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Myths of ethnic consciousness as a factor in the formation of personal identity in preschool children: A psychological analysis in a multicultural environment

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Abstract
The research in this article examines the function of ethnic myths as psychological and symbolic mechanisms in building identity in preschool children. Through the lens of war and refugee displacement, we examine how cultural narratives impact early ethnic-racial awareness and identification. We applied a comparative mixed-method design to two preschool groups (ages 4–6): a group who stayed in Ukraine during the war (n = 45), and a group resettled to multicultural surroundings abroad (n = 43). The following tools were used: a narrative projective exercise ("Tell the Hero's Story"), the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale for Children (BIIS-C), pictorial self-identification tools, and questionnaires from parents. The children living in Ukraine had stronger ethnic identification, more frequent occurrence of enemy figures in narratives, and more ethnically marked symbols. The displaced children had larger bicultural identity integration, more open narratives, and more hybrid or cosmopolitan character figures. Research shows ethnic myths as early symbolic models used in building identity, particularly in situations of cultural threat or change. In conflict situations, myths are used to enhance psychological consistency and group affinity and in multicultural environments to achieve adaptable bicultural identification. The importance of narrative structure to the formation of identity early in life underscores the necessity of culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Keywords
multicultural education; bicultural identity; narrative psychology; ethnic-racial socialization; war trauma.

1. Introduction
The crisis of Ukraine, brought about through the all-out Russian assault of 2022, has, therefore, redrawn the development landscape of young Ukrainians. Families are faced with involuntary displacement, school closures, abrupt shifts from a linguistic minority to majority status, and the perennially stress-engendering environment of violence and unpredictability. In such a context, the construction of personal and collective identity becomes not merely a development yardstick but a psychological imperative. For, according to Barrington (2022) and Kulyk (2022), Ukrainian civic identity is, necessarily, multi-layered, having being molded from linguistic allegiances, ethnic identification, and fluctuating national borders. War, unfortunately, has intensified such a process, rendering questions of identity politicized and emotive well beyond a baseline.

It is a sensitive period during which children are most sensitive to cultural inscriptions and symbolic markers. Znamenska et al. (2024) report that second signal system—verbal and symbolic capacity—development is sensitively vulnerable to maternal stress, disrupted attachment, and sociopolitical trauma. These are all compounded in the twin scenario of war and post-pandemic travail. Inadequate symbolic functioning can compromise children's metaphorical thinking, internalising of cultural scripts, and generation of integrated self-narratives. As a consequence, preschool periods are just as central for consolidatory symbolic identity development as for emotional and linguistic development.

Research works of Melnychuk et al. (2022) and Lunov et al. (2024) further emphasizes the manner in which enormous global shocks, such as armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic, insert themselves into the emotional lives of children via anxiety, familial disintegration, and social disintegration. Ethnic myths, at this

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juncture, can be seen to be modes of collective memory and affect-regulation tools, which create continuity and coherence to a disordered world elsewhere. In this study, we use the term “ethnic myths” to refer to symbolic narratives that convey cultural meaning, historical memory, and group identity frameworks to young children. While similar to “ethnic narratives” or “master narratives” (McLean & Syed, 2015), we adopt the term "myth" to emphasize the archetypal, emotionally charged, and often moralistic nature of these stories as received by children. Myths serve not merely as descriptive accounts but as affective-symbolic maps through which identity is shaped—especially under sociocultural disruption such as war or displacement. This usage is informed by Cassirer’s (1946) notion of myth as a mechanism of psychological containment and order in times of uncertainty.

With uprooted populations, these processes of building identity are further complicated with acculturation. Refugee children resettling in multicultural countries or societies are compelled to reconcile transmitted ethnic identification with host milieus' values and norms. Mesman et al. (2022) note that the acquisition of a bicultural identity can be a protective adaptation or internal source of conflict, depending on the child's ability to incorporate conflicting symbolic systems.

Preschool contexts are most characteristic for this procedure. Spencer (2022) and Ong (2022) remind us that children's texts, storytelling, and classroom talk are not objective educational texts but fluid locations of cultural negotiation. These symbolic media either re-inscribe cultural hegemonies or are locations for anti-racist, inclusive identity work. In this respect, preschool classrooms are constitutive locations of the symbolic construction of identity.

Psychologically, internalisation of ethnic myths is seen as one of the earliest forms of abstract cultural knowledge. In the form of storytelling models of heroes versus villains, transmutation frameworks, and ethical motivations, children learn initial social affiliation schemas (Rogers et al., 2023). These structures of myth provide developmentally constructive scaffolding, more specifically, during episodes of ambiguity, with cognitive as well as emotional functions (Lingras, 2021).

Though not traditionally framed as a multiethnic nation, Ukraine's ethnocultural setting is complex, fluctuant, and shifting (Kulyk, 2022). For youth, that means opportunity alongside ambiguity, particularly during periods of sociopolitical transformation. In this everyday setting—determined through language, school, parental relationships, and trauma—ethnic myths are functioning alongside received histories and coping scripts of deep-reaching development influence.

This work investigates the psychological and symbolic functions of ethnic myths for young children forming identity in Ukrainian and multicultural diasporic contexts. It specifically compares children forming identity under monoethnic conflict regions with internally displaced children based on symbolic representation, self-identification, and bicultural orientation.

By means of a mixed-method design that includes narrative analysis, projective techniques, and psychometric testing, the study examines the initial processes whereby children internalize, accommodate, or rework ethnic myths through exposure to their sociocultural setting. As a consequence, it sheds new light on the character of identity development not merely as a school-centred or parental one, but more essentially one heavily impacted by macro-contextual forces of conflict, migration, and cultural mixing.

By locating identity development between cognitive-linguistic development and symbolic-emotional construction of meaning, the study identifies early mythic forms fundamental to psychologically resilient functioning and social integration in early childhood.

2. Theoretical Framework

Children are now commonly understood to start showing ethnic awareness long before the age of seven. According to a report by Southwell (1984), even three-year-old children are not only proficient at perceiving racial differences but also at expressing ethnic preferences and even early prejudices. Her empirical work at a multicultural nursery school in Nottingham illustrated how more than 70% of the children were able to identify their own ethnic group using visual stimuli. What was found to be somewhat remarkable was the high percentage of three-year-olds who were also good at correctly identifying themselves, a finding which indicates ethnic awareness is not simply a taught concept brought on in late childhood but is instead a manifestation of early social and cognitive development.

Southwell’s (1984) early work in multicultural preschool environments demonstrated that children as young as three exhibit ethnic awareness and preference. Although her study was conducted in the UK, its broader relevance lies in showing that ethnic consciousness is developmentally rooted, not context-specific. This challenges assumptions of ethnic "neutrality" in preschool years and supports the need for culturally

responsive pedagogy across all settings, including post-conflict and migrant contexts like Ukraine and Europe. In rejecting the notion that children are inherently neutral or immune to social categorisation, Southwell provides a compelling argument for early pedagogical interventions grounded in cultural realism rather than idealistic universalism.

Ethnic myths are understood broadly as common symbolic stories encoding cultural values and group identities and are responsible in early childhood for the formation of children's understanding of their own and others' social positions. While empirical work on the particular content of ethnic myths internalized early in life is thin on the ground, Farago, Davidson, and Byrd (2019) document how ethnic-racial socialization by parents – including communicating cultural pride, preparing children for bias, and even encouraging intergroup mistrust – informs children's comprehension of ethnic boundaries and social hierarchies. Their research indicates that mythic and symbolically charged features – like heroic figures, collective suffering, or cultural superiority – are regularly contained in such socialization messages, especially in minority households dealing with systemic inequality.

Schools in general, and especially in multicultural urban settings, are not simply locations of academic pedagogy but powerful socialising institutions directly engaged in shaping identity. The failure to directly address ethnic diversity can unwittingly reinforce prevailing cultural myths and exclude minority identities. Farago et al. (2019) argue that early childhood educators, like parents, are agents of ethnic-racial socialization. Unlike parents of color who are likely to adopt proactive ethnic education, early educators are tied to colorblind ideologies in many cases. These good-intentioned but ineffective practices sidetrack social realities children experience and work against the formation of genuine, robust ethnic identities. A colour-conscious pedagogy – one which celebrates difference without promoting hierarchies – is to be favored instead.

The ignoring of ethnic consciousness in children will have a range of psychosocial consequences. These include cognitive dissonance, distress and behavioral withdrawal in children when they are brought up in a fundamental conflict between their own culture and the norms of the school. Southwell (1984) documented a number of anecdotal case studies when children repressed parts of their identity to be accepted by peers or teachers, or internalized racism by excluding their own cultural group.

Color-evasive or power-evasive ideologies advocating superficial neutrality towards race, color-consciousness involves a conscious recognition of racial and ethnic differences and power dynamics underlying group-based inequalities (Mesman et al., 2022). In early childhood development, the ideology has far-reaching consequences on how young children comprehend themselves and others. Colour-awareness is not the same as anti-racism but instead a required stepping stone towards it (Berman & Paradies, 2010). By avoiding conversations around race, educators and parents might actually perpetuate structural inequalities. The research also highlights how even young children are attuned to adults' talk about race–or the noticeable lack of it–something which might be internalized as off-limits and thus block healthy identity exploration.

The early childhood period is a key developmental window for the establishment of ethnic-racial identity (ERI), a process with long-term consequences for self-esteem, social competence, and psychological resilience. Iruka et al. (2021) hold that infants start to construct a sense of ethnic-racial identity as early as infancy and that racial socialisation by the parents is instrumental in shaping the same. These practices of socialisation usually involve messages promoting cultural pride, preparation against discrimination, and ways of confronting racialized contexts.

Multiracial children, as per Nishina and Witkow (2020), cannot all be viewed as a homogeneous group because their identity formation takes on a range of forms contingent on family configuration, phenotype, language practices, and social context. This is particularly crucial in multicultural settings where children are subject to a range of ethnic myths, expectations, and in-group and out-group demarcations.

Within schools, especially in early childhood education, teachers function as secondary but influential agents of ethnic-racial socialization. Wee et al. (2024) explored how early childhood student teachers of color conceptualized and enacted cultural competence in practice. The authors describe how lived experience – bilingualism and biculturalism – informs both how educators perceive diversity and how they integrate it into pedagogy. Student teachers in the research highlighted using culture as a methodology tool and promoting asset-oriented approaches acknowledging children's backgrounds instead of deficits to be "fixed".

This finding supports previous research by Farago et al. (2019) who contend educators do not avoid using race-based language but should instead learn color-conscious pedagogies. Failing to receive such training, teachers might fall back on culturally neutral or evasive practices that disavow the explanatory significance of race and culture in the child's reality.

Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is a dynamic developmental process and its formation begins early in childhood and persists through adolescence and adulthood and is a function of person-specific, family-specific, society-

specific, and history-specific circumstances. The Lifespan Model of ERI developed by a workgroup in 2018 offers an expansive framework to address the age-varying and context-embedded character of identity formation. Among the key questions it poses is how the multiple identities–national, ethnic, culture, and racial identities–are interwoven and influence developmental outcomes. The model also emphasizes the importance of biculturalism as a central aspect of identity development among ethnic-racial minorities as the process of integrating both heritage and host culture identities. To clarify our use of key identity terms throughout the manuscript, we offer the following distinctions: personal identity refers to a child's self-concept, encompassing personal traits, preferences, relationships, and affective experiences. In early childhood, this is expressed through narrative, play, and symbolic association; ethnic-racial identity (ERI) involves awareness, affective investment, and meaning-making related to one's ethnic or racial group membership. ERI is shaped by socialization and becomes particularly salient in both monoethnic and multicultural settings (Iruka et al., 2021); civic identity refers to identification with broader societal or national structures and values, such as being "Ukrainian" or part of a host country's citizenry. In war or displacement, civic identity may intersect with trauma, national pride, and group narratives.

The individuals who are bicultural have to reconcile potentially contradictory schemas of the two cultures and it may prove to be both a source of enrichment and a source of psychological burden (Meca et al., 2023). A key to further developing the field is measurement of ERI that is accurate and culturally responsive.

Meca et al. (2023) describe how established measures like the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) have been vital but are by no means perfect. Since it was constructed to evaluate exploration, commitment, and affirmation, MEIM has been found to load on a two-factor model instead of the first three-factor model. In response to this, EIS proposed a more advanced three-factor configuration, although psychometric issues exist–specifically with its affirmation scale.

Furthermore, the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) provides content-assessed measures of identity centrality and group regard as a supplement to the process-measured EIS. The intersections between dimensions across the two tools are underexamined to this point. The Bicultural Identity Integration Scale (BIIS-2), in a bicultural identity context, offers useful information on how individuals manage cultural harmony and conflict and blended and compartmentalisation (Trifiletti et al., 2022). The BIIS-C validation in children represents a vital extension of such a tool to young populations. In multicultural classrooms, it is especially relevant as bicultural or multiracial children are likely to encounter identity compartmentalisation when their household and educational cultures expose them to competing norms and expectations.

Identity development is contextually situated such that neighborhoods, schools, and socio-political environments all play a part in how children define and express their cultural identity. In supportive and diverse environments, children will have a better likelihood of exploring and claiming their heritage identity, while monocultural or inhospitable environments tend to force minority children to compartmentalize or hide aspects of themselves. Juang et al. (2021) also call to mind that conceptualisations of ERI need to be tailored to cultural and historical contexts as well. In Germany, as an example, the term "race" is still taboo and impacts both research and practice. That example shows the necessity of adapting identity systems to local narratives and sociohistorical sensitivities.

In addition to between-group differences, diversity within groups has to also be acknowledged. According to Meca et al. (2023), ignoring such diversity has the potential to perpetuate monolithic narratives and dismiss the distinct identity pathways within a group. In order to operationalize the above theoretical constructs and situate them in the context of the current research, the following table 1 outlines the main psychological and socio-cultural concepts on which our exploration of the part played by ethnic myths in the development of preschool children's identity in multicultural settings is premised.

The present study draws on the framework of narrative identity as conceptualized by McAdams (2021), who argues that individuals construct a sense of self by internalizing and editing life stories that provide their lives with unity, purpose, and meaning. In early childhood, these stories are less autobiographical and more symbolic or mythic, yet they already begin to scaffold the self. Preschoolers, through imaginative play, storytelling, and symbolic expression, start constructing what McAdams calls "proto-narratives" of identity. These early narrative structures are often influenced by family and cultural mythologies, offering children metaphoric tools to articulate their role in the social world. Thus, analyzing children's stories allows us to trace early elements of meaning-making, cultural positioning, and emotional coping strategies—core components of emerging narrative identity.

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Table 1.
Core concepts and definitions underpinning the study

Concept	Definition	Relevance to Preschool Development
Ethnic Consciousness	Awareness of one's own ethnic group and others as distinct identity categories	Emerges as early as age 3; shapes social preferences and identity labels
Ethnic Myths	Narratives and beliefs transmitted culturally, often symbolising traits, values, and social roles	Influence a child's self-understanding and perceptions of ethnic groups
Personal Identity (Preschool Age)	A developing sense of self including physical, social, and cultural attributes	Early identity schemas become foundational to later self-concept and worldview
Ethnic-Racial Socialisation (ERS)	Processes by which children learn about their ethnic group and others through family, school, media	Affects identity formation, prejudice, and social competence
Bicultural Identity Integration (BII)	The degree to which children see their heritage and mainstream cultures as compatible or conflicting	Predicts emotional well-being and school engagement in multicultural contexts
Color-Consciousness	Acknowledgment of racial and ethnic difference and associated power dynamics	Linked to more positive outgroup attitudes and identity coherence
Multicultural Education	Pedagogical practices that validate multiple cultural backgrounds and foster intercultural understanding	Encourages identity affirmation and respectful intergroup interactions
Context of Reception	Socio-political environment's openness or hostility toward diversity	Determines how children internalise social messages about ethnicity and belonging

Personal identity formation is thus anything but a neutral and isolated developmental process but instead deeply rooted in common myths and cultural narratives which children pick up in interactions with adults, peers and stories as well as in institutional messages.

These are intensified in multicultural environments. Not only do children hear their own ethnic story but also others', typically in fragmentary, romanticized, or stereotypical accounts. The extent to which such myths are internalized, challenged, or incorporated depends on a range of mediating variables – chat at home, teachers' attitudes, media images, and class life. It is against this backdrop that ethnic myths are of particular relevance: they are cognitive and affective templates for meaning-making in relation to self and others.

In addition, despite numerous studies on ethnic identity and socialization during adolescence, very little empirical research has been conducted on children between the age of 3 and 6 at a time when early ethnic awareness has been documented. In order to fill this research gap, this study aims to investigate empirically how ethnic myths serve as developmental mechanisms during identity formation in preschool children in a multicultural preschool context.

2.1. Materials and Methods

This research used a comparative, mixed-method design to investigate how ethnic myths are a source of influence on the development of personal identity in preschool-age children in different cultures. More broadly, it looked at the internalisation of ethnic stories and expressions of symbolic identity in children aged 5-6 who had stayed in Ukraine amidst the conflict and their counterparts who were displaced to foreign countries and now live in multicultural communities. The two-group design enabled a contextualized comparison of identity formation both in terms of cultural continuity and cultural transition.

The sample was composed of 90 Ukrainian preschool children aged 5-6 (M = 5.5, SD = 0.6), divided equally between two groups. Group A consisted of 45 children who resided in Ukraine during the war and were attending urbano- or semi-urban mono- and biethnic communities. Group B consisted of 45 children who had migrated abroad (Germany, Poland, or the Czech Republic) with their parents because of the war and were in preschools with a multicultural composition. The gender distribution was even across groups (22 boys and 23 girls per group), and all the children were Ukrainian native speakers.

Families in Group B were recruited via Ukrainian diaspora organizations, preschool networks, and refugee assistance NGOs in Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Initial contact was made through bilingual community liaisons who facilitated informed consent and participation. All families had resettled abroad within the 12–18 months prior to participation, with children attending local preschools for at least six consecutive months.

The preschools selected for Group B were in urban areas with high ethnic diversity, where at least 40% of enrolled children were from immigrant or multicultural backgrounds. This data was confirmed via publicly available demographic reports from host-country education ministries. In contrast, Group A children attended schools in mono- or bi-ethnic Ukrainian towns with limited multicultural exposure.

To investigate how identity development operates during early childhood, the study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative tools to match the cognitive and affective abilities of early childhood. One of the key tasks was

the projective story exercise “Tell the Hero’s Story” (McAdams, 2021), whereby children wrote an open-ended story about a culturally ambiguous hero. The "Tell the Hero’s Story" task is grounded in narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2021), which posits that early symbolic storytelling reflects foundational processes of meaning-making and self-positioning. This projective technique was selected specifically for its accessibility to preschool-aged children and its ability to elicit both implicit and explicit dimensions of identity.

Each narrative was coded for components that mirror key dimensions of identity development: Hero type – reflects the child’s ideal self or perceived role models (personal identity); Presence of antagonist/conflict – represents threat appraisal, social boundary awareness (ethnic/civic identity); Cultural symbols – signal group membership and ethnic salience (ethnic-racial identity); Story resolution – indicates coping strategies and affiliation tendencies; Explicit ethnic labelling – indexes awareness and salience of ethnic categories. Their production was analyzed on the basis of ethnic myth content, moral connotations, and cultural affiliation indicators.

The Figure Selection Task (Southwell, 1984) was utilized to evaluate both social preference and self-identification. The children were presented with a range of illustrated figures of children with different ethnic looks and symbols and were asked to pick out a figure most like themselves and a friend.

The figure choice task was adapted from Southwell’s (1984) original instrument. Children were shown laminated cards depicting cartoon figures of diverse ethnic appearance, attire, and symbols (e.g., traditional Ukrainian dress, neutral dress, culturally ambiguous clothing, darker/lighter skin tones). Each child was asked two key questions: “Which one looks most like you?” and “Which one would you like to be friends with?” Their responses were coded for self-recognition, in-group vs. out-group preference, and justifications. A selection of these figures and the coding guide is provided in Appendix C.

The response was coded to look at both outgroup association and ingroup identification. A third tool used was "Identity Tree", a symbol mapping exercise whereby children built a map of their ethnic and family identity using stickers, drawing, and culturally representative icons. The number and composition of ethnic symbols, languages, and identities allowed for an understanding of how children conceptualize and structure their ethnic self (Appendix B).

To evaluate bicultural orientations, a modified version of the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale for Children (BIIS-C) was utilized (Trifiletti et al., 2022). This consisted of 10 questions measuring harmony versus conflict and blendedness versus compartmentalisation on different cultural experiences. Visual stimuli were paired with each item and a pictorial Likert scale using expressive facial emojis to promote accessibility to preschool understanding. The scale was linguistically translated into Ukrainian and was pilot-tested with internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$). The BIIS-C was adapted linguistically and visually to suit preschool comprehension. Items were simplified in language, each accompanied by color illustrations and a pictorial Likert scale with emoji faces ranging from sad to happy, as recommended for early childhood scaling. The pilot group ($n = 15$) consisted of children aged 5–6 from a Ukrainian preschool not involved in the main sample. Internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$) indicated acceptable psychometric reliability in this age group. Adaptation followed guidelines from Trifiletti et al. (2022) and was reviewed by three early childhood development specialists fluent in Ukrainian. Finally, a brief parental questionnaire was used to capture ethnic-racial socialization in the household. This included language usage, storytelling practices, ethnic talk, and cultural integration or separation perceptions.

Although bicultural identity integration (BII) is most often studied in adolescence, early indicators of cultural integration can be meaningfully observed in preschoolers through adapted instruments. Research by Iruka et al. (2021) and Farago et al. (2019) has shown that preschool-aged children are capable of recognizing, naming, and evaluating cultural cues. Moreover, the BIIS-C was specially adapted for visual-symbolic expression in this study. Its use is further justified by our goal: not to measure cognitive meta-awareness of biculturalism, but rather to detect early emotional and symbolic orientation toward cultural integration or compartmentalisation.

To facilitate further transparency and replications, the coding schema for the analysis of narratives was induced from a initial pilot group of 15 children's stories. This initial round generated five broad categories: (1) type of hero (e.g., defender, traveler, helper), (2) whether and how antagonists appear (e.g., war imagery, abstract threats), (3) cultural symbolism (e.g., flags, food, linguistic markers), (4) resolution of the moral (e.g., collectivism, reconciliatory), and (5) explicit or implicit identification based on ethnicity. These broad categories were then applied systematisedly to all of the narratives via NVivo 14. Double-blind review and intercoder agreement was implemented for reliability of coding, which yielded a resultant Cohen’s Kappa of .82.

For example, a child's narration described a “small hero who sings two languages and eats two breads,” which was encoded under hybrid symbolism and bicultural storyline. In contrast, a second narration depicted

a “brave soldier with a shield from black shadows,” which was encoded under national defender character, explicit enemy, and ethnic specificity. These bits of storytelling uncover the diversification of symbolism and psychosocial coping that children utilized for identity negotiation.

Before undertaking parametric analyses, the dataset was assessed for normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test. All major outcome variables were normally distributed ($p > .05$), therefore justifying the use of independent-samples t-tests for group comparison. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Thematic qualitative analysis was carried out using NVivo 14, which facilitated the organisation, coding, and comparison of narrative data between a number of symbolic categories and dimensions of story.

The children were individually tested in quiet environments in their preschool settings. The data collection was done in two sessions of 20 minutes to match children's attention spans. The procedures were undertaken by trained psychology and education practitioners who were fluent in Ukrainian, and linguistic and cultural support was also available to children in host countries. Parent questionnaires were also presented in parallel and all interviews and sessions were video-recorded and transcribed to analyze content. Informed consent procedures were used (based on ethnic socialisation items from Farago et al. (2019).

Quantitative data were evaluated using independent samples t-tests, chi-square (χ^2), and descriptive statistics to determine differences among groups. Descriptive statistics, i.e., means and standard deviations, were calculated for variables as measured by bicultural identity integration. Independent t-tests contrasted mean scores for each child group, and chi-squared tests evaluated categorical variables like the presence of antagonists, use of symbols, and ethnic labelling of story people. Statistical significance for all tests was established at $p < .05$, and analyses used standard statistical software to ensure rigour and replicability.

To complement the quantitative evaluations, a strong qualitative analytic framework was utilised to analyse children's symbolic and narrative productions. The major purpose of this qualitative aspect was to tap into the psychological meaning contained in children’s stories, drawings, and decision-making objects that are potent avenues for symbolic identity construction. Data elicited from three projective instruments – the story exercise "Tell the Hero’s Story," "Identity Tree" symbolic mapping activity, and pictorial choice activity – were subjected to thematic content analysis rooted in interpretative traditions in developmental and cultural psychology.

Narratives from the "Hero’s Story" (Appendix A) exercise were assessed along five pre-determined qualitative dimensions: (1) the kind of hero depicted, (2) whether an antagonist is featured or absent, (3) whether and how culturally symbolic elements (e.g., food and clothing, language and symbols, national symbols), (4) the moral arc or ending of the story, and (5) explicit and/or implicit references to the ethnic identity of the protagonist. These analytic categories were inductively derived from a pilot coding round and based on existing research on mythic identity structures in early childhood (McAdams, 2021). Two researchers trained in narrative analysis independently coded each story and resolved discrepancies through consensus discussion for increased intercoder reliability.

Thematic coding focused on both semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes extracted near-surface-level story content, including explicit references to national identity and enemy figures, while latent themes extracted deep-seated psychosocial meaning, including fear-based identity models and reconciliation scripts based upon being bilingual and bicultural. Such a double-layered method is consistent with young populations' standards for narrative psychological examination and enabled the research team to extrapolate patterns in group affiliation and mythic self-construction processes in youth (Rogers & Way, 2021).

In "Identity Tree," children's visual and symbolic productions were systematically decoded based upon the diversity and integration of markers used in their respective cultures. This involved assessing the quantity and integration of symbols of ethnic identity (e.g., Ukrainian symbols, native clothing, bilingual words, native vs. host-country symbols). The drawings were assessed not just for representational meaning but also for structural properties, including balance, stratification and hybrid placement of elements from different cultures, seen as indicators of internal schema organisation and bicultural identity processing (Meca et al., 2023).

The figure choice task–where children selected pictures representing themselves and a friend–was also qualitatively analysed to examine implicit social preference and symbolic self. The reasoning was to tap into explicit ethnic recognition of self as well as in-group and out-group choice patterns indicative of early cognitive-affective associations of similarity and belonging (Southwell, 1984). While numerical counts were noted for statistical comparison purposes, children's accompanying explanations behind their selections were thematically coded to reveal underlying motives (i.e., selecting based on common language, similar appearance, or moral attributes such as kindness or courage).

Lastly, parental questionnaire responses were qualitatively examined to contextualise children's symbolic productions. Although used mostly to provide descriptive background information about family ethnic-racial

child-rearing practices (e.g., linguistic use, story routines, integration/separation practices), parent responses were sampled for verification of child narratives' themes as part of data triangulation involving child-generated and parent-reported data. This triangulation furnished a deeper interpretive context for understanding how ethnic myths and cultural scripts were passed on, reinforced, and altered within family microcultures (Farago et al., 2019; Mesman et al., 2022).

Combined, the qualitative approaches utilised in this research facilitated an understanding at multiple layers about how preschool-age children symbolically interact with narratives about cultural identity. With projective storytelling, symbolic mapping, and coding through narratives included as instruments, the study transcended static measurement to map out how mythic identity unfolds as an emerging process located within lived sociocultural life.

Although the sample was balanced and methodologically heterogeneous, some constraints exist. Cultural generalisations are multifaceted, and children's narrative abilities are shaped by family, education, language exposure, and media. Interpretation of symbolic data, even if systematised, has a component of subjectivity. Longitudinal methods could be used in future research to closely monitor how ethnic mythologies and narrative identity develop into middle childhood and adolescent life. In addition, parents' storytelling techniques need to be investigated as mediating variables in passing on and reinterpreting ethnic myths.

Ethical considerations were a priority in every stage of the research. Informed written consent was collected from all legal guardians or parents and child assent was gained following a simplified and developmentally appropriate description of the activities in the study. Observing the level of exposure of the children involved, with many having a personal exposure to armed conflict, being displaced, or losing a family member, particular sensitivity was taken towards trauma-informed ethical practice in the study. All of the researchers had prior training for child trauma sensitivity and safe play procedures, including identification of non-verbal indicators of distress, culturally respectful language, and procedures for emotional management that are developmentally appropriate for preschool children.

Participation was voluntary only, explained to children as a storytelling game. Participants were free to withdraw from participation at any moment without pressure or punishment. Trained observers joined data collectors while they conducted data collections to monitor for signs of distress or fatigue, and a session was terminated instantly for a participant if distress was observed. All test settings were structured to be familiar, quiet, and child-friendly. In host-country settings, cultural and linguistic brokers were provided for communication facilitation and emotional protection.

Those protocols were entirely compatible with ethical guidelines for research on vulnerable child populations and were approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the G.S. Kostiuk Institute of Psychology of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine.

One of our methodology's limitations is the apparent absence of missing data or participant dropout. This anomaly is almost entirely explained, though, by the study setting being standardized: children were tested one-on-one, in quiet, familiar preschool environments, with teachers helping to facilitate participation because they pre-identified children most likely to participate reliably. Short data gathering sessions, coupled with developmentally appropriate instruments, minimized the risk of fatigue or dropout even more.

While this approach provided greater internal consistency for the data, this might limit the ecological validity of the outcome. In naturally occurring contexts, such as more dynamic, less structured preschool settings, participant variability and non-response might be larger. Future longitudinal or naturally occurring studies must address potential attrition, partial data, and greater contextual noise to optimise generalisability.

Another fundamental limitation concerns the sample size (N = 90). Although even between the two groups and of appropriate age, the fairly small size places a limit on the generalisability of the results to broader populations. However, the sample can be seen to be representative for the specific context of Ukrainian preschool children who are themselves directly impacted by war and forced displacement. Such a population, for one, has until now received limited empirical focus, and a study makes a valuable contribution to understanding identity processes of such a particularly vulnerable group.

Previous works from related fields likewise employed sample sizes of comparable magnitude, either. For instance, Farago et al. (2019) conducted early childhood narrative and symbolic tests with $n < 100$, while Trifiletti et al. (2022) cross-validated the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale for Children (BIIS-C) with equally organized samples. Therefore, more extensive and heterogeneously diverse samples, which would boost statistical power, external validity, and so on, are not required for the current setup, which is aligned with traditional practice for preschool identity tests with high stakes.

3. Results

This section presents the findings from the comparative analysis of two child groups: those who remained in Ukraine during the war (Group A) and those displaced abroad in multicultural host societies (Group B). We analysed three primary indicators related to ethnic-racial identity development: harmony of bicultural integration, self-identification accuracy, and ingroup friendship preference. This part reports on the comparative study results of two groups of children: Group A, who stayed in Ukraine during the war, and Group B, who were displaced to multicultural host countries. We compared three main indicators of ethnic-racial identity formation: the harmony of integration in two cultures, accuracy in self-identification, and ingroup preferred friendship (Figure 1).

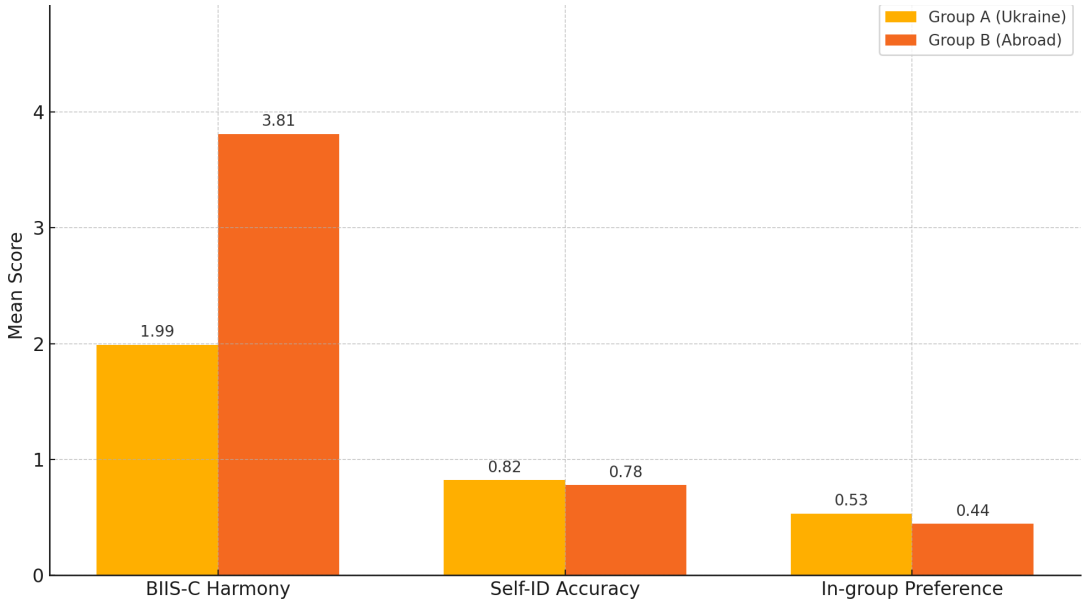

Figure 1. Comparative analysis of ethnic-racial identity variables

The average harmony score on the BIIS-C was significantly greater in Group B (M = 3.81, SD = 0.60) than in Group A (M = 1.99, SD = 0.50). An independent t-test showed the difference to be statistically significant, $t(88) = -16.75$, $p < .001$. These findings reveal that children exposed to multicultural environments have significantly greater cognitive-emotional integration of two cultural identities than do children who live in monoethnic environments. This confirms the assumption that exposure to a variety of cultural environments makes it easier to perceive cultural harmony and compatibility in identity formation processes at preschool age.

In the figure choice test, 82.2% of Group A children correctly chose the character of their ethnicity, while 77.8% did the same in Group B. While Group A was found to be slightly more accurate, it was not found to differ statistically significantly ($t(88) = 0.52$, $p = .603$). This indicates both groups have a high and equal level of ethnic self-recognition, which means basic ethnic awareness does emerge strongly irrespective of geographical context. When asked to pick a friend from a selection of different character figures, 53.3% of Group A children picked an ingroup friend compared to a mere 44.4% of Group B children. The groups did not differ statistically significantly, $t(88) = 0.84$, $p = .405$, although the trend is to evidence a little greater ethnocentrism in social preferences in the monoethnic condition. This result could represent greater social flexibility among individuals in multicultural settings who gain favourable outgroup orientations from daily exposure to peers.

Of all three of the main variables examined, the variable of bicultural harmony alone was found to exhibit a statistically significant group difference. The children abroad had a much stronger level of cultural integration. They indicated a critical influence of exposure to multicultural environments early in life in forming an expansive ethnic-racial identity. All other identity indicators–self-recognition and social preference–were equivalent across groups and imply a certain universality to early ethnic awareness. These results validate the theoretical premise that cultural context functions as a developmental moderator of identity development and the meaning of ethnic myths during early childhood (Figure 2).

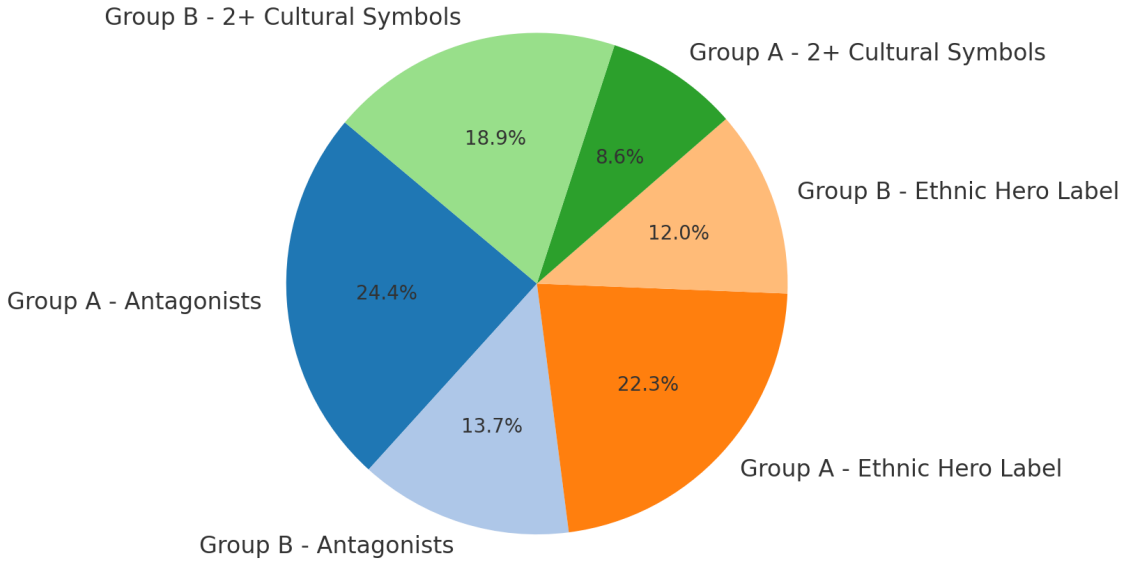

Figure 2. Narrative analysis of projective storytelling

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of symbolic narrative features across the two groups of children. The y-axis reflects the percentage of children whose stories contained each feature (e.g., antagonist, ethnic symbols, moral resolution type), while the x-axis categorizes the five coded dimensions of narrative analysis. For example, under “Cultural Symbols,” a higher percentage in Group B reflects greater symbolic diversity in their stories, often including both heritage and host culture references. The chart summarizes thematic findings in visual form to highlight both group similarities and divergences.

To capture the mythic and symbolic aspects of ethnic identity formation, responses to the projective exercise "Tell the Hero’s Story" were analysed on five qualitative dimensions: hero type presented, presence or absence of an antagonist, cultural symbols invoked, moral direction of the narrative resolution, and direct mention of ethnic identification.

Hero Type–Both groups of children used a blend of realistic and symbolic hero types. Group A (Ukraine) used primarily overtly Ukrainian child heroes (n = 25), but Group B (abroad) used figures of other ethnic origins or fictional beings (n = 25 combined) more often. The groups' overall distribution of hero types was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(3) = 5.24$, $p = .160$). Although the distribution of hero types differed descriptively between groups, the difference did not reach statistical significance. Therefore, any interpretation regarding contextual influence should be made with caution, and further studies with larger samples are required to clarify potential trends. Presence of Antagonists–A statistically significant difference was found in the presence of antagonistic figures ($\chi^2(1) = 7.65$, $p = .006$). In Group A, the enemy figure was mentioned in a clear definition by 71% of the children as "the bad people," "invaders," or war metaphors. In Group B stories, such features occurred in only 40% of cases, with a greater percentage depicting peaceful or emotionally neutral contexts. The result may indicate the war-stamped psychosocial climate of Ukraine and its expression in children's narratives. Another significant analytical aspect is the emotion regulation approaches implicitly contained in children’s stories about myths.

To further illustrate the symbolic and thematic structure of children’s narratives, we include selected verbatim excerpts from both groups in Appendix A. These examples demonstrate the mythic elements discussed (e.g., hero type, antagonist presence, cultural markers) and offer insight into children’s psychological positioning through story. For instance, the phrase “a wind goes around the world collecting colours” (Group B) reveals abstract thinking and symbolic hybridisation, while “builds a wall of stars to protect from black men” (Group A) reflects anxiety-driven, defensive myth-making.

Tales of heroic sacrifice, overt antagonism, and defence of homeland in Group A might be related to emotion-based defence and threat management coping approaches, aiming outward and toward defence of in-group identity. In contrast, Group B stories highlighting negotiation, change, and inter-group amity imply emotion regulation through integration and capacity for relationship flexibility. These patterns in stories gesture

toward early evidence of "identity affect synchrony," as described by Milner (1975), that is, coordination among a child's affective handling of identity tasks and their symbolic expression in story form.

Cultural Symbols–References to ethnic or cultural symbols (e.g., dress, language, food, flags) also varied substantially across groups ($\chi^2(2) = 6.84$, $p = .033$). Most children in Group A had either none or a single ethnic indicator, whereas more than 55% of children in Group B had two or more such features, combining Ukrainian and host-country motifs. The finding is consistent with the expectation of enhanced symbolic multicultural competence in children exposed to varied sociocultural settings (Figure 3).

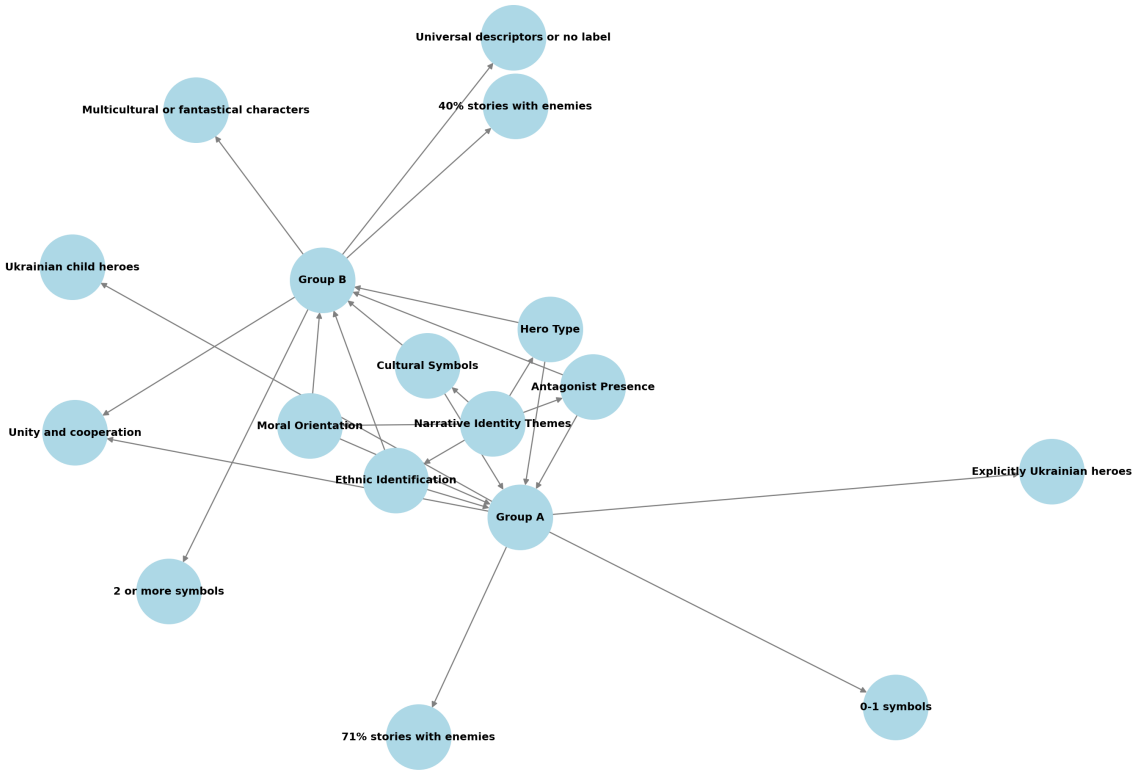

Figure 3. Narrative identity themes – mindmap

Moral Orientation of Story Endings–There was no statistically significant difference across groups in how story endings were framed regarding morality ($\chi^2(2) = 2.12$, $p = .346$). Both groups most commonly finished their stories on a note of collectivism and a theme of unity, helping others, or overcoming difficulties together. Cross-contextual convergence indicates a developmental social affiliation preference as a story ending in early childhood.

Ethnic Identification of the Hero–We did observe a substantial difference in the direct identification of the hero by ethnicity ($\chi^2(1) = 5.72$, $p = .017$). The children of Group A were much more likely to define their hero as "Ukrainian" or attribute specific national identifiers. The children in Group B were more likely to omit such identifiers or define their hero using universalistic terms (e.g., "a kid who helps everyone" or "a traveller").

Narrative content analysis provides insightful commentary on how children symbolically represent and negotiate cultural identity in narratives. Perhaps most strikingly, children in Ukraine used more conflict-oriented features and voiced stronger ethnic particularity, indicating a greater visibility of national identity under threat. In contrast, children in diaspora presented greater symbolic syncretism of multiple cultures, fewer adversarial framings, and greater abstraction or hybridised representations of self and other. These results highlight the strong influence of sociocultural context on how ethnic myths are internalised and reconceived by young children even before formal education.

4. Discussion

This research explored the psychological and symbolic processes of preschool children developing ethnic-racial identity under different sociocultural settings. In a comparative assessment of children who lived in

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Ukraine and were displaced to multicultural societies in foreign countries, the findings indicated significant differences in how preschool children interact with cultural symbols, internalise ethnic narratives, and construct the self against others.

Although frequency gives a numerical baseline for mythological elements, a more nuanced understanding arises through more in-depth qualitative content analysis of the children's accounts. Symbolic selections and storytelling directions seen among children's accounts are more than descriptive features; they act as projective windows into their developing concepts of themselves and internalised social blueprints. For example, in Group A, a few children depicted heroes as "defenders of the land," evidently speaking to nationalistic archetypes. These heroes often employed symbolic tools like shields or flags, and their moral quests often included protecting family or taking back peace. These stories align closely with collective structures of mythology identified by Parry (2021), whereby heroism is an accepted model for resilience and integration in society.

Concurrently, Group B stories tended to place their heroes in states of liminality or migration – for instance, "traveller who takes up residence in two villages" and "child who sings two songs." These symbols demonstrate a negotiation and integration of dual cultural attachments at a symbolic level. The psychological consequence is not just narrative diversity but representation as an adaptive and mobile agent – an identity that McAdams (2021) would label as "self-authored", developed through sociocultural interaction. This is similar to Trifiletti et al. (2022), who discovered that bicultural children tend to create hybrid symbolic expressions that balance potentially competing cultural scripts.

Notably, the mythical elements were not arbitrary; they cohere into personality profiles. Ukrainian children living in war circumstances generated stories with high affect-arousal, antagonistic structure, and salient moral dichotomies – us vs. them. These grammars of stories approximate personality prototypes involving watchfulness, in-group solidarity, as well as existential fearfulness, and potentially higher neuroticism or affect intensity. In contrast to their war-scarred counterparts in multicultural environments, displaced children with exposure to multiple cultures manifested narratives about curiosity-seeking, transcending, and harmonising personality attributes involving higher openness to experience and affect flexibility, and higher bicultural identity integration (Huynh et al., 2018).

A representative story from Group A told of a child-hero who constructs a barrier around his town to exclude "dark strangers." This mythical theme of boundary-drawing and fearfulness about anything unknown is both an instance of war-induced perception of threat and a hardening of identity in terms of exclusion and defence. Here, myth acts as a defence mechanism on a psychological level – that is, "myth of security," as described by Cassirer (1946) – creating order and stability amid chaos on the outside. Here, myth is not just a representation of identity but a method for cognitive-affective containment.

In Group B's contrasting story, a "magic tree" bore two types of fruit – one from the child's native land and one from the host country. This symbolic imaginary proposes acceptance and entangling of the two cultures and offers affective metaphors for continuity and fusion as well as growth. These myth structures are more than literary; they reflect internal schemas through which young children incorporate multiple and competing signifiers from different cultures into an integrated system of the self. Such capacity for dual and complex identities is a marker of maturity and resilience and is particularly beneficial during early childhood, as Meca et al. (2023) postulate.

At a sociocultural level, myth operates as both a story and an internal ideology. Children learn about and internalise these symbolic forms through family language, school textbooks, and media presentations, mirroring Farago et al. (2019)'s concept of ethnic-racial socialisation as stratified messaging. For instance, Group A stories commonly featured martyr-like figures who give their all for a higher purpose, evocative of high ethnic identity salience and conformity to collective suffering tropes. This is in keeping with Brass's (2024) theory that ethnic identity, especially in settings involving political upheaval, is crafted through struggle myths and symbolic martyrdom.

In contrast, more often, Group B children utilised transformation motifs involving a hero learning a foreign language or befriending foreign nations. These motifs reflect internalisation of adaptive, as opposed to defensive, mythic structures. The transformation from heroic protectionism to metamorphic adaptation implies an environmental mediation in narrative structure – support for the hypothesis by Rogers and Way (2021), that macrostructures in society (e.g., refugee identity, multicultural schooling) influence not just behaviour but internal story structure as well.

Interestingly, ending narratives also served as implicit markers of psychosocial coping. Group A stories tended to close with restoration through struggle – enemy defeated, home secured. Group B stories tended to end with synthesis or transformation – the hero is "friend to all," "the house with many doors is one family."

These story conclusions implicate distinct psychosocial processes: in Group A, coping through symbolic conquest and externalisation; in Group B, through integration and narrative pluralism. These correspond with investigations by Southwell (1984) and Lingras (2021), who maintain that story conclusion is an expression of children's perceived agency in codified terms.

In addition, projective results from the study must be explained from a developmental psychology perspective. Group A's tendency to symbolise identity in terms of national symbols corroborates Aboud and Doyle's (1993) model of development in that young children show in-group preference and bounded identity categories as a result of their restricted cognitive flexibility. Displaced children in Group B, on the contrary, made more unbounded symbolic expressions involving more than one language, food symbols, and even symbolic figures who were non-human (e.g., "a wind that unites cultures"), suggesting greater flexibility in understanding categories of social identity and narratives about identity.

The existence and/or lack of antagonists also warrants theoretical interest. The frequency of enemy figures in Group A lends credibility to the suggestion by Greenwood (2023) that mythic dichotomies are perpetuated in nationalistic and war-like settings. Such antagonists are more than dispassionate figures; rather, they are counterpoint figures – constructing a child's identity by defining what is 'other.' The cognitive-affective purpose of such figures is to project fear and stabilise self-consistency, as stated by Lingras (2021), who illustrates how children in high-stakes settings manage anxiety through symbolic forms of expression.

In Group B, moral neutrality and absence of antagonists imply an alternate schema – inclusion and ambiguity. These stories define others as unknowns to be discovered rather than as threats, indicating greater tolerance for uncertainty and social difference. Such a developmental orientation is necessary in multicultural societies in which ethnic identity is relationally and dynamically constructed rather than in rigid binary categories (Nishina & Witkow, 2020).

Psychoeducationally, the finding highlights pedagogically the need to tackle narrative building and mythic reading in early childhood. Spencer (2022) and Ong (2022) highlight how children's fiction, symbolic play, and school stories act as avenues for transmitting cultural scripts. Our findings suggest that symbolic materials—such as multicultural children's literature—may play a constructive role in identity development by offering hybrid narrative templates and fostering emotional flexibility. While further research is needed to assess direct impact, exposure to culturally diverse storylines appears aligned with the identity flexibility observed in multicultural contexts. The more symbolic variety presented to a child, the more developed their choice in narratives for constructing themselves – a view verified by Mesman et al. (2022). The statistically nonsignificant ingroup preference observed in Group A is in line with more pronounced attention to ethnocultural boundaries and perceived familiarity concerning collective categories. This behavioural tendency is subtle at this age but might be an indication of early manifestations of social modelling based on exclusivist identity schemas. In contrast, Group B's moderately more adaptive social preferences map onto the concept of "symbolic permeability," whereby identity boundaries feel negotiable. This flexibility could be fostered by a common engagement with diverse peers during everyday life and is in support of Ong's (2022) argument that early inclusion practices build intergroup empathy and preparedness for diverse affiliation.

Lastly, we must highlight the relationship between person orientation and mythic content. Conflict-based myths correlate with high self-other distinction, existential defence, and collectivist affiliation – all very high among Group A. Integrative myths, on the contrary, imply openness, empathy, and bicultural flexibility – all more common among Group B. These distinctions might later be expressed in social action, group inclusion/exclusion, and resistance to enculturating stresses. As Rogers et al. (2023) note, whatever mythical template an individual adopts early in life will continue to shape how they create meaning, manage affect, and negotiate group membership throughout their lifetime.

In short, mythological structures in this research do more than mark cultural membership–they predict psychological direction, social action, and identity flexibility. They serve as early scaffolding for meaning construction in times of strain and transformation and provide special windows into young children's developing psychology as they move through combat, displacement, and multicultural negotiation. By shifting from a focus on frequency counts to depth of interpretation, the mythic material shows how preschool children don't just receive but remake culture through narrative.

Preschool children who dwelt abroad had much higher levels of bicultural identity integration and perceived cultural harmony. This is consistent with the premise that exposure to multiple cultures sensitises identity to become more fluid and to perceive itself as having a richer sense of belonging across domains (Safa et al., 2021). These results corroborate Trifiletti and colleagues (2022), who established a developmental model of children's bicultural identity and demonstrated how, even early on, two cultural systems are possible to work with when environments support integration symbolically.

Notably, children in multicultural settings often referred to Ukrainian and host-culture symbols in storytelling and symbolic tasks. Their narrative content expressed a greater reliance on hybrid identities and cultural mixing, and it seemed unlikely that the mythic self–created in story is fixed to any one national template. This has echoes in recent work by Rogers et al. (2023), which discovered that children (and adults) who attribute their life story to a “Hero’s Journey” report higher meaning and resilience. Both stories contained aspects of challenge, transformation, and legacy, reflecting the formation of internalised hero types influenced by cultural experience and global myth structures (Parry, 2021).

Ukrainian children were more likely to exhibit explicit national self-identification and to symbolically frame stories around conflict and antagonism. This is indicative of lived experience in a war-torn context, making ethnic identity more salient and making dichotomous moral schemata stronger (e.g., "us" and "them"). These results are consistent with early theories of ethnic formation, which were socially constructed and grounded in historical and political circumstances and not as biologically fixed or unchanging (Greenwood, 2023). The centrality of antagonists in Ukrainian narratives may also signify a coping or meaning-making following mass trauma.

Children overseas tended to produce characters with undefined or hybridised ethnic characteristics and had fewer narratives with explicit enemies and violence. More fluid myth-making demonstrates increased cognitive flexibility and a larger social inclusion framework. It more than likely also represents a transition away from primordial identity features towards constructed and negotiated cultural selfhood (Greenwood, 2023).

The research results highlight the necessity of early childhood multicultural and antiracist education. Since educators commonly underappreciate young children's ability to handle issues of race and identity (Spencer, 2022), our evidence reveals that preschool children are not merely aware of race and ethnicity but also active in making symbolic meaning around their group identity and differences.

The symbolism found in children's books–flags, languages, foods, and values–indicates how young learners build meaning from exposure to the available resources. Multicultural education, including specially curated children’s books, is central to identity work (Ong, 2022). Multiracial children’s books projecting a range of characters and cultural realities afford narrative models by which children make sense of their own lives and envision social inclusion. The narrative approach employed in the study substantiates McAdams’ (2021) hypothesis that even early childhood involves beginning to construct coherent narrative identities informed by cultural narratives and available mythic structures.

During fieldwork, our researchers were often surprised at the symbolic accuracy with which children expressed emotional verities. In a session, a child would not draw but later revealed a story of a “hero who hides until the sky is calm.” These episodes reminded us that narration is not only a cognitive but a deeply embodied form of action, most of all under situations of insecurity.

These phenomenological field experiences stress that the current study was grounded on inter-action and observation that was direct, not abstraction modelling. Even though our approach was grounded on formatted tools, the humanness—resilience, uncertainty, and silence—was a constant and profound one.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated how ethnic myths function in shaping psychological structures in early childhood identity formation among preschool-age children living in war-torn and multicultural environments. Relying on a comparative examination of children living in Ukraine amid the war and children evacuated abroad, the results highlight the impact of sociocultural circumstances, symbolic capital, and shared narratives on early childhood identity formation.

The youth in Ukraine, living in a monoethnic but dangerous society, expressed stronger ethnic identification and used conflict-oriented story forms more often. In contrast to both of the other groups, their narratives contained antagonists and moral poles and were indicative of an internalisation of struggle at the national level. This confirms the thesis that myth as a coping response in times of anxiety provides symbolism and group coherence.

Displaced children living in multicultural settings exhibited greater integration of the two cultural identities and a richer symbolic vocabulary regarding narrative tasks. They created less conflictual and more integrative narratives that combined elements from their countries of origin and host countries. These results are consistent with prior research establishing multicultural exposure early in life, enabling users to develop symbolic flexibility and the likelihood of non-exclusive identity configurations.

Notably, the findings also highlight developmental vulnerabilities. The second signal system's impairment caused by the stress condition may restrain symbolic communication during verbal and emotional

development. Under such circumstances, the child's ability to construct coherent ethnic narratives may be restricted and result in identity confusion or symbolic withdrawal.

This work confirms the merit of combining narrative, projective, and psychometric approaches to early identity research. By directly tapping into children's symbolic expression–via story, pictorial selection and symbolism mapping–it is now possible to research the early origins of identity in a manner unencumbered by adult-derived speculation.

Our findings highlight the importance of ethnic myths as more than cultural heritage and instead as psychological means of guidance and protection, whether implicitly via discourse among close relations or directly using educational content. Curricula involving multiple narratives about plurality and difference, fostering intercultural understanding and a validation of inherited identity, are a protective factor against the psychological destabilisation of war, bereavement, or displacement. Most especially, displaced children gain from formal provision of a space to reconcile heritage identity with everyday cultural reality, resolve internalised conflict, and achieve narrative consistency. An awareness of how ethnic myths are represented and reframed under pressure will help psycho-professionals to pick up early warning signs of identity diffusion, cultural estrangement, or internalised stigmatisation.

In short, ethnic myths are not simply cultural heritage but living symbolic systems through which young children interpret who they are, to whom they belong, and on what values their group stands. In times of war, displacement, and uncertainty, they are particularly potent–and possibly protective–developmental tools. Facilitating children's exposure to rich plural mythologies through storytelling, early education, and family conversation is thus pedagogically sensible but also psychologically imperative.

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Appendix A. Selected children's narratives with commentary

Table below presents five representative examples from the "Tell the Hero's Story" storytelling task, including thematic codes and brief interpretations. These examples were selected to reflect the symbolic diversity, emotional structuring, and cultural construal of children's identity stories for the two study groups. All stories were translated from Ukrainian and de-identified.

No.	Narrative Excerpt	Group	Thematic Codes	Brief Interpretation
1	"A little boy builds a wall of stars to protect his house from the black men who fly."	A	Antagonist, defender hero, symbolic fear	This narrative reflects heightened threat perception and a myth of defence under siege.
2	"She carries bread from one land to another, so no one is hungry. People smile in both languages."	B	Cultural bridging, kindness hero, biculturalism	Represents integration and empathy through food and language; typical of Group B.
3	"A wind goes around the world collecting colours to paint one big tree."	B	Abstract agent, unity myth, hybrid identity	A symbolic vision of multicultural cohesion and shared belonging.
4	"He wears blue and yellow and fights the fire shadow that tries to take the school."	A	National symbolism, threat, martyr narrative	Projects patriotic defence and trauma-salient themes into a child-centric mythos.
5	"The hero sings two songs — one is from grandma, one from the new school — and makes the clouds dance."	B	Emotional integration, heritage and adaptation	Illustrates emotional fluency and dual cultural affiliation through music and kinship.

Note: All of the children were aged 5–6 years. Stories were evoked using the projective task "Tell me a story about a brave or kind hero." Thematic coding themes are described elsewhere, in Materials and Methods. Quotes reveal children using cultural metaphors, implicit identity positioning, and emotional symbolism to construct narrative self-representations.

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Appendix B. Illustrative examples from the "Identity Tree" symbol mapping exercise

The "Identity Tree" activity invited children to visually express aspects of their ethnic, family, and cultural identity through drawing, stickers, and symbolic placement. Below are selected anonymised excerpts with interpretation.

No.	Description of Drawing	Group	Symbolic Features	Interpretation
1	A tree with two roots — one labelled *"Ukraine"* and one *"Germany"* — and hearts in both flags on the branches.	B	Bicultural roots, national symbols, affective symbols	Shows dual cultural grounding and emotional acceptance of both heritages.
2	A trunk with three stickers: mother, flag of Ukraine, and a house. The top has stars and a school labelled *"future"* in local script.	B	Intergenerational links, migration aspiration	Indicates symbolic linkage between home, care, and educational hope in the host country.
3	A tree with one large Ukrainian flag as a crown, flames at the bottom, and stick-figure holding a book and shield.	A	Conflict, hero figure, national protection theme	Visualises identity through national threat and heroic defence, common in Group A children.
4	Mixed-language labels: *"Babusia"* under the roots, *"friend"* in German in the branches. One branch has a musical note and a drawing of shared bread.	B	Linguistic hybridity, cultural practices, memory cues	Reflects cultural integration and hybrid identity expressed through family terms and shared rituals.
5	Tree with one root and one branch only; root shows soldier with black circle. The leaf shows sun and the word "free."	A	Trauma symbolism, binary identity coding	Indicates fixed in-group identity and symbolic resolution through contrast (danger/freedom).

Note: Drawings were analysed according to symbolic coding dimensions including: quantity of ethnic symbols, cultural layering, structural balance, and emotional markers (see *Materials and Methods*). Children were encouraged to explain their choices verbally, and these statements were incorporated into interpretation.