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Ethnic identity: Evidence of protective effects for young, Latino children

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Research on the ethnic identity of minority youth has proliferated over the past two decades, in tandem with a growing interest in identifying sources of resilience among children and adolescents at risk for negative developmental outcomes (Kuperminc, Wilkins, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2013; Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013). For Latino youth, mounting evidence suggests that ethnic identity, or one's sense of belonging and commitment to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 2003), may indeed be protective (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). To date, this research is guided by the view of ethnic identity formation as a developmental task of adolescence, when issues of identity and self-concept become highly salient and individual socialization experiences within the family and larger community lead to the acceptance or rejection of one's ethnicity or nationality (Phinney, 2003). Less attention has been given to the formation and potential protective effects of ethnic identity during early childhood, when developmental trajectories begin to take shape. The overarching aim of the present study was to examine ethnic identity and its association with child functioning among young Latino children at high risk for later mental health and academic problems.

Latino Youth in the US

According to a number of national surveys, Latinos initiate and engage in risky behaviors, such as carrying a weapon, getting into fights, smoking, drinking and using illicit drugs, at earlier ages and more often compared with other groups of adolescents (MMWR Surveillance Summary, 2008). Moreover, Latina girls have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of any ethnic group, with more than half of Latinas bearing a child before the age of 20 (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009), while Latino boys enter the juvenile justice system at disproportionately high rates (Sickmund & Snyder, 1999). These disquieting statistics are based on pan-ethnic (predominately Mexican-origin) samples without consideration of specific ethnicity, but a small literature suggests that, consistent with adult studies (e.g., Alegría et al., 2007), some subgroups (Mexican Americans, Dominican Americans and Puerto Ricans in particular) fare worse than others

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(Bettes, Dusenbury, Kerner, James-Ortiz, & Botvin, 1990). Such variations in developmental trajectories are thought to reflect the tremendous heterogeneity of the Latino population.

Though united by a shared pan-ethnic categorization, the more than 50 million Latinos in the US come from different ethnic (e.g., Mexican, Dominican, Colombian) and racial (i.e., white, black, indigenous) groups. Nonetheless, Latino heterogeneity is understudied, in part because although race and ethnicity are theoretically distinct (race refers to the physical, biological and genetic make-up of a group, while ethnicity refers to social grouping based on shared language, values, customs, etc.), they are often used interchangeably in the literature. This may reflect the confound between race and ethnicity that exists in certain groups (e.g., African Americans are racially black, Chinese Americans are racially Asian), but such overlap is less clear in the Latino population. For example, Latinos from Mexico, who represent the largest group in the US, are primarily mestizo (mixed white and indigenous race) but may be of white or indigenous race, and Latinos from the Dominican Republic, the 5th largest group in the US, are primarily mulatto (mixed white and black race) but may be of white or black race. Importantly, though, Latinos may not identify with either a racial categorization or the pan-ethnic label of "Latino or Hispanic," but instead tend to define themselves according to their country of origin/specific ethnicity (García Coll & Marks, 2009; Ruble et al., 2004). Thus in the present study of social identity, we define ethnicity according to country of origin without consideration of race, and we focus on ethnic rather than racial identity because the former is believed to be more salient to Latinos (Quintana, 2007; Smith, 1991).

Ethnic Identity in Latino Adolescents

The importance of ethnic identity to youth development is suggested by social psychology, which conceptualizes an individual's view of his or her ethnic group membership as a key aspect of self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In line with social identity theories, ethnic identity has been consistently linked to higher self-esteem in adolescents (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). This literature with pan-Latino samples also shows associations between ethnic identity and other developmental outcomes, including less substance use (Kulis, Marsiglia, Kopak, Olmsted, & Crossman, 2012), better mental health (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007; Umaña-Taylor, 2004) and better academic functioning (Fuligni, Witkow, & García Coll, 2005; Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Hernandez Jarvis, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), which in some cases appear to be mediated partially by self-esteem (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007).

Insomuch as girls and boys experience ethnicity differently (Hughes et al., 2006), ethnic identity and its association with youth outcomes are expected to be moderated by child gender. For example, some evidence suggests that boys may be slower in developing their ethnic identities than girls (Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009). In addition, past studies have found unique predictors for the ethnic identity formation of boys relative to girls (Bracey et al., 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012) and unique protective effects (e.g., against substance use) for boys that did not generalize to girls (Kulis et al., 2012). Beyond the greater social maturity shown by girls (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009),

these gender differences are thought to reflect the expectation that the transmission of culture (e.g., traditions, values) across generations is the responsibility of women, and that in preparing girls for this role, parents tend to socialize girls more than boys to cultural practices (Hughes et al., 2006; Kulis et al., 2012; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Crouter, 2006).

Ethnic Identity in Early Childhood

Little is known about the development of ethnic identity among boys and girls in early childhood. According to cognitive developmental theories, children actively construe their world based on social cues and within the constraints of their cognitive abilities. During early childhood (i.e., 3 – 7 years old), children are able to engage in symbolic thought and are learning to classify objects and people according to prominent characteristics (Bialystok, 1992). The social identity developmental literature indicates that beginning around age 2, children become aware of social categories such as gender, race and ethnicity (Kohlberg, 1966), marking the beginning of their own social identity development. Over the early childhood years, social identity then unfolds in three developmental stages of self-identification, stability (i.e., unchanging over time) and consistency (i.e., unchanging across situations) that collectively signal the achievement of *constancy*. *Knowledge* and *preferences* specific to one's identity are viewed as components of the multidimensional construct of social identity that emerge once children understand their grouping and its permanence (Ruble et al., 2004). This model has been tested in a number of gender and racial identity studies and show that children between 2 – 7 years old are able to accurately label gender and race; show a basic understanding that these characteristics are immutable; identify group-specific behaviors; and show gender- and racial-based preferences (Aboud & Amato et al., 2001; Byrd, 2011; Clark & Clark, 1974; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; García Coll et al., 1996; Katz, 2003; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Martin & Ruble, 2010; Rhee & Ruble, 1997; Ruble et al., 2004; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005; Serbin & Sprafkin, 1986). Though identity based on ethnicity may emerge later because its social markers are more ambiguous, very limited empirical data regarding when and how children show an understanding of their ethnic identities currently exists. The present study draws on the social identity developmental literature, along with the seminal work of Bernal and colleagues (Bernal, Knight, Garza, Ocampo, & Cota, 1990), to address this gap.

The work of Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, et al. (Bernal et al., 1990; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Ocampo et al., 1993; Ocampo, Knight, & Bernal, 1997) with Mexican American children described five components of early (i.e., pre-adolescent) ethnic identity that "reflect a set of self-ideas about one's ethnic group membership" (Bernal et al., 1990, p. 4). This model closely parallels the social identity developmental model in suggesting that once ethnicity is integrated into a child's sense of self, as signaled by the emergence of ethnic *self-identification* and *constancy*, it guides information-processing, leading to the development of ethnic-specific *knowledge*, *behaviors* and *feelings*/*preferences* (Ocampo et al., 1993). Though not described as stages, the five ethnic identity components were found to emerge at different ages in what the researchers considered a developmental sequencing. From the preschool (4 – 5 year old) to school-aged (6 – 10 year old) years, self-identification shifted from an "empty" label (i.e., that is parroted) to a "meaningful" one

(i.e., that reflects understanding of why an individual is MA), and the other components shifted from simple imitation of what family members were doing to more complex, individualized knowledge, behaviors and feelings/preferences. Despite the more sophisticated understanding of ethnicity shown by older children, about half of preschoolers were found to self-identify, 37% understood ethnic constancy and 11% showed ethnic knowledge.

Bernal et al.'s model of early ethnic identity (1990, 1993) was groundbreaking in extending social identity theories to ethnic identity development and thus highlighting the feasibility and importance of studying ethnic identity in children. To date, though, it has not been subsequently tested, leaving open the question of whether their original findings are replicable and generalizable to: 1) other samples of Mexican American children and specifically, those being reared in more diverse communities where the salience of ethnicity as a social construct may be higher (Berry, 2004; García Coll & Marks, 2009); and 2) Latino children from other ethnic groups (i.e., countries of origin). To address this question, in the present study we examined the components of ethnic identity proposed by Bernal et al. with Mexican American (MA) and Dominican American (DA) children in New York City (NYC). As noted above, MAs are the largest Latino group in the US, and though they have not historically resided in the Northeast, MAs are poised to become the largest subgroup in NYC by 2021 (Bergad, 2011). The Dominican population has long represented one of the largest subgroups in NYC, where 1 in 5 Latinos is DA. As a well-established group in the area, DAs are more likely to live in ethnic enclaves, to have citizenship status and to speak English, whereas MAs in NYC are more likely to be living in diverse (non-Mexican) communities, to be undocumented and to have limited English skills (Yoshikawa, 2011). These social and historical characteristics define a unique context for children, allowing us to address the extent to which past findings are generalizable to two distinct Latino samples.

The Present Study

Ethnic identity in Latino adolescents has garnered attention for its protective effects on academic, mental health and substance use outcomes (e.g., Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Developmental scientists argue that adolescent outcomes are a function of "early ecological and child factors [that] set in motion a chain of events that unfold, grow and magnify over time into serious problem behavior in adolescence" (Malone & Lansford, 2010, p. 5). From this perspective, the study of early childhood, as a critical juncture in development, allows for the identification of risk and protective factors that are expected to have long-term impact. Early childhood may mark an especially important developmental period for children from immigrant families, as they are confronted with the salience and meaning of their social identities during the transition to school where they first come into regular contact with mainstream culture (García Coll & Marks, 2009). Surprisingly, though, no studies have been conducted on the ethnic identity of young Latino children since the pioneering research of Bernal and colleagues more than two decades ago (1990, 1993). The need for early childhood studies is further underscored by demographic data showing that among DAs and MAs, 29% and 36% respectively are under the age of 17, and approximately 1 in 10 is under the age of 5 (Brown & Patten, 2013a, 2013b).

To address this notable gap in the literature, the present study aimed to: 1) describe ethnic identity in young MA and DA children, and 2) explore its association with child functioning at home and school, the two settings in which young children spend most of their time but that may be culturally incongruent (García Coll & Marks, 2009). For our first aim, we hypothesized that young MA and DA children would show an emerging ethnic identity, conceptualized as self-identification, constancy, knowledge and preferences. We examined all components of ethnic identity, even those that may be expected to emerge at older ages, for several reasons: 1) the only evidence regarding expected ages comes from the original studies by Bernal et al. (1990, 1993) and has never been replicated, 2) a number of past studies on gender and racial identity have found young children to be capable of understanding social identity at earlier ages than initially proposed (e.g., Ruble et al., 2004; Rutland et al., 2005) and, 3) a given ethnic identity component may be associated with child functioning, even if it is not universally observed in the population. For our second aim (to examine ethnic identity in relation to child functioning), we hypothesized that ethnic identity would be protective for children, and we explored moderation by child gender and ethnicity. Based on adolescent studies, we expected more positive associations for boys than for girls (Kulis et al., 2012), but in the absence of past studies on ethnic group differences, we made no specific hypotheses regarding moderation by ethnicity.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a longitudinal study to examine the early childhood development of Mexican American (MA) and Dominican American (DA) children. Mothers who self-identified as MA or DA and had a child in pre-kindergarten (pre-k) or kindergarten in one of 24 public elementary schools in NYC that served as recruitment sites were eligible to participate. This study included three cohorts recruited yearly between 2010–2013. The sample consisted of 674 (n = 375 MA; n = 299 DA) families, representing 74% percent of eligible participants (i.e., 86% of MA and 63% of DA participants who were approached accepted to participate in the study). Children were on average 58 months (SD = 6.92) and were evenly distributed across gender (48% boys) and grade (48% in pre-k). Ninety-two percent of children were born in the US, whereas 92% of mothers were foreign-born, with an average length of residence in the US of 11 years. Seventy percent of families were living in poverty, according to the federal poverty guidelines.

Demographic characteristics, shown in Table 1, differed between ethnic groups. Compared to DA mothers, MA mothers were younger, more likely to be poor, less likely to have graduated from high school, and less likely to be working for pay. MA children were more likely to live in a two-parent home and in a Spanish-speaking home environment. Across groups, virtually all (99% MA; 95% DA) children from two-parent homes had a Latino father. There were no child gender differences in demographic characteristics.

Measures

Demographic Characteristics—Mothers provided information about their family's demographic characteristics including age (mother and child), country of birth (mother and

child), educational and occupational status, marital status, household income, length of residence in the US, and language used in the home.

Ethnic Identity—The *Early Childhood Ethnic Identity Interview* (ECEII) was developed for the present study based on the ethnic identity research of Bernal and colleagues (Bernal et al., 1990) and the gender identity research of Ruble and colleagues (Ruble et al., 2007). The interview consisted of open- and close-ended questions that were administered by bilingual research assistants in either English or Spanish, depending on the child's dominant language. Items were originally developed in English and then translated and back-translated by a pair of bilingual research assistants; discrepancies were resolved by the second author (the principal investigator), who is also bilingual. The interview started by asking children to indicate in which language they preferred to be interviewed (though the interviewer was free to change between Spanish and English, as indicated by the ongoing responses of the child). Then several practice items were administered, including "Are you a girl or a boy?" and "Are you in pre-kindergarten or in 8th grade?" Subsequent items were designed to assess several components of ethnic identity, as per the social identity developmental model, and scoring decisions were based on past gold standard social identity measures, as described fully in the appendix.

Ethnic self-identification and constancy[1]: Children were first asked a self-identification question, "Are you a Mexican/Dominican boy or a Chinese boy/girl?" We chose Chinese boys/girls as the comparison group because it seemed highly unlikely that a child would be of mixed MA/DA *and* Chinese heritage. Self-identification was scored dichotomously, depending on whether the child correctly identified his/her ethnicity (1) or not (0) in response to this question. Children were then asked a question tapping into ethnic constancy (and specifically, stability), "When you grow up, will you be a Mexican/Dominican man/woman or a Chinese man/woman?" An ethnic constancy scale was created based on these two items and children were received a score of 1 *only* if they answered *both* questions correctly (otherwise, children received a score of 0). Although the first item measured self-identification and not constancy, per se, we included it based on the theoretical premise that self-identification precedes and is a requirement of ethnic constancy. Thus, by including the self-identification item, our measure became more stringent and better aligned with our theoretical model.

Next, a series of open-ended questions were asked to assess ethnic knowledge and preference. All responses were recorded verbatim and later coded by three bilingual researchers (the principal investigator and two trained research assistants). The percent agreement across questions was 97%. The few inconsistencies that emerged were discussed until the coders reached consensus.

Ethnic knowledge: To measure ethnic knowledge, children were asked, "What makes you Mexican/Dominican?" and "What does it mean to be Mexican/Dominican?" Responses were coded as: a) lack of knowledge ("Doing homework"; "Playing with my brother") or; b)

[1]We originally used six forced-choice questions to assess ethnic constancy, as described in the appendix. The scale was revised, however, because of low internal consistency between items. The revised, final scale was based on Bernal et al. (1990).

knowledge of culturally driven behaviors ("I eat chile, chicken, mole and frijoles"; "Because I speak Spanish in my house"). As per Bernal et al. (1990), if a response was coded as both *a/lack of knowledge* and *b/knowledge* (e.g., "I speak Spanish and I like playing with my brother."), children were credited with having knowledge *unless* the response coded as *a* spoiled the other response (e.g., "We call my grandmother in Mexico and I speak Chinese."). Also consistent with Bernal et al., children received a score of 1 if their response indicated knowledge on *any* item, and a 0 if their response indicated a lack of knowledge across items.

Ethnic preferences: To measure ethnic preferences, children selected the child they would like to play with from a series of 4 illustrations of children (matched on gender) with varying shades of skin color and other phenotypic characteristics (i.e., hair type/texture) representing a white, Mexican (light brown/indigenous skin tone), Dominican (medium brown skin tone), and black (dark black skin tone) child. After making their selection, children were asked, "Why did you pick that child?" and their responses were coded to determine the basis for their preference. We used Aboud's (1977) coding scheme for ethnic differences and similarities, with an additional two categories (*h, i*) to reflect responses received in the present study. Codes included a) simple reiteration (e.g., "He's the same as/ different than me"); b) affective (e.g., "He's nice"); c) possessions (e.g., "I have a shirt like him"); d) physical appearance (e.g., "She has brown hair"); e) behavioral (e.g., "She plays with dolls"); f) ethnicity or country of origin (e.g., "He's Dominican like me"; "She is from Mexico"); g) language (e.g., "She speaks Spanish"; "He talks like me"); h) age/gender (e.g., "We're both 6"; "He's a boy and I'm a girl"); and i) other commonalities/differences (e.g., "We both like pink"; "We're in different classes"). Open-ended responses were scored 1 if they included a reference to either ethnicity/country of origin or language, and 0 if they were coded otherwise. To reduce the confound between race and ethnicity, preference based on physical appearance (*d*) was not coded as ethnic preference. The final score considered both the forced choice and open-ended item. That is, children were scored as showing an ethnic preference (1) if they selected an ethnically-matched playmate and/or explained their selection based on ethnic characteristics. In giving credit to either item, we sought to ensure that a child who was racially different than the MA/DA child presented in the picture (e.g., a white Dominican) was not penalized for selecting a white playmate who he/she in fact considered a member of his/her ethnic group (as indicated by his/her open-ended response).

Child Functioning—The *Behavior Assessment System for Children-2* (BASC-2; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2004) is a widely–used standardized measure of childhood externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity), internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatization), and adaptive behaviors (e.g., adaptability, social skills, functional communication). The BASC-2 has both a parent report form (PRS) and a teacher report form (TRS) and is available in Spanish as well as English. The Spanish form demonstrated adequate psychometric properties with the subsample of 311 Latino children and adolescents (82 preschoolers) who participated in the standardization study of the BASC-2. In the present study sample, internal consistency across different cohort is high, ranged from .79 – .94. Past studies of the BASC also suggest that its factors are cross-culturally robust (Brewis & Piñeda, 2001).

Intelligence—The *Wechsler Nonverbal Scale of Ability* (WNV; Wechsler, 2006) is a standardized measure of children's intelligence that was designed to minimize verbal requirements and thus reduce bias for children from diverse linguistic, cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We selected the WNV because our sample was comprised of many English language learners, and the WNV is minimally influenced by limited English language skills. We used the shortened version of the WNV, which includes the Recognition and Matrix subscales and yields a Full Scale IQ score with a mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15. In the present study, children scored 95.75 (*SD* = 26.38) on average.

Procedures

Recruitment took place in 24 New York City public schools that had pre-k and kindergarten classrooms serving MA or DA children. Families were recruited at the beginning of the school year, when bilingual research staff were present at school events and daily drop-off and pick-up to inform parents of the study. Parents who enrolled (74% of eligible participants) were asked to consent to a parent interview, child assessments and teacher ratings of family and child functioning. Parents participated in an in-person interview in their language of choice (i.e., Spanish or English; 92% chose to be interviewed in Spanish). Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and included measures of parenting, cultural values, acculturative status, and child functioning. Child testing was conducted at the school, in the child's dominant language (as reported by the mother; 49% were tested in Spanish) and included measures of intelligence, language, school readiness, and ethnic identity. Teachers of study children were asked to complete an assessment packet that included measures of child functioning; 94% of teachers agreed to participate. Only measures of child functioning were included in the present study. For more details of the larger study, please refer to Calzada, Huang, Anicama, Fernandez, & Brotman (2012). There were no significant differences on any study variables between children with and without teacher data. As an incentive to participate, teachers were offered help in the classroom (e.g., preparing materials for bulletin boards or classroom activities) by research staff. Children received a book and stickers, and mothers were paid $35, for their participation. All data used in the present study came from the first timepoint (i.e., in the fall of pre-k or kindergarten) in this longitudinal study.

Analytic Approach

To describe the ethnic identity of children, we examined descriptive statistics using *t*-test and chi-square analyses. We examined each ethnic identity component (self-identification, constancy, knowledge and preference) separately by grade, gender and ethnicity. To study the association between ethnic identity and child functioning, we first examined the main effects of ethnic identity on each child functioning outcome using linear regression models. The models controlled for three demographic factors that were associated with our outcomes and/or predictors: family living in poverty, mother's education level and single parent home. To understand whether associations differed by child gender and ethnicity, we then added moderator (gender or ethnicity) and moderator-by-ethnic identity variables to the regression models.

Because some of our child functioning outcome measures were based on teacher ratings, and some teachers rated multiple children, we investigated clustering effects. In our study sample, the average number of students rated by each teacher was 1.79 (*SD* =1.18). We calculated design effects [1 + (average group size −1) × intraclass correlation coefficient] and followed guidelines suggested by Muthén and Satorra (1995) to determine whether traditional statistical techniques (that assume observations to be independent) could be employed without concern for bias from the clustered nature of the sampling design. The design effects for our teacher rated variables were all less than 2.0, suggesting that traditional regression techniques could be used.

Results

Ethnic Identity Development during Early Childhood

Descriptive results are presented in Table 2. The majority of the sample (75%) was able to self-identify; about half of the children showed understanding of ethnic constancy; about 20% showed ethnic knowledge; and 27% expressed ethnic preference. Consistent with developmental theory, most components of ethnic identity were more likely to be seen in kindergarten, relative to pre-k, children. Relative to DA children, significantly more MA children showed understanding of ethnic constancy and expressed an ethnic preference.

After examining descriptive statistics for the measure, we examined correlations between the ethnic identity scales and IQ scores to rule out the possibility that ethnic identity scores were confounded with children's intelligence. No significant associations were found with ethnic self-identification, constancy, knowledge, or preference (r_s = .00 to .05).

Ethnic Identity and Child Functioning

Tables 3 and 4 show the main and moderated effects of ethnic identity on child functioning at home and school, respectively. In examining child functioning at home (Table 3), we found two significant main effects in which ethnic constancy and knowledge were associated with better adaptive behavior; neither gender nor ethnicity moderated these effects. No main or moderated effects were found for externalizing or internalizing behavior at home. In examining child functioning at school (Table 4), ethnic constancy and knowledge each had a significant, positive main effect on adaptive behavior. In addition, ethnic constancy was significantly and negatively related to both externalizing and internalizing behavior. No moderated effects were found for child functioning at school.

Discussion

The study of ethnic identity among Latino and other ethnic minority youth holds great promise for identifying and building sources of resilience in populations highly vulnerable to mental health and academic problems. While the protective effects of ethnic identity have been well established in adolescent samples, however, little is known about how ethnic identity forms during the early stages of development and whether it influences early developmental pathways. The present study with pre-k and kindergarten Latino children addresses this gap in the literature by examining ethnic identity formation and its association

with children's adaptive and mental health functioning. Results provide evidence suggestive of the importance of ethnic identity in MA and DA children as young as four years old.

The Development of Ethnic Identity in Early Childhood

Our model of early ethnic identity borrowed closely from the social identity developmental literature (e.g., Ruble et al., 2004) and the ethnic identity developmental model (Bernal et al., 1990) in emphasizing self-identification, ethnic constancy, knowledge, and preference. Although ethnic identity—across its components—had not emerged universally among children in the present study, we found clear evidence of its manifestation in early childhood. Using a newly-developed, theoretically-informed interview, findings showed that most (75%) young Latino children were able to self-identify based on their ethnicity (i.e., country of origin) and that about half understood ethnic constancy (i.e., that ethnicity does not change over time). Approximately one-quarter of children had accurate knowledge of what their ethnicity means and viewed ethnicity as an important factor in selecting a playmate. These descriptive results, along with significant mean-level differences between pre-k and kindergarten children, are consistent with the developmental sequencing found by Bernal, Knight, and Ocampo (1990; 1993) in suggesting that self-identification and constancy are the first ethnic identity components to emerge, and that other components (e.g. knowledge, preferences) crystalize later over the developmental course.

Previous research, albeit limited, has been inconclusive in establishing the age at which children understand ethnicity. In the work of Bernal and colleagues (1990), the only other study of which we are aware with Latino children as young as 4 years old, the initial stages of ethnic identity (i.e., self-identification and constancy) were not widely evident until school-age (i.e., 6 – 10 years); in contrast, our results suggest that ethnic identity development begins to unfold much earlier. Inconsistencies across the studies may be due to the unique context of the respective study samples; the work of Bernal and colleagues was in the 1990s with MA children living in a traditional receiving state for a prominent (though still marginalized) MA population, whereas the present research, twenty years later, was with MA and DA children living in a highly diverse city. It may be that the historical (e.g., an increasingly politicized national debate on immigration) and cultural (e.g., a large, visible and highly diverse—racially, ethnically and linguistically—immigrant population in NYC) context prompted the emergence of ethnic identity earlier than might be seen in a more insular or homogenous community.

We also consider how the racial characteristics of the present study sample may have played a role in study findings. In the absence of data on children's race, we are not able to parse out the effects of being MA or DA from those of being a child "of color" (i.e., mestizo, indigenous, mulatto, black), but the relatively early age at which we found evidence for emerging ethnic identity is consistent with past findings on racial identity in African American children (Akiba, Szalacha, & García Coll, 2004). Conceptually, ethnic identity is distinct from racial identity in that it is informed by abstract concepts such as language and traditions and is expected to develop later than racial identity, which is informed by concrete physical characteristics such as skin color (Quintana, 1998). However, it may be that for non-white Latinos, racial and ethnic identity formations are interdependent developmental

processes that are both well underway by age 4. While the present study focused on ethnic identity, which is believed to be more salient for Latinos than identity based on race (Quintana, 2007; Smith, 1991), little is known about how MA and DA children understand their race and whether children's phenotypic characteristics facilitate (or hinder) the process of ethnic identity formation. It seems likely that a child's racial background serves as one of a wide array of factors that influence the development of ethnic identity, leading to variability in the age at which a particular child embarks on this developmental task.

Other critical factors that shape identify formation are likely to include characteristics of the home and community settings, especially those relevant to children's socialization experiences (Bernal et al., 1990; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001). For example, dramatic shifts in migration patterns over the past two decades have resulted in rapidly growing settlement communities in states that have not traditionally been home to Latino populations (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). These communities vary along a number of characteristics that may shape children's emerging ethnic identity, including the ethnicity of neighbors, the extent to which the home language is spoken by community members, and the availability of foods and other products from the family's country of origin. Past studies suggest that the salience of ethnicity differs according to the community context, in that ethnic identity is higher among adolescents who are the numerical minority relative to those who are the majority within their communities (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2007). Indeed, in the present study, ethnic identity was higher among MA children who are part of a new immigrant population in NYC, relative to DA children who are part of a well-established, multi-generational and enclaved immigrant population in the city.

Within the home, the messages children receive regarding their ethnicity inform their understanding of ethnic-specific beliefs, traditions and behaviors and give rise to ethnic pride. A rich literature underscores the importance of parenting, and ethnic/racial socialization in particular (Hughes et al., 2006), in the identity formation of youth, but these associations have not been examined in families of young Latino children. Given the present study findings on the potentially protective role of ethnic identity, future studies on its predictors would have clear implications for promoting successful development beginning in early childhood in the Latino population.

Ethnic Identity as a Protective Factor

In our early childhood sample, ethnic constancy and knowledge were associated with better adaptive behavior at home and school, and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems at school. In school, ethnic identity may have been especially protective as children encountered values, traditions and expectations that were unfamiliar and incongruent with those from their home environments. That is, children who felt more secure in their understanding of their ethnicity and especially in its permanence may have been more self-confident and less susceptible to the potential stress of negotiating cultural differences between home and school (García Coll & Marks, 2009). The mechanisms through which ethnic identity influences child functioning were not tested in the present study, but past studies with adolescents suggest that a strong identity is associated with better self-esteem (Brody et al., 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003), which in turn bolsters positive mental health

outcomes. Understanding the process by which ethnic identity promotes positive outcomes is an important goal of future research with young children (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012).

Importantly, the associations between ethnic identity and child functioning were robust across gender and ethnic groups, suggesting that subgroup differences observed in adolescence (at least in terms of child gender; ethnic group differences have not been tested) develop over time as children are socialized along gender lines. For example, socialization of boys often centers around preparing for discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006), and although studies with African American children show that preparation for discrimination begins in early childhood (Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004), it may be that in newly immigrated Latino families, these gender-specific messages are more infrequent until mothers become more aware of societal prejudices or until children are older and/or have interactions with mainstream society that prompt such discussions.

While the associations between ethnic identity and functioning were similar across groups, we did find evidence of mean-level group differences in ethnic identity. Ethnic constancy and preference was higher among MA children. To the extent that the components of ethnic identity are shaped by social context (Berry, 2004), ethnic group differences may be expected. For example, preferences among young children may be determined by the ethnicity of family friends, and as a less acculturated group, MA families in our sample may have had a more ethnically homogeneous social network. In contrast, DA children in the present study had mothers who were more acculturated, more likely to speak English, more educated, more likely to be working outside the home, and less poor than in MA families. As a result, DA mothers were likely to have more contact with mainstream culture, thereby advancing their young children's acculturation and a US American, rather than a Dominican identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings from the present study should be interpreted with consideration for several limitations. First, additional studies on early ethnic identity are needed to more firmly establish the age and developmental sequencing of each component. Scholars have speculated that the age at which children demonstrate the various components of social identity (e.g., constancy) may vary depending on the measure; for example, studies on gender identity have found that children are more likely to show understanding of constancy when asked forced-choice questions (as in the present study; Ruble et al., 2007). Also, it is important to note the relatively limited variance in child functioning that was explained by ethnic identity, and although small effects early in development have the potential to significantly alter developmental trajectories (Malone & Lansford, 2010), our findings suggest that it is but one of numerous individual and ecological factors that shape children's development. In addition, given our use of cross-sectional data, causality cannot be inferred and it is not known whether ethnic identity has a meaningful long-term effect on early childhood development. Longitudinal data that includes school-aged children is needed to examine ethnic identity over time and what may be dynamic patterns of influence on child well-being. Finally, as noted above, the present study was limited in focus, and did not

examine predictive (e.g., ethnic socialization) or mediating (e.g., self-esteem) variables that would more broadly inform developmental models of resilience.

Nonetheless, our research provides support in favor of the relevance and importance of ethnic identity in the early childhood development of Latino children, and contributes to the literature on measurement of ethnic identity before adolescence. Our study design allowed for a test of differences within the heterogeneous Latino population and findings were robust across two large subgroups. Findings were also robust across gender, suggesting that gender differences in ethnic identity emerge later, as a result of socialization over time. Perhaps most importantly, the present study contributes to the literature on youth resilience by showing the potential advantages of promoting the development of ethnic identity in young, Latino children as a means of mitigating the risks associated with living as a minority population in the US.

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Appendix

Model and Measurement of Ethnic Identity Development in Early Childhood

Component	Definition	Age range at which component emerges	Gold-standard measure[a]	Early Childhood Ethnic Identity Interview
Self-Identification	A child's ability to accurately label his/her social (gender, racial, ethnic) identity	Gender self-identification 2–3 years Ethnic self-identification 7–10 years †† 3–5 years	Gender self-identification *Forced choice question*: Are you a boy or a girl? Ethnic Self-Identification *Sorting of photo into proper ethnic category*	*Forced choice question:* Are you a (MA/DA) (boy/girl) or a Chinese (boy/girl)?
Constancy 1. Stability	The understanding that social (gender, racial, ethnic) identity is stable across time	Gender stability 3–5 years Ethnic stability 7–10 years †† 3–5 years	Gender Stability *Forced choice questions*: When you were a little baby, were you a little girl or a little boy?; When you grow up, will you be a mommy or a daddy?; When you grow up, will you be a man or a woman?	*Forced choice questions:* When you grow up, will you be a (MA/DA) (man/woman) or a

Component	Definition	Age range at which component emerges	Gold-standard measure[a]	Early Childhood Ethnic Identity Interview
			Ethnic Stability *Forced choice questions*: Will you still be MA when you grow up? [b]	Chinese (man/ woman)? *Credit given if child responded this and the self-identification correctly.
2. Consistency	The understanding that social (gender, racial, ethnic) identity is consistent across situations.	Gender consistency 3–7 years Ethnic consistency 8–10 years †† 7 years	Gender Consistency *Forced choice questions*: If you went into the other room and put on clothes like these [show opposite-sex clothes], would you then really be a girl or really be a boy?; If you played [opposite sex of subject] games, would you be a girl or a boy?; When you grow up, if you do the work that [opposite-sex adults] do, would you then really be a man or really be a woman?; Could you be a [opposite sex of subject] if you wanted to be? Ethnic/racial consistency: *Forced choice questions*: If you went on holiday to a really hot place and got a suntan and your skin turned dark, which of these children would you *really* be like? [Sort photo into proper ethnic category (e.g., MA)]	*Forced choice questions*: If you put makeup on your eyes and wear a wig so you look like a Chinese person, would you really be Chinese or really be (*MA/DA*)?; If you spoke Chinese, would you really be Chinese or really be (*MA/DA*)?; If you really wanted to be Chinese, could you be? *Items dropped from scale due to low internal consistency.
Knowledge	Awareness that certain behaviors, values, customs, etc. are relevant to one's social (gender, racial, ethnic) identity	Gender knowledge 2–3 years Ethnic knowledge 3–6 years	Gender knowledge *Forced choice questions*: Who usually wears nail polish, boys or girls?; Who usually wears barrettes, boys or girls?; Who usually plays with dolls/trucks, boys or girls? Ethnic knowledge *Yes/no questions:* Do MAs…eat frijoles or beans at home?; Go to Mexico to visit their family?; Have a piñata at their birthday party or at Christmas?; Talk with their elbows?; Pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe?	*Open-ended question:* What makes you (MA/DA)?; What does it mean to be (MA/DA)? *Credit given if open-ended response reflected culturally-driven behaviors
Preference	Feelings and preferences about being a member of one's social (gender, racial, ethnic) identity group	Gender Preference 3–4 years Ethnic Preference Not measured in early childhood by Bernal et al. †† 3–4 years	Gender Preference *Child asked to rate how much they like pictures of boys and girls.* Ethnic Preference *Forced choice questions*: [After viewing drawings/pictures/ dolls of a white, Hispanic, and black child] "Which one would you like to be?"	*Open-ended questions:* [After selecting a preferred playmate from a series of four (DA, MA, white and black) drawn images of children] Why did you pick that child? *Credit given if response reflected preference based on playmate's ethnicity

[a] Based on the work of Ruble et al (2004; 2007); Bernal et al., (1990); Knight, Bernal, et al., (1993).

†† Expected age suggested by the racial identity literature.

[b] Bernal et al., (1990) labeled this single-item question *ethnic constancy* in their study with children aged between 3–6 years.

Highlights

- The present study describes ethnic identity in young Mexican-American and Dominican-American children.
- The study explores the association between children's ethnic identity and their functioning at home and school.
- Ethnic identity is associated with better adaptive behavior and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics by Child Gender and Ethnicity

	Full Sample	Boys	Girls		MA	DA	
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*t*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*t*
Child's age (months)	58.78 (6.91)	58.95 (6.95)	58.61 (6.87)	0.64	58.67 (6.98)	58.91 (7.90)	−0.43
Mother's age	31.93 (6.35)	32.01 (6.35)	31.86 (6.37)	0.28	31.00 (5.77)	33.11 (6.85)	−4.28***
Years in US (mother)[a]	11.74 (6.22)	11.34 (6.07)	12.11 (6.35)	−1.48	11.23 (4.83)	12.54 (6.82)	−2.22*
Adaptive Behavior (Home)	49.14 (9.65)	48.15 (9.85)	50.04 (9.39)	−2.52**	46.83 (9.33)	52.04 (9.27)	−7.16***
Externalizing Problems (Home)	48.17 (9.61)	48.94 (10.32)	47.47 (8.86)	1.96*	47.41 (8.75)	49.14 (10.43)	−2.26*
Internalizing Problems (Home)	52.65 (10.73)	52.60 (10.99)	52.69 (10.50)	−0.11	52.28(10.66)	53.11 (10.82)	−0.98
Adaptive Behavior (School)	45.95 (9.35)	44.76 (8.87)	47.10 (9.65)	−3.12**	45.01 (9.11)	47.15 (9.52)	−2.82**
Externalizing Problems (School)	46.96 (8.15)	48.14 (9.21)	45.84 (6.82)	3.52***	45.75 (7.35)	48.52 (8.85)	−4.17***
Internalizing Problems (School)	46.49 (8.44)	46.73 (8.52)	46.27 (8.37)	0.67	45.69 (7.81)	47.56 (9.11)	−2.72**
	%	%	%	χ^2	%	%	χ^2
Child gender (male)	48.1	-	-	-	47.7	48.5	0.03
Family living in poverty	70.1	71.3	69	0.40	83.8	54	65.15***
Single parent home	24.2	23.6	24.9	0.14	12.7	38.6	59.90***
Mother's education < HS	27.4	28.1	26.9	0.17	43.5	7.4	59.90***
Mother works for pay	45.2	45.5	45.1	0.01	29	65.4	87.31***
Spanish only spoken at home	70.1	70.6	69.6	1.89	86.5	50.2	104.56***
Child assessed in Spanish	48.9	49.7	48.3	0.13	56.1	40	16.97***

Note. Child functioning based on the Behavior Assessment System for Children-2 Parent and Teacher Rating Scale. All values represent T scores. HS = high school.

[a]For foreign-born mothers (*n* = 576; 92 %).

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Ethnic Identity by Grade, Gender and Ethnicity

	Full	**Pre-K**	**K**		**Boys**	**Girls**		**MA**	**DA**	
	%	**%**	**%**	**χ^2**	**%**	**%**	**χ^2**	**%**	**%**	**χ^2**
Self-Identification	74.6	66.8	81.6	18.19^{***}	75	74.3	0.03	75.9	73.1	0.61
Constancy	56.8	46.8	65.4	21.45^{***}	56	57.5	0.13	63.4	52.7	5.56^{**}
Knowledge	21.8	12.7	30.2	29.44^{***}	19.1	24.3	2.55	23.5	19.7	1.43
Preference	26.6	25.3	27.8	0.51	28.2	25.1	0.79	34.2	17.5	22.88^{***}

Note.

$^{*}p < .05$.

$^{**}p < .01$.

$^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3

Ethnic Identity as a Predictor of Latino Child Functioning at Home, Moderated by Gender and Ethnicity

	Adaptive Behavior	Externalizing Behavior	Internalizing Behavior
	B (SE)	***B(SE)***	***B(SE)***
Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	3.04 (1.17)**	−0.79 (0.74)	0.76 (0.96)
Knowledge	2.58 (1.35)*	−0.71 (0.85)	0.18 (1.11)
Preference	−0.41 (1.31)	0.31 (0.82)	0.09 (1.07)
	F = 9.32; R^2 = .11***	F = 1.23; R^2 =.02	F =0.64; R^2 =.01
Gender * Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	−1.08 (2.32)	1.41 (1.47)	0.04 (1.91)
Knowledge	3.56 (2.72)	−1.94 (1.72)	−1.80 (2.24)
Preference	−3.25 (2.59)	−1.40 (1.64)	−2.72 (2.13)
	F = 6.67***; ΔR^2 = .01	F = 1.30; ΔR^2 =.01	F =0.65; ΔR^2 =.01
Ethnicity * Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	3.68 (2.37)	1.12 (1.49)	1.89 (1.93)
Knowledge	0.62 (2.74)	1.32 (1.72)	1.49 (2.23)
Preference	−0.01 (2.83)	2.17 (1.78)	2.34 (2.31)
	F = 6.84***; ΔR^2 = .02**	F = 1.19; ΔR^2 =.01	F =0.71; ΔR^2 =.01

Note. Child functioning based on the Behavior Assessment System for Children-2 Parent Rating Scale. Degrees of freedom for Step 1 F statistic is (3, 539), for Step 2 is (4, 538), for Step 3 is (7, 535), and for Step 4 is (11, 531).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Ethnic Identity as a Predictor of Latino Child Functioning at School, Moderated by Gender and Ethnicity

	Adaptive Behavior	Externalizing Behavior	Internalizing Behavior
	B (SE)	***B(SE)***	***B(SE)***
Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	2.12 (1.02)*	−2.11 (0.74)**	−1.66 (0.70)*
Knowledge	2.68 (1.20)*	0.57 (0.85)	1.53 (0.82)
Preference	0.08 (1.15)	0.18 (0.82)	−0.23 (0.79)
	F = 3.04; R^2 = .04**	F = 4.99; R^2 =.06***	F =2.58; R^2 =.04*
Gender * Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	−0.14 (2.03)	0.45 (1.45)	1.02 (1.40)
Knowledge	1.83 (2.41)	−1.28 (1.70)	0.48 (1.65)
Preference	−2.24 (2.28)	−1.64 (1.62)	−2.46 (1.57)
	F = 2.64**; ΔR^2 = .01	F = 4.81***; ΔR^2 =.03**	F =2.03*; ΔR^2 =.01
Ethnicity * Ethnic Identity			
Constancy	2.91 (2.04)	−0.51 (1.45)	0.07 (1.41)
Knowledge	−2.19 (2.37)	−0.68 (1.67)	−1.58 (1.64)
Preference	−0.71 (2.47)	−0.88 (1.75)	−1.77 (1.69)
	F = 2.75**; ΔR^2 = .01	F = 4.06***; ΔR^2 =.01	F =1.61; ΔR^2 =.01

Note. Child functioning based on the Behavior Assessment System for Children-2 Teacher Rating Scale. Degrees of freedom for Step 1 F statistic is (3, 541), for Step 2, is (4, 540), for Step 3 is (7, 537), and for Step 4 is (11, 533).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.