

Family and social influences on identity conflict in overseas Chinese

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Abstract

Emphasis of this research is placed on the construction of a predictive model of identity conflict experienced by overseas Chinese on the basis of two groups of variables—developmental/family related and intergroup-related variables. One hundred and eighty-six Chinese young adults in New Zealand and 263 Chinese young adults in Singapore completed a questionnaire which assessed ethnic identity, family cohesiveness, authoritarian filial piety, quality of host national contact, host language proficiency, perceived social permeability, perceived discrimination and sense of cultural continuity. Results of the current study suggested that intergroup variables were far more powerful and effective than the developmental/family related variables in predicting Chinese young adults' level of identity conflict during cross-cultural transitions. Specifically, in both cultural settings (i.e., New Zealand and Singapore), contact conditions with host nationals, perceived discrimination, perceived permeability and sense of cultural continuity emerged as significant predictors. Results of the current study further suggested that perceived discrimination contributed most to the overall predictive model of identity conflict.

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As individuals move from their countries of origin to a different country, they not only experience a difference in geography, but are also confronted with different social attitudes, moral values, and behavioural inclinations. It is without a doubt that dealing with two cultures simultaneously is a difficult and demanding task, as the 'old' culture (represented by the parents and family) and the 'new' culture (represented by the wider society) are both exerting pressure to conform. This gives migrating individuals conflicting and mixed messages, which often lead to changes in a person's sense of self and identity.

According to Baumeister (1986), this type of intrapersonal struggle and the subjective feeling of being "torn apart" between two or more different commitments is a type of identity crisis, which he called *Identity Conflict*. In a study of the cross-cultural transition and adaptation of Chinese sojourners in Singapore, Leong and Ward (2000) provided empirical support to the usefulness of Baumeister's model. They argued that the measure of identity conflict is a clear and unambiguous indicator of cognitive adjustment (in which lower identity conflict indicated better cognitive adaptation), which deserves further attention. Even though Baumeister's model of identity conflict appears to be promising, no further empirical research has employed this line of approach in the study of cross-cultural transition and adjustment.

The current research, therefore, is a response to this call and an attempt to construct a predictive-model of identity conflict experienced by Chinese sojourners with reference to two groups of variables—developmental/family related

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variables and intergroup-related variables. Furthermore, as asserted by Berry and colleagues (Berry & Dasen, 1974; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1999), the first (and most obvious) goal of cross-cultural psychology is to transport hypotheses and findings to other cultural contexts in order to test their validity and applicability in other cultures. With this goal in mind, the second objective of this research is to examine the influences of identity/family related and intergroup-related variables on Chinese young adults' level of identity conflict in two different cultural contexts – New Zealand (a western culture) and Singapore (an eastern culture) – in an attempt to establish external validity.

1. Study 1: predictors of identity conflict

Cross-cultural research that takes a developmental perspective has often focused on the importance of ethnic identity and family relations on individuals' adjustment. Findings from previous research suggest that maintenance of a strong ethnic identity is associated with a positive self-concept, better psychological well-being and more positive attitudes and greater acceptance of other groups (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Lambert, Mermigis, & Taylor, 1986; Phinney, Ferguson & Tate, 1997; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999). Thus, it is expected that Chinese young adults with a strong ethnic identity will have a better sense of who they are and a greater acceptance of others during cross-cultural transition. In other words, they are less prone to experiencing identity conflict. With regard to family relations, past research has shown that good family relationships are related to less psychological adjustment problems, lower acculturative distress, and better adjustment and success in a novel and unfamiliar setting (Florsheim, 1997; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002). Thus, it is expected that Chinese young adults who perceive greater emotional bonding between family members (i.e., stronger sense of family cohesiveness) will experience less identity conflict.

In addition, a core value concerning family relations in Chinese culture is the importance of filial piety. For centuries, performing filial duties toward parents was obligatory for a person to maintain psychological homeostasis in traditional Chinese culture. However, with industrialization, the expansion of capitalistic economies and the exposure to Western influences, some contemporary researchers have suggested that beliefs in authoritarian filial piety may have diminished since it conflicted with such prominent values of Western cultures as egalitarianism and democracy (Chu, 1997; Ho, 1996; Yeh, 1997). As a result, it is expected that those individuals who score high on authoritarian filial piety (which emphasizes obedience, submission and compliance to the authority of parents) will feel a stronger internal conflict between being a filial person according to traditional standards and being a self-responsive and independent person as is preferred in the Western society.

In contrast to the developmental/familial perspective in understanding identity change and conflict during cross-cultural transition, a second line of research has highlighted the significance of intergroup perceptions and relations. During cross-cultural transition, intergroup contact has been shown to facilitate psychological (Liebkind, 1996; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Masgoret, 2004), sociocultural (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Ward & Kennedy, 1993), and academic (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Pelly, 1997) adjustment of sojourning individuals. Thus, it is expected that Chinese young adults who have more satisfying and positive (e.g., pleasant, intimate and cooperative) contact with host nationals, and those who have a higher level of host culture language fluency will experience lower identity conflict.

Furthermore, there has been a great deal of evidence in the acculturation literature to suggest that racial discrimination is associated with a wide range of maladaptive outcomes for migrant groups. Studies have found that perceived discrimination significantly reduced psychological and sociocultural adaptation, was associated with a reduced orientation towards integration, and had a deleterious effect on individuals' self-concept and sense of coherence (Aycan & Berry, 1994; Berno & Ward, 1998, 2003; Berry et al., 2006; Leong & Ward, 2000; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Whitbeck, McMorris, Hoyt, Stubben & LaFromboise, 2002; Ying, Lee & Tsai, 2000). Thus, it is expected that individuals who perceive greater discrimination, who feel they cannot continue to practice the cultural traditions and values that are important to them (i.e., have a weak sense of cultural continuity), and those who believe that the intergroup structures are impermeable for them to become members of the host society (i.e., low intergroup permeability) will experience stronger identity conflict.

In summary, it is hypothesized that ethnic identity, family cohesiveness, contact with host nationals, host language proficiency, sense of cultural continuity and intergroup permeability will be negatively associated with identity conflict. Conversely, authoritarian filial piety and perceived discrimination will be positively associated with identity conflict.

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