THE ISSUES OF 'ETHNICITY', 'IDENTITY', 'MULTICULTURALISM' AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The human beings use to ascribe themselves and others to certain groups and dividing world for 'them' and 'us'. We should re-think the role played by ethnicity concept in social sciences, common sense knowledge and practice in contemporary world. But the turn from ethnic or national identities to other ones is just the first step in my opinion. The second step in the same direction is to try to answer the question: does it really make sense for sociologists and anthropologists to investigate identities or we rather have to investigate people's action and their behaviour? Moreover, if only we agree on these points we have to re-think the role that scholars play in the process of interpretation of the world by modern people, because the interpretations that we produce as 'experts' do not exist only in an 'academic world'. They are in use by ordinary people as well as by politicians, and that is why those interpretations have visible practical consequences. Hereby I would like to discuss possible alternatives to ethnically based understandings of the issues of the 'ethnicity', 'identity' and 'multiculturalism'. I'll start with the description of the research experience that made me concerned about the issues pointed out.

KEY WORDS: socio-cultural anthropology, ethnicity, identity, multiculturalism, social groups, imagined communities, social sciencies.

ANOTACIJA

Žmogus visuomet susitapatina su tam tikromis "mes-grupėmis" ir sukuria ribas, atskiriančias jas nuo "jie-grupių". Tai gali būti etninio – nacionalinio, religinio ar klasinio – identiteto apraiškos. Šiuolaikiniam žmogui būdinga priskirti save ir kitus asmenis nacionalinėms valstybėms ir "įsivaizduojamoms bendruomenėms". Tokį požiūrį politikai panaudoja savo žaidimams, taip skatindami smurtą ir sukeldami konfliktus bei karus. Šiame kontekste kyla natūralus klausimas, – ką mes vadiname "etniškumu", "identitetu" ir "daugiakultūriškumu" (angl. multiculturalism)? Ar daugiakultūriškumą būtina sieti su etninėmis kultūromis? Kaip tada vertinti profesijos, vartojimo, laisvalaikio ir kitų gyvenimo praktikų "kultūras"? O gal kalbėdami apie daugiakultūriškumą kaip ateities socialinę struktūrą turėtume praplėsti šios sąvokos turinį? Jei sutiktume su tokia nuostata, turėtume permąstyti mokslininkų (ypač socialinių mokslų atstovų) vaidmenį pasaulio interpretavimo procese. Kitas socialinių mokslų atstovų žingsnis turėtų būti perėjimas nuo "identitetų" prie išsamių ir kruopščių "žmogaus elgsenos" studijų.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sociokultūrinė antropologija, etniškumas, identitetas, daugiakultūriškumas, socialinės grupės, įsivaizduojamos bendruomenės, socialiniai mokslai.

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I am quite far from idealistic supposition that human beings could avoid ascribing themselves and others to certain groups and dividing world for 'them' and 'us'. However I believe this division for 'them' and 'us' should not unavoidably causes to wars and mass deaths. We should re-think the role played by ethnicity concept in social sciences, common sense knowledge and practice in contemporary world.

But the turn from ethnic or national identities to other ones is just the first step in my opinion. The second step in the same direction is to try to answer the question: does *it really make sense for sociologists and anthropologists to investigate identities* or we rather have to investigate people's action and their behaviour?

Moreover, if only we agree on these points we have to re-think the role that scholars, especially social scholars, play in the process of interpretation of the world by modern people, because the

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interpretations that we produce as 'experts' do not exist only in an 'academic world'. They are in use by ordinary people as well as by politicians, and that is why those interpretations have visible practical consequences.

In this article I would like to discuss possible alternatives to ethnically based understandings of the issues of the 'identity' and multiculturalism. I'll start with the description of the research experience that made me concerned about the issues pointed out.

The research: cases, informants and field work

Between the years of 1997-1999 I and colleagues of mine from the Centre for Independent Social Research conducted a **research project** in St. Petersburg. In 1999 - 2000 I did the research project myself, which was a continuation of the first joint research project. The purpose of both projects was to investigate the problems of integration of migrants form Caucasus region in St. Petersburg as the most problematic and conflict-prone group in public discussion in St.Petersburg and Russia

Our target group was *recent economic migrants*. There were some reasons for the choice of such a group as a subject: the group of recent economic migrants is the least integrated into the urban community and its participants are weakly adjusted to the new conditions of life in the 'alien' context. The high competitive ability of migrants from the Caucasus in certain spheres of activity (for instance: in trade), their distinctive appearance, which differs from that of the local inhabitants, as well as the sharp differences in cultural and everyday practices, result in the ascribing of negative features to these migrants and lead to an increase in hostility with respect to 'Caucasians'.

Me and one of my colleague – Olga Brednikova – we collected our data during two years of participant observation among Azerbaidjanians and Tajics at St.Petersburg vegetable markets. In these both research projects we used research tactics of case-study. Our main informants were two families from the town of Gyandja in Azerbaijan and two males from Tadjikistan who immigrated without their families. The 'length of migration' of our informants was approximately two years. We investigated the new social networks, the living strategies and the everyday practices of migrants in the context of their life stories. We used *qualitative methods:* participant observation that we combined with in-depth interviewing and talks. During the period of two and half year we visited market places in St. Petersburg to communicate with our informants.

Does ethnicity matter for economic migrants?

As being "good young scholars" at the beginning of the research project we started to read a lot of literature based on research of ethnic migration and ethnic Diasporas that were conducted in the US and Western Europe. Thus, from the day of starting field research we knew what phenomena we were looking for: it had to be ethnic community with some informal or even formal organizations; with some strong links between all the representatives of a certain ethnic group; and with an economy which is organized on the basis of "strong ethnic solidarity" (See: Ligh, Karageorgis, 1994, Waldinger, Ward, Aldrich, 1985, etc.).

However, fortunately, we were enough "sensitive" (Blumer's term (1954)) while doing our field work; this allowed us to get interesting findings instead of framing Russian reality by western theoretical concepts.

The first thing we discovered in our research was the following one: in spite of heir large numbers, the Azerbaijanis as well as Tadjicistanis of St. Petersburg do not form any united ethnic

community with clear boundaries, collective consciousness, articulated group interests or strategies. Each diaspora of St. Petersburg consists of *various social milieus* which are relatively closed and have a weak interaction with each other. There are several criteria of distinctions between these milieus: the length of time resident in the city, the level of adaptation, social status, etc. The combination of these characteristics forms *diverse social communities and boundaries between them*. There are, for example, scientists or successful businessmen connected with Azerbaijan etc., who do not communicate with market traders and, moreover, try to make a strong border with them, to stress a difference between themselves and those "dirty and wild" recent migrants. So, boundaries between these milieus are quite strong and important, in *spite of the fact that people who compose these communities formally belong to common ethnic group or have similar ethnic identity*.

Further, we explored that the *economic networks of the migrants from the Caucasus in St. Petersburg are not based on the co-ethnic criterion*. If speaking about identities, the biggest role is played by territorial ties, neighbourhood; familial or friendly identities also matter. Besides, we found that the identity of economic migrants was very important for our informants. We also realized that day-to-day life of our informants who were economic migrants (that is why their day-to-day life included economic activity to great extent) was structured by several principles which have nothing in common with ethnicity or any other identity.

We distinguished at least five important principle which structure life, activities, interactions and social networks of our informants:

- Easiness in interaction (i.e. simplicity, lack of obstacles; usage of common language which scholars usually identify as a sign of meaningful ethnicity in fact belongs to this reason: migrants, as well as everyone, feel better and more comfortable when communicate by familiar language, it has nothing in common with ethnic identity);
- Rationality (benefit which is the most important goal for economic migrants and they do not hesitate to scarifies so called ethnic solidarity to get benefit);
- *Trust* (which backside is possibility of control: some scholars stress trust between co-ethnics as an ethnic resource (Ligh, Karageorgis, 1994, Waldinger, Ward, Aldrich, 1985, etc.) but we found this trust is usually rooted in other types of links kinship, neighbourhood, former experience migrants never trust each other only because they belong to the same ethnic group; but another reason for trust among migrants is a control: they trust to those who they could control (reach, influence, apply sanctions) through the migrants' community);
- Pressure from outside (from recipient society: 'locals', including local authorities, police but also philistines – have much more resources to impose their own interpretation of reality to 'newcomers'; therefore, since locals consider all 'Caucasians' belonging to (more or less) the same ethnic group – they force them out, put them altogether in the same space – physical, legal, social and symbolic);
- Space (i.e. simple physical space of living and working migrants as many other people communicate with who they share the same physical space space of work, of leisure, of living, etc.).

None of these points concerns ethnicity (apart from the 'pressure from outside' which is rooted in ethno-nationalistic view, but this is 'imposed ethnicity' often not felt by migrants themselves), however, all of them are crucial for migrants' life conducting.

Let us draw a brief conclusion for this data we collected from the field: we realized that ethnic identity though took place and was among most important identities for our informants (especially

- when we asked them about it), however did not play so important role in their everyday activities. It meant for us two things among many others:

- our informants employ many other identities apart from ethnic or national to act, to
 live, to survive and to prosper in migration; or in other words: it was not ethnic or national
 identity that became a material for creating their new social networks, for choosing social
 encounters, for building their life in new conditions. Even though they were a kind of people who were strongly prescribed to ethnic minorities by local majority;
- 2) an importance of ethnicity/nationality for our informants economic migrants who might be prescribed to ethnic minorities was often an artefact, a product of interpretation of scholars, whose interpretations were based on the same 'common sense' and 'taken for granted' 'everyday knowledge' (ethno-methodological terms, Garfinkel, 1967) as views and interpretations of 'ordinary people'; at the first stage of the research we ourselves were scholars who shared this common sense based approach but later we could come over it.

Let me explain the second claim. Just imagine the situation we observed while our fieldwork. People from the country side of 'Leningrad oblast' come to market place in the early morning as wholesale traders: to sell big portions of good – green grass – to retail traders who are supposed to sell that green grass by small portions at the market place during the rest part of the day. There are at least three possible interpretation of this activity – in terms of identities:

- 1) 'Russians' sell goods to 'Azeries' and 'Tadjics',
- 2) 'Locals' sell goods to 'migrants',
- 3) *'Whole sellers' sell goods to 'retail traders'* usual economic transaction which take place everywhere at any market system.

I claim now that if scholar pretends to make a sort of what Clifford Geertz called 'thick description', means to give a description which shows the situation in its context and take into consideration perspectives of its participants, then this scholar is supposed to think a lot before giving the interpretation #1 and describing the situation in ethnic terms. First of all, because it is not clear – what does it mean – 'to be Russian or Azery'! And further: even if we knew, what does it mean 'to be Russian or Azery' for those people, are we sure they interact with each other as 'Russians' and 'Azeries' in that exact situation? I really doubt. In the article I wrote altogether with my colleague we claimed that ethnically based interpretation of this situation is one which is far from real subjective meanings of those people, meanings that determined their activities, their interaction with each other at that market place (Brednikova, Pachenkov, 2000). This conclusion brought me to the point concerning the influence of scholars to social order.

'Dangerous ethnicity' versus 'homo ethnicus' or what shall scholars do?

Some years ago, anthropologists refused to use the 'race' concept and I think there are reasons to do the same with the 'ethnicity' concept. The main reason for this is that ethnicity, which is closely connected with nationalism, is a political phenomenon and a lot of danger is hidden in it (Anderson, 1998, Hobsbaum, 1983, 1990, etc.). First of all, it is because politicians use concepts produced by scholars in their own ways in according to their own goals and tasks. This is a practical reason. The academic reason is: *scholars should not make up an ethnicity where it does not exist.* Or in other words referring to an ancient philosopher: we should not look for a black cat in a dark room, especially when there is no cat (and especially in a case this cat might turn out to be a tiger). I think economic migration is such a case in some sense. However, we have to mention also

situations when there is 'a cat in the room'. Someone could say that in reality situation is not as clear as we wish it was: sometimes people who we investigate think in the frame of nationalistic discourse themselves and reproduce it in their activity, they act as *homo ethnicus*. This is not a new idea that people in a 'modern age' (including scholars who are people of their 'age' also) prefer to see surrounding reality through nationalism-like eye-glasses. In according to Benedict Anderson this is a feature of modern human beings to ascribe themselves and others to 'nation state'-like 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1998).

But the very fact that this is a feature of Modernity means that the situation is not primordially inherited or given once and for all. Thus we could rise a question about the scholars' positions in this concern.

First of all I would say, yes, sometimes it is impossible to avoid ethnic or nationalistic concepts in a description of investigated reality – because people themselves think in the frame of nationalistic discourse and reproduce it in their activity. And there are no reasons to avoid it in such descriptions. But, description – is not a whole science yet. I think that the task of an anthropologist or sociologist is not to reproduce ethnic or nationalistic discourse following his informants. There is a need for another very important step which is to be done by social scientists: from description to analysis. Scholars have to deconstruct discourse they observed and described, it means to show how did it appear, by whom it was constructed, who is interested in its existence, how does it work today, and what possible danger it brings to people, etc.

The second point is: since we agree that the concept of ethnicity is dangerous but we are not able to avoid it when we describe social reality (because people believe in it and use it), and we agree that we have to deconstruct it – I would like to suggest one possible technique of deconstruction.

Conclusion

There are four main points in my paper and I will make four claims in this concern. They are partly based on the findings of the other scholars, partly – are rooted in my own empirical experience¹; and they look as follows:

1. The methodological point. I believe that social scholars should not investigate 'identities' or 'ethnicities' or 'inter-ethnic relations' or the like; instead social scholars should investigate how people live. By this holistic methodological approach we avoid building boundaries for our professional attention, we would not limit ourselves as scientists and would not bind our fields. By this we could investigate what is important for people, we understand the whole context of their lives. Otherwise we find in our research what we are looking for but this is not how it is getting on in real life of our informants. This is a big question – what is determinative for people's activities, and the answer to this question is supposed to become a result of research – not its starting point, in any sociological or anthropological investigation. Since we start from what we already know – the only result we get will be another evidence for our presumption, nothing else. When we start our research with a goal to investigate (inter)ethnic relations or nationalism – we will get information about ethnicity and nationalism, not about how do people live: and these two issues might be quite

detailed description of the field research and empirical data see also: Brednikova, Pachenkov, 2002.

Materials are based on the article "Looking for a black cat in a dark room: the issues of identity and Multi-culturalism" published in 2004 (Pachenkov, 2004). This article includes brief description of the research projects and some findings which became the background for this and some other papers and articles. For

different. In contrary when we start from the intention to "understand" (Weber's term/approach (Weber, 1978:4)) how do people leave, we realise that dozens of different things are determinative for people's activities: many identities and many other phenomena. We will find ethnicity among them, probably, but in a case we start with the holistic methodological approach we would understand what is an exact place of the ethnicity or ethnic identity in our informant's lives, what role does it play for people – among many other issues. It is quite difficult to cover all the parts and dimensions of the people's lives in one research and to represent them all in the report, and a few people could do that. However we can choose one research focus. And in case we start from the holistic "understanding" approach we would be able to describe the phenomenon we are focused on as an integral part of the whole life of people – as it does exist in real life. Only in this case we would show adequately (for people's experience) what is the meaning and importance of, let us say, ethnicity and ethnic identity for people who we investigate.

2. The issue of scientific ethics. Social scholars should not look for a black cat in dark room; especially when the there is no cat, and even more so the cat could turn out to be a tiger. By this I mean we should not make up ethnicity where it does not exist or do not really matter for people interactions. There are at least two reasons for this 'careful' approach. The first reason is academic: we should not abuse ethnic terms in descriptions and interpretations of social reality when they are not relevant for people's lives and activities, for peoples' subjective meanings – this is against interpretative (Geertz, 1977) and understanding (Weber, 1978) approaches in social sciences. The second reason has political nature: 'ethnicity' is a dangerous category. This is closely linked to nationalism as a political project and is over abused by politicians – this is already good reason to avoid using this category as an analytical one in social sciences. Scholars should not impose ethnicity to their informants – there are many other agents who do this and this is not a task for social scientists at all. Instead scholars should deconstruct ethnicity as a social phenomenon, should split this vague, unclear, complex and dangerous phenomenon in parts. This approach would probably allow us, first, to describe situations, conflicts and interactions we observe in the field, in terms which are rather relevant for our informant's experience, and second, to avoid complication of social conflicts, to avoid reducing them to ethnicity, which is rather a way to stir up the problem than to make it clear and solvable.

'Ordinary people' prefer to reduce an explanation of any situations to ethnic and national categories². But should scholars do the same? Would we simplify any conflict situation and increase its chances to be solved by using this complicated, vague and dangerous concept of ethnicity? Or by this we rather would fog the situation and complicate its solution? Ethnicity is a very complex concept and ordinary people approach to it in a way to save their time and efforts: who cares about 'truth' when there is convenient explanation which fits popular stereotypes!? But scholars should approach to this complexity in the other way. While people prefer to reduce an explanation of any conflict to ethnicity which they understand as a 'coherent entity' (which means they define any

Here is no time and space to go deeper in the explanation of this tendency. To be brief we would just say that this happen because ordinary people still are mainly primordialists in their approach to the nature of ethnic identity. Primordialist approach is based on the believe in "natural" character of ethnic identity. "Naturality" of ethnicity means, among other things, that ethnicity is something a) basic for people's behavior ("whatever we do is determined by our nature") b) unchangeable (if something is natural, you can not change it – only exterminate the "carrier"). Common sense, probably, prefer primordialistic approach because of simplicity of both consequences – simplicity of natural explanations and simplicity of possible solution.

'black skin' person as 'spitfire, cruel and aggressive'), scholars should do something opposite: to diversify the concept, to 'prepare' it, to split it into several separated 'pieces' which are more concrete and transparent than the whole concept. As scientists we have to practice micro approach which means: to go deeper in details, to discover meanings and subjective interpretations of the people. If we would be anxious about this, then we can come to unpredictable results: for instance we could realize that, something called 'inter-ethnic conflict' or 'conflict of ethnic/national cultures' in everyday and political language, turns out to be either economic or personal, or gender, or professional, or economic conflict, or anything else³. But this you discover only in case you go into details and are not too much concentrated on ethnicity concept at the beginning of your investigation.

- **3.** The analytical issue. While we were arguing against 'ethnicity' or 'ethnic identity' as useful analytical categories, some scholars go further in their critic and doubt about usefulness of the 'identity' as an analytical category at all. We would share this approach because in our point of view there are at least three significant reasons for not using identity as an analytical category in social sciences:
 - a) identities are not relevant for people's experience: day to day life of people rather consists of praxis and identities become important only when are problematized (mobilized) by either politicians or scholars (or other agents, like journalists etc.);
 - b) in according to Max Weber the very subject of sociology as a discipline is not identity but social act (Weber, 1978); this means that sociologists should investigate social activity which is probably determined somehow by social identifications but should not be reduced to the latter. We believe that relations between social activity and identities are very complex and complicated, they are linked but this linkage is not simple and linear;
 - probably "identity" as an analytical concept is not relevant and useful for social sciences c) at all because it is empty and contradictory. This point of view was clearly stated by Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in their article called "Beyond identity" (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The authors argued that the concept "identity" is too discrepant, too complex and empty at the same time to be used as an analytical category. Due to several collisions which happen to this term in the process of its existence, and because of some interdisciplinary misunderstandings, nowadays this concept is pretending to mean everything, which is mortal for analytical category: to mean everything is to mean nothing. This is a category of praxis, right, but this does not mean that social sciences should use it as an analytical concept. Probably the very fact that this is a "category of praxis" is already a good reason to avoid using this term as an analytical category in social sciences. Brubaker and Cooper are calling to treat the term "identity" in the same way that we suggested in concern to the term "ethnicity": to approach to this complex and unclear category with micro analysis, to split it for parts which might be described by different terms - more precise and useful, which would have concrete referents in empirical reality (these terms might be "identification", "self definition", "group belonging" etc. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).

Me and my colleague Olga Brednikova experienced this change of "mind" and of "frame of interpretation" in the course of doing our field work among economic migrants from Azerbaijan and Tajikistan employed at market places in St.-Petersburg; see details in: Brednikova, Pachenkov 2002, Pachenkov, 2004.

4. The Multiculturalism issue. What do all the above stated points mean for the concept of Multiculturalism which was proclaimed being an alternative to racist and ethno-nationalistic social orders? I believe this means, first of all, that we should extend pour understanding of the concept 'culture' beyond 'ethnic culture': people form, produce and reproduce myriads of cultures which are important for them, which organise their lives, and have nothing in common with ethnicity. Right, we live in multicultural world but these cultures are not only ethnic ones. Social scholars should remember that, and should work with 'real people' – not with mythological 'ethno-cultural groups' – phantoms which were created by the welfare state and NGOs with support by social scientists, and to which all people are prescribed by force (Radtke, 1999). Otherwise we – social scientists – again become 'experts' who reproduce popular stereotypes by ordinary people instead of analysing them and deconstructing complicated, vague and dangerous terms like 'ethnicity' or 'nationality'.

The second consequence is: we do not need identity concept for multiculturalism approach at all. The multicultural world should not obligatory be a world of identities; this is rather a world of interacting people, who are referring in the process of interaction – verbal and non verbal – to shared meanings and sets of certain symbols, this is world of people who are producing narratives and doing practices.

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"ETNIŠKUMO", "IDENTITETO", "DAUGIAKULTŪRIŠKUMO" SĄVOKOS IR ŠIUOLAIKINIAI SOCIALINIAI MOKSLAI

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Santrauka

Gerai žinomas ir akivaizdus yra faktas, kad žmogus visuomet susitapatina su tam tikromis "*mes*-grupėmis" ir sukuria ribas ar užtvaras, atskiriančias jas nuo "*jie*-grupių". Tokia jau žmogaus prigimtis. Tačiau nenorėčiau teigti, kad yra daug identiteto tipų, provokuojančių smurtą ar žudynes:

tai gali būti nebent etninio-nacionalinio, religinio ar klasinio identiteto apraiškos. Anot Benedict Anderson, šiuolaikiniam žmogui būdinga priskirti save ir kitus asmenis nacionalinėms valstybėms kaip "įsivaizduojamoms bendruomenėms". Tokį požiūrį politikai panaudoja savo žaidimams, tokiu būdu skatindami smurtą ir sukeldami konfliktus bei karus.

Kyla klausimas, – *ar yra galimybė atsigręžti į kitokias identiteto formas, kurios užkirstų kelią masinėms žudynėms?* Nesu toks idealistas, kad įsivaizduočiau, jog žmogus gali apsieiti be savęs bei kitų skirstymo į grupes ir pasaulio dalijimo į *juos* ir *mus*. Tačiau tikiu, kad pasidalijimas į *jų* ir *mūsų* grupes nebūtinai turi pasireikšti karais ir mirtimis.

Be to, greta *identiteto* yra dar vienas reiškinys, vadinamoji *gyvenimo praktika*. Kyla klausimas, ar tokia gyvenimo praktika (praktiniai interesai, poreikiai, kasdienė veikla) nėra svarbesnė įprastam žmogaus gyvenimui negu jo identitetas? Pabandysiu pateikti kitokią problemos formuluotę (galbūt priimtinesnę tiems, kuriems identitetas gyvybiškai svarbus): *ar gyvenimo praktika grįsti įsipareigojimai gali pakeisti (ir faktiškai pakeičia kasdienės veiklos lygmenyje) identitetą, grindžiamą istoriniu-kultūriniu paveldu?*

Taip susiduriame su daugiakultūriškumo (angl. *multiculturalism*) problema. Kitas mano klausimas būtų toks: ką mes vadiname daugiakultūriškumu? Ar daugiakultūriškumą būtina sieti su etninėmis kultūromis? Kaip tada vertinti profesijos, vartojimo, laisvalaikio ir kitų gyvenimo praktikų "kultūras"? O gal kalbėdami apie daugiakultūriškumą kaip ateities socialinę struktūrą turėtume praplėsti šios sąvokos turinį?

Jei sutiktume su tokia nuostata, turėtume permąstyti mokslininkų (ypač socialinių mokslų atstovų) vaidmenį pasaulio interpretavimo procese. Kitas socialinių mokslų atstovų žingsnis turėtų būti perėjimas nuo "identitetų" prie išsamių ir kruopščių "žmogaus elgsenos" studijų.

Problemos, kurias aptariu šiame straipsnyje, atsirado remiantis mano atliktų Kaukazo regiono "etninių migrantų" Sankt Peterburge ir vietinių gyventojų identiteto lyginamųjų studijų, atliktų 1997–2002 metais, rezultatais.

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