



Brief report: Do peer relationships matter to Vietnamese adolescents' and young adults' development of identity? Towards a working theory of identity development in a changing culture

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A B S T R A C T

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In this paper, using data from the first nationally representative, cross-sectional survey of more than 7000 Vietnamese adolescents, we explore how peers, compared to family, matter to Vietnamese adolescents' development of their independent identity as an adult. We use future hopes and aspirations as proxies for identity development, arguing that an individual's development of future hopes and aspirations is a correlate to the emergence of an independent identity. Our analyses show that peers have a positive and consistent influence on adolescents' hopes to have a happy family, good job, good income, and opportunities to do what they want. Regarding career and economic aspirations, the importance of peer relationships appears to have dropped away. It may be that when youth consider their realistic economic alternatives, the role of peers that was important for identity development in adolescence gives way to pragmatism about the attainment of a career identity.

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Introduction

Traditionally, Vietnamese youths (especially girls) are given little room to develop their independent identity; rather, they are encouraged to develop an interdependent identity that is founded on familial relationships (Phan, 2003; Tran, 2000, 2001). In this paper, using data from the first nationally representative survey of more than 7000 Vietnamese adolescents, we will explore how peers, compared to family, matter to the development of identity as an adult for Vietnamese adolescents. We use the concepts of future orientation and aspirations as proxies for identity development, arguing that an individual's development of future hopes and aspirations is a correlate to the emergence of an independent identity (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nurmi, 1989, 1991, 1994). In our conceptualization, these concepts cover the hopes and dreams of adolescence and young adulthood, as well as realistic expectations. Aspirations are considered more realistic objectives than is future orientation. We asked: (1) What is the relative impact of peer influence and family closeness on future hopes for Vietnamese adolescents? and (2) What is the relative impact of peer influence and family closeness on Vietnamese adolescents' aspirations for the future?

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Method

Participants

Participants in this Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY) consisted of 7584 youths aged 14–25 in nationally representative households (institutional settings were excluded) (UNICEF, 2005).

Measures and procedures

The SAVY was conducted as a one-time, cross-sectional interview and self-report survey that aims at assessing education, employment, health, relationships, and expectations of young people (UNICEF, 2005). All variables used in the analyses are shown in Table 1. To address the role of changing culture in identity development, we used urban vs. rural residence status as a proxy for social change. To address the extent to which youth are connected to peers, we assessed participants' dichotomous replies to two questions: (a) "Do you have a group of friends with whom you often keep company?" and (b) "Are you a member of any mass organization or clubs in your community?" To address youths' emotional closeness to family, we used replies to the statement: "When having difficulties, I felt more comfortable sharing with non-family members." The variable "Positive peer influence" was constructed from a series of questions asking "Do your friends encourage you to avoid (smoking, drinking, using amphetamines, watching pornography, having premarital sex, trying drugs, and causing trouble)." If "Yes" was the response for two or more of these questions, the dichotomous variable was coded 1.

There were five dependent variables. Four future orientation variables measured future orientation or optimism about family, job, opportunity and income. Respondents were asked "Do you agree/partly agree or disagree with the following statements? (a) I will have a happy family in the future; (b) I will have a job that I like; (c) I will have opportunity to do what I want; and (d) I will have a good income to live comfortably." Each dichotomous variable was coded 1 if the respondent agreed or partly agreed, or coded 0 if the respondent chose "Don't know" or "Disagree." The fifth dependent variable, "Aspirations for career or economic security," was constructed from a question "What are your aspirations for the future?" Respondents picked their 1st and 2nd choices from a list of seven aspirations. If either employment career or economic security/finance was the first choice, the variable was coded 1. Otherwise the variables were coded 0.

Analysis

The analysis plan consisted of univariate frequencies of each variable (or the mean and standard deviation for age) and multi-variate logistic regressions, conducted for each separate dependent variable using the Hosmer–emeshow test for model fit. Standardized coefficients were then examined for their relative predictive impact on the dependent variables.

Findings

Predictors of future hopes

Table 2 shows predictors of all dependent variables. All models fit the data well, with the Hosmer–Lemesow *p* value well above .05 in each model. In the regression predicting "Future: happy family" all variables except "Urban" and "Share more with non-family" were statistically significant. Seeing oneself as valuable to family showed the strongest predictive ability,

Table 1
Study variables and frequencies (or mean).

Variables	Frequency (Percentage) or mean (S.D.) <i>N</i> = 7584
Independent variables:	
Lives in urban area	2662 (35.1%)
Has group of friends	6669 (87.9%)
Positive peer influence	6033 (79.5%)
Member of club/organization	2944 (38.8%)
Lives with family members	6721 (88.6%)
Age at survey	18.69 (3.63)
Share difficulties more with non-family	2434 (32.1%)
Valuable to family	5430 (71.6%)
Female	3831 (50.5%)
Dependent variables:	
Future: happy family	7005 (92.4%)
Future: job	7129 (94%)
Future: opportunity	7102 (93.6%)
Future: good income	6461 (85.2%)
Aspirations for career or economic security	5564 (73.4%)

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