Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices, Ethnic Identity and Psychological Adjustment among Multi Ethnic Children in Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract. This study aims to examine differences in parents' ethnic socialization practices, ethnic identity development, and psychological adjustment among urban and rural multi ethnic children in Sabah, Malaysia. Another aim of this study is to explore the effects of parents' ethnic socialization practices on ethnic identity development and the effects of ethnic identity development on the psychological adjustment of multi ethnic children. A total of 342 multi ethnic children (male: 132, female: 210) with ages ranging from 10-14 years old and their parents participated in the present study. The modified version of Multi group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), The Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM) and Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale Edition 2 (BERS-2) were used in this study. The results showed that: i) rural area multi ethnic children reported higher levels of total ethnic identity development and higher levels of ethnic identity affective than urban area multi ethnic children; ii) rural area multi ethnic children reported higher levels of family influence on ethnic identity development than urban area multi ethnic children; iii) there were no significant differences between rural and urban area multi ethnic children in behavioral and emotional adjustment variables; iv) greater parents' ethnic socialization was related to greater ethnic identity development; v) multi ethnic children with a greater ethnic identity exploration exhibited better psychological adjustment (interpersonal strength and school functioning).

Keywords: Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices, Ethnic Identity and Psychological Adjustment

1. Introduction

With the current rapid globalization, inter-racial, inter-ethnicity and inter-cultural marriage is an unavoidable phenomenon. Such marriage is a social domain that proves interactions between races, ethnicity and cultures. Interaction between social groups (e.g., marriage) is a fundamental mechanism that allows us to experience change of borders within a group and marriage between races or ethnic groups is an intimate network between social groups (Cottell, 1990).

Although a majority of Malaysians practice intra-racial or intra-ethnicity marriage, inter-racial or inter-ethnicity marriage is not a new social phenomenon. This phenomenon may be associated with the diverse ethnicity in Malaysia. Inter marriages between Malays and Chinese, Indian or other local ethnicity, or perhaps marriages between KadazanDusun with Chinese, Bajau, Murut or any other local ethnicity, produces a generation who experience growing up in a mixed-cultural environment or even in a multi-cultural environment as has been occurring in the state of Sabah.

Interethnic marriage in Sabah has been a regular practice since years ago and has been one of the main contribution to the formation and maintenance of harmony and unity among the communities in Sabah. This practice also contributes to the uniqueness of multi-ethnic and multi-religion communities in Sabah. Statistics show that nearly 50% of the Sabah population or their descendants practice inter-ethnic/racial marriage (The Borneo Post, 9 Feb 2010).

The children of two individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds are believed to be exposed to various cultures and practices of both parents. Therefore, their communication level and sense of community within these children are enhanced. In addition, these children are also trained not to be a racist and are open minded toward other cultures. It is therefore hoped that the unity of a country with multiracial society can be strengthened. Children from mixed marriages are expected to have a unique character, as well as having a more liberal stance. In short, they are not rigid to only one type of culture as they have been practicing a mixed-cultural practice that they have inherited.

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However, many psychologists believe that multi ethnic children are often faced with difficulties in identifying their ethnicity in a community (Bowles, 1993; Gibbs, 1987). They are often stressed out in choosing their ethnic identity, as choosing an ethnic over the other may result in guilt (Poston, 1990). This can be more complex for a multi-ethnic individual as compared to single-ethnic individuals (Gibbs, 1987; Herring, 1992). On the other hand, some psychologists and parents of inter-racial/ethnic children believe that children who have identified and understood their heritage and both cultures for their parents from the early stages experience less identity problems (Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Daniel, 1996; Morrison & Rogers, 1996). Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts & Romero (1999) stated that ethnic identity may be associated with high levels of psychological well-being, high level of self-esteem, coping and optimists and better academic performance.

According to Bowles (1993) the personal identity of an individual is mainly influenced by relationships in their family. It was also emphasized that family provides the basis to multi ethnic children in developing an ethnic identity. If both parents are from cultural backgrounds that are far too different from each other, their intraction may negatively affect their childrens' formation of ethnic/racial and cultural identity. Herring (1992) claimed that biracial children are particularly vulnerable to differential treatments by their parents and relatives, social rejection by their peers, and ambivalent attention in their schools and communities.

As parents and family play an important role in forming and shaping a child's race/ethnic identity, it is important to have studies done on parents' ethnic socialization practice on ethnic identity and psychological adjustment of a child. Socialization refers to the process by which children acquire knowledge, values and community standards. Thus the behavior of couple (parents) in socializaing their children to establish a stable ethnic/racial identity and psychological adjustment is very important. Thus this study aims to examine differences in parents' ethnic socialization practices, ethnic identity development, and psychological adjustment among urban and rural multi ethnic children in Sabah, Malaysia and to explore the effects of parents' ethnic socialization practices on ethnic identity development and the effects of ethnic identity development on the psychological adjustment of multi ethnic children.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants
A total of 342 multi ethnic children (male: 132, female: 210) with age ranging from 10-14 years old and their parents in urban and rural areas of Sabah, Malaysia participated in the present study.

2.2. Measures
2.2.1. Ethnic Identity
The study measures the Malaysian ethnic identity of the participants using a modified version of Phinney's (1992) Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (in. Phinney & Ong, 2007). The modified version of MEIM used in this study consists of 12 items that measure an individual's degree of identification with their ethnic group. The MEIM measures aspects of exploration and commitment towards an ethnic group. The items are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with points of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

2.2.2. Familial Ethnic Socialization
The parents' ethnic socialization practice was measured by using a modified version of The Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (FESM) (Umana-Taylor, 2001). The FESM is used to measure the degree to which participants perceive that 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).

2.2.3. Psychological Adjustment
The Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS) (Epstein & Sharma, 1998) was used to measure the strengths of students with significant emotional and behavioral concerns. The BERS consists 52 items that measur five domains (i.e., Interpersonal Strength, Family Involvement, Intrapersonal Strength, School Functioning, and Affective Strength). The BERS was designed to be completed by any adult (e.g., parent, teacher, school psychologist) with knowledge about a student. In this study this part had been completed by the participants' parents. The items are rated using a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all like) to 3 (very much like).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Differences in Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practice, Ethnic Identity and Psychological Adjustment among Urban and Rural Area Multi Ethnic Children

The result of the t test (refer Table 1) showed that significant differences were found in parents' ethnic socialization practice ($t = -2.565$, $p < .05$), ethnic identity ($t = -2.348$, $p < .05$) and ethnic identity affective ($t = -2.668$, $p < .05$) but not significant in psychological adjustment between urban and rural area multi ethnic children. The rural area multi ethnic children reported higher levels of family influence on ethnic identity development than urban area multi ethnic children.

The rural area multi ethnic children also reported higher levels of total ethnic identity development and high level of ethnic identity affective than urban area multi ethnic children. This may be because of those who live in the rural area are trained in a more conservative manner as compared to children who live in urban area. Activities that are conducted in the rural area are more likely to adapt cultural elements according to the ethnic and race of the community. Rural communities usually prefer to maintain traditional values (Faridatul Akma & Siti Rasidah, 2005). Thus indirectly, they perceive that they learn more about their ethnic or racial group. This contradicts with the urban environment, whereby their activities and surrounding are much more sophisticated and seem to resebel the western cultures. Therefore, their awareness or sense of belonging to an ethnic group is found to be higher among those living in rural areas.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviations and t Test Results of Sample on Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practice, Ethnic Identity and Psychological adjustment

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	n	Mean	sd	*t*	*Sig.*
Parents' Ethnic Socializational Practice	**Urban area**	**155**	**40.561**	**7.326**	**-2.967**	**.003**
	Rural area	**179**	**42.983**	**7.537**		
Ethnic Identity	**Urban area**	**159**	**30.371**	**4.037**	**-2.348**	**.019**
	Rural area	**183**	**31.404**	**4.078**		
Ethnic Identity Exploratation	Urban area	159	16.918	2.373	-1.172	.242
	Rural area	183	17.208	2.192		
Ethnic Identity Afective	**Urban area**	**159**	**13.453**	**2.572**	**-2.668**	**.008**
	Rural area	**183**	**14.197**	**2.571**		
Psychological adjustment	Urban area	154	108.123	25.944	-0.312	.755
	Rural area	179	108.978	23.957		
Interpersonal Strength	Urban area	154	29.974	7.866	-.071	.943
	Rural area	178	30.034	7.333		
Family involvement	Urban area	154	22.682	5.474	-.889	.375
	Rural area	179	23.179	4.725		
Intrapersonal Strength	Urban area	154	23.201	6.336	-.268	.789
	Rural area	179	23.380	5.818		
School functioning	Urban area	154	18.286	5.582	-.568	.571
	Rural area	178	18.612	4.900		
Affective strength	Urban area	154	13.980	3.389	-.312	.755
	Rural area	179	14.045	3.270		

3.2. The Effect of Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices on Ethnic Identity Development

The multiple regression analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between dependent variable (ethnic identity) and the independent variables (parents' ethnic socialization practices). The results showed that 40.0% of the variance in ethnic identity development can be explained by the variable of parents' ethnic socialization practices. These results indicated that the greater the participants perceive that their parents' socialize them with respect to their ethnicity, the greater their identification, positive feelings and preferences towards their ethnic group. Previous studies have also pointed out the effect of parental ethnic socialization practices on ethnic identity formation. In a study of ethnic youth from Asian, Indian, Chinese, Philipinos, Vietnamese and Salvadors decendents (mean age 15.5 years) residing in the United States, Umaña-Taylor,

Bhanot, and Shin (2006) found that family context explains 50% of the variance associated with the development of ethnic identity for the ethnic groups studied. From that, they suggest the importance of family influence in the formation of ethnic identity and concluded that the context of the family, which includes ethnic socialization practices of parents, are factors that are critical to the formation of ethnic identity of all youth.

Table 2.Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices and Ethnic Identity

Independent Variables	Ethnic Identity					
	R^2	F	sig. F	Beta	t	sig. t
Parents' Ethnic Socialization Practices	.400	220.98	.000	.632	14.865	.000

3.3. The Effect of Ethnic Identity on Psychological Adjustment

The multiple regression analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between psychological adjustment (dependent variable) and *ethnic identity* (independent variables). The variable of ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity affective were entered into a linear model of regression equation with psychological adjustment (interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning and affective strength) as the dependent variable. The results of regression are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Ethnic Identity and Psychological Adjustment

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	R^2	F	sig. F	Beta	t	sig. t
Ethnic Identity Exploration	Interpersonal Strength	**.020**	**3.357**	**.036**	**.145**	**2.409**	**.017**
Ethnic Identity Affective					-.112	-1.872	.062
Ethnic Identity Exploration	Family Involvement	.013	2.167	.116	.109	1.816	.070
Ethnic Identity Affective					.011	0.117	.860
Ethnic Identity Exploration	Intrapersonal Strength	.009	1.466	.232	.094	1.566	.118
Ethnic Identity Affective					-.077	-1.277	.202
Ethnic Identity Exploration	School functioning	**.015**	**2.571**	**.078**	**.136**	**2.256**	**.025**
Ethnic Identity Affective					-.044	-.734	.463
Ethnic Identity Exploration	Affective strength	.010	1.682	.188	.078	1.293	.197
Ethnic Identity Affective					.039	0.650	.516

The regression results showed that ethnic identity exploration was the only significant predictor of the psychological adjustment of multi ethnic children. But this variable can only explain variance in two of the psychological adjustment sub scale (interpersonal strength and school functioning). The result indicated that the multi ethnic children with a greater ethnic identity exploration have greater ability to control emotions and behaviors in social situations and can perform competently in classroom tasks and in school in general. There are a lot of literature which suggest that ethnic identity is the most adaptive achievement and that psychological adjustment has implications for the development of identity. In this aspect, exploration and resolution of issues in identity is an important dimension of identity. (Eyou et al., 2000; Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts & Romero, 1999; Schwartz, 2009)

4. Conclusions

In summary, the current study highlights the importance of considering parents' ethnic socialization practice, as well as the children's ethnic identity on indicators of psychological adjustment of multi ethnic children. Results from this study indicate that rural area multi ethnic children reported greater ethnic identity development and greater family influence on ethnic identity development than urban children. Greater parents' ethnic socialization was related to greater ethnic identity development and multi ethnic children with a greater ethnic identity exploration exhibited better psychological adjustment (interpersonal strength and school functioning).

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