

EXAMINING THE RELATION BETWEEN ETHNIC IDENTITY AND  
COMPETENCE AMONG LATINO EARLY ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

Adolescence is an important period of time to study ethnic identity because it is when adolescents begin to have the cognitive maturity to evaluate their sense of self as it relates to their ethnic membership. Furthermore, strong ethnic identity has been linked to positive outcomes among Latino adolescents. Using data from 282 Latino sixth graders in a south central city (53 % female), the central goal of this study was to examine the relationships between aspects of ethnic identity (i.e., private regard and public regard) and physical, academic, and social competence. Findings revealed a significant main effect for gender and a significant interaction between gender and ethnic identity-public regard in predicting competence, such that males were more likely to report higher levels of competence than females. Furthermore, higher levels of ethnic identity-public regard predicted higher levels of competence among males than among females. Future research should consider a longitudinal design to consider bidirectional relationships and changes over time.

*Keywords:* adolescent, competence, ethnic identity, gender, Latino

## **Examining the Relation between Ethnic Identity and Competence among Latino Early Adolescents**

Much research is available for European American children living in the United States that identifies their obstacles and achievements; however, this is less true for Latino youth and, as a result, the nation is lacking knowledge about a fast-growing and diverse group of children (Murphey, Guzman, and Torrez, 2014). As of 2014, Latinos represent 17% (55 million) of the US population and in 2060 are projected to account for 29% (119 million) of the US population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). For example, Texas is one of four states considered majority-minority, meaning that at least 50% of the population consists of minority groups ((Heuman, Scholl, & Wilkinson, 2013). Therefore, identifying predictors to Latino youth's developmental competencies is imperative for the success of the Latino community and society at large.

The theoretical framework focusing on the developmental competencies of minority children (i.e., the integrative model on child development; García Coll et. al., 1996) suggests that children do not simply collect experiences, but that their experiences influence their contribution to their own socialization and family processes (day-to-day experiences and interactions). Furthermore, competencies emerge as a direct function of family processes, individual contributions of adaptive culture, and a child's own characteristics. Focusing on individual contributions, it is likely that ethnic identity, a sense of self as a member of an ethnic group and feelings associated with that membership (Phinney, 1990), can play a particularly important role for the competencies of Latino youth. Strong ethnic identity has been linked to high academic achievement (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006); this success reflects academic competence, one of four

domain-specific areas defined by the proponents of the Positive Youth Development perspective (e.g., Lerner et. al., 2005). Therefore, ethnic identity may be an important predictor of overall competence. Furthermore, whether ethnic identity matters for competence might depend on gender; Phinney (1990) suggested that differing cultural expectations between men and women has led to greater ethnic involvement by women. Thus, the goals of the study were twofold: (a) to examine the relationship between ethnic identity (i.e., private and public regard) and competence and (b) whether gender moderated the relationship between ethnic identity and competence.

### **Ethnic Identity and Latino Adolescent Competence**

**Ethnic identity.** In adolescence, the development of ethnic identity involves examining and actively questioning what it would mean to be a member of their ethnic group; it also involves the degree to which the individual is attached and has a sense of belonging to the ethnic group (Else-Quest, 2015). It is not until after adolescence that individuals develop the abstract thinking necessary to consider issues concerning identity (Umaña-Taylor, et. al., 2014). For example, prior to adolescence, children categorize by more concrete labels (e.g., I'm brown, my friend is blonde); in adolescence, youth begin to understand these labels in more complex ways, becoming more aware of the impact ethnicity has on life chances and social experiences (García Coll et al., 1996).

As identity is viewed as more complex it can be broken down into 2 separate categories, public regard and private regard. Private regard in reference to ethnicity is an individual mental process regarding the in-group; for example, a feeling of group esteem, group pride, group affirmation, or feelings of belonging to the group (Fuligni, Hughes, & Way, 2009). The sense of self that is related to the ethnic group might be due to the

extent children value and feel proud of their heritage at a young age and whether or not this pride carries into adolescence. (Hughes, Way, & Rivas-Drake, 2011). Public regard in reference to ethnicity is described as the extent to which an individual believes others value their group socially. In other words, this is the extent to which individuals perceive others perceiving them as a member of a particular ethnic group and the value they perceive others place on this group membership. Studies examining the relationship between public regard and youth adjustment outcomes highlight that if an individual believes that others view their ethnic group more favorably they are likely to experience more positive outcomes (e.g., have high academic motivation and engagement; Hughes, Way, & Rivas-Drake, 2011).

Children will often adopt their parent's core values and beliefs and use them when forming their own opinions about their identity. However, as children transition into adolescence, they spend less time with their family and more time among their peers. During this time, they may challenge their parents' beliefs and be further influenced by their surrounding peers (Lerner, et. al., 2005). The influence from peers and people outside of the family may expose individuals to more opinions and beliefs dissimilar from their own. Depending on what these influences are they may either reaffirm or negatively impact an adolescent's public regard for their ethnicity. If the influence has a negative impact on public regard, it may also decrease the benefits that have been associated with positive ethnic identity development.

**Ethnic identity and competence.** Much of the research available has documented consistent links between ethnic identity and positive adjustment. For example, there are studies that find positive associations between ethnic identity and

academic outcomes, adaptive relationships, well-being, and self-esteem (Harter, 2006; Eccles & Rogers, 2003; Kiang, 2010; Harter, 2006; Torres & Rollock, 2007). However, we know little on whether ethnic identity predicts overall competence (e.g., physical, academic, and social).

As children enter the period of adolescence, they may experience developmental stressors, such as cognitive, social, peer, biological, and familial. For Latino youth, developing high levels of ethnic identity can act as a protective factor against distress. According to Hughes, Way, and Rivas-Drake, (2011), adolescents who had a higher private ethnic identity showed to have greater psychological well-being, a greater academic investment, lower perceived stress, and higher self-esteem. Distress may also be mitigated by high competence. Researchers have found that competence was negatively associated with distress (Arroyo & Segrin, 2013; Pomerantz & Rudolph 2003). Pomerantz et. al. (2003) found that emotional distress in particular led youth to underestimate their own competence, negatively impacting their performance. This highlights the importance of finding indicators of high competence in order to counterbalance the negative impact of distress. A sense of ethnic identification may act as a constant from which youth can seek comfort when coping with the many changes they face (Hernandez, 2014).

**Gender.** Research has shown that boys indicate having a higher sense of competence when looking at physical ability whereas girls have shown to exhibit higher levels of social and cognitive competence (Birndorf, Ryan, Auinger, & Aten, 2005; Santo, Bukowski, Stella-Lopez, Carmago, Mayman, & Adams, 2013; Ahmed, 2012; Westling, Andrews, & Peterson, 2012. However Findlay & Bowker (2009) found that

adolescent females who participated in physical activity had a higher increase in competence than boys indicated girls may have a higher competence than boys. Ethnic identity can influence the way gender plays a role when we look culture. For example, western culture affords, more lenience concerning autonomy and other cultures may have conflicting gender expectations for women (Ahmed, 2012; Phinney, 1990) so it is possible men will be able to develop higher competence because gender expectations between cultures are less conflicting for males than for females.

### **Present Study**

The goals of the study were twofold: (a) to examine the relationship between ethnic identity (i.e., private and public regard) and competence and (b) whether gender moderated the relationship between ethnic identity and competence. Specifically, I expected positive relationships between ethnic identity-private regard and competence and between ethnic-identity-public regard and competence. Furthermore, I examined whether these relationships differed for adolescent girls and boys. I expected that the relationship between ethnic identity and competence would be stronger for females than for males.

### **Method**

Participants for this study were 6th grade students from a middle school in a south central city (N=282; 53% female). Based on district-reported demographics, 68.3 % of the 6th graders in the district identified as Latino and 75% of the students were eligible for the free/reduced price lunch program. Eligibility was based on students' grade level and school attended.

## Participants

Of the 536 6th graders, 445 (52% female;  $M_{age} = 11.68$  years,  $SD = .62$ ; 31.2% bilingual in English and Spanish) participated in the study. The remaining 91 students were absent or did not receive parental consent. For this study, only those who identified themselves as Latino ( $N=282$ ; 53% female;  $M_{age} = 11.66$  years,  $SD = .63$ ; 46% bilingual in English and Spanish) were included. 75% of the students were eligible for the free/reduced price lunch program.

## Procedure

Recruitment letters were sent to all of the 6th graders' homes in English and Spanish and passive consent was received for all students who participated in the study. Bilingual staff made follow-up phone calls to all parents to provide more information about the project, confirm eligibility, and answer any questions.

Members of the research team went to the 6th grade center to distribute pencil-paper questionnaires during a social studies class period. Research assistants were available to answer any questions during the survey. It was expected that the questionnaire would take students approximately 10 minutes to complete but instead it took around 40 minutes.

## Measures

**Ethnic Identity.** Ethnic identity was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Similar to multi-ethnic work by Yip et al. (2014), items from the MIBI were shortened and "Black people/community" was replaced with "my ethnic

group” to be relevant to any ethnicity. Adolescents reported their agreement to the items on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Ethnic identity-private regard was based on the mean of five items (e.g., “I have a strong attachment to other members of my ethnic group,” and “I am happy that I am a member of my ethnic group”;  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ , Cronbach’s alpha = .947). Higher scores for these items indicated higher levels of private regard.

Ethnic identity-public regard was based on the mean of four items (e.g., “Overall, my ethnic group is considered good by others,” and “In general, others respect members of my ethnic group”;  $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ , Cronbach’s alpha = .924). Higher scores for these items indicated higher levels of public regard.

**Competence.** Adolescents reported on indicators of the “5 C’s” of Positive Youth Development (i.e. competence, connection, caring, character, and confidence; Geldhof et al., 2014). This study focused on the competence subscale, which was based on the mean of six items that indicate physical, academic, and social competence. An example of an item indicating physical competence is “(a) Some kids feel that they are *better* than others their age at sports, BUT (b) Other kids *don’t* feel they can play well”. An example of an item indicating academic competence is “(a) Some kids do *very well* at their class work, BUT (b) Other kids *don’t* do very well at their class work”. An example of an item indicating social competence is “(a) Some kids are *popular* with others their age, BUT (b) Other kids are *not* very popular”. The competence subscale of Positive Youth Development was measured using a scale of 4 ;where 1= really true for me(a), 2= sort of true for me (a), 3= sort of true for me (b), 4= really true for me (b). Scores were averaged

representing;  $M=3.99$ ,  $SD=.608$ , Cronbach's alpha = .653; Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013).

**Demographic Variables.** Demographic questions included age, gender, family origin, and language fluency. An open-ended question was included so that participants could indicate fluent language(s) other than English. Answers to this question were used to identify students who are bilingual in English and Spanish. This study will focus on a Latino adolescent population consisting of boys and girls attending the 6th grade, their last year of middle school around the ages 11 and 13. For the purpose of assessing positive trends the factors that will be included are the 5 C's of positive youth development (Geldhof et al., 2014)and an adapted version of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Yip et al. 2014).

**Analytic Plan.** The analyses for this study were conducted using SPSS. The data for this study only included students who indicated being Hispanic or Mexican in the demographic section of the survey. Regression analyses were conducted to test ethnic identity-private regard and ethnic identity-public regard as predictors of competence (Goal 1). Further, to test gender as a moderator in the relations between both subscales of ethnic identity and competence (Goal 2), both subscales of ethnic identity and gender were centered at the group mean, following the procedures of Aiken & West (1991). Further, interaction terms were created with the centered variables and included in regression models. See Table 1 for correlation table and demographic information for all study variables.

## Results

Regression analyses revealed a main effect between both ethnic identity-private regard and competence, ( $\beta = -.249$ ,  $t (-3.18) = .002$ ,  $p < .005$ ). However, when examining ethnic identity-public regard gender and the interaction term, Male Ethnic Identity-Public Regard, emerged as significant ( $\beta = -.205$ ,  $t (-3.18) = .002$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Males were more likely to report higher levels of competence than females. Furthermore, higher levels of ethnic identity-public regard predicted higher levels of competence among males than among females. See Table 2 and 3 for regression analysis for all study variables.

## Discussion

The results for goal one showed no significant relationship between ethnic identity and competence. Contrary to original expectations competence was only related to public regard for ethnic identity. Furthermore the relationship between public regard and competence was only significant for males. Harter (2006) suggested in a context where people feel their ethnic group is valued by others they are more likely to exhibit competence in the form of academic success. In contrast, when individuals feel that the environment they are in is controlling, the psychological need for belonging and innate motivation is obstructed (Patall et al., 2014).

Future research should explore the effects of the environment. This may be a possible explanation for why results did not indicate a significant relationship between private regard for ethnic identity and competence, because regardless of internalized identity of ethnicity if the environment is not supportive of that ethnic group the environment will discourage the development of competence.

A second expectation of the study was that the relationship between ethnic identity and competence would be stronger in females than in males. It is possible that this result is due to the young age of the participants; ethnic identity development is a process that starts in adolescence and because these participants are sixth graders they are just becoming aware of this identity exploration. A significant amount of data indicated competence would be higher in women (Santo, Bukowski, Stella-Lopez, Carmago, Mayman, & Ahmed, 2012; Findlay & Bowker, 2009), however when Westling, Andrews, & Peterson (2012) looked at gender differences among 6<sup>th</sup> grade adolescents as a predictor of competence they found no significant difference between males and females. However this does not mean the results of this study do not indicate that a relationship exists.

A possible reason there was no significant relationship found between private ethnic regard and competence is because of the age of the participants used for this study. The students in this study ranged from ages 11 to 13. The period of adolescence starts roughly around 10 to 12 years of age and extends until 18 to 22 years of age (Santrock, 1996). Perhaps private ethnic regard is an indicator of competence but cannot be determined this early in the adolescent period. Another factor that was not taken into account was the development of competence over time. Some of the limitations of this study were limited time frame, age of participants, and limited sample size. This data were only collected once so a change in competence as adolescents age and their ethnic identity becomes more concrete could not be observed.

Future studies should consider conducting a longitudinal models to see how competence develops as the adolescent gets older. It may also be beneficial to account for

motivation as an indicator of competence development. Research should continue to dissect the nature of the relationship between competence and identity in order to determine if these two factors can act as indicators of future performance.

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## Appendix

Table 1

*Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

	Ethnic Identity- Private	Ethnic Identity- Public	Gender	Competence
Ethnic Identity- Private	--	.855*	.075	.022
Ethnic Identity- Public	.855*	--	.107	.043
Gender	.075	.107	--	-.204*
Competence	.022	.043	-.204*	--

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Latino	Mean	3.932	3.824	3.989
	(SD)	(1.084)	(1.090)	(0.608)

Table 2

*Regression Analysis for Study Variable Private*

	$\beta$	p-value
Gender	-.249	.002
Ethnic Identity- Private	.072	.178
privateXgender	-.105	.156

\* Notes.  $R^2 = .053$  ( $p < .05$ )

Table 3 <i>Regression Analysis for Study Variable Public</i>		
	$\beta$	p-value
Gender	-.250	.002
Ethnic Identity Public	.115	.027
publicXgender	-.166	.025

\* Notes.  $R^2 = .009$  ( $p < .05$ )