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Article 73

Racial Identity of Minority Adolescents: A Review of Empirical Research

Paper based on a program accepted at the 2011 American Counseling Association Conference, New Orleans, LA, March 25, 2011.

Kun Wang

Wang, Kun, is a doctoral student in the Department of Counseling at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Her research interests include racial identity, ethnic identity, spirituality, and counseling international students.

Introduction

According to Erik Erikson, the basic task for adolescents is to explore and create a more complete identity (Miller, 2002). Adolescence is the developmental period in which there are increases in autonomy, physiological changes, and cognitive gains. Youth are exposed to a greater variety of situations and experiences (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). They have to negotiate an identity that is appropriate for the new needs, skills, and goals. This process can be complicated by one’s minority-group status (Miller, 2002). With increased exposure to the world, race becomes increasingly salient for minority adolescents. They are pressured to consider the personal significance and meaning of race (Neblett et al., 2009). Therefore, the process of racial identity development in this period is very important for their identity integration.

Racial Identity

Research on racial identity among minority groups is considered as one of the most valuable ways to inform multicultural counseling (Sue & Sue, 2008). Racial identity has been conceptualized in several ways. A number of models have been proposed to account for racial identity development in different minority groups. To give a comprehensive review of these models is beyond the scope of this paper. Please refer to Sue and Sue (2008) for a detailed description of these models. Among these models, Cross’s model of Nigrescence is the most researched and influential one (Cross, 1971). The Nigrescence model describes five stages of racial identity development of African Americans: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. In the pre-encounter stage, the individuals identify more with the dominant White society and devalue their own Blackness. In the second stage, encounter, individuals encounter a crisis or event that is related to their race. This experience leads them to re-examine their previous way of thinking and behaving. In the third stage, the
person is immersed in African American culture, but internally, they are not ready to have positive attitudes toward their own Blackness. In the fourth stage, internalization, the individual feels secure and satisfied with being Black. They are more tolerant of the White culture. The last stage, internalization-commitment is characterized by an internalized identity and the commitment to make social changes and achieve social justice.

The developmental models assume that individuals have uniform racial identity attitudes within stages. They do not account for individual differences within stages. Recently, several researchers have suggested that racial identity is a multidimensional construct (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002). Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous (1998) proposed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) to examine the structure and functioning of African American racial identity. According to this model, there are four dimensions in African American racial identity: racial saliency, racial centrality, racial regard, and racial ideology. Racial saliency refers to how meaningful being Black is in a particular context or situation. Racial centrality refers to the extent to which being Black is a core part of an individual’s self-concept. Racial regard refers to the extent to which the individual feels positively or negatively about being Black. It consists of a private and a public component. Private regard refers to how one feels about African Americans and their group membership. Public regard refers to how one thinks other people feel about African Americans. Racial ideology refers to one’s attitudes and opinions about how African Americans should act.

Racial Identity and Psychological Functioning

Research on how racial identity affects psychological functioning of minorities has yielded mixed results (Caldwell et al., 2002). Some studies found that individuals with less salient racial identity and stronger anti-Black attitudes tended to have higher levels of anxiety, paranoia, and depression (Carter, 1991). For example, a few studies on racial identity development revealed that the less developed stages such as pre-encounter and encounter were associated with more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem, while the more advanced stages such as internalization were associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Munford, 1994; Pyant & Yanico, 1991).

In contrast to these findings, Sellers and Shelton (2003) did not find any significant relationship between racial identity attitudes and indicators of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress in a sample of African American college students. In a longitudinal study of African American youth, Sellers et al. (2003) found that there was no direct relationship between racial identity attitudes and psychological distress. Hovey (2006) found that ethnic identity had minimum influence on the mental health of Korean American college students.

The Present Study

Although there is a wealth of research on racial identity, not many studies have been conducted to explore the racial identity of minority adolescents. The purpose of this present study is to extend both researcher and practitioner knowledge of the results of the
empirical research on racial identity of minority adolescents. There are three research questions:

1. How is racial identity conceptualized and measured for minority adolescents?
2. What are the characteristics of the participants?
3. What are the major research findings on racial identity of minority adolescents?

**Method**

A computer-based review of the professional literature was conducted. EBSCOhost Electronic Journals Service system was used to identity relevant research for this study. It is one of the world’s most popular research databases. The keywords used when conducting the computer-based search were *racial identity* and *adolescents*.

All the articles generated from the computer-based search were reviewed for analysis. Publications that were not empirical studies were eliminated. Hard copies were made of empirical studies. A detailed spreadsheet was developed which contained specific information about each article.

The information included in the spreadsheet is as follows: the article title, the name(s) of the author(s), publishing information, purpose of the study, research question(s)/hypothesis(es), conceptualization of racial identity, research methodology, instruments used, validity and reliability of the instruments used, description of the participants, data collection method, data analysis method, variables examined, research outcomes, and strengths and limitations. Based on the data collected in this review of the professional literature, the author was able to report on the current state of research on the racial identity of minority adolescents.

**Results**

The use of the keywords *racial identity* and *adolescents* resulted in the generation of 74 articles. A careful review of the 74 articles resulted in only 11 articles on racial identity of minority adolescents that were empirical studies. Of the 11 articles, 10 of them were on African American adolescents, and 1 was on biracial (Black/White) children. Data entered into the spreadsheet provided answers to the research questions.

**Discussion**

**Conceptualization and Measure of Racial Identity**

Seven articles used the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) as proposed by Sellers and colleagues (1998) to conceptualize racial identity. The MMRI model is composed of four dimensions: racial saliency, racial centrality, racial regard, and racial ideology. In these seven articles, however, only three dimensions were examined: racial centrality, racial regard (private regard and public regard), and racial ideology.

In four articles, the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) was used to measure racial identity. A few of these articles used a shortened or modified version of this inventory. The original inventory has 65 items. It measures racial identity on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). It has a centrality scale, two regard subscales (private and public),
and four ideology subscales (assimilation, humanist, minority, and nationalist). Sample items included “Being Black is an important reflection of who I am,” “I am happy that I am Black,” and “Overall, Blacks are considered good by others.” This inventory was found to have an acceptable level of internal consistency with high school students (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998).

The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen (MIBI-T; Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyen, 2005) was used in three other articles. It is an adolescent version of the MIBI (Sellers et al., 1997) based on adolescent focus group data. It has 21 items. It has the same scales and subscales as the MIBI. This inventory has been proven to have adequate validity and internal consistency.

In one article, racial identity was measured by both the Children’s Racial Identity Scale (CRIS; Belgrave et al., 1994) and the Africentric Values Scale for Children (AVSC; Belgrave, Townsend, Cherry, & Cunningham, 1997). The CRIS is a 9-item scale. It measures the affective, cognitive, and behavioral beliefs about African Americans (e.g., “I believe that being Black is a good experience”). It is a 3-point scale: agree, disagree, and not sure. The AVSC has 19 items. It assesses the endorsement of the seven principles of Nguzo Saba (Karenga, 1965) and African American cultural heritage (e.g., “African Americans should work together to make their communities great”). The seven principles of Nguzo Saba include unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. The possible responses are agree, disagree, and not sure. Both scales have good internal consistency.

In another article, three aspects of racial identity were assessed: racial connection, racial importance, and racial pride (Byrd & Chavous, 2009). Racial connection was assessed by the racial connection measure (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). It has four items asking whether youth felt they had close friends because of their group, whether they felt their group had a rich cultural heritage and traditions, and whether the members of their group were supportive of each other. Racial importance was measured by one item asking youth how important it was to know their racial background. Racial pride was assessed by one item asking youth how proud they were of their racial background.

**Characteristics of the Participants**

The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. One article that didn’t provide the relevant information is not included in the following table.

**Major Research Findings**

The articles selected for this study examined the relationships between racial identity, racial discrimination, racial socialization, psychological functioning, and academic achievement among African Americans.

Racial regard, both public regard and private regard, was found to be associated with racial discrimination (Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Adolescents who had low public regard beliefs seem to be at greater risk for experiencing racial discrimination. This may be because adolescents with low public regard beliefs tend to be more sensitive to racial cues. This sensitivity is likely to be the result of previous experiences of racial discrimination. The relationship between racial discrimination and private regard seemed to be moderated by age. Perceptions of racial discrimination were negatively associated with private regard among older adolescents.
aged 17 to 18. Racial discrimination caused older youth to feel more negatively about being African American.

Table 1

*Characteristics of the Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Average age</th>
<th>Median Family Income</th>
<th>Education Level of Caregivers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burlew, Neely, Johnson, Hucks, Purnell, Buter, Lovett, &amp; Burlew, 2000</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, &amp; Notaro, 2002</td>
<td>17.48</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mostly factory-line workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott, 2003</td>
<td>15.60</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Advanced degree: 47.9% College or vocational: 42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, &amp; Lewis, 2006</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>High School or less: 25% College or less: 70% Doctoral degree: 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akos &amp; Ellis, 2008</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Small, Griffin, &amp; Cogburn, 2008</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>$45,000-$49,000</td>
<td>High school: more than50% College degree: 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byrd &amp; Chavous, 2009</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>$45,000-$100,000</td>
<td>High school: 92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neblett, Small, Ford, Nguyen, &amp; Sellers, 2009</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Less than high school: 7.5% High school diploma: 20% Some college/college: 43.5% Master’s or doctorate: 29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seaton, Yip, &amp; Sellers, 2009</td>
<td>14.80</td>
<td>$40,000-$49,000</td>
<td>College degree: 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, &amp; Jackson, 2009</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>$28,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were mixed findings on the relationship between racial identity and psychological functioning. Caldwell et al. (2002) found little support for a direct relationship between racial identity and mental health in African American adolescents. However, Sellers and colleagues (2006) suggested that positive personal regard beliefs
were associated with more positive psychological outcomes regardless of the level of racial discrimination. This is consistent with previous research that supported the relationship between positive attitudes toward one’s racial group and positive psychological functioning (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). Positive attitudes toward one’s racial group were believed to prevent adolescents from internalizing inferiority beliefs (Sellers, et al., 2006). Sellers et al. (2006) also found that low public regard beliefs buffered the impact of racial discrimination on psychological functioning. This may be because adolescents with low public regard beliefs have developed more effective coping skills to deal with racial discrimination, while those with high public regard beliefs are ill-prepared for it.

Racial socialization and maternal support were found to influence the shaping of African American adolescent racial identity (Caldwell et al., 2002; Neblett, et al., 2009). Neblett et al. (2009) identified three patterns of racial socialization experiences: High Positive, Moderate Positive, and Low Frequency. High and Moderate Positive are characterized by a parental emphasis on racial pride and self-worth, racial barrier and egalitarian messages, and socialization behaviors. These two patterns differ only in the relative frequency of the messages. Low Frequency is characterized by little or no explicit racial socialization. Parental messages about the meaning of African American and race provide important information for African American adolescents to construct their racial identities. Adolescents in the High Positive cluster tended to feel that race was more central to their self-concept and were more likely to emphasize attitudes unique to African Americans. Adolescents in the Low Frequency cluster were more likely to feel race was not an important part of their identity and they didn’t see African Americans as a unique group. It is interesting that girls were more likely to be in the High and Moderate groups, while boys were more likely to be in the Low Frequency group. Parents of adolescents in the Low Frequency cluster tended to have less formal education than parents of those in the High Positive cluster.

Research on the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement yielded mixed results (Byrd & Chavous, 2009; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009). Thomas et al. (2009) concluded that public regard moderated the negative impact of the perceived teacher discrimination on academic achievement. Chavous et al. (2008) suggested that there was a gender difference in how racial identity affected the impact of racial discrimination on academic engagement outcomes. They found that boys with higher racial centrality were more likely to have positive school importance attitudes and better school performance regardless of levels of discrimination reported. Girls with higher centrality were protected against the negative influence of peer discrimination on school importance and academic self-concept. However, for girls with lower centrality, their academic self-concept was positively related to peer discrimination. Byrd and Chavous (2009) proposed that neighborhood characteristics made a difference in how racial identity was related to academic outcomes. They found that high racial pride was related to a high GPA in neighborhoods low in economic opportunity, while high pride was related to a low GPA in more advantaged neighborhoods.
Implications for Practice

Based on the above mentioned research findings, the following suggestions are made for practitioners to enhance adolescents’ racial identity and improve their psychological functioning (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Sue & Sue, 2008):

1. At school, racial identity development can be promoted through different channels and opportunities such as multicultural curriculum, schoolwide presentations and postings, and guest speakers.
2. School counselors can develop a racial identity development group for minority students. This can give students an opportunity to have structured conversation with each other on racial identity.
3. Teachers and school personnel can be educated about racial identity development to create a school atmosphere that welcomes diversity and encourages students to explore their cultural heritage.
4. Outside of school, resources such as student associations and churches can offer opportunities such as mentoring, seminars, or other activities to foster racial identity development.
5. Parents can be educated that racial socialization facilitates racial identity development. They can be encouraged to provide their children with messages of the meaning of race, racial pride, self-worth, racial barriers, etc.
6. Counselors and other practitioners are encouraged to understand their own racial identity. This can help them to better understand the impact of thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs regarding racial issues. For example, increasing their self-awareness in this area can help them recognize barriers that may impede the counseling process.
7. Preference for a racially similar or dissimilar counselor may be a function of the racial identity of the minority person rather than of race per se.
8. It is important for practitioners to accurately assess the racial identity of their clients. This can help them to better conceptualize the presenting problem and provide appropriate treatment.
9. Racial identity models acknowledge the sociopolitical influences in shaping minority identity. Practitioners should not only treat minority adolescents in the counseling rooms, but also advocate for them actively in the larger society.

Limitation

This study only included empirical studies that were located through an online search with one database. Future research may be able to include more articles that deserve attention.

References


Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm