



## Examining the role of physical appearance in Latino adolescents' ethnic identity

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### ABSTRACT

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Guided by ecological theory, the current study examined physical appearance as a moderator of the relation between familial ethnic socialization (FES) and ethnic identity among 167 Latino adolescents. Results indicated that FES was positively associated with ethnic identity exploration and resolution. Furthermore, as expected, physical appearance moderated the relation between FES and ethnic identity affirmation such that this relation was positive among adolescents who were rated as having a more Latino appearance, a less European appearance, and darker skin, and it was non-significant among adolescents with a less Latino appearance, a more European appearance, and lighter skin. Findings underscore the importance of considering within-group variation when studying ethnic identity. In addition, this study highlights the importance of examining ethnic identity as a multidimensional construct.

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During adolescence, a stable self-concept emerges in which one develops a subjective view of one's identity that recognizes that one is different and autonomous from others (Erikson, 1968). One aspect of identity that has been found to be particularly salient among ethnic minority adolescents is ethnic identity (Branch, 2001; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). As a result, researchers have stressed the role that ethnic identity may play in the psychological well-being of ethnic minority adolescents, particularly as a source of strength and resilience for ethnic minority youth (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006). As such, it is important to examine the predictors of ethnic identity so that we may uncover avenues through which to promote this important developmental process. Furthermore, scholars have called for studies that account for the context in which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) and, specifically, that examine how the diversity that exists within ethnic minority populations is associated with individuals' developmental outcomes (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Among Latinos, the largest pan-ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2008), within-group variability is salient and important to assess due to the considerable heterogeneity that characterizes this group with respect to factors such as national origin, socioeconomic status (SES), and race (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001). Thus, guided by ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), the current study examined the relation between familial ethnic socialization (FES) and ethnic identity among Latino adolescents, with a specific focus on how this relation may be moderated by one critical aspect of within-group diversity: physical appearance. We begin, below, with a general discussion of the construct of ethnic identity.

### Latino adolescents' ethnic identity

Ethnic identity is particularly salient for ethnic minorities in the United States (Branch, 2001; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996), of which Latinos make up a large percentage (U.S. Census, 2008). In fact, Latinos are currently the fastest growing ethnic group in

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the United States (U.S. Census, 2008) and are a relatively young population, with 36% being 17 years old or younger (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). Because Latino adolescents comprise a large portion of a rapidly growing ethnic group, their developmental outcomes can drastically shape the social and economic future of the U.S. It is important, therefore, that researchers examine the normative development of Latino adolescents and factors that promote positive psychological well-being, including ethnic identity, among this group.

Ethnic identity is a self-constructed idea of what membership in an ethnic group means to the individual (Phinney, 1989; Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004), and is comprised of three components: exploration, resolution, and affirmation. Ethnic identity exploration involves adolescents exploring their ethnic group. For example, adolescents may explore their ethnic identity by seeking out information through books, the internet, or participation in clubs and classes focused on ethnicity. A second component of ethnic identity is resolution, which is characterized by a clear concept of what one's membership in an ethnic group means to his or her global identity. The process of ethnic identity exploration may aid in the formation of ethnic identity resolution, though individuals may achieve ethnic identity resolution without the process of exploration (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Thus, exploration and resolution represent separate dimensions of ethnic identity that are developmental in nature and may develop simultaneously yet independently from one another, rather than stages in which one is a prerequisite of the other. In addition, unlike the previously examined construct of commitment (Phinney, 1989), resolution does not imply that individuals feel positively about their ethnicity. With the current conceptualization, positive feelings toward ethnicity are assessed via the construct of ethnic identity affirmation. Thus, affirmation is separate from the developmental process of ethnic identity formation (i.e., exploration and resolution) and does not dictate whether an individual is considered to have a resolved ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) posits that development occurs within multiple ecological contexts (e.g., familial). Individuals have a reciprocal relationship with these contexts such that development is impacted by the contexts in which their lives are embedded, and these contexts also are shaped by individuals' characteristics; thus, a bidirectional relationship is theorized between contextual factors and individual characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Therefore, it follows that individuals' ethnic identity may be informed by ecological factors such as FES, individual characteristics such as physical appearance, and the *interaction* of these ecological factors and individual characteristics. Erikson's (1968) seminal work on identity, which noted that environments influence identity development, complements this notion. Furthermore, building on Erikson's work, Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, and Orlofsky (1993) specifically emphasized the role of the familial context in informing adolescents' identity formation. Specifically, adolescents who have successful models and psychological support from their families may have more opportunities to explore their identities and may have less difficulty forming a clear understanding of their identity. Thus, an examination of the familial context is critical for understanding adolescents' identity formation. In particular, understanding how characteristics of the familial context interact with adolescents' individual characteristics to inform identity development is an important area of study. In the sections that follow, we (a) elaborate on the notion that families play a central role in adolescents' ethnic identity and (b) introduce the notion that, among Latino adolescents, it also is critical to empirically examine how within-group differences such as physical appearance may moderate the association between FES and adolescents' ethnic identity.

### **FES as a predictor of ethnic identity**

Supporting notions from ecological theory, existing work suggests that contextual factors such as ethnic socialization processes within the family are significantly associated with ethnic identity. For example, Umaña-Taylor and Fine (2004) found that as Latino adolescents reported higher levels of FES, they also tended to report higher levels of ethnic identity achievement. Similarly, FES has been empirically linked to ethnic recognition among Mexican American children (Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993) and to ethnic identity via ethnic behaviors among Armenian American, Vietnamese American, and Mexican American adolescents (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001).

Recently, researchers have moved toward a multidimensional conceptualization of ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Although studies that have used a composite score of ethnic identity have found an association between FES and ethnic identity, studies examining separate components of ethnic identity have found differences in the relations between FES and each ethnic identity component. For instance, ethnic identity exploration and resolution were each positively related to FES in two separate studies (i.e., Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Conversely, neither study found an association between FES and affirmation. A possible explanation for the non-significant relation between FES and affirmation could be that important variability is being overlooked such that FES is significantly related to affirmation but only for a subgroup of Latino adolescents. Unfortunately, when variability within Latinos is examined, it is often treated as a control variable, rather than as a moderator that could explain differences in ethnic identity processes. This is a particular problem when studying developmental processes among Latinos because of the numerous demographic characteristics within this ethnic group that are assumed to contextualize development and vary considerably across group members (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). One individual characteristic that is a source of within-group variability among Latinos is physical appearance because Latinos, as a whole, represent a variety of racial origins (Sullivan, 2000). As such, the current study examined physical appearance as a possible moderator of the relation between FES and ethnic identity affirmation.

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