



## Family cultural socialization practices and ethnic identity in college-going emerging adults

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### A B S T R A C T

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We examined how family cultural socialization related to the ethnic identity of Asian American, Latino, White, and Mixed-Ethnic emerging adults ( $N = 225$ ). Greater family cultural socialization was related to greater ethnic identity exploration and commitment. Ethnic minority students reported higher levels of family cultural socialization and ethnic identity compared to White students. The family cultural socialization-ethnic identity link was more pronounced for females compared to males, and for White compared to ethnic minority students. The findings highlight the importance of the family for identity development beyond adolescence.

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### Introduction

Ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of self as a member of an ethnic group (Phinney, 2003). A strong ethnic identity is linked to positive psychological adjustment in terms of self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, and less loneliness and depression (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006; Lee & Yoo, 2004; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999; Tsai, Ying, & Lee, 2001). Because ethnic identity relates to a variety of psychological adjustment indicators, it is important to illuminate the conditions under which ethnic identity develops. The overarching aim of this study, then, is to focus on how family cultural socialization contributes to ethnic identity in diverse emerging adult students.

#### *Ethnic identity and emerging adulthood*

Because many emerging adults (roughly between the ages of 18 and 30 years) have not yet entered into adult roles concerning family (e.g., marriage and parenthood) and work (e.g., established career), this developmental period is characterized by a focus on the self (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). Consequently, emerging adulthood is also a critical time for identity work (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; McAdams, 2001; Phinney, 2006). College-going emerging adults, in particular, are exposed to new contexts and experiences that may serve as catalysts for identity development (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003). Thus, the confluence of development at the individual level (e.g., advanced cognitive abilities, Habermas & Bluck, 2000) with shifts in contexts that afford opportunities for an increasing awareness of ethnicity, implies that emerging adulthood is a particularly dynamic time for ethnic identity development.

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### *Family as a key socialization agent*

Ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1996) highlight the need for understanding development within multiple layers of context. For ethnic identity, these contexts can range from macro-level factors such as societal prejudice and ethnic representation (Berry, 2003; Phinney, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) to micro-level factors involving peers and families (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001; Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004). This multi-level perspective converges with Erikson (1968), who maintained that the key mechanism through which identity develops is interaction with others – first with family members (mainly parents) and subsequently, with members in the community and larger society. Erikson stressed the primary role of parents in shaping children's identity, initially through identification and modeling and then, in adolescence and later life through supporting, challenging, accepting, or protesting their child's developing identity.

Contemporary scholars also argue that the family provides the primary foundation for ethnic identity development through the process of ethnic-racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006). Family ethnic-racial socialization refers to the “transmission of information from adults to children regarding race and ethnicity” (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 748). Importantly, Hughes et al. (2006) distinguish between racial and cultural socialization. Racial socialization refers to the ways in which parents teach their children how to cope with the fact that one's racial group is devalued in society, focusing on issues of discrimination, racism, and barriers to opportunities. Most studies on racial socialization have focused on African American children and their families. Cultural socialization, on the other hand, highlights the preservation and transmission of cultural practices and traditions. Most studies of cultural socialization have focused on immigrant families of Latino and Asian backgrounds. Both types of socialization serve similar functions: to help children understand the role of ethnicity in their lives, foster a strong ethnic identity, and develop a sense of pride in their ethnic/cultural/racial background (Hughes et al., 2006; Johnson, 2003).

In their review of 46 studies examining racial and cultural socialization, Hughes et al. (2006) highlighted key limitations. The most striking was that samples were predominately African American, with seven including Latinos (mostly Mexican), three of Asians, two including Mixed-ethnic, and one with White participants. Thus, apart from African American families, we know very little about how parents communicate cultural values, practices, and traditions to their children. Furthermore, we know little about how this socialization process is related to ethnic identity development for diverse groups.

### *Family cultural socialization and ethnic identity: beyond childhood and adolescence*

Family socialization practices contribute to ethnic identity development during childhood and adolescence (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, et al., 2006). However, research on the role of the family in emerging adulthood is scarce. There is evidence, however, that families continue to play an important role for emerging adults' identity development. For instance, emerging adults view their parents as an important source of emotional support (Aquilino, 2006). Being able to turn to parents for emotional support may provide a context suitable for identity exploration and resolution (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). However, while studies confirm that family relationships do matter during emerging adulthood, most of this literature is based solely on majority White populations. One study that did include ethnically diverse emerging adults found that family cultural socialization was related positively to identifying with one's cultural heritage (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007), but their measure of cultural heritage encompassed aspects of acculturation, cultural values (such as familism) and ethnic identity, all related yet distinct constructs. As a result, the specific association between cultural socialization and ethnic identity was untested. Therefore, the first aim of the present study is to test the hypothesis that greater family cultural socialization will be linked to higher levels of ethnic identity in an ethnically diverse sample of emerging adults.

The second aim is to explore whether family cultural socialization can account for frequently observed ethnic differences in ethnic identity. One robust finding is that ethnic minority adolescent and college students report higher levels of ethnic identity compared to White Americans (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). However, we do not know what accounts for this consistent finding. One factor may be that ethnic minority families engage in greater cultural socialization, and, consequently, foster greater awareness of and curiosity about ethnic identity. Notably, by focusing on practices and behaviors (such as family cultural socialization) associated with different ethnicities to explain group differences, we move away from conceptualizing ethnicity as a static category in our study.

### *Moderating effects of gender and ethnicity*

Individual characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, may shape how socialization is experienced (Cheng & Kuo, 2000). Thus, the third aim of the study is to explore how gender and ethnicity moderate the relation between family cultural socialization and ethnic identity. Concerning gender, studies of immigrant families (that include Latino and Asian American youth) show that parents socialize their daughters more than their sons to preserve traditional cultural ideals (Dion & Dion, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Qin, 2006). Studies of African American families suggest that racial/cultural socialization and transmission of cultural values is primarily carried out by females (the “kin keepers”) (Stack, 1974). Finally, research with Asian American and Latino youth suggest that parents may monitor and limit peer interactions in girls more than boys, and, as

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