






Attachment and Identity Formation in Bicultural Families

Seyed Sajad. Dezhan¹, Ebrahim. Setayesh Manesh², Kimiya. Zebardasti^{3*}, Vale Mohammad. Parsadost⁴, Mansour.
Derakhshandeh⁵

¹ Master of Clinical Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Yasouj branch, Yasouj, Iran

² Master's degree in psychology for exceptional children, Isfahan University, Isfahan, Iran

³ Bachelor of Counseling, Farhangian University of Isfahan (Fateme Al-Zahra Campus), Isfahan, Iran

⁴ Bachelor of Counseling, Farhangian Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran

⁵ Master's degree in Educational Psychology, Yasouj University, Yasouj, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Kimiya2022zebardasti@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the dynamics of attachment and identity formation within bicultural families, focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities they face. The research seeks to understand how parenting styles, bonding activities, emotional connections, and the role of extended family influence these processes. Additionally, the study examines the continuous cultural negotiation and the impact of social relationships and support systems on the overall well-being of children raised in bicultural environments.

Methods: A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data from 23 participants, including parents and children from 15 bicultural families. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse cultural backgrounds. Data were analyzed using NVivo software, with themes and patterns identified through rigorous coding and thematic analysis. Theoretical saturation was reached after conducting interviews with the 15 families, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the study's objectives.

Results: The study identified four main themes: Attachment Dynamics, Identity Formation, Cultural Negotiation, and Family and Social Relationships. Attachment dynamics were influenced by varied parenting styles and the integration of cultural practices. Identity formation was shaped by cultural pride, school environment, and peer relationships. Cultural negotiation involved continuous adaptation of decision-making processes, traditions, and language practices. Family and social relationships, including peer interactions and community engagement, played a crucial role in supporting the social experiences of bicultural children.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the complex interplay of attachment and identity formation in bicultural families. Effective parenting, cultural negotiation, and strong social support systems are essential for fostering positive identity development and family cohesion.

Keywords: Bicultural families, attachment dynamics, identity formation, cultural negotiation, social relationships, parenting styles, cultural integration, support systems.

1 Introduction

The process of attachment and identity formation within bicultural families presents unique challenges and opportunities that merit close examination. Bicultural families, defined as those where parents come from different cultural backgrounds, often navigate complex dynamics to balance and integrate their diverse cultural heritages. This balancing act is crucial not only for maintaining family cohesion but also for fostering a positive identity in children who are raised in such environments. The interplay between attachment and identity within these families is particularly significant given the potential for cultural clashes and the need for cultural negotiation (Comănanu et al., 2017).

Bicultural identity orientation refers to the degree to which individuals integrate and navigate their dual cultural backgrounds. According to Comănanu, Noels, and Dewaele (2017), bicultural individuals often develop unique strategies to harmonize their heritage and host cultures. This process can impact various aspects of their lives, including family relationships, mental health, and social integration (Comănanu et al., 2017). The theoretical framework for understanding bicultural identity has been extensively discussed in the literature, highlighting the importance of both heritage and host culture engagement in fostering a coherent bicultural identity (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007).

Bicultural identity development is critical for the psychological well-being and social adjustment of individuals in bicultural families. Firat and Noels (2021) emphasized that perceived discrimination can lead to psychological distress among immigrants, with bicultural identity orientations playing a mediating role. This suggests that a well-integrated bicultural identity can buffer against the negative effects of discrimination and promote psychological resilience (Firat & Noels, 2021). Similarly, Safa (2023) noted that bicultural identity and adjustment are particularly relevant for ethnoracially minoritized and immigrant adolescents, who often face additional challenges in their developmental trajectories (Safa, 2023).

The influence of family dynamics on bicultural identity formation is profound. According to Miranda, Estrada, and Firpo-Jimenez (2000), family cohesion and adaptability are crucial for Latino families at different stages of acculturation. The study highlighted that families who maintain strong cultural ties and adapt to new cultural contexts effectively support their children's identity development. This underscores the importance of

understanding how attachment processes within bicultural families influence identity formation.

Attachment theory provides a useful lens for examining the relationships within bicultural families. Attachment dynamics, which involve the emotional bonds and interactions between family members, are shaped by cultural contexts and practices (Harrison et al., 1990). In bicultural families, the integration of different cultural attachment styles can either create a harmonious environment or lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. For instance, Oshri et al. (2014) found that bicultural stress, which arises from the demands of navigating two cultures, can significantly impact identity formation and lead to maladaptive behaviors in Hispanic adolescents (Oshri et al., 2014).

Parental attitudes and practices play a pivotal role in shaping children's attachment and identity in bicultural settings. Choi et al. (2016) explored the acculturation strategies among Korean American youth, highlighting how parents' cultural adaptation and parenting attitudes influence their children's bicultural acceptance and career adaptability (Choi et al., 2016). These findings align with the broader literature on acculturation and family dynamics, suggesting that supportive and culturally adaptive parenting fosters better outcomes for bicultural youth ((Choi et al., 2016; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2006).

Bicultural families often face unique challenges, such as acculturation gaps between parents and children, which can lead to family conflicts and stress (Smokowski et al., 2008). These gaps arise when parents and children adapt to the host culture at different rates, potentially leading to misunderstandings and disagreements. Tran (2024) investigated bicultural stress in adult bicultural Canadians, highlighting that effective communication and mutual cultural appreciation are essential for mitigating these challenges (Tran, 2024).

On the other hand, bicultural families also have the opportunity to develop rich and multifaceted identities. Schwartz et al. (2015) found that longitudinal trajectories of bicultural identity integration in Hispanic adolescents are linked to improved mental health and family functioning (Schwartz et al., 2015). This suggests that successful integration of dual cultural identities can enhance overall well-being and strengthen family bonds. Moreover, Ferenczi, Marshall, and Bejanyan (2015) discussed the protective effects of self-construal on perceived rejection from heritage culture members, indicating that a strong sense of bicultural self-efficacy can buffer against negative social experiences (Ferenczi et al., 2015).

Cultural negotiation is a continuous process in bicultural families, involving the reconciliation of differing cultural values, practices, and expectations. Lo, Kim, and Grotevant (2023) examined how Chinese American families navigate acculturative family conflicts and adapt their socialization beliefs. Their findings underscore the importance of flexibility and mutual respect in maintaining family harmony (Lo et al., 2023). Similarly, Laketa et al. (2023) highlighted the role of linguistic, affective, parental, and educational contributions to the bicultural identity development of Balkan minority adolescents, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of cultural adaptation (Laketa et al., 2023).

The role of the broader social context cannot be overlooked in understanding bicultural identity formation. Safa (2023) discussed how societal views and experiences of discrimination influence bicultural adolescents' identity development and adjustment (Safa, 2023). This aligns with David, Okazaki, and Saw's (2009) findings on bicultural self-efficacy among college students, which revealed that higher self-efficacy is associated with better mental health outcomes and greater cultural competence (David et al., 2009).

Despite the extensive research on bicultural identity and attachment, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of how these processes unfold within the unique contexts of bicultural families. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the dynamics of attachment and identity formation through qualitative methods, providing rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences of bicultural families. By focusing on semi-structured interviews and achieving theoretical saturation, this research seeks to capture the nuanced ways in which bicultural families navigate their cultural landscapes. The primary objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the attachment dynamics within bicultural families, focusing on parenting styles, bonding activities, and the role of extended family.
- Investigate the processes of identity formation in children raised in bicultural environments, including self-identification, cultural integration, and the influence of school and community.
- Understand the challenges and strategies involved in cultural negotiation within bicultural families.
- Explore the impact of family and social relationships on the overall well-being and identity development of children in bicultural families.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore attachment and identity formation in bicultural families. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions, providing rich, detailed data that quantitative methods might not capture.

The participants in this study were members of bicultural families, specifically focusing on parents and their children aged between 10 and 18 years. The families were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and experiences. The inclusion criteria required that at least one parent in the family was from a different cultural background than the other parent, and that both parents and children were willing to participate in the study.

The principle of theoretical saturation was applied to determine the sample size. This means that interviews were conducted until no new themes or insights were emerging from the data, indicating that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon had been achieved. In this study, theoretical saturation was reached after 15 families had been interviewed.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were chosen for their flexibility and depth. This method allowed the researchers to probe into specific areas of interest while also giving participants the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The interview guide included open-ended questions aimed at understanding the dynamics of attachment and identity formation within the context of bicultural family life. Questions covered topics such as:

The participants' experiences of cultural differences within the family.

How attachment bonds were formed and maintained across different cultures.

The challenges and benefits of being part of a bicultural family.

The process of identity formation in children growing up in a bicultural environment.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool. NVivo was chosen for its ability to handle large volumes of qualitative data and facilitate complex coding and thematic analysis. The analysis process involved several steps:

Familiarization: Researchers thoroughly read the transcripts to become intimately familiar with the data.

Coding: Initial coding was conducted to identify key themes and patterns. Codes were assigned to segments of text that were relevant to the research questions.

Thematic Analysis: The codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Reviewing Themes: The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and provided meaningful insights into attachment and identity formation in bicultural families.

Finalizing Themes: The final themes were clearly defined and named, ready for presentation in the findings section.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers maintained a reflexive approach, regularly discussing their interpretations and ensuring that their own biases and assumptions did not unduly influence the findings.

3 Findings and Results

The study included a total of 23 participants from 15 bicultural families, comprising 10 parents and 13 children. The parents ranged in age from 35 to 50 years, with an average age of 42. Among the parents, 6 were mothers and 4 were fathers. The children's ages ranged from 10 to 18 years, with a mean age of 14. There were 7 girls and 6 boys. The families represented a diverse array of cultural backgrounds, including African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and European heritages. Specifically, 5 families were African-American/European, 4 were Hispanic/European, 3 were Asian/European, and 3 were mixed within other ethnic combinations. The majority of the families (14 out of 15) resided in urban areas, while one family lived in a suburban setting. Most parents had a college degree or higher education, with 7 parents holding undergraduate degrees and 3 parents possessing graduate degrees. The children attended a mix of public and private schools, with 9 attending public schools and 4 enrolled in private institutions.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories (Main Themes)	Subcategories (Subthemes)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Attachment Dynamics	a. Parenting Styles	Cultural expectations, Discipline methods, Emotional support
	b. Bonding Activities	Communication styles, Role of extended family
	c. Emotional Connection	Shared cultural rituals, Family outings, Religious practices
	d. Role of Extended Family	Language use, Storytelling
	e. Impact of Bicultural Stress	Expression of affection, Emotional availability, Trust
2. Identity Formation	a. Self-Identification	Conflict resolution, Emotional security
	b. Cultural Integration	Grandparents' involvement, Cross-cultural interactions, Family visits
	c. Influence of School Environment	Stress management, Coping strategies, Identity conflicts
	d. Role Models	Cultural pride, Mixed identity, Self-perception
	e. Challenges of Dual Identity	Peer influence, Parental influence
	f. Impact of Societal Views	Adaptation to cultural norms, Bicultural competence, Language skills
3. Cultural Negotiation	a. Decision-Making Processes	Social integration
	b. Cultural Traditions	Peer relationships, Cultural representation in curriculum, Bullying
	c. Language Practices	Teacher attitudes, Extracurricular activities

4. Family and Social Relationships	d. Gender Roles	Language teaching methods
	e. Religious Practices	Traditional vs. modern roles, Gender expectations, Role modeling
	a. Peer Relationships	Religious holidays, Rituals, Faith-based activities
		Friendships, Peer support, Social activities
		Peer influence
	b. Community Engagement	Participation in cultural groups, Community events, Volunteering
	c. Family Cohesion	Family unity, Shared values, Communication patterns
	d. Intergenerational Relationships	Grandparent-grandchild bonds, Cultural transmission, Respect
		Storytelling
	e. Influence of Media	Media portrayal of cultures, Media consumption, Social media
		Cultural representation
	f. Social Support Systems	Support groups, Counseling, Religious communities

3.1 Attachment Dynamics

Parenting Styles: Participants described various parenting styles influenced by cultural expectations and discipline methods. One mother stated, "In my culture, respect and discipline are paramount, but my husband prefers a more relaxed approach." Emotional support and communication styles varied significantly, with one father noting, "We try to blend our approaches, but it's challenging when extended family has different expectations."

Bonding Activities: Bonding activities were crucial for maintaining strong attachment bonds. Families engaged in shared cultural rituals, family outings, and religious practices. A participant shared, "We celebrate both cultural festivals to ensure our children appreciate both sides." Language use and storytelling also played a significant role in bonding.

Emotional Connection: Emotional connection within bicultural families was nurtured through expressions of affection and emotional availability. One child mentioned, "I feel secure knowing my parents are always there for me, even when they disagree." Trust, conflict resolution, and emotional security were key elements highlighted in the interviews.

Role of Extended Family: The involvement of extended family in the children's lives varied, with significant impact on attachment dynamics. One participant noted, "Grandparents play a huge role in transmitting cultural values and providing support." Cross-cultural interactions and family visits were common themes.

Impact of Bicultural Stress: Bicultural families faced unique stressors, affecting attachment dynamics. Stress management and coping strategies were essential, as one parent explained, "We've developed ways to handle cultural conflicts to protect our children's sense of identity." Identity conflicts were frequently discussed.

3.2 Identity Formation

Self-Identification: Children's self-identification was shaped by cultural pride, mixed identity, and self-perception. A teenager expressed, "Sometimes I feel confused about where I belong, but I'm proud of both cultures." Peer and parental influences were significant factors in self-identification.

Cultural Integration: Adaptation to cultural norms and bicultural competence were critical for identity formation. Language skills and social integration were emphasized, with one child stating, "Speaking both languages helps me connect with both sides of my family."

Influence of School Environment: The school environment played a crucial role in identity formation. Peer relationships, cultural representation in the curriculum, and bullying were recurrent themes. "I felt more accepted when my school celebrated multicultural events," one participant shared. Teacher attitudes and extracurricular activities also influenced identity.

Role Models: Role models, including parents, community figures, and media representations, were vital in shaping identity. "Seeing people like me on TV makes me feel more confident," a child noted. Sibling influence was also a key factor.

Challenges of Dual Identity: Children often faced challenges related to dual identity, such as identity confusion, cultural clashes, and social acceptance. One participant said, "It's hard balancing expectations from both cultures." Balancing cultural expectations was a recurring theme.

Impact of Societal Views: Societal views on bicultural families impacted identity formation. Experiences of stereotyping, discrimination, and cultural appreciation were common. "Sometimes people don't understand our family dynamics, but it's getting better," a parent explained.

3.3 Cultural Negotiation

Decision-Making Processes: Decision-making processes in bicultural families involved parental roles, cultural compromise, and negotiation strategies. One parent stated, "We have to constantly negotiate our cultural differences to make decisions that work for everyone." Conflict resolution was also crucial.

Cultural Traditions: Celebrating cultural traditions was vital for cultural negotiation. Participants discussed the importance of holiday celebrations, food customs, and traditional attire. "We mix elements from both cultures in our celebrations," one participant shared.

Language Practices: Language practices, including bilingual communication and language preference, were essential for cultural negotiation. A parent mentioned, "We encourage our children to speak both languages fluently." Code-switching and language teaching methods were common topics.

Gender Roles: Gender roles varied between cultures, influencing family dynamics. Traditional vs. modern roles, gender expectations, and role modeling were discussed. One mother noted, "Balancing traditional gender roles with modern expectations is challenging."

Religious Practices: Religious practices were a significant aspect of cultural negotiation, with families observing religious holidays, rituals, and faith-based activities. "We respect and practice both religions in our household," a participant explained.

3.4 Family and Social Relationships

Peer Relationships: Peer relationships were crucial for children in bicultural families. Friendships, peer support, and social activities were frequently mentioned. One child said, "My friends from different cultures help me feel more accepted." Peer influence was also significant.

Community Engagement: Community engagement included participation in cultural groups, community events, and volunteering. "Being part of cultural groups helps us stay connected to our roots," a parent noted.

Family Cohesion: Family cohesion was maintained through unity, shared values, and communication patterns. One participant shared, "Despite our differences, we focus on what unites us as a family."

Intergenerational Relationships: Intergenerational relationships, particularly with grandparents, were essential for cultural transmission and respect. A child stated, "My

grandparents teach me a lot about our culture." Storytelling was a common method of cultural transmission.

Influence of Media: Media significantly influenced family and social relationships, with portrayals of cultures, media consumption, and social media use being discussed. "Media representation of our culture boosts my children's confidence," a parent mentioned.

Social Support Systems: Social support systems, such as support groups, counseling, and religious communities, were crucial for bicultural families. "We rely on our support groups to navigate the challenges of being a bicultural family," a participant explained.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the attachment and identity formation processes within bicultural families. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 23 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, four main themes emerged: Attachment Dynamics, Identity Formation, Cultural Negotiation, and Family and Social Relationships. Each theme encapsulates the multifaceted experiences of bicultural families as they navigate the complexities of integrating multiple cultural identities.

Attachment Dynamics revealed that parenting styles, bonding activities, emotional connections, and the role of extended family are pivotal in shaping children's attachment experiences. The integration of different cultural expectations and practices often required negotiation and adaptation. For instance, parenting styles varied significantly, with some parents emphasizing traditional discipline methods while others adopted more relaxed approaches (Harrison et al., 1990).

In Identity Formation, children's self-identification was influenced by cultural pride, peer and parental influences, and their ability to integrate cultural norms. The school environment played a critical role, with cultural representation and peer relationships significantly impacting identity development. These findings align with Schwartz et al. (2015), who noted that bicultural identity integration is crucial for mental health and family functioning (Schwartz et al., 2015).

Cultural Negotiation highlighted the ongoing process of reconciling differing cultural values, traditions, and practices within families. This negotiation was evident in decision-making processes, celebration of cultural traditions, language practices, and gender roles. Lo, Kim,

and Grotevant (2023) similarly emphasized the importance of flexibility and mutual respect in managing acculturative family conflicts (Lo et al., 2023).

Lastly, Family and Social Relationships underscored the importance of peer relationships, community engagement, family cohesion, and media influence in shaping the social experiences of bicultural children. The support systems available to these families, including community groups and counseling, were crucial in navigating the challenges of bicultural life.

The attachment dynamics within bicultural families are complex and multifaceted, requiring parents to balance different cultural expectations and practices. This study found that parents often adopt a blend of disciplinary methods and communication styles, which is consistent with the findings of Oshri et al. (2014), who highlighted the impact of bicultural stress on family dynamics and identity formation (Oshri et al., 2014). The emotional connections and trust within these families were fostered through shared cultural rituals and bonding activities, supporting the notion that cultural engagement enhances family cohesion (Miranda et al., 2000).

In terms of identity formation, the study revealed that children in bicultural families develop a strong sense of self-identification through the integration of cultural norms and values from both heritage and host cultures. This process is influenced by the school environment, peer relationships, and parental guidance. Schwartz et al. (2015) found similar results, noting that successful bicultural identity integration is associated with improved mental health outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2015). The challenges of dual identity, such as identity confusion and cultural clashes, were also evident, reflecting the findings of Safa (2023), who emphasized the impact of societal views and discrimination on identity development (Safa, 2023).

Cultural negotiation within bicultural families involves continuous adaptation and compromise. This study highlighted the significance of decision-making processes, cultural traditions, language practices, and gender roles in this negotiation. The findings align with those of Lo, Kim, and Grotevant (2023), who stressed the importance of acculturative family conflict management (Lo et al., 2023). Language practices, including bilingual communication and code-switching, were particularly crucial in maintaining cultural connections, supporting the work of Choi et al. (2016) on the role of language in bicultural adaptation (Choi et al., 2016).

The social relationships and support systems available to bicultural families play a vital role in their overall well-being. This study found that peer relationships, community engagement, and media influence significantly impact the social experiences of bicultural children. The findings are consistent with those of Tran (2024), who highlighted the importance of effective communication and mutual cultural appreciation in managing bicultural stress (Tran, 2024). The support systems, such as community groups and counseling, provide essential resources for families navigating the challenges of bicultural life (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2008; Smokowski et al., 2008).

While this study provides valuable insights into the attachment and identity formation processes within bicultural families, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 23 participants, though sufficient for qualitative research, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within bicultural families. The study primarily included families from urban areas, which may differ significantly from those in rural or suburban settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may introduce bias, as participants might portray their experiences in a socially desirable manner. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should consider a longitudinal approach to better understand the evolving dynamics of attachment and identity formation in bicultural families over time. Longitudinal studies can provide deeper insights into how these processes change as children grow and as families continue to navigate their bicultural identities. It would also be beneficial to explore the role of digital media and technology in shaping the experiences of bicultural families, given the increasing influence of these factors in contemporary society. Furthermore, comparative studies involving different cultural groups and geographical locations can help identify unique challenges and strategies employed by various bicultural families, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Practitioners working with bicultural families, including educators, counselors, and social workers, should prioritize culturally sensitive approaches that recognize and respect the unique experiences of these families. Schools can play a pivotal role by promoting cultural representation and inclusivity within the curriculum and extracurricular activities, helping children feel valued and understood. Counseling services should incorporate bicultural competence training to better support families in managing

cultural conflicts and fostering positive identity development. Community organizations can facilitate support groups and cultural exchange programs to strengthen community ties and provide additional resources for bicultural families. By adopting these practices, practitioners can enhance the well-being and resilience of bicultural families, helping them navigate the complexities of their unique cultural landscapes.

The findings of this study highlight the intricate dynamics of attachment and identity formation within bicultural families. Parenting styles, bonding activities, emotional connections, and the role of extended family are critical in shaping attachment experiences. Children's self-identification and cultural integration are influenced by various factors, including the school environment, peer relationships, and parental guidance. The continuous process of cultural negotiation requires flexibility, mutual respect, and effective communication. Social relationships and support systems play a vital role in the overall well-being of bicultural families.

The study's limitations, such as the sample size and reliance on self-reported data, suggest the need for further research to explore these dynamics more comprehensively. Future studies should consider longitudinal approaches and comparative analyses across different cultural groups and geographical locations. Practitioners can support bicultural families by adopting culturally sensitive approaches, promoting inclusivity, and providing resources that address their unique challenges.

In conclusion, understanding the attachment and identity formation processes in bicultural families is essential for fostering positive family dynamics and supporting the development of resilient, well-integrated identities in children. By recognizing the complexities and unique experiences of these families, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can contribute to the well-being and success of bicultural individuals in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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