

Putting the cognitive turn into practice in ethnicity research: identifying and explaining ethnic cultural cognitive schemas

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Abstract

This article develops a set of empirical strategies for research on ethnicity after the cognitive turn. Despite substantial implicit cognitivisation of the field, the cognitive turn, understood here as an explicit integration of social-scientific approaches with psychology and cognitive science, has yet to become a coherent research programmeme. Announced by Rogers Brubaker in the early 2000s, it remained largely programmematic, partly because field-ready methods were never systematically developed. I first reconstruct the cognitivisation of ethnicity research historically and sociologically. I then propose the “ethnic cultural cognitive schema”, adapted from contemporary cognitive sociology, as a key empirical object. Drawing on studies conducted between 2022 and 2026, I show how such schemas can be identified, described and explained using interviews, elicitation, association tasks, the Implicit Association Test and other methods. The explanatory models link schemas to elements of social structure, especially institutions, and to recurrent acts of perception and communication. I conclude by identifying the limits of these approaches and the methodological and conceptual work still required to make the cognitive turn a cumulative empirical programmeme in ethnicity research.

Keywords: ethnicity; cognitive turn; cognitive schemas; cognitive sociology; Brubaker

Ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a perspective on the world.
Rogers Brubaker

Introduction

The cognitive turn, long overdue but only now becoming explicit across much of the social sciences, has affected different areas of research to different degrees. Ethnicity is a paradoxical case. Its gradual, implicit cognitivisation can be traced back to the Manchester School (Gluckman 1940; Mitchell 1956; Turner 2020 (1957)). Later classics (Barth 1969; Horowitz 2000 (1985); Jenkins 2008) shifted the focus from ethnic groups and their cultures to ethnic distinctions and the conditions under which those distinctions are reproduced, making this approach mainstream in research on ethnicity. Yet it was articulated as an explicit research agenda only in the early 2000s by Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker 2004; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004), and even then it remained more a declaration of intent than an implemented programmeme. Meanwhile, cognitive sociology emerged at the intersection of the sociology of culture (Cerulo 2023 (1998); Cerulo, Leschziner, and Shepherd 2021) and organisational sociology (Delmestri and Greenwood 2016; Lounsbury et al. 2021), explicitly calling for interdisciplinary integration and for revisions to basic sociological ontologies and models of explanation. Ethnic phenomena should be especially productive terrain for this enterprise, both because they may be better explained through tools that bridge the social and cognitive sciences and because they make many of cognitive sociology's central problems unusually visible. Yet within this framework they remain understudied.

The cognitive turn is not only a matter of concepts and theoretical models; it also requires methodological strategies and research designs. This article synthesises the experience of empirically cognitivising research on ethnicity undertaken by the author and colleagues at the Group for Migration and Ethnicity Research between 2022 and 2026. It asks what it means, in practical terms, to put the cognitive turn to work in empirical research and

what this move makes visible. The article centres on the ethnic cultural cognitive schema (Boutyline and Soter 2021; Hunzaker and Valentino 2019). This is not an unproblematic choice. Cognitive schemas have been defined in multiple ways across cognitive science and the cognitive social sciences, and some contemporary models of cognition move away from the concept altogether (Clark 2016). In contemporary cognitive sociology, however, the schema remains an important point of theoretical convergence. I therefore use it to connect the studies discussed below, even though only some of them explicitly focused on schemas when they were conducted.

After a brief historical-sociological reconstruction of the implicit and explicit cognitivisation of ethnicity research, I turn to research designs in which ethnic schemas are, first, identified and described and, second, incorporated into explanatory models. For each design I provide a condensed account of the problem, methodology and results, before showing how a cognitive framing changes the empirical object and the explanation. The discussion then draws out the added value of this approach, its limits and the steps required for further development.

Ethnicity research: from implicit cognitivisation to an explicit cognitive turn

Since the institutionalisation of sociology and anthropology on the one hand, and psychology and cognitive science on the other, researchers have repeatedly tried to cross what is in many respects an artificial disciplinary divide. Indeed, few major programmemes in the social sciences have been entirely untouched by assumptions about perception, memory, classification or reasoning. These attempts nonetheless developed against a strong disciplinary injunction against “psychologism”: explanations that treat social phenomena as products of psychological differences without, in turn, explaining how those differences are socially produced through socialisation and other processes. This purism was theoretically

productive when the object of the social sciences was still being established. Over time, however, anti-psychologism became partly detached from that original function. Once the social sciences had become institutionally and theoretically established, maintaining a bright line between social and psychological explanation became less obviously useful and, in some cases, an obstacle to the broader explanatory project. This applies to theoretical models, research designs and specific methods alike.

It is therefore unsurprising that from the very emergence of the social sciences, researchers whose goal was not to build a strict disciplinary theory but to explain the surrounding world found disciplinary boundaries constraining, and attempts to cross those boundaries were made many times in one form or another. Among classical early examples of such synthesis, with certain qualifications, one can mention symbolic interactionism with its theorisation of the spontaneous *I* and the social *me* (Mead 1934). In recent decades, several programmemes have explicitly called for integrating the psychic and the social. These include Van Dijk's socio-cognitive studies of discourse (Van Dijk 2017), Moscovici's theory of representations (Moscovici 1981), and Zerubavel's cognitive sociology (Zerubavel 1999). The field that has advanced furthest on this issue, however, is what is known as the cognitive sociology of culture, associated above all with DiMaggio (DiMaggio 1997), Vaisey (Vaisey 2009), Lizardo (Lizardo 2017), and others. All these programmemes were, in one way or another, inspired by the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, which substantially changed scientific ideas about the psyche, thinking, and personality. Beginning roughly in the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas began to spread in various forms into other disciplines. Interdisciplinary theoretical models emerged, as did research designs drawing methods and understandings from both sides of the boundary between the sciences of the human "inner world" and the context of that world, as well as works problematizing and attacking that boundary itself.

Paradoxically, however, ethnicity research are not among the fields in which this explicit integration has taken place. Implicitly, this thematic field was cognitivised quite early, but at the same time, perhaps precisely because of this early cognitivisation, an explicit cognitive turn in ethnicity research has not yet occurred. In 2004, in the influential article “Ethnicity as Cognition,” Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker et al. 2004) pointed to the need for a cognitive “recutting” of social research on ethnicity. Yet the article did not become programmatic and was not taken up as a direct guide to action. At the same time, if the cognitive turn as applied specifically to ethnicity is understood as the theoretical, methodological, and substantive integration of the social and cognitive sciences, then once carried out explicitly it would undoubtedly prove productive. After all, in addition to methods, these disciplines have accumulated a huge body of potentially complementary, empirically verified ideas that need to be brought together in order to understand ethnicity as a whole. There are also many gaps that can be closed more effectively by proceeding from such a consolidated understanding, and one of these gaps concerns how ethnicity can be studied empirically “after the cognitive turn.”

“Ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a perspective on the world” (Brubaker et al. 2004, 32). This formulation by the American sociologist Rogers Brubaker aphoristically describes both the starting point of this turn and the ontology toward which it should move. What exactly does this mean? From their emergence and for a long time afterward, the social sciences “thought” in terms of variously named groups. In anthropology, the “science of other societies,” these were first “tribes” and later “ethnic groups,” whose “cultures” and “relations” with one another were to be studied. This simple ontology, however, gradually ceased to withstand the test of fieldwork, which increasingly aimed not merely to describe culture but to explain it. The mismatch between actual cultural patterns and ideas about similarities and differences, circulating both in scholarship and among “ordinary people,”

became increasingly conspicuous. Over time, the study of culture and the study of such ideas were separated conceptually. The field “responsible” for studying the categorisations that people apply to others and to themselves came to be called ethnicity research, while culture was distinguished as a variable separate from, though related to, ethnicity. Whereas previously categories had been treated exclusively as consequences of objective cultural differences, later the very fact of categorical differentiation came to be seen as important for the “production” of cultural differences. Ethnicity studies thus focused on how people categorise other people, why they do so in one way rather than another, and what consequences such categorisation has. Put even more compactly, contemporary ethnicity research focus on a socially shared, differentiating view of the world. This refocusing, from groups and cultures to a differentiating perspective, both spontaneous and institutionalised, can be interpreted as the early cognitivisation of ethnicity research or, as Brubaker writes, an implicit cognitive turn.

How and when did this cognitivisation occur? “Reconstructors” of the field (Banks 2003 [1996]; Eriksen 2010 [1994]; Jenkins 2008) agree on the key role of two principal research traditions that developed in relative independence from one another: the Barthian tradition and the less well-known but earlier Manchester tradition, which became the first classical theoretical and methodological “revolt” against the groupist view then hegemonic in the study of ethnic phenomena. The Manchester School of anthropology focused on different aspects of African urbanism in the mid-twentieth century. Within it emerged the term that most clearly conveys its approach, *tribalism*, defined as a “way of classifying Africans of diverse origins who live together in towns” (Gluckman 1960, 64). According to the Manchester School, tribal categories that “moved” to the city together with rural residents, and in the course of that “move” changed both the concrete sets of people they described and

their social meaning, were simultaneously a prism through which Africans viewed one another and a structure organising interactions among them (Mitchell 1956).

A genuinely broad proliferation of cognitivised ethnicity research, however, was made possible by the work of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth. In the introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Barth 1969), he proposed a radical inversion of the analytical focus of classical anthropology. According to his logic, the key to understanding ethnicity lies not in identifying the content of ethnic culture, but in studying categorisation and its consequences. Ethnicity in this approach is conceived as a form of social organisation within which a relatively stable categorical distinction between groups is maintained. This also means that the object of analysis is not a set of cultural traits, but an institutionalised procedure of categorisation, that is, the “ethnic boundary.” Barth distinguishes two levels of categorisation. The first is interactional: ethnicity is realized in acts of interaction in which certain traits are actualized as relevant for categorisation. The second is institutional: there are stable mechanisms of socialisation, sanctioning, and representation that support the reproduction of this logic of differentiation over the long term. The coupling of these levels constitutes the phenomenon of the “ethnic group” as a social reality. By proposing to shift attention from groups to categories, acts of categorisation and perception, and their social consequences, Barth fundamentally cognitivizes the basic theoretical model of ethnicity research.

Donald Horowitz’s influential book *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Horowitz 2000 [1985]) was also written in the spirit of this implicit cognitive turn. Genealogically, Horowitz largely inherits the Manchester School, refining and generalizing its then more than forty years of inquiry. Horowitz draws attention to the fact that the “language of talking” about ethnicity is to a large extent the “language of talking” about kinship. This is because when, for various reasons, the social and economic ties of people and communities expand, and in the absence

of another way to interpret the proximities/oppositions/relations that arise in new contexts, family and kinship logic begins to be used for this purpose. Put more simply, kinship categories and principles are “transposed” onto non-kin relations, and the key to understanding ethnicity lies precisely in this “transposition.” When he turns directly to explaining ethnic conflict, Horowitz identifies, as one of its elements/mechanisms, the cognitive operation of “comparison,” carried out “through the prism” of categorical membership in a situation of contact, borrowing this move from the work of psychologists Tajfel and Turner. The cognitive is also present in other theses advanced by Horowitz. For example, he writes that an important constituent element of ethnicity is “perceptual judgments of ethnic similarities and differences” (Horowitz 2000 [1985], 75). The list of such “cognitive” statements could be continued.

Given its influence, Horowitz’s book represents the next important step toward the cognitivisation of ethnicity research. Yet from the vantage point of 2025 it also contains obvious anachronisms. One of them is the concept of the “group,” revised only seventeen years after the first edition of Horowitz’s book in Rogers Brubaker’s *Ethnicity without Groups*. Before that, however, another important step toward the cognitivisation of ethnicity research had been made, associated with the name of Richard Jenkins.

Jenkins’s project (Jenkins 2008) consisted in further sociologizing and theoretically clarifying the anthropological constructions derived from Barth. Barth proposed that culture becomes what it is as a result of differentiation and mutual definition/categorisation at “ethnic boundaries.” Jenkins objects that in reality the “cultural material” of ethnic boundaries also matters. Overall, however, Jenkins agrees with Barth and even “intensifies” him, for example in the thesis that culture is not discrete but continuous. Jenkins argues that diversity is not a peculiarity of modernity, and that there has always been substantial actual and perceived diversity. Any history is a history of “creeping” migrations accompanied by constant

categorisation of “everyone by everyone.” Jenkins’s most important extension of Barth’s model, however, is his explicit theoretical focus on “external” categorisations and classifications. Whereas Barth, and anthropology in general for various reasons, including ideological ones, implicitly focused on identity “from within,” for the sociologist Jenkins “identity” is something “imposed,” with the only question being by whom and when. From this, Jenkins concludes that the foundation of ethnicity should not be “identity,” as before, but primarily external classifications or categorisations that are internalized and begin to determine behaviour at the individual level.

On this basis Jenkins makes another important theoretical move. Arguing that ethnicity functions at three levels, individual, interactional, and institutional, he identifies “social realms,” contexts in which ethnicity “takes place.” These contexts include sex, kinship, work, medicine, politics, and much else. He begins, however, with primary socialisation, in which a person “absorbs” representations circulating in society, including representations of how people differ from one another, and ends with science as an important “legitimator” of categorisations and at the same time an arena of struggle in which different elite groups try to “proclaim” categorisations that are more “advantageous” to them. In conclusion, he introduces the so-called “basic anthropological model of ethnicity,” consisting of four points: (1) ethnicity is grounded in cultural differentiation; (2) ethnicity is reproduced in interactions in which cultural meanings become socially shared; (3) ethnicity is fixed and fluid to the same degree that the contexts in which it “takes place” are stable or changeable; and (4) ethnicity is simultaneously collective and individual, externalized in social relations and categorisation and internalized in personal self-identification. Jenkins’s project is a balanced theoretical sociologization of the Barthian revolution in anthropology. Jenkins can be regarded as one of the most important precursors of the cognitive turn, but his research, although focused on perception and categorisations, still “suffers” from groupism, lacks

rigorous methodologies, and is not conceptually integrated with psychology/cognitive science. It therefore cannot itself be called the cognitive turn.

The first attempt to declare such a turn was made by another sociologist, Rogers Brubaker. The key text here is his article “Ethnicity as Cognition” (Brubaker et al. 2004), which became the third chapter, under the same title, of his book *Ethnicity without Groups* (Brubaker 2004). Noting the increasingly central place of categories and categorisations among the objects of ethnicity research, Brubaker observes that categorisation is one of the most important concepts in cognitive research in general and that “without categories the world would be a ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ in which experience and action, as we know them, would be impossible” (Brubaker 2012, 140). Tracing the main approaches to studying categorisations in sociological and anthropological research on ethnicity, Brubaker nevertheless points to their “elitism,” that is, their focus on “categorisation from above,” even though such categorisation becomes socially important only when those being categorised accept it and begin to act on its basis.

Moreover, Brubaker notes, the cognitive turn is much more than a focus on categorisations. It is the study of how ethnicity is conceived by people in general, how ethnic and non-ethnic interpretations of events “compete” with one another, and so forth. More specifically, according to Brubaker, cognitivised ethnicity research should focus on “processes of classification and categorisation, formal and informal <...>; <...> categories and frames around which social comparison and social explanation are organised; schemas, scripts, and cultural models that enable the perception, experience, or interpretation of situations and sequences of action <...>; cognitive biases in perception and information processing that cause us to perceive information selectively <...>” (Brubaker 2012, 158). Brubaker proposes borrowing basic ideas about how people think, and therefore how they think ethnicity, from cognitive science as the science focused on thinking. He stresses that

this should not be seen as psychological reductionism, because a substantial part of the tools of thinking are intersubjective and social in character. At the disciplinary level, he proposes overcoming the divide between the social sciences and psychology/cognitive science, which exists in part because of mutual methodological prejudice, with interviews versus experiments functioning as ideal-typical methods in the respective disciplines. He also formulates the “motto” of the cognitive turn, “ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a perspective on the world,” arguing that “groupist ontologies,” in which variously named ethnic groups were the focus of research, should be replaced by ethnicity as a frame of thought, a way of interpreting reality. But how exactly should research be conducted “after the cognitive turn”? And what might explanatory models look like in this renewed paradigm? Brubaker does not answer these questions, leaving them to the next generation of researchers, among whom Andreas Wimmer became a key figure.

Wimmer’s project (Wimmer 2013) is, on the one hand, a more detailed theorisation of constructivist ethnicity research and, on the other, their empirical operationalisation and a certain, though not complete, methodological formalization. Borrowing Barth’s metaphor of the “boundary,” Wimmer specifies that at the individual level it necessarily functions in two dimensions, categorical and behavioural, and that both dimensions are associated with their own type of “cognitive schemas.” This cognitivisation, however, is then hardly used in the otherwise impressive theoretical modeling whose purpose is to describe variations in ethnicity across contexts and explain them. Wimmer proposes to explain these variations through two broad types of social phenomena: institutions and networks. Institutions are “responsible” for reproducing structures of distribution, inequality, and interest; networks reproduce social worlds, representations, loyalties, resources, and so on. Under certain configurations of interests and institutions, actors will be motivated to choose those boundary-making strategies that allow them to claim greater resources, either by defending

their own, social closure, or by trying to obtain others' resources, as in some versions of nation-building. Sometimes actors will be more or less in agreement about existing boundaries, consensus; at other times, "classification struggles" will unfold, in which actors occupying different positions in the social structure insist on their own versions of boundaries, and in the end coalitions of individuals, networks, that are more resourceful and cohesive will prevail.

These concepts-variables also make it possible to describe and explain boundary dynamics. Institutions and networks that change for one reason or another affect individual interests and boundary-making strategies, and this, in the logic of Giddens's structuration theory, in turn changes institutional and network structures. Wimmer, however, does not limit himself to theoretical models and schemas. In the second part of his book, he describes ways of operationalizing boundaries and the theoretical models outlined above. His methodologies are varied and complex. For example, together with network analysts he studies friendship networks among college students as they appear on Facebook. These networks are constructed both from who is friends with whom and from appearances in joint photographs. Statistical methods that separate so-called baseline homophily from inbreeding homophily make it possible to calculate to what extent friendship with members of one's own ethnic category is explained simply by the presence of such people in the environment and to what extent "ethnic preferences" are also involved.

Cognitive language and the corresponding model are used directly in another empirical study of ethnically mixed neighborhoods in Switzerland (Wimmer 2013, 113–138). In this study, Wimmer and colleagues use in-depth interviews to examine classificatory schemas and scripts of action in four migrant neighborhoods in four Swiss cities. According to the results, ethnic differences *per se*, although one way of classifying and describing people, explain only a small share of what occurs in the neighborhoods, actual classifications and friendships.

Instead, the social world there is structured around a schema the researchers called “order,” a working-class value to which some migrant population groups may conform and others may not. Of all the studies described by Wimmer, this one is the most explicitly cognitivised, but apart from the declaration that cognitive schemas are at issue, cognitive theoretical apparatus is not brought to bear on the study. Moreover, neither in the article nor in the book does Wimmer describe exactly how the interview corpus was analysed and how cognitive schemas were “distilled” from it. Thus, Wimmer incorporated some ideas and concepts from cognitive sociology into his research on ethnicity, but he did not go deeply into them, and the degree to which this cognitivisation penetrates the research designs does not allow one to say that Wimmer realized the cognitive turn.

The researchers named above do not exhaust the set of authors who contributed to strengthening the constructivist framework and cognitivising ethnicity research. Yet constructivist works, projects, and programmemes on ethnicity published from 2000 onward that are comparable in quality and influence, for example those associated with Chandra (Chandra 2012), Laitin and Fearon (Fearon and Laitin 2003), and others, are even less explicitly cognitivised than Wimmer’s project. Thus, by the early 2020s the cognitive turn in ethnicity research, proclaimed by Brubaker as a major research agenda twenty years earlier, had still not been realized, either at the level of concepts or at the level of particular methodologies and studies. This state of affairs became the starting point for the project presented in this article.

Ethnic cognitive schemas as an object of research after the cognitive turn

The cognitive turn is therefore a theoretical and methodological project of interdisciplinary synthesis and, on that basis, a different way of approaching ethnicity. Its feasibility depends to a considerable extent on the growth of the cognitive social sciences, especially cognitive sociology and, to a lesser degree, cognitive anthropology. A companion

article reviews this field (Serebrennikov and Varshaver 2026). For present purposes, it is enough to note that, although a recognisable canon of authors and works now exists, the field has not yet settled on a single set of concepts or empirical procedures. It is better understood as a laboratory in which different ways of specifying and studying cognition are being tested. One concept that recurs across this work, and that can itself become an empirical object, is the cognitive schema. First developed in early research on cognition (Bartlett 1995 (1932)), the concept later became less central within cognitive science but was, in parallel, transplanted into cognitive sociology, where several specifically sociological versions emerged.

In an influential formulation, Boutyline and Soter specify that sociology is concerned with collective or cultural schemas, that is, phenomena analogous to classical social facts, and define such schemas as “socially shared representations deployable in automatic cognition” (Boutyline and Soter 2021, 728). This deliberately broad definition, formulated in connectionist terms as relations among representations, serves as the working definition for the studies discussed here.

How, then, can cultural schemas be studied “in the field”? Cognitive sociology offers several answers (Serebrennikov and Varshaver 2026, pages to be specified before publication), but each remains open to criticism. Operationalising schemas is intrinsically difficult. First, schemas are defined at a high level of abstraction and have no obvious material correlate; neurons and neural networks are not treated as such correlates. Second, the status of “automatic cognition” is itself unsettled. Dual-process models that became influential in cognitive sociology (Vaisey 2009) describe the relation between automatic and non-automatic cognition in different ways, and it is increasingly difficult to define anything simply by saying that it is “located” in automatic cognition. The definition above should therefore be treated as a productive working definition rather than a final one. Even so,

cultural cognitive schemas remain one of the most promising concepts to operationalise in sociological research after the cognitive turn.

The next part of the article describes ways of recording and explaining schemas in ethnicity research. For brevity, they will be called *ethnic schemas* and defined as cultural cognitive schemas one element of which is ethnicity. Ethnicity, in turn, will be defined, as in other works by the author (Varshaver 2024a, 2024b), as the organisation of differences around categories membership in which is predominantly inherited. Importantly, in this case the difference, or act of differentiation, that is necessarily placed at the center of the definition can, in the logic of 4E cognition, be a category, an action, a symbol, an object, and so forth. It is also important that this line of definitions is provisional, as are other conceptualisations at this stage in the development of the field. The projects presented below were carried out in the logic of the cognitive turn, but schemas were far from always their directly articulated focus at the time. Rather, schemas serve here as a common denominator that makes it possible to tell the story of these studies and think through operationalisations of ethnicity “after the cognitive turn.”

Below, these projects are presented briefly with a focus on methodological solutions for operationalizing schemas. The “Discussion” section shows what has been learned from this series of studies as a whole and proposes directions and methodological moves that may be useful in the future.

The empirical basis of these studies consists of projects implemented under the author’s leadership from 2022 to 2026. They included both large-scale nationwide studies using mixed methods and projects focused on one of three regions of Russia: Moscow, the Republic of Dagestan, and the Republic of Bashkortostan. For the purposes of this description, however, individual stages of the corresponding projects could be selected. For each project, the footnote describes the methodology of data collection and analysis, as well as articles and

other works in which the results are presented in greater detail. If the discussion concerns a subproject of a project whose methodology has already been described above, this is indicated separately, together with details specific to that subproject.

How can ethnic schemas be identified and described?

Who belongs to Russian society, and how can one become part of it? Identifying ethnic schemas through interviews

Cognitive schemas, and ethnic schemas in particular, are difficult empirical objects. They cannot be reduced to neurons or neural networks, and they become observable only indirectly, through reactions, judgements, actions and other manifestations. How, then, can a schema be observed, or at least reconstructed from indirect evidence?

One basic route is through classical qualitative methods in sociology, especially interviews and focus groups (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Lizardo 2017). This raises a theoretical and methodological problem: how can one distinguish the “collective representations” that sociology has traditionally studied from cultural schemas proper? Collective representations are routinely accessed through verbal methods, including interviews. Can the same methods be used to study schemas, which are often associated with automatic cognition? Contemporary work suggests that speech and language should not be assigned exclusively to Type 2 cognition (Tomasello 2003; Evans and Stanovich 2013). Interviews and focus groups can therefore, with appropriate caution, be treated as routes to cognitive schemas.

A large-scale study of the ethnic schema of Russian residents determining how “they” can become “us,” and thereby also determining “us,” was carried out in 2024–2026.¹ During its qualitative stage, 40 focus groups and 100 in-depth interviews were conducted in five regions of Russia. The transcripts were thematically coded. Collective analysis involved

¹ The methodology and results of this study are presented in (Varshaver et al. 2024a).

“distilling,” first, separate representations and links between them in coded fragments, then reconstructing individual ethnic schemas, and finally typologizing and generalizing those schemas. The main result of the analysis was a description of an ethnic cultural schema underlying representations of the national “we,” the criteria of “membership” in it, and the paths by which a person can become part of it. A visualization of this schema is presented in Figure 1.

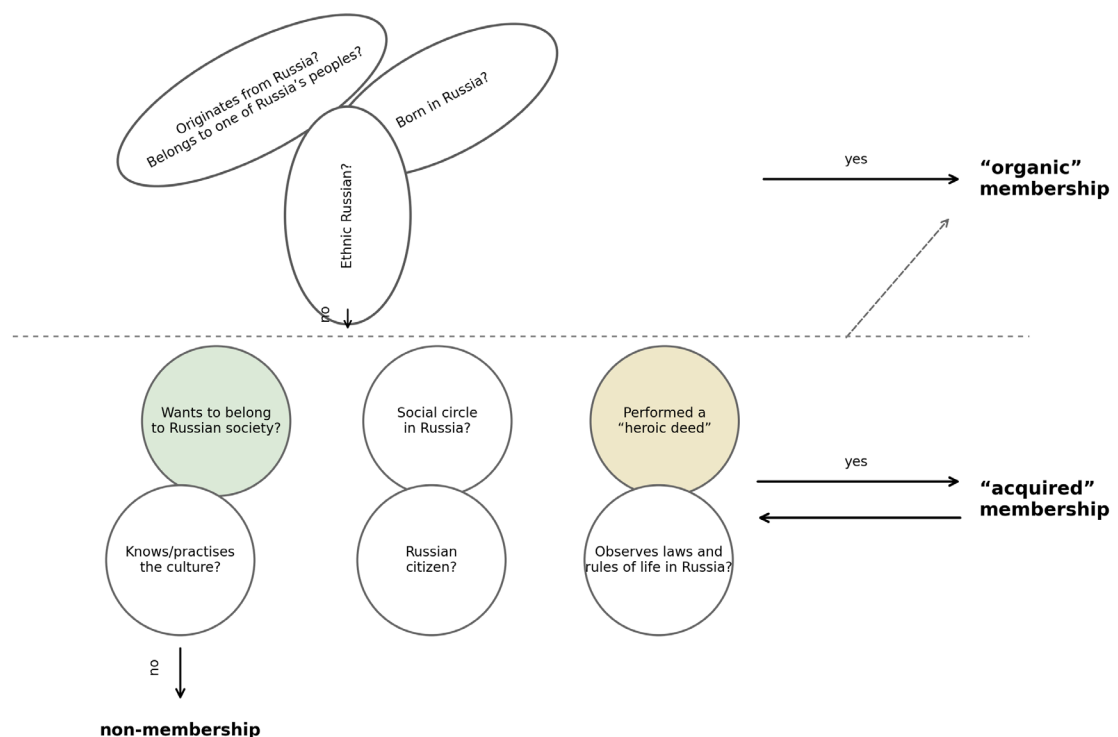


Figure 1. Ethnic cultural we-schema describing membership in the Russian nation and the possibility of joining it.

Within this schema, membership in Russian society can be of two types, organic and acquired, but the boundary between them is not clear. A member of Russian society is defined through an “ideal” prototype: born in Russia, belongs to the peoples of Russia, meaning that ancestors in the ascending line lived in Russia, and is Russian. Deviations from this prototype with its three “petals” make particular cases more problematic, but generally

do not make it possible to deny membership. A Russian born in Latvia, for example, one of the “vignettes” included in the interview guide, is part of Russian society because he is Russian, and his ancestors most likely came from somewhere within the territory of Russia. But a Black person born in Russia is also part of Russian society because he most likely lived in Russia for at least some time and therefore absorbed the culture. Nevertheless, in some cases respondents also voiced reservations referring to a block of “requirements” for people who are not, in the basic or “organic” sense, part of Russian society. How, then, is such “acquired” membership structured?

If a person does not possess the characteristics of an “organic” member of Russian society, they can become a member, but they then find themselves, as it were, “under observation.” This “observation” records the following characteristics: whether the person knows/practices the culture, whether they have obtained Russian citizenship, whether they observe the laws and rules of life in Russia, and what their social circle in Russia is.

Of course, if he decided to come live with us, here with us he has to take us into account, our rules, our laws <...> But the main thing, the very main thing, dear, I don't like disorder, people behaving badly. If they obey the law, then why not? Let them live here.

It should be noted that ideas about which culture must be known and what exactly the rules of life in Russia are are likewise neither clear nor definite. Most important, however, is the person's own desire to be part of Russian society, which, according to these representations, will “pull along with it” the fulfillment of the criteria described above. There is, however, one criterion that functions as a “shortcut” into membership in Russian society and makes it unnecessary to examine candidates' social circles and behaviour “under a microscope.” This is a heroic deed:

I mean, I think that it is probably quite difficult for a Black person to sincerely become part of Russian culture. But at the same time, certainly, under some circumstances, in some particular case, he can do it. <...> I even know that a Black man fought with Prigozhin and died heroically. So... Why isn't he Russian? <...> Certainly.

Acquired membership differs from organic membership in that acquired membership can be revoked if a person ceases to satisfy the requirements described above. In particular, if they violate laws and norms, socialize “only with their own,” or for some reason never obtained citizenship, according to this schema they cease to be part of Russian society. Criminals with “acquired” membership should be sent “back home,” but if a crime is committed by an “organic” member of Russian society, respondents did not come up with the idea of excluding that person from Russian society.

This is what a verbal description of Russians’ ethnic cultural we-schema looks like. What is the relation between membership in Russian society as a cultural schema and citizenship as a social institution? In one form or another, this question was also discussed during the interviews and focus groups. In the schema described above, citizenship is only one criterion of membership in Russian society and not the most important one. It is not among the defining criteria of “organic membership” and is only one of the criteria of “acquired membership,” “losing” to the desire to be part of Russian society, observance of laws and rules, and so on. Nevertheless, the schema itself and the institution of citizenship are similar. Most citizens became citizens automatically by inheriting this status from their parents, but a person can also become a citizen by meeting certain criteria. And although, until a certain point, acquired citizenship could not legally be revoked, in recent years this has begun to happen fairly often. One can moreover suggest that the institution of citizenship is “drifting” toward the cultural cognitive schema described above.

Methodologically, then, and with the qualifications noted above, interviews and focus groups remain useful tools for reconstructing cognitive schemas in research on ethnicity after the cognitive turn. The reconstruction above concerns cultural schemas, socially shared representations relating to ethnicity, but it leaves open where such schemas are “located” and which forms of cognition are involved. Because the method is conversational, it is also

difficult to distinguish conceptually and empirically between schemas and discourse as an external, socially organised linguistic reality. Are there more direct and potentially more valid ways to study schemas while remaining within qualitative sociology? The next section turns to elicitation.

Are there two “nationalities” in Moscow, “Slavs” and “Southerners”? Identifying ethnic schemas through elicitation

The project discussed here was carried out in Moscow in 2024. Its methodological “heart” was so-called elicitation. Elicitation, as the name suggests, is a “cluster” of methods in which participants are presented with one stimulus or another and their reaction is studied with varying degrees of formalization. In this case, elicitation was carried out as a qualitative quasi-experiment. Respondents were either shown videos previously recorded in everyday Moscow settings, the metro, shopping and entertainment centers, and educational institutions, and asked to determine “which ethnic group” the people shown belonged to, video elicitation, or the same question was asked about people surrounding the respondent and interviewer during an interview conducted specifically for this purpose in a crowded place, on-site elicitation. A total of 41 interviews were collected.² The elicitation part was accompanied by a detailed biographical part, on the basis of which assumptions were later made about why particular modes of categorisation were used.

In addition, usually before the elicitation, respondents were asked “which ethnic groups live in Moscow.” The answer to this question was necessary in order to compare actual classificatory schemas with nominally known ethnic categories. Once again, the transcripts and video recordings were analysed collectively, with the categories used and their indicators

² The detailed methodology and results of the study are presented in the following publications: (Varshaver et al. 2024b; 2025).

first recorded sequentially, individual schemas then reconstructed, and finally those schemas generalized into a description of a collective cultural schema.

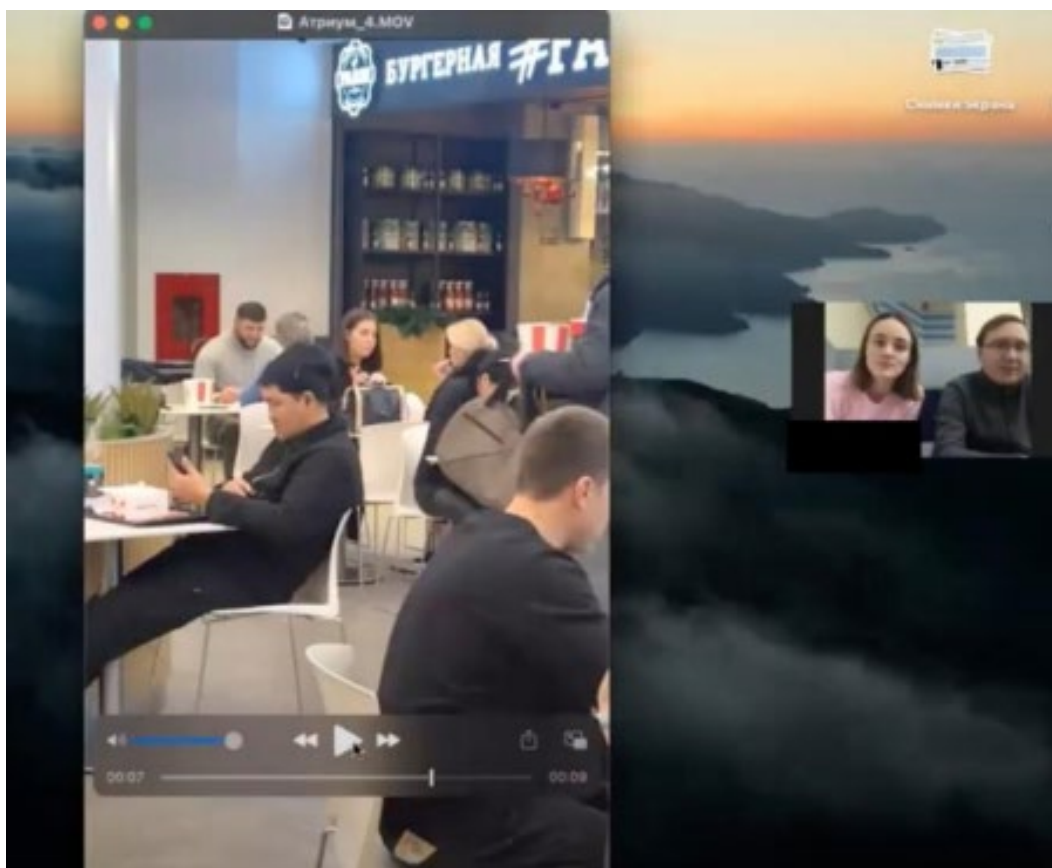


Figure 2. Screenshot from an elicitation interview.

The study showed that the basic schema used for categorisation in Moscow distinguishes two types of people, referred to, with variations, as “Slavs”/“Russians” and “Southerners,” with the latter sometimes further divided into “Asians” and “people from the Caucasus”:

Okay, he’s... well, he’s like Asian. The eyes, specifically. The eyes and the shape of the face, they sometimes have these chubby cheeks. <...> I think she’s Russian. Why not a girl from the Caucasus? Because they don’t dress like that in the Caucasus. girl from the Caucasuss are more put together. <...> An older man from the Caucasus dresses more solidly, while here it’s flashy, something for teenagers.

This schema is reproduced by the majority of respondents regardless of which category they themselves can be assigned to within it. The quotation above, for example, comes from an interview with a 29-year-old Avar born in Makhachkala. Respondents also know a classification “by nationalities,” which they attempted to reproduce when, before or after the

elicitation, they were asked directly which nationalities live in Moscow. They often reproduced this classification as a list, very approximately ranked by population size and apparently referring to various kinds of lists circulating in statistical handbooks, school textbooks, and Wikipedia pages:

Well, all sorts of people live here. Russians. Who do we have a lot of? Tatars, Bashkirs. Tatars, Bashkirs, what else. Some Belarusians, some Ukrainians...

Many respondents also name their own category of identification and “see” its representatives during elicitation.³ For all other people, however, they use precisely the basic binary/ternary schema described above. What might account for its preferential use? An obvious reason would seem to be the discriminating power of the indicator system, which makes it possible to “see” three categories effectively but provides almost no basis for making a well-founded assumption about finer distinctions. Another explanation is also likely. As follows from self-categorisation theory (Turner and Onorato 2014) and its sociological extensions (Varshaver 2025, 2026), ethnic, and indeed any other, schemas are used, and generally exist, as long as they are useful to those who employ them for categorisation. If a distinction is genuinely important, indicators will be found for determining who belongs to which category.

The usefulness of the basic schema identified in the study is tied to regimes of safety, competence, and prosociality that are important in everyday Moscow life. Thus, people from the Caucasus may be read by “Slavs” as unsafe, while Central Asians, and sometimes people from the Caucasus, may be read as incompetent. For “people from the Caucasus” and “Southerners” themselves, the same schema can, for example, help identify people from whom one can seek assistance by appealing to shared cultural values. The list of such “functions” could be continued and should be studied separately.

³ On the mechanisms through which this may occur, see a companion article: (Aitzhanov 2026).

Importantly, the concrete categories used to designate people within the basic schema vary substantially and are situational. It appeared, although the research design does not allow this to be stated with certainty, that if the question about which ethnic categories live in Moscow was asked before elicitation, and perhaps more generally, categories from the “list of nationalities” were used more often to verbalize the elements of the basic schema. For “Slavs,” migrants from Central Asia could be “Tajiks” or “Tajik-Uzbeks,” even though respondents themselves might acknowledge that they knew there were differences between the nationalities but could not distinguish their representatives and, moreover, usually had no need to make such a distinction.

The categorisation “Slavs/Southerners,” therefore, is not a clear verbal classification of people but rather an indication of an ethnic cultural schema. Another argument in favor of this interpretation is that recent migrants from outside the former Soviet region, who have little command of Russian, master this distinction fairly quickly. At first they make obvious mistakes, but they learn to understand which of these two categories the people they encounter in everyday life belong to.

Elicitation interviews therefore provide a more direct route to cognitive schemas than conventional interviews alone. Substantively, the study identified a basic classificatory schema used in Moscow; methodologically, it showed how asking people to categorise concrete visual stimuli can reveal distinctions that are much less visible in direct verbal accounts of “which ethnic groups live in Moscow”.

Ethnicity in Bashkortostan: identifying ethnic schemas through association tasks embedded in a survey

The connectionist approach to defining schemas used in this article assumes that schemas are networks of representations, that is, ideas, “pictures in the head,” or categories that are basically separate from one another but “co-present” in internalized collective

representations. The most direct way to operationalise such a network is to study associations. In the cognitive-sociological tradition, however, the possibilities of this approach are used only partially. While drawing on various ways of measuring implicit associations (Hunzaker and Valentino 2019), the tradition neglects a more obvious route, the measurement of explicit associations. Yet such measurements have long been used in psycholinguistics, where a number of special techniques exist, including the word association test, WAS, and the free association method, FAM (Lo Monaco et al. 2017). These techniques ask respondents to formulate their own associations with proposed words or other stimuli, and the most frequent associations, in conjunction with the stimuli, can be regarded as fragments of cultural cognitive schemas.

In a project devoted to ethnicity in Bashkortostan,⁴ it was decided to study both explicit and implicit associations and then determine how the two are related. First, during qualitative interviews, respondents were asked to name associations with ethnic categories and with various objects and phenomena. Sometimes respondents were also shown stimuli, for

⁴ The project was carried out in 2025–2026; publications based on it had not yet been prepared at the time of writing. Data collection consisted of two stages, qualitative and quantitative. During the qualitative stage, 73 interviews were collected, ranging from 32 to 219 minutes in length; the mean interview length was 103 minutes. Interviews were first conducted in Ufa and then in the districts: Blagovarsky, Baltachevsky, Khaibullinsky, and Beloretsky districts of Bashkortostan and Bardymisky District of Perm Krai. Age, gender, and nominal-nationality quotas were maintained, and the maximum-variation principle was implemented. During the quantitative stage, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted. Data were collected through an online interface, the Anketolog survey builder, and respondents completed the questionnaire independently. Respondents were included if they met the following criteria: age over 18, consent to participate, and at least two years' experience living in the Republic of Bashkortostan. After cleaning and application of quality criteria, the final dataset included 1,107 respondents. The author thanks K. D. Eskin, S. M. Aitzhanov, and N. S. Ivanova for participation in data collection and analysis.

example a *khakal*, a women's breast ornament, or played the popular song "Khomay," and asked to describe the "pictures in their head" that arose in connection with them. On the basis of the interviews, the most frequent associations of different kinds were identified. Thus, associations with the category "Bashkirs" included symbolic objects, for example the *kurai*; people, above all Salavat Yulaev and Minigali Shaimuratov; "national" clothing and ornaments, *khakal*, skullcap, fur hat; foods, *beshbarmak*, *kumis*, *chak-chak*, *baursak*, honey; animals, horse; "national" music and dances; weapons, bow and arrows; and so on. Respondents also produced more coherent images. One woman described herself galloping across the steppe on horseback "with no hands," something she had never done in real life; another described flying over mountains and forests. Some mentioned events from the past, images of relatives, and so on. The qualitative stage, however, allowed only very approximate conclusions about the frequency of associations, and therefore of cultural schemas, and mainly served as a pilot for the survey carried out in the second stage of the study.

In the survey, respondents were first asked, in free form, to enter first- and second-order associations with three ethnic categories, "Russians," "Tatars," and "Bashkirs," into blank fields. First-order associations were understood as direct associations with the categories; second-order associations as associations with the first-order associations. Respondents were then shown images of the monument to Salavat Yulaev in Ufa and of a *khakal*, a women's breast ornament, and the procedure was repeated. The blocks were also rotated: some respondents were first asked for associations with nationalities and then with the images, while for others the order was reversed.

You are looking at an image of the monument to Salavat Yulaev in Ufa.

What is the FIRST association (a word or phrase) that comes to mind when you look at this image?

*



Try to avoid simply describing what is visible in the image (for example, do not write "Salavat", "monument", or "sky"). Associations may be any words or phrases.

First association with the image

You are looking at an image of a khakal, a traditional women's chest ornament.

What is the FIRST association (a word or phrase) that comes to mind when you look at this image?

*



Try to avoid simply describing what is visible in the image (for example, do not write "ornament", "coins", or "fabric"). Associations may be any words or phrases.

First association with the image

Figure 3. Images and association task used in the survey.

The first analytical step was to create a list of the most frequent associations, which were preliminarily lemmatized. In parallel, the list was visualized as a “word cloud.” Both the list and the “cloud” were presented broken down by respondents’ nominal nationality, making it possible to identify the “shift” that appears when associations are elicited for one’s own category of identification.

Table 1. Associations with ethnic categories, most frequent

Respondent nationality	Association	N	Association	N	Association	N
Associations with Bashkirs	Bashkirs		Russians		Tatars	
	pride	33	Bashkortostan	58	Bashkortostan	28
	dear	17	homeland	31	horse	21
	family	15	honey	29	nomad	19
	honey	14	Salavat	26	honey	17
Associations with Russians	one’s own	14	kurai	23	yurt	14
	Russia	48	Russia	88	Russia	32
	country	19	pride	43	all/whole	11
	pride	18	country	30	homeland	11
	great	13	great	29	strength	11
Associations with Tatars	great	13	homeland	29	strong	11
	Kazan	33	Kazan	60	Kazan	25
	cunning	24	chak-chak	34	dear	22
	chak-chak	20	language	30	one’s own	18
	neighbors	18	cunning	29	family	17
Associations with the khakal	cunningness	13	neighbors	27	pride	14
	beauty	58	ornament	84	beauty	69

among the words Russians associate with the category “Russians,” with the small difference that these words are displaced by a semantics of greatness associated with Russia. Their first association is the name of the country, “Russia,” followed by “country,” “pride,” “great,” all related to greatness, then “homeland” and “family,” identification, and then “strength,” “power,” and “strong,” again greatness. It should be noted, however, that for Tatars and Bashkirs as well, “Russians” are semantically linked above all to “Russia” and to words denoting greatness and strength to one degree or another, while ethnic stereotypes, when present, for example “bear,” occupy far from the top positions.

Associations with the images of the Salavat monument and the *khakal* were analysed in a similar way. The *khakal* is perceived fairly universally overall: for respondents it is simultaneously semantically linked with beauty, folk traditions/culture, and Bashkirs. The only small difference is that for both Bashkirs and Russians the *khakal* is specifically and exclusively Bashkir, whereas for Tatars, who by the survey conditions live or have lived in Bashkortostan, it is both Bashkir and Bashkortostani. Salavat, by contrast, is in public representations first and foremost a “national,” Bashkortostani hero, that is, common to respondents of different nationalities. His specifically Bashkir connotations recede into the background even among Bashkirs, occupying only ninth place in the Bashkir chart, seventeenth in the Russian chart, and fifteenth in the Tatar chart.

In addition to this computer-based approach, the associations were also coded manually. For the image of the Salavat monument the following codes were identified: hero/heroism; Bashkortostan/national; Bashkirs/Bashkir; freedom/protests; Russia/loyalty; horse-related; masculinity; home/childhood/warmth; Ufa/urban toponyms; pride. The analysis showed that Salavat is indeed above all “national” and a “hero,” with the associations of roughly 40% of respondents coded in this way. For Bashkirs he is more Bashkir, indicated by the higher share of Bashkirs linking Salavat to Bashkirs and to the national in general, as well as to “pride,”

which points to an “appropriation” of the symbol. Tatars, by contrast, more often than the others see in Salavat a universal, non-national masculinity. For Russians, Salavat is less national, less Bashkir, and less masculine, and the only association with the image that is more prevalent among Russians than among representatives of the other nationalities is related to horses.

At the same time, the survey also included the Implicit Association Test, IAT, a more established tool in cognitive sociology research. It measured how strongly the category “Bashkir” was associated among respondents with horses and mountains, associations identified during the qualitative stage and verified in the quantitative measurement of explicit associations, although not among the highest-ranked associations in the “charts.” In the test, respondents were shown stimuli that had to be assigned to categories using two keys. The key indicator, the D-score, represented the standardised difference in keypress speed between a pairing that, according to the hypothesis, formed part of the schema, Bashkirs-horses and Bashkirs-mountains, and a pairing, Russians-cows and Russians-swamps, that did not.⁵

⁵ The survey used the classical seven-block design. In the first two blocks, respondents separately learned to classify two target categories and two attribute categories. Combined blocks followed, in which a target and an attribute category were assigned to the same key. The location of one pair of categories was then reversed, and the participant completed a second series of keypresses with the reversed configuration. The dataset was then cleaned for extremely fast or, conversely, extremely slow keypresses. Mean latencies, response speeds, were calculated separately for each of the four critical blocks, 3, 4, 6, and 7, as were the differences between blocks 3 and 6 and between blocks 4 and 7. These differences were divided by the corresponding previously calculated standard deviation. The final D-score was calculated as the mean of the two component standardised differences. Positive D-score values indicate easier processing of the theoretically expected “compatible” pairing; negative values indicate the theoretically “incompatible” pairing. One-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether the specified implicit associations actually existed.

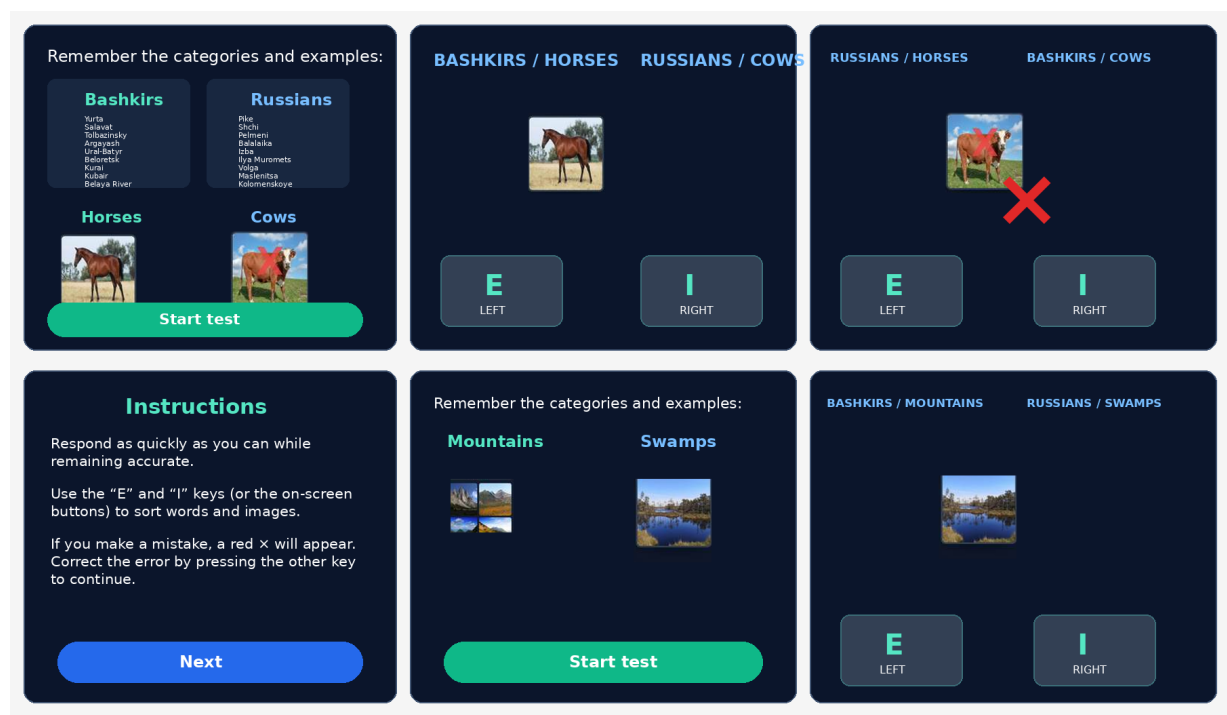


Figure 5. Material used in the Implicit Association Test.

Both mean values obtained in the calculations were statistically significantly greater than zero.⁶ This result should be interpreted to mean that across the sample, in both cases, the predicted implicit associations do indeed exist: Bashkir, as predicted, is more strongly associated with horses and mountains than Russian is with cows and swamps. At the same time, the effect in the first test is noticeably and significantly stronger than in the second.⁷ This means that across the sample the “Bashkirs-horses” association was stronger than the “Bashkirs-mountains” association. Translating this into the language of schemas, both associations are, to a greater or lesser degree, fragments of the ethnic schema organised around the category “Bashkir.”

⁶ D-scores for both tests were statistically significantly above zero. For the first test, the mean D-score was 0.204 ($t = 12.55$, $p < 0.001$), and for the second, 0.094 ($t = 6.87$, $p < 0.001$).

⁷ Comparison of the two D-scores among participants who completed both tests confirmed a statistically significant difference between them. The mean difference was 0.107, and a paired t-test yielded a significant result ($t = 5.30$, $p < 0.001$).

How, however, are the fragments of schemas identified through measurements of explicit and implicit stereotypes related to one another? To answer this question, the relationship between the presence of “horses” and “mountains” among explicit associations and the presence of the corresponding implicit association was examined. Both rough and more fine-grained calculations,⁸ however, showed no statistically significant relationship between the variables constructed in this way. In other words, the people who spontaneously write “horses” and “mountains” as associations with the category “Bashkirs” are not necessarily the same people for whom these pairings are present as implicit stereotypes. This may be related both to differences between the theoretical objects being studied, discourse and schemas or verbal and visual schemas, and to features of the procedures themselves. The fact that “horses” and “mountains” are absent among the first two associations with the category “Bashkir” does not mean that these categories would not emerge as the third, fourth, or subsequent association. Conversely, measuring the associations that rank higher among explicit associations using an implicit-test method might produce higher D-values. Nevertheless, it is most likely that both sets of links, those identified by explicit methods and those identified by implicit methods, are present in ethnic cultural cognitive schemas in Bashkortostan. Evidence for this is that the horse appears among explicit associations with

⁸ First, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the mean strength, D-score, of the implicit associations “Bashkirs-horses” and “Bashkirs-mountains” between groups defined by the variable “mention of horses as a free association” (1 = mentioned, 0 = not mentioned). No statistically significant differences between the groups were recorded. Pearson correlation analysis produced analogous results: for the implicit association “Bashkirs-horses,” $r = 0.0001$, $p = 0.9987$; for “Bashkirs-mountains,” $r = -0.0142$, $p = 0.7656$. D-score values for the two tests were also dichotomized in two ways: (1) values ≥ 0 were recoded as 1 and values < 0 as 0; (2) absolute values ≥ 0.15 were coded as 1, strong association, and the rest as 0, weak association. In both cases no significant differences were found ($p \geq 0.9930$). Thus, analysis of correlations and contingency tables confirmed the t-test results.

the category “Bashkirs” and is also linked with the ethnic category “Bashkirs” at the level of implicit stereotypes.

To what extent, however, are these schemas, and their fragments, equally represented among different categories of the republic’s residents, or are there categories and groups among which some schemas or fragments circulate more actively? The results of a simple breakdown by categories of identification, Russians, Bashkirs, Tatars, for explicit stereotypes were presented above. But is nationality really the variable with the greatest explanatory power for the distribution of types of associations? A more appropriate way to answer this question is regression analysis, which was carried out for several associations.

In this context, an attempt was made to explain the presence or absence, at the individual level, of a link between the image of Salavat and the meanings of freedom/liberty/protest. A regression model was calculated⁹ in which the dependent variable was the presence of this association, while nationality, strength of identity, sex, age, and education were used as independent and control variables. The analysis showed that the Salavat-freedom association does not occur more frequently among Bashkirs than among Tatars. Age is more important for its emergence, younger people see Salavat as a symbol of freedom and protest more often, as is the strength of ethnic identity, the stronger the identification with one’s “own” category, Tatar or Bashkir, the stronger the association of the image of Salavat with freedom.

A different picture appears if a regression model is calculated in which the dependent variables are the implicit associations Bashkirs-horses and Bashkirs-mountains while the independent variables remain the same. Both models explain a smaller share of variance than the model with the explicit association, but the implicit association “Bashkirs-horses” is

⁹ In this case, the model was calculated for the subset of respondents who identified themselves with the categories Tatar or Bashkir.

statistically significantly more frequent among those who identify themselves with the category “Bashkir.”

Table 2. Regression models explaining the presence of associations

Predictor	Explicit association: Salavat - freedom/protests	Implicit association: Bashkirs - horses	Implicit association: Bashkirs - mountains
Year of birth, higher value = later year / younger age	-0.007***	0.016	0.002
Sex, woman = 1, man = 0	0.009	-0.088	0.048
Higher education, 1 = yes, 0 = no	-0.093	0.115	0.077
Bashkir nationality, 1 = yes, 0 = no	0.015	0.163*	0.140
Strength of identity, 0-3, weak to strong	0.106**	0.018	0.079
N	278	278	278
R ²	0.092	0.059	0.054

Note. Standardized linear regression coefficients, β , are shown. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Taken together, these analyses identified and cross-validated elements of ethnic cognitive schemas. They revealed clusters of meanings that “come to mind” in Type 1 cognition when respondents encounter ethnic categories or ethnicised objects, and they showed how the prevalence of particular associations varies across social groups. The combination of explicit association tasks, manually coded meanings and the IAT also makes it possible to compare different empirical traces of schemas rather than treating any single measure as a direct read-out of cognition.

So far, the focus has been on identifying and describing ethnic schemas and their component elements. The next step is explanatory: to connect these schemas to social processes, institutions and recurrent forms of experience.

How can ethnic schemas be explained?

Explaining the reproduction of ethnic schemas in Dagestan through perceptual-communicative facts

Cognitively informed constructivism treats ethnic groups, or ethnicity, as neither more nor less than a schema through which people sometimes interpret the world. But through what mechanisms are such schemas reproduced?

The contemporary view of this question is rather less radical and falls within the logic of the so-called 4E conception of cognition (Newen et al. 2018). According to this conception, there are phenomena in the external world that stably activate schemas, but they also exist inside, as representations, and a clear outside-inside division is no longer drawn. What is “absorbed” in the course of socialisation includes individual representations, links between them, ways of responding to the activation of representations, and much else. But how exactly does this happen? How is ethnic classification learned when it is, like many other objects of cognitive sociology, simultaneously formalized in institutions and exists as a spontaneous frame of categorisation? And how is it reproduced as the latter? A study conducted in Dagestan in the summer of 2024 addressed this question.

The data were collected through in-depth biographical interviews. One hundred such interviews were conducted in 31 locations of the republic, according to the sample.¹⁰ During the interview, moving gradually through the main stages of the informant’s life from the earliest period he or she could remember, the interviewer identified elementary acts of communication and perception in which nationalities were “involved.” Such acts were called perceptual-communicative facts (PC-facts), and much of the interviews and their subsequent

¹⁰ Detailed methodology and results of the study are presented in (Varshaver 2026).

analysis was devoted precisely to detecting and describing them. Someone mentioned nationalities in the informant's presence, or the informant himself or herself identified someone else's nationality. The PC-facts identified in this way were then entered into a separate tab of the casebook, with an indication of where and when the relevant fact occurred and with a summary of what the PC-fact consisted in. Here is an example of the description of one PC-fact, including a quotation, a summary, and information on place and time:

Informant: *In general, I started paying attention to nationality after I noticed that when my mother watches television, every nation has its own dialect. A bit of a manner, drawing things out a little, or speaking quickly somewhere. You can understand what nation anyone is. So she started... "Hear that," she says, "a Kumyk woman, a Lezgin woman, an Avar woman." She understood it from the dialect. I say, "How do you understand?" She says, "Every nation has its own way of speaking." Then I started paying attention to it too, I also learned to guess very early.* **Interviewer:** *And when was that? Your mother was sitting there?* **Informant:** *I was about 12. Yes, we were at home watching television. Twelve, yes? I was probably... actually, yes. Twelve years old, that would be fifth grade. Yes, somewhere around 12.*

Summary: When the informant was in the fifth grade, while at home, he heard his mother noticing the nationality of people on television from their "dialect" and commenting on it; after that he himself began paying attention to nationalities and learned to guess them.

Place, time: Makhachkala, Fifth Settlement, 1992.

It was not always possible, however, to "distill" a specific event. Informants could say that certain conversations or modes of perception were widespread in particular environments during a certain period. Such a fact, in contrast to the PC-fact described above and classified as a PC-fact-event, was designated a PC-fact-generalization. Here is an example of the description of such a PC-fact:

Quotation: *To tell the truth, the way the teachers gave us those lessons. We did not really encounter other nations much. We were Laks, just children. The teachers presented it to us so beautifully that at night you would dream of seeing them. They told us what they had done from generation to generation, what Dargins did, potters there. They worked, went somewhere. There was no transport then either. On foot, on donkeys, on asses. They traveled on whatever they could. Whatever people could do, they made with their hands, handicrafts. They made things, earned money. To feed their family. Back then. And that was how it was presented to us. Our only dream was to see an Avar, a Dargin, a Tabasaran, a Lezgin, a Kumyk, a Nogai. Do you know why it was interesting? Because they had their own language. But the culture was one. In the end, the culture was one. Culture and upbringing, and religion, everything overall was one.*

Summary: At school there was a subject called the culture of the peoples of Dagestan, where students were told about the culture and everyday life of Dagestani nationalities. It was presented in an engaging way, and as a result the informant and his friends dreamed of seeing Avars, Dargins, Tabasarans, and others.

Place and time: Kaya village, Kulinsky District, mid-1980s.

In total, 1,104 PC-facts of both types were “extracted” from the 100 interviews. The earliest dated to 1943, although most referred to the last four decades. The database of PC-facts was thematically coded, on the basis of which conclusions were drawn about typical situations in which nationalities were communicated and used as a tool of perception in late Soviet and post-Soviet Dagestan. This produced the following “story” of the individual acquisition and collective maintenance of nationalities as a cultural cognitive schema.

At an early, preschool age, Dagestanis usually first encounter actual cultural diversity, most often linguistic diversity. In mountain villages, traders speaking an incomprehensible language may arrive; in a city, guests who do not speak Russian may visit neighbors in an apartment building. This raises questions for children, which they ask adults, usually their parents, and adults tell the children for the first time that “these are Dargins, they have their own Dargin language,” or, more broadly, that different nationalities live in Dagestan and each has its own language. Language is not always, and not exclusively, the trigger for such conversations. In one village in Tsumadinsky District, the trigger was that geologists conducting exploration nearby were wearing shorts. People in the village did not dress that way, and the children were surprised. They were told that these were Russians, who had different traditions. Sometimes, however, as in the PC-fact-event example above, a child first hears ethnic categories from adults and tries to find out what they mean because the child had not heard such words before. Overall, by the time most Dagestanis enter school, they have accumulated experience of actual diversity, know some ethnic categories, and have experience correlating these categories with particular people. At the same time, the general

picture, a generalized and narrativized construction of ethnicity, is still unknown to them at that point.

A full-fledged construction according to which “N peoples live in Dagestan, each of them has a unique culture and language, and these peoples live in peace” is communicated to them already at school. First, this happens in lessons, within subject curricula or class meetings; more recently, this construction has also been transmitted during the “Conversations about Important Things” classes. Second, schools hold festival-type events in which each student represents one or another nationality: “their own” when the class is multiethnic, more often on the plain and in cities, and one of the “not-their-own” nationalities when the class is monoethnic. During such events schoolchildren recite poems in the corresponding language, perform “national” dances, and/or bring to school dishes from cuisines associated with one or another nationality. Another typical form of communication at school through which the reality of nationalities is internalized is the assignment of schoolchildren to “native language” classes, which often takes place on the basis of nominal nationality. Some informants said that only at this moment did they realize that their classmates had nationalities. In addition, nationalities could also be present at school as an administrative reality. A pupil’s nationality could be entered next to the pupil’s surname in the class register, and from time to time roll calls were held in which pupils had to state their nationality. Informal “questionnaires” in special notebooks, in which schoolchildren entered their nationality alongside their favorite color and favorite performer, were a “reflection” of this practice. Overall, therefore, although in the mountains this knowledge is more abstract and on the plain and in cities more empirical, by the end of school Dagestanis have learned the narrative of multinationality and, more generally, have taken on board that every Dagestani has a nationality.

After finishing school, Dagestanis mostly leave their home settlement for varying periods, for example to study at a technical college or university. In new contexts, it is nationalities that become the frame through which they try to make sense of those contexts. Two typical interactions stand out here. First, nationality becomes information that is communicated or established when people meet, sometimes immediately, sometimes a little later, and sometimes nationality is not spoken about but is actively “read” from indirect indicators. Second, nationality once again becomes an element of a minimal administrative-documentary description of people or of its vernacular imitation. As an example of the latter, in 1975, on the first day of classes at Dagestan State Pedagogical University, the students themselves passed a sheet around the classroom on which they had to write their first name, surname, district, and nationality. Such introductions and administrative recording are characteristic not only of educational institutions but also of workplaces. This period, moreover, proves decisive for the extent to which a particular Dagestani will subsequently use the ethnic classificatory schema in practice. Each nationality is associated with certain stereotypes, and if at the outset those stereotypes are confirmed, the probability that this schema will continue to be used later in life is high. In that case, however, it is subsequently used as something like a statistical model with low predictive power. An Avar groom may make parents wary because Avars are considered harsh, but no one will hire a Dargin as an accountant simply because “Dargins love money and know how to handle it.”

This description helps us understand through which PC-facts nationalities are reproduced as a classificatory frame. But why does this reproduction continue despite the fact that the categorisation was fairly coarse to begin with and hardly explained actual cultural diversity, which has since declined even further? Why do nationalities not “die out” as a classificatory attribute, given that they do not have a strong effect on life? The basic answer is that, while not being vitally important, and therefore not being regularly tested for fitness, this

classification is reproduced in administrative practices in the broad sense. Nationality continues to be recorded in some personal documents and lists, is present in symbolic arrays describing the republic and individual districts, including posters, museums, and verbal narratives, and is also used in the implementation of nationalities policy. Second, nationalities have been ritualized by Dagestanis: people introduce themselves through them, try to identify them, and, more generally, nationality is an element of the image of a person in perception. Third, however, this classification proves useful at the individual level. To the extent that nationality is an indirect indication of district of origin, information about nationality is useful for “allocating” an interlocutor in the social field. Because nationality “correlates” with which language a person knows, knowing nationality makes it possible to “moderate” the language situation by including or excluding people from communication. A shared nationality with a cashier or a university teacher may become grounds for a discount or educational preferences, and so on. This state of affairs allows the classification to continue to exist and to remain a basic cognitive schema for categorising people in Dagestan.

Methodologically, this study is important above all for its conceptualisation and operationalisation of PC-facts, which make it possible to answer the question of how ethnic cultural cognitive schemas are reproduced in elementary acts of communication and perception, thereby explaining them.

Explaining ethnicisation: why do some people see reality through “ethnic lenses” while others do not?

“Ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a perspective on the world”: Brubaker’s formulation, used as the epigraph to this article, points to ethnicisation, the linking of situations and phenomena to ethnic categories, as a variable process rather than a constant condition. Some people use ethnic categories readily when interpreting what they see; others do not. What explains this variation?

To make at least an initial approach to answering this question, the following research design was implemented. An online survey questionnaire devoted to local residents' attitudes toward migrants¹¹ included three open-ended questions in which respondents were asked to describe, in one sentence, an image shown to them. The images were photographs depicting real situations from Russian everyday life. The first showed the checkout area of a KFC restaurant, with cashiers and customers; the second and third showed a construction site, with the builders' faces visible in greater and lesser detail. In all cases, the people shown in the photographs could in fact, by one criterion or another, be assigned to the category "migrants." To what extent, however, did respondents use an ethnic frame, and to what extent did they resort to ways of interpreting the situation that did not use ethnic categories?

The answers were coded manually. A response was assigned the value 1 if it used names of nationalities or the category "migrant," as well as synonyms such as "newcomer," "Southerner," and so forth. It was assigned the value 0 if this kind of ethnicisation was absent from the description of the image, for example if in the first case the respondent wrote "a queue at KFC," and in the second or third "a construction site" or "construction workers."

¹¹ The survey was conducted online in the summer of 2024. Detailed methodology is presented in (Ivanova et al. 2026).

We will now show you two images. Your task is to describe in a few words what or whom you see in them. At the end of the survey, we will explain why we are asking this.



8. In a few words, describe what or whom you see in this image (open response)

Figure 6. Task used to measure ethnicisation.

Because the first image was shown to all respondents, whereas respondents saw only one of the second and third images, an ethnicisation index was constructed. It took the value 1 if the respondent ethnicised both images, 0.5 if only one image was ethnicised, and 0 if neither image was ethnicised. The majority of respondents, 82%, did not ethnicize either image, while 18% ethnicised at least one. How can this distribution be explained?

Ethnicisation of images (valid responses, N = 6,949)

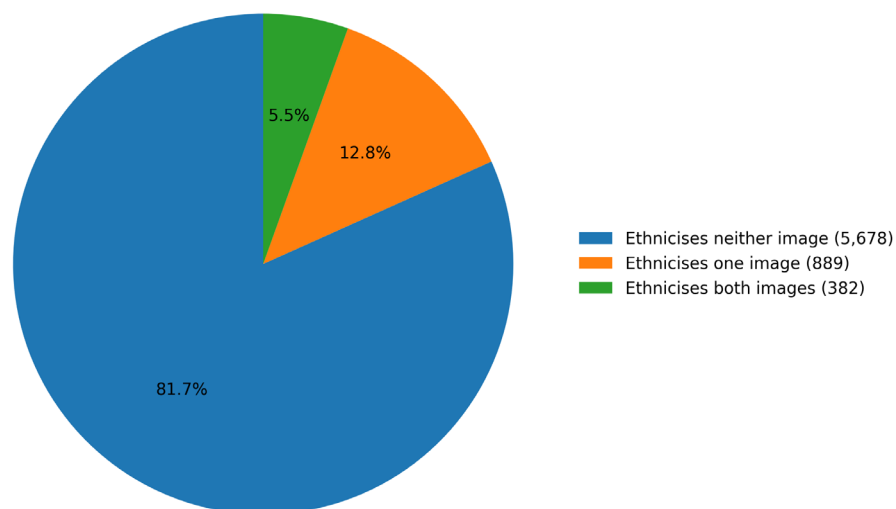


Figure 7. Distribution of responses by ethnicisation of the images.

To answer this question, the “ethnicisation index” variable was used as the dependent variable, first in correlation analysis and then in regression analysis. Within this exploratory analysis, various demographic, social, and other variables were tested as independent variables.

Table 3. Bivariate relationships and multiple linear regressions of the ethnicisation index

Predictor	Bivariate relationship, r	Multiple regression, Model 1, β	Multiple regression, Model 2, β
Sex (woman = 1, man = 0)	-0.060**	-0.050**	-0.050***
Age (years)	0.130**	0.080***	0.070***
National republic/region of residence (1 = yes, 0 = no)	-0.110**	-0.070***	-0.070***
Regional capital (1 = yes, 0 = no)	-0.040**	-0.030	—
Higher education (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.020	0.020	—
Attitude toward migrants (0 = negative, 1 = rather negative, 2 = rather positive, 3 = positive)	-0.230**	-0.180***	-0.200***
Russian/Slav (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.060**	-0.020	—
Anxiety (0 = completely disagree, 1 = rather disagree, 2 = rather agree, 3 = completely agree)	0.140**	0.070***	0.060***
Generalized trust (0 = one should be cautious with people, 1 = people can be trusted)	-0.030*	0.000	—
Life satisfaction (0 = completely dissatisfied, 1 = rather dissatisfied, 2 = rather satisfied, 3 = completely satisfied)	-0.080**	-0.030*	—
Experience of travel abroad (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.040**	0.030	—
News consumption (0 = do not watch/read, 4 = daily)	0.060**	0.000	—
Migrants among family and friends (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.000	0.010	—
Migrants among acquaintances and colleagues (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.000	0.010	—
N	7046	3620	5354
R ²	—	0.080	0.080

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The analysis showed that ethnicisation was consistently more common among (1) men, (2) older respondents, (3) residents of non-ethnic federal regions, (4) people with more negative attitudes towards migration, the strongest association, and (5) respondents with lower trust in others. The exploratory design does not establish causal mechanisms, but it demonstrates that the tendency to interpret ambiguous scenes through ethnic categories varies systematically across social positions and attitudes.

Explaining documentary constructivism: what happens when the state uses categories inconsistently?

Cultural schemas, while being a social phenomenon, affect individual people and entire communities to different degrees. How can differences between variants of ethnic schemas circulating in society be explained? One of the key questions of another study conducted in Dagestan in the summer of 2022¹² concerned how informants perceived the nature of ethnicity. This question proceeded from the tradition known as the folk sociology of ethnicity. Researchers traditionally distinguish between two “folk theories” of ethnicity. According to the first, ethnic belonging is “fixed” in blood and genes; according to the second, it has no biological component, is a cultural phenomenon, and is transmitted through socialisation. There is also a tool traditionally used to measure whether research participants belong to one group or the other. This is the so-called Switch at Birth Task, SaBT, in which participants are asked to assign a child born to parents of one nationality but raised in a family of another nationality to one nationality or the other. Those who believe that the child retains the nationality of the biological parents are classified as “essentialists”; those who believe that the child’s nationality is the nationality of the adoptive parents are classified as “constructivists.” In this way, variation in ethnic schemas, or more precisely in the component of those schemas related to perceptions of ethnic differences in general, is recorded.

In the study described here, informants were given the task in the following wording: “Imagine a situation. In a family where the father is Avar and the mother is Avar, a child is born, but immediately after the birth the parents are killed in an accident, and the child is

¹² The study collected 133 interviews in nine locations of the republic. Detailed methodology and results are described in (Varshaver et al. 2023).

taken in by the family of the father's best friend, who is Dargin by nationality. In this family he is treated as one of their own and is given everything the same as the biological children. Alongside them he learns Dargin, while he does not know Avar. What nationality, in your view, is this child? What if the accident happened not immediately after his birth but when he was six or seven years old? What if the parents killed in the accident were Russian? What if the nationality of his parents is unknown?" It was assumed that people who answered "Avar," or tended toward this answer, would be classified as "essentialists," while those who answered "Dargin" would be classified as "constructivists."

Time and again, however, without any pressure from the interviewers, who had not expected this at all, informants gave a third answer, according to which nationality is neither blood nor culture but a line in official documents:

Interviewer: *[States the vignette.] He is raised in the family as one of their own, that is the situation. Is he Avar or Dargin?* **Informant 1:** *It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter in which nation he was raised. [What matters is] what they write in the birth certificate... They write the nation too, don't they? Yes, I think they do. <...> What is written there stays for the rest of your life.*

How, according to such informants, can nationality be changed? By changing documents:

Interviewer: *And what do you have to do for that?*

Informant: *To change nationality? [Change] the passport. I don't know that procedure.*

And what happened after the "nationality" entry in documents was abolished following the collapse of the Soviet Union? Nationalities themselves disappeared as well:

Interviewer: *So are nationalities important in Dagestan now?*

Informant 1: *Nationalities, we don't have such a thing. Whatever nationality... Before, the passport said "Lak man," "Russian woman," "Dargin woman," "Avar woman." Now that is not there. It is not there. Here there is no nationality in the passport now. ... Before it was "Lak woman," "Lak man," "Dargin woman," now it is not there. There is no such thing anymore. Now everything is common.*

In the analysis, this view was designated “documentary constructivism.” All interviews were coded with respect to informants’ views. Although one interview could contain narrative indicators of several views, a dominant view was identified in those interviews where this was possible. In total, 15 of 123 informants, or 12%, could primarily be assigned to the category of “documentary constructivists.” How, however, do these 12% differ from everyone else, and how can this “folk sociology of ethnicity,” previously undescribed in the scholarly literature, be explained?

At this point it is necessary to go back a step and briefly describe how ethnic categories, nationalities, took shape in contemporary Dagestan in the form in which they exist today. Although the first attempts to codify cultural diversity in Dagestan were made as early as the mid-nineteenth century, with the amateur linguist and retired Russian Army officer Baron Peter von Uslar as a key figure, comprehensive efforts to classify Dagestanis ethnically were undertaken by the Soviet administration in the 1920s as part of the policy of *korenizatsiya*, including in preparation for the first All-Union Census of 1926. Around 40 “local” nationalities were distinguished in this campaign. Subsequently, however, for various reasons, the number of nationalities changed from census to census. In 1939 there were 11, largely because small nationalities whose members spoke Andic-Tsezic languages were included in the category “Avars.” By 1959, with Aguls, Rutuls, and Tsakhurs excluded from the Lezgin category, the number of nationalities had increased to 14, and the “register” of nationalities acquired the form in which it survived until the collapse of the USSR. Then, in the wave of liberalization and with minor nuances, the list of Dagestani nationalities returned to its 1926 form. This means that over the course of one person’s life, that person and his or her fellow villagers could, in one form or another, be reclassified by the state twice. For example, a person born in 1910 in the village of Bezhta received a passport as a Kapuchin, became an Avar in the late 1930s, and, if he lived until the 2002 census, could be enumerated

as a Bezhta. There are several dozen villages in Dagestan whose populations were reclassified at some point.

Table 4. Representation of nationalities in Soviet and post-Soviet population censuses, compiled by the author

1926	1939	1959, 1979, 1989	1970, 2002, 2010, 2021
Avars, Botlikhs, Tindis, Kapuchins, Khunzals, Tlyaratas, Bagvalals, Archins, Chamalals, Godoberis, Khwarshis, Karatas, Akhvaks, Andis, Didois	Avars	Avars	Avars, Botlikhs, Tindis, Bagvalals, Archins, Chamalals, Godoberis, Khwarshis, Karatas, Akhvaks, Didois, Andis, Hunzibs, Bezhtas, Ginukhs
Dargins, Kubachins, Kaitags	Dargins	Dargins	Dargins, Kubachins, Kaitags
Kумыks	Kумыks	Kумыks	Kумыks
Lezgins, Aguls, Rutuls, Tsakhurs	Lezgins	Lezgins, Aguls, Rutuls, Tsakhurs	Lezgins, Aguls, Rutuls, Tsakhurs
Laks	Laks	Laks	Laks
Turks	Azerbaijanis	Azerbaijanis	Azerbaijanis
Tabasarans	Tabasarans	Tabasarans	Tabasarans
Russians	Russians	Russians	Russians
Chechens	Chechens	Chechens	Chechens
Nogais	Nogais	Nogais	Nogais
Jews, Mountain Jews, Tats	Jews	Jews, Mountain Jews, Tats	Jews, Mountain Jews, Tats

On the basis of the casebook and the coding described above, a logistic regression model was calculated in which the dependent variable was “documentary constructivism” as the dominant “folk sociology of ethnicity,” with values 1 = yes and 0 = no. Two factors were found to be stably associated with a documentary-constructivist position: age, with the probability of documentary constructivism increasing with age, and socialisation in a village whose population had been reclassified during the twentieth century. If a person was born and spent childhood in such a village, the probability that he or she would be a documentary constructivist was more than five times higher than if the person had been born in any other location. The theoretical conclusion from this result is as follows: if the state is inconsistent in its classificatory acts, there is a high probability that those being classified will perceive the entire classification as no more than an element of administrative reality, rules of the game external to themselves. Thus, an element of the ethnic schema that may be designated “shared spontaneous ideas about the nature of ethnicity,” taken as the dependent variable, was

explained institutionally. This study therefore illustrates how an explanation of cultural schemas in ethnicity research may be constructed.

Table 5. Binary logistic regression: documentary constructivism

Predictor	B	OR
Village was reclassified (1 = yes, 0 = no)	1.639*	5.150
Age (years)	0.050**	1.052
Sex (woman = 1, man = 0)	-0.411	0.663
Higher/incomplete higher education (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.148	1.159
Lived outside Dagestan (2 = yes, for a long time; 1 = yes, briefly; 0 = no)	-0.058	0.943
Constant	-4.951***	0.007
N	99	—
Cox and Snell pseudo-R ²	0.174	—
Nagelkerke pseudo-R ²	0.304	—

Note. The dependent variable is whether the informant was classified as a documentary constructivist (1 = yes, 0 = no). Unstandardised logistic regression coefficients (B), p-values, and odds ratios (OR) are shown. $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. A dash indicates that the statistic is not applicable.*

Explaining strong ethnic identity in Bashkortostan: why is ethnic belonging nominal for some people but a motive for action for others?

Sociological explanation, however, consists not only, and not so much, in relationships between variables as in reconstructing recurrent chains of causes and consequences through which “large social facts” are reproduced. Such chains are known as mechanisms. The example below describes mechanisms through which strong ethnic identity is reproduced in Bashkortostan.

From the perspective of cognitive sociology, identity is a connection between representations of the person and representations of an ethnic category, or, put more simply, a state of affairs in which ethnicised phenomena, things, and words are perceived as part of the “self.” How can strong ethnic identity be explained? Although the sociological literature indirectly discusses many factors associated with “bright” ethnic boundaries (e.g., Wimmer 2013, 44–112), the social mechanisms through which people for whom ethnic belonging had been background information with no effect on their lives become “identified” representatives of their ethnic category are, with rare exceptions, outside the focus of the literature. The best-known scholarly narrative of this kind is associated with the American

social psychologist J. Phinney (Phinney 2013), in which strong identity emerges as a step-by-step consequence of discrimination. To what extent is this the case among residents of Bashkortostan?

To answer this question, a mixed-methods study was conducted.¹³ In the interviews, as in Dagestan in 2024, the focus was placed on perceptual-communicative facts related to ethnicity. Analyzed in the same way, these facts made it possible to distinguish several individual factors and mechanisms recurring from case to case, as a result of which strong ethnic identity regularly emerges among residents of Bashkortostan. The following factors were identified: (1) the presence of a significant other for whom ethnic belonging was already important and who “communicated” the value of national belonging to the informant; (2) the professionalization of ethnicity, that is, a situation in which a person’s work is directly connected with his or her nationality, for example playing a national instrument or teaching a language; (3) a crisis, an age-related period or event, such as the birth of a child or retirement, that “triggered” a reconsideration of one’s view of the world; and (4) ethnic discrimination. At the same time, the most vivid, frequent, and unexpected mechanism through which a person who was nominally Bashkir or Tatar developed a strong ethnic identity was the mechanism designated “ethnification through nostalgia.”

Within this mechanism, a person born in a village where a non-Russian language predominated, or was at least present, moved to a city, above all Ufa, for study or work and began to miss familiar people and places. In parallel, the person encountered the fact that rural everyday life, culture, objects, and landscapes had been ethnicised within nationalities policy and various kinds of events. The home village turned out to be not simply a village but

¹³ The general methodology of data collection and analysis is described in the methodological note to the Bashkortostan project above. In addition to those mentioned there, the author thanks T. D. Egorova and A. A. Orlova for participation in data collection and analysis.

a Bashkir or Tatar village; grandmother's ornaments, with which the person had played as a child, were interpreted as national; moreover, even nature, mountains and steppes, was ethnicised and tied closely above all to the category "Bashkir." This interpretation, however, did not occur overnight. Partly because the relevant objects, for example yurts or ornaments, are present in the urban space, but above all as a consequence of attending events in which both a symbolic and an emotional component are present, for example "samovar dances" on the embankment of the Belaya River, where the main language is Bashkir, the action takes place "under the shadow" of the monument to Salavat, the main emotions are joy and ecstasy, and the narrative regularly refers to districts, a person who had previously been Bashkir or Tatar only nominally became emotionally attached to his or her ethnic category. To summarize briefly, villagers' nostalgia for familiar places, people, and childhood, ethnicised through symbolic arrays and emotionally "charged" during "ethnic" events, is what creates strong ethnic identity in Bashkortostan.

How reliable are these conclusions, based on a limited, albeit extensive, qualitative field? At the second stage of the study, the survey, some questions measured the extent to which respondents' lives included the events constituting the "ethnicisation through nostalgia" mechanism, including moving, missing home, attending events, and others. A normalized cumulative index was created, taking the value 1 if all the events in the mechanism had occurred in the respondent's life, 0 if none had occurred, and intermediate values if some had occurred and others had not. The other factors and mechanisms, significant other, significant event/period, and discrimination, were also measured, but each was measured directly with a single question. The corresponding variable likewise took the values 1, if the events had occurred, and 0, if they had not. An identity index borrowed from Phinney's work and adapted for the purposes of the study was used as the dependent variable.

Table 6. Linear regressions explaining the strength of ethnic identity

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mechanism: significant other	0.294**	—	—
Mechanism: significant events	0.111	0.292***	—
Mechanism: discrimination	-0.055	-0.020	0.049
Mechanism: nostalgia	0.399***	—	—
Year of birth (higher value = later year of birth / younger age)	0.108	0.079	0.052
Sex (woman = 1, man = 0)	-0.032	-0.085	-0.074
Higher education (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.013	0.037	0.020
N	1107	1107	1107
R ²	0.330	0.090	0.010

Note. The dependent variable is identity. Standardized linear regression coefficients (β) are shown. A dash indicates that the predictor was not included in the corresponding model. $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.*

A series of regression models was calculated in which, controlling for sociodemographic variables, the extent to which particular mechanisms, separately and together, explained variation in the identity index was measured. According to the calculations, it is the “nostalgia” mechanism that has the greatest explanatory power, $\beta = 0.399$, $p < 0.01$, with $R^2 = 0.33$. At the same time, this value of R^2 is achieved by including all the other mechanisms and factors in the model, of which only “significant other” is statistically significant alongside “nostalgia.” Calculation of another model, from which the “nostalgia” and “significant other” mechanisms were excluded, showed that the “significant event” mechanism may also play a role, although empirically distinguishing a significant event, a significant other, and nostalgia may prove difficult. At the same time, the factor “discrimination” was statistically insignificant in all models.

On the basis of these calculations, the following conclusions can be drawn. First of all, “nostalgia” is not a phantom or an artifact of qualitative data but a mechanism operating in the production of strong identity at the level of Bashkortostan as a whole. Moreover, although it operates alongside other factors and mechanisms, “significant other” and “significant event,” it is this mechanism that has the greatest explanatory power. Substantively, this means that a pattern has developed in the republic in which villagers from predominantly Bashkir- and Tatar-speaking villages move to cities and, through “missing” familiar people, places, and landscapes, which in the city become ethnicised and symbolically linked to the categories “Bashkirs” and “Tatars,” as well as through attending events and meetings during

which the positive emotions arising from participation become ethnicised, that is, symbolically “attached” to ethnicised symbols, objects, people, and practices. Through the operation of this mechanism, initially nominal Bashkirs and Tatars regularly develop strong ethnic identity at the individual level, or, in the language of schemas, the ethnic schema is “superimposed” on the representation of the self. This identity then becomes a basis for individual and collective action, although that lies beyond the boundaries of the mechanism whose existence and significance this study was designed to test.

Discussion and conclusion

The cognitive turn in ethnicity research was announced in the early 2000s as a way of making explicit, and accelerating, a cognitivisation that had already been under way for decades. Yet it was never translated into a sufficiently explicit methodological programme: there was no cumulative repertoire of methods, procedures and research designs through which the turn could be operationalised in particular studies. The contribution of this article is to begin assembling such a repertoire.

What, then, do the designs discussed above make it possible to see about ethnicity more generally? Several substantive insights can already be treated as added value generated by an explicit cognitivisation of ethnicity research. First, in contrast to approaches that concentrate primarily on official ethnic categories, vernacular and spontaneous categorisation appears at least as important as administrative categorisation. Administrators themselves reproduce vernacular understandings in their representations and practices, while many administrative interventions have limited effects. In everyday life, people continuously select among competing interpretations of reality, favouring those that are simultaneously plausible, cognitively inexpensive and useful. Second, the schemas involved vary substantially across contexts. Cognitive universals may exist, but context-dependent ethnic schemas are at least as

important, and the chains through which they are reproduced can be intricate, as the Bashkortostan case shows. Third, the elementary units of this reproduction, acts of communication and perception, are fleeting and difficult to capture, but they can be studied and must be studied if we are to explain how ethnicity is organised between large-scale institutions and trends, on the one hand, and everyday social-cognitive processes, on the other.

At the same time, social-cognitive phenomena, and cultural cognitive schemas in particular, remain difficult empirical objects. Theoretically, schemas are not always easy to distinguish from more classical sociological “representations”. The spread of 4E approaches complicates the distinction further by treating cognition as distributed across relations among bodies, artefacts and environments rather than as something located exclusively inside the brain. From this perspective, the boundary between “internal” schemas and “external” representations becomes much less secure. Terminology adds another layer of confusion because “representation” also has a distinct history within cognitive science. The conceptual vocabulary of cognitive sociology therefore requires further clarification. Against that background, however, specifying workable operationalisations of cognitive schemas for a domain that has so far been only partly affected by the cognitive turn is a useful inductive task. That is the task pursued here.

The studies presented here do not exhaust the possible operationalisations. A companion article develops other empirical strategies, including the analysis of naturally occurring language. No single method can provide direct and complete access to a schema, not least because the concept itself is defined at a high level of abstraction. The range of methods proposed here should therefore be read in two ways: as a practical toolkit for sociological research on ethnicity that focuses on an institutionalised, differentiating perspective rather than on bounded peoples and cultures, and as an invitation to further methodological

experimentation at the intersection of the social and cognitive sciences. Research on ethnicity has much to gain from the methodological developments associated with the cognitive turn. The cognitive social sciences, in turn, have much to gain from ethnicity as an empirical domain in which spontaneous classification, emotion, the schema-action relationship and other core problems can be studied with unusual clarity.

The cognitive turn also points towards several especially promising next steps. The first is the conceptualisation and operationalisation of emotion. Increasingly discussed as a possible fifth “E” alongside the 4E approaches to cognition, emotion plainly plays a major role in how ethnicity becomes salient and consequential. The sociology of emotions already provides an empirical tradition, but its methodological repertoire remains incomplete for the questions posed here. A second direction is the selective integration of neurophysiological methods, from relatively simple measures such as galvanic skin response and heart-rate variability to more demanding techniques that examine overlap in neural activity associated with representations of the self and of social categories or objects. A third task concerns the cognitive social sciences themselves, which have not yet produced a fully coherent conceptual architecture or a cumulative research programme. None of these tasks can be accomplished within a single discipline. Progress will require sustained collaboration among social scientists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, historians and other relevant specialists.

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