Multiple social identities and reactivity to daily stress among ethnically diverse young adults

Tiffany Yip [a,*], Lisa Kiang [b], Andrew J. Fuligni [c]

[a] Department of Psychology, Fordham University, 332 Dealy Hall, 441 East Fordham Road, Bronx, NY 10458, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC 27109-7778, USA
[c] Center for Culture and Health, University of California—Los Angeles, C8-698 NPI, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA

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ABSTRACT

In a sample of 181 young adults from Filipino, European, Latin and Asian American backgrounds, cluster analytic techniques were employed to determine how ethnic, American, family, and religious identity interact to form unique identity configurations. Four clusters emerged: Many Social Identities (MSI), Blended/Low Religious (B/LR), Blended/Low Ethnic and American (B/LEA), and Few Social Identities (FSI). Based on daily diary reports over 14 days, differential reactivity to daily stressors was examined on feelings of anxiety and positive mood. Results suggested that individuals in the MSI, B/LR and B/LEA clusters reported increased anxiety on days when they experienced more stressors. In addition, individuals in the MSI and B/LR clusters reported feeling less positive when they experienced stressors. Multiple identity configurations and their implications for stress reactivity are discussed.

1. Introduction

A fundamental understanding of the multiple groups and categories to which one may socially connect is embedded in the establishment of one's self or identity, considered a crucial developmental task (Erikson, 1968). From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), knowledge of such social group membership and the degree to which individuals feel closely tied to their group can have robust effects on adjustment and well-being. For instance, contemporary research in the area of social identification has pointed to the valuable resource of ethnic identity, as one form of social group membership. Much of the existing work has demonstrated positive effects of ethnic identity, both in terms of direct links to outcomes such as self-esteem and overall well-being (Phinney, 1991; Umana-Taylor, 2004), as well as through indirect protective effects against perceived discrimination or other negative life experiences (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006; Shelton et al., 2005).

Although a growing collection of research has underscored and confirmed the vast benefits that social identity, such as ethnic identity, can have in individuals' lives, little is known about how simultaneous identification with *multiple* social groups operate in unison to directly and indirectly affect psychosocial outcomes. Indeed, a clear limitation in the field is that most social identity researchers have typically focused on single group categories of identity, with very little work examining the effect of multiple social identifications (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In addition, much of the current research has focused on ethnic identity almost exclusively to the point of neglecting other important forms of identification, for instance, religious or family identity. The goal of the current study is to address this gap in the literature by examining individuals' constellations

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* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: tyip@fordham.edu (T. Yip).

of social identification in order to determine how multiple identities work in concert to influence development and potentially protect against stress.

1.1. Multiple categories of social identification

Although numbers and possible combinations of social identification are virtually endless, there are several types of group membership that appear particularly proximal and primary for ethnically diverse youth, namely, ethnic, American, family, and religious. Venturing beyond ethnic identity, Yip and Cross (2004) found that Chinese Americans with a strong sense of American identity reported levels of mental health that were just as positive as those with a strong sense of ethnic identity. That is, there were no distinguishing characteristics between having a strong American identity versus a strong ethnic one; just having *some* sense of identity or group belonging was the key in terms of adjustment. Acculturation research also attests to the importance of mainstream American identification, especially in conjunction with ethnic identification (Berry, 2003). For instance, those with bicultural competence or the ability to feel strongly connected to their ethnic and American identities have been consistently found to fare the best in terms of well-being and mental health (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Identification with one's national or American group thus appears to be an important form of social identity, particularly for youth living in the U.S. (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997).

In addition to one's ethnic and American identity, family identity may be equally or even more relevant given that the family represents one of the more immediate social groups that are salient in individuals' lives (Dmitrieva, Chen, Greenberger, & Gil-Rivas, 2004). Recent work indeed suggests that the family signifies an important social identity in and of itself (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). As one of the earliest sources of socialization, adolescents' family membership serves an important role as being perhaps the earliest and most proximal form of social group identity to develop, having a clearly lasting impact on development (Parke, 2004).

Social categories such as one's ethnicity, nationality, and even one's family share the commonality of being readily observable, or potentially assumed in the case of nationality. One key social group that has a less visible nature is religious affiliation. Despite being an identity that is not readily visible to others, researchers recently found that young adults participating in a nationwide study tended to report, on average, that their religion is at least moderately important in their lives (Pearce & Thornton, 2007). Therefore, the idea that religion can constitute a primary domain of social identification has been confirmed in recent work. Moreover, this work has generally found positive mechanisms involved, namely, that strong levels of religious identity are related to positive adjustment and well-being (Furrow, King, & White, 2004).

Independent bodies of research thus show that ethnic, American, family, and religious identities have each been found to be related to positive outcomes. However, the reality is that individuals do not belong to these groups in isolation and researchers have called for a more comprehensive view of identity from a "whole person" perspective (Frable, 1997). Therefore, in this study, we ask how these four categories of identity interact and contribute to youth development. Consider a young adult who feels a strong sense of belonging with his or her religious group but not his or her ethnic group. Would this individual exhibit different outcomes than if the opposite was true? Do individual differences in well-being vary as a function of individuals' *patterns* or configurations of multiple social identities?

1.2. Cluster analytic approach to studying social identities

A person-centered approach is well-suited to answer these types of questions. This approach can distinguish dispositional patterns among several variables and how they interact with each other (Bergman, Magnusson, & El-Khouri, 2003). For instance, cluster analysis helped determine that different levels of identity commitment and exploration in adolescents and adults from African American backgrounds reliably mapped onto four theorized identity statuses (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). Rowley, Chavous, and Cooke (2003) also adopted a person-centered approach and identified five profiles of racial ideology (Undifferentiated, Integrationist, Multiculturalist, Pluralist, Separatist) based on individuals' scores on subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Further, these profiles have been found to be related to outcomes such as academic attainment (Chavous et al., 2003). Although such prior work has focused on multiple aspects of ethnic or racial identity, a person-centered approach can be similarly used to examine patterns among multiple categories of social identity (e.g., ethnic, American, family, religious).

In recent work (Kiang, Yip, & Fuligni, in press), we utilized a person-centered approach to examine such patterns of multiple social identification within ethnically diverse young adults. Four qualitatively different constellations emerged (see Fig. 1). One cluster, labeled "Many Social Identities (MSI)," was characterized by youth having above average scores on all four identity domains in questions, namely, family, religious, ethnic, and American. A second cluster, defined as "Blended/Low Religious" (B/LR), was reported as those having strong family and American identity, average levels of ethnic identity, but low scores on religious identity. The third cluster reported high levels of family identity, average levels of religious identity, and low identification with their ethnic and American groups; hence, this group was referred to as "Blended/Low Ethnic and American" (B/LEA). Individuals with Few Social Identities" (FSI) comprised the fourth cluster, illustrated by those with low identification in all four groups, with particularly low levels of family identity.