UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC-RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Fact sheet created by: Gabe Murchison

Key Terms

Race

A system where people are **categorized by appearance** (including skin color), often to justify differences in power and privilege.

Ethnicity

Includes the **languages, values, beliefs, and traditions** to which people are connected through their ancestry, nationality, and/or family.

Ethnic-racial identification

How someone **labels** their race and/or ethnicity. Examples: Latinx, Vietnamese, White, or Navajo.

Ethnic-racial identity

A person's **thoughts and feelings** about their race and ethnicity and the **process** of developing those thoughts and feelings.

Dimensions of Ethnic-Racial Identity

Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is **multidimensional** [1], meaning it includes several related concepts (dimensions). Each dimension is related to either ERI content (thoughts and feelings) or the ERI development process [1].

Content Dimensions

The content of someone's ERI could include: [1]
- **Affirmation:** How good or bad someone feels about being part of their ethnic/racial group(s)
- **Public regard:** How positively someone believes other people view their ethnic/racial group(s)
- **Centrality:** How important someone feels their race/ethnicity is to their whole identity
- **Salience:** How important someone feels their race/ethnicity is in a particular situation

Why does content matter?

ERI **affirmation** is believed to be especially important because positive feelings about being part of an ethnic/racial group help youth feel good about themselves. These feelings are thought to be **protective** against the effects of negative stereotypes and discrimination [2], so they may be especially (though not exclusively) important for youth of color.

The idea that ERI content (especially affirmation) is important is based on Henri Tajfel's **Social Identity Theory** [3], which argues that feeling good about the groups one belongs to is an important way of feeling good about oneself [2,3] and counteracts negative treatment by other groups.
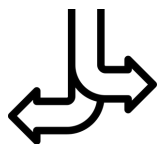
Process Dimensions

- Many people engage in **exploration** of their ERI. This might include cultural activities, learning more about their background, or discussing race and ethnicity with others.
- People also differ in how certain they feel about what their ethnic-racial identity means to them. This certainty is known as **resolution**.
- The ERI development process can be measured in terms of these two dimensions [4].

Why does process matter?

Exploring and resolving one's ERI can give young people more self-confidence. This process is thought to be **universal,** meaning it is relevant regardless of one's ethnic or racial background [5]. It is also **promotive** [2], meaning that it is helpful regardless of whether youth experience adversity.

Research on the ERI development process builds on research by Jean Phinney. Phinney's work **emphasizes adolescence** as an important stage for ERI, both because younger children lack the cognitive abilities to truly explore their ERI and because adolescents are often exposed to more diverse environments, making them more aware of their own race and ethnicity [6].

Promoting ERI development in schools

Modeling Openness

- Acknowledging students' positive and negative experiences with race and ethnicity supports identity development and student-teacher relationships.
- Some educators find it helpful to practice these conversations in affinity groups, such as a race/ethnicity discussion group for White educators.

Does promoting ethnic-racial identity harm relationships with other groups?
For youth of color, research indicates that it doesn't! [8] But identifying more strongly as White is linked to more avoidance of people of color [8]—so it is important for White youth to explore their identities in a context that emphasizes diversity and tolerance.

Affinity Groups

- Affinity groups give students an opportunity to discuss race and ethnicity with others who share similar experiences.
- Some schools offer an affinity group for White students, focused on understanding White privilege and developing positive, anti-racist White identities.
- Groups for older students may be youth-led, with support from an adult advisor, and may engage in advocacy and activism as well as social support.

Formal Curricula

- In a randomized, controlled trial, participating in the Identity Project, an ethnic-racial identity curriculum, resulted in higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, and better academic performance among 9th-graders of various ethnicities [5].
- The curriculum, designed by experts in adolescent ethnic-racial identity development, is appropriate for both White youth and youth of color, and encourages youth to share their cultures with their peers.

Benefits

For adolescents and young adults, ERI affirmation (positive feelings), and/or the process of exploring and resolving one's ERI, are associated with...[3,7]

- Lower levels of depressive symptoms
- Fewer health risk behaviors
- Higher self-esteem
- More positive academic outcomes and attitudes
- Better social functioning

Key Takeaways

- All youth (including White youth) have an ethnic-racial identity and can benefit from exploring it.
- Positive feelings about one's race and ethnicity are important, but so is the process of exploring and coming to conclusions about that identity.
- Educators can foster ethnic-racial identity development by creating formal and informal opportunities to discuss students' experiences with race and ethnicity.

Further reading

- **For more information on ethnic-racial identity in specific groups, such as multiracial youth,** see Giraud, M., & Grant-Thomas, A. (2017, June 1). Understanding Racial-Ethnic Identity Development. [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.embracerace.org/blog/recording-and-resources-understanding-racial-ethnic-identity-development
- **For advice on addressing race and ethnicity in schools that are mostly or entirely White,** see National Association for Multicultural Education (n.d.). *Relevant in an All-White School?* Retrieved from https://www.nameorg.org/learn/relevant_in_an_all-white_schoo.php
- **For more information about affinity groups in K-12 schools**, see Parsons, J., & Ridley, K. (2012, Winter). Identity, affinity, reality. *Independent School.* Retrieved from https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/winter-2012/identity,-affinity,-reality/
- **For guidance on building skills to discuss race with students, particularly for White teachers,** see Watson, A. (2017, March 19). 10 things every white teacher should know when talking about race. [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race/
- **To learn more about the Identity Project,** see Shafer, L. (2018, February 23). Exploring ethnic-racial identity. [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/02/exploring-ethnic-racial-identity

References

[1] Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Quintana, S. M., Lee, R. M., Cross, W. E., Rivas-Drake, D., Schwartz, S. J., . . . Seaton, E. (2014). Ethnic and racial identity during adolescence and into young adulthood: an integrated conceptualization. Child Development, 85(1), 21-39.

[2] Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2016). Ethnic-racial identity: conceptualization, development, and youth adjustment. In L. Balter & C. S. Tamis-Lemonda (Eds.), Child Psychology: A Handbook of Contemporary Issues (pp. 305-327). London: Taylor & Francis.

[3] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), Psychology of intergroup relations (2nd ed., pp. 7-24). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

[4] Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Yazedjian, A., & Bámaca-Gómez, M. (2004). Developing the ethnic identity scale using Eriksonian and social identity perspectives. Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 4(1), 9-38.

[5] Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Douglass, S., Updegraff, K. A., & Marsiglia, F. F. (2018). A small-scale randomized efficacy trial of the Identity Project: promoting adolescents' ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution. Child Development, 89(3), 862-870. doi:10.1111/cdev.12755

[6] Phinney, J. S. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity development in minority group adolescents. The Journal of Early Adolescence, 9(1-2), 34-49.

[7] Rivas-Drake, D., Syed, M., Umaña-Taylor, A., Markstrom, C., French, S., Schwartz, S. J., & Lee, R. (2014). Feeling good, happy, and proud: a meta-analysis of positive ethnic–racial affect and adjustment. Child Development, 85(1), 77-102.

[8] Wantchekon, K.A., Umaña-Taylor, A.J., McDermott, E.R., Rivas-Drake, D., Medina, A.C. Comparing relations of ethnic-racial public regard, centrality, and other group orientation among diverse adolescents. (in progress).
Graphics: Flaticon.com. Used under license.