Effect of Ethnic Awareness on Job Association

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between education and job association stereotypes. We predicted that middle school students would exhibit more job stereotyping than college students and that college students would associate professional jobs with their own ethnicity. Participants were 82 college students (34 men, 48 women), and 30 middle school students (16 boys, 14 girls). Students filled out an ethnic identify survey and identified the ethnicity they most associated with four pictures depicting different occupations. Middle school students displayed more stereotyping than did college students. Also, college students associated their own ethnicity with professional occupations. This shows the importance of education in eliminating ethnic job stereotypes.

With the election of the first minority United States President, it would appear that children of every color can now dream of choosing any career. Despite this progress, evidence from recent surveys show that minorities are still disproportionately underprivileged. This ongoing trend of discrepancy between majority and minority groups can best be explained by Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory (SIT), which claims that members of an ingroup generally favor themselves and discriminate against or hold negative attitudes towards members of outgroups. Newman, Liss, and Sherman (1983) substantiated this theory when they showed unisex pictures depicting various ethnicities to Hispanic, Caucasian, and African-American kindergarten and second-graders and found that these children were not only able to accurately identify individuals of their ethnic group, but also preferred friends of the same ethnicity and socioeconomic status. When understood in the context of current unemployment and poverty rates, it is not surprising that Caucasians, the ingroup majority, are more economically advantaged than African Americans and Latinos, the outgroup minorities.

Ethnic identity development, formed primarily by identifying with one's ancestral background and its encompassing values and attitudes, shares Marcia's (1966, 1980) four stages of identity: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achieved (Phinney, 1989). A study by Phinney, Ferguson, and Tate (1997) noted a positive correlation between age and ethnic identity development.

Children are made aware of ethnic differences and stereotypes at a young age (Kim-Ju & Lien, 2003). Since Newsom (2004) found that ethnic identity development and self-concept are positively correlated, premature exposure to ethnic stereotype consciousness in younger children may negatively shape their occupational aspirations. Further evidence of this was provided by Cook et al. (1996) who examined inner-city boys and noted that their occupational expectations and aspirations mirrored existing class and race differences in adult professions. The implications of these studies affect not only the formation of ethnic identity but also the future socioeconomic status of some ethnic groups.

The present study sought to determine whether education might lessen ethnic stereotypes. We hypothesized that middle school students would show more stereotyping in ethnic job associations than would college students. Secondly, we predicted that college students would be more likely to associate professional jobs with their own ethnicity.

Method

Participants

Participants included 82 students (48 women, 34 men, M_{age} = 19.78 years, age range: 17-37 years) from a small, liberal arts college, and 30 middle school students (14 girls, 16 boys, M_{age} = 12.59 years, age range: 11-14 years) attending a private school in California. The self identified ethnic composition for the college participants was: 28 (34%) Caucasian, 5 (6%) African American, 12 (15%) Asian, 4 (5%) Pacific Islander, 15 (18%) Latino, and 17 (21%) Mixed. The composition for the middle school participants was: 16 (53%) Caucasian, 3 (10%) Asian, 2 (7%) Latino, and 9 (30%) Mixed.

Materials

The survey used consisted of eight questions and four pictures depicting ethnically ambiguous stick figures (see Figures 1 & 2). The pictures illustrated the figures of a fast food worker, police officer, teacher, and physician. The pictures were attached in random order with boxes to check one of the following ethnicities: White, Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, and Other. Participants indicated their ethnicity by responding to the question: What is your ethnicity? (Check all that apply.) Further, in order to obtain a more complete view of the participant, the following question was asked: What ethnicity do you most resemble in physical appearance? (Check only one.) Finally, the ultimate question to assist with the determination of self-identification was asked: Culturally, what ethnicity do you most relate to in everyday life?

Procedure

The college participants were given the ethnic identification surveys with consent forms attached. In order to ensure participant anonymity, no names were written on the surveys. For the middle school sample, only students whose parents consented to their participation in the study were permitted to participate. The participants received the same instructions as the college participants and completed the survey in the same manner.

Results

Researchers read the narratives of the ethnic incidents and rated them as positive, neutral, or negative in nature. Figure 3 shows the comparisons between middle school and college students on the independent ratings.

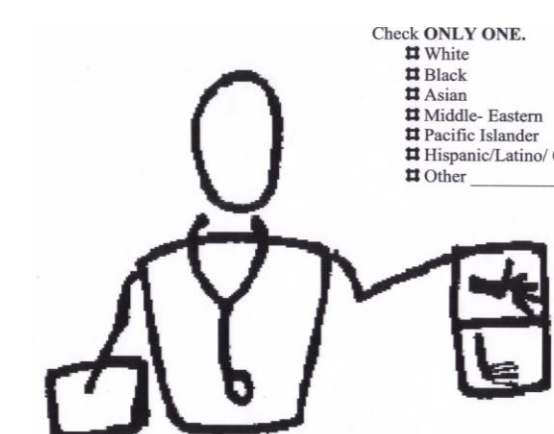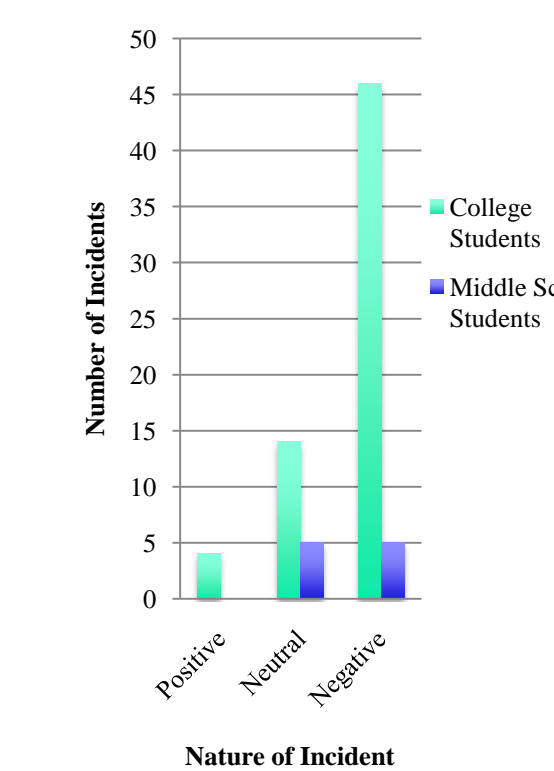**Figure 1**

Figure 2

Figure 3

The first hypothesis, that the middle school participants would show more stereotyping in ethnic job associations than would college students was examined using a Pearson Chi Square. An analysis of the data revealed significant differences between middle school students and college students in ethnic job association stereotyping in two jobs. Specifically, middle school students showed more ethnic job association stereotyping than did college students for the police (χ^2 (1, N = 112) = 33.39, $p < .01$) and teacher (χ^2 (1, N = 112) = 3.94, $p = .05$).

The second hypothesis was that college students compared with middle school participants, would be more likely to associate professional jobs with their own ethnicity. When analyzed with a Pearson Chi Square, we found a strong relationship between the college students' own cultural ethnicity and their ethnic choice for doctor (χ^2 (1, N = 81) = 6.96, $p = .01$) and teacher (χ^2 (1, N = 81) = 7.58, $p = .01$).

Discussion

Although results revealed significant differences between middle school and college students in ethnic job associations for police and teacher, both groups showed ethnic stereotyping of the fast food worker. It may be that both groups were not stereotyping but were in fact basing their ratings on reality (Goldman, McDonald, & Epstein, 1970). Because of a lack of post secondary education, socioeconomic factors, and limited available resources for finding employment, statistics show that minorities are disproportionately represented in non-professional jobs (Elliot, 2001). One avenue for equalizing occupational opportunities across ethnicities continues to be higher education. For this reason we hypothesized and found support for the idea that students with more education would be more likely to classify professional occupations like doctor and teacher with their own ethnicity. Essentially, more education relates to less ethnic job association stereotyping in professional occupations. Not only is there more exposure to ethnic diversity in higher education through increased interaction in and out of the classroom, but there is increased exposure to minority role models in the professions like teachers and doctors. These interactions serve to minimize the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy and allow for more positive ethnic self-identifications for minority members. Education appears to be the key that enables disadvantaged minorities to transcend the unequal socioeconomic conditions.