lessons but in a softer variant). Females demonstrate a greater flexibility and readiness for changes (due to their lower status) but they are not ready to assume responsibility for their own choices and, generally, are satisfied with a secondary benefit from the line-up occurred. Publicly, males share variants of interaction offered by their native ethnos but at the level of behavior (privately) they can deviate from the prescribed variants of action. Here we deal with a double ethnic game: traditions of the native ethnos are followed on the surface, but privately (when compatriots cannot see) a meltdown of traditions is observed, males try to benefit from cultural exchange with the Russian more eagerly but these equal rights are denied to women. The representatives of young generation appear to be agents of ethnic identity social transformation. However, with due regard to reverence for elders, which is embedded in orient mentality, the youth influence is reduced to low values.
4. Conclusion

1. Changes in ethnic identity can be considered at two levels: formalized relations and interpersonal relations. The former is characterized by social mimicry and flexibility. They are reflected in behavior and have a certain effect on the value of basic personality. The latter is more rigid and is integral to the individual’ personality construct and basic personality principles.

2. In the situation of interethnic interaction and transformation, the participants review some values, principles, behavior patterns of their own ethnos in favor of their comfort. If women are more inclined to discuss "soft patriarchy", then men are more active in gaining socio-psychological benefits from double ethnic identity.

3. The concept of security with regard to migrants is linked to both the external threat from dominant ethnic majority and intra-ethnic threat associated with social criticism from the referent group of countrymen.

The results are obtained based on the survey administered to Kazakhstan-, Armenia-, Azerbaiddzan- and Uzbekistan-born respondents (Caucasus and Middle Asia are mostly Muslim countries). The results are relevant, in the first place, to people of this descent.

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References


