

Научная статья

УДК 316.644

## Нарративная национальная идентичность как история личных действий в глобальных процессах

*Олеся Алексеевна Вальгер*<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Новосибирский государственный педагогический университет, Новосибирск, Россия

*Аннотация.* Изучение конкурирующих коллективных нарративов в государствах с активными процессами национального проектирования затруднено в связи с особенностями дискурса национальных проектов, предлагаемых культурными и политическими элитами в силу высокой инерции таких государственных систем. В статье автор рассматривает нарративный подход к национальной идентичности, который позволяет представить ассортимент знаковых исторических событий как историю личных действий в глобальных процессах. Таким образом, становится возможным изучение знаково-символического поля национальной идентичности посредством контент-анализа глубинных интервью с отдельными носителями такой идентичности, а не через анализ потока контаминированных массмедийных текстов. В статье предлагается первичный вариант набора вопросов для таких глубинных интервью.

*Ключевые слова:* национальная идентичность, воображаемые сообщества, нарратив, личный нарратив, агентность, интернализация нарратива, социальная детерминированность.

*Для цитирования:* Вальгер О. А. Нарративная национальная идентичность как история личных действий в глобальных процессах // Актуальные проблемы филологии и методики преподавания иностранных языков. 2023. Т. 17, № 1. С. 98–103.

Original article

## Narrative national identity as a story of personal agency in global processes

*Olesya A. Valger*<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University, Novosibirsk, Russia

*Abstract.* Studying collective narratives in the states with active nation-building processes is hindered by the discourse of nation-building projects attempted by cultural and political elites due to natural inertia of state systems. In the article, the author suggests employing narrative approach to national identity to represent a range of global historic events as an individual story of personal agencies in these processes, and therefore MEASURE the existing symbolic field of national identity by means of content analysis of in-depth interviews rather than contaminated stream of public media texts. The article suggests a draft framework for such interviews.

*Keywords:* national identity, imagined communities, narrative, personal narrative, personal agency, narrative internalization, social determination.

*For citation:* Valger O. A. Narrative national identity as a story of personal agency in global processes. *Topical issues of philology and methods of foreign language teaching*, 2023, Vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 98–103. (In Russ.)

As social, economic, and political processes are experienced by a society, its cultural and political elites construct narratives of these events and transmit them into the existing symbolic field by means of mass media. Aspiring nation-building projects seem to pay particular attention to the construction of these narratives in the

chase of an imagined value of a cohesive society where the public consensus based on shared identities promotes lawful and legal behaviours as they are appointed as lawful and legal. Establishing traditions to legitimize institutions and authority may take a variety of forms ranging from foundation of national museums, like it was demonstrated in the extensive study of new museums in the countries of the Arabic peninsula [8, p. 76] to personality cults and media monopolization, as A. Polese and S. Horak describe in their review of nation-building process in Turkmenistan [10, p. 459]. This variety provides individuals in the specific society with a range of opportunities to practice their national identity and, at least in the intention of the political and cultural elites, is intended to foster it [11, p. 17]. The attention of the political elites to history curricula in public school system and the revival of national narrative is observed in states with active nation-building processes [12, p. 258], and this very attention contaminates the stream of public media texts by the collective narrative that is actively introduced rather than is allowed to merely exist in the stream of unhindered public discussion. As a result, measurement of public media texts in such a society will allow a researcher to measure the attempt itself rather than the effect of collective nation-building narratives.

In the measurement of these effects of nation-building on the society the constructivist theory in a range of social sciences encounters the domains of social psychology (namely, the social identity theory) and linguistics (namely, the study of narratives), and it is a task for social philosophy to build a non-contradictory picture of the way collective narratives are reflected in personal narratives.

Following the origins of social identity theory by Erik H. Erikson [2, p. 15], we now see identity as a cycle of storytelling, where an individual builds a narrative of

individual past and brings the events that were a given, or a choice, or an accident, into context that explains the present conditions and behaviours. In some way or another, narrative identities reconstruct the individual autobiography and anticipate the imagined future to provide the self with temporal coherence and some semblance of psychosocial unity and purpose [5, p. 2]. In the stories that individuals tell themselves about themselves they compose the important, significant episodes of their personal life cycles into narratives of justified choices and successful strategies. Therefore, an event itself has a limited influence on the character, personality, and behaviour of a person; its influence is filtered through the rhetoric the person adopts to place the event into context that shapes the attitudes and behaviours. A catastrophic event of losing a business, for instance, may be put into a context of success and perseverance despite the unfavorable economic conditions, or may be seen as a logical continuation of 'bad luck' that goes on through generations. The very mass culture idea of 'positive attitudes that change life' is essentially but a distant echo of narrative psychology and social identity theory that has left academic circles and travelled to the pop culture in its most simplistic variant.

However, the resilience to events and the perceived degree of personal agency in large global events seems to be limited as well, and these limitations may bring us both to the diachronic study of a developing self, i.e., education theory, and back to the concept of collective narratives, as the assortment of attitudes is given to individuals in experience and social trends are conducive to individual trends. A good illustrative example would be attitude to a catastrophic event such as breast cancer case. If we take a European woman in 1970s who experienced a case of breast cancer and survived it due to a successful mastectomy could build

a personal narrative of a fighter who overcame difficulties and survived despite all odds; it was highly unlikely for that woman to tell this story publicly and broadcast the narrative into the symbolic field. A similar personal story in 2020s happens in a different symbolic field, where public figures such as the American film star Angelina Jolie have normalized the perception of this type of surgery, breast cancer has been featured in a number of books, films and documentaries, the rhetoric of a cancer patient as a brave fighter and a stubborn survivor is well-established at least in the European societies and telling a personal story of cancer on social media is perceived by many as an act of selfless bravery conducive to better practices and emancipation in the society in general. This example illustrates that certain individuals are prone to contradicting the collective narratives and changing the social norm, but the common collective narratives do shape the accepted range of behaviors for the majority that follows rather than establishes them.

National identity is no different from other identities in any aspect of its existence except the factor that political and cultural elites in young societies often aim to invest conscious effort into nation-building projects in the hope to shift and shape it within an observable time span. Collective narratives of national history, therefore, differ from other collective narratives, such as gender narratives, in the degree of competition between them. Political elites may appeal to social narratives of what it means to be a miner, or a mother of three children, or a happy citizen, but they rarely attempt to change the existing rhetoric and the existing symbolic field. The introspection into the common historical past and the social narrative of what it means to be a member of national community is often coloured by the challenges of contemporary political reality and is just as often employed as

justification or context for contemporary decisions. The very idea that the historic narrative may serve as justification for modern political affairs is a narrative of the 19th century nationalism [9, p. 789], but as states are inertial systems and political elites belong to older generations than the average age in the society, political elites may be particularly prone to this narrative.

J. László describes a methodology that uses content analysis to capture the effect of these narratives and states that various kinds of texts including historical textbooks, texts derived from public memory (e.g., media or oral history), novels and folk narratives play a central part in constructing national identity [4, p. 44]. Content analysis of recurrent topics, epithets, and characters in these types of texts enables to specify the range of symbols offered to an individual in the experience of public collective narrative. We argue that this range is not easily internalized and is not as limiting as nation-building projects would like to assume. History textbooks, for instance, may contradict family narratives of the recent past in a specific area and as a result cause a personal resistance to the whole narrative.

An individual national identity is practiced in a small group: a family circle, a group of friends, an office of colleagues, sometimes a political community of the lowest level, like a local chapter of a political party or an activist group. Inclusivity or exclusivity of a collective narrative is always a choice for a narrative constructor group, but it is a given for a small group that reiterates it in its daily conversations, and this narrative either leaves space for a story of personal agency or represses it. If the individual has a perspective that does not fit into the collective narrative, or the collective narrative disregards the experience of the individual, the whole collective narrative may be rejected as hostile, incomplete,

wrong, or superficial, so that the individual will investigate alternative, competing narratives and borrow from them. An example of this may be studies into effects of narrative transportation in storytelling advertisements which demonstrate that high narrative transportation may also lead to reduced character identification [1, p. 300]. In the same way, political speeches aimed at a specific target audience, such as suburban conservative male audience aged between 40–65, can produce a greater effect on mobilization *against* the speaker if a different audience, such as urban female liberal audience aged 18–40, will be inadvertently exposed to them [7, p. 2532].

This leads us to the idea that exclusive collective narratives without space for personal agency are rejected for the sake of more inclusive collective narratives. A narrative that disregards personal experience can be imposed for a brief period of time, but its interaction with internalized identity cannot be deep and serve as a basis for expected irrational behavioral choices. A narrative identity is the context of personal space or family space in global processes, and content analysis of collective narratives should include the key points that allow an individual to intertwine the story of personal successes and failures into large national events.

A story of personal agency is a basis for ascribing values to large historic events that could leave no family untouched. Public discussion about these events happens at a local level, rooting the discussion in place-based culture [13, p. 17]. Federal promotion and linking the narrative to a limited set of historic personalities rather than local personal stories creates a cleave in the cohesion of the collective narrative, and the narrative is likely to be perceived as empty and imposed. In the digital age social media do not only serve communion goals but also provide opportunities to

assert agency and build identity narratives with redemptive themes [3, p. 203], therefore any collective narrative is challenged, contested, and internalized or rejected in the constant narration of stories with represented, explicit personal agency.

Research into narrative national identity might be done through a series of in-depth interviews devoted to a set of questions aimed at reflexive narration of key problematic points in the recent history of the modern Russian society. We suggest that the frame for these interviews shall include the following list of questions:

- colonization and migration processes of the 18–20th century: why is this specific territory part of the Russian Federation? Why does my family live in this specific territory? How does our ownership of a space translate into the participation in the life of this territory?

- cultural uniformity in the Soviet period: how was my native language affected by the unifying processes of a soviet project? How were local cultures reflected, rejected, respected, or disregarded in this project? What elements of cultural specificity are observed or should be observed in the public celebrations, laws, family traditions of the specific territory?

- repressions, social progress, and loss in the 1930s: how was my family affected by these large processes? Were my recent ancestors part of the progress, benefactors of it or its dark price? What was lost on the way?

- the clash of culture and counterculture in the late USSR: what was the environment that predetermined my parents' views and beliefs? What music, literature or art was a conduit to their values and expectations? What was their place in the social order and what social lifts were available to them?

- the roaring nineties, economic cataclysms and opportunity: what did my family lose and what did it get from the social change? What social lifts became available? What personal catastrophes

unfolded on this background? How are my education, profession, and personal lifestyle determined by the generational change?

– the sated 2000s, economic growth and incorporation into world trends: what opportunities did my family employ during this period? How did the economic stability influence the values and political beliefs? How did the general growth of level of life translate into personal success?

– the centralization and vertical power of 2010s: how did economic loss translate into my individual level of life? How greater rigidity of the legal and political systems influence my personal strategy? Who am I in this society?

These marker points offer space for exploring collective narratives through stories of personal agency that are

measurable by means of content analysis aimed at highlighting narrative national identity as a story of personal agency in global processes. Any attempts of political and cultural elites at deductive nation-building from top to bottom are going to remain an imitation without profound sociological research [6, p. 42], and we argue that this research should be conducted at the micro level. Even though personal narratives are harder to grasp than collective narratives, studying public rhetoric in a society with hindered public discussion will not provide cohesive and reliable data. A narrative approach to national identity therefore allows us to measure the existing symbolic field of national identity by means of content analysis of in-depth interviews rather than contaminated stream of public media texts.

#### Список источников

1. *Dessart L.* Do ads that tell a story always perform better? The role of character identification and character type in storytelling ads // *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. 2018. № 35, Vol. 2. P. 289–304. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2017.12.009
2. *Erikson E. H.* Identity and the life cycle. WW Norton & company, 1994. 193 p.
3. *Granic I., Morita H., Scholten H.* Beyond screen time: Identity development in the digital age // *Psychological Inquiry*. 2020. № 31, Vol. 3. P. 195–223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2020.1820214>
4. *László J.* Historical tales and national identity: An introduction to narrative social psychology. Routledge, 2013. 200 p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880105>
5. *McAdams D. P.* First we invented stories, then they changed us: the Evolution of Narrative Identity // *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*. 2019. № 3, Vol. 1. P. 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26613/esic.3.1.110>
6. *McAdams D. P.* Narrative identity // *Handbook of identity theory and research*. New York: Springer, 2011. P. 99–115. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9_5)
7. *Meeks L.* Appealing to the 52 %: Exploring Clinton and Trump's appeals to women voters during the 2016 US presidential election // *International Journal of Communication*. 2018. № 19. P. 2527–2545. DOI: <https://doi.org/1932-8036/20180005>
8. *Mitchell J. S.* We're all Qataris here: The nation-building narrative of the National Museum of Qatar // *Representing the Nation*. Routledge. 2016. P. 75–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315691350-18>
9. *Moffitt U., Juang L. P., Syed M.* Being both German and Other: Narratives of contested national identity among white and Turkish German young adults // *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 2018. № 57, Vol. 4. P. 878–896. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12268>
10. *Polese A., Horák S.* A tale of two presidents: personality cult and symbolic nation-building in Turkmenistan // *Nationalities Papers*. 2015. № 43, Vol. 3. P. 457–478. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1028913>
11. *Rowley L. J.* Let Me Be a Part of the Narrative: Effects of Exposure to Musical Theater Production Hamilton on Adolescent National Identity. Diss. Fielding Graduate University, 2018. 148 p.

12. *Sheldon N.* Politicians and history: the national curriculum, national identity and the revival of the national narrative // *History*. 2012. № 97, Vol. 326. P. 256–271. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.2012.00550.x>

13. *Wilmers L.* The Local Dynamics of Nation Building: Identity Politics and Constructions of the Russian Nation in Kazan and Ekaterinburg // *Nationalities Papers*. 2022. P. 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.13>

### **Информация об авторе**

**О. А. Вальгер** – старший преподаватель кафедры лингвистики и теории перевода, Новосибирский государственный педагогический университет, Новосибирск, Россия, [olesyavalger@gmail.com](mailto:olesyavalger@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3379-4519>

### **Information about the author**

**O. A. Valger** – Senior Lecturer of the Department of Linguistics and Translation Theory, Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University, Novosibirsk, Russia, [olesyavalger@gmail.com](mailto:olesyavalger@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3379-4519>

*Статья поступила в редакцию 08.11.2022; одобрена после рецензирования 21.11.2022; принята к публикации 24.11.2022.*

*The article was submitted 08.11.2022; approved after reviewing 21.11.2022; accepted for publication 24.11.2022.*