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Ethnic identity and self-esteem: examining the role of social context

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Abstract

This study explored ethnic identity and self-esteem among 1062 Mexican-origin adolescents who were attending one of three schools, which varied in their ethnic composition (i.e., predominately Latino, predominately non-Latino, and balanced Latino/non-Latino). Significant relationships emerged between ethnic identity and self-esteem among adolescents in all school settings. Furthermore, controlling for generation and maternal education, adolescents attending the predominately non-Latino school reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity than adolescents in the other schools. Consistent with ecological theory, these findings challenge researchers to design future studies in ways such that multiple layers of context and their influence on development can be examined.

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Introduction

In an increasingly ethnically diverse society, it is critical to gain an understanding of the role that individuals' ethnic identities play in their lives. Previous research suggests that ethnic identity can have an important influence, as it has been related to outcome variables such as academic achievement (Arellano & Padilla, 1996), abilities to cope with racism and discrimination (Chavira & Phinney, 1991; Phinney & Chavira, 1995), and psychological well-being (for a review, see Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). Although one's ethnic identity is one of many components that comprise an individual's global identity, it is interesting to note that this single component is consistently positively related to individuals' self-esteem. To gain a clearer theoretical understanding of this relationship, scholars have drawn on social identity theory.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), individuals' self-concepts are derived from knowing that they are members of particular social groups. Furthermore, if individuals evaluate

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the ethnic group they belong to favorably, their self-esteem may be enhanced via membership in that group (Lorenzo-Hernandez & Ouellette, 1998). In line with these ideas, researchers have consistently found a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem among ethnic minority adolescents (e.g., Asian, African American, Latino, Native American; Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phillips Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999; Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Phinney, Chavira, & Tate, 1993; Phinney, Dupont, Espinosa, Revill, & Sanders, 1994). Specifically among Latino adolescents, this relationship has been consistently positive (see Umaña-Taylor & Fine, in press, for a review) and effect sizes (i.e., r^2) have ranged from 0.02 to 0.07 (Carlson et al., 2000; Phinney et al., 1994, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999). Thus, although the relationship has been consistent, the demonstrated effect has been small to moderate (Cohen & Cohen, 1983).

When studying ethnic *majority* adolescents (i.e., White), however, researchers have only found a significant positive relationship between these two constructs when White adolescents are in a minority or ethnically diverse context (i.e., Whites make up a small percentage of the population in their schools; e.g., Phinney, 1992; Phinney et al., 1994, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999). As a result, it has been suggested that the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem holds only for adolescents for whom ethnicity is salient (Phinney, 1991).

In addition, scholars suggest that ethnicity and, in turn, ethnic identity is more salient for ethnic minority adolescents than for adolescents who are members of the ethnic majority (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). In fact, researchers who have compared the ethnic identity of White adolescents and ethnic minority adolescents have found support for this idea, as White adolescents consistently score significantly lower on measures of ethnic identity than their ethnic minority counterparts (e.g., Branch, Tayal, & Triplett, 2000; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney et al., 1994). Researchers suggest that perhaps the lower scores are an indication of the lower salience that ethnic identity has for ethnic majority group members. Although significant, these differences have been moderate; for example, mean item differences between White adolescents and ethnic minority adolescents on ethnic identity have ranged from 0.29 to 0.52, for items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Phinney et al., 1994). Nevertheless, they consistently demonstrate a possible lower salience of ethnicity.

In terms of examining the social context and its influence on ethnicity, it is important to consider that individuals' lives are embedded in multiple contexts and, as such, these contexts may work together to influence individuals' experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). As described above, previous studies on ethnic identity in which social context has been considered have explored the influence of divergent macro and micro contexts for White adolescents. That is, White adolescents have been studied in situations in which they are a numerical *minority* in their school context (i.e., micro) but a numerical *majority* in society (i.e., macro). However, we have not explored Latino adolescents in divergent contexts (e.g., *majority* in a school context and *minority* in societal context). It is possible that being a numerical minority in a broader (i.e., macro) context may overshadow the effects of being a numerical majority in a micro context. For example, adolescents who live in ethnic enclaves may continue to feel like a 'minority' because experiences with discrimination occur when they travel outside of their neighborhoods and, furthermore, discriminatory housing practices limit their ability to live in more integrated communities. However, it is also possible that the effects of being a numerical majority in a micro context can

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