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Research Paper

Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem in Khasi Youth

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is likely derived from an array of identities, including ethnic identity especially for minority youth. Indeed, ethnic identity has been found to be positively correlated with self-esteem for adolescents and youth of different minority groups. In a country like India with a huge population, the Khasis of Meghalaya form a minority group, which have been subjected to socio-political influence or change in different forms throughout history. Although the Khasis have retained their tribal status, perceptions of ethnicity and group belonging may have changed due to such influences. This study examined the relation of ethnic identity to self-esteem among Khasi youth of Meghalaya, taking into consideration the gender differences within this group. The sample included 100 male and 100 female college students aged 18 to 25 years. Using a correlational methodology, results indicated a weak positive correlation only between Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) sub-scale Resolution and self-esteem measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In addition, t-tests resulted in the rejection of the null hypothesis for EIS Affirmation and EIS Exploration, but not for EIS Resolution or self-esteem. Therefore, gender difference is found to be significant only for the affirmation and exploration subscales of the EIS. Such differences are discussed within the context of the Khasi matrilineal culture of Meghalaya, India.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, Khasi identity, Khasi Youth*

Ethnic identity refers to the extent by which individuals identify with a particular ethnic group. It is a personal self-categorization that identifies the individual's language, culture, beliefs and practices along with a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group. Using a developmental approach, based on Erik Erikson's and James Marcia's theories of identity development, Phinney (1988) focused on ethnic identity formation as not only an individual process but that which is influenced by the individual's culture. Erikson too, did view culture as playing a role in the development of identity and emphasized how ethnic minority groups struggled to maintain their cultural identities within a dominant culture (Santrock, 2007). Ethnic identity is a construct that has been widely researched in the recent years, especially with immigrant communities. Such research on ethnic identity showed that it is related to positive outcomes for ethnic minority groups (Santrock, 2007). For instance, ethnic identity has been found to be related to self-esteem as well as higher school engagement and lower aggression. Further, these social, psychological and developmental perspectives suggest that a strong, secure ethnic identity makes a positive

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contribution to psychological well-being. For instance, a study on youth of Chinese descent in America (Rivas-Drake, Hughes & Way, 2008) indicated that a positive affect towards their own ethnic group was positively associated with higher self-esteem, and the more favourably they perceived others viewed their group the fewer depressive symptoms were reported. Another study among Arab Americans (Atari & Han, 2018) found that ethnic identity resolution and affirmation was positively associated with psychological well-being. A study on Mexican and Chinese adolescents suggested that individuals obtained direct psychological benefits from holding positive perceptions about their ethnic group (Kiang et al., 2006). Therefore, it can be said that ethnic identity is related to psychological benefits and contributes to the development of self-esteem in individuals.

Self- esteem which refers to the value or worth one places on oneself, has been a topic of prominent interest in the field of psychology. It refers to an evaluation of the self, thereby contributing to one's overall self-concept. Generally, a positive self-esteem has been found to be beneficial for individuals. For instance, while low self-esteem has been found to be a predictor of increases in sadness (Ciarrochi, Heaven & Fiona, 2007), high self-esteem predicted success and well-being in relationships, work and health domains (Orth & Robins, 2014). Also, another study indicated that the effect of self-esteem on depression was significantly stronger than the effect of depression on self-esteem, but that the effects between low self-esteem and anxiety were relatively balanced (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), which indicates the role of self-esteem on depression. Therefore, self-esteem does play an important role with regards to the psychological aspects of individuals. Further, in their research article Cast & Burke (2002) discussed self-esteem using a social identity theory in which it was posited that self-esteem is produced through the process of self-verification within groups, and that the self-esteem thus acquired help sustain the individual and the social group. The process of verification involves comparing the perceptual inputs with identity standards, resulting in an output which is meaningful behaviour of adjusting to the situation, so as to maintain the matching of perceptions of the situation with meanings in the identity standard. Since an identity is necessary to one's group membership such a self-verification should have positive effects on the individual. Viewing self-esteem as contributing to an identity within a social group is therefore most relevant. Like ethnic identity, self-esteem also focuses on the individual within the context of a social group. Further ethnic identity was found to be significantly related to self-esteem among adolescents (Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Bracey, Bámaca & Umaña-Taylor, 2004). However, a study on a minority group suggests that a strong ethnic identity is related to high self-esteem when accompanied by a positive mainstream orientation but otherwise problematic (Phinney, 1991). Another study (Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen & Guimond, 2009) indicated that patterns of growth of ethnic identity components varied by adolescent sex and only growth in exploration predicted growth in self-esteem for boys and girls over a period of 4 years. Therefore, although self-esteem has been studied extensively, there is still need to understand its implications within the context of the particular social group of interest, along with its relationship to ethnic identity.

Background

The Khasis refer to a group of people belonging to the State of Meghalaya in India. It is a Scheduled Tribe that is known for its matrilineal culture that is the children carry their mother's surname or title unlike the other communities whose family name is that of the father. The Khasis family name is indicative of the clans to which they belong. Nongbri (2003) says that the central defining feature of the identity of a Khasi is the matrilineal system and that the woman is the bearer of this tradition. The Khasi Hills Autonomous

District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997 defines a Khasi as a person belonging to the Khasi tribe who may be Khasi, Jaintia, Pnar, Synteng, War, Bhoi or Lyngngam. Although the Khasis have retained their tribal status, they have experienced the effects of colonization as the rest of this country, colonization being a major context of acculturation (Baron & Misra, 2018). These effects and interactions with outsiders had not only influenced its people, but also the beliefs and various cultural aspects to a certain extent. For instance, the British brought with them Christianity in the early 19th century which was a new religion for the tribals in India at that time. However, it is not only the occurrences in history that have brought about change in the region but also the effects of the global village, since accessibility to the internet and social media came within reach. This influence is marked not only in shifts in practices but also in the everyday lives, such as the preference of food and clothing. Therefore, as an identity is formed partly by the cultural and socio-historical influence (Phinney, 2000), it would also be interesting to study the ethnic identity of such a people. Also, it is notable that as reported in the Highland Post (2024) Meghalaya has the highest unemployment rate in the North Eastern region of the country. Other problems concerning youth in the State include early marriage, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, drug abuse and mental health issues. According to a study on school dropout by the Centre for Research in Schemes and Polices (Passah, Phira & Moulick, 2024), Meghalaya ranks third amongst the States with the highest dropout at the secondary level, citing teenage pregnancy or eloping as one of the minor reasons. And according to The Shillong Times (2024), the number of drug users in Meghalaya increased from 2 lakh to around 3 lakh in just one year. Therefore, these problems exist in the State and in this light, the focus of this study is on establishing the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem in Khasi youth.

Objectives

1. To establish the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem in Khasi youth.
2. To determine the gender differences with regard to ethnic identity and self-esteem among Khasi youth.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem-
   - **H_{01}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity exploration and self-esteem.
   - **H_{02}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity affirmation and self-esteem.
   - **H_{03}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity resolution with self-esteem.
2. There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity-
   - **H_{04}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity exploration.
   - **H_{05}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity affirmation.
   - **H_{06}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity resolution.
3. **H_{07}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to self-esteem.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative method using a correlational design so as to establish the relationship between the two variables, ethnic identity being the independent variable and self-esteem being the dependent variable. Statistical analysis is applied to determine the Pearson correlation and t-test is used to determine the gender differences in the group pertaining to the respective variables.

Sample

The sample includes 200 college students belonging to the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, 100 being male and 100 being female. The age ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a Mean of 21.36 and a SD of 1.62. A probability multi-stage random sampling method was used in the selection of the sample for this study.

Inclusion Criteria-

1. Individuals born to parents who are both Khasi.
2. Individuals who live in Meghalaya.

Exclusion Criteria-

1. Individuals with mixed parents, that is one parent being non-Khasi.
2. Individuals who have resided or lives outside Meghalaya.

Instruments

1. Ethnic Identity Scale

The Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian,. & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004) was used for data collection with regards to ethnic identity. The EIS assesses three distinct components of ethnic identity:

1. Exploration, which is the degree to which individuals have explored their ethnicity
2. Resolution, which is the degree to which individuals have resolved what their ethnic identity means to them
3. Affirmation, which is the affect that individuals associate with their ethnic-group membership, indicated as either positive or negative.

This scale consists of 17-items scored on a 4-point Likert scale from (1) “Does not describe me at all” to (4) “Describes me very well”.

With regards to reliability, the three subscales of the EIS have obtained moderately strong coefficient alphas ranging from .84 to .89 with ethnically diverse samples (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES was developed by Morris Rosenberg (1965) at the University of Maryland. It consists of 10 items which includes both positively and negatively worded items, that measures global self-esteem. It is measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

With regards to the reliability of the scale Cronbach coefficient was found to be .91 for an overall sample and ranged from .84 to .95 across demographic groups (Sinclair et al., 2010). With regards to validity it has been found to correlate in the predicted direction with measures of depression and anxiety.

3. A demographic form was also used to gather the details of the respondents and to verify the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

RESULTS

This section summarises the results of the data analysis that was done using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of all variables

	EIS (A)	EIS (E)	EIS (R)	RSES
Mean	22.16	18.36	12.39	16.94
Standard Deviation	2.57	4.08	2.94	3.32
N	200	200	200	200

The descriptive data for the EIS subscales and self-esteem are presented in Table 1. The highest attainable score for the EIS- Affirmation subscale is 24 thereby a mean of 22.16 is on the higher end. The highest attainable score for the EIS- Exploration sub-scale is 28 and therefore a mean of 18.36 indicates that most individuals do engage in exploration activities with regards to their ethnic identity. The mean of the EIS- Resolution subscale of 12.39 also points towards scores on the higher end as the highest attainable score on this subscale is 16. With regards to self-esteem, the highest score possible is 30 and a mean of 16.94 indicates that most individuals in the sample have an average self-esteem. The data shows maximum variability for EIS- Exploration sub-scale, with a standard deviation of 4.08 and minimum variability for EIS- Affirmation subscale with a standard deviation of 2.57 in the current sample. Therefore the descriptive statistics provides an initial understanding of the pattern of data in this sample.

Table 2: Correlational Analysis (N=200)

	EIS (A)	*EIS (E)*	*EIS (R)*	*RSES*
EIS (A)	1			
EIS (E)	-0.09184	1		
EIS (R)	0.164679**	0.485856*	1	
RSES	0.020402	0.072578	0.143693**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

- **H_{01}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity exploration and self-esteem.
- **H_{02}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity affirmation and self-esteem.
- **H_{03}** There is no significant correlation between ethnic identity resolution with self-esteem.

Table 2 indicates the result of the correlational analysis for the sample of 200 college students. Since the statistical analysis is not significant for EIS exploration and self-esteem as well as EIS affirmation and self-esteem, we fail to reject both null hypotheses **H_{01}** and **H_{02}**. However, EIS resolution was found to have a weak positive correlation to self-esteem, $r(198) = 0.14$, p= .04. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no significant correlation between ethnic identity resolution and self-esteem, **H_{03}** is rejected. Additionally, EIS affirmation and EIS resolution were weakly positively correlated, $r(198) = 0.16$, p= .02.

However, ethnic EIS exploration and EIS resolution were moderately positively correlated, $r(198)= 0.49$, $p<.001$.

Table 3: Correlational Analysis (Females, N=100)

	EIS (A)	*EIS (E)*	*EIS (R)*	*RSES*
EIS (A)	1			
EIS (E)	-0.103	1		
EIS (R)	0.141998	0.50095*	1	
RSES	0.125707	0.064082	0.259872**	1

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Table 4: Correlational Analysis (Males, N=100)

	EIS (A)	*EIS (E)*	*EIS (R)*	*RSES*
EIS (A)	1			
EIS (E)	-0.1399	1		
EIS (R)	0.151244	0.453362*	1	
RSES	-0.05942	0.082124	0.025453	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

When correlational analysis was computed separately for the male (n=100) and female (n=100) samples, EIS resolution was found to be weakly positively correlated to self-esteem only for females, $r(98) = 0.26$, $p= .01$. Additionally, EIS exploration and EIS resolution were moderately positively correlated for both male, $r(98)= 0.45$, $p<.001$ and female, $r(98)= 0.50$, $p<.001$ samples.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and t-value with regards to male and female groups

Variables	M (Male)	SD (Male)	M (Female)	SD(Female)	t-value	p
EIS (A)	21.7	2.88	22.62	2.15	t (198)= 2.56	.01
EIS (E)	17.7	4.23	19.02	3.84	t (198)= 2.31	.02
EIS (R)	12.02	2.91	12.76	2.94	t (198)= 1.79	.08
RSES	16.94	3.29	16.95	3.37	t (198)= 0.02	.98

- **H_{04}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity exploration.
- **H_{05}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity affirmation.
- **H_{06}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to ethnic identity resolution.
- **H_{07}** There is no significant difference between men and women with regard to self-esteem.

In order to determine any gender difference with regards to the respective variables, t-test analysis was done and results are indicated in Table 5. It was found that females had higher EIS exploration (M=19.02, SD=3.84, n=100) than males (M=17.7, SD=4.23, n=100). This difference was significant t (198)= 2.31, p=.02. Therefore the null hypothesis **H_{04}** is rejected. Similarly females had higher EIS affirmation (M=22.62, SD=2.15, n=100) than males (M=21.7, SD=2.88, n=100). This difference was significant t (198)= 2.56, p=.01. Again the null hypothesis **H_{05}** is rejected. However no significant difference was found between males

and females with regards to EIS resolution and self-esteem and therefore we fail to reject the null hypotheses $\mathbf{H_{06}}$ and $\mathbf{H_{07}}$.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to establish the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem, and to determine any gender differences in these variables with respect to youth belonging to the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya.

Previous research has indicated that ethnic identity is positively related to self-esteem (Bracey, Bámaca & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Lorenzo-Hernández & Ouellette, 2006). Such studies point to the importance of the link of ethnic identity and self-esteem, but also highlight the focus to establish such links within the specific ethnic group under study. In the present study the results indicated that there is a weak positive correlation between EIS resolution and self-esteem. Further this correlation was found to be significant for female students but not for male students. According to Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian and Bámaca-Gómez (2004) resolution refers to the degree to which individuals have resolved issues regarding what their ethnic identity means to them. Therefore, in the light of the Khasi tribe it may be pointed out that this finding may be related to how Khasi women view themselves as responsible for carrying the family name, which is also indicative of the clan to which Khasi people belong. Traditionally Khasi men do not have the privilege of propagating the family name as in other cultures of patriarchy. If a resolved ethnic identity is related to women's self-esteem and not men's self-esteem, then it may be said that a resolved ethnic identity holds more meaning for women than men in terms of how they evaluate themselves. If self-esteem is derived from one's ethnic group, then in the case of the Khasi community this may be a salient for women more than it is for men. However, t-tests indicated that EIS resolution is not significantly different for men and women. In fact, the scores on EIS resolution for men (M=12.02) and women (12.76) is similar. Therefore, while women's resolution is related to self-esteem, it does not mean that they have a higher resolution or self-esteem than men. Notably, women however showed higher EIS exploration and EIS affirmation than men, which shows that women are more keen to explore their culture and tradition than men, and have more positive affect towards their ethnicity than men in this sample. Further a study (Chae, 2000) conducted across four ethnic groups found that female college students had higher ethnic identity than their male counterparts, while another study on ethnic socialization (Stache, 2024) that used multigroup comparisons indicated similar developments between genders in ethnic identity and mainstream identity. However, these findings point to the gender differences that varies across different ethnic groups and cultures. In the context of the Khasi culture therefore, it may be said that the particular process of socialization of gender and cultural meanings may have resulted in the differences of ethnic identity within this group.

Overall, EIS exploration was found to be positively correlated to EIS resolution, for the entire sample of 200 students and separately for male and female groups. Therefore, it can be said that more exploration means better resolution of ethnic identity. However again, while women showed higher exploration than men in this sample, they did not have higher resolution than men, indicating the need to explore the role of other variables in this relationship. This study hence sheds some light on understanding the ethnic identity of Khasi youth, in that women showed higher exploration and affirmation, and that resolution holds more significance in women's self-esteem and not in men's self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the relationship of ethnic identity and self-esteem in Khasi youth, indicating significant gender differences in ethnic identity and in the relationship of these two variables. Such findings contribute to the understanding of these social and psychological attributes pertaining to the Khasi people and their culture. However, it may be said that while the culture specific meanings were beyond the scope of this study, a qualitative approach would add to a more complete insight to the individual experience in terms of the process of ethnic identity development. The results of this study may promote further research and contributions with regards to this unique ethnic group.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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