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Ethnic Identity and the Adolescent's Academic Performance

Chaiqua A. Harris and Robika Modak Mylroie

Harris, Chaiqua A., Ph.D., NCC, is an assistant professor at Jackson State University. Her research interests include: academic self-efficacy, ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic performance, adolescents, and minorities.

Mylroie, Robika Modak, Ph.D., NCC, LPC, is a distance clinical professor at Lamar University. Her research interests include childhood obesity's impact on personal/social, academic and career growth in students, bullying behaviors, and cyberbullying.

Abstract

Ethnic identity can play an influential role during the adolescent development stage. The impact of ethnic and racial identity formation has been explored in past research and is certainly an area that should be more thoroughly examined. This study explored the relationship between academic self-efficacy, ethnic identity, sex, and socioeconomic status with academic performance. Ethnic identity and socioeconomic status were not found to be statistically significant. This finding was contrary to some previous research findings that found ethnic identity to play a significant role in the increasing or decreasing of adolescents' academic success. Due to this knowledge, the researchers will focus on how ethnic identity can play an influential role in the academic performance of adolescents.

Keywords: adolescence, ethnic identity, grade point average, middle school, Mississippi Curriculum Test (Second Edition)

Introduction

Ethnic identity is defined as the level to which an individual feels connected to his or her ethnic group (Phinney, 1996). This belief influences attitudes and behaviors (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006). According to Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), a student's academic performance can also be influenced by his or her ethnic identity. For academic settings to be conducive for academic success, school personnel must focus on assisting students from a holistic framework, so it is pivotal that school personnel and mental health personnel are familiar with the effects of all facets of

an adolescent. Many school personnel are only allotted time to focus on the academic component of a student (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Paucity exists in the research exploring how various cultural or ethnic identities impact the academic performance of adolescents. Educational researchers have explored the relationship between ethnic identity and academic achievement with mixed results (Zarate, Bhimji, & Reese, 2005). Some researchers have found minority adolescents' ethnic identities to influence the increasing or decreasing of their academic performance more than their Caucasian counterparts (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Worrell, 2007; Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004). Some Caucasian adolescents do not view ethnic identity as a pivotal factor in their identity (Yasui et al., 2014). However, minority adolescents are not only dealing with academic issues, but they are also trying to understand their full identity (Erikson, 1950).

Identity Development

During the adolescent phase, students encounter many experiences that cause them to question themselves intrapersonally (Erikson, 1968). Academic, ethnic, and social self-concept are challenged, and the adolescent may feel intrapersonal frustration and confusion (Erikson, 1968). In this stage, individuals may experience identity confusion and/or may question their ethnic and sexual identity (Erikson, 1968). French, Seidman, Allen, and Aber (2006) stated that various forms of identity, including ethnic identity, become remarkably significant during adolescence. Increased abstract reasoning abilities and increased need to explore several aspects of one's identity make this a critical period to explore ethnic identity (French et al., 2006).

Pearson (2008) described early adolescence as a time when adolescents are changing both biologically and socially; it is often described as the most tempestuous stage of a child's life. According to Erikson (1950), puberty and adolescence is a period of rapid body growth and physical genital maturity. Individuals in this stage are concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others in contrast to what they feel they are (Erikson, 1950). Adolescents have questions about how to connect the roles and skills that were nurtured earlier with the prototypes that are considered to be normal and popular (Erikson, 1950). Adolescents are searching for a sense of belonging and sameness (Erikson, 1950). In this period, the growing adolescent must know that every step of his or her maturation is a successful component of a group identity. Erikson (1950) contended that during this period, adolescents are ready to install lasting idols and ideals to assist in the confirmation of the inner design for life. The intrapersonal confusion in the student impacts his or her academic, social, and personal life. Adolescents begin to explore and discover who they really are (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). They explore every aspect of themselves, including their identification with their ethnicity.

Understanding Ethnic and Racial Identity

Ethnic and racial identity development is a very important milestone for young persons of color (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). The formation of a sound and universal definition of ethnic and racial identity has been difficult. According to Phinney (1989b), several studies have examined ethnic identity in single group samples and have utilized

broad discrepant definitions of ethnic identity, resulting in challenging and unreliable generalizations and comparisons. Cohen (2004) described the formation of ethnic identity as being a continuous process that is impacted by changes within the ethnic group and interactions with others. Phinney (1996) defined ethnic or racial identity development as a progressive examination that includes (a) inquiring about preexisting ethnic attitudes and (b) exploring past and present group experiences and the associations one's group maintains with other groups. Differences occur within ethnic groups, as well, including "acculturation, generation of immigration, social class, and regional influences; there is wide variation in the cultural norms and values maintained by members of an ethnic group" (Phinney, 1996, p. 143). Ethnic and racial identity is made up of several influential facets and the degree and significance of individual identification with an ascribed group varies.

Evens, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) classified ethnic identity into two components: external ethnic identity and internal ethnic identity. External ethnic identity is comprised of distinguishable social and cultural behaviors. Internal ethnic identity is a composite of the cognitive, moral, and affective dimensions of ethnic identity. Several family, community, and societal experiences impact individual ethnic identity. According to Schwartz, Jarvis, and Zamboanga (2007), racial identity is based on skin tone; however, ethnic identity is formed from particular values, beliefs, and customs. Children and adolescents usually accept the beliefs of their present environment and struggle with sexual and ethnic identity when trying to find their identities (Erikson, 1968).

Ethnic Identity Development

According to Bernal and Knight (1993), the majority of adolescents have not thoroughly examined the meaning of their ethnicity; yet they form preconceived notions about it from their parents and/or society. Phinney (1989a) described the ethnicity confusion individuals experience after childhood:

Beyond childhood, concerns about ethnicity shift from learning one's ethnic label to understanding the significance of one's group membership. Adolescents are faced with a number of changes that affect this understanding, including increased cognitive abilities, more interactions outside their own community, and greater concern with appearance and social life. (p. 35)

The formation of an ethnic identity is an essential human need; it provides a sense of group involvement and a sense of historical connection (Smith, 1991). This sense of "belongingness" can act as a buffer for students who are having negative academic experiences (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009; Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008). Phinney (1992) developed a model to further explore how ethnic identity is formed.

Phinney's Model of Ethnic Identity (1992). Phinney (1989b) examined the stages of ethnic identity development through in-depth interviewing of Asian American, African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian junior high and high school students. All of the students were born in America and came from integrated urban high schools. The researcher presented a model of ethnic identity development that combined ego identity statuses and ethnic identity models. Phinney also provided evidence for distinct stages of ethnic identity. Phinney based the 3-stage model of ethnic identity development on research with minority adolescents combined with other ego identity and ethnic identity models, specifically Marcia's (1966) and Erikson's (1980, 1968) work. The stages of the

model include a) unexamined ethnic identity, b) ethnic identity search/moratorium, and c) ethnic identity achieved.

Unexamined ethnic identity is described as the stage when the individual lacks exploration, experiences diffusion or foreclosure, and has a lack of interest in ethnicity or has a general acceptance of others' opinions (Phinney, 1992). According to Bernal and Knight (1993), individuals accept the worldviews of the dominant culture during this stage.

Ethnic identity search/moratorium is a combination of encounter and exploration; it begins when the individual develops his or her ethnic identity. This stage is often initiated by a harsh or indirect event (Phinney, 1992). Those individuals who are members of a group that is devalued and culturally defined may have different experiences than those who are a part of a more mainstream group (Spencer et al., 2001). The individual who is in this stage becomes aware that the values of the dominant culture are not beneficial to all minorities and may develop anger towards the majority culture (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Evens et. al, 2010). The individual then begins to explore and inquire about the beliefs of his or her culture and the dominant culture.

The final stage, Ethnic Identity Achieved, occurs when the individual has a clear sense of his or her ethnic identity and is able to successfully navigate their bicultural identity (Phinney, 1992). Individuals who are in this stage are proud of who they are and are comfortable with both parts of themselves. These parts include the side that embraces the dominant culture and the part that accepts and internalizes their culture (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Evens et al., 2010).

Phinney (1992) stated that an individual's ethnic identity is a developmental progression, so individuals will progress through each stage when developmentally ready. This developmental approach indicates that one's age causes variation in ethnic identity levels. It suggests that younger adolescents will have lower ethnic identity levels than older adolescents (Roberts et al., 1999). However, not all individuals progress through each stage; they may remain constant at any (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). Contextual factors, such as parents and the community, are significant to the extent and rate of development. In order for one to have an achieved ethnic identity, he or she must have positive self-evaluations and good family and peer relationships (Bernal & Knight, 1993).

Ethnic Identity and Academic Performance

Phinney (1992) found that the stages of ethnic identity can impact student academic performance. Adolescent academic performance is influenced by the search to connect with an ethnic identity. This search includes exploration of some developmental components, such as sexual identity and ethnic identity (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1996; Spencer et al., 2001).

Ethnic identity may act as a shield against elements that decrease school engagement and academic self-efficacy. Wakefield and Hudley (2007) indicated that a firm positive ethnic identity could possibly provide support for academic achievement and mental health. If an adolescent feels linked to his or her ethnic group, and the ethnic group is thought of as having the skills that are needed to excel academically, then better academic outcomes will result (Kerpelman et al., 2008). Therefore, it is very important that educators who work with early adolescents acknowledge, explore, and understand

the ethnic identity process, because it can have a remarkable influence on academic success (Phinney, 1989a).

Phinney (1992) found high school students with more developed ethnic identities were less likely to believe negative stereotypes that may hamper their academic success, and they reported having higher academic scores. Yasui et al. (2004) also explored the role of ethnic identity as a factor in the protection of the adolescent from the impact of negative stereotypes. The researchers compared high-risk Caucasian and African American sixth-grade students to their academically successful counterparts. Researchers found that adolescents who were at-risk had lower ethnic identity levels than those who were academically successful (Yasui et al., 2004).

Ethnic identity, self-esteem, and other group orientation attitudes among academically successful African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Caucasian middle and high school students has also been examined (Worrell, 2007). The variables were measured by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measurement (Roberts et al., 1999), which Phinney modified from the 1992 version. The findings indicated that Caucasian counterparts did not differ in their other group orientation attitudes; however, ethnic minority groups had significantly higher ethnic identity scores. African American students' ethnic identity and other group orientation attitudes were the only results that were negative and positive predictors of school achievement. For African American students, high self-esteem was moderately predicted by academic achievement. Strong ethnic identification instead increased self-esteem in Latinos. High ethnic identity levels for African American students was linked with academic achievement being negatively predicted. Also, for the African American students, a positive orientation towards other ethnic groups was a strong predictor of high academic achievement (Worrell, 2007). These results indicated that if African American students identified with other ethnic groups, there was positive impact on their academic achievement.

In contrast, researchers have found weak salience in Caucasian students. This indicates that they do not believe there is significance in identifying with their ethnic group. They have also found that Caucasians' ethnic identity levels are not strong predictors of academic achievement (Phinney et al., 1997; Yasui et al., 2004). Caucasian students may have low ethnic identity levels yet have high academic scores. However, research has shown that other ethnic group students with high ethnic identity levels have high academic scores (Zarate et al., 2005).

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 169 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade participants from middle schools in northeastern Mississippi and the Mississippi Delta. The researcher met with several school boards and administrators and was allowed to distribute consent forms to multiple schools. Once the consent forms were signed and returned, the researcher was able to go in the schools and run the study.

The sample self-identified their races/ethnicities on a demographic form that was included in the survey packet. Of these, 113 were African American, 36 were Caucasian, 4 were Biracial, 7 were Hispanic, 2 were Asian American, 3 were American Indian, 1 was Filipino, and 3 were Italian. Sixty-seven (40%) participants were boys, and 102

participants (60%) were girls. Seventy-three participants were (43%) sixth graders, 34 participants (20%) were seventh graders, and 62 participants (37%) were eighth graders.

Instrumentation

Phinney's (1999) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). Phinney's (Roberts et al., 1999) MEIM is used to measure student ethnic identity levels. The participants in this study were given the MEIM survey once during the study. The MEIM was developed over a 5-year span. Phinney used Adams' (1987) model of the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status. An original version of the scale was developed to explore ethnic identity search and commitment. This instrument was administered to 60 college undergraduates as a trial measure. The scale was then revised and given to 196 undergraduates ranging from age 18 to 23, and who were from one of the following ethnic groups: White, Asian American, Black, or Mexican American. Reliability of the exploration and commitment scores were assessed with the calculation of Cronbach's alpha; reliabilities were .69 and .59.

The scale was again revised on the basis of item analysis and was administered to 206 Hispanic and White students at another university. The reliability coefficients of .80 for ethnic identity exploration and .66 for ethnic identity commitment were attained. The MEIM consists of 12 items that assess three aspects of ethnic identity and there are two factors in the 12-item scale. The two factors are ethnic identity search or exploration, and ethnic identity commitment.

Items are rated on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. None of these items are reversed. The scores range from 5 (indicating high ethnic identity) to 1 (low). Higher scores indicate a higher level of ethnic identity. The preferred scoring of these items is to use the mean of the items. The mean of the 12 items for an overall score was used.

Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2). Performance levels from the MCT2 of the previous school year were taken from student cumulative folders. The MCT2 is an assessment given annually in the spring of each year that measures the achievement of students in the areas of Language Arts and Mathematics in Grades 3–8. The measurement is based on the 2006 Mississippi Language Arts Framework-Revised and on the 2007 Mississippi Mathematics Framework-Revised (Mississippi Department of Education [MDE], 2010). The MCT2 is designed to meet federal testing requirements specified in the NCLB of 2001. Test items on the MCT2 vary in their degree of difficulty, and are aligned to the content skills and processes represented by Mississippi's academic content standards as specified in the state curriculum frameworks and the academic performance level descriptors. The performance level descriptors are (a) advanced, (b) proficient, (c) basic, and (d) minimal (MDE, 2011).

Advanced level is described as the student consistently performing beyond the level that is required to be successful in the grade or course of content area. Advanced level scale scores for the mathematic portion are 164–185, and 166–190 for the language portion. Proficient level is defined as the student showing solid academic performance and mastery of the knowledge and skills to be successful in that grade or course in the content area. The proficient level scale scores for the mathematic portion are 150–163, and 150–165 for the language portion. Basic level is described as when the student exhibits partial mastery of the knowledge and skills in the course, but may encounter

difficulties in the next grade or course in the content area. The basic level scale scores for the mathematic portion are 142–149, and 135–149 for the language portion. Minimal level is defined as the student inconsistently expressing the knowledge or skills that define basic level performance. The minimal level scale scores for the mathematic portion are 115–141, and 112–136 for the language portion. As for this study, each district's school counselors report the scores as 1 = minimal, 2 = basic, 3 = proficient, and 4 = advanced. There was a score given for the language portion and the mathematic portion. The researcher of this study used the average of the two scores. The researcher chose to combine the scores so that the holistic academic scope of the student was embodied and used in the multiple linear regression analysis, which requires one criterion variable and multiple predictor variables for each analysis.

The test developer ensured content-related validity by aligning the items to the standards for educational and psychological testing and verified the items independently by multiple content reviewers and Mississippi educators. However, there is no indication that statistical analyses were performed. The developer stated that construct validity is the central concept underlying the MCT2 test validation process. The Language Arts test on the MCT2 demonstrated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.84. All Language Arts tests (except Grade 6 tests) reported reliability higher than 0.85, which is the general accepted value for a high-stakes assessment. Reliability for the Mathematics test ranged from 0.87 to 0.91 (MDE, 2011).

Grade point average (GPA). Student GPAs from the previous 9 weeks were obtained from student cumulative records. The GPAs were based on the 4.0 grade point scale: 4.0–3.1 = A; 3.0–2.1 = B; 2.0–1.1 = C; 1.0 = D; and 0 = F.

Data Analysis

Stepwise multiple regression was the analysis that was used in this cross-sectional correlational study. Petrocelli (2003) contended that multiple regression is a powerful set of analyses for inspecting “specific scientific hypotheses and relationships among experimental, quasiexperimental, and nonexperimental data” (p. 9). The researcher utilized a .05 alpha. The investigator examined four predictor variables and one criterion variable with SPSS software and ran 2 analyses (i.e., one with GPA as the criterion variable and another with MCT2 as the criterion variable).

Results

Predictor variables. The variable of ethnic identity is the level that an individual identifies with his or her ethnic culture. The researcher used the MEIM to measure this. Scores on this scale have a possibility of ranging from 1 to 5; and scores in this particular study ranged from 1.33 to 3.75. Higher scores indicate a greater ethnic identity development. The mean for both analyses was 3.03 (SD = .465). Therefore, on average, participants indicated a moderate ethnic identity level.

Descriptives and criterion variables. The dependent variable, GPA, was an indication of a participant's academic performance, with scores ranging from 0.0–4.0 to 4.00. Scores ranged from 0.58 to 3.9, with 11 (.06%) participants scoring between 3.5–5.0, 116 (69%) scoring between 2.5–3.49, 37 (22%) scoring between 1.5–2.49, three (.02%) scoring between 1.0–1.49, and one (.005%) scoring between 0.0–0.99. The dependent variable, MCT2, is also an indication of a participant's academic performance.

Scores could range from 1 to 4, with 1 demonstrating minimal competency, 2 demonstrating basic competency, 3 demonstrating proficient competency, and 4 demonstrating advanced competency. The mean for this variable in the current study was 2.33 (SD = .799). Twenty-nine (17%) participants demonstrated minimal competency, 65 (38%) demonstrated basic competency, 69 (41%) demonstrated proficient competency, and seven (.04%) demonstrated advanced competency. These results indicate that the average participant had a GPA of 2.75, and a MCT2 score of 2.32 (basic level competency and above).

Discussion

Although the relationships were found to be statistically significant, there were beta weights of independent variables that were not found to be statistically significant and were excluded from the model, ethnic identity and socioeconomic status. This implies that when academic self-efficacy and sex are involved, the impact of ethnic identity and socioeconomic status are not as influential. As indicated by Phinney and Ong (2007), increased salience of one's ethnic identity occurs when he or she lives in an ethnically diverse environment. The participants sampled in this study were not living in ethnically diverse communities and were not at an age that cultivates the exploration of their ethnic identities, which could mean that as of yet ethnic identity is not strong enough to have a statistically significant impact on academic success; however, school personnel should proactively address it so that future problems can be alleviated. Ethnic identity may not have impacted the academic performance of this sample; however, in other research, it has been found to impact life satisfaction in adolescents (Vera et al., 2011).

Adolescence is a stage that is signified by role identification or role confusion (Erikson, 1950). In this developmental stage, students may encounter interpersonal and intrapersonal issues that can contribute to the increasing or decreasing of their academic success (Erikson, 1968). Racism and how one identifies with his or her ethnic group can be issues that the adolescent may encounter, and school personnel must be equipped with the tools that are needed to assist the student (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). This knowledge provides clinicians with the literature to assist them in being proactive and combatting these issues before they arise.

Implications for Mental Health and School Personnel

This study and literature review provides implications for those who work with the adolescent population. Mental health and school personnel should continue to assist the adolescents in all areas (e.g., personal, social, academic, and career) and guide them in their budding ethnic identities. This guidance can be implemented through individual, group, and classroom guidance lessons. Personnel can give surveys to explore the ethnic identity levels of the students, provide ethnic identity exploration groups, provide individual and group counseling to those who are experiencing ethnic identity formation turmoil, and provide ethnic identity workshops for parents, faculty, and administrators. When working with this population, the intervention strategies that mental health personnel implement must be diverse and culturally sensitive. These strategies should

focus on the empowerment of the adolescent. They should provide them with a voice and support that allows them to use that newfound voice (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Intervention strategies should also be strength-based and maximize on the strengths, abilities, and skills of the client (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Clinicians can implement these strategies by using a narrative approach. For example, allow the clients to tell his or her “what it means to be Black” story. The clinician can ask students questions such as, “whom they feel they matter to” and “who and what matters to them in their academic, career, and persona/social domain” (Rayle & Myers, 2004, p. 89). The concept of healthy ethnic identities to wellness can aid the students in defining wellness for themselves (Rayle & Myers, 2004). These interventions can be done in group or individual counseling sessions.

Future Research

Future researchers could explore the ethnic identity of adolescents in a longitudinal study. They could also examine the relationship between the academic performance and ethnic identity in adolescents who are in high school. A future study could be run in a diverse community and across different states. Researchers could also explore the impact of race on the ethnic identity levels of adolescents as well as its impact on academic success. In addition, future researchers could observe the influence of interventions on ethnic identity levels and academic performance. It would also be interesting to continue following the performance and identity of the students in this study after specific interventions to address identity have been provided.

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