Second Generation Korean American Baby Boomers: Life Course Perspective on Ethnic Identity Development

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BACKGROUND

- There are 78 million baby boomers born between 1946-1965 (U.S. Census 2006), constituting more than a 1/4 of the total U.S. population.
- Research on baby boomers in the U.S. has focused on white non-Hispanics (82% of this population) overlooking Asian Americans, who constitute 4% of this population.
- Research on the developmental stage of midlife (~ages 40-60) has examined multiple paths of identity formation (e.g., work and gender roles, cognitive, personality, and physical changes), but there has been no study of ethnic identity development.
- Current research on ethnic identity narrowly focuses on adolescents (~ages 13-18) & emerging adults (~ages 19-25).
- Most research on Asian Americans are conducted on the “new” immigrants and their families who entered the U.S. after a landmark immigration act in 1965.
- Of the ~2300 Korean students pursuing higher education in the U.S. after WWII and the Korean War, some remained in the U.S. as immigrants. Their American born children are the baby boomers of interest in this study.

MAJOR AIMS

- Explore the Korean American baby boomer experience, particularly in regards to their ethnic identity development.
- Explore influences that have shaped their present identities at midlife (i.e., social, historical, and cultural contexts).
- Explore the influences of midlife development on ethnic identity development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Instead of using an ethnic identity framework, the Life Course perspective (Elder, 1995) was used to study ethnic identity development because:

1) It explores how social and historical contexts intersect and affect development over time
2) It incorporates a life span development approach

METHODS

Design

- A qualitative study framed by the Life Course perspective explored ethnic identity development.

Sample Participants

- Participants (N = 16) for this study were born in the U.S. between 1953 and 1965. They are adults in midlife and part of the baby boomer generation.
- Participants were found through the internet, books on Asian Americans, newspaper articles, and conversations with other people. Through this process, 38 people were recruited and 16 people agreed to be interviewed.
- Excluded from this study were immigrant children (the 1.5 generation), Korean adoptees, and children born to Korean War brides and other mixed marriages.
- Participants (N = 16) were interviewed (~1hr) using semi-structured questions and from their own perspectives.

Data Collection

- Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

- Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- Data analysis involved a multistep process: 1) open coding to identify patterns 2) patterns were grouped into categories 3) themes were generated
- Analysis was guided by the Life Course perspective.

RESULTS

Findings on influences of social and historical context

- Growing up in predominantly white neighborhoods influenced how participants viewed themselves as Koreans. Through adolescence, many wanted to be like their White friends and not stand out.

  “I wanted to look like my blond-headed American friend and do what they do.”

- Strong emphasis on “English only” language acquisition during the 1960s and 1970s prevented participants from learning Korean, their heritage language. Two outcomes from the push for assimilation were:
  1) Since immigrant parents entered the U.S. to study at the graduate level, their English language skills enabled the dominant use of English in the home.

  “I think my parents didn’t push us to learn the Korean language. They spoke to us in English. They wanted us to assimilate.”
  2) Assimilating into the dominant white society was not an issue but the inability to speak Korean resulted in questioning their “authenticity” as a Korean and created a sense of exclusion from the larger immigrant Korean community.

Findings of influences of midlife development

- At midlife, participants experienced a renewed consciousness of being Korean in 2 ways:
  1) For themselves, most participants developed a sense of appreciation for their Korean heritage which they did not have growing up. At midlife, they were able integrate the different parts of their identity, including Korean American. Carl Jung (1933) calls this “individuation”.
  2) For their children, participants developed a sense of “generativity” —a concern for the welfare of future generations (Erikson, 1997) and wanted to preserve the Korean culture for the next generation by teaching what little they knew or through relationships with their Korean grandparents.

CONCLUSIONS

- Social and historical contexts influenced ethnic identity development through the life course for this particular cohort as they compared themselves either to the dominant white society or to the newer Korean immigrants at different stages of their life (childhood, adolescence and college, young adulthood, and middle adulthood).
- This study illustrates that ethnic identity development is not something that is “achieved” (Phinney, 1995) but is something that is influenced by different experiences throughout their life course and continues to affect the lives of individuals at different developmental stages.
- Although a cohort comparison was not conducted, this study demonstrates that the Life Course perspective is an innovative way to study ethnic identity development as it helps us begin to understand how individuals identify themselves as they age.

REFERENCES