Kentucky Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship

6-1-2019

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Deaf Culture: Bicultural Identity Integration's Effect on Self-Esteem

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Abstract: *Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) is the result of how much a bicultural individual may feel that their two cultures cohesively work together, such as Chinese and American cultures (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). BII's effect on self-esteem has previously been looked at with immigrant families but has not really been looked at in regard to that of Deaf individuals with Deaf culture and hearing culture. The current study's goal was to investigate the relationship between BII and a Deaf individuals self-esteem. It was hypothesized that 1) a Deaf individual's level of BII will be positively correlated with their selfesteem. 2) those with marginalized identities will have lower self-esteem than those with integrated identities. Participants for this study (N=13) were recruited from different Deaf socials within Kentucky and Ohio. The participants were recruited using American Sign Language and were given a survey to complete. Data was analyzed using a Pearson's r correlation and a One-Way ANOVA. Results suggest a positive correlation between BII and self-esteem, supporting hypothesis one. However, hypothesis two was not fully supported by the results.*

Keywords: Deaf, Deaf culture, Self-esteem, Bicultural Identity Integration, BII, Culture

Research has shown an individual's level of self-esteem can have lasting effects on their mental and physical health (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Many aspects of his or her life, including their cultural identity, may affect an individual's level of self-esteem. Research has begun to consider not just one cultural identity but how varying identities can affect self-esteem (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). The aforementioned research has yet to examine individual's self-esteem regarding American Deaf culture. The purpose of the current study was to examine the effect that bicultural identity integration has on a person's self-esteem within this group.

Deaf Culture

For the purpose of this research, the term "Deaf culture" is specifically referring to American Deaf culture. To many hearing people the word "deaf" only refers to someone's hearing ability. However, in recent years, many within the Deaf community have urged for a more cultural, rather than a pathological or medical, model to be used when discussing d/Deaf individuals. Instead of saying deaf individuals are unable to hear, there has been a demand for viewing deaf individuals through a cultural

perspective where they are members of their own distinct Deaf culture; deaf individuals want to be seen as being more than having a hearing loss (Padden & Ramsey, 1993; Reagan, 1995). These different perspectives are represented in Deaf culture by using "big-D" Deaf to mean a cultural viewpoint and "little-d" deaf to mean a pathological viewpoint.

Anthropologists, such as Sparrow (2005), suggest that Deaf people's shared history, unique language, exclusive arts and literature, and more show that Deaf culture fits the parameters for a distinct culture. It is important to point out that the unique language used by Deaf people, American Sign Language (ASL), is an aspect of their culture that equates them to an ethnic or national culture and aids in establishing Deaf culture as its own entity. However, just because there is a Deaf culture does not mean that all people who experience deafness are involved with this culture (Reagan, 1995). Each person must decide if he or she will identify as Deaf or not.

Knowing that Deaf culture exists, researchers have begun applying different research concepts to this group. While Deaf people do have the larger Deaf community to rely on and interact with, these individuals are also influenced by the culture of their family, which tends to be predominantly hearing (Holcomb, 2013). Some researchers have investigated the effects of self-esteem from this perspective before researching that of the greater Deaf community. Through these investigations, research has shown that a parent's level of signing ability is positively related to their child's self-esteem (Crowe, 2003; Desselle, 1994). If the child is not getting sign access at home, it is common for them to seek it through the Deaf community (Holcomb, 2013). While the parent's abilities may affect self-esteem and can cause the child to seek out the Deaf community, this may not be the case for all individuals.

As previously mentioned, not everyone who is deaf decides to identify or become a member of the Deaf community. Some people who are medically labeled as deaf do not necessarily see themselves as being a member of the Deaf community, but becoming a member of the Deaf community has psychological benefits. Various studies have shown that identification with the Deaf community has a positive relationship with an individual's self-esteem (Bat-Chava, 1994; Holcomb, 2013; Jambor & Elliot, 2005). The individual's decision to interact with the Deaf community, or not interact with them, can affect them later in life.

Bicultural Identities

This idea of having multiple cultural identities and the extent to which a person integrates them is referred to as bicultural identity integration (BII). According to Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005), BII is the result of how much an individual may feel that their two cultures cohesively work together; additionally, BII is a process that individuals may go through rather than a concept.

Building on this research, Berry, Kim, Power, Young, and Bujaki (1989) explained this idea of a process by identifying the different levels of BII an individual can experience before being comfortable with both

cultural identities. Berry et al. (1989) stated that an individual could become marginalized, separated, integrated, or assimilated within their culture and the larger social culture. If individuals are marginalized, then they are neither in their own culture nor the larger social culture. To be separated, they must be in their own culture, but not the larger social culture. If they identify as assimilated, they are in the larger social culture but not their own culture anymore. Finally, to be considered integrated, an individual must be comfortable in both cultures. The levels are seen as a process or spectrum where people can travel between the levels at different points of their lives due to different circumstances (Cross & Gore, 2011). While the effects of one culture have been examined, the integration of more than one culture may affect self-esteem in different ways.

BII and the different levels of integration have been seen to affect an individual's behavior and self-esteem. Research findings propose that the level of BII can affect the way that an individual behaves in a given cultural situation—referred to as cultural frame switching (CFS)—and their overall psychological adjustment (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008). For CFS, it has been shown that those with lower BII must consciously think about how to act in a foreign cultural situation, whereas individuals with higher BII do it almost effortlessly (Chen et al., 2008; Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Having higher BII makes CFS more effortless and is more beneficial for the bicultural individual.

While the general effect of BII has been established, the effect that it has on self-esteem, in particular, has also been investigated. In general, results have alluded that individuals with higher BII are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem than their lower BII counterparts (Downie, Koestner, El Geledi, & Cree, 2004). However, within the levels of BII, research has suggested that when individuals are marginalized, they are more likely to have lower self-esteem scores than the other cultural identities (Hoerstring & Jenkins, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2015; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). These results emphasize the impact BII and acculturation level can have on a person's self-esteem.

Biculturalism in the Deaf Community

Many researchers have examined major American subcultures such as the Latino and Asian communities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Cheng et al., 2006). However, little research has been done to investigate the effects of BII on the Deaf community. Research suggests that Deaf people are in fact bicultural because they regularly interact with both the hearing and Deaf worlds, they adapt and participate in CFS between the two cultures, and they combine or blend aspects of both cultures into their everyday lives (Grosjean, 2010; Rutherford, 1988). As members of this community experience biculturalism, researchers have begun to investigate the impact these experiences in the Deaf community. Marginalized Deaf individuals are more likely to have low self-esteem than the other identity groups until they are introduced to sign language and other Deaf people (Hintermair, 2008). Once this introduction occurs, the acculturation process

slowly begins (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). While little research has been conducted on this topic regarding the Deaf community, this initial idea that marginalized Deaf individuals are more at risk for low self-esteem is important for future research.

The Current Study

The limited research on the effects of BII on self-esteem within the Deaf community was the basis for the current study. The main purpose of the current study was to apply Bicultural Identity Integration to a population that had yet to be investigated in regard to BII. There was a need to examine how the different levels of BII affect the individual directly, not just the general idea of biculturalism, but rather the degree and type of biculturalism. Additionally, much of the previous research only used samples from universities or areas that were meant to be more accessible and accepting of d/Deaf individuals. This was not a representative sample of the Deaf community; it failed to include those who may live in areas where Deaf individuals are ostracized. The current study aimed to obtain a more diverse sample of members of the Deaf community, which would be more representative of the overall community.

For this study, it was hypothesized that a d/Deaf individual's level of BII would be positively correlated with their self-esteem. In addition, it was hypothesized that those with marginalized identities would have lower self-esteem than those with integrated identities.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 13 Deaf individuals (females [n=7] = 54%, males [n=6] = 46%) of varying races. Participants ranged in age from 22-86 years of age (M = 47.2 years), and their age of onset of deafness ranged from birth to three years (M = 0.67 years) with a few not reporting age as they did not know. The researcher recruited participants from various Deaf gatherings such as mall socials and silent dinners as well as from a regional university in central Kentucky's American Sign Language and Interpreter Education department. The recruiter signed initial information needed to explain the study to the participants; afterwards, the researcher provided participants with a consent form attached to their survey packets. If consent was given, then participants continued filling out the survey.

The researchers excluded some participant's ratings because they did not correctly fill out the Likert scales. For example, some participants check-marked the statements that they believed applied to them rather than rating all statements. Additionally, exclusions occurred because participants correctly rated the statements, but left some statements blank and did not rate them at all. Those who forgot to fill out the Acculturation scale on the back sheet were still included in the analysis if they correctly filled out the Self-Esteem and BII scales. After exclusions, eight participants' ratings were included in the data analyses

Materials

     Participants were provided with a packet containing the consent form, three questionnaires, and a debriefing form. The three questionnaires used were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale (Modified), and an Acculturation Scale.

     Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a self-report questionnaire, containing ten items, used to evaluate one's self-esteem or well being (Rosenberg, 1965). The questionnaire provides both positive and negative statements in relation to self-esteem. For instance, a positive statement states, "I feel that I have a number of good qualities," while a negative statement states, "all in all, I am inclined to feel that I'm a failure." These statements are representative of what individuals may think if they have high versus low self-esteem, respectively. Participants responded by using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The overall sample had a high level of self-esteem ($M = 37.62$, $SD = 5.06$).

     Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) Scale. Benet-Martinez and Haritatos's (2005) questionnaire was slightly modified for word choice and distributed to the participants. The original study used Chinese Americans as participants and as such their scale is geared toward this group. The scale used in this study changed any mention of "Chinese" or "American" (and any variation of those terms) to be "Deaf" or "hearing." For example, question one states, "I am simply a Chinese person who lives in America." This statement was changed to read, "I am simply a Deaf person who lives in the hearing world." The overall sample had a moderate level of bicultural integration ($M = 21.85$, $SD = 5.93$).

     Acculturation Scale. The Acculturation Scale is a list of five Venn diagrams that depict the different styles of acculturation. The diagrams are labeled with statements appropriate for each level. For instance, the diagram that corresponds to marginalized individuals read, "I am Deaf, but I am not in the hearing world" and was accompanied by a diagram. The diagram included two circles, "Deaf" versus "hearing," with an X in the Deaf circle. This gave a visual representation of participants' identity solely being connected to the Deaf world. The participants were expected to place a check mark next to the diagram which best represented their cultural identity at that given time. The Acculturation Scale was adapted from Phinney and Devich-Navarro's (1997) conception of identification patterns; the scale was modified similarly to the BII scale. The wording was changed in order to fit the participants of this study. The terms "Deaf" and "Hearing" were used in the diagrams rather than "American" and "Ethnic." Although there were several options, participants only selected either Integrated or Separated.

Procedure

     Recruitment for this study took place at various malls, coffee shops, and meeting places in Kentucky where many Deaf people convene on a regular basis. Recruitment entailed the primary researcher, or a designated

individual who has appropriate training, attending the areas or events mentioned above. The recruiter approached the group, called their attention, and signed the script provided. If individuals at these meetings agreed to participate in the study, packets containing the consent form, surveys, and debriefing form were disbursed. The information did not typically take more than 5 minutes to fill out, but if participants found more time was needed, that was allowed.

Participants were handed a packet containing the consent form, questionnaires, and debriefing. The researcher first signed a script to the participants that informed them of the general reason they were being asked to fill out these surveys. Participants were asked to first read the consent form before filling out the form if they would like to proceed. If consent was given, the participants filled out the three questionnaires to the best of their ability. If there were any misunderstandings with the questionnaires, the consent form encouraged asking the recruiter to clarify. The recruiter handed out debriefing forms once the questionnaires were complete.

Results

To test the hypothesis that BII is positively correlated with self-esteem, a bivariate correlation test was conducted. The results, as exemplified in Figure 1, showed that BII is positively correlated with self-esteem ($r = .65$, $p < .01$), confirming the first hypothesis.

None of the participants selected the Marginalized category in the Acculturation measure, so the researchers tested a modified hypothesis that individuals with a separated identity would have lower self-esteem and lower BII than individuals with an integrated identity. We expected this effect because both separated and marginalized individuals are disconnected from the mainstream culture. To test these two hypotheses, the researchers conducted two independent samples t-tests using Acculturation Category (1 = Separated, 2 = Integrated) as the independent variable and BII and Self-Esteem scores as the dependent variables. The results indicated that separated individuals scored significantly lower than integrated individuals on Self-Esteem ($M_{separated} = 32.33$, SD = 2.08, $M_{integrated} = 40.29$, SD = 4.42), $t(8) = -2.90$, $p < .05$, and on BII, ($M_{separated} = 17.00$, SD = 3.61, $M_{integrated} = 24.29$, SD = 6.32), $t(8) = -1.83$, $p = .05$). Thus, the modified second hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

The results showed that individuals who are higher in bicultural identity have higher self-esteem. Additionally, the results supported the second hypothesis. Originally, the second hypothesis proposed that integrated identities would be associated with higher self-esteem than marginalized identities. However, when data collection was completed, there were no participants who indicated a marginalized identification. The participants only indicated integrated or separated identities. The analysis of the data showed that Deaf individuals with an integrated identity had higher

self-esteem and bicultural identity integration than those with a separated identity.

These results suggest that the ability to navigate between both hearing and Deaf cultures is related to higher self-esteem and bicultural identity. While these findings do not exactly align with the original hypothesis, they do follow the main idea that integrated identities are related to higher self-esteem among the Deaf and hearing cultures.

Implications

The purpose of our study was to build on previous research and confer with the findings about general BII and self-esteem. McIlroy and Storbeck (2011) proposed that Deaf individuals are bicultural, and the current research aimed to build off this idea to examine exactly the meaning of that identity in regards to affecting the individual. Similar to results found by Downie et al. (2004), this study's results showed that the first hypothesis was supported and there is a relationship between BII and self-esteem, alluding that an individual's level of integration is strongly associated with self-esteem. Similarly, this research supported the previous findings that feeling unwelcomed within a mainstream culture results in low self-esteem (Hoerstring & Jenkins, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2015; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). McIlroy & Storbeck (2011) proposed that individuals are bicultural, but the results from the current study suggest that only some can claim a bicultural identity, whereas others are less able to do so.

The researchers further expanded on previous research by examining members of Deaf culture, a group of individuals who were often overlooked within cross-cultural psychology. The current research further extends Hintermair's (2008) work by showing that Deaf individuals' level of acculturation affects their self-esteem. The results helped to provide more support for ongoing research into this group and showed that there is a discrepancy between the levels of acculturation.

Potentially, this information may aid parents in deciding to involve their child within the Deaf community earlier in his/her life. Additionally, this information may help parents decide on providing sign language, involving their child in social events, placing their child within either a day school or residential school for the Deaf, or any other level of involvement.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research should attempt to correct a few limitations that occurred with the current study. First, this research did not produce a very large sample size. Future research needs to use more participants to obtain more accurate statistical results. Uploading the survey online may generate more participants and more accurate results.

Additionally, in order to test the hypotheses correctly, future research needs more diverse sampling. Specifically, there needs to be more participants in order to present more diversity in the acculturation levels and to get all of the levels represented for data analysis. Placing the survey online

will definitely aid in procuring a more diverse sample. There is a better chance of obtaining participants from new areas and different backgrounds; this diversity can help bring in the other acculturation levels to the analysis.

Conclusions

It has been proposed that members of the Deaf community are bicultural. The current study's results propose that this is only the case for some, whereas others feel disconnected to the mainstream, hearing culture. Identifying as bicultural allows individuals to navigate both cultures effectively, form relationships in both cultures, and ultimately have higher self-esteem. Applications of these findings could be used to help members of Deaf culture. These results may help deaf individuals and the parents of deaf children to make more educated decisions on whether Deaf culture is the right fit for the specific individual. Ultimately, the decision to be involved in a group or not is up to the individual (or up to the parents in the early years), and hopefully this research can contribute more information to help individuals make a more informed decision on what they believe is best for their personality and life.

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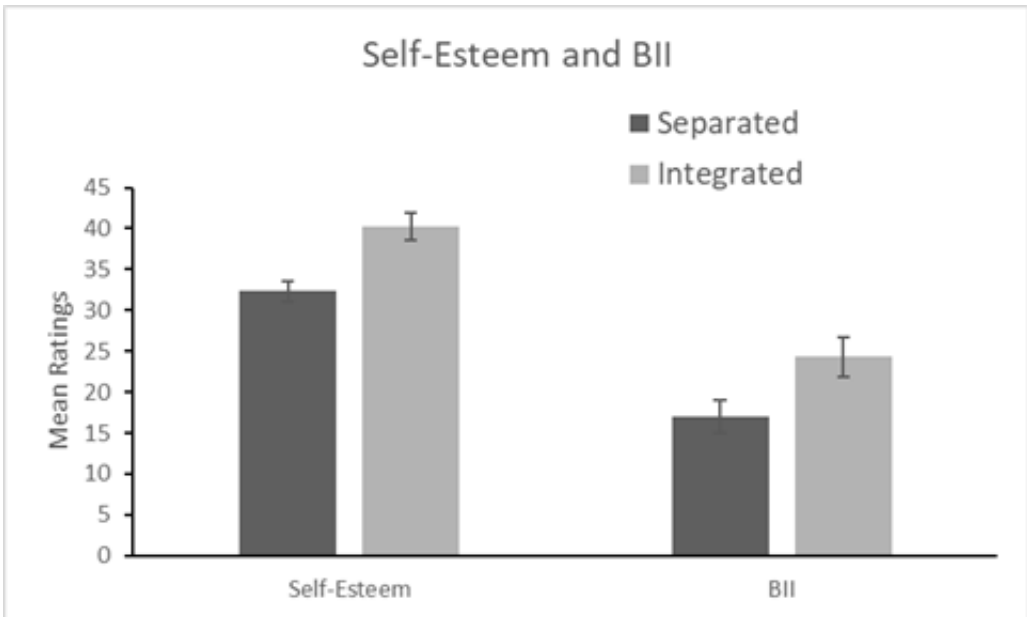
Figure 1. The difference in means between the two acculturation labels for self-esteem and BII were found using an ANOVA. Standard errors are represented in the figure by the error bars that are attached to the columns.