

## LOCAL BOUNDARY INTERPRETATIONS AND MINORITY EDUCATION

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*The notion of boundary is widely referred in sociological and anthropological research, among others, in the study of ethnicity, cultural identity and locality. This article shows few of those concepts, which are applicable in understanding of the needs toward and conflicts around educational programs dedicated to children, who belong to national minority families. With this theoretical background the work summarize the results of a research developed in Slovakian minority schools in Pest County, in Hungary. Furthermore it suggests a possible model of analyses of the local discourses about minority education focusing on the concept of cultural agency.*

**Keywords:** minority education, ethnicity, cultural connectedness, boundary theory

The meaning of boundary – beyond the everyday usage of the word - can be defined in various ways. It is a tool for the division of the space, but from the 1960's due to the metaphorical flexibility of the term it became a commonly referred and contested word in works, which focus on the process of cultural differentiation, ethnicity, connectedness and identification (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). Few of these think of boundary in the sense of *passage*. From this perspective the boundary is understood as the place for passing through, and at the same time the field of separation and identification. It is considered as identity-boundary, which is described as situative, interactive and processual.

Other group of theories concentrates on boundary-identities. In this regard, boundary is the place of *transition*: it means liminality (Turner, 1967), non-place (Augé, 1995), heterotrophy (Foucault, 1986), a periphery (Lugo, 1997). It would be the location of marginalized identities or provisional self-identifications, which struggle for the dominance over boundaries and the legitimation of their own boundary definitions.

The results of my fieldwork, which was made in Slovakian minority schools in Pest County, Hungary arouse questions about the presentation of these types of boundary interpretations in local discourse on minority education. As a starting point of the research, I suggested that minority educational programs have social, cultural boundary-making role in local societies. On the one hand, this hypothesis is based on the assumption that minority education delineates and reinforces cultural identity-boundaries. On the other hand, the schools involved in the research serve as places of battles for influence over personal and community boundary definitions and for the distribution of local resources.

In the phase of field-investigation - using qualitative research methods - I've made interviews with those local actors who were deeply involved in the context of minority education. As a fruit of the analysis of the sixteen narrative interviews with teachers, school leaders and minority politicians, I introduced the term of "ethnic manager". To grasp the meaning of the word, it seems worth-while to make a short review of the term and typify the main motives, patterns and forms of this agent role. Therefore the present paper consists of two main parts: in the first section I build a theoretical frame for the analyses of the expression of the ethnic manager. The second part is dedicated to the summary and interpretation of the findings of the field-work. In this point I describe the main types of the ethnic manager role: the coping-preserving and the innovative narrative, which are considered as dominant characteristics of the possible discourses about minority education as well. In the latter case I use a concept map of a case study to describe preserving-coping narrative of a boundary making process.

In conclusion, this article discusses a possible theoretical approach of understanding the influence of minority education on the formation of cultural connectedness and ethnic identity. The scope of the writing is too narrow to constitute a complete model of these processes, but wide enough to show further pathways of more detailed studying of the field.

## Theoretical pillars

### Late modernity, cultural identity and the notion of boundary

The term of ethnic manager can hardly be understood without studying the late modern experience of identity. It is commonly referred that due to the social, cultural and political changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the definition of this term became problematic and dubious, and debates over identity got multidisciplinary characteristic.

The source of concerning arguments is that the meaning and the significance of the individual gained new form. Social ties became relative due to the expansion of individualization, which is strengthened by modernization effects, that is the traditional structural boundaries between social classes are blurred or disappeared; class identification is replaced by the heterogeneity of lifestyle forms (Beck, 1992). With the modernisation of social institutions the meaning and significance of the self and the individual has fundamentally changed. The construction of the self became a lifelong-project, which aims the maintenance of coherence in the permanently reshaped biographical narratives. Because of the pluralisation in value-schemas the individual must to choose alone between the endlessly available possibilities, hence decision making about the individual life strategies means the harmonization of particular life-style choices. To put it another way, life-style can be defined as a more or less integrated set of life strategies, which "fill out" self identity.

As a consequence of these phenomena the construction of the group membership changed as well. Its traditional contexts and strategies reshaped or diminished. The social identity became fragmented in the scientific research and in everyday practice as well. The way of cultural connectedness and group relatedness are much more considered as an endless definition making process, in which the horizons of the past, present and future perceptions and interpretations of community, affiliation and strangeness must be involved. With one word, identity accepted as socially and culturally constructed, discussed and always changing image, which is elaborated on

the border of the “our” and “their”, the familiar and the strange, the local and the distant.

At this point it is easy to find conceptual connection between identification and boundary construction. Since human thinking is based on the act of separation and connection, the acknowledgement of the world is a continuous process of join together familiar objects, information, senses into a mental schema to form integral knowledge and divide this unity from the unfamiliar, strange or distant. With other words the essence of the notion is the continuous interaction. There is no border without the perception of the differences between the *OUR* and *THEIR*, so it appears only in those situations where the differences are socially perceived and significant. The boundary is a bridge and a door (Simmel 1997:170-174) at the same time; the former expresses the extension of the meaning of the *OUR* and local, while the latter refers to the necessary contact between the well-known and the different.

Beyond the narrower geographical and physical connotation of the term, it can be used everywhere in social interaction. It is a form of expression of cultural and social differentiation, thus it is immersed part of the scientific discussion about language, religion, ethnicity or sexuality, and wildly used in economic, psychological, political research and administrative practice.

The present paper not allows the comparison between scientific approaches of cultural and social boundaries in general sense, but we should stop for a moment at the crossroad of ethnicity and boundary terms.

It is quite commonplace to refer to the labyrinthine characteristic of ethnicity theories. Regardless of that, this simple sentence indicates the transformable meaning of the word, and at the same time, gives the opportunity to concentrate only one aspect of the possible interpretations. Avoiding the etymological explications, here I just write about the turn in the usage of ethnicity, which was mainly due to Barth's (1969) work, the '*Ethnic groups and boundaries*'.

In his introductory essay of the book, in 1969, Barth wants to understand the stability of cultural differences, and he puts the focus on the interactions between differing groups instead the comparative analyses of their cultural stuff. That is, he suggests concentrating on boundary making and maintenance processes between the neighbouring cultural groups, or with other words, he studies the social representations of cultural differentiation.

The relevance of Barth's notes in understanding of ethnicity, that he drives attention to the perception of significant cultural differences between groups (Wallman, 1978:201). With other words, he suggests that social and cultural boundaries are results of the categorisation of 'our', 'their', 'familiar' and 'stranger', 'close' and 'distant'. So boundaries are interfaces between two worlds, therefore they symbolize the meeting and diversity. In a society the important differences – among others - are expressed through the boundaries of the society, where the meaning of the group membership is clearly expressed.

### Minority education and cultural connectedness

To anchor these thoughts to the field of minority education, we can not forget about the widespread phenomenon of modern societies that most of the traditional informal identity maintenance functions (reproduction of elements of identity, for example common knowledge and social memory) are passed to formal institutions such as educational institutions or minority organizations. Following from that, schools, substituting the family or the local network of relationships, take a great part in the process of ethnic

identity formation. More concretely in the case of national minorities in Hungary the internalization of primary elements of ethnic identity – like language, cultural memories, traditions – strongly linked to the school. Children coming from minority rooted families often meet with the cognition of minority identity as a part of the curriculum. Moreover, in Hungary national minorities have been strongly assimilated within the frames of the nation state. So members of these communities possess double or multiple identities, explicit and homogeneous identity definitions don't exist anymore. Hence – while minority educational programs support the cultural connectedness to an ethnically defined community – minority cultural content of the curriculum is just one string in the strands of motivations of family decisions about school. Their selection is based on practical rationality and takes account long standing success, financial and time expenses as well (Girán, 2002).

To see it from the perspective of cultural revitalization I argue that minority educational programs are institutionalized “revitalizers” of ethnic identity, who, on the one hand express cultural connectedness, ethnic identification, or with other words take a part in the reproduction of ethnically defined group definitions; on the other hand these educational programs propose extra acquaintance, which is transmittable to benefits for the families and their children in the possible future contests for better high school, university or job. Those schools that are involved in minority educational programs try to translate these community and individual requirements to the language of the school and offer answers to meet these needs, whereas the interest of the school is to use these programs as resources to keep its present and potential future clients (families and their children). Beside the family and the school, the third participant of the local discourse around minority education is the representative body of local ethnic community, the local minority self-government, which attempt to support those local initiatives that aim the maintenance and revitalization of ethnic identity, so it insists on strengthening of community based motivations.

As a result of this overview it is important to emphasize that local discourses about minority education involve not just definitions about ethnic identity, but at the same time these are about the distribution of local power and resources. That means that minority educational programs can hardly be separated from identity political struggles. According to P. Bourdieu's (1991) thoughts all the participants of the debates fight for the power over the vision and division of the social world. It is a struggle for legitimation and wider acceptance of their own categories and definitions about the structure of social and cultural borders.

### The ethnic manager

During the analysis of local discourses around minority education I looked for an emblematic keyword, which embraces the roles, claims and needs around minority education. The term of boundary seemed perfect for my aims, due to its plasticity and flexible usage in the cultural anthropological literature. In keeping with A. Wimmer (2008), on the field first I tried to discover the main scenes of ethnic boundary maintenance in the local discourse: institutions of boundary making and maintenance, map of local networks and political interest and streams of power. There is no doubt that social actors are not free from these in their decisions and strategies, but at the same time these spheres of boundary making first of all sound through their emblematic agents. For this reason I tried to find those members of the

community who identified themselves alongside the term of boundary. Stepping forward on this way, I met to those actors who could essentially influence the local decisions about minority questions, and at the same time represent the minority community too. In later phase of the work a silhouette of a specific position has articulated from the body of interview texts. I used the label of ethnic manager to the interviewees, who through the position, which they occupy in local society, invoke and inspire the members of the community, so they are capable to push them toward cooperation, and with that they contribute to the delineation of cultural and social boundaries as well. The ethnic manager is an agent of the boundary making process, he or she is a boundary worker, the specialist of an ethnically defined group, represents the group in the wider society, so they become the experts of the group, as well, in the eyes of the major society. They are mediators, translators between the word of “OUR” and “THEIR”. They stimulate solidarity on the community level and at the same time they investigate to their own mobility and future success through this work.

Previously I described Barth’s (1969) boundary theory as a milestone in the history of ethnicity, since his approach looks at cultural boundaries such as interactionally embedded phenomena. That means that boundaries are always subjects of negotiation, so their meaning is depending on the reflections to the presence of the Other. The term therefore essentially implies the act of mediation, since boundaries are considered as interfaces, meeting points of the separated sides. That’s the reason why I defined the key actors of local educational discourses through the act of mediation, or to express differently, I identified them as a kind of mediator.

One finds several references to the role of the mediator in the literature of cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, intercultural communication or language studies, but there are various other ways of usage and interpretations. So, the meaning of the term is very complex, especially in the context of ethnic identity. The different readings of the term can hypothetically be sorted into two main groupings. One is the cultural broker, who is rather an agent mediating between the state and communities – for example Wolf’s (1956) economic and political broker or Geertz’s (1960) cultural broker –, or between the globalized world and communities – see Hannerz’s (2004) cosmopolitan – and occupies a more or less neutral position halfway the worlds between he or she builds bridges. The other is the role of the cultural innovator or the ethnopolitical entrepreneur – according to Barth (1969) and Brubaker (2002) –, who tries to find new sources of community connectedness, his/her aim is to canalize the community’s interests into macrosocial discourses, thus performs the community in the wider society. Ethnopolitical entrepreneurs live for and from the community, cultural innovators are the agents of change, and representatives of the always altering cultural borders. Relating to these models the term of ethnic manager indicates that through the position, which he or she occupies in local society, invokes and inspires the members of the community, so the ethnic manager is capable to push the community toward cooperation, and with that he or she contributes to the delineation of cultural and social boundaries as well.

Standing on the ground of the approaches cited above, and as a result of interview analyses I tried to typify the main motives and patterns of this agent role. Finally I distinguished the main narratives, which can be classified in the local discourses about minority education by ethnic managers. In this paper I explain the two main types: the coping-preserving and the innovative narrative. Of course, the two narratives assign two end

points of a hypothetic scale where different tones of minority expert attitudes are placed.

During the analyses I considered interviews as identity narratives: stories of understanding minority roots and career - stories of the speakers of the minority community. Stories are organized around the status of the representative of the minority in the local society, who is delegated to enhance the vitality of ethnic cultural connectedness in the minority community. The past and the present conditions, conflicts of minority education are strongly tied together with their own expert-story; generally the milestones of the local minority education are significant events of their own life, as well.

### About the fieldwork and the method

The research started in the second half of 2007. During the first phase I used half-structured qualitative interviews in all those schools in Pest county, where any kind of Slovakian minority educational programs are running. *Table 1* shows the information about the involved settlements and educational programs.

Table 1. *Slovakian minority educational programs in Pest County, Hungary*

Settlement	Minority self-government	Type of minority education
Acsa - Petőfi Sándor Primary School and Nursery	+	3
Budapest - Slovakian Secondary School, Primary School and Nursery	+	2
Dabas 1 - II. Rákóczi Ferenc Primary School	+	3
Dabas 2 - Szent János Catholic Primary School	+	3
Ecser - Ecser Primary School	+	3 (the program has been ended till the time of the interview)
Galgagyörk - Gárdonyi Géza Primary School	+	3
Márianosztra - Virág Benedek Primary School	-	3
Pilisszántó (the head of the school and the leader of the minority self-government is the same person) - Slovakian National Minority Primary School and Library	+	3
Pilisszenteskereszt - Slovakian National Minority Primary School	+	3
Pilisszentlászló – Blue Walley Waldorf Slovakian National Minority Primary School, Primary Art Educational Institution and Waldorf Secondary School Pilisszentlászló	+	3

*Type of the minority education in Hungary: (1) minority language schools, (2) bilingual schools, (3) minority language instruction schools, (4) complementary minority education, (5) Roma integrational education.*

The schools I visited mostly occupy a central position in the subregion, that is, often these centre institutions provide professional staff and administrative basis for functioning of schools in the surrounding villages. The vitality of minority culture shows great differences by settlement; the scale is expanding from deep minority connectedness till the refusing of minority ties.

Interviews were made with the heads of the schools and the leaders of the local minority self-governments, and in few cases I found other significant agents (teachers, representatives of the minority community) who largely influence the emphasis of local discourses around minority education and the life of minority community.

The language of interviews – all conversations were recorded in Hungarian - raises questions about the troubles of translation. Though it is possible to literary translate the text of the interviews (viz. the excerpts from them), but the hiding coherence and latent content of it would be lost in English. Therefore I use a concept map of a concrete case study to present the main features of the narrative-analyses, which is the basis of the model of coping-preserving narrative type.

Furthermore I conducted a survey of parents whose children attended minority classes or lessons in the school. Questionnaires contain items about ethnic and local identity, community conscience, school-parent and minority self-government-parent relationship. The data analyses of survey part haven't finished yet.

## Ethnic manager narratives

### The innovative narrative

We find the notion of “opening” in the focus of the narrative, which defines the role of the ethnic manager. Mostly these interviewees occupy more than one key position in the minority community or aspire for more prestigious statuses in the future. They are innovative leaders and/or local politicians, so with the rearrange of the available resources they radically reinterpret those strategies that are useful in the revitalization of cultural identity. They are often obsessed project writers, exploit all opportunities hiding in accessible technical solutions and they sometimes use extravagant or surprising tools for the rescue of minority education programs. Although they recognize the relevance of traditional ethnic ties, but at the same time they attempt to reshape the inherited traditions, refresh them and make it more attractive. These narrators consider the opening of the symbolic boundaries of the locality and ethnic group highly important in the maintenance of the community, because this act can only guarantee new resources for the local society.

In their interpretation the discourse between the school and the families is regarded as a special persuading process, so the ethnic manager has to continue a quasi campaign communication. The minority educational program is a product or service on the market, and the families take into account rentability and calculability during their decisions about it. As a result during the school-family communication the rational benefits of the minority education are dominant (language certificate, market orientation, etc.), while families through their choice can symbolically express their ethnic ties.

### The coping-preserving narrative

The narrative of the interviewee is organized around the act of struggle and coping practices. The text is composed as a history of symbolic battles, the significant events are examples of some kind of opposition between the storyteller and other actors. The chronology of the story is based on the line of these conflicts, as well. The storyteller acts in these situations as a problem solver, who – through the successful usage of coping strategies – protects the traditionally established borders of the ethnically defined community. So in conflicting-preserving narratives the terms of boundary-building and maintenance often associate with the acts of demarcation, clash and distance making, on the individual, the local (community) and the macro-social level, too.

Analysing the main characteristics of the levels of time, the past is the age of the order, well balanced relations, obvious and apparent social, cultural, ethnic and local borders that enclose more or less homogeneous units. In these times people were clear about their community attachments; they were aware of and accepted the requirements of community membership. In conflict with the past, the present is described as the era of consumption, individualism and alienation, the feeling of shame about traditional ethnic roots, the confusion of identities. The interviewees define the frames of the “our-group” by the occupied position in these fighting.

The struggles typically occur between the narrator (his/her institution, group or organization) and the local community and its representatives (e.g. local self-government). The storyteller explains the opposition mainly with the differences in cultural identity strategies.

Naturally, the meaning of boundary is not stable and absolute one, but it is always changing with the context. We can identify several fault-lines in the narrative, where new interpretations of boundary can be added to the connotation of the word. That means that boundaries expresses not just cultural differences (mostly strangeness), but distances in social status of the opposite sites. That characteristic becomes important during the deeper understanding of conflicted elements of the local discourses over minority education.

### Fields of conflict

In the coping-preserving narrative the three most conflicting territories of boundary building processes are defined as minority folk traditions, institutionalized memory and value systems, within which the most dominant boundary meanings are crystallized.

Traditions easily become subjects and at the same time, catalysers of boundary making processes. Traditional forms of habit, language, devices, and customs are the content of cultural differences themselves. With the passing time these traditional forms were reinterpreted by the community and reused as symbolic tools of cultural connectedness. The reference to these traditions expresses the presence and importance of ethnocultural ties, and the continuous usage of these signs catalyse ethnic boundary maintenance. For instance, the exhibition of these symbols is the example of *representation of local boundaries*. Just to illustrate this statement, the everyday usage of minority language in public places, mostly in informal conversations, is often the tool of separation from the strangers, the outsiders, who don't understand the minority language. Furthermore in this narrative local culture includes a kind of untouched atmosphere, a harmonic way of life, commonality, in opposition with urbanized and atomized lifestyle patterns beyond locality.

At the same time the surviving elements of ethnic minority culture don't strengthen the power of ethnic and community bounds. The traditional cultural patterns haven't – or just partly – inherited to the younger generations, who represent modernity and refusal of ethnic roots. The generational gap threatens with breaking out of younger generations from behind *ethnically defined cultural boundaries*.

School minority programs gain relevance at this point. First of all, national minority educational programs build bridges between the past and present, hence minority language teaching and learning in the school assigns slight continuity between tradition and modernity. Embraces common knowledge and transmits the meanings of commonality, in this sense school language programs for minority children play crucial role in the maintenance



of ethnic boundaries. During Slovakian lessons the inherited minority experience gets fresh form and filled with new meanings. With other words, school produces institutionalized cultural memory, completes informal ethnic knowledge, and constructs new definition of ethnic boundary.

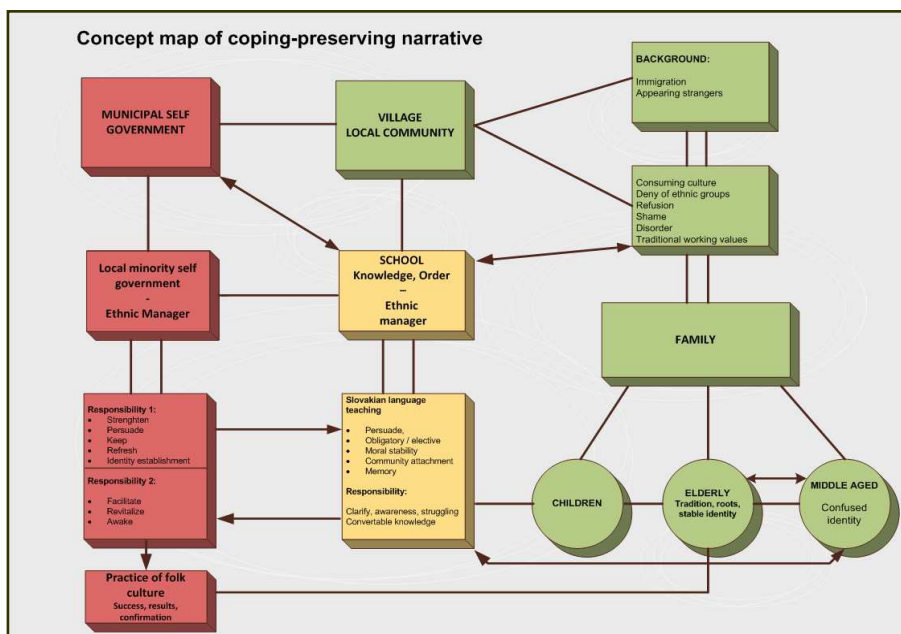
Simultaneously, in the coping-preserving narrative of the ethnic manager though minority educational program aims the preservation of ethnical bounds, local community (as the social environment of the school) refuses or denies these ties of multiple identities. The ethnic boundary definition constructed by the school loses its meaning in the local community, it comes to be empty.

In this context the main task of the ethnic manager is mobilizing the hidden bounds of community and facilitating common activity, refresh symbols of the community. Practically it means that the ethnic manager tries to preserve the traditional knowledge and inherit it to the future generations. The central place of this transmission is the school, where cultural knowledge is mostly available in more abstract and formal forms, and its internalization assumes a certain level of intellectual sensibility. It is considered useful or relevant in those families where the intellectual work and abstract knowledge is respected. (For example only those children will make efforts for minority language learning whose family have the requirement for a language certificate or reflect consciously to their minority roots in the education of their child). Therefore the relation to intellectual knowledge differentiates the parents' needs and claims. Due to the abstraction of cultural knowledge, the school and the ethnic boundary building function of minority educational program transformed to presentation of *social boundaries* between different social statuses in the local society.

Here we can find the trap of the preserving strategy: minority educational program gives place for battles between different values and social statuses. Paradoxically, the school – which is financed by the majority government - must permanently fight with the members of the minority community for minority subjects in the curriculum (namely for minority language teaching).

The ethnic manager's important responsibility in this narrative is building bridges between past, present and future and link together the institutionally offered possibilities with the individual interest, this is the key of the successful work for preserving ethnic attachments. It is important to note that in the coping-preserving narrative the mediator's role doesn't lay on symmetrical relationships with the local community: persuading (indirectly), shaking up, strengthening, making efforts, proof, call, sell - often used expressions in the story correspondence with the community role of the interviewee.

Figure 1.



## Conclusion

Instead of the summary of the findings of the research, it seems yielding to collect those features of the case study that complete to previous hypothetical model of the ethnic manager. The ethnic manager covers the social, cultural and power functions of the ethno-political entrepreneur, the cultural broker and the cultural innovator. The aim of his/her agency is the institutionalization of ethnic boundary making processes, where minority education gains a significant role.

The achievement of the status of the ethnic manager gives benefits in the struggles for cultural, relational and symbolic capital, due to the cognition and recognition that goes together with this position. Consequently, the ethnic manager, for the aim of preservation of his/her status, attempts to collect enough symbolic capital to influence the boundary building processes (and other power discourses as well) in the local society. He/she uses the potential of these capitals in his/her work: in his/her agency the emphasis is on mediation and canalization of abstract ethnocultural knowledge into the horizons of practical everyday thinking. With this act he/she tries to strengthen boundary maintenance, and at the same time revitalize the ethnic identity.

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