
American Identity Revisited: The Relation Between National, Ethnic, and Personal Identity in a Multiethnic Sample of Emerging Adults

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Abstract

The present mixed-methods study investigated meanings and affective valences ascribed to “American identity” and the ways in which these meanings and valences relate to ethnic and personal identity. The data were collected from 2004 to 2006 and used a multiethnic sample of 287 college students residing in Miami, Florida. Subjective meanings of American identity were assessed using four qualitative questions that were coded thematically: characteristics that define the typical American, characteristics that describe ways in which one is American, qualities that make one something other than American, and the degree to which one feels American. Results suggested many similarities, along with some differences, across ethnic groups. In terms of how American one feels, ethnic minorities felt less American than Whites and believed that, regardless of their citizenship, they are not perceived as American. Responses suggested that participants believed that to be American, one must sacrifice a connection to family and community. Continuing to examine the relationship between national, ethnic, and personal identity will help us better understand how emerging adults make sense of their social world and manage difficult choices about their identities.

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Keywords

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Emerging adulthood has been defined as the period of life bridging adolescence and adulthood. In developed nations such as the United States, this period can span from the end of high school to the mid-to-late 20s. Issues associated with self-definition are especially salient during this time (Arnett, 2003). Emerging adults are also an important voting bloc—for example, their large turnout in the 2008 election helped to propel Barack Obama to the presidency (Gallup Poll, 2008). Both the developmental and political significance of emerging adulthood calls for examining national identity, and its relationships to other aspects of identity, in this age group. The present article focuses on how American emerging adults conceptualize and experience their national identity—one of a number of issues pertaining to where and how an individual fits into the larger society (Arnett, 2000; Schachter, 2005; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). We examine two main issues—the nature of national identity and the extent to which national identity appears to complement or contradict personal and ethnic identity. We do so while keeping in mind that today's youth comprise the most diverse group in American history. More than 30% of American youth are children of immigrant parents (Feliciano, 2006), many of whom maintain strong ties to their heritage cultures. It therefore stands to reason that, as the cultural backgrounds and values of Americans change, so too must the definition of “American” be evolving. Our goal is to present data that will begin to clarify the relationships between personal, ethnic, and national identity in this rapidly changing cohort—where personal identity refers to the consistency and coherence of one's overall sense of self (Erikson, 1980) and ethnic identity refers to the solidarity that one feels toward one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992, 1995).

The concept of national identity is regarded by some historians as “perhaps the most fundamental and inclusive” of collective identities (Smith, 1991, p. 143). However, until recently, national identity has received relatively limited attention in psychological research (cf. DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Schildkraut, 2002). Scholars agree that national identity is not a unitary construct (Schildkraut, 2003, 2005, in press) and that its meaning differs across contexts and historical periods (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Schildkraut (2005, 2007, in press) defines American national identity as a singular construct comprised of several components, including democratic ideals and characteristics of the typical American. Bush (2005), using a multiethnic sample of college students, identified a number of content areas, including non-Hispanic White ethnicity, exclusive use of English, observance

of American national holidays, and American symbols (e.g., flag, bald eagle, apple pie). Given the very different histories of the three largest U.S. ethnic groups—Whites, Blacks, and Latinos—in the United States, it is reasonable to expect that these three groups would characterize American national identity differently (or would endorse these attributes to different extents). Furthermore, given that being American may often be equated with being White (Bush, 2005; DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Tsai, Mortensen, Wong, & Hess, 2002), Blacks and Latinos may place more importance on their heritage identities (attachments to their ethnic groups or cultural lineages; Phinney, 2003). The relationship between heritage and American identities therefore needs to be considered for these groups (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007). The importance of ethnic identity, and its relationship to American identity, may be less important for Whites as of now, but given the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity in the United States, these issues may be becoming more and more important over time (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Weisskirch, 2008).

Models of National Identity

Several models have been introduced in attempts to provide theoretical frameworks that would clarify the relationship between an individual's identification with his or her heritage culture and identification with the nation as a whole. Two of these theories, reviewed below, were used to guide the present study.

According to the *ethnic pluralism model (EPM)*, individuals can simultaneously maintain a positive identity with their nation while remaining identified with their heritage culture (Phinney, 1996; Sidanius, Feshbach, Levin, & Pratto, 1997). The psychological properties of ethnic pluralism relate to a state that DuBois (1961) labeled *double-consciousness*, and what is now referred to as *bicultural efficacy* (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1998)—the belief that one can live simultaneously within an ethnic culture and a larger national context without compromising a cohesive sense of self (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). There is empirical evidence to support the ethnic pluralism model. For example, in a national investigation of Mexican American adults, de la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia (1996) found a positive relationship between attachment to heritage (Mexican) identity and attachment to American national identity. Research also suggests that individuals are best adapted when they integrate their ethnic and national identities into a larger bicultural identity that subsumes both identities (Schwartz et al., 2007; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002; Yuh, 2005). This is especially true for adolescents and emerging adults, for whom identity issues are particularly salient (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1980).

By contrast, *social dominance theory* (SDT; Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar, & Levin, 2004) proposes that ethnic and national identities are destined to come into conflict in cases where the individual's ethnic group was subjugated through conquest or domination by the majority culture. Individuals who identify with a conquered or subjugated ethnic minority group are perceived to be, and ultimately see themselves as, subordinate to majority group members (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius et al., 2004). According to SDT, there are important variations among ethnic groups in the relationship between identification with their own ethnic groups and their national identities. Sidanius and colleagues (1997) examined the relationship between ethnic and national identity in a sample of White, Black, and Latino young adults. These researchers also compared whether a national sample differed from a university sample and found important variations in ethnic identity and patriotism across ethnic groups and samples. In their national sample, a strong ethnic identity was negatively related to national attachment and patriotism for Blacks, whereas for Whites and Latinos, ethnic identity was positively related to attachment and patriotism. In their university sample, however, the findings for Latinos shifted, showing less national attachment when a strong ethnic identity was present. Sidanius et al. argued that the social context experienced by Latinos in their university sample, namely, the anti-immigration sentiments in Southern California might have influenced these results.

The findings reviewed above typify the available literature, with studies showing some support for the ethnic pluralism model and some support for the social dominance model. These literatures have led some researchers to argue that, in contemporary America, the only consistency is a complete lack of consensus (Schildkraut, 2007). These conflicting findings are particularly evident among samples of emerging adults, for whom the search for identity is heightened. For instance, in a qualitative study of national identity, Bush (2005) found that White American college students (whose families had been in the United States for generations) experienced being "American" as similar to being "White." Such a finding is consistent with SDT, in that as part of the dominant culture, White Americans would see themselves as completely aligned with the American national identity. In contrast, findings for ethnic minorities were far more diverse, ranging from biculturality (feeling both attachment to the nation and ethnic group) to total separation from either their American identity or their ethnic identity.

Using the Implicit Attitude Test (IAT), a measure that taps unconscious ethnic and racial attitudes, DeVos and Banaji (2005) found a strong disconnect between explicit and implicit attitudes among Asian American emerging adults. Although Asian Americans stated explicitly that they considered themselves American, results from the implicit measure revealed that they

implicitly viewed themselves as separate from the American mainstream because they were not White. Most recently, in an open-ended investigation of definitions of American identity among emerging adults, Park-Taylor et al. (2008) found responses focused on physical characteristics, beliefs and values, and opinions about whether 9/11 brought together or further drove apart ethnic minorities in the United States. Results of that study suggested that being "American" was defined according to physical traits, values, and national symbols. However, Park-Taylor et al. did not examine the extent to which use of these descriptors differs across ethnicity. This issue clearly warrants further empirical attention.

In sum, the available literature suggests that the relationship between ethnic and national identity among emerging adults is complicated. Furthermore, although prior literature has examined the symbols and characteristics used to represent national identity, there has been little attention paid to the degree of positivity or negativity attributed to these symbols and traits. Finally, despite the need to integrate across levels of identity (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2008), the available models do not address the relationship of national identity to either ethnic or personal identity.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to explore the definition of American national identity among a diverse group of emerging adults and to examine the relationships of American national identity to personal and ethnic identity in a sample of White, Latino, and Black emerging adults (aged 18-25). Although some prior research has explored the meanings and functions of national identity from a qualitative perspective, few studies have used rigorous coding methods within a large sample, included multiple questions to more fully capture participants' beliefs and attitudes about national identity, and related these perceptions to other aspects of participants' identity. In the present study, a systematic coding scheme was developed to examine the nuances of participants' views regarding their own identities as individuals, as ethnic group members, and as citizens or residents of the United States. As was done in prior research, participants were allowed to generate their own responses regarding what "American" means. Given that past research has found that "American" is often characterized in terms of values or personality characteristics, physical appearance, national symbols, and birthplace, we anticipated that these (or similar) themes would emerge in the present study. Both the content and affect of responses were examined. We then related these views of national identity to participants' personal and ethnic identities.

The coding scheme for American identity was developed based primarily on the work of Bush (2005), Schildkraut (2007, in press), and Park-Taylor et al. (2008). These authors, using very different types of samples—college students versus nationally representative samples of adults—found similar groupings of responses concerning American identity. These include being born in the United States, being White, speaking English, holding democratic and egalitarian attitudes, and celebrating American holidays such as July 4 and symbols such as the American flag. Although we used these prior studies to guide our coding system, we also systematically examined responses and searched for additional themes that emerged. Moreover, we included the *valence*, as well as *content*, of responses. That is, although Schildkraut (2007, in press) has characterized American identity in almost universally positive terms, we believed it is possible that participants might comment negatively on what it means to be American.

Given the interrelatedness among various aspects of identity (Schwartz et al., 2008), we expected that a synthesized sense of personal identity would be positively related to national identity—that is, a more coherent sense of identity in general would help young people to make sense of themselves as Americans. For instance, both Blacks and Latinos have complex histories in the United States: most U.S. Blacks are descended from slaves who were brought to the U.S. involuntarily, and because of their large and growing population, Latinos have become the target for discrimination and are considered a threat to the U.S. national fabric by many White Americans (Huntington, 2004; Schildkraut, 2007, in press). Thus, we expected that there would be variations among the three ethnic groups in how ethnic and national identity relate, such that ethnic and national identity would be closely and positively interrelated for Whites but negatively related for Blacks (Bush, 2005). Given the conflicting findings for Latinos, we were unsure how national and ethnic identity would relate in this study for this group (see Sidanius et al., 1997; Tsai et al., 2002).

Method

Participants

The present sample consisted of 287 emerging-adult university students residing in Miami, Florida (28% male, 72% female; mean age 19.46 years, $SD = 1.78$, range 17-25). The sample consisted of students who self-identified as members of one of the following three ethnic groups—Black ($n = 68$), Latino ($n = 176$), or White ($n = 43$)—were included in the present analyses.

The majority of the sample (65%) reported being second-generation Americans—that is, born in the United States to immigrant parents. Half the sample (50.6%) was composed of 1st-year students, with sophomores (25.9%), juniors (17.9%), and seniors or 5th-year students (5.7%) making up the remainder. Annual family income was fairly evenly divided among the categories of less than US\$30,000 (17%), US\$30,000 to US\$50,000 (26.5%), US\$50,000 to US\$100,000 (28%), and above US\$100,000 (28.4%).

Procedure

Data were collected between September 2004 and April 2006. Participants were recruited from introductory psychology and sociology courses and received course credit for their participation (95% participation rate). Participants were asked to complete the questionnaires at home and to return them in class to their instructors. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could obtain the same amount of credit by writing a term paper. The institutional review boards at the University of Miami, Florida International University, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst approved this investigation.

Qualitative Measures: American Identity

American identity was assessed using the following open-ended questions:

1. When you think of the word *American*, what characteristics or traits do you think of?
2. In what ways do you consider yourself an American?
3. In what ways do you consider yourself something other than American?
4. How American do you feel?

The coding scheme for rating the responses to the first 3 questions arose naturally from content analyses and strongly resembled categories derived in previous studies (Bush, 2005; Park-Taylor et al., 2008; Schildkraut, in press) consisting of the following categories: tangible (behaviors or practices), unambiguous (birthright or citizenship), ambiguous (values and beliefs), and symbolic (see Table 1). Although we did not ask for numerical answers to Question 4, responses to this question were most often expressed as continuous percentages (or as responses such as “about half,” which were converted into numeric values).

Three coders, the first author (who was then a graduate student), a former social worker, and an undergraduate student were trained in the coding system described below. The coders completed their ratings independently of one another, with a minimum of two coders assigned to each set of responses. If discrepancies arose, the coders discussed their responses until a final decision was reached. Overall, the average percentage agreement across the four American identity questions was 96.8%, and the average Cohen's Kappa was .86.

For each question, coders provided both a category and an affective rating (a rating of emotional valence) of each participant's response. Emotional valence ratings ranged from highly negative (-3) to highly positive (+3). For the categorical placement, responses were assigned a category from among the four available categories available per question, based on the two coders' judgments. The affective ratings never differed between coders by more than 2 points, and consequently, the affective ratings were averaged across the two raters.

Quantitative Measures: Ethnic and Personal Identity

Ethnic identity. Ethnic identity was assessed using the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999). This instrument assesses two aspects of ethnic identity: ethnic identity achievement (seven items), representing the extent to which the individual has considered her or his ethnicity and has decided on its personal meaning; and affirmation and belonging (five items), representing the extent to which the individual identifies with or values her or his ethnic group. Sample items include "I have spent time trying to find out more about my group, such as its history, traditions, and customs" (ethnic identity achievement) and "I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group" (affirmation and belonging). A review of 12 studies that used the MEIM found scores on the two subscales to be highly correlated with one another, to have satisfactory levels of internal consistency, and to have moderate degrees of construct and criterion-related validity (Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Stracuzzi, & Saya, 2003). In the present investigation, the correlation between the two ethnic identity subscales was also high ($r = .64$). We therefore summed the two subscales to create a total ethnic identity scale. Cronbach's alpha for the combined scale was .86 (for Blacks $\alpha = .87$; Latinos $\alpha = .85$; Whites $\alpha = .85$). In prior research, this total ethnic identity score has been positively associated with other indices of heritage-culture retention, such as ethnic behaviors and practices (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008).

Personal identity. Personal identity was assessed using the 12-item identity subscale from the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). This subscale measures the extent to which the respondent has a clear sense of self and personal beliefs. Six items are worded in a “positive” direction (i.e., toward identity synthesis), and six items are worded in a “negative” direction (i.e., toward identity confusion). Sample items include “I’ve got a clear idea of what I want to be” (identity synthesis) and “I don’t really know who I am” (identity confusion). The confusion or “negatively” worded items are reverse-scored and summed with the synthesis or “positively” worded items to create a total identity scale score. In the present sample, Cronbach’s alpha was .80 (for Blacks, $\alpha = .78$; Latinos, $\alpha = .81$; Whites, $\alpha = .80$). Prior research has demonstrated that scores on the EPSI converge as expected with scores on other measures that reflect a well-organized and coherent sense of self (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009).

Results

A summary of themes and affective valences that emerged in the qualitative analyses is presented in Table 1. Qualitative analyses are presented at length below. Each section begins with a review of whether ethnic group differences arose in the pattern of themes/categories endorsed per question, followed by a descriptive exploration of each category. For each question, we report results of Category \times Ethnicity chi-square analyses to examine the consistency of the *content* of responses across ethnic groups and analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to analyze the consistency of *affective valence* of responses across ethnic groups. Associations of personal and ethnic identity were examined using bivariate correlation coefficients and are presented under a separate heading.

Question 1—When you think of the word American, what characteristics or traits do you think of? A chi-square test across categories indicated no significant differences among ethnic groups in the overall pattern of statements in response to this question. That is, each group responded fairly similarly, endorsing each of the themes at similar rates. However, the affect attributed to each response did differ by ethnicity. Overall, White participants ($M = 1.08$, $SD = 1.85$) expressed more positivity in their responses to this question compared to Black participants ($M = .21$, $SD = 1.87$), $F(2, 282) = 3.09$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$; whereas Latinos ($M = .57$, $SD = 1.75$) did not differ significantly from either of the other two groups.

Table 1. American Identity Questions and Themes Found

	Affect range	Black (M,SD)	Latino (M,SD)	White (M,SD)	Positive themes	Sample responses	Negative themes	Sample responses
AIQ No. 1. Definition of "American"								
Symbols	9.1 -1 to 3	.88, .88	.33, .82	.50, .50	Holidays, foods, music	"American = Hamburgers, hotdogs, baseball games and picnics" (28-year-old White male)	—	—
Language/ geography	10.1 -2 to 1	.00, .10	-.05, .16 ^a	.20, .27 ^a	Reference to specific regions	"I think of Alabama, middle America." (19-year-old White female)	English only policies	"Someone who lives in the US and speaks only English" (21-year-old Latina)
Race/physical descriptions	18.1 -3 to 3	-.71, 1.35	-.90, .96	-.50, 1.80	Ethnic pluralism	"Someone who has lived in America regardless of their ethnic background" (18-year-old White male)	Social dominance	"I think of White Americans ... [they] believe that they are better than any other race ..." (19-year-old Latina)
Ideology	62.0 -3 to 3	.26, 2.11 ^a	1.32, 1.83	1.55, 1.91 ^a	Valuing freedom, opportunity, equality, and work ethic	"Independent, free, strong-willed" (several respondents); "An American is patriotic, someone who respects others' human rights" (20-year-old Latina)	Superiority, not family oriented, materialism, selfish, and materialistic	"Busy, wasteful, workaholics" (several respondents); "Arrogant, superiority complex, we're 1 way of thinking." (19-year-old Black female)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	%	Affect range	Black (M, SD)	Latino (M, SD)	White (M, SD)	Common themes	Sample responses
AIQ No. 2: How are you American?							
Globally	8.4	-3 to 3	.00, 2.12 ^a	-.46, 1.54 ^a	2.62, .75 ^a	Overall	"In every way" (18-year-old White female)
Ideology	21.3	-1 to 3	.50, 1.05	1.07, .92	.94, .78	Convictions, values, ideals	"... my ideals and beliefs are mostly from the Western culture ... my politics and personal beliefs" (19-year-old Latina)
Actions	24.4	-2 to 3	1.32, 1.05 ^a	1.59, 1.15	2.42, .86 ^a	Behaviors, practices	"In knowing my history, being patriotic, voting and getting and education" (18-year-old Latino)
Birtheright/residency	45.3	-3 to 3	.15, .94	.18, .91	.38, .80	Born or raised in the United States	"I was born and raised here and am in tune with the habits of the culture." (23-year-old White male)
AIQ No. 3: How are you something other than American?							
Discrimination	4.9	-2 to 1	-.71, 1.73	-.44, .73	—	Experiences with discrimination	"Mostly because of the way I'm treated ... it's hard to get a job, even going to some places is a hassle" (19-year-old Black male)
Globally	11.1	-3 to 3	.00, 2.26	.47, 1.96	1.15, 2.07	Pro- or Anti-American	"I would not consider myself anything but American" (21-year-old White female)
Ideology	15	-3 to 3	.11, 1.18	-.65, 1.36	-.10, 2.09	Pro- or Anti-American	"I question what I'm being told, respect nature ... [am] compassionate and open-minded;" (19-year-old White female)
Heritage/culture	65.2	-2 to 3	.42, .87	.57, .96	.45, .88	Family traditions or cultural descriptions	"My mother's parents are from Cuba and Colombia. We speak Spanish at home, watch Spanish TV ... we are very involved in each other's lives ..." (18-year-old White female)
						M (SD)	
AIQ No. 4: How American do you feel?							
Blacks							55.76 (33.37)
Latinos							60.64 (26.06)
Whites							77.38 (22.53)

a. Denote significant mean differences.

The most common responses to this question were in the form of personality traits or values (62%), a category to which we refer as *American Ideology*. Themes in this category were similar to those reported in previous studies including “American Core Principles” (Park-Taylor et al., 2008) and “Liberalism and Incorporationism” (Schildkraut, 2007). At the positive end of the spectrum, respondents highlighted “freedom, opportunity, and equality” (22-year-old Latina) as typical American values and “out-spoken, open-minded, and free-spirited” (20-year-old White female) as typical characteristics of an American. Neutral responses contained both positive and negative descriptions, such as “aggressive, talented, and ambitious” (18-year-old Latino) or “economically stable, self-centered, arrogant, and hard-working” (22-year-old Latina). There was a clear tension between two opposing concepts: multiculturalism (ethnic pluralism model) and nationalism (social dominance theory). Some respondents viewed America as a successful multicultural nation—“An American is patriotic, proud of their heritage and respectful of others’ heritage” (18-year-old Latina)—or “Accepting all people and allowing them freedom of choice and everything else” (20-year-old Latina). Other participants alluded to the loss of core American values because of multiculturalism, “. . . my home town [has] been invaded by another country trying to take over and [that] never conforms to the ways of America, language, tradition, or democracy” (19-year-old White female). Still others were more direct in their assessment of the United States as “. . . ethno-centric, unhealthily brain-washed, overindulgent, careless, cultureless . . . Christian, complacent . . . imperialistic and wasteful” (19-year-old White female). Several responses also highlighted the fact that typical Americans are highly individualistic: “I think of someone being independent, working for his or her self-interest most of the time” (21-year-old Latina). Very few responses provided more collectivistic perceptions of Americans, such as “[I think of] loyalty and unity” (20-year-old Latina). Within this category, the descriptions given by Black participants ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 2.11$) were more negative than those of either Latino ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 1.83$) or White ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 1.91$) participants, $F(2, 175) = 6.00$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$.

Another sizeable portion of respondents (18.1%) described the typical American in terms of physical or racial characteristics, a common finding in American qualitative research (Park-Taylor et al., 2008: “Physical Characteristics of True Americans”; Schildkraut, 2007: “Ethnoculturalism”). The majority of these responses represented concrete physical characteristics, such as “Blond hair, blue eyes, me!” (19-year-old White female) and “white, blond, blue eyes, English, simple, conservative” (18-year-old Latina). Other responses suggested a Euro-centric nationalism, “. . . white, proper,

high-class, snobby people . . . they think that Hispanics are beneath them” (18-year-old Latina), whereas others viewed ethnic diversity as central to American culture: “I think of the different types of people that live in America . . . the variety and mixtures of colors, races, and cultures” (18-year-old Black female) or “Caucasians, Blacks, and American Indians” (19-year-old Latino). The level of affect displayed in responses did not differ by ethnic group.

A smaller portion of respondents (10.1%) referred to speaking fluent English, having been born in the United States, or being a descendant of several generations of Americans as the definition of a typical American (language/citizenship). The majority of these responses were related to what Schildkraut (2007) refers to as *Contested* definitions or in which being monolingually English-speaking and being born in the United States are seen as necessary conditions for being American: “someone who only speaks English” (20-year-old Latina) or “someone who was born and raised in the United States, speaking English” (19-year-old White female). A very small portion of respondents alluded to specific regions of the United States to define the typical American: “I think of people living in Alabama” (18-year-old Latina). Within this category, the descriptions given by Latino participants ($M = -0.05$, $SD = 0.16$) were more negative than those given by White participants ($M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.27$), $F(2, 26) = 4.39$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .25$.

Finally, the remaining participants (9.1%) used iconic symbols to represent America, such as “McDonald’s, rap music, Anglo people” (19-year-old Latina) or “Baseball, burgers . . . suburbanites” (18-year-old White female). The majority of these responses were neutral, though more negative responses hinted at materialism and overindulgence, “Money, high debts, politics, big business, not family oriented . . . stress and heart attacks” (20-year-old Black female). The level of affect displayed in responses did not differ by ethnic group.

Question 2—In what ways do you consider yourself an American? No ethnic group differences were found in the pattern of themes used to respond to this question; each group was equally likely to endorse each category. The affect attributed to each response did, however, differ by ethnicity. Overall, White responses ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 1.25$) were significantly more positive compared to the responses of Blacks ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 1.87$) or Latino/as ($M = .67$, $SD = 1.7$), $F(2, 282) = 11.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Despite the fact that most respondents used values and ideology to describe a typical American, they were far less abstract when applying definitions to themselves. The most typical response (more than 45% of participants) regarded being born or raised in the United States as the primary reason they consider themselves American (birthright). Such responses included “I was

born in America, live in America, I am educated in America . . ." (18-year-old White female) or "I was born in America and so were my parents. I also feel a certain pride in living in such a blessed country" (19-year-old White female). The level of affect displayed in this category did not differ by ethnic group.

Approximately, a quarter of participants (24.4%) considered themselves American based on their behaviors and practices. These responses tended to be either neutral ("I celebrate and follow many of the traditional American holidays. I am well informed on American events" [19-year-old Latina]) or somewhat positive ("I serve in jury duty, I vote, I lived in the United States all of my life, I take account of all the opportunities offered to me otherwise unavailable in another country" [21-year-old Latina] and ". . . I watch American TV, I like American music, I only go to American concerts and movies, I want the American dream . . . I'm an American" [20-year-old White male]). A handful of participants used their military service or decision to join the military as a sign of their commitment to the United States. White participants ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .86$) expressed more positivity in this category of responses compared to Black participants ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 1.05$), $F(2, 58) = 4.03$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$.

Ideological responses were provided by 21.1% of participants when describing the reasons they believed themselves to be American. These responses contained similar themes to those discussed in Question 1, though they tended to be more positive: "In the sense that I have a strong belief and understanding of my freedom and human rights . . ." (19-year-old Latina). Negative responses alluded to disagreement over U.S. policies or values: "I feel American in my ignorance for issues greater than myself" (21-year-old Black male) or "Sometimes I am not proud to be an American because of what people believe, do, or say" (19-year-old Latino). The level of affect displayed in this category did not differ by ethnic group.

Finally, a smaller portion of respondents (8.4%) made reference to being American in an overall sense: "In every way, I have the freedom to be everything and anything I want" (19-year-old Latina) or "In every way possible" (21-year-old Black male). However, Latinos ($M = -0.46$, $SD = 1.54$) and Blacks ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 2.12$) were more likely to provide negative global responses compared to Whites ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.75$), $F(2, 23) = 5.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .33$: "I don't [consider myself American], though I have learned a lot from Americans" (21-year-old Latina) or simply "I don't consider myself American" (22-year-old Latina). The level of affect displayed in this category did not differ by ethnic group.

Question 3—In what ways do you consider yourself something other than American? A Category \times Ethnicity chi-square test revealed significant differences

among ethnic groups in the categories endorsed when answering this question, $\chi^2(6, N = 287) = 26.54, p < .001, \phi = .31$. This finding appeared to be most strongly driven by the differences described below. Interestingly, affective ratings did not differ by group—either overall or within any of the categories.

Almost three quarters of Latino participants and about 60% of Black participants—compared to less than half of White participants—described their heritage culture when reflecting on how they were “something other than American.” When respondents took the time to describe how their heritage culture differed from American culture, they referred to American culture as more individualistic compared to their own more collectivistic or family-oriented heritage culture: “My family values are stronger than those of most people in the United States” (19-year-old White female) or “. . . I want to enjoy life with my family and support them in every way . . . my culture is different . . .” (19-year-old Latina). However, the majority of responses simply referred generally to the cultural practices, such as food, festivities, languages, and religions practiced by members of their heritage culture or family: “My family’s culture, the way we look and speak” (20-year-old Latina) or “Where my parents come from, being able to speak and understand Spanish, eating traditional foods and listening to Spanish music” (18-year-old Latina).

Ideological or value-based differences were the second most frequently endorsed reason for how participants described being something other than American. The major ideological themes included a broad displeasure with U.S. policies, such as “When I don’t like the policies of the United States” (20-year-old White male) or “there are times when I am upset about how authorities make certain decisions [that make me] wish I wasn’t American” (19-year-old Black female).

Relatively few (11.1%) participants responded that they could not think of any way in which they were not American. We referred to this as the Global/General category: “None really” (17-year-old White male) or “Not in any way” (18-year-old Latina). These responses were concise and uninformative, and therefore, usually given a neutral rating.

Finally, a small portion of Latinos and Blacks (but not Whites) referred to experiences with bias or discrimination when describing how they are “something other than American.” These responses tended to highlight racial distinctions such as “My skin color” (18-year-old Black male) or racial discrimination: “. . . the biases of others against African Americans relative to job opportunities, residences, and the color difference” (20-year-old Black male).

Question 4—How American do you feel? Responses to this question ranged from 0% (not at all) to 100% (completely). An ANOVA and corresponding

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Among Predictor Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. What is an American					
2. How are you American?	.45**				
3. Are you something other than American?	.14*	.06			
4. How American do you feel?	.27**	.40**	.06		
5. Personal identity	.13**	.09	.05	.12*	
6. Ethnic identity	-.07	-.08	.03	-.23**	.13*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Tukey's HSD post hoc analyses were used to investigate ethnic group differences. These analyses indicated that Whites ($M = 77.38$, $SD = 22.53$) felt significantly more American compared to both Blacks ($M = 55.76$, $SD = 33.37$) and Latinos ($M = 60.64$, $SD = 26.05$), $F(2, 277) = 8.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Associations With Personal and Ethnic Identity

An ANOVA and corresponding Tukey's HSD post hoc analyses were used to investigate ethnic group differences in levels of personal and ethnic identity. Ethnic groups did not differ significantly on personal identity (overall $M = 45.01$, $SD = 7.32$). They did, however, differ significantly on ethnic identity; Whites ($M = 37.79$, $SD = 8.85$) were significantly less attached to their ethnic heritage than either Latinos ($M = 42.03$, $SD = 8.36$) or Blacks ($M = 45.02$, $SD = 9.50$), $F(2, 267) = 8.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Pearson bivariate correlations were computed among each question's affective ratings as well as ethnic and personal identities (see Table 2). Three notable findings emerged. First, the affective ratings for responses that described the typical American (Question 1) were significantly related to the affective ratings for the other two questions as well as to personal identity (but not to ethnic identity). Second, personal and ethnic identity were weakly and positively related to one another, $r(261) = .13$, $p < .05$. Finally, the extent to which participants felt American (Question 4) was modestly and negatively related to ethnic identity, $r(261) = -.23$, $p < .001$, and weakly and positively related to personal identity, $r(261) = .12$, $p < .05$. Follow-up analyses by ethnicity indicated that personal identity was positively related to feeling American only for Whites, $r = .42$, $p < .01$, but not for Blacks, $r = .25$, $p = .10$, or for Latinos, $r = .03$, $p = .75$. An opposing pattern emerged for ethnic

identity, which was negatively related to feeling American for Blacks, $r = -.29$, $p < .05$ and Latinos, $r = -.19$, $p < .05$, but not for Whites, $r = .09$, $p = .57$. Interestingly, personal identity was unrelated to ethnic identity for Whites and Blacks but positively related for Latinos, $r = .17$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to gain a greater understanding of the meaning of “American identity” and to explore how the resulting themes may relate to the ethnic and personal identity of emerging adults. The present findings indicate that American emerging adults have complex views of their nation and their relationship to it (see also Bush, 2005; Park-Taylor et al., 2008; Schildkraut, 2007). When asked to define the typical American or to describe what factors contribute to seeing oneself as American, our content analyses produced remarkably similar results across ethnic groups (see also Schildkraut, 2007). There was a high degree of consensus among Blacks, Latinos, and Whites regarding the values, behaviors, physical characteristics, and symbols that represent the typical American. The most common positive themes are typical of the American creed as taught in high school history books: patriotism, democracy, freedom, capitalism, and individualism (Schildkraut, in press). Interestingly, when asked to describe what made them feel American, most emerging adults did not reference the aforementioned values but rather focused on citizenship status or the fact that they had been raised in the United States. Only one fifth of emerging adults reflected on their own values when describing the factors that contributed to their being American. The “American Creed,” then, may be seen by emerging adults as an external set of abstract values rather than as a set of descriptors that apply to themselves or others.

Although the content of responses to the qualitative questions we posed did not differ by ethnic group, there were significant ethnic differences in the affective tone of the responses. The differences that we found are similar to those found in previous research (Barlow, Taylor, & Lambert, 2000; Tsai et al., 2002; Weisskirch, 2005); some members of each group expressed ideological or cultural misgivings about mainstream American culture (e.g., America as imperialistic or American values as true only in theory and not in practice). A small group of ethnic minorities relayed their own experiences with discrimination as a means to address their experience relating to the belief that multiculturalism is not truly valued in America. Overall, when describing the typical American or the factors that make one feel American, Black and Latino emerging adults, on average, wrote more negative descriptions

than White participants. Moreover, Black and Latino emerging adults also felt significantly less American overall compared to White emerging adults. A few participants *choose* to be excluded from the national identity, whereas others believed that they were *excluded by others* despite having been born and raised in the United States (see also Barlow et al., 2000). Affective valence is an important aspect of American identity because it touches on emotional attachment to the nation. Renshon (2005) argues that it is the emotional connection, and not the content or definition endorsed, which is most important in understanding American identity: “Civic engagement without emotional attachment is the civic equivalent of a one-night stand” (p. xviii).

However, and all too often, research has focused solely on affect or levels of patriotism when investigating American national identity. The fact that we found no major ethnic differences in the content of responses within the present sample is of great importance given the current debates regarding national identity. For instance, some conservatives argue that one of the most serious threats to national identity is the rapid growth of and attachment to heritage culture displayed by immigrant groups, particularly Latino immigrants (Huntington, 2004). Our findings indicate that this fear—that too strong an attachment to one’s ethnic heritage may lead to a multicreedal America—is unfounded, or, at the very least, misguided (see Schildkraut, 2007). Consistent with Schildkraut (in press), our findings also demonstrate that an ethnocultural view of American identity persists—a tradition that maintains that American identity is defined by cultural ancestry; a nontrivial proportion of respondents believed that, to be American, one must speak English fluently (10%), come from a European ethnic background (18%), or have been born in the United States (46%). Some scholars, such as Huntington (2004), propose establishing English as the national language as a strategy for preventing significant changes to the American national identity. For Huntington, as well as millions of other Americans, the shifting demographics and the resulting changes in language usage represent a direct threat to the American national identity.

Although the core of Huntington’s (2004) argument was not supported by the present results, our findings regarding the role of personal and ethnic identity in predicting how American one feels do lend some credence to Huntington’s concerns. When looking at the overall sample, personal identity was positively related to feeling American, whereas ethnic identity was negatively related to feeling American. A closer look into ethnic group differences suggested that personal identity was related to feeling American only for Whites and that ethnic identity was negatively related to feeling American for Blacks and Latinos. Previous work (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005;

Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2008) suggests that a strong ethnic identity is an important aspect of a cohesive personal identity, at least for Blacks and Latinos. Indeed, for Latinos in our sample, a strong ethnic identity was related to a strong personal identity—or a strong sense of self—whereas ethnic identity was negatively related to feeling American for this group. What does this mean for the future of this rapidly growing, highly bicultural cohort of emerging adults? Erikson (1980) believed that identity was a multifaceted, complex, and dynamic construct consisting of both personal and sociocultural dimensions. A strong personal identity is seen as one's ability to synthesize various identity elements into a whole—those aspects of the self that are consistent over time and place (Dunkel, 2005). Our findings demonstrate that some emerging adults are managing to reconcile the inherent contradictions and to move toward a cohesive sense of self, one that includes a strong ethnic as well as national identity.

Our analyses also highlighted the tension between two major perspectives on national identity: ethnic pluralism and social dominance. This tension was especially salient in participants' responses to the question: In what ways are you something other than American? In fact, this was the only question that *did* produce ethnic group differences in content and *did not* elicit differences in affect; Black and Latino participants were significantly more likely than Whites to cite their heritage culture and their experience with racial/ethnic discrimination as reasons for not feeling fully American. Several participants in each ethnic group made reference to family values, community interconnectedness, or interdependence when describing why their heritage culture was "something other than American": "I have more family values, I think we stick together more" or "I have a strong sense of my native background, family comes before self." Even some White participants made reference to their ethnic heritage (e.g., Polish or Irish) when describing how Americans do not seem to value their families as much as other cultures do. This notion was also supported by the results of quantitative analyses. For Blacks and Latinos, whose cultures are generally viewed as promoting familism or solidarity toward family and community members (Marin & Marin, 1991), a stronger attachment to their ethnic identity was related to feeling less American. Although 65% of individuals used their heritage culture to describe what made them feel something other than American, the level of affect displayed in these responses was not related to the strength of feeling American. The independence of emotional attachment to American and "other than American" identities reflects a bidimensional model of cultural identity, in which feeling American does not preclude identifying highly with the heritage culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh,

2001; Schwartz et al., 2007). Perhaps it is not as simple as choosing between heritage culture and American culture but rather a perception among emerging adults that certain values they admire within their cultural heritage are missing from mainstream American culture.

An important question emerges: What kind of identity does a healthy nation need? Are nations, like individuals, in need of a cohesive identity? Or are they more flexible and inclusive? Ethnic pluralism would suggest that a nation can be composed of individuals from varied backgrounds and cultures and still remain a cohesive community. The social dominance perspective would assume that the majority group would set the national identity standards, and minority groups should remain on the periphery until a new dominant group stakes its claim—as may happen with ethnic minorities comprising progressively larger shares of the U.S. population. Our review of responses makes clear that both of these perspectives are occurring simultaneously in the United States, at least among emerging adults who are considering identity issues. We suggest that an ecological view of identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) would propose that both processes can occur independently because they are affecting different levels of identity; one perspective explains how an individual makes sense of multiple social identities (EPM), whereas the other better explains how social groups make sense of their shared experience within a given society (SDT). Such an integrative framework allows the ethnic pluralism model to explain why White emerging adults appear to be as conflicted as ethnic minorities about their American identity. Although responses of White participants were on average more positive, the range of affect and content displayed within this group varied as dramatically as it did for Blacks and Latinos. Furthermore, the lack of relationship between participants' emotional attachment to their American and "other than American" identities (bicultural model of identity) also demonstrates ethnic pluralism. However, we find that the social dominance perspective best explains why Latinos and Blacks, on average, feel less American than Whites and why their descriptions of American identity were somewhat more negative compared to those of White participants. The complex (and often negative) historical experiences of Blacks and Latinos in the United States, as well as the socioeconomic disparities that persist between these groups and White Americans, may decrease the likelihood that Blacks and Latinos will fully embrace—or feel embraced by—the American national identity.

With that said, the present findings should also be interpreted within the sociohistorical context in which the data were collected, given that the choice of a particular self-definition is dependent on the salience of specific social identities at any given moment. For example, after September 11, 2001,

public opinion research (Putnam, 2002) found that there was a “renewal of citizenship,” or an increase in American identity across the United States. Indeed, the events were so uniting that, as Putnam claims, Americans became simultaneously more community-minded, more patriotic, and more tolerant of ideological and ethnic differences (pp. 402-403). The data analyzed for this article were collected a few years after 9/11, in the midst and aftermath of a divisive and controversial presidential election (2004 to 2006), and at a time where the Bush administration’s approval ratings were veering toward the lowest levels in American history (Gallup Poll, 2006). Yet, as this article was being written, America experienced some dramatic political changes. In 2008, Americans elected the first Black president of the United States, and the international community once again began to view the nation favorably. However, despite what would otherwise appear as positive changes, two thirds of Americans say the country is more deeply divided than ever before (Gallup Poll, 2009). This set of circumstances serves to remind us that when studying identity, context is critical. Especially when exploring the experiences of emerging adults, researchers should keep in mind how volatile and unstable identity is during this stage (Arnett, 2003); the context in which emerging adults develop will undoubtedly affect the identity choices they make. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand the impact of the sociohistorical context on both the relationships between national, ethnic, and personal identity and the meanings of those identities.

Limitations

The present results should be considered in light of important limitations. First, a major limitation of the current study was that the sample was not nationally representative, both in terms of the ethnic groups represented and the geographical regions represented. The data were collected in southern Florida, where Cuban Americans are the largest Latino minority group and where a considerable proportion of Blacks are of Caribbean—rather than African American—descent. This somewhat limits the generalizability of our results. Second, many other aspects of identity not included in the present study may also impact the subjective meaning of “American” (or vice versa): sexual orientation, religiosity, personality, socioeconomic status, and intergroup attitudes, among others (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, in press). More work is needed to explore how these aspects of identity relate to American identity, political ideology, and civic engagement. Third, we do not know the ethnic groups that participants were thinking about when they completed the MEIM. As Portes and Rumbaut (2001) report, some individuals conceptualize their

ethnicity in terms of pan-ethnic groups, whereas others think of their ethnicity in terms of their family's country (or countries) of birth, and still others might think of the country in which they reside (in this case the United States). Finally, it is important to conduct studies of national identity in samples of emerging adults who do not attend college—as college students may not accurately represent the emerging adult population (Halperin, 2001).

Despite these limitations, our findings are consistent with those found with a larger and more diverse national sample (Schildkraut, 2007). The overarching finding is that American emerging adults, regardless of ethnicity, hold similarly varied views of the ideology, behaviors, or symbols that define the American identity. Despite a wide range of responses among all participants, Whites on the whole provided more positive responses, and felt more American than either Blacks or Latinos. The United States is now more racially, ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse than at any other point in its history. There are many advantages to such diversity, but there is also significant tension between diversity and tradition. The challenge, at least for emerging adults, is to reconcile these tensions and attempt to develop a cohesive sense of self while living within a nation whose identity—like its populace—is constantly evolving.

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