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Contents and Methods in Ethnic Identity Studies:
Review of Research

Liling Li[1]
Arunee Sriruksa[2]
Nattapong Yamcharoen[3]

Ms. Darunee Bunkrong[4]

Abstract   The goal of this article is to summarize the contents and methods in ethnic identity studies through literature review, to show directions for researchers who want to conduct similar research. The contents in ethnic identity studies include self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to the group, attitudes about one's group membership, ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practices, and attitudes) and so forth. The methods employed can be categorized either qualitative method or quantitative method.

 Key words: ethnic identity, contents, methods

[1] *Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture Fine Arts and Design, Khon Kaen University*
[2] *Lecturer from Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture, Fine Arts, and Design Research, Khon Kaen University*
[3] *Lecturer from Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture, Fine Arts, and Design Research, Khon Kaen University*
[4] *Lecturer from Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture, Fine Arts, and Design Research, Khon Kaen University*

1. Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity has been studied in diverse fields such as psychology, social psychology, counseling psychology, cognitive developmental psychology, sociology, anthropology, educational anthropology and so on. Within these diverse fields, researchers have different assumptions and focus of attention, so there is no widely agree-on definition of ethnic identity.

Many of the studies on ethnic identity have been based on the research of group identity by social psychologist (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel (1981) defined ethnic identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). Some writers emphasized the cultural aspect, Sodowsky and colleagues (1995) defined ethnic identity as the sharing of a cultural heritage, a sense of social relatedness, and symbolic cultural ties by members of a racial or ethnic group. Other researchers considered sense of belonging the key aspect (Masuda, Matsumoto & Meredith, 1970).

Although the definition cited above considered different aspects, most of the researchers acknowledge that ethnic identity is dynamic, changing over time and context (Nunes, 2019; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Stodolska & Yi, 2003; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

2. Contents in Ethnic Identity Studies

As aforementioned, ethnic identity has been studied across different fields and disciplines, resulting a lot of different contents been paid attention to. According to Phinney (1990), most of the studies were based on one of three broad perspectives: social identity theory, as presented by social psychologists; acculturation and culture conflict, as studied by social psychologists, sociologists, or anthropologists; and identity formation, drawn from psychoanalytic views and from developmental and counseling psychology. These different fields and disciplines based on different theories usually have their own research contents, yet sometimes overlapped.

Social psychologists based on social identity theory often study self-identification, sense of belonging; while a perspective from acculturation and culture conflict (e.g., social psychologists, sociologists, or anthropologists) is more interests in ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practices, and attitudes), majority culture, generation of immigrants, gender and national identity; as for psychoanalysis and developmental and counseling psychologist, often focus on attitudes about one's group membership, exploration, values and beliefs, importance and salience.

Self-identification (also called self-definition or self-labeling) refers to the ethnic label that one uses for oneself (Phinney, 1990). Or by Ashmore et al. (2004), self-categorization, identifying oneself as a member of a particular social grouping. Self-identification is the starting point of measuring ethnic identity, "measurement of ethnic identity must begin with verifying that the individuals being studied in fact self-identify as members of a particular group. This can be done either with open-ended questions or with lists that are appropriately inclusive" (Phinney, 1992).

Sense of belonging or commitment, refers to a strong attachment and a personal investment in a group. It is perhaps the most important component of ethnic identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Ethnic involvement refers to involvement in the social life and cultural practices of one's ethnic group. The most commonly assessed are language (e.g., Kim et al., 2004; Laroche et al., 1981, 2005; Lee, 2002), friendship, social organizations, religion, cultural traditions, and political ideology and activity.

Majority culture. The acculturation framework for studying ethnic identity suggests that for understanding ethnic identity, it is also necessary to consider the individual's relationship to the dominant or majority group.

Generation of immigrants. A number of researchers (Masuda, Matsumoto & Meredith, 1970) have examined the changes in ethnic identity related to generational status among immigrant groups.

Gender may be a variable in acculturation in those cultures in which men are more likely to get jobs in the mainstream culture while the women remain at home. Some writers conducted studies in ethnic change with emphasis on gender roles (Chan & Ng, 2013; Kim et al., 2004).

National identity. The relationship between ethnic and national identity has been debated for decades by scholars of acculturation. For ethnic identity to be fully understood, it is best considered in relation to another prominent group identity of most minority group members, namely their identity as part of their national culture, e.g., in the United States, their American identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Attitudes about one's group membership. In addition to their self-identification and a sense of a belonging, people can have both positive and negative attitudes toward their own ethnic group. Positive attitudes include pride in and pleasure, satisfaction, and contentment with one's own group. The absence of positive attitudes, or the presence of actual negative attitudes, can be seen as a denial of one's ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990).

Exploration, defined as seeking information and experiences relevant to one's ethnicity, can involve a range of activities, such as reading and talking to people, learning cultural practices, and attending cultural events (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Values and beliefs. Values are important indicators of one's closeness to the group, many measures of ethnic identity have been developed for specific groups and have included values and beliefs specific to a group (e.g., Felix-Ortiz et al., 1994).

Importance and salience. There is wide variation in the importance attributed to one's

ethnic identity across individuals and groups (Phinney & Alipuria,1990), also, there is variation in the salience of ethnic identity over time (Yip and Fuligni, 2002).

Apart from these widely studied contents, some researchers have also tried to explore other aspects related to ethnic identity. Stodolska & Yi（2003）put their emphasis on leisure behavior of adolescent immigrants and find that ethnic boundaries seem constructed by what is taught in social network. Shuangyun & Hongxia (2021) study the relationship between ethnic identity and social media and social support. Age of immigration also plays an important role in ethnic identity development and acculturation processes in general (Rumbaut, 2004). Social economics status as a factor has led to different results on ethnic identity in different studies (Karl Kwan, 2000; Phinney,1989; Phinney & Alipuria,1990; Sodowsky et al., 1995).

3. Methods in Ethnic Identity Studies

Since the contents in relation to ethnic identity are multidimensional, the methods applied are varied. Basically, these diverse methods can be categorized either to qualitative method or quantitative method. As for the combination of qualitative method and quantitative method we will not discuss here because it is relatively rare among the journal articles we have reviewed.

Stodolska & Yi (2003) employ semi-structured and in-depth interviews methods to study the impact of immigration on the emergence of ethnic identity as well as on post-immigration changes in leisure behavior among adolescent immigrants from Korea, Mexico and Poland. Chan & Ng (2013) investigate the gender role and identity perceptions of ten adolescent Chinese girls in Vancouver through constant comparative method from grounded theory. Syed (2015) presents a narrative approach to the study of ethnic identity and uncovers voices and stories of individuals related to the experience of ethnicity and race. He notes that this method is particularly apt at giving voice to members of marginalized groups whose voices have not always been reflected in developmental science.

Ortiz et al. (2015) present a historical account of ethnographic methods and their application to the study of ethnic identity. By using the methodological and analytical lens of critical ethnography, Ortiz et al. reveal a transformative experience of ethnic identity within a school setting. Roth (2015) introduces yet another method. Using photo elicitation techniques, Roth challenges the emphasis on identity and instead emphasizes the need to consider cognitive structures or ethnic and racial schemas that individuals use in dividing themselves and others into racial and ethnic groups. López et al. (2015) explore the visual experience of ethnicity, but in relation to phenotype. In particular, the authors explore the association between phenotype and ethnic identity among Puerto Rican women.

As for quantitative methods, it can be further divided into two kinds, based on (a) specific analysis method (s) or a specific measure scale.

Laroche et al. (2005) conduct their research on ethnic identity and food consumption with confirmatory factor analysis and multi sample analysis. Kim et al. (2004) employ factor analysis method to study ethnic change among the Chinese in Canada.

For the measure scales, the most widely used is the MEIM, proposed by Phinney (1992), was designed to meet the need for a general measure that could assess ethnic identity across diverse ethnic groups. Phinney & Ong (2007) made some changes on the MEIM to create two subscales (exploration and commitment), which became the WEIM-R scale.

Some other measure scales were designed to examine particular ethnic groups. The SL-ASIA (Suinn-Lew Asian Self-identify Acculturation Scale), was made to assess the variable for Asians, modeled after a successful scale for Hispanics (Suinn et al., 1987). The Internal-External Ethnic Identity (Int-Ext Id) measure was examined using a sample of Chinese Americans (Karl Kwan, 2000). Items in the Int-Ext Id measure reflect the common internal and external aspects of ethnic identity as conceptualized from the social psychological

perspective, as well as the Asian values of family orientation and collectivism.

4. Summary

As we mentioned before, ethnic identity is a concept has drawn tensive interests from different fields and disciplines, in which been studied with different contents. Among these contents, we must understand that some of them can be examined across ethnic groups, e.g., sense of belonging to a group and exploration of one's own group, while other contents need to be considered independently, values and beliefs for instance. As for the methods, no matter what kind of methods or which scale we employed, we must combine the generality within different ethnic groups and particularity of a specific one.

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