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Identity Development and Self-Esteem of First-Generation American College Students: An Exploratory Study

Kathryn P. Alessandria Eileen S. Nelson

Based on Chickering's model, differences in self-esteem and identity development among first-generation American (FGA) college students and non first-generation American (NFGA) students were examined. FGAs were the first generation born in the U.S. to one or both parents born and raised in another country. All participants responded to the Erwin Identity Scale and the Index of Self-Esteem. Results indicated that FGAs reported significantly higher self-esteem than the NFGAs. This research adds to the body of knowledge concerning multicultural issues of development in college students. Implications for college counselors and other student affairs professionals are addressed.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe a group of students under-represented in the research on multicultural issues. We assessed the identity development and self-esteem of first-generation Americans (FGAs) compared to non first-generation Americans (NFGAs) in an effort to better understand the developmental process of these students and the needs of this population. Psychological research on multicultural issues frequently compares racial or ethnic groups with little respect for differences between generations of immigration. However, sociological research does address acculturation and the social construction of ethnic identity, including the changes across generations. In particular, the literature pertaining to Mexican and Asian Americans incorporates generation

of immigration as a descriptive variable, if not as an independent variable. Authors such as Bacon (1999), Gim Chung (2001), Kibria (1999, 2000, 2002), Levitt and Waters (2002), Min and Kim (2000), Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, and Rodriguez (1999), Rosas and Hamrick (2002), Thai (1999), Torres and Phelps (1997), and Tuan (1999) are to be commended for bringing attention to this important aspect of individuals' experiences.

In the past, being Caucasian was (and largely still is) assumed to grant an individual priority membership in status. Reviewing the history of the United States, this was not the case; individuals have been discriminated against based on socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnicity. The research regarding minorities or ethnic identification most often has focused on a few ethnic and racial groups as compared to Whites (Phinney, 1989, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). However, the category of White is a symbol of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) value system, and has unfortunately, become a synonym for European American views (Hartigan, 1997). Yet, there are many diverse groups such as French, German, Irish, Italian, Greek, etc. that fall under the category of European American, and each one has distinct characteristics. According to Hartigan, if one looks back at the history of the United States, one will find that status as "White" was not equal for all

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Europeans. The Italian, Slavic, and Irish immigrant groups each experienced a period in which their cultural differences from Anglo-Americans were viewed in racial terms (Hartigan). The research approach of comparing ethnic or racial groups to Whites ignores a group of individuals who may have distinct ethnic identities regardless of their race. Thus, rather than view minority status as a function of race, we used status as a first-generation American in order to increase awareness of an, often unnoticed, minority group.

First-generation American college students have been educated in the American school system and have chosen to continue to do so. Before attending college, students were likely to come from a situation in which parents attempted to preserve the customs, values and language from their country of origin (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). According to Dacey and Kenny (1994), for FGAs to develop a positive sense of belonging the challenge is to construct a unique sense of self that will retain the support of significant others and society. Of interest in this study is how identity development is affected when students remove themselves from a setting where both parent culture and U.S. culture were likely emphasized, to live in a setting that emphasizes the U.S. culture. In other words, these individuals have left the comfort of home to be in an environment where they would need to seek affirmation of their ethnicity, if they desire it. From family, friends, and the community, they have learned the messages about the role their ethnicity plays in where they came from or their identity. Perhaps these ideas are challenged when they enter the “Eurocentric” world of college life (Jones, 1990) where they will begin to answer the questions, “Who am I?” and, “Where am I going?” One supposition of the

present study was that, because FGAs are one generation removed from the immigrant experience, total assimilation has not occurred and these individuals have to negotiate into their identity both parent culture and the immediate societal culture. This research was designed to expand upon the limited information available regarding minority groups and attempted to add to the existing body of knowledge on the impact of being different from the dominant culture on identity and self-esteem.

IDENTITY THEORY

Erikson

Identity development begins early in life, and it is uncertain when, if ever, it ends. It is generally agreed that developing an identity is a life-long process; that a basic identity is solidified during adolescence and young adulthood, but as life progresses it is continually refined. A positive resolution of the identity and repudiation versus identity diffusion crisis is classified by Erikson as “a sense of psychosocial well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (Erikson, 1968, p. 165). Erikson’s stage model has been used as a point of orientation for many other developmental theorists, such as Chickering (1969), in the development of his model of college student development. Phinney’s (1989) model of cultural identity development likewise incorporates appreciation for Erikson’s original formulation of the construct.

Chickering

Chickering’s model of identity development is based upon Erikson’s identity formation

stage (Chickering, 1969). There are seven vectors to Chickering's model, each of which can be viewed as a sequence of developmental tasks, a cause of anxiety, and a collection of end results (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978). These vectors include: developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Each of the vectors represents a component of the larger category of identity development, yet six of these vectors (other than establishing identity) also exist to make the concept of identity more integrated (Chickering).

As individuals gain new information, they determine what fits with who they are and integrate it into their self-conceptualization (Widick et al., 1978). It is central to Chickering's model that individuals will be at different developmental points, since the vectors are not age specific but based on individual life experiences. This is a reminder that students are unique and cannot be addressed as a homogeneous population. Students respond to the challenges or stimulation provided by the college environment, and this process gives rise to the development of identity (Widick et al.). We thought it likely that if FGAs did not receive enough opportunity and support to explore their ethnic identity, they would experience setbacks in their identity development processes.

Some influences that factor into identity formation include: family, friends, communities, ethnicity and race, gender, sexual orientation, political beliefs, socioeconomic status, personal beliefs, religion or spiritual beliefs, regionality, and life experiences (Collier & Thomas, 1990; Erikson, 1968). Individuals develop their identities by comparing themselves with others on an individual level as well as on a group basis. By being a member

of society and therefore interacting with individuals different from and similar to oneself, identity may be challenged, confirmed, or modified (Collier & Thomas).

Therefore, it seemed that FGA college students may experience identity confusion related to feelings of being removed from the support of their family, friends, and community while experiencing the developmental task of creating their own unique identity. This identity encompasses the confidence gained from developing competence; the ability to experience emotions gained from effectively managing emotions; and the ability to be connected to others while maintaining their own values by becoming autonomous (Chickering, 1969). It also adds a sense of self in relation to historical and cultural context, which is related to the development of identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Phinney

Ethnic identity is a multifaceted construct that is characterized by a positive attitude toward one's own ethnic group, a sense of ethnic pride and ethnic belonging, as well as a strong sense of group membership (Phinney, 1990, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). The concept of ethnic identity development has been studied by many individuals, but rarely in an attempt to define a model that can be generalized to all ethnic groups (Phinney, 1989, 1990). Phinney has developed such a model, which is based on Erikson's concept of identity development, as conceptualized by Marcia (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria). This model consists of three ethnic identity statuses which include diffusion/foreclosure, moratorium, and achieved (Phinney, 1989). An individual's status is based upon the degree of exploration and commitment pursued.

A strong relationship between ethnic identity development and self-esteem has been

demonstrated among college student minority groups, but not for Whites (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Research indicates that minority group status alone, does not impact self-esteem negatively. It is a lack of identification, a sense of not belonging to a group, that negatively influences self-esteem (Phinney et al., 1997). According to Phinney, Chavira, and Williamson (1992), there are four ways an individual may choose to participate in society: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginality. Assimilation occurs when an individual abandons all connections to ethnicity in order to identify with the dominant culture. Integration occurs when the individual identifies strongly and is involved with both the ethnic and the dominant cultures. Separation is characterized by minimal if any interaction with the dominant culture and an intense focus on the ethnic group and its traditions and values. Marginality is characterized by forfeiture of the individual's native culture and an absence of involvement with the dominant culture (Phinney et al., 1992). According to Berry (1995), identity confusion is a possible effect of stress related to acculturation. First-generation Americans may have difficulty determining their affiliative group, which may negatively influence self-esteem.

Hypotheses

1. General self-esteem scores of FGA college students as measured by the Index of Self-Esteem would be lower than general self-esteem scores of non first-generation American (NFGA) students.
2. First-generation American college students would report lower levels of identity development on the Erwin Identity Scale III than NFGAs.

METHOD

Participants

A sample of 175 students (105 females and 70 males) enrolled at a mid-sized public southeastern university participated in this study. There were 45 FGA and 130 NFGA participants. Within the FGA group, 53.3% were female and 46.7% were male; in the non first-generation group, 62% were female and 38% were male. Individuals were categorized based upon responses to demographic questions about parents' places of birth and country of origin. Participants who were born in the U.S. to parents, at least one of whom was born and raised in a country other than the United States were considered FGA. Participants whose parents had both been born and raised in the U.S. were classified as NFGAs. By cultural groups, the total sample included 18 Asian Americans, 5 African Americans, 7 Hispanics or Latinos, 136 Caucasians (not Hispanics), 1 Middle Eastern, 7 Mixed (parents from two different groups), and 1 Non-specified. Within the FGA group the sample included 17 Asian Americans, 3 African Americans, 4 Hispanic or Latinos, 16 European Americans, 1 Middle Eastern, and 4 Mixed. By class level, 89 participants were Freshmen, 32 were Sophomores, 20 were Juniors, 26 were Seniors, 2 were Fifth-year Seniors, and 6 were Graduate Students. The mean age for participants was 19. The religions represented by the participants were: 55 Catholics, 67 Protestants, 3 Jewish, 13 Other, and 33 Not religious.

To determine the representativeness of the sample, university demographic statistics were consulted. The sample generally reflected the composition of the university-at-large based upon the sex, religion, and race variables, although along racial groupings there were some slight differences. The sample had a

higher percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino, and multiracial students, and fewer African American students than the university population. All of the differences were less than ten percent.

Measures

Identity was measured by the Erwin Identity Scale (EIS-III). There are 59 items on the EIS-III, which uses a 5-point Likert-type response scale. This scale was designed to measure the basic ideas put forth by Chickering and Erikson regarding identity (Erwin, 1987). Although the EIS-III comprises three subscales: Confidence, Sexual Identity, and Conceptions about Body and Appearance; for the purposes of this study only the Confidence and Conceptions about Body and Appearance subscales were used. Erwin defined the Confidence subscale as a measure of a sense of security in one's self and in one's abilities. The Conceptions About Body and Appearance scale measures an individual's self-perception and acceptance of his or her manner of physical presentation (i.e., "What do I think of my body? How do I conceive of myself and my appearance?" Erwin, p. 5); the sample subscale reliabilities were .87 and .82 respectively. Sample EIS-III items include: "I am as sure of myself as most other people seem to be sure of themselves"; "I have found one of the easiest ways to make friends with others is to be the kind of person they would like me to be"; and "When I look in the mirror at myself, I am satisfied with the physical image I see."

The second instrument administered assessed self-esteem as measured by the Clinical Measurements Package Index of Self-Esteem (ISE). This is a 25-item questionnaire that uses a 5-point Likert-type scale for responses (Hudson, 1982). Instruments from the Clinical Measurements Package are

generally used to determine if individuals need clinical services; the sample reliability for the ISE was .95. The rationale for selecting a clinically oriented measure was to determine if the FGA population was in need of clinical services for their hypothesized low self-esteem. Sample items from the ISE include: "I feel very self-conscious when I am with strangers"; "I feel that if I could be more like other people I would have it made"; and "I feel I get pushed around more than others."

Procedures

Most of the participants were students in various major and general education psychology classes who volunteered in order to receive extra credit. Volunteers were solicited through the Participant Pool of the Psychology Department, by pre-arranged appointments with professors and clubs to visit classes and organizations, and by public service announcements on the campus radio station. Participants were tested in a group format and completed the EIS-III first, followed by the ISE and a brief demographic questionnaire. Data were collected over a one-month period. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and were told they could leave the study at any time.

RESULTS

In order to test the hypotheses predicting that general self-esteem scores of FGA college students would be lower than general self-esteem scores of non first-generation students, and that FGA college students would report lower levels of identity development than NFGA students, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted. The overall result was significant using Pillai's Trace as the omnibus F , $F(3, 144) = 7.36, p < .0001$. Examination of the univariate F tests revealed that the only

TABLE 1.
ISE and EIS Subscale Scores Between First-Generation American and Non
First-Generation American Students

Source	df	F	ES	P
ISE	1	10.278	2.43	.002*
EIS Body and Appearance	1	2.110	0.86	.148
EIS Confidence	1	0.243	0.35	.623

* $p < .01$.

significant group differences were on the total self-esteem scores, $F(1, 146) = 10.28, p < .05$. See Table 1 for inferential statistical information. However, counter to the first hypothesis, the first-generation group had significantly higher self-esteem scores than the non first-generation group.

The second hypothesis predicting that first-generation students would report lower levels of identity development than non first-generation students was not supported. It is noteworthy that FGAs had higher scores than NFGAs on both EIS-III subscales, though the differences did not reach significance. See Table 2 for descriptive information regarding self-esteem and identity of both FGAs and NFGAs. Several additional t-tests were conducted to determine if any gender differences existed on the ISE and EIS-III subscales within the FGA or NFGA groups; additional one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine if FGA students' scores on the dependent measures differed by ethnic group membership, and if scores on the EIS-III subscales differed by age for FGAs. None of the results were significant.

DISCUSSION

The significantly higher self-esteem scores of FGA students than non-first generation

students indicate that minority status as a FGA may indeed have had an impact on this group of students. First-generation American students were found to be different from non first-generation students, regardless of ethnic group. Some possibilities for these counter-to-expected results are as follows: First, it may be that the parents of FGAs have higher self-

TABLE 2.
ISE and EIS Subscale Means and
Standard Deviations for
First-Generation Americans (FGA) and
Non First-Generation Americans
(NFGA)

Group	M	SD	n	ES
<i>Self-Esteem</i>				
FGA	63.32*	23.61	38	19.87
NFGA	52.62	15.23	110	
<i>EIS Body Appearance</i>				
FGA	55.95	10.08	38	9.99
NFGA	53.23	9.91	110	
<i>EIS Confidence</i>				
FGA	85.76	14.60	38	14.28
NFGA	84.45	13.95	110	

* $p < .0001$.

esteem than the general population in order to have been able to successfully immigrate to the United States. Perhaps to be able to leave what is familiar, and move to a country where one may not speak the language and may be viewed as a minority, requires a high level of self-esteem. Second, the children of these immigrants may benefit from having parents as role models with high self-esteem and who have fostered the development of positive self-esteem in their children. Finally, it may be that developing an identity that allows individuals to feel that they are a part of both cultures promotes a sense of pride in one's cultural heritage both as an ethnic minority and as a U.S. citizen. This would be in keeping with the findings of Phinney et al. (1992) that there are four ways for ethnic minorities to participate in a multicultural society: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginality. Phinney et al. (1997) further support this final explanation with the finding that minority group status alone does not influence self-esteem negatively. Rather, if an individual identifies or has a sense of belonging to a group, then his or her self-esteem may not be impacted negatively.

Phinney et al. (1992) assessed the relationship between attitudes toward acculturation and self-esteem and found a weak, yet consistent relationship between the two variables. A positive relationship was found between an attitude of integration and self-esteem, while it was found that an attitude of assimilation was associated with lower self-esteem. Phinney et al.'s (1992; 1997) studies provide support for the notion that FGA college students who retain a positive identification with their own culture as well as the mainstream culture, may have higher self-esteem than individuals who relinquish connections to their culture of origin. It is possible that these individuals have accom-

plished the integration of their ethnicity and the mainstream culture into their general identity; which could result from having parents who have supported or modeled this attitude. Future research may further investigate attitudes toward participation in society and self-esteem of first generation Americans.

While not significantly higher, the scores of the FGAs on the EIS-III were comparable to those of the NFGA group indicating strong levels of confidence and body appearance for those individuals who had higher self-esteem. Chickering and Reisser (1993) have noted that an awareness of one's cultural history can have a positive impact on the identity development of culturally diverse students. Besides having positive influences on identity development, other possible benefits include: an appreciation of the traditions and rituals of the native culture, feeling a sense of connectedness to one's ancestors, and participating in cultural events. For college students, knowledge of one's roots and cultural history, paired with pride in one's ancestors and their accomplishments, are directly related to knowing who one is. A firm grasp of an individual's cultural identity is imperative to being able to appreciate and acknowledge differences between oneself and other cultural groups without losing one's identity (Chickering & Reisser). It is possible that the FGA group had established an awareness of their cultural identity before attending college, which could explain the non-significant results on the EIS-III subscales.

The results of this exploratory study generally did not support the hypotheses and are therefore not readily interpretable. A contributing factor to the level of complexity of interpreting the data may be the number of diverse groups that fall under the category of FGA. It is difficult to draw any conclusions because of the small number of participants

within each category, and the number of categories. Each of the groups is distinct and has been received differently by the mainstream culture. Another contributing factor may be that research with FGAs as a comparison group without limiting the research to a specific ethnic or racial group is extremely limited. The impact of status as a FGA should continue to be studied to determine any other areas in which there are significant differences between first-generation and non first-generation groups. Future research with larger sample sizes could disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity, and then compare the outcomes by generational status within groups.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There were several limitations in this study. The small number of participants within each FGA ethnic group made it difficult to draw conclusions about so many different ethnic groups when they are studied together. It may be that status as a FGA interacts with different ethnicities in different ways. Each ethnic group that has immigrated to the U.S. has faced different challenges in their attempts to be accepted into the U.S. culture. Still, more difficulties may be faced by immigrants who are political refugees (e.g., from Iraq, Cuba, Vietnam, etc.), and therefore not in the U.S. by choice. The reason for immigration may impact how an individual or group finds their way to acceptance within the U.S. culture. The history of experiences, both positive and negative, of the many immigrant groups in the U.S. may be taught to their children, and may impact how the FGAs view themselves as U.S. citizens, as well as their attitudes toward acculturation.

Another limitation may be that within each “major” ethnic group there is room for

a wide range of ethnicities. For example, the Asian group included all Asian Indians and other Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups. Similarly, the Caucasian (not Hispanic) group included many different cultures such as Italian, German, French, etc. Each of these ethnic groups has its own values and traditions. It may be inappropriate to draw conclusions about FGAs from these cultures by lumping them into racial categories. Social desirability and the non-random selection of participants may have been additional limitations.

A final limitation might be whether an individual is the first generation in his or her family to attend college. Issues that revolve around status as the first generation in one’s family to attend college were not addressed by this research. It may be that there are some interactions between status as a FGA and as a first-generation college student. Controlling for this variable in future research may be important to studying a more homogeneous FGA population, and therefore a sample about which more accurate generalizations can be made. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it should be only tentatively concluded that FGAs have higher self-esteem than NFGAs, regardless of ethnic group membership; and that FGA status alone does not necessarily have a negative impact on general identity development.

CONCLUSIONS

We suggest that future studies might limit research with FGA students to one ethnic group at a time. Doing so might control for inappropriate comparisons between groups whose experiences have been so dissimilar that it is not appropriate to compare them. It might be more appropriate to compare specific ethnic groups within one racial group rather

than across ethnic and racial groupings. A point of focus might be to further investigate the finding that FGAs had significantly higher self-esteem in order to narrow the possible reasons for this discovery. Perhaps after several individual groups have been studied a meta analysis could be conducted to determine if there are differences that can be accounted for by FGA status alone. Because identity is a developmental concept that changes over time, future research may approach this issue with a longitudinal design. Phinney's (1992) Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) may be an appropriate instrument for use in further studying generation status and ethnic influences. Finally, ethnic identity is a complicated construct that may better be addressed through qualitative methodology (Ponterotto, Costa, & Werner-Lin, 2002). Understanding the contextual factors that influence ethnic identity may be critical for interpreting data (Fischer & Moradi, 2001).

Diversity issues are a major concern in society today, particularly in a post-September 11th world. This research adds to the body

of knowledge concerning multicultural issues of development in college students by heightening the awareness of a minority group that has not often been considered in this field of research. The difficulty of generalizing results between specific ethnic groups is particularly important to any professionals who work closely with college students, particularly mental health counselors on college campuses. The variability with which FGA students responded to the ethnic self-identification survey item indicates that within ethnic groups students may have different levels of affiliation with their culture of origin. Some FGAs may not even consider themselves part of this group. This may be important to consider in order to avoid making generalizations about individuals based upon the ethnic group to which they appear to belong.

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