

# Mediating Effects of Self-esteem and Peer Support in Relationship between Racial Diversity and Social Distance of Elementary School Students

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## Abstract

This study aims to verify the mediating effects of self-esteem and peer support in racial diversity and social distance of elementary school students. For this purpose, a survey was carried out among 538 students in three elementary schools from October 2013 through February 2014. The results of the study are as follows: First, racial diversity had a positive correlation with social distance. Further, there was a positive correlation between self-esteem and peer support, and the effects of racial diversity and social distance was higher than the effects of self-esteem and peer support on social distance. Second, the mediating effects of self-esteem and peer support between racial diversity and social distance of elementary school students were verified. Lastly, this study suggested that as the Korean society enters into a multi-cultural society, a study on self-esteem and social, emotional support must be carried out in order to resolve social distance due to the racial diversity of elementary school students.

**Keywords:** Mediating Effect, Peer Support, Racial Diversity, Rural Area, Self-esteem, Social Distance

## 1. Introduction

As of 2013, the number of domestic residence foreigners residing in South Korea is 1,440,000, accounting for 2.8% of the registered population. By nationality, 700,000 people are Chinese; 130,000, American; and 120,000, Vietnamese<sup>16</sup>; moreover, the weight is gradually expanding. In addition, as compared with 2012, in 2013, the number increased by 2.6% from 1,400,000 to 1,440,000, and it is predicted that it will continue to increase each year; thus, in 2020, it will exceed 3,000,000<sup>13</sup>. In addition, in 2012, students of multi-cultural families (children of international marriage families plus children of foreign families) increased by 21% (8,276 people) from 2011, a total of 46,954 people, and the rate of students of multi-cultural families over all students was 0.7%. In 2014, it was estimated that this percentage will exceed 1%. To look into the rate of the school level, 72% of such students were elementary school students (33,792); 20.5%, middle school students (9,647); 7.5%, high school students (3,515). Overall, the rate of elementary school students was the highest<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, we can observe that South Korea is entering into a multi-cultural society. Because the period of elementary school is important for students to recognize and understand ethnic diversity and moreover, they may live their entire life with the social distance concept formed during this period, it is necessary to study social distance. More specifically, the adolescent period is a time of forming both concept and recognition and as a result, their social distance to foreigners may increase or decrease<sup>12</sup>. The early adolescent period is a deconstruction period when they break themselves from the identity of childhood values with rapid physical, cognitive and social changes<sup>14</sup>. In a sense, several thoughts and values formed during this period may have continued effects on mid-to late adolescent period. Due to the importance of such concepts, it is necessary to study them.

In addition, adolescents have much interest in multi-culture and are also relatively less likely to be threatened by cultural contacts with various ethnic groups compared to adults<sup>7,8</sup>. For this reason, it is necessary to inquire about the racial diversity and social distance of elementary school students.

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Self-esteem has impacts on attitudes in personal relationships. People with low self-esteem feel embarrassment and anxiety in various social situations and try to do everything in order to avoid the difficulties<sup>6</sup>. It is reported that those with low self-esteem have high anxiety, poor personal relationships, are isolated, and in particular, lack confidence and are afraid of failure<sup>20</sup>. Also, those with low self-esteem care about others unnecessarily and have much dependence' hence, they do not solve problems themselves<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, elementary school students' self-esteem is closely related to their school life and social distance as well as personal relationships.

The social support of elementary school students include teacher support, family support and peer support, among which peer support is a factor decreasing social distance. Korean elementary school students' recognition of foreigners is still negative. At this point of time, with having pride of being a homogeneous country, even if foreigners increase, it is expected that the social distance they feel would have great physical, mental impacts<sup>11</sup>. Hence, it is important to understand the relationship between peer support and social distance.

To look into social distance and related previous studies, Koreans have a tolerant attitude toward foreigners by understanding cultural diversity and the increase in migrants; yet, they are passive in accepting them as fellow citizens more than as peers or neighbors. Further, their acceptance attitude is different depending on the country of origin<sup>8</sup>. Further more, with regard to the effects on adolescents' social distance, the lower the intimacy with adolescents in multi-cultural families, the more negative it became; the group of middle school students had the most negative social distance<sup>25</sup>. The recognition of real conflicts in reality due to migrants had the highest explanatory power<sup>26</sup> and adolescents' attitude was more negative than that of adults. In addition, contact, group identity and faith in assimilation had an effect on their social distance<sup>9</sup>.

The purpose of this study is to verify the mediating effects of self-esteem and peer support on elementary school students' attitude to the relationship between racial diversity and social distance; further, it provides resources for education and policy in order to reduce their social distance.

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions were established. First, what correlations are there among attitude to racial diversity, social distance, self-esteem and peer support? Second, do self-esteem and peer support mediate the relationship

between attitude toward racial diversity and social distance?

## 2. Methods of Study

### 2.1 Subjects of Research and Data Collection Procedures

Purposive sampling of schools in this study was carried out considering the ease of investigation and difficulties of the questionnaire. With Elementary Schools S-1, B and S-2, a survey was conducted from October 2013 through February 2014. The researcher visited the schools in person and as a result of the survey, excluding the questionnaires of the respondents with non-responses, the number of research subjects used in the analysis was 538 copies.

Regarding the research subjects' personal characteristics, 56.2% were girls and 43.8% were boys. 39.3% were 6th graders; 32.2%, 5th graders; and 28.4%, 4th graders. Their grade was divided into top, middle and low. 27.3% were at the top; 59.9%, middle; and 12.8%, low. For their religion, 44.6% did not have a religion; 40% were Christian or Catholic; 14.1% were Buddhist or had another religion. For their residence, 71.5% were living in the city while 28.5% in the country, and for the form of living, 90.2% lived with their parents while 9.8% had a different form of living. For the level of education of the father, 52.5% were college graduates, 29.5% had education lower than high school; and 18.0% graduated from graduate school. For the level of education of the mother, 50.3% were college graduates; 33.1% had education lower than high school; and 16.6% graduated from graduate school. For the father's occupation, 41.2% were clerks and public officials; 24.4%, simple laborers, sales and service persons; 21.3%, managers, professionals and businessmen; and 13.2%, workers in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry and others. For the mother's occupation, 48.6% were workers in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industry, housewives and others; 24.7%, clerks and public officials; and 19.1%, simple laborers, sales and service persons. For the standard of living, 77.3% responded that they were well-off while 22.7%, at the middle level or below.

### 2.2 Measuring Tools

#### 2.2.1 Social Distance

Social distance criteria were modified and supplemented for the research subjects from the social distance criteria<sup>1</sup>.

The criteria examined the social distance of multi-cultural adolescents, which consists of 15 positive questions. A 3-point Likert scale was used (1 point for 'Strongly disagree' and 3 points for 'Strongly agree'); higher total points imply lower social distance. The credibility of social distance in this study was .912 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ).

### 2.2.2 Self-esteem

For the self-esteem criteria, the Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) developed by Rosengerg 21 will be used. The criteria are for adolescents with a total of 10 questions (5 positive questions and 5 negative questions). A 3-point Likert scale was used (1 point for 'Never' to 3 points for 'Always'). Higher total points imply higher self-esteem. The credibility of the self-esteem in this study was .776 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ).

### 2.2.3 Peer Support

To measure social support, the social support criteria for children adopted10 from the Social Support Appraisal Scale (SSAS), developed by Dubow and Ulman3, were modified for the research subjects. The criteria measure children's perception and evaluation of family support, peer support and teacher support, which consist of a total of 23 questions. A 3-point Likert scale was used. Higher points measured implied higher social support. This study only used peer support, and its credibility was .877 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ).

### 2.2.4 Racial Diversity

For attitude to racial diversity and their related questions, the criteria was evaluated and revised by Park 18, referring to studies by Ponterotto 17, Jackman 5, Dee 4, Guyton 23, Munroe and Pearson16. It consisted of a total of 14 questions on a 3-point Likert scale (1 point = Strongly disagree, 3 points = Strongly agree), where higher points mean more positive attitude to racial diversity. The credibility of attitude to racial diversity was .909 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ).

## 2.3 Analysis of Materials

For the materials, to understand the correlations among the variables, a correlation analysis was carried out; to understand the general trends of the variables, a descriptive statistic study was carried out. In order to

verify the mediating effects, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was carried out according to the verification procedures of the mediating effects by Baron and Kenny<sup>2</sup>. Sobel<sup>24</sup> was used for a significance test on the indirect effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables through parameters.

## 3. Results of Study

### 3.1 Correlation Analysis and Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

To understand the correlations among elementary school students' racial diversity, self-esteem, peer support and social distance, Pearson's correlation analysis was carried out. As a result, like Table 1, social distance had positive correlations with racial diversity ( $r = .592, p < .01$ ), self-esteem ( $r = .233, p < .01$ ) and peer support ( $r = .264, p < .01$ ); racial diversity had significant positive correlations with self-esteem ( $r = .243, p < .01$ ) and peer support (.369,  $p < .01$ ). In particular, social distance had a relatively higher correlation coefficient with racial diversity.

As a result of the analysis on the descriptive statistics, adolescents' racial diversity was 2.3603 points; self-esteem, 2.4742 points; peer support, 2.1491 points; and social distance, 2.3685 points, which were more than the moderate levels Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of study variables

	1	2	3	4
Racial diversity	1			
Self-Esteem	0.243**	1		
Friend Support	0.369***	0.551***	1	
Social Distance	0.592***	0.233**	0.264**	1
M	2.3603	2.4742	2.1491	2.3685
SD	0.36168	0.43427	0.43695	0.42259
Skewness	-0.417	-0.540	-0.382	-0.253
Kurtosis	-0.337	-0.393	-0.122	-0.556

(N=538) \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

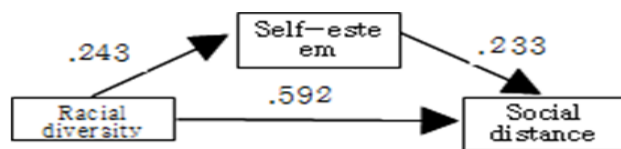
### 3.2 Analysis on the Mediating Effects

In the relationship between adolescents' racial diversity and social distance, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis and Sobel Test were carried out in order to understand the mediating effects of self-esteem and peer support.

**Table 2.** Regression analysis on social distance for total samples

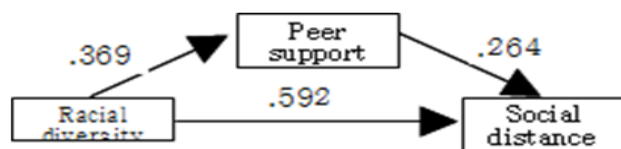
IV	DV	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sobel's test
Racial diversity	Self-Esteem	0.208	0.036	0.243***	0.059	33.723***	3.9948***
Racial diversity	Social Distance	0.612	0.036	0.592***	0.351	289.397***	
Racial diversity	Social Distance	0.588	0.037	0.569***	0.359	149.876***	
Self-Esteem		0.115	0.043	0.095**			
Racial diversity	Peer Support	0.380	0.041	0.369***	0.136	84.697***	5.2290***
Racial diversity	Social Distance	0.612	0.036	0.592***	0.351	289.397***	
Racial diversity	Social Distance	0.592	0.039	0.573***	0.353	145.957***	
Peer Support		.053	0.038	0.053			

\*\*p.<01, \*\*\*p.<001



**Figure 1.** The relationship among racial diversity, social distance and self-esteem.

Like Table 2. and Figure 1, in Step 1, racial diversity significantly predicted self-esteem ( $F = 33.723$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in Step 2, racial diversity significantly predicted social distance ( $F = 289.397$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In Step 3, when racial diversity and self-esteem were input simultaneously, the two variables significantly predicted social distance ( $F = 149.876$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of racial diversity in Step 3 decreased from .592 in Step 2 to .569. Thus, in the relationship between adolescents' racial diversity and social distance, there were partial mediating effects of self-esteem.



**Figure 2.** The relationship among racial diversity, social distance, and peer support.

The result of a significance test regarding the indirect effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables through parameters was also significant (Sobel test:  $Z = 3.9948$ ,  $p < .001$ ); hence, the mediating effects were verified.

In addition, like Table 2 and Figure 2, in Step 1 of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, racial diversity significantly predicted peer support ( $F = 84.697$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in Step 2, racial diversity significantly predicted social distance ( $F = 289.397$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In Step 3, when peer support and racial diversity were input simultaneously,

only racial diversity significantly predicted social distance ( $F = 145.957$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In Step 3, the standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of racial diversity decreased from .592 in Step 2 to .573. Thus, there were full mediating effects of adolescents' racial diversity in the relationship with social distance. Moreover, the result of a significance test regarding the indirect effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables through parameters was also significant (Sobel test:  $Z = 5.2290$ ,  $p < .001$ ); hence, the mediating effects were verified.

## 4. Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to understand the mediating effects of the variables of self-esteem and peer support on adolescents' attitude to racial diversity and social distance. For this purpose, a survey was performed at three schools nationwide. Finally, a data of 538 adolescents were used for analysis. To understand the mediating effects, they were verified using SPSS WIN 21.0 and Sobel's Test. The suggestions through a discussion based on the results of the study are as follows.

First, the higher the elementary school students' racial diversity, self-esteem and peer support, the higher the social distance became. In particular, racial diversity had a relatively higher influence. This result of the study is in the same context with a study on the factors affecting adolescents' multi-cultural acceptance<sup>19</sup>. More specifically, this suggests that it is necessary to develop a program in order to improve racial diversity, self-esteem and peer support. Such intervention will be the basis of elementary school students' psychological growth and their acceptance of others and further, multi-culture.

Second, there were partial mediating effects of self-esteem and peer support on the relationship between elementary school students' attitude toward racial diversity and social distance. In other words, changes in elementary



school students' positive attitude toward racial diversity had a direct relationship with the reduction of social distance. Also, their positive attitude also contributed to the reduction of social distance mediated by self-esteem and peer support. This is consistent with the results of a study on social distance to multi-cultural society and foreigners<sup>12</sup>, where exclusivity in a homogeneous nation was not very obvious in the relationships with colleagues, neighbors and peers. In addition, this supports the result of a study by Park et al<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, in order to reduce elementary school students' social distance, it would be necessary to seek plans to increase self-esteem and peer support as well as attitude toward racial diversity.

Lastly, suggestions for a follow-up study include the following. First, the possibility of generalization was low because this study dealt with three elementary schools in S. city. Therefore, a follow-up study should be carried out with elementary school students nationwide. Second, the variables selected by this study included racial diversity, self-esteem and peer support in social supports only; however, it is judged that there would be many other variables affecting social distance. Hence, a follow-up study should add more variables.

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