



# Development of ethnic–racial identity among Latino adolescents and the role of family☆

Sara Douglass\*, Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor

Arizona State University, United States



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## ABSTRACT

The current study modeled the simultaneous development of ethnic–racial identity (ERI) exploration and resolution for Latino adolescents ( $n = 323$ ,  $M_{\text{age at T1}} = 15.31$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = .76$ ; 49.5% female) from 9th to 12th grade. Three theoretically supported ERI trajectories emerged, including (1) high and significantly increasing exploration and resolution (i.e., “Increasingly Achieved”), (2) low and stable exploration and resolution (i.e., “Consistently Diffused”), and (3) low exploration and moderate resolution that were both stable over time (i.e., “Consistently Foreclosed”). Increasingly achieved was the most common trajectory. High levels of family ethnic socialization promoted membership into this trajectory class (relative to others) most strongly. Implications for advancing understandings of ERI development and the role of family ethnic socialization among Latino youth, as well as the focus and timing of possible intervention efforts, are discussed.

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Adolescence is an active period of identity development as youth become increasingly aware of who they are and what their many identities mean to them (Erikson, 1968). For ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, one particularly salient aspect of their identity is their ethnic–racial identity (ERI; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Research has examined the development of ERI (e.g., Seaton, Yip, Morgan-Lopez, & Sellers, 2012; Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009) as well as myriad contexts and factors that influence ERI (e.g., Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010). However, research has largely neglected how ERI processes change simultaneously and continuously over time, taking into account the intersection of exploration and resolution development. Therefore, the current study examined ERI developmental trajectories of exploration and resolution in tandem, how these trajectories varied between individuals, and whether family ethnic socialization predicted developmental trajectory class membership. We focused on Latino youth, who make up 22% of the current U.S. population of youth, and are projected to be 39% of the U.S. youth population in 2050 (United States Census Bureau, 2008). Understanding how ERI development proceeds among this large and growing portion of the U.S. population is a critical foundational step in understanding how to promote positive identity formation, and in

turn help youth be better adjusted, healthier, and more successful in the classroom (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

## Development of ethnic–racial identity during adolescence

Psychosocial theory points to adolescence as a formative period of identity development in which individuals are struggling to assert and make a commitment to their identity (Erikson, 1968). Identity development is marked by two distinct yet related components of *exploration* and *resolution* (i.e., commitment; Marcia, 1966) in which individuals seek to explore their identity and gain a sense of clarity about it, respectively. Extensions of this theoretical foundation suggest that, for ethnic minorities, ERI is a salient aspect of one's global identity, and that adolescence is a critical period for ERI development because the social knowledge and cognitive abilities that enable engagement in these processes mature rapidly during this developmental period (Phinney, 1990; Quintana, 1994; Selman, 1980). Drawing from general psychosocial theory, the development of exploration and resolution has been detailed as stages that capture particular points in the process of identity formation (Marcia, 1966), which in turn have been applied to ERI (Phinney, 1989; see Fig. 1). These include the *diffused* stage, in which individuals have neither explored their ethnicity, nor feel like they know what it means to them; the *foreclosed* stage, in which individuals have not explored their ethnicity for themselves, but nonetheless feel like they know what it means to them; the *moratorium* stage, in which individuals are actively exploring their ethnicity but have not reached a sense of clarity about its meaning; and the *achieved* stage, in which individuals have both explored their ethnicity, and feel secure in its personal meaning. The stage model approach highlights that exploration and resolution are inherently related, and even when they do not develop in

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\* Corresponding author at: T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, United States.

E-mail address: sara.douglass@asu.edu (S. Douglass).

Resolution	Exploration	
	Low	High
	Low Diffused <sup>1</sup>	High Moratorium
	High Foreclosed <sup>1</sup>	Achieved

**Fig. 1.** A stage model of ethnic–racial identity based on Marcia (1966) as adapted by Phinney (1989). <sup>1</sup>Phinney (1989) was unable to reliably distinguish between these two stages.

parallel (e.g., high exploration coupled with low resolution), they must be considered simultaneously for a comprehensive understanding of identity (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004).

Taking a historical perspective, the field of ERI has moved away from examining composite measures that blurred these developmental components (e.g., combining exploration and resolution items for a single continuous scale score). For example, Huang and Stormshak (2011) found that, among a diverse sample of adolescents, there was significant variability in ERI such that some youth showed growth, others showed decline, and yet others remained stable. Among a Mexican–American sample of male adolescents, Knight and colleagues found that there were mean-level differences among youth in terms of how high, low, or moderate ethnic-identity was across late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Knight, Losoya, Cho, Williams, & Cota-Robles, 2012). However, because these studies used a composite measure of ERI, it is unclear whether these patterns were masking potential differences between changes for exploration and resolution. Given this inability to distinguish between the developmental components, the field has moved toward examining them separately (e.g., testing exploration and resolution as individual predictors; Schwartz et al., 2014). Although examining them separately has helped to increase clarity and specificity in understanding what each component means for individuals, this approach does not capture those aspects of theory that point to their intersection as critical, as reviewed above (Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 1989). Indeed, it is necessary to consider exploration and resolution as independent but co-occurring components of ERI.

Consistent with this approach, previous research has examined typologies of identity that address the intersection of exploration and resolution through cluster-based approaches (Syed, Azmitia, & Phinney, 2007; Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006; Seaton et al., 2012; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2010). By considering relative levels of exploration and resolution at a given point in time, this research empirically validated the presence of identity statuses supported by foundational psychosocial theory (i.e., diffused, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved; Seaton et al., 2006; Seaton et al., 2012; Yip et al., 2010), and Phinney's (1989) initial application of the psychosocial model to ethnic identity (i.e., unexamined, moratorium, and achieved; Syed et al., 2007). Further, this research provided critical insight into how ERI development proceeds by examining transitions between typologies of ERI (e.g., movement from a moratorium to achieved status). Overall, these typology approaches are consistent with conceptualizations of exploration and resolution as dimensions of a larger construct, and this research has significantly advanced our understanding of the complexity of ERI development.

Despite the significant contributions of this research, however, there are a number of limitations to typology approaches for understanding ERI development. Although identifying statuses at different points in time enables an understanding of how exploration and resolution co-occur, such an approach captures *discontinuous* change in ERI development by examining the transition between statuses at one point in time and a subsequent point in time. That is, examining transitions between static typologies does not capture the developmental processes taking place during the time of the transition. Further, with the notable exception of Syed et al. (2007), this research has been conducted almost exclusively with African American samples. The cumulative consequence of these limitations is that there is limited knowledge of how exploration and resolution change in tandem among Latino adolescents. The current study extends prior work by examining simultaneous trajectories of ERI exploration and resolution, thereby capturing

typologies of identity as they occur continuously over time among Latino adolescents.

ERI is recognized as a normative developmental process (Umaña-Taylor, O'Donnell, et al., 2014; Williams, Tolan, Durkee, Francois, & Anderson, 2012), and is salient among Latino youth as members of an ethnic–racial minority group in the U.S. (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The salience of this social identity is expected to spur engagement in ERI developmental processes (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). However, Latino youth are not just members of an ethnic–racial minority group; they are members of a group that brings varying cultural values and heritages that inform their sense of self and everyday practices (Berry, 1997; Hughes et al., 2006). For example, research has long examined values of familism and cultural orientations toward collectivism as developmental assets within Latino populations (e.g., Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2002). Furthermore, Latino youth are situated in a particular sociohistorical context that may make their experiences of ERI different from that of their peers who are members of other ethnic–racial minority groups (Pahl & Way, 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). For instance, challenges related to immigration and the unique context of reception for Latino immigrants in the U.S. may modify their ERI formation process. Marginalization also is a challenge for Latinos, and can include sweeping generalizations, stereotyping, and discrimination of members of this pan-ethnic group based on assumptions about nativity, legal immigration status, and language ability, among other factors (e.g., Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Smokowski et al., 2010). As such, it is necessary to examine ERI development among this ethnic–racial group in particular, and examine whether findings that have emerged with other non-Latino ethnic minority groups generalize to Latinos. At the same time, it is important to recognize the diversity within this pan-ethnic group. In the current study, we consider how the processes of family ethnic socialization are related to ERI development among Latinos, taking into consideration within group variability in (a) how family ethnic socialization is related to ERI development, and (b) trajectories of ERI development.

### Individual differences in ethnic–racial identity development during adolescence

Though theory suggests that development of ERI generally moves from an unexamined identity toward engagement with and clarity about one's ethnicity (i.e., toward achievement), movement through stages is not always expected to occur in a linear fashion (Phinney, 1989; Waterman, 1999). Empirical evidence has supported the notion that ERI development is progressive; studies examining exploration and resolution independently indicate that, on average, both components increase with age (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2009). However, findings also suggest that identity development is not uniform during adolescence (Waterman, 1999), and that there is significant between-person variability in how (and if) components of ERI change during adolescence (Pahl & Way, 2006). Indeed, typology approaches have shown that there are many different patterns of ERI development; although some individuals progress to an achieved status over time in a manner consistent with ERI theory, others remain stable (i.e., do not change over time) or show regressive patterns from statuses conceptualized as more advanced to less advanced (e.g., achieved to moratorium; Syed et al., 2007; Seaton et al., 2006; Seaton et al., 2012; Yip et al., 2010). This variability between people calls for the need to consider individual differences in development. Therefore, the current study considers potential heterogeneity across individuals (i.e., between-person differences) in trajectories of ERI exploration and resolution among Latino adolescents. Consistent with previous research, we expected to find growth, decline, and lack of change for exploration and resolution alike. We extended previous work, however, by (a) identifying common patterns of co-occurring continuous change in exploration and resolution from 9th to 12th grade among Latino adolescents, and (b) identifying the prevalence of these different continuous patterns.

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