

A Closer Look at Peer Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, and Psychological Well-being Among Urban Chinese American Sixth Graders

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Abstract Recent research suggests that although ethnic discrimination may have negative consequences for psychological well-being among youth of Chinese descent as it does for other ethnic groups, ethnic identity beliefs may buffer against such effects. Data for this study were drawn from the Early Adolescent Cohort Study, an investigation of contextual influences on the social, emotional, and academic adjustment of youth in ethnically diverse New York City middle schools. The present study sample consists of Chinese American ($n = 84$) and African American ($n = 119$) sixth graders. Results suggest that Chinese American youths' own positive affect toward their ethnic group (private regard) was positively associated with higher self-esteem. In addition, the more favorably Chinese American youth perceived that others view their group (public regard), the fewer depressive symptoms they reported. In addition, among Chinese American youth, more favorable public regard attenuated the negative relationship between peer ethnic discrimination and depressive symptoms. The implications of these findings are discussed in light of the commonalities among ethnic and racial minority groups' experiences of discrimination as well as the unique challenges that Chinese American youth face.

Keywords Chinese Americans · Ethnic and racial discrimination · Ethnic and racial identity · Early adolescence

Introduction

Although there has been an increasing interest in youth of Asian descent, previous work has focused primarily on their strengths relative to other ethnic groups, especially their high aggregate levels of academic achievement (Lee 1996; Louie 2004). The emphasis on mechanisms underlying successes of Asian origin youth in the academic domain has contributed to the maintenance of the popular myth of the model minority (see Lee 1996; Louie 2004 for critiques of the myth and these approaches). Less attention has been paid to the experiences of oppression that Asian American youth may encounter as ethnic minorities in the US, including the discrimination that they may experience as a direct result of the model minority myth (e.g., Greene et al. 2006; Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004).

Recent studies indicate that ethnic discrimination is a salient feature in the experiences of Asian American youth, including those of Chinese descent (Alvarez et al. 2006; Choi et al. 2006; Greene et al. 2006; Goto et al. 2002; Lee 2005; Louie 2004; Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press) and that such discrimination has negative consequences for their psychological well-being, as it does in other ethnic and racial groups (Brown and Bigler 2005; Choi et al. 2006; Lee 2005; Ying et al. 2000). Although many of these studies provide rich descriptive insight into Asian American youths' perceptions of discrimination, most have focused on high school and college students; relatively little is understood about

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the prevalence, nature, and correlates of discrimination among early adolescents. Moreover, few studies have examined the extent to which factors that are protective in other groups, such as ethnic identity beliefs, are also protective among Chinese American adolescents (for exceptions see Greene et al. 2006).

The present study examines the frequency and correlates of perceived ethnic discrimination from peers among Chinese American early adolescents, and the extent to which aspects of ethnic identity may serve in a protective capacity. Unlike previous studies that have investigated such processes in older adolescence (e.g., Greene et al. 2006), the present study focuses on early adolescence—a time in which issues of ethnic identity and discrimination may be particularly relevant as youth begin to grapple more deeply with questions of who they are as ethnic minorities (see, e.g., French et al. 2006; Quintana 2007). The Chinese American sixth graders in the present study reported alarmingly high exposure to ethnic discrimination from peers. In light of this, we sought to illuminate protective mechanisms that might mitigate the deleterious consequences of such exposure for their psychological well-being. We employed within-group and comparative analyses, with African American youth as the comparative referent, in which we could identify associations that emerged for the combined sample as well as those that were distinct for Chinese American youth. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the prevalence of perceived ethnic discrimination among youth of Asian descent generally, and among Chinese Americans in particular whenever possible. We then discuss the hypothesis that ethnic identity can buffer youths' psychological health in the face of ethnic discrimination.

Chinese Americans and Ethnic Discrimination

Recently, there have been an increasing number of studies that have examined experiences of discrimination among adolescents and its consequences for their mental health. These studies find that a substantial number of ethnic minority youth experience discrimination, and that, consistent with the literature on discrimination among adults, these experiences are associated with a range of poor outcomes including depression, low self-esteem, delinquency, and substance use (see e.g., Greene et al. 2006; Gibbons et al. 2007; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Simons et al. 2003). The few studies that have focused on Asian American (see Alvarez et al. 2006) or Chinese American youth more specifically (see Greene et al. 2006; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Qin et al. in press; Way et al. in press) have consistently suggested that discrimination is a very salient component of their daily experiences. For

example, a study of Asian American college students of various national origins found that 98% reported they had experienced at least one racial microaggression such as being treated rudely or disrespectfully in the past year, and 99% had witnessed a racist event directed at another Asian American within the 5 years prior to the study (Alvarez et al. 2006). In longitudinal studies of the experiences of discrimination and its psychological impact on high school students, Way and colleagues have found that Chinese American youths' levels of perceived peer discrimination remained consistently high throughout their high school years (Greene et al. 2006; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press). In other studies, over 80% of East Asian origin youth reported being called names and almost 50% felt socially excluded or threatened because of their race or ethnicity (Fisher et al. 2000). Ethnographic studies in both Boston and New York City (e.g., Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press) consistently suggest that Chinese American adolescents are frequently teased, picked on, and called names by their peers because they are Chinese. As Louie (2004) states in her recent ethnography, youth of Chinese descent encounter "their share of racially and ethnically charged incidents from childhood onward that underscor[e] their foreignness...even in cosmopolitan New York City" (p. 167).

As with studies of other ethnic groups, Chinese American youths' perceptions of discrimination have been associated with declines over time in self-esteem and increases over time in depression (Greene et al. 2006). Ethnic discrimination has been linked associated with decreased self-esteem among Asian American college students (Lee 2003) and among those of Korean descent in particular (Lee 2005). Perceived ethnic discrimination has also been associated with increased depressive symptoms among Asian American and Korean American college students (Lee 2003, 2005). However, virtually no studies have examined the impact of ethnic discrimination on self-esteem and depression among Chinese American early adolescents specifically. Yet in New York City individuals of Chinese origins constitute one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups (New York City Department of City Planning 2000). In addition, early adolescence is a time in which discrimination may be particularly detrimental to a young person's sense of self as they struggle with both group and self-identity issues.

Research on perceived discrimination with ethnically diverse youth has also suggested that peer discrimination experiences during adolescence are particularly troubling. For example, Way and her colleagues (e.g., Greene et al. 2006) found that discrimination by peers is more detrimental for psychological well being than discrimination by adults. They also found that discrimination by peers was

particularly detrimental to the well being of Chinese American students (Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press). Hughes and Johnson (2001) found that perceived discrimination by peers, compared to perceived discrimination by adults, was more strongly associated with parents' messages to their children about intergroup tensions. Fisher and her colleagues (2000) have also emphasized the importance of distinguishing between adult and peer discrimination. Thus, in this study, we focused on peer discrimination and its importance for understanding psychological well-being among Chinese American youth.

Ethnic Identity as a Buffer Against Discrimination

Although ethnic discrimination has been associated with lower psychological well-being (e.g., Brody et al. 2006; Greene et al. 2006; Sellers et al. 2006), ethnic identity has been associated with greater self-esteem and well-being in diverse ethnic samples (e.g., Korean American, Asian American, African American, White, Latino, and American Indian adolescents; Kiang et al. 2006; Lee 2003, 2005; Lee and Yoo 2004; Martinez and Dukes 1997; Pahl and Way 2006; Phinney et al. 1997; Romero and Roberts 2003; Sellers et al. 2006; Whitesell et al. 2006), including Chinese American adolescents (Yip 2005; Yip and Fuligni 2002). Among Chinese American adolescents and college students, ethnic identity has been associated with fewer depressive symptoms and better mood (Pahl and Way 2006; Yip 2005), increased general well-being (Lee 2003, 2005; Yip and Fuligni 2002), and feelings of happiness (Kiang et al. 2006). Accordingly, theorists have suggested that having positive affect toward one's ethnic group (private regard) may buffer, or protect, youth from negative outcomes that have been associated with discrimination. And indeed, this hypothesis has been largely supported in studies of Mexican (Romero and Roberts 2003) and African American early adolescents (Wong et al. 2003) and among ethnically diverse high school students (Greene et al. 2006). However, support for this hypothesis from studies of discrimination among youth of Asian descent is mixed. For example, one study by Way and her colleagues (Greene et al. 2006) found that the negative effect of discrimination on self-esteem was attenuated by ethnic affirmation among Chinese American, Latino, and African American high school students. In another study, having a positive ethnic identity diminished the impact of daily stress on Chinese American youths' feelings of happiness (Kiang et al. 2006). Other studies have found, however, that ethnic pride buffered Korean American students from depression only at low levels of perceived racial discrimination (Lee 2005). Finally, one study found that ethnic identity did not moderate relationships between

discrimination and depression and self-esteem for Asian American college students of Indian descent (Lee 2003). Thus it is unclear whether and to what extent private regard functions in a protective manner for Asian American youth.

Another important dimension of ethnic identity that may buffer youth from ethnic discrimination but which has been remarkably understudied is public regard—youths' perceptions of others' views of their group (e.g., Sellers et al. 1998). Although findings regarding public regard are less straightforward, they support the notion that discrimination interacts with such perceptions in potentially complex ways. In one study, African American youth with more favorable public regard also fared better academically (Chavous et al. 2003). However, in another study, when public regard was considered in concert with perceived racial discrimination, African American youth with lower public regard reported better psychological well-being and fewer depressive symptoms at high levels of discrimination (Sellers et al. 2006). Sellers and colleagues (2006; see also Sellers and Shelton 2003; Shelton et al. 2005) concluded that youth with lower public regard may be less affected by discrimination possibly because it is consistent with their beliefs about how others view them. However, studies have not examined whether public regard functions as a protective factor among Chinese American youth, and it is thus unclear whether it would be similar to African American youth. On the one hand, given prior research that documents the extent to which Chinese American youth experience ethnic discrimination from peers (e.g., Greene et al. 2006; Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press), one might expect that those with lower levels of public regard would be more prepared to encounter ethnic hostility from peers because it would be consistent with their internalized perceived group status. On the other hand, one might expect that some Chinese American youth base their public regard in part on positive expectations of Asian American youth in academic domains, and if so, that having higher public regard would might buffer them against interpersonal ethnic discrimination from peers. Thus, we tested two competing hypotheses regarding the buffering aspects of public regard among Chinese American youth.

The Present Study

In the present study, we examined the prevalence of discrimination from peers among urban Chinese American early adolescent youth relative to African American youth and the associations of such discrimination with self-esteem and depressive symptoms. We also explored the extent to which two dimensions of ethnic identity (private and public regard) predict self-esteem and depressive

symptoms in this urban sample of early adolescents. We expected that more positive private and public regard would be associated with better self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms. Consistent with previous studies, we hypothesized that more favorable private regard would attenuate negative effects of peer discrimination on self-esteem and depressive symptoms among Chinese American youth. We also tested competing predictions regarding how public regard would interact with ethnic discrimination because the research base is equivocal at this point. Finally, we examined whether there were different within-group associations of ethnic discrimination experiences and ethnic identity beliefs with well-being outcomes among Chinese American youth relative to their African American peers.

Method

Sample

Data for this study are drawn from the Early Adolescent Cohort Study¹, an investigation of contextual influences on the social, emotional, and academic adjustment of youth in ethnically diverse New York City middle schools. The initial sample consisted of 219 Chinese American and African American sixth graders (age $M = 11.32$, $SD = .62$). Gender was missing for 2 students (1%), more than 20% of discrimination items were missing for 10 students (5%), and 4 additional students (2%) were missing other key study variables (i.e., ethnic identity, outcomes). The analyses presented therefore focus on a sample of 203 youth (48% girls, 52% boys). Of these, 84 identified as being of Chinese descent and 119 as African American. About 97% of Chinese American youth were children of immigrants.

Procedure

Youth were recruited in all sixth grade classrooms in each of the schools, with the exception of self-contained and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Parents were provided bilingual recruitment letters, flyers, materials and informed consent forms (i.e., in English and Chinese). All survey administration was done in participating school classrooms in the spring of 2005, during periods determined by the principal and the teachers. After reminding youth that the questionnaire was voluntary and confidential, they were asked to sign informed assent

forms. The research team members encouraged participants to ask for assistance at any point as they completed the survey and checked each questionnaire to ensure the quality of the data. Youth were given \$5 in appreciation of their time.

Measures

Peer Ethnic Discrimination

Discrimination by peers was assessed with 18 binary items that tapped whether or not youth had experienced various kinds of unfair, biased, or prejudiced treatment. This measure, created by Way and colleagues, was based on a measure of discrimination by Williams et al. (1997) and on qualitative interviews with adolescents regarding their experiences of discrimination with peers (Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press). Youth were asked to indicate how often each type of discrimination has occurred (0 = Never, 4 = All the time; e.g., “How often do you feel that peers in school treat you with less respect because of your race and ethnicity?”). In previous studies, this scale has demonstrated excellent reliability (see Pahl and Way 2006; Greene et al. 2006). In the present study, the initial peer discrimination scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .95$), however, there was restricted range and low variability in the mean. Therefore, each item was recoded into a binary item that indicated whether the youth had ever experienced each type of discrimination described. The resulting summary indicator consisted of the number of different types of peer discrimination youth had ever encountered (range = 0–18).

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity was assessed with two measures based on the original Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al. 1997) as well as the MIBI-Teen (Scottham et al. 2005, Unpublished). Although the MIBI was developed for use with African American samples, the constructs that are conceptually based on Crocker and colleagues’ (e.g., Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) model of collective self-esteem—including private group affect and public views of one’s group—are appropriate and useful for examining ethnic identity among diverse samples. Furthermore, the MIBI component of private regard has been modified and used reliably with diverse samples (e.g., Fuligni et al. 2005; Kiang et al. 2006). Therefore, in the present research, all items were modified for use with multiple groups by replacing “Black” with references to “my ethnicity” or “my ethnic group.” A 3-item scale of

¹ The Early Adolescent Cohort Study is part of the NYU Center for Research on Culture, Development, and Education, of which Diane Hughes and Niobe Way are two co-Principal Investigators.

private regard asked students to indicate their agreement with statements such as, “I am proud to be part of my ethnic group” ($\alpha = .82$). On average, youth reported very positive private regard ($M = 4.36$, $SD = .77$). The 3-item scale of public regard inquired about youths’ perceptions of ethnic group devaluation or status with items such as, “A lot of people don’t expect my ethnic group to do well in life” (reverse coded; $\alpha = .80$). On average, youth perceived relatively positive public regard for their ethnic group ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.10$). All ethnic identity scales provided a response range of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) and were scored such that higher values indicate more positive private and public regard, respectively.

Psychological Well-being

Two outcomes were assessed—self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg 1965). Youth were asked to indicate their agreement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree) with 10 items (e.g., “I am satisfied with myself;” $\alpha = .85$). The Children’s Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs 1985) was used to assess depressive symptoms. Across 10 items, youth were asked to select a statement that best represented the extent to which they experience negative affect ($\alpha = .82$). For example, youth could select one of the following: I am sad once in a while = 0; I am sad many times = 1; I am sad all the time = 2.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive Results

Means and standard deviations for all study variables for the combined sample and for each group are provided in Table 1. Analyses of covariance controlling for gender indicated that there were significant ethnic group differences in mean levels of peer discrimination, private regard, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms (all $F_s \geq 11.00$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). As predicted, Chinese American youth reported significantly more peer discrimination ($\eta^2 = .06$), less positive private regard ($\eta^2 = .05$), lower self-esteem ($\eta^2 = .15$), and more depressive symptoms ($\eta^2 = .06$) than African American youth.

Bivariate correlations are provided in Table 2 for Chinese American youth (above the diagonal) and African American youth (below the diagonal). There were similar associations between peer ethnic discrimination, private regard and psychological well-being variables among

Table 1 Variable means and standard deviations

	Overall	Chinese American	African American
Peer Discrimination***	4.57 (5.55)	6.18 (5.92)	3.44 (4.99)
Private regard***	4.36 (.77)	4.15 (.78)	4.50 (.73)
Public regard	3.66 (1.10)	3.69 (1.02)	3.64 (1.16)
Self-esteem***	3.15 (.62)	2.87 (.64)	3.35 (.52)
Depressive symptoms***	.26 (.33)	.36 (.37)	.19 (.28)

Note: Standard deviations are provided in parentheses

Asterisks denote significant differences between groups, all $p_s \leq .001$

Table 2 Intercorrelations among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5
Peer discrimination	–	–.18	–.49***	–.49***	.58***
Private regard	–.17 ⁺	–	.24*	.24*	–.25*
Public regard	–.17 ⁺	–.03	–	.37***	–.50***
Self-esteem	–.20*	.33***	–.06	–	–.71***
Depressive symptoms	.19*	–.35***	–.03	–.59***	–

Note: Values above the diagonal are for Chinese American youth only; those below the diagonal are for African American youth

⁺ $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Chinese American youth and their African American peers. Among Chinese American youth, peer discrimination was significantly correlated with more negative public regard, but not significantly correlated with private regard. For Chinese American youth, peer discrimination was associated with significantly lower levels of self-esteem and more depressive symptoms. Finally, private and public regard were significantly associated with higher self-esteem and with fewer depressive symptoms among Chinese American youth. In contrast, for African American youth, public regard was uncorrelated with well-being outcomes.

Primary Analyses

To test the primary hypotheses of the study, we estimated a series of OLS regression equations, with self-esteem and depressive symptoms as the criterion, in turn. In these equations, control variables (i.e., ethnicity and gender) and ethnic identity and peer discrimination variables were entered simultaneously at step 1, followed by a set of two-way multiplicative interaction terms using centered variables (Aiken and West 1991; private regard \times peer discrimination, public regard \times peer discrimination) at step 2. These interaction terms test the hypothesis that the slope for the relationship between discrimination and each of the criterion variables vary for youth with high versus low private and public regard. Finally, at step 3, we entered a

set of two-way interaction terms and three-way interaction terms to determine whether the nature of the main effects and two-way identity × discrimination interactions differed for Chinese youth as compared to African American youth. In Tables 3 and 4, the *F* and change in *R*² at each step represent the incremental proportion of the variance explained by entry of each set. The unstandardized regression coefficients and their standard errors are from the final equation, with all variables entered.

Self-esteem

As summarized in Table 3, the initial step of the model accounted for 30% of the explained variance in self-esteem. Chinese American youth reported lower self-esteem, on average, than African American youth. In addition, more peer discrimination was associated with lower self-esteem, whereas more positive private regard was associated with higher self-esteem. The interaction terms entered at step 2 accounted for a non-significant increase in the variance of self-esteem, and neither of the ethnic identity × peer discrimination interactions were significant. Finally, at step 3, there was a significant

ethnicity × peer discrimination interaction such that among Chinese American youth, peer discrimination was associated with slightly lower self-esteem than among African American youth. None of the other interaction terms were significant, and the inclusion of the terms contributed to an additional 5% of the variance explained in self-esteem.

Depressive Symptoms

The initial step of the model predicting depressive symptoms explained 27% of the variance in depression (see Table 4). At this step, more positive private regard was associated with fewer depressive symptoms. The peer discrimination × private regard and peer discrimination × public regard interactions were significant at step 2, however, they explained a non-significant additional 2% of the variance in depressive symptoms. Perhaps more importantly, however, there was a significant three-way interaction of ethnicity × peer discrimination × private regard and of ethnicity × peer discrimination × public regard at step 3, which explained an additional 13% of the variance in depressive symptoms.

To better grasp the nature of these three-way interactions, we first plotted the three-way ethnicity × peer discrimination × private regard interaction to determine how it differed between Chinese American and African American youth (see Fig. 1). We then plotted the three-way interaction of ethnicity × peer discrimination × public regard (see Fig. 2). Next, we conducted hierarchical linear regressions with the Chinese American sample only to determine which interactions were robust for the Chinese American youth given the relatively small sample size for this group (see Table 4). We also adopted a more conservative *p*-value of <.01 to determine significance of the interaction in these analyses.

The results of the within-group analyses echo those of the comparative analyses with the whole sample (see Table 4). Specifically, as shown in Fig. 1, whereas having more positive private regard was associated with fewer reported depressive symptoms among African American youth who encounter more peer discrimination, there was no such buffering effect of private regard among Chinese American youth. With regard to the buffering properties of public regard, Fig. 2 shows that among Chinese American youth, those who perceived more favorable public regard reported fewer depressive symptoms in the face of higher levels of peer discrimination compared to those who perceived less favorable public regard. Moreover, no such buffering property of high public regard was found for African American youth, and in fact the interaction showed an inverse relationship to the one found for Chinese American youth.

Table 3 Hierarchical regressions of peer discrimination and ethnic identity on self-esteem

	Combined sample		
	<i>b</i>	SE	B
Step 1			
Intercept	3.37	.06	
Chinese	-.34	.09	-.27***
Gender	-.08	.07	-.06
Peer discrimination	-.02	.01	-.19*
Private regard	.22	.07	.26**
Public regard	-.05	.04	-.09
	<i>R</i> ² = .30 <i>F</i> (5, 197) = 16.78, <i>p</i> < .001		
Step 2			
PD × Private regard	-.01	.01	-.04
PD × Public regard	-.01	.01	-.08
	$\Delta R^2 = .00$ <i>F</i> (2, 195) = .51, <i>p</i> < <i>ns</i>		
Step 3			
Chinese × PD	-.03	.02	-.21*
Chinese × Private regard	-.08	.11	-.06
Chinese × Public regard	.12	.08	.13
Chinese × PD × Private regard	-.02	.02	-.12
Chinese × PD × Public regard	.02	.01	.13
	$\Delta R^2 = .05$ <i>F</i> (5, 190) = 2.73, <i>p</i> < .05		

Note: PD = Peer discrimination

+ *p* ≤ .10, **p* ≤ .05, ***p* ≤ .01, ****p* ≤ .001

Table 4 Hierarchical regressions of peer discrimination and ethnic identity on depressive symptoms

	Combined sample			Chinese American		
	b	SE	B	b	SE	B
Step 1						
Intercept	.19	.03		.27	.05	
Chinese	.07	.05	.10	–		
Gender	.00	.04	.00	.08	.06	.10
Peer discrimination	.01	.01	.16 ⁺	.03	.01	.42***
Private regard	–.13	.04	–.28***	–.03	.05	–.05
Public regard	.01	.02	.05	–.10	.04	–.27**
	R ² = .27 F(5, 197) = 14.63, p < .001			R ² = .42 F(4, 79) = 14.32, p < .001		
Step 2						
PD × Private regard	–.02	.01	–.23**	.01	.01	.08
PD × Public regard	.01	.00	.24**	–.02	.01	–.23**
	ΔR ² = .02 F(2, 195) = 2.20, p < ns			ΔR ² = .05 F(2, 77) = 3.60, p < .05		
Step 3						
Chinese × PD	.02	.01	.23*			
Chinese × Private regard	.08	(.06)	.12			
Chinese × Public regard	–.09	.06	–.17*			
Chinese × PD × Private regard	.03	.01	.26**			
Chinese × PD × Public regard	–.03	.01	–.36***			
	ΔR ² = .13 F(5, 190) = 8.79, p < .001					

Note: PD = Peer discrimination
⁺ p ≤ .10, *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001

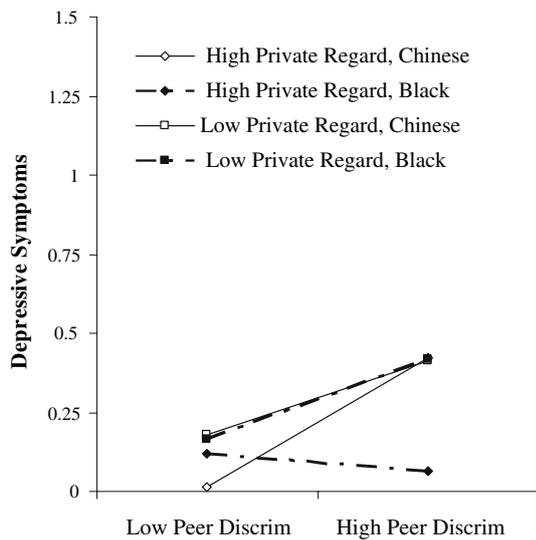


Fig. 1 Three-way interaction of ethnicity × peer discrimination × private regard on depressive symptoms

Discussion

The primary goal of the present research was to examine ethnic discrimination from peers and two aspects of ethnic identity—private and public regard—both descriptively for Chinese students relative to their African American peers and as they relate to psychological well-being among

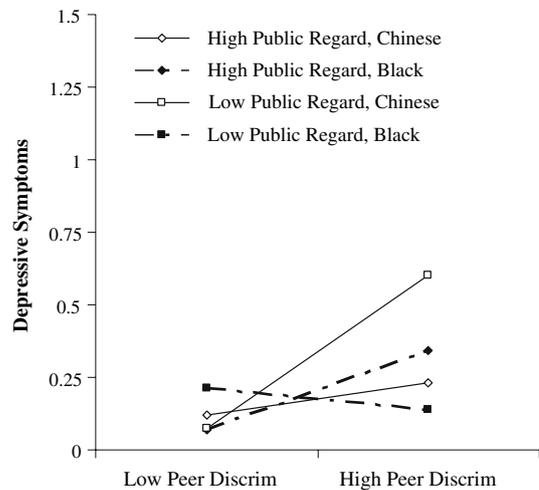


Fig. 2 Three-way interaction of ethnicity × peer discrimination × public regard on depressive symptoms

Chinese American youth. Our results show a number of important differences between Chinese American youth and their African American peers, namely, in the prevalence of peer discrimination they experience and in the joint influences of discrimination and ethnic identity on their well-being.

As predicted, Chinese American early adolescents in the present study reported feeling that they are treated badly,

unfairly, teased, harassed, and called names by peers, who are individuals whom they encounter on a regular basis. Of the 18 types of discrimination from peers that were included in our measure, Chinese students, on average, had experienced about 6 of them, compared to 3–4 among African Americans. These findings confirm previous findings on the prevalence of peer discrimination among Chinese American youth in particular (Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press). It will be critical in future research to continue uncovering some of the specific dynamics of peer discrimination experiences among this group of adolescents. Research suggests that preferential treatment shown to Asian American youth by teachers in low-SES or predominantly minority schools may bring about discrimination from peers who are not Asian American and who are resentful of the positive attention they receive (Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press). Moreover, given the fact that even Chinese American youth who attended a school with a predominantly Chinese American population reported such high levels of discrimination, it is possible that they are also reporting intragroup peer discrimination from their co-ethnic Chinese American peers who have different regional or socioeconomic origins in China (see Qin et al. in press; Rosenbloom and Way 2004). Our findings contribute to an understanding of discrimination experiences among early adolescents and suggest that Chinese American middle school students experience peer discrimination to a similar degree as their high school counterparts.

The other goal of this study was to examine the extent to which two aspects of ethnic identity functioned to protect Chinese youth from the negative consequences of discrimination, as has been found among African American and Latino youth. In regards to self-esteem, private regard, but not public regard, was associated with self-esteem such that youth with lower levels of private regard reported lower self-esteem. However, having more positive private regard did not provide a buffer against the negative consequences of peer discrimination for Chinese American youths' self-esteem as it did for African American youth in the present sample. Although this finding contrasts those from previous studies with other ethnic groups (e.g., Romero and Roberts 2003; Wong et al. 2003) that suggest that private regard protects youth from the discrimination, it is consistent with Lee's (2003, 2005) studies, which have not found a buffering effect of private regard among older Asian American students.

With regard to depression, Chinese American youth who perceived more favorable regard from others toward Chinese Americans reported fewer depressive symptoms. Furthermore, when peer discrimination and ethnic identity were considered in concert, more favorable public regard functioned as a protective factor for Chinese American

youth. The association between peer discrimination and depression was weaker when Chinese American youth reported higher public regard. This finding contrasts with previous research among African American adolescents (e.g., Sellers et al. 2006). Sellers and colleagues (2006), Shelton and Sellers (2003) argue that lower public regard is potentially protective in that if youth already have a stable sense that their group is devalued, individual instances of discrimination may have less impact on their well-being. Indeed, public regard functioned similarly among the African American youth in the present study. It is possible that *some* Chinese American youth with higher public regard are drawing from positive expectations of adults in school, for instance, and they are thus able to discount ethnic rejection from peers. It is also possible that those students who report higher public regard are experiencing fewer or less severe forms of peer discrimination. Hence the association between peer discrimination and depression may be diminished in this circumstance. Our findings suggest the need to further explore the links between ethnic identity and discrimination for middle school students and how these links may be shaped by the context of adolescents' lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

A key limitation in the present study is the cross-sectional nature of the data. Although many of the findings converge with longitudinal studies among Chinese Americans in middle and late adolescence (e.g., Greene et al. 2006; Rosenbloom and Way 2004; Way et al. in press), cross-sectional data leave open the possibility that self-esteem and depression influence youths' reports of discrimination and ethnic identity, rather than the reverse or that a third variable (e.g., youths' strength of self-identification, for example) inflates the correlation between them. Research with Asian American college students suggests that those who feel that a particular social identity forms an integral part of their sense of self may also tend to report more positive private and public regard toward that group (e.g., Crocker et al. 1994). A second limitation is that the study relied on adolescents' self-reports as measures of discrimination, ethnic identity, and youth outcomes. Although most research on ethnic discrimination and identity utilize self-report data, in part because subjective experiences and perceptions matter, we cannot rule out the possibility that stable individual factors, such as personality, may inflate the reporting of experiences of discrimination as well as the link among discrimination, ethnic identity, and psychological adjustment. Finally, the present study included only one group within the larger pan-ethnic group of Asian youth and only one context. Therefore, we cannot

generalize to all Asian American youths' experiences in general, nor to all those of Chinese descent. Our findings might be meaningfully different if we had a diverse sample of Asian American youth of various national origins who reside in different kinds of communities. We note, however, that previous ethnographic research has identified important similarities in views about ethnicity and discrimination among Chinese American students of urban and suburban backgrounds (e.g., Louie 2004).

Conclusion

This study provides a glimpse of the psychological correlates of ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity among Chinese American early adolescents. Public perceptions and discussions about the well-being of such youth tend to focus on high levels of academic achievement, which inadvertently proliferate the myth of the model minority. Such perceptions overlook how ethnic discrimination may have meaningful consequences on the psychological and social development of Asian American youth as it does for other groups. As the number of American youth of Asian descent continues to increase, it is necessary to continue investigating what resources they may draw upon to negotiate discrimination in order to more holistically explicate the complex role of ethnic minority status in their development.

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