

Ethnic identity exploration among young South Asian immigrants in New Zealand



RESEARCH

‘Ethnic identity exploration among South Asian immigrant young adults in New Zealand’

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Background

Having a strong and stable sense of self has significant implications on health and wellbeing. In order to achieve a sense of self, individuals must explore and understand elements of their many social identities (e.g., ethnic, national, religious) which can have differing, or even conflicting, influences on understanding ego-identity (the overall sense of self).

The influence of social identity on ego-identity is particularly salient for young immigrants who are developing their own identity within a new culture and environment. Yet little is understood about the relationship between ego-identity development and exploration of ethnic identity.

The Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, conducted research on ethnic identity exploration in South Asian young adult immigrants in New Zealand.

Main research findings

The findings indicated that moratorium (the process of identity exploration without commitment) reduced ethnic identity achievement (a strong and positive sense of self related to membership in one's ethnic group). That is, those who had greater ego-identity exploration (without being committed to a solid sense of self) were less likely to feel that their ethnicity was a central part of their identity and a source of pride.

However, further examination highlighted that moratorium can both increase and reduce ethnic identity achievement through two different processes: ethno-cultural identity conflict (conflict in managing more than one cultural identity) and ethnic identity search (exploration of one's ethnic identity).

Those who were higher in moratorium also had greater ethnic identity exploration, which increased ethnic identity achievement. Conversely, those who were higher in moratorium were also higher in ethno-cultural identity conflict, which reduced ethnic identity achievement.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

The findings indicate that identity exploration in young South Asian immigrants in New Zealand can have contradictory effects on their ethnic identity achievement. Those who are in the process of exploring their ego-identity and, thus, actively search to understand the meaning and importance of ethnicity also feel that their ethnicity is a source of belonging and pride that is central to their sense of self. However, those who are exploring their ego-identity and experience conflict in managing multiple cultural identities tend to feel that their ethnicity is not central nor a source of pride and belonging.

Hence, moratorium is not necessarily positive or negative but depends on people's perceptions of ethnic identity exploration as a search for meaning or as a source of conflict. Though, more research is needed to understand the relationship between identity and ethnic identity processes, particularly for immigrant communities in New Zealand.

The findings highlight the complexity of identity processes for South Asian immigrants in New Zealand and suggest that reducing ethno-cultural identity conflict may help improve ethnic identity achievement. Therefore, future research should also look into how ethno-cultural identity conflict is experienced by immigrants in New Zealand to help improve multicultural policy development.