

Ethnic Identity Formation (in a changing world)

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Ethnic identity is a multidimensional construct with varied and changing definitions. Psychologist Jean Phinney (2000, 2003) broadly defines ethnic identity as “an enduring, fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that group membership.” Typically, members of ethnic groups will share a similar culture, religion, language, race, values, or place of origin. As individuals become aware of their ethnicity in the context of their surroundings, ethnic identity develops and changes over time. Ethnic identity has been shown to impact a broad range of an individual’s feelings, friendships, and behaviors and is believed to effect long-term social and psychological wellbeing. Ethnic identity formation, particularly among ethnic minority youth, is considered to be an important part of identity formation during adolescence and is believed to continue into young adulthood.

The interest in and understanding of racial and ethnic identity development has changed as history has shaped interactions between ethnic groups and individuals. The idea of ethnic identity becomes meaningful when distinct groups interact over time. If a society is ethnically homogenous, ethnic identity development is unnecessary because no differences between ethnic groups exist and therefore a stronger identification with one group is not necessary. Many researchers attribute the current, increased interest in ethnic identity to be a result of the African American civil rights movement. The civil rights movement facilitated

a more defined African American ethnic identity that was validated and encouraged, resulting in stronger ethnic identity formation. In other words, the ethnic subgroup (African American) within the primary group (White) became more clearly defined and resulted in notably stronger ethnic identities for African American populations.

Acculturation is similar to, but not synonymous with, ethnic identity. Acculturation refers to changes in cultural attitudes and behaviors as a result of direct contact of two cultures. For example, a Mexican-immigrant adolescent may learn English or acquire an appreciation for pop music after attending a high school in the United States, resulting in stronger U.S. acculturation. Ethnic identity, on the other hand, focuses more on how individuals see their ethnic subgroup within the primary culture. For example, a Somali-origin adolescent may believe that Somalis' value family more highly because she lives with grandparents, aunts, and uncles, while her U.S. high school peers live with a small, nuclear family or one parent. The Somali-origin adolescent's ethnic identity is strengthened due to her alliance to the Somali ethnic value of family and her perceived difference from the primary group.

Ethnic identity includes the impact of group differences in cultures that vary significantly, such as an adolescent Sudanese immigrant living in Los Angeles, California, as well as multiple, distinct ethnic identities within one city, such as African American, Puerto Rican, and Chinese groups living in New York City. Even if the ethnic groups are all born in New York City, the groups likely vary in their distinct culture, religion, language, race, or values, creating group differences between their ethnic group and the primary group (White). This minority-group, ethnic identity development may include more than cultural dimensions.

Identification with an ethnic-minority group may also involve social identity, feelings of belonging, self-identification, and shared attitudes.

Social psychology research has found group membership to help self-esteem and well-being; however, ethnic identity research results have been mixed due to a lack of consistent construct definitions as well as disagreement about the best way to measure ethnic identity (language, acculturation, self-identification, belonging). Current research suggests that ethnic identity group membership may not result in similar, positive outcomes because of the perceived negative social identity associated with membership in a minority group. If ethnic minority individuals view their ethnic group negatively, they may choose to disassociate themselves from their ethnic group in varying degrees. However, other studies report that ethnic minority adolescents and young adults with a stronger sense of belonging to their ethnic group are more likely to persist in high school and college, and have fewer undesirable psychological outcomes, for example, low self esteem.

Increasing ethnic diversification worldwide will continue to impact ethnic identity development and is likely to create a need to better understand ethnic identity in the future. The impact of age of immigration, for example, may help us better understand the large, ethnic identity variability between different immigrant populations, including country of origin and circumstances surrounding immigration (refugee, legal, illegal, DREAM Act). Multiracial ethnic identity development is also understudied, despite increasing multiracial populations. Multiracial individuals may potentially identify with more than one race or be faced with a decision to align with only one ethnicity, either way effecting their ethnic identity development. Cooperative research may help explore how ethnic identity shapes individual

identity development, leading to more cohesive theories and improved outcomes for ethnic minority and multiracial populations worldwide.

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