

The Mediating Role of Positive Psychological Capital in the Relationship between Acculturative Stress and Ethnic Identity among Ethnic Minority University Students in Mainland China

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that there exists a link between ethnic identity, acculturative stress, and psychological capital. Since there are own ethnic identities and Chinese national identities among Chinese ethnic groups. The present study aims to examine the relationship among these variables, specifically in the context of ethnic minority university students. Additionally, this study investigates the potential mediating role of positive psychological capital. To assess ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress, three scales were employed, and structural equation modeling was utilized to explore the associations and potential pathways between these variables. The sample comprised 533 ethnic minority university students, aged 17-23, from two universities located in Hunan. The findings reveal that ethnic minority university students possess a strong sense of ethnic identity, with their Chinese national identity significantly surpassing their ethnic identity. Furthermore, a significant negative correlation is observed between Chinese national identity and acculturative stress. Both Chinese national identity and own ethnic identity demonstrate a significant positive correlation with positive psychological capital. Structural equation modeling indicates that positive psychological capital partially mediates the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. These findings underscore the significance of ethnic identity and positive psychological capital in mitigating acculturative stress among ethnic minority university students.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Positive Psychological Capital, Acculturative Stress, Ethnic Minority,

University Students

Introduction

Ethnicity is a cultural and collective concept that encompasses both cultural and group identity (Minggang & Yapeng, 2004). Individuals possess universal and stable cultural cognitions regarding ethnic groups and their members in their daily lives. During the process of ethnic interaction and integration, these cognitive factors can be activated at any given time, subsequently influencing an individual's modes of communication, attitudes toward interactions, and even cognitive processes (Qin Xiangrong, 2005). The collision and fusion of cultures, along with increased freedom in human activities, have necessitated our confrontation with a myriad of differences and the establishment of a pluralistic culture founded upon these disparities. Consequently, our society has progressively become more tolerant in embracing the customs and achievements originating from various ethnicities.

In the context of China, this phenomenon manifests in the construction of 'unity in the diversity' within the Chinese nation. This principle encompasses two dimensions: first, the embracement of cultural and ethnic diversity, allowing for their coexistence; second, the recognition of national political and cultural unity, thereby facilitating integration at the national level. However, in regions where Han nationality culture predominates, students from ethnic minority backgrounds face inherent disadvantages, particularly in terms of language, culture, and other aspects. This educational scenario reflects ethnic disparities that extend beyond well-known factors such as historical, economic, cultural, and developmental disparities, prompting an exploration into whether social cognition also contributes to these observed differences (Xing & Ma Xiaoyi, 2005).

The ethnic identity development process in ethnic minority university students is intricately linked to their positive psychological well-being, perception of social equality, and acquisition of social resources. Previous research has demonstrated a positive relationship between ethnic identity and traits such as hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and locus of control (Williams et al., 2012). Higher levels of ethnic identity in adolescents indicate greater emotional stability and positive emotional experiences, leading to increased internal locus of control, self-confidence, and optimistic self-appraisals. Psychological capital encompasses four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans et al., 2007). It represents a positive psychological state observed during individual development and serves as a vital psychological resource for promoting personal growth and enhancing abilities (Kuppens, et al., 2008). Thus, it is crucial to focus on the mental well-being and adaptation of ethnic minority university students for their physical and psychological health, personal development, and societal harmony and stability.

While prior studies have extensively examined the relationship between ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, acculturative stress, and life satisfaction (Kuppens et al., 2008; Gao Chenghai et al., 2011), few have explored the interplay and mediation effects among these three constructs. Consequently, it is imperative to investigate how ethnic identity and positive psychological capital are associated with acculturative stress among students. This study seeks to address this research gap by examining the relationship and mediation role between ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress in ethnic minority university students from the Chinese mainland.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity refers to an individual's self-identification as a member of a specific ethnic group, encompassing a sense of belonging and attitudes toward that group (Phinney, 1992, 2003). Phinney suggests that ethnic identity is a multidimensional, dynamic, and intricate construct. Initially, Phinney identified four components comprising ethnic identity: ethnic self-identification, a sense of belonging, positive or negative attitudes toward ethnic groups, and national involvement (Phinney, 1992). In China, the study of ethnic identity has a long history, and various definitions have been proposed. One prominent framework is the multi-factor integrated pattern theory, which posits that ethnic identity in China is hierarchical. At a lower level, individuals identify with their specific ethnic group among the 56 ethnic groups. Over time, these groups have developed an interdependent and inseparable collective identity known as Chinese national identity (Fei Xiaotong, 1999). Qin Xiangrong (2005) suggests that ethnic identity in China comprises two components: one's own ethnic identity and the identity associated with the unity of the Chinese nation. Studies have demonstrated a significant and positive correlation between ethnic identity and mental health, indicating that ethnic identity positively predicts mental well-being and is closely related to self-esteem and social behavior in adolescents (Umaña-Taylor, 2007). Additionally, research within China has shown that factors such as age, gender, personal growth experiences, and familial influences, such as parental education levels and family educational environments, as well as social and environmental factors like living conditions, school education, and ethnic policies, can shape the formation of Chinese national identity (Zuo Bin, 2005; Qin Xiangrong & Zuo Bin, 2007). As China emphasizes the construction of a "Chinese national community," ethnic identity and Chinese national identity have increasingly become focal points of research in ethnopsychology.

Positive Psychological Capital

Positive psychological capital refers to a favorable psychological state exhibited during an individual's growth and development, which plays a beneficial role in regulating one's psychological well-being (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). It encompasses four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. Research has consistently demonstrated a positive association between ethnic identity and hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience (Roberts et al., 1999; Elorriaga et al., 2014). Higher levels of ethnic identity in adolescents are associated with greater emotional stability, positive emotional experiences, internal locus of control, self-confidence, optimism, and overall self-appraisal. Psychological capital, consisting of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, represents a positive psychological state observed during individual growth and development. It also serves as a significant psychological resource for facilitating personal growth and enhancing one's abilities. Ethnic identity is significantly related to psychological capital. On one hand, psychological capital positively predicts ethnic identity (Xie Chang, 2018). On the other hand, a strong ethnic identity can also foster the development of psychological capital (Yan Xiuying et al., 2015).

Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress refers to the emotional response experienced by individuals during the process of adapting to a new cultural environment. It is influenced by various factors, including social support, interpersonal relationships, language proficiency, and adaptive strategies. When individuals undergo the process of ethnic identity and strive to adapt to their new surroundings, they inevitably encounter acculturative stress, which manifests as negative

emotions such as loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, and experiences of discrimination during cultural adaptation (Berry, 2003). Foreign studies have revealed a significant correlation between acculturative stress and factors such as English language proficiency, cultural adaptation styles, social support, and ethnic identity (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Berry, 2005). Domestically, research has demonstrated that the mainstream cultural identity of ethnic minorities indirectly impacts the pressures of cultural adaptation, with negative ethnic identity often associated with challenges such as isolation and cultural disconnection (Wang Yapeng, 2002; Wan Minggang & Yapeng, 2004). Conversely, a positive ethnic identity can influence feelings of social isolation and alienation, and it is more conducive to individual mental health and social adaptation. Further studies have indicated a significant correlation between Tibetan college students' ethnic identity and acculturative stress (Zhang Yanan, 2019).

Objectives and Hypotheses

The primary objective of this study was to assess the levels of ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress among Chinese mainland ethnic minority university students. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate the relationships between ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress. Lastly, the study sought to examine the mediating role of positive psychological capital in the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. Building on existing theoretical and empirical evidence, the following hypotheses were proposed

- H1: Ethnic identity would be positively correlated with psychological capital.
- H1a: The own ethnic identity would be positively correlated with psychological capital.
- H1b: Chinese national identity would be positively correlated with positive psychological capital.
- H2: Ethnic identity would be negatively correlated with acculturative stress.
- H2a: The own ethnic identity would be positively correlated with acculturative stress.
- H2b: The Chinese national identity would be negatively correlated with acculturative stress.
- H3: Positive psychological capital would mediate the relationships between ethnic identity and acculturative stress.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted in two cities in the Hunan province of China. Participants were selected using simple random sampling from two universities within the province. Based on the population size ($N = 52,986$), a sample size of 381 participants was determined following the Krejcie and Morgan sample size table. However, a total of 603 responses were received. After eliminating 70 participants who did not meet the criteria (e.g., not answering more than 50% of the items, providing the same response for more than 90% of the items, or exhibiting irregular response patterns), the final sample consisted of 533 valid responses, resulting in a response rate of 91.5%.

The participants had a mean age of 20.9 years (range = 17–23 years; $SD = 1.01$). Among the participants, 231 (43.3%) were male and 302 (56.7%) were female. Additionally, 100 (18.8%) were freshmen, 217 (40.7%) were sophomores, 182 (34.1%) were juniors, and 34 (6.3%) were seniors. In terms of ethnicity, 107 (20.1%) participants belonged to the Miao ethnic group, 95 (17.8%) to the Dong ethnic group, 98 (18.4%) to the Tujia ethnic group, 84 (15.8%) to the Yao

ethnic group, and 149 (27.9%) belonged to other ethnic groups. Moreover, 194 (36.4%) participants came from urban or town areas, while 339 (63.6%) participants came from rural areas. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the sample characteristics.

Table 1

The description of the sample characteristics

Variables	Category	n	(%)
Gender	Boys	231	43.3
	Girls	302	56.7
Grade	Freshman	100	18.8
	Sophomore	217	40.7
	Junior students	182	34.1
	Senior students	34	6.3
Ethnic	Miao	107	20.1
	Dong	95	17.8
	Tujia	98	18.4
	Yao	84	15.8
	Other ethnics	149	27.9
Residence	Urban or town	194	36.4
	Rural areas	339	63.6

Procedures

The recruitment of participants took place at two universities located in different cities within the Hunan province. Prior to the study, consent was obtained from the school authorities, and approval was granted by the institutional review board of our affiliated university. The participants were given a designated time of 25 minutes to complete the survey, which was administered during class sessions under the supervision of research team members. The questionnaires were collected on-site after completion. Participants were assured that only non-sensitive information, such as age, gender, grade, and ethnicity, would be recorded, and they were given the freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the study.

Measures**Ethnic Identity**

In this study, the Ethnic Identity Scales (EIS) developed by Qin Xiangrong (Qin Xiangrong, 2005) were employed to measure ethnic identity. The EIS consists of two volumes: the Own Ethnic Identity Scale (Volume A) and the Chinese National Identity Scale (Volume B). Volume A comprises 23 items, while Volume B consists of 21 items, with one reverse-scoring item included in each scale. Both scales assess four dimensions: cognitive component, behavioral component, evaluation component, and affective component. Participants responded to the items using a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of ethnic identity.

The internal consistency coefficients of the Own Ethnic Identity Scale and its four dimensions ranged from 0.78 to 0.90. Similarly, for the Chinese National Identity Scale and its four dimensions, the internal consistency coefficients ranged from 0.72 to 0.92. These findings indicate good reliability for both scales. Overall, the revised ethnic identity scale demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency.

Positive Psychological Capital

The present study utilized the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) developed by Luthans (2007) to assess positive psychological capital. The scale consists of four subscales: self-efficacy, hope, toughness, and optimism, each comprising six items. To adapt the scale for the ethnic minority university students in this study, appropriate adjustments were made to the language. However, the self-efficacy subscale from the original scale, which is specifically tailored to the workplace context, proved difficult to modify through language adjustments. Therefore, it was substituted with the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer, 1999) consisting of 10 items. To maintain balance with the Luthans (2007) self-efficacy subscale, the General Self-Efficacy Scale was condensed to six items.

Ultimately, the positive psychological capital scale used in this study encompassed 24 items, with each subscale containing six items. Participants rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a higher level of positive psychological capital. The overall Cronbach's α coefficient for the scale in this study was 0.923, and Cronbach's α coefficients for each subscale ranged from 0.898 to 0.923, indicating good reliability for the scale and its dimensions.

Acculturative Stress

Previous research has commonly employed the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS), developed by American scholars Sandhu and Asrabadi (1994), to measure acculturative stress among international students studying abroad. In this study, a revised version of the acculturative stress scale based on the ASSIS questionnaire was utilized, as adapted by Zhang et al. The revised scale consists of 29 items distributed across five dimensions: a sense of discrimination (DIS), fear (FEA), homesickness (HOM), cultural shock (SHO), and hostility (HOS).

Participants rated their responses to each item on a 5-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate a higher level of acculturative stress experienced. The total Cronbach's α coefficient for the scale in this study was 0.923, indicating good reliability. Furthermore, the Cronbach's α coefficients for each dimension of the scale ranged from 0.635 to 0.812, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency for the individual dimensions of acculturative stress.

Results**Descriptive Analysis**

The results of the survey data revealed that ethnic minority university students obtained a mean score of 99.18 ± 8.79 on the Own Ethnic Identity scale, with an average item score of 4.35. This indicates a relatively high level of identification with their own ethnicity. Additionally, participants obtained a mean score of 104.70 ± 12.04 on the Chinese National Identity scale, with an average item score of 4.72. These results suggest a stronger identification with the Chinese nation compared to their own ethnicity.

Furthermore, statistical analysis indicated a significant difference between the scores of own ethnic identity and Chinese national identity ($t=15.16$, $p<0.001$). The students exhibited a higher level of identity towards the Chinese nation compared to their own ethnicity. Detailed information regarding the descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

The status quo of ethnic identity of ethnic minority university students(N=533)

Dimension	M	SD	The mean of individual items
Cognition of own ethnic	25.66	3.46	4.28
Evaluation of own ethnic	28.99	2.86	4.25
The emotion of own ethnic	24.53	3.09	4.09
The behavior of own ethnic	19.98	2.61	4.00
Cognition of the Chinese nation	23.33	3.82	3.89
Evaluation of Chinese nation	29.66	4.22	4.42
Emotion of the Chinese nation	25.05	3.24	4.18
The behavior of the Chinese nation	26.65	4.24	5.33
The own ethnic identity	99.18	8.79	4.35
Chinese national identity	104.7	12.04	4.72

As presented in Table 3, the results of the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to investigate the associations between ethnic identity and acculturative stress among ethnic minority university students. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between Chinese national identity and acculturative stress ($r = -0.316, p < 0.001$). However, no significant relationship was observed between own ethnic identity and acculturative stress. Nevertheless, the emotional aspect of own ethnic identity exhibited a positive correlation with acculturative stress ($r = 0.131, p < 0.001$), while the behavioral aspect of own ethnic identity showed a positive correlation with acculturative stress ($r = 0.102, p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the cognitive aspect of own ethnic identity displayed a negative correlation with acculturative stress ($r = -0.109, p < 0.05$).

Table 3

The relationship between ethnic identity and acculturative stress of ethnic minority university students (N=533)

	Discrimination	Sense of fear	of Homesickness	Culture shock	Sense of hostility	of Acculturative stress
Cognition of own ethnic	-0.113*	108*	-0.101*	-0.117*	.026	109*
Evaluation of own ethnic	0.098	127*	-0.057	-0.125*	.099	096
The emotion of own ethnic	0.062	195	0.176**	0.103*	.097	131**
The behavior of own ethnic	-0.321**	173	0.096	0.105*	0.137**	102*
Cognition of the Chinese nation	-0.163**	-0.273**	-0.177**	0.324**	-0.113*	0.312**
Evaluation of Chinese nation	-0.016	0.214**	-0.105*	0.168**	-0.086*	0.183**
Emotion of the Chinese nation	-0.016	.046	0.084	0.031	.069	0.018
The behavior of the Chinese nation	-0.323**	0.341**	-0.197**	0.265**	-0.112*	0.316**
The own ethnic identity	-0.021	.024	0.033	-0.013	0.117*	0.008
Chinese national identity	-0.268**	0.281**	-0.123*	0.237**	-0.074	-0.316**

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between ethnic identity and positive psychological capital among ethnic minority university students. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between Chinese national identity and positive psychological capital ($r=0.251$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, there was a significant positive correlation between own ethnic identity and positive psychological capital ($r=0.223$, $p < 0.001$), as presented in Table 4.

Table. 4

The Relationship between Ethnic Identification and Positive Psychological Capital of Minority College Students(N=500)

	Self-efficacy	Toughness	Hope	Optimism	Positive psychological
Cognition of own	0.262**	0.187**	0.273**	0.036	0.235**
Evaluation of own	0.331**	0.219**	0.373**	0.172**	0.335**
The emotion of own	0.034	0.008	0.036	-0.031	0.013*
The behavior of own	0.191**	0.023	0.146**	-0.017	0.107**
Cognition of the	-0.237**	0.271**	0.353**	0.307**	0.351**
Evaluation of Chinese	-0.128*	0.076	0.235**	0.173**	0.185**
Emotion of the	0.043	-0.018	-0.034	-0.037	-0.010
The behavior of the	0.173**	0.147**	0.263**	0.147**	0.223**
The own ethnic	0.268**	0.137**	0.264**	0.054	0.225**
Chinese national	0.194**	0.165**	0.273**	0.273**	0.253**

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Evaluation of the Prospective Model

To assess the proposed model, the study examined the mediating role of positive psychological capital between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. The analysis employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the relationships among ethnic identity, acculturative stress, and positive psychological capital. The questionnaire items were organized based on their composition, with the own ethnic identity subscale comprising 23 items distributed across four factors, the Chinese national identity subscale consisting of 21 items across four factors, the acculturative stress scale comprising 29 items categorized into five factors, and the positive psychological capital questionnaire containing 26 items distributed across four factors.

The structural equation model was constructed using LISREL 8.80 software, and the results are presented in Figure 1.

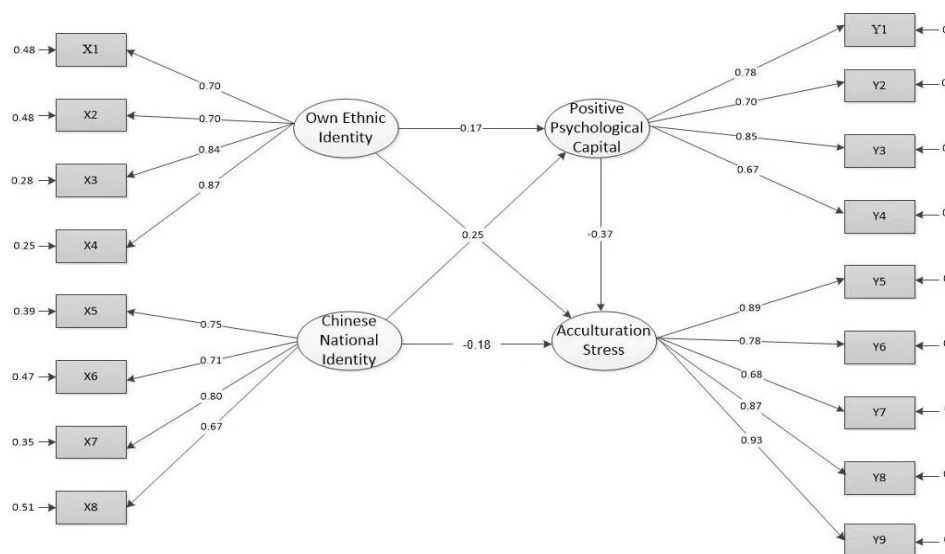


Figure 1. Structural equation models for ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress

The results of the model fit indices indicated a relatively good fit, with $X^2/df=8.15$, $RMSEA=0.12$, $NFI=0.91$, $GFZ=0.89$, $IFI=0.92$, $CFI=0.92$, $NNFI=0.90$, and $NNFI=0.90$. Although the X^2/df values were slightly higher, this may be attributed to the sample size. However, all other fit indices met the criteria, suggesting a satisfactory fit of the model.

To examine the mediation effect of positive psychological capital, bias-corrected bootstrapping with a 95% confidence interval (CI) was employed to assess significant indirect pathways. The results demonstrated that the model met the statistical criteria, with significant total, direct, and indirect effects ($p<0.05$). Both own ethnic identity and Chinese national identity exhibited a direct effect on acculturative stress, as well as an indirect effect on acculturative stress through positive psychological capital. Specifically, positive psychological capital played a partial mediating role between ethnic identity and acculturative stress, with a mediation effect of -0.0684 and 0.0532, respectively.

Discussion

In the present study, we investigated the relationships among ethnic identity, positive psychological capital, and acculturative stress in Chinese mainland ethnic minority university students. According to the results, the students showed a strong connection to their ethnic identity. Interestingly, they identified more strongly with the Chinese nation than with their own ethnicity. These findings are consistent with previous research and show that these students acknowledge their dual identity as both a minority and a member of the Chinese nation. These results also demonstrate the success of current ethnic and patriotic education in China. Moreover, notable gender disparities in ethnic identity were identified.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated a significant negative correlation between Chinese national identity and acculturative stress among Chinese mainland ethnic minority university students. Moreover, the emotional and behavioral aspects of own ethnic identity were positively correlated with acculturative stress. These findings are consistent with previous research by Ning Shengwei and Zhang Qinglin (2018), which highlighted the predictive role of ethnic identity in bias, discrimination, and linguistic pressures. To mitigate acculturative stress

among ethnic minority university students, it is recommended to enhance Chinese national identity through patriotic and cultural education, while also promoting cultural exchange and integration between ethnic minority cultures and the Chinese national culture through ethnic minority education and cultural festivals.

The study further revealed significant positive correlations between both own ethnic identity and Chinese national identity and positive psychological capital. This supports the notion that a strong ethnic identity contributes to an individual's happiness, self-acceptance, and life satisfaction (Rivas-Drake et al., 2008). Domestic scholars have also posited that a positive ethnic identity enhances subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Li Ling, 2014). Therefore, in the education of ethnic minority students, universities should encourage the exploration of their own ethnic culture and history, as well as provide opportunities to learn about the culture and history of the Chinese nation. This can help foster positive psychological capital and improve overall life satisfaction among ethnic minority university students.

The structural equation model employed in the study indicated that ethnic identity and Chinese national identity not only directly predicted acculturative stress but also indirectly predicted it through positive psychological capital. In other words, positive psychological capital played a partial mediating role between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. Ethnic identity represents a form of social identity at the group level and is a component of self-identity. Positive self-identity is associated with high levels of positive psychological capital, whereas negative self-identity is associated with low levels of positive psychological capital. Specifically, higher levels of own ethnic identity and Chinese national identity among ethnic minority university students were associated with higher levels of positive psychological capital, including increased self-efficacy, resilience, and hope, as well as lower levels of acculturative stress. To promote intercultural exchange and enhance ethnic and national identity among ethnic minority university students, universities can offer relevant courses and activities that foster multicultural perception and acceptance. Additionally, affirming and positively evaluating the ethnic identity of ethnic minority university students and enhancing their positive psychological capital can contribute to the ultimate goal of building a Chinese national community and strengthening ethnic unity.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that ethnic minority university students exhibit a strong sense of ethnic identity, with their Chinese national identity being significantly higher than their own ethnic identity. Moreover, Chinese national identity was found to be negatively correlated with acculturative stress. Both Chinese national identity and own ethnic identity showed significant positive correlations with positive psychological capital. The structural equation models further revealed that positive psychological capital partially mediates the relationship between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. These results emphasize the significance of ethnic identity and positive psychological capital in mitigating acculturative stress among ethnic minority university students.

Limitations and Future Research

This study possesses a series of limitations that necessitate attention. Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that this investigation adopts a cross-sectional design, thereby hindering the establishment of a definitive temporal relationship between the variables. Secondly, our reliance primarily on questionnaires and self-reported data to examine the associations among the variables warrants consideration. The assessment of ethnic identity, positive

psychological capital, and acculturative stress predominantly employs self-report surveys, implying the need for the incorporation of alternative methodologies. Employing diverse sources of measurement to procure additional information would enhance the outcomes of future research endeavors. Lastly, the sample size employed in this study is relatively small, constituting a convenience sample that lacks representativeness of Chinese mainland university students. Consequently, enlarging the sample size would have rendered the relationships model more robust and dependable.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge other limitations of this work that warrant consideration in subsequent research. Future investigations should incorporate other factors previously analyzed in pertinent studies that may influence the associations between ethnic identity and acculturative stress. Additionally, further exploration is needed to elucidate the mechanisms through which ethnic identity influences positive psychological capital and acculturative stress.

Ethics Statement

The research involving human participants underwent a thorough review and received approval from the Wulingshan K-12 Educational Research Center at Huaihua University, China. This study also aligns with the objectives of ethnic education in Hunan province. Prior to participating in the study, written informed consent was obtained from the legal guardian or next of kin of each participant, ensuring their voluntary participation.

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Declaration Of Interest Statement

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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