

Ethnic Identity In Emerging Adulthood

Research has demonstrated that emerging adulthood is a crucial developmental period for ethnic identity exploration

by Chaazé P. Roberts, MSMFT

Emerging adulthood, a developmental period situated between adolescence and young adulthood, is an “age of explorations:” a time in life in which one of the tasks is to determine who one is and how one fits into society (Arnett, 2000, 2006). The concept of emerging adulthood refers to a period in which young people are legally adult but do not yet see themselves as fully adult, and have not taken on the range of responsibilities that are characteristic of adulthood in developed societies (Arnett, 2000).

The challenges of this period have been defined largely in individualistic terms, such as forming a personal identity, attaining independence from one’s parents, and assuming financial responsibility for oneself. As with many domains of identity development, ethnic identity development is an important task of adolescence (Phinney, 1990). Recent research, however, has demonstrated that emerging adulthood serves as a crucial developmental period for ongoing ethnic identity exploration (Phinney, 2006; Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

What is ethnic identity?

Ethnic identity has been defined as one’s identity, or sense of self, as a member of an ethnic group and the feelings that accompany such membership (Phinney, 1990). In developmental psychology, the study of ethnic

identity has largely been situated within Eriksonian theory (Erikson, 1968), focusing on the processes of exploration and commitment (Phinney, 1989, 1990, 2006). Although this emphasis has greatly advanced our understanding of ethnic identity, it has tended to overemphasize the *process* of ethnic identity formation and overlook the *content* of ethnic identity — meaning that the nature and form of the exploration (the substance) are rarely considered. For example, when children become aware of distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from some people but are shared with others, they begin to experience a positive and/or negative sense of self; this is an example of a developmental process. On the other hand, the content of ethnic identity is contained in more concrete, physical terms, such as clothing, skin color, daily activities, language, traditions, customs, values, etc.

How does ethnic identity determine attainment of adulthood?

For members of ethnic minority groups, the criteria for reaching adulthood may be different for both demographic and cultural reasons. Many factors, both individual and contextual, determine whether and to what extent young people experience a period when they are no longer adolescents but not yet adults. Young people from American ethnic minority backgrounds deal with many of the same issues as their White peers do, but they may have additional challenges and strengths that influence the point at which they attain adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2003; Arnett & Galambos, 2003).

For example, many minority youth are expected to take on adult responsibilities earlier than their peers

from the majority culture (Cauce, Stewart, Rodriguez, Cochran, & Ginzler, 2003). Minority young people, as part of their cultural heritage, typically value close and interdependent relationships with their family and as a result, they may feel obliged to assist the family with chores and to contribute financially to the household. A recent study found that more minority college students, in comparison with their European American peers, reported that an important reason for them to attend college was to be able to help their family financially; this difference existed even when socioeconomic status was taken into account (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006).

Because of their sense of responsibility to their families, minority young people may consider themselves as adults at an earlier age. Research with Canadian aboriginal college students has shown that they believe that they reach adulthood at a younger age than their European origin peers (Cheah & Nelson, 2004). Youth from some minority cultures also experience pressure to marry and have children at an early age (Phinney, 1990); if they become parents, these young people are likely to consider themselves as adults. Although marriage is not always an indicator of adulthood in the majority culture (Arnett, 1998), it is seen as an important marker in many cultural contexts. Thus young people from minority and immigrant backgrounds may reach at least some of the markers of adulthood earlier than do their peers from the dominant culture and experience a shorter period of emerging adulthood.

However, in other respects, emerging adulthood may be extended for members of ethnic minority groups. Identity exploration in the areas of love, work, and worldview has been cited as one of the defining characteristics of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). In addition to identity exploration in those areas, ethnic group members must deal with identity issues in relation to their ethnic and racial heritage. These identity domains are far more central for minorities

than for majority group members (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Their sense of membership in an ethnic, racial, or cultural group is an underlying issue that pervades and influences progress toward adulthood (Phinney, 1990). The need to explore the implications of their group membership may extend the identity exploration period throughout their 20s and often beyond. Minority young people may therefore experience a longer period of the fluidity that characterizes emerging adulthood.

In fact, evidence of ethnic identity exploration well beyond adolescence provides the strongest argument for a distinct period of emerging adulthood for these young people (Phinney, 2006). Fluidity in identity for minority persons may be associated with the conflicting images of their ethnic group portrayed by American culture, and the difficulty of finding a satisfactory identity option available to them. For European Americans, even if they do not buy into the stereotypical White image, the White image is generally positive and broader than the more limited range of possibilities with which minority persons may be confronted.

What are the implications of ethnic identity and emerging adulthood?

As clinicians work with the emerging adult population, especially ethnic minorities, it is important that ethnic identity formation be assessed. Understanding who one is (at both the personal and sociocultural level) is of critical importance for successful transition into adulthood, especially in the face of increasing globalization and ethnic and cultural diversity (Schwartz, et al., 2006; van de Vijver & Phaet, 2004). Current research has examined the relationships of cultural identity issues to adaptive and maladaptive psychosocial functioning. Recent work by Schwartz and colleagues (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Wang, 2010) bridges the literatures on personal identity and cultural identity (which have traditionally been treated separately), in the service of predicting adaptive and maladaptive psychosocial functioning. Their

study showed that cultural identity, personal identity consolidation, and psychosocial functioning are strongly correlated.

With respect to ethnic identity, what can I do to support the emerging adult in my family?

Understanding and empathy are the keys. The task of ethnic identity formation involves sorting out and resolving positive and negative feelings and attitudes about one's own group and other groups, as well as identifying one's place in relation to both. As we support the emerging adults in our own families in their search for self, it may be helpful to understand that in multicultural societies, identifying with one or multiple sets of cultural values and practices may help consolidate a sense of self in emerging adulthood.

Conclusion

For members of ethnic minority groups within the United States, formation of a group identity relative to one's ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage is a salient, important, and extended process. Exploration and questioning about one's heritage and its implications continue well beyond adolescence, although the process varies widely across individuals and groups (Phinney, 2006). A secure sense of self as a member of an ethnic or racial group is a defining attainment of adulthood for most people from minority backgrounds, and is becoming important for non-minorities in many contexts. However, the completion of identity exploration and the achievement of a group identity cannot clearly be assigned to any given age range. Studying the interaction of personal and environmental factors that influence this process across a range of ethnic groups and contexts remains an important challenge for developmental researchers concerned with identity processes in emerging adulthood (Phinney, 2006).

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