

Coerced Identity and Psychological Distress: Eritrean Identity Adoption among Ethiopian Migrants in Europe

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Abstract

*This article examines identity crises among Ethiopian migrants in Europe who adopt an Eritrean identity as a survival strategy within restrictive asylum regimes and tightly regulated diaspora networks (Sinatti & Horst, 2015; Vink & Meijerink, 2003). Using a mixed-methods research design integrating surveys (N = 120), semi-structured interviews (n = 30), focus groups, and in-depth case studies conducted in Germany and Sweden, the study analyzes the socio-political, economic, and psychological drivers of identity adoption and its consequences (Hepner, 2015; Belloni, 2019). Findings indicate that while identity substitution improves asylum outcomes and access to diaspora resources, it generates significant psychological costs, including identity dissonance, anxiety, depression, fear of exposure, and social withdrawal (McEwen et al., 2021). The article argues that identity adoption among Ethiopian migrants constitutes **coerced adaptability** rather than free choice, shaped by structural inequalities embedded within asylum governance and diaspora gatekeeping practices.*

Keywords: Coerced identity; asylum policy; Ethiopian migrants; Eritrean diaspora; psychological distress; Europe.

Introductions

Migration from the Horn of Africa to Europe has intensified over the past two decades amid political instability, armed conflict, economic insecurity, and uneven asylum governance. Ethiopia and Eritrea have been central to these migration flows, shaped by long-standing historical tensions, the 1998–2000 border war, and ongoing political repression and ethnic violence (Negash, 2019; Kibreab, 2000).

Within European asylum systems, Eritrean nationals are widely recognized as originating from a refugee-producing country, resulting in higher protection rates. Ethiopians, by contrast, are often framed as economic migrants or as having access to internal protection alternatives, leading to lower recognition rates (Vink & Meijerink, 2003). This disparity has created institutional incentives for Ethiopian migrants to adopt an Eritrean identity during asylum procedures.

While identity negotiation has been widely discussed in migration studies, existing research has primarily focused on transnational belonging and cultural hybridity. Far less attention has been paid to **identity concealment and substitution driven by asylum governance** and its psychological consequences. This study addresses that gap by examining identity adoption as a structurally induced survival strategy that carries profound mental health costs.

Literature Review

Migration and diaspora studies conceptualize identity as fluid, negotiated, and politically embedded (Bruneau, 2010;

Wahlbeck, 2002). Diaspora communities often serve as critical support systems, providing social protection, housing, and employment information. However, they also enforce boundaries of belonging that regulate access to resources and legitimacy.

The Eritrean diaspora in Europe is among the most politically organized, with strong narratives centered on persecution, nationalism, and collective memory (Hepner, 2015). These narratives align closely with dominant asylum discourses, reinforcing Eritrean identity as credible and legitimate. Ethiopian migrants, particularly those without visible ethnic or linguistic markers, are often excluded from these networks.

The concept of **instrumental ethnicity** has been used to explain strategic identity performance within bureaucratic systems (Goodman & Speer, 2007). While analytically useful, this framework often underestimates the emotional and psychological toll of sustained identity concealment. Psychological research demonstrates that prolonged deception and identity dissonance increase cognitive load, stress, and emotional exhaustion (Suchotzki et al., 2017).

Despite growing scholarship on migrant mental health, few studies have empirically examined the psychological consequences of asylum-driven identity substitution. This study contributes to the literature by linking asylum governance, diaspora gatekeeping, and mental health outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: **instrumental ethnicity**, coerced adaptability, and liminal legality (Menjívar, 2006).

Instrumental ethnicity explains how migrants strategically mobilize identity categories to navigate institutional constraints. However, this study extends the concept by emphasizing that such strategies are rarely freely chosen. Instead, identity adoption occurs under conditions of structural coercion, where alternative options are severely constrained.

The concept of **coerced adaptability** captures this dynamic, highlighting how migrants adjust identity performances to survive within unequal asylum systems. Liminal legality further explains how prolonged uncertainty and legal precarity shape psychological well-being, producing chronic stress and identity instability.

Together, these frameworks illuminate how asylum systems transform identity from a personal and cultural construct into a bureaucratic survival tool.

Methodology

A mixed-methods research design was employed to capture both structural patterns and lived experiences. Data were collected between 2023 and 2025 in **Germany and Sweden**, selected for their established Eritrean diaspora communities and influential asylum regimes.

The study included **120 survey respondents, 30 semi-structured interviews, three focus groups, and five in-depth case studies**. Participants were recruited through community organizations, legal aid centers, and snowball sampling.

Quantitative data focused on asylum outcomes, social integration, and self-reported mental health indicators. Qualitative data explored motivations for identity adoption, experiences within diaspora networks, and emotional consequences. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic qualitative analysis.

Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants' legal and personal safety.

Findings

Survey data revealed that approximately **75% of Ethiopian migrants in Germany** reported adopting an Eritrean identity to improve asylum outcomes and access diaspora support. In Sweden, nearly 50% reported improved social inclusion through Eritrean community networks.

However, **60% of participants** reported significant psychological distress linked directly to identity concealment. Common symptoms included anxiety, depression, guilt, fear of exposure, emotional exhaustion, and social withdrawal (McEwen et al., 2021).

Qualitative interviews revealed constant vigilance in maintaining fabricated narratives, avoidance of close relationships, and strained family dynamics. Parents reported difficulties transmitting cultural identity to children, leading to intergenerational confusion and emotional conflict.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the psychological consequences observed among Ethiopian migrants adopting Eritrean identities cannot be adequately understood through conventional frameworks of migrant distress. Rather than reflecting generalized trauma associated with displacement, the findings point to a distinct configuration of psychological strain produced by sustained nationality alteration under structural pressure.

The evidence suggests that identity adoption operates not merely as a strategic adaptation but as a prolonged condition of identity fragmentation. Participants do not simply navigate multiple identities; they are required to maintain parallel and often contradictory self-representations across institutional, social, and private domains. This results in a persistent splitting of the self, accompanied by chronic cognitive demands related to monitoring speech, behavior, and personal narratives. Such conditions generate continuous psychological load that exceeds typical stress responses.

A central mechanism underlying this distress is moral injury. Participants report not only guilt but a deeper sense of violating their own moral and cultural integrity by concealing or replacing their national identity. This form of distress is qualitatively different from standard depressive symptoms, as it is rooted in perceived self-betrayal rather than loss or uncertainty alone. At the same time, the constant risk of exposure produces a form of identity-specific hypervigilance, where individuals remain in a sustained state of alertness tied to the possibility of being "discovered." This exposure anxiety drives behavioral adaptations such as social withdrawal, avoidance of co-national communities, and selective engagement with institutions.

The study also identifies identity exhaustion as an emerging condition, particularly among younger migrants, reflecting the cumulative psychological toll of maintaining a fabricated identity over time. This is compounded by intergenerational tensions, where family members must collectively sustain secrecy, creating environments marked by silence, fear, and conflicting identity expectations. In such contexts, children and youth experience heightened identity confusion, often reporting a sense of belonging to neither their original nor their adopted national category.

Importantly, these findings indicate a cumulative pattern of psychological deterioration, where prolonged engagement in identity performance intensifies distress outcomes. This suggests that the effects are not static but develop over time, reinforcing the argument that nationality alteration under coercive conditions constitutes a form of structural psychological harm.

The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in shifting the analytical focus from individual coping strategies to the systemic production of identity-based distress. The psychological outcomes documented here should be understood as consequences of institutional arrangements that condition access to protection and resources on the performance of specific national identities. As such, the findings call for a re-examination of asylum governance frameworks that inadvertently incentivize identity alteration, while highlighting the need to recognize the psychological costs embedded within these systems. The objective is not to medicalize these experiences but to illuminate how structural conditions reshape identity and well-being in profound and measurable ways.

Policy Implications

Policy reforms should prioritize trauma-informed asylum assessments that recognize identity complexity and avoid rigid nationality-based credibility judgments. Asylum systems must reduce incentives for identity concealment and expand access to culturally responsive mental health services.

Diaspora organizations should also be supported in adopting inclusive practices that recognize mixed identities and reduce gatekeeping pressures that exacerbate psychological harm.

Conclusion

Adopting an Eritrean identity enables Ethiopian migrants to navigate restrictive asylum regimes but at significant psychological cost. Identity substitution is not opportunism but a survival response to structural inequality. Addressing this phenomenon requires asylum systems that respect identity complexity and protect migrants' psychological integrity. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine long-term mental health outcomes and intergenerational impacts.

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