

Ethnic Identity Development across the Transition from High School to College

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to extend research of ethnic identity development by examining how three components of ethnic identity: ethnic search, and commitment; change across the transition from high school to college. As part of a larger longitudinal study, we recruited students from three public high schools in the Buffalo area. In the 12th grade, we asked the participants to complete a questionnaire, containing a revised Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992) Two years later, we invited participants via e-mail, telephone, and mail to complete a similar questionnaire using a commercial, web-based survey service. Participants were more likely to commit to their ethnic identity while in college while similarly there was a normative increase in ethnic achievement over time. Contrarily, the participants reported significantly higher for ethnic search while in high school than in college.

Keywords: ethnic identity development, self reports, college transition, MEIM

Ethnic Identity Development across the Transition from High School to College

Literature Review

For ethnic minorities in the United States, their status as a minority heightens the awareness of their ethnicity and contributes to the important developmental task of both ethnic identity formation and commitment. Ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a fundamental aspect of the self that is associated with an individual's sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group and includes an individual's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors associated with ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1996). How well they explore and commit to an ethnic identity determines their developmental stage. Through an ethnic socialization process that begins in childhood, individuals acquire the behaviors, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group and begin to see themselves as a part of that group.

Refining and extending the work of Erik Erikson, James Marcia came up with four Identity Statuses of psychological identity development. The statuses basically state that one's sense of identity is determined largely by the choices and commitments. The first identity status, identity diffusion, Identity foreclosure refers to the stage where adolescents are not actively trying to determine what is important to them. The third identity status is called moratorium. Youth are said to have achieved their identity by a process of active exploration and strong commitment to a particular set of values, beliefs, and life goals.

Jean Phinney adopted Marcia's work and further theorized that people go through four stages of ethnic identity development: achieved, in moratorium, foreclosed, and diffused, respectively. The relation between ethnic identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and healthy psychological functioning of adolescents and young adults increasingly has become recognized.

Chavira and Phinney (1991) found that adolescents with high ethnic identity had higher self esteem and were more proficient in dealing with threats such as discrimination and stereotypes. Similarly, results from one of his studies found significantly higher scores on ethnic identity achievement among college students than among high school students.

For ethnic minorities in the United States, their status as a minority heightens the awareness of their ethnicity and contributes to the important developmental task of both ethnic identity formation and commitment. One goal of this study is to extend research of ethnic identity development by examining how three components of ethnic identity: ethnic search, and commitment; change across the transition from high school to college. We are expecting to see an increase across all three components of ethnic identity.

Phinney (1990) found that individuals who establish a clear understanding of their ethnic group membership are likely to experience greater well-being and adjustment. Chavira and Phinney (1991) further emphasized the relationship between ethnic identity and self esteem. The study found that adolescents with high ethnic identity had higher self esteem and were more proficient in dealing with threats such as discrimination and stereotypes. Similarly, results from one of Phinney's studies found significantly higher scores on ethnic identity achievement among college students than among high school students. Ethnic identity is characterized by someone's race, religion, country of origin, language, and cultural background and is considered important because of its relationship to the psychological well being of ethnic minority group members.

Studies on changes in ethnic identity have focused primarily on the high school years and have yielded somewhat inconsistent findings. Some studies, such as (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006), have observed an increase in ethnic identity, whereas Pahl and Way (2006) found

that ethnic identity decreased. Other research (Fuligni, Kiang, Witkow, & Baldelomar, 2008) noted no changes in ethnic identity during the high school years.

Arnett (2000) proposed that emerging adulthood, the period between adolescence and adulthood, is an important time when young adults have increased independence to explore their interests in order to establish a sense of who they are and to understand their place in society. Likewise, recent research has provided evidence that college attendance facilitates students' exploration and understanding about the role that ethnicity plays in their lives and their adjustment to mainstream U.S. society (Syed & Azmitia, 2010).

Methods

Participants

As part of a larger longitudinal study, we recruited students from three public high schools in the Buffalo area. The student population of these schools differed somewhat in terms of their ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Out of the three, one school was dominated by a single ethnic group (Caucasian). We recruited the entire 12th grade of each school. Of the original sample of 646 students, 425 (66%) students participated again 2 years after high school. Our present sample of participants included 468 students (M: 20.74 years, SD:0.43), who participated in both parts of the study and were enrolled in either a 2-year college (161; 34%) or a 4-year college (286; 61%) at the time of the subsequent questionnaire.

Materials

The measure contained 12 items: 5 ethnic identity search (items 1,2,4,8,10), 7 achievement and/or commitment (3,5,6,7,9,11,12), and 3 questions on self identification of ethnicity, father's and mother's ethnicity. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree through 4= strongly agree).

Procedure

In the 12th grade, we asked the participants to complete a 2 page questionnaire, which in a brief introduction, explained the idea of ethnic identity and assessed various domains including identity, academic achievement, and well being. We allotted participants class time to complete the questionnaire. The response rate approached 100%. Two years later, we invited participants via e-mail, telephone, and mail to complete a similar questionnaire using a commercial, web-based survey service.

Results

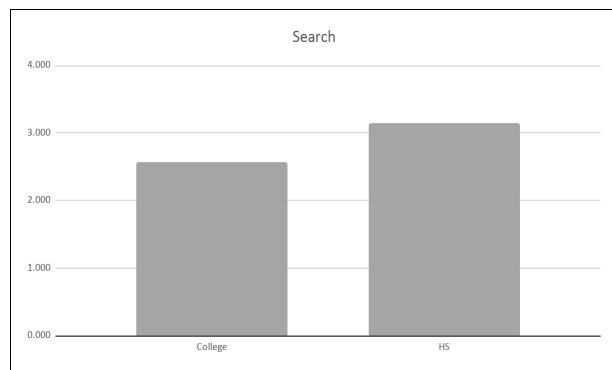
We were expecting to see an increase across all three components of ethnic identity (search, commitment, and achievement) during the transition from high school to college. As reflected in table 1, the results supported this hypothesis, except for the search component. There was a normative decrease in ethnic search over time. The participants reported significantly higher for ethnic search while in high school ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.51$) rather than in college ($M = 2.567$, $SD = 0.585$), $t=2.96$, $df=202$, $p<0.001$. Change in search did not differ according to ethnicity or gender.

As shown in graph 2, results indicated a significant increase in ethnic identity commitment across the transition from high school ($M = 2.927$, $SD = 0.591$) to college ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.49$), $t=3.01$, $df=202$, $p<0.1$. Participants were more likely to commit to their ethnic identity while in college, supporting our hypothesis. As shown on graph 3, there was a normative increase in ethnic achievement over time. Participants reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity achievement in college ($M = 2.747$, $SD = 0.528$) than high school ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.54$), $t=2.45$ $df=202$, $p<0.1$.

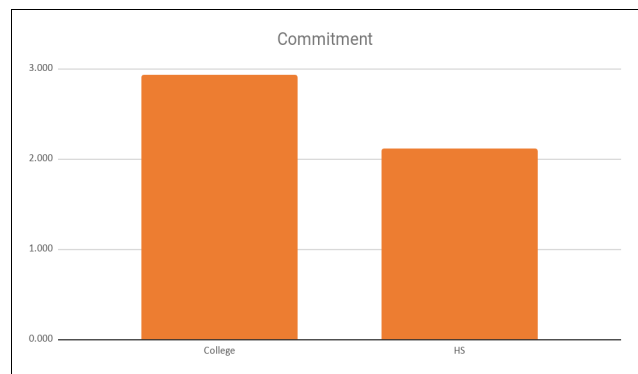
Our initial hypothesis was supported by normative increases in ethnic commitment and achievement over time. However, there was a normative decrease across the transition from high school to college. Change also did not vary according to college type (2 year vs 4 year). 12th-grade extracurricular involvement in high school was higher for individuals who participated in the follow-up.

Table 1:

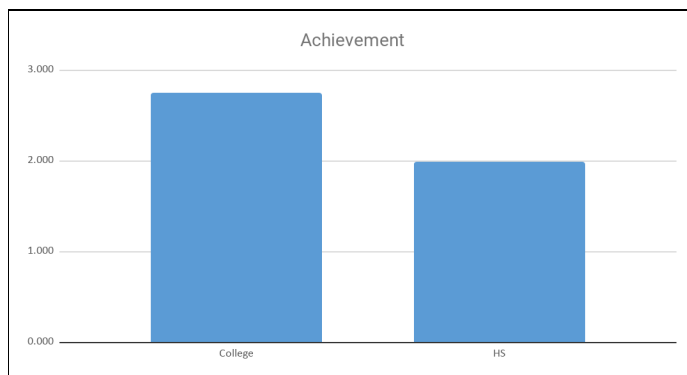
N	Achievement		Commitment		Search	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
College (425)	2.747	0.528	2.927	0.591	2.567	0.585
HS (646)	1.98	0.54	2.12	0.49	3.14	0.51



Graph 1



Graph 2



Graph 3

Discussion

Ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a fundamental aspect of the self that is associated with an individual's sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group and includes an individual's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviors associated with ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1996). The goal of this study was to extend research of ethnic identity development by examining how three components of ethnic identity: ethnic search, commitment, and achievement change across the transition from high school to college. We were expecting to see an increase across all three aforementioned components of ethnic identity during this period of time. Our findings supported this hypothesis for the commitment and achievement components, whereas there was a normative decrease in ethnic search over time. Results showed a significant increase in ethnic identity commitment across the transition from high school to college indicating that participants were more likely to commit to their ethnic identity while in college. Furthermore, there was a normative increase in ethnic achievement over time. Participants reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity achievement in college than high school. These findings support our initial hypothesis. Our study suggests that there are greater opportunities, such as extracurricular activities, at colleges than high school's that facilitate exploration of one's cultural background.

Likewise, recent research has provided evidence that college attendance facilitates students' exploration and understanding about the role that ethnicity plays in their lives and their adjustment to mainstream U.S. society (Syed & Azmitia, 2010). It is possible that young adults established a relatively strong understanding of and belonging to their ethnic group during the

transition from high school to college. Arnett (2000) proposed that emerging adulthood, the period between adolescence and adulthood, is an important time when young adults have increased independence to explore their interests in order to establish a sense of who they are and to understand their place in society. Studies on changes in ethnic identity have focused primarily on the high school years and neglected to focus on long term changes. These studies have yielded inconsistent findings, such as (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006), which observed an increase in ethnic identity, similar to our findings. In contrast, Pahl and Way (2006) found that ethnic identity decreased while (Fuligni, Kiang, Witkow, & Baldelomar, 2008) noted no changes in ethnic identity during the high school years.

A limitation in our study is that our sample consisted of primarily students in high school and college. We did not have a sample of non-college-going adults to observe and analyze their ethnic identity development. Also, since our study focused on long term effects of the transition to college, we did not have data immediately after the participants transition to college. Lastly, there are extraneous variables that may have influenced ethnic identity development across the transition from high school to college that we were not able to manipulate. Future research should attempt to administer this study to participants not in school, to further analyze how ethnic identity develops across other transitions. We were also not able to control for extraneous variables during high school that may have influenced students' choice to attend a 2- or 4-year college.

The goal of this study was to extend research of ethnic identity development by examining how three components of ethnic identity (ethnic search, commitment, and achievement) change across the transition from high school to college. Results showed

normative increases in all components of ethnic identity development except for search, which showed a normative decrease. Participants were more likely to commit to their ethnic identity and reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity achievement while in college. Our study suggests that there are greater opportunities, such as extracurricular activities, at colleges than high school's that facilitate exploration of one's cultural background.

Understanding the trajectories of ethnic identity can contribute to understanding of how different social contexts, such as school or the workforce, that adolescents enter could provide different opportunities for individuals to explore the significance of their ethnicity. Our study suggests that there are greater opportunities, extracurricular activities such as fraternities or clubs, at colleges than high school's that allow adolescents to explore their cultural background. Future research should aim to determine what features of these activities play the most significant role in adolescents' ethnic identity development. This study highlights that ethnic identity change is associated with the type of contexts that young adults enter.

References

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