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Brief report: Ethnic identity and aggression in adolescence: A longitudinal perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Ethnic identity has been found to relate to many positive psychological outcomes, such as self-esteem and well-being, but little has been said about negative social outcomes such as aggression, nor have these relations been tested across time. The current study examined the concurrent and longitudinal relations between ethnic identity and peer nominated aggression at two time points with a two-year interval (8th and 10th grades) in a sample of 125 Israeli adolescents with an immigration background (56.8% girls). As hypothesized, ethnic identity related negatively to aggression at both T1 and T2. In addition, ethnic identity predicted a relative decrease in future aggression. Given these findings, the article suggests the importance of strengthening ethnic identity through interventions and educational programs.

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Identity formation is an important but challenging task during adolescence (Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013; Erikson, 1968). For migrant adolescents whose identity develops in diverse contexts (Beyers & Çok, 2008), this task may be particularly challenging, as it includes establishing a sense of belonging to a specific ethnic group. Ethnic identity, or the awareness of and the attitudes of adolescents to the significance and meaning of ethnicity in their lives (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012; Phinney, 1991), has been proved to play an important and positive role in their psychological lives (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001), including increasing their self-esteem (Phinney, 1991) and daily positivity (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). A recent meta-analysis of the positive effect of ethnic identity on adolescents noted various positive psychological and social outcomes, such as well-being and social functioning (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). However, little attention has been paid to negative social outcomes such as aggression.

The few studies examining this relationship during adolescence have been cross-sectional and have found ethnic identity to be related negatively to aggression (Belgrave, Nguyen, Johnson, & Hood, 2011). For example, a strong positive ethnic identity is related to fewer beliefs supporting aggression and less self-reported aggressive behavior (McMahon & Watts, 2002). The following mechanisms have been suggested to explain this relationship.

First, strong ethnic identity may serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of discrimination (McMahon & Watts, 2002; Neblett et al., 2012); This process occurs in various ways: a sense of belonging, pride and positive appraisal of one's ethnic group all help increase well-being (Neblett et al., 2012) and reduce the tendency to make personal attributions in cases of discrimination which lowers self-worth (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Moreover, strong ethnic identity might provide more meaning in life, contributing to better adjustment (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). In this view,

adolescents with stronger ethnic identity will enjoy greater self-esteem, and their sense of meaning in life will be enhanced. Hence, they will be less aggressive.

Second, ethnic identity may be part of a social scheme that, by providing a set of norms and values, helps adolescents interpret their social environment (Crick & Dodge, 1994). When this scheme includes trust and connections to others, often the result of a strong ethnic identity, information cues will be observed and interpreted in a less hostile way. Therefore, a strong ethnic identity will be related to less aggressive behavior (Belgrave et al., 2011).

The study discussed here examined the concurrent and longitudinal relationship between ethnic identity and peer nominated aggression at two time points with a two-year interval (8th and 10th grades) in a sample of 125 Israeli adolescents with an immigration background. We hypothesized that (a) ethnic identity would relate negatively to aggression at both T1 and T2. As far as we know, no previous study has measured the relations between ethnic identity and aggression during adolescence longitudinally, but there is some evidence that strong ethnic identity relates to future social functioning (Galliher, Jones, & Dahl, 2011). Therefore, we hypothesized that (b) ethnic identity would predict lower levels of future aggression.

Methods

Participants and procedure

The study included 125 adolescents; all adolescents or their parents had immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union. The participants (56.8% females) were approached through their schools in 8th grade at T1 ($M_{age} = 13.81$, $SD = .50$) and again in 10th grade at T2 ($M_{age} = 15.62$, $SD = .60$). All students were enrolled in public schools and socioeconomic status varied: elementary education was completed by .08% of the fathers; 20.8% of the mothers and 28.8% of the fathers completed high-school; 60.8% of the mothers and 48.8% of the fathers graduated from university. There were missing values for 18.4% of the mothers' degree of education and 21.6% of the fathers' degree of education.

Five schools in the north of Israel, in which immigrants from the former SU were enrolled, were approached by telephone; three agreed to participate. Consent forms were sent to parents of all adolescents in the 8th grade at T1 and in the 10th grade at T2; only those adolescents whose parents gave consent for their children to participate (over 95%) completed the questionnaires. Questionnaires were distributed by trained research assistants during a class session lasting about 45 min. The study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Haifa and Ministry of Education ethical review boards.

Measures

Ethnic identity. Ethnic identity was assessed by centrality and private regard subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI, Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), adapted to Russian identity (e.g. "Being Russian is an important reflection of who I am", "I am happy that I am Russian"). Factor analysis revealed the students did not clearly understand items that were phrased negatively; therefore, they were removed from the analysis, leaving ten items. The participants answered using a response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), T1 $\alpha = .95$, T2 $\alpha = .92$.

Aggression. Aggression was assessed using peer nominations (Cillessen, 2009). Children were given a roster listing the names of their classmates and asked to circle the names of those who fit six statements for direct and indirect aggression (e.g. "Who hits and pushes other kids?", "Who gossips or spreads rumors about other kids?", T1 $\alpha = .87$, T2 $\alpha = .82$).

Only the names of classmates who had permission to participate in the study were listed on this measure. A child's score for each behavior item was computed as the number of nominations for that item s/he received divided by the total number of classmates who could have nominated that child for that item. The final scores for each item were standardized and averaged together to create an aggression score.

Control Variables. Gender and socioeconomic status (SES) were controlled. SES was calculated as the aggregated score of parents' level of education as reported by students.

Results

As shown in Table 1, *t*-tests revealed no mean differences in ethnic identity and aggression at T1 and at T2. Nevertheless, our first hypothesis was confirmed, as we found negative associations at both T1 and T2 for the simple associations between

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations for ethnic identity and aggression.

	Mean	SD	t	p	1	2	3
1. Ethnic identity in T1	4.63	1.65	.29	.77			
2. Ethnic identity in T2	4.88	1.40			.33*		
3. Aggression in T1	−.05	.75	.21	.83	−.22*	−.27*	
4. Aggression in T2	−.08	.62			−.33*	−.52***	.38***

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.