

# Importance of Race and Ethnicity: An Exploration of Asian, Black, Latino, and Multiracial Adolescent Identity

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This mixed-method study used a grounded theory approach to explore the meanings underlying the importance that adolescents attach to their racial–ethnic identities. The sample consisted of 923 9th- to 12th-grade students from Black, Latino, Asian, and multiracial backgrounds. Thematic findings identified a broad range of explanations for adolescents’ racial–ethnic centrality, ranging from pride and cultural connection to ambivalence and colorblind attitudes. While racial–ethnic groups differed in reported levels of racial–ethnic centrality, few group differences were identified in participants’ thematic explanations, with the exception of racial–ethnic and gender differences for Positive Regard and Disengagement. These findings highlight the diversity of meanings that adolescents attribute to their racial–ethnic centrality as well as the many commonalities among adolescents across gender and racial–ethnic groups.

*Keywords:* racial identity, ethnic identity, gender and race, grounded theory

Racial and ethnic identity, commonly defined as the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity to one’s self-concept (Phinney, 1996; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), represent crucial components of adolescent development and exploration among youth of color (W. E. Cross & Cross, 2007). As with most racial identity constructs, research on the importance of race and ethnicity was initiated with adult African American populations (e.g., Cross & Vandivir, 2001; W. E. Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991; Sellers et al., 1998) and has provided critical foundations for the study of racial and ethnic identity. A growing body of work investigates how these constructs apply to diverse groups of adolescents (e.g., Charmaraman & Grossman, 2008; Herman, 2004; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Pellebon, 2000; Romero & Roberts, 1998), although multiracial populations, in particular, remain understudied (Herman, 2004). The present mixed-method study explores racial–ethnic centrality among Black, Asian, Latino, and multiracial adolescents. Participants were asked to rate their racial–ethnic centrality and to elaborate on the nuances behind these ratings, providing a qualitative window into the phenomenology of racial and ethnic centrality among a diverse group of respondents.

## Use of “Racial” and “Ethnic” Identity

Racial identity has been historically understood as relating to responses to racism and prejudice (Helms, 2007), while ethnic

identity has included a sense of belonging to a group connected by heritage, values, traditions, and often languages (Phinney & Ong, 2007), although both terms are acknowledged as socially constructed (W. E. Cross & Cross, 2007; Helms, 2007; Markus, 2008; Omi & Winant, 1986). Consistent with these definitions, Markus (2008) argued that race should be conceptualized as distinct from ethnicity because of its historical and contemporary racial hegemony related to power and privilege. However, as Cokley (2005) noted, there is great variability in how these constructs are operationalized, with much complexity and definitional overlap (Trimble, Helms, & Root, 2003; Worrell & Gardner-Kitt, 2006). W. E. Cross and Cross (2007) further argued that regardless of these theoretical differentiations, racial and ethnic elements interact within individuals’ lived experiences and should not be artificially isolated from one another, as in the exploration of ethnic features of African American racial identity (Cokley, 2005). This may be especially relevant for adolescents, who are often early in their exploration of racial and ethnic identity, and whose own constructions of racial and ethnic identity may diverge from researchers’ categorizations and assumptions (W. E. Cross & Cross, 2007). In this study, we invited adolescent participants to reflect on their racial and ethnic backgrounds, not to assert that these constructs are conflated, but to leave open how adolescents conceptualize these historically and developmentally complex concepts when referring to their identities, and to capture their understandings of these often intermingling concepts through grounded theory methodology. To reflect this understanding, we have adopted Cross and Cross’ language of “racial–ethnic identity” development throughout this article.

## Theoretical Perspectives

Several theories help to explain racial–ethnic importance and the phenomenological meanings that minority adolescents attribute to their racial–ethnic identity. Stryker’s (1987) identity theory

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proposes that individuals may attribute different levels of importance to various aspects of identity (e.g., race and gender). However, Sellers and Shelton (2003) pointed out that group identification alone cannot encompass identity and that individuals who share a common level of group identification may attribute their engagement to different underlying reasons. Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) expanded on Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological developmental framework by integrating the role of meaning making in shaping individuals' self-concepts, resulting in the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). Spencer et al. asserted that these processes are more complex for American ethnic minorities, particularly in adolescence, in part because of potentially stressful environments, which combine with phenomenological experiences of emergent identities to shape one's self-concept. These theories contend that the importance of group identification and the meanings behind these identifications together provide a fuller picture of the motivations that drive racial-ethnic identification than would importance alone.

### Centrality of Racial-Ethnic Identity

The importance of race and ethnicity to an individual's identity, which is referred to as *centrality*, represents a relatively stable perception of the significance that one attributes to one's racial-ethnic background. We use *centrality* and *importance* interchangeably in this article, following the terminology originally utilized by the researchers. While much scholarship has focused on racial regard (Sellers et al., 1998), defined as how one feels about one's group membership, or on broader notions of exploring racial and ethnic identity, the construct of centrality is emerging as a meaningful component of racial and ethnic identity. For instance, recent findings for African American adolescents have shown that regard contributes to positive outcomes only when race or ethnicity are central aspects of individuals' identities (e.g., Caldwell, Sellers, Bernat, & Zimmerman, 2004; Chavous, Revas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008), and other studies directly link centrality with positive academic and mental health outcomes among adolescents of Mexican American, Chinese American, and European American backgrounds (Fuligni, Witkow & Garcia, 2005) and for African American adolescent boys (Chavous et al., 2008). Cross-group comparisons suggest that those who tend to face greater racial adversity attribute higher centrality to racial aspects of their identities. Studies have found that adolescents of color report higher racial-ethnic centrality than do White youth (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2008; Herman, 2004), whereas African Americans reported higher racial-ethnic importance than did either multiracial or White adults (Jaret & Reitzes, 1999). Most prior studies have taken a quantitative, group differences approach to studying racial-ethnic centrality, whereas in the current study, we explore group differences in centrality and use grounded theory to better understand the meanings behind these ratings.

### Meanings of Racial-Ethnic Identity

Researchers have suggested several explanations for individuals' varying racial-ethnic centrality levels. Sellers and colleagues (1998) identified racial regard as central to how African American individuals assign meaning to their racial identity. This concept, arising from Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) construct of collective

self-esteem, is a frequently identified component of racial-ethnic meaning making. It includes positive feelings and pride toward one's racial-ethnic group, has shown positive influence among diverse adolescents, including those of Mexican and Chinese descent (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006), and predicts self-esteem among African American, Latino, and White adolescents (Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). Another orientation underlying racial-ethnic centrality is the belief in a colorblind society, wherein everyone is considered to be part of the "human" race. Notions of colorblindness are typically identified with Whites (e.g., Grossman & Charmaraman, 2009; Perry, 2002) and can entail denial of discrimination and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Some models of racial-ethnic identity have also alluded to colorblind ideologies in their developmental statuses, such as W. E. Cross and colleagues' (1991) preencounter stage and Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2002) transcendent identity. Neville, Worthington, and Spanierman (2001) suggested that colorblindness may have different meanings for ethnic minorities than for Whites, as such perspectives work against one's own group interest for people of color.

### The Role of Gender

S. E. Cross and Madson (1997) theorized that girls and young women are more interdependent and concerned with being connected to others and maintaining relationships, whereas boys are more independent and focused on agentic action. Such gender differences may relate to differential patterns of parental cultural socialization that favor girls as being connected to home, community, and traditions, whereas boys are more attuned to messages of racial barriers and bias (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Hughes, Haggelskamp, Way, & Foust, 2009; Thomas & Speight, 1999). These distinctions may lead to greater expression of themes related to family culture and heritage for girls than for boys.

These conceptualizations have found mixed support in empirical literature. According to Maywalt Scottham, Sellers, and Nguyen (2008), few studies have considered gender variation in centrality or even in the broader area of racial-ethnic identity, and existing findings have shown inconsistent relationships, ranging from no significant gender differences (e.g., Rowley, Chavous, & Cooke, 2003) to finding gender differences only in limited situations or subscales (e.g., Maywalt Scottham et al., 2008; Munford, 1994). In the area of centrality, one of few studies addressing gender found direct relationships between centrality and academic achievement only for boys, while moderating roles for centrality also differed across gender (Chavous et al., 2008). Within the broader area of ethnic identity, whereas adolescent girls have been reported to have stronger ethnic identity than boys (Romero & Roberts, 1998), another study showed similar results only among Black and Asian adolescents, with no gender differences for Hispanic or mixed-race adolescents (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). Plummer (1995) also found that African American men endorsed more "raceless" or "preencounter" attitudes than did women. These findings suggest that further exploration is needed regarding intersections of gender and racial-ethnic identity.

### Objectives of Present Study

This study adds to the body of research concerning adolescents' racial-ethnic centrality and its multiple meanings across gender

and diverse racial groups, including multiracial participants. We asked participants to rate the importance of race–ethnicity in their lives and to comment on the subjective meanings behind their ratings, which we analyzed for thematic categories. Moving beyond predetermined, researcher-defined categories for racial–ethnic understandings, our phenomenological stance allowed for participants’ meanings to emerge. Given this article’s focus on adolescents of color, participants who identified as solely White/non-Hispanic or of mixed European backgrounds were excluded ( $n = 781$ ).

This study explored the following research questions: (a) Are there racial–ethnic and gender differences in levels of reported racial–ethnic centrality? (b) What themes do adolescents of color offer regarding the importance of their racial–ethnic identities? (c) Are there similarities or differences in thematic meanings across gender and racial–ethnic groups?

## Method

### Participants

This subsample was part of a larger research study on adolescent racial and ethnic identity among monoracial and multiracial youth (Tracy et al., in press). A total of 1793 adolescents in Grades 9 through 12 from three public high schools participated in the larger study. This article focuses on the 948 non-White participants who responded to an item on racial–ethnic centrality, of which 24 were excluded because of missing data on key variables, as well as the only Native American adolescent. The remaining sample of 923 adolescents included 251 Black, 275 Latino, 138 Asian, and 259 multiracial participants. As reported by the participants, the Black subgroup was largely composed of African American, Haitian, and Cape Verdean, as well as African and Jamaican adolescents. The majority of Latino adolescents ethnically identified as Puerto Rican and Dominican, with the remainder identifying as Colombian, Mexican, Guatemalan, and El Salvadorian. Asian adolescents consisted of predominantly Chinese or Vietnamese origins, as well as Indian, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, or Pacific Islander ancestry. Within the multiracial participants, the five largest subgroups were Black/White, Black/Latino, Latino/White, Asian/White, and Black/Native American combinations. The sample was 54% female, ranging in age from 13 to 21 years, with a mean age of 15.84 ( $SD = 3.076$ ). One hundred twenty-three participants were missing data for maternal education. Mothers’ educational levels included those who did not complete high school (19%), received a high school diploma or equivalent (20%), attended some college (18%), graduated from a 4-year institution (21%), and received a masters- or doctoral-level degree (8%).

### Procedure

Seven high schools with varying racial–ethnic composition in the New England area were invited to participate in this study. Three public high schools agreed to participate. The first was a low-income, working class, predominantly Latino urban school (68% Latino, 16% White/non-Hispanic, 15% Black, and 1% Asian). The second school was primarily White, affluent, and suburban (84% White, non-Hispanic, 7% Asian, 4% Black, 3% Latino, and 2% multiracial). The third school was a multicultural,

middle income, suburban school (55% Black, 23% White, non-Hispanic, 15% Asian, and 7% Latino; www.schoolmatters.com, 2008). The schools varied in how many residents within the district were born outside of the United States, ranging from 11% at the predominantly White suburban school to 22% at the multicultural school to 35% at the predominantly Latino school (retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com>; page not listed to maintain school confidentiality).

Administrative staff and school counselors provided assistance in disseminating study information letters and parent/guardian (passive) consent forms to students. Surveys were translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and French as needed as indicated by classroom teachers. Translations were done using the dual focus approach to generating multiple-language versions of instruments and communication (Erkut, Alarcón, García Coll, Tropp, & Vázquez García, 1999). This approach involves preparing translations simultaneously to achieve equivalence in meaning, affect, and usage across languages. Before asking students for their assent, students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be kept confidential. Teachers administered the surveys in their classrooms with the instructions provided by the researchers. Project personnel were on hand to answer questions and to collect the surveys, which took approximately 20 min to complete. Ninety-eight percent of participants answered the surveys in English, with the remaining 2% in Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

### Measures

**Racial–ethnic identification.** Respondents were asked about their race–ethnicity in one of three randomly assigned ways, as part of a larger study on self-categorization of race and ethnicity (Tracy et al., in press): (a) multiple-choice checkboxes taken directly from the 2000 Census form; (b) checkboxes and fill-ins; or (c) open-ended fill-in. Participants were also asked to report the race and ethnicity of each biological parent and whether they considered themselves multiracial. All racial–ethnic identification responses were coded in a two-step process: (1) a single, researcher-identified racial/panethnic category—labels that are widely used in the research literature: Black, White, Asian, Latino, Native, or multiracial (the latter category was operationalized as identification with two or more racial–ethnic categories); and (2) ethnicity responses coded by country or region of origin, yielding 22 ethnic groups. Though the “category” *Latino* comprises multiple ethnic and racial origins, we organized the categories to distinguish Latinos from the White, non-Hispanic participants.

**Racial–ethnic centrality.** We used W. E. Cross and Cross’ (2007) inclusive “racial–ethnic” terminology so that participants could reflect on their racial or ethnic background, in order to widely capture their self-concept of what those labels mean to them. The following question was used to assess centrality of race and ethnicity to adolescent identity: “How important to you is race/ethnicity in describing who you are?” Respondents were asked to answer using a four-point Likert scale, with end points of *Not at all important* (1) to *Among the most important* (4). Respondents were given the opportunity to comment on the importance of their race–ethnicity rating through a follow-up open-ended question: “Please explain.”

## Researchers' Backgrounds, Experiences, and Biases

Researchers for this study (a female Thai American and a female White, Jewish American) specialized in different areas of adolescent research. Our backgrounds were complementary and struck a balance between having sufficient knowledge to conduct the investigation, yet not having been too immersed in existing perspectives and expectations (Fassinger, 2005). One of us had greater expertise in qualitative methods focusing on adolescent identity and agency, including grounded theory methods prior to this study, but had limited empirical experience with racial-ethnic identity, whereas the other investigator had less experience with grounded theory, but had more extensive knowledge of the racial-ethnic identity literature, particularly in the area of racial discrimination and adolescent psychological outcomes. We both completed 2 years of postdoctoral National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) training in researching minority adolescent populations and health disparities. Prior to and during data analysis, we discussed our biases and their potential implications for this research, in order to minimize their impact on the data coding process (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997).

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data were obtained from the 575 participants who provided open-ended elaborations of their importance ratings. Eighteen responses were undecipherable or too vague to be interpretable and were therefore excluded, leaving a total of 557 responses included in qualitative analyses. Fifty-three percent of male participants ( $n = 224$ ) provided open-ended responses, in comparison with 63% of female participants ( $n = 333$ ), indicating that these results may be less representative for the male participants. In terms of racial breakdowns, 62% of Black, 53% of Latino, 59% of Asian, and 68% of multiracial participants provided qualitative responses for analysis.

Utilizing a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we systematically analyzed the data in three nonlinear, recursive phases: open, axial, and selective coding. We independently sorted through 200 randomly selected responses from the entire data set in order to develop open codes for the preliminary categories that emerged. The purpose of the open coding was to explore how to first conceptualize the details of the data, which consisted of breaking down sentences and fragments into thematic categories. Longer and more complex responses often entailed coding more than one theme. During the entire coding process, we remained unaware of the identifying characteristics of the respondents, namely their racial-ethnic background and sex, to guard against biases that might emerge from unconscious expectations based on group membership.

Coding resumed with periodic recalibration of categories through axial coding, that is, relating the initial codes to each other. This involved checking the agreement between the two independent coders and discussing how to reorganize the open codes, constantly comparing existing data to generate meaningful categories (Charmaz, 2000). The process continued until all categories were saturated. In cases in which there were coding disagreements, the coders returned to the original data and codebook to review definitions and criteria for inclusion in a particular category. Lastly, relationships between categories were revised and con-

firmed through a process of selective coding, illuminating the core categories that arose from prior iterations of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This final process included incorporation of the scholarly literature as the data analysis proceeded, obtaining outsider perspectives through peer debriefing and a multicultural research team review, and negative case analysis, for example, returning to the existing data to verify coherence of categories (Fassinger, 2005). Final coding was debated until a consensus was reached or by refining existing codes. Interrater reliability of codes was calculated during the axial coding stage. To calculate reliability, we divided the number of agreements by the sum total of agreements and disagreements, then multiplied by 100 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Reliability for the thematic coding was calculated at 98.4%.

## Results and Discussion

First, we quantitatively assessed racial-ethnic and gender differences in levels of reported racial-ethnic centrality. A two-way between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to assess racial and gender differences in levels of reported racial-ethnic centrality. Mother's level of education and participants' age were included as covariates to control for individual differences and did not significantly predict centrality. After adjusting for age and mother's level of education, the interaction between gender and race was not statistically significant,  $F(3, 777) = 2.51, p = .058$ . There was a statistically significant main effect for race,  $F(3, 777) = 9.91, p = .001$ ; however, the effect size was small (partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). Post hoc Bonferroni analyses documented the following differences across groups: Black ( $M = 2.74, SD = 0.94$ ) and Latino ( $M = 2.68, SD = 0.92$ ) participants reported the highest levels of centrality, whereas Asian participants ( $M = 2.46, SD = 0.80$ ) reported significantly lower levels than did Black participants. Multiracial adolescents ( $M = 2.33, SD = 0.89$ ) reported the lowest levels of racial-ethnic centrality, significantly lower than did Black or Latino participants. Adolescents who responded to open-ended questions reported higher racial-ethnic centrality than did those who did not ( $t = -3.36, p < .001$ ), suggesting greater engagement with racial-ethnic identity for these adolescents. There was also a statistically significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 777) = 7.58, p = .002$ , with female participants ( $M = 2.66, SD = 0.87$ ) reporting higher racial-ethnic centrality than did male participants ( $M = 2.45, SD = 0.95$ ), with a small effect size (partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ).

These findings are consistent with research identifying a stronger sense of ethnic identity among African Americans and Latinos, followed by Asians and multiethnic adolescents (Pellebon, 2000). Consistent with these findings, gender differences may exist across several racial-ethnic groups, though prior research has primarily identified gender differences among African Americans (Phinney, 1990; Romero & Roberts, 1998).

## Qualitative Themes

Several overarching themes emerged during the grounded theory analysis, reflecting a range of engagement with racial-ethnic identity, which we labeled (a) *Positive Regard*, (b) *Ambivalent Regard*, (c) *Awareness of Inequities*, (d) *Acceptance of Diversity*, and (e) *Disengaged* responses. These themes are not mutually

exclusive, such that one participant's response can generate more than one code. Table 1 shows the percentage of participants listed by race who were coded within each theme and subtheme.

The major theme of Positive Regard, representing expressions of pride and appreciation toward one's racial or ethnic background, characterized the greatest number of responses (58% of open-ended responses). To differentiate the varied components of this broad category, we divided Positive Regard into two primary themes: (a) *Internal Pride* (43%) involves positive feelings or identification with one's race or culture and (b) *External Pride* (20%) involves positive representation of one's background to others or a desire to be accurately identified as affiliated with one's group (or groups). The theme of Internal Pride was broken down into three subthemes that we labeled as *high definition, love and pride*, and *cultural connection*. Like the major themes, these subthemes are not mutually exclusive, such that a response can be coded as both high definition and cultural connection. High-definition responses (18%) often indicated that race or ethnicity was inextricable from participants' identities, such as "It's my culture—it's who I am so it's very important to me. If someone says describe yourself, one of the first words out of my mouth is Colombian" and "My race/ethnicity affects my standards and scruples, it is a large part of who I am, physically and culturally" (Chinese participant). The subtheme of love and pride (15%) characterizes the expression of affection and loyalty for one's race and culture. For example, "I take pride in being Cape Verdean," and "I love my Puerto Rican culture." Finally, the subtheme of cultural connection (19%) focuses on valuing one's cultural history and traditions, and a sense of belonging to a cultural community: "It is very important because to know me you have to know my background where my ancestors are from" (Jamaican/African American participant) and "I love the different things I learn about my family and heritage and the customs that come with my ethnicities" (Puerto Rican/Cuban/Irish participant). The theme of External Pride, which focuses on representation and validation, includes responses such as "It's important for me to represent where I am from. I wear Puerto Rico every day [with] shirts,

bracelets, earrings, and so forth"; "It's very important because we are different from others. Just because we are Asian doesn't mean that we are considered Chinese. It shows me who/where I belong"; and that of a participant of mixed Black, Asian American, and Native American heritage, "Because I like what I am and I don't want anyone to confuse me for something different."

Chi-squared analysis showed significant differences in the number of Positive Regard responses across racial groups,  $\chi^2(3, n = 557) = 9.02, p = .029$ . All groups showed high levels of Positive Regard, particularly Latino (69%) and Asian (67%) participants. These findings not only reflect the high levels of racial pride among African Americans found in prior research (Sellers et al., 1998; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, & Stanard, 2008), but also suggest that other monoracial groups of color have similarly high levels. Findings also showed gender differences in Positive Regard responses,  $\chi^2(1, n = 557) = 10.44, p = .001$ , with female participants (67%) endorsing more Positive Regard responses than did male participants (53%). This is unsurprising, given that minority women tend to report stronger ethnic identity than do men, and studies have shown that parents provide more messages regarding cultural pride and connection to one's heritage to girls than to boys (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Thomas & Speight, 1999).

The theme of Acceptance of Diversity illustrated the importance of appreciating and valuing cultures different from one's own. These relatively infrequent types of responses (6%) acknowledged that culture may shape who people are: "I don't care about the race of people—everyone is different. We can't all be the same" (Guatemalan participant). Across gender and monoracial-ethnic groups, there were similarly infrequent levels of Acceptance of Diversity (between 4% and 8%). Thirteen percent of responses showed an Awareness of Inequities, evenly split between *stereotypes* (assumptions about group membership) and *discrimination* (identifying prejudicial verbal or physical behaviors). Stereotype responses reflected perceptions of being judged or misunderstood on the basis of race or ethnicity: "Because when people (look) at me they think they know for a fact what I am and they don't (Jamaican female participant)." Some discrimination responses

Table 1  
*Dimensions of Centrality by Race: Summary of Adolescents' Responses*

Theme	Total ( <i>n</i> = 557)	Black ( <i>n</i> = 155)	Latino ( <i>n</i> = 145)	Asian ( <i>n</i> = 82)	Multiracial ( <i>n</i> = 175)
Positive regard					
External pride	20%	21%	24%	13%	15%
Internal pride	43%	45%	40%	46%	36%
High definition	18%	20%	11%	23%	18%
Love and pride	15%	18%	17%	11%	10%
Cultural connection	19%	19%	20%	20%	16%
Acceptance of diversity	6%	8%	6%	6%	4%
Ambivalent regard					
Uncertainty	9%	9%	5%	11%	13%
Constancy	2%	4%	—	2%	3%
Awareness of inequities					
Stereotypes	7%	5%	8%	9%	9%
Discrimination	7%	9%	4%	6%	7%
Disengagement					
Colorblindness	8%	7%	8%	10%	10%
Low definition	7%	7%	1%	10%	11%
Individuality	5%	3%	5%	7%	6%

referred to a history of unfair treatment, such as “Because my Black race, it is a race that has been enslaved, and it’s a race that has a lot of courage and humility. And I am Black,” whereas some emphasized ongoing experiences of discrimination: “It kinda matters because some people be talking about Mexicans and not knowing that I am [one] of them.” Others mentioned context-specific cases of discriminatory practices: “I feel the American education system is somewhat skewed to Caucasian ideas and history and my heritage is more or less ignored even in World History class” (Chinese male participant). No racial group differences were found for Awareness of Inequities, which may reflect a common experience of inequities among minority youth, yet may take different forms across racial and ethnic groups.

When adolescents’ responses did not show entirely positive reflections about their racial-ethnic heritage, we coded these responses as Ambivalent Regard, encompassing 11% of open-ended responses. Surprisingly, these responses were often paired with medium or high centrality scores, suggesting relatively strong racial-ethnic engagement, while their content suggested ambivalent feelings. We identified two types of ambivalence: (a) a sense of uncertainty and (b) constancy. *Uncertainty* responses included dual statements affirming racial-ethnic importance, while also qualifying its significance, for example, “My race/ethnicity is something that is obvious to the naked eye. Of course I’m Asian, of course I respect my culture, but it doesn’t run my life” (Chinese female participant). Other uncertain types of responses included a male participant stating, “Usually I say I’m Filipino, but as few people have heard of Philippines, I tend to not care about it that much” and a Black/White male participant saying, “It is somewhat important to me because I represent what I am, and my people but I’m not all crazy about [it], I’m more focus[ed] on my life.” *Constancy*, an emerging concept in middle childhood studied previously by Aboud and Doyle (1993), entails a defeated attitude of not being able to change (or escape from the consequences of) one’s racial or ethnic heritage. For instance, a Black/White/Native multiracial female respondent stated, “Unfortunately my skin will always mark who I am so there is no hiding if people are inquiring.” These constancy-coded responses had a quality of resignation in their tone: “I think it is important because your race is something that you could never change. No matter how hard you try” (Haitian male participant) and “I feel that because of my experiences as my race, I’ve grown into someone who has to carry the darker skin burden” (Black female participant). These responses represent only a small portion of open-ended responses, suggesting few such negative in-group perceptions among study participants.

In 20% of the responses, a sense of racial-ethnic *disengagement* emerged, which we subdivided into three themes: (a) colorblindness (8%), (b) low definition (7%), and (c) individuality (5%). *Colorblind* responses focused on commonalities rather than on racial-ethnic differences, suggesting that “we are all human” and should not be categorized by race or ethnicity. One French/Haitian/Cuban male participant stated, “I don’t think people should be classified as races because it just divides us even further and causes discrimination,” and a Guatemalan male participant believed that “I have chosen ‘not important’ because the whole world is one race we are family.” The disengaged theme of *low definition* (7%) was characterized by the belief that racial-ethnic background has little or no relevance to one’s identity, as exemplified in these responses by a South Asian male participant, “I don’t think my

race explains who I am and what I value in my life,” and by a Jamaican female participant, “Your race does not play a part in who you are.” At the core of the final disengaged theme of *individuality* (5%) was a strong identification with personal uniqueness rather than of racial-ethnic group membership: a male participant wrote, “I am Cape Verdean but it doesn’t define who I am.” This subtheme is characterized by the belief that one’s personal qualities/talents are more central in characterizing oneself than is race or ethnicity. For example, “It doesn’t play a big part in describing me, because my ethnicity has nothing to do with my personality” (African American female participant) and “It is the character/personality of a person that describes who they are, not their race” (Asian/White male participant). These disengaged responses may entail denial or minimization of racial inequities, as in Neville, Coleman, Falconer, and Holmes’ (2005) investigation of colorblind attitudes among African American college students, or alternately may reflect participants’ emphasis on other aspects of their identities as more pivotal to their self-definition (W. E. Cross & Cross, 2007).

Analyses showed significant differences for the disengagement theme across racial groups,  $\chi^2(3, n = 557) = 9.79, p = .020$ , with a high percentage of multiracial participants’ responses (27%) reflecting racial-ethnic disengagement. Previous research has demonstrated that multiracial participants are not as engaged in their racial-ethnic identities as are Black participants, but are more engaged than are monoracial White participants (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2008; Jaret & Reitzes, 1999). Ambiguity about racial group membership or lack of belonging to a well-defined racial-ethnic community for multiracial adolescents may make racial-ethnic identity more complex, thereby reducing racial-ethnic engagement (Shih & Sanchez, 2005) or causing potential distress and identity confusion (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). However, this finding is difficult to interpret, given the diversity within multiracial participants. For instance, Black/non-White mixes reported fewer disengaged responses (13%) than did the White/non-Black (36%) or Black/White (30%) respondents. Female participants (26%) also expressed fewer responses reflecting racial-ethnic disengagement than did male participants (16%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 557) = 9.06, p = .003$ . This is unsurprising, because women and girls are more likely to value family ties and maintaining connections. In addition, the dual minority status of women of color may make them less likely than men to dismiss or downplay racial or ethnic identity.

## Conclusions and Implications

This mixed-method study explored the levels and meanings of racial-ethnic importance in adolescents from different cultural backgrounds. Participants’ overall levels of racial-ethnic centrality indicate that they view their racial-ethnic backgrounds as important aspects of their identities. Open-ended responses also indicated high levels of Positive Regard for this sample, suggesting that these adolescents have generally positive perceptions of their racial-ethnic background, with minimal expression of shame and internalized racism, counter to prior conceptualizations of African Americans in social science (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), but consistent with recent findings for Black racial identity (Worrell, 2008). A minority of responses expressed disengaged or ambivalent attitudes toward their racial-ethnic backgrounds. These may

reflect negative feelings about participants' background, but may also represent a focus on other aspects of individuals' identities, such as gender or sexual orientation, which may be more central to their self-concept (W. E. Cross & Cross, 2007). Thematic commonalities for Awareness of Inequities suggest that constructs related to discrimination and stereotyping, explored primarily with African American populations in racial identity studies, may be applicable to a wider range of racial-ethnic groups. Overall, these themes demonstrated both the diversity and commonality of experiences and beliefs across adolescents of different minority backgrounds.

The present study also found often overlooked gender differences in the racial-ethnic centrality literature, demonstrating that female participants placed more importance on their racial-ethnic background than did male participants. While findings were mixed regarding gender differences in thematic categories, higher levels of Positive Regard for female participants than for male participants may tie to theoretical work emphasizing a higher tendency for girls to be socialized to cultivate and maintain relationships and kinship ties (S. E. Cross & Madson, 1997), as opposed to asserting independence and autonomy for boys.

### Limitations

Open-ended responses provided a limited window for analyzing participants' racial-ethnic centrality, and follow-up interviews are needed for clarification. While the range of participants' racial-ethnic backgrounds, particularly the inclusion of multiracial participants, enabled group comparisons, small numbers of responses within some thematic categories limit the reliability of group comparisons and did not allow for comparisons of specific racial mixes. We also attempted to expand narrow definitions of race and ethnicity through our measurement and discussion but recognize the limitations inherent in the five panethnic plus multiracial categories that we used to evaluate group differences. Also, this study's sample of adolescents from the Northeast may limit the generalizability of results. Finally, higher racial-ethnic centrality for participants who provided open-ended responses also suggests that these categories better represent adolescents with greater engagement with racial and ethnic identity.

### Future Directions

More investigation is needed to assess similarities and differences in racial-ethnic centrality and underlying ideological meanings across specific multiracial groups. Further investigation into the mechanisms of how gender intersects with racial-ethnic identity is also critical. For adolescents of color who feel that race and ethnicity are not important to their self-definition, future qualitative research might explore how race and ethnicity interact with other components of their identities, such as religion and sexual orientation. Given the variation in racial and ethnic language used within participants' explanations of centrality, future work might explore how adolescents define and utilize these terms in everyday contexts.

Future research in racial-ethnic centrality should also include longitudinal studies that follow participants over the course of adolescence and early adulthood, which is a transitional period of identity development. More mixed-method research would help

illuminate possible group-level differences, for example, race or gender, and probe into the sources of these differences. Future work could devise a new measure of racial-ethnic centrality that encompasses broader issues pertaining to minorities of color, and assess its reliability with diverse communities in different regions of the country. Finally, the development of school-based campaigns for diversity awareness that are sensitive to a range of racial-ethnic engagement for adolescents of color will be critical in this increasingly multicultural society.

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