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ETHNIC IDENTITY, ACCULTURATION ATTITUDES AND SELF-ESTEEM IN RURAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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By
Concetta M. Posella

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science

Rochester, New York                      December 20, 1998

Approved: ____________________

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ABSTRACT

The current study used questionnaires in order to survey a sample of rural high school students regarding their self-esteem, attitudes toward acculturation, and their sense of ethnic identity. Students' ratings of self-esteem were not related to their sense of ethnic or racial identity nor their generational status, or how far removed they are from their cultural background. However, when acculturation attitudes were examined, the results were somewhat unexpected. The students who endorsed integration, or the idea that immigrants should both maintain their cultural traditions and try to adapt to their new culture, reported higher levels of self-esteem and identified themselves as completely American. The current findings were discussed in comparison to the results of previous studies conducted in inner-city communities such as New York City. Also discussed were the implications the current study has for educating and counseling adolescents in an increasingly diverse American school system.
In American schools today, one might observe a student relaying messages between school personnel and her parents who are Russian immigrants and not yet fluent in English. Similarly, one may also observe a Hispanic-American student struggle with academics after having recently moved to a suburban school district from an inner-city school in which he achieved above average grades. There is an on-going debate about how public education should address changes in the racial and ethnic make-up of American schools. Some educators believe schools should emphasize and celebrate cultural diversity whereas others believe doing so would be a disservice to children and youth struggling to adjust to American culture. “As the racial and ethnic make-up of the American population continues to become more diverse, the process of acculturation can bring stress and conflict to people of both the dominant society and the growing minority groups” (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992, p. 300). As this stress and conflict interferes with an individual’s ability to achieve success and to meet his or her needs, it can also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. In order to supplement the research on this topic, the present study explores how cultural diversity issues such as acculturation and ethnic identity may be related to students’ overall adjustment (i.e. how they feel about themselves, their lives, etc.) in American schools today.

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process whereby individuals come into contact with and subsequently adapt to a different culture (Phinney, 1995). For example, this often occurs when people immigrate to another country. In a broader sense, acculturation can also occur when members of different ethnic, racial, or socio-cultural backgrounds interact, as observed to a greater extent in American schools today. It is well-documented that stress
and conflict, both personal and social, tend to be associated with the acculturation process (Padilla, Alvarez, & Lindholm, unpublished manuscript). Researchers have explored the many factors involved in what they have termed "acculturative stress" (Padilla et al, unpublished manuscript). Below is a brief overview of the extant literature, which explores issues associated with the acculturation process, as it has contributed to the current study.

According to the literature, an individual’s self-esteem or the way one feels about him or herself is the best predictor of one's level of acculturative stress (Padilla et al, unpublished manuscript). In studying acculturation issues, many researchers have used ratings of self-esteem as a measure of overall personal adjustment (Heras & Revilla, 1994; Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987; Padilla, Wagatsuma, & Lindholm, 1984). Previous studies have shown that low levels of self-esteem are related to psychopathology such as depression (Munford, 1994, Shin, 1993) and eating disorders (Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996, Abrams, Allen, & Gray, 1993). For the purposes of the current study, ratings of self-esteem will be used as a measure of personal adjustment.

Previous studies surveyed members of minority groups, immigrants, and the descendants of immigrants in order to determine what factors might affect their self-esteem and overall adjustment.

Generational status refers to how far removed one is from his or her cultural heritage. Immigrants themselves are considered part of the first generation, their "American-born" children are part of the second generation and so on. Researchers have found that first generation immigrants experience more stress and lower self-esteem than members of later generations (Mena et al, 1987; Padilla et al, 1984). However, according
to a more recent study, it is the members of the second generation who are less well adjusted, as measured by self-esteem, than both third and first generation subjects (Heras & Revilla, 1994). These results make intuitive sense when one considers the fact that the immigrant family’s second generation is the bridge or point of contact between the two cultures. For children of immigrants and their parents, the differences in the cultures within which they were raised may widen the proverbial generation gap which already exists and exacerbate parent-child conflict especially during adolescence.

For immigrants, the age at which they left their country also affects their level of acculturative stress and personal adjustment. Some researchers have found that individuals who immigrated before the age of 12 experience less stress than individuals who came to America as a teenager or adult (Mena et al, 1987). According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is the time when children work toward developing their own sense of identity. Thus, it stands to reason that children who immigrate to another country before adolescence would have less difficulty adjusting to a new culture than their older counterparts. Younger children may not have completely developed their own sense of self or identified themselves as members of ethnic, racial, or cultural groups.

The ability to communicate to others in their new community is also important for immigrants as they begin to adjust to a new culture. Researchers have demonstrated that self-confidence in English is positively related to personal adjustment. Immigrants who feel they are capable of communicating in English experience higher self-esteem and greater satisfaction with life in general (Wan-Ping Pak, Dion, & Dion, 1985). Another study has shown that the language an immigrant chooses to use when responding to a
survey is related to that individual’s stage in the acculturation process (Lanca, Alksnis, Roese, & Gardner, 1994).

**Ethnic Identity**

Thirty years ago, Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period of crisis and change, a stage during which identity development is the primary developmental task. An aspect of overall identity includes membership and participation in social groups and development of social identity within that context. In Tajfel’s (1982) research on inter-group discriminatory behavior, he developed the social identity theory which defined social identity as a specific part of one’s sense of self that is derived from membership to a particular group. According to Tajfel (1982), individuals seek positive self-esteem from their group memberships. One way in which this is accomplished is through making favorable comparisons between their group and another specific group which social scientists term an “out-group.” Researchers have employed an experimental design called “minimal inter-group discrimination” in order to investigate the social identity theory. In these studies, subjects who had the opportunity to discriminate against members of a different group, demonstrated higher self-esteem than subjects who did not have the opportunity to discriminate (Oakes & Turner, 1980; Lemyre and Smith, 1985). More recently, Ruttenberg, Zea, and Sigelman (1996), in their research with Jewish and Arab students in the United States, found that individuals who are highly invested in their group membership and feel their group is evaluated unfavorably by others seek a positive social identity by discriminating against out-group members.

The current research examines ethnic identity, a type of social identity which is derived from an individual’s racial, ethnic, or cultural heritage. Previous research has
investigated ethnic identity in relation to a variety of issues including self-esteem and other personality constructs. In their longitudinal study, Phinney and Chavira (1992) surveyed adolescents at 16-years-old and again at 19-years-old. The researchers found that inner-city high school students who consider themselves bi-cultural (both an American and a member of a racial or ethnic group) have higher self-esteem than students who see themselves solely as an American or member of a racial or ethnic group. They also found that this relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem continued throughout the three-year period of time. Bautista de Domanico, Crawford, and De Wolfe (1994) conducted research with Mexican-American teenagers. Adolescents who identified themselves as bi-cultural, both Mexican and American, “reported greater self-esteem, ability to socialize in diverse settings, and psychological well-being” (Bautista de Domanico, Crawford, & DeWolfe, 1994, p.197) than students who identified themselves as either Mexican or American. Conversely, for British college students in Canada, identifying themselves solely as British was significantly related to higher levels of stress, depression, and lower self-esteem than students who identified less strongly with their English heritage. Phinney and Alipuria (1996) asked U. S. high school students to label themselves as either multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic. These students did not differ significantly on a measure of self-esteem by these two groupings. However, the multi-ethnic students viewed other cultural and ethnic groups more positively.

In the study which served as the basis for the current research, Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, (1992) examined the relationship between ethnic identification, self-esteem, and individuals’ attitudes toward acculturation. The researchers surveyed inner-city high school students’ opinions about the acculturation process by asking them to rate their
agreement with three different approaches. Overall, the diverse group of adolescents favored what the researchers termed "integration," maintaining one's culture yet adapting to American culture as well. "Assimilation" – the process of adapting to American culture without maintaining one's cultural heritage was given minimal support. The inner-city high school students tended to disagree with the third acculturation attitude called "separation" in which immigrants maintain their original culture and have "little or no contact with the dominant society" (Phinney et al., 1992, p. 300). Results revealed that inner-city high school students' reported levels of ethnic identification varied with acculturation attitudes in the expected direction: an ethnic identity was associated with endorsement of separation, an American identity with the endorsement of assimilation, and a bi-cultural identity with integration. Data analysis also revealed a positive relationship between ratings of self-esteem and the endorsement of integration. There was a negative correlation between ratings of self-esteem and the endorsement of assimilation. Thus, inner-city high school students who endorsed integration reported higher self-esteem that those who favored assimilation. No relationship was found between ratings of self-esteem and the endorsement of separation.

Overall, the literature reviewed above explores the many factors involved in the acculturation process. Using self-esteem as a measure of personal adjustment, it appears that generational status, age at immigration, speaking a second language, acculturation attitudes, and ethnic identity are the primary factors related to an individual's personal adjustment in the acculturation process. These variables are important ones in examining what schools can do to facilitate the education and growth of all students. Furthermore, all of the research reviewed above was conducted with adolescents and adults from inner-
city communities such as those found in New York City. The individual subjects were, for the most part, members of minority groups, immigrants themselves, or children and grandchildren of immigrants. There is little known about the relationship between self-esteem and the variables discussed above as applied to rural high school students who are farther removed from their ethnic or cultural background as well as ethnic or racial minority students living in rural communities. According to Phinney (1995), “ethnic identity is unlikely to be a meaningful concept or to have an impact on self-esteem among third generation Polish-Americans who are completely assimilated and do not call themselves Polish” (Phinney, 1995, p. 58). The present study contributes to the literature on the acculturation process by sampling a rural high school population in which the majority of students are white, of Western-European descent and more than 3 or 4 generations removed from their cultural heritage. According to records from 1990, the upstate New York town in which this research was conducted has a population of 9,384, which is 0.1% of New York City’s population (Hernor, 1996). Whereas only 52% of New York City’s population is white, 98% of this upstate New York town’s population identify their race as white (Hernor, 1996). Because of the differences between the population sampled in previous studies and that sampled for the present one, it is hypothesized that white students who are three or more generations removed from their cultural heritage will see themselves as completely American and their ratings of self-esteem will be positively related to an American identity. In a more homogeneous environment, students who are only one or two generations removed from their cultural heritage will favor an “assimilation” approach to acculturation, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the “mainstream” American society without maintaining one’s
cultural heritage. These students’ ratings of self-esteem will probably be lower overall and will be positively related to the endorsement of assimilation and a more American identity.

METHODS

Participants

The subjects were 132 high school students enrolled in “honors, regents, and local” level History/Government classes at a rural high school in which the students are predominantly of Caucasian descent. Students enrolled in History/Government classes were selected because this course discusses immigration and acculturation issues. Thus, the students were familiar with the topic and had already discussed some pertinent issues. The course was taught by two different teachers and it is not known whether class discussions may have biased the students toward a particular philosophy or belief system.

Materials

Cultural Attitude Questionnaire (CAQ). The first questionnaire was used to measure both demographic information and acculturation attitudes. This survey was adopted with permission from Phinney et. al., (1992). A copy of the CAQ is provided in Appendix A.

Demographic Information. The CAQ surveyed variables including age, grade, gender, parents' cultural heritage or ethnic background. The subjects were also asked to list the birthplaces of their parents and grandparents. In order to measure the extent to which the students have been exposed to their cultural heritage, the CAQ surveyed language spoken in the home, participation in activities related to the students' cultural
heritage, and the amount of contact the students’ have had with other members of their ethnic or cultural group.

**Ethnic Identification.** The CAQ also surveyed the subjects’ degree of ethnic identification. The respondents were asked whether they see themselves as completely American, as both an American and a part of their racial, ethnic, or cultural group, or solely as a member of their racial, ethnic, or cultural group.

**Acculturation Attitudes.** As a measure of acculturation attitudes, the students rated their agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 meaning “strongly agree” and 4 meaning “strongly disagree”): 1) I feel that the best way for members of ethnic groups to get along is to play down their own culture and to become part of American society by being as much like other Americans as possible; 2) I believe that ethnic minority groups should maintain and practice their own cultural traditions, but also learn to get along in mainstream American society; 3) I think that members of different minority groups should emphasize their own cultural traditions within their communities and not try to mix with other Americans.

**Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (PH)**

This 80-item scale was used to measure the students’ self-esteem or how they feel about themselves. The high school students were asked to indicate whether each of the 80 statements could be used to describe themselves. The PH also includes an Inconsistency Index and a Response Bias Index. Subjects whose scores on either of these indexes fell above the 98th percentile were omitted from the data analysis.

**Procedure**
The questionnaires were administered by the author during the students’ History/Government classes. The subjects were told that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be confidential. All of the students completed the CAQ followed by the PH. After the surveys were collected, the author discussed the research topic with the students and answered their questions.

RESULTS

Ethnic identity was assessed on an 8-point scale with a high score indicating an individual’s identification with his or her ethnic background rather than American culture. Overall, 95% of the students reported that they considered themselves, to varying degrees, “completely American” or “both American and a member of their ethnic, racial, or cultural group.” Approximately one third (33.3%) of the respondents reported that they see themselves as “completely American,” 22.5% of the students endorsed a bi-cultural identity (equally American and ethnic), and 24.2% of the students responded in between an American and a bi-cultural identity. Less than two percent (1.6%) of the students reported an ethnic identity (i.e., not American).

Generational status was calculated according to the students’ birthplace, the birthplace of their parents and grandparents. Approximately two-thirds (68.3%) of students were 4 or more generations removed from their ethnic background, 30% of the respondents were third generation immigrants, and less than 2% of the students’ parents were born in another country.

Rural high school students’ ratings of self-esteem, as measured by the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, were not found to be related to their level of ethnic identification (r =
Ethnic ID and Acculturation Attitudes

-.06, \( p = .547 \) nor their generational status, \( (i.e. \) how far they are removed from their cultural heritage) \( \chi^2 (3, 120) = 2.853, \ p = .415 \). An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) yielded similar results; there was no relationship between ratings of self-esteem and ethnic identity, even with generational status included as a covariant \( \text{F}_{(1, 114)} = .721, \ p = .398 \).

Acculturation attitudes were measured on a 4-point scale, with a high score signifying agreement. Integration was strongly supported by the students \( (M = 3.476, \ \text{S. D.} = 0.727) \). Assimilation was given little support, \( (M = 1.960, \ \text{S. D.} = 0.932) \) and the students tended to oppose separation \( (M = 1.655, \ \text{S. D.} = 0.871) \).

Results of a Pearson product-moment correlational analysis showed a positive relationship between ratings of self-esteem and the endorsement of integration on the Acculturation Attitudes Questionnaire \( (r = .188, \ p = .037) \). Further analysis revealed a negative relationship between rural high school students’ level of ethnic identification and their endorsement of integration \( (r = -.232, \ p = .011) \). Students who strongly agreed that immigrants should both maintain their cultural traditions and adapt to their new environment reported higher levels of self-esteem and were more likely to consider themselves completely American rather than a member of their ethnic, racial, or cultural group. Table 1 presents a summary of these findings.

DISCUSSION

The current study provides some evidence that there is no relationship between rural high-school students’ ratings of self-esteem and their sense of ethnic identification. This finding supports Phinney’s (1995) prediction that individuals who are only distantly
connected to their cultural heritage would not evaluate themselves or their lives in terms of their ethnic or racial background and that these individuals’ ratings of self-esteem would not be associated with their level of ethnic identification. However, these results contrast those of Phinney et al. (1992)’s research with inner-city high school students. Their study found that urban high-school students who identify themselves with both American culture and their ethnic, racial, or cultural background reported higher self-esteem than those students who considered themselves either completely American or completely a member of their ethnic, racial, or cultural group. Given the results of the present study, it seems that, in a more culturally diverse environment, adolescents tend to view themselves and their lives in relation to their ethnic identity but this is not the case in the culturally homogeneous environment of a rural high school.

Data analysis revealed similar results when generational status was taken into account. Rural high school students’ ratings of self-esteem were found to be unrelated to how far removed they are from their heritage. The current findings support the hypothesis mentioned above. For students living in a culturally homogeneous environment, ethnic background may not be a salient aspect of their experience. Therefore, cultural issues may not wield significant influence over how rural high school students see themselves. Further research on this topic is necessary in order to shed more light on this finding.

Of particular interest to this author are the results regarding rural high school students’ attitudes toward acculturation and ethnic identification. Subjects were asked what they think immigrants should do in order to acculturate to American society. Rural high school students tended to support the idea of integration which states that immigrants should try to adapt to American culture but also maintain their own cultural traditions.
Students who strongly agreed that immigrants should both maintain their cultural traditions and adapt to their new environment reported higher levels of self-esteem. As far as ethnic identification is concerned, students who responded that they consider themselves completely American rather than a member of their ethnic, racial, or cultural group also reported higher levels of self-esteem.

For rural high school students, the endorsement of integration and the perception that they are completely American was associated with higher ratings of self-esteem. There are many possible explanations for these findings. First, individuals reporting high self-esteem may be less threatened by immigration than those with lower ratings of self-esteem; they may be confident that they will continue to have access to resources, jobs, etc. Also, people who report feeling good about themselves and their lives may be more accepting of different cultures and better able to imagine what it might be like to be an immigrant. For students who consider themselves completely American, the issues immigrants face do not affect them directly as they identify themselves with American culture rather than their ethnic or racial background. Because of this, these individuals may be more objective about immigration and thus, able to conceive of a compromise between maintaining one’s cultural traditions and adapting to a new environment. However, this compromise may seem more plausible to adolescents who are unaware of the difficulties immigrants face in the acculturation process. Also, not feeling in touch with their own cultural heritage, rural high school students might feel it is important for immigrants to maintain their cultural ties even though it may be necessary for the immigrants to adapt to their new culture.
Notwithstanding the explanations mentioned above, other factors may have confounded this research, limiting this author's ability to formulate generalizations from these results. First of all, the students may have responded on the surveys in a way they feel is socially acceptable even though they were told their responses would be confidential. As previously mentioned, the students had discussed immigration in their History/Government classes. These discussions could have led to bias by promoting a particular way of thinking over another. Also, the sample used in this study was restricted to the eleventh grade class of one rural high school. Future studies should include adolescents of different ages and sample various rural and suburban communities.

In summary, the current investigator has surveyed a sample of rural high school students and found that the students' ratings of self-esteem are not related to their sense of ethnic or racial identity, nor their generational status (i.e. how far removed they are from their cultural background). However, when acculturation attitudes were examined, data analysis yielded unexpected results. The students who endorsed integration or the idea that immigrants should both maintain their cultural traditions and try to adapt to their new culture, reported higher levels of self-esteem and identified themselves as completely American. The current findings provide more information about how adolescents in rural communities see themselves and their lives, what factors may or may not influence how they feel about themselves, and what rural high school students think about diversity issues. This research has implications for education and counseling in an increasingly diverse American school system. In working with individuals, it is important to consider the environment in which they live, as what might be true for high school students in New York City is not necessarily true for the students in upstate New York or across the
country. As far as education is concerned, the question of whether educators should encourage assimilation into American culture or integration of both one's ethnic or racial background and the American culture is still unclear. However, high school students from both inner-city and rural communities tend to favor integration. A closer look at issues regarding multicultural education is necessary so that American schools can respond to the changing make-up of their classrooms and address the needs of all students.
REFERENCES


### TABLE 1

Correlation Between Self-Esteem, Ethnic Identity, and Acculturation Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Assimilation</th>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Separation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>+.188**</td>
<td>-.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>+.022</td>
<td>-.232**</td>
<td>+.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>+.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.193**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
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** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
APPENDIX A
CULTURAL ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE
[Adapted from Phinney, et al. (1992)]

Demographic Information

Age:__________
Grade:__________

If your parent(s) or guardian(s) are employed, please specify below what their occupations are:

Father__________  Mother__________  Guardian__________

Although we are all Americans, many of our families did not originate in this country. Please circle the cultural, racial, or ethnic heritage(s) with which your family identifies the most. Circle one.

African Nations  Scandinavian Nations  Russian  German  Italian
Phillipino  Puerto Rican  Spanish  Greek  French  West Indian
Middle Eastern Nations  Canadian  South American Nations  Indian
Eastern European  Chinese  Japanese  English  Native American
Jewish  Australian  Irish  Hawaiian  Mexican  Cuban
Mixed________________________  Other________________

Were you born in the USA?  Yes  No

If not, in what country were you born?__________  How long have you lived here in the USA?__________

In what country were your parents born?__________  How long have they lived here in the USA?__________

In what country were your grandparents born?__________________

How long have they lived here in the USA?__________________

Is there a language other than English spoken at home?  Yes  No

If so, what language(s)?__________________
Please list any family traditions related to your cultural, racial, or ethnic heritage in which your family participates.__________________________________________

Please describe any contact you and your family has with other non-family members of the cultural, racial, or ethnic group(s) you have circled above.__________________________________________

Attitude Information

Which of the following phrases best describes the way you see yourself? Place an “X” on the spot along the line below in order to indicate how American or part of a cultural, racial, or ethnic group you feel you are.

Completely an American.  Both an American and a member of the cultural, racial, or ethnic group with which my family identifies.  A member of the cultural, racial, or ethnic group with which my family identifies.

What do you think about the following statements? Rate your agreement with these statements on a scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 4(strongly agree).

1.) I feel that the best way for members of ethnic minority groups to get along is to play down their own culture and to become part of American society by being as much like other Americans as possible.

   1 strongly disagree  2 disagree somewhat  3 agree somewhat  4 strongly agree

2.) I believe that ethnic minority groups should maintain and practice their own cultural traditions, but also learn to get along in mainstream American society.

   1 strongly disagree  2 disagree somewhat  3 agree somewhat  4 strongly agree

3.) I think that members of different minority groups should emphasize their own cultural traditions within their communities and not try to mix with other Americans.

   1 strongly disagree  2 disagree somewhat  3 agree somewhat  4 strongly agree