

Of Pride and Pencils: Deconstructing the Role of Ethnic Pride in Hmong Adolescent Identity Formation

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Abstract

This study examines the ways that Hmong adolescents describe ethnic pride and how their descriptions are informed by perceptions of collective and social identities. Data from semi-structured interviews with 25 Hmong adolescents age 12-18 were thematically analyzed with attention to affective versus behavioral aspects of ethnic pride and the role of collective or social group identities in adolescent pride perceptions or expressions. Results indicate that Hmong adolescents view affective and behavioral components of ethnic pride as distinct and evaluated self and peer pride along these two dimensions. Moreover, pride was found to be defined as both an individual characteristic and a social construct, and the perception and expression of the term was informed by Hmong adolescent peer groups and collective identities.

Keywords: *ethnic pride, ethnic identity, Hmong adolescents, collective identity*

Introduction

*Roses are red HMONG are yellow
thats my race but heres tha demo!!
My HMONG pride I will not hide
My HMONG race I will not disgrace
My HMONG blood flows hot & true
My HMONG peeps, I will stand by you
thru thick & thin, till the day we die
Our HMONG flag always stands high
I yell this poem louder than all the rest.
cuz every 1 knows HMONG ARE THE BEST!!!
HMONG Pride in my mind, HMONG BLOOD is my kind
So step aside and let me through, cuz its all about the HMONG crew
Life sucks and then u die, but if your (sic) HMONG
You die with good a\$\$ pride!!!!*

This poem/rap about Hmong pride first emerged on the social networking site, MySpace circa 2004 and can be found posted on social media (e.g., Facebook) as recently as the writing of this manuscript. The original author is not cited in any posts, but the continuous and frequent sharing of this poem is indicative of the strength with which it has resonated with Hmong adolescents for over a decade. As a psychological construct, pride is an important affective component of one's ethnic sense of self and is included in nearly all measures of ethnic identity (for a thorough review, see Quintana, et al., 2006). As operationalized in the field of psychology, ethnic pride is the feelings, attitudes, and emotions that individuals may have regarding their membership in a particular ethnic group. It is centrally featured in stage theories of ethnic identity formation (e.g., Phinney, 1990) and in measures of ethnic identity, assessed through questions such as "I am proud to identify with or be part of my own group" (Driedger, 1976; Sellers et al., 1997) or "How much pride do you feel towards [your own group]?" (Phinney, 1989).

However, ethnic pride is not merely an affective/emotional construct. It has a behavioral component and is expressed through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, in the form

of collective pride. Behavioral pride is also socioculturally situated and informed by the cultural milieu including political ideologies and historical and national events (Junn & Masoka, 2008; Sullivan, 2007). Because of the shifting nature of psychological pride and its varying components, there is a need to deconstruct the meaning of the construct and to validate the operationalization of the term. This paper seeks to describe the multifaceted ways Hmong adolescents define, act upon, and negotiate pride related to their ethnic identity and to expand the definition of pride not only as an individual component of ethnic identity, but as a cultural construct that is informed by social relationships and the evolving, complex identities of Hmong and Asian youth.

Collective pride

In one of the few scholarly examinations of ethnic pride, Sullivan (2007) argues that it is not a singular emotion or experience, but rather a construct that is embedded in collective experiences and occurs in “waves” concomitant with “shame racism, marginalization, (and) patriotism” (p. 166). Pride in one’s ethnic group is affected by events that impact the collective identity. For instance, national pride increases during major sporting events such as the World Cup or the Olympics (Tracy and Robins, 2004) and may result in both heightened emotions about one’s ethnic or national identity and behavioral expressions of that pride (e.g., wearing team clothing, attending group events, etc).

Current events are not the only source of change in collective identity. In adolescence, individuals are highly oriented toward their peers and peer groups are dominant sources of influence in ethnic identity. In particular, a sense of belongingness and positive social interactions with peers from the same ethnic group predict positive ethnic identity development (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). However, Hmong adolescents are heterogeneous and

Hmong youth differentiate peer groups based on the extent to which individuals adhere to actual or stereotyped cultural values and behaviors (Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009). That is, those who demonstrate “too much” affinity for Hmong culture without sufficient acculturation and adaptation are rejected by their Hmong peers and are assigned low social status labels such as “fobby” (Pyke & Dang, 2003). To avoid such labels, youth express ethnic pride through behaviors deemed socially acceptable by peers (Nguyen & Brown, 2010).

Same ethnic peers themselves are not the sole influence over ethnic pride. Negative perceptions of one’s collective group identity from outsiders may decrease feelings of pride due to negative stereotypes and messages about the ethnic group. Conversely, affective and behavioral pride also increases when the collective identity is threatened or marginalized. Ogbu (2004) explains this phenomenon as the development of oppositional collective identity and documents it among African American youth. An oppositional identity has also been found in Hmong youth by Lee (2008) and among Latino youth in light of the debate about U.S. immigration policies, in which a decreased identification with an identity of *citizenship* (and thereby the dominant culture) is replaced by increased identification with the marginalized *undocumented* identity (Corrunker, 2012; Morrissey, 2013). The source of influence in behavioral and affective pride may vary based on the collective identity with which Hmong adolescents closely identify.

Therefore, pride is neither a universal nor unidimensional construct contingent on an affective sense of “belongingness” alone. It is complex and varies as a result of peer group influence and the perception of adherence to a socially acceptable collective identity. Additionally, behavioral expressions of pride are not necessarily synonymous with the emotional or affective feelings of pride. One can experience high positive feelings of pride, yet dampen

their behavioral expressions of pride in the face of social repercussions. The relationship between these two aspects of pride remains largely unexamined in the developmental sciences.

Current Study

This study explores Hmong adolescent perceptions of ethnic pride. Adolescents are simultaneously impacted by peer definitions of pride and agents themselves in enforcing these definitions. Therefore the meaning that they ascribe to the concept and their self-construal of these concepts is important to examine. This study examines adolescent reports of their beliefs about behavioral and affective pride and how these descriptions are informed by Hmong adolescent perceptions of collective and social identities.

Method

Participants

Data for this paper are drawn from individual and focus group interviews conducted with participants in a study examining ethnic and cultural identity development in Hmong youth. Hmong adolescents were recruited through after-school programs for youth at community centers and located in low-income housing developments that are densely populated (50-70%) by Hmong families. These centers are in mid-sized Midwestern city that is predominantly White outside of these housing developments. Participants were also recruited through door-to-door visits in these housing developments.

There were a total of 28 participants in this study (16 female; $M_{age}=14.8$ years). Eighteen participants were born in the U.S. and ten arrived under age six (the average age at immigration was four). Participants received a gift certificate to a popular big-box retail store upon conclusion of the interviews. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the primary author's affiliated University at time of the study.

All interviews were tape-recorded, fully transcribed, and de-identified, with names replaced by pseudonyms selected by participants themselves (Hmong names were assigned for two participants who were unable to select a pseudonym). The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocol that asked major questions about ethnic identity conceptualization (e.g., What does it mean to be Hmong to you?), ethnic identity attitudes, identity expression and behaviors, peers, and other group orientation. However, a voice-centered relational interviewing technique developed by Brown & Gilligan (1992) was used for all interviews. In this technique, the course and content of the interview is primarily determined by participant responses, therefore, probes were based on participant responses to the initial questions. Questions directly related to Hmong pride were not part of the interview protocol, but when participants discussed cultural or ethnic pride the interviewer followed up with probes.

For this manuscript, all portions of the interview transcripts in which pride was discussed were excerpted for thematic analysis. Using selective coding techniques (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) the patterns and motifs in responses within and across the interviews were identified and analyzed within two major areas of interest in this paper: collective identity and multicultural identity. Reported interview narratives were edited to facilitate ease of reading; pauses and fillers (such as “like”) were removed to increase clarity of the participant’s sentiment. Interviewer questions and comments are reported in parentheses.

Results

The general theme of pride emerged emically from participant interviews, which was expected given its salience in ethnic and cultural identity development. Two sub-themes emerged within adolescent descriptions of pride. First, behavioral expressions of pride were differentiated

by participants based on authenticity and purpose. Second, pride was discussed as an attribute of the collective Hmong identity rather than merely as an intra-individual characteristic.

Differentiated pride. There was a wide range of behavioral expressions of pride reported by participants including explicit verbal statements, non-verbal displays such as writing “Hmong pride” on physical belongings, participating in cultural traditions and rituals, and sharing knowledge about Hmong history and culture. Descriptions of affective pride were limited to a self-report on their own emotions and what participants could observe in their peers, such as a desire to be around other Hmong (belongingness) and explicit verbalizations of emotional pride or a lack thereof (e.g., “When we talk about the culture they’re like, oh that’s bullshit who cares”(Lee, 15, female)).

Demonstrating or feeling pride in these forms were agreed-upon indicators of ethnic group pride. Yet participants also described seeking deeper meaning behind the activities to discern or evaluate the level of pride conferred with each expression or action. In so doing, they assessed the authenticity of the actor and the purpose behind the behavior. Simply stating or displaying “Hmong/Asian pride” was insufficient proof of authentic pride to many of the participants, particularly if they did not engage in other ethnic group activities:

See that’s what’s funny about them (the Asian Pride group), they’re all “Asian Pride” but when it comes down to it, say their dad nags them to learn a little of it (culture), they’re like “Hell no.” (Ricky Tan, 17, male)

These youth would score highly on traditional measures of pride and own group membership and affiliation. Yet participants described perceptions that the behaviors and adherence to cultural values of these peers belie their ethnic identity orientation or are used for the purpose of self-promotion or arrogance rather than to promote a positive collective identity:

My friends are like, Asian pride all the way... (What's your reaction when you hear that?) Like, that person wants attention...like, to have pride in themselves. Sometimes they say it too many times. Like, they have too much pride in themselves. (Lee, female, 15)

Because behavioral pride may be inauthentic, some participants placed little value on the behavioral components of pride and instead emphasized the importance of having affective pride:

For me, I don't really care if they show it or not. 'Cuz they don't have to be like me... going around saying Asian Pride! They don't have to be showing everybody that they are proud of being Hmong, but as long as they ARE proud. (Eve, 14, female)

Other participants, however, still value behavioral pride, but identified displays they used to more accurately discern the extent of pride in their peers, such as sharing cultural history or language with non-Hmong peers:

I think people show that they're proud of being Hmong by just openly telling anyone about Hmong. I've heard girls who just go, yeah, I'm Hmong, got a problem with that? Or something like that. Or they just go, they just continue speaking Hmong, they speak Hmong out loud. If you're shy to speak your own language, I think that's not supportive so much of who you are. But if you're openly saying stuff to anyone in your language, I think that's really supportive. (Kandi, 14, female).

Indeed, many participants delineated complex ways of not only assessing the pride of their peers based on a combination of behavioral and affective expressions of pride, but that they distinguished among peer groups as a result of these expressions of pride, collectively naming a group of "Asian Pride" youth most resoundingly professing Asian or Hmong pride yet

paradoxically demonstrate very little desire for engagement in cultural continuity or maintenance (e.g., participating in rituals and traditions) or expressing pride in Hmong culture to out-group members in positive ways. These narratives indicate that expressions of pride that benefit the collective identity are highly valued to participants.

Pride as collective identity. In nearly all participant discussions of authentic pride, the importance of behaviors that contributed to a positive collective identity was stated. There were two facets to this discussion. First, participants expressed concern that within-group collective pride would be impacted due to a monolithic expression of pride that was usurped by one primary group. Participants were concerned this could adversely impact the desire of others to express their pride in those measurable and important ways. Indeed, some participants such as Chan (male, 15) acknowledged a decrease in the importance of ethnic behavioral pride due to the “Asian pride” group of peers, despite his own affective pride:

They mostly write like, “Hmong Pride” on their backpack. And, mostly we talk in Hmong...Some people draw Hmong pictures, and some gangster people put “Asian Pride” and stuff like that on streets. (Have you ever put stuff on your backpack?)

Yeah...But I only did it for one year. (laughs) (Yeah? How important is it for you to show that you’re Hmong?) Not that important.

Many participants mention a group of peers whom they describe as “hardcore” or “gangster” and who use expressions of Asian Pride around which to form their collective identity. The existence of this group deflates both behavioral and affective expressions of ethnic pride due to their marginalized status amongst Hmong peer groups and also within the Hmong community. Chan, for instance, might well experience ethnic pride but his responses on a measure asking “I am proud to identify with my own group” would be tempered if he equates Asian Pride with this

group of marginalized, “gangster” individuals with which he had little affiliation. The impact of this group’s co-option of ethnic pride also manifests through peer interactions, as described by Ricky Tan (male, 15):

The thing I really hate is: Asian kids are like, “Asian Pride.” Yet there’s a(nother) kid who’s doing really good in school and he gets ripped on because he’s doing good and he doesn’t go out much. And I’m like, “Well where’s the so-called Asian Pride here?”

The other manner in which the collective identity was discussed in relation to pride was through out-group contact and the importance placed on true pride that supported the collective Hmong identity rather than one’s individual identity:

(What about the kids who have Hmong pride written all over themselves?) I think they’re confident in being Hmong, but just not, “Oh yeah, I want tell everyone about the Hmong culture.” I think they’re like, “Oh yeah, I’m Hmong, I’m bad”... “I’m Hmong, don’t mess with me,” kind of thing. They think they’re all hardcore or something. But the ones that really express that “I am Hmong, I am proud to be Hmong,” in a positive way, they’re more confident in themselves, they’re not scared to talk to other people. To me, I think expressing (pride) would be to go out and tell people about it. (Khou, 16, female)

Expressions of behavioral pride that were highly valued by the participants were those activities or expressions that had the potential for social change and promoted a positive collective identity to out-group members, such as educating non-Hmong individuals about the culture. In contrast, expressions of ethnic pride that were highly disliked were those in which pride was used to denigrate other groups as described by Jessie (17, female):

If they’re used in a way that’s just cheering then I’d say, yeah, that’s cool. But if you’re using it (Asian pride) against somebody else then it’s kind of bad too. We shouldn’t use it

as a bad term for other races. (Do you hear some people say it in a bad way to other races?) Yeah, they'll say that "We're Asian, we're better than some other race," and then just say that "we're proud of it and I'll kick your ass and stuff..."

In contrast, participants such as Steve (15, male) felt that behavioral expressions of Asian pride were valuable in asserting one's collective identity within the dominant culture, to ensure one was not marginalized:

(What do the phrases Asian Pride or Hmong Pride mean to you?) Just being different. It's like, like you're Asian, you're different and you have pride because you're Asian. You gotta have pride cuz if you don't have pride then it's not like the African-American or the white kids are gonna have pride for you.

Indeed, asserting Asian pride in ways that promoted the collective identity not only prevented marginalization from the dominant culture but was also described as a means through which the participants could garner recognition or acceptance by members of the dominant culture, as the 14-year-old, female members of this focus group elucidate:

Kiwi: Sometimes I feel good saying 'Represent the Asian Pride!' because some White people they love talking in Hmong too. They always come up and ask us to speak Hmong, so I'm like okay and I speak Hmong to them. Sometimes they just want to learn profanities.

Kandi: Oh it is so cool when some White guys comes up to you and says, "hi Hmong girl..." It is so cool when they go, "I love Asian people." And it feels really good to have guys, any race of guys who go, "You know, I think Asian people are cool, I think you're cool."

For these young women, there was a reciprocal relationship between individual ethnic pride and positive perceptions of the collective Hmong identity. Their individual sense of pride was informed by the ways others viewed (and accepted) them as Hmong women (and this was indeed a gendered discussion). Yet their internal desires to express ethnic pride assisted in promoting positive intergroup interactions and a positive collective identity.

Analysis

The data reveal a complex portrait of the form and function of ethnic pride in the lives of Hmong adolescents. Not only do the participants in this study clearly distinguish between affective and behavioral aspects of pride, their own ethnic pride informs--and is informed by--their peers' demonstration of pride. The results highlight the multidimensionality of a construct central to ethnic identity, yet is often assessed largely through measures of affect. Moreover, Hmong adolescent perceptions of the ways their same-ethnic peers express and internalize ethnic pride impacted their own feelings and expressions of pride. This indicates that pride is not merely an internal, individual attribute but also a socially defined construct. This discussion will focus on the socially-embedded nature of pride and the influence of peers on participant expression and interpretation of pride.

Pride can vary due to context and is not always equivalent to behavioral engagement in ethnic group activities. Ying & Han (2008) found that Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong young adults showed a greater affinity toward U.S. American mass media and cultural activities than the media and activities of their own ethnic group, yet demonstrated stronger ethnic pride than U.S. pride. Therefore, involvement in own-group activities is no better a proxy for ethnic pride than involvement in other-group ethnic and cultural activities. The participants in this study

demonstrate awareness of this and seek to gauge ethnic pride through other authentic means, including gauging the intent of the actor.

Ratcliff, Miller, & Krolkowski (2013) identified two dimensions of pride: authentic pride and arrogance-based pride, which she terms “hubristic pride.” These dimensions are clearly captured by the narratives of participants in this study. While Ratcliff et al. find that majority group members are more supportive of ethnic minority groups who demonstrate pride in authentic, accomplishment-based ways, this study finds that the same is true for in-group support. Hmong adolescents have more positive perceptions when pride is not expressed for self-promotion and arrogance. However, in-group evaluation of pride is contingent on the extent to which displays promote a positive collective identity for Hmong adolescents at large. Acts of ethnic pride from peers who have adopted oppositional identities were rejected and sometimes even diminished participants’ desires to express their pride, due to fear of association with peers that are marginalized from both mainstream and Hmong culture.

The participants described a group of peers who expressed Asian and Hmong pride to construct an oppositional collective identity, one which attempts to elevate one’s own group while creating distance from others (Ogbu, 2004). For this group of Hmong youth, development of an oppositional identity entails increased participation in marginalized cultural acts—particularly those (stereo)typically associated with Black adolescents. Yet for other youth, engagement in rap, hip hop, speaking slang, and other behavioral or “ideological” (Lee, 2008) identification with Black culture is not an act of resistance, but rather, an internalization of popular culture and/or multicultural identities. In an increasingly multicultural and global environment, adolescents may elect to integrate different identities into their own sense of self either through mere exposure or as conscious acts of identity construction. Following interviews

for the present study, Hmong adolescents informally discussed a new identity label they had adopted with the first author: *Pencils*. These youth said that they were reclaiming the typically denigrating identity descriptors such as “Twinkie” and “Banana”--terms used largely by members within an ethnic group to describe individuals who “act white” yet are “yellow” on the outside (Pyke & Dang, 2003). In a play on these terms, these Hmong adolescents said they were Pencils because they were “Yellow on the outside, White in the middle, and Black at the core.” This term resonates with other identity labels such as Blackarican (Black and Puerto Rican) or Hapa (multi-ethnic Asian or multi-racial backgrounds) (Eglinton, 2013; Taniguchi & Heidenreich, 2005 respectively) which are used to express multicultural identities by ethnic minority adolescents who may or may not be biologically biracial.

Ethnic pride must be examined in light of these complex cultural identities. It may be unfair for adults and Hmong peers alike to evaluate these youth as lacking in ethnic pride rather than acknowledging the evolution of their ethnic and cultural orientations to include engagement in non-Hmong cultures and activities. Simply casting these youth with oppositional identity labels decreases the rich tapestry of Hmong culture today and the growing diversity and within-group heterogeneity that contributes to the Hmong identity.

Methodologically, it is evident that both affective and behavioral expression of pride are influenced by the context of the social and collective identities of the Hmong adolescent participants. It is therefore important for psychological science to understand pride as a socioculturally embedded construct, rather than simply an internal process that reflects feelings about one’s ethnic group.

Limitations and future directions

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of this study. In particular, the sample size and limited diversity of the population with regard to socioeconomic status and geographic variability limit the ability to make generalizations about Hmong adolescent pride across the diaspora. Further studies must examine the nature of pride in Hmong and other Asian populations in different geographic locations. Moreover, missing from this sample are the voices of the adolescents to whom a number of the participants referred as “hardcore” or the “pride” group. The perspectives of individuals who may enact some of the oppositional identities discussed herein must be included in a thorough examination of the social complexities undergirding the construct of pride.

The data were drawn from participants’ self-elicited discourse on pride within the interviews. This is valuable in demonstrating the salience of pride to many of the interviewees but without a consistent assessment of adolescent perceptions of pride, the conclusions must be drawn with reservation and findings could be strengthened with a more structured interview in which questions about ethnic pride are asked of all participants or ethnographic or systemic observations of adolescent expressions of pride in situ.

Conclusion

Limitations notwithstanding, this study hopes to trouble and deconstruct a development and psychological variable that is often laden with assumptions. The poem cited at the beginning of this manuscript resonates strongly with some Hmong adolescents, but perhaps not others. The calls to shout Hmong pride and yell “Hmong are the best!” may initially elicit feelings of solidarity among youth, but upon closer inspection, may also deepen the social divisions within Hmong peers. To do justice to the complexity with which pride functions in the

lives of Hmong adolescents, we must clarify the construct and develop new ways to assess ethnic pride within the Hmong population and across different ethnic minority groups. A unique measure of ethnic pride that assesses the construct apart from ethnic identity measures is recommended. Such a measure should consider the distinct dimensions of pride and include affective and behavioral subscales. This measure would also attend to nature of pride, including an assessment of authentic and hubristic pride. New measures and a better definition of the construct of pride will enhance our understanding of the ways this important construct contributes to ethnic identity development.

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