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Abstract

Participants (*N* = 113) who indicated that their parents had different ethnic or racial backgrounds provided retrospective accounts of parental messages they perceived as influential in the development of their ethnic identity. Three themes of parental messages concerning ethnic identity emerged from the participants' responses: (a) parental messages of encouragement/egalitarianism, (b) parental messages of preference, and (c) lack of explicit parental messages/silence. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for understanding multiethnic identity development, and future directions for research are put forth.

Keywords: race/ethnic, socialization

Over the last few decades, the United States has experienced a notable growth in individuals with parents from different ethnic or racial groups. In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau made a fundamental change in the way race and ethnicity were conceptualized by allowing household members to select multiple categories. According to the latest U.S. census, estimates are that the population of those who self-identify as belonging to two or more races or ethnicities has grown considerably, resulting in more than 9 million individuals

reporting that they belong to two or more racial categories (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011), and expectations are that this population will continue to grow in the coming decades. Given the monoethnic norms in our society and the historically disapproving views on interethnic relationships (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000), multiethnic[1] individuals' experiences are often unique compared to those of their monoethnic peers.

Historically, scholars have problematized the experiences of multiethnic individuals, focusing on negative outcomes stemming from (a) uncertainty and ambiguity associated with one's multiethnic background and (b) rejection from majority and minority monoethnic groups. Whereas theoretical approaches have assumed that multiethnic individuals experience the same development processes and identity issues as monoethnic peers, more recent theorizing recognizes that although experiences of multiethnic individuals are not inherently negative, these experiences are unique compared to monoethnic peers (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). As such, scholars should not assume that conclusions drawn from research on monoethnic populations necessarily generalize to the multiethnic experience. Although relatively limited, a more concerted effort to include individuals with multiple ethnic backgrounds is appearing in the research on ethnic identity. Building on some of the early work on multiethnic experiences (e.g., Root, 1996) and using theories from the social identity tradition and more critical theories (e.g., complicity theory, performance theories), scholars have focused their attention on understanding how individuals embrace and express multiethnic identity (Moreman, 2011; Orbe & Drummond, 2007; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), family communication and ethnic diversity (Orbe, 1999; Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009), and well-being (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009). Emerging from this research is the complexity situated in the development, negotiation, and expression of ethnic identity.

Much of the research on ethnic/racial identity development is based on Erikson's (1968) seminal work on identity development, in which forming a secure and stable identity is associated with an individual's self-concept and overall well-being, including ethnic identity (Herman, 2004; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). Yet, one area that is still untapped in terms of understanding ethnic identity development is the role of parents in the socialization process of multiethnic individuals. Ethnic socialization, according to Hughes and colleagues (2006), may refer to several processes or messages: (a) transmission of cultural values, knowledge, and practices; (b) messages targeted to prepare children for and to help children cope with discrimination; (c) cautionary messages instilling distrust or suspicion when interacting with other races or ethnicities; and/or (d) messages that discourage racial differentiation and instead encourage individual or mainstream qualities. Whereas research has identified the family as an important influence in multiethnic identity development (Root, 1998) and examined general valence of familial interactions (e.g., supportive vs. unsupportive: Jourdan, 2006), we would benefit from a more nuanced perspective on the messages received by multiethnic individuals that they recall as being salient in their identity development. Given Saenz, Hwang, Aguirre, and Anderson's (1995) assertion that "parents play the most crucial role in the transmission of culture and in the development of the ethnic identification of children" (p. 178), our focus is on parental messages. Specifically, we are interested in understanding the messages provided by parents that are perceived as "memorable" by their children because they are considered influential and important in the shaping of their identity and worldviews (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981; Medved,

Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006). Therefore, the following research question serves as a framework for the present study:

RQ: What messages do multiethnic individuals report receiving from parents concerning their ethnic identity?

Method

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, 113 participants ranging in age from 19 to 53 years (*M* = 26.59, *SD* = 8.02; 18.13% men, 69.91% women) were asked to answer open-ended questions soliciting their perceptions of parental messages concerning ethnic identity as part of a larger study on the familial and relational experiences of multiethnic individuals. Participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds and offered various levels of specificity in describing the family compositions (e.g., "Hispanic/White," "Japanese/Black," "Mexican American/African American"). Participants were recruited predominantly through online and face-to-face community groups, from classes in a large, midwestern university, and through personal social networks.

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory, an inductive approach that privileges data and allows themes to emerge naturally, rather than testing data against a priori theoretical frameworks (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). First, each researcher separately employed an "idiographic approach," meaning that each response was read thoroughly, one at a time, before moving on to the next (Smith, 1995, p. 19). In this, we conducted an open coding to identify potential themes and to establish a sense of familiarity among the responses (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Following a process akin to a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), responses were reread to verify thematic fit and/or identify any emergent themes. This step involved an iterative process of open and axial coding through which we analyzed responses in accordance with Owen's (1984) criteria. Rather than focusing solely on frequency of similar experiences among participants, we identified themes based on recurrence (e.g., multiple instances within the report), repetition (e.g., multiple uses of the same wording), and forcefulness (e.g., emphasis on particular words or phrasing). Finally, responses were revisited a third time with an emphasis on identifying any thematic incongruity and choosing suitable exemplars for the themes (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through discussion, researchers completed a negative case analysis, developed points of agreement that guided the final refined categories, and identified appropriate exemplars to represent the themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Findings

Our analysis revealed three broad themes of parental messages about ethnic identity: (a) encouragement/egalitarianism, (b) preference, and (c) lack of explicit parental messages/silence.

Parental Messages of Encouragement/Egalitarianism

The first theme that emerged focused on messages that contributed to an overall sense of encouragement or pride in an individual's ethnic background. Participants noted that parental messages served as a means of support for identity development, and they often noted how these parental messages relayed respect for all ethnicities. For example, one participant noted that her parents emphasized that she and her siblings should "be proud of who [they] are and to never choose one race because [they] weren't just one race/ethnicity" (38, "Asian/Native American/African American"). Likewise, parents reinforced ideas about being multiethnic through family discussions:

> Probably about once a week we [would] have a conversation that involves my racial identity. Growing up, my mom always told me that I should identify equally with both my "White and Black" side. That I shouldn't feel like I have to choose between one or the other. This mindset really drove how I personally racially identified. (24, "White/African American")

Likewise, another participant explained that through regular conversations and through ethnically representative toys, her parents conveyed messages of egalitarianism that were not widely accepted or promoted through social media:

> They told me that I was what they were: I am equally made up [of] what they were. They were different races and I am both; even though society often categorizes me as "Black." [. . .] They taught me to be proud of all that I was and really went out of their way to offset the images of beauty in the media or society by making sure that I also had Black Barbies and brown ones. (35, "White/Hispanic/Afro-Panamenian")

Parents also focused on cultural activities and emphasizing language proficiency as a method for socializing multiethnic worldview:

> They encouraged me to learn Spanish and Japanese. I was exposed to cultural activities, i.e., parades, traveling, food. They did not hide the fact that I was biracial, instead they exposed me to my different cultures. (28, "Hispanic/Japanese")

Although many of these messages were from both parents, there were quite a few participants who specifically referenced one parent as the conveyor of messages concerning ethnic identity. Nevertheless, as with all the messages represented by this theme, they were typically infused with (and interpreted as) positive and empowering elements in terms of making sense of one's ethnic heritage. This valence is in contrast to the remaining themes in which the content of the messages were not as positive and, often, associated with potentially negative outcomes for individuals.

Parental Messages of Preference

Many participants described memorable messages in which a parent (or parents) clearly supported embracing and identifying with one ethnic identity. One participant, for example, recalled a time when her mother discouraged her from spending too much time in the sun because it made her appear distinctive as non-white:

> Well, my mom always got angry at me as a little girl if I went too much to the pool during the summer because I would get too dark and look "india" or "negra." She also talked about my brothers and I marrying White people to "better" our race. (42, "Hispanic/African American/Native American")

Similarly, another participant noted that he distinctively remembers messages explicitly conveying that a specific identity should be embraced, emphasized, and expressed:

> There are a lot [of memorable messages], but the only one that stands out is that my mom told me, when I was about 13 years old, that I was acting "too Black" [like my father's race] and that I would probably end up "hanging around the wrong crowd as I got older." (23, "German/Norwegian/African American")

Preference was also manifested in more extreme messages, as in the case of a 33-year-old individual with a "African American/White" heritage as he remembered his "father trashing 'White people' and when it was pointed out [that] his kids were half White [he would say] 'not to me they're not.'" For some, a parent would acknowledge the mixed background while explicitly demonstrating expectations of embracing a singular identity: "You may be half Filipino, but this is a Filipino house with Filipino rules" (30, "Filipino/White").

Often, these types of messages were generated by only one parent. However, there were cases in which individuals received these types of messages from both parents—typically with contrasting perspectives:

> My mom always put down Latino culture as being too sexist and my dad for being machista. My dad used to give me Spanish music to listen to when I was young. He also frequently tells me or insinuates that I "don't understand Peruvian culture." They never talked to me about being biracial. (25, "White/Peruvian")

In many cases, participants noted that their parents simply did not recognize or affirm their multiethnic heritage:

> [My] father puts large emphasis on mother's ethnic identity, it is of prime importance, to be learned about, respected, etc. My identity as a multiethnic child was rarely discussed unless I brought it up, any concerns of mine were often brushed aside. I always felt that I was only half, or less than half, of what my mom is, as a person of ethnicity. (33, "Ethnic Chinese/White")

Lack of Explicit Parental Message/Silence

The final theme that emerged from the data focused on the lack of explicit parental messages regarding ethnicity. Participants described a palpable void in conversation surrounding these issues, noting that formulating an identity was a confusing process, which for some, led to negative feelings about their diverse backgrounds.

> The lack of conversations about ethnic identity influenced me in that I was often confused and sometimes ashamed. Often times I felt completely misunderstood by my father's family, which led to some distrust. (34, "White/Native American")

Other participants explained how the lack of explicit parental messages created ambiguity in their identity development and that lack of messages or discussions failed to prepare them for conversations about race and ethnicity in general:

> The thing in my family is that they didn't really talk about race at all, which I think put me at a disadvantage . . . I didn't know how to deal with being biracial and having people ask me, "What are you?" as if it was a problem for others that they couldn't categorize me . . . [They] couldn't wrap their heads around being anything but [a] single race. I wish we had talked more about race in my family, so I would have been better prepared. (30, "German/Polish/Filipino")

Although lack of explicit messages about one's background was typically conveyed as a negative aspect of the family communication environment, a few participants believed that there was a positive aspect of not focusing on race/ethnicity:

> My parents tended to ignore race as if it didn't exist . . . [M]y parents raised my sister and I to appreciate people of all colors and backgrounds for their individual beauty and qualities of who they were, not what they looked like . . . to respect all colors and backgrounds. (22, "Jewish/African American")

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into parental socialization of ethnic identity through retrospective accounts of multiethnic individuals. Based on these findings, the participants painted an extremely nuanced and varied landscape of socialization processes in families. In summarizing Thornton and Wason's (1995) work, Shih and Sanchez (2005) discussed the divergent perspectives on whether or not experiences of monoethnic individuals and multiethnic individuals are unique or comparable. The themes emerging in this study support both perspectives as there are socialization processes unique to those with parents from different racial or ethnic groups (i.e., parental messages of preference), whereas others may be similar to monoethnic experiences. These accounts further demonstrate the need for scholars to consider the complexity of identity development and relational experience for individuals with multiethnic backgrounds with the goal of identifying fam-

ily communication processes that differentiate positive identity development from experiences with potentially negative consequences for self-concept and well-being. As such, we offer three avenues for future scholarly pursuits in this context.

First, although not explicitly requested in our initial questions, many participants framed these memorable messages in terms of how they may have influenced their self-concept and family identity. Whereas some individuals received encouraging messages that facilitated secure and positive identity development, others indicated messages that likely hindered this more positive sense of self and, at times, provoked a negative affective perspective on their mixed heritage. This finding is significant given that what may differentiate positive and negative identity development for multiethnic individuals is the extent to which they are secure in both their understanding and affiliation with ethnicity, ethnic groups, and the family, in general. Messages that hinder a secure identity development or sense of ethnic belongingness can have negative implications for well-being (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). As such, we encourage scholars to identify communication processes that differentiate positive and potentially negative identity development trajectories for individuals.

Second, the focus of this inquiry was on parental messages, and although parents may be the primary source of socialization message, we should not discount the potential influence of grandparents and siblings as well as what Root (1998) refers to as "social interactions with community" (e.g., schools, friends). For instance, an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) would highlight the influence of various levels of an individual's environment (e.g., family, school, culture) as well as critical incidents and experiences in their lives (e.g., experiences in school, socio-historical context), which may influence the development and expression of ethnic identity. Likewise, our perspective in this study clearly focused on a unidirectional parent-child socialization influence on ethnic identity. However, it is likely that multiethnic individuals have various experiences, incidents, or contexts in their life, which allow for changes in self-concept—as supported in Root's "Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage" (1996) and suggested in Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2002) conceptualization of a *protean* identity. As such, the socialization process is dynamic as identity is embedded in the flux of messages to and from parents and children over the course of the lifespan. The findings from the current study would be complemented by inquiries focusing on these changes in self-concept and the manner in which familial messages are affected by or influence these changes (e.g., how parents communicatively react to changes in expressions of ethnic identity).

Third, we believe that this topic is an understudied area of inquiry that will benefit from theoretically grounded research to provide a unified conceptual language to discuss what we believe should be an important area of inquiry in the coming years. Specifically, understanding experiences of multiethnic individuals is best served by theoretical frameworks that focus on the intersection of identity, group-based cognitions, communication, and marginalization (e.g., social identity and intergroup theory, co-cultural theory, muted-group theory, face negotiation theory).

Note

1. We employ the term *multiethnic* to refer to individuals with more than one ethnic or racial background so as to be inclusive of subjective variation in definitions of race and ethnicity.

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