



## Relationship-specific variability in adolescents' ethnic self-labeling preferences



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### ABSTRACT

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Consistency between adolescents' best-fitting ethnic label and the labels uses in three different relationship contexts was compared and linked to adjustment among 154 9th–10th graders (50% 9th; 56% female) of Asian descent. Results indicated that 57%, 61%, and 63% of adolescents reported best-fitting labels that were inconsistent with the labels they would use with Asian, non-Asian minority, and European American peers, respectively, and only 25% reported using the same label across all four situations. Inconsistency was not associated with gender or generation, but was linked with higher perceived discrimination. Despite its prevalence, there were few adjustment differences based on labeling inconsistency. One exception was that adolescents who reported inconsistency between best-fitting labels and labels used with non-Asian minority peers reported more negative emotions than those with concordant labels. Results and discussion highlight the need to continue investigating the contextual fluidity of ethnic labels, including predictors and developmental and cultural implications.

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Ethnic identity is theoretically a dynamic, social construction (Gee, 2000; Phinney, 2003), with a presumed malleable orientation that can protectively adapt to different contexts and social situations (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Despite its theoretical fluidity, ethnic identity tends to be measured and treated like a relatively stable trait. However, recent approaches have attempted to use more flexible operationalization strategies to capture its situational variability.

In line with contemporary models that specifically highlight the idea that some dimensions of identity can vary from situation to situation (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), recent research has determined that ethnic identity (e.g., salience) can fluctuate across different contexts (Yip, 2005). For instance, using daily diary methods, “feeling Chinese” was found to vary on a day to day level and as a function of adolescents' interactions with peers and participation in cultural activities (Yip & Fuligni, 2002). Using more traditional survey measures, Kiang and Fuligni (2009) found that ethnic identity, as assessed through standard subscales of ethnic affirmation and exploration, significantly varied across relationships when adolescents reported on their feelings of identification with their same-ethnic and different-ethnic peers. Similarly, Kiang, Harter, and Whitesell (2006) focused on how ethnic identity is expressed when individuals are in different social contexts and derived distinct, data-driven models of identity among parents, Asian peers, and European American peers.

Collectively, such emerging work provides some empirical evidence in support of ethnic identity's situational and contextual variation. The goal of the current research was to extend this literature even further by examining whether the

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basic ethnic labels that adolescents use to define themselves change dynamically as a function of relationship context, possible factors that might be related to such variation, and what, if any, well-being and adjustment implications are associated with such relational differentiation in ethnic labeling preferences.

### Relational differences in ethnic labeling

Ethnic labels represent one of the most rudimentary, yet highly meaningful, indicators of identity. Fundamentally, ethnic identity formation requires adolescents to consider different labeling options (Fuligni, Witkow & Garcia, 2005; Kiang, 2008) and, when deciding on the one that best defines them, many variations abound. For instance, adolescents from Asian American backgrounds may strategically choose a panethnic label (e.g., Asian), perhaps to self-align with a numerical majority and to acknowledge commonalities with a broad cultural group (Kibria, 2000; Okamoto, 2006). In contrast, they may choose instead to identify more specifically with a heritage label (e.g., Chinese, Thai, Hmong) to pay a targeted homage to their ethnic or cultural group. In conjunction with these panethnic or heritage labels, youth may choose to attach the term “American” (e.g., Chinese American) or drop the ethnic terms altogether and identify solely as an American.

Although research has yet to systematically uncover the mechanisms behind such individual differences in labeling preferences, some work suggests that demographic factors including language proficiency and generational status might play a role. For instance, decreases in heritage language proficiency over time has been found to predict a greater tendency for Latino and Asian adolescents to add the term “American” to their ethnic labels (Fuligni, Witkow, Kiang & Baldelomar, 2008). Similarly, among Chinese American adolescents and adults, English language proficiency as well as second-generation status have been linked to a greater likelihood of using panethnic and hyphenated American labels (Kiang, 2008). Labeling preferences could also reflect adolescents’ acculturation status, with the use of hyphenated American labels potentially signifying a bicultural acculturation status and comfort with both ethnic and mainstream cultures (Berry, 2003). Broader contextual factors might also come into play. For instance, Kiang, Ferreira and Fuligni (2011) found that Latino and Asian adolescents residing in North Carolina used the term “American” less and tended to choose more heritage labels compared to their counterparts residing in California, and these geographic differences were, in part, explained by group differences in generational status and language proficiency.

Given such variability in ethnic labeling options, it appears deceptively straightforward to ask adolescents to report on their self-preferred or best-fitting ethnic label. Moreover, going beyond geographical differences as found by Kiang et al. (2011), responses might become increasingly complex considering that specific contexts and social relationships can shape the way one defines oneself (Wang & Ollendick, 2001). Indeed, at the daily level, one’s ethnic identity is relevant to culturally-relevant interactions, and well as more normative, everyday experiences (Cross & Strauss, 1998). Drawing on a bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), adolescents must often interact with diverse groups of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Due to the salience of ethnicity, their cultural background and ancestry might be inquired about or naturally disclosed in everyday social interactions and conversations. Do the ethnic labels that adolescents use to describe themselves change depending on who they are interacting with?

Perhaps adolescents from Asian American backgrounds are most likely to disclose their ethnic heritage when they are with other Asian peers in an effort to either differentiate themselves from their peers or to establish a more specific affiliation. In contrast, when interacting with different-ethnic peers (e.g., European Americans and non-Asian minorities), adolescents may be more motivated to emphasize their broader Asian identification. Alternatively, it is possible that Asian American youth would use an American label to highlight their American identification to emphasize their similarity with the mainstream. All or some of these options might then deviate from the ethnic label that adolescents generally prefer to use, more personally speaking, and regardless of who they are interacting with. Although these specific expectations are speculative, we generally hypothesized that most adolescents would clearly differentiate across their social relationships and report using different ethnic labels depending on context and in comparison to their chosen best-fitting ethnic label. We focused on three primary social relationship contexts in the current study, namely, adolescents’ Asian peers, European American peers, and non-Asian ethnic minority peers.

### *Liabilities of a differentiated, relational identity*

Understanding whether adolescents prefer certain ethnic labels over others in different social interactions is not only a key developmental issue but is also significant given that the differential use of ethnic labels can have implications for adjustment and social relationships. For instance, qualitative work with Latino youth suggests that ethnic label use is tied to ethnic identity and is driven by parent and peer influences (Malott, Alessandria, Kirkpatrick & Carandang, 2009). Among a sample of Chinese American adults, Kiang (2008) found that those who used specific ethnic heritage labels along with an American label reported significantly higher self-esteem and more positive relationships with Asian peers compared to their counterparts who preferred broader panethnic labels. The current study builds on existing work by examining adolescents’ ethnic self-labeling preferences, but within the context of multiple peer relationships. More specifically, we uniquely examined whether there are repercussions for well-being related to relational consistency or differentiation in ethnic labeling preferences. That is, do adolescents who consistently define themselves the same way across different social relationships report higher or lower adjustment compared to those who report using different ethnic labels as a function of who they are interacting with? Given that we, as social beings, interact with a variety of people with similar and different ethnic

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