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Understanding Latino Ethnic Identity Development: A Review of Relevant Issues

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One of the most promising areas in cross-cultural psychology is the development of identity among various ethnic groups in the United States. This article has a twofold purpose. First, it offers the concept of ethnic identity as defined and studied within the social sciences — sociology, anthropology, and psychology — including a review of some of the recent work on ethnic identity development proposed by leading investigators in the field of psychology. The author discusses their generalizability across ethnic groups. Second, it presents a number of dimensions considered important in conceptualizing and studying Hispanic ethnic identity development. These include acculturation, the notion of biculturalism, and gender and generational differences. Implications for mental health practitioners and recommendations in the area of public policy are discussed.

One of the most promising areas of study in cross-cultural psychology is the development of identity among various ethnic groups.[1] This interest in ethnicity is prompted by the significant increase in the number of ethnic minorities in the United States. Of particular importance is the rapidly growing number of Latinos — approximately 22 million, or 8 percent of the population. Moreover, the substantial migration from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America, and the high birth rate of this group, make the Latino population the fastest-growing minority group. It is estimated that by the year 2050 one in every five persons will be Hispanic.[2]

The steady growth in the population has necessitated extended research that is more reflective of cultural perspectives which are different from the typical Western view of the world or the majority culture. This is particularly true of the literature on identity development. Hoare points out that the values of American society of autonomy and independence foster an identity that is individualistic.[3] In particular, she states,"American individualism and self-centrality help us to understand the American idea of the person. They do not, however, propel us toward understanding the way in which identity may be differentially constituted in other cultures."[4] Furthermore, Bernal and Knight have cogently stated that it is necessary to broaden our perspectives on how cultural factors such as customs, language, and values influence the development of ethnic identity.[5]

The purpose of this article is to present a number of ethnic identity development models proposed by leading investigators in the field of psychology and to discuss their

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"It is important to conceptualize Latino ethnic identity and its development as complex and dynamic, involving many factors. Specifically, a variety of socioeconomic and political factors that may have an impact on the development of ethnic identity are often overlooked in the psychological literature.... Also, within this socioeconomic and political context, there are inequities in education and employment opportunities that play a significant role in the identity development of Latino youth."

— Azara Rivera-Santiago

relevance to Latinos. I introduce and describe a variety of dimensions such as the process of acculturation, biculturalism, gender, and generational differences that should be considered in conceptualizing Latino ethnic identity development.

Before I elaborate on Latino identity development issues, several points bear mentioning regarding "ethnic identity" as conceptualized and studied within the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, and psychology). First, there are differences in the way it has been defined. For example, Tajfel offers an often cited definition stemming from a "social" identity perspective: "That part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to membership."[6] Interestingly, Ferdman distinguished cultural identity from ethnic identity by describing it as an individual's perception of the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms characteristic of the ethnic group to which one belongs.[7] On the other hand, researchers have proposed that ethnic identity is multidimensional, consisting of "self-identification" — the label individuals give themselves — knowledge about the culture including customs, values, beliefs, and traits, and the feelings and attitudes individuals have about their group membership.[8] Likewise, Rogler, Cooney, and Ortiz considered the concept of ethnic identity in terms of language use and ability, subjective affiliation with particular cultural values, and attitudinal preference for the given culture.[9] García proposed that "ethnicity" consisted of three distinct components: ethnic consciousness (awareness and expression of specific cultural behaviors); ethnic identification (cultural group membership or association with a given ethnic group); and identity (self-identifier or self-label).[10]

Second, ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a developmental phenomenon stemming from the work of Erikson, who proposed a theory of ego identity formation.[11] He postulated that individuals achieve an identity as a result of experiencing a crisis, exploring one's role, and making commitments in such areas as occupation and religion. Phinney speculated that ethnic identity may indeed parallel that of Erikson's concept of ego identity, particularly since culture is implicated in its formation.[12]

Finally, ethnic identity has been studied from a variety of disciplines with differing definitions, methodological approaches, and ethnic populations, offering little in the way of cross-cultural comparisons or generalizability of findings.[13] Nonetheless, there is considerable agreement that ethnic identity is an important aspect of psychological functioning and that it is a major part of an ethnic individual's personality.[14]

Ethnic Identity Development

It has been suggested that ethnic identity is a complex dynamic process that changes over time.[15] Within the psychological literature, a number of models regarding the development of ethnic identity have been proposed. For instance, Cross developed a four-stage model of black identity that contributes to the formation of specific racial identity attitudes and is a precursor of many of the more recent models.[16] According to Cross, the four stages are: (1) preencounter, in which blacks deny their culture and value the dominant society (white culture); (2) encounter, in which a situation occurs that pushes the individual to question and reexamine old ways of thinking and behaving. In this stage, a search for black identity is coupled with feelings of guilt and anger with the dominant society; (3) immersion/emersion, in which there is a full commitment to black culture. The individual pulls away from the values held by the dominant culture and is often characterized as having little tolerance for white society; and (4) internalization, viewed

as the final stage of development, involving the resolution of conflicts with the dominant culture. Individuals achieve a sense of balance between beliefs about their own culture and the dominant culture.

More recently, Helms developed a six-stage racial identity model for whites in which racial attitudes toward blacks and other ethnic groups can be examined.[17] Briefly, the stages are: (1) contact, conceptualized as lacking awareness of racial differences; (2) disintegration, defined as a state of confusion resulting from knowing that one belongs to a white racial group that perhaps has a history of discriminating against other ethnic groups; (3) reintegration, considered a stage in which there is a sense of superiority over other racial groups; (4) pseudoindependence, characterized by a superficial acceptance of members of other racial groups; (5) immersion/emersion, viewed as involving a deeper understanding about what it means to be white; and (6) autonomy, a stage of complete acceptance of both strengths and weaknesses of white society, including culture and group membership.

Although these models have broadened our understanding of the dynamics involved in the identity formation as it relates to contact with whites (Cross model) or blacks (Helms model), the various stages as outlined cannot be generalized across all ethnic groups. In response to this issue, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue integrated the various perspectives of earlier models and proposed a five-stage Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (R/CID) that can be applied to a variety of ethnic groups (Asians, blacks, Latinos, and native peoples).[18]

This model consists of five distinct stages: (1) conformity, characterized as a preference for the values of the dominant culture and society; (2) dissonance, viewed as a gradual reexamination of the attitudes and beliefs held by the dominant culture and society. This reexamination often takes place after some experience has occurred, leading to questioning old beliefs and ways of behaving; (3) resistance and immersion, defined as a rejection of the dominant culture. In this stage an individual may have intense feelings of anger resulting from the knowledge that he or she is a member of a group that has experienced oppression and discrimination, combined with a sense of pride in the person's own cultural and racial group; (4) introspection, characterized as a stage involving a deeper understanding of the racial/ethnic group to which one belongs, as well as of other minority groups. This stage also involves some degree of conflict as one struggles with the desire to be loyal to the group, at the same time wanting independence and autonomy; (5) integrative awareness, the last stage, viewed as achieving a balance and a sense of security.[19] This comes about after the individual is able to accept aspects of his or her culture and those of the dominant culture that are both appealing and beneficial. With this new perspective comes a real appreciation for cultural differences. In this stage, there is a deliberate attempt to work toward eliminating oppression.

A fourth model, developed by Jean Phinney, is one of the first to elaborate on an ethnic identity model for adolescents and young adults, which can also be applied across ethnic groups (e.g., Africans, Asians, Hispanics, and whites).[20] Specifically, her model is a three-stage process based on the theoretical formulations proposed by Erikson and incorporates many of concepts and ideas mentioned in the models described above.[21] In the first stage, called unexamined ethnic identity, an individual unquestionably accepts the values and attitudes of the dominant culture.

According to Phinney, a person may have a preference for the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the dominant society, but that is not viewed as an absolute necessity as elucidated by Cross and others. In other words, an individual can be totally unaware of

having a preference for these values and behaviors. In the second stage, known as the ethnic identity search or moratorium, the individual begins to explore his or her ethnic identity after a profound and meaningful experience. It is sometimes considered an emotional stage as a person undergoes a search to understand oneself and the culture. The third and final stage, ethnic identity achievement, is characterized as an "internalized sense of ethnic self" and confidence about who one is. A sense of security is combined with positive feelings about the self and others.

Phinney points out that initial studies with Mexicans, Asians, and African ethnic groups show promising results supporting the stage model.[22] According to her, adolescents move from stage to stage. She further speculates that individuals may, in fact, continue achieving stages higher than those illustrated in the model.

A number of studies exploring the relationship between the three-stage model and psychological measures of self-esteem and adjustment show promising results. In one survey, Phinney and Alipuria found that among a sample of college students, the correlations between self-esteem and ethnic identity were higher for Asian, black, and Mexican students than for the white students.[23] In another study, Phinney studied the relationship between ethnic identity and various factors associated with psychological adjustment among a sample of tenth-grade students.[24]

Specifically, she found that students with an "achieved ethnic identity" had stronger social (peer) and family relations and exhibited more self-confidence and control as compared with those in the early stages of development. In sum, these studies clearly demonstrate that for adolescents and young adults, a strong sense of who one is in relation to ethnic group membership is associated with healthier psychological functioning. Equally important, a unique feature of Phinney and her colleagues' work is that the model has been successful in studying ethnic identity across minority groups from a developmental perspective. More recently, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure has been developed; it consists of three scales: positive ethnic attitudes and sense of belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and cultural practices referred to as ethnic behaviors. Overall reliability coefficients range from .71 to .90.[25]

Several points regarding these models bear mentioning. First, there is considerable overlap in some of these stages. For example, in the stages of conformity,[26] preencounter,[27] and unexamined ethnic identity,[28] all share the common belief that an individual shows a preference for the values of the dominant culture and society. Moreover, the immersion/emersion stage[29] and resistance and immersion stage[30] are similar to the ethnic identity search stage proposed by Phinney.[31] In this stage, all three models suggest that individuals undergo a search for a better understanding of their culture and themselves. Second, there are age differences in the populations on which these models are based. Phinney's work has focused on minority youth, whereas the other models describe ethnic identity for adult populations. Finally, considerable importance has been given to these models because they help mental health professionals become more sensitive to the attitudes and behaviors of minority clients who seek counseling or therapy.[32] From a broad perspective, these models provide valuable frameworks useful in the development of effective intervention programs for ethnic minorities. Although these frameworks have increased our understanding of the dynamics involved in ethnic identity development, Sue and Sue have argued that a number of limitations should be considered.[33] A primary concern is that they suggest that ethnic identity development is a linear process and occurs in one direction. They have contended that for the R/CID model in particular, some individuals may skip stages while others may actually move back to earlier stages

of development. A second issue concerns their relevance to recent immigrant groups. For example, Sue and Sue speculated that many recent immigrant groups (Asians) have strong attitudes and beliefs about their culture on arrival in the United States. If the immigrant encounters a negative experience, such as discrimination or racism, which forces the individual to reexamine identity, it is not clear where that person would fit in the model. A question they raise is whether the immigrant would begin at the conformity stage (a denigration of one's culture and complete acceptance of the dominant culture) and move to subsequent stages as a result of a negative experience. Another issue is the fact that they do not consider possible gender and class differences among ethnic populations. A final concern is that only a few studies have examined ethnic identity in relation to generations of immigrants.[34] This is particularly important for Latinos, given the recent increase in the number of immigrants arriving in the United States from Central and South America.

Latino Identity Development: Toward an Integrative Model

While the literature reviewed here shows that more attention has been given to ethnic and cultural backgrounds as important factors in identity development, one of the major limitations of this research is the continued belief that the process and progression from one stage to another is uniform. Perhaps at a basic level it may be appropriate to look at identity formation as a common phenomenon for all humans, but when exploring its relationship with psychological adjustment, the approach might be to examine specific dimensions of ethnic identity. This is particularly important when dealing with Latino populations. It is widely acknowledged that Latinos are a diverse group of people. Included in this broad category are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Central and South Americans. Latinos not only represent a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds, but also differ in such factors as ancestry, migration history, and cultural traditions, values, and practices. Equally important, these groups differ in the type and quality of contact with the United States.

When one is conceptualizing ethnic identity development for the Latino in the United States, it is proposed that consideration be given to a more integrative approach, which includes the following dimensions:

Acculturation
It is widely recognized that acculturation plays an important role in the psychological adjustment of Latinos. Marín has defined it as "a process of attitudinal and behavioral change undergone by individuals who reside in multicultural societies . . . or who come in contact with a new culture due to colonization, invasion or other important political changes."[35] Marín further speculates that acculturation not only affects the degree to which individuals adhere to certain cultural values and practices, but that it is also a dynamic and lifelong process

Of particular interest is the contention that the acculturation process can influence a person's ethnic identity. For example, when examining self-identification as a component of ethnic character, Marín reports that the process of acculturation was significantly related to the way Mexican-Americans identified themselves on the Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.[36] In fact, he found that as they acculturated, there was movement toward self-identification as a "biethnic."

From a different angle, Estrada examined changes in socioeconomic status, an indicator of acculturation, in relation to ethnic identification.[37] Specifically, he developed three hypotheses, each proposing a change in ethnic identity as a result of economic mobility: (1) with an increase in socioeconomic status, Latinos tend to identify with the dominant culture and refer to themselves as "white"; (2) with an increase in socioeconomic status, Latinos develop a stronger identification with their culture, which is demonstrated in a sense of pride transmitted to their children; and (3) Latino ethnic identity of parents and children is clearly demarcated at the highest and lowest levels of socioeconomic status and less defined at midlevel. Although these various hypotheses have not been tested, Estrada's perspectives suggest that to obtain a better understanding of the dynamics of acculturation as it pertains to ethnic identity, one must examine it in the context of social and economic mobility.

Biculturalism

Also related to ethnic identity is the concept of biculturalism. Rotheram-Borus and others have defined it as a multidimensional concept in which there is a "unique blending of two cultures," suggesting that biculturalism is also tied to the process of acculturation.[38] For example, a dimension of biculturalism might be the degree to which individuals use and preserve the Spanish language. Within the process of acculturation, it may be possible to maintain certain cultural values and norms such as the significance of familism (obligation to and support from relatives) while losing the ability to speak fluent Spanish. Thus, the degree to which individuals adhere to certain cultural values and beliefs, and the degree of bilingualism, could be considered separate aspects of biculturalism.

Much of the current research on identity development in relation to biculturalism has focused on adolescents. Studies conducted by Rotheram-Borus show that the way in which minority youth self-identify (i.e., "bicultural," "mainstream," or "ethnically identified") depends on the communities in which they attend school.[39] In these studies, black, Asian, and Mexican adolescents from an integrated school were asked to self-identify using these terms. These adolescents were compared with a similar sample of minority youth from a nearby school, which was considered to experience more racial tension among the student body and was less integrated. Interestingly, they found that a significant percentage of the minority youth identified themselves as bicultural, with a smaller, but significant, number reporting a strong identification with their ethnic group. In contrast, the findings from the less integrated school revealed that the overwhelming majority strongly identified with their ethnic group. Based on these findings, one can conclude that in environments where there is perhaps less tolerance for cultural differences, preference for identifying with the ethnic group becomes more meaningful.

With respect to psychological functioning, there is mounting evidence suggesting that biculturalism contributes to healthy adjustment.[40] In a recent review of the literature on the psychological impact of biculturalism, LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton not only supported this contention but also proposed that the ability to function efficaciously in two cultures may be related to healthier psychological functioning. According to these authors, this "cultural competence" includes a variety of skills such as maintaining positive attitudes toward one's own cultural/ethnic group and the majority culture and establishing a strong within-cultural-group support system.[41] Another factor considered important is the ability to communicate effectively in both the native language and the language spoken by the dominant culture. However, it has also been suggested that

because biculturalism is dynamic and fluid, more research into specific dimensions that would help clarify its relationship to psychological adjustment is necessary.[42]

Gender Differences

The examination of gender differences in the formation of ethnic identity is an area that has been largely overlooked. The few studies Phinney reviewed on this topic suggest that women may have more invested in this process than men.[43] Specifically, some of these studies show that women identify more with their ethnic group and culture than men. Interestingly, Parham and Helms, studying a population of African-Americans, found that the women were at higher stages of ethnic identity development than their male counterparts.[44]

To date, there are no studies investigating potential gender differences in Latino ethnic identity development. However, the research that has examined gender differences in the acculturation process suggests that it has an impact on Latino men and women in different ways. For example, Espin points out that women who come from traditional cultural backgrounds may experience conflict as they are exposed to the new and changing roles of women in the United States.[45] It follows that as women adapt to these new roles, there could be changes in their ethnic identity. It is proposed that this would be a fruitful area of further inquiry.[46]

Differences in Generations

Another important dimension to be considered when discussing Latino ethnic identity development involves generational differences among immigrants. Some studies have shown that identification with an ethnic group changes with the second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants living in the United States. For example, Rogler, Cooney, and Ortiz found that Puerto Rican children who had a longer exposure to U.S. culture and society showed less identification with the Puerto Rican culture than their parents.[47] However, the most striking finding was that the majority of these children perceived themselves to be either bicultural or identified themselves solely as Puerto Rican as opposed to a complete identification with "American" culture. Furthermore, important factors to consider in relation to generational differences are educational attainment of the second and third generations; place of residency (e.g., Latino communities versus non-Latino communities); the quality of life in these residential areas; and the degree of contact with an individual's ethnic cultural group.

Understanding Latino Identity Development

There is increasing awareness that ethnic identity and its development comprise a complex phenomenon. It is also recognized that identity is intimately related to culture. This is witnessed in the development of a variety of ethnic identity models that have surfaced in recent years. These models and the various approaches presented here are well intentioned; however, caution should be exercised in applying them to Latinos.

It is important for mental health professionals to understand that these models have their strengths and weaknesses. A major strength is that they help us to understand how environment influences identity. For example, some of the models focus on oppression as the driving force in triggering change in ethnic identity. On the other hand, a major weakness is that most of these models do not include potential forces which could also contribute to ethnic identity formation. This is particularly the case for Latinos.

As described in the previous section, one must consider factors like the role of acculturation as an important driving force.

Mental health professionals should weigh these fundamental issues when working with Latino clients. A starting point might be to follow the advice offered by Hoare who cogently states, "The greater the extent to which counselors know the symbols, meanings, and messages of the client's culture, and the world-and-person view those cultures express, the greater will be their ability to achieve cross-cultural identification."[48] Her statement reflects the view that not only should we learn about a client's unique cultural background, but also how it influences the way in which the person perceives immediate surroundings. Taking this one step further, the counselor's sensitivity to factors that contribute to ethnic identity development, as well as those dimensions which are part of its makeup are important considerations. For instance, Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, and Cota describe five components of identity: ethnic self-identification, ethnic constancy, ethnic role behaviors, ethnic knowledge, and ethnic feelings and preferences.[49]

One of the most important contributions of the ethnic identity development models described is their helping us understand how the experiences of oppression and prejudice affect an individual's sense of self, sometimes leading to alienation and isolation. This could contribute to maladaptive behaviors that one might explore in a counseling relationship.

Policy Implications

It is important to conceptualize Latino ethnic identity and its development as complex and dynamic, involving many other factors. Specifically, a variety of socioeconomic and political factors that may have an impact on the development of ethnic identity are often overlooked in the psychological literature. For instance, it is generally acknowledged that poverty and discrimination lead to inadequate health care services. Also, within this socioeconomic and political context, there are inequities in education and employment opportunities that play a significant role in the identity development of Latino youth.[50]

Given the complexity of Latino identity development, one can make several recommendations regarding public policy in areas of education and mental health. First, although well-intentioned school-based interventions have been developed to deal with cross-ethnic tension, conflict, and behavior problems among our adolescent populations,[51] policymakers must not disregard the wide range of social problems Latino youth face that undoubtedly have an affect on their self-image. Second, a restructuring of the curricula in our educational system is necessary. In particular, Rotheram-Borus and Wyche have argued that developing adequate interventions in school settings calls for reform in which ethnic identity is integrated in all aspects of a curriculum, including the teaching of cultural diversity.[52] An obvious benefit of teaching from a multicultural perspective is that it promotes ethnic pride. Policymakers are urged to continue such efforts in the public school system. Third, it is clear that positive role models are needed in the educational system. Efforts to recruit and train Latinos aggressively for teaching, administrative, and counseling positions should continue.[53] Policymakers are urged to support not only the restructuring of school curricula to reflect the richness of cultural and ethnic diversity, but also to facilitate the hiring of Latinos at all levels of the educational system.

With respect to mental health, there are several recommendations for policymakers to consider. Foremost among these is the need to examine the problems of Latinos in holis-

tic and systematic ways. It is not enough to address the issue of ethnic identity from a purely psychological context. It must be examined from sociopolitical and historical contexts as well. Second, policymakers must continue to advocate for culturally sensitive mental health services. Finally, efforts should be made to provide appropriate allocations of funding to conduct research in the area of Latino mental health. Although there is considerable agreement that ethnic identity is an important aspect of psychological functioning, more research is needed to examine the unique experiences and circumstances of the various Latino populations in the United States. ❧

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