

Comparison of Perception of Self-Competence Among Five Ethnic Groups of Preschoolers in the US

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This study compared the perception of self-competence of immigrant Asian-American, Asian-Indian, Hispanic, native European-American, and African-American preschoolers. Self-competence is defined by Harter as the “feeling of confidence in achieving certain tasks”. The development of self-competence emerges gradually as children acquire greater physical, self-help, social, and cognitive skills and become aware of their own abilities. Preschoolers ($n = 205$) between the ages of 3 and 5 years participated in the study. The children’s perception of self-competence was measured using the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children. Analyses of variance were conducted to compare the self-competence scores of the children by their ethnic origin (race \times self-competence scores). Results indicated cultural variations in the perception of self-competence among the preschoolers: cognitive competence, $F(5, 199) = 5.96, p < 0.0001$; peer acceptance, $F(5, 199) = 11.301, p < 0.0001$; physical competence, $F(5, 199) = 6.816, p < 0.0001$; and maternal acceptance, $F(5, 199) = 2.553, p < 0.05$. Post-hoc analysis indicated that, compared with European-American, African-American, and Asian-Indian children, Hispanic children had lower cognitive competence, physical competence, and peer acceptance.

INTRODUCTION

Past research has provided interesting information about dimensions of self, changes with age, and factors influencing the development of the self-system (Harter and Pike, 1984). The research on self-system has been conducted under a plethora of paradigms that include self-concept, self-esteem, self-competence, self-confidence, and so on. The present paper will focus only on the self-competence aspect of the self-system, and will explore and compare the perceptions of self-competence of African-American, Asian, Asian-Indian, European-American, and Hispanic preschool children living in the US.

Perception of self-competence according to Harter (1983) is the ability of children to identify their competencies in certain tasks. Researchers are divided on whether the perception of self-competence is multidimensional or unidimensional. Rogers (1950) and Coopersmith (1967) view self-competence as being unidimensional. They propose that self-competence is the cumulation of one’s evaluations of performances across various tasks. On the other hand, Harter (1983, 1985) and Bandura (1988) argue that the perception of self-competence is the confidence about one’s performance in different, specific, and separate

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areas. This approach to the study of self-competence highlights important evaluative judgments about the self. Harter (1983) proposed four dimensions to describe the perception of self-competence in young children: (a) cognitive competence, (b) physical competence, (c) peer acceptance, and (d) maternal acceptance.

Research has indicated that it is important to foster positive perceptions of self-competence at an early age (for example, Hubbard and Coie, 1994; McAdoo, 1985; Parker and Asher, 1985; Rosenberg, 1979). Previous researchers also noted that children with positive self-concepts seemed to have higher peer and social acceptance (Bradley and Newhouse, 1975; Downs, 1988).

The literature has indicated that the development of perception of self-competence is related to a number of variables including age, cognitive competence, developmentally appropriate practices, and parenting attitudes (for example, Broughton, 1978; Gottschalk, 1993; Harter and Pike, 1984; Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce, 1999; Jambunathan and Hurlbut, 2003). However, the literature addressing self-competence is not complete, since most past research has been carried out with older children and children with special needs. In addition, most of the studies concerning the perception of self-competence among children has been conducted with children from Western cultures. Yet researchers agree that children's development is influenced by cultural norms and values (Rubin, 1990). There is lack of adequate research in investigating the perception of self-competence among children from other cultures and the influence of cultural constructs on their perception of self-competence.

The psychology and behavior of ethnic minorities varies from that of the majority population. Recent research has highlighted the importance of recognizing these differences when studying ethnic differences. This stems vastly from the way in which the ethnic minorities are socialized as children. Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, and Buriel (1990) proposed that the socialization goals that minority parents have for their children usually stems from their perception of adult roles the children will have to play when they grow up. The parents then translate the requirements to fulfill these roles into their socialization goals for their children. However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Ogbu (1980) point out that all ethnic families may not interact with similar family ecology systems; as a result, there are likely to be differences in the socialization goals and in the child outcomes as well. Behaviors that are considered to be appropriate and positive in one culture may be viewed as being inappropriate and negative in other cultures. Also the ethnic minority parents incorporate the adaptive strategies of family extendedness and role flexibility (extended family support and networks that usually serve as problem-solving and stress-reliving mechanisms), biculturalism (ability to function effectively in more than one culture), and ancestral worldviews (which include the beliefs of the community and the family interwoven with those of the self) in their parenting practices (Harrison, *et al.*, 1990). The following paragraphs provide a brief description of the characteristics of children from African-American, Asian, Asian-Indian, European-American, and Hispanic backgrounds.

European-American Children

Children in Western culture are encouraged to be independent, assertive, self-confident, and self-reliant, and such behaviors have been found to be related to peer acceptance. Researchers have described children growing up in the European-American culture as being "field-independent" (Rodriguez, 1983). This indicates that these children are capable of solving problems separately as parts, as well as a whole by themselves, and do not require external support or assistance. These characteristics are valued in the US, a country that cherishes individualism. While Asians' and Asian-Indians' perceptions of appropriate child behavior

are very similar to one another, these perceptions vary from that of Westerners, especially that of taking initiative to become independent and assertive.

Asian and Asian-Indian Children

Research has indicated that the Asian parents strongly encourage their children to be reticent, dependent, not to display emotions, and to exhibit self-restraint (Chen, Rubin, and Sun, 1992; Ho, 1986; Ho and Kang, 1984). These behaviors are viewed by both Asians and Asian-Indians to be appropriate in promoting peer and social acceptance. However, research by Chen *et al.* (1992) implied that shyness-sensitivity were positively related to Chinese children's peer acceptance, while it was negatively related to Western children's peer acceptance.

The expectations of Asian and Asian-Indian children's behavior changes with increase in age. When the children are infants they are perceived to be relatively incapable of meeting their needs, are not responsible for their behavior, and parents provide for the infants and toddlers. However, during the preschool period the Asian children are expected to take responsibility for their own behavior. Parents begin to have higher expectations for the children's academic achievement and self-help skills. The expectations Asian-Indian parents have for their preschoolers is slightly different from that of the Asian parents. The Asian-Indian parents do not expect their children to be responsible for their own actions during the preschool period of development. In fact, they still strongly encourage dependency on the primary caregiver. However, they have high expectations for the academic achievement of the children.

As the Asian and Asian-Indian children grow older, often they are expected to fulfill adult roles, like taking care of younger siblings. Asian and Asian-Indian children of all ages are prohibited from being disobedient, aggressive, and they are expected to comply with family and societal rules, and roles. Asian children are usually complimented for behaviors such as completing chores, academic achievement, and exhibiting self-control. However, these compliments are not overt. The Asian and Asian-Indian children from an early age are under tremendous pressure to keep up the "family name and honor." Any behavior that would bring down the family honor usually has severe consequences. Interestingly, Ou and McAdoo (1980), in their research with American-born Chinese boys, reported that the self-concept of boys were low when their parents strongly encouraged them to follow Chinese cultural rules. This indicates that the social development of children is a complex process. Children's ethnicity and the majority culture in which they live might be important influential factors in their socialization.

African-American Children

The psycho-social development of African-American children can be best understood when we attempt to understand the interactive influence of school, home, society, and history (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rickel and Allen, 1987). Previous research with African-American children has portrayed them as having difficulties in academic achievement, behavior problems, low self-esteem, and lack of direction (for example, Clark and Clark, 1939; Coles, 1976; Noland, 1972). However, more studies have indicated that African-American children do not have low self-esteem/self-concept in comparison with their Western European counterparts (for example, Hines and Berg-Cross, 1981; Samuels and Griffore, 1979; Stevenson, Chen, and Uttal, 1990). Research has also indicated that African-American children tend to do better in school if the teachers were more direct and told them what to do.

Historically, African-Americans have faced racism. African-American parents prepare their children to deal with racism by emphasizing the development of high-achievement motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem in their children (Peters, 1988). Research has also indicated that African-American parents are stricter in their parenting style than European-Americans, requiring higher levels for accepting responsibility, for self-help and care, for coping with racism and negative stereotyping (for example, Bartz and Levine, 1978; Bell-Scott and McKenry, 1986; Hamner and Turner, 1990; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis, 1988). African-American parents also encourage their children to openly express their positive and negative emotions. This is a characteristic that might be viewed as being aggressive by other cultures.

Hispanic Children

The cultural values and norms of the Hispanics have been described in terms of the following categories:

- (a) Identification with family, community and ethnic groups.
- (b) Personalization of interpersonal relationship, which essentially is socializing children to be receptive and sensitive to the needs of others and to be cohesive as a group versus the promotion of individualistic success.
- (c) Status and roles based on age and gender.

Both parents in Hispanic households tend to adopt a permissive attitude towards childrearing and toward the younger children. They provide an abundance of nurturance, have a relaxed attitude towards their child's achievement, and promote self-reliance. However, as the child grows older he/she is expected to take more responsibility in maintaining the family (Ramirez, 1983). Like African-Americans, Hispanic children are reported to have lower achievement levels. The lower level of achievement among the Hispanic children has sometimes been attributed to cognitive and linguistic deficits, low need for achievement, lack of self-direction, and low self-esteem (Holliday, 1985). More recently, scholars have focused on the impact of being part of a language-minority population (Barry, 1997; Bermudez & Padron, 1988).

The Hispanic children, like the Asian and Asian-Indian children, are under tremendous pressure to abide by the rules of the community. There are different societal expectations for boys and girls. Boys are allowed to explore their environment and interact with others to better prepare them for their role of a breadwinner and head of the household. In contrast, girls are protected, have limited freedom, and are trained to become the primary caregiver of their children. The Hispanic children are also strongly encouraged to obey authority and not to question the person in command. This is exemplified by research where Hispanic children were found to perform well in school when their teacher told them what to do. Hispanic children are generally emotionally expressive; however, in the presence of an authority figure they tend to suppress their emotions. Research has also implied that Hispanic children were more non-confrontational than the African-American and Western European children (Phinney and Rotherham, 1987).

There is contradictory information about the self-concept of the Hispanic children. Evans (1970) and Hishiki (1969) found Hispanic children to have a lower self-concept than their European-American counterparts. However, Samuels and Griffore (1979) and Carter (1968) found no such differences. Stevenson *et al.*, (1990) also found that Hispanic children had higher expectations for success, showed the ability to focus, and had higher self-esteem and achievement.

The review of the literature brings to light some serious deficits with regard to the study of the perception of self-competence among preschoolers, especially as it relates to minority

children. The present study examined the differences in the perception of self-competence among African-American, Asian, Asian-Indian, European-American, and Hispanic children. The results of the present study will help clarify the relations between ethnicity and self-competence.

METHOD

Subjects

Preschoolers ($n = 205$) between the ages of 3 and 5 years participated in the study. The children belonged to one of five ethnic backgrounds. There were sixty-one European-Americans, forty-nine African-Americans, forty-one Asians-Americans, thirty-one Hispanics, and twenty-three Asian-Indians. The children attended preschools located in two states in the southern and western parts of the US. The socio-economic status of the participating children ranged from lower-middle to upper-middle class based on the fact that none of the children participated in school lunch programs and did not get any kind of financial aid to attend the preschools. The mothers of these children ranged in age from 18–40 years. Information gathered from the directors of the preschool indicated that almost all the children came from families with dual caregivers and had at least one parent with a high school degree. The immigrant children's families had been in the US for at least 3 years.

Data Collection

Parental consent forms were distributed to the directors of early childhood education programs, who in turn distributed them to the parents of all the children in the preschool classrooms. Letters were sent to two hundred and ninety parents, and two hundred and five were returned (71% return rate). Graduate research assistants who were trained in the administration of the instrument and one of the authors administered the instrument. Each participating preschoolers' perception of self-competence was individually assessed using the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance (Harter and Pike, 1984). The test administration was conducted in a quiet setting outside the classroom (*e.g.*, in the Director's office, resource room) during regular program hours. The researchers introduced themselves to the children and explained to the children that their parents had given permission for the researchers to work with them. Each assessment lasted about 15–20 minutes.

Instruments

The participating preschoolers' perceived self-competence was measured using the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance (Harter and Pike, 1984). The scale consists of four subscales, each composed of six items. The subscales are: (a) cognitive competence (*e.g.*, "This girl is good at doing puzzles" versus "This girl has trouble doing her puzzle"), (b) physical competence (*e.g.*, "This girl can hop on one foot" versus "This girl cannot hop on one foot"), (c) peer acceptance (*e.g.*, "This girl has lots of friend to play with on the playground" versus "This girl does not have many friends to play with on the playground"), and (d) maternal acceptance (*e.g.*, "This girl's mother takes her to all her favorite places" versus "This girl's mother does not take her to all her favorite places"). The questions are presented in a "structured alternative format", in which each child is presented with descriptions and pictures of two different "kinds of children", one of whom is competent and the other is not.

There are different picture plates for each gender. The child is first asked to point to which of the two depicted children is most like him/her (e.g., "This girl can point to the first letter of her name" versus "This girl cannot point to the first letter of her name"). The child is then asked whether this is only "sort of true" or "really true" by pointing to each of two circles beneath the picture (e.g., "Can you run really point to the first letter of your name?" pointing to a large circle versus "Can you run sort of point to the first letter of your name?" pointing to a small circle). Each item is scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from 4 (highest level of perceived self-competence) to 1 (lowest level of perceived self-competence). A mean score is calculated for each of the subscales. The internal consistency reliabilities for the preschool children were: cognitive competence, 0.71; physical competence, 0.66; peer acceptance, 0.74; and maternal acceptance, 0.85 (Harter and Pike, 1984).

RESULTS

A one-way (four: cultural groups) analysis of variance was conducted with four subscales of the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance to compare the self-competence scores of the children by their ethnic origin. The means and standard deviations for the subscales of the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance are presented in Table I.

Results indicated there were significant differences in the perception of self-competence among the five ethnic groups of preschoolers living in the US: cognitive competence, $F(5, 199) = 5.96, p < 0.0001$; peer acceptance, $F(5,199) = 11.301, p < 0.0001$; physical competence, $F(5,199) = 6.816, p < 0.0001$; and maternal acceptance, $F(5,199) = 2.553, p < 0.05$. Post-hoc Tukey tests for ethnic group differences in the perception of self-competence yielded significant results ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$) for twenty-four of the forty pairwise comparisons. In summary, Hispanic children had lower cognitive competence than their European-American, African-American, Asian, and Asian-Indian counterparts. Hispanic, Asian, and Asian-Indian children had lower perception of physical competence and peer acceptance compared with their African-American and European-American counterparts. Asian children were also found to have lower cognitive competence than African-American and Asian-Indian children; and European-American children were found to have lower cognitive competence compared with Asian-Indian children. Hispanic children were also found to have lower perception of maternal acceptance than Asian-Indian, European-American, and African-American children. The Asian children were found to have lower perception of maternal acceptance compared with the Asian-Indian and African-American children.

DISCUSSION

TABLE I Means and Standard Deviations (SDs) of the Perception of Self-Competence

Ethnicity	Cognitive competence		Peer acceptance		Physical competence		Maternal acceptance	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Caucasians	3.43	0.56	3.13	0.54	3.22	0.58	3.33	0.55
African-Americans	3.56	0.428	3.19	0.61	3.32	0.47	3.43	0.61
Hispanics	2.92	0.85	2.42	0.63	2.71	0.64	3.09	0.74
Asians	3.21	0.72	2.56	0.70	2.89	0.66	3.14	0.63
Asian-Indians	3.67	0.48	2.61	0.65	2.77	0.77	3.54	0.54

The findings from the present study indicated that there were cultural variations in the perception of self-competence among the five ethnic groups of preschoolers living in the US. In interpreting the results of the present study, it is important to keep in mind that the instrument used was based upon research and theory from the Western culture, and its reliability and validity checked with European-American samples.

Several trends emerged from the analysis of data in the present study. The Hispanic children consistently scored lower than other cultural groups in all four dimensions of perception of self-competence. On the other hand, the African-American children consistently had higher perception of self-competence across all four of the dimensions than children from other cultural groups. European-American children also had higher perceptions of self-competence in the three dimensions of physical competence, peer acceptance, and maternal acceptance; they scored lower than Asian Indian children on the dimension of cognitive competence. No clear pattern emerged with Asian and Asian-Indian children's perception of self-competence. They had higher perceptions of self-competence in some dimensions (*i.e.*, cognitive competence and maternal acceptance) and lower perceptions of self-competence in other dimensions (*i.e.*, physical competence and peer acceptance) compared with certain other cultural groups.

The contrast between the perception of self-competence among African-American children and Hispanic children is particularly interesting given that both of these minority groups are considered to be at-risk in the US. African-American children have been found to have high perception of self-competence by several researchers (for example, Evans, 1970; Hines and Berg-Cross, 1981; Hishiki, 1969; Samuels and Griffore, 1979) in comparison with European-American children. The high perception of self-competence among African-American children may be attributed to the African-American parents' emphasis on developing skills to survive as a minority in a majority environment (Harrison *et al.*, 1990). In addition, African-American and European-American parents provide ample opportunities for their children to develop their self-help and physical skills. African-American and European-American parents also encourage their children to make independent decisions, choose their own friends, and they provide ample opportunities to interact with other children of their own age. This encourages the children to venture out and feel confident about their abilities, and to make new, and sustain existing friendships.

These findings may also be explained, in part, by the social context and family structure of African-American families. African-American mothers play an important role in childrearing. Scholars report a strong bond between African-American mothers and their children (Hammer and Turner, 1990). Children may perceive this maternal involvement as maternal acceptance. The high perception of cognitive competence indicated by the children in the present study may be a result of the how parents prepare African-American children to deal with current social issues. This includes the incorporation of the adaptive strategies of biculturalism and ancestral worldviews in their parenting practices to prepare their children to deal with racism and negative stereotyping by emphasizing achievement, self-competence, and self-esteem.

The results of the present study indicated that the Hispanic children have low perceptions of self-competence. These characteristics maybe due in part to the relaxed attitude the Hispanic parents have towards their children's academic achievement (Ramirez, 1983). Hispanic parents believe their job is to nurture and the schools' job is to educate (Espinosa, 1995). The lower perception of physical competence among the Hispanic children is not surprising given the parenting practices of the Hispanic parents does not involve providing a stimulating environment for their children's physical growth and development. The Hispanic parents have a relaxed attitude towards encouraging their children to pursue

physical competence skills. The parents place less emphasis than the European-American parents in seeing that their child achieves developmental milestones and excels in physical tasks. Also, Hispanic mothers, as well as the Asian and Asian-Indian mothers, tend to be very nurturant towards their children to the extent that they do most of the self-help tasks for their children, not giving the children a chance to learn the tasks by themselves.

The Hispanic parents emphasize dependence of family and obedience to authority figures more than European-American parents. This is also reflected in their reluctance to allow their children to interact with outsiders. The Hispanic parents encourage their children to be dependent on them for a prolonged period of time and do not encourage independent peer interaction and autonomous behavior. This monitored socialization pattern may be related to the low perception of peer acceptance among the Hispanic children.

The European-American children's high perception of self-competence was consistent with previous literature (for example, Rodriguez, 1983) which indicated that these children had high perception of self-competence. These results could partly be attributed to the authoritative parenting practices where the parents strongly encourage their children to be more independent and make their own decisions. Also, European-American parents perceive excellence in physical skills as important, and provide ample opportunities for their children to develop these skills, particularly those of self-help. Similarly European-American parents promote socialization skills among their children. They encourage them to interact with other children and to make their own friends. As a result, European-American children feel competent about their peer interactions. Even though the European-American mothers promote independence among their children, the mothers are the primary caregivers and strive to meet the needs of their children, with constant interaction with them. This close relationship might have promoted the high perception of maternal acceptance among the European-American children.

The high perception of cognitive competence among the Asian and Asian-Indian children could be attributed to the values their parents place on cognitive skills. The Asian and Asian-Indian children are under tremendous pressure to do well academically and to improve cognitively. The Asian and Asian-Indian parents focus more on educating their children academically and helping them to develop cognitively and religiously rather than physically. This may result in the children having a low perception of physical competence, as the Asian and Asian-Indian parents do not provide ample opportunities for their children to excel or participate in sports or to practice physical skills.

The Asian and Asian-Indian children's lower perception of peer acceptance in comparison with the European-American and African-American children is a reflection of the traditional socialization patterns of Asian and Asian-Indian parents. These parents usually emphasize dependence on family and obedience to authority figures. The Asian and Asian-Indian parents encourage their children to be dependent on them for a prolonged period of time and do not encourage independent peer interaction and autonomous behavior.

Although there are similarities in the role expectations of Asian and Asian-Indian children throughout infancy and toddlerhood, during the preschool years there is a difference in the role expectations for Asian and Asian-Indian children. While Asian-Indian children are encouraged to remain dependent on the primary caregiver, Asian children's dependency on the primary caregiver is discouraged and Asian children are now expected to take responsibility for their own behavior. Additionally, parents have high expectations for self-help skills and academic achievement for Asian children during this period of development. This change in role expectations may be somewhat difficult for Asian children to adjust to during the preschool period because they have not been exposed to this kind of independence before. They may view this change in relationship with their mother as less accepting during

a time when cognitive expectations are even greater than previously. While this may be a plausible explanation for the noted differences in the present study, more research needs to be conducted to explore the subtle changes in the relationship between the caregiver and children when children move from one period of development to another.

The results of the present study suggest that there are cultural variations in the perception of self-competence among children across various ethnic groups living in the US. The variations within the minority groups may be attributed to other influential sources, such as the stereotypical portrayal of certain ethnic groups in the media and the degree of variation of incorporation of the adaptive strategies in the childrearing practices by ethnic minority parents. However, the interpretation of these results is limited because the perception of self-competence is influenced by several factors including variability in the patterns of skill development, temperament of the child, within cultural variation in the societal expectations of child roles, and the socialization process. Thus, it is very important for parents, teachers, and educators to bear in mind that children from different ethnic groups have diverse needs and that adults must adapt the techniques they use to help these children. Additional research needs to be performed investigating gender differences among children from different ethnic groups, and also in studying the other influential factors related to self-competence development.

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