

The Role of Language, Parents, and Peers in Ethnic Identity Among Adolescents in Immigrant Families

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To construct a model of the influences on ethnic identity among adolescents in immigrant families, we surveyed adolescents and their parents from 81 Armenian families, 47 Vietnamese families, and 88 Mexican families. Adolescents completed measures of ethnic language proficiency, in-group peer social interaction, and ethnic identity. Parents completed a measure of support for cultural maintenance. Across all groups, ethnic language proficiency and in-group peer interaction predicted ethnic identity, and parental cultural maintenance predicted adolescent ethnic language proficiency. However, because of differences among the groups, a separate model was required for each ethnic group. The results suggest both common processes and group differences in the factors that influence ethnic identity.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents from immigrant backgrounds face complex issues of adaptation involving both their culture of origin and the culture of the new country (Berry, 1997; Rumbaut, 1994). As part of this experience, they develop an identity as a member of an ethnic group within the larger society, that is, an ethnic identity

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(Phinney, 1989, 1990). The issue of ethnic identity is particularly salient for adolescents whose parents are immigrants (Rumbaut, 1994). On the one hand, these young people have grown up with, and been socialized by, parents who carry with them the language, values, and customs from their country of origin and are likely to retain these characteristics throughout their lives (McCoy, 1992). On the other hand, the adolescents have been educated in the American school system, which emphasizes English proficiency and American customs. Furthermore, in ethnically diverse schools and communities, adolescents are likely to interact with peers both from their own ethnic group and from other cultures.

The differences between the two cultures present these adolescents with many choices in areas such as cultural practices, language use, and friendship. Both the values and attitudes expressed by their parents and those they encounter among their peers are likely to play a role in the formation of ethnic identity for these youth. There has, however, been relatively little research on factors that influence ethnic identity in adolescents. Recent psychological research on ethnic identity has focused largely on the implications of ethnic identity; this research has consistently shown the positive relationship of ethnic identity to a variety of psychological outcomes including self-esteem (Phinney, 1992; Phinney *et al.*, 1997; Roberts *et al.*, 1999), ego identity (Markstrom *et al.*, 1998), and school involvement (Taylor *et al.*, 1994). Because of the important role of ethnic identity in psychological well-being, it is important to understand the variables that contribute to its development and maintenance.

To study ethnic identity, it is essential to begin with a clear definition of what is meant by the concept. Ethnic identity has been conceptualized and measured in a wide variety of ways, often without basis in theory (Phinney, 1990). Recent research with adolescents (Roberts *et al.*, 1999) suggests two theoretically based elements to ethnic identity, a group membership component and a developmental component. The first component, termed ethnic affirmation and belonging (Phinney, 1992), is based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). As an aspect of one's social identity, ethnic identity can be thought of as a subjective sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the feelings and attitudes that accompany this sense of group membership (Phinney, 1990). According to social identity theory, this sense of belonging is implicated in the psychological well-being of ethnic group members. Because people attribute value to the groups they belong to and derive self-esteem from their sense of belonging, ethnic affirmation plays an important role in their self-concept.

A second component of ethnic identity involves the extent to which adolescents have engaged in the developmental process of ethnic identity exploration. With the onset of adolescence, as part of the larger task of ego identity formation (Erikson, 1968), most minority youths explore the meaning of being a member of an ethnic group within a larger society (Phinney, 1989). This process may include learning about the history and traditions of their group and confronting issues

of discrimination and prejudice. Adolescents may discuss such issues with their parents or others as part of this exploration process. Ideally the process culminates in an achieved ethnic identity, characterized by clarity about oneself as an ethnic group member. This sense of self is assumed to be a source of personal strength and positive self-evaluation (Phinney and Kohatsu, 1997).

By assessing these core elements of ethnic identity, we can examine the relationship of ethnic identity to factors that may contribute to its development and maintenance. In the present study, we examined the importance of 3 factors that are assumed to influence ethnic identity among adolescents from immigrant families: ethnic language proficiency, cultural maintenance by parents, and social interaction with peers from the same ethnic group. Prior research has typically examined these variables separately in relation to ethnic identity, but to our knowledge no studies have examined these factors together. In addition, most research has been carried out with a single ethnic group. In the present study, families from 3 immigrant groups were studied in order to determine whether these influences on ethnic identity operate in the same way across groups.

Language is perhaps the most frequently cited contributor to ethnic identity (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1990; Hurtado and Gurin, 1995; Miller and Hoogstra, 1992). Giles *et al.* (1977) state that "Ingroup speech can serve as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural solidarity. It is used for reminding the group about its cultural heritage, for transmitting group feelings, and for excluding members of the outgroup from its internal transactions" (p. 307). However, these authors and others (e.g., Edwards and Chisholm, 1987) also point out that language is not necessary for group identity; there are situations and groups where language is not an important aspect of identity. Recent research reveals conflicting findings regarding the importance of language, largely because of both different methodologies and differences in the specific situation of the groups studied (Imbens-Bailey, 1996). Studies from Canada, where much recent research has been conducted, may not be comparable to the situation in the United States, because of different immigration history and different policies, such as the official bilingualism of Canada (Feuerverger, 1991; Lanca *et al.*, 1994).

In the United States, acquisition of English has been assumed to be essential for the integration of immigrants and their children into American society. In contrast, the value of retention of the ethnic language has been debated throughout U.S. history. Immigrants who have sought to retain their language have often been met with negative attitudes in the dominant culture (Crawford, 1992; Gerber, 1991). Currently, with the foreign-born residents representing 8% of the total population, the issue of ethnic language retention continues to be controversial (Rumbaut and Cornelius, 1995). However, there is increasing evidence that knowledge and usage of the ethnic language has a positive effect on developmental outcomes for adolescents in immigrant families. For example, recent studies with adolescents from several different immigrant groups have found a positive relationship between

ethnic language proficiency and future educational and occupational aspirations (Bankston and Zhou, 1995; Portes and Schauffler, 1994).

Language retention appears to be particularly critical for second and later generation immigrants (Phinney, 1998). Children who arrive at a very young age or are born in the United States may not acquire their ethnic language. Even for those who learn it at a young age may not value retaining it, because of the salience of English in schools, with peers, and in the media. Of theoretical importance, then, is whether proficiency in, or the retention of, one's ethnic language will have a positive impact on ethnic identity among these youths. Studies that directly address this question suggest that ethnic language and ethnic identity are positively related (e.g., Bankston and Zhou, 1995; Imbens-Bailey, 1996). However, in past research ethnic identity and language have been assessed in widely differing ways.

Imbens-Bailey (1996) used interviews with first and second generation Armenian American children to explore the importance of being proficient in Armenian (i.e., being bilingual; all the adolescents knew English). Results showed that the bilingual children and adolescents expressed a closer affinity with the Armenian community than did those who were monolingual in English. The author suggests that knowledge of the ancestral language may help maintain ethnic participation, which may in turn reinforce ethnic identity.

In a study of first and second generation Vietnamese youth from immigrant families in New Orleans, Bankston and Zhou (1995) assessed ethnic identity (based on self-identification and preference for endogamy) and the ability to read and write Vietnamese. These two measures were highly correlated ($r = .44$), indicating a strong link between language and ethnic identity. Like Imbens-Bailey, the authors suggest that the ethnic language provides access to the ethnic community. Retention of one's ethnic language can be seen as a cultural resource (Portes and Schauffler, 1994). On the basis of recent research, we expected that proficiency in one's ethnic language would contribute to the ethnic identity of adolescents in immigrant families.

Closely related to the ethnic language proficiency of adolescents are the attitudes of parents regarding cultural maintenance. The family is the major socializing influence on children and adolescents within a cultural context (Super and Harkness, 1997), and parental attitudes are likely to be important to ethnic identity. Current research suggests that immigrant parents strongly desire to maintain their cultural values, traditions, and language in their new country (McCoy, 1992; Woon, 1985). Nevertheless, relatively few studies have directly examined the relationship between parental socialization for cultural maintenance and ethnic identity in the children of immigrant families. Based on research with European American immigrants, Alba (1990) reported that parents who believed ethnicity to be important were more likely to engage in behaviors to promote their child's ethnic identity. However, this research did not measure children's ethnic identity in relation to parents' socialization beliefs and practices.

Bankston and Zhou (1995) report indirect evidence for a relationship between parents' attitudes toward cultural maintenance and adolescents' ethnic identity. They found that if a parent belonged to one or more ethnic organizations, the child tended to have higher ethnic identity. In contrast, in an interview study of Mexican American, Japanese American, and African American adolescents and their parents, Phinney and Chavira (1995) found a nonsignificant relationship between adolescents' ethnic identity and parents' responses to questions regarding whether they taught their children the cultural practices of their group. However, in this study parental socialization was assessed with dichotomous (yes/no) responses to questions regarding their ethnic socialization; these items did not provide a response range that might show a relationship. In the present study, immigrant parents indicated the extent of agreement with a number of questions regarding specific practices aimed at maintaining their cultural heritage. We expected that parental cultural maintenance would contribute to ethnic identity either directly or through promotion of ethnic language maintenance.

The extent of social interaction or amount of time spent with peers from one's own group is assumed to be an additional influence on ethnic identity, although evidence regarding such a relationship is mixed. Bakalian (1993), on the basis of a study of Armenians in the United States, showed that ethnic identity could remain strong in second generation immigrants even though in-group ethnic friendships decreased as individuals broadened their social contacts outside their ethnic group. However, Alba (1990) suggested that social interaction can provide a means by which ethnicity is experienced and expressed. The opportunity for social interaction with same-ethnic peers is likely to reinforce ethnic identity. Furthermore, if these same-ethnic peers speak the ethnic language, in-group social interaction should be associated with greater language proficiency, which may in turn influence ethnic identity. In the present study, we expected that adolescents who spent more time with same-ethnic peers would have a stronger ethnic identity. In addition, we investigated whether in-group peer interaction would have an indirect effect on ethnic identity, through greater use of the ethnic language.

Existing research and theory suggest that ethnic language proficiency, cultural maintenance by parents, and in-group peer interaction have a role in ethnic identity. In an effort to provide an integrated understanding of the bases of ethnic identity, we developed a conceptual model of their anticipated interrelationships in immigrant families (Fig. 1). We expected the ethnic language proficiency of adolescents to influence their ethnic identity. Parental encouragement of cultural maintenance and in-group peer social interactions were also expected to influence ethnic identity. Furthermore, we investigated whether or not parental cultural maintenance and peer interactions affect ethnic identity indirectly, via language.

The relationship of socioeconomic status (SES) to ethnic identity and its correlates is unclear. On the one hand, families with higher SES are more likely

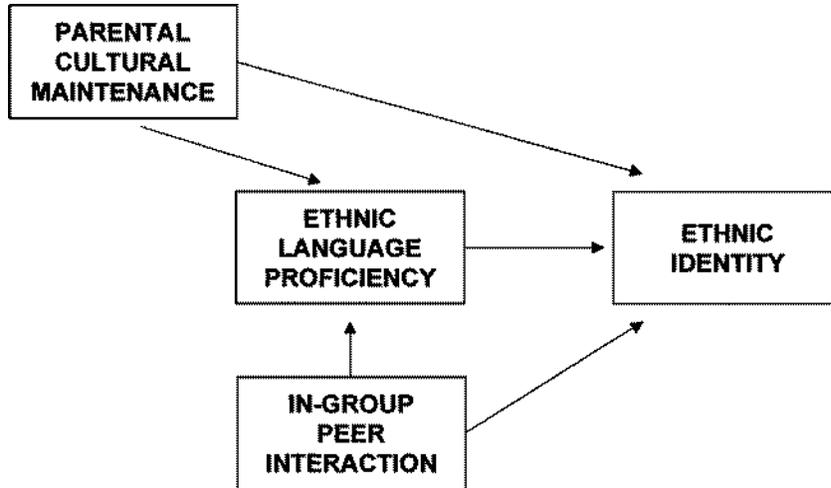


Fig. 1. Proposed model of influences on ethnic identity.

to be integrated into the dominant society and might thus retain less attachment to their ethnic culture. On the other hand, such families have more resources to support ethnic schools and other institutions that promote ethnic retention. There is little research that addresses this question, and existing research is inconsistent (Phinney, 1990). Because of differences in SES across the 3 groups, we included it in the statistical model as a possible predictor of each of the main variables. However, as there is no definitive research on which to base predictions, we did not include it in the conceptual model and made no specific predictions regarding its impact.

We assumed that the model would apply generally to immigrant families in the United States. However, the strength of the relationships among the variables may differ across groups as a result of differences in the immigration history, culture, and current situation of each group. By studying 3 groups within the same geographic region, we are able to test the generality of the model across ethnic groups.

In the present research, families from 3 immigrant groups from ethnically diverse communities in Southern California were studied: Armenian, Vietnamese, and Mexican. Each group includes large numbers of immigrant families who now have adolescents who were either born in the United States or came here at an early age. These adolescents have had most of their schooling in the United States and generally are highly proficient in English. However, the cultural background, immigration history, and present situation of these groups vary considerably. It is important, therefore, to understand the particular situation of each group.

Armenian Families

Armenians are a very small proportion of the U.S. population and only 1.3% of the population of California. The Los Angeles Armenian community includes both first and later generation immigrants, with origins from the former Soviet Union and other Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon and Iran. Throughout much of their history, Armenians have been faced with political oppression and have had no true homeland. However, wherever they have settled, Armenians have created their own communities and retained their culture (Bakalian, 1993). In the greater Los Angeles area, they have developed well-defined and highly visible communities despite their relatively small numbers. Unlike some other immigrant groups, many Armenians were able to bring possessions and money with them when they immigrated, and Armenians as a group have a relatively high SES. They typically have achieved a high degree of economic integration into American society. Although there has been some decline in involvement in ethnic organizations, Armenian identification, pride, and sense of uniqueness has remained strong (Bakalian, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 1990). Their communities support ethnic institutions such as schools, churches, and businesses.

Vietnamese Families

Although the Los Angeles area has the largest Vietnamese population of any area in the United States, Vietnamese are a very small minority; their population is under 1% in Los Angeles County. Most of the Vietnamese came to the United States from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s, as political refugees. However, Vietnamese immigration is continuing through family reunification, and the Vietnamese population includes both foreign-born and U.S.-born adolescents (Schoeni *et al.*, 1996; Rumbaut and Cornelius, 1995). Many Vietnamese in Southern California live in communities that have large numbers of other Asians, particularly Chinese, so that Vietnamese cultural institutions are not highly visible. Furthermore, the prolonged war in Vietnam and the hardships of the refugee experience have made many Vietnamese suspicious of institutions, including ethnic associations aimed at serving the community. The majority of Vietnamese families in Southern California are lower middle class and have relatively low levels of educational attainment (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Nevertheless, their children are performing as well or better in school than their peers from other groups. Several studies show that Vietnamese parents strongly encourage the maintenance of cultural traditions at home, while at the same time encouraging their children to adapt to the larger society and become more independent in school (McCoy, 1992; Nguyen and Williams, 1989; Woon, 1985).

Mexican Families

Unlike Vietnamese and Armenian families, people of Mexican descent have a long history in the United States, going back over 400 years (Camarillo, 1990). Mexican descent families are concentrated in California, which is home to over half of all Mexican descent individuals in the United States (Reddy, 1992). They comprise nearly 30% of the population of Los Angeles County (Myers, 1995; Schoeni *et al.*, 1996; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). There have been continuing streams of immigrants from Mexico, and the resulting blend of different generations has created a unique presence in California. Mexican immigrants have developed stable communities that preserve their cultural tradition of strong family ties, promote pride in their origins, and contribute to the widespread use of Spanish (Camarillo, 1990). Recent immigrants provide a constant renewal of language, customs, and traditions. On average, Mexican Americans have lower levels of educational and occupational attainment than that of other groups (Schoeni *et al.*, 1996), but they have made gradual progress, and there is a growing middle class (Myers *et al.*, 1997).

Adolescents from these 3 backgrounds experience exposure to their ethnic language and to their cultural heritage from their parents, ethnic peers, and communities, but such exposure differs across groups. This study examined the relative importance to ethnic identity of ethnic language proficiency, parents' efforts to maintain the culture, and interaction with same ethnic peers. We tested a model of these relationships (Fig. 1) and explored the generality of the model across the 3 groups.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 216 adolescents attending ethnically diverse schools in the Los Angeles area, and their parents. Participants were from 3 immigrant backgrounds: 81 Armenian, 47 Vietnamese, and 88 Mexican. The sample was 60.7% female and 39.3% male, with these proportions similar across the 3 groups. Most adolescents (62%) were U.S.-born; the remainder were foreign-born but had arrived before the age of 7 and hence had virtually all of their schooling in the United States. Of the parents, 85% were foreign born. The mean age of the adolescents was 14.86 years.

SES was calculated from the parents' self-report of both father's and mother's education and occupation. A principal component analysis of these four SES indicators resulted in 1 extracted component, explaining 67% of the variance. The SES component is the score calculated from this analysis, transformed so that the range is from 0 to 10; a higher score indicates higher SES. There were missing data in some cases, primarily due to missing information about the father or from

one parent reporting not working. To compute the SES component, data, values were imputed for missing data, using regression techniques, regressing mother's occupation on mother's education, father's education on mother's education, and father's occupation on both mother's occupation and father's education. The imputed value was the predicted value from the regression plus a normal deviate randomly sampled from a normal distribution with 0 mean and variance equal to the variance of the individual's predicted value, given the individual's scores on the independent variables from the regression. This method of imputation maintains both the correlation structure among the 4 SES variables and the variability of the individual items. An analysis of variance by ethnicity revealed significant SES differences, $F(4, 361) = 195.71, p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons showed that Armenians ($M = 6.5, SD = 1.7$) were of higher SES than were the Vietnamese ($M = 4.3, SD = 2.1$) and Mexican Americans ($M = 4.0, SD = 2.1$). Because of these differences, SES was included in subsequent analyses.

Procedure

High schools throughout the Los Angeles area with an enrollment of no more than 50% of 1 of the 3 target groups were contacted and invited to participate in a study of adolescent development in diverse cultures. In schools that agreed to participate, research assistants visited randomly selected 9th grade classrooms and invited students to participate. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary, that their responses were confidential, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. They were also informed that if they participated they would receive \$10 and a chance to win a \$100 gift certificate to a nearby mall. Interested students filled out a screening form indicating their age, gender, the ethnicity of themselves and their parents, the place of birth of themselves and their parents, their address, and phone number. From the students who completed the form, a selection was made of all those who met the criteria for the study: the adolescent was a member of 1 of the 3 targeted ethnic groups, with both parents from the same group, and was either born in the United States or had arrived there before age 7. Eligible students were sent by mail a detailed description of the study, a letter to parents and parent consent form, an adolescent and a parent questionnaire, and a stamped addressed envelope to return them in. The letter, consent form, and parent questionnaire were in the ethnic language as well as in English. Adolescents who returned both questionnaires and the consent form were mailed a \$10 check and a lottery ticket for a \$100 gift certificate. Two drawings were made from the lottery tickets, and 2 students were each sent a \$100 gift certificate.

Analysis of the responses indicated that parental questionnaires were completed by mothers (67%), fathers (13%), both (18%), or other, such as grandparent or other relative (2%). There were no differences in the variables of interest in relation to the person who completed the parental questionnaires.

Parental Measures

Parental Cultural Maintenance

This scale was created for the purpose of this project. It consisted of 6 items that assessed the extent to which the parents maintained their culture by instilling ethnic pride, discussing ethnic history and the meaning of ethnicity, and encouraging their children to learn and practice cultural traditions and values. Typical items were “We teach our child about what it means to be Vietnamese (Armenian, Mexican)” and “We discuss Vietnamese (Armenian, Mexican) history with our child.” Response options ranged from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The reliability of the scale was alpha equal to .83.

Parental Demographic Variables

Parents reported their birthplace, year of arrival in the United States if foreign born, level of education, and current occupation. Education and occupation were used to construct a measure of SES, as described in the Participants section.

Adolescent Measures

Ethnic Identity

This scale was a revised version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992), based on a recent study with a large sample of adolescents from diverse backgrounds (Roberts *et al.*, 1999). The scale consists of 12 items; 7 items assess adolescents’ affirmation and sense of belonging to their ethnic group (for example, “I am happy that I am a member of the ethnic group I belong to”); 5 items assess the extent to which adolescents have explored the meaning of their ethnicity (for example, “I have spent time trying to learn about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs”). A mean was calculated from the 12 items, yielding a score ranging from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*). The scale had a reliability in this sample of alpha equal to .84.

Ethnic Language Proficiency

The language proficiency scale was created for purposes of this project. The ethnic language proficiency scale contained 4 items assessing how well adolescents understood, spoke, read, and wrote their ethnic language; for example, “How well do you understand Vietnamese?” Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very well*). The alpha was equal to .87.

In-Group Peer Social Interaction

This scale had 6 items that assessed the frequency of social interaction with peers from their own ethnic group; for example, “How often do you spend free time with Vietnamese kids?” Response options ranged from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The alpha was equal to .85.

Adolescent Demographic Variables

Adolescents reported their age, sex, grade in school, place of birth, and age of arrival in the United States if foreign born.

Both adolescents and parents completed other measures not used in this study.

RESULTS**Ethnic Group Differences**

Before examining the conceptual model, analyses of variance were carried out to examine ethnic group differences in all the variables in the model: parental cultural maintenance, in-group peer interaction, ethnic language proficiency, and ethnic identity. SES was used as a covariate. Fisher LSD post hoc tests were carried out when there were significant differences. The means, standard deviations, and ethnic group differences are shown in Table I. The results showed that Armenian and Mexican adolescents interacted significantly more with peers from their same ethnic group than did Vietnamese adolescents. Ethnic language proficiency was significantly higher for Armenian and Mexican adolescents than for the Vietnamese. There were no ethnic differences in cultural maintenance or ethnic identity.

Table I. Means, Standard Deviations, and Ethnic Group Differences, with SES as Covariate, for Main Variables

	Armenian (<i>n</i> = 81)	Vietnamese (<i>n</i> = 47)	Mexican (<i>n</i> = 88)	<i>F</i>	Post hoc
Parental cultural maintenance	3.70 (.93)	3.68 (.65)	3.54 (.97)	2.76	
In-group peer interaction	4.38 (.71)	3.77 (.77)	4.34 (.46)	12.05***	A, M > V
Ethnic language proficiency	3.86 (.98)	2.88 (.90)	3.81 (1.03)	19.48***	A, M > V
Ethnic identity	3.90 (.71)	3.78 (.76)	3.90 (.52)	.58	

Note. Significant differences between means are shown by “>.” A: Armenian; V: Vietnamese; M: Mexican.

*** *p* < .001.

Table II. Bivariate Correlations Among Variables, for Each Ethnic Group

	Ethnic identity	Ethnic language proficiency	In-group peer interaction	Parental cultural maintenance
Armenians				
Ethnic language proficiency	.49***			
In-group peer interaction	.63***	.46***		
Parental cultural maintenance	.59***	.36**	.33**	
SES	-.06	.03	-.11	-.15
Vietnamese				
Ethnic language proficiency	.55***			
In-group peer interaction	.52***	.27		
Parental cultural maintenance	.37**	.52***	.38**	
SES	.32*	.09	.25	.14
Mexican				
Ethnic language proficiency	.22*			
In-group peer interaction	.26*	.14		
Parental cultural maintenance	.21*	.38***	.07	
SES	.12	-.43***	.01	-.33**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

SES was a significant covariate for cultural maintenance and ethnic language proficiency. Higher SES was associated with lower parental cultural maintenance and lower ethnic language proficiency.

Bivariate Correlations

As a first step in exploring the predictors of ethnic identity, bivariate correlations among all the variables were calculated separately for each ethnic group. Results are shown in Table II. For all the groups, ethnic language proficiency, in-group peers, and parental cultural maintenance were significantly related to ethnic identity; in addition, parental cultural maintenance was significantly related to adolescent ethnic language proficiency. Other significant relationships varied across groups.

Path Model

The Amos program (Arbuckle, 1997) was used for the path analysis. Model fit was checked using several measures, including the chi-square goodness-of-fit (ideally the p value should not be statistically significant), the RMSEA (ideally less than .08, with p not statistically significant), and CFI (ideally close to 1.0). Because the base model has few parameters, no adjustment for parsimony was used.

Figure 1 shows the base model used to assess the path model, using parental cultural maintenance, ethnic language proficiency, peer interactions, and SES to

predict ethnic identity. The Amos program (Arbuckle, 1997) was first used to make multigroup comparisons. The base model was initially constrained so that parameters would be equal across the 3 ethnic groups. The multiple group path model did not fit the data ($\chi^2 = 72.24$, $df = 30$, $p < .001$; $RMSEA = .08$, $p = .02$; $CFI = .77$). Inspection of the correlation matrix suggested that the relationships among the variables differed most between the Mexicans and the other 2 groups. Therefore, another multigroup comparison was made by dropping the Mexicans and constraining the base model parameters to be equal for the Armenians and Vietnamese. Although some of the fit parameters improved over the earlier model, this model also did not fit the data ($\chi^2 = 30.34$, $df = 15$, $p = .01$; $RMSEA = .09$, $p = .07$; $CFI = .89$). The conclusion was that each ethnic group should be analyzed separately.

The base model was then fit for each of the 3 groups. Estimates divided by their standard errors (z scores) were inspected to identify constraints to be made to the base model within each group.

For the Armenians none of the covariance and regression coefficients for SES were statistically significant ($z < 1.96$, n.s. at $p = .05$). Constraining these parameters to be 0 yielded a model with a good fit, shown in Fig. 2, top ($\chi^2 = 3.51$, $df = 4$, $p = .48$; $RMSEA = 0$, $p = .57$; $CFI = 1.0$).

For the Vietnamese, the parameters for SES were also not significant, nor were 2 other parameters. First, we constrained the SES parameters to be 0. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test for this model indicated a good fit ($p = .21$), but the RMSEA measure (.10) indicated that we should try additional models. Using the z scores that were not significant, we constrained 2 more coefficients to be 0: those between peer interactions and language proficiency, and between cultural maintenance and ethnic identity. This model, shown in Fig. 2, middle, provided a good fit to the Vietnamese data ($\chi^2 = 6.20$, $df = 6$, $p = .40$; $RMSEA = .028$, $p = .47$; $CFI = .995$).

For the Mexicans, the parameters for SES were statistically significant using z scores. The parameters that could be removed were the covariances for peer interactions and the regression coefficients between peer interactions and language proficiency and between cultural maintenance and ethnic identity. Constraining these parameters to be 0 resulted in a model with good fit, shown in Fig. 2, bottom ($\chi^2 = 5.78$, $df = 4$, $p = .22$; $RMSEA = .07$, $p = .32$; $CFI = .96$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of ethnic language, parents, and ethnic peers as contributors to the ethnic identity of adolescents in immigrant families. These similarities across 3 immigrant groups strongly suggest common processes that underlie ethnic identity in spite of differences among the 3 groups both in their immigration experiences and in characteristics measured in the study, specifically, differences in language retention and social interaction.

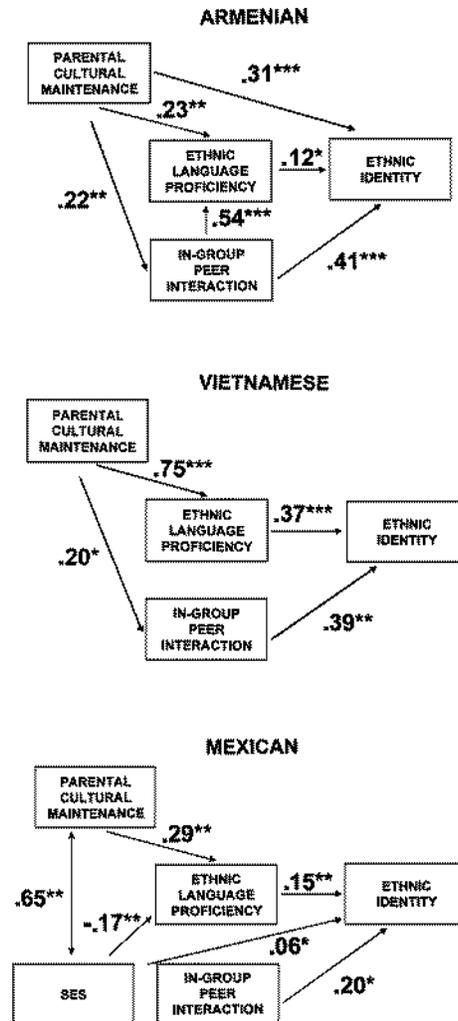


Fig. 2. Pathmodels of influences on ethnic identity for Armenian, Vietnamese, and Mexican adolescents.

At the same time, a single model did not fit all groups, and there were a number of differences in the specific pathways and the strength of the relationships. It is therefore important to examine both general processes and the unique factors that account for differences across groups.

First, in terms of common processes, ethnic language proficiency had a positive impact on ethnic identity among adolescents across the 3 immigrant groups. This result is in accord with previous theoretical and empirical work (Giles *et al.*,

1977; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1990; Hurtado and Gurin, 1995; Miller and Hoogstra, 1992). The importance of language for the ethnicity of these adolescents is not surprising, as it provides a link to the culture in which their parents were raised. Future research is needed to explore the extent to which the relationship between language and ethnic identity remains in later generations. Typically, knowledge and usage of an ethnic language is significantly less by the third and fourth generation, following immigration. Yet members of some groups, particularly those of non-European origin, maintain a strong ethnic identity independent of language usage (Phinney, 1998). Clearly other factors besides language contribute to this sense of oneself as an ethnic group member.

Second, for all 3 groups, social interaction with peers from one's own ethnic group was significantly related to ethnic identity; this peer effect was in fact stronger than the effect of ethnic language. This result provides further evidence of the important role of peers in socialization, a role that has been stressed in a recent review (Harris, 1995).

Third, in keeping with our expectations, behaviors reported by parents to promote cultural maintenance had a significant positive effect on ethnic language proficiency. The impact of parental socialization practices on identity has been demonstrated in prior research with African Americans (Demo and Hughes, 1990). These results extend prior research in showing that this relationship holds across 3 groups with different immigration experiences.

Nevertheless, there were substantial differences across the 3 groups in the pathways and in the strength of the relationships. As pointed out by Steinberg and Fletcher (1998), when developmental processes differ across ethnic groups, the results can best be understood by using separate analyses within each group. In the present study, a different model was required for each group. In addition to the common processes across groups, there was variation in the models that can be interpreted in terms of the uniqueness of each group.

Among the Armenians, there were strong correlations among all 4 variables, both in the bivariate correlations and in the model. Armenians were the only group in which parental cultural maintenance directly influenced ethnic identity, in addition to its indirect influence via language. When studying the characteristics of the Armenian communities, we found that many parents enrolled their children in Armenian language schools as part of their means of maintaining their cultural heritage. In such schools, Armenian adolescents not only learn their ethnic language, but also associate with Armenian peers. Parents, peers, and language thus form a cluster of variables reinforcing the ethnic culture and ethnic identity. These results are in accord with evidence of the strength and coherence of the Armenian community, a finding that has been noted in other studies of Armenians in the United States (Bakalian, 1993).

The Vietnamese had a distinctive profile among the 3 groups, reporting less in-group peer interaction and lower ethnic language proficiency. The Vietnamese communities studied are substantially smaller than the Mexican communities

and less well-established than the Armenian communities. Prior research has shown that a vital and cohesive ethnic community provides more opportunities for ethnic involvement and identification than a smaller and less cohesive one (Rosenthal and Hrynevich, 1985). Rosenthal and Feldman (1992) found that in Melbourne, Australia, where the Chinese communities are small, the second generation Chinese had a significantly smaller circle of in-group friends than did the first generation. In contrast, in San Francisco, with a larger ethnic community, Chinese youth maintained their ethnic friends across generations. Vietnamese adolescents in this study had less opportunity to interact with ethnic peers and use their ethnic language. Because of their lower language proficiency, many probably communicate with their Vietnamese friends in English. In an Australian study, McCoy (1992) found that many Vietnamese children preferred to use English with both friends and siblings. Perhaps because of the weaker role of peers, the Vietnamese parents have a stronger influence on language proficiency than in the other two groups and through language, on ethnic identity. Parental influence may thus to some extent be independent of the size and structure of ethnic communities and be able to compensate for a less cohesive community.

The Mexican Americans were similar to the Vietnamese in SES and to the Armenians in all the variables in the model. Furthermore, Mexican Americans did not differ from the other 2 groups in ethnic identity. Yet the model and the patterns of correlations for this group showed generally weaker relationships among the variables. Other factors, such as the strong Mexican American presence in the region and the continuing influx of immigrants may in part explain the strong ethnic identity of this group. Unique to the Mexican Americans was the effect of SES. In families with higher social class standing, there was less effort by parents to maintain their culture and lower language proficiency among adolescents. Paradoxically, there was no negative effect of SES on ethnic identity and in fact there was a very small positive effect. Clearly social class plays a complex role in the relationship among these variables for the Mexican American community and is only one of a number of factors that impact ethnic identity. Although the mechanism is unclear, it is apparent for this group, as well as for the other 2 groups studied, that increasing social status among immigrant families does not lead to a decline in adolescents' sense of ethnicity.

In evaluating these results, it is important to keep in mind that these data are correlational and that the models do not demonstrate causality or establish the direction of effect. It may be that adolescents who have a strong ethnic identity are more likely to learn and use their ethnic language and to associate with peers from their own group. Opportunities to interact with peers from one's own group and to speak one's ethnic language are likely to be related to ethnic identity in ways that are not easily separated. Furthermore, a strong ethnic community may contribute to each of these processes. On the other hand, the direction of influence from parents to adolescents is more likely to be one-directional. It seems improbable that parental

cultural maintenance, which was independently reported by the parents, would be influenced by the adolescents' ethnic identity. It appears that parents in immigrant families can have an important impact on their adolescent children's sense of their ethnicity, either directly or through the promotion of the ethnic language in the home. This influence does not appear to depend on the ethnic community.

In summary, to accurately understand the complex factors contributing to ethnic identity, it is important to consider both general influences that apply across groups and processes related to the unique characteristics of each group. By studying diverse samples, we can begin to identify developmental processes that are common across groups and those that must be understood in terms of the characteristics of particular groups.

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