

## **Career Experience of Asian Ethnicity Immigrants in Australia**

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HRM Outcomes: Empowerment, Job Satisfaction and Productivity Track

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### **Abstract**

The literature has shown that most immigrants reported a negative experience with their career in their newly adopted countries. In particular, they complained of loss in income and status, especially for those from non-English speaking countries. The Social Psychology literature has been shown that ethnic identity can influence an immigrant's perception of the fairness of organizational recruitment and job acceptance intention. However, little is known of the impact of immigrant's ethnic identity and how this impacts on their career experience. This is the subject of the current paper as we draw upon the literature on ethnic identity and social cognition career theory to examine the career experience 196 'visible racial minority' individuals in Australia. These individuals were immigrants from Asia (first generation Asian Australians) and Asian-born Australians (second generation Asian Australians) in Australia. Data were collected from face-to-face and online surveys. Data analyses were conducted using Partial Least Squares (PLS) modeling, a form of Structural Equation Modeling, to test the hypothesized relationships. The findings showed that visible racial minority individuals reported that their level of self esteem is positively influenced by the pride of their ethnic background. Individuals who possess more self esteem tend to report fewer experiences of being discriminated in the career within the workplace. Individuals who were proud of their ethnic background tend to report having experienced more culturally-related career barriers in the workplace. Individuals who were actively engaged in their ethnic communities were more likely to accept job offers which were below their capabilities and qualifications. However, those who reported higher levels of self esteem were more confident in not accepting job offers. Our findings provide support for the need to consider ethnic identity when developing career counseling strategies for Asian immigrants. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed.

Most immigrants complained of losing income and status after arriving in host countries (Borooah and Mangan, 2002; Mahuteau and Junankar, 2008). Finding a suitable job in the host countries is a challenge for migrants especially those from non-English speaking countries (Kheimets and Epstein, 2001). For instance, the career experience of Asian migrants in Western host country has received considerable attention in the psychology of ethnic immigration literature (e.g., Goto, Gee and Takeuchi, 2003).

Wong (1995) identifies a bimodal occupational structure for the ethnic Chinese in the United States. While the native born ethnic Chinese are mostly engaged in high paying professional occupations, many foreign born ethnic Chinese have occupied the bottom of employment ladder with low paying jobs like waiter, kitchen assistants in the restaurants, and service job in the hotel. Ethnic discrimination has been seen by most ethnic groups as an obstacle for their career advancement in the host country (Reyneri, 2004). Different ethnic groups handle ethnic discrimination differently. In the event of ethnic-related discrimination, individuals of Chinese ancestry tend not to act proactively towards discrimination (Leong and Chou, 1994). They employed strategies such as self-employment (Wong, 1995), work harder and not complain about their negative experience (Leong and Chou, 1994), and accept low pay job in order to gain

employment (Cheng, 1997). To these ethnic Chinese immigrants, being unemployed and/or living on social security, is a source of shame.

Like the United State and Canada, Australia is a multicultural country with people from diverse ethnical backgrounds. Immigrants from China and other Asian countries, comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in Australia. The growing Asian population in Australia makes the study of career experience of the Asian immigrants an important one. This will be the aim of the current study. The present study will explore the relationship between self-esteem, ethnic identity, outcome expectations and perceived ethnic-related career barrier.

### **Ethnic Identity and Career Experience of Asian Immigrants**

There is no agreement on the definition of Ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The term “ethnic identity” is a component of self-concept. Ethnic identity is crucial as it enables to understand their own racial identity in the host country. Phinney (1990) noted that ‘the concept of ethnic identity provides a way of understanding the need to assert oneself in the face of threats to one’s identity (Phinney, 1990: 499). She further argued that ‘... Ethnic identity is meaningful only in situations in which two or more ethnic groups are in contact over a period of time. In an ethnically or racially homogeneous society, ethnic identity is a virtually meaningless concept’ (Phinney, 1990: 501). However, not all ethnic group members are equally committed to the tradition/culture of their ethnic groups. For ethnic minority, their ethnic identity can be a source of pride or a source of shame depending on one’s attitudes toward their ethnicity, and the dominant group’s attitude toward the ethnic group. Ethnic identity influences one’s opinion of the mainstream society and it also dictates an individual’s behavior and social relation with other ethnic groups in the host country (Negy et al., 2003). Recent studies have also shown that ethnic identity can influence an individual’s perception of the fairness of organizational recruitment and job acceptance intention (Kim and Gelfand, 2003). Consequently, ethnic identity will contribute directly and/or indirectly to an individual’s career experience in the main stream society.

#### ***Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).***

Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) integrated the different theories and research on career development to create the Social Cognitive Career Theory. SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) was primarily built upon Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory which included self-efficacy in the process of career development. SCCT model is mostly explained by three key variables: self-efficacy (people’s judgment of their capability to achieve designated performances), outcome expectation (one’s beliefs about probable response outcome), and contextual influences (objective and perceived environmental factors) which can be a support or a barrier to one’s career. All of these three variables can directly or indirectly influence an individual’s interests, goals, and actions in his/her career development process. However, an individual’s self-efficacy and outcome expectations are determined by his/her learning experience, background, and physical attributes, etc. The model argues that ‘the goals that people select for themselves, and their implementation of their goals, are directly responsive to environmental supports and barriers as well as to person factors, such as self-efficacy’ (Lent et al., 2003: 459).

Last decade has seen an increasing interest in using SCCT as a research framework for ethnic minority’s career development (see Tang, Fouad, and Smith, 1999). While some of the studies were designed to expend the theory (Byars-Winston, 2006), other studies were set to test the utility of the theory (Flores and O’Brien, 2002; Tang et al., 1999).

The results generated from these studies were inconclusive. While considerable empirical studies have provided support for SCCT (e.g., Gushue, 2006; Tang et al., 1999), other studies just found partial support for SCCT (Flores and O'Brien, 2002). Lent et al (2003) contend that although SCCT has stimulated many studies, not all SCCT variables have been adequately studied.

***Self-esteem and outcome expectations.*** The concept of self-esteem is one of the most researched topics in social psychology. Self-esteem has been investigated as an outcome, self-motive, and buffer (Cast, 2002). Previous studies found an association between high self-esteem and positive individual outcomes (Nesdale and Pinter, 2000). Self-esteem has generally been identified as an outcome of an individual's competence and interpersonal experiences. High self-esteem was found to contribute to better preparatory job search behaviors and less job search anxiety (Saks and Ashforth, 2000) and eventually resulted in better chance of getting employment (Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz, 2001). Therefore, job seekers with high self-esteem is motivated to follow a more systematic job search process (Schwab, Rynes, and Aldag, 1987) and may possibly set a higher career goal for themselves. Since people with high self-esteem are more competitive and employable (Kanfer et al., 2001), they will generally have a high expectation of themselves and more positive view of their future career. Consequently they will be less likely to accept low paying job as a strategy to overcome ethnic-related career barrier in the host country. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Self-esteem has a negative effect on humble job outcomes.

***Ethnic identity and self esteem.*** Since self esteem is very important to the individual and society as a whole, considerable efforts have been devoted to increasing a person's self-esteem. When exploring the antecedents of self-esteem, previous studies have generally focused on individual competence and interpersonal experiences. However, the impacts of ethnic identity on self-esteem have not been adequately studied (Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz, 1997). According to Taifel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory (SIT), an individual's group identity contributes to his or her self-esteem. In line with SIT, Phinney, Cantu and Kurtz (1997:167) argue that 'a positive sense of belonging to one's group should enhance self-esteem'. SIT have been supported by research on ethnic minority psychology. Positive association was found between ethnic identity and self-esteem (Nesdale and Mak, 2003). Hence, we expect:

Hypothesis 2: Ethnic identity has a positive effect on self-esteem.

***Self esteem and perceived ethnic-related career barrier.*** Previous studies found that people with low self-efficacy/esteem tend to perceive more barriers than people with high self-efficacy. Moreover, people with low self-efficacy/esteem always find the perceived barriers hard to surmount (Hackett and Byars, 1996). Consequently, we expect ethnic minority individuals who possess a higher level of self to be less sensitive to ethnic discrimination (Neto, 2006). However, Major, Quinton, and Schmader (2003) suggest that attributing negative outcome to discrimination can help protect one's self-esteem especially when discrimination is an obvious cue in the environment. These findings lead to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Self-esteem has a negative effect on perceived ethnic-related career barrier.

Hypothesis 4: Immigrants who tend to accept lower job outcomes will report more experience of being discriminated in their career.

Hypothesis 5: The impact of self-esteem on perceived ethnic-related career barriers is mediated by a humble career outcome expectations.

***Ethnic identity and perceived ethnic-related career barrier.*** Although ethnic identity can be a source of pride (Nesdale and Pinter, 2000), studies on ethnicity and migration revealed that immigrants' ethnic backgrounds can influence their job seeking endeavors and career development in the host countries (Ho, 2006; Junankar and Mahuteau, 2005). Workplace ethnic-related discrimination can adversely affect the ethnic minority employee's job satisfaction, job attitudes, psychological well-being, and finally result in job withdrawal (Deitch, et al., 2003). A recent study conducted by Ward and Masgoret (2008) found that New Zealanders rated Indian and Chinese immigrant significantly less favorable than immigrants from Australia, British, and South Africa. This finding suggests that the more the ethnic minority's culture diverges from the host culture, the more they will experience culturally-related career discrimination. It is held that ethnic identity and perception of discrimination are positively related (Declan and Grilo, 2003). Study on other Western country yielded similar finding as minority students perceived more ethnic related career barriers in their future job search efforts than European American students (McWhirter, 1997). This finding is supported by empirical study on unemployed ethnic youth. The unemployed ethnic youth saw their ethnicity a barrier in the job market (Nesdale and Pinter, 2000).

Hypothesis 6: Ethnic identity has a positive effect on perceived ethnic-related career barriers.

Hypothesis 7: Perceived culturally-related career barrier has a negative impact on career satisfaction of ethnic minority immigrants.

***Ethnic identity and outcome expectations.*** Understandably, immigrants from the Asian culture are different from the Western culture. For instance, Chinese people are very concerned about protecting face, being non-assertive, hardworking, respect for authority, humble, and conservative. It has been documented elsewhere, in order to keep their job, traditional ethnic Chinese in the host country are prepared to work hard, not to complain, and willing to accept low paying job (Bhagat and London, 1999).

Hypothesis 8: Ethnic identity has a positive effect on humble job outcomes.

## **Methods**

***Data Collection Procedures.*** We used a self-administered questionnaire to collect the required information. Asian immigrants are examined in the current study because we wanted to focus on individuals who are 'visible racial minority'. There have been few empirical studies which examine the impact of ethnic identity of Asian immigrants in Western host country on their career satisfaction. Respondents were recruited from an online migrant support service, purposive sampling, MBA students from a large metropolitan university in Sydney, through word of mouth and or personal contacts, and an online survey. While we do acknowledge that this sampling methodology is not ideal, it is difficult to conduct survey on ethnic minority career experience as they are a minority in the Australian society.

We received completed surveys from 164 migrants from Asia (including countries such as People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, India, and Japan). Respondents were asked, in addition to other items of interests, their country of birth, country of permanent residency, and the language they spoke at home in Australia. For the purpose of the current paper, we only used those data provided by immigrants who have permanent residency and or citizenship of Australia.

The majority of the participants were female (52 percent). There were 34 percent permanent residents and 65.8 percent citizens. Majority of the participants were below

39 years of age (38.8 percent between 20-29 years, 31.1 percent between 30-39 years, and 20.4 percent between 40-49 years). A large number of the participants were full-time employees (42.3 percent) and the average working experience was 5 or more years of working experience in Australia.

***Ethnic Identity (reflective construct).*** We employed the shortened Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) recently validated by Lee and Yoo (2004) to assess 'Ethnic Identity' (EI). The shortened MEIM scale was based on the original scale developed by Phinney (1992). The shortened MEIM consists of 14 items (sample item included 'Clear sense of ethnic background', and 'Feel good about culture'). Each item was rated by the subject on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from '1' = strongly disagree to '7' = strongly agree.

A factor analysis was conducted using Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation. The present study yielded two factors which are similar to that of Lee and Yoo's (2004) first two factors. The first factor relates to ethnic pride (composite reliability of 0.89) which is similar to those identified in Lee and Yoo (2004) while the second factor reflects socialization within the ethnic group and is labeled as Ethnic Engagement (composite reliability of 0.82).

***Self-Esteem (reflective construct).*** Following others (such as Barry and Grilo, 2003), immigrant's self esteem was measured by adopting Rosenberg's (1965) scale (sample items include 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself' and 'At times, I think I am no good at all'). Each statement was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from '1'=strongly disagree to '5'=strongly agree. As a result of discriminant analysis, four items were retained for analysis (composite reliability coefficient of 0.84).

***Cultural-related career barriers (reflective construct).*** Immigrants' perceptions of ethnic-related career barriers are measured by adopting the Perception of Barriers Scale (POB) developed by McWhirter (1997). It consists of four items relating to ethnic/racial discrimination (such as 'In my future career, I will probably be treated differently because of my ethnic/racial background') and are rated on a 7-point Likert Scale from '1'= Strongly disagree to '7'= Strongly agree (composite reliability of 0.93).

***Humble job outcomes (reflective construct).*** Humble job outcomes measured the extent to which immigrants accept job offer which is lower than what they expected to accept in the Western host country. This construct is created as the result of extant literature on labor economics (Junankar and Mahuteau, 2005) and immigrant career progression (Borooah and Mangan, 2002; Leong and Chou, 1994). It is measured by two items ('In my future career, I will probably work hard and try not to complain because I need a job' and 'In my future career, I will probably accept lower starting salary to obtain an employment for saving face'). These two items were developed based on previous studies which examine the career experience of immigrants. This scale has a composite reliability coefficient of 0.87.

***Perceived Career Satisfaction.*** Participants were asked to indicate their overall level of career satisfaction in a single item 5-point rating scale, with '1'=not satisfied at all and '5'=very satisfied.

***Model estimation.*** Testing of the proposed model as depicted in Figure 1, was carried out using *SmartPLS v.2* (Partial Least Square, Ringle, Wende and Will 2005) latent path model, a technique used for estimating path coefficients in causal models. Harman's ex post one factor test was used to ensure that the current study did not suffer from common method variance (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). All the variables used in the study were entered into an unrotated factor analysis to determine the number of factors.

If a single factor emerged from the factor analysis, this indicates that the data suffered from a common method variance problem. The analysis showed that there were 6 factors (with eigenvalues greater than 1.0) which explained 71.9 percent of the variance. It provided some confidence that common method variance is not an issue in this study. We assessed the significance of PLS parameter estimates by using the Bootstrap option incorporated within the *SmartPLS* (Ringle et al., 2005) software. Bootstrapping procedure is carried out to provide extra confidence that the results are not sample specific by using repeated random samples drawn from the data. In this instance, the bootstrap procedure is repeated until it reached 500 bootstrap samples.

We conducted a Power Analysis to determine the minimum sample size required for our proposed model by following Green's (1991) guideline. To achieve a medium effect size of 0.8 ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) in a priori model, the minimum sample size required for the current study (with five predictors) is 89 cases (Green, 1991, 503). Therefore, our sample size ( $N=196$ ) is greater than the minimum required. It is also greater than the range considered to be suitable for PLS analysis (Chin and Newstead, 1999: 314), that is between 30-100 cases.

## Results

Results of the structural model are shown in Table 2. As shown in the table, there was a positive and statistically significant path leading from Ethnic Engagement to Humble Job Outcomes ( $\beta=0.1975$ ,  $t$ -statistic=2.111,  $p<.05$ ). There was a positive path from Humble Job Outcomes to Culturally-related Career Barriers ( $\beta=0.4679$ ,  $t$ -statistic=6.2875,  $p<.001$ ). There were two positive and statistically significant paths from Ethnic Pride to Culturally-related Career Barriers ( $\beta=0.1617$ ,  $t$ -statistic=2.2271,  $p<.05$ ) and Self esteem ( $\beta=0.4081$ ,  $t$ -statistic=5.5775,  $p<.001$ ) respectively. There were also two negative and statistically significant paths from Self esteem to Culturally-related Career Barriers ( $\beta=-0.1635$ ,  $t$ -statistic=2.0433,  $p<.05$ ) and Humble Job Outcomes ( $\beta=-0.2454$ ,  $t$ -statistic=3.1173,  $p<.001$ ) respectively. Surprisingly, the path from humble job outcomes did not lead to perceived career satisfaction, despite showing a negative relationship. Subsequently, Culturally-related Career Barriers led to Perceived Career Satisfaction ( $\beta=-0.3328$ ,  $t$ -statistic=4.6157,  $p<.001$ ).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Solving unemployment problems of ethnic minority has been many host countries' concern. Understanding the factors contributing to ethnic minority's career experience in Western host country can help the host country improve the ethnic minority's employment rate in the host country. In this paper we developed a model which integrated the literatures on ethnic identity and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2003).

Previous studies using ethnic identity as unidimensional found a positive association between ethnic identity and self esteem (see Phinney et al, 1997). However, our study yielded a two-dimension model for ethnic identity, namely ethnic engagement and ethnic pride. These two dimensions were similar to the first two factors identified in Lee and Yoo (2004). Contrary to previous studies, only ethnic pride was found to have a significant and strong positive effect on Asian migrant's self esteem in the Western host country. Consistent with the literature (e.g., Neto, 2006), Asian migrants who have high self esteem are less likely to accept job offers which are lower than their capabilities and qualification. This finding suggests that feeling proud of one's ethnicity will help

improve self esteem. Contrary, engagement and participation in the activities of one's ethnic group will not help increase one's self esteem. Instead, individuals who reported high level of ethnic engagement tend to accept job offers which were lower than their capabilities and qualifications.

While the SCCT does not explain the direct relationship between outcome expectations and contextual barriers, our study found a strong association between the two variables. Our study shows that visible racial minority who hold a negative view (that is, humble view) of their future career prospect tend to report higher level of culturally-related career barriers in the workplace. These individuals tend to attribute the expected negative outcomes to racial discrimination and it resulted in a lower level of career satisfaction. This finding provides support for the SCCT (Lent et al., 2003).

From a practical perspective, our study provides guidance to career counselors who assist visible racial minority individuals to obtain employment in their new adopted country. While immigrants have been told that they are welcome in their newly adopted country, they continue to perceive some form of ethnicity related career barriers in the workplace. Recently various popular press reported on the racial related incidents faced by Indian citizens residing in Australia (e.g., Das, 2010). Muslim Australians have also been shown in the popular press as well as academic research that they face workplace discrimination (Phillips, 2007). Phillips reported a finding by researchers at Edith Cowan University where Muslim Australians reported specific fears for their personal safety in public places and a mistrust of the Australian society. Muslim women also reported an increasing number of incidents where they faced discrimination in their own community as well as the wider society. These examples demonstrated the challenges faced by visual racial minority living in an Anglo society. Career counselors have to assist their clients to further settle into the community. This means that they do not have to adopt a Western lifestyle. Instead, immigrants need to understand that it is acceptable to feel proud of their home culture and engage in cultural activities of their home country. Career counselors will have to assist their Asian clients to keep their ethnic identity, which, will ultimately lead to more self esteem. An increase in self esteem will subsequently lead to lesser probability of accepting job offers which are lower than their expectations, thus, leading to less perception of ethnicity related career barriers, and more career satisfaction.

***Limitations and Suggestions.*** The limitation of the present study is related to sampling method and sample size. The present study employed a snowball sampling method to locate the hidden population (foreign-born ethnic Chinese). This method relies on referrals from other survey respondents. Snowball sample is a nonrandom sampling technique which involved the referral's subjective judgment on sample selection. Using this sampling method will reduce the generalizability of the study's results. Again, as limited by the small sample size, the conclusion that is drawn in the study cannot be generalized. Since the survey was confined in Sydney, future study should expand to other cities in Australia to increase generalizability of the results.

Another possible direction for future study is to incorporate career decision making self efficacy (Taylor and Betz, 1983) into the model. Career decision making self efficacy is important in the context of ethnic career decision as it may act as a mediator for understanding the relationship between ethnic identity and career choice of visible racial minority as they face potential racial discrimination in the workplace.

In conclusion, the current study found support for an integrative perspective in explaining the factors which impact on the career satisfaction of Asia born migrants and



Australia born Asian ethnicity citizens in Australia. Our study contributes to the theory on ethnic identity and career management by drawing upon social psychology and migration literature. This study has provided some insight into future extension of SCCT. Our study shows that ethnic identity has an impact on the career experience of visual racial minority in Australia.

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