The Role of Social and Personal Identities in Self-Esteem Among Ethnic Minority College Students

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This study examined the latent personal-social identity profiles that emerged from simultaneous consideration of ethnic, national (United States), and personal identities among ethnic minority college students \(N = 3,009\) as well as how personal and social identities are jointly associated with self-esteem. Results indicated that the structure of personal-social identity profiles significantly differed across ethnicity, but also indicated some commonalities. The study identified three profiles among Blacks, four among Asian Americans, and two among Latinos. Some personal-social identity profiles were common across multiple ethnic groups, but others were unique within one specific ethnic group. Overall, the profiles indicated important associations between ethnic identity, U.S. identity, and personal identity. These profiles were linked with self-esteem such that individuals who reported high levels of multiple social and personal identities had the highest self-esteem compared to other profiles.

U.S. Census projections forecast continuing increases in racial and ethnic diversity such that, by 2060, no ethnic group will represent a majority of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, ethnic minority young adults are faced with the challenges of integrating their ethnic, national, and personal identities—a vital developmental task with implications for psychosocial well-being (Arnett, 2000). Scholars have highlighted the multifaceted nature of identity that includes personal and social identity components (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Although some researchers have examined the integration of various social identities such as ethnic and U.S. identity (e.g., Kiang, Yip, & Fuligni, 2008), few studies have examined the integration of social and personal identities. Further, personal identity is interpreted in the context of group membership, and internalization of group membership is informed by aspects of personal identity (Deaux, 1993; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Put differently, personal and social identity domains are intricately and reciprocally connected. Given that coherence among multiple dimensions of identity is theoretically linked to higher self-esteem (Thoits, 1983), it is important to identify the ways in which multiple identity domains intersect. In this study, we examined the identity constellations (i.e., latent profiles) of personal identity and the domains of ethnic and U.S. identities, and then determined how these personal-social identity profiles were associated with self-esteem among ethnic minority college students.

Personal and Social Identity Domains

**Personal Identity**

In general, *personal identity* encompasses general beliefs about one’s values, goals, and aspirations (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966) as well as personal conceptualizations about one’s physical, psychological, and social characteristics and abilities (Harter, 2012). According to Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity, identity achievement is the most adaptive identity configuration in which an individual arrives at identity commitments following a period of exploration. This process results in a feeling of identity synthesis in which the person feels a sense of continuity of the self over time. Conversely, identity confusion results when an individual feels a lack of cohesion and continuity. Empirical evidence has highlighted the importance of personal identity synthesis by pointing to the association between identity achievement and psychosocial well-being.
In addition to synthesis of personal identity, integration of this domain with other domains of identity, such as social identity domains, is critical to the formation of self-concept and psychosocial well-being (Thoits, 1983).

**Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity is a social identity domain that is particularly central for ethnic minorities (Umana-Taylor, 2011). Ethnic identity encompasses the two components of exploration and belonging (Phinney, 1989). *Ethnic identity exploration* involves considering the role and meaning of one’s ethnicity in one’s life and participating in ethnically linked activities (Syed, 2013). *Ethnic identity belonging* refers to a stable internalization of the meaning of ethnic group membership (Phinney, 1989).

Previous studies have found associations between ethnic and personal identity among ethnic minority adolescents and young adults. Specifically, among Latinos and Asian Americans, Branch, Tayal, and Triplett (2000) found that a composite ethnic identity score was negatively associated with personal identity diffusion such that the stronger an individual’s ethnic identity, the less likely he or she was to be categorized as personal identity diffused (i.e., absence of commitments and of systematic exploration). Similarly, Miville, Koonce, Darlington, and Whitlock (2000) found a positive association between personal identity achievement and composite racial-cultural identity scores among African American and Mexican American college students. Thus, it appears that ethnic identity may serve a central role in personal identity among ethnic minorities, and in this study we aimed to empirically examine the patterns that arise based on these identity domains.

**U.S. Identity**

U.S. identity is another social identity domain that holds importance for ethnic minority young adults in the United States (Schildkraut, 2014). Huddy and Khatib (2007) reported that, among an ethnically diverse sample of college students in the United States, over 80% reported that being American was a central aspect of their identity. However, the associations between U.S. and ethnic identity are complex for ethnic minorities. On one hand, many ethnic minority individuals do not view ethnic and U.S. identities as being in conflict with one another (Schildkraut, 2014). Conversely, some ethnic minorities have internalized messages that equate American with being White. For instance, Devos and Ma (2008) found an implicit association for considering faces of non-American White individuals (e.g., Europeans such as Kate Winslet and Gérard Depardieu) to be more American compared to faces of Asian Americans (e.g., Lucy Liu and Ken Jeong) among a sample of Asian Americans. Thus, although many ethnic minorities view their ethnic and U.S. identities as compatible, some may have internalized discriminatory messages and view, perhaps on an implicit level, these social identities as incompatible with one another. These different identity profiles may be differentially integrated with personal identity and may have distinct implications for psychosocial well-being.

The association between personal identity and U.S. identity is not clear, perhaps because only a small number of studies have been conducted in this area. One study found that personal identity was associated with U.S. identity only among non-Hispanic White college students.
(Rodriguez, Schwartz, & Whitbourne, 2010). Conversely, other research has found that a strong personal identity is associated with greater endorsement of heritage and U.S. cultural practices (Schwartz et al., 2013). These cultural practices may contribute to stronger identity in these domains such that personal identity is associated with greater ethnic and U.S. identities. Thus, ethnic and U.S. identities are important domains, and may be integrally associated with personal identity, among ethnic minority individuals. In this study, we sought to identify patterns of identity by jointly examining personal, ethnic, and U.S. identity among ethnic minority college students.

**Integration of Identity Domains**

Identity domains that are associated with salient memberships in social groups are important to a general sense of personal identity, and integration of these social identity domains with personal identity is critical for psychosocial well-being (Thoits, 1983). Such integration may be especially important for ethnic minority groups. Social identities based on membership in historically oppressed groups are thought to increase an individual’s degree of identification with these groups (Tajfel, 1981), making such identifications particularly relevant in the scope of their personal identity and vice-versa. Indeed, ethnic minorities (e.g., African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos) tend to score higher on ethnic identity measures compared to their European American counterparts (Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Thus, ethnic identity is particularly salient for ethnic minorities and may be reciprocally related to personal identity.

Given that the salience of specific social identity domains is impacted by the social stratification of such groups (Tajfel, 1981), when individuals belong to a marginalized group and a privileged group, those identities are inherently informed by one another. For ethnic minorities in the United States, the U.S. culture can serve as a context in which they interpret their membership in an ethnic minority group; in turn, the way in which U.S. society views ethnic minority groups shapes the identities of individuals in those groups. Because minority individuals in the United States must evaluate themselves as members of their ethnic groups and as Americans, it follows that ethnic and U.S. identity are fundamentally associated among such individuals and each of these domains is integrally associated with personal identity. Indeed, Schildkraut (2014) found that Blacks and Latinos are less likely than Whites to consider the maintenance of culture of origin as conflicting with U.S. identity. In fact, research has suggested that cultural blending (i.e., incorporating aspects of one’s culture of origin and U.S. culture) is viewed as part of U.S. identity for many Blacks and Latinos (Schildkraut, 2014), and because of the salience of such social identities, many ethnic minorities may consider these social domains as a central part of their personal identity. Thus, a central goal of this study was to examine, within a sample of ethnic minority college students, latent profiles defined in terms of the associations of multiple social identities (i.e., ethnic identity and U.S. identity) with personal identity.

**Multiple Identity Domains and Well-Being**

Erikson (1968) emphasized the importance of a coherent identity that integrates multiple identity domains for psychosocial outcomes. Indeed, the link between personal identity and well-being has been consistently demonstrated empirically (Waterman et al., 2010). Social identity domains
are similarly associated with psychosocial well-being. Tajfel and Turner (1986) noted that because membership in marginalized social groups is salient to members of these groups, individuals may be motivated to establish a positive group identity as a means of preserving their self-esteem. Research has indeed found that ethnic identity is associated with positive adjustment—such as self-esteem (Bracey, Bámaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004), daily happiness (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witcow, & Fuligni, 2006), and conferring protection against cultural stressors (Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Gonzales-Backen, 2011)—among adolescents and young adults from various ethnic minority backgrounds.

Much less attention has been given to the association between U.S. identity and well-being. However, in their review of ethnic and national identity among immigrants, Phinney et al. (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001) concluded that the association between national identity and well-being depended in part on ethnic identity. This conclusion is in line with research on the psychosocial benefits of dual cultural identification (compared to an ethnic- or U.S.-focused cultural orientation; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Further, personal identity has been shown to be associated with greater reports of such dual cultural identification (Syed, 2013). Thus, it is possible that the role of U.S. identity for ethnic minority young adults’ well-being depends on the simultaneous levels of ethnic and personal identities.

Given that ethnic, U.S., and personal identity appear to be important for well-being, it may be that individuals who have developed mature identities in each of these domains report the most favorable psychosocial adjustment. Theoretically, (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013; Thoits, 1983) the more role identities individuals accumulate, the higher their well-being, a proposal that has received empirical support (Kiang et al., 2008). Research supporting the benefits of a bicultural orientation may speak to the combined benefit of strong ethnic and U.S. identities (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). However, to our knowledge, no research has examined the joint implications of social and personal identities for psychosocial well-being.

The Current Study

In this study, we examined the associations between personal and social identities. Specifically, we examined the profiles that emerged from the simultaneous consideration of ethnic identity, U.S. identity, and personal identity using latent profile analysis (LPA). LPA is a person-centered analytic strategy that identifies categorical profiles based on a set of continuous indicators (Collins & Lanza, 2010). LPA is a particularly appropriate analytic method to address the intersectionality of social identities and personal identity because it allows us to identify subgroups of individuals based on multiple domains of identity whereas traditional analytic models such as multiple regression and structural equation modeling identify variable-centered patterns of associations among identity domains (Pastor, Barron, Miller, & Davis, 2007). We expected that some individuals’ identities would be primarily focused on ethnicity whereas others would be more focused on being American. We also hypothesized that strong social identities would correspond with strong personal identity such that individuals who had strong ethnic identity and U.S. identity would have the strongest personal identity, and those with low levels of both social identities would report the most confused identities.

Previous research has noted ethnic differences in ethnic identity, U.S. identity, and personal identity (Pahl & Way, 2006). Thus, it is possible that personal-social identity profiles differ
across ethnic groups. Because of the lack of research on latent profiles of multiple identities, we adopted an exploratory approach to examining ethnic differences in personal-social identity profiles.

A second goal of this study was to examine the associations of personal-social identity profiles with self-esteem. We hypothesized that individuals whose personal-social identity profile emphasized high levels in all three identity domains would have the highest self-esteem, compared to individuals with profiles characterized by strong identities in fewer (or no) domains.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Data for this study were taken from a larger study on culture and identity that included students (aged 18 to 63 years) from 30 colleges and universities across the United States (Weisskirch et al., 2013). The study focused on ethnic minority college students. Montgomery and Côté (2003) have suggested that the college context serves as a “laboratory” for identity development. Given the importance of the college context for traditionally aged students, we restricted the sample to participants between the ages of 18 and 25 years. As such, the sample was restricted to 3,009 participants between the ages of 18 and 25 years ($M = 19.75, SD = 1.64$) who identified as Black, Asian American, or Latino. A majority were women (71.3%) and born in the United States (72.6%). The ethnic composition of the sample was: 39.7% ($n = 1,196$) Asian American, 37.1% ($n = 1,196$) Latino, and 23.2% ($n = 698$) Black.

**Procedure**

Participants were invited to complete an online survey via printed, e-mailed, and in-class announcements. Participants completed the survey on their own time in a private setting. Recruitment sites were diverse with regard to type of institution (e.g., large and small private and state colleges and universities), setting (e.g., urban/suburban vs. college town), and ethnic composition. The survey took approximately 2 hours to complete, and participants received either course credit or entry in a prize drawing as compensation for participating.

**Measures**

The alpha coefficients for the measures described below are presented by ethnic group in Table 1.

**Personal Identity**

The identity subscale of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981) was used to measure personal identity. The EPSI includes 12 items that assess personal identity synthesis. Participants responded to each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The EPSI has shown good reliability across ethnic groups (Rodriguez et al., 2010).
Ethnic identity was assessed using the exploration and belonging subscales from the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999). The MEIM assesses two components of ethnic identity: exploration and belonging. Participants were asked to respond to each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The MEIM has demonstrated measurement equivalence across ethnic groups (Avery, Tonidandel, Thomas, Johnson, & Mack, 2007).

U.S. Identity

The American Identity Measure (AIM; Schwartz et al., 2012), an adapted version of the MEIM, was utilized to examine U.S. identity. As with the original MEIM, the AIM includes two subscales: exploration and belonging. The same 5-point response scale for the MEIM was also used for the AIM. A separate study using this sample demonstrated that the AIM performed well on tests of reliability and validity, including measurement equivalence across ethnic groups (Schwartz et al., 2012).

Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1979) was used to measure self-esteem. The 10-item measure assessed participants’ positive and negative feelings about themselves on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. The RSES has demonstrated good internal consistency among samples of Black, Asian American, and Latino adolescents and young adults (Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012; Kuhlberg, Peña, & Zayas, 2010; Shek & McEwen, 2012), and has demonstrated measurement invariance across ethnic groups (Michaels, Barr, Roosa, & Knight, 2007).

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses were performed to examine the distribution and bivariate associations among study variables (see Table 2). Bivariate associations were in the expected direction. Each study variable was adequately normally distributed, as indicated by skew of less than |2| and kurtosis less than |7| (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995).
Latent Profile Analysis

LPA was performed using Mplus Version 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). The indicators for the LPA model were ethnic identity exploration and belonging, U.S. identity exploration and belonging, and personal identity synthesis and confusion. To identify latent profiles that accounted for correlations between indicators, the local independence assumption (Muthén, 2001) was upheld by constraining correlations between indicators to zero within each profile, which is the default in Mplus Version 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén). We examined personal-social identity profiles within each ethnic group separately to determine whether invariance existed in terms of number and structure of profiles.

Profile enumeration within each ethnic group was determined by examining several indices: Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test (VLMR), Akaike’s information criterion (AIC), the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), the adjusted Bayesian information criterion (ABIC), and the entropy value (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). VLMR is a measure of fit for which a significant value indicates that the model with \( k \) profiles provides a superior fit compared to a model with \( k - 1 \) profiles (Lo, Mendell, & Rubin, 2001). Lower values of AIC, BIC, and ABIC indicate better fit (Kline, 2010). Specifically, we retained the model in which these values were minimized, paying special attention to BIC given its accuracy in identifying the number of profiles in LPA models (Nylund et al., 2007). Finally, entropy is a measure of posterior classification accuracy (Pastor et al., 2007). Entropy values range from 0 to 1, and values above .75 are preferable. Missing data were handled using full information maximum likelihood estimation. For the total sample, 11% of data points were missing. There were no significant differences in demographics of participants who had complete data, compared to those with one or more missing data points. The nested nature of the data was accounted for by entering dummy codes for data collection sites as covariates in LPA and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) models.

LPA results indicated noninvariance in the structure and number of latent profiles across ethnic groups. Specifically, we identified a different number of profiles within each ethnic group. Some profiles were common to two or more ethnic groups; however, some were unique to a specific ethnic group. As such, we did not examine the latent profiles of the full sample and, instead, present here the LPA findings for each ethnic group.

Among Black college students, a three-profile solution best fit the data (see Table 3). Although the VLMR continued to be significant for models with more profiles, the three-profile
model demonstrated superior fit due to a minimized BIC and improved entropy in the three-profile solution. The personal-social identity profiles were interpreted based on estimates of the within-profile means of each indicator for each ethnic group compared to the overall mean of that indicator for that group, utilizing theory and research as a framework (see Table 4 and Figure 1). We called the first and smallest (2.0%) profile identified among Blacks diffused. This profile was characterized by levels of each indicator that were 0.5–3.0 standard deviations below the mean, indicating low levels of ethnic, U.S., and personal identities. A second profile, named undifferentiated, included 39.7% of Black college students. Like the diffused profile, individuals in the undifferentiated profile reported lower than average ethnic and U.S. exploration and belonging and personal identity synthesis, but slightly above average personal identity confusion. Levels of each indicator in the undifferentiated profile, however, were all within 1 standard deviation of their respective means. Finally, we named the largest profile among Blacks (58.3%) emerging. Individuals in the emerging profile reported ethnic and U.S. exploration and belonging and personal identity synthesis that were slightly above the mean. Personal identity confusion was slightly below the mean. All indicators in the emerging profile were within approximately 0.5 standard deviations of their respective means.

Among Asian American college students, a four-profile solution best fit the data (see Table 3). As in the Black sample, we identified an undifferentiated profile (22.1%) in which all indicators were slightly (<1 standard deviation) below their respective means, except for personal identity confusion which was slightly above the mean. We identified two profiles that were unique to Asian Americans: ethnic leaning and U.S. leaning. Individuals in the ethnic leaning profile, which was the largest profile among Asian Americans (45.9%), reported levels of ethnic identity exploration and belonging slightly above the mean and levels of U.S. identity exploration and belonging slightly below the mean. Personal identity synthesis and confusion were near mean levels in this profile. Conversely, individuals in the U.S. leaning (16.6%) profile reported levels of ethnic identity exploration and belonging that were near 1

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Note. Fit statistics for the best fitting model are in bold. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; ABIC = adjusted Bayesian information criterion; VLMR = Vuong-Lo-Mendal-Rubin likelihood ratio; E = entropy.
standard deviation below the mean and U.S. identity exploration and belonging that were slightly above their respective sample means. Personal identity synthesis was slightly above the mean and personal identity confusion was slightly below the mean in the U.S. leaning.
profile. We named the fourth profile *concordant* (15.4%) because all indicators were 0.5–1.0 standard deviations above their respective means, except for personal identity confusion, which was slightly below the mean.

A two-profile solution best fit the data among Latino college students. As with Black and Asian American students, we identified a profile that we named *undifferentiated* (35.0%) among Latinos. Individuals in the undifferentiated profile reported indicators slightly (≤1 standard
deviation) below their respective means except for personal identity confusion, which was slightly above the mean. Similar to the findings for Blacks, the largest profile among Latinos was called emerging (65.0%). It consisted of ethnic and U.S. identity exploration and belonging and personal identity synthesis slightly above their respective means and personal identity confusion similar to the mean.

Personal-Social Identity Profiles and Self-Esteem

Finally, ANCOVAs were performed to examine mean differences in self-esteem across personal-social identity profiles, controlling for nativity, gender, and data collection site. We performed these analyses separately by ethnicity because the LPA solutions differed by ethnicity. To test our hypothesis that personal-social identity profiles with high levels in all three identity domains would have the highest self-esteem, we used the profile with the highest levels of all three identity domains within each ethnic group as the reference group (i.e., emerging for Blacks and Latinos and concordant for Asian Americans).

Among Black college students, there were significant differences in self-esteem among personal-social identity profiles, $F(2, 551) = 18.87, p < .001$. In support of our hypothesis, individuals in the emerging profile reported higher self-esteem than the diffused, $\beta = -6.82$, $SE = 2.09$, $p < .01$, 95% CI $[-10.92, -2.72]$, and undifferentiated, $\beta = -3.57$, $SE = .64$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-4.82, -2.32]$, profiles. The effect size for the total model was small according to Cohen’s (1992) criteria ($R^2 = .10$), with personal-social identity profile accounting for 7% of the variance in self-esteem.

Significant differences emerged in self-esteem among Asian Americans across personal-social identity profiles, $F(3, 1,010) = 50.01, p < .001$. Individuals in the concordant profile reported higher self-esteem compared to those in the undifferentiated, $\beta = -7.53$, $SE = .70$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-8.90, -6.16]$, and ethnic leaning, $\beta = -3.46$, $SE = .62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-4.68, -2.25]$, profiles. Self-esteem did not differ between the concordant and U.S. leaning profiles, $\beta = -.72$, $SE = .75$, $p = .34$, 95% CI $[-2.19, 0.75]$. The effect size for the total model was small ($R^2 = .14$), with personal-social identity profile accounting for 13% of the variance in self-esteem.

Among Latino college students, a significant difference in self-esteem emerged between personal-social identity profiles, $F(1, 913) = 38.93, p < .001$. Specifically, individuals in the emerging profile reported higher self-esteem than those in the undifferentiated profile, $\beta = -3.04$, $SE = .49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-3.99, -2.08]$. The effect size for the total model was small ($R^2 = .08$), with personal-social identity profile accounting for 4% of the variance in self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

This study goes beyond existing identity literature that focuses on mean ethnic differences in ethnic, U.S., and personal identities by identifying differences in latent profiles derived from these identity domains. Specifically, we identified patterns among multiple social and personal identities in a large national sample of college-attending young adults. Results suggested unique personal-social identity profiles that differed across ethnic groups in terms of structure and number. The findings supported our hypothesis that those with strong multiple social identities
would also report strong personal identities and that those who had lower levels of ethnic and U.S. identities would report the lowest levels of personal identity coherence. Finally, the hypothesis that personal-social identity profiles that include high levels of ethnic, U.S., and personal identities would be optimal for psychosocial adjustment was supported in that the concordant and emerging profiles had the highest self-esteem in each ethnic group. Taken together, the results of our study support theory and extend research on identity formation by highlighting the complexity in associations between social and personal identity domains, and how these multiple identities are jointly associated with well-being.

Empirical Support of Integrative Identity Theory

Identity scholars have highlighted the importance of examining integration of personal and social identity domains (i.e., integrative identity theories; Syed, 2010; Vignoles et al., 2011), but to our knowledge no prior studies have examined the intraindividual, or latent, profiles that emerge from such domains. Grounded in theoretical and empirical work, and as hypothesized, we found profiles that demonstrated a connection between personal and social identity such that those with strong social identities also had a strong personal identity (i.e., emerging among Blacks and Latinos and concordant among Asian Americans) and those with weak social identities also had a confused personal identity (i.e., diffused among Blacks and undifferentiated among all three ethnic groups). This finding supports theoretical notions by Deaux (1993) that social and personal identity domains are fundamentally connected in that strong social and personal identities tend to co-occur. It is important to point out, however, that a strong personal identity may also predispose individuals to explore and make commitments in multiple social identity domains.

Results also partially supported the notion that salient social identities would co-occur with strong personal identity. Asian Americans in the U.S. leaning and ethnic leaning profiles emphasized U.S. identity and ethnic identity, respectively, such that they reported higher levels of exploration of and belonging to one social identity in the context of lower levels of the other. Individuals in the U.S. leaning profile reported personal identity synthesis above the total sample mean and confusion that was below the sample mean. Those in the ethnic leaning profile reported personal identity synthesis that was slightly below the mean and personal identity confusion that was slightly above. Despite the seemingly low levels of personal identity in this group, these levels were near the mean and personal identity synthesis was above the midpoint of the 5-point scale. Thus, it appears that lower levels of one social identity, in the context of higher levels in the other, is not detrimental for personal identity. These personal-social identity profiles partially support the theoretical notion that salient social identity domains, rather than social identity domains in general, may facilitate personal identity formation (Kroger, 1993). Specifically, although participants in the U.S. leaning profile reported the lowest levels of ethnic identity, they reported strong personal identity. Therefore, U.S. identity might have been more relevant for these individuals’ personal identities. Given that differences in social identity endorsement did not systematically relate to personal identity synthesis, it may be that individuals build their personal identity around social identity domains that hold personal significance to them (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006).

In sum, the results support theoretical notions that emphasize integration of identity domains by identifying how multiple social identities coalesce with personal identity. In particular, our
research highlights the need to examine multiple domains of identity in the context of one another. A striking finding was that levels of exploration tended to co-occur with levels of belonging within each social identity domain. Because the sample for this study was college-age young adults, we may not have captured a period of moratorium or foreclosure within any identity domain. Future research should continue to adopt a multidimensional approach to studying identity and examine patterns of identity components (e.g., exploration and belonging) to test identity theoretical notions such as Marcia’s (1966) identity statuses.

Ethnic Differences in Personal-Social Identity Profiles

In this study, we also examined ethnic differences in personal-social identity profiles. We extended existing research, much of which has focused on mean differences, by examining how personal-social identity profiles differed in structure across ethnic groups. Overall, six personal-social identity profiles were identified. Of these six, two were common to two or more ethnic groups, with all ethnicities demonstrating the undifferentiated pattern and Blacks and Latinos demonstrating the emerging pattern. Given the ethnic similarities of these profiles, they may be indicative of a developmental trajectory in which individuals progress from preexploration through moratorium to identity achievement (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1993). Undifferentiated individuals may be in what Phinney (1993) referred to as the preencounter stage. These college students may have not yet begun identity work or may be focusing on other aspects of identity given their social context in college (e.g., vocational or academic identity). Emerging individuals may be approaching a period of identity exploration and development; however their levels of exploration and belonging are both close to mean levels. As such, they may not yet be fully engaged in identity work.

Only Asian Americans had a personal-social identity profile that was consistent with an achieved identity within all three identity domains (i.e., concordant profile). Conversely, only Blacks had a personal-social identity profile that was consistent with a diffused identity status in all domains examined (i.e., diffused). This finding may be associated with the college context in that Blacks are entering a new setting in which they are underrepresented. Transitions such as that from high school to college may be related to reevaluation of individuals’ identity as they come to understand it in a new social context (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). As such, Blacks may be revisiting these identity domains in a context in which their ethnic group is not well represented whereas Asian Americans are better represented in U.S. higher education (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010) and, thereby, may be able to maintain a stable achieved identity in these three domains.

Among Asian Americans, we identified U.S. leaning and ethnic leaning profiles. Previous research has shown ethnic identity and U.S. identity to be positively correlated among Asian American adolescents (Gartner, Kiang, & Supple, 2013); however, our findings revealed a subset of Asian Americans who identify either primarily as American or primarily with their ethnic group. It is possible that U.S. leaning individuals are engaging in “interethnic othering” in which they view highly ethnically identified Asian Americans as “fresh off the boat” in reaction to internalized racism and may minimize their own ethnic identity in an attempt to disassociate with these individuals (Pyke & Dang, 2003). They also could represent groups that have fully integrated into U.S. culture, no longer speaking heritage language or adhering to heritage practices.
and values because they fully acquired English and American values and practices. Further, these individuals have moderate levels of personal identity synthesis, suggesting that perhaps they find their U.S. identity most relevant to their overall self-concept. Research has indicated that Asian Americans may be more likely to experience the perpetual foreigner stereotype (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) compared to other ethnic groups given the history of systematic discrimination in U.S. immigration laws that denied citizenship to Asian immigrants (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985). Ethnic leaning Asian American college students may have experienced more of this form of discrimination, and such experiences may lead individuals to view U.S. and ethnic identities to be incompatible and cause them to focus primarily on their ethnic identity.

Our findings highlight complex ethnic differences in personal-social identity profiles. This study goes beyond previous work that has focused on mean differences, primarily between ethnic minorities and Whites, in individual identity domains by demonstrating important differences in how ethnic, U.S., and personal identity differently co-occur across ethnic minority groups.

Personal-Social Identity Profiles and Well-Being

The findings supported our second hypothesis that individuals with a personal-social identity profile that included strong identities in multiple domains would have higher self-esteem. Within each ethnic group, individuals in the profiles consisting of above-mean levels of ethnic, U.S., and personal identities reported the highest self-esteem. Specifically, Blacks and Latinos in the emerging profile reported higher self-esteem compared to other personal-social identity profiles. Similarly, Asian Americans with a concordant profile reported higher self-esteem than those with undifferentiated or ethnic leaning profiles. This finding is consistent with previous findings indicating that having multiple strong social identities is beneficial for adjustment (Kiang et al., 2008). Specifically, our finding suggests the presence of high self-esteem among individuals who have strong social identities compared to those with moderate or low social identities. It is important to note, however, that Asian Americans who reported a strong U.S. identity but a lower ethnic identity did not have lower self-esteem compared to the Asian American concordant group. Perhaps a strong personal identity in conjunction with one or more strong social identities is important for well-being. We note that the effect sizes for these associations were small, suggesting that although well-being significantly differed based on patterns of personal and social identities, profile membership may not be critical in predicting self-esteem. Despite small effect sizes, this finding highlights the need to consider social and personal identity when examining the association between identity and well-being. Future research should examine whether personal-social identity profiles are important in specific social contexts such as being a minority in one’s immediate context.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings should be interpreted in light of important limitations. First, all of the participants were college students and, therefore, findings cannot be generalized to all young adults in the United States. However, by its nature, college may prompt exploration of these various domains of identity, making identity particularly important for this group, and this limitation may be tempered by the inclusion of a diverse set of colleges and universities. Recruitment sites included
private and public institutions as well as campuses located in college towns and urban areas. Thus, although generalizability was restricted to college students, the sample was quite diverse in terms of the general college student population in the United States. Future studies should include a more general sample that includes non-college-attending young adults as well as those enrolled in community colleges and other forms of postsecondary education (e.g., vocational programs).

In addition, women and U.S.-born individuals were overrepresented in the sample. Although the sample was large and we controlled for gender and nativity, it is possible that women and U.S.-born individuals were driving the personal-social identity profiles that we identified. As such, future studies should strive to examine latent identity profiles among samples that are more evenly distributed in terms of nativity and gender.

Due to the cross-sectional design of this study, we were unable to make causal inferences regarding associations between personal-social identity profiles and self-esteem. It is possible that individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to engage in identity work in multiple personal and social identity domains. In addition, the temporal order of the identity domains that we examined is unclear. We cannot infer whether personal identity is predictive of ethnic and U.S. identity or vice versa. Future studies on identity profiles should employ a longitudinal design to discern causal associations and temporal order of these concepts.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the importance of examining the convergence among multiple identity domains using person-centered techniques. Further, personal-social identity profiles were associated with self-esteem such that high levels of multiple identity domains, rather than high levels of any individual domain, were important for well-being.

Understanding how multiple identity domains inform one another and jointly predict well-being provides a more holistic approach to examining the role of identity in psychosocial adjustment. The findings in this study suggest that having a strong identity in multiple domains is optimal, but future research should examine this across other identity domains and within various social contexts. For example, it is unclear whether it is most adaptive to have multiple strong social identities, or whether some domains are more important within a given context. Further, it is unknown if personal identity is more influential to well-being in some contexts and social identities are more influential in others. By addressing such research questions, identity scholars will move closer to understanding the complexities of identity formation and processes across domains. An extension of a richer understanding of identity will increase our ability to develop resources to support healthy formation of identity among young adults. Given our findings, healthy identity formation is a promising path to supporting optimal adjustment among ethnic minority youth.

REFERENCES


