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**Normative Changes in Ethnic and American Identities and Links With Adjustment Among Asian American Adolescents**

Lisa Kiang, Melissa R. Witkow, and Mariette C. Champagne


**CITATION**

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Lisa Kiang
Wake Forest University

Melissa R. Witkow
Willamette University

Mariette C. Champagne
University of Chicago

Identity development is a highly salient task for adolescents, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, yet longitudinal research that tracks simultaneous change in ethnic identity and American identity over time has been limited. With a focus on 177 Asian American adolescents recruited from an emerging immigrant community, in the current study, we used hierarchical linear modeling and found that ethnic identity tends to remain fairly stable across the 4 years of high school, whereas American identity increases over time. When ethnic identity and American identity were examined simultaneously, consistent with existing research, ethnic identity was positively associated with positive relationships, high self-esteem, academic motivation, and lower levels of depression over time. Although American identity was not significantly associated with depression, positive links with relationships, self-esteem, and academic motivation were found. Both identities were interactively associated with academic motivation. Acculturative implications and the importance of considering the dual construction of ethnic identity and American identity in light of adolescent adjustment are discussed.

Keywords: ethnic identity, American identity, adolescents, adjustment, normative change

Adolescence is traditionally viewed as a period of identity construction and self-discovery (Erikson, 1968). For those from ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds, ethnic identity formation is a particularly salient and meaningful process (Phinney, 2003). Yet, few longitudinal studies and divergent results have led to uncertainty regarding normative patterns of ethnic identity development (Kiang, Witkow, Baldeomar, & Fuligni, 2010). Moreover, the few studies that have examined change in identification over time (e.g., French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Kiang et al., 2010; Pahl & Way, 2006) have typically focused solely on ethnic identity, to the exclusion of other identity domains, such as American identity, which may be concurrently forming. Indeed, from an acculturative perspective, it has long been argued that American or national identity represents a prominent form of identity for ethnic minority youths and should be considered (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Scheibe, 1983). To our knowledge, however, longitudinal studies that examine how both ethnic and American identities evolve over time and are simultaneously or interactively related to adjustment are virtually nonexistent. Our goal in the current study is to address this gap in the literature by examining normative changes in both domains of identity over the high school years, as well as their competing and interactive influences on adjustment. Our focus is on Asian American youths, who make up one of the largest and fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Our sample was recruited from an emerging immigrant community, which further adds to its distinctiveness.

Cultural Identity Formation in Adolescence

Much of the ethnic identity literature stems from Eriksonian perspectives, in which identity is thought to follow a developmental course that includes exploration of and commitment to one’s group (Phinney, 1990). Social identity perspectives also prevail, which define identity as the value, knowledge, and emotional significance attributed to social group membership (Tajfel, 1981). Such theoretical frameworks have often yielded multidimensional operationalizations, with some focusing on specific aspects of identity formation (e.g., exploration, regard) and others examining broad aggregates that incorporate multiple dimensions (Phinney, 2003). Irrespective of specific definitions, most of the research on ethnic identity development has been cross-sectional. For instance, examination of age-related differences in subscales of exploration and belonging has revealed that older adolescents report stronger levels of ethnic identity than do younger adolescents (Phinney, 1990; Quintana, 2007). Similarly, a cross-sectional study of ethnically diverse youths found that with each high school grade, ethnic pride or belonging increased incrementally (Rotheram-Borus, Lightfoot, Moraes, Dopkins, & LaCours, 1998). However, the limited literature examining longitudinal changes in ethnic identity has been mixed. Some have found steady increases in ethnic identification with age (French et al., 2006), yet others have
found more stability throughout the high school years (Pahl & Way, 2006).

We address the scarcity of longitudinal research on ethnic identity change, as well as extend existing research in three notable ways. First, we focus on Asian American adolescents from a geographically understudied area of the United States. Second, we examine changes in American identity in conjunction with changes in ethnic identity. Third, we focus on how both ethnic and American identities may be linked to diverse indicators of adolescent adjustment over time.

**Asian American Identity in Emerging Immigrant Communities**

A recent U.S. Census Bureau (2011) report documented that Asian Americans exhibited the highest rate of growth (44%, compared with 6%–14%) among other ethnic groups (e.g., White, African American, Hispanic). Additionally, even though, like other immigrant groups, Asian adolescents may face challenges because of issues such as language barriers, they are also often uniquely perceived by others as either “honorary Whites” or perpetual foreigners (Goto, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2002; Tuan, 1999). Such experiences point to distinctive cultural interactions that may disrupt or hinder Asian Americans’ identification with both their ethnic and their American backgrounds.

As highlighted next, some researchers have examined identity and acculturation among Asian Americans; however, little work has longitudinally targeted change in adolescents’ ethnic identity over time. What is more, virtually all of the work that exists has been conducted within metropolitan cities that are large and already quite ethnically diverse. Recent theoretical and empirical approaches emphasize the qualitative differences between such urban areas, which typically have a long history of hosting immigrant families, and emerging or new immigrant communities that are only recently becoming used to having an immigrant population (Massey, 2008). Southeastern U.S. regions have experienced particularly large growth in both Asian and Latin American populations (Perry & Schachtzer, 2003; Reeves & Bennett, 2003). Often less prepared to advocate for newcomer families and with fewer practical and cultural resources in place, new immigrant communities may provide an environmental context that is particularly challenging for developing youths (Bailey, 2005). Indeed, a distinguishing feature of these emerging communities is that, despite recent increases in number, institutional resources are sorely lacking. For instance, Asian Americans in North Carolina have tripled in number over the last decade, yet they still represent only 2% of the population statewide (Reeves & Bennett, 2003), which likely precludes funding allocations for resources and programs to help them adjust.

Research directly comparing youth adjustment in emerging immigrant and traditional migration areas has found unique geographic differences (Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2010). In terms of ethnic identity, Asian and Latin American youths in new immigrant communities were found to use ethnic labels that reflect their native heritage identity (e.g., Chinese, Mexican) and were less likely to identify as American, compared with youths in Los Angeles (Kiang, Perreira, & Fuligni, 2011). International work has also pointed to contextual differences in cultural identification. For example, in a 13-country study, the ethnic diversity of the surrounding context played a role in how individuals tended to identify, with those in ethnically mixed communities generally preferring bicultural or integrated identity patterns and those in more homogeneous areas choosing labels that corresponded with the predominant ethnicity represented (e.g., ethnic identification in areas that were ethnically homogeneous; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Berry and Sabatier (2011) further found that links between acculturation status and adjustment were stronger for immigrant youths from Montreal versus Paris and attributed these results to societal differences in how immigrants are treated and perceived. Collectively, such research supports the need to consider context by focusing on U.S. areas that have been overlooked in the literature and appear to provide distinct experiences that may differentially affect adolescents’ identity formation and adjustment.

**Acculturative Changes in Ethnic and American Identities**

Acculturation can be broadly defined as the change that occurs when two or more cultures come into contact and interact (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Traditional acculturation models adopt a linear view and argue that as majority identity increases, ethnic identity decreases (Birman & Trickett, 2001; Masuda, Matsumoto, & Meredith, 1970). Alternative perspectives suggest that ethnic and majority identities are orthogonally associated and develop in non-competing ways (Berry, 2003; Schwartz, 2007). Although contemporary evidence tends to be more often found for orthogonal models, whereby multiple identities operate independently and often complementarily, some research does support linear models suggesting that one identity must succumb to the other during the acculturative process (Costigan & Sui, 2004; Mok & Morris, 2010).

Notably, these primary questions of cultural identity change are largely unanswered given that very little longitudinal research has quantified changes in the balance between adolescent ethnic and American identities over time. The few studies that have targeted identity formation among adolescents from ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds have centered on the influence of ethnic heritage, neglecting American experiences, which, as discussed, may differ from or even challenge adolescents’ customary practices and beliefs (Ying & Lee, 1999). In one of the few longitudinal studies examining acculturative changes, Birman and Trickett (2001) found that first-generation Soviet Jewish adolescents’ American identity increased over time, while their Russian identity decreased, suggesting that there may be independent processes of identity change involved. Cross-sectional work has also found that with increased length of residence in the majority culture, majority identity tends to increase while ethnic identity remains more stable (Berry et al., 2006). However, alternative cross-sectional evidence suggests that the two identities go hand in hand; that is, ethnic identity tends to be correlated with American identity, and the two may develop in tandem (Schwartz, 2007). Similar evidence has been found using cluster analytic approaches in which European, Filipino, Latin, and Asian American young adults reported on their ethnic, American, school, and family identities. Four distinct clusters were formed, but ethnic and American identities were strongly related in all four clusters (e.g., both were low or high together; Kiang, Yip, & Fuligni, 2008; Yip, Kiang, & Fuligni, 2008).

Considering the scarcity of and inconsistency in existing work, it is imperative to use multivariate approaches to examine how ethnic and American identities simultaneously or competitively
develop over time. Specifically, because of more contemporary approaches that tend to support orthogonal models of identity change (Berry, 2003), we expected that ethnic and American identities would largely correspond and not be inversely related. Moreover, given that the limited research on ethnic identity trajectories supports generally stable or slightly increasing patterns of change (French et al., 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006) and prior work suggesting that immigrant youths gradually report feeling more Americanized (Berry et al., 2006; Birman & Trickett, 2001), we expected that the balance between ethnic and American identities would equalize over time, with ethnic identity remaining rather stable and American identity increasing.

Identity and Adjustment

Theory and research have abundantly and consistently documented links between ethnic identity and positive indicators of adjustment (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). From a social identity perspective ( Tajfel, 1981), to the extent that one feels strongly connected to one’s group, there may be positive benefits. Direct and indirect effects have been indeed found between multiple ethnic identity dimensions (e.g., exploration, regard, ethnic labels) and a wide range of outcomes such as self-esteem, academic motivation, social relationships, and daily well-being (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006; Phinney, 2003). Although less empirical work has linked American identity and adjustment, particularly among ethnic minority youths, American identity and adjustment (e.g., self-esteem) have been correlated (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991).

Despite the relatively rich literature that points to cultural identification as a positive resource in adolescents’ lives, unanswered questions remain. Little work has directly addressed whether ethnic and American identities have competing or interactive effects on adjustment. The few studies that do exist are limited in their cross-sectional nature and have not centered on youths from understudied emerging immigrant communities. Existing findings also have been contradictory. For instance, among a cross-sectional sample of Asian youths, having an ethnic versus American orientation did not significantly differentiate overall adjustment (Yip & Cross, 2004). That is, ethnic and American identities each conveyed similar benefits. However, despite arguments that American identity is a primary aspect of development (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Scheibe, 1983), it was not significantly related to well-being among a sample of Mexican American youths (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Similarly, Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997) found that, when considered simultaneously, both American and ethnic identities were significantly linked to self-esteem, but only among White students. For those from ethnic minority backgrounds, ethnic identity predicted self-esteem but American identity did not.

To shed light on these fundamental questions, we examined direct, competing, and interactive effects of ethnic and American identification on adjustment. We considered a broad range of outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, depression, positive relationships, academic motivation) to demonstrate the diverse implications that cultural identity can have on adolescents’ development. On the basis of prior research, we expected that ethnic identity would be positively and consistently related to all four outcomes. However, effects of American identity were less certain because of the limited prior work that has focused on the construct. For instance, although we expected that American identity would be positively linked to school motivation, given that the educational experience in the United States is largely a Western or American one (McBrien, 2005; Pryor, 2001), it is possible that American identity would have few implications in terms of self-esteem, as some prior work (e.g., Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997) has found. We were also uncertain whether overall effects of ethnic and American identity on adjustment would be best described as additive or interactive, particularly given the unique context in which these associations were examined. Certainly, theory and research on individuals from more traditional areas of migration have long documented that acculturative processes are crucial in predicting overall psychological and social outcomes (Organista, Organista, & Kurasaki, 2003), largely suggesting interactive effects whereby positive outcomes should be especially striking among those with strong levels of both ethnic and American identities (Berry, 2003; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). For example, bicultural identity has been more strongly associated with adjustment and well-being than either ethnic or majority identity alone (Phinney, Homrenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Notably, such prior research has been limited in its geographical focus and has tended to concentrate on only a small number of outcomes at a time, which further points to the uniqueness of the current study in capturing psychological, social, and academic indicators of adjustment.

Current Study

Taken together, we had two primary goals in the current study: (a) to examine normative changes in ethnic and American identity and (b) to identify direct and interactive influences of both identities on well-being and adjustment over time. We contribute to existing work by focusing on Asian Americans from an understudied region of the United States and by using multiwave reports collected yearly over the high school years. Identity was measured by an aggregate of regard and centrality subscales (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Regard refers to positive feelings and pride in being a member of one’s ethnic or American group, and centrality is the degree to which group membership is viewed as key to one’s overall self. Given prior work pointing to gender and gender effects on adjustment and identification (e.g., Berry et al., 2006; Qin, 2006), we control for the main effects of these demographics in analyses.

Method

Participants

Participants at the initial time of recruitment were approximately 180 ninth (48.3%) and 10th grade Asian American adolescents (60% female) recruited from six public high schools in the Southeastern United States. About 74% of the sample was born in the United States or second generation. Of those who were foreign born or first generation, age at the time of immigration ranged from 1 to 14 years ($M = 5.79$ years, $SD = 4.21$). An open-ended, self-report item indicated that adolescents represented a range of specific ethnic identifications, including Hmong (28%); multieth-
nic (mostly within Asian groups; e.g., Cambodian and Chinese; 22%); South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani; 11%); Chinese (8%); panethnic (i.e., Asian; 8%); and small clusters, such as Montagnard, Laotian, Vietnamese, Filipino/a, Japanese, Korean, and Thai (23%).

Procedure
A stratified cluster design identified public high schools in central North Carolina with high Asian population growth and a student body with relatively large proportions of Asian students (3%–10%). The schools differed in overall ethnic diversity, size, achievement, and socioeconomic status. More specifically, two of the schools were predominately African American (60%–65%), with Latino and White students each making up about 10%–20%, and Asians making up about 4%–6% of the remaining student body. Two of the schools were mostly White (60%), with Latinos and African Americans each making up 10%–20% and Asians making up about 3%–4% of the remaining student body. Two of the schools were also predominately White (80%), with Asian American students making up about 7%–10% of the student body and smaller distributions (less than 5%) of Latino and African American students. In small group settings, students identified as Asian through school matriculation forms were invited to participate in a study on the social and cultural issues that affect their daily lives. Students were told that the study was unique given its exclusive focus on adolescents from Asian American backgrounds. Once they returned parental consent and adolescent assent forms during a follow-up school visit, participants were administered the packet of questionnaires during school time. The questionnaires took 30–45 min to complete. Approximately 60% of adolescents invited to participate returned consent and assent forms and, of these, 100% participated in the first wave of data collection.

Participants completed follow-up surveys once a year for 3 additional years. The questionnaire remained consistent in content and length throughout waves. For Waves 2 and 3, researchers returned to schools to distribute questionnaires during class time. Participants were sent questionnaires in the mail if they were no longer in school or if absent the day the surveys were administered. For Wave 4, because our older cohort was presumably 1 year out of high school, we collected data entirely through postal mail.

Adolescents received $25 for Wave 1 of the study (which involved an additional daily diary component), $15 for Wave 2, $15 for Wave 3, and $20 for Wave 4. The retention rate in Wave 2 was approximately 91%. About 87% of the original sample was retained in Wave 3, and 67% was retained in Wave 4. The sample used here excluded the 17 participants with only one wave of data. These excluded participants did not differ from the rest of the sample on any of the key study variables, using a $p < .01$ cutoff given the number of tests run.

Measures

Ethnic and American identities. A shortened Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity used in prior work (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006) measured ethnic and American identities. Successfully adapted for use with Asian Americans (Kiang et al., 2006), the four-item regard subscale measures positive feelings toward one’s ethnic group (e.g., “I feel good about being a member of my ethnic group”). The four-item centrality subscale assesses whether ethnicity is central to one’s self-concept (e.g., “In general, being a member of my ethnic group is an important part of my self-image”). Consistent with prior work (Yip et al., 2008), parallel items were created for American regard and centrality (e.g., “In general, being an American is an important part of my self-image”). All items are scored on a scale of 0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree, with higher scores reflecting higher regard and centrality. Internal consistencies ranged from .87 to .91 across subscales and within the study waves. Ethnic regard and centrality were correlated .79—.86 within the multiple waves. American regard and centrality were correlated .82—.89. Given these strong intercorrelations, we combined subscales for more parsimonious analyses.

Positive relationships. Used in prior work with Asian American adolescents (Thompson & Kiang, 2010), the positive relationships subscale from Ryff’s (1989) psychological well-being measure assessed positive relationships. Nine items are scored on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree and focus on relationships with family and friends. A sample item reads, “I know I can trust my friends, and they know they can trust me.” Internal consistencies were .76 to .80.

Depressive symptoms. A widely used 10-item depression scale (Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale—10; Andersen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994) assessed adolescents’ depressive symptoms experienced within the previous week. All items are scored on a scale of 0 = rarely or none of the time to 3 = all of the time. Higher scores indicate higher levels of depressive symptoms. Internal consistencies ranged from .75 to .80.

Self-esteem. We had participants complete the widely used 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1986) to measure self-esteem. Items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with higher values indicating higher self-esteem. The five items that were negatively worded were reverse scored. A sample item reads, “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” The internal consistencies ranged from .84 to .87.

Academic motivation. Drawing on prior work (Eccles, 1983), we appropriated two items successfully used in Asian American samples (Fuligni et al., 2005) to measure intrinsic motivation. On a scale of 1 = very boring to 5 very interesting, youths were asked, “In general, I find working on school work . . . .” A second item asked, “How much do you like working on school work?” using a scale of 1 = a little to 5 = a lot. These items were significantly correlated .69—.72 within study waves.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted a series of preliminary analyses. First, we examined whether there were differences in any of our time-varying variables (ethnic identity, American identity, positive relationships, depression, self-esteem, and academic motivation) according to number of waves of participation. Given our interests in examining change over the high school years, our analyses were conducted such that ninth grade represented the intercept and we excluded data from surveys completed after high school. Analyses were thus conducted with four waves.
of data from the original ninth-grade cohort and three waves of data from the 10th-grade cohort. Most participants completed all waves during high school, with those who began in ninth grade completing an average of 3.95 (SD = 0.22) waves and those who began in 10th grade completing an average of 2.92 (SD = 0.27) waves. To determine if there were differences in any of the variables as a function of number of waves of participation, hierarchical linear models (Bryk & Raudenbusch, 1992) were estimated using the following equations:

\[ \text{Study Variable}_{ij} = b_{0j} + b_{1j} (\text{Year}) + e_{ij}, \]  
\[ b_{0j} = c_{00} + c_{01} (\text{Participation}) + u_{0j}, \]  
\[ b_{1j} = c_{10} + c_{11} (\text{Participation}) + u_{1j}. \]

Equation 1 represents adolescents' scores on the key study variable across the waves of their participation in the study, and Equations 2 and 3 show how both the average score and the effect of the year of the study were modeled as a function of number of waves of participation. There were no differences in any of the variables in the study based on number of waves of participation except for positive relationships, where adolescents who participated in more waves of the study reported higher scores on the positive relationships measure \((b = .36, p < .05)\). This did not vary across the year of the study. We conducted similar tests to see if there were differences according to cohort, replacing participation in Equations 2 and 3 with a variable indicating whether participation began in ninth or 10th grade. As with participation, the only difference was found for positive relationships, such that participants who began in the 10th grade reported lower levels of positive relationships than did those who began in ninth grade \((b = -.41, p < .01)\).

We next examined associations between the identity variables, as well as intercorrelations between these variables and adjustment. First, we conducted within-subject \(t\) tests to examine the relative strength of ethnic and American identities at each wave. Participants reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity than American identity in ninth (for ethnic identity, \(M = 3.33, SD = 0.83\); for American identity, \(M = 2.98, SD = 0.92\)), \(t(80) = 2.92, p < .01\), and 10th grades (for ethnic identity, \(M = 3.23, SD = 0.85\); for American identity, \(M = 2.90, SD = 0.94\)), \(t(154) = 3.94, p < .001\). However, in 11th (for ethnic identity, \(M = 3.10, SD = 0.93\); for American identity, \(M = 3.04, SD = 0.90\)), \(t(152) = 0.71, ns\), and 12th grades (for ethnic identity, \(M = 3.18, SD = 0.91\); for American identity, \(M = 3.13, SD = 0.81\)), \(t(132) = 0.62, ns\), there was no difference between ethnic and American identities, suggesting that their balance becomes more equalized over time. To ensure that these differences are not due to differences in sample size and thus which participants contributed data at any given wave, these tests were repeated and the results were replicated with the subsample of participants with all four waves of data. Second, we examined the wave-by-wave correlations between identity and outcomes. As shown in Table 1, there was substantial variation across waves in the strengths of the correlations, as well as between different measures.

### Normative Changes in Ethnic and American Identities

Our first primary goal in this study was to examine change over time in adolescents’ reports of ethnic and American identities. Separate hierarchical linear models were estimated for ethnic and American identities. The estimated statistical model was as follows:

\[ \text{Identity}_{ij} = b_{0j} + b_{1j} (\text{Year}) + e_{ij}, \]

\[ b_{0j} = c_{00} + c_{01} (\text{Gender}) + c_{02} (\text{Generation}) + u_{0j}, \]

\[ b_{1j} = c_{10} + c_{11} (\text{Gender}) + c_{12} (\text{Generation}) + u_{1j}. \]

As shown in Equation 4, adolescents’ levels of identity in a particular year \((i)\) for a particular individual \((j)\) was modeled as a function of the individual’s average identity \((b_{0j})\) and the year of the study \((b_{1j})\). Year was coded such that ninth grade = 0, 10th grade = 1, 11th grade = 2, and 12th grade = 3. Equations 5 and 6 show how both the average levels of identity and the effect of the year of the study were modeled as a function of the adolescents’ gender and generational status. The level two variables were grand-mean centered. Gender was coded as female = 0 and male = 1 and generation was coded as immigrant = 0 and nonimmigrant = 1.

As shown in Table 2, although there was no normative change in ethnic identity over time, adolescents reported increasing strength of American identity over the high school years. There were also gender and immigrant status differences in the strength of American identity over time. In particular, boys reported lower levels of American identity at the beginning of high school than did girls but experienced stronger increases over time, and non-immigrant adolescents reported higher average levels of American identity than did immigrant adolescents throughout high school.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations Between Study Variables</th>
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<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ethnic identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. American identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Positive relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Depression</td>
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<td>5. Self-esteem</td>
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*Note.* Shown are the ranges of correlations across the four waves of the study.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.*
Concurrent Changes in Associations Between Identity and Adjustment

Our next goal in this study was to examine whether changes in ethnic and American identity were associated with concurrent changes in adolescents’ positive relationships, depression, self-esteem, and school motivation. Ethnic and American identity were examined within a single model, such that each model tests both the independent direct effects of ethnic and American identities and their interaction. The general model used for analyses was as follows:

\[
\text{Adjustment}_{ij} = b_{0j} + b_{1j} \text{ (Ethnic identity)} \\
+ b_{2j} \text{ (American identity)} + b_{3j} \text{ (Ethnic \times American identity)} \\
+ b_{4j} \text{ (Year)} + e_{ij},
\]

(7)

\[
b_{0j} = c_{00} + c_{01} \text{ (Gender)} + c_{02} \text{ (Generation)} + u_{0j},
\]

(8)

\[
b_{1j} = c_{10},
\]

(9)

\[
b_{2j} = c_{20},
\]

(10)

\[
b_{3j} = c_{30}, \text{ and}
\]

(11)

\[
b_{4j} = c_{40}.
\]

(12)

Equation 7 shows how adolescents’ adjustment in a particular year \(i\) for a particular individual \(j\) was modeled as a function of the individual’s average adjustment \(b_{0j}\) and strength of identity (i.e., ethnic identity, American identity, and the interaction between ethnic identity and American identity). Year was also included as a control variable. Equation 8 shows how the average adjustment was modeled as a function of gender and generational status, which were coded in the same manner as before. Finally, Equations 9–12 show the association between identity and adjustment.

Because we had more Level 1 parameters than time points in the models, some of the Level 2 variances needed to be constrained to zero. A two-step process was used to select the most parsimonious models (see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). First, all Level 2 variance parameters were fixed to equal zero except that for baseline adjustment. Additional freed parameters were kept in the model only when a likelihood ratio test indicated a significantly improved overall model fit (i.e., \(p < .05\); see also Nishina & Juvonen, 2005).

Using this method, baseline adjustment was the only variance parameter freed for depression. For the positive relationships model, the interaction was freed; for the model predicting self-esteem, grade was freed; and for the model predicting academic motivation, grade and the interaction were freed.

As shown in Table 3, ethnic identity and American identity were independently associated with both positive relationships and self-esteem. Ethnic identity but not American identity predicted reduced levels of depressive symptoms. In terms of school motivation, independent associations with ethnic and American identity were found as well as an interaction between the two. As shown in Figure 1, high levels of both ethnic identity and American identity were associated with the highest levels of motivation, whereas a low level of either identity was associated with the lowest levels of motivation. One main effect of generational status was also found whereby school motivation was lower for youths who were born in the United States than for their foreign-born counterparts.

Discussion

Given that adolescence is commonly conceptualized as an intense period of identity formation (Erikson, 1968), surprisingly little research has examined actual changes in youths’ identity over time. Further, the few studies (e.g., French et al., 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006) that have incorporated multiwave reports have focused exclusively on ethnic identity to the exclusion of other domains of identification, such as American identity. Adolescents from ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds may be struggling with the simultaneous and perhaps competing formation of both their ethnic and majority identities (Ying & Lee, 1999), which makes it particularly relevant to longitudinally track these multiple aspects of identity over time.

The first major goal of the current research was to address such normative changes in both ethnic and American identities over the high school years using an understudied sample of Asian American youths residing in the Southeastern United States. The distinct context of emerging immigrant communities makes examining adolescents’ acculturative processes especially significant, considering that these areas are experiencing rapid immigrant population growth with few resources in place to help these newcomers adjust (Bailey, 2005; Massey, 2008). Using multiple waves of data, our results revealed little evidence for normative increases or decreases in ethnic identity from year to year. That is, ethnic identity, as defined by an aggregate of regard and centrality subscales, appears to be rather stable for the sample as a whole.

In contrast, American identity, also defined by regard and centrality subscales, appears to increase over time, suggesting that adolescents feel more positive about being American and report that being American becomes more central to their overall sense of self as they progress through high school. These results are largely consistent with prior acculturation research suggesting that individuals tend more strongly identify with the majority culture over time, without necessarily losing a sense of their ethnic identification (Berry et al., 2006; Birman & Trickett, 2001). One caveat to these findings is the question of whether increases in American identity are due to normative developmental changes that reflect greater solidification of identity formation or whether such in-
Increases are simply due to acculturative changes. Indeed, one salient issue in acculturation research is whether such cultural change, which is rather elusive, can be distinctly seen as independent from a more general developmental effect (Trimble, 2003). That is, both acculturation and development are characterized by aspects of change, and an important issue to consider is whether these constructs can be disentangled.

Nonetheless, by the 11th grade, levels of American identity are virtually equivalent to adolescents’ already high levels of ethnic identity. Given that these increases in American identity transpire without any detriment to ethnic identity, one implication is that orthogonal rather than linear models of acculturation may be more appropriate to explain changes in ethnic identity. Given that these increases in American identity transpire without any detriment to ethnic identity, one implication is that orthogonal rather than linear models of acculturation may be more appropriate to explain changes in ethnic identity.

Our second goal was to examine whether changes in ethnic and American identities are associated with changes in adjustment over time. Time was uncentered, but all other Level 1 and Level 2 variables were grand-mean centered.

Note. Gender was coded as female = 0 and male = 1 and generation was coded as immigrant = 0 and nonimmigrant = 1. Year was uncentered, but all other Level 1 and Level 2 variables were grand-mean centered.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .001.

Taken together, then, and in line with existing theory and research (Zosuls et al., 2009) and suggest that further research should continue considering how gender may interact with and directly affect adolescent identity development.

For our second goal was to examine whether changes in ethnic and American identities are associated with changes in adjustment over time. We considered a wide range of outcomes including positive social relationships, depression, self-esteem, and academic motivation. In terms of positive relationships, self-esteem, and school motivation, both ethnic and American identities were positively associated with adjustment. However, only ethnic identity was associated with lower levels of depression, suggesting that American identity may be less relevant to adolescents’ depressive affect or that ethnic identity may trump any effects of American identity. Taken together, then, and in line with existing theory and research that highlights the psychosocial benefits of feeling closely tied to

Figure 1. Interaction between American identity (Am Id) and ethnic identity (Eth Id) in predicting academic motivation.
one’s social group (Fuligni et al., 2005; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, 2004), ethnic identity plays a relatively consistent role in being positively linked to a diverse range of adolescent adjustment outcomes. It is noteworthy that any time that American identity was associated with outcomes, ethnic identity was also. It is also notable that American identity was not associated with depressive symptoms (the association was virtually zero), suggesting that ethnic identity may have a wider influence than American identity in terms of adolescents’ affective well-being. Further, these collective effects of ethnic identity were significant even after controlling for American identity and vice versa, suggesting that multiple domains of cultural identification are important to consider in adolescents’ positive development (Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Yip & Cross, 2004).

Further, in terms of school motivation, an interactive effect of ethnic and American identity was found. More specifically, there appears to be an additive effect whereby the greatest benefits were found for adolescents with high levels of both ethnic and American identities rather than low levels of both. These results are consistent with prior work that emphasizes a positive link between cultural values and ethnic identification and academic outcomes (Fuligni et al., 2005). Results also support the broad perspective that the school environment may constitute a Western phenomenon given that American orientations were closely tied to academic engagement and probable success (McBrien, 2005; Pryor, 2001). Notably, school motivation was the only exception in which effects of identity actually supported research on bicultural competence that points to a putative compounding influence of both identities on adjustment (LaFromboise et al., 1993). In all other outcomes, only direct, independent influences of ethnic and American identities were found. In addition to interactive effects of ethnic and American identities, a main effect of generational status was also found with respect to average levels of school motivation. Consistent with the immigrant paradox, or the idea that recent immigrants have healthier outcomes than do their U.S.-born counterparts (McDonald & Kennedy, 2004), adolescents born in foreign countries reported higher levels of motivation than did adolescents born in the United States.

One of the unique aspects of the current study was its focus on adolescents from new or emerging immigrant communities. Given that these communities are only recently adjusting to dramatic increases in their immigrant and ethnic minority populations, scarce resources and social and institutional supports tend to be in place (Bailey, 2005; Perry & Schachter, 2003; Reeves & Bennett, 2003). Children from newcomer families may be particularly vulnerable to the lack of community and cultural resources and likely have qualitatively distinct experiences compared with their counterparts who reside in more traditional areas of migration (Perreira et al., 2010). That said, the relatively stable levels of ethnic identity that were found over time were concordant with patterns found in prior research that has centered on youths from more urban areas (e.g., Pahl & Way, 2006). In addition, the increases in American identity found here were consistent with international work also documenting trends in terms of greater identification with the majority culture over time (Berry et al., 2006). Clearly, recent theory and research has emphasized the importance of context in adolescent development. Hence, one useful strategy to extend this line of research is to conduct a comparative study to examine levels of identity among immigrant youths who reside in different geographic locations to more clearly determine how context and environment help shape adolescent identity and outcomes.

Although the panethnic nature of our sample was another distinguishing feature, it was also a limitation. The nature of investigating Asian youths among emerging areas of migration makes inferences for any specific sub-Asian ethnicity rather difficult because individual numbers tend to be small. Nationalities are typically extremely diverse among these communities, and continued research should aim to understand such wide variation among Asian subgroups. Another related direction for future research is to compare how change in ethnic and American identification and their relative influence on adjustment may be similar or different among other ethnic minority and immigrant groups, such as those from Latin American backgrounds. It would also be informative to examine trajectories of identity development beyond high school. For many adolescents, college is an intense period of self-discovery (Ethier & Deaux, 1994) and it is possible that either or both ethnic and American identities become more or less salient in later years as youths continue their education, enter the work force, or start families of their own.

In summary, the results of our study point to the overall importance of considering longitudinal processes of identity development across multiple domains of social identity. Although ethnic identity remains an indelible aspect of immigrant youth development, identification with the majority culture should not be neglected. Our findings suggest that, among Asian American youths in the Southeastern United States, both forms of cultural identity are independently—and interactively in one case—relevant to the social, psychological, and academic well-being of immigrant youths. Given that adolescents from immigrant backgrounds must identify with their ethnic heritage as well as with the majority, future researchers should continue to explore how these identities interact in their dual construction. Indeed, youths do not develop within a cultural vacuum, and efforts to improve youth outcomes may be best served by fostering both cultural connectedness and closeness to the broader society at large.

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