



# ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A BUFFER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT TO STRESS

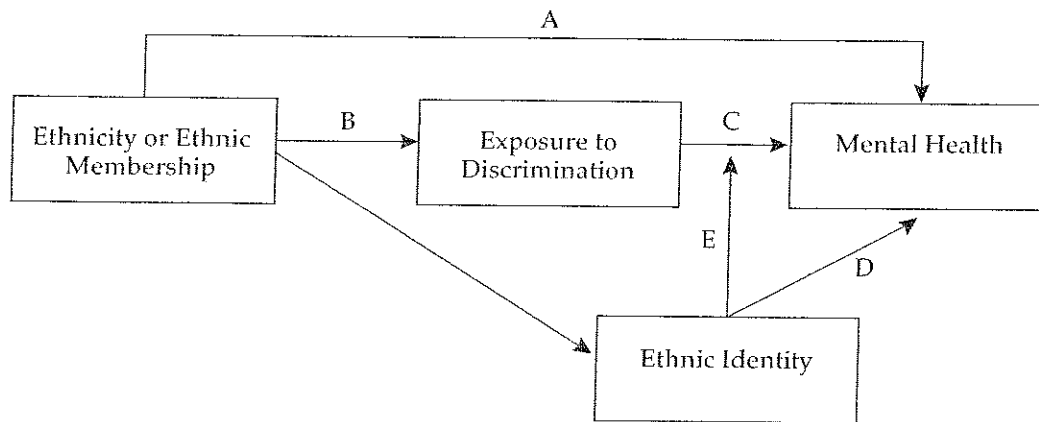
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Being an ethnic minority in the United States can be stressful. Having to contend with negative stereotypes and beliefs about one's group can be emotionally and psychologically draining for ethnic minorities. In fact, researchers once suggested that ethnic minorities internalized the dominant culture's stereotypes and beliefs about their groups, which led to negative self-concepts (see Cross 1991 for a review). Moreover, having to deal with unfair treatment and resource inequities can lead to poor physical and psychological health for ethnic minorities (Allison 1998).

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that ethnic identity has the potential to protect ethnic minorities from the negative consequences of ethnic prejudice and discrimination and general daily stressors. We argue that although ethnicity (ethnic group membership) may put ethnic minorities at risk for experiencing discrimination, which in turn is associated with negative psychological consequences, *ethnic identity* buffers individuals from these consequences (see figure 5.1 for a conceptual model).

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of research that focuses on ethnicity as a risk factor for psychological well-being. The next section reviews research that demonstrates that ethnic identity can buffer ethnic minorities from the risks associated with being an ethnic minority. Throughout this latter section, we draw on empirical findings from three different programs of research to illustrate incidents when and mechanisms whereby ethnic identity serves as a protective function in individuals' lives. These data sets allow us to make comparisons between African Americans and Chinese Americans. In addition, the data sets allow us to examine the protective function of ethnic identity in young adolescents thirteen to eighteen years old and older, college-age young adults eighteen to twenty-two years old. Taken together, the data sets provide us with converging evidence that various dimensions of ethnic identity protect ethnic minorities from the psychological consequences related to discrimina-

Figure 5.1 Conceptual Model of Racial Identity and Experiences with Discrimination



Source: Authors' compilation.

tion and negative events more generally. We close the chapter with directions for future research and recommendations for policy intervention.

## ETHNICITY AS A RISK FACTOR FOR POOR PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

Much of the early research on ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, was geared toward demonstrating that being an ethnic minority was related to negative psychological outcomes (see, for example, Kardiner and Ovesey 1951). This research suggested that being an ethnic minority is related to poor psychological outcomes through two routes. First, researchers assumed that there was a direct relation between ethnic minority group membership and mental health (see Cross 1991 for a review). Second, researchers argued that being an ethnic minority places individuals at risk for higher levels of stress, including those associated with ethnic discrimination, which in turn could lead to poor psychological outcomes. We discuss these two views in more detail in the next section.

### Ethnicity and Mental Health

Is ethnic-group membership directly related to negative psychological adjustment (see path A in figure 5.1)? If so, then there should be consistent group differences between whites and ethnic minorities in measures of psychological well-being. If not, then research should indicate that ethnic minorities are not psychologically worse off than whites. Most of the early theoretical work on ethnic minorities suggests the former, but most of the past and recent empirical research suggests the latter.

A substantial portion of the research on group differences in mental health has focused on differences in self-esteem. In general, empirical evidence in this literature indicates that African Americans have higher personal self-esteem than whites (see

Crocker and Major 1989; Porter and Washington 1979; and Twenge and Crocker 2002 for reviews). In fact, a recent meta-analysis of research published between 1960 and 1998 on racial differences in self-esteem revealed that African American children, adolescents, and young adults have higher self-esteem than their white counterparts (Gray-Little and Hafdahl 2001; see also Twenge and Crocker 2002 for a meta-analytic review). Interestingly, Bernadette Gray-Little and Adam R. Hafdahl (2001) note that because it is practically unacceptable or hard to imagine that African Americans have higher self-esteem than whites, various arguments, such as response style artifact, a group-by-item interaction favoring African American respondents, and defensive responding have been postulated as explanations as to why this finding must be incorrect. In essence, there seems to be an implicit bias toward examining ethnic minorities within a risk-factor framework.

The evidence comparing self-esteem of whites and other ethnic minority groups such as Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans is not as favorable as that comparing whites and African Americans. Some Latin American groups, for example, Mexican Americans, tend to have self-esteem equivalent to white Americans, whereas others, for example, Puerto Ricans, tend to have lower self-esteem. In a meta-analytical review, Jean M. Twenge and Jennifer Crocker (2002) found that Hispanics and Native Americans tend to have lower self-esteem than whites. Furthermore, of all of the ethnic groups represented in these studies, Asian Americans tend to have the lowest levels of self-esteem compared to whites. As Jennifer Crocker and her colleagues (Crocker and Lawrence 1999; Crocker and Wolfe 2001) note, however, these findings do not necessarily indicate that all ethnic minorities are at risk for low self-esteem. In fact, making the comparison between whites and ethnic minorities in terms of mental health outcomes may be too simplistic an approach to assess the extent to which ethnic minority status is a risk factor for poor psychological functioning. There may be differences within groups that are important to consider in this process.

### Ethnicity and Exposure to Discrimination

Does belonging to an ethnic minority group increase the risk of being exposed to discrimination (see path B in figure 5.1)? The answer to this question seems to be a resounding yes. Ethnic minorities, compared to whites, are disproportionately exposed to stimuli that may be sources of stress (Clark et al. 1999). Objective and subjective reports on incidents of ethnic discrimination corroborate this point. Objective findings show that ethnic minorities are discriminated against in higher education (Farrell and Jones 1988), the housing market (Bobo 1983; Massey and Denton 1992; Yinger 1988), as well as hiring and employment (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Additionally, subjective, self-report findings indicate that ethnic minorities are more likely than whites to believe they are targets of intergroup discrimination and prejudice. For example, Nancy Krieger (1990) found that approximately 60 percent of the noncollege adult African American respondents in her sample reported one or more instances of negative race-based treatment in their lives, whereas approximately 84 percent of the white respondents reported *never* experiencing negative race-based treatment. Additional research suggests that 60 percent or more of ethnic minority adults report that they typically encounter ethnic discrimination in their lives (D'Augelli and Hershberger 1993; Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams 1999; Landrine and Klonoff 1996; Sanders-Thompson 1996; Williams et al. 1997).

The statistics are just as disturbing for ethnic minority groups other than African Americans. For instance, approximately 20 percent of Latino job seekers are discriminated against because of their ethnicity (Bendick et al. 1991). Similarly, 30 percent of Asian Americans indicate they have experienced discrimination in employment situations, 15 percent indicate that they have experienced discrimination in seeking housing, and 39 percent indicate that they have experienced discrimination in other situations (Kuo 1995). More specifically, approximately 20 percent of Chinese Americans indicate that they have received some form of unfair treatment because of their ethnicity in their lifetime (Goto, Gee, and Takeuchi 2002). Taken together, these findings provide objective and subjective support that large numbers of ethnic minorities are frequently exposed to discrimination-related stress.

Additional research shows that exposure to racial discrimination is directly linked to a variety of negative physical health outcomes among ethnic minorities (see path C in figure 5.1; Allison 1998; Clark et al. 1999; Landrine and Klonoff 1996). Perceived prejudice and discrimination contribute to the disproportionately high rates of hypertension among African Americans (Clark et al. 1999; Gyll, Matthews, and Bromberger 2001; Krieger 1990; Krieger and Sidney 1996; McNeilly et al. 1995). Evidence also shows that for African Americans, experiencing high levels of discrimination is adversely related to cardiovascular health, compared to experiencing moderate or low levels of discrimination.

Researchers have pinpointed various psychological consequences of experiencing discrimination (see path C in figure 5.1). For example, experiencing racial discrimination is associated with a higher incidence of psychiatric symptoms—depression, anxiety, obsession-compulsion, and somatization—among African Americans (Landrine and Klonoff 1996; Sanders-Thompson 1996). Moreover, the more African Americans and Hispanics experience discrimination the more they feel anger, lower levels of life satisfaction, and lower levels of happiness (Jackson et al. 1996; Salgado de Snyder 1987). Maya McNeilly et al. (1995) found that racist provocation produced resentment, anxiety, and cynicism among African Americans. Finally, experiences with racial discrimination over time have a cumulative negative impact on African Americans' subjective well-being. Taken together, the findings from these studies indicate that experiencing racial discrimination can have serious mental health consequences.

In summary, empirical evidence is mixed regarding the extent to which ethnicity is associated with poor psychological adjustment. Despite earlier theoretical arguments, there is little empirical research to support the direct link between ethnic-group membership and poor mental health. In fact, at least with respect to self-esteem, the data indicate that some ethnic minority groups fare psychologically similarly to or better than whites. There is research, however, indicating that ethnic minorities are at a higher risk than whites for experiencing and perceiving discrimination, which leads to poor psychological outcomes.

## ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR

Thus far, the discussion has focused primarily on ethnicity as a social-category label. That is, the previously discussed research examines ethnic minority status in terms of whether or not a person belongs to a certain social category. Being an ethnic minority

is more complex than such thinking. Consistent with the idea that being an ethnic minority is complex, as research on and about ethnic minorities has started to flourish, researchers have given more thought to what it means to be an ethnic minority. Scholars are developing sophisticated and intricate models and measures specifically about ethnic minority identity that examine ethnicity as more than a social category (for examples, see Cross, Parham, and Helms 1998; Phinney 1990, 1992; Sellers et al. 1998).

Despite differences in definitions and labels to describe the components of ethnic identity that have arisen from these ethnic-identity models, there seems to be consensus from this research that ethnic minority groups are not homogeneous.<sup>1</sup> (See Chatman, Eccles, and Malanchuk, chapter 6, this volume, as well as Allen et al., chapter 7, this volume, for additional discourse on definitions of ethnic identity.) There is a great deal of variability in the value ethnic minorities place on their ethnicity and how important their ethnicity is to their overall self-concept. For some ethnic minorities, ethnic-group membership is not an important reflection of who they are whereas for others it is the most significant component of their identity (Cross 1991; Luhtanen and Crocker 1992; Sellers et al. 1997). Similarly, some ethnic minorities have positive regard for other members of their ethnic group whereas others have negative regard (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992; Sellers et al. 1997). Moreover, as Robert M. Sellers and his colleagues note, there is variability in the beliefs and attitudes ethnic minorities have about what it means to be a member of their ethnic group. Interestingly, the grounded-theory approach used by Celina M. Chatman, Jacquelynne Eccles, and Oksana Malanchuk (chapter 6, this volume) to assess the meaning of ethnic identity for adolescents revealed similar components (racial ideology and racial pride), suggesting that these concepts are indeed how individuals think about their ethnic identity.

Research that has advanced from the ethnic-identity models has demonstrated that the variability in ethnic identity is associated, both directly and indirectly, with positive mental health outcomes. First, researchers have demonstrated a direct relationship between ethnic identity and mental health. Second, researchers have demonstrated that ethnic identity buffers the previously discussed relationship between exposure to discrimination and mental health. We discuss examples from our programs of research that illustrate these two points in more detail in the following sections.

## Ethnic Identity and Mental Health

Is there a direct relationship between ethnic identity and mental health? If so, is it positive or negative (see path D in figure 5.1)? Empirical evidence indicates that the more ethnicity is an important component of ethnic minorities' social identity, the higher their levels of psychological well-being (Lorenzo-Hernandez and Ouellette 1998; Martinez and Dukes 1997; Phinney 1996; Smith 1991; Yip and Fuligni 2002a). Research shows that for African Americans in particular, the esteem associated with ethnic-group membership is positively related to personal self-esteem, but only among those individuals for whom ethnicity is an important part of the self-concept (Rowley et al. 1998). A similar relationship was found among Chinese adolescents who participated in a daily-diary study (Yip and Fuligni 2002a, 2002b) and Chinese college students who participated in an experience-sampling study (Yip 2004) on ethnic-identity salience and psychological well-being. In these studies, ethnic-identity salience was considered to

be the dynamic dimension of ethnic identity that fluctuates in response to contextual cues. Tiffany Yip and Andrew J. Fuligni (2002a, 2002b) found that Chinese adolescents (mean age = sixteen years) with a strong attachment to their ethnic group showed the highest association between daily levels of ethnic salience and psychological well-being such that increased ethnic salience was paired with more positive feelings. In contrast, adolescents with a weaker attachment to their ethnic group reported no daily association between ethnic salience and psychological well-being. Similarly, at the level of the situation, Yip (2004) found that ethnic-identity salience was positively associated with psychological well-being among older Chinese students, but primarily among those individuals with high regard for their ethnic group. Specifically, Yip (2004) found that older Chinese students with high regard for their ethnic group reported positive associations between situation levels of ethnic-identity salience and psychological well-being, while students with moderate levels of regard for their group reported much weaker positive associations, and students with low regard for their group reported negative associations between ethnic-identity salience and psychological well-being.

Taken together, these findings show that people of color who choose to make ethnicity an important aspect of their social identity or have positive views about their group seem to exhibit better psychological adjustment. Interestingly, it does not seem to be the case that those who do not have a strong sense of ethnic identity are more poorly adjusted, rather it appears that their well-being is not tied to their feelings about their ethnic group. Therefore, we propose that ethnic identity may in fact protect and promote esteem and positive mental health for ethnic minorities who integrate ethnicity in the construction of their identity.

### Ethnic Identity as a Buffer Against Racial Discrimination

Does ethnic identity buffer ethnic minorities from the adverse effects of discrimination and prejudice (see path E in figure 5.1)? We, along with other scholars (Bowler, Rauch, and Schwarzer 1986; Chatman, Eccles, and Malanchuk, chapter 6, this volume; Crocker and Major 1989), posit that it does. Specifically, a certain type of ethnic identity seems to provide individual members of ethnic minority groups with a repertoire of strategies that allow them to negotiate difficult situations such as being faced with negative stereotypes, discrimination, and unfair treatment. Perhaps in the presence of discrimination, individuals who are connected to their group can feel good about themselves by focusing on the positive aspects of their group. We discuss the results of two programs of research, one dealing with young adults and the other with adolescents, to illustrate the buffering effects of ethnic identity in the lives of ethnic minorities.

**BUFFERING EFFECTS FOR YOUNG ADULTS** Using the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) as a theoretical framework, Sellers and his colleagues (Sellers and Shelton 2003; Neblett, Shelton, and Sellers 2004) found support for the buffering thesis with a sample of African American young adults. Sellers and colleagues define racial identity as the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals attribute to being black in their conceptualization of self (Sellers et al. 1997; Sellers et al. 1998).

They refer to the significance component of racial identity as “racial centrality,” and refer to the qualitative meaning of racial identity as “racial ideology” and “racial regard.” More specifically, “racial centrality” refers to how important race is to an individual’s overall self-concept. As noted previously, for some African Americans, race is not an important part of who they are, but for others it is the most defining component of their identity. Sellers and his colleagues suggest, however, that two people can be equally identified with their racial group but have very distinct beliefs about what it means to be a member of that group—in other words, have different racial ideologies—as well as have very different affective judgments about their group. According to this research there are at least four ideologies that capture African Americans’ views on what it means to be an African American:

1. A nationalist ideology, which stresses the uniqueness of being of African descent
2. An oppressed-minority ideology, which stresses the similarities between African Americans and other oppressed groups
3. An assimilationist ideology, which stresses the similarities between African Americans and American mainstream society
4. A humanist ideology, which stresses the commonalities of all humans

(See Sellers et al. 1998 for a richer description of each ideology.) In addition to these ideologies, Sellers and his colleagues suggest that some African Americans may have positive private regard for African Americans whereas others may have negative private regard; similarly, some African Americans believe that other people have positive regard for African Americans whereas some African Americans believe that other people have negative regard (public regard).

In accordance with a buffering framework, these three dimensions of racial identity (centrality, regard, and ideology) should moderate the relationship between experiencing racial discrimination and mental health outcomes. As noted previously, individuals who are strongly identified with their racial group may be able to focus on the positive aspects of their racial group in the face of discrimination. As a result, they may be buffered from the effects of discrimination. Similarly, Sellers and his colleagues suggest that racial discrimination may be consistent with some individuals’ racial ideological worldview and that individuals for whom this is the case may be buffered from the ill effects of discrimination. For example, African Americans with a racial ideology that stressed their uniqueness (nationalist ideology) or one whereby they see themselves as members of an oppressed minority group may expect others to treat them negatively because of their racial group membership. Because it is consistent with their perspective on life, these individuals may have developed strong coping strategies to deal with discrimination. As a result, when they experience discrimination in their lives it may not be as psychologically taxing for them as it is for African Americans with other racial ideologies. Finally, African Americans who believe that other groups make negative affective judgments about African Americans may be less affected by discrimination because it is not foreign to the way they view the world. Similar to individuals who endorse a nationalist or an oppressed-minority ideology,

these individuals may have developed coping strategies to deal with discrimination. In the next section, we discuss recent research that supports these predictions.

**RACIAL CENTRALITY AS A BUFFER AGAINST RACIAL DISCRIMINATION** Using data from the Racial Identity Longitudinal Survey (RILS), Enrique Neblett, J. Nicole Shelton, and Robert M. Sellers (2004) examined racial centrality as a moderator of experiencing racial discrimination and psychological distress. At the time of their data analyses, the participants in the RILS were 108 self-identified African American freshman college students from two predominately white universities located in the Midwest and Southeast and one historically black college located in the Southeast. All students who participated in the RILS completed a racial-identity measure, a racial-discrimination daily hassles questionnaire, and several psychological well-being measures. Students also completed the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), which is a fifty-six-item measure that assesses an individual's racial centrality, racial ideology, and racial regard (Sellers et al. 1997). In addition, students completed the Daily Life Experience questionnaire, a self-report measure whereby students indicate the frequency of experiencing eighteen types of micro-aggressions due to race in the past year (Harrell 1994) and how much the events bothered them. The micro-aggressions include being observed or being followed while in public places; and being ignored or overlooked, or not being given service. Finally, students completed the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and the Spielberger Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). Students completed all of these measures during their first semester of college and again at the end of their second semester of college.

The analyses from this portion of the RILS revealed that there was a direct relationship between experiences with daily racial hassles and anxiety, stress, and depression. Specifically, the more racial discrimination students reported experiencing at the first time point, the more anxiety, stress, and depression they reported experiencing at the second time point. Racial centrality, however, moderated these relationships. The sample was divided into low, medium, and high groups based on how important race was to individuals' overall self-concept. The results suggest a buffering effect of centrality on the relationship between experiencing daily racial hassles and mental health outcomes. Among students for whom race was not important or moderately important to their overall self-concept, experiencing daily racial hassles was related to more anxiety, stress, and depression. By contrast, among students for whom race was a very important aspect of their overall self-concept, experiencing daily racial hassles was unrelated to anxiety, stress, and depression. In other words, highly identified African Americans were buffered from the adverse impact of daily racial hassles on mental health.

**RACIAL IDEOLOGY AND RACIAL REGARD AS BUFFERS AGAINST RACIAL DISCRIMINATION** The findings from the RILS suggest that not all African Americans suffer from the adverse mental health consequences of racial discrimination. Racial centrality seems to buffer some individuals from these negative outcomes. Expanding upon that finding, Sellers and Shelton (2003) demonstrated that other dimensions of racial identity besides racial centrality—racial ideology and racial regard—also protect individuals from the negative consequences of racial discrimination.



Similar to Neblett, Shelton, and Sellers (2004), Sellers and Shelton's (2003) research also utilized African American students from the RILS. However, several differences regarding the sample and the methodology must be noted. First, by the time Sellers and Shelton's work was conducted, the RILS comprised a larger sample size than the one used by Neblett, Shelton, and Sellers (2004); Sellers and Shelton's research involves 267 African American students, instead of 108. Second, in addition to examining the global mental health consequences of experiencing racial discrimination, Sellers and Shelton investigated the event-specific consequences. Specifically, students indicated how bothered they were by daily racial hassles as an index of the event-specific consequences. In addition, Sellers and Shelton created an overall psychological distress variable that was a composite of the three mental health scales—*anxiety, stress, and depression scales*—as opposed to examining each scale separately as conducted by Neblett, Shelton, and Sellers (2004). Students completed the racial identity, daily racial hassles, and psychological well-being measures at two time points, at the beginning and at the end of their freshmen year in college.

Sellers and Shelton (2003) found that experiencing racial discrimination more frequently at the first time point resulted in more negative psychological outcomes at both the event-specific and global levels of psychological distress at the second time point. Participants' own appraisal of the discriminatory situation (for example, their answers to the question "How much did it bother you?") as well as their overall psychological well-being indicated that experiencing racial discrimination was devastating for individuals' mental health. However, as Sellers and Shelton predicted, individuals' attitudes regarding the meaning of race influenced the extent to which they were psychologically influenced by racial discrimination. Specifically, individuals who endorsed a nationalist ideology, which stresses the uniqueness of being black, were buffered from the adverse impact of racial discrimination at event-specific and global distress levels. That is, the more individuals believed that African Americans should join together and provide emotional, financial, and spiritual support to one another, the less they were negatively impacted by racial discrimination. Likewise, individuals who believed that other groups perceived African Americans negatively were buffered from the negative impact of racial discrimination. That is, the more individuals recognized that whites hold negative views of African Americans generally, the less they were negatively impacted by racial discrimination.

Taken together, the findings by Sellers and his colleagues (Neblett, Shelton, and Sellers 2004; Sellers and Shelton 2003) provide empirical support to the accumulating theoretical work that suggests that ethnic identity protects minorities from the deleterious impact of racism. Their data show that for African Americans who see race as a central component of their self-concept, and for those African Americans who endorse a nationalist ideology, as well as for those African Americans who think others view their group negatively or encountered negative racial events, they were not as psychologically taxed as other African Americans.

**BUFFERING EFFECTS FOR ADOLESCENTS** Sellers and his colleagues' research focused exclusively on African American college-age youth. Recent research by Eccles and her colleagues (Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff 2003) explored the protective functions of aspects of ethnic identity among African American adolescents in their school

experiences. Their findings are based on longitudinal analyses of data from the Maryland Adolescent Development in Contexts Study (MADICS).

The participants in this study were living in a county in Maryland that has undergone tremendous demographic and political changes since 1960 (Cook et al. 1999). For example, prior to 1960, 85 percent of the residents in this county were white and political control was held by whites; by 1995, 51 percent of the households were African American and 43 percent were white, and whites and African Americans had equal political control. In addition, because of the fairly comparable social-class profile of the white and African American households in this county, it was possible to study the development of African American adolescents from poor and from middle- and upper-class families.

The first wave of MADICS data was collected from 1,480 families when the adolescents were in seventh grade (1991). The second wave was collected from 1,067 families the summer following the adolescents' completion of eighth grade (1993). Only the 336 African American males and 293 African American females who participated in both waves of data collection in both of the larger studies are included in the present study. The median-income range for the African American adolescents' families in 1991 was \$45,000 to \$49,999 and for the white adolescents' families, \$50,000 to \$54,999. The primary caregivers' average levels of education were the same in the two ethnic groups: 54 percent had received a high school degree and 40 percent had obtained a college degree.

The adolescents attended public junior high schools in which the racial composition of the student body ranged from 99 percent African Americans and less than 1 percent white to 33 percent African Americans and 60 percent white students. The racial composition of the school faculties ranged from 25 percent African American and 70 percent white teachers to 52 percent African American and 47 percent white teachers.

In the following sections we first show that there is a negative relationship between discrimination and mental health and also between discrimination and developmental outcomes. Secondly, consistent with our argument, we show that ethnic identity buffers adolescents from these negative outcomes.

**PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT** Consistent with Sellers and colleagues' research with college-age students, the findings from Carol A. Wong, Eccles, and Arnold Sameroff's (2003) research indicates that during early adolescence, experiences of ethnic discrimination at the first time point influence mental health and developmental outcomes at the second time point. Specifically, the findings reveal the negative effects of perceived racial discrimination from peers and teachers (as a single scale) on adolescents' academic motivation and achievement (declines in school grades, self-concept of academic ability, perceived importance of and perceived utility of school success), and mental health (declines in psychological resilience and self-esteem and increases in depression and anger). In addition, perceived discrimination was associated with increases in the probability of engaging in problem behaviors and having a high proportion of friends who also engage in problem behaviors. These relationships were obtained after controlling for each of the outcome variables and family socioeconomic status at the first time point.

Engaging the Future

These results indicate that experiences of racial discrimination in junior high school are environmental risks that potentially can threaten African American adolescents' academic and socio-emotional well-being. This is noteworthy because at this age adolescents are at an increased risk for declining motivation, poorer self-perceptions, greater susceptibility to conforming to peers' negative influence, and proneness to problem behaviors (Berndt 1979; Eccles and Midgley 1989; Eccles et al. 1993). Experiencing ethnic stressors such as experiences of discrimination in addition to the non-ethnic-related stressors commonly faced by early adolescents can further increase the probability of negative psychological outcomes (Simmons et al. 1987). Furthermore, prior research indicates that risks during early adolescence have long-term implications. For example, Eccles and her colleagues found that adolescents who report decreases in self-esteem as they make the transition to junior high school continue to have lowered self-esteem throughout their high school years, along with increased depression, anxiety, and alcohol consumption (Eccles et al. 1997).

**THE PROTECTIVE ROLE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG ADOLESCENTS** Although the above findings reveal a negative relationship between exposure to discrimination and psychological and developmental outcomes, we argue that ethnic identity may serve as a protective factor for adolescents, in a similar vein to what Sellers and his colleagues have found with college-age students. Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) focused specifically on connection to one's ethnic group as the principal component of ethnic identity. Adolescents' feeling of connection to their ethnic group was measured with four questions developed by the staff of the MADIC study: whether respondents felt close to friends because of similar race or ethnicity; whether they believed that people of their race or ethnicity had a rich heritage; whether they felt they had rich traditions because of their race or ethnicity; and whether they felt supported by people of their own race or ethnicity.

Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) demonstrated that connection to one's ethnic group had both main and interactive effects on psychological adjustment for these African American adolescents. First, connection to one's ethnic group predicted increases in one's psychological resilience and school grades and a higher proportion of friends who were positive about school. In each case, the size of the beta for the connection indicator was approximately equal to the size of the negative beta for perceived discrimination. These results suggest that a strong positive connection to one's ethnic group is a promotive asset that can compensate for the negative impact of perceived discrimination on these aspects of adolescent development.

Second, the interaction term between connection to one's ethnic group and perceived discrimination provides an estimate of the buffering or moderating effect of connection to one's ethnic group on the negative impact of perceived discrimination on adolescent development. This interaction term was significant for four adolescent outcomes: self-concept of academic ability, school grades, involvement in problem behaviors, and the proportion of one's friends that value school. In each case, perceived discrimination had no impact on change in these aspects of adolescent development if the adolescent had a strong connection to their ethnic group. Thus, these African American youths' connection to their ethnic group acted as a protec-

tive factor by both compensating for and buffering against the impact of perceived discrimination.

Like the work by Sellers and colleagues, described above, results from the MADICS indicate that although perceptions and experiences of ethnic discrimination can negatively influence well-being among African Americans, certain aspects of ethnic identity can act as a buffer against those effects. Taken together, the Sellers and colleagues and Eccles and Wong studies suggest that the protective function of ethnic identity against the negative effects of discrimination is relatively robust, applying to both adolescents and adults in varying contexts (school, college, workplace), across time, and with regard to many different outcomes (for example, psychological adjustment, academic motivation).

## Ethnic Identity as a Buffer Against General Stress

It is clear from the two programs of research described thus far that ethnic identity can protect individuals from discrimination-related stress. But is it possible that ethnic identity can also protect individuals from the deleterious consequences associated with threatening events more generally? That is, is it possible that members of ethnic minorities, because of their marginalized status in society, may be more exposed to general stressors in addition to stressors related to exposure to race-related discrimination? Recent research by Yip and Fuligni (2002a, 2002b) suggests that ethnic identity does indeed buffer against the potentially damaging effects of daily stressors. Approximately 100 Chinese adolescents (mean age = sixteen years) completed the ethnic-identity achievement subscale of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney 1992). Individuals who scored high on the identity achievement subscale showed evidence of having explored and come to terms with what it means to be an ethnic minority. Hence, these individuals have a clear understanding of the role of ethnicity in their lives as well as a secure sense of themselves as members of ethnic minority groups. Individuals reporting a low ethnic-identity achievement score may be grappling with the role and meaning of ethnicity in their lives. In addition to reporting on their ethnic identity, participants also completed a measure of daily stressors (Bolger and Zuckerman 1995) and anxiety (Profile of Mood States, Lorr and McNair 1971) at the end of the day for one week. Respondents indicated the occurrence of general stressors for that day. More specifically, participants checked whether they "had a lot of work at home," "had a lot of work at job or school," "had a lot of demands made by your family," and "had a lot of demands made by other relatives or friends" ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = .72$ ). Anxiety was assessed using five items (for example, "on edge," "uneasy," "nervous"), to which participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = .68$ ).

In general, on days when participants reported more stressors, they also reported feeling more anxious, but this association was buffered by individual differences in ethnic-identity achievement. For youths who had a clear sense of their ethnic identity, daily stressors were not associated with anxiety, and this pattern of results remained even after controlling for individual differences in personal (Rosenberg 1986) and collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). Therefore, it seems that

the buffering effect was due to the specific dynamics of ethnic-identity achievement, and not general feelings of esteem. Ethnic identity was also found to buffer the effect of stressors on anxiety after adjusting for feelings of family closeness. High levels of ethnic identity seemed to account for decreased anxiety in the face of daily stressors, independent of youths' level of intimacy with their parents. For youths reporting moderate and low scores on ethnic-identity achievement, stressors maintained a positive association with anxiety.

From these data, it seems that having a strong sense of ethnic identity may help to protect Chinese adolescents and perhaps more generally other ethnic minority youth against the mental health consequences of exposure to everyday stressors. Not having a strong sense of ethnic-identity achievement seemed to predict increased anxiety in reaction to stress on a daily basis, as these youths were not able to draw upon their ethnic identity as a stress-buffering resource. It is not clear what the consequences of this increased anxiety may be over time.

## SUMMARY OF PROTECTIVE FUNCTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Taken together, the findings from three programs of research (Sellers and his colleagues, and Eccles and her colleagues, Yip and Fuligni) show that ethnic identity can serve a positive and protective role in the lives of ethnic minorities. In the past, most of the research on ethnic minorities has attended to only the deficits, weaknesses, and risks associated with being an ethnic minority. By contrast, the evidence in the work presented in this chapter illuminates the protective factors associated with ethnic identity. This work shows how ethnic identity plays an important role in ethnic minorities' psychological development, particularly under threatening circumstances.

It is important to stress that we are not arguing that experiencing ethnic discrimination does not have negative consequences for ethnic minorities who feel connected to their identity group or who endorse certain ideological views about race. The consequences of discrimination may take on other forms for these individuals. Perhaps these individuals' racial attitudes or perceptions of intergroup dynamics are influenced. Or perhaps these individuals are affected in an unconscious manner. Moreover, in our work, we have focused primarily on *intrapersonal* consequences of discrimination (mental health and goals) and how identity may play a role. Future research needs to address the extent to which there are *interpersonal* consequences in which ethnic identity may not be a protective factor. Finally, we are not arguing that a certain type of ethnic identity (being strongly identified with one's group) always serves as a protective function for ethnic minorities. In some contexts a certain type of ethnic identity may be detrimental to individuals' physical and mental health. Our research shows, however, that in the context of stressful events, particularly those related to prejudice and discrimination, being highly identified with and feeling positive regard for one's ethnic group is associated with positive well-being.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The goal of this chapter was to illustrate that ethnic identity protects ethnic minorities against the deleterious consequences associated with the stressors of being an eth-

nic minority in the United States. Although being an ethnic minority can be a risk factor for negative physical and psychological outcomes, we argued that there is great variability in ethnic minorities' experiences and beliefs regarding their ethnicity. Our research shows that ethnic minorities who value their ethnicity seem to be protected from the adverse consequences of such stressors. Unfortunately, not much is known about the specific processes and mechanisms by which ethnic identity serves as a buffering factor for ethnic identity in the face of stress. Research presented in other chapters in this book, especially chapter 4, by Linda Strauss and William Cross, and chapter 3, by Bonita London, Geraldine Downey, Niall Bolger, and Elizabeth Velilla, may shed light on this issue.

Strauss and Cross suggest that African Americans cope with positive and negative events associated with their black identity through the use of identity transactions. They provide evidence that social situations identified as race-related and stressful trigger African Americans to use a buffering transaction, a strategy designed to protect oneself from a hostile situation. In addition, Strauss and Cross demonstrated that the more important their racial identity is to African Americans' self-concept, the more likely they are to rely on the buffering transaction, regardless of the type of situation. Given these findings, it is feasible that ethnic minorities for whom their ethnic identity is an important component of their self-concept rely on buffering when they experience discrimination, which protects them from the negative psychological implications of discrimination. In addition, individuals who feel connected to their ethnic group may be better able to draw on (think about) positive experiences with other in-group members when they are faced with discrimination than are those who are not connected, which helps reduce the negative effects of discrimination on mental health. This process may be closely linked to what Strauss and Cross refer to as bonding. Future research is needed to explore the possibility that identity transactions explain why ethnic identity buffers the ill effects of discrimination on mental health.

London, Downey, Bolger, and Velilla (this volume) also investigated stress and coping issues among university students who are members of devalued social-identity groups. Specifically, they examined the relationship between encounters with stressors related to one's devalued social identity and feelings of belonging to the university, and how individuals' coping strategies impact that relationship. They found that coping with a negative race-related event by transforming the situation into one that is less focused on negativity (perhaps through the use of humor or changing the subject) allows individuals to feel a greater sense of belonging to the university. It is feasible that ethnic minorities who are highly identified with their ethnic group engage in such transformation coping strategies when they encounter discrimination, which buffers them from the negative consequences of the event. Future research is needed to explore the role of transformation as a means of explaining the buffering effect of ethnic identity on experiences with discrimination and mental health.

In this chapter, we opted to focus on how ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor in experiences with *intergroup* treatment. Recent work has begun to show the importance of studying *intragroup* relations among ethnic minorities. For example, Chatman, Eccles, and Malanchuk (chapter 6, this volume) as well as Strauss and Cross (chapter 4, this volume) suggest that ethnic identity may influence self-presentation strategies ethnic minorities use in intragroup contexts. These strategies in intragroup contexts may have important implications for ethnic minorities' psy-

chological well-being. In addition, recent research suggests that intragroup discrimination and rejection can negatively impact ethnic minorities' psychological well-being. Tom Postmes and Nyla Branscombe (2002), for example, found that the more African American college students (study 1) and noncollege adults (study 2) felt rejected by other African Americans, the lower their collective self-esteem, personal self-esteem, and life satisfaction. In similar work on intragroup relations, Signithia Fordham (see Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fordham 1988) argue that behaviors that distance African American youth from other African Americans result in feelings of cultural alienation, and these feelings of cultural alienation are related to depression and anxiety. Likewise, Richard J. Contrada et al. (2001) found that the more ethnic minorities felt pressured by their in-group to conform to certain behaviors, the more depressive symptoms and negative physical symptoms they experienced.

Taken together, these findings suggest that negative intragroup treatment may be just as important as intergroup treatment for ethnic minorities' well-being. Does being highly identified with one's ethnic group protect individuals' from the negative consequences noted above? Or does being highly identified exacerbate the problem? Given the adverse consequences associated with negative intragroup treatment, future research needs to address the extent to which the protective function of ethnic identity discussed in this chapter extends to stress associated with intragroup experiences.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND INTERVENTIONS

In the census year 2000, much discussion surrounded the treatment of race and ethnicity in the United States national census. In 2004, the Illinois Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, Barack Obama, who was born to a Kenyan father and white American mother and who identifies himself as an African American, re-sparked the debate over who should be considered an African American in America. In a *New York Times* article entitled "'African American' Becomes a Term for Debate" (August 29, 2004), the Illinois Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, Alan Keyes, asked whether it was correct for Obama to claim an African American identity. Although the policy ramifications of the labels used in the census and the resulting labels used for ethnic minorities such as Barack Obama are extremely important, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that when it comes to understanding the everyday lived experiences of ethnic minorities it is also important to take into consideration the *meaning* ethnic minorities associate with their identity. We are in no way suggesting that the Census Bureau should assess individuals' ethnic identity as we have done in our research (that is, with multiple-item scales that assess ethnic-identity centrality and ideology). But policymakers should keep in mind that the meaning an individual attaches to his or her ethnic-identity label may be just as important as if not more important than the label itself. The findings from the programs of research presented in this chapter suggest that the meaning associated with individuals' ethnic identity has serious implications for the way they experience daily and race-related stressors in a particular context.

Along with the debate about ethnic-identity labels has occurred a long-standing debate about how to improve intergroup relations in the United States. Some re-

searchers suggest that the best strategy to foster intergroup harmony is to de-emphasize group differences and to highlight commonalities across groups. Other researchers, however, oppose de-emphasizing group differences and instead suggest that it is important to emphasize and celebrate group differences. In truth, the best strategy is probably a combination of the de-emphasizing and emphasizing differences. This chapter's findings support allowing ethnic minorities to vary in the meaning they associate with their ethnic identity. If ethnic minorities in the United States were forced to de-emphasize their ethnic identity or redefine their ethnic identity solely in terms of another identity, such as a national identity, they may not benefit from the protection that feeling connected to one's ethnic group and having a certain racial ideology seem to afford them when they encounter stress, especially prejudice-related stress.

Given that it may be difficult to eradicate negative perceptions and treatment of ethnic minorities, policies and practices targeting race- and ethnicity-related stressors and their effects on individuals' lives may be best informed by surveying the ethnic minorities who experience these stressors. If nothing more, we hope we have convinced interested parties that the same intervention and prevention strategies will not work for all ethnic minorities. If exposure to negative treatment (general stressors as well as discrimination) has differential impact on different members of ethnic minority groups, then the same intervention and prevention strategies will not work for all individuals. It is of critical importance to undertake research that takes this variation within ethnic groups into account, in order to identify the specific strategies that will be maximally effective for different types of people.

That said, we caution readers about interventions aimed at encouraging ethnic minorities to identify with and feel connected to their ethnic group (perhaps this process may even be detrimental). In general, our findings show that ethnic minorities who feel attached to their ethnic group are protected from the deleterious consequences of discrimination on their psychological well-being. Our findings, however, do not suggest that ethnic minorities who do not feel attached to their ethnic group incur more psychological harm when they encounter discrimination. In fact, in most of the studies we presented in this chapter, there was no relationship between encountering discrimination and psychological well-being for ethnic minorities who do not feel attached to their group. Thus, the theme that emerges from our research is that it is vital for intervention researchers to develop ways for ethnic minorities who already feel attached to their group to continue to embrace and nurture their ethnic identity.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In closing, we turn to what is perhaps the definitive pivotal finding that sparked research on ethnic identity. Approximately fifty years ago, Kenneth and Mamie Clark's classic "doll studies" changed the course of American history when their results were incorporated into the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which mandated desegregation of American institutions. The core finding of the "doll studies" was that black children, when given a choice between white and brown dolls, showed a preference for the white dolls when asked which ones they preferred and liked the most (Clark and Clark 1947). These studies provided the scientific evidence that segregation was detrimental to the self-esteem and psyches



of black Americans. During the past fifty years there have been numerous debates over how to interpret the Clarks' finding. The interpretation used in the Court's decision was crucial for promoting social change at the time. Nevertheless, over the years the zeitgeist has changed, and researchers have focused more on the adaptive functions of being an ethnic minority in the United States. We hope our work, which was very much inspired by some of the original questions that challenged Kenneth and Mamie Clark, enriches scholars' understanding of the complexity of ethnicity and ethnic identity in the lives of ethnic minorities in the United States.

## NOTE

1. Because of these differences we do not provide a general definition of ethnic identity. Instead we provide definitions and detailed information about the component or dimension of ethnic identity we are referring to when we discuss empirical findings from our three different programs of research.

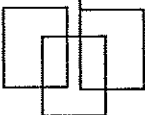
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# NAVIGATING THE FUTURE



Social Identity, Coping, and Life Tasks

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