RUNNING HEAD: IDENTITY IN IMMIGRANT YOUTH

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Identity Development in Immigrant Youth: A Multilevel Contextual Perspective

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Abstract

Rates of immigration are at an all-time high in many Western countries, and immigration can exert profound influences on identity development. These influences occur both at the individual level and at the group level, but these two sets of influences have rarely been considered simultaneously. Accordingly, this article adopts a multilevel approach to identity development among immigrant youth, with a focus on North American receiving contexts. We focus not only on individual ethnic, national, and personal identity development, but also on the societal-level intergroup processes (e.g., threats and stereotypes) that constrain the identity options available to immigrants. We highlight the prominence of biculturalism – endorsement of both heritage and destination-country identities – but also discuss ways in which biculturalism may be difficult to attain for some immigrants and immigrant groups. We also emphasize the interplay between individual immigrants’ identities and the mechanisms through which defensive policies enacted by “threatened” majority groups may harm identity development among immigrant youth. The article concludes with a listing of priorities for future work.

KEY WORDS: Immigrant, ethnic identity, national identity, personal identity, cultural identity, intergroup processes.
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As of 2015, the most recent year for which published data are available, 240 million people worldwide were immigrants – that is, residing in a country other than the one where they were born (United Nations, 2016). Approximately 15% of these people – 36 million – were under 20 years of age. Further, the majority of immigrants in “global north” countries (North America and Western Europe) are from the “global south” (Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East), where sharp cultural differences exist between these two sets of countries and regions (Gelfand et al., 2011).

The net result of these migration patterns is that minority groups (groups that are ethnically, culturally, or religiously different from the mainstream – largest or most powerful – ethnic group in a given society) have been created and/or expanded in many Western countries (van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). Such minority groups are further ingrained into the fabric of the receiving countries through two primary mechanisms – (a) when immigrants settle into ethnic enclaves comprised largely of people from the same ethnic group and (b) when children are born to immigrant parents in the destination country. Immigrant-heritage groups comprise increasing shares of the populations of the nations where they reside – such as Mexicans, Chinese, and Indians in the United States, among other examples (Steiner, 2009). As a result, many countries that were once fairly ethnically homogeneous have become far more diverse in recent decades.

In this article, we will focus on the United States as a receiving country. The United States is the top immigrant-receiving country in the world (United Nations, 2016), and not surprisingly,
the majority of immigration research has focused on the United States. We should note that there may be important differences in immigrant adjustment and identity across receiving nations (Berry, 2017), and as a result, generalizations to other receiving contexts should be drawn with caution.

The demographic trends reviewed above set the stage for a multitude of identity-related processes and transactions that occur within immigrant communities, within the nations or regions that are receiving them, and between immigrant groups and “host nationals” (non-immigrant members of the destination society). For example, host nationals may be threatened by mass immigration (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008); immigrants must “find their place” within the receiving society (Wiley, Perkins, & Deaux, 2008); and the ways in which host nationals and immigrants perceive each other may depend on the extent of personal contact they have with each other (Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006). Further, laws and policies permit some immigrants to become legal residents or citizens, whereas other immigrants are excluded (Steiner, 2009). We will review these and other identity-related process surrounding immigration – especially as they relate to the lives of immigrant youth.

A wide range of identity processes and domains are affected by immigration. Cultural aspects of identity – such as the ethnic and national groups to which one perceives oneself as belonging – may be most readily changed during and after immigration (Berry, 2017; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). However, personal identity may also be affected: during the most acute periods of cultural change (e.g., immediately following immigration), personal identity may serve as a stabilizing factor (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). However, in the longer term, cultural identity changes may also lead to changes in personal identity (Meca et al.,
2017). In this article, given the primacy of cultural identity as an outcome of immigration, we will focus primarily on cultural identity, and secondarily on personal identity.

It is also essential to acknowledge that the number of people whose identities are affected by immigration is far greater than what is reported within official immigration statistics. Second-generation immigrants are individuals who are born in the destination country but raised by foreign-born parents. Like their first-generation (foreign-born) counterparts, second-generation immigrants are raised in immigrant homes and are challenged with reconciling their cultural heritage with the cultural stream(s) of the country or region where they reside (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). We therefore include and discuss both first-generation and second-generation immigrants in this article, although it is important to keep in mind that these two groups experience different challenges.

Second-generation immigrants may actually fare worse in terms of cultural pressures, and in terms of mental and physical health, compared to first-generation immigrants (Alcántara, Estevez, & Alegría, 2017). Because they were born in the destination country, many second-generation immigrants’ contact with their families’ countries of origin is limited to vacations, communication with relatives, and other brief or indirect forms of contact. As a result, the direct ties to the family’s heritage countries – ties that ground the person culturally and protect against a number of negative psychosocial and health outcomes – may not be present. Moreover, cultural conflicts between parents and second-generation immigrant children may be more prevalent and intense than those with first-generation immigrant children (Cook, Alegría, Lin, & Guo, 2009).

Societal-Level Identity Processes: The Context of Identity Development for Immigrant Youth
In the present article, we adopt a multilevel approach to examining identity among immigrant youth. We focus on youth – adolescents and emerging adults – because identity issues (both cultural and personal), although important across the entire life span, are most prominent during these age periods (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Identity issues continue to be present in adulthood, but they are most prominent during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Immigration – or growing up in an immigrant family – introduces identity issues because the person is moving from one cultural context to another. The process of acculturation, referring to orientation toward the behaviors, values, and identifications associated with the heritage and destination cultural context, involves potentially adding a new cultural component to one’s identity (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). One’s cultural heritage, which may be “taken for granted” in the country of origin, may paradoxically be more likely to become part of one’s identity once one is living in a new country (Schwartz, Vignoles, Brown, & Zagefka, 2014).

For example, a Mexican person living in Mexico may not think of her behaviors or values as Mexican. However, upon relocating to the United States, the contrast between her behaviors (or values) and those more characteristics of Americans may lead her to identify even more strongly as Mexican. Our hypothetical Mexican immigrant may also begin to incorporate “American” into her sense of self as she learns the language, associates with American friends, adjusts to American values, and begins to notice contrasts between her new American way of life and her former Mexican way of life.

These acculturation-related processes – heritage culture retention and destination culture acquisition – are clearly part of one’s cultural identity, but can they also influence one’s
personal identity as well? Further, are immigrants free to choose how much of their cultural heritage they will retain and how much of the destination culture they will integrate into their sense of self? Or, is it easier for some immigrants to choose than it is for others? Are some immigrant groups accepted and afforded the freedom to acculturate as they wish, whereas others are discouraged from retaining their heritage, from becoming part of the destination culture, or both? How do these larger, social-level intergroup processes direct and constrain the identity options available to individual young people?

To address these questions, it is necessary to focus not only on the ways in which individual young people develop their personal and cultural identities, but also on the larger national and ethnic contexts in which these identities are constructed, as well as the historical context of the receiving society. A general principle is that there is considerable variability both (a) across nations and (b) across immigrant groups within a nation in how immigrants are regarded. For example, at a very general level, national-level discourse in some countries tends to favor an “essentialist” conception of belonging, where membership in the nation (and the implicit ability to claim a majority-culture identity) is granted (or not) based on one’s ancestry (Pehrson, Vignoles, & Brown, 2009). Discourse in other countries may favor a definition of nationality where identifying with the nation and “acting like” someone from that country is sufficient to be viewed as a member of the nation.

The United States is an interesting case in that both of these types of discourse are prominent. Liberal scholars and commentators tend to suggest that “acting American” and identifying with the United States should qualify one as American (e.g., Chavez, 2013). Conservative scholars and commentators (e.g., Huntington, 2004), on the other hand, may view
American culture as “descending” from European (particularly British) influences – and may therefore view immigrants from outside Europe as a threat to the cultural fabric of the country. There may also be variability across time in how immigrants are viewed – for example, anti-immigrant sentiment may be highest during times of mass immigration, high unemployment, or international conflict (Coenders, Lubbers, Scheepers, & Verkuyten, 2008), and right-wing populist parties may “fan the flames” of threat by emphasizing ways in which immigrants may take resources away from host nationals or endanger their homeland (Oesch, 2008). Even within a given nation, some regions (such as New York and California in the United States) may be especially receptive to immigrants, whereas other regions (such as the United States Deep South) may be less receptive.

Further, not all immigrant groups are regarded equally within a nation. Rudmin (2003) argues that the cultural similarity versus distance between an immigrant group and the destination society is an important determinant of how that group will be received and will integrate (or not) into the destination society. Although the exact definitions of “similarity” and “distance” may be elusive, examples might include emphasis on individualism (emphasis on individual achievements, desires, and needs) and on collectivism (emphasis on social ties, allegiance to others, making one’s family proud, et cetera), religious background, and ethnicity/physical appearance (Hofstede, 2001; Verkuyten & Martinović, 2012). For example, in the United States, Mexicans and Central Americans are often viewed as a “threat” and treated with suspicion (e.g., Chavez, 2013). In contrast, European and Canadian immigrants in the United States are viewed as more culturally and phenotypically similar to host nationals and welcomed into the destination society (Steiner, 2009). Some other immigrant groups, such as
Chinese and Indians, may receive a mixed reception – they are lauded as exemplary students and workers, but their success may also be viewed as taking opportunities away from host nationals (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). These more “favored” immigrants (e.g., immigrants from Europe and Canada) may then have more identity options than would immigrants from “less desirable” groups (e.g., immigrants from Mexico and Central America). For example, “favored” immigrants may be encouraged to pursue advanced careers, to run for political office, or to assume other types of leadership roles. These same opportunities may be less likely to be extended to individuals from “less desirable” immigrant groups.

Integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) specifies three types of threats that host nationals can perceive regarding immigrant groups – symbolic threats, realistic threats, and negative stereotypes (see also Schwartz & Unger, 2017, for a recent review). Symbolic threats represent perceived harm that the immigrant group poses to the host national group – such as a fear that Islam will conquer Europe or that mass Hispanic immigration will unseat the status of English as the official language of the United States (Buchanan, 2011). Realistic threats refer to concerns that immigrants will take away jobs and other resources that “should” belong to host nationals – especially to those from low-income backgrounds (Chomsky, 2007). Negative stereotypes refer to the (generally pejorative) characteristics that a prototypical member of the immigrant group is perceived as possessing.

In contexts of mass immigration, especially when the immigrants are perceived as culturally dissimilar from host nationals, all three of these threat dimensions are likely operating. These threats can be observed in Donald Trump’s June 2015 statements upon announcing his candidacy for United States president: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending
their best ... they're sending people that have lots of problems ... they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists.” These statements are not consistent with research evidence suggesting that immigrants are less likely than host nationals to be involved in criminal activities (Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Schwartz, & Córdova, 2016) – but such statements often nonetheless drive immigration laws and enforcement policies (Mukherjee, Molina, & Adams, 2013) – which, in turn, drive public opinion. The presence of realistic threats, symbolic threats, and negative stereotypes can also be used by threatened majority groups as justification for attacking (physically, verbally, or both) members of the immigrant groups who are perceived as representing the source of the threat. The result can be compromised identity options, as well as compromised mental and physical health, among members of the immigrant group (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017). Political and religious radicalization may, in some cases, result from exclusion from “mainstream’’ society (Schwartz, Dunkel, & Waterman, 2009). The term context of reception has been coined to refer to the general valence surrounding interactions between immigrants and host nationals – including the general opportunity structure presented to immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014).

In terms of identity, groups that represent realistic and symbolic threats, and that are negatively stereotyped, may be blocked or discouraged from pursuing higher education or assuming leadership positions. As a case in point, Los Angeles – a city with nearly 5 million first and second generation Mexican and Central American immigrants (Brown & Lopez, 2013) – did not elect its first Hispanic mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, until 2005. In contrast, New York City and New York State have had a number of Italian American mayors and governors, such as Fiorello LaGuardia, Mario Cuomo, and Rudolph Giuliani. LaGuardia was elected mayor in 1934,
about 50 years after Italian migration to New York began. In contrast, Villaraigosa was elected more than 150 years after California became a state (at which time Mexicans were already living there). In the current (post-1965) wave of immigration, European immigrants have been generally regarded as more favorable than Mexican and Central American immigrants (Steiner, 2009).

It is important to note that, although some host nationals may regard members of a given immigrant group as a monolithic entity, in actuality there are a great deal of individual differences among immigrants from the same ethnic group. The number of years lived in the destination society is important for some outcomes – for example, Williams et al. (2007) found that, among Black Caribbean immigrant adults, those who had resided in the United States for less than 20 years were especially unlikely to be diagnosed with substance use disorders. In addition, although some host nationals tend to group Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese immigrants under a broad “Asian” ethnic gloss, these countries actually have very different cultural, political, and economic histories that affect the skills, resources, and values that their citizens bring to the United States. A similar statement can be made regarding Hispanic nationalities (e.g., Mexican, Cuban, Venezuelan, Argentinian). Some immigrants – such as sexual-minority immigrants – may experience added identity challenges (i.e., discrimination due to sexual orientation as well as due to cultural differences from host nationals; Nakamura & Pope, 2013). Immigrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are especially likely to encounter barriers to completing their education and to finding suitable employment (Lutz, 2007). So it is essential to look within, as well as across, ethnic and national groups when studying immigrants.
Ethnic and National Identity among Immigrant Youth

As noted above, identity issues are likely to be of greatest concern in adolescence and emerging adulthood. These are the times of life when individuals acquire the advanced cognitive capabilities required to consider who they might become (or wish to become; Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1968). In many different life domains, young people begin to consider potential identity alternatives and to examine the ways in which they fit into the world around them (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). These domains include culture (e.g., nationality and ethnicity), as well as occupation, relationships, religion and spirituality, and politics, among others.

It is well known, however, that individuals are not necessarily free to choose any option they want, or to define themselves in any way they wish. Interpersonal relationships, ethnic group memberships, gender roles, and other social characteristics and processes guide and direct the ways in which young people define themselves (Côté & Levine, 2015; Farrelly et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2013). In the case of immigrant youth, additional societal-level intergroup processes serve to constrain the identity alternatives that are available to individual immigrant youth. For example, identifying as American requires not only that the individual person claim such an identity, but also that that identity claim is verified by others (cf. North & Swann, 2009, regarding self-verification theory). For example, individuals of Asian descent in the United States may be asked “where are you really from?” when they indicate that they are from a United States location (Lee, Lee, & Tran, 2017). The implication from such statements is that the individual is not granted inclusion within the category of “American.” In the United States, Whites are most readily associated with being American (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Heng,
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2009). In fact, experimental research using implicit measures, which measure subconscious attitudes unfiltered by logical cognitive processing, has indicated that White celebrities from other countries are more likely to be rated as American than are Hispanic and Asian American celebrities from the United States (Devos & Ma, 2008).

Research indicates that being rejected, or otherwise discouraged, from identifying with the “mainstream” society is likely to lead individuals to reject such a “mainstream” identification (Wiley, Lawrence, Figueroa, & Percontino, 2013). Such rejection can take the form of overt or covert acts of discrimination, as well as national policies excluding some immigrant groups from full membership in the nation. For example, undocumented immigrants – including those brought to the United States as young children – are not allowed to work unless they are granted “deferred action” permits – and many conservative voters and politicians seek to end the deferred action program. As a result, these immigrants may infer that they cannot be American, and they may also identify more strongly with their cultural heritage.

The phenomenon of identifying more strongly with one’s ethnic or cultural group following rejection by the host-national group has been referred to as reactive ethnicity (Rumbaut, 2008). Reactive ethnicity represents a defensive form of identification, and it is consistent with identity research indicating that people are unlikely to choose options that they perceive as unavailable to them (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Anti-immigrant discourse may have the unintended effect of segregating immigrants away from host nationals and preventing them from integrating into the host-national society. In short, immigrants – especially those from stigmatized or “less desirable” groups – are criticized for not integrating but are often actively blocked from doing so.
To the extent to which people perceive themselves (or are perceived) as culturally different from the larger society in which they reside, they are tasked with developing a sense of *ethnic identity*. In short, ethnic identity has been proposed as referring to three interrelated dimensions – exploring or considering the subjective meaning of one’s ethnic or cultural group, committing to a specific view of that group, and taking pride in and drawing self-esteem from that group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For example, a Chinese immigrant adolescent in the United States might think about what it means to be Chinese in American society, might decide that being Chinese in the United States means honoring Confucian traditions and maintaining fluency in the Chinese language, and might decide to be proud of being Chinese. The construct of reactive ethnicity suggests that Chinese immigrants may embrace their Chinese heritage following rejection from “mainstream” American society. This sense of being Chinese may increase the salience of certain personal identity paths, particularly those that involve honoring one’s family and making them proud by avoiding shameful behaviors that would cause the family to lose face (Bedford & Hwang, 2003).

Ethnic identity serves to provide people with a clear place in the larger society in which they live by providing them with an “imagined community” (Hage, 2005) of co-ethnic individuals – a community comprised of people who the individual might not know personally, but who share a common group identity. For example, although many individuals within the Mexican American community do not know each other, there is often a sense of solidarity with other people from the same group to which one belongs, because of similar experiences in the host

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1Note that “imagined” refers to the fact that most members of these communities do not know one another. “Imagined” should not be confused with “imaginary.”
country, a similar cultural and political history, and similar cultural values. Ethnic identity provides a sense of connection with this community of people—a community that is often geographically dispersed and where the majority of members do not know one another personally. Similar to ethnic identity, national identity refers to three interrelated dimensions—exploring or considering the subjective meaning of residing or being a member of the host society, committing to a specific view of that group, and taking pride in and drawing self-esteem from that group (Schildkraut, 2014).

When one belongs to a socially stigmatized group, connecting with the imagined community that this group represents requires social creativity. Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) holds that individuals evaluate their group memberships by comparing their groups to other groups using salient dimensions, especially those dimensions on which the ingroup perceives itself to be superior. For example, residents of a given country may judge their country against others in terms of food, sights, language, belief systems, and other characteristics on which their country is viewed as superior. Within a society, however, there is often an established hierarchy of ethnic groups, religious denominations, language groups, and other cultural demarcations (Wimmer, 2008). According to social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) and system justification (Jost & Hunyady, 2005) theories, higher-status groups view themselves—and are viewed by lower-status groups—as outranking lower-status groups on most points of social comparison. For members of lower-status groups, comparing themselves to higher-status groups would likely result in a negative evaluation (Cobb, Meca, Xie, Schwartz, & Moise, 2016). However, self-categorization theory outlines a number of socially creative approaches that can be adopted, such as
highlighting unique features of one’s group (e.g., “Black is Beautiful”), reframing a group’s struggles in terms of resilience and triumph, comparing one’s group to other lower-status groups, or selecting other dimensions on which the lower-status group outperforms the higher-status group (e.g., athletic ability, language skills). Some minority groups, such as some groups of Mexican Americans, have minimized the comparison to Whites by creating unique group labels, such as Chicano, that are outside of traditional ethnic or racial classifications. The “imagined community” represented by a stigmatized group therefore serves important identity-related functions, but some degree of social creativity may be required for these functions to be realized.

Ethnic and national identity often work in concert with one another, such that individuals who are more ethnically identified may also identify strongly with the nation in which they reside (Schwartz et al., 2015). National identity can also be described according to the dimensions outlined by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) – considering what it means to be a member of the nation, committing to a view of the nation, and taking pride in and drawing self-esteem from belonging to the nation (Schildkraut, 2014). Ethnic and national identity also feed into personal identity, such that a stronger sense of one’s cultural group membership and belonging within the destination country may facilitate a more coherent sense of personal identity (Meca et al., 2017). Again, however, it should be emphasized that claims to membership in the nation are less secure, and may be less likely to confer benefits for the person, when they are not verified by other members of the national group (Theiss-Morse, 2009).

A large body of cultural research has found that biculturalism – endorsement of both heritage and destination cultural contexts – is associated with the most favorable psychosocial
outcomes among a range of immigrant groups (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009). With specific reference to identity, among first and second generation immigrants, biculturalism can be viewed as a combination of strong ethnic and national identities. In their study of immigrant youth in 13 nations, Berry et al. (2006) found that biculturalism was the most commonly endorsed identity configuration among first and second generation immigrants, suggesting that most young people do not perceive inherent conflicts between feeling bonded to their cultural heritage and feeling a sense of solidarity with the nation where they reside. This may not be the case universally, however – and there may be some cases where biculturalism is difficult to achieve. As a general principle, Schwartz and Unger (2010) suggest that biculturalism is most achievable – and adaptive – in contexts where both the immigrant and destination cultural contexts are present. This may occur in major cities with large immigrant enclaves or diverse populations, but in smaller areas such enclaves and diversity may not be available. Further, even among large cities there may be substantial differences in receptivity toward immigrants and their cultural heritage. New York City, for example, is known for its welcoming context (Foner, 2007), whereas Phoenix – despite being close to the Mexican border – is more politically conservative and not especially receptive to immigrants (and particularly to Mexican immigrants; Diaz, Saenz, & Kwan, 2011). So the local context is important in determining the extent to which immigrants will be able – and comfortable – to endorse both their cultural heritage and the larger national identity.

Both ethnic and national identity may be especially challenging for some subgroups, such as refugees and undocumented immigrants (e.g., Beiser & Hou, 2006; Cobb et al., 2017). For example, Beiser and Hou found that, among a sample of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada,
ethnic identity was associated with greater depressive symptoms for individuals who reported being unemployed or experiencing discrimination. These effects are the opposite of those found with voluntary immigrants, where ethnic identity tends to buffer the effects of stressors and discrimination on psychosocial and health outcomes (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, for a recent review). Identification is also a complex issue for undocumented immigrants, who are often viewed negatively not only by host nationals but also by documented and/or longer-term immigrants (Lopez, Morin, & Taylor, 2010). Indeed, undocumented immigrants must come to terms with what it means to be “illegal” (Gonzales, 2011) in addition to identifying with their ethnic group (which may not accept them) and the destination society (which likely looks down upon them and denies them opportunities and services). It should be noted, however, that some undocumented immigrants may nonetheless identify as bicultural (Meca, Cobb, Xie, & Schwartz, in press).

Returning to definitional issues, ethnic identity is far more salient for – and is endorsed more strongly by – members of immigrant and ethnic minority groups than among host nationals (especially those from the dominant ethnic group, such as White Americans; Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004). Ethnicity is “optional” for many host nationals because their ethnic group is often synonymous with the nation. Individuals from visible-minority immigrant-origin groups, such as Mexican Americans and Asian Americans, are likely aware that others view them as foreigners (Armenta et al., 2013). In turn, immigrants and ethnic minority group members are more likely than White Americans to endorse ethnic identity because they know that they are less readily assumed to be part of the national group.
Links between Ethnic Identity and Psychosocial Outcomes. Ethnic identity serves protective and promotive functions for immigrant youth in some cases but not others. These effects have been examined both in terms of direct effects and in terms of moderated effects. Direct effects involve positive or negative associations between ethnic identity and psychosocial outcomes. Moderated effects involve cases where ethnic identity offsets or exacerbates the effects of culturally related stressors (e.g., discrimination) on psychosocial outcomes.

Direct Effects. In terms of direct effects, using meta-analytic methods, Smith and Silva (2011) found ethnic identity to be positively linked to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and other forms of well-being. Using a national college sample, Brittian et al. (2015) found a sense of solidarity with one’s ethnic group to be protective against depressive symptoms. Indeed, ethnic identity appears to be positively related to well-being, and negatively related to internalizing symptoms and other unpleasant or harmful outcomes in the majority of cases (see Rivas-Drake et al., 2014, for a review).

However, for some ethnic groups and some outcomes, ethnic identity may not necessarily be protective. In three samples of Hispanic adolescents and emerging adults in the United States, ethnic identity was positively linked with substance use and sexual risk behavior, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Schwartz et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2014; Zamboanga, Schwartz, Jarvis, & Van Tyne, 2009). These patterns did not emerge for other ethnic groups. The authors of these studies concluded that identifying with a stigmatized ethnic group – one that is at the center of many United States immigration debates – may lead to personally and/or socially destructive behavior because the individual may be blocked from pursuing more prosocial endeavors (see Meeus, 2017, for a review of similar general principles.
regarding the adaptiveness of ethnic identity). Further, in the United States, many media images have portrayed Hispanics as drug dealers and users and as sexually promiscuous, perhaps leading Hispanic youth to identify with these stereotypes (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008). Such a self-fulfilling prophecy is in line with Erikson (1968, p. 196), who stated that “[when] a young person who, for reasons of personal or social marginality, is close to choosing a negative identity, that young person may well put his energy into becoming exactly what the careless and fearful community expects him to be—and make a total job of it.”

**Indirect Effects.** Some studies have examined indirect (mediated) associations of ethnic identity with psychosocial and health outcomes. We review two of those studies here. For example, Schwartz, Zamboanga, and Jarvis (2007) found that, in a sample of Hispanic adolescents in western Michigan, self-esteem mediated the links of ethnic identity with prosocial and antisocial behavior. Specifically, ethnic identity was positively related to self-esteem, which in turn was positively linked with prosocial behavior and negatively linked with antisocial behavior. In a large sample of university students from around the United States, Syed et al. (2013) found that personal identity coherence and confusion mediated the links between ethnic identity exploration and well-being. Interestingly, these researchers examined two components of ethnic identity exploration—participating in ethnic activities and thinking about the meaning of one’s ethnic group. Participating in ethnic activities was linked with personal identity coherence, which was positively associated with well-being. Conversely, thinking about the meaning of one’s ethnic group was linked with personal identity confusion, which in turn was negatively linked with well-being. Similar to the direct effects reviewed above, these mediated findings suggest that, although ethnic identity processes are generally
facilitative of well-being and protective against problematic outcomes, this is not always the case.

**Moderated Effects.** In some cases, ethnic identity may also help to offset the effects of discrimination and other negative cultural experiences on well-being and other psychosocial outcomes. Umaña-Taylor, Wong, Gonzales, and Dumka (2012) found such an effect in their Mexican American sample. In other cases, however, ethnic identity may actually *exacerbate* the effects of discrimination on mental health outcomes. In their analyses using a national sample of Asian Americans, Yip, Gee, and Takeuchi (2008) found that ethnic identity amplified the effects of discrimination on anxiety and depression among second-generation individuals. It is essential to continue to examine those scenarios where ethnic identity is promotive or protective, as well as those scenarios where it is not.

**The Intersections among Ethnic, National, and Personal Identity among Immigrants**

At one time, the literatures on personal and ethnic identity were largely separate. Personal identity research focused primarily on host nationals with little regard to ethnicity, and much ethnic identity research did not take other life domains (e.g., religion, politics, friendships, dating relationships) into account (Schwartz et al., 2013; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2014). However, more integrative research using first and second generation immigrant samples has been undertaken. Broadly, studies have found that a stronger sense of ethnic and national identity is linked with a more coherent sense of personal identity in adolescence (Meca et al., 2017) and emerging adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2013). Further, there appear to be two different ways of exploring one’s ethnic identity – search (thinking about ethnic issues) and participation (engaging in activities reflective of one’s ethnicity). These two types of ethnic
Identity exploration are related to personal identity in opposing ways – participation is linked with personal identity coherence (i.e., consistency across various parts of one’s sense of self) and commitment, whereas search is linked with personal identity confusion and poor well-being (Syed et al., 2013). People likely engage in both “thinking” and “doing” during the process of developing a sense of themselves in terms of ethnicity and nationality – suggesting that exploration can be both helpful and harmful. Similar findings have emerged for exploration in other identity domains (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2008). Specifically, there appear to be both helpful (e.g., sorting through identity alternatives) and harmful (e.g., chronic indecision and rumination) forms of identity exploration – and this principle appears to apply to both personal and cultural domains of identity.

Some advances in identity theorizing may be useful to further expand the investigation of ethnic and national identity, and their intersection with personal identity, among immigrants. Among these are addition of a reconsideration dimension for ethnic and national identity (Meeus, 2017). Within the personal identity literature, reconsideration refers to reevaluating current commitments and deciding whether to retain, suspend, or discard them (Crocetti, 2017). Commitments can be suspended or discarded for a number of reasons, most principally a sense that these commitments no longer fit with one’s core sense of self, with the context in which one finds oneself, or with the people with whom one is involved in close relationships. A similar principle might apply to ethnic and national identity: if one’s beliefs about one’s ethnic group or the larger national context no longer fit, one might proceed to reconsider what one’s ethnicity or nation means to oneself. Such reconsideration may lead to further exploration (both thinking and doing) of what one’s ethnicity or nationality mean to oneself. It is further
possible that reconsideration of one’s ethnic or national identities might occur along with reconsideration of other identity domains as well.

Generally, the concept of identity integration suggests that individuals who are making progress in one identity domain are also doing so in other domains that are of importance to them (Syed & McLean, 2016). Such “well-rounded” identity configurations are predictive of the most favorable psychosocial functioning and the lowest levels of health-compromising behaviors (e.g., hard drug use, unprotected casual sex, driving while intoxicated; Meca et al., 2015). The concept of importance is critical here – people likely have not spent much time or effort on identity work in domains that are not salient to them (Cheek & Briggs, 1982). So a well-rounded identity might be operationalized as one where the person is (or has been) engaged in identity work within domains that are important to her or him.

Although ethnicity and ethnic identity are important to many immigrants, it is likely not important to all immigrants – and there is evidence that ethnic identity is most protective for people who consider ethnicity to be an important aspect of who they are (Brittian et al., 2013). This concept of identity centrality applies to many identity domains – exploring, committing, and affirming oneself within a given domain is most facilitative of well-being, and protective against negative outcomes, when the person considers that domain to be important (Cheek & Briggs, 1982; Sellers et al., 1998).

In three United States studies, Syed and Juang (2014) tested a key assumption of some ethnic identity models – that ethnic identity would predict personal identity coherence, and psychosocial outcomes, more strongly for United States immigrant-origin groups (Hispanics and Asian Americans) than for White Americans. They found scant support for this hypothesis –
indeed, ethnic identity was equivalently related to identity coherence, and to self-esteem and depressive symptoms, for White Americans and other ethnic groups. As a result, although mean levels of ethnic identity tend to be lower for host nationals than for members of immigrant-origin groups, the developmental functions of ethnic identity are similar across ethnic groups. Such a finding suggests that endorsement of ethnic identity may be lower for host nationals primarily because they are not in a subordinate social position – but in cases where host nationals do endorse higher levels of ethnic identity, the developmental functions are similar to those observed among other groups.

The finding that ethnic and national identity facilitate personal identity has emerged across several independent United States samples (Meca et al., 2017; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Wang, 2010; Syed et al., 2013; Syed & Juang, 2014). These findings have led some writers (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2013) to label ethnicity as a domain of personal identity. It also appears that personal identity is “closer” to psychosocial and health outcomes than ethnic or national identity are – indeed, when both personal and ethnic/national identity are allowed to predict outcomes, personal identity generally reaches significance whereas ethnic and national identity do not (Meca et al., 2017; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009; Syed et al., 2013). In fact, some of these studies have found that personal identity may mediate the links between ethnic or national identity and psychosocial or health outcomes.

For many first and second generation immigrants, then, ethnic identity may help to prompt the development of a more general, overarching sense of personal identity. The principle of identity integration, as articulated by Syed and McLean (2016), suggests that – at least for those people who consider ethnicity to be important – a strong sense of ethnic identity may be linked
with well-established identity commitments in other domains as well (see also Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Syed, 2010).

**Putting the Pieces Together: Societal-Level and Individual Identity Processes**

Returning to the interplay between societal-level and individual-level identity processes, we can put forth a number of propositions. First, at the intergroup level, the “need” for ethnic identity within a given immigrant group may be directly related to that group’s extent of perceived cultural difference from the dominant host-national group (Rudmin, 2003) – that is, the group with the most political and economic power. It may be helpful for stigmatized groups, or those labeled as “threats,” to develop a common identity – indeed, an imagined community – that can offset the effects of perceived discrimination and rejection by the host-national group (Latrofa, Vaes, Pastore, & Cadinu, 2009). For example, Mexican Americans may be viewed with suspicion and discriminated against by some White Americans. The imagined community, for which ethnic identity serves as a conduit, can help to offset the effects of discrimination.

Second, perceived rejection by the host-national group may lead immigrants to separate themselves from the larger national identity and from the labels that the “mainstream” ethnic group imposes on them. Some ethnic groups create their own unique labels, such as Chicano (Mexican Americans) and Boricua (Puerto Ricans residing on the United States mainland), to distinguish themselves from other members of the nation (Gómez, 2007; Soto-Crespo, 2009), and to express pride in that distinction. Social identity perspectives maintain that groups – and their members – are driven by a desire to view themselves positively (Spears, 2011). Rejection by host nationals requires social creativity in terms of finding ways to view one’s ethnic or
cultural group favorably. At the same time, however, ethnic or cultural groups also maintain expectations regarding how their members should and should not behave and interrelate (Castillo, Conoley, Brassart, & Quiros, 2007). Immigrants may thus find themselves doubly challenged in terms of managing the expectations and demands of the destination society and of their heritage group.

Third, large immigrant groups united by a common language, religious background, or racial background may be viewed by host nationals as most threatening (Chavez, 2013; Coenders et al., 2008). Poor immigrants, who are often viewed as competition for low-income jobs, may be viewed as especially threatening (Golash-Boza, 2015). Host nationals’ views of immigrant groups tend to be most negative during times of mass immigration (Coenders et al., 2008), and some host nationals may perceive themselves as being “overrun” or “invaded,” or having their scarce resources (e.g., jobs) taken by others (see Buchanan, 2011; Caldwell, 2008, for examples). These perceptions of threat may result in defensive measures such as United States laws designed to crack down on illegal immigration – including California’s Proposition 187 and Arizona’s SB-1070 law (Chavez, 2013). United States President Donald Trump’s proposed Muslim travel bans and threats to begin deporting undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children likely also qualify as such defensive measures. These defensive measures, in turn, serve to constrain the identity options available to members of the immigrant groups that are viewed as threatening.

Fourth, given the finding that ethnic and national identity may facilitate personal identity among immigrant youth, hostile reactions toward immigrant groups may ultimately constrain the personal identity options available to young immigrants, as well as young immigrants’
ability to capitalize on the options available to them. Indeed, implicitly (or explicitly) telling groups of people that they are unwanted or “bad” because of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds may be damaging to their identities, and ultimately to their psychological and physical health. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) describe a Dominican adolescent boy in New York who claims that he is “bad like all Latinos.” Such a description is quite likely the result of negative stereotypes and symbolic threats – in this case internalized by a member of the stigmatized group.

Fifth, although biculturalism, represented as strong endorsement of both ethnic and national identities, is the most adaptive identity configuration in most cases (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2015), it may not be attainable in some instances. As noted earlier in this article, it may be difficult for someone to identify with a nation that rejects her or him. In the words of Asian American writer Caroline Hwang (quoted in Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), “I identify with Americans, but Americans do not identify with me.” Identifying strongly with a stigmatized ethnic group may also require social creativity and connection with an imagined community – something that may be discouraged by host nationals. For example, the banning of Mexican American studies classes in Arizona may represent an attempt to prevent Mexican American students and educators from creating and sustaining such an imagined community (Banks, 2012). So, in essence, these types of defensive policies may thwart immigrants’ attempts to become bicultural – again potentially harming their health outcomes.

Finally, there are important effects of generational time (i.e., the passing of generations) on the ways in which specific immigrant groups are received within a given destination country. In
the United States, for example, Irish, German, Italian, and Jewish immigrants were once regarded as separate “races” from other Americans (Stepick, Stepick, & Vanderkooy, 2011). Benjamin Franklin once ridiculed German immigrants as a “stupid sort” who refused to learn English; Irish immigrants were mocked as drunks who had to be rounded up in “paddy wagons” and escorted home; and Jews and Italians were referred to as “human garbage.” All of these ethnic groups have now been incorporated into the United States mainstream, and immigrants from these backgrounds are usually not viewed with suspicion by the mainstream society. It is noteworthy that these shifts in perceptions occurred after mass immigration from these groups had stopped. It is not clear whether current immigrant groups, such as Hispanics and Asians in the United States, will be viewed differently in subsequent generations.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

We will end this article by looking forward – making recommendations for future research examining the interplay between social-level and individual identity processes among immigrant youth. First, the vast majority of research on immigration – and research in general – is conducted in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Because a large share of the world’s immigrants settle in neighboring countries (United Nations, 2016), more research is needed to examine the adjustment and identity development of immigrants in regions such as Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Do immigrants who settle in neighboring countries in the developing world differ from those who migrate to the developed world, in terms of their identity and adjustment outcomes?

Second, although there is a solid knowledge base regarding immigrants’ and host nationals’ views and attitudes toward one another, much of this work has been conducted using
convenience samples and laboratory experiments (e.g., asking people to read fictitious passages about immigrant or host-national groups). Some sociological work has been conducted using national survey datasets (e.g., Oesch, 2008; Pehrson et al., 2009), but individual-level identity variables are not always included in these datasets. Given the interactive nature of intergroup processes between immigrant and host-national groups, creative methodologies are needed to map the effects of societal-level group identity processes on opportunities for ethnic and national identity formation among immigrants. Further, because ethnic and national identity are inherently developmental (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), longitudinal designs are essential for understanding how intergroup processes between immigrant and host-national groups facilitate or hinder the development of ethnic and national identity (and biculturalism) among immigrant youth.

Third, more studies are needed that explicitly compare across immigrant groups, and across destination countries, in terms of the interplay between societal and individual level identity processes – including policies and laws that encourage or inhibit biculturalism, expression of immigrants’ cultural heritage, and acceptance of immigrants into the larger national group. As Berry (2017) notes, no two countries (or regions within a country) provide exactly the same receiving context for immigrants, and no two immigrant groups respond in exactly the same way to the opportunities (or lack thereof) presented to them within the destination country. Comparative studies, such as the one led by Berry and colleagues (2006), allow for rich comparisons across immigrant groups, destination countries, and the interaction between the two. More work is needed in this direction.
Finally, it is important to identify specific developmental differences in the effects of societal-level intergroup processes on individual-level identity formation, and on health outcomes through individual-level identity processes. Would young adolescents, who are just beginning to develop a sense of self, be affected in the same way that emerging adults would? Adolescents and emerging adults are exposed to differing types of social institutions (e.g., schools versus workplaces) and are characterized by different levels of cognitive and emotional maturity. Longitudinal and age-cohort studies will be necessary to examine these issues.

In conclusion, the present article has highlighted not only the ways in which young immigrants develop their identities, but also the societal-level dynamics that may facilitate or constrain these individual-level identity processes. Research following up on the ideas discussed here has the potential not only to advance identity theory (through connecting intergroup processes with individual-level identity formation), but also to stimulate policies and programs designed to reduce barriers to immigrants’ adjustment and health. We hope that the present article will help to inspire more work in this direction.
References


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