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Ethnic Identity Among Arab Americans: An Examination of Contextual Influences and Psychological Well-Being

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Background and Objectives

Being a member of an ethnic minority group may be stressful. Ethnic minorities have to constantly grapple with negative stereotypes about their group as well as with experiences of discrimination that may be psychologically draining. In fact, various studies indicate that perceived discrimination is related to psychological distress, decreased self-esteem, and increased depressive symptoms (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Updergraff, 2007). While discrimination may place ethnic minorities at risk for negative psychological outcomes, other studies suggest that cultural-specific resources, namely ethnic identity, may protect them from the negative consequences of stress and adversity (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2011). Holding positive perceptions of and strongly identifying with the in-group is suggested to bolster minorities' self-esteem and provide them with the resources from which they can draw on in the face of ethnic related-stress. In addition, ethnic identity has been repeatedly associated with various markers of psychological health (e.g., Gong, 2007; Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006). A major caveat in the literature to date is that most research studies have focused on African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans. There appears to be a relative scarcity of research pertaining to other ethnic groups, namely Arabs. In addition, although researchers have acknowledged the importance of ethnic identity and have examined its' association with psychological well-being, little attention has been given to the role of contextual factors in promoting and inhibiting the process of ethnic identity development.

Hypotheses:

1. Multiple contextual factors (higher levels of family ethnic socialization, high scores for authoritative parenting styles and low scores for authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, higher levels of perceived discrimination, and lower generational status) are associated with higher levels of ethnic identity development of male and female Arab American college students.
2. Family ethnic socialization mediates the relationship between ethnic identity and generational status.
3. Perceived discrimination is negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to levels of depressive symptoms.
4. Ethnic identity moderates the relationship between the negative effects of discrimination and psychological well-being (self-esteem and depressive symptomatology).

Methods

A total of 323 participants (216 females, 107 males) were recruited for the study through advertisements and flyers placed on bulletin boards across the Wayne State University (WSU) campus and through announcements placed on WSU pipeline as well as on the Arab American Student Association Facebook page. All flyers and advertisements included the online study website (surveyMonkey.com) to allow students to access the survey and complete it. Apart from the demographic questionnaire, participants completed the Family Ethnic Socialization Scale, Parental Authority Questionnaire, Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire, Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, and Center for Epidemiology Scale – Depression.

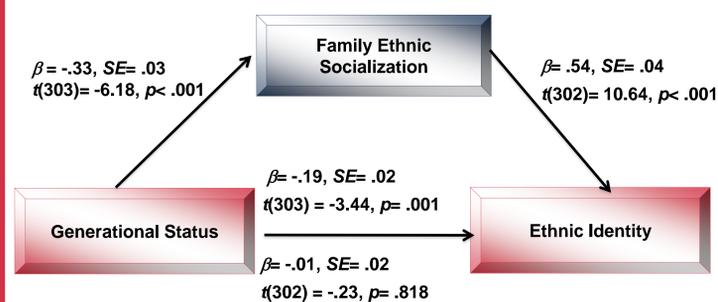
Results

Contextual factors associated with ethnic identity. Family ethnic socialization (FES) was positively correlated with ethnic identity ($r = .55, p < .01$). Also, authoritative parenting was significantly positively correlated with ethnic identity ($r = .51, p < .01$) and authoritarian parenting yielded a weak correlation ($r = .16, p < .01$). Perceived ethnic discrimination was not significantly correlated with ethnic identity. In addition, generational status was negatively correlated with ethnic identity ($r = -.19, p < .01$). Further, a stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated that family ethnic socialization and authoritative parenting were predictors of ethnic identity, accounting for 40.2% of the variance $F(2, 301) = 101.067, p < .001$.

Predictor Variable	b-Weight	β-Weight	Δr ²	t-Value	Sig
Included Variables					
Family ethnic socialization	.296	.409	.299	8.413	<.001
Authoritative parenting	.322	.349	.102	7.176	<.001
Excluded Variables					
Authoritarian parenting		.082		1.716	.865
Generational Status		-.024		-.545	.986
Disvaluation		-.012		-.252	.888
Multiple R	.634				
Multiple R ²	.402				
F Ratio	101.067				
Sig	<.001				

Family Ethnic socialization mediates the relation between generational status and ethnic identity:

Using Baron and Kenny's (1986) regression approach, the first requirement was met by a significant relation between generational status and ethnic identity ($\beta = -.19, t = -3.44, p = .001$); second, generational status was negatively related to family ethnic socialization ($\beta = -.33, t = -6.18, p < .001$). Third, family ethnic socialization was positively related to ethnic identity ($\beta = .54, t = 10.64, p < .001$). The fourth requirement was met in that the relation between generational status and ethnic identity became nonsignificant ($\beta = -.01, ns$) after controlling for FES.



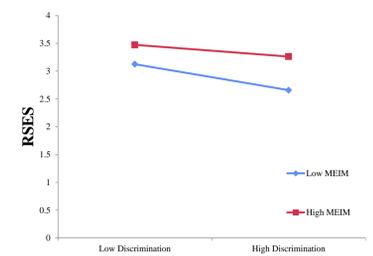
Ethnic Identity, Perceived Discrimination, and Psychological well-being.

Ethnic identity was positively related to self-esteem ($r = .45, p < .01$) and negatively related to depressive symptoms ($r = -.23, p < .01$). Perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem ($r = -.33, p < .01$) and positively related to depressive symptoms ($r = .49, p < .01$).

Results

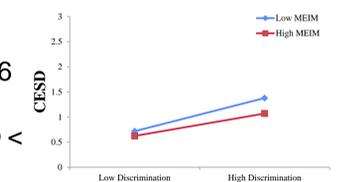
Ethnic identity moderates the relation between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being:

Self-esteem: In Step 1, results of a hierarchical linear regression revealed that ethnic identity and perceived discrimination accounted for 27.8 % of the variance in self-esteem, $F(2, 319) = 61.462, p < .001$.



In Step 2, the overall interaction effect of ethnic identity and perceived discrimination was significant and contributed 1.5% of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .015; F(3, 318) = 44.013, t = 2.619, p < .05$. For individuals with high ethnic identity, perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem ($b = -.077, SE = .033, t(319) = -2.291, p = .022$); however, this relationship was even stronger for those with low ethnic identity ($b = -.172, SE = .030, t(319) = -5.727, p < .001$).

Depression: In Step 1, ethnic identity and perceived ethnic discrimination accounted for 26.6 % of the variance in depressive symptoms, $F(2, 319) = 57.825, p < .001$.



In Step 2, as hypothesized, the overall interaction effect of ethnic identity and perceived discrimination was significant and accounted for an additional 1% of variance, $\Delta R^2 = .10; F(3, 318) = 40.430, t = -.209, p < .05$. Further analyses revealed that for individuals with high ethnic identity, perceived discrimination was positively related to depressive symptoms ($b = .164, SE = .0356, t(319) = 4.609, p < .001$); however, this relationship was even stronger for those with low ethnic identity ($b = .242, SE = .023, t(319) = 10.563, p < .001$).

Discussion

- Recent immigrants are more likely to socialize their children about their ethnic culture than those who have been for a longer time in the United States; in turn, those whose families socialize them more with regard to their ethnicity are likely to report higher ethnic identity.
- Perceived discrimination is negatively associated with psychological well-being; as such, discrimination causes a threat to young adults' development. This finding is consistent with existing literature demonstrating the psychologically deleterious consequences of discrimination for African Americans adolescents (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006) Latino youths (Tynes, Umaña-Taylor, & Updegraff, 2007) and Asian American college students (Lee, 2003).
- Consistent with past research (e.g., Greene Way, & Pahl, 2006), results indicated that ethnic identity mitigated the negative effects of discrimination on psychological well-being. The Social Identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) supports the stress-buffering effect of ethnic identity by highlighting that a positive sense of group membership helps bolster individuals' self-esteem. Also, individuals with a strong ethnic identity are able to dismiss rather than internalize negative stereotypes of their ethnic group (Spence, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003).