American Behavioral Scientist

Understanding Ethnic Diversity: The Role of Ethnic Identity
JEAN S. PHINNEY

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/40/2/143

Published by:

SAGE Publications

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *American Behavioral Scientist* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://abs.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 7 articles hosted on the
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/40/2/143

Understanding Ethnic Diversity

The Role of Ethnic Identity

JEAN S. PHINNEY
California State University, Los Angeles

Models of minority ethnic identity and White identity development are described, along with examples of ways in which the models can be used as heuristics for helping students to think about their own and others' ethnicity. Ethnic or racial identity formation depends on a process of exploration that includes questioning preexisting ethnic attitudes and searching into the past and present experiences of one's group and its relations with other groups. This process leads ideally to the development of a secure, positive sense of one's identity as a member of an ethnic or racial group, together with an acceptance of other groups. By exploring their own and others' ethnic identity, students can gain insight into the implications of ethnicity in a diverse society.

Social scientists interested in understanding and teaching about ethnic diversity face a difficult task. The topic of ethnicity lacks a clear theoretical framework and has only a limited empirical base. Although most people have a commonsense notion of ethnicity, precise delineations of specific American ethnic groups are almost impossible. Because of the differences within ethnic groups, for example, in acculturation, generation of immigration, social class, and regional influences, there is wide variation in the cultural norms and values maintained by members of an ethnic group. Group members differ also in the degree to which they have joined the American mainstream or remained in ethnic enclaves. In addition, increasing numbers of individuals from mixed ethnic backgrounds cannot be assigned to a single group and thus blur the boundaries of ethnic groups (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). For these reasons, there is limited value in attempting to describe ethnic groups objectively in generalizations assumed to apply to all members of the group (Phinney, 1996).

In contrast to approaches that aim at objective descriptions of particular ethnic groups, the study of ethnic identity involves an emphasis on how group members themselves understand and interpret their own ethnicity. Individuals vary in the degree to which they identify with their ascribed ethnic group and

the extent to which their group identity is salient and significant to them. Some people have a clear sense of commitment to their group; others feel confused and conflicted about their ethnicity. Some have strong positive emotional ties to their group, whereas others wish they belonged to a different group. Some people are highly involved in their ethnic or cultural heritage and its customs; others show little or no interest in it or feel that ethnicity is not important in their lives. These attitudes and behaviors change over time and have important implications for the ways in which individuals live their lives, interact with people from other groups, and view society as a whole. The exploration of these differences has been the goal of recent research and theorizing on the topic of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of our current understanding of ethnic identity development, with the goal of illuminating how an understanding of ethnic identity can be of value to both students and instructors who are attempting to deal with the implications of a diverse society.

Early work on ethnic identity in the United States, carried out largely by sociologists and anthropologists, focused on ethnic groups of European origin, such as the Poles or Irish, who are often referred to as White ethnics (e.g., DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1982). However, with the changing demographics of the United States, research on ethnic identity has dealt increasingly with ethnic minorities of color, particularly African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics (or Latinos), and Native Americans (Phinney, 1990). Within these groups, terminology varies considerably, with some writers, particularly those studying African Americans, using the term *racial identity* rather than ethnic identity (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990). Although both ethnicity and race can form the basis of group identity, ethnic and racial identity have been studied within different research traditions, encompassing different theoretical and methodological approaches (see Phinney & Kohatsu, in press, for a discussion). For present purposes, I use the term *ethnic identity* to include both constructs, and I discuss the commonalities across models of ethnic and racial identity formation.

In addition to research on ethnic and racial identity among minorities of color, there has been a small amount of recent work on White racial identity development (Helms, 1990), that is, the changes among members of the dominant White majority as they become aware of the meaning and implications of being White in America. There is relatively little empirical research on this topic, but the proposed model provides a useful way of thinking about the responses of White students to issues of race and ethnicity.

The models of minority ethnic identity and White identity are quite different because of the underlying fact of power differential and the history of relations between Whites and non-Whites. For ethnic minorities of color, identity formation has to do with developing an understanding and acceptance of one's own group in the face of lower status and prestige in society and the presence of stereotypes and racism. On the other hand, White racial identity formation involves becoming aware of the existence of racism and the privilege associated with being White and developing a nonracist White identity that incorporates

this awareness. Nevertheless, both include emphasis on the process of exploration about ethnicity. In the following sections I discuss each of these models. The emphasis is on minority ethnic identity because of the greater amount of research on the topic.

ETHNIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Ethnic identity has been conceptualized as a complex construct including a commitment and sense of belonging to one's ethnic group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group, and involvement in activities and traditions of the group (Phinney, 1990). Much of the research, especially studies with adults, has studied individuals at one point in time and looked at differences in the way individuals interpret their ethnicity (e.g., Ferdman, 1995).

However, both conceptual and empirical writings acknowledge that ethnic identity is a dynamic construct that changes over time and context and varies across individuals. Developmental approaches focus on the process by which an ethnic identity is formed, typically during adolescence and young adulthood. Much research in this area has been based on theoretical and empirical writings on ego identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). The ego identity literature emphasizes the importance of a moratorium or crisis phase in development, during which individuals reexamine and evaluate their childhood identifications and explore their own interests, abilities, and options. A secure identity is achieved only after one has thought through for oneself and made commitments in a variety of domains (e.g., ideology, occupation, lifestyle); these commitments then serve as a guide to future choices.

Similarly, for the domain of ethnicity, models of ethnic, racial, or minority identity development (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1993; Cross, 1991; Phinney, 1989) have all emphasized the importance for minority group members of examining and questioning preexisting attitudes and assumptions about ethnicity, as a necessary step toward identity achievement. A review of research on this topic (Phinney, 1993) suggests a common conception of the process across models. Adolescents and young adults are assumed to progress over time from an unexamined or received view of their ethnicity—based on attitudes of parents, communities, or society—through a crisis or exploration phase, in which they immerse themselves in the history and culture of their group, to an achieved, secure sense of their ethnicity.

This process is summarized in Table 1, together with the hypothesized implications of this process for attitudes and feelings about both one's own and other ethnic groups. The table includes terms used by various writers for each phase. Although the term *stages* is used here for convenience, the levels described are not conceptualized as stages in a strict sense; they do not necessarily show an invariant sequence, and they may not be experienced by all people. There is evidence that individuals progress with age to higher levels

(Phinney & Chavira, 1992), but throughout life they may reexamine aspects of their ethnicity and return to earlier stages (Parham, 1989). Writers vary on the number of stages proposed and on the terms used (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1989). Therefore, the model as presented here is intended as a guide to considering variation among young adults in their understanding of ethnicity, rather than as a theoretical explanation of the process. Development of ethnic identity is clearly influenced by many experiences, at the family, community, and societal level, but specific factors that bring about transitions have not been documented empirically.

The initial stage is described as a period when ethnicity is not salient and has been given little conscious thought. The individual, typically a child or young adolescent, accepts the values and attitudes present in his or her environment. When the family and community present a strong positive image of the group for the minority child, the child is likely to have a positive identification with the group, even though it has not been consciously examined and hence may be vague and inarticulate. However, children may also internalize negative images and stereotypes from the wider society, including those from mainstream institutions and the media. Thus children may enter adolescence with positive, negative, or mixed feelings about their ethnicity.

The model presented in Table 1 suggests that initially attitudes toward other groups, like own-group attitudes, will depend in large part on socialization in the family and on the social context. However, there has been little empirical research specifically associating ethnic identity stages with attitudes toward other groups. Helms (1990) and others (Atkinson et al., 1993; Cross, 1991) argue that minority group members at the initial stage are likely to show a preference for the White majority culture and, in turn, may be deprecating or rejecting of their own culture. However, it is not clear how widespread this attitude is, for not all minority youths experience White preference (Phinney, 1989). Furthermore, in many settings minority youths are exposed to members of groups other than Whites, and little is known about attitudes toward these other minorities at this stage. The school and neighborhood contexts are likely to play an important role in the extent to which individuals have had positive interactions with members of other groups (Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1996).

The second stage is seen as a period of search (Phinney, 1993) or immersion (Cross, 1991), during which individuals become deeply interested in knowing more about their group. Initiation of the exploration process may be stimulated in part by the developmental issues that influence ego identity more generally (Erikson, 1968). However, experience probably plays a more important role, as adolescents move into a larger world, encounter more people from backgrounds different from their own, and are increasingly exposed to discrimination. These experiences trigger the desire to understand the history, traditions, and current situation of their group. Ethnic clubs on campuses can assist students in this process, as can efforts by educational institutions to develop courses, to invite speakers, and to promote activities that give recognition to diverse cultural and

TABLE 1:   **Stages of Minority Group Ethnic Identity: Implications for Attitudes Toward One's Own and Other Ethnic Groups**

Stage	Relationship to Own Group	Relationship to Other Groups
1. Unexamined ethnic identity (diffusion or foreclosure; preencounter)	Positive, negative, or neutral, depending on socialization (in family, community).	Positive, negative, or neutral, depending on socialization. Possible White identification.
2. Moratorium or exploration (immersion/emersion; resistance)	High involvement; high salience; typically positive attitudes but possible swings of mood.	Increased awareness of racism; possible anger toward Whites and empathy for other minorities.
3. Achieved ethnic identity (internalization)	Secure sense of group membership; realistic appraisal of own group; salience may be high or low.	Can vary from acceptance and positive involvement (integration) to preference for separatism as rational approach to discrimination.

ethnic groups. At this time, ethnicity is assumed to be highly salient, and attitudes toward one's group highly positive, even ethnocentric.

As minority group members explore the history of their group within the larger society, they become increasingly aware of racism and discrimination. This knowledge is often accompanied by feelings of anger toward the dominant group for past and present wrongs. Cross (1991) highlights the negative attitudes toward Whites that are present at this time. At the same time, Atkinson et al. (1993) suggest that individuals in this stage may feel greater empathy for members of other minority groups who have shared the experience of oppression, even though these feelings can be in conflict with their strong in-group attitudes.

At the final stage, minority individuals develop a secure, confident sense of themselves as members of their group. They feel secure in their own ethnicity and are assumed to hold a positive but realistic view of their own group. Although they are comfortable with their group membership, ethnicity may or may not be salient to them; other aspects of their lives may become more important. Individuals at this stage have abandoned anger toward the majority group and are generally open to other groups, but their personal relationships with other groups may vary (Cross, 1991). Those who see the possibility of minority and majority groups working together to achieve common social goals support integration and favor working toward positive intergroup relations. However, those who are disillusioned with the status quo and see little possibility for change may believe that minorities are better off becoming self-sufficient within their own communities and thus embrace a philosophy of separatism.

The stages of ethnic identity that have been described are important conceptually but remain difficult to measure accurately, and there is not extensive empirical research to validate them. Interviews are probably the best way to study ethnic identity stages (Phinney, 1989), but they are time-consuming and difficult to code for assignment to stages. An alternate approach to measuring

ethnic identity involves the use of a questionnaire (Phinney, 1992). Rather than assessing stages, the questionnaire is based on a conceptualization of ethnic identity as a continuous variable, ranging from a low or weak identity to a high, strong, positive identity. The measure includes items that tap the extent of exploration and commitment regarding one's ethnicity and also the degree to which attitudes are positive. The measure has been found to be reliable with a wide variety of ethnic groups, including Whites, and across the age span from junior high school through college (Phinney, 1992; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, in press; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, in press; Roberts, Phinney, Romero, & Chen, 1996).

The questionnaire measure does not allow assignment of individuals to stages. However, the low scores on the scale indicate a weak or negative ethnic identity, whereas the high scores suggest a strong, positive identification with one's group. Use of the questionnaire allows for assessment of large samples in order to study correlates of ethnic identity. Research using the measure has consistently shown that ethnic minorities score higher than Whites on ethnic identity and that African Americans score higher than other minority group members (Phinney, 1992; Phinney, Dupont, Espinosa, Revill, & Sanders, 1994). Further, ethnic identity shows a low but consistent positive correlation with self-esteem across all ethnic groups including Whites (Phinney et al., in press; Roberts, et al., 1996). Ethnic identity, as measured by this scale, appears to be a characteristic of individuals that can be reliably measured, that shows variation across both individuals and ethnic groups, and that is implicated in psychological well-being (see also Phinney & Kohatsu, in press).

WHITE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Although most research and theorizing about ethnic identity has focused on ethnic minority groups, the topic of White ethnic or racial identity has been explored conceptually by Helms (1990), who has proposed a model of White identity development and carried out research using the model. Helms (1990) suggests a progression that begins with a lack of awareness of the implications of being White. The individual gives little or no thought to issues of race and ethnicity except as they relate to others. For example, in an interview study with high school students from four groups (Phinney, 1989), the White adolescents expressed little understanding of the concept of ethnicity and often assumed the term referred only to ethnic minorities, not to themselves. This lack of awareness may, with experience, give way to a growing recognition of the advantages of being White and the inequalities experienced by minorities. The dissonance that is experienced in realizing the differences between the White and minority experience leads to discomfort, guilt, and denial. Whites may at this point feel fear and anger toward people of color, who are blamed as the source of their discomfort, and may distance themselves from minorities.

Although many Whites remain at this stage, others are exposed to experiences that help them to reexamine their previous attitudes and to realize that they may have unwittingly perpetuated racism. The individual begins to abandon beliefs in White superiority. This phase may be associated with a sense of alienation from other Whites who are seen as racist. There is likely also to be exploration, similar to the immersion phase, as the individual tries to gain accurate information about what it has meant to be White in the United States. Ideally, the individual eventually attains a positive sense of self as White, together with recognition of the need to confront racism and oppression, and comes to value cultural differences. It becomes easier at this point for Whites to relate to people of color, and they become more open in their dealing with other groups.

The stages of White identity development are framed within the context of Black-White relations, and many of the items in the measure of White identity developed by Helms (1990) refer directly to Black-White relations. It is not clear to which extent the model applies in situations where Whites interact with members of other ethnic groups, such as Asian Americans or Hispanics. Furthermore, the measure taps attitudes that are seen as characteristic of each stage, but it is not easily used to assign individuals to stages. The concept of stages may therefore be useful primarily as a heuristic for understanding the ways in which Whites respond to a changing awareness of the implications for them of ethnic diversity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

The models of group identity formation suggest that college students will be at differing levels in their own ethnic or racial identity development and that their level of development will influence their response to learning about other groups. Teaching the content alone, that is, what is known about various groups, is not only problematic, as discussed earlier; it is also likely to be less effective than efforts to integrate self-knowledge and the understanding of others. Having students explore ethnic identity formation in themselves and others is an effective way of helping them learn about cultural diversity.

Two specific educational approaches based on identity models may be useful to educators. One approach involves an activity that can be carried out as one assignment in any class that deals with ethnicity (Phinney, in press). The goals of the assignment are to help students to gain an understanding of ethnic identity from the perspective of an adolescent or young adult who is dealing with the issues. To accomplish this, students are first introduced to the concepts of ethnic identity development, discussed above. They are then asked to interview one or more adolescents or young adults from an ethnic group other than their own, using an interview similar to one used in research (Phinney, 1989). The assignment depends on a context that has at least a minimal amount of diversity, so that students have access to adolescents from different backgrounds. If the

students in the class are from diverse backgrounds, class members can interview each other.

In the interviews, the interviewees are asked (in part) to identify their ethnic background and that of their parents; to comment on their interest (or lack thereof) in knowing about their background and on things they have done to learn about it; to discuss the things they like or do not like about their ethnic culture, traditions, or experiences; to evaluate the perceived impact of ethnicity on their lives now and in the future; to describe the meaning for them of their group membership and what they would like other people to know about their group; to indicate whether they would change their ethnicity if they could; and to comment on their sense of pride in their group. (Interviews can be tape-recorded to allow for subsequent analysis, transcribing, or discussion.)

Responses are likely to provide a good indication of how much respondents have thought about and can articulate the implications of their ethnicity, as well as the clarity and direction (positive or negative) of their feelings and attitudes about their group membership. Responses may also include feelings of anger and resentment toward other groups or, conversely, evidence of a desire to reach out to members of other groups. Thus some respondents may reveal clear evidence for being in one of the stages described. However, many will not, because of the complexity and overlap of the stage model. Rather than trying to assign respondents to a stage of ethnic identity, students can benefit more by simply listening for evidence of the process by which members of different groups explore and deal with ethnicity and by relating this information to their own experience. This view of ethnicity "from the inside" typically yields insights about how ethnicity is constructed differently by each person yet also suggests common themes both within and across groups, such as pride in one's group and anger at discrimination. The differences and similarities revealed in the interviews can serve as the basis for class discussions of the meaning of ethnicity in the context of the students' lives.

However, a single assignment can provide only a beginning to the complex process of understanding ethnic identity development. A more extensive approach is that of Tatum (1992, 1994), who describes a semester course in which she presents models of ethnic (or racial) identity and White identity development and encourages students to examine their own levels of awareness. Her course, which has involved predominantly White students, uses readings, films, student journals, and class discussions to explore the difficult issues of racism, oppression, White privilege, and intergroup understanding (and misunderstanding). She points out that such a class inevitably generates powerful emotions in students, including guilt, shame, despair, resistance, and anger, along with feelings of pride and empowerment.

Clearly, a course dealing with personal and often emotional ethnic attitudes requires a teacher who has clinical skills and is comfortable with the complex issues raised by the topic. In dealing with these issues, Tatum finds that models of identity development are very helpful to students as they become more aware

of their own feelings about race and ethnicity. Through the concept of stages, students can understand both themselves and others as being at a particular point in development. Their current attitudes can be seen as indicative of past experiences, and they can recognize the possibility of further change and development. Tatum (1992, 1994) provides extensive quotations describing changing attitudes and feelings, as students explore their own racial identity development.

In summary, learning about ethnicity involves more than acquiring information; it requires the exploration of attitudes and feelings. The study of ethnic identity provides a way of exploring the meaning of ethnicity for oneself and others while avoiding the stereotypes and clichés that may result from attempts to describe particular groups. Moreover, this approach provides a hopeful view of diversity, in that individuals are seen as being able to progress to a better understanding of both their own and others' ethnicity that can in turn lead to better intergroup relations.

APPENDIX
For Further Information

Phinney, J. (in press). Teaching about ethnic diversity in adolescence through ethnic identity interviews. A description of an assignment in which students carry out ethnic identity interviews to gain understanding of the issues involved in the identity process. Details, including the complete interview, are available from the author.

Tatum, B. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. A description of a course taught mainly to White students, using racial identity theory as a basis.

REFERENCES

Atkinson, D., Morten, G., & Sue, D. (1993). *Counseling American minorities* (4th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.

Cross, W. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

DeVos, G., & Romanucci-Ross, L. (Eds.). (1982). *Ethnic identity: Cultural continuities and change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.

Ferdman, B. (1995). Cultural identity and diversity in organizations: Bridging the gap between group differences and individual uniqueness. In M. Chemers, S. Oskamp, & M. Costanzo (Eds.), *Diversity in organizations: New perspectives for a changing workplace* (pp. 37-61). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Helms, J. (1990). *Black and White racial identity: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Greenwood.

Marcia, J., Waterman, A., Matteson, D., Archer, S., & Orlofsky, J. (1993). *Ego identity: A handbook of psychosocial research*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Parham, T. (1989). Cycles of psychological Nigrescence. *The Counseling Psychologist, 17*(2), 187-226.

Phinney, J. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity development in minority group adolescents. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 9*, 34-49.

Phinney, J. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: A review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 499-514.

Phinney, J. (1992). The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure: A new scale for use with diverse groups. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 7*, 156-176.

Phinney, J. (1993). A three-stage model of ethnic identity development. In M. Bernal & G. Knight (Eds.), *Ethnic identity: Formation and transmission among Hispanics and other minorities* (pp. 61-79). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Phinney, J. (1996). When we talk about ethnic groups, what do we mean? *American Psychologist, 51*, 918-927.

Phinney, J. (in press). Teaching about ethnic diversity in adolescence through ethnic identity interviews. In J. McKinney, L. Schiamberg, & L. Shelton (Eds.), *Teaching about the adolescent.* New York: Garland.

Phinney, J., & Alipuria, L. (1996). At the interface of culture: Multiethnic/multiracial high school and college students. *Journal of Social Psychology, 136*, 139-158.

Phinney, J., Cantu, C., & Kurtz, D. (in press). Ethnic and American identity as predictors of self-esteem among African American, Latino, and White adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence.*

Phinney, J., & Chavira, V. (1992). Ethnic identity and self-esteem: An exploratory longitudinal study. *Journal of Adolescence, 15*, 271-281.

Phinney, J., & Devich-Navarro, M. (in press). Variations in bicultural identification among African American and Mexican American adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence.*

Phinney, J., Dupont, S., Espinosa, C., Revill, J., & Sanders, K. (1994). Ethnic identity and American identification among ethnic minority youths. In A. Bouvy, F. van de Vijver, P. Boski, & P. Schmitz (Eds.), *Journeys into cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 167-183). Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Phinney, J., Ferguson, D., & Tate, J. (1996). *Intergroup attitudes and interactions among adolescents from three ethnic groups.* Manuscript submitted for publication.

Phinney, J., & Kohatsu, E. (in press). Ethnic and racial identity and mental health. In J. Schulenberg, J. Maggs, & K. Hurrelman (Eds.), *Health risks and developmental transitions in adolescence.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, R., Phinney, J., Romero, A., & Chen, Y. (1996, March). *The structure and validity of ethnic identity across ethnic groups.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Boston.

Tatum, B. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*, 1-24.

Tatum, B. (1994). Teaching White students about racism: The search for White allies and the restoration of hope. *Teachers College Record, 95*, 462-476.