Family Matters: The Implications of Family Support on Multiracial Identity

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Abstract

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, family has some of the greatest impacts on how children develop. Recent research has suggested that resilience mitigates multiracial adolescents' struggle to develop ethnic identity continuity (Kramer, Burke, & Charles, 2015), while alternative evidence supports that multiracial individuals experience maladaptive psychosocial functioning due to ethnic identity confusion (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Although research has investigated ethnic and racial identity development in minority groups, few studies have focused on the interaction between multiracial identity and personal identity development. The present study seeks to determine how the strength of family support interacts with identity exploration in multiracial individuals during emerging adulthood. Self-report questionnaires were distributed to Psychology students from a public university in a metropolitan city in the Pacific Northwest. Additional participants were collected from the general public via social media and through Amazon Mechanical Turk. It is crucial to the development of future generations of multiracial adolescents that their experience is understood so that psychologists, doctors, and community workers may have a better understanding of individual differences. Keywords: multiracial identity, personal identity, identity confusion, family support, emerging adulthood

Adolescence is a time of great personal tension. It is a stage of development when people experience overwhelming amounts of emotions, some of which may oftentimes feel conflicting. The years between adolescence and adulthood, referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), are also a time of identity exploration when teenagers and young adults test their personal boundaries mentally, physically, and socially (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). For multiracial adolescents in the United States, this exploration may also include understanding their own ethnic and racial identity (ERI).

Erikson's (1968) fundamental works on identity theory describe adolescence and emerging adulthood as critical periods when personal identity development is paramount. James Marcia (1966) pioneered a model of identity development explaining that during adolescence, young adults occupy one of four stages. These stages describe how salient, secure, and committed an individual feels in their personal identity after exploration. Marcia (1966) posits that identity can be broken down into four specific types dependent upon whether or not exploration is pursued and whether the individual is committed or uncommitted to a specific identity (e.g., music taste, gender, SES, etc.). These types are defined as *identity achievement, identity moratorium, identity foreclosure,* and *identity diffusion* (see Table 1). Likewise, these concepts were further considered to address similar stages in ERI development (Phinney, 1989; Rockquemore, 1998).

Table 1.Marcia's Identity Status Theory

Commitment

	Present	Absent
Present	Achievement	Moratorium
Absent	Foreclosure	Diffusion

Exploration (row label, left side)

While adolescent identity largely focuses on the individual's perceived place in the world, a growing body of literature has begun to focus on the development of identity specific to race and ethnicity. The 2000 U.S. Census introduced a revised answering system for racial identification (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010); it was the first year where respondents could identify as more than one race. As a result, the 2010 Census documented a 32% rise in the "Two or More Races" category from the 2000 survey. Over the last decade, many have attempted to discern how and what unique experiences in development affect minority individuals, and the literature on ERI is currently inconclusive.

The rise in documentation of the multiracial population has served to motivate further research on racial differences and well-being (Bracey et al., 2004; Coleman & Carter, 2007; Kramer et al., 2015; Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, & Austin, 2010). Such research is conflicting in that some have found positive outcomes to a multiracial status in relation to resilience and well-being (Kramer et al., 2015; Lusk et al., 2010), whereas other researchers point to negative well-being for individuals identifying as multiracial (Bracey et al., 2004; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Additionally, a large quantity of literature has focused on defining variations of stability in racial identity for multiracial or biracial individuals (Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; Rockquemore, 1998). Very little research, however, has connected racial identity with personal identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2008) and even fewer studies have addressed family influences on that interaction (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Zeiders, & Updegraff, 2013). Culture plays a central role in how a person develops, and it is imperative that we understand these differences.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, individuals exist in a social sphere where every level of this environment affects individual development. The importance of family and peers as developmental influencers is explained by the ecological systems theory in the participation of these agents in the individual's microsystem. This is made evident in situations where young adults come to the realization that they are not so different from the world around them, especially their own parents, as they are often raised in the same area in which their parents grew up. In most cases, how parents raise and socialize their children has an immense influence on a child's immediate and subsequent development. Furthermore, previous research on ethnic-racial socialization identifies how parenting practices in early development directly impact the child's framework in long-term outcomes (Hughes et al., 2006, Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Umaña-Taylor et. al., 2013). The ethnic-racial socialization experienced in childhood has been shown to affect later-in-life concepts such as self-esteem, academic achievement beliefs, and coping mechanisms for dealing with discrimination and prejudice (Phinney & Chaviera, 1995; Scott, 2003; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Hughes et al. (2006) note that most research in these practices have focused on monoracial individuals as well as specific ethnic groups.

The present study seeks to determine how the strength of family support influences identity exploration and well-being in multiracial individuals through emerging adulthood. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) identifies family and peers as influential pieces of an individual's microsystem; therefore, the current study assumes the amount of time spent with family members during development will have a greater influence on an individual than time spent with peers. Likewise, the conflicting nature of more recent literature fails to address the extent to which these microsystem agents (family and friends) aid or hinder the identity development and psychological well-being of individuals from multiracial backgrounds. The following hypotheses were addressed as a means to explore the complexity of multiracial identity development:

H_1: Individuals with lower scores of family attachment will reflect lower scores in identity. Likewise, those with low family attachment will also have low well-being scores.

H$_2$: Multiracial individuals will experience more personal identity confusion, evidenced in low identity scores, than will monoracial individuals.

H$_3$: Multiracial individuals will report lower identity scores when their families are unsupportive in their identity exploration than when families are supportive.

As the multiracial population continues to rise, it is important to illuminate differences in development so that mutual understanding can be achieved. It is the hope of this researcher to explore an underrepresented aspect of potential conflict experienced by multiracial adolescents as such research may reveal information vital to the development of healthy individuals, sound families, and functional communities.

Method

Participants

A total of 286 participants completed an online survey, and 76 responses were eliminated due to incomplete or insufficient content. Of the 210 remaining respondents, 55% identified as "White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; not Hispanic" (*n* = 115) while 42.2% identified as having a minority ethnic background. Sixty-four percent of the sample identified their sex as female and 36% were male. The most common age of the participants was 19 years in a sample containing ages ranging from 18–69 years old. Due to the large age range, an analysis of variance was conducted to control for age within the findings and no significant differences were found. Ninety percent of the total respondents reported their age as 33 years or lower.

Procedures and Measures

A self-report questionnaire method was utilized for this study and the electronic survey was distributed to Psychology students from a public university in a metropolitan city of the Pacific Northwest. The survey was distributed to the public via Amazon Mechanical Turk and circulated via Facebook in order to generate higher potential for participant diversity.

Ethnic identity. The revised Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999) was used to measure participant ethnic and racial identities. This test is comprised of 12 items which are measured on a 4-point Likert-like scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) and includes questions such as "I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group." The MEIM contains two subscales, one denoting ethnic identity exploration and the other measuring ethnic identity affirmation and commitment. All items are worded positively and are scored by averaging the items (α = .80).

Participants were also asked to report their ethnicity in a format similar to that of the ethnicity and race questions used in the US Census. To navigate deviations of nomenclature in personal ethnic or racial identity, respondents were provided additional write-in fields where they were asked to self-identify the ethnicity or race of their mothers, their fathers, and themselves. Participants were coded as monoracial (*n* = 132) if they identified both parents as the same ethnicity or race, while respondents who identified their parents as two different races were coded as multiracial (*n* = 78).

Attachment. Family and peer attachment were measured utilizing the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The IPPA is a 25-item questionnaire assessing the respondents' attachment to their parents, or parental figures, and their peers. The inventory uses the same 25 questions with minor wording changes to make each question applicable to either participants' mother/mother figure, father/father figure, and their peers. The IPPA also contains three subscales detailing a facet of attachment. These subscales are Trust, Communication, and Alienation. Survey items include statements such as "My [mother, father, friends] accept[s] me as I am," and all responses are recorded on a Likert scale, from 1 (*almost never or never true*) to 5 (*almost always or always true*). All negatively worded items are reverse scored, and scores for each targeted subject (mother, father, or

peers) are totaled where higher scores indicate higher attachment. Internal reliability for mother attachment is α = .87. For fathers, it is α = .89, and it is α = .92 for peers.

Personal identity. To measure participants' personal identity salience, the 12-item identity subscale was utilized from the Erickson Psychosocial Inventory Scale (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981; α = .73). These items contain questions such as, "I know what kind of person I am," and are scored on a Likert-like scale from 1 (*hardly ever true*) to 5 (*almost always true*).

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965; α = .88) was used to obtain scores for participant self-esteem. This scale contains 10 items, including questions such as "I am able to do things as well as most people." Responses are recorded on a Likert-like scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Negatively worded items are reverse scored, and a sum score is compiled for all items where higher totals indicate higher global self-esteem.

Well-being. The Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being (QEWB; Waterman et al., 2010; α = .86) was used to collect respondents' scores regarding life potential and well-being. This 21-item scale contains questions such as "I can say that I have purpose in my life," and are scored on a Likert-like scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The QEWB contains seven negatively worded items that are reverse scored, and higher total scores indicate higher well-being.

Results

The first hypothesis assumed that respondents with low scores in family attachment would likewise report low scores in identity as well as in well-being. Family attachment was measured by the scores for parent trust, parent communication, and parent alienation. Scores for identity were collected from the EPSI, and well-being scores were gathered from the QEWB. All scores of the subscales for family attachment weakly to moderately correlated with respondents' identity scores. Table 2 displays each IPPA subscale item correlated to the variables *EPSIIdentity* and *QEWB*. It is noteworthy to include the peer attachment scores as they moderately to strongly correlated to identity and well-being and supported implications addressed in the discussion portion of this article. Identity was moderately related to family and peer attachment. No correlation was evident between family attachment and well-being scores while peer attachment indicated weak to moderate correlation with well-being.

Table 2.Correlation Matrix for EPSI Identity, Family Attachment, and Peer Attachment

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. EPSIIdentity	—									
2. Mother Trust	.32**	—								
3. Mother Communication	.31**	.83**	—							
4. Mother Alienation	-.42**	-.75**	-.73**	—						
5. Father Trust	.33**	.35**	.35**	-.30**	—					
6. Father Communication	.25**	.28**	.38**	-.31**	.87**	—				
7. Father Alienation	-.44**	-.26**	-.23**	.44**	-.70**	-.69**	—			
8. Peer Trust	.40**	.23**	.25**	-.15*	.21**	.12	-.10	—		
9. Peer Communication	.35**	.15*	.21**	-.12	.16*	.12	-.08	.86**	—	
10. Peer Alienation	-.51**	-.25**	-21**	.44	-.23**	-20**	.41`**	-.50**	-.51**	—
11. QEWB	.67**	.11	.10	-.13	.08	.00	-.10	.36**	.33**	-.30**

Note. *p < .05. ** p < .01.

Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to compare *EPSIIdentity* scores in monoracial and multiracial individuals. Identity exploration and identity affirmation scores collected from the MEIM survey items were also compared, as well as respondents' scores in well-being and self-esteem. There were no significant differences found between monoracial and multiracial participants in *EPSIIdentity*, identity affirmation, well-being, and self-esteem scores. However, a significant difference was identified in identity exploration scores between multiracial (M = 1.66, SD = 0.14) and monoracial (M = 1.58, SD = 0.16) respondents; $t(208)$ = 3.51, p = 0.001. Ultimately, t-test analyses

resulted in findings that did not support H$_2$, where no significant difference was found in *EPSIIdentity* scores between multiracial and monoracial participants.

The final hypothesis initially predicted that multiracial individuals would report lower identity scores when their families were unsupportive of their identity exploration, but due to the unsupportive results of the t-test conducted, the regression analyses for H$_3$ could not be tested.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to identify in what ways parents and parental figures influence multiracial individuals given the variety of perspectives found in the current literature. I hypothesized that results from data analyses would support significant differences in scores of personal identity and well-being between multiracial and monoracial persons when accounting for reported family support. Correlations indicated a connection between family attachment and personal identity, which reinforces current research on ethnic-racial socialization and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hughes et al., 2006, Umaña-Taylor et. al., 2013); however, our inability to support more robust tests of significance seems to be more indicative that there are more similarities than differences between multiracial and monoracial individuals (Kramer et al., 2015). The moderate to strong significance in the relationship between *EPSIIdentity* and peer attachment seems to imply that the closest agents within an individual's microsystem would be friends and acquaintances (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This particular finding might support further research in friendships and their specific influence on personal and ethnic-racial identity development.

The most significant finding from the current study is the difference between multiracial and monoracial individuals pertaining to their ERI exploration. While the variables addressed in this study may not have accounted for this difference, they do serve to identify areas that are worthy of further research. Current literature is exploring the effects of identity negation, or cultural homelessness, which may warrant extensive identity exploration for multiracial individuals (Navarrete & Jenkins 2011; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009). Likewise, qualitative data, such as personal narratives, may illuminate unconsidered factors behind the difference in exploration scores (Syed & Azmitia, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study may have been influenced by the amount, as well as the quality, of the participants that responded to the survey. With a total sample just above 200 responses, future research should attempt to collect more respondents in order to fortify the significance of the utilized analyses. Likewise, future research on ERI should attempt to collect participants from both diverse and non-diverse locations, as a means to compare individual differences in experience and identity navigation. Although the current study controlled for age differences in the collected responses, it is suggested that future studies attempt to limit samples by respondents' ages to account for those changes throughout lifespan and participant memory, which are difficult to assess.

Conclusion

Emerging adulthood is defined as the time between adolescence and the time when full adulthood has been achieved (Arnett, 2000). It is typically the age range in which traditional college students are pursuing their baccalaureate degrees, and it is during this time that many young scholars explore what it means to define the question, "Who am I?" In the case of students of color, a unique experience in their identity exploration is defining and navigating their ERI alongside their personal identity. One consideration that multiracial adolescents and emerging adults must contend with is the navigation of stereotype threat within their intersecting identities. Stereotype threat has been linked to outcomes including, but not limited to, positive and negative social behaviors, as well as academic achievement (Hughes et al., 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Amid the variety of processes enacted to maintain and cultivate salience of both personal identity and ERI is the added complication of understanding in what contexts these minority students may be confirming negative or positive stereotypes (Gaither, 2015). Furthermore, due to the range of physical and observable features from different minority backgrounds in multiracial individuals, these instances can be vastly nuanced (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

As the multiracial population continues to grow, it is imperative to explore an underrepresented aspect of potential conflict experienced by these individuals. Such research may reveal information vital to the development

of healthy adolescents, sound families, and functional communities. Furthermore, it is crucial to the development of future generations of multiracial adolescents that their experience is understood so that psychologists, doctors, and community workers may have a better understanding of individual differences.

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