Exploring the Relations between Ethnic Identity, Discrimination, and Self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Today, 50% of school-aged adolescents in California are of Mexican descent. While racial discrimination is prevalent in our society and affects the self-esteem of ethnic minority children, previous studies suggested strong ethnic identification as a protective factor to self-esteem and mental health. The current study aims to examine the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem and perceived discrimination experienced by Latinx children. This secondary analysis used baseline data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS; Portes & Rumbaut, 2018). This study included participants who were second-generation immigrant children of Mexican descent (N=470). The result showed a statistically significant relationship between ethnic identity and perceived discrimination by students, but not by teachers and counselors. There was no statistically significant difference in self-esteem and ethnic preference in the current study. This research is important to social work because it highlights the experiences of ethnic minorities in our American culture. Racism and xenophobia are prevalent in our society, and it is essential to be knowledgeable about our clients' cultural realities.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

- Racial discrimination is a stressor that affects self-esteem and can impact an individual's mental health.

Purpose of Research

- The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of ethnic identity on perceived discrimination and self-esteem.

Research Questions

- What is the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem among second-generation Latinx youth?
- What is the relationship between ethnic identity and perceived discrimination among Latinx youth?

Hypothesis

- Those with a strong sense of ethnic identity, or have greater regard for their ethnic group, will experience higher self-esteem and lower perceived discrimination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Identity and Self-esteem

- Self-esteem is correlated with mental health, academic success, social behaviors, and substance abuse (Corenblum, 2014).
- Perceived discrimination is associated with self-esteem and the process of exploring and resolving ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor in self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2007).

Ethnic Identity and Discrimination

- Discrimination is usually related to language proficiency, physical traits, or ethnicity, and 50% of second-generation Mexican adolescents reported discrimination of this nature in 2003 (Dulin-Keita, 2011).
- Ethnic minorities are disproportionately harmed by stress and health problems and only recently has literature begun to connect ethic identity as a possible protective factor for coping with discrimination (Mossakowski, 2003).

Systems Theory

- The construction of social identity is affected by social factors and often, with immigrants, a dissonance can occur (Rumbaut, 1994).

Gaps and Limitations

- Ethnic identity has been suggested to be a protective factor and aids in developing resiliency, however, relatively few studies explore which comes first: a strong ethnic identity or discrimination.

METHODS

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The current study is a secondary analysis from the data Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS; Portes & Rumbaut, 2018).
- The original study's research design used surveys to collect data and were gathered through face-to-face interviews and paper and pencil interviews (PAPI).

Sample and Sampling Method

- The original study followed over 5,200 children of immigrants from early adolescence to early adulthood interviewing them at three critical periods in their life: junior high school age, preceding high school graduation age, and beginning careers or further education.
- Participants were drawn from four locations to ensure that women and minorities were included and to be more representative.
- This current study explored only Mexican and Mexican-American individuals, making the sample size 470.

Measures

- Ethnic Identity was assessed with one item "respondent's American way preference" with four categorical measures.
- Self-esteem was assessed by using the ten-item Rosenberg scale (Rosenberg, 1979). Questions in the scale included feelings of worth, attitudes, and satisfaction.
- Discrimination was assessed with three items: respondent discriminated by teachers, respondent discriminated by students, and respondent discriminated by counselors.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=470)

Characteristic	*f*	%
Sex		
Male	249	53.0
Female	221	47.0
Age in Years		
	M= 14	SD= .871
Grade		
Eight Grade	289	61.5
Ninth grade	181	38.5
Birth Country		
US	310	66.0
Germany	1	0.21
Philippines	1	0.21
Mexico	158	33.6
Language Spoken at Home		
Spanish	448	95.3
French	1	0.21
Portuguese	1	0.22
Korean	1	0.22
Preferred Speaking Language		
English	209	44.5
Spanish	259	55.1
Korean	1	0.2

RESULTS

A Kruskal-Wallis H test

- The Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in self-esteem score between four different ethnic preferences; H(3)=2.828, *p*=.419.

Chi-Square Test

- A chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of respondent's American way preference and respondent's perceived discrimination by counselors. No significant relationship was found: $x^2(3)=7.727$, *p*=.052.
- A chi-square test was used to compare the frequency of respondent's American way preference and respondent's perceived discrimination by teachers. No significant relationships was found: $x^2(3)=2.282$,*p*=.51.
- A chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of respondent's American way preference and respondent's perceived discrimination by students. A significant association was found $x^2(3)=14.038$, p=.003, while a Cramer's *V* statistic suggested a moderate relationship (.220). As shown in Table 3, participants who assimilated into American culture all of the time felt like they were not discriminated against by other students (0%), while participants who never assimilated to American culture felt discriminated against by other students (57.6%).

Figure 1

Percentages of respondents perceived discrimination by students and American way preference

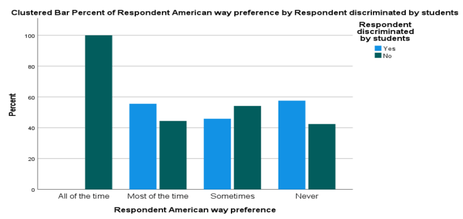

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics: Study Variables

Variables	*f*	%
American Way Preference		
All of the time	17	3.6
Most of the time	107	22.8
Sometimes	296	63
Never	47	10
Self-Esteem Scale		
	M= 31.59	SD= 5.3
Discriminated by teachers		
Yes	90	31.0
No	200	69.0
Discriminated by students		
Yes	138	47.6
No	152	52.4
Discriminated by counselors		
Yes	20	6.9
No	270	93.1

Table 3

Respondent American Way Preference and Perceived Discrimination by Students

	Respondent perceives discrimination by students		Respondent does not perceive discrimination by students	
	n	%	*n*	%
Respondent American way preference				
All of the time	0	0.0	12	100
Most of the time	35	55.6	28	44.4
Sometimes	83	45.9	98	54.1
Never	19	57.6	14	42.4

DISCUSSION

Major Findings

- The relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem was not consistent with prior research or the hypothesis. The literature illustrates that adolescents that report higher levels of ethnic identity exploration or resolution largely report higher levels of self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2007).
  - One interpretation is that self-esteem increases with age, through cognitive maturity, and the sample focused solely on 8th and 9th graders where major social, biological, and cognitive transitions are happening.
- There was a moderate relationship between ethnic identity and discrimination among students, however no relationship among teachers and counselors.
  - The relationship between ethnic identity and discrimination among students was significant, however, the relationship is in the opposite direction.
  - Some existing research suggests that having a strong ethnic identity may exacerbate the psychological impact of racial discrimination since the identity that is being discriminated against is so closely correlated to their sense of self.
  - While several studies indicate that perceptions of discrimination may stay the same or increase depending on ethnic identification, findings suggest that high levels of involvement in Latino culture may serve as a protective factor, minimizing the negative impact of discrimination on adolescents (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2007).

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

- Specific demographic information for accurate representation
- Helped fill the gap in current literature around ethnic identity and self-esteem

Limitations

- Cross-cultural design focusing on 8th and 9th graders
- Geographical location: San Diego and South Florida where there is a high Mexican Latinx population and little diversity.

Implications for Research and Practice

- Racism and xenophobia are prevalent in our society, and it is essential to be knowledgeable about our clients' cultural reality.
- Understanding cultural influences and recognizing patterns within each cultural group may serve as a protective factor for individuals.
- Perceived discrimination and low self-esteem are related to health risks and although the current research does not show a correlation between having a strong ethnic identity and the amount of discrimination a person will face, several studies indicate that strong ethnic identification impacts resiliency and mental health.
- Social workers can use this research to aid in future research and create therapeutic interventions, implement policy that target racial injustices, or create support groups that aims to build social support and self-esteem.

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