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Ethnic identification, self-esteem and immigrant psychological health

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Abstract

This study focused on the psychological consequences of immigration. It was designed to assess the relative significance of a range of variables in predicting the ethnic identification, personal and ethnic self-esteem, and psychological health of members of a variety of immigrant groups to Australia. Of particular interest was the possible impact of the degree of cultural distance between the immigrant groups and the host country. The study included 510 adult participants from Hong Kong, Vietnam, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and New Zealand. The results indicated that the main predictors of ethnic identification (i.e., immigrants' identification with their culture of origin) were cultural distance, extent of friendship with Australians, the degree to which the immigrants were involved with their ethnic communities, and their ability to speak English. The immigrants' level of ethnic identification was found to be the primary determinant of ethnic self-esteem whereas the main predictors of personal self-esteem were individual achievements and accomplishments. Finally, immigrant psychological health was mainly dependent upon personal self-esteem rather than ethnic self-esteem and/or ethnic identification. The findings are discussed in relation to theories and research on ethnic adaptation, in addition to social identity theory.

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Keywords: Ethnicity; identification; Self-esteem; Acculturation; Adaptation; Immigrant

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1. Introduction

The nature of the acculturation process and the identification of factors predictive of successful migrant cultural adaptation have been of considerable interest to researchers (e.g., Berry, 1984; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992; Grossman, Wirt, & Davids, 1985; Koh & Bell, 1987; Liebkind, 1993, 1996; Nesdale, Rooney, & Smith, 1997; Nicassio, Solomon, Guest, & McCullough, 1986; Sam & Berry, 1993; Sands & Berry, 1993; Shisana & Celentano, 1985). In contrast, researchers have shown comparatively little interest in issues relating to immigrants' ethnic identification (i.e., their identification with their culture of origin), beyond the development and maintenance of ethnic identity in immigrant adolescents, and the relationship between their ethnic identity and self-esteem, (e.g., Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994; Laperriere, Compere, Dkhissy, Dolce, & Fleurent, 1994; Liebkind, 1993; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Phinney, Chavira, & Tate, 1992; Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992; Phinney, DuPont, Espinosa, Revill, & Sanders, 1994; Rumbaut, 1994; Saenz, Hwang, Aguirre, & Anderson, 1995; Spencer, Swanson, & Cunningham, 1992) and their acculturation strategies (e.g., Berry et al., 1989; Liebkind, 1996; Nesdale & Mak, 2000; van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998).

This is somewhat surprising in view of the current influence of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its more recent elaboration, self-categorisation theory (SCT, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) on research in social psychology. These theories, and the vast amount of research arising from them, have emphasised the importance to individuals of their identification with particular social groups, the effect it has on their levels of self-esteem, as well as the impact it has on their inter- and intragroup cognitions, attitudes, and behaviour (e.g., Hogg, Turner, Nascimento-Schulze, & Spriggs, 1986; Hurtado et al., 1994; Lemyre & Smith, 1985; Oakes & Turner, 1980). Despite this emphasis, however, social identity theorists have typically tended not to focus on the case of immigrants, apparently choosing to ignore the literature on ethnicity and acculturation. In turn, acculturation researchers appear to have paid comparatively little attention to the accumulating literature emphasising the significance of social identity processes to individuals and groups.

In view of these considerations, the aim of the present study was to identify the main predictors of immigrants' identification with their culture of origin (i.e., their ethnic identification) and to examine the extent to which their ethnic identification impacts upon their self-esteem and psychological health. Of particular interest was the extent to which these processes were influenced by the degree of cultural distance between the immigrant groups and the host country.

A considerable amount of research has addressed the impact of cultural distance on a range of responses of both transient (e.g., students, expatriate workers) and permanent migrants, as well as refugee groups. Currently, the impact of cultural distance on immigrants remains to be clarified. For example, research has revealed that cultural distance is inversely related to intercultural competence (e.g., Redmond,

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