

Cultural Immersion Camps and Development of Ethnic Identity in Asian American Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore camp outcomes specialized in ethnic identity among Asian American youth after they participated in a residential cultural immersion camp. In this study, the cultural immersion camp is viewed as a mediating factor that channels other influences in such a way as to guide Asian American youth to commit more expressly and more fully to their perception of ethnic identity. The results obtained from 3 cultural immersion camps located in the Western United States reveals that cultural immersion camp experiences significantly increase perceived levels of ethnic identity among Asian American youth. Implications of cultural immersion camp on the development of Asian American youth are discussed.

Key words: ethnic identity, Asian American youth, cultural immersion camp

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census (2017), the fastest growing racial group in the United States is the Asian American population, growing 2.2% between July 2014 and 2015, and with an overall population increase of 43% since 2000 (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim & Shahid, 2012). The Asian

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American population is also projected to reach 40 million by the year 2050 and immigration from Asian countries will account for nearly 75% of the U.S. population growth (U.S. Census, 2009). Within the United States the Asian American population includes people with origins in the Far East (China, Japan, and Korea), Southeast Asia (Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), and South Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal). All of these population groups have unique cultural characteristics and languages, as well as the historical, sociopolitical and economic conditions of their native countries that have shaped their experiences within the United States. These experiences are reflected in how each immigrant population socializes its children and youth to become a part of the U.S. culture.

The U.S. Asian youth population is growing rapidly and at a faster rate than all other racial/ethnic group. Their total share of the youth population increased by 43% from 2000 to 2010. In 2016, Asian children's share in the population of all U.S. children had increased to 5.5%. By 2020, they are projected to represent 5% of all U.S. children and increase to 8.1% by 2060 (Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2018). Despite their growing number, there still exists only a small amount of research that explores the process in which cultural identity manifests within a host country. The conflicts between one's heritage culture and the host culture gradually develop a "storm" in Asian American adolescents' identity formation process and misplace the role of ethnic identity for the positive development of minority youth (Chu & Sue, 2011).

Furthermore, Asian American youth have been historically lumped together into a pan-ethnic category despite their different histories, cultures, languages and identities (Le Espiritu, 1992). This monolithic portrayal and the acculturation and assimilation process has led many Asian American youth from immigrant families to face numerous cultural conflicts that contribute to mental health issues. For example, studies have found that Asian American youth report relatively high rates of suicidal behaviors and lower self-esteem (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; Chu & Sue, 2011). Researchers have found that 30 percent of Asian American girls in grades 5 through 12 reported symptoms of depression. Not surprisingly, suicide is the third-highest cause of death among Asian American Pacific Islander youth ages 15 through 24 (Africa & Carrasco, 2011; Collins et al., 1999). Numerous studies have also identified that these mental health problems (e.g., alienation, poor communication with parents, lack of coping skills, and suicide) potentially inhibit the maturation of Asian American youth (Keung, 2015, Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000; Rick & Forward, 1992; Umemoto & Ong, 2006).

Regardless of the racial/ethnic background of youth in the United States, the development of an ethnic identity is key to becoming a productive adult. Unfortunately, the increase of mental health issues among Asian American youth can serve as a barrier to this positive development. As a result, many parents are seeking out cultural immersion camps as an ideal setting to help ameliorate these mental health issues in youth while simultaneously increasing ethnic identity with their home country.

Literature Review

Ethnic identity is not only a dynamic process that reacts with the environmental elements, but is also a systematic way of accounting for how an individual adapts to his/her heritage culture and social environment. Researchers have suggested that feelings of attachment, belongingness, and commitment derive from having a strong ethnic identity (Baldwin, 1984; Broman, Neighbor & Jackson, 1989; Castro, Stein, & Bentler, 2009; Chang & Ng, 2002; Helms & Cook, 1999; Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009; Phinney, 1992, 2003; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971). Strengthened ethnic identity potentially ameliorates dissatisfaction by inducing more positive mental health outcomes, and thus serves as a protective factor for a positive view of self, as well as a foundation for positive connection to the social environment. Parental attachment is an ongoing process that provides feelings of security important for maturation processes. Cultural immersion camp that delivers cultural heritage knowledge and social group membership, as well as the presence of caring adults, can provide additional support for Asian American adolescents' ethnic identity formation process. The consideration of this additional support has so far received relatively little attention.

Cultural Influence for Asian American Youth From Immigrant Families

Identity formation is recognized as one of the central tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1984; Yeh & Hwang, 2011). Erikson (1968) provided a model illustrating eight developmental stages that humans experience throughout life, with each stage focused on a specific issue or task. The issue or task that adolescents face is the formation of an identity, despite the physical, mental, and social changes that are occurring at this time. Adolescents are asking and trying to answer the question, "Who am I?" (Erikson, 1968). The process becomes even more complex if an adolescent is a member of two or more cultures (Phinney, 1992). In these cases a focus on individual identity and group identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, religion) becomes important.

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Though both individual and group identity formations primarily take place during adolescence, their foundation begins during childhood, when role models provide them with a sense of what they can become and where they are from. Because the United States is a multicultural society, group identity can be very important (Phinney, 1992). Depending on the setting, the dominant group can have a strong influence on this identity formation. This may or may not cause problems for those adolescents who are trying to find their ethnic identity in a complex world.

Ethnic identity is an important component of self-identity, which is derived in part from an individual's experience with social group membership (Phinney, 1992, 2003; Phinney & Tarver, 1988). Researchers have argued that an individual's retention and knowledge of his/her ethnic culture creates a sense of belonging that strengthens the identity formation process, which, in the United States, is a significant factor to the self-esteem and self-confidence of minority adolescents (Chang & Ng, 2002; Helms & Cook, 1999; Phinney, 2003; Phinney & Tarver, 1988; Pinckney, Outley, Blake, & Kelly, 2011; Pomales, Claiborn, & LaFromboise, 1986). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) reported a significant cultural influence on mental health conditions and behaviors of ethnic minorities. More recently, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) found that culture plays a big part on attitude toward ethnic identity and relates to important developments from early childhood into young adulthood among Asian American youth. Culture heavily influences minority youth and their families in regard to mental health service selection and whom they turn to for help or receive help from, including informal network members and collateral services (Cauce et al., 2002). Given the reluctance of Asian culture to seek help from formal mental health treatment providers, access to treatment for Asian American youth is often outside of the mental health system.

Beyond the mental health service, research has begun to discuss treatments for Asian American families that fit with cultural conceptions of mental health (Chu & Sue, 2011; Williams, Hean Foo, & Haarhoff, 2006; Zane et al., 2005). Key elements of therapeutic success have been identified and include the perception of ethnic identity of minority youth and its potential to promote individuals' self-esteem and positive connections with the social environment (Snowden & Cheung, 1990; Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). The coping resources available to them—some of which derive from identification with their ethnic culture, and others sustained by beliefs about their host culture—influence this process. In addition, cultural institutes and programs (such as culture community centers, culture immersion schools or camps) provide a context where Asian American youth may develop interrelations between acculturation and enculturation during this ethnic socialization process that takes place in adolescence. Acculturation refers to a member of one cultural group changing his or her

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behaviors, thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes to live within the norms of another culture. Enculturation means maintaining aspects of one's culture of origin while living within another culture (Gonzales, Knight, Morgan-Lopez, Saenz, & Sirolli, 2002).

Asian American parents tend to have higher expectation of their children than other ethnic groups, and use certain techniques to pass on the unique values and behaviors of their heritage culture (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). Asian parents may not have sufficient understanding of being bicultural (i.e. heritage and host culture) to support Asian American youth's negotiation process. Biculturalism refers to comfort with both one's heritage culture and the host culture where one has settled and where their cultural heritage may be maintained across generations (Yamaguchi, Kim, Oshio, & Akutsu, 2016). Research has found that Asian American youth actually are able to identify equally with both cultures and develop their bicultural identity (Devos, 2006; Yamaguchi et al., 2016). Some researchers have concluded that mental health problems among Asian American youth arise when they become more acclimated to American culture and disconnected from their parents' value system, developments that generate feelings of alienation from either the social environment or themselves (Rick & Forward, 1992; Umemoto & Ong, 2006). The negotiation process of two different cultures in constructing Asian American youth's ethnic identity indicates that additional resources should be further discussed. One area that has received very little attention is the role of cultural immersion activities for the development of ethnic identity, connectedness, and socialization within American culture.

Role of Cultural Immersion Camp for Asian American Youth From Immigrant Families

In the United States, the camp experience is a powerful setting for young people's socialization processes, due to the role of peers and caring adults in the camp context (Browne, Gillard & Garst, 2019). Culture camps provide a socialization experience and camps need to apply a more culturally sensitive perspective regarding emotional management and socialization processes (Baden, 2015; Yamaguchi et al., 2016). Cultural immersion camps are specifically designed to deliver social connections among specific ethnic groups and encourage a greater sense of cultural heritage among adolescents. Asian American youth who take part in cultural immersion camp programs are expected not only to gain improved capacities to balance their identities between their Eastern heritage and their host Western culture, but also to reflect on "who they are" in order to increase personal identity. Settings such as cultural immersion camps may be

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able to serve as an intervention to improve mental health conditions among Asian American youth.

The objectives of cultural immersion camps are first, to enhance Asian American youths' ethnic identity so as to narrow the cultural gap with other family members, and second, to lead the youth to construct their developmental assets, such as self-confidence, self-esteem and social skills, so as to achieve better connections within the social environment. Researchers have argued that cultural institutions such as cultural immersion schools and camp programs also serve as an alternative form of "family" for Asian American youth—a place where they feel accepted and comfortable (Serafica, 1997; Serafica & Vargas, 2006). The camp staff, counselors, and peers from the cultural immersion camp community provide psychological support for Asian American adolescents by engaging them with people who hold similar cultural values, and by enabling them to receive understanding and sympathy from other camp participants. Furthermore, these camps also serve as resources for formal and informal psychological support through daily retrospection sessions and personal peer and adult consulting. Immigrant youth tend to establish a sense of connection and belonging when they maintain relationships with peers who provide a sense of closeness through various interactions within the camp setting (Juang et al., 2018). While critically important, only a few studies (e.g. Baden, 2015) have empirically discussed the impact of the cultural immersion camp program on the ethnic identity of Asian American youth and the value of cultural immersion camp experiences among immigrant families.

An immigrant youth's ecological environment—including family, school, neighborhood, and community—impact the youth's resilience and positive developmental process (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2017; Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018). An environment out of the normal ecological network, such as cultural immersion camp, has rarely been discussed and investigated as to how camp experiences might influence the developmental process of immigrant youth. This study was designed to examine the proposition that cultural immersion camp experiences can reduce mental health problems among Asian American adolescents by increasing their level of ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity is achieved during a period of exploration and experimentation during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Drawing upon Erikson's (1968) identity formation model and positive youth development theory (Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008), we anticipated that cultural immersion camp experiences could promote the level of ethnic identity of Asian American youth from immigrant families. Minority youths' perception of their ethnic identity is

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essential for their development by promoting their self-esteem and connection with their social environment (Lee & Yoo, 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Although Asian American youth perform well academically on average, and may be perceived as a model for other minority groups, the model minority myth and conservative Asian family culture potentially discourage Asian American youth from seeking emotional support for mental health and development from other adults and institutes (Wing, 2007). The impact such a study would have on society is a greater awareness of the value of cultural immersion camp experiences on the development of Asian American youth identity.

Methodology

Setting

The purposes of Asian cultural immersion camp are to create Asian American youth networks, encourage interpersonal relations, and provide resources focused on the awareness of traditional Asian culture. Three cultural immersion camps participated in this research project. These camps were chosen given their objectives associated with cultural immersion: seeking to enhance the campers' ethnic identity and to encourage them to use their developmental assets (i.e., ethnic identity, self-esteem, and social skills) in constructing better connections within their social environment. All three camps had the following common characteristics:

- Residential (overnight camp as opposed to day camp)
- Located in the Southwest or on the west coast of the United States
- Sessions lasting one week
- Managed by independent nonprofit organizations
- Participation fees assessed were affordable
- Programs were co-ed
- Program designs were culture-oriented

The program activities included cultural knowledge sessions, social skills classes, debriefing and reflection activities, and team-building. On the last day of camp participants' parents were invited to attend a camp stage show where campers acted out what they saw as the results or lessons of what they had learned at camp. The cultural immersion camps in this study are held annually and specifically target Asian American youth from immigrant families.

Participants

Data were collected from 84 second- and third-generation Asian American youth (37 male, 47 female). All participants were born in the United States. At least one of the parents of nearly all participants ($n = 80$) were born in an Asian country including Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, China and Cambodia. Four of the participants' parents were born in the United States. Family socio-economic status was assessed according to whether or not youth received free lunch at school. The language(s) spoken in the households were identified as follows: 68% ($n = 57$) spoke English and another native language and 32% ($n = 27$) spoke only English. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Study Participants, $N = 84$

| Characteristic | Breakdown | N | Percentage |
|---------------------------|--|----|------------|
| Gender | Male | 37 | 44.0% |
| | Female | 47 | 56.0% |
| Age | 11-14 | 32 | 38.1% |
| | 15-18 | 52 | 61.9% |
| GPA | 4.0 (Grade of A) | 58 | 69.1% |
| | Below 4.0 | 26 | 30.9% |
| Socioeconomic status | Do not receive free meal at school | 69 | 82.1% |
| | Receive free meal at school | 15 | 17.9% |
| Ethnic classification | American | 10 | 11.9% |
| | Other than American | 74 | 88.1% |
| Parents' country of birth | United States | 4 | 4.8% |
| | Asian Country (i.e., Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, Cambodia) | 80 | 95.2% |

Procedure

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Researchers contacted the campsite staff by phone, emailed a research summary and then scheduled a site visit meeting so staff could gain more information regarding the research process. A recruitment letter, parental permission forms, and personal consent forms were sent to participants by the camp staff. Parents who consented to their child participating in this study were asked to turn in the parental permission forms when checking in at the beginning of camp. Campers were informed that participation in

this study was not required even if their parents did not decline. They were asked to fill out a pre-camp survey on the first day of camp, and then completed a post-camp survey on the last day of camp. Both the pre- and post-camp surveys included various demographic factors, as well as Likert-scale response items intended to measure participants' perceptions of ethnic identity. Camp counselors assisted with the survey collection process in order to protect the confidentiality of research participants. Fifty-four percent of campers participated in the study by completing the survey.

Measurements

The survey was based upon questions adopted from Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992). The MEIM has demonstrated appropriate reliability and validity standard on a diverse sample of Asian American groups (Lee & Yoo, 2004; Phinney, 1992). The self-reported survey focused on different levels of strength (i.e., strong or not strong) and affect (i.e., positive or negative) regarding the perception of ethnic identity. The MEIM was used to examine adolescents' ethnic identity achievement. This measure included 20 items. The items were scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree a lot) to 4 (agree a lot). The higher values indicated greater exploration of, and eventual commitment toward, one's ethnic group; greater participation in ethnically-specific behaviors or activities; and more positive feelings and preferences toward one's ethnic group. Sample items included, "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me" (ethnic identity achievement); "I have a stronger sense of belonging to my own ethnic group" (affirmation, belonging, and commitment); "I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group" (ethnic behaviors); and "I am involved in activities with people from other ethnic groups" (ethnic behaviors). The measure has been used with diverse groups such as African Americans, Central Americans, Mexican Americans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese, Haitians, and White adolescents and young adults.

Data Analysis

In order to determine whether or not cultural immersion camp experiences could promote the level of ethnic identity of Asian American youth from immigrant families, we performed a paired sample t-test. The descriptive statistics (Table 2) characterize Asian American youths' ethnic identity before and after the camp program. In this study, a matched pair *t*-test was used to examine the evidence of change in scores by individuals in a small sample. We used IBM SPSS Statistics 20 for data analysis. Most variables on ethnic identity showed a normal distribution,

and the residuals showed a normal distribution. The data set satisfied the paired *t*-test criteria for robust results, making inferences from the results defensible. A paired *t*-test was used to examine the impact of camp experiences on Asian American youths' sense of ethnic identity.

Results

Asian American youths' perceptions of their ethnic identity increased based upon the cultural immersion camp experiences reported in this study. This was supported by the result of a paired *t*-test analysis shown in Table 3. Paired *t*-test analysis of variance tests were conducted to examine differences among pre- and post-performance on ethnic identity. Significant differences were found with ethnic identity ($p < .05$). The gain scores were identified from mean difference scores (ethnic identity $\mu = 5.50$).

Table 2. Ethnic Identity Growth Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Mean | <i>N</i> | Standard deviation % | Standard error mean |
|-----------------------------|-------|----------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Ethnic Identity (pre-camp) | 57.26 | 84 | 7.3% | .858 |
| Ethnic Identity (post-camp) | 62.76 | 84 | 7.9% | .799 |

Table 3. Ethnic Identity Growth Statistics Paired Sample *T*-Test

| Pair | Mean | <i>SD</i> | Standard error mean | Lower | Upper | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | Significance (2-tailed) |
|------------------------------|------|-----------|---------------------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| Ethnic Identity (post - pre) | 5.50 | 8.62 | .94 | 7.37 | 3.63 | 5.84 | 83 | $p < .05$ |

Discussion

This study examined the impact of cultural immersion camp experiences on the strength of Asian American youths' ethnic identity and found these impacts to be significant. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, which showed that minority adolescents who gain cultural knowledge tend to develop ethnic pride, and also tend to have positive attitudes about themselves and their social environment (Parham, 1989; Phinney & Tarver, 1988; Pinckney et al, 2011). In addition, minority adolescents who have strong ethnic pride are more likely to have motivation for social engagement (Parham, 1989; Phinney & Tarver, 1988;

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Pinckney et al, 2011). A stronger sense of ethnic identity drives these adolescents to create positive relationships with their social environment. This finding underscores the importance of understanding the determinants of ethnic identity which create the a priori conditions that the cultural immersion camp intervention seeks to alter. The supportive resources aimed to be generated by the immersion experience need to be shaped by a more thorough understanding of the status quo ante of participants' ethnic identity. Based on other research, we can also entertain the possibility that the cultural immersion camp experiences contributed to the preparation of these adolescents for well-being in adulthood. Future research might further investigate and consider generating data on those potential assets that contribute to minority youths' maturation process derived from the cultural immersion camp experiences.

A primary contribution of this study is the recognition that cultural immersion camp is an important factor in Asian American youths' lives, not just as children and adolescents but throughout adulthood. In this study, cultural immersion camp also represents an ethnic-based community where minority adolescents feel comfortable and confident while they explore their identity with an ethnic group. These camps serve as a space where Asian American youth receive sympathy and support by meeting community members similar to them.

Our findings also indicate that the significant increase of the sense of ethnic identity among Asian American youth supports the notion that cultural immersion camp experiences can be important for a minority adolescent's identity formation process and an effective intervention in increasing levels of ethnic identity. Our findings also suggest the importance of exploring the longer-term impacts of camp community membership on adolescents' development of social networks with friends and school mates, and on their relationships with their parents. Longer-term studies would inform us about how to formulate strategies to sustain camp outcomes. Subsequent research also needs to test more concretely the putative impacts of ethnic identity on the mental health of Asian American youths.

In addition, study findings suggests that the type of activities the youth were engaged in may have been a strong influence on ethnic identity. The ability to become more familiar with various aspects of one's own culture and history, despite balancing becoming an American could help shape positive identity. These activities could lead to additional exploration of their country of origin, which is viewed as a positive step toward acceptance of one's own Asian American identity.

Limitations and Recommendations

While it was determined that cultural immersion camp experiences increased the level of individual ethnic identity among Asian American youth, we recognize limitations to our study, and make the following recommendations:

1. Further questions were generated by this study for future investigation. Measurement tools that focus on the risk and protective factors that shape the development of ethnic identity are needed. Longitudinal studies that are grounded in mixed methods (i.e., quantitative and qualitative) are best in order to understand the processes that these immigrants are encountering. In addition, while researchers have stated that positive ethnic identity of minority youth promotes their connection with the social environment, campers were expected to have more positive connections with families and friends after they returned home. The ability to determine if long-term positive ethnic identity remains should be followed up for further evidence.
2. The findings suggest camp programs can be seen as an essential intervention to strengthen the perception of ethnic identity of minority youth and therefore their positive development. The latent variables during their stay at camp that impact Asian American youths' ethnic identity must be investigated in more detail.
3. This study provides evidence to suggest that a cultural immersion camp is an important resource for the development of the perception of ethnic identity of Asian American youth. Researchers and practitioners should further explore the development of research tools and programs for Asian American youth to maintain or develop their ethnic identity during the regular school year. This should include a range of experiences that promote ethnic identity year-round. Exposure clearly matters, but its presence in the United States appears to be insufficient.
4. Finally, researchers must also begin to develop translational pieces to educate parents, teachers, and youth development professional about the realities of Asian American immigrant youth in order to erase the stigmas and stereotypes (e.g., model minority myth) and covert/overt discrimination that exists. Focus on these type of activities will allow programs to be better informed about the importance of cultural competency and providing more opportunities for positive development.

Conclusion

This study represents initial steps toward an understanding of certain outcomes for cultural immersion camps for Asian American youth. The strength of ethnic identity among Asian American youth is significantly increased after the cultural immersion camp experiences.

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