How School Diversity, Peer-Relations, and Ethnic Identity Shape Ethnocultural Empathy Among Latino and Asian American Students

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Abstract

As a result of the shifts in the ethnic composition of the U.S., public schools are becoming more culturally diverse, making culture-related issues more salient (Santos et al. 2007). The current study examined ethnic differences in school diversity (diversity), proportion of cross-race friendships (peer-relations), ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy (empathy) among a sample of 97 college students (77 Asian/Pacific Islanders and 20 Latinos). Additionally, diversity, peer-relations, and ethnic identity were examined in relation to empathy. Results indicated that there were ethnic differences among each study variable except for peer-relations. Also, ethnic identity was positively associated with empathy. Considering that the Asian American and Latino populations are the two fastest growing ethnic groups in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), the current findings are important for shedding light on ways to possibly increase positive attitudes towards members of different ethnic groups among incoming college students.

With the United States population becoming increasingly ethnically and racially diverse, culture, race, and ethnicity have become more salient in the lives of ethnic minority and white American individuals alike. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) estimates show that ethnic minority group members are projected to make up about half of the U.S. population by 2050. As a result of the growing ethnic minority population and its implications for public schools, interests in examining the positive shifts of culture-related factors among ethnic minority students has become more important (Chang and Le 2010; Santos et al. 2007). Accordingly, many more researchers have begun examining social context variables, such as school diversity and residential segregation, in relation to the psychological and social experiences of people, especially ethnic minority group members. For instance, Chang and Le (2010) found that attending a multicultural school predicted more favorable perceptions of teachers promoting racial harmony, opportunities to learn about diverse cultures by incorporating multiculturalism into the academic curriculum, and ethnocultural empathy. They also found that ethnocultural empathy, defined as empathetic feelings towards members of ethnic groups different from their own (Wang et al. 2003), positively mediated the relationship between multiculturalism and academic

achievement for Asian American and Hispanic American students (Chang and Le 2010). Studies have also shown that attending a diverse school provides students with many opportunities to form cross-racial friendships and discuss different perspectives and experiences regarding their social interactions and cultural upbringings (Graham, Munniksma, and Juvonen 2013). The exposure to and formation of friendships between members of different ethnic groups can be related to individuals' psychological processes, including their social identities (e.g., ethnic identity).

  There is a large body of research examining the pivotal role of friendships in the development of elementary and adolescent students (Newcomb and Bagwell 1996; Parker et al. 1995; Sullivan 1953) and that classroom diversity can increase the likelihood of forming cross-ethnic relations (Khmelkov and Hallinan 1999). For example, past researchers have found that for students attending a diverse school campus, cross-ethnic friendships (but not same-ethnic friendships) were uniquely associated with positive outcomes. Some positive outcomes were increases in peer support; pro-social behavior; leadership skills; empathy; and awareness of and sensitivity to different races (Hunter and Elias 1999; Kawabata and Crick 2008; Kawabata and Crick 2011) as well as less prejudice and less stereotyping in the face of negative peer experiences (Aboud, Mendelson, and Purdy 2003; Killen 2007). Yet studies have not explained the underlying mechanisms of *how* these cultural factors change throughout this process. While studies support the association between social context, ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy, there appears to be gaps in the research literature examining how school diversity, friendships, and ethnic identity work together to potentially predict ethnocultural empathy. Accordingly, the present study will explore the relationships between school diversity, same-race and cross-race friendships, ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy among Latinos and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (AAPI).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Context

Within the last decade, the U.S. population has become more racially and ethnically diverse; the ethnic minority population has increased by 28.8%, while the white American population has increased by 1.2% respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). In addition, the Asian and Latino populations grew by 43.3% and 43%, respectively, accounting for the biggest increases among all ethnic groups between the years 2000 and 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). As a result of the growing ethnic minority population, school campuses are also becoming more culturally diverse, potentially making culture-related issues, such as ethnic identity and cross-ethnic relations more salient (Santos et al. 2007) than in previous

years. Building on this research, studies have found positive links between school diversification, acceptance and empathic feelings towards members of different ethnic groups, and academic achievement (Chang and Le 2010).

Since students spend most of their time inside a classroom for much of their early life, classroom diversity becomes an important situational factor in socializing students' social and cultural attitudes and beliefs. For example, studies have found that classroom diversity increased the likelihood of creating positive cross-ethnic relationships (Kawabata and Crick 2011; Khemlkov and Hallinan 1999). Although individuals, including children and adults, are more likely to form friendships with others who are similar to themselves along racial, social, and cultural, as well as individual factors (Aboud and Mendelson 1998; see for a review), there are many benefits that are exclusive to forming cross-ethnic friendships. For example, among ethnically diverse children, forming cross-ethnic friendships (but not same-ethnic friendships) was associated with being viewed as more popular and more well-liked among peers (Lease and Black 2005). Cross-race friendships also exclusively predicted positive associations with pro-social behavior and leadership skills, social skills, and an awareness of and sensitivity to ethnicities different than one's own (Hunter and Elias 1999; Kawabata and Crick 2008). Forming cross-race friendships produces more opportunities for individuals to discuss different beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from a different perspective than their own. Within these friendships, members from different ethnic groups are able to recognize similarities that they may have overlooked had they not formed these friendships. Rather than allowing each other's race or ethnicity to act as a psychological barrier to companionship, research shows that cross-race friendships allow individuals to form positive thoughts and feelings toward members of different ethnic and racial groups (Hunter and Elias 1999; Kawabata and Crick 2008). It appears that the newly established positive thoughts may ultimately be generalized to the entire ethnic group as a whole, leading to greater acceptance and harmony.

Social Context and Ethnic Identity
Ethnic identity refers to people's commitment or sense of belonging to their ethnic group and the extent to which they explore and seek experiences relevant to their ethnicity (Phinney and Ong 2007). Ethnic identity can play a central role in the development of ethnic minorities' psychological experiences (Phinney 1990). Ethnic identity is similar to other group identities in the sense that it is not hard-wired within an individual; rather it is dynamic and can fluctuate depending on one's experiences and environment (Phinney and Ong 2007). With school campuses becoming increasingly more ethnically diverse, students are likely to encounter a variety of people from different ethnic groups on a daily basis. The constant exposure of members from different ethnic groups is likely to shape their ethnic identities. For example, studies have found that students'

perceptions of a multicultural campus—operationally defined as a campus where students perceived cultural diversity to be valued by peers and teachers—were predictive of ethnic identification (Chang and Le 2010). Past research has also suggested that ethnic identity can be shaped by different social contexts, such as families, schools, peers, and neighborhood segregation (Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee 2008; Chang and Le 2010; Nishina et al. 2010; Yip 2009; Yip, Seaton, and Sellers 2010.)

Linville's (1987) social complexity theory has played a foundational role in the body of literature related to the association between social context and psychological processes. Specifically, he stated that one's self-representation is made up of multiple self-aspects, with each self-aspect being associated with its own specific set of cognitive elements, such as social roles, types of relationships, types of activities, and superordinate traits. With every event, the self-aspect most relevant to the immediate context becomes salient, thus producing thoughts and feelings associated with the corresponding self-aspect. More recently, researchers have built on Linville's early theoretical framework. For instance, current findings suggest that identity salience can influence ethnic identification depending on the social settings and interactions (Yip 2009; Yip et al. 2010). Specifically, Yip (2009) found that regardless of the strength of Chinese American students' ethnic identities, their ethnic identification shifted between Chinese and American depending on whether they were around their friends or family members. Building on past research, Yip et al. (2010) also found that for black students in racially diverse schools, having more black friends was associated with maintaining a stable ethnic identity. Conversely, black students who had minimal contact with other black students were more likely to report identity change. Also, black students in predominantly white schools were less likely to change their ethnic identity status if they had few white friends. It appears that both contact with in-group members and an environment rich with members of one's in-group serve as protective factors for maintaining a strong ethnic identity. Building on this research, Wright and Littleford (2002) found that positive interracial experiences fostered a stronger sense of belonging to individuals' ethnic groups. Collectively, these studies suggest a positive and strong ethnic identity is associated with greater psychological well-being (Phinney and Kohatsu 1997).

Ethnocultural Empathy

As noted above, shifts in the U.S.'s ethnic makeup have increased daily exposure and contact between members of different ethnic groups, especially those attending public schools. Since the U.S. population will continue to become more ethnically diverse, it is important that members from different ethnic groups learn to tolerate, understand, and accept each other's different cultural upbringings and traditions in order to promote harmonious and peaceful environments. Researchers have developed the term ethnocultural empathy,

which is synonymous to positive multicultural attitudes and cultural competence (Wang et al. 2003). While there have been additions to the psychological literature attempting to conceptualize the definition of ethnocultural empathy (Rasoal, Eklund, and Hansen 2011; Wang et al. 2003), there have been few studies examining correlates of ethnocultural empathy.

Although not directly investigating the relationship between context and ethnocultural empathy, limited research has shown that youth who are exposed to diverse social contexts are more accepting of different ethnic group members (Duncan et al. 2003). Building on this research, Nesdale et al. (2005) found that greater ethnocultural empathy was significantly related to greater liking for different out-groups. More recently, researchers have found that perceived school multiculturalism predicted ethnocultural empathy, which in turn was predictive of subjective happiness for African American and Asian American middle school students (Le, Lai, and Wallen 2009). While it appears that ethnocultural empathy serves as a pivotal underlying factor for promoting positive and harmonious social environments, there is still much to be learned regarding the development and outcomes of ethnocultural empathy.

The Present Study

Based on previous research findings, the researcher hypothesized that school diversity, the proportion of cross-race friendships, and ethnic identity would be positively related to ethnocultural empathy. Building on past research that examined the relationships between students' perceptions about school multiculturalism (Le, Lai, and Wallen 2009) and ethnocultural empathy, the researcher focused on school diversity by using demographic data obtained from participants' high school accountability reports. Additionally, since Asian Americans are typically socialized to be more interdependent than other ethnic groups (Okazaki 1997), it was hypothesized that the diversity of high schools, the percentage of cross-race friends, ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy would differ between Asian American/Pacific Islanders (AAPI) and Latinos.

Method

Participants

A sample of 101 participants (32 males, 69 females) who were engaged in community service-learning opportunities voluntarily participated in either an online or pencil-and-paper survey. All participants were undergraduate students at a large Northern California State University. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 36 years of age ($M = 19.07$, $SD = 2.84$), and most of them were first-year college students (75.4% 1st year; 4.3% 3rd year; 13.0% 4th year; 7.2% 5th year). The participants' races, which were determined by asking them to check one or more of

the predetermined options (Latino; Asian American/Pacific Islander), included 81 Asian and Pacific Islanders (80.2%) and 20 Latinos (19.8%).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through community service-learning programs from their respective university. At the beginning of the semester, students were asked to voluntarily participate in the research study. Participants completed questionnaires, either online or through pencil-and-paper surveys. It is important to note that students who participated in the online survey reported a significantly higher percentage of cross-race friends $F(1, 98) = 7.55, p < .001, \eta = .07$, and also attended significantly less diverse high schools $F(1, 99) = 13.37, p < .001, \eta = .12$, than did students who participated in the pen-and-paper surveys. Participants did not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

Measures

Ethnic Identity

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R) developed by Phinney and Ong (2007) was used to assess ethnic identity. The MEIM-R measured participants' sense of belonging and attachment to their group identity (e.g., "I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group") and the extent to which participants seek information and experiences relevant to their group identity (e.g., "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs"). Participants completed the subscales using response scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate stronger levels of ethnic identity ($M = 3.97, SD = .70, \alpha = .89$).

Cross-race friendships

Participants were asked to report the number of close friends they had from each of the following specific ethnic or racial groups: African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, White (non-Latino/a), Latino/Latina, Native Indian/Alaskan Native, Arab American, and Multiracial from zero to six or more. To control for friendship network size, a *proportion of cross-race friendships variable* was developed by dividing the number of cross-racial friendships by the total number of friendships they reported. Reflecting the diverse campus, 60% of the listed friends were rated as belonging to a different ethnic group, on average ($M = .60, SD = .22$).

High school diversity

Participants were asked to report each high school that they had attended, along with the number of years they had attended each school. All participants attended public California high schools. Most students had only attended one

high school throughout their high school career; if they attended more than one high school, the high school they attended for the longest duration was used. Student ethnic demographic data from the year that the students were in the 12th grade, which were available through the California Department of Education (CDE), were used to calculate high school diversity. Some ethnic groups were combined to better parallel the ethnic groups in the current study's demographic sheet. There is a notable difference between CDE data and the current study's demographic sheet: CDE treats Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos as three separate groups, whereas Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were categorized as one ethnic group in the current study. As a result, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos were identified as a composite Asian American ethnic group when calculating school diversity.

The ethnic diversity (D_s) of each of the schools was computed with Simpson's diversity index (1949):

$$D_s = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{g} p_i^2$$

where p is the proportion of students in the school who are in ethnic group i. The proportion is squared (p_i^2), summed across g groups, and then subtracted from 1. The measure gives the probability that any two students randomly selected from a school will be from different ethnic groups. Values can range from 0 to approximately 1 ($M = .36$; $SD = .17$; ranged from 0 to .94), where higher values indicate greater diversity (i.e., more ethnic groups that are relatively evenly represented and a higher probability that two randomly selected students will be from different ethnic groups).

Ethnocultural empathy

The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE) developed by Wang et al. (2003) was used to measure culturally-specific empathy ($M = .36$; $SD = .17$, $\alpha = .87$). Specifically, it measured empathic feelings and sensitivity toward members of ethnic groups different from one's own (e.g., "I seek opportunities to speak with individuals of other racial or ethnic backgrounds about their experiences"). The participants completed the subscales using response scales ranging from 1 *(strongly disagree that it describes me)* to 6 *(strongly agree that it describes me).* Several items were reverse coded, and all items were summed and then averaged across thirty-one items. Higher scores indicated higher levels of ethnocultural empathy, while lower scores were indicative of less empathic feelings and sensitivity towards members of ethnic groups different than one's own.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Results are organized in the following manner: preliminary and descriptive analyses are presented first, followed by hierarchical regression analysis. Preliminary analyses with demographic variables were conducted. The researcher used bivariate correlations to examine the associations among the study variables and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences by ethnicity.

Bivariate correlations

Correlations between high school diversity, proportion of cross-race friendships, ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy are displayed in Table 1. Interestingly, the correlations among the study variables were not statistically significant except for the positive relationship between ethnic identity and ethnocultural empathy. Specifically, higher levels of ethnic identity were correlated with higher levels of ethnocultural empathy.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	*2*	*3*	*4*
Diversity	-.13	.10	.06
Proportion cross-race friendships	—	-.17	-.03
Ethnic identity	—	—	.47**
Ethnocultural empathy	—	—	—

Note: ** p < .01

Several one-way between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to explore possible ethnic differences among all study variables. Descriptive statistics for all study variables, which are organized by ethnicity, are displayed in Table 2. The results indicated that the mean differences by ethnicity were statistically significant for each study variable except for the proportion of cross-race relationships, with the η^2 values ranging from .04 to .23. Specifically, findings showed that Latinos attended significantly more diverse schools than did Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) participants. Contrary to the researcher's expectations, there were no significant differences in the proportion of cross-race friendships; however, there was a trend, with AAPI participants having a higher proportion of cross-race friendships than Latinos (p = .08). Furthermore, Latino participants reported significantly higher levels of both ethnic identity and ethnocultural empathy than did AAPI participants.

Table 2. Ethnic Differences among Study Variables

Variable	Latino M (SD)	AAPI M (SD)	F ratio ($\eta2$)
High School Diversity	.52	.31	28.80*** (.23)
	(.24)	(.11)	
Proportion cross- race friends	.52	.62	3.25† (.03)
	(.24)	(.21)	
Ethnic identity	4.27	3.90	4.53* (.04)
	(.64)	(.70)	
Ethnocultural empathy	5.06	4.49	16.59*** (.14)
	(.62)	(.55)	

Note: *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001; † = .08

Predictive Analysis

A four-stage hierarchical linear regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses that school diversity, the proportion of cross-race friendships, and ethnic identity would be positively associated with ethnocultural empathy. In the first block, ethnicity was entered as a predictor variable to control for ethnic differences; in the second block, school diversity was entered as a predictor variable; in the third block, the proportion of cross-race friendships was entered into the model; in the fourth and final block, ethnic identity was entered as the primary variable of interest.

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis are shown in Table 3. The results of the first step of the hierarchical regression, with ethnicity entered into the model, indicated that there were significant ethnic differences among ethnocultural empathy, $F(1, 98) = 16.41$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .14$. Specifically, Latino participants reported higher levels of ethnocultural empathy than did AAPI participants; thus ethnicity was entered into the first block to control for ethnic differences. Although the second block, with school diversity entered into the model, was statistically significant because of the effects of ethnicity, $F(3, 96) = 9.37$, $p < .60$, $R^2 = .16$ it did not account for a significant amount of change in shared variance, F change $(1, 97) = 2.13$, $p > .05$ R^2 change $= .02$. When the proportion of cross-race friendships variable was added into the third block, the prediction model still statistically significant, $F(3, 96) = 6.26$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .16$ due to the strong ethnic difference. However, again, the third block did not account for a significant amount of change in shared variance over and above the previous blocks, F change $(1, 96) = .11$, , $p < .05$, R^2 change $= .00$. After controlling for ethnic differences, the results of hierarchical regression analysis suggested that neither

school diversity nor the proportion of cross-race friendships were predictive of ethnocultural empathy.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Results (N = 101)

Block	Variables	B	SE	β	R2	Δ R2
1	Ethnicity	.29	.07	.38***	.14	.14***
2	Ethnicity	.35	.08	.45***	.16	.02.
	Diversity	-.56	.39	-.16		
3	Ethnicity	.35	.08	.46***	.16	.00
	Diversity	-.56	.39	-.15		
	Cross-race friends	.09	.26	.03		
4	Ethnicity	.28	.08	.37***	.33	.16***
	Diversity	-.51	.35	-.14		
	Cross-race friends	.25	.24	.09		
	Ethnic identity	.37	.08	.42***		

Note: *p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001

Lastly, when ethnic identity was added into the fourth and final block, not only was the model statistically significant, $F(4, 95) = 11.52$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .33$, but ethnic identity accounted for a significant proportion of variance in ethnocultural empathy, over and above the previous three blocks, $F\ change\ (1, 95) = 23.10$, $p < .001$, $R^2\ change = .16$. Although school diversity and the proportion of cross-race friendships were not statistically significant in the model, ethnic identity was positively associated with ethnocultural empathy, even after controlling for statistically significant ethnic differences. With all other variables in the analysis statistically controlled, it appears that those who were more in touch with their ethnic identity also reported higher levels of ethnocultural empathy.

Discussion

In the present study, the researcher sought to test whether school diversity, the ethnic makeup of one's friends, and ethnic identity were positively related to ethnocultural empathy. It was hypothesized that there would be ethnic differences among each study variable and that school diversity, the proportion of cross-race friendships, and ethnic identity would be positively related to ethnocultural empathy. Collectively, the results provided partial support for the

hypotheses, with ethnic identity being positively associated with ethnocultural empathy across ethnic groups. It appears that having a stronger ethnic identity (i.e., greater sense of belonging and attachment to one's ethnic group) fosters more positive, sensitive, and empathic feelings towards members of ethnic groups different from one's own (Wang et al. 2003). Although the findings do not speak directly about social context, the present study does shed light on ways to possibly increase positive attitudes towards members of different ethnic groups among incoming college students, which is increasingly important due to the fast growing ethnic minority population and enrollment in public universities (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). The main findings speak to the value of promoting a diverse K-12 curriculum and campus and community activities which allow individuals to learn more about and explore their ethnic identities. Having a stronger ethnic identity can enhance ethnocultural empathy, perhaps by helping individuals place a greater value on culture, learning their ancestral history, gaining a better understanding of their ethnic group's racial struggles, and applying that knowledge to members of ethnic groups different from their own. Considering that higher levels of ethnocultural empathy are related to academic success for Hispanic and Asian American students (Chang and Le 2010), ethnic identity could potentially act as a moderator of academic success among this population as well; however, this can only be speculated based on the scope of the current study.

Interestingly, inconsistent with past research (Duncan et al. 2003; Hunter and Elias 1999; Kawabata and Crick 2008), there was not a significant relationship between school diversity, proportion of cross-race friendships, and ethnocultural empathy among this sample of participants. It is important to note that the participants in the current study were conveniently recruited from ethnic minority group members involved in service-learning opportunities on campus, which primarily focuses on awareness and appreciation of culture-related issues. Considering that the current study was focused on culture-related issues, it is likely that the results would differ if participants were recruited from the general public or student pool. The participants in the current study also had relatively high levels of ethnocultural empathy ($M = 4.6$, $SD = .61$), with an average mean score of 1.6 points higher than the midpoint of 3 on the scale (possible score ranged from 1-6). The high levels of ethnocultural empathy may also be attributed to the fact that all participants attended public high schools in California, which is relatively more ethnically diverse than most states. To obtain more robust findings, future research should control for service-learning effects by including a sample of both service-learning and non-service-learning students in geographical locations that are not as ethnically diverse as California.

Since there were ethnic differences in school diversity, ethnic identity, and ethnocultural empathy among the Latino and Asian American/Pacific Islander

(AAPI) participants, there could also be differences among white or African American participants as well. Each of these ethnic groups have their own unique cultural upbringing and beliefs, thus future studies should consider obtaining a more representative sample by also recruiting white and African American participants.

Overall, the present findings underscore the importance of ethnic identity as a component of ethnocultural empathy. Looking beyond ethnic differences between Latino and AAPI college students, the current study suggests that being more in touch with one's ethnic identity may be related to empathic feelings and sensitivity towards members of ethnic groups different than one's own. These findings suggest that encouraging students to explore their ethnic identity may foster a more harmonious campus climate, along with more positive attitudes towards different ethnic groups.

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