

## **PARENTS' ETHNIC SOCIALIZATION PRACTICES IN SHAPING ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SELF-ESTEEM OF MULTI-ETHNIC CHILDREN IN MALAYSIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Parents' Ethnic Socialization practices play important role in shaping their children's ethnic identity and is also important for other developmental and behavioral outcomes such as self-esteem, and academic achievement. The present study examined the role of parents' ethnic socialization practices in shaping ethnic identity and self-esteem of multi-ethnic children in Malaysia. A total of 342 multi ethnic children (ages ranging from 10-14 years old) participated in the present study. The modified version of Multi group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), The Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM) and The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) were used in this study. The results showed that: i) parents' ethnic socialization practices were strong predictor of ethnic identity development and self-esteem of the children; iii) the children with a greater ethnic identity exploration exhibited higher self-esteem. The results of this study showed the implications for parents' ethnic socialization practices in successful multi ethnic families for better child development outcomes.*

**KEYWORDS:** Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices, Ethnic Identity Development, Self-Esteem, Children

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last two decades ago, scholars introduced the notion that communications to children about ethnicity and race are central and highly salient components of parenting in multi-ethnic families. Parental practices regarding ethnic-racial socialization are shaped by individual and group characteristics and by characteristics of the contexts in which parents and children operate. Parents play an important role in shaping their children's ethnic identities. Parents transmit information, values, and perspectives that encompass issues such as ethnic group history, custom and traditions, ethnic pride, awareness of discrimination, intergroup trust and mistrust, and appreciation of diversity and equality across groups to their children (Hughes *et al.*, 2006; Uman and Fine, 2004). The development of ethnic identity is a significant and unique developmental task for multi-ethnic children and this development is as fundamental to the establishment of an adult's healthy self-concept and positive intercultural attitudes (Ponterotto and Pederson, 1993). Thus, a positive practice of ethnic-racial socialization by the parents is important to develop a strong and positive ethnic identity in their children.

The studies on ethnic socialization also reported a positive correlation between parents' ethnic socialization with a range of children outcomes, including self-esteem, self-concept, academic motivation and achievement, and behavioral outcomes. A strong ethnic identity is linked to positive psychological adjustment in terms of self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, and less loneliness and depression (Kiang *et al.*, 2006; Chua *et al.*, 2012). Self-esteem is commonly conceived of as the central evaluative dimension of youths' self-concept (Rosenberg, 1986), and it is associated with varied psychological and behavioral outcomes (Greene and Way, 2005; Chua *et al.*, 2012). It is highly sensitive to parenting (Laible *et al.*, 2004). Thus, it seems likely that ethnic-racial socialization would be associated with youths' self-esteem. For instance, when ethnic-racial socialization leads youths to expect persistent discrimination and unfair treatment, one might expect it to be associated with lower self-esteem (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999). When such socialization enhances youths' positive views of their ethnic-racial group or allows them to attribute unfavorable outcomes to an external source (Crocker & Major, 1989), one might expect it to be associated with higher self-esteem (Smith *et al.*, 1999; Chua Bee Seok, *et al.*, 2012).

### **Review on Ethnic Identity and Self Esteem**

Ponterotto and Pederson (1993) have contended that positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem has been reported in studies with various populations, including middle school (Carlson *et al.*, 2000; Chua, *et al.*, 2012), high school (Phinney, 1989), and university (Phinney and Alipuria, 1990) students. This research suggests that if one belong to an ethnic minority group it does not predict higher or lower levels of self-esteem. Instead, it is the sense of belonging that a student feels toward his or her ethnic group that better predicts self-esteem (Helms, 1993; McMahan and Watts, 2002; Phinney, 1992). Martinez and Dukes (1997) found that among a multiracial sample of more than 12,000 adolescents, stronger sense of ethnic identity is associated with higher self-esteem and self-confidence.

In a more recent study, Bracey, Bamaca, and Umana-Taylor (2004) found that in a large sample of adolescents ( $n = 3282$ ), there was a significant positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem for all ethnic groups. As a result of this study, biracial adolescents scored significantly higher than White's on a measure of ethnic identity but scored significantly lower than African American, Asian, and Latino adolescents on the same measure. Ethnic identity development has been significantly related to many adolescent behaviors. For instance, in a study with middle school Jewish students reported that students with more advanced levels of ethnic identity were more sensitive to culture-specific stressors (e.g., discrimination, racism) (Dubow *et al.*, 2000). Multiracial individuals may classify themselves as one race but be seen by others as another race. As a result, they may formulate their own racial identities in response to their physical outlooks, socialization, and others' perceptions towards them (O'Hearn, 1998).

Parents often play an important role in the formation of their children's racial identities. Intermarried couples can instill a certain ethnic identity into their children by choosing a place to live, a school, and a culture in which to raise their children. Ethnic identities instilled by parents

provide a solid foundation that shapes the future identities of multiracial individuals. When intermarried couples must mark one race for their children, their choice may depend on the relative status between the husband and the wife and their experiences of race relations. Previous studies on racial/ethnic identification of children of intermarried couples are limited. Saenz et al. (1995) and Xie and Goyette (1997) are two of the few studies addressing how intermarried couples identify their children's race. In both studies, however, limit one of the spouses to be Asian American. Indeed, their results indicate that racial identification of children with one Asian parent is not random and depends on parents' socio-economic status and demographic characteristics (Amily and Norina, 2010). Ethnic-racial socialization and ethnic-racial identity are highly interlinked. Messages that children received from parents (and others) on how they should position themselves in their ethnic-racial group and the meaning of their ethnicity and race, play a critical role in shaping youths' ethnic racial identity processes. Empirical relationships between ethnic-racial socialization and ethnic-racial identity have been documented in Hughes et al. (2006) the studies of African American, Latino, Asian, biracial, and cross-racially adopted youths. This study includes multiple developmental stages including middle childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood.

Although previous studies have examined a range of youth outcomes related to parental ethnic socialization practices, but only a handful of studies have examined in a multi-ethnic children. The literature shows lack of theoretical rationale that specifies how ethnic-racial socialization might operate together with youth developmental outcomes. Besides, because of ethnic socialization, ethnic identity relates to a variety of psychological adjustment, it is important to investigate the relationship between these variables (Chua et al., 2012). Studies of ethnic-racial socialization in relation to adolescents' self-esteem have also produced conflicting results, possibly because of differences in research framework, methodology, and measurement. Thus the present study is a systematic effort to determine the nature of relationship among parents' ethnic socialization practices and ethnic identity and self-esteem of multi-ethnic children in Malaysia.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants and Location**

The participants consist of 342 multi-ethnic children from urban and rural area of Sabah, Malaysia. The selection of this sample is based on the method of purposive sampling, i.e. only those children were selected as participants whose parents belong to two different ethnic groups. The sample consists of 132 (38.6%) male and 210 (61.4%) female with a mean age of 12.14 years ( $SD = 1.52$ ). There were 35 sub ethnic groups involved in this study, while the major ethnic group were Bajau (57 or 16.7%), followed by Malays (45 or 13.2%), Malay Brunei (43 or 12.6%), Dusun (33 or 9.6%), Kadazandusun (31 or 9.1%), Bisaya (20 or 5.8%) and others minor group (113 or 33%).

## Measures

The participants were asked to give responses to a set of questionnaire which consists of four parts. Part 1 consists of demographic information such as gender, ethnics, and ages. Part 2 includes Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM), Part 3 comprises of Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), and Part 4 on The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE).

### *The Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM)*

The Familial Ethnic Socialization (FESM) measure is proposed by Umana-Taylor and Fine (2001) was used to measure the parents' ethnic socialization practice. This FESM was used to measure the degree to which participants perceive their parents socialize them with respect to their ethnicity. The FESM consists of 12 items and are rated on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very much). The higher scores indicate higher levels of parent ethnic socialization. An internal reliability estimate of The Familial Ethnic Socialization in the present study with respect to Malaysian samples was found to be 0.907.

### *The Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)*

The Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was adopted and modified from Phinney and Ong (2007) and the original version was used to measure an individual's degree of identification with their ethnic group. MEIM assesses identity aspects such as exploration and affective components towards an ethnic group. The modified version of MEIM consists of 12 items. The items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with points of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The higher score indicates the greater exploration and commitment toward one's ethnic group, more participation in ethnic activities or behaviors, and have more positive feelings and preferences toward one's ethnic group. The reliability coefficient of MEIM in this study was 0.748.

### *The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)*

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure participants' global self-esteem. RSE consists of 10 items where the participants were asked to answer the items on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) to indicate their sense of self-worth. This scale consists of four negative items. The scoring for the negative items was reversed so that in each case the scores go from less to more self-esteem. The higher scores reflected higher self-esteem. Internal reliability estimate on RSE in this study was found to be 0.667.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the above the three significant measures, this present study results are presented as follows and discussed in detail about the ethnic and self-esteem relationship among the different groups of people in Malaysia.

### **The Effect of Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices on Multi-ethnic Children's Ethnic Identity Development and Self-Esteem**

The regression analysis was performed to analyze the role of parents' ethnic socialization practices on ethnic identity development and self-esteem of multi-ethnic children. The variable of parents' ethnic socialization practices (independent variable) was entered into a linear model of regression equation with ethnic identity (the total ethnic identity as well as its sub scale of exploration and commitment), and self-esteem as the dependent variables. The summary of the analysis were presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1. Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices and Ethnic Identity (Total Ethnic Identity and Its Sub Scale)**

Dependent Variables	Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices					
	R <sup>2</sup>	F	sig. F	Beta	t	sig. t
Total Ethnic Identity	.400	220.980	.001	.632	14.865	.001
Ethnic Identity Exploration	.172	68.82	.001	.414	8.296	.001
Ethnic Identity Affective	.400	220.946	.001	.632	14.864	.001

**Table 2. Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices and Self-Esteem**

Dependent Variable	Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices					
	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig. F	Beta	t	Sig. t
Self-Esteem	.037	12.356	.001	.191	3.515	.001

#### ***The Effect of Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices on Multi-ethnic Children's Ethnic Identity Development***

Based on the regression analyses, it indicates that, parents' ethnic socialization practice accounted for 40.0% of the variance in total ethnic identity development ( $F_{(1, 332)} = 220.980$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The result showed that parents' ethnic socialization practice ( $\beta = .632$ ,  $t = 14.865$ ,  $p < .05$ ) contributed significantly and positively to prediction of total ethnic identity development (Table 1). Similar multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the influence of this variable on predicting the ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective. The analysis showed that parents' ethnic socialization resulted as significant predictor of both ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective. The model accounted for 40.0% of the variance in ethnic identity affective while accounted for 17.2% of the variance in ethnic identity exploration. The result also indicated that parents' ethnic socialization ( $\beta = .632$ ,  $p < .05$ ) have more

influence on children's ethnic identity affective (positive feeling or preferences to one's ethnic group).

The results suggested that the multi-ethnic children who have high parental involvement in socializing them about their ethnicity reported high levels of identification, preferences and positive feelings towards their ethnic group. The finding of this study are supported the Stage models, Phinney (1990) has proposed, suggest that exploration is a prerequisite for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the meaning of one's ethnicity. The finding also agree with the previous findings which indicate that parents and family members who transmit information that emphasized ethnic group history, culture and heritage, would have children and adolescents who are more knowledgeable about their own ethnic group, and have more positive attitudes toward their group (Knight et al., 1993). Seeking information about the meaning of one's ethnicity or race often leads to connectedness, appreciation, and pride of one's group history and traditions. Hughes (2003) and Umaña-Taylor and Fine (2004) suggested that family acts as a significant socializing agent in ethnic identity development for the children.

#### ***The Effect of Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices on Multi-ethnic Children's Self-Esteem***

The analyses in Table 2 indicated that parental ethnic socialization accounted for only 3.7% of the variance in multi-ethnic children's self-esteem. However, the model was significant ( $F(1, 326) = 12.356, p > .05$ ). The result showed that parental ethnic socialization ( $Beta = .191, p < .05$ ) is positively influenced children's self-esteem. The findings explained that high scores on parents' ethnic socialization were linked to high scores in multi-ethnic children's self-esteem. Those who have high parental involvement in socializing them regarding their ethnicity reported high levels of self-esteem. The findings of the present study are supported by theoretical writings on ethnic-racial socialization which proposed that parents' emphasis on cultural pride and knowledge of one's cultural heritage enhances self-esteem (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) also suggested that ethnic-racial socialization play an important function to bolster youths' self-esteem. The results are also consistent with other findings where there is a positive relationship between ethnic socialization and children outcomes, including self-esteem, academic motivation and achievement, and behavioral outcomes (Fuligni *et al.*, 2009).

#### ***The Effect of Ethnic Identity on Self-Esteem***

The similar multiple regression analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between self-esteem and two sub scale of ethnic identity: ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective. The variable of ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective were entered into a linear model of regression equation with self-esteem as the dependent variable (Table 3).

**Table 3. Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices and Ethnic Identity (Exploration and affective)**

Dependent Variable	Self-Esteem					
	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig. F	Beta	t	Sig. t
Ethnic Identity Exploration	.077	13.90	.0001	.228	3.961	.000
Ethnic Identity Affective				.092	1.596	.111

The analyses in Table 3 showed that the model (consisted of ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective) accounted for only 7.7% of the variance in multi-ethnic children's self-esteem ( $F(2,333) = 13.90, k < .05$ ). The results also indicated that only ethnic identity exploration (Beta = .228,  $p < .05$ ) was significantly and positively associated with multi-ethnic children's self-esteem. The finding explained that those who had explored regarding their ethnicity, participated in ethnic activities or behaviors tended to have higher level of self-esteem. This finding also indicated that the way in which one is identified in society affects the way in which one identifies oneself. The findings of present study are consistent with Umaña-Taylor (2003) and Chua et al. (2012) findings which also reported that those who had explored, resolved, and felt positively tended to have the highest self-esteem scores. Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, and Fuligni (2006), Lee and Yoo (2004), and Tsai, Ying, and Lee (2001) reported a strong ethnic identity is linked to positive psychological adjustment in terms of self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, and feel less loneliness and depression.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the present study provides a foundation for understanding the parental involvement in ethnicity, ethnic identities and psychological development of multi-ethnic children. The results of this study indicated that parents' ethnic socialization was a significant predictor to multi-ethnic children's ethnic identity development and play an important role in enhancing children's self-esteem. The findings also indicated a positive relationship between ethnic identity development and multi-ethnic children's self-esteem.

The present study provides important insight into the ways in which positive parental socialization about ethnicity will help to shape a strong and positive ethnically identity among multi ethnic children. And in turn a strong sense of belonging to the group and a positive development of ethnic identity play an important role as a buster of the psychological development for adolescents. Feelings of affirmation, exploration of the meaning of one's ethnicity, and involvement in ethnic behaviors each are associated with messages from parents regarding culture, heritage, and history and regarding discrimination processes.

This study underscores the linkages between parental ethnic socialization, ethnic identity and psychological development, provides theoretical rationale that specifies how ethnic-racial socialization might operate together with adolescents developmental outcomes and provides important information for understanding the ethnic identities processes and development of multi-ethnic children.

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