EXPLORING ETHNIC STEREOTYPES AND ADOLESCENT VALUES:
A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how ethnic stereotypes influence adolescent identity and values. It draws conclusions from a

qualitative focus group of 12 participants (ages 11-52) from various cultural and generational backgrounds, including members of the Armenian diaspora and other ethnic minorities. The study identified eight key themes: identity formation and cultural duality, media portrayal, daily stereotyping, internalized perceptions, generational changes, coping mechanisms, value influences, and constructive solutions. The findings highlight the complex and changing experiences of youth navigating ethnicity within a multicultural society, emphasizing the important roles of education, media, and family in shaping identity.

Keywords: *ethnic identity, adolescence, stereotypes, diaspora, qualitative research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human behavior, encompassing thoughts, emotions, and actions, cannot be explained solely by natural laws; cultural rules and norms play a decisive role (Eckensberger, 1990). Culture, while widely invoked, remains a complex construct referring to shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that shape human experience (Valsiner, 2009; Kashima, 2019). Psychology conceptualizes culture as both shaping and being shaped by individuals, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between mind and culture (Shweder, 1995).

Over time, shared cultural values may crystallize into stereotypes, simplified and often distorted beliefs about social groups. Ethnic stereotypes, whether positive or negative, can obscure individual variation and contribute to prejudice and discrimination (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.-b). Adolescence represents a particularly sensitive developmental period in which social feedback and cultural narratives significantly influence identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1990).
Previous research demonstrates that stereotypes can shape adolescents' self-concept, aspirations, and interpersonal behavior through mechanisms such as social identity processes and stereotype threat (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, few studies have qualitatively examined how adolescents articulate, justify, and critically evaluate ethnic stereotypes across cultural and generational contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining how ethnic stereotypes are experienced and negotiated in relation to adolescent value development, with particular attention to diaspora and cross-generational perspectives.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The study included 12 participants aged 11 to 52 years. The sample consisted of adolescents (ages 11–21) and adults reflecting on adolescent experiences. Participants identified as Armenian (from Armenia and diaspora communities in Germany, Lebanon, and Iran), Mexican American, and German.

2.2 Selection Criteria

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (a) identification with a distinct ethnic or cultural group, (b) direct experience with adolescence in a multicultural or mono-cultural context, and
(c) willingness to discuss experiences related to ethnic stereotypes and values. Adults were included to provide cross-generational reflections on adolescent development. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent; parental consent was obtained for minors.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through a semi-structured focus group discussion. Guiding questions addressed experiences with ethnic stereotyping, identity formation, cultural integration, value transmission, and perceived generational differences. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed following Braun and Clarke's qualitative framework. Analysis proceeded through six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) initial open coding to identify meaningful units, (3) clustering codes into preliminary themes, (4) reviewing themes for internal coherence and distinctiveness, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the analytic narrative.

Coding was conducted iteratively, with ongoing comparisons across participants and age groups. Analytic saturation was considered reached when no new themes or substantive insights emerged from the data.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Identity Formation and Cultural Duality

Participants reported hybrid identities, particularly among those in diasporic contexts. Adolescents described being Armenian at home while integrating seamlessly into host cultures (e.g., German or Iranian society). This dual identity offered cultural adaptability but sometimes led to internal conflict when cultural expectations diverged. These experiences are consistent with Berry's (1997) model of acculturation and Phinney's (1990) research on bicultural identity development.
Berry proposed a model of acculturation that categorizes individual adaptation strategies along two dimensions (Berry, 1997). The first dimension relates to whether a person maintains or abandons their native culture. The second dimension concerns the adoption or rejection of the host culture.
Phinney's (1990) research on bicultural identity development focuses on the process by which individuals develop a sense of belonging to both their ethnic group and the dominant culture. She proposes that exploring ethnic identity involves understanding one's cultural heritage, recognizing the implications of group membership, and making informed decisions about the role of ethnicity in one's life.
Identity formation and development patterns vary due to differences in individual backgrounds and social

environments (Seaton et al., 2006).

3.2 Media Representation and Its Impact

Media representation, the way different groups and ideas are portrayed in media, significantly shapes societal values and norms. It influences how individuals perceive others, understand identities, and ultimately, how the world is viewed. While positive representation fosters empathy and inclusiveness, negative portrayals may reinforce prejudice and inequality.

Participants in this study emphasized the decisive role of media in shaping stereotypes and self-perception. A common concern among the participants was media misrepresentation. For instance, a Mexican-American attorney criticized the lack of positive Latina role models, while Armenian participants noted inaccurate portrayals of diaspora Armenians in homeland media. These media depictions influence adolescents' self-image and societal expectations (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000).

3.3 Stereotypes in Daily Life and Education

Stereotyping was evident in both educational and community settings. Lebanese-Armenians reported facing judgments based on language use, while Germans, influenced by their historical experiences and collective guilt, tended to avoid overt stereotyping. Informal biases were also evident in community narratives, often reflecting urban-rural divides.

These findings highlight the widespread presence of both explicit and implicit bias in institutional and informal settings (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). Explicit bias refers to conscious, deliberate prejudices or beliefs about specific groups. Unlike implicit bias, which functions unconsciously, explicit bias is something individuals openly admit and express. Implicit bias theory concerns unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that influence individuals' decisions and actions. (APA, n.d.-a).

3.4 Internalized Stereotypes and Self-Worth

Internalized stereotypes are stereotypes and misinformation that a person believes are true about themselves (APA, n.d.-b; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Participants showed varying responses to internalized stereotypes. Some reported strengthened identity and pride (e.g., rooted in Christian heritage), while others experienced diminished aspirations due to societal bias, particularly around academic or professional goals.

These outcomes align with research on stereotype threats and their impact on performance and ambition. Introduced by Steele and Aronson (1995), stereotype threat occurs when individuals from stigmatized groups internalize negative stereotypes, which can harm their self-esteem and performance and, consequently, lead them to incorporate negative stereotypes associated with their group identity (e.g., race, gender) into self-perception and behavior.

3.5 Generational Shifts

A notable generational difference emerged, with older participants displaying more rigid ethnic worldviews, whereas younger adolescents (11-15 years) exhibited more fluid and open attitudes. The younger group often reported limited or no experience with stereotyping, was more tolerant, and was much more accepting of diversity, suggesting that evolving societal norms, globalization, and increased digital exposure may be having a lasting influence on their beliefs and shaping their perspectives.

Arnett and Ward et al. offer complementary perspectives on the impact of globalization and digital exposure on younger generations. Arnett (2000) highlights the extended period of exploration and identity formation in "emerging adulthood", driven by technological advancements and globalization. Ward et al. (2001) focus on the psychological and social processes underlying intercultural adaptation, which are intensified by globalization and digital connectivity.

3.6 Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

In this study, participants' responses to stereotyping included adaptive strategies such as education,

mentorship, and social media engagement. Some participants combined cultural preservation with integration into mainstream society. However, many found this balance challenging, a finding that echoes Berry's (1997) and Ward et al.'s (2001) ideas on cultural resilience and identity negotiation in multicultural settings.

3.7 Influencers of Values: Family, Educators, and Media

All participants emphasized that family, teachers, and media profoundly shape adolescent values. While families instill ethnic pride, educators and media serve as agents of inclusion or exclusion. As Jeffrey Arnett concludes in his study, "The growing role of social media was noted as both a risk and a tool for cultural empathy. The proliferation of media around the world means that adolescents now have access to the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of people in other parts of the world, allowing for both imitation and critical reflection." (Arnett, 2000, p. 473)

3.8 Constructive Recommendations

The group collectively advocated nuanced heritage education, emphasizing the importance of teaching history and cultural heritage with depth and complexity, while avoiding indoctrination and encouraging critical thinking. They also promoted intercultural respect and empathy, aiming to foster an environment that supports understanding, mutual respect, and compassion across diverse cultures and perspectives. Additionally, they supported the creation of inclusive environments in schools and communities, spaces that value diversity, promote inclusivity, and celebrate a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

As one participant astutely observed, "Stereotypes say more about the people who create them than about you." This insight highlights the importance of addressing biases and stereotypes in education and community settings.

4. DISCUSSION

This study reveals how ethnic stereotypes impact adolescents in complex ways. It demonstrates that multiple influences shape identity, as adolescents navigate both their heritage culture and the culture of their surroundings, which can significantly affect their sense of self. Positive reinforcement plays a crucial role. Consistent with findings by Steele and Aronson (1995) and Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000), support from education, family, and media representation can enhance adolescents' self-worth. In contrast, negative stereotypes may damage aspirations and lead to feelings of alienation. Furthermore, generational differences are significant. While stereotypes persist in many areas of life, younger, digital-native generations are increasingly driving a shift toward greater inclusivity.

The persistence of stereotypes in both institutional and informal settings indicates the need for targeted interventions. To address these issues, we need specific actions in education, media policy, and community engagement to create a more inclusive environment.

5. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small and not statistically representative, limiting generalizability. Second, the inclusion of adults reflecting retrospectively on adolescence may introduce recall bias. Third, focus group dynamics may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose sensitive experiences. Finally, cultural groups were unevenly represented, which may have shaped the prominence of specific themes.

6. CONCLUSION

Ethnic stereotypes continue to profoundly impact adolescent values and identities, influencing their self-perception, social interactions, and worldview. While some youth successfully navigate cultural duality, leveraging it as an incentive for personal growth and resilience, others encounter significant barriers rooted in systemic bias and discrimination. These obstacles can hinder their ability to form authentic identities and fully participate in diverse social contexts.

To foster a generation that not only embraces diversity but also remains true to themselves, it is essential to promote:

- Representation: Ensure diverse representation in media, education, and leadership positions, providing adolescents with positive role models and a sense of belonging.
- Dialogue: Encourage open and respectful dialogue about ethnic stereotypes, cultural differences, and social justice, helping adolescents develop empathy and critical thinking skills.
- Inclusive Education: Implement inclusive educational practices that value diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences, preparing adolescents to thrive in a multicultural society.

By prioritizing these strategies, we can empower adolescents to navigate the complexities of identity, culture, and social difference, ultimately cultivating a more compassionate, inclusive, and equitable society.

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