

Who am I? Going Bananas – Establishing (Ethnic) Identity

Keynote address: Going Bananas: Multiple Identities Forum 12th August 2006.

Kia ora tatou, Ni hao, Hi,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this conference today. You might ask why I, a member of the majority culture, am standing here today. Well the obvious answer is, I was approached and asked if I would, but the credentials I bring today are of someone who has studied developmental psychology for some 20 years or more and who has a particular interest in promoting the health and wellbeing of young people. On a more personal level, I have served as a student advisor at the University and this has brought me into contact with young people from many other countries who have been struggling to find their place in a new country. Further, as my own family was growing up, we always seemed to have other young people living with us and, at last count, we had hosted four young people from Japan, one from Italy and two from the UK, on cultural exchange programmes. These young people spent between 3 and 12 months with us, and most spoke little or no English when they first arrived, and no one in our family could speak Japanese or Italian. All this has led me to an interest in ethnic identity and acculturation and the role these play in the wellbeing of ethnic minority young people in an increasingly diverse society. Further, it behooves us, who are currently members of the dominant culture, to be aware of these issues because, if statistical models are correct, the ethnic make up of this country is changing rapidly, and those of us in the dominant culture may well be a minority by the middle of this century.

In my address to you this morning, I want to talk a little about identity development in general, and ethnic identity development, in particular, and I will conclude by examining the role that language, parents and peers play in all this.

Originally, the title of my address included childhood. However, questions such as ‘Who am I?’, “Where did I come from?”, “Where am I going?” are not usually a focus in childhood, but are questions that surface later, and are common to adolescents, and are virtually universal concerns. As a consequence, little research has investigated identity in children under 10. Thus, while I may refer to younger children from time to time, today, what I will be talking about is particularly relevant to young people in early to late adolescence, roughly corresponding to the age group 13 – 25 years.

First, let's look at what we mean by identity. To do this, we need to understand where these notions that one's identity is important come from. Erik Erikson's theory of human development is one, if not, the most influential theories in developmental psychology. Erikson divided the life span into seven stages, and at each stage he identified a particular developmental task that predominates. Thus, Erikson said that prior to adolescence, children learn a number of different roles and can describe themselves in relation to these, for example, ‘I am a girl’, ‘a sister’, ‘a friend’, “a tennis player”, ‘Christian’, ‘Chinese’, etc. During adolescence, the major developmental task is to integrate these various roles into a consistent identity. You are all probably aware of the idea of identity crisis, which, in adolescence, involves reconciling the identities that have been imposed on you in childhood by family and society with the need to assert one's independence and personal control. However, it should be noted that issues of identity are not confined to adolescence, and any time we face a major change in our life, we need to reevaluate our identity in order to accommodate the new role/change. For example, I have been recently thrown into an identity crisis, pleasant as it is, having learnt I am about to become a grandmother for the first time. I am currently wrestling with what I want to be called in this new role -- something that will be central to my identity as a grandparent.

Identity can be seen to be made up of two elements – personal (Who am I?) and social (What group/s do I belong to to?) Erikson and others believed that establishing a secure identity is achieved through a process of exploration and commitment across various domains (e.g. occupational identity, religious /philosophical identity, sexual identity), and while young people experience this search for an identity in various ways, it is fair to say that the task is especially complex for ethnic minority adolescents. For these young people, added to the questions above, is the question, “What does minority group membership mean for me?” Thus, the process of identity formation has an added dimension due to ethnic minority adolescents’ membership in both the ethnic minority group and in the larger society. The impact of migration and minority status on young people is mediated by their ethnic identity, which refers to “one’s sense of belonging in an ethnic group, and the part of one’s thinking, perception, feelings and behaviour, that is due to ethnic group membership” (Phinney,1997).

With specific reference to ethnic identity, this requires resolution of two fundamental issues that arise from being a member of an ethnic minority; a) the difference or conflicts between the norms and values held by their ethnic group and that of mainstream society, and, b) negative stereotyping and prejudice faced by their ethnic group (Phinney,1997).

Cultural identity has been defined as a special case of social identity and refers to a sense of solidarity with the ideals, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of a given culture (one’s own and other).

From this arises the notion of acculturation and it is this, and the relationship to ethnic identity, I wish to now focus on.

However, before I go any further, I would like to pause for a moment and acknowledge Mei Lin Eyou who was a very able graduate student of mine some years ago. Mei Lin won a Health Research Council Scholarship that funded her

Master's degree research, which I had the privilege of supervising, and which looked at cultural identity and psychological adjustment of adolescent Chinese immigrants in New Zealand. By the way, Mei has since married a Pakeha New Zealander and the last I heard was living in California.

Mei's research and that of numerous others suggests that young people who identify strongly with their culture of origin, and the mainstream culture, have better psychosocial outcomes. That is, they are less stressed and anxious, and tend to do better at school than those students who are marginalized – that is, those with weak ties to both cultures. In her study of 427 first generation Chinese students, Mei found that 44% of students were integrated, 36% separated, 6% assimilated and 14% marginalised.

So, if we accept that integration is the most adaptive status to have, is there anything that parents and other adults can do to maximize the probability of this outcome? Well, yes there are some things we can do, and to this end, I want to quickly look at what we know about the role of language acquisition and retention, parents and peers in this process.

Language

While proficiency in English is taken as central to integration, with a strong association between English proficiency and strength of identification with mainstream culture, until recently, the value of retention of the ethnic language was less clear. In fact, those who have tried to retain their language have often been met with negative attitudes from the dominant culture. However, there is increasing evidence that knowledge and use of ethnic language has positive outcomes for young people in immigrant families, with several studies indicating that ethnic language proficiency is associated with future educational and occupational aspirations and, it would seem, is central to retaining strong links to the ethnic culture.

In our study, we found that the extent to which adolescents felt accepted by 'Kiwis' was partly dependent on their ability to speak English. Somewhat reassuringly, we were able to show that increased proficiency in English was not associated with a weakening of ethnic identity.

“ Misunderstandings happen mainly because of language factor. Due to language difficulties, we hardly express our feelings and views. Due to language difficulties, we don't try to understand the Kiwis' feelings views, thought, so a feeling of separation is always present. (18yr M China)

“I noticed many Europeans react to you how well and fluent you can speak English . Good English ...friendlier bad English ...cruel” (15yr M Hong Kong)

Parents

Parental attitudes regarding cultural maintenance play a significant role in shaping identity. Most immigrant parents have a strong desire to maintain their cultural values traditions and language in their new country. It seems that parents who believe ethnicity to be important are more likely to engage in behaviours, and convey attitudes, that promote their child's ethnic identity.

“they think that we should try to retain some Chinese values as well as adopt some Kiwi values” (16yr M Malaysia)

Parental attitudes to the mainstream culture are also influential.

“Most of the time you stay at home , what your parents feel stick in your mind, and if racist, then reflect in your thinking” (17yr F.Malaysia)

In our study, we found that mothers were more influential than fathers in this respect. Young people who perceived that their parents, particularly their mother, placed equal importance on exposure to the values and practices of both

the culture of origin and those of the dominant culture, were more likely to identify strongly with both. While this could be a reflection of the fact mothers are more accessible than fathers, such findings need further investigation. Suffice to say that it appears that parents who convey the importance of, and maintain the values and traditions associated with the ethnic group and who at the same time encourage exploration of those of the mainstream culture, assist their young people in the establishment of an ethnic identity embodying elements of their ethnic group of origin and those of the mainstream .

Peers

Social interaction with same-ethnic peers is likely to reinforce ethnic identity. In addition if same-ethnic peers speak the ethnic language within group social interaction should promote greater language proficiency, again influencing ethnic identity.

In our study, the Chinese young people who felt accepted by “kiwis”, not surprisingly, tended to have stronger identification with this group. Participants felt that if Kiwis were accepting of them, they would be more understanding and tolerant if they struggled with English.

“ acceptance is most important because if they are friendly , they won't mind if your English is not very good” (17y F Hong Kong)

Finally, in our study it was interesting to note that the extent to which adolescents perceived similarities between their own Chinese ethnic group and Kiwis was related to cultural identity, with those perceiving greater similarities tending to have weaker ethnic identity, but stronger Kiwi identity.

“Malaysian Chinese have always been a minority and have to live with Malays, and Indians, so when they come here, there is not much change, they are still a

minority, whereas in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, the Chinese have always been the majority, as there are not many other races to live with.(16yM Malaysia)

In conclusion, the development of a strong ethnic and cultural identity, the degree to which young people feel part of their new country and at the same time retain strong links with the country of origin is somewhat of a balancing act. Young people need to be able to explore both and come to their own conclusions however, I hope this morning I have shown that parents and other influential adults, from both the ethnic and the mainstream culture, have an important role to play in this journey.

I thank again for this opportunity and trust that I have laid the foundations for an exciting and informative day.