Exploring the Relationship between Ethnic Identity, Belief in a Just World and Self-esteem among Ethnic Minority Students in Guangxi, China

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is twofold: to test the relationship between ethnic identity, belief in a just world and self-esteem of the minority youth; and to determine if belief in a just world can mediate the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. A total of 871 adolescent and young adult students were recruited. The findings support the strong positive association between ethnic identity, belief in a just world and self-esteem. The data also suggest that belief in a just world mediate the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. The current study confirms the positive trend of psychological well-being of the minority youth. The findings highlight the significant role of belief in a just world in the overall psychological well-being of minority youths. It points out the need for policy changes to integrate more educational programs focusing on increasing students' belief in a just world in the current education system.

Keywords: Ethnic minority; Belief in a just world; Identity; Self-esteem; China

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between racial or ethnic identity and indicators of psychosocial well-being, such as self-esteem has been an increasingly important area of inquiry for sociologists and psychologists.

Social Identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group . . . together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership".

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals are motivated to achieve "a positive social identity". In the past decade, ethnic identity research has been consistently increasing with some significant achievements [1,2].

According to Lerner [3], the belief in a just world (BJW) refers to the belief that the world is a just place where people generally get what they deserve. He states that individuals have a need to believe that they live in a just world, so that they can live with confidence and believe that no unjust events will happen to them.

Research revealed inconsistent effects of the belief in a just world on individual's psychological well-being. On one hand, members of disadvantaged social groups who strongly endorse the just world belief tend to believe that discrimination against them is legitimate and minimize the injustice happening to them [4].

On the other hand, the BJW can be the personal resource when dealing with challenges; it could serve as a coping mechanism in face of harsh realities to promote mental health and enhance achievement behavior [5].

Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China is in south central China, bordering Vietnam; historically, Guangxi is a region with multiple ethnic minority groups.

There has been significant disparities among different ethnic groups in terms of socioeconomic status and social relations [6]. The issue of psychological well-being of the minority youth in China has not been fully addressed yet.

In the context of the imbalance of economic development of east China and southwest China, more and more younger generations are moving out of the underdeveloped areas, such as Guangxi, to seek economic prosperity in the developed areas.

The issue of the minority groups' social integration is emerging as a major social concern.

The goal of this study is to explore the relationship between ethnic identity, BJW and self-esteem of the minority youth in Guangxi area. Particularly, the current study addressed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference on the measurements of ethnic identity, BJW and self-esteem among different ethnic youth groups in Guangxi.

Hypothesis 2: Ethnic identity will be positively associated with BJW of the ethnic youth groups in Guangxi.

Hypothesis 3: BJW will be positively associated with self-esteem of the ethnic youth groups in Guangxi.

Hypothesis 4: Ethnic identity will be positively associated with self-esteem of the ethnic youth groups in Guangxi.

Hypothesis 5: BJW will mediate the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedures

A sample of students (n=871) were recruited from a middle school, a high school and a college in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Students in these classrooms were provided with an initial information session providing details of the nature of the study. A consent form was provided later to be completed by their parents or themselves.

After the consent form was completed, the questionnaire of the study was issued to the students and then collected upon its completion by trained research assistants.

Among all the participants, 38.46% are middle school students (n=335), with a mean of years of age of 13.71 (SD=1.03). The number of high school students (n=283) counts 32.49% of all participants.

Their mean age is 17.02 (SD=0.80). 29.05% of the participants are college students, with a mean age of 20.85 years old (SD=1.20). 49.48% of the participants are Han people (majority ethnic group in China), 41.68% are Zhuang people and the rest (8.84%) belongs to other minority ethnic groups. There are 49.71% are males (n=433) and 50.29% are females (n=438) in the total sample and the mean years of age of all participants is 16.86 (SD=3.08).

Measures

Ethnic identity: Ethnic identity was measured by the Student Ethnic Identity Scale developed by Gao and colleagues [7]. This 15-item scale is primarily developed based on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) [8] and the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) [9]. It was designed to integrate Chinese cultural customs about inquiring ethnic identity and validated among

Chinese youth groups [7]. In the current study, the Cronbach's α is 0.82.

Belief in a just world: BJW was assessed by the Personal Belief in a Just World Scale developed by Dalbert [10]. This is a 13-item scale measuring two dimensions: Personal BJW (6 items) and General BJW (7 items). Participants responded to all items on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A higher score indicates more faith in justice. Chinese version of BJW was translated by Su and his colleagues, shows acceptable reliability and [11]. The Cronbach's α for the current study is 0.86.

Self-esteem: Self-esteem was assessed Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). This 10-item scale was developed by Rosenberg. Each item is answered to on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The RSES has been translated into Chinese and validated among Chinese youth [12,13]. In the current study, the Cronbach's α is 0.75.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analysis in the current study were performed with SPSS version 16.0. Prior to analysis, data were closely examined, outliers were cleaned and no missing values were found. A univariate descriptive analysis was utilized to the total sample initially. The mediation effects evaluation approach used in current study were developed by Wen and his colleagues [14].

RESULTS

Means of each key variable were shown in Table 1 by ethnicity, gender and education. The independent sample t-test revealed males had significant higher level of self-esteem than females in the current study (t (869) = 4.59, p<0.001), shown in Table 2. There were no gender differences found on ethnic identity and BJW.

Table 1: Difference tests of main variables among different ethnic groups.

Variables	Han (n=431)	Zhuang (n=363)	Other ethnics (n=77)	F	p-value
Ethnic identity	27.61 (6.69)	27.30 (6.69)	26.49 (6.54)	0.97	0.38
BJW	51.43 (9.62)	51.23 (9.83)	51.04 (11.04)	0.07	0.93
Self-esteem	18.97 (4.46)	18.41 (4.72)	18.62 (4.49)	1.51	0.22

Independent analyses of variance (ANOVAs) demonstrated the three educational levels (middle school, high school and college) were of significantly different level of ethnic identity (F (2,868)=3.26, p<0.05, η2<0.001). In addition, the LSD test confirmed that college students (M=28.19, SD=7.35) showed

higher level of ethnic identity than middle school students (M=26.78, SD=6.46). The results were shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Difference tests of main variables between gender.

Variables	Female (n=438)	Male (n=433)	t	p-value
Ethnic identity	27.18 (6.10)	27.60 (7.25)	0.92	0.36
BJW	50.96 (9.30)	51.66 (10.35)	1.04	0.30
Self-esteem	18.01 (4.38)	19.41 (4.67)	4.58	<0.001

Table 3: Difference tests of main variables among different student groups.

Variables	Middle School (n=431)	High School (n=363)	College (n=77)	F	p-value
Ethnic identity	26.78 (6.46)	27.39 (6.24)	28.19 (7.35)	3.26	<0.05
BJW	51.71 (10.28)	49.78 (9.42)	52.50 (9.52)	5.61	<0.01
Self-esteem	18.46 (5.03)	18.57 (4.40)	19.18 (4.10)	1.94	0.22

Study also revealed three education groups showed significant differences on the level of BJW (F (2,868) = 5.61, p<0.01, η 2=0.013). College students showed highest level of BJW (M=52.50, SD=9.52) and high school students had the lowest level of it(M=49.78, SD=9.42). College students (M=28.95, SD=5.11) and middle school students (M=28.42, SD=5.72) had higher personal BJW score than high school students (M=26.94, SD=5.30). No significant differences on general BJW were found between three education groups (F (2,868) = 1.37, p>0.05). Furthermore, the current study has not found any statistical differences on self-esteem between three education groups (F (2,868) = 1.94, p>0.05, η 2<0.001).

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted between the key variables to determine whether they are related to each other or not and the results is shown in Table 4. As hypothesized, the study results confirmed a significant positive relationship between ethnic identity and BJW (r=0.283, p<0.01) as well as self-esteem (r=0.277, p<0.01). Further, a significant positive relationship was also found between BJW and self-esteem (r=0.419, p<0.01).

Table 4: Pearson's correlation among the main variables.

Variables	M (SD)	Ethnic Identity	BJW	Self-esteem
Ethnic identity	27.39 (6.68)	-	-	-
BJW	51.31 (9.84)	0.28 (p<0.01)	-	-
Self-esteem	18.71 (4.58)	0.28 (p<0.01)	0.42 (p<0.01)	-

Following the mediation effect evaluation steps developed by Wen and his colleagues [14], the current study aim to test BJW (w) as a mediator that accounts for the relation between ethnic identity and self-esteem.Themediation model was shown in Figure 1. In this general causal model, ethnic identity is the predictor (x) and self-esteem is the outcome or criterion (Y). Three linear regression models were tested and results from

these models demonstrated strong statistically significant associations between ethnic identity and self-esteem (β =0.28, t (869) =21.44, p<0.001), shown in Table 5. The models also confirmed that BJW was a partial mediator between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Variance explained by BJW was 37.75% of the variability between ethnic identity and self-esteem.

Table 5: Mediation effect evaluation of BJW.

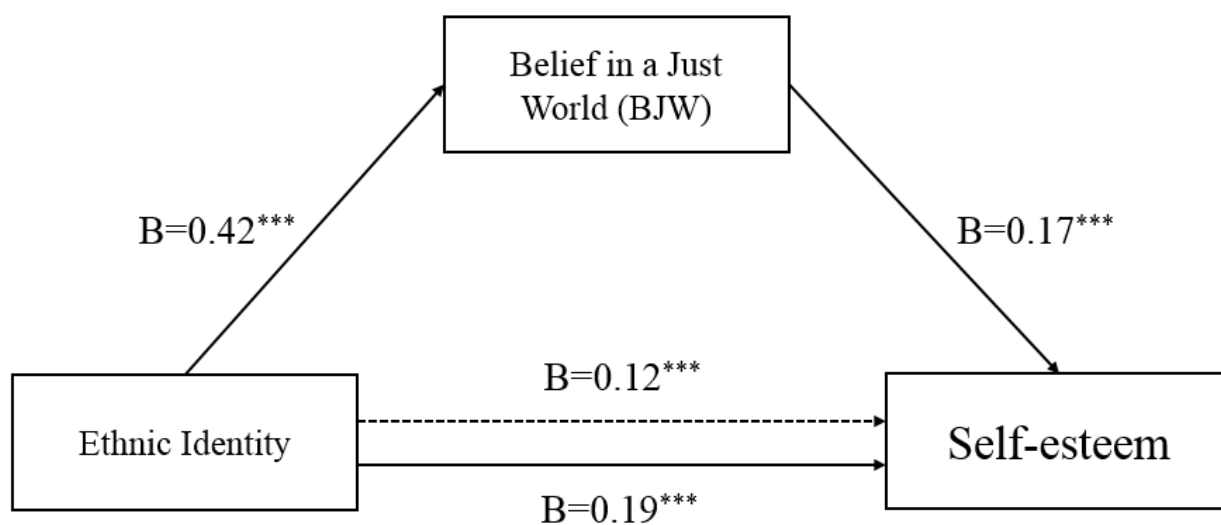|	Standardized regression equation	SE	t (p)	β	F (p)
The first step	Y = 0.19x	0.63	21.44 (p<0.001)	0.28	72.44 (p<0.001)
The second step	W = 0.42x	0.05	8.71 (p<0.001)	0.28	75.78 (p<0.001)
The third step	Y = 0.17w	0.02	11.70 (p<0.001)	0.37	110.31 (p<0.001)
	+0.12x	0.02	5.47 (p<0.001)	0.17	

Figure 1: BJW mediates the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. The dashed line represents the direct effect (c') controlling for belief in a just world. **Notes:** ***p<0.001

DISCUSSION

Research on relationships between ethnic identity, belief in a just world and self-esteem of the minority youth groups in China were insignificant, especially the research focusing on quantitative model testing. The current study found that participants in the sample showed higher score on each key measurement than the measurement tool average, confirming the positive trend of psychological well-being of the minority youth in Guangxi, China. Gao and colleagues found Tibetan and Hui students showed higher level of ethnic identity than Han [7]. However, Zhuang and Han students in the current study had similar level of ethnic identity. Historically, Guangxi is an area with higher interethnic integration level and it could be the reason why the current research showed inconsistent results with previous research.

Male minority youth in the current study showed higher level of self-esteem than their female counterparts, indicating their self-image and self-value are more positive. Culturally, males hold higher social status and expectations, particularly in underdeveloped areas such as Guangxi. However, culture as a mediator, including other potential mediators like SES, educational performance and relationship, has not been discussed in the regression model. New models including more mediators could be developed in the future.

College students in the sample showed the highest level of ethnic identity. From a life span perspective, identity is a continuous developmental task from adolescent to young adulthood [15]. In addition, colleges in China primarily are in urban areas which have more diverse populations. College students have more opportunities to interact with other ethnic groups and develop their own views on ethnicity.

Wen and colleagues [14] found that the level of BJW in youth group decreased when their age increased. The current study found no consistent results. In this sample, high school students showed lower level of BJW than middle school students. However, college students showed higher level of BJW than both high school and middle school students. For high school students, some external stresses such as extensive school work, planning to go to college can shape their views of the environment and their roles, leading to the lower level of BJW [16].

CONCLUSION

The current study confirmed a strong positive association between ethnic identity and self-esteem among the study sample. A positive ethnic identity integrated into the individual's overall social identity can help the individual to achieve a more positive self-image. The study also confirmed a medium positive association between BJW and self-esteem, indicating the more they see the world as a just place the more positive self-image and self-value they have. The positive association between ethnic identity and BJW was also confirmed, which makes the mediation effects analysis an appropriate approach to explore the relationship between ethnic identity, BJW and self-esteem. Analyzing the direct and indirect effects from between ethnic identity and self-esteem and testing and confirming the mediation effects of BJW can demonstrate the significant role of BJW in the overall psychological well-being of minority youth in Guangxi. Furthermore, the current research points out the need and trend for policy changes to integrate more educational programs focusing on increasing students' BJW in the current education system.

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