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Acculturation, Ethnic Identity and Well-being among Asians

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ACCULTURATION, ETHNIC IDENTITY, AND WELL-BEING AMONG ASIANS

One of the most popular topics in ethnic minority psychology is acculturation, a psychological process that is believed to have a crucial role in adjusting American lives. Early acculturation theories claimed that ethnic minorities' acculturation process is a bipolar phenomenon, with individuals being totally acculturated or remaining traditional, implying that the higher the acculturation, the better off these minority members. In recent years, the bicultural model enriched the understandings of acculturation process by the belief that ethnic minority members can acculturate into mainstream cultures without compromising their ethnic identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). What gets recognized is that individuals with a bicultural orientation possess high level of acculturation as well as ethnic identity, the identity that construct fundamental aspect of the self reflecting a sense of membership in his/her own ethnic group (Phinney, 1996). Many theorists agree that maintaining such a bicultural orientation brings the best psychological outcomes for minority members (e.g., Berry, 1998; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

However, research findings on how acculturation and ethnic identity are related to ethnic minorities' psychological adjustment have not been consistent. One reason can be that most past research concerning psychological adjustment had examined either acculturation or ethnic identity without considering the other. Therefore, it is not clear whether and how ethnic identity and acculturation interact in relation to adjustment, nor is it clear if one of these two processes is more or less relevant/important than the other for some individuals. Further, the understanding is also lacking about the relationship

between ethnic identity and demographic variables such as age, education level, or year of residence in America, which had been found to predict acculturation.

In this study, we studied acculturation, ethnic identity, and emotional well-being of Asian American students and Asian international students. In particular, we were interested in how acculturation and ethnic identity are developed, whether these processes would bring similar psychological outcomes, how they are related, and if they can be predicted by the same demographic variables for Asian American and Asian international students. We believe that acculturation would be an important phenomenon to consider in understanding both Asian American and Asian international students, whereas ethnic identity would be more relevant to Asian American students than for the international students. Based on the literature and our observations, we developed and tested the following hypotheses: 1) Asian American students would score higher on both acculturation and ethnic identity than Asian international students. The difference in acculturation was expected because Asian American students have lived in the United States longer and have had more exposure to the mainstream American culture than have Asian international students. The difference in ethnic identity was anticipated because Asian American students have faced the challenge of defining themselves in ethnic terms much longer than Asian international students. Most Asian international students came from homogeneous societies, and ethnic identity had not been a relevant concept for them until very recently; 2) Asian American students and Asian international students would not differ in emotional well-being. Although we expected individual variations in emotional well-being within each group, we did not see any reason to expect that one group is happier than the other; 3) Ethnic identity would predict emotional well-being for

Asian American students, and acculturation would for Asian international students. We assumed that for Asian American students, who have lived in this multiethnic America for many years, knowing “who I am” ethnically would have a crucial role in their interaction with people of other ethnicity and their emotional well-being (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1981), whereas for Asian international students, who came to the U.S. recently for their specific educational goals, knowing “what and how to do” (e.g., language acquisition) would be important in their emotional adjustment (e.g., Sodowsky & Plake, 1992); and 4) We expected a moderate, negative relationship between acculturation and ethnic identity for both groups. Although ethnic identity development and acculturation can occur simultaneously, we believed that, to a certain degree, increased practice of the dominant culture would decrease the attachment to the ethnic culture.

In addition, we also made an attempt to answer the following research question: What demographic variables would best predict ethnic identity and acculturation for Asian American and Asian international students?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 63 Asian Americans (28 men and 35 women) and 55 Asian international students (33 men and 22 women) recruited from Asian student organizations on two Midwest state university campuses. Among the Asian American students, 31 were the first generation and 32 the second generation, and their age ranged from 19 to 41 ($M = 21.54$, $SD = 3.47$). The ethnic background for this group consisted of 24 % Vietnamese, 21% Chinese (36% from China mainland and 6% from Taiwan), 19% Indian, 9% Philippines, 7% Korean, 7% Japanese, 3% Thai, and 10 % from other East Asian

countries. The educational background of the Asian American participants was 8% freshmen, 20% sophomores, 30% juniors, 21% seniors, 7% masters, 5% doctoral, and 9% other.

The international students' age ranged from 19 to 36 ($M = 26.62$, $SD = 4.77$). The ethnic composition of this group was 42% Chinese, 24% Koreans, 12% Malaysians, 12% Japanese, 4% Indians, 4% Singaporeans, and 2% Indonesians. Education background of Asian international students was 2% freshmen, 4% sophomores, 9% juniors, 17% seniors, 38% master's, and 28% doctoral, and 2% other.

They completed three measures, ethnic identity, acculturation and depression/happiness, and a demographic form.

Measures

Ethnic identity: The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measures (MEIM; Roberts, Phinney, Masse, & Romeo, 1999) was used to measure levels of ethnic identity.

Acculturation: The Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASIA; Suinn, Richard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987) was utilized to measure acculturation levels.

Emotional well-being: The Depression-Happiness Scale (DHS; McGreal & Joseph, 1993) was used to detect subjective well-being of the participants.

Demographic form: The participants' age, sex, year in school, length of residence in the United States, and citizenship status (Internationals vs. Asian Americans) were investigated by demographic form along with the above-mentioned measures.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

The t-test results revealed that Asian international students ($M = 26.62$, $SD = 4.77$) were significantly older than Asian American students ($M = 21.54$, $SD = 3.47$), $t(116) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, and their education levels (49 % graduate students) were higher than those of Asian American students (10 % graduate students), $t(112) = 4.29$, $p < .001$. Therefore, we made the decision to control for age and education level in the subsequent comparative analyses between the two groups.

Differences Between Asian American and Asian international students

To compare the Asian American and Asian international students' acculturation, ethnic identity, and emotional well-being (Hypotheses 1 and 2), we conducted three separate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs), with age and education level as covariates. The results showed that Asian American students scored higher in acculturation than Asian international students, $F(1, 110) = 59.32$, $p < .001$. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .35$), a large effect according to Cohen (1988), indicated that 35% of the variance of acculturation was accounted for by participants' group membership. The acculturation scores placed both Asian American students ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .38$) and Asian international students ($M = 2.10$, $SD = .52$) in the bicultural range.

The results also showed that Asian American students had stronger ethnic identity ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .49$) than the Asian international students ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .42$), $F(1, 110) = 6.63$, $p < .05$. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .06$), a medium effect (Cohen, 1988), suggested that 6% of the variance of ethnic identity was accounted for by the

participants' group membership. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the two groups' emotional well-being, $F(1, 108) = 0.8, p > .05$. Both Asian American ($M = 49.85, SD = 10.34$) and Asian international students ($M = 49.17, SD = 8.15$) scored in the upper range on the Depression-Happiness scale. Both the mean score of the Asian American students, $t = 10.46, p < .001$, and that of the Asian international students, $t = 11.87, p < .001$, were significantly higher than the mid-point on the depression-happiness continuum. Thus, the participants in both groups appeared to be in a generally happy state.

The relationship Between Acculturation and Ethnic Identity and Emotional Well-being

Two sets of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, with age and education level being controlled for, were conducted to examine the relationship between acculturation and emotional well-being and that between ethnic identity and emotional well-being (Hypothesis 3). The results (Table 1) revealed that age and education level, entered in the first step of each analysis, failed to explain any significant amount of variance of emotional well-being for either Asian American or Asian international students. When ethnic identity and acculturation were entered in the step 2, R^2 change was statistically significant for the Asian American students, but non-significant for the Asian international students. It was notable that ethnic identity, not acculturation level, contributed uniquely to the Asian American students' emotional well-being. The higher ethnic identity seemed to be associated with higher Asian American students' emotional well-being.

The Relationship between Acculturation and Ethnic Identity

Partial correlation coefficients, with age and education level being controlled for, were calculated to examine the relationship between acculturation and ethnic identity for Asian American and Asian international students respectively. The results revealed that acculturation and ethnic identity were negatively correlated for both Asian American students (Partial $r = -.49$, $p < .001$) and Asian international students (Partial $r = -.31$, $p < .05$). It appeared that, to a moderate degree, ethnic identity level decreased as acculturation increased.

Demographic Predictors of Acculturation and Ethnic Identity

To answer the research question concerning the role of demographic variables that predict acculturation and ethnic identity for Asian American and Asian international students, step-wise multiple regression analyses were conducted. The results showed that the Asian American students' acculturation was significantly predicted by (1) the length of residence in the U.S. ($\beta = .59$), which accounted for 34.4% of the variance, $F(1, 58) = 30.42$, $p < .001$, and (2) Generation status ($\beta = .31$), which accounted for additional 6.5% of the variance, $F(2, 57) = 19.71$, $p < .001$. Asian international students' acculturation, on the other hand, was significantly predicted by their length of residence in the U.S. only ($\beta = .37$), which accounted for 14.0% of the variance, $F(1, 49) = 7.87$, $p < .01$. Longer length of residence in the U.S. and higher generation status were associated with higher acculturation level of Asian American students, and longer length of residence was related to higher acculturation of Asian international students.

When ethnic identity was regressed on all of the demographic variables, Asian American students' education level ($\beta = -.26$) was found to be a significant predictor,

accounting for 6.6% of the total variance, $F(1,58) = 4.13, p < .05$. It suggested that the ethnic identity decreased as their education level increased. On the other hand, none of the demographic variables predicted Asian international students' ethnic identity.

Discussion

As expected, both acculturation and ethnic identity were higher among Asian American students than Asian international students. It is not a surprise that acculturation levels were higher among the Asian American samples than the international students, whereas it was notable that Asian American students were the ones who held higher ethnic identity than Asian international students were. Phinney's (1990) argument that one's ethnic identity based on the differences in geographical contexts has been confirmed by this finding.

Nature of relationship between ethnic identity and acculturation for both Asian American students and Asian international students were found to be negative, implying that as one acculturates to mainstream culture, loss of his or her ethnic identity occurs. This negative pattern of relationship was somewhat incongruent with what the bicultural theorist (e.g., LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) suggests. However, consistent with our findings, higher involvement of mainstream cultural behavior was reported to lessen their commitment to their own ethnic group (e.g., Cuellar, Nyberg, Maldonado, & Roberts, 1997).

Ethnic identity level was the only statistically significant predictor in emotional well-being among the Asian American samples. For Asian Americans, the adequate understanding of what their ethnicity mean to them in the contexts of culturally diverse society can produced utmost adjustment. Whereas no evidence was found for predicting

emotional well-being for Asian international students. Degrees to which they are “Asian” or “Americanized” might not have been related to their emotional well-being.

An investigation of acculturation and ethnic identity in relations to demographic variables provided us important implication to understand cultural adjustment of Asian populations. Mainly, acculturation levels of Asian Americans were explained by the demographic variables to a large degree. In particular, contribution of each demographic variable to their acculturation levels suggested that longer length of residence and higher generation status were associated with higher acculturation levels. Thus, it can be speculated that, following his or her initial contact to the mainstream American culture, acculturative learning occurs in the developmental manners where one gradually acquires his or her second cultural skills.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small. There were simply not many students of Asian heritage on Midwestern college campuses. Second, the data were collected at the beginning of Asian student organization meetings. By doing so, we allowed a kind of self-selection in our participants. We do not know what kind of sampling biases could have been present. Those who chose to get involved in ethnic student organizations probably have stronger ethnic identity than those who did not choose to do so. In addition, taking ethnic pride may also be a desirable response in the environment of ethnic organizations.

Another limitation was that we had to group individuals with different Asian nationality and heritage together as Asian American or Asian international students.

Our attempts of examining differences within each of the two groups failed to yield any meaningful results due to the limited number of participants in each subgroup (i.e., Vietnamese, Chinese, etc.). While there are many cultural similarities, differences between and among Asian subgroups do exist and should not be ignored (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998). Future research taking within Asian group differences into consideration will improve our understanding of Asian American and Asian international students' cultural adjustment and emotional well-being.

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Table 1

Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Well-being

| Predictors | β | sr^2 | Increment R^2 | F change | p |
|------------------------------|---------|--------|-----------------|----------|-------|
| Asian American Students | | | | | |
| Step 1 | | | | | |
| Education Levels | -.03 | .00 | | | |
| Age | .01 | .00 | | | |
| | | | .00 | .02 | n.s. |
| Step 2 | | | | | |
| Ethnic Identity | .43* | .12 | | | |
| Acculturation | .18 | .03 | | | |
| | | | .13 | 3.84 | < .05 |
| Asian International Students | | | | | |
| Step 1 | | | | | |
| Education Levels | -.16 | .02 | | | |
| Age | .11 | .02 | | | |
| | | | .03 | .64 | n.s. |
| Step 2 | | | | | |
| Ethnic Identity | .16 | .02 | | | |
| Acculturation | .14 | .02 | | | |
| | | | .03 | .75 | n.s. |

* $p < .01$