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# Acculturation, Ethnic Identity, and Coping

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## Abstract

Ethnic identity is understood as a dynamic state, that is determined by three components: (1) by the degree of inclusion in the group of one's cultural origin; (2) the tendency to assimilate to the ethnic group of origin; and (3) the complementary tendency to differentiate from one's own ethnic group. In the same degree as the inclusion intensifies, the tendency to assimilate decreases and the tendency to differentiate increases and vice versa. A state of balance of the two complementary tendencies to assimilate and to differentiate is assumed to exist at an intermediate degree of inclusion (Brewer, 1992). The model predicts that the intermediate balanced state of identity is associated with greater personal resources of those who are in this balanced state of ethnic identity. This ethnic identity model was elaborated by exploring the relationship of adaptive personal resources such as coping styles, self-esteem, developmental state, and the dispositional personal resource of sociability to ethnic identity states of Turkish migrant adolescents living in Germany. The model tended to be supported by these predictors when antecedent measures were included. When the predictors were measured concurrently, the low ethnic identity level revealed the highest level of resources and the high ethnic identity state the lowest.

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## Introduction

The stress-coping framework of acculturation, elaborated by Berry (1997) in his recent review of immigration, acculturation, and adaptation, highlights the significance of life changes during cross-cultural transitions, the appraisal of these changes, and the selection and implementation of coping strategies to deal with them. Cross-cultural researchers who have examined acculturation from a perspective of stress and coping have been predominantly concerned with the prediction of psychological adjustment. Many have considered factors that are routinely investigated in research on stress and coping. These include life changes, cognitive appraisals of stress, coping styles, personality, and social support. Others have concentrated on variables that are more specifically related to cross-cultural transition and adaptation, such as cultural identity and type of acculturating groups.

The cognitive appraisals of potentially stressful demands by acculturating individuals is likely to be influenced by broad social and situational factors, including aspects of the acculturative experience. Despite the general interest in stress and coping, relatively few published studies have actually examined coping strategies in relation to adaptive outcomes in migrants: e.g. Ward and Kennedy (2001) examined the coping strategies and psychological adjustment of British expatriates in Singapore. They identified four basic coping styles: approach (planning, suppression of competing activities, and active coping), avoidance (behavioral disengagement, denial, venting and the absence of positive reinterpretation), acceptance (acceptance and restraint coping), and social support (seeking emotional and instrumental support). The research revealed that approach coping was associated with a decrement in depressive symptoms in the British expatriates in Singapore. Avoidance coping, however, was related to higher levels of depression in this investigation.

For the most part, the findings from studies on coping with cross-cultural transition parallel the general literature on stress and coping. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989), for example, highlighted the functional aspects of direct, action-oriented coping strategies, while questioning the long-term effectiveness of disengagement strategies. This is not to suggest that specific coping strategies would be uniformly affective, or that cultural factors have no bearing on adjustment outcomes. Indeed, Cross (1995) has speculated that there may be cross-cultural variations in coping effectiveness. This line of research begins with the distinction between primary and secondary coping strategies. Primary strategies are direct actions; they are overt, task-oriented behaviors, aimed at changing aversive features of a stress-provoking environment. Secondary strategies, in contrast, are more cognitive than behavioral; they most commonly involve changing perceptions and appraisals of stressful events and situations. In the simplest terms, primary strategies imply changing the environment to suit the self, while the secondary strategies reflect changing the self to suit the environment. Cross (1995) speculated that primary or direct coping strategies are highly valued by people in individualist cultures, while indirect or secondary mechanisms may be more adaptive for those in collectivist cultures.

The work by Cross (1995) and Ward and Kennedy (2001) suggests the likelihood of a "cultural fit" model of coping and adaptation; however, it is somewhat premature to draw such a conclusion. It may be the case that indirect tactics are intrinsically more suitable and efficacious for coping with at least some aspects of cross-cultural transition. In short, cross-cultural migrants are powerless to change entire cultures, and in many cases they have limited resources for modifying the troublesome features of their new cultural milieu. In these instances, cognitive strategies may be more effective in reducing stress. In any event, further research is needed to clarify the relationship among culture, coping, and ethnic identity during cross-cultural transitions.

### **Relationship between Ethnic Identity and Coping**

One question that needs further clarification is the relationship between ethnic identity and tendencies to prefer certain coping strategies. This study explores the preferences of coping strategies of Turkish adolescents, sons of migrant families living in Germany. Their various degrees of ethnic identity may be understood as indicators of different degrees of acculturation.

Ethnic identity in acculturation situations may be described as a dynamic state, that is determined by three components: (1) by the degree of inclusion in the group of their cultural origin; (2) the tendency to assimilate (be included) in the group and (3) the complementary tendency to differentiate from one's own. In the same degree as the inclusion intensifies, the tendency to assimilate decreases and the tendency to differentiate increases. Furthermore, if the tendency to assimilate increases, the tendency to differentiate decreases. A state of balance of the two complementary tendencies to assimilate and to differentiate is assumed to exist at an intermediate degree of inclusion (Brewer, 1991).

Results reported by Schönplug (1999) with this ethnic identity model revealed that Turkish adolescents reporting to be in the balanced state between tendency to assimilate and tendency to differentiate showed higher well-being in terms of absence of psychosomatic and somatic symptoms. On the other hand, dispositional resources which had revealed in past research little dependence on context as e.g. the personality trait of sociability, activity, and intelligence decreased linearly with ethnic identity. The lowest personal resources were observed among adolescents with a strong ethnic identity with reference to their cultural group of origin.

Among the personal resources investigated in this study are *adaptive context-dependent resources* as coping styles, global self-esteem and state of social development. In addition, a *dispositional personal resource*, i.e. sociability, was selected to be included in the analysis. Sociability is a biologically based personality factor defined by Zuckerman (1990); it refers to preference of being with others rather than alone.

The association between ethnic identity and coping strategies may be predicted as follows:

### *Hypothesis 1*

Strong and weak identification with the ethnic group of origin are states associated with a deficit in problem-solving oriented coping and a focus on self-oriented coping strategies. The balanced, intermediate, state of ethnic identity is associated with a higher level of problem-oriented coping and a lower level of self-focused coping.

### *Hypothesis 2*

The relationship of the second type of adaptive personal resource, global self-esteem with ethnic identity, is assumed to be the same as that of problem-focused coping: it is expected to be low with weak and strong levels of ethnic identity and higher with an intermediate level of ethnic identity.

### *Hypothesis 3*

The relationship of ethnic identity with the dispositional personal resource of sociability is predicted in hypothesis 3.

Strong and weak states of identification with the ethnic group of origin are expected to be associated with low sociability. The balanced, intermediate state of ethnic identity is associated with a higher level of sociability than the other two states.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

A three-year longitudinal study included 200 female and 200 male Turkish adolescents in Berlin and in Friedrichstadt (Southern Germany), aged 13 to 19 years. They attended all school tracks possible in both cities from the 7th grade to the 12th grade.

### *Procedure*

A questionnaire was administered in the classroom. The questionnaire included items for the scales measuring the constructs investigated in the study. The completion of the questionnaire took approximately 90 minutes.

## **Measures**

### *Ethnic Identity*

Identity was defined as the resultant of the agonistic tendencies to assimilate and to differentiate from the cultural group of origin and according to the degree of inclusion in this cultural group. The tendency to assimilate was measured by 4 items (e.g. "For me it is important that I am Turkish"), Cronbach's Alpha was .61. The tendency to differentiate was measured by 8 items (e.g. "I am embarrassed when people notice that I am Turkish"),

Cronbach's Alpha was .81. Level of inclusion in culture of origin was measured by collectivistic orientation with regard to the parents and extended family.

Three identity states were defined according to the agonistic tendencies to assimilate and to differentiate from the cultural group of origin and according to the degree of inclusion in this cultural group: (1) *low ethnic identity*: persons with high tendency to assimilate, low tendency to differentiate and low level of inclusion; (2) *medium level of ethnic identity*: persons with medium tendency to assimilate and to differentiate and intermediate level of inclusion; (3) *high ethnic identity*: persons with low tendency to assimilate, high tendency to differentiate and a high level of inclusion.

### *Coping Styles*

Coping styles were defined according to Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1986). A second order factor analysis of ten single coping styles yielded two higher order factors: (1) *Problem-Oriented Coping Style*: five coping strategies loaded with loadings above .40 on this second order factor: (a) active problem-oriented coping; (b) strategic planning; (c) emotional-social coping; (d) wait-and-see coping; (e) positive re-evaluation. Cronbach Alpha for this higher order problem-oriented coping style was .81. (2) *Self-Oriented Coping Style*: Again five coping strategies loaded with loadings above .40 on this second order factor: (a) denying; (b) giving up; (c) diverting; (d) taking things; (e) taking pills, alcohol or illegal drugs. Cronbach Alpha for this higher order self-oriented coping style was .65.

### *Sociability*

The sociability scale is part of Zuckerman's Personality Inventory measuring the classical five personality dimensions. The sociability scale had 20 items (e.g. "I don't like being alone"). Cronbach Alpha for this scale was .79.

### *Global Self-Worth*

An eight item scale with items taken from the Rosenberg (1965) inventory measured global self-esteem (e.g.: "I am satisfied with myself"). Cronbach's Alpha was .83.

### *Social Developmental State (Self-Rating)*

The adolescents rated their own developmental state with reference to their peer group. They rated (a) their relationship to their brothers and sisters as (1) worse than their peers; (2) the same as their peers; (3) better than their peers; (b) their relationship to their friends, (c) to their parents and (d) to themselves according to the same three response categories. The four items had a Cronbach Alpha of .67.

## Results

### *Predictors of Three Identity States*

Two exploratory discriminant analyses estimated the importance of the selected predictors for membership in the three ethnic identity states. The results presented in Table 1 are the outcome of an optimization procedure: The predictors representing the adaptive personal resources, the problem-oriented and the self-oriented coping styles and global self-esteem alone together with age, gender, schooltype, and time spent in country of origin yielded no satisfactory classification solution (only 56% correct classification). Only after adding sociability representing a dispositional personal resource (Zuckerman, 1990) the correct classification increased to an acceptable 71% and 72% for antecedent and concurrent predictors, respectively. The first significant discriminatory function may be understood as an acculturation-adaptation-to-host country dimension as length of stay in a host country, self-focused coping, and social developmental state have structure coefficients with a negative direction whereas sociability, gender (girls over boys) and age (the older the adolescent, the more acculturated) have substantial positively directed structural coefficients. The first discriminatory functions from the antecedent and the concurrent wave, respectively, show essentially the same pattern with slight deviations in structural coefficients.

Table 1

Results of two exploratory discriminant analyses: Antecedent and concurrent predictors of ethnic identity states (structural coefficients on the significant first discriminant function).

| <b>Predictors</b>              | <b>Antecedent Predictors</b> | <b>Concurrent Predictors</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Sociability                    | .54                          | .60                          |
| Gender                         | .42                          | .55                          |
| Age                            | .38                          | .32                          |
| Social Developmental State     | -.33                         | -.17                         |
| Self-Oriented Coping Style     | -.30                         | -.20                         |
| Problem-Oriented Coping Style  | .21                          | .34                          |
| Time in Country of Origin      | -.25                         | -.30                         |
| Global Self-Worth              | .21                          | .37                          |
| Schooltrack                    | .19                          | .09                          |
| <i>Correct Classifications</i> | <i>71%</i>                   | <i>72%</i>                   |

Theoretically relevant is the insight provided by the structural coefficients that adaptive personal resources such as coping styles are not as strong predictors for ethnic identity states as are the dispositional resource of sociability, and the socio-demographic predictors gender and age.

The developmental state in the social domain as defined here by self-ratings of the quality of relationship to brothers and sisters, friends, parents and to oneself with reference to peers has a negative relationship to the discriminatory function: The more the adolescents rate themselves as having better relationships with these significant others the less acculturated and adapted to their host country they seem to be.

### *Distribution of Predictor Means Across Identity States*

The distribution of means of the sociodemographic predictors of ethnic group membership across the three ethnic identity groups shows that ethnic identity states differ distinctly with regard to length of stay in host country: the higher the level of ethnic identity, the longer the stay in the country of origin ( $F(2,108) = 4,05; p < .05$ . see Figure 2a,b). This finding validates the three ethnic states defined. The adolescents' age decreases with level of ethnic identity, the younger adolescents seem to gather in the high ethnic identity group. A one-way analysis-of-variance yielded significant mean differences of  $F(2,107) = 6,74, p < .05$ ). Only the difference between the mean age of the high identity group and the other two was significant according to a posthoc comparison of means with the Scheff, procedure. The distribution of boys and girls over the three identity groups revealed a distinct distribution: Boys gathered in the high ethnic identity state and girls in the low state. The intermediate group had an equal distribution of boys and girls (chi square = 18,73,  $df = 2; p < .00$ ).

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three predictors of interest: sociability, self-oriented coping style and problem-oriented coping style across the three ethnic identity groups.

The more preferred coping style of the two included in the study over all three identity groups is the problem-oriented coping style. In this respect migrant adolescents are similar to Turkish, German, or American adolescents staying in their home country. Concurrent measures of sociability and problem-oriented coping decrease with level of ethnic identity,  $F(2, 105) = 10,52, p < .00$  for sociability and  $F(2, 103) = 6,83, p < .00$  for problem-focused coping, respectively). The antecedent measurements of sociability and problem-focused coping did not show parallel results: Antecedent problem-focused coping did not differ across identity states, whereas antecedent measures of sociability did. The predicted curvilinear distribution of levels of sociability across the identity states was found with intermediate identity level revealing the highest sociability,  $F(2, 97) = 6,97, p < .01$ . Self-oriented coping shows a weak curvilinear trend over the three identity groups, the lowest self-oriented coping mean was observed with the intermediate ethnic identity group, the highest with the high ethnic identity group, with low ethnic identity showing an intermediate level of self-oriented coping. Neither the means of the antecedent nor those of the concurrent measures differed significantly.



Thus, the three hypotheses are partially supported by the distributions of means of the antecedent variables (see Figure 1b). The migrant adolescents in a balanced state of ethnic identity reported to be more social in the preceding year. Also, the problem-oriented and the self-oriented coping means showed the predicted curvilinear trend but did not differ significantly in the three ethnic identity states. The concurrent measures, however, do not favor the intermediate, balanced state of ethnic identity as the state held by more resourceful adolescents than in either the low and the high state: Sociability decreases linearly with levels of ethnic identity states; so does the problem-oriented coping style and global self-esteem (also for antecedent measures).

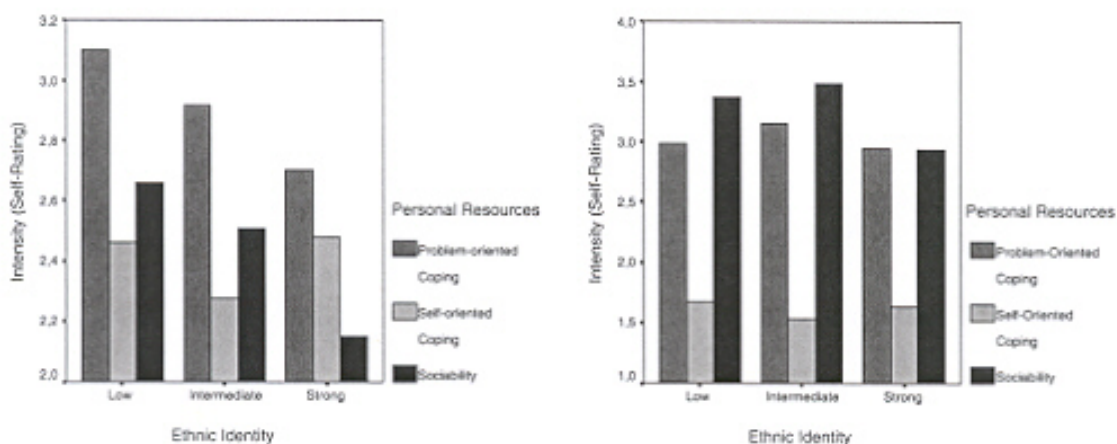


Figure 1a,b. Distribution of mean preference of problem-oriented coping style, self-oriented coping style, and sociability: concurrent and previous measures. (Figure 1a, left: concurrent measures; 1b, right: antecedent measures).

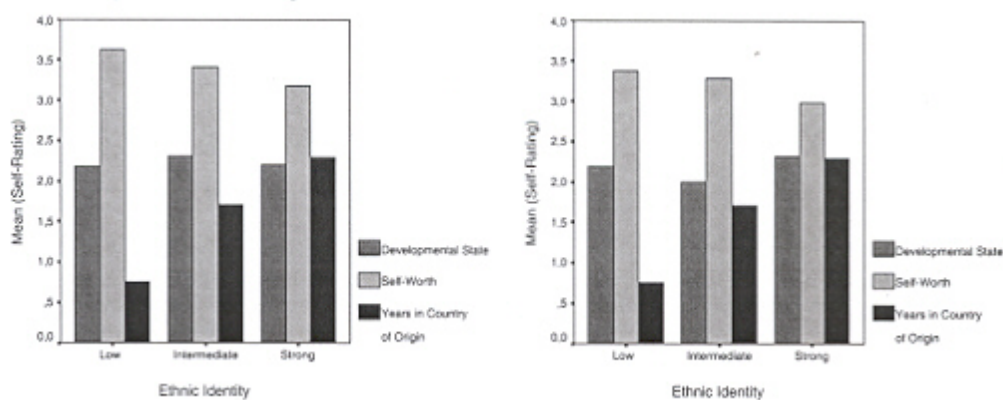


Figure 2a,b. Distribution of self-rated developmental state, self-worth and years spent in country of origin: concurrent and antecedent measures. Figure 2a (left) and 2b (right). *Linear decreasing trend for global self esteem across the three ethnic identity levels in the antecedent and the concurrent measures. Developmental state does not show any clear or significant trend in relation to the ethnic identity states.*

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to search for concurrent and antecedent predictors of ethnic identity. Ethnic identity was defined as a dynamic state that is the result of two antagonistic tendencies to assimilate to and at the same time to dissociate from one's group of origin; both these tendencies depend on the degree of inclusion in one's group of origin: the more persons feel included in their group of origin, the more they develop the tendency to distance themselves from it and at the same time the less they tend to assimilate. Furthermore, the less persons feel included in their culture of origin the more they tend to assimilate to and the less they tend to dissociate from it. Brewer's theoretical model was supported by previous research which indicated that intermediate ethnic identity might represent a balanced state with optimal life satisfaction, low vulnerability and low stress symptoms. High ethnic identity seemed to be associated with weaker personal resources and life satisfaction. However, contradictory to Brewer's model, adolescents in the low ethnic identity group seemed to be rather resourceful.

This study continues the research on Brewer's model of ethnic identity and looks for other personal resources that are associated with ethnic identity states as defined here. They are briefly validated by length of stay in home country. The higher the level of ethnic identity the longer the stay in the country of origin.

Coping strategies may be understood as adaptive personal resources that develop in interaction with a person's personality. A person's ethnic identity in an acculturation context may be the result of the person's coping capacity. It was hypothesized that adolescents with strong ethnic identity tend to be less resourceful with regard to their coping capacity as compared to adolescents with an intermediate, balanced state of identity and compared to adolescents with low ethnic identity. This hypothesis followed a stress model of acculturation: adolescents avoiding acculturation because of lack of resources to endure this stressful process: The findings somewhat support these considerations. Adolescents with high ethnic identity preferred self-oriented coping more than the other two groups. However, adolescents in the intermediate, balanced ethnic identity state tend to be the most resourceful only previously, not concurrently. Indeed those adolescents that show the highest level of sociability, problem-focused coping, and the lowest level of self-focused coping were in the balanced identity state one year later. A linear relationship between ethnic identity and problem-oriented coping capacity was found with concurrent measurements. However, the state of balanced ethnic identity may thus be predicted from previously resourceful adolescents with regard to their personal resources. The fourth personal resource examined in this study was global self-worth. It declines over the identity levels in both measurements. Developmental state as assessed here with reference to relationships with significant others (siblings, friends, parents) and to oneself, did not show any significant association to ethnic identity.

Thus, the hypotheses were only partially supported. It may be concluded that adolescents' ethnic identity in the context of acculturation reflects and is predicted by coping resources, sociability, and global self-esteem, but the predictors examined show different relationships to ethnic identity states when measured previously or as concurrent

variables. Future studies are needed to clarify further the role of personal resources in the acculturation process.

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### About the Author

Ute Schönflug is currently professor of developmental psychology at Martin-Luther-University, Halle/Saale, Germany. She is also affiliated to the Institute of Cognitive Science at the University of Colorado. Her enduring interest in cross-cultural psychology lead her to initiate several longitudinal studies of youth development in Turkish-German and Polish-German cultural contexts. Later, she focused on acculturation and development. Her second area of research is language acquisition and bilingualism. Among her last important publications is the special issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* concerning *Cultural Transmission*.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Ethnic identity is understood here as a dynamic process that has three components. What are they? What relations do these components have to each other? Who developed this identity model in what research context?

2. There are two distinct coping styles according to Cross (1995); what are they and how are they defined?
3. How do the three ethnic identity states relate to the coping styles? Why is it meaningful to explore this relationship?
4. Can you think of a good explanation for the difference in relationships of antecedent and concurrent predictors to ethnic identity states in this study?
5. What might be the reasons for less resourceful adolescents in an acculturation context to develop strong ethnic identity?
6. How should this line of research be continued?