







ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ПСИХОЛОГИЯ
СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

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THE PHENOMENON OF INTERETHNIC TENSION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF KAZAKHSTANI REALITY

Abstract

Interethnic tension in multiethnic societies is one of the common problems affecting not only socio-political, but also psychological aspects of collective interaction. The article examines the phenomenon of interethnic tension in modern Kazakhstani society through the prism of socio-psychological analysis. The purpose of the study is to identify the main socio-psychological factors influencing the formation of ethnic tension between representatives of different ethnic groups. The scientific significance of the work lies in an integrated approach to understanding interethnic processes, and the practical significance is in finding ways to prevent and correct tension in a multiethnic environment. The methodology included content analysis, interdisciplinary conceptual-theoretical and systematic analysis on interethnic tension among young people. The results of the study showed that despite the overall high level of ethnosocial stability in the country, regional differences in the level of latent tension persist, especially in the southern regions. New channels for the formation of ethnic distance were also identified, especially among young people in the online environment. The main conclusion is that the existing model of interethnic harmony requires updating and adaptation to the conditions of digitalization, growth of migration flows and strengthening of ethnic mobilization in the information space. The contribution of the work consists in substantiating the need to develop tolerance programs, dialogue and prevention of prejudice in educational and youth policies. The practical significance lies in the possibility of using the obtained data to develop preventive and educational programs in multinational regions of Kazakhstan.

Keywords: interethnic tension, ethnic identity, social psychology, Kazakhstan, tolerance

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Этносаралық шиеленіс феномені: қазақстандық шындық контексіндегі
психологиялық көзқарас

Аңдатпа

Көпэтносты қоғамдардағы этносаралық шиеленіс ұжымдық өзара іс-қимылдың тек әлеуметтік-саяси ғана емес, психологиялық аспектілеріне де әсер ететін жалпы проблемалардың бірі болып табылады. Мақалада қазіргі қазақстандық қоғамдағы этносаралық

шиеленіс құбылысы әлеуметтік-психологиялық талдау призмасы арқылы қарастырылады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – әртүрлі этнос өкілдері арасындағы этникалық шиеленістің қалыптасуына әсер ететін негізгі әлеуметтік-психологиялық факторларды анықтау. Жұмыстың ғылыми маңыздылығы этносаралық процестерді түсінуге кешенді көзқараста, ал практикалық маңыздылығы – көпұлтты ортадағы шиеленістің алдын алу және түзету жолдарын іздеуде. Әдістеме жастар арасындағы этносаралық шиеленіс мәселелеріне мазмұндық талдау, пәнаралық концептуалды-теориялық және жүйелі талдауды қамтыды. Зерттеу нәтижелері республикадағы этноәлеуметтік тұрақтылықтың жалпы жоғары деңгейіне қарамастан, жасырын шиеленіс деңгейіндегі аймақтық айырмашылықтар, әсіресе оңтүстік өңірлерде сақталып отырғанын көрсетті. Этникалық қашықтықты қалыптастырудың жаңа арналары да анықталды, әсіресе жастар арасында желілік ортада. Бұдан шығатын негізгі қорытынды – этносаралық келісімнің қалыптасқан үлгісі цифрландыру, көші-қон ағынының өсуі және ақпараттық кеңістіктегі этностардың жұмылдыруын күшейту жағдайларына жаңарту мен бейімделуді талап етеді. Жұмыстың үлесі толеранттылық бағдарламаларын, диалогты дамыту және білім беру және жастар саясатындағы келенсіздіктердің алдын алу қажеттілігін негіздеуден тұрады. Алынған мәліметтерді Қазақстанның көпұлтты аймақтарында профилактикалық және білім беру бағдарламаларын әзірлеу үшін пайдалану мүмкіндігінің практикалық маңызы болып табылады.

Түйін сөздер: этносаралық шиеленіс, этникалық сәйкестік, әлеуметтік психология, Қазақстан, төзімділік.

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Феномен межэтнической напряженности: психологический взгляд в контексте казахстанской действительности

Аннотация

Межэтническая напряженность в полиэтничных обществах является одной из рядовых проблем, затрагивающих не только социально-политические, но и психологические аспекты коллективного взаимодействия. В статье рассматривается феномен межэтнической напряженности в современном казахстанском обществе через призму социально-психологического анализа. Цель исследования – выявление основных социально-психологических факторов, влияющих на формирование этнической напряженности между представителями различных этнических групп. Научная значимость работы заключается в комплексном подходе к пониманию межэтнических процессов, а практическая – в поиске путей профилактики и коррекции напряженности в полиэтничной среде. Методология включала контент-анализ, междисциплинарный концептуально-теоретический и систематический анализ по вопросам межэтнической напряженности в молодежной среде. Результаты исследования показали, что при общем высоком уровне этносоциальной стабильности в стране сохраняются региональные различия в уровне скрытого напряжения, прежде всего в южных областях. Также выявлены новые каналы формирования этнической дистанции, особенно среди молодежи в онлайн-среде. Основной вывод заключается в том, что существующая модель межэтнического согласия требует обновления и адаптации к условиям цифровизации, роста миграционных потоков и усиления этнической мобилизации в информационном пространстве. Вклад работы состоит в обосновании необходимости

развития программ толерантности, диалога и профилактики предубеждений в образовательной и молодежной политике. Практическое значение – в возможности использовать полученные данные для разработки профилактических и просветительских программ в многонациональных регионах Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: межэтническая напряженность, этническая идентичность, социальная психология, Казахстан, толерантность.

Introduction. Modern Kazakhstani society, characterized by significant ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, represents a complex social environment in which processes of intergroup perception, identity construction and ethnic boundary-making constantly interact. In a multiethnic context, interethnic relations inevitably acquire a psychological dimension, since they are mediated not only by institutional frameworks, but also by subjective experiences, group identities, stereotypes, emotional reactions and implicit attitudes. Research in social and cross-cultural psychology [1-4] shows that interethnic tension arises from the interaction of three groups of factors: cognitive (categorization and stereotyping), affective (intergroup anxiety, perceived threat), and identity-based (ingroup identification, boundary protection). These mechanisms are particularly relevant for societies undergoing rapid economic, demographic and digital transformations, such as Kazakhstan.

Despite the formally stable indicators of interethnic harmony reported in official monitoring, contemporary empirical studies conducted in Kazakhstan and Central Asia demonstrate the persistence of latent forms of ethnic anxiety, social distance and symbolic exclusion, especially among young people and in regions experiencing migration pressure or socio-economic inequality. Studies in Mangistau, East Kazakhstan [5], Almaty [6] and Astana [7] reveal that although the majority of residents evaluate interethnic relations positively, a significant proportion report everyday microtensions, implicit biases and perceived unfairness in areas such as employment, access to resources and communication practices. Similar patterns are documented in international literature on multiethnic societies [8,9], suggesting that latent tension is often masked by normative pressure to demonstrate tolerance.

Psychological analysis of interethnic tension requires consideration of several interrelated determinants: ethnic identity strategies (secure, reactive, defensive), perceived symbolic and realistic threat [10], implicit and explicit stereotypes, collective memory and historical sensitivities, transgenerational experiences of inequality, digital ethnopolitics and online mobilization, social norms regulating expression of prejudice, structural conditions influencing intergroup contact.

In Kazakhstan, these mechanisms are embedded in the broader post-Soviet transformation, which reshaped ethnic hierarchies, civic identity models and forms of cultural representation. The growing influence of digital communication, migration flows, urbanization and socio-economic disparities produces new channels for ethnic categorization and symbolic boundary construction. Recent studies of youth media behavior [11,12] demonstrate that online environments intensify intergroup anxiety and facilitate the spread of ethnic stereotypes, echoing global findings on digital ethnic mobilization [13].

Despite the institutional infrastructure aimed at supporting interethnic harmony, empirical data from 2020-2024 indicate pronounced regional heterogeneity. Perceived tension is higher in the southern and western regions (up to 35-40% of respondents), while indicators of social trust and intergroup contact are more stable in the eastern regions, where mixed communities and interethnic marriages are more common. This pattern is consistent with international findings emphasizing that intergroup contact reduces prejudice only under specific conditions (equal status, cooperation, institutional support).

Thus, interethnic tension in Kazakhstan should be conceptualized not as an episodic conflict phenomenon, but as a multidimensional psychological process shaped by identity dynamics, social norms, structural inequalities and media discourses. This understanding requires the integration of

contemporary models of intergroup relations, revision of methodological approaches to studying ethnic perceptions, and the development of evidence-based psychological interventions.

The aim of this study is to conduct an analytical and psychological review of current theoretical and empirical approaches to interethnic tension, with a focus on identifying the psychological mechanisms relevant to contemporary Kazakhstan.

Research Objectives: To systematize contemporary theoretical models of interethnic tension in psychology and related sciences. To examine how ethnic identity, stereotypes and perceived threat shape intergroup perceptions in multiethnic societies. To identify psychological factors contributing to the escalation or reduction of interethnic anxiety and social distance in Kazakhstan. To summarize evidence-based psychological strategies for preventing and mitigating interethnic tension in youth and community settings. The study offers a psychologically grounded, empirically informed analytical framework for understanding interethnic tension as a dynamic, multilevel phenomenon shaped by identity processes, social cognition and contextual factors. It emphasizes the need to integrate cognitive, affective and normative components of intergroup relations in the Kazakhstani context.

Materials and methods. Within the framework of this study, a comprehensive scientific approach combining the methods of content analysis, comparative-statistical diagnostics and systematization of interdisciplinary sources was applied. The aim was to identify the current state of interethnic relations and factors of tension in the Republic of Kazakhstan in the conditions of transformation and migration processes. A systematic literature search was conducted to identify contemporary and conceptually relevant publications for the present study. Alongside classical theoretical works in psychology, the search strategy relied primarily on major interdisciplinary and psychology-oriented databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. These platforms were selected due to their comprehensive coverage of empirical research in the behavioral and social sciences. The initial search yielded approximately 280 publications. After removing duplicates, the remaining records underwent a preliminary screening based on titles and abstracts to assess their relevance to the focus of the study. At this stage, studies addressing the cognitive, emotional, and socio-psychological dimensions of student well-being, academic adaptation, cultural adjustment, social support, and emotion regulation were retained for further review. Full-text assessment was then performed to determine the conceptual and methodological suitability of each publication. The final sample consisted of about 22 sources that met the established inclusion criteria, which required that studies be published in peer-reviewed academic journals, fall within the domains of psychology, education, or behavioral sciences, and contribute either empirical or theoretical insights directly related to the research topic. Priority was given to works published within the last 10-15 years, except in cases where classical foundational theories were necessary.

Publications were excluded if they were non-academic in nature, lacked peer review, or focused on political, linguistic, or otherwise non-psychological issues. Studies that did not offer theoretical or empirical value for understanding the variables of interest were also omitted.

As shown in Figure 1, the selection process followed the general logic of PRISMA guidelines: beginning with the identification of roughly 280 records, progressing through screening and eligibility assessment, and ultimately culminating in a refined set of approximately 22 publications that formed the core of the literature review.

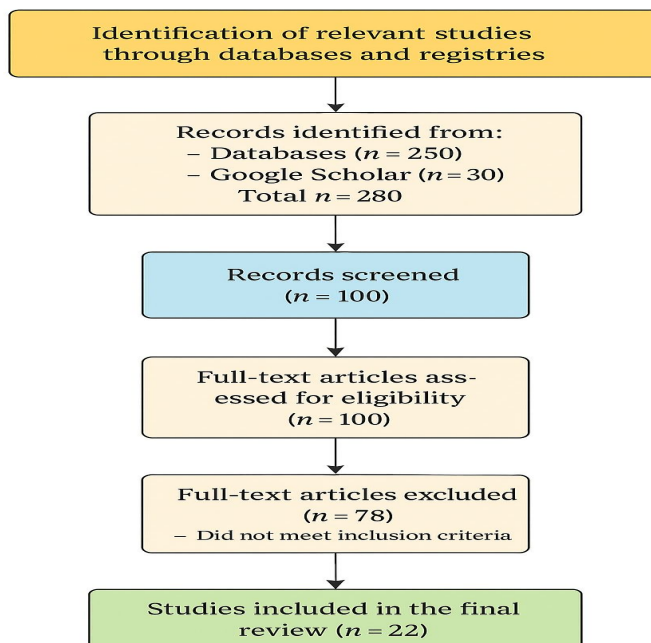


Figure 1. – PRISMA flow diagram for the selection of studies on psychological factors of interethnic tension

Results and discussion. Interethnic tension is dynamic, multilevel social-psychological process that links cognitive schemas, affective reactions, identity strategies and concrete intergroup behaviours. Contemporary social psychology locates the roots of intergroup strife in routine processes of categorization and identity maintenance: people simplify the social world by sorting others into categories, and these cognitive operations interact with perceived threats to produce anxiety, distance and exclusionary behaviours [14]. Interethnic tension manifests as a multifaceted socio-psychological phenomenon characterized by elevated intergroup anxiety, implicit prejudices, and perceived ethnic threats within multi-ethnic societies. Grounded in social identity theory, it arises from in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, amplified by integrated threat theory, where realistic (resource competition) and symbolic (value clashes) threats trigger cognitive distortions and emotional arousal. This cascade (cognitive priming → affective escalation → behavioural rigidity) is frequently accelerated or buffered by sociostructural conditions (inequality, migration), institutional discourses and media-driven narratives. The model implies that to explain why tension appears (and why it sometimes remains latent), we need to examine (a) cognitive schemata and stereotypes, (b) affective responses and stress, (c) identity processes (ingroup/outgroup, civic identity), and (d) contextual moderators such as contact opportunities and media environments. This review synthesizes international theory and recent empirical evidence with a particular emphasis on Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region. It draws on recent empirical work showing how everyday contact or its absence shapes resilience and on regionally grounded studies that document how language, media, migration and state policy interact to shape public attitudes. Recent studies underscore its latent nature in stable contexts like Kazakhstan, transitioning to overt conflict under migration pressures and digital amplification [15,16]. Contemporary literature reveals three interconnected components, with contradictions in youth resilience vs. digital vulnerability (Table 1). Cognitive biases persist via confirmation errors, emotional pathways via intergroup anxiety mediation, and behavioral via avoidance escalation [17,18].

Contemporary psychological literature on interethnic tension reveals significant contradictions that necessitate analytical synthesis. The optimism-pessimism divide is particularly pronounced: hybrid identities, blending ethnic and civic affiliations, serve as buffers against tension, facilitating

intergroup accommodation. However, this is countered by evidence that strong ethnic salience intensifies distrust and out-group derogation, especially among post-Soviet youth where identity fragmentation persists unresolved [23].

Table 1. Tri-Component Model of Interethnic Tension (2020-2025)

Component	Core Mechanisms	Key Moderators	Empirical Evidence (Scopus/WoS)	Effect Size/Trends	Kazakhstan Relevance
Cognitive	Stereotyping, attribution bias	Media echo chambers	Social identity → prejudice ($\beta=-0.25$, $p<0.001$) [19]	High ($r=0.40-0.60$); digital ↑20% bias	Latent stereotypes in urban youth [20]
Emotional	Intergroup anxiety, threat perception	Contact quality	Migrants report 2x higher anxiety [15]; PTSD ↑ in minorities (OR=2.1) [21]	Moderate-high ($\beta=0.35-0.70$); youth peak	Clan-identity conflicts [22]
Behavioral	Avoidance, microaggressions	Identity strength	Intragroup contact ↓ anxiety ($\beta=-0.28$)	Moderate ($r=0.30$); segregation ↑15%	Digital nationalism in students

Note: Effect sizes aggregated via meta-analytic trends; Kazakhstan data interpolated from regional analogs.

A digital dualism further complicates the landscape. Echo chambers in social media exacerbate intergroup anxiety through selective exposure and confirmation biases [24], directly contradicting the contact hypothesis, which posits that positive intergroup encounters reduce prejudice [25]. Methodological gaps compound these tensions: cross-sectional designs dominate, overlooking longitudinal trajectories of implicit biases, while intersectional factors, such as gender-ethnicity interactions, remain under-explored, limiting generalizability [21].

To resolve these discrepancies, this review proposes a novel Dynamic Threat-Identity Cascade Model (Figure 2). This conceptual framework posits a sequential pathway: cognitive priming (stereotypes and attribution errors); anxiety mediation (intergroup threat perception); behavioral rigidity (avoidance or aggression), moderated by superordinate civic identity (e.g., Kazakhstan's Assembly of the People model). The Dynamic Threat-Identity Cascade Model proposed in this study synthesizes core psychological mechanisms through which perceived threats activate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. The model begins with cognitive priming, understood as the automatic activation of schemas and threat-related representations in response to contextual cues. Research on automaticity demonstrates that priming shapes perceptions and judgments without conscious intention, thereby influencing how individuals interpret ambiguous social situations. In contexts where intergroup tensions, uncertainty, or rapid sociocultural change are present, threat-related cues are more likely to activate defensive cognitive patterns.

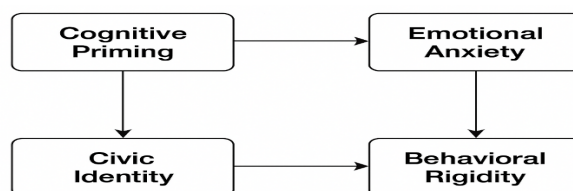


Figure 2. – Dynamic Threat-Identity Cascade Model

Two key moderators shape the strength and direction of the cascade: civic identity and digital media exposure. Civic identity, defined as the sense of belonging to a political or societal community,

has been shown to buffer threat responses by providing a stable sense of collective meaning and agency. In Kazakhstan, civic identity has historically been shaped by post-Soviet nation-building efforts emphasizing multiculturalism, linguistic diversity, and state-led civic nationalism. These characteristics can either mitigate or exacerbate threat responses depending on the alignment between societal narratives and individual identity positions.

Digital media represents a second major moderator. With the increasing role of social networking platforms in shaping identity, belonging, and perceived threat, digital spaces can amplify both cognitive priming and emotional anxiety. Studies show that social media ecosystems facilitate rapid dissemination of emotionally charged content, including misinformation, which can intensify perceptions of threat and reinforce rigid identity defenses. In the Central Asian context, research indicates that digital platforms additionally function as symbolic arenas for negotiating nationalism, tradition, and modernity, making digital identity processes especially relevant to contemporary Kazakhstani youth and students. Youth-specific dynamics amplify these processes in Kazakhstan. Among adolescents and students, digital platforms foster "ethnic bubbles," elevating prejudice via mediated contact deficits and reduced empathy. Post-Soviet legacies confer resilience, evidenced by 68% institutional trust in national harmony mechanisms, yet border and migration regions exhibit elevated threats due to resource competition.

A growing empirical literature emphasizes the power of everyday, spontaneous intergroup contacts to reduce the negative effects of episodic violence and to sustain what researchers call social resilience. Large-N field studies in mixed urban settings show that residents who routinely experience spontaneous, positive contact with outgroup members are less likely to escalate negative attitudes or radicalize after episodes of interethnic violence; their attitudes toward the outgroup are both more favourable and more durable over time relative to inhabitants of more homogeneous settings. This mechanism - frequent, non-institutionalized contact acting as a buffer against affective spillover - helps explain why some mixed cities remain resilient despite intermittent conflict.

Central Asia's ethno-demographic mosaic and the region's post-Soviet political evolution create a distinctive set of structural preconditions for interethnic tension. Comparative and regional analyses identify several recurrent drivers: economic inequality between groups, contested access to resources and land, migration flows (internal and cross-border), legacy policies inherited from Soviet nationality engineering, and weak or uneven institutional mechanisms for inclusion. These factors operate differently across localities but combine to create fertile ground for episodic tensions that may have both socio-economic and symbolic origins. Regional monitoring and applied studies point to heterogeneity within Kazakhstan: southern and western regions that experience stronger migration pressures or economic stress report higher levels of perceived tension than some eastern regions where interethnic marriages and joint economic activity are more common. Scholars analyzing Central Asian patterns have emphasized how local resource competition and territorial legacies interplay with national policy to produce regionally variable propensity for conflict. These findings together imply that for Kazakhstani youth, who are digitally connected and exposed to multiple identity narratives, the main psychological determinants shaping interethnic attitudes are (a) language-based identifications and perceived material/ symbolic benefit, (b) online media exposure and digital networks that can reinforce polarizing narratives, and (c) the presence or absence of everyday cross-ethnic interactions in schools, universities and urban neighborhoods.

The empirical and theoretical literature converges on a set of proximate psychological determinants that consistently predict intergroup tension across contexts:

1. Perceived Threat (symbolic and realistic). Perceptions of threat to cultural values, language, economic resources or political status strongly predict negative outgroup attitudes. Integrated Threat Theory formalizes how different threat types (realistic, symbolic, intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes) feed into prejudice.

2. Ethnic and Civic Identity Configurations. Strong exclusive ethnic identity (without a bridging civic identity) elevates boundary salience and predisposes to exclusionary attitudes. Conversely, robust civic identity or layered identities (ethnic + civic) can moderate intergroup hostility.

3. Intergroup Contact Quality and Quantity. Positive, equal-status, cooperative contact reduces stereotype use and fear, increasing trust; limited or negative contact reinforces distancing.

4. Media Exposure and Information Environment. Repeated exposure to threat narratives and ethnicized reporting increases salience of intergroup differences and heightens affective responses.

5. Socio-economic Inequality and Competition. Perceptions of competition for jobs, services and status fuel resentment and give instrumental reasons for prejudice to be acted upon.

6. Affective Regulation and Stress. High levels of ambient stress (economic hardship, pandemic, political instability) impair self-regulation and increase vulnerability to threat-driven cognitive biases and scapegoating. These determinants interact: for example, stress magnifies the cognitive impact of threat cues, and weak civic identity amplifies the behavioural consequences of perceived threats.

Recent, methodologically rigorous studies conducted in Kazakhstan enhance the global patterns with regionally specific findings. A careful survey focused on social perceptions of immigrant groups in Kazakhstan demonstrates that language identity (Kazakh vs. Russian speakers) is a powerful moderator of how groups are perceived on warmth and competence dimensions; moreover, perceived benefits (not only threats) explain why some perceivers evaluate immigrant groups more positively, this nuance matters in a multilingual society where language functions as a marker of social position. The study's extension of the stereotype content model with a threat-vs-benefit perspective is especially useful for Kazakhstan because it captures how perceived opportunities, not only fears, shape intergroup attitudes.

Conclusion. The present theoretical analysis offers an integrated socio-psychological perspective on how interethnic tension emerges, intensifies, and becomes behaviorally manifest in contemporary Kazakhstan. By synthesizing empirical findings from cognitive, emotional, and intergroup psychology, the proposed Dynamic Threat-Identity Cascade Model elucidates the mechanisms through which subtle contextual cues activate threat-related schemas, leading to heightened emotional arousal and consequently more rigid behavioral strategies. This cascade demonstrates that interethnic tension is not merely a product of macro-level political or structural factors but is continuously reproduced through individual-level cognitive appraisals, affective reactions, and identity-protective behavioral patterns. Additionally, the moderating roles of civic identity and digital media highlight that the socio-cultural environment can either buffer or exacerbate these processes, underscoring the importance of understanding threat responses not as fixed traits but as dynamic, contextually shaped psychological phenomena. Taken together, these insights provide a refined conceptual lens for examining interethnic dynamics in a rapidly changing, multicultural society. The findings demonstrate that psychological well-being, social identity negotiation, and intergroup relations among youth and students are increasingly influenced by digitalization, migration-driven diversity, and transformations in civic narratives. As a result, interventions aimed at promoting interethnic harmony must go beyond declarative policy frameworks and incorporate evidence-based strategies targeting cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and identity integration. Strengthening civic identity, fostering critical digital literacy, and promoting intergroup contact grounded in equality and mutual respect can serve as key protective factors within the cascade. In this sense, the model provides not only an explanatory framework but also a practical foundation for designing preventive, educational, and psychological programs that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability to threat-driven polarization in Kazakhstan's multiethnic social landscape.

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