

# Examining Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem Among Biracial and Monoracial Adolescents

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The psychological well-being and ethnic identity of biracial adolescents are largely underrepresented topics in current scholarly literature, despite the growing population of biracial and multiracial individuals in the United States. This study examined self-esteem, ethnic identity, and the relationship between these constructs among biracial and monoracial adolescents ( $n = 3282$ ). Using analysis of covariance, significant differences emerged between biracial and monoracial adolescents on both a measure of self-esteem and a measure of ethnic identity. Specifically, biracial adolescents showed significantly higher levels of self-esteem than their Asian counterparts, but significantly lower self-esteem than Black adolescents. Furthermore, biracial adolescents scored significantly higher than Whites on a measure of ethnic identity, but scored lower than their Black, Asian, and Latino peers on the same measure. Finally, correlational analyses revealed a significant and positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem for all groups.

**KEY WORDS:** biracial; identity; adolescents; ethnicity; race.

## INTRODUCTION

The number of interracial marriages in the United States, as well as the number of interracial individuals, has steadily increased since the 1967 Supreme Court repeal of laws barring interracial marriages (Root, 1992; Wardle, 1987). In response to a long-term debate over the addition of a multiracial category for the 2000 census

(Rockquemore and Brunson, 2002), a compromise was made that allowed respondents to select multiple racial categories, resulting in approximately 2% of the population self-identifying as multiracial (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Despite these figures, this segment of the population remains largely invisible in the area of scholarly research. Much of the literature on biracial or multiracial populations tends to be theoretical (Phinney, 1990), and the limited empirical work has been based largely on small clinical samples or samples recruited via snowball sampling techniques (Phinney and Alipuria, 1996).

Given the growing visibility of biracial families in society, it is critical to learn more about the developmental outcomes of adolescents within these families, specifically with regard to their psychological adjustment. Understanding the complexity and impact of diversity on adolescent development should be at the forefront of our priorities. Two interrelated psychological factors in need of more in-depth examination among biracial adolescents are ethnic identity and self-esteem. Despite the fact that self-esteem, as an evaluative measure of psychosocial adjustment, is linked to major mental health outcomes, researchers have not focused on examining the self-esteem of biracial adolescents. Both identity development and the

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maintenance of self-esteem are critical and interactional processes that occur during adolescence whose dynamic nature provides important implications for individuals' development over the life course (Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1992). Given the changing demographics of the United States, it is important to begin to explore the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem among biracial people.

As such, this paper presents a review of the existing literature on self-esteem among individuals with parents of 2 different races (i.e., White, Black, Latino, and Asian) and attempts to fill in the existing gaps with empirical data that allow the examination of ethnic identity and self-esteem in a representative sample of biracial adolescents. Although Latinos represent members of an ethnic group, not a racial group, Latinos are included as a separate racial group in this study for a number of reasons. Because of different cultural and societal experiences, Latinos are not typically grouped with Whites or Blacks in existing research (e.g., Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1992; Phinney and Alipuria, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Spencer *et al.*, 2000), although they may share racial (i.e., phenotypic) characteristics. Given that race is a social construction (e.g., Helms, 1994; Omi and Winant, 1994; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002; Rodríguez, 2000; Spickard, 1992) and that Latinos in the United States are often socially constructed to be separate from Whites and Blacks (e.g., Denton and Massey, 1989; Martin *et al.*, 1990; Rodríguez, 1990, 1992, 2000), the current study includes Latinos as a separate racial group.

### Self-Esteem

Indisputably, self-esteem has been one of the most widely studied aspects of the self. Several theorists (e.g., Coopersmith, 1967; James, 1980; Rosenberg, 1979) have defined this construct and, while varying definitions exist, all refer to individuals' personal feelings of worth. In the current study, self-esteem refers to a positive or negative orientation toward the self (Rosenberg, 1979). That is, self-esteem refers to "a *personal* judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward himself [or herself]" (Coopersmith, 1967, p. 5).

During adolescence, individuals undergo several changes (e.g., physical, cognitive, and social) and encounter new experiences (e.g., new social demands) that may influence their psychological well-being in various ways. In the midst of these experiences, and given that self-esteem is commonly considered an index of psychological well-being (Kao, 1999; Phinney, 1991), understanding issues related to youth's self-esteem has been one of the most

important areas of study in mental health research. Researchers have repeatedly used self-esteem as a proxy for adolescents' psychological adjustment (Phinney, 1991), psychological well-being (Benjet and Hernandez-Guzman, 2001; Kao, 1999; Martinez and Dukes, 1997), and positive mental health (Rosenberg, 1967).

It is important to note that this study will use the term self-concept to refer to self-esteem in those instances where previous studies have done so. Elsewhere, the term self-esteem will be used in order to more accurately represent the construct under the current investigation. Theorists suggest that self-concept refers to the description that one attaches to one's self, while self-esteem refers to one's negative, positive, or neutral appraisal of that description (King, 1997). However, these terms have been used interchangeably in numerous studies (e.g., Buri, 1989; Filozof *et al.*, 1998; Watkins and Yu, 2001) and, as such, both have been included in the literature reviewed for this study.

### Biracial Identity

Much of the research on biracial identity is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), which states that people are classified into distinguishable groups dependent on socially meaningful similarities. This theory, coupled with the dominant social norms regarding *hypodescent* (i.e., the "one drop rule" of racial classification), led early researchers who were studying biracial individuals to classify this population according to their minority status because that is how the dominant society perceived them (Davis, 1978; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002; Root, 1992; Wardle, 1987). Furthermore, researchers assumed that biracial individuals' marginal status as outsiders to either racial category would cause them distress and low self-esteem (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1961; Teicher, 1968). In addition, biracial individuals were expected to contend with more complex race-related behaviors based on their multiple backgrounds (Helms, 1995), and this complexity led to the expectation that mixed-race children would have identity problems and that their racial identity would negatively affect their self-esteem (Brown, 1990; Williams and Thornton, 1998). Thus, early work on biracial adolescents assumed them to have low self-esteem, and attributed it to a marginalized status.

Later research on biracial individuals revealed that they are not a homogenous group and may choose to identify as White, as minority, or as a unique bicultural combination, and that these processes are dynamic and related to self-esteem (Helms, 1995). Researchers in the area of racial identity are divided as to whether positive self-esteem is derived from strong feelings of group-belonging,

or whether low self-esteem is a result of identification with a stigmatized social group (Rockquemore and Brunσμα, 2002). Existing empirical findings demonstrate a variety of possible outcomes regarding biracial identity and self-esteem.

### Research on Biracial Adolescents' Self-Esteem

By searching social science databases (i.e., PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, ERIC) and obtaining references from articles obtained through the databases, a total of 6 studies were found in which self-esteem was examined among biracial adolescents; dissertations, case studies, purely theoretical pieces, and studies conducted outside of the United States were omitted from our search. In general, when biracial participants were examined without a comparison group, they were reported to have high levels of self-esteem (Gibbs and Hines, 1992). Differences emerged, however, when self-esteem was compared across racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, Chang (1974) found racially mixed early adolescents to have significantly higher self-concepts than nonmixed peers. Similarly, Brown (2001) found that biracial participants had significantly higher scores on self-esteem than both Black and White comparison groups. In contrast, Phinney and Alipuria (1996) found no significant differences between multiethnic and monoethnic high schoolers on self-esteem. Similarly, no significant differences were found in levels of self-esteem when Asian/Black biracial participants were compared to their Asian and African American counterparts (Cauce *et al.*, 1992). Contrary to the previous studies, Martinez and Dukes (1997) found that ethnically mixed adolescents scored lower than Whites and Blacks, but higher than Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans on self-esteem. In sum, research findings have been mixed, with some suggesting that biracial adolescents tend to have higher or lower levels of self-esteem than monoracial adolescents, and others indicating no differences in self-esteem.

The divergent results of these studies may be due to several limitations of the research. First, a few studies utilized small samples (e.g., samples ranging from 3 to 93 total participants) primarily recruited through word-of-mouth techniques. Therefore, participants were often selected because they actively self-identified as biracial and they tended to be homogenous in their ethnic identification, limiting generalizability of the results.

Second, larger scale studies tended to employ a variety of methods to determine who was classified as biracial or tended to group all mixed-race participants together. One group of studies relied on a snowball sampling

method to recruit adolescent participants on the basis of the race of their parents as reported by third-party referrals (e.g., Chang, 1974; Gibbs and Hines, 1992). Another group of studies classified participants on the basis of the race of their parents as reported by the adolescents (e.g., Brown, 2001; Cauce *et al.*, 1992; Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). One study collected demographic information from adolescents about themselves and their parents, but did not specify what information was used to classify participants (e.g., Martinez and Dukes, 1997).

In studies that relied on self or third-party reports of the participant's race, it was often unspecified whether participants were Black/White biracial or White/Asian biracial, for example, creating ambiguity and possible within-group variability in the sample. In addition, biracial individuals who self-identify as monoracial may be overlooked when self-reports are used, rather than participants' reports of their parents' race (Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). This is problematic because minority groups are stigmatized in different ways and individuals' experiences and perceptions may vary as a result. These possible within-group differences may be camouflaged when biracial individuals are grouped together and assumed to be a homogeneous group. Self-labels have also been found to vary on the basis of the physical appearance and perceived acceptance of the participants, as well as the answer format and ethnic composition of the survey setting (Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). Although using adolescents' reports of the race of their parents may not be the *best* possible method for classifying study participants, these findings suggest that is more accurate and methodologically clearer than relying on self-reported labels.

Finally, a few studies were based on adults' retrospective accounts of their self-esteem as adolescents; therefore, validity of their data may be compromised because of the decreased salience of issues as participants mature, as well as the effects of memory loss over time (Henry *et al.*, 1994).

### Relationship Between Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem Among Biracial Adolescents

In 1991, a review of the literature on ethnic identity and self-esteem concluded that the "relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem only holds among those who identify themselves as ethnic group members and for whom ethnicity is salient" (Phinney, 1991, p. 205). However, this review was based primarily on monoethnic minority adolescents. Because of limited research on biracial adolescents, it is unclear whether a relationship exists between ethnic identity and self-esteem among this group.

Studies conducted since Phinney's review (Phinney, 1991) have consistently found a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem (i.e., Brown, 2001; Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1992; Phinney and Alipuria, 1996; Roberts *et al.*, 1999; Smith *et al.*, 1999). For instance, higher self-esteem was found in multiethnic and monoethnic high school and college students who scored higher on measures of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992; Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). In studies on multiracial participants, results indicated that those who had examined their ethnic identity and had come to some resolution had a higher self-esteem than those in conflict over their ethnic identity and those with unexplored ethnic identities (Brown, 2001; Martinez and Dukes, 1997). Thus, there is some evidence to suggest that a positive relationship exists between ethnic identity and self-esteem among biracial adolescents. However, further research with representative samples is needed.

Although existing studies inform us about the self-esteem of biracial adolescents and provide insight into the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem, there are limitations to be considered. As discussed above, previous studies have been limited with respect to sample size and studies that have had larger and more representative samples have tended to group all multiethnic participants into one category, with large within-group variability. This study sought to improve upon previous work in several ways. First, biracial adolescents were identified on the basis of the race of their parents. Second, participants were surveyed while in high school in order to capture their present-day attitudes. Next, differences among biracial subgroups were examined before grouping them into a larger biracial group. Finally, this study utilized a large representative sample of the biracial population in a metropolitan area.

On the basis of the inconsistency of results in existing work regarding self-esteem among biracial adolescents, this study did not set out to examine specific hypotheses with regard to differences in self-esteem among biracial and monoracial adolescents. Thus, a general research question was whether self-esteem scores would differ significantly among biracial, Black, White, Asian, and Latino participants. In addition, on the basis of previous research, which indicates that a positive relationship exists between ethnic identity and self-esteem, we hypothesized that a significant positive correlation would emerge between ethnic identity and self-esteem among biracial adolescents. In sum, this study sought to (a) fill gaps in the existing research on biracial adolescents' self-esteem and (b) replicate previous research regarding the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem to provide evidence for generalizable findings in this area.

## METHOD

### Participants

Data for this study were drawn from a larger study designed to examine ethnic identity formation among adolescents (see Umaña-Taylor, 2001). A total of 3282 students from 3 different high schools in a large southwestern city were included in this study. The racial category for each parent, as reported by adolescents, was used to determine adolescents' racial group membership. Adolescents were classified as Black ( $n = 331$ ), White ( $n = 982$ ), Asian ( $n = 626$ ), Latino ( $n = 1162$ ), Asian/White ( $n = 37$ ), Black/White ( $n = 26$ ), Latino/White ( $n = 95$ ), Asian/Black ( $n = 3$ ), Asian/Latino ( $n = 6$ ), or Black/Latino ( $n = 14$ ). Membership in the first 4 categories required that both parents be of the same ethnic or racial group. Adolescents ranged in age from 13 to 20 years ( $M = 15.6$ ), with the sample comprising approximately 50% males and 50% females (see Table I).

### Procedure

Participation was voluntary. Letters explaining the study were sent home with students, and parents were asked to sign and return the letter if they did *not* want their child to participate. Overall, 2% of parents returned letters, declining their child's participation in the study.

**Table I.** Sample Characteristics

	Biracial		Monoracial	
	<i>n</i>	Sample (%)	<i>n</i>	Sample (%)
Grade	181	100	3097	99.9
9th grade	58	32.0	1031	33.2
10th grade	52	28.7	766	24.7
11th grade	39	21.5	616	19.9
12th grade	32	17.7	684	22.1
Sex	179	98.9	3094	99.8
Male	89	49.2	1532	49.4
Female	90	49.7	1562	50.4
Maternal education	177	97.8	2926	94.4
Less than high school	35	19.3	864	27.9
High school/GED	47	26.0	649	20.9
2 years of college or less	44	24.3	629	20.3
4-year college degree	27	14.9	495	16.0
Graduate or professional	24	13.3	289	9.3
Paternal education	165	91.2	2846	91.8
Less than a high school	24	13.3	816	26.3
High school/GED	30	16.6	494	15.9
2 years of college or less	44	24.3	572	18.4
4-year college degree	40	22.1	497	16.0
Graduate or professional	27	14.9	467	15.1

*Note.* Sample size may not always equal 3282 because of missing data.

It should be noted that adolescents were not *required* to participate even if their parents did not decline, because of the voluntary nature of the study. Approximately 32% of adolescents did not participate in the study. Because data were not gathered from those who did not participate, reasons for nonparticipation could not be determined.

Spanish and English versions of all materials (i.e., parent letter, youth assent form, and questionnaire) were available. All forms were translated into Spanish by the third author, who is fluent in Spanish and English. A native Spanish speaker reviewed the translated version to determine whether anything was awkwardly worded. After revisions, the Spanish version was given to a third individual who back-translated it into English. The third author then compared the original English materials with the back-translated versions and all inconsistencies were discussed with another researcher to determine any necessary changes. Adolescents completed a questionnaire that assessed various demographic factors and included a number of measures. Questionnaires were distributed during the first 2 weeks of the school year during English or social studies classes, depending on the school.

## Variables

### Demographics

Adolescents' *racial group membership* was determined by examining parents' race. For example, if adolescents reported that their mothers were White, non-Hispanic and reported that their fathers were White, non-Hispanic, adolescents were categorized as White, non-Hispanic. On the other hand, if adolescents reported that their mothers were Black, non-Hispanic and reported that their fathers were White, non-Hispanic, adolescents were categorized as Black/White. Additionally, adolescents provided information about their age and the educational attainment of each of their parents. *Parental education*, a proxy for socioeconomic status, was created by averaging fathers' and mothers' levels of education, as reported by adolescents on a scale of (1) *less than high school* to (9) *graduate or professional degree*. For adolescents who reported information for only 1 parent, the single value was used.

### Self-Esteem

Adolescents' self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale is composed of 10 items with end points of (1) *strongly disagree* to (4) *strongly agree*. Items (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") were scored so that higher scores indicated greater levels of self-esteem.

**Table II.** Internal Consistency of Self-Esteem and Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure by Racial Group

	Self-esteem		MEIM	
	<i>n</i>	$\alpha$	<i>n</i>	$\alpha$
Asian/White	31	0.83	31	0.85
Black/White	22	0.80	24	0.78
Latino/White	88	0.85	80	0.84
Asian/Black	2	0.58	2	0.80
Asian/Latino	5	0.87	5	0.86
Black/Latino	9	0.77	11	0.72
Black, not Hispanic	287	0.82	274	0.82
White, not Hispanic	904	0.87	841	0.84
Asian, not Hispanic	567	0.85	557	0.86
Latino	1004	0.81	946	0.79

This scale has been examined with diverse populations (e.g., Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, African American, and White adolescents) and has obtained high coefficient alphas ranging from 0.79 to 0.85 with these samples (Der-Karabetian and Ruiz, 1997; Lorenzo-Hernandez and Ouellette, 1998; Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Phinney *et al.*, 1997). For the population examined in this study, coefficient alphas ranged from 0.58 to 0.87 (see Table II).

### Ethnic Identity

Adolescents' ethnic identity achievement was examined using Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992), which is composed of 14 items. This measure has been examined with diverse groups such as African Americans, Central Americans, Mexican Americans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese, Haitians, and White adolescents and young adults. The items (e.g., "In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group" and "I feel a strong attachment toward my own ethnic group") are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, with end points of *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (4) and were coded so that higher values indicated greater exploration and commitment toward one's ethnic group, more participation in ethnic behaviors or activities, and more positive feelings and preferences toward one's ethnic group. In this study, coefficient alphas for the MEIM ranged from 0.72 to 0.86.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

#### Age and Parental Education

To examine differences among biracial and mono-racial groups on demographic characteristics, 2 one-way

**Table III.** One-Way ANOVA With Parental Education as a Dependent Variable

	Parental education		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	SD
Asian/White	36	3.39 <sup>a</sup>	0.99
Black/White	26	3.08 <sup>b</sup>	1.10
Latino/White	94	2.66 <sup>cdef</sup>	1.12
Asian/Black	3	4.00	0.87
Asian/Latino	6	3.75 <sup>g</sup>	0.61
Black/Latino	13	2.50	1.31
Black, not Hispanic	321	3.23 <sup>c</sup>	1.07
White, not Hispanic	961	3.21 <sup>d</sup>	1.02
Asian, not Hispanic	591	3.21 <sup>e</sup>	1.24
Latino	1099	1.66 <sup>abcefg</sup>	0.94
Total	3150	2.65	1.28
<i>F</i>		173.68* (9, 3140)	

Note. Values in the same column with the same superscript character are significantly different from each other at  $p < 0.05$ .

\* $p < 0.001$ .

analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted, with age and parental education as dependent variables. Groups did not differ significantly with respect to age. However, significant differences were found with respect to parental education,  $F(9, 3140) = 173.68, p < 0.001$ . Scheffé post hoc analyses revealed that Latino/White adolescents scored significantly higher than Latino adolescents on parental education (see Table III). Furthermore, Scheffé's post hoc analyses revealed that Latino adolescents differed significantly from other monoracial and biracial groups, with their reported levels of parental education being lower than that reported by Asian/White, Black/White, Latino/White, Asian/Latino, Black, White, and Asian adolescents. Because of significant differences that emerged, all further analyses that included monoracial Latino participants were conducted controlling for parental education.

### Examining Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem

Given that previous research has grouped all mixed-race participants together, 2 one-way ANOVAs were initially performed to examine possible differences among biracial adolescents, in terms of ethnic identity and self-esteem. Results indicated that biracial subgroups did not differ significantly from each other on self-esteem or ethnic identity. Given that biracial subgroups did not differ significantly with regard to self-esteem or ethnic identity, all biracial adolescents were treated as one group in subsequent analyses.

To examine whether differences on ethnic identity and self-esteem existed between biracial adolescents and

monoracial adolescents, 2 ANCOVAs were conducted, controlling for parental education. In addition, ANCOVAs with significant values were followed up with post hoc analyses. Finally, the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem was examined among all racial groups.

### Self-Esteem

After controlling for parental education, a one-way ANCOVA revealed that biracial and monoracial adolescents differed significantly with respect to self-esteem,  $F(4, 2814) = 21.46, p < .001$ . Post hoc analyses revealed that biracial adolescents reported lower self-esteem than Black adolescents ( $M = 31.68, SD = 4.99$  and  $M = 34.00$  and  $SD = 4.63$ , respectively). In addition, significant differences were found between biracial and Asian adolescents, with the former reporting higher levels of self-esteem ( $M = 30.65, = 5.13$ ). No other significant differences emerged.

### Ethnic Identity

After controlling for parental education, a one-way ANCOVA revealed that biracial and monoracial adolescents differed significantly on ethnic identity,  $F(4, 2673) = 128.59, p < .001$ . Scheffé post hoc analyses revealed that biracial adolescents differed significantly from all other groups. Specifically, biracial adolescents reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity ( $M = 37.12, = 7.49$ ) than White adolescents ( $M = 35.13, = 7.58$ ). Conversely, biracial adolescents reported significantly lower levels of ethnic identity than Latino ( $M = 39.98, = 6.66$ ), Black ( $M = 42.09, SD = 7.20$ ), and Asian adolescents ( $M = 42.99, SD = 6.97$ ).

### Relationship Between Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem

To explore the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem among biracial and monoracial adolescents, partial correlational analyses were conducted. After controlling for parental education, significant positive relationships emerged for all groups (see Table IV). That is, higher scores on ethnic identity were associated with higher scores on self-esteem among biracial, White, Black, Asian, and Latino adolescents.

In addition, correlation coefficients between ethnic identity and self-esteem were compared among the 5 groups (i.e., Biracial, White, Black, Asian, and Latino) by converting them into  $z$  scores and checking for statistical difference. No significant differences emerged.

**Table IV.** Partial Correlations Between Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem for Biracial and Monoracial Adolescents

	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Biracial	133	0.19*
Black, not Hispanic	238	0.29**
White, not Hispanic	772	0.14**
Asian, not Hispanic	491	0.20**
Latino	802	0.19**

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## DISCUSSION

This study examined self-esteem, ethnic identity, and the relationship between these two constructs among a multiethnic sample of adolescents. This study improved upon previous work on biracial individuals in several ways. First, a large representative sample of adolescents was obtained. Second, the racial group membership of participants was based on the race of their parents, allowing for identification of both biracial and monoracial adolescents that was *not based* on self-ascribed labels. Next, differences among biracial subgroups were examined *before* creating a broader biracial category, acknowledging the existence of possible within-group differences. Finally, this study measured contemporary attitudes of adolescents, rather than relying on retrospective reports of adults.

### Self-Esteem Differences

Previous research findings regarding racial/ethnic differences in self-esteem are inconclusive, with some studies finding higher, some lower, and yet others finding indistinguishable levels of self-esteem for biracial adolescents in comparison to their monoracial peers. Findings indicated that the biracial adolescents in this study had significantly lower self-esteem than Black adolescents, but significantly higher self-esteem than Asian adolescents. These results are consistent with common perceptions that Blacks generally have high self-esteem and Asians tend to have low self-esteem (Porter and Washington, 1993), but more research is needed to determine why biracial adolescents differ from these two groups. Because of the lack of research on self-esteem among biracial individuals, it is difficult to explain the group's scoring patterns. Nevertheless, previous research provides a possible rationale for why Black students scored higher on the measure of self-esteem, and Asian adolescents scored lower, compared to their biracial peers.

Higher levels of self-esteem found among Blacks have been traced to factors such as resilience against dis-

crimination and strong community support (e.g., Porter and Washington, 1993), while lower levels of self-esteem among Asian Americans have been attributed to cultural marginality due to recent immigration (e.g., Porter and Washington, 1993) and collectivist, rather than individualist, worldviews (e.g., Diener and Diener, 1995). While biracial adolescents may lack the strong community network that Blacks experience due to social marginality or lack of acceptance, they may benefit from being bicultural, putting them in between their Black and Asian counterparts in terms of levels of self-esteem. It has been suggested that individuals who are competent in multiple cultures have a broader base of social support, more positive attitudes toward both cultures, and a strong sense of personal identity and efficacy (LaFromboise *et al.*, 1993). Thus, it is possible that the adolescents in this study received differential levels of social support in the communities, resulting from their varied ethnic/racial backgrounds, and that this variation may partially explain the differences we found in self-esteem.

In addition, the national origin of the current Asian sample may provide some insight. The majority of the Asian adolescents in this sample identified as Vietnamese, Indian, and Pakistani. Previous research indicates that while South Asian Americans value self-esteem through similar concepts such as self-respect, dignity, and self-control, they also emphasize humility, which can be misinterpreted in the United States as displaying a low self-concept (Ibrahim *et al.*, 1997). These cultural values may influence Asian adolescents to respond more modestly to items regarding personal self-esteem, resulting in lower scores on Western measures of self-esteem, such as the one employed in this study. These interpretations are speculative, however, and further research is necessary in order to determine the factors that may be contributing to these differences.

### Differences in Ethnic Identity

Results of this study indicate that biracial adolescents had reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity than White adolescents. This is consistent with previous research findings that attribute higher levels of ethnic identity to minority groups because of the salience of race and ethnicity (Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Phinney and Alipuria, 1996). It is possible that the complexity of ethnic identity development for biracial adolescents (Brown, 2001; Williams and Thornton, 1998) may lead to greater identity exploration for biracial individuals than for Whites, resulting in higher ethnic identity scores for biracial adolescents.

Conversely, biracial adolescents in this study scored significantly lower on ethnic identity in comparison to Black, Latino, and Asian adolescents. This suggests that the increased level of exploration for the biracial group, which may have resulted in higher ethnic identity scores when compared to White adolescents may still be lower when compared to other ethnic minority groups. It is possible that while biracial adolescents may explore their ethnicity more than their White peers, they are not at the same level of exploration and/or commitment as their ethnic minority peers, which may be evidenced by their significantly lower scores on ethnic identity. Perhaps, when compared to their ethnic minority peers, biracial adolescents have more confusion, less commitment, or inconsistency in their feelings about ethnicity, which result in lower scores. Future research is needed in which the variation in the components of ethnic identity (i.e., exploration and commitment) is examined among the different groups.

Finally, examining the limitations of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) may reveal additional explanations for why biracial adolescents scored lower than the other minority groups in the study. For instance, the wording of certain items in the MEIM may lead biracial individuals to interpret the questions as inquiring about the group that they tend to identify with more strongly, or about their unique combination of ethnic backgrounds (Spencer *et al.*, 2000), potentially causing individuals to omit confusing questions or to alternate reference groups. Moreover, while some statements are easily answered in reference to a biracial identity (e.g., “I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to”), some items are difficult or nearly impossible to answer (e.g., “I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs”). More research, especially studies incorporating qualitative methods, must be conducted in order to further examine which ethnic/racial group biracial individuals are referencing for each question, as well as to establish exactly what these questions and scores mean for biracial individuals.

### **The Relationship Between Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem**

As expected, we found a significant, positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem for all groups. This indicates that adolescents who score highly on ethnic identity also tend to demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem. One explanation for this robust relationship is that high levels of ethnic identity serve to protect individuals from the effects of negative stereotypes and discrimination by providing them a larger frame of reference

with which to identify and, in turn, protecting their psychological well-being (Martinez and Dukes, 1997). This relationship holds for the White students in this sample as well, most likely because they were a numeric minority in 2 of the 3 high schools surveyed. Previous research has shown that Whites resemble ethnic minorities in terms of the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem when they are the minority in a specific setting (Phinney, 1992). Because of the low magnitude of the correlations for all groups, however, more research is needed to examine other mediating factors in the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem (Phinney *et al.*, 1997). These findings have important implications for intervention programs, youth programs, and multicultural education in that they suggest the importance of promoting both healthy self-esteem as well as positive ethnic identity development as critical to adolescent adjustment.

A limitation of this study resulting from its cross-sectional design is that we are unable to determine the causal direction of this relationship. Previous research has suggested that ethnic identity and self-esteem interact simultaneously, so that adolescents with higher self-esteem are more likely to engage in successful ethnic identity exploration, while a clearer understanding of one’s ethnicity promotes positive self-esteem (Phinney and Chavira, 1992). Consequently, further research utilizing longitudinal designs are needed to further examine the direction of causality between these two constructs.

Further, while our use of parents’ race as reported by adolescents as a means to identify biracial individuals was a strength of this study, it simultaneously served as a limitation in that we relied solely on 1 method of classification. Different methodologies (i.e., self-report, report of parents’ race, third-party referrals) have been used by several researchers in previous studies to identify biracial participants, and this inconsistency has been a general limitation of studying this population. Ideally, future research that examines biracial individuals should use a combination of methods to identify biracial participants.

In closing, out of a vast review of scholarly literature, only 6 empirical studies were found regarding the ethnic identity and self-esteem of biracial adolescents. The potential contribution of this study is substantial in that it stands to increase the scholarly discourse on biracial psychological adjustment, and it helps to fill in the gaps of existing literature by providing empirical data on biracial adolescents. Although much remains to be learned about the ethnic identity and self-esteem of biracial adolescents, it can be stated that multiple heritages may require more complex negotiation of ethnic identity for biracial adolescents, yet their psychological adjustment remains healthy.

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