



Ethnic identity development and ethnic discrimination: Examining longitudinal associations with adjustment for Mexican-origin adolescent mothers



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A B S T R A C T

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Few studies examine normative developmental processes among teenage mothers. Framed from a risk and resilience perspective, this prospective study examined the potential for ethnic identity status (e.g., diffuse, achieved), a normative developmental task during adolescence, to buffer the detrimental effects of discrimination on later adjustment and self-esteem in a sample of 204 Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. Ethnic discrimination was associated with increases in depressive symptoms and decreases in self-esteem over time, regardless of ethnic identity status. However, ethnic discrimination was only associated with increases in engagement in risky behavior among diffuse adolescents, suggesting that achieved or foreclosed identities buffered the risk of ethnic discrimination on later risky behavior. Findings suggest that ethnic identity resolution (i.e., the component shared by those in foreclosed and achieved statuses) may be a key cultural factor to include in prevention and intervention efforts aimed to reduce the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on later externalizing problems.

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Mexican-origin⁴ females experience disparate rates of poor mental health (Anderson & Mayes, 2010), are more likely to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., illicit drug and alcohol use, physical fights; CDC, 2007), and have the highest teenage pregnancy birthrate of all ethnic groups in the U.S. (88.7 per 1000 births; CDC, 2011). Further, Mexican-origin adolescent mothers experience heightened risk of poverty (Berry, Shillington, Peak, & Hohman, 2000), which has been linked to adverse psychosocial well-being (e.g., Kurtz & Derevensky, 1994). From a risk and resilience perspective (e.g., Rutter, 1987), these disparities warrant attention to the processes and factors that may place these young women at risk, in addition to the potential protective factors that may ameliorate stress and enhance well-being.

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⁴ The term “Mexican-origin” is used to describe the country of origin and/or ancestry of the adolescent participants.

In addition to undergoing the non-normative transition to parenthood during adolescence, teenage mothers are also negotiating normative developmentally driven processes that become increasingly salient during adolescence, such as identity formation. The integration of normative developmental processes (e.g., focusing on risk and/or protective factors and processes) within the study of a high-risk population, such as Mexican-origin adolescent mothers, will allow for a more holistic understanding of their lives, including appropriate ways to build on normative developmental strengths and prevent negative outcomes that stem from risk. Guided by the risk and resilience perspective (Rutter, 1987), this study examined ethnic discrimination as one culturally-salient explanation for the disparate rates of health and well-being experienced by Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. Although discrimination is just one of many risk factors and cultural stressors that contribute to negative outcomes, it is a pervasive occurrence among Latinos in the U.S. (e.g., Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Pérez, Fortuna, & Alegria, 2008; Romero & Roberts, 2003a) and has been linked to numerous negative outcomes (e.g., Flores, Tschann, Dimas, Pasch, & de Groat, 2010; Romero & Roberts, 2003a; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007).

Given the negative consequences of discrimination for Mexican-origin adolescents, identifying potential buffers of this risk is critical from a risk and resilience perspective (e.g., Rutter, 1987). Ethnic identity is one culturally salient and developmentally relevant factor that may buffer the risk of ethnic discrimination on well-being and self-esteem (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Research with samples of Mexican-origin youth has documented that ethnic identity can buffer the negative effects of discrimination on well-being (e.g., Greene et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Wong, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2012); however, this work has only examined ethnic identity *affirmation* (i.e., positive/negative feelings about one's ethnicity) and has not examined the buffering potential of ethnic identity *exploration* (i.e., seeking information and knowledge about one's ethnic group) or ethnic identity *resolution* (i.e., one's confidence about the feeling one has about one's ethnic identity). These normative developmental features of ethnic identity are particularly salient during adolescence, especially among Latina adolescents (Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009). Further, to date, we are not aware of any study that has examined the interaction between ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity statuses (i.e., diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, achieved; Phinney, 1993) within a high-risk sample, such as adolescent mothers.

This study sought to expand upon previous research via two main goals. First, we examined whether ethnic discrimination was prospectively associated with adjustment problems among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers. Second, we examined ethnic identity status as a potential buffer of the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on later depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and engagement in risky behaviors.

Ethnic identity as a buffer

Adolescence marks a critical point for identity development (Erikson, 1968), particularly because youth are increasingly able to think about abstract concepts due to significant cognitive maturity that occurs in this developmental period. For ethnic minority youth, normative development also involves culturally salient issues such as ethnic identity development (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gomez, 2004). Building on theoretical work on identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) and Phinney's (1989) early work on ethnic identity, individuals' ethnic identity can be conceptualized as fitting into one of four identity statuses by examining the individual's degree of exploration and resolution: diffuse, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved. Individuals characterized as having a diffuse ethnic identity report low exploration and low resolution, whereas those characterized as foreclosed report low exploration and high resolution. Additionally, individuals who report high exploration and low resolution are characterized as in moratorium, whereas those who report high exploration and resolution are characterized as achieved. Theoretical notions of identity and empirical research do suggest that exploration without commitment (i.e., moratorium status) is normative during middle to late adolescence (e.g., Quintana, 2007), and that a diffuse status is normative in early adolescence. The linear nature of this conceptualization has been criticized given that research has found that individuals may depart from the linear sequence (e.g., Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006). Nonetheless, given that there appears to be individual and developmental differences in how adolescents develop their ethnic identities, it is important to understand the impact of ethnic identity exploration and resolution in a more nuanced way, such as examining how the combination of one's levels of exploration and resolution inform adjustment.

Indeed, researchers have found mean level differences in adjustment based on ethnic identity status groups. For instance, one study found that African American adolescents (aged 11–17 years) with achieved ethnic identities reported better psychological adjustment compared to those in other statuses and that youth with foreclosed identities reported better adjustment compared to diffuse youth (e.g., Seaton et al., 2006). Similarly, research with Navajo adolescents found that achieved youth reported higher self-esteem and social functioning than youth who were categorized in diffuse, moratorium, or foreclosed statuses (Jones & Galliher, 2007). Nonetheless, these studies have only examined ethnic identity status as a promotive factor of healthy adjustment whereas the current study examines ethnic identity status as a protective factor that may disrupt the link between ethnic discrimination and later adjustment. That is, it may be the case that one's ethnic identity status may interact with experiences of discrimination in a way that produces more positive adjustment in the context of risk (e.g., a protective effect). This may be the case because adolescents who have explored and come to resolution about their ethnic identities (i.e., achieved youth) may feel more confident and secure about their ethnic identity, which may in turn aid in the buffering of stress related to their ethnicity. Further, those who have not explored or come to a resolution about their ethnic identities (i.e., diffuse youth) may have fewer cultural resources to draw upon during stressful events related to their ethnicity, which may enhance the association between discrimination and adjustment.

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