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Cultural, Psychosocial, and Educational Factors in Relation to Ethnic Identity among Cambodian High School Students in the United States

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between preferred ethnic labels and cultural, psychosocial, and academic variables in a sample of 174 Cambodian high school students in the United States. Results indicated that participants who chose “American” ethnic labels reported higher scores on White/Anglo orientation and on English language usage and fluency, whereas participants who chose the “Cambodian” ethnic label reported more Khmer language usage and frequency. Students who chose the combined “Cambodian American” ethnic label reported stronger beliefs in the utility of education and higher academic aspirations. The findings from this study expand the research on ethnic identity by focusing on 2nd generation Cambodian adolescents.

Ethnic identity is a term used to describe how individuals understand and interpret their own ethnicity, including identifying a group identity that is salient to them and to which they feel positive emotional ties (Phinney, 1996). Phinney further defined ethnic identity as: (a) a sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group, (b) interest in and knowledge about the group, and (c) involvement in activities and traditions of the group. In other words, ethnic identity is related to how individuals feel about their own native cultural group in the framework of the larger collective society. Of the many variables that may impact the success of immigrant or refugee groups in the United States, ethnic identity is one important factor that needs more attention in research. This is especially true regarding adolescent development, such as our sample of Cambodian youth with family history affected by war, genocide, and migration trauma (e.g., Chan, 2004).

Ethnic identity studies originally focused on either African American populations exclusively (Cross, 1991), then evolved into studies of a diverse combination of ethnic groups (Phinney, 1996); While notable recent studies continue to explore this topic (e.g., Budescu et al., 2023; Hernandez et al., 2023), it is important to examine ethnic identity and its correlates in ethnic-specific samples to establish the generalizability of research findings, especially with understudied
ethnic populations (Chhuon, 2014; Museus et al., 2023). In this paper, we considered ethnic identity in the examination of cultural, psychosocial, and educational factors related to the overall well-being of Cambodian high school students. Our focus on ethnic identity in relation to cultural, psychosocial, and educational factors for Cambodian youth is a needed contribution to the current research. The enduring high rates of high school dropouts among Cambodian students (Touch, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2020) implicate potential negative consequences of failing to address the barriers to their educational achievement, as well as the need to highlight factors associated with well-being in Cambodian refugee youth (Papa, 2019).

The Cambodian Context

The recent history of Cambodia provides a unique context for the refugee experience and for understanding the lived experiences of Cambodian youth whose parents were refugees (Chan, 2004). In 1975, following the Cambodian Civil War, a communist regime known as the Khmer Rouge took over control of Cambodia. As part of their social engineering policies, the Khmer Rouge forcefully removed the majority population of Cambodia out of cities and pushed them into an agrarian way of life in rural parts of the country. Citizens who were considered to be potential opponents against the new regime were targeted and executed, including political and religious leaders, academics, and artists, resulting in the Cambodian genocide that involved the deaths of about 25% of Cambodia’s population over a 4-year period. All forms of education were shut down in the country. Families were largely separated, as men were relocated to rural areas where they endured the burden of physical labor while women and children were left to fend on their own for survival. In 1979, the Khmer Rouge lost power when Vietnam invaded Cambodia; this event led to extensive guerrilla warfare between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese occupiers, exacerbating the dire situation in Cambodia. During the ruling of the Khmer Rouge and following their removal from power, a large population of Cambodian citizens made difficult treks across dangerous terrains and escaped as refugees to Thailand, later to be largely relocated to the United States, as well as France, Australia and Canada (e.g., Hach, 2020; Wijers, 2011). Due to these lived experiences, many Cambodian refugees in the United States experience long-term adverse experiences, including mental and physical health problems (Marshall et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2013), which have potential intergenerational effects on the children of these refugees (Dinh et al., 2020).

Ethnic Identity in the Lives of Cambodian Youth

Various factors can impact ethnic identity formation, including country of birth, immigration history, parents’ ethnic identities, prejudice experienced in the United States, and ethnic socialization, including the ethnic composition of one’s school (e.g., Le & Stockdale, 2008; Museus et al., 2023; Rumbaut, 1994). Past researchers have noted that the unique experiences of Asian refugees, such as Cambodian youth, may become invisible in research because they tend to be aggregated into the universal “Asian American” categorization (Museus, 2013; Spring, 2016; Tang & Kao, 2012; Wallitt, 2008). There is limited research that highlights the unique experiences of the Cambodian youth refugee population, particularly relating to the ethnic identity development of those of second-generation status. One prior study examined differences in ethnic identity among Cambodian, Chinese, Laotian, and Vietnamese youth (Le & Stockdale, 2008), and the results showed that Cambodian students scored highest on ethnic identity measures, indicating
that ethnic identity was the most salient for this student group. Another study found that Cambodian, Portuguese, and Dominican youth all chose labels that represented their country of origin 100% of the time, in addition to panethnic labels, and that Cambodian students also reported positive levels of ethnic identity centrality and pride, with higher ethnic identity salience than other student groups (Marks et al., 2007). Furthermore, in their study of American college students of Southeast Asian descent, Ying and Han (2008) showed that Cambodian students reported higher ethnic pride and ethnic orientation over American orientation and that ethnic pride was the most salient predictor of ethnic orientation for Cambodian students. In sum, these studies show that ethnic identity for Cambodian youth is important and thus warrants further research, especially in relation to their cultural and psychosocial adjustment and academic success.

Ethnic identity development among Cambodian students may be complicated by the paradox between their marginalized status in the United States, which is typically associated with obstacles in academic achievement, and the prevailing “model minority” stereotype of Asian Americans overall, which is associated with high academic outcomes (Chhuon, 2014; García Coll & Marks, 2012; Museus et al., 2023; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Wallitt, 2008). Although ethnic identity is a topic that has not received wide attention in research with Cambodian youth, the available research does show that Cambodian students have been found to report strong ethnic identity, with older students reporting greater ethnic identification in prior studies (Le & Stockdale, 2008; Marks et al., 2007). This is consistent with ethnic identity models more broadly (e.g., Cross, 1991). In addition, Cambodian youth who encounter discrimination based on their race/ethnicity were found to perform worse in school than those who do not (Kim, 2002).

**Hyphenated Ethnic Labels**

Ethnic identity may be a complicated process, particularly for marginalized youth. Thus, newer models suggest that there is a benefit to the flexibility offered by allowing hyphenated models of self-identification. The use of hyphens within ethnic labels allows individuals to represent the experience of living between two or more cultures (e.g., “Cambodian American”) rather than within single cultures (e.g., “Cambodian” or “American”) (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011). Few research studies have examined combined or hyphenated ethnic label preferences among immigrant youth, particularly those from Cambodian backgrounds. One important study by Rumbaut (1994) found that immigrant adolescents of diverse ethnicities, including Cambodian students, with more assimilated families preferred hyphenated labels (e.g., Cambodian-American, Asian-American). Moreover, Cambodian students in another study (Marks et al., 2007) frequently chose hyphenated ethnic labels in addition to their native label, and their ethnic label consistency was associated with their choice of a hyphenated label, indicating that students who reported a sense of belonging to both their culture of origin and the new host culture experienced a bicultural ethnic identity over time. Taken together, it appears that the process of adapting to a new culture has an impact on ethnic identity, as immigrant youth struggle to maintain their relationship to their culture of origin while also adapting to their new host culture (Le & Stockdale, 2008). The current study examined this relationship further for a sample of Cambodian high school students in the United States, including hyphenated ethnic label options.
Cultural Adjustment

Southeast Asian refugees and their descendants face various cultural challenges in their experiences of living in the United States (e.g., Chan, 2004; Dinh, 2009). The process of cultural adjustment to U.S. society is complex and dynamic and can yield varying modes of adjustment, including assimilation (high connection to new culture with low or no connection to culture of origin), separation (high connection to culture of origin with low or no connection to new culture), integration (high connection to both new culture and culture of origin), and marginalization (low or no connection to both new culture and culture of origin) (Berry, 2003). Furthermore, acculturative stress can play a prominent role in the cultural adjustment process as refugees confront new cultural demands and attempt to cope with significant life changes. Acculturative stressors, such as adapting to multigenerational changes in language, home and school cultures, and living in drastically new geographical areas, can lead to additional stressors, including socioeconomic disadvantages, intergenerational cultural conflict, and mental health problems. Stress associated with the cultural adjustment experience can impact various dimensions of well-being for Cambodian youth in the United States (Dinh et al., 2020).

Cultural Adjustment and Ethnic Identity

The K-12 schooling system in the United States has historically reinforced cultural assimilation, or “deculturalizing” of newly arriving populations (see Spring, 2016, for a detailed account). Research shows a complex relationship between different modes of acculturation strategies and ethnic self-identification. Doña (1991) found that Latinx participants living in Canada who were in the assimilation mode did not identify with their culture of origin, whereas those in the separation mode only identified with their culture of origin. Furthermore, participants in the integration mode chose multiple and diverse identifications, including those with and without Latinx and Canadian hyphenations. In Lee’s (2001) study, first-generation students who typically chose “Hmong” ethnic labels experienced more obstacles to school success, including increased obligations for parental assistance at home and cultural brokering in the community, leaving little or no time to focus on their academics. Balidemaj and Small (2019) conducted a recent review of research on the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturation strategies and noted that findings remain limited and inconclusive. In their review, Balidemaj and Small concluded that acculturation and ethnic identity appear to interact differently for different groups in different contexts. These results suggest that further investigation is needed to examine this complex association, including whether or not such an association is significant in the life experiences of Cambodian youth.

Mental Health

Decades since the Khmer Rouge genocide and migration to the United States, many Cambodians are still suffering from elevated rates of depression (51%), post-traumatic stress disorder (62%), and other mental health issues (Marshall et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2013). When it comes to accessing mental health resources, barriers exist. Lee et al. (2010) found that specific barriers to mental health care in a sample of Southeast Asian refugees included a lack of knowledge about mental health, culture-specific knowledge, and beliefs about depression (which may not match their understanding of mental health practitioners in the United States), lack of awareness about
professional help, and cultural attitudes about seeking mental health care. Yet, even when mental health care is accessed by members of the Cambodian refugee population, high rates of PTSD and depression persist (Wong et al., 2015).

The demands of coping with cultural adjustment stressors, and potential intergenerational cultural conflict, have considerable consequences for the emotional adjustment of Cambodian youth (Dinh et al., 2013; Mollica et al., 1997). Intergenerational cultural conflict may stem from differential modes of cultural adjustment among family members, especially between parents and children, as incongruity in cultural adjustment has been found to occur within many Asian immigrant families (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Dinh et al., 1994; McCabe & Dinh, 2018). Further difficulties occur when parents or elders are unable to learn English as quickly as children, while children may be unable to achieve or maintain their proficiency in Khmer as they spend increasing time focusing on learning English and within English-speaking contexts. This may result in direct conflict in Cambodian families when family members lose their ability to communicate effectively with each other. Although limited research is available in the general literature, one study that examined the relationship between ethnic identity and intergenerational cultural conflict showed that students whose ethnic identity matched their parents’ ethnic identity typically reported that they were better able to rely on their parents as a support system (Ong et al., 2006). These researchers also found that Latinx students who experienced less family cohesion had worse academic outcomes. Lee (2001) found that second-generation Hmong students (i.e., U.S.-born) reported more intergenerational cultural conflict than their first-generation peers (i.e., foreign-born). These results are consistent with findings from our previous research with Cambodian American youth showing a negative association between Cambodian cultural orientation and intergenerational cultural conflict (Dinh et al., 2008; Dinh et al., 2013). Therefore, we expected that ethnic label preferences may be significantly related to intergenerational cultural conflict among Cambodian students in this current study.

Further research on mental health among the Cambodian refugee population can have important implications for prevention and intervention when it comes to well-being. Generally, across various samples, the development of ethnic identity has been related to healthy mental health outcomes; this effect has been particularly strong among marginalized youth samples (Moore et al., 2022). For these populations, promoting ethnic identity development may aid in recovery from mental health issues, serving as aids in coping, stress management, and social support. In some refugee populations in particular, a stronger ethnic identity to one’s native culture has mental health benefits, such as lower depression (Mossakowski, 2003; Noh et al., 1999). However, for Southeast Asian refugee populations, the association between ethnic identity and depression remains unclear. This association is also unclear among the second generation of Cambodian youth, who are the children of Southeast Asian refugees, and needs to be examined as to whether such an association is important in the mental health issues of Cambodian youth. But what is clear is that further research in this area may offer us additional options for promoting well-being in immigrant and refugee populations.

**Academic-Related Outcomes**

Previous research showed that Cambodian students value education, similar to other immigrant student groups in the United States (e.g., Kim, 2002). However, Cambodian students have continuously lagged behind other Asian immigrant groups with regard to achieved educational outcomes, such as grade point average and school graduation rates (e.g., Chang & Le, 2005;
Ethnic identity has been shown to be related to academic outcomes across diverse youth samples. For example, Chinese, Mexican, and White adolescents who reported more native ethnic identities and more positive regard towards their own ethnic group have been found to have stronger beliefs in school success, higher levels of intrinsic interest in school, greater levels of identification with school, and stronger beliefs in being valued and respected by their schools (Fuligni et al., 2005). Furthermore, studies reveal that strong ethnic identification with one’s own group is related to academic self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy for immigrant and minority students (Jaret & Reitzes, 2009; Le & Stockdale, 2008). Yet, limited research on the relationship between ethnic identity and academic-related outcomes has included a Cambodian youth sample, particularly those of second generation, so it is unclear what this relationship might be for this youth population. What the research does tell us is that various factors contribute to the educational obstacles for Cambodian students in schools, including historical and family refugee-related traumas that have created unique challenges in the bicultural adjustment to Cambodian and American cultures (Chang & Le, 2005; Chhuon & Hudley, 2011; Dinh et al., 2008; Dinh et al., 2013; McCabe & Dinh, 2018). Ethnic identity is potentially one such important correlation to educational experiences that we further explore in the current study.

The Current Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which ethnic label preferences are related to cultural, psychosocial, and educational outcomes for Cambodian high school youth. The current study presents a valuable addition to the research on ethnic identity, especially among Cambodian youth, including those who are second generation, the children of Cambodian refugees. In the current study, given the limited prior research with Cambodian youth with first- and second-generation status, we examined the data with the following research questions: What ethnic labels do students of Cambodian descent living in the United States choose? Which ethnic labels are associated with better cultural, psychosocial (depression, family conflict) and academic (GPA, school membership, and attitudes toward educational achievement) outcomes?

Method

Participants

The present sample included 174 Cambodian students (56% girls, 42% boys, 2% other) from a large urban public high school located in the Northeast United States. The mean age of students was 16.00 (SD = 1.42), ranging from ages 13 to 20. There were 25% ninth-graders, 28% tenth-graders, 26% eleventh-graders, and 19% twelfth-graders. Seventy-five percent of the students were born in the United States and 95% of the students’ parents were foreign-born. Parental homeownership was used as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status; 50% of students reported parental home ownership and 50% reported parental non-home ownership (e.g., renting an apartment/house, living in homes of other family members).
Procedure

With permission from the public school district and the institutional review board’s approval, recruitment efforts (i.e., class announcements and informative flyers) of Cambodian students were conducted in Khmer language classes, advisory/home rooms, and throughout the participating high school. The selected school was the primary high school located in a city with the second largest Cambodian population in the United States. School personnel, including a bilingual Cambodian liaison and a trained bilingual Cambodian research assistant, assisted in the recruitment of students in all four grade levels (9th–12th) for participation in the study. School administrators provided class rosters for the selection of potential Cambodian participants. A cover letter, along with an informed consent form and a return stamped envelope, were mailed to parents as well as sent home with students from school. The cover letter and informed consent form, in both English and Khmer, explained the purpose and procedure of the study. Students who had one or both parents’ permission and also assented to being part of the study were allowed to participate in the survey. Each student received a movie ticket for their participation in this study.

A series of group survey sessions, lasting approximately 45 minutes, were held at the participating high school. We assured participants, both orally and in writing, that their responses to the survey would be anonymous and to leave their names off the survey. In the survey, we assessed preferred ethnic labels, cultural variables, intergenerational cultural conflict, depression, psychological sense of school membership, belief in the utility of education, educational aspirations, and demographic information. The survey was completed in English because this was the primary language for most participants.

Measures

Demographics & Ethnic Identity Label

As part of the survey, a short questionnaire was used to collect basic demographic information, including participant’s age, gender, grade level, and immigrant status. Parental homeownership was assessed as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status (SES) and was included in this study because students were more likely to have knowledge of their parents’ home ownership status than other metrics of SES, such as the level of total household income or level of parental education or type of employment. Finally, “What is your preferred ethnic label?” was included as one item, in which students were provided the following choices: “Cambodian,” “Asian,” “Cambodian American,” “Asian American,” “American,” and “Other: please specify.”

Cultural Variables

From our previous research, the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ; Tsai et al., 2000) was adapted for this study to assess Cambodian and White/Anglo cultural orientations. Because of concerns about survey length, only 10 parallel items were selected from each of the respective 39-item scales of the GEQ. The selected items were similar to items in other cultural assessments, such as the Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation scale (Suinn et al., 1992). The items in the Chinese cultural orientation scale were slightly revised to reflect the Cambodian cultural orientation (e.g., changing “I am proud of Chinese culture” to “I am proud of Cambodian culture.”). Each item in the GEQ was accompanied by a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1
“strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.” Higher mean scores reflected higher levels of immersion in the respective cultural orientations. Sample items include: “I would prefer to live in a Cambodian (Anglo/White American) community” and “I am familiar with Cambodian (Anglo/White American) cultural practices and customs.” These adapted scales have been used in previous research with Cambodian or other Asian samples, with Cronbach alphas ranging from .76 to .91 (Dinh et al., 2008; Ho et al., 2012). In the current study, the alphas for the Cambodian and Anglo/White scales were .79 and .90, respectively.

In addition, the GEQ also contains a separate scale for language use. Five questions ask how fluently and how often participants read and speak in Khmer and English languages, respectively. The response scale is comprised of a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “Not at all” to 5 “Very Much.” For this study, the alphas were .85 for Khmer language use and .89 for English language use.

**Psychosocial Variables**

The Dinh Intergenerational Conflict Inventory (DICI; Dinh, 2005) was used to assess students’ perceptions of intergenerational cultural conflict. It is a 10-item measure, with a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “not true at all” to 5 “very much true.” Sample items include: “My parents believe I have become too Americanized” and “My cultural values are the same as my parents’ cultural values.” Certain items were reverse scored (three items) so that a higher mean score reflected a higher level of intergenerational cultural conflict. In this study, the alpha for the DICI was .71.

The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff, 1977) was used to assess depression. The CES-D is a 20-item measure, utilizing a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “rarely or none of the time” to 4 “most or all of the time,” with instructions to select the response that best reflects the participant’s feelings during the past 30 days. Sample items include: “I felt that could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends” and “I thought my life had been a failure.” Certain items were reverse-scored (four items) so that a higher mean score reflected a higher level of depression. The CES-D scale has good internal reliability (.86) across diverse subgroups (Orme et al., 1986). In this study, the alpha for the CES-D was .86.

**Academic-Related Variables**

The Psychological Sense of School Membership measure (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993) assessed how connected, accepted, and supported participants feel at their school. This 18-item measure utilizes a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “not at all true” to 5 “completely true.” Sample items include: “Most teachers here are interested in me,” and “I wish I were in a different school.” Certain items were reverse-scored (five items) so that a higher mean score reflected a higher level of school membership or connection. The PSSM’s internal reliability (.88) has been shown to be good across diverse samples (Goodenow, 1993). In this study, the alpha for the PSSM was .82.

The Belief in the Utility of Education (BUE) scale assessed students’ attitudes toward education (BUE; Fuligni, 2001). It is a 5-item measure, utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “not at all true for me” to 5 “very true for me.” Sample items include: “Going to college is necessary for what I want to do in the future” and “Doing well in school is the best way for me to succeed as an adult.” This measure has good internal reliability (.88; Fuligni 2001). In this study, the alpha for the BUE was .85.
Educational aspirations were assessed through the following three questions: “How far do your parents or guardians want you to go in school?,” “How far would you like to go in school?,” and “How far do you think you will actually go in school?” The response scale to these three questions includes: (1) “finish some high school,” (2) “graduate from high school,” (3) “graduate from a 2-year college,” (4) “graduate from a 4-year college,” and (5) “graduate from a law, medical, or graduate school.” In this study, these three questions were combined into one summary score and had an internal reliability coefficient of .84. This summary scale was used in previous research with Cambodian youth, yielding an internal reliability coefficient of .86 (Dinh et al., 2008).

Results

Ethnic Identity Labels

Results showed that the highest percentage of participants in the current sample chose the “Cambodian” ethnic label \(n = 73\) or 42%. The next most frequently selected ethnic label was “Cambodian American” \(n = 43\) or 25%. The remaining ethnic labels were selected as follows: “Asian American” \(n = 28\) or 16%; Asian \(n = 27\) or 16%, and “American” \(n = 3\) or 2%.

Correlations among Demographics and Primary Study Variables

A few demographic characteristics were correlated with ethnic label choices. The “Cambodian” ethnic label was negatively correlated with gender, indicating that more male students chose this label \(r = -.15, p = .04\). Ethnic label preferences were associated with birthplace, with being born outside the United States correlated with the “Cambodian” ethnic label \(r = -.37, p < .001\) and being born within the United States correlated with the “Cambodian American” \(r = .22, p < .001\) and “Asian American” ethnic label \(r = .26, p < .001\). Finally, a higher household income was positively correlated with the “Asian American” ethnic label \(r = .25, p < .001\).

Additional correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. The “Cambodian” preferred ethnic label was negatively correlated to the “Asian” label \(r = -.35, p < .001\), the “Cambodian American” label \(r = -.48, p < .001\), and “Asian American” label \(r = -.37, p < .001\). The “Asian” preferred ethnic label was negatively correlated with the “Cambodian American” \(r = -.23, p < .001\), and “Asian American” labels \(r = -.18, p = .01\). The “Cambodian” preferred ethnic label was negatively correlated with White/Anglo orientation \(r = -.22, p < .001\), whereas the “Asian American” label was positively correlated with White/Anglo orientation \(r = .20, p = .01\). Further, the “Cambodian American” preferred label was positively correlated with educational aspirations \(r = .16, p = .03\), while the “Cambodian” label was negatively correlated \(r = -.15, p = .04\) with educational aspirations. Khmer language use was negatively correlated with intergenerational conflict \(r = -.28, p < .001\).

Cultural, Psychosocial, and Educational Variables in Relation to Ethnic Identity Labels

To investigate our research questions, discriminant analysis was used to determine whether cultural, psychosocial, and educational variables were related to specific ethnic identity labels. Results showed that Cambodian orientation \(F(4) = 2.93, p = .03\), Anglo/White orientation \(F(4) = 5.09, p = .01\), Khmer language \(F(4) = 3.64, p = .01\), and English language \(F(4) = 8.30, p <
.001) were significantly related to ethnic identity labels (Table 2). Results also showed a trend towards significance between educational aspirations and preferred ethnic identity labels ($F(4) = 2.34, p = .06$; see Table 2). Other variables were statistically nonsignificant in their associations with ethnic labels, including psychological sense of school membership, belief in the utility of education, depression, and intergenerational cultural conflict.

**Group Differences by Ethnic Label**

We utilized analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine group differences by ethnic label. Both Cambodian and Anglo/White cultural orientations showed statistically significant differences based on grouping variables (Table 3). Specifically, participants who chose a Cambodian label reported higher Cambodian cultural orientation than those who chose American labels ($F(4) = 2.94, SD = .02$). Participants who chose the “Asian American” ethnic label reported higher Anglo/White cultural orientation ($M = 3.43, SD = .64$) than those who chose “Cambodian American” ($M = 3.23, SD = .69$), “Asian” ($M = 3.17, SD = .64$) and “Cambodian” ($M = 2.89, SD = .70$) labels ($F(4) = 3.85, p = .005$). Furthermore, analyses examining language use also showed statistically significant differences. Participants who chose American labels reported higher English usage and fluency than those who chose labels without the American option ($F(4) = 6.35, p < .001$). Conversely, participants who chose the “Cambodian” label reported higher Khmer usage and fluency ($M = 3.30, SD = .88$) than those who chose “Asian” ($M = 2.93, SD = .78$), “Asian American” ($M = 2.91, SD = .88$) and “Cambodian American” ($M = 2.84, SD = .70$) labels ($F(4) = 3.98, p < .001$) (see Figure 1).

For educational variables (Table 3), a trend was found for the BUE, such that participants who chose the “Cambodian American” ethnic label reported stronger beliefs in the utility of education ($M = 4.67, SD = .58$) than those who chose “Asian American” ($M = 4.54, SD = .47$), “Cambodian” ($M = 4.51, SD = .62$), and “Asian” ($M = 4.41, SD = .62$) labels ($F(4) = 1.96, p = .10$). A similar trend was found for ethnic label and educational aspirations, such that participants who chose the “Cambodian American” ethnic label reported higher educational aspirations ($M = 4.05, SD = .70$) than those who chose “Asian American” ($M = 3.89, SD = .51$), “Asian” ($M = 3.74, SD = .96$), and “Cambodian” ($M = 3.66, SD = .96$) labels ($F(4) = 2.17, p = .07$). No significant or marginally significant differences were found for psychological sense of school membership ($F(4) = .84, ns$), intergenerational cultural conflict ($F(4) = .58, ns$), or depression ($F(4) = 1.08, ns$) (see Figure 2).

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to examine whether preferred ethnic labels are related to cultural, psychosocial, and academic variables in a sample of Cambodian high school students. Given the unique context of this particular sample, with a high percentage of Cambodian students in the participating school, fewer participants in this study chose “Asian” or “American” non-hyphenated labels. Instead, they indicated “Cambodian,” “Cambodian American,” or “Asian American” as their preferred ethnic labels. Further, participants who preferred a Cambodian ethnic label reported higher Cambodian cultural orientation and Khmer language use and fluency, whereas those who preferred an American ethnic label reported higher White/Anglo cultural orientation and English language use and fluency. Because language usage and fluency are often proxy measures of cultural modes of adjustment, it is not unexpected that these cultural variables...
were associated with specific ethnic labels for Cambodian students. It is important to note here the school context, such that these findings will apply to a particular sample of Cambodian youth who attended a high school with a large Cambodian student population (33%). Because language usage and fluency are often proxy measures of cultural modes of adjustment, it is not unexpected that these cultural variables were associated with specific ethnic labels for Cambodian students. It is important to note here the school context, such that these findings will apply to a particular sample of Cambodian youth who attended a high school with a large Cambodian student population (33%). However, these findings are consistent with previous research involving other immigrant youth samples (e.g., Birman & Trickett, 2001) and further expand the general literature on ethnic identity. These findings also indicate a symbiotic relationship between modes of cultural adjustment and ethnic identity for Cambodian youth and the importance of examining this relationship from a prospective developmental perspective in future research with this youth population to ascertain how they interact over time and across different contexts. Furthermore, these results indicate the importance of language usage and fluency in the maintenance of Cambodian ethnic identity and/or adoption of American ethnic identity, and that language usage plays a key role in the processes of cultural adjustment and ethnic identity formation. Longitudinal designs that include more contextual covariances, such as school environment measures, would provide a better understanding of the interaction effect of these variables on outcomes of well-being and their bidirectional influences on the formation and changes in ethnic identity and cultural adjustment.

The results indicated that no ethnic identity label preferences were significantly related to depression and intergenerational cultural conflict. It is important to note that these findings are consistent with Noh et al. (1999), who also examined the link between mental health and ethnic labels in a Southeast Asian sample. It may simply be that the development of ethnic identity is unique for this group of adolescents and is not linked to depression specifically but that it may be related to other mental health variables, such as externalizing symptoms, which were not assessed in this study. Future research should consider assessments of multiple mental health variables, as well as other outcomes of well-being (e.g., physical health, social health, etc.), in examining their connection to ethnic identity among Cambodian youth. Future research should also re-examine the association (or lack thereof in this study) between ethnic identity and intergenerational cultural conflict with other Cambodian or Southeast Asian youth samples as the latter is often involved in the process of cultural adjustment for Asian youth of immigrant background (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Dinh et al., 2013).

Academic struggles may be further intensified by the marginalized status that these students hold in U.S. society as well as the intergenerational effects of family exposure to war and genocide trauma. Results showed a potentially important link between educational aspirations and preferred ethnic labels. Upon further examination, students who chose the “Cambodian American” ethnic label reported stronger beliefs in the utility of education and higher educational aspirations. These findings are consistent with previous research showing academic advantages to bicultural orientations (Dinh et al., 2008). Nevertheless, schools often overlook the advantages that can be gained from fostering bicultural ethnic identity in Cambodian youth, as well as youth from other minority or marginalized backgrounds. Future research should examine ethnic label choices further, particularly bicultural label choices, and the benefits that may result from such an orientation.
Study Limitations

There were some limitations in the current study. The study sample is unique; the students in this study attended a large, inner-city high school with a large Cambodian student population (33%). Due to this representation, the school offers multiple Khmer language and culture classes during the day, taught by native Cambodian high school teachers. It may be the case that Cambodian students in other U.S. settings may experience their ethnic identity development differently (Chan, 2017), which would likely result in different research findings if they were included in a study like this one. Further, participants in our sample did not identify with the multiethnic options provided to them. We recognize the complexity and nuances in ethnic identities in relation to multiethnic influences and the need to focus further research attention on this topic. Future research should consider a comparative investigation into ethnic identity development between Cambodian youth living and attending schools in ethnic enclave communities and those living outside ethnic enclaves, along with possible multiethnic identities. The sample in this study is also limited in that it was restricted to only high school students and included a cross-sectional design, which does not capture change over time, an especially important factor in understanding the process of ethnic identity development. Furthermore, our study is limited in its assessment of additional demographic variables, such as parental or family characteristics and migration background, that would yield a richer contextual picture of ethnic identity and its correlates in the lives of Cambodian youth. Future research with Cambodian American youth should consider including assessments of experiences of prejudice and discrimination and mental health variables aside from depression. Finally, our data collection occurred pre-pandemic; future research should consider the impact of the pandemic and post-pandemic events on ethnic identity formation and preferences and whether the results may differ from the results of research studies conducted pre-pandemic.

Implications for Intervention

The significant relationship of ethnic identity to the process of adapting to a new culture and language must be acknowledged when developing intervention and supportive programs for Cambodian youth. Although underfunded urban public schools may not be able to address the various obstacles to learning that these experiences produce, public school personnel must recognize the potential impact of cultural challenges on student achievement. Towards this goal, schools should be aware of the complicated interaction that exists between the Cambodian cultural traditions and the American educational system for the entire family, including parents of Cambodian students who have a history of war and migration trauma (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

Teachers and other school personnel need to understand that Cambodian students and parents may experience cultural challenges in American schools when they are expected to express themselves according to Anglo/White cultural values and behaviors. Teachers ought to attend to their own cultural biases (see Chhuon & Hudley, 2011), such as the tendency to pathologize the “lack” of expressiveness among Cambodian students or label their classroom behaviors as “internalizing” (e.g., Chhuon, 2014). In addition, teachers who work with immigrant and refugee students should understand their distinctive significance in the lives of these students, especially those who spend the majority of the school day with the students (Weinstein & Trickett, 2016). Teachers can build check-ins to the school day, using modalities that take little time and benefit both teachers and students (e.g., mindfulness practices, life skills instruction, structured social interactions). In addition, teachers can use classroom best practices to bring benefits to all students,
including multisensory teaching approaches, scaffolded or differentiated instruction, structuring classroom routines, and creating a positive learning environment. Finally, Keo (2019) examined the importance of including parents in the educational environment and with educational decisions.

Wallitt (2008) found that other simple curriculum modifications, such as the inclusion of Cambodia in the history curriculum or in writing assignments that allowed Cambodian students to explore their culture, resulted in students who felt more connected to the school environment and had an increase in academic motivation. Conversely, when Cambodia was not included in any of the curriculum topics, especially in History classes, Cambodian students felt ignored and tended to withdraw from school as a consequence. Another modification that would benefit students includes access to classes in Khmer language and culture, such as the access that students in this study’s sample benefitted from. Longitudinally, there is the goal of promoting the positive benefits of ethnic label associations that can endure post-high school (Tang, & Kao, 2012). For example, lower discrimination and societal devaluation by ethnic labels has been shown to be associated with more success through college (Huynh & Filigni, 2012; Tang et al., 2013). Thus, success can be fostered as early as elementary school and can continue post-graduation.

Conclusion

It is important to remind ourselves that the Cambodian community is comprised of survivors (e.g., Papa, 2019). They have lived through life events that most Americans born in the United States cannot imagine, and they have endured immense obstacles to relocate and survive in the United States. Despite the many challenges faced by this community, both in the turbulent history of Cambodia and in the process of cultural adjustment to America, the Cambodian American community is a symbol of resilience that we can learn from. There are further lessons that we can learn from the young Cambodian refugee sample in this study, who represents the future of the Cambodian American community. The findings of the present study, combined with those of previous research on Cambodian youth (e.g., Chhuon & Hudley, 2011; Dearing et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2008), underscore the importance of paying attention to ethnic identity and cultural factors in this population, especially because of their potential implications for academic outcomes and other areas of well-being, presently and in the future.

About the Authors

Traci L. Weinstein, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Community Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Rhode Island College. She teaches a range of courses in Community, Developmental, and Social Psychology that explore topics of diversity, inequity, and social change. Ecological theory guides Dr. Weinstein’s work, in which multiple ecosystems that impact the individual are highlighted, including family, school, work, community, and society. Her research in community psychology uses a systems approach to promote positive mental health and overall well-being across community contexts. The main focus of this work is with marginalized groups in school settings.
Khanh T. Dinh, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Lowell. Dr. Dinh’s primary areas of expertise include clinical, community, and feminist psychology. She is particularly interested in the effects of cultural changes and stress in the lives of immigrant individuals and families, as well as the effects of intercultural contacts and social injustice on human development. Her research work has been published in various academic outlets. She is a recipient of the NIH Health Disparities Service Award and the NIMH National Research Service Award. She has served on the Editorial Boards of the Asian American Journal of Psychology, Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, and Women & Therapy. She is a Past President of the Section on the Psychology of Asian Pacific American Women and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race, the Society for the Study of Social Issues, and the Society for the Psychology of Women.

Tamara D. Springle, Ph.D., conducted this research as a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Dr. Springle is an independent researcher and consultant; research interests revolve around social media and the development and expression of cultural identities of youth and adults. Specifically, she is interested in 1) the construction and performance of racial, gender, romantic, and sexual identities in social media 2) the role of social media in socialization about romantic relationships, sex, and sexuality, and 3) development and evaluation of culture specific interventions to promote healthy intimate relationships and relationship behaviors.
References


Weinstein et al.: Ethnic Identity Among Cambodian Students in the U.S.
Table 1
Correlations among Variables

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*p < .05. **p < .01.
### Table 2
*Discriminant Analysis of Cultural Variables in Relation to Ethnic Identity Labels*

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*Note:* For Cultural Variables, 45.6% of original grouped cases correctly classified. For Educational Variables, 31.0% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$; † = $p < .10$. 

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Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations using ANOVA with Post-Hoc Tukey’s Test

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**p < .01; *p < .05.
Figure 1

*Acculturative Variables by Ethnic Label*

![Bar chart showing acculturative variables by ethnic label. The chart compares acculturation levels among Cambodian, Asian, Khmer, and English orientations.

Figure 2

*Educational Outcomes by Ethnic Label*

![Bar chart showing educational outcomes by ethnic label. The chart compares educational attainment levels among Cambodian, Cambodian American, Asian, and Asian American groups in terms of belief in the utility of education and educational aspirations.}
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