Ethnic Identity and Sexual Initiation Among East Asian Youth in Canada

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Abstract

Background—Despite the large number of East Asian youth in Canada, little is known about their health and risk behaviors. We examined the relationship between ethnic identity and sexual initiation among East Asians.

Methods—This secondary analysis of a population-based survey selected 4,311 students in 7–12th grades who described themselves as East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean). Gender-stratified logistic regression analyses examined whether ethnic identity was associated with sexual initiation, controlling for age, living situation, and cultural exposure.

Results—Boys with stronger commitment to their ethnic groups were less likely to have ever had sexual intercourse (aOR = 0.80). Girls with higher levels of ethnic identity exploration were less likely to report sexual initiation (aOR = 0.71).

Discussion—Stronger ethnic identity was associated with not having sexual intercourse initiation among East Asian adolescents. The findings suggest the need to consider ethnocultural factors in future research and practice.

Keywords

Ethnic identity; Sexual intercourse; Adolescents; East Asian

Introduction

As the immigrant population has increased, the well-being of immigrants and the next generation of Canadians has become a public health issue. In Canada, 20% of the total population were born outside of the country [1]. Among the top 10 source countries, two are

East Asian: China and South Korea. However, there is little research on adolescents of East Asian origin in Canada.

In British Columbia (BC), 9–10% of East Asian adolescents have ever had sexual intercourse [2]. Over 70% of those sexually experienced adolescents reported early sexual initiation, inconsistent condom use, or multiple sexual partners. These behaviors place youth at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections [3–5]. Canadian-born East Asian youth who speak English at home, had higher odds of sexual initiation than their foreign-born peers who use a heritage language at home. Similar findings were reported in the United States [6]. Cultural factors appear to be key in understanding sexual activity among East Asian adolescents in North America.

Ethnic identity, a sense of self as a member of an ethnic group, may also be another key factor associated with health and risk behaviors. Ethnic identity can be a risk factor for people with strong ethnic identity whose values and behaviors conflict with those of the mainstream culture. Such conflicts may create stress, which in turn increases the risk of health compromising behaviors [7]. In contrast, strong social and psychological connections with an ethnic group can be a source of support that promotes healthy development and protects adolescents from risk exposure [7]. We examined the relationship between ethnic identity and sexual initiation among East Asian adolescents in BC.

Methods

Sample

We used data from the 2008 British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey (BCAHS), administered to a cluster-stratified random sample of 1,760 classes in grades 7 through 12 across 50 school districts in BC (response rate = 66%). We selected students who marked 'East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc)' as their cultural or ethnic background (un-weighted N = 4,311). The University's Behavioural Research Ethics Board has approved both the original survey and this study.

Measures

The dependent variable was whether students have ever had sexual intercourse. Ethnic identity was measured by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM–R) which assesses two core components of ethnic identity: exploration of one's ethnic identity (seeking out information and experiences regarding one's ethnic group) and commitment to one's ethnic group (a sense of belonging and attachment to one's group) [8]. A two-factor model, consisting of three Exploration items and three Commitment items, fit to the data; the two factors were highly correlated ($r = 0.85$) [9]. Ordinal alphas [10] were 0.76 for Exploration and 0.87 for Commitment. The BCAHS did not specifically ask with which ethnic or cultural group(s) a respondent identified.

Our independent variable of interest was a proxy variable for culture. Students were classified into four cultural exposure groups: a) immigrants speaking a heritage language at home, b) immigrants speaking English at home, c) Canadian-born speaking a heritage

language at home, and d) Canadian-born speaking English at home [2]. Other variables were age and living situation (living with at least one parent versus living without parents).

Analysis

Logistic regressions, by gender, were performed to examine relationships between ethnic identity (Exploration and Commitment) and having engaged in sexual intercourse. The first model included ethnic identity, age, and living situation; we then added cultural exposure to the first model. We used the Complex Sample module of SPSS version 18.0 to handle complex survey data. Data were weighted and scaled to provide a provincial representation of all regular public school students throughout BC (weighted N = 48,108).

Results

Sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1. On average, East Asian students had moderate levels of ethnic identity. Exploration, not commitment, differed by gender with girls indicating slightly greater exploration.

Table 2 and Table 3 show adjusted odds ratios (aORs) of the association between ethnic identity and sexual initiation among boys and girls, respectively. Boys with higher levels of ethnic identity commitment were less likely than boys with lower commitment to report ever having sexual intercourse (aOR = 0.75). On the other hand, the odds of sexual initiation were not significantly associated with exploration. Among girls, stronger exploration (aOR = 0.65) and commitment (aOR = 0.72) were significantly associated with lower odds of ever having intercourse.

When cultural exposure, along with demographic variables, was controlled for, stronger commitment (aOR = 0.80), but not exploration, were significantly associated with a lower likelihood of sexual initiation among boys. Girls with higher levels of exploration were less likely than other girls to report that they had ever had sexual intercourse (aOR = 0.71). Commitment, however, was no longer significantly associated with sexual initiation among girls. Canadian-born adolescents who spoke English at home were about twice as likely as immigrant adolescents speaking their heritage language at home to report sexual initiation.

Discussion

Ethnic identity was a significant factor associated with sexual initiation among East Asian adolescents living in BC. When cultural exposure was not taken into account, boys and girls with stronger ethnic identity were less likely to report that they had ever had sexual intercourse. When cultural exposure was taken into account, ethnic identity commitment for boys remained statistically significant; exploration was still not a significant factor. For girls, exploration was independently associated with lower odds of ever having sexual intercourse, whereas commitment was no longer a significant predictor. Among both genders, however, the odds ratios for the two components were similar. This result is not surprising, given the strong correlation between exploration and commitment. Both components of ethnic identity are important factors linked to sexual initiation.

An explanation for the association between ethnic identity and sexual initiation among girls may involve family socialization. Parents socialize their children about their ethnic heritage through transmission of ethno-cultural values, practices, and knowledge. Family socialization helps to foster children's ethnic identity, particularly exploration [11]. The effect of family socialization on ethnic identity has been stronger for girls than for boys [11]. Because women are generally expected to maintain and pass on cultural traditions, parents may teach their daughters more about their ethnicity than their sons, which may contribute to higher levels of exploration among girls as reported by this study and others [11]. Generally girls have a closer relationship with their mothers than do boys, thereby having more opportunities to participate in gendered cultural practices such as cooking and preparing for cultural events. East Asian girls who have learned about their ethnic cultures from their parents and explored the meaning of ethnicity may be more likely than their peers with lower levels of exploration to adhere to their cultural values about teen sexual activity. In general, East Asians have conservative sexual norms and values [12]. Higher levels of ethnic identity thus may be associated with lower odds of sexual initiation. However, we do not know with which ethnic or cultural group a respondent identified. Therefore, this explanation is not applicable to those who identified with a group other than East Asian.

For boys, other socialization agents than parents, such as peers, may be more salient for ethnic identity development [11]. Interactions with same-ethnic peers and community members may help to develop a sense of belonging to one's ethnic group. Strong social and psychological bonds can protect adolescents from risk exposure [13].

This was the first study to examine the association between sexual behavior and ethnic identity for East Asian teens living in Canada. Analyses of this large-scale, population-based, probability sample produced stable and reliable results. A limitation of the study is that the BCAHS, a school-based survey in English, did not include those who were absent or dropped out, or those who did not speak English. Some recent immigrants in English as a Second Language classes may not have completed the survey. In addition, the BCAHS did not ask which group a participant most identified with; thus we do not know whether sexual initiation was associated with a level of identification with particular ethnocultural group (e.g., Chinese, Korean, or Japanese) or any group. Next, due to the cross-sectional, correlational study design, causal or temporal relationships between variables cannot be inferred. Last, the MEIM-R has only three items for each of the two subscales, limiting its ability to measure each construct.

This study demonstrates the importance of ethnocultural factors in East Asian teens' sexual initiation. Although ethnic identity appears to play a role in differentiating sexually experienced and non-sexually experienced boys and girls, the mechanisms underlying the relationship between ethnic identity and sexual initiation may differ by gender. Moreover, this study illustrates the heterogeneity within gender and culture. The notion that culture is not static can be evidenced by the higher odds of sexual initiation among Canadian-born adolescents who spoke English at home compared to their peers. Because of the small number of studies in this area, definite conclusions require further research. However, the findings suggest the need to consider cultural exposure and ethnic identity in future research and practice. Tailoring sexual health promotion for East Asians may be beneficial. For

example, aiding with East Asian adolescents' exploration of their cultures and groups with which they identify and fostering a sense of belonging to the group(s) are relevant. Furthermore, at family, school, and community levels, it may be helpful to provide adolescents with positive role models and opportunities to learn about their heritage cultures as well as Canadian culture, and to celebrate ethnocultural diversity.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics

	Boys	Girls
N (weighted)	22,601	25,507
Age, mean (standard deviation)	15.1 (± 1.84)	15.1 (± 1.82)
Living without parents, %	8.0	6.8
Ethnic identity ^a , mean (95% confidence intervals)		
Exploration *	3.40 (3.36, 3.44)	3.46 (3.42, 3.49)
Commitment	3.64 (3.60, 3.68)	3.62 (3.58, 3.66)
Cultural exposure, %		
Immigrants, speaking a heritage language at home	39.9	40.8
Canadian-born, speaking a heritage language at home	11.5	13.5
Immigrants, speaking English at home	18.0	14.8
Canadian-born, speaking English at home	30.5	30.8
Ever had sexual intercourse, %	9.1	9.7

Note. Data were weighted and scaled to provide a provincial representation of regular public school students.

^aScores for Ethnic Identity scales ranged from 1–5 where a higher score = more of the concept

* $p < 0.05$ (t test).

Table 2

Multivariate Logistic Regressions of Sexual Initiation on Ethnic Identity, Cultural Exposure, and Demographic Covariates Among Boys

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Exploration				
Age	1.57	1.41, 1.74	1.59	1.43, 1.78
Living without parents ^a	2.26	1.41, 3.62	2.57	1.56, 4.23
Exploration	0.81	0.64, 1.03	0.88	0.69, 1.12
Immigrants speaking a heritage language at home			1.00	
Canadian-born speaking a heritage language at home			1.46	0.76, 2.83
Immigrants speaking English at home			1.43	0.88, 2.34
Canadian-born speaking English at home			1.97	1.28, 3.04
Commitment				
Age	1.57	1.41, 1.74	1.59	1.43, 1.78
Living without parents ^a	2.26	1.41, 3.61	2.58	1.57, 4.24
Commitment	0.75	0.61, 0.92	0.80	0.65, 0.98
Immigrants speaking a heritage language at home			1.00	
Canadian-born speaking a heritage language at home			1.48	0.76, 2.87
Immigrants speaking English at home			1.38	0.85, 2.24
Canadian-born speaking English at home			1.91	1.25, 2.93

Note. Boldface numbers indicate $p < 0.05$. Data were weighted and scaled to provide a provincial representation of regular public school students. (weighted boys' $n = 22,601$) OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval

^aReference group = living with one or two parent(s)

Table 3

Multivariate Logistic Regressions of Sexual Initiation on Ethnic Identity, Cultural Exposure, and Demographic Covariates Among Girls

	Model 1		Model 2	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Exploration (N =				
Age	1.69	1.53, 1.88	1.76	1.57, 1.97
Living without parents ^a	1.79	1.09, 2.94	2.03	1.19, 3.49
Exploration	0.65	0.53, 0.80	0.71	0.57, 0.88
Immigrants speaking a heritage language at home			1.00	
Canadian-born speaking a heritage language at home			1.09	0.53, 2.24
Immigrants speaking English at home			1.57	0.95, 2.60
Canadian-born speaking English at home			2.43	1.56, 3.78
Commitment				
Age	1.68	1.51, 1.87	1.74	1.56, 1.95
Living without parents ^a	1.77	1.07, 2.93	2.01	1.16, 3.47
Commitment	0.72	0.58, 0.90	0.80	0.63, 1.01
Immigrants speaking a heritage language at home			1.00	
Canadian-born speaking a heritage language at home			1.06	0.51, 2.19
Immigrants speaking English at home			1.56	0.95, 2.55
Canadian-born speaking English at home			2.42	1.55, 3.75

Note. Boldface numbers indicate $p < 0.05$. Data were weighted and scaled to provide a provincial representation of regular public school students. (weighted girls' n = 25,507) OR = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval

^aReference group = living with one or two parent(s)