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Author(s): Caroline Bill Robertson Evans, Paul R. Smokowski and Katie L. Cotter

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Individual Characteristics, Microsystem Factors, and Proximal Relationship Processes Associated with Ethnic Identity in Rural Youth

Caroline Bill Robertson Evans *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Paul R. Smokowski *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Arizona State University*

Katie L. Cotter *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

ABSTRACT Although strong ethnic identity is associated with positive psychological functioning and high academic achievement, few studies have examined factors associated with ethnic identity of rural youths. Social identity theory was used as a guide for the current study, integrating ecological systems theory to frame the study's focus on how transactions and social relationships across microsystems relate to ethnic identity. This study uses hierarchical regression analysis to investigate which individual characteristics, microsystem factors, and proximal relational processes are associated with ethnic identity in a large sample ($N = 3,418$) of rural students in Grades 6 through 8 (mean age 12.8 years, 46.77% male) who participated in the Rural Adaptation Project in 2011. Results show that adolescents from racial/ethnic minority groups report higher levels of ethnic identity than Caucasian adolescents. We find high levels of ethnic identity are related to individual characteristics, including speaking a language other than English in the home, and having high levels of optimism for the future. In contrast, we find characteristics such as gender and socioeconomic disadvantage are not related to ethnic identity. For microsystem transactions, religious orientation was positively associated with ethnic identity. The relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity was not statistically significant once religious orientation was added to the regression model. Other microsystem transactions positively associated with ethnic identity include high levels of both school satisfaction and perceived discrimination. Proximal processes in the form of social support (i.e., from parents, friends, teachers, neighbors) across multiple microsystems are associated with high levels of ethnic identity. Implications of these findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: ethnic identity, adolescence, rural, identity formation

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Identity formation is a central goal in adolescence (Erikson, 1950), and the process is influenced by myriad individual and social factors, including race and ethnicity (Britto, 2008). An individual's race/ethnicity is particularly salient during adolescence because that developmental stage is a period of ethnic identity exploration (Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, & Nylund-Gibson, 2010). Ethnic identity is a component of an adolescent's identity formation that can serve as a psychological resource to link the adolescent with various levels in his or her social environment (e.g., to a cultural group, to social institutions such as churches that serve the cultural group, to family members who share the same race, ethnic affiliation, ancestry, language, or place of origin). Therefore, developing a better understanding of the factors associated with ethnic identity is critically important to building knowledge and increasing the social workers capacity for culturally competent social work practice.

The term ethnic identity refers to an individual's self-identification with a racial or ethnic group (e.g., culture, traditions, values) and the person's emotional responses to that group (e.g., feelings, preferences; Bernal & Knight, 1993). Strong or weak levels of ethnic identity reflect the extent to which an individual embraces his or her ethnicity (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). A strong ethnic identity can provide adolescents with a sense of group membership and belonging. Indeed, researchers have reported an association between ethnic identity and successful psychological functioning (Phinney, 1990), including decreased levels of depression (Kiang, Witkow, & Champagne, 2012; Street, Harris-Britt, & Walker-Barnes, 2009), and anxiety (Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009; Tynes, Rose, Anderson, Umaña-Taylor, & Lin, 2012) and increased levels of self-esteem (Blash & Unger, 1995; Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012; Phinney & Chaviara, 1992; Phinney et al., 2001; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Ethnic identity has also been associated with other positive developmental outcomes such as high academic achievement (Adelabu, 2008).

Previous studies have identified several factors related to ethnic identity, including gender (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012), race (Brown, Spatzier, & Tobin, 2010), and language proficiency (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2000). In addition, research has demonstrated an association of ethnic identity with psychological factors such as self-esteem (Phinney & Chaviara, 1992; Phinney et al., 2001) and with social factors, including parental support (Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2012), sense of community (Blash & Unger, 1995; Kenyon & Carter, 2011), religious beliefs (Lopez, Huynh, & Fulligni, 2011), and discrimination experiences (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009).

Despite the emerging understanding of the importance of ethnic identity for positive development, the available research in this area has primarily focused

on adults living in urban or suburban areas, and few studies have considered ethnic identity in adolescents. Consequently, substantially less is known about rural adolescents from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Given the unique stressors of rural environments, it is unclear whether a straightforward generalization of results found in urban and suburban settings to rural settings is justifiable (Grama, 2000). In the current study, an ecological systems lens was used to investigate which individual characteristics, microsystem transactions, and proximal relationship processes are associated with ethnic identity in a racially/ethnically diverse group of rural adolescents. Moreover, this article provides a unique contribution to the literature by considering how characteristics and relationships from different microsystems (e.g., individual, family, peers, school, and neighborhood levels) are associated with ethnic identity.

Literature Review

Guiding Theories

Social identity theory. According to social identity theory, group membership provides individuals with a sense of belonging and thus fosters a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In addition, group membership serves to maintain self-esteem when members define their group positively relative to other social groups (Bourhis & Hill, 1982). This theory was first conceptualized by Tajfel (1979), who posited that group membership is the central means through which a person's social identity is formed. Because ethnic identity is a part of social identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007), social identity theory is commonly used as a theoretical framework in studies of ethnic identity (Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Adolescents use their current evaluation of their strengths and attributes, that is, their self-esteem, as a foundation for forming future goals and plans (Nurmi 1991a; Nurmi, & Pulliainen, 1991; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeir, 2002). Given that ethnic identity helps foster self-esteem through the sense of group membership, ethnic identity also helps foster planning for future goals. This connection underscores the importance of studying both self-esteem and future optimism in relation to ethnic identity. Further, although ethnic identity is part of an individual's social identity, its formation and maintenance requires the individual to engage in social interaction with multiple systems and others in the environment (Phinney, 1992) as well as to examine his or her own ethnic group relative to other ethnic groups (Phinney, 1996). For example, this social interaction might take the form of individuals participating in a religious community with other members of their ethnic group. Moreover, participation in a religious community has been shown to be associated with high levels of ethnic identity (Markstrom, 1999), highlighting the importance of religious affiliation and orientation in the

study of ethnic identity. In addition, examining adolescents' positive connections to other social institutions or communities where youth might encounter large groups of ethnically similar peers, such as schools, can also yield greater insight into the factors affecting ethnic identity. Thus, measures of school experiences, such as school satisfaction, can be important in studies of ethnic identity. The importance of these multiple social groups across diverse environments and the social relationships with parents, peers, teachers and neighbors that occur in these environments, can also be understood using social-ecological theory. Because identity development is influenced by multiple social relationships across different environments (Erikson, 1968), a social-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can also illuminate factors associated with ethnic identity.

Ecological systems theory. Figure 1 depicts the application of ecological systems theory to ethnic identity. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory, social environments—or microsystems—include an adolescent's family, peer network, school, and neighborhood. The interpersonal social interactions within and between microsystems, which we term *proximal relationship processes*, influence the adolescent's identity formation. The characteristics and quality of these relationships or proximal processes, such as support from parents, friends, teachers, and neighbors, can influence adolescent identity formation in general, and ethnic identity in particular. For example, parents are central agents in a youth's racial/ethnic socialization (Hughes et al., 2006); when parents are supportive of their children, the children are more likely to thrive within their ecological context, embracing their ethnicity as a piece of their cultural heritage.

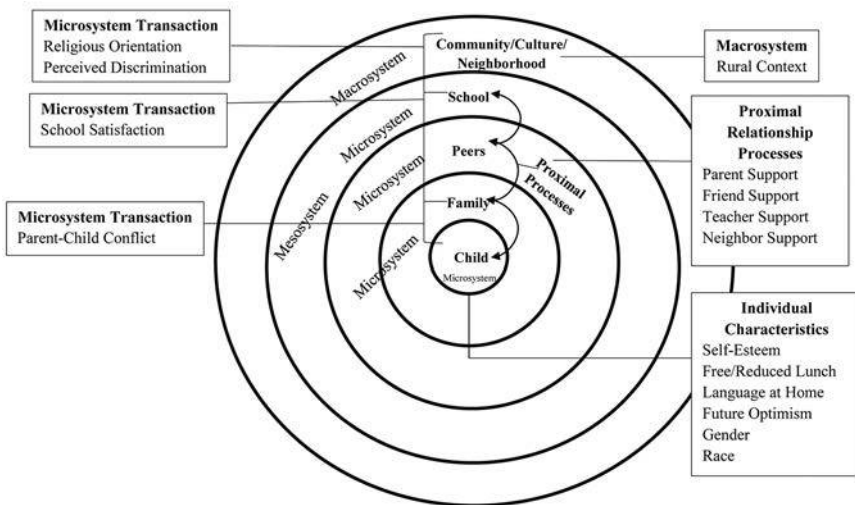


Figure 1. Ecological model for correlates of ethnic identity

Other important features of the ecological model are the microsystem transactions, which refers to exchanges between an individual and a higher-level social system. For the current study, these microsystem transactions result in an abstract feeling about the higher-level system. For example, a child's transactions with a church or synagogue (i.e., a microsystem) can lead to religious orientation, exposing the child to cultural practices that influence his or her ethnic identity. Positive transactions with schools lead to feelings of school satisfaction and attachment. In contrast, disagreements with the parental subsystem in families can lead to parent-child conflict. Similarly, an adolescent who feels wronged by members of his or her neighborhood or society is likely to report perceived discrimination. All of these microsystem transactions (parent-child conflict, school satisfaction, religious orientation, perceived discrimination) affect the development of adolescents' social identity, of which ethnic identity is an integral part.

Examinations of microsystem transactions must also consider the macrosystem (i.e., social beliefs, norms, and interactions in a specific context; McKown, 2005) in which these microsystems operate because the social beliefs affect not only individual microsystems but also the interactions of microsystems. The macrosystem in the current study was composed of two rural, economically disadvantaged counties in the Southern United States. The unique aspects of the rural macrosystem provided an understudied environment in which to investigate ethnic identity.

Importance of the Rural Macrosystem

Although rural life is commonly assumed to be low stress (Grama, 2000), a rural environment can expose residents to stressors absent from urban environments (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001) such as isolation and a lack of public services. For example, although the rural counties in the current study had some public transportation, that service was limited to certain areas and operated on a restricted schedule. This limited transportation is problematic given the wide dispersion of rural residents.

These stressors likely influence rural adolescents by limiting their access to extracurricular activities, mental health services, and social interactions with others beyond the family or kin group. Further, these factors are likely to contribute to the higher rates of risk-taking behavior in rural youth. As compared with urban and suburban youth, rural youth are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as substance use (i.e., alcohol, drugs, or tobacco), bringing weapons to school, and having sexual intercourse (Atav & Spencer, 2002). Similarly, a study of 213,225 rural students compared risk-taking behaviors of youth living in very remote areas with those of rural youth living in less remote areas, and found adolescents in more remote rural areas reported higher rates of alcohol use and intoxication (Swaim & Stanley, 2011). Other research comparing

urban and rural youth has shown that rural youth face increased risk for poor educational outcomes (Witherspoon & Ennett, 2011) and had higher levels of parent-reported cumulative risk factors (e.g., parent-child conflict, adolescent problem behaviors; Spoth, Goldberg, Neppl, Trudeau, & Ramisetty-Mikler, 2001). Despite such findings, few researchers have examined health-related risk and protective factors for rural youth (Carlson, 2006; Dawkins & Hill, 1995; Robbins, Dollard, Armstrong, Kutash & Vergon, 2008; Spoth et al., 2001) such as ethnic identity. Given the positive relationship between ethnic identity and healthy functioning (Adelabu, 2008; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Chaviara, 1992; Phinney et al., 2001), it is worthwhile to explore which individual factors, microsystem transactions, and proximal processes are associated with a strong ethnic identity in rural youth.

Individual Factors Associated With Adolescent Ethnic Identity

Self-esteem. Several studies have examined the connection between self-esteem and ethnic identity. However, these studies have produced conflicting results regarding the strength and direction of the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity (see Phinney, 1990). Ethnic identity and self-esteem have been positively correlated: high self-esteem not only can prompt the individual to investigate ethnic issues (e.g., challenging ethnic stereotypes, seeking out positive ethnic role models), but also foster an individual's increased positive feelings about himself or herself (e.g., increased knowledge and pride about hardships overcome by his or her ethnic group; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). The majority of existing studies have examined how ethnic identity predicts self-esteem. For example, Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz (1997) found that ethnic identity was a statistically significant predictor of self-esteem for Caucasian, African American, and Latino youth. Other researchers have found a positive relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity for African American adolescent males (Blash & Unger, 1995), Native American adolescents (Jones & Galliher, 2007), for a group of Asian American, African American, and Latino youth (Phinney & Chaviara, 1992), and for a sample of 12,386 African American, Caucasian, Latino, and Native American youth (Martinez & Dukes, 1997).

Contrary to the previous findings, one study showed ethnic identity was negatively associated with self-esteem in a sample of Native Aboriginal Canadian youth (Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012), and other researchers found no association between ethnic identity and self-esteem in a sample Lakota/Dakota Sioux Native American youth (Pittenger, 1998) and a sample of Lumbee Native American adolescents (Newman, 2005). The inconsistencies in these findings suggest the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity varies across racial/ethnic groups, and therefore, findings should not be generalized without context-

specific research. Consequently, the lack of research in rural settings highlights the importance of the current study.

Equally important, the concept of self-esteem is often a controversial construct, especially so when researchers attempt to measure self-esteem across racial groups because the majority of existing self-esteem measures were normed on Caucasians (Michaels, Barr, Roosa, & Knight, 2007). However, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which was used in the current study, has been found to measure the same construct across cultures and countries (Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, & Macek, 2004).

Differences among minority groups. To more fully understand the salience of ethnic identity, it is necessary to consider the diverse experiences of the racial/ethnic groups being studied. Ogbu and Simons (1998) categorized minorities as either voluntary or involuntary minorities. Voluntary minorities, or immigrants, are those who chose to move to the United States in search of better opportunities. In contrast, involuntary, or nonimmigrant minorities, have been integrated into U.S. society against their will through slavery or colonization. Examples of involuntary minorities include the African American and Native American youth in the current study sample. Both voluntary and involuntary groups face challenges that can affect their ethnic identities.

Voluntary minorities are faced with the challenge of acculturation, which is defined as “The differences and changes in values and behaviors that individuals make as they gradually adopt the cultural values of the dominant society” (Smith & Guerra, 2006, p. 283). This definition highlights the assimilation perspective, which posits that immigrants replace their culture-of-origin with the predominant culture in the host country. In contrast, other researchers have argued that accommodation occurs, whereby immigrants do not necessarily lose their ethnic identities as they adapt to the dominant cultural system. Many immigrants form bicultural identities by integrating their culture-of-origin or ethnic identities with the norms, beliefs, values, and behaviors of the dominant culture (Bautista de Domanico, Crawford, & Wolfe, 1994; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Gonzales, Knight, Morgan-Lopez, Saenz, & Sirolli 2002; Phinney et al., 2001; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010). Consequently, voluntary minorities, such as Latino/Latina immigrants, have important nuances in their ethnic identities because they might be struggling to adapt to multiple cultural influences.

Both Native Americans and African Americans have suffered a long history of persecution, slavery, and discrimination (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Stannard, 1992). This historical trauma underscores the importance of understanding the ways in which these racial/ethnic groups support their group members, bond through shared beliefs and behaviors, and foster resilience in the face of adversity. Ethnic identity has been shown to be a potential resource that can assist members of

these groups in coping with intense persecution and discrimination (Phinney, 1990) as well as fostering solidarity, resilience, and a sense of community. When groups experience acute or chronic stress, a strong affiliation process often occurs, making the cultural, racial, or ethnic group a key source of social identity.

Given the unique experiences of minority populations, research has shown variations in ethnic identity related to race/ethnicity. Specifically, adolescents who identified as Black, Latino, or mixed race reported higher levels of ethnic identity than Caucasians (Brown et al., 2010), and this pattern endures into adulthood (Gaines et al., 1997). In addition, Brown and colleagues (2010) found that White children who identified with minority labels (e.g., biracial, or label based on their family's ethnic, cultural, or religious affiliation) had more positive ethnic identities than White children from similar backgrounds who identified as Caucasian. Coupled with the discussion of voluntary versus involuntary minorities above, these effects of race on ethnic identity suggest important between-group differences regarding ethnic identity, especially when comparing minority groups with Caucasians.

Demographics. Various demographic variables such as gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and language are associated with ethnic identity. Although most studies have not found gender-related differences in the development of ethnic identity (Allen & Aber, 2006), it is possible that distinct factors might influence ethnic identity in adolescent males and females. For example, Umaña-Taylor and Guimond (2012) found that family factors (i.e., ethnic socialization and support) had a positive influence on young males' ethnic identity development, but did not find the same association for females.

Household SES, often measured by receipt of free/reduced price lunch, is another demographic factor related to ethnic identity. Specifically, parents from high SES backgrounds place more emphasis on ethnic socialization than lower SES parents (See Hughes et al., 2006, for a review). For example, in one study of African American preschoolers, researchers found that as household SES increased, so did the emphasis of African culture in the home (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). However, scant research is available on the connection between SES and ethnic identity, and additional research is needed.

Finally, the development of ethnic identity also appears to be influenced by language, with some researchers asserting that language is the most important element of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). Indeed, studies with adolescents from immigrant households have reported a positive association between the adolescents' proficiency in their native language and ethnic identity (Kim & Chao, 2009; Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010). In addition, research has shown that increased use of ethnic language, such as Latino adolescents serving as translators for their parents, was positively associated with ethnic identity (Weisskirch, 2005). The limited research on the relationship between these individual char-

acteristics and ethnic identity, especially in rural settings, highlights the need for additional research.

Future optimism. Future optimism refers to an individual's ability to think about and envision a positive future. This perspective enables adolescents to make plans for their future and set goals (Nurmi, 1991b). Moreover, future optimism or a future perspective has been shown to serve as a protective factor for vulnerable adolescents (McCabe & Barnett, 2000), such as youth living in impoverished, rural environments. However, future optimism can be diminished by environmental factors such as limited employment opportunities, which is especially salient for youth in rural environments. For example, researchers have found rural adolescents' occupational interests and aspirations declined significantly with age, whereas urban adolescents' interests did not (Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1994). Moreover, some researchers have identified links between future optimism and ethnic identity. For example, in a sample of African American rural adolescents, ethnic identity and maternal support were two of the most important predictors of future education orientation (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephens, 2008). Further, another study found that, in a sample of rural African American adolescents, there was a positive association between identity exploration and commitment (two ethnic identity subscales) and future optimism (Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004). Similarly, a study with a sample of Native American youth study found that measures of ethnic identity levels in Year 1 predicted the youth's level of future optimism in Year 2, suggesting a positive association between the two constructs (Smokowski, Evans, Cotter, & Webber, 2013).

Positive Microsystem Transactions

Religious orientation. Many studies have highlighted the role of religious beliefs in maintaining an individual's ethnic identity (Chong, 1998). For rural youth, participation in religious activities can be an important source of social and spiritual support. Given the central role of religion in the lives of many rural adolescents (King, Elder, & Whitebeck, 1997), particularly strong associations might exist between religious orientation and ethnic identity for rural youth. This association was demonstrated in a study of 477 ethnically diverse adolescents (i.e., Latino, Caucasian, and Asian) that found the adolescents' ethnic and religious identities remained relatively stable over the high-school years, and changes in one identity often prompted changes in the other (Lopez et al., 2011). Further, religious participation was strongly, positively connected to ethnic identity in a sample of Vietnamese adolescent immigrants (Bankston & Zhou, 1995). A similar connection was found in rural African American adolescents who attended religious services regularly and reported higher ethnic identity than Caucasians and African Americans who did not attend religious services regularly (Markstrom, 1999). The role of religion in the ethnic identity of Native

Americans is particularly important given that Native American tribes may use religious and spiritual practices to keep their cultural traditions alive and to enhance their ethnic identities (Garrouette et al., 2009). Due to the scarce literature examining Native American youth, additional research is needed to highlight this potential link.

School satisfaction. Research has established a clear link between ethnic identity and school success. Strong ethnic identity was positively associated with academic success in a sample of Latino adolescents (Conchas, Oseguera, & Vigil, 2012) and with optimistic feelings about future educational success in a sample of rural African American adolescents (Kerpelman et al., 2008). In a racially diverse group of 132 Latino, Asian American, and African American students in Grades 7 and 8, higher levels of ethnic identity were positively related to school engagement (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007). Similarly, in a group of 158 Latino, African American, and Asian American adolescents, ethnic identity was positively associated with school satisfaction (Shin, Morgan, Buhin, Truitt, & Vera, 2010). Little research exists on American Indian ethnic identity and school satisfaction, but one study of 103 Lumbee Native American high school students found no association between ethnic identity and the perceived school environment (Bryant & LaFromboise, 2005). The mixed results of these findings and the lack of research in rural areas points to the importance of additional research to fill critical knowledge gaps.

Negative Microsystem Transactions

Parent-adolescent conflict. Adolescence marks a period of exploration and increasing independence, which is often a catalyst for family conflict. Parent-child conflicts about culture, which can include ethnic identity, are particularly harmful to adolescent development and are associated with increased depressive symptoms and decreased self-esteem (Behnke, Plunkett, Sands, & Bamaca-Colbert, 2011; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010). Further, normative parent-child conflicts can be exacerbated by acculturation stress (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). This evidence suggests that for immigrant adolescents, family conflict might focus on cultural issues, and therefore, have a substantial effect on levels of ethnic identity.

Adolescents engaging in high levels of conflict with their parents are at risk for poor mental health outcomes. For example, parent-child conflict in general is associated with increased depression and decreased self-esteem (Holtzman & Roberts, 2012; Kuhlberg, Pena, & Zayas, 2010; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). Therefore, these youth are likely to be less inclined to interact socially with other members of their ethnic group, and might be less likely to participate in cultural or community gatherings that could bolster their ethnic identities. Further, parents are the primary socializing agents for children and adolescents,

and thus, exert significant influence on adolescents' identity development (Hughes et al., 2006). A conflict ridden parent-child relationship would likely impact ethnic identity. It is plausible that high levels of conflict might motivate adolescents to spend increasing time away from the family, perhaps causing them to miss cultural and ethnic family practices that serve to reinforce ethnic identity.

Discrimination experiences. The relationship between discrimination and ethnic identity is unclear. One study of a group of African American adolescents found no association between the youths' experiences of discrimination experiences and changes in their ethnic identities (Seaton, Yip, Morgan-Lopez, & Sellers, 2012). However, other research with a sample of Latino adolescents found the youths' perception of discrimination was related to stronger ethnic identity, whereas actual experiences of discrimination were associated with decreased ethnic identity (Masuoka, 2006). This latter finding was replicated in a sample of 379 African American, Latino, Asian, and Caucasian sixth graders (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009). Notably, research with a sample of African Americans showed some negative effects of discrimination were mitigated by a strong ethnic identity (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), indicating the benefit of fostering positive ethnic identity. Perceived discrimination might be particularly pernicious for immigrants, such as Latino youth, and researchers have found an association between increased discrimination and increased levels of depression and anxiety for Latino youth (Lorenzo-Blanco, Unger, Ritt-Olson, Soto, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2011; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2007). However, in a sample of adolescent Navajo Indians, ethnic identity and perceived discrimination were not associated (Gallicher, Jones, & Dahl, 2011).

Proximal Relationship Processes Associated with Adolescent Ethnic Identity

Social support. Research has established that positive relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and neighbors are important in adolescent identity formation, providing evidence for social identity theory (Hall & Brassard, 2008). However, little research has examined these social supports in relation to ethnic identity, and even fewer studies have considered the relationships from the various microsystems in the adolescent's environment within the same analysis. The link between social support and ethnic identity was demonstrated in a study of 158 African American ninth and tenth grade students that found family support was the primary predictor of ethnic identity (Lamborn & Nguyen, 2004). In another sample of African American adolescents, ethnic identity partially mediated the relationship between social support and depression (Gaylord-Harden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007). In a sample of American Indian youth, ethnic identity and social support from peers and family were weakly, but significantly correlated (Whitesell et al., 2006). For Latino youth, supportive

parenting was associated with increased self-esteem (Bamaca, Umaña-Taylor, Shin, & Alfaro, 2005); given the connection between ethnic identity and self-esteem for Latino youth (Martinez & Dukes, 1997), it is plausible that parent support might also be associated with ethnic identity.

Community support appears to affect adolescents' ethnic identity by promoting a feeling of group membership and emotional safety, which is supported by research that has established a correlation between high levels of ethnic identity and strong sense of community (Ellison & George, 1994; Kenyon & Carter, 2011). This correlation suggests that an adolescent's perception of support from their environment, such as neighbors, might foster ethnic identity by creating a feeling of belonging and sense of community cohesion. Because neighborhoods are often racially segregated (Miller & Garran, 2008), adolescents are likely surrounded by people of a similar ethnicity. For example, a study of African American adolescents found that neighborhood racial/ethnic composition homogeneity was an important factor in identity formation (Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). Although limited, the available research suggests social support is positively related to ethnic identity; however, more research is needed to clearly establish this relationship.

The Current Study

Based on the mixed results of the available research and unanswered questions about factors associated with the ethnic identities of rural youth, we examined the individual characteristics, microsystem factors, and proximal processes potentially associated with ethnic identity in rural youth. Drawing from social identity theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, and past research, the current study proposed five hypotheses:

1. Self-esteem would be positively associated with ethnic identity. Self-esteem was the first variable block entered into the model because of the well-established relationships between self-esteem and ethnic identity. After establishing this basic relationship, we wanted to see how individual characteristics, microsystem transactions, and proximal relationship processes predicted ethnic identity, while controlling for self-esteem effects and examining if other variables reduced the significance of the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity.
2. Individual characteristics (i.e., future optimism, race, speaking a language other than English at home, receipt of free/reduced price lunch) will be associated with higher ethnic identity.
3. Positive microsystem transactions (i.e., religious orientation, school satisfaction) will display positive links with ethnic identity.

4. Negative microsystem transactions (i.e., parent-adolescent conflict, perceived discrimination) will be related to lower ethnic identity.
5. Positive proximal relationship processes (i.e., parent, friend, teacher, and neighbor support) will be associated with higher ethnic identity.

Method

The study sample was drawn from the Rural Adaptation Project (RAP), which is a 5-year longitudinal panel study of more than 4,000 middle-school students from 28 public schools located in two rural, economically disadvantaged counties in North Carolina. The data for the current study were collected at the RAP baseline in spring 2011. Following approval from the University of North Carolina's Institutional Review Board, RAP staff obtained student assent to participate via a statement that students read and electronically signed before completing an online assessment. In accordance with school district policies, one of the rural counties adopted the assessment as part of normal procedures and all students were included on the roster. The second county was larger geographically and had a larger student population; therefore, a random sample of 40% of middle school students was selected from district rosters. Parents in the second county received a letter explaining the study. Parents who did not want their children to participate had to return the letter requesting non-participation, and then those children were removed from the study roster. Participants completed the online assessment in school computer labs under close supervision from research staff. To maintain confidentiality, surveys were identified using students' identification numbers rather than names.

Participants

The study sample ($N = 4,321$) had a mean age of 12.8 years and was 46.77% male ($n = 1,601$). After listwise deletions to handle missing data (Allison, 2002), the analytic sample contained 3,418 participants. The sample reflected the racial/ethnic composition of the study counties. Based on participant self-report of race/ethnicity, the sample for this study was 28.10% ($n = 962$) Native American, 26.33% ($n = 896$) Caucasian, 22.26% ($n = 762$) African American, 12.30% ($n = 421$) Latino, and 11.01% ($n = 377$) mixed race/other. Approximately 33% of participants were enrolled in each of the three grades (Grades 6 thru 8), and 66.47% of sample received free/reduced-price lunches.

Study Setting

The two counties that formed the macrosystem for this study are typical of sparsely populated rural counties, and these counties had an average population density of 101.65 persons per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although

both counties had some public transportation, those services are limited to certain areas and have restricted days and hours of operation. Both counties are approximately 100 miles from the nearest large city, which further limits the county residents' access to resources such as large hospitals, mental health services, and health care providers.

The effect of limited access to healthcare and other resources is reflected in the high infant mortality of the two counties. At the time the study data were collected, the average infant mortality rate of the two counties was 22 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, which was more than 3 times the national average (Heisler, 2012).

Both counties are economically disadvantaged areas. The poor economic health of the area was reflected in unemployment rate of 12%, which was five percentage points higher than the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Measures

Data were obtained using a modified version of the School Success Profile (SSP; Bowen & Richman, 2008). The SSP is a 220-item youth self-report survey that measures attitudes and perceptions about school, friends, family, neighborhood, self, health, and well-being. The SSP has been widely used and has well-documented reliability and validity (Bowen & Richman, 2008). The modified version, the School Success Profile Plus (SSP+), included 152 SSP items and three additional subscales: a modified version of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979), and Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity measure (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Dependent variable: Ethnic identity. The six-item version of Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney & Ong, 2007) was used to measure the strength of participants' ethnic identity. Example items include, "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs" and "I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group." Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a greater extent or strength of ethnic identity. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .92 in this sample. The mean for this scale was 3.40($SD = 1.0$).

Individual characteristics: Self-esteem. To limit the length of the assessment, self-esteem was assessed with a five-item scale adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The adapted version re-worded five items drawn from the Rosenberg scale using language appropriate for the literacy level of a middle-school population. For example, superfluous and confusing words were removed from items to make them more easily understood. The item "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" was revised as, "I am satisfied with myself." Example items included, "I feel good about myself" and "I am able to do things

as well as most other people.” Each item was rated on a 3-point scale of *not like me*, *a little like me*, or *a lot like me*, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. Cronbach’s alpha was .88 in this sample.

Gender and free/reduced-price lunch. Gender (female coded as 1, male 0) and free/reduced-price lunch (*yes* coded as 1, *no* 0) were self-reported by students.

Race/ethnicity and language. Race/ethnicity and language were self-reported by students. Dummy variables were created to measure the four racial/ethnic groups (i.e., Latino, African American, Native American, and mixed race/other), with *Caucasian* as the reference group. *Language spoken at home* was a dummy variable with *English spoken at home* as the reference group (coded 0) and a *language other than English spoken at home* coded as 1.

Future optimism. The 12-item future optimism scale measured the adolescents’ attitudes and expectations for success. Example items include, “When I think about my future, I feel very positive” and “I see myself accomplishing great things in life.” Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating a greater level of optimism for the future. Cronbach’s alpha was .92 in this sample.

Positive microsystem transactions: Religious orientation. The three-item religious orientation scale assessed the importance of religion in participants’ lives. Example items included, “Religion plays an important role in my daily life,” and “My religious faith influences the decisions I make.” Each item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale (*not like me*, *a little like me*, and *a lot like me*). Cronbach’s alpha was .89 in this sample.

School satisfaction. School satisfaction was measured with a seven-item scale that assessed a participant’s level of satisfaction with his or her school experience. Example items include, “I am happy that I attend this school” and “I am getting a good education at this school.” Responses for each item used a 3-point scale ranging from *not like me* to *a lot like me*. Cronbach’s alpha was .84 in this sample.

Negative microsystem transactions: Parent-adolescent conflict. Parent-adolescent conflict was measured using 10 of the 20 items from the Conflict Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ; Prinz et al., 1979). A modified version of the CBQ was used in order to limit the length of the SSP+. This scale used dichotomous *true/false* items to assess the degree of conflict in the parent-child relationship; the scale’s reliability and validity have been documented (Robin & Foster, 1989). Example items included: “At least three times a week, my parent(s) and I get angry at each other” and “My parent(s) put me down.” The Cronbach’s alpha reliability was .82 in the current sample.

Perceived discrimination. The three-item perceived discrimination scale assessed the frequency of participants’ experiencing or witnessing unfair treatment based on race/ethnicity. Example items include, “How often do people dislike you be-

cause of your race or ethnicity?" and "How often are you treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?" Each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale (*never, sometimes, frequently, or always*), with higher scores indicating greater levels of perceived discrimination. Cronbach's alpha was .70 in this sample.

Proximal relationship processes: Social support variables. Four social support variables (*parent support, friend support, teacher support, and neighbor support*) assessed participants' perceptions of their social support networks.

The five-item parent-support scale measured the frequency with which an adult in the household provided emotional support to the student over the past 30 days. Example items include, "How often did the adults in your home let you know you were loved?" and "How often did the adults in your home make you feel special?" Responses to each item used a 3-point scale (*never, once or twice, and more than twice*). Cronbach's alpha was .89 for this sample.

A five-item friend-support scale measured a student's perception of friends' supportiveness. Example items include, "I can count on my friends for support" and "I can trust my friends." Responses for each item used a 3-point scale ranging from *not like me to a lot like me*. Cronbach's alpha was .89 for this sample.

The eight-item teacher-support scale measured students' perceptions of their teachers' supportive behavior. Example items include, "My teachers give me a lot of encouragement" and "My teachers care whether or not I come to school." Responses for each item used a 4-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree to strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha was .88 in this sample.

The five-item neighborhood-support scale measured students' perceptions of the extent to which adults in their neighborhood were interested and willing to help young people. Example items include, "If I had a problem, there are neighbors who would help me" and "People in my neighborhood really help one another out." Responses for each item used a 4-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree to strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha was .77 in this sample.

Scale scores were calculated by adding the participant's scores for each scale item and then dividing by the total number of items answered. This calculation provided an average item rating for each scale and minimized the amount of missing data. If more than half of the items were missing responses, the case was considered missing on that particular variable.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression (HMR), with four blocks of independent variables regressed onto ethnic identity. Each block contained the independent variables from the previous block and included additional independent variables. Self-esteem was entered first to establish the well-researched relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity. Subsequent blocks included individual characteristics, microsystem transactions, and proxi-

mal processes to determine which factors explain the variance in ethnic identity after controlling for self-esteem. Additional variables were also added after self-esteem to determine if the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem would continue to be statistically significant after other variables were placed in the model. Each block of independent variables was chosen based on predictors of ethnic identity reported in the literature. The model entry order was set to move on the ecological model from closest variables to the individual out to more distal layers of ecological transactions. Relationships with people in different microsystems were entered last because these social support variables were conceptualized as being the key to ethnic identity. Entering this block last provided the strongest test of the salience of social supports. By examining differences in adjusted R^2 statistics, HMR allows assessment of the relative influence of each set of predictors.

Handling Clustered Data

One methodological issue that needs to be addressed in clustered data is the control of clustering effects. Students coming from the same school might share common characteristics on an outcome variable. The presence of clustering violates the independent-observation assumption embedded in a regression model and leads to an incorrect test for statistical significance of predictor variables. Using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) developed by Raudenbush and Bryk (2002), we tested the clustering effect of the outcome variable. The ICC is defined by the following equation:

$$ICC = \frac{\sigma_u^2}{\sigma_u^2 + \sigma_e^2}$$

where σ_u^2 is the between-group variance, and σ_e^2 is the within-group variance. Results show that at worst .008 (less than 1%) of the variation in ethnic identity lies between schools, indicating that independent observations could be assumed and the independence assumption of ordinary least squares regression was not violated. Multicollinearity was assessed using the variation inflation factors (VIF) measure. Individual VIFs ranged from 1.08 to 2.01 and the mean VIF was 1.42, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue.

Handling Missing Data

To handle missing data, we followed Allison (2002) and employed a listwise deletion of the missing data. Consequently, the analyzed sample consisted of 3,418 participants, which was 79.1% of the original sample. A series of bivariate analysis (i.e., *t*-tests, chi-square tests) were performed to identify differences between the analyzed and unanalyzed samples. Compared with the unanalyzed sample, the

analyzed sample was significantly older (.15 years older, $p < .001$), had significantly higher proportions of females (9.06% higher, $p < .001$) and Native Americans (8.54% higher, $p < .001$); and had significantly lower proportions of African Americans (10% lower, $p < .001$), participants identifying as mixed race/other (2.72% lower, $p < .05$), and students receiving free/reduced-price lunch (7.02% lower, $p < .001$).

Results

The final model's R^2 indicated that approximately 23% of the variation in ethnic identity was explained by the covariates included in the model. Significant correlates of ethnic identity are summarized below. Variables are discussed in the order in which they were entered into the models. See Table 1 for estimated coefficients.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem had a statistically significant, positive relationship with ethnic identity when entered on its own ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$). When entered alone, self-esteem explained 4% of the variation in ethnic identity. However, the effect for self-esteem predicting ethnic identity was no longer statistically significant when the third block was added.

Individual Characteristics

Gender and receipt of free/reduced-price lunch were not significantly associated with variation in ethnic identity. Speaking a language other than English at home was statistically significantly associated with ethnic identity ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$). Race/ethnicity was also significantly associated with a strong ethnic identity. Participants who identified as African American ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$), Latino ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), American Indian ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$), and mixed race/other ($\beta = .09$, $p > .05$) were significantly more likely to have a high ethnic identity than participants who identified as Caucasian. Future optimism ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) was also significantly related to ethnic identity. The block of individual characteristics explained 11% of the variation in ethnic identity.

Microsystem Transactions

Religious orientation ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), school satisfaction ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), and perceived discrimination ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$) were all significantly related to ethnic identity. Parent-adolescent conflict ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .01$) was significantly related to ethnic identity, although this relationship was non-significant in the final model. The block of microsystem transactions explained 9% of the variation in ethnic identity.

Table 1
Model Estimated Coefficients

	Mean (SD) %	Range	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Individual Characteristics						
Intercept			2.11***	0.88***	0.31*	-0.47**
Self-esteem	2.71(.44)	1-3	0.48***	0.26***	0.06	0.01
Gender (Male)	46.77%					
Female	0.532	0-1		0.04	-0.02	-0.03
Free/ Reduced Lunch (No)	33.33%					
Yes	66.67%	0-1		-0.05	0.01	0.03
Race/ethnicity (White)	26.19%					
Latino	9.56%	0-1		0.27***	0.28***	0.29***
African American	22.41%	0-1		0.17**	0.18***	0.19***
American Indian	28.06%	0-1		0.21***	0.24***	0.26***
Mixed race	13.77%	0-1		0.09	0.13*	0.14**
Language at home (English)	93.68%					
Non-English	6.32%	0-1		0.22*	0.16	0.18*
Future optimism	3.48(.49)	1-4		0.48***	0.32***	0.21***
Microsystem Transactions						
Religious orientation	2.34(.66)	1-3			0.42***	0.39***
School satisfaction	2.37(.48)	1-3			0.22***	0.08*
Parent-child conflict	2.08(2.5)	0-1			-0.02**	-0.00
Perceived discrimination	1.45(.55)	1-4			0.15***	0.16***
Proximal Relationship Processes						
Friend support	2.49(.55)	1-3				0.10**
Parent support	2.68(.49)	1-3				0.13**
Teacher support	3.16(.56)	1-4				0.12**
Neighborhood support	3.03(.60)	1-4				0.20***
N			3432	3432	3432	3432
R ²			0.04	0.11	0.20	0.23

Proximal Relationship Processes

Perceived social support from parents ($\beta = .13, p < .01$), friends ($\beta = .10, p < .01$), teachers ($\beta = .12, p < .001$), and neighbors ($\beta = .20, p < .001$) were significantly, positively associated with ethnic identity. The block of proximal relationship processes explained 3% of the variation in ethnic identity.

Discussion

This investigation illuminated key factors in rural adolescents' ecology associated with ethnic identity. Previous ethnic identity research has been predominantly completed in urban and suburban areas, leaving little guidance about generalizability to disadvantaged rural contexts. Unique contextual stressors exist in rural communities such as a lack of access to resources and minimal public transportation. At the same time, rural environments are commonly characterized by close social networks and key community institutions (e.g., churches, schools) that can facilitate the development of ethnic identity. Our analyses provided information on critical ecological processes connected to ethnic identity in rural environments.

Our first hypothesis that self-esteem would be positively associated with ethnic identity was partially supported. When considered in isolation, self-esteem was significantly associated with ethnic identity, a connection supported by past research (Blash & Unger, 1995; Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012; Phinney & Chaviara, 1992; Phinney et al., 2001). However, our analyses moved the field forward by showing that this association was no longer salient once other microsystem factors were taken into account. When religious orientation was added to the model, self-esteem was no longer significantly associated with ethnic identity. Past research has linked religious orientation to ethnic identity (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Chong, 1998; Garrouette et al., 2009; Lopez et al., 2011) and self-esteem to ethnic identity (Blash & Unger, 1995; Jones & Galliher, 2007; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney & Chaviara, 1992); however, this is the first investigation to consider all three constructs at the same time.

The connections among self-esteem, religious orientation, and ethnic identity are important to consider. These three variables are closely related, warranting closer examination in future research. It is possible that self-esteem and ethnic identity are both enhanced by religious orientation because of the strong sense of community fostered at religious gatherings. This connection might be especially true for rural adolescents who tend to report strong religious orientation throughout adolescence (King et al., 1997). Adolescents participating in the current study came from two rural counties in North Carolina where churches are significant microsystems that provide critical social and psychological support. Similar to ethnically segregated neighborhoods, participants from specific ethnic groups dominate many church congregations (Dougherty, 2003). For example, many Southern African Americans are Baptist and many Mexican immigrants are Catholic. Consequently, in adolescent development, religious orientation and ethnic identity can be closely aligned. Religion and culture are often inextricably tied, especially for adolescents who are just beginning to explore these abstract concepts. Churches provide a gathering space for community members to come together to support their youth, profess their religious beliefs, follow their cul-

tural norms, and discuss social issues that affect different ethnic groups (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010). Sermons often interweave cultural, social justice, and religious themes. Additional research is needed to fully understand the connections between self-esteem, religious orientation, and ethnic identity in different environmental settings. Future research should examine how these three factors work together as a cluster of developmental assets for adolescents.

Our second hypothesis concerning the importance of individual characteristics was partially supported. Adolescents who identified as Latino, African American, American Indian, and mixed race/other reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity than those who identified as Caucasian. This finding is in line with previous studies in other contexts showing that people of color tend to report higher ethnic identities (e.g., Gaines et al., 1997). We can extend this notion to rural adolescents and to both voluntary and involuntary minority groups. The current study was completed in rural areas with "majority-minority" populations. Caucasian youth were a minority in roughly equal proportions to the other racial and ethnic groups. However, Caucasian youth did not report high ethnic identity scores like the other minority groups; this finding is enigmatic, but might signify a lack of salience for the construct among Caucasian youth. For example, the questions on ethnic identity refer to "my ethnic group" (e.g., "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.") For Caucasian youth, does "my ethnic group" refer to being of Italian, Polish, Norwegian, or some other heritage, or does it make them think "I am American?" If it is the latter, the ethnic identity construct might have little overt meaning to adolescents until they visit another country. Experiencing a contrasting culture is often what brings an individual's ethnic identity into clear focus, especially for immigrant adolescents (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010). Alternately, Caucasian adolescents might identify with their family's ancestral country-of-origin, creating great variation and blocking these youth from forming an omnibus group affiliation for "Caucasian." These nuances should be explored in future ethnic identity research.

Consistent with past research, we found participants who spoke a language other than English at home reported higher ethnic identities than their counterparts who spoke only English at home (Oh & Fuligni, 2010; Kim & Chao, 2009; Weisskirch, 2005). Language can be considered the carrier of culture (Cavallaro, 2005) and maintaining use of a native language in the home fosters a feeling of connection to a cultural heritage and could maintain or increase ethnic identity. The benefit of speaking the culture-of-origin language at home on ethnic identity is well documented, especially for voluntary minorities such as Latino immigrants (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010).

Future optimism was an individual characteristic significantly related to ethnic identity. This extends past research linking ethnic identity and future opti-

mism in African American (Kerpelman et al., 2008; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004) and Native American adolescents (Smokowski et al., 2013) to the current ethnic and racially diverse sample. The corresponding question concerning why this relationship exists is intriguing. Perhaps adolescents with high investment in ethnic identity have spent time learning about the historical challenges experienced by their voluntary or involuntary minority group. Understanding struggles from the past and the progress made by the ethnic group could engender a sense of optimism about the future. Alternately, mentors from the cultural group who helped the adolescent develop ethnic identity might stress hope for the future, thus increasing adolescent optimism. Because this study did not go beyond the correlational relationship between future optimism and ethnic identity, it remains an important question for future research to explore how and why these constructs are connected.

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, gender and SES were not associated with ethnic identity. This suggests that ethnic identity is a developmental asset equally available to females and males, disadvantaged families and those not experiencing economic stress.

Providing support for Hypothesis 3 concerning salient microsystems, religious orientation was significantly related to increased ethnic identity. These results are consistent with past research, which has identified a connection between religious identity and ethnic identity (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Lopez et al., 2011) and suggests that religion is associated with the maintenance of ethnic identity (Chong, 1998). Religious practices incorporate many positive and prosocial cultural and ethnic ideals, which might increase a person's positive feelings about his or her ethnicity, thus increasing ethnic identity. Further, rural churches are often racially homogenous (Dougherty, 2003), reinforcing ethnic community affiliations.

Providing further support for Hypothesis 3, school was a salient microsystem associated with ethnic identity. Specifically, school satisfaction was significantly associated with ethnic identity, which is also consistent with previous research (Shin et al., 2010). Satisfying academic and social experiences within the school environment provide adolescents with a sense of belonging. If adolescents feel integrated in the school community, they might be more comfortable in exploring and developing their ethnic identities. Similar to rural churches discussed above, some of the rural schools in this study had large clusters of minority adolescents, reflecting the racial and ethnic mix in the surrounding neighborhoods. Consequently, at school, adolescents experienced many interactions with peers from the same minority group. These interactions might have heightened their feelings of affiliation with their ethnic group if they enjoyed the school environment. Future research should explore these possibilities with longitudinal data.

Contrary to Hypothesis 4, the negative microsystem transactions of parent-child conflict, was not related to lower ethnic identity. Past research has linked parent-adolescent conflict to a number of deleterious outcomes in adolescent mental health (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2010), but it does not appear to have affected ethnic identity in this sample.

The negative experience of perceived discrimination was related to increased ethnic identity. This unexpected finding is in line with a rejection-identification model, which posits that when perceived discrimination is pervasive and stable, individuals will strongly identify with their own minority group (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). Empirical support for this hypothesis is mixed (e.g., Masuoka, 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003), suggesting that rejection-identification is context-specific. Perhaps the experience of perceived discrimination was related to participants in this exceptionally diverse rural sample embracing their ethnic group more intensely as a way of coping. Following social identity theory, an individual who strongly affiliates with his or her ethnic group might have a perception of heightened support and safety. Experiencing or perceiving discrimination underscores inequalities and differences among social and cultural groups. If the perceived discrimination is based on race/ethnicity, the adversity of such discrimination might create a shared challenge among ethnic group members and prompt individuals to learn more about their cultural heritage. An individual's only major alternative is to agree with the aggressor, submit to discrimination, and reject his or her ethnic affiliation, which leads to cognitive dissonance, ethnic self-loathing, loss of support, and is largely untenable for healthy identity development.

In line with Hypothesis 5, positive proximal relationship processes across microsystems (i.e., parent, friend, teacher, and neighbor support) were important predictors of ethnic identity. As posited by social identity theory and ecological systems theory, it is important to note that positive support from diverse individuals across different microsystems, parents, friends, teachers, neighbors, were all significantly related to ethnic identity. These social support effects underscore that it takes a community to reinforce ethnic identity. Kenyon and Carter (2011) reported that ethnic identity was positively associated with a strong sense of community. High levels of social support are related to a sense of community and a feeling of social cohesion that might strengthen ethnic identity (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994). In addition, rural adolescents commonly spend time with individuals of their own ethnic background because neighborhoods are often racially segregated and spread apart (Miller & Garran, 2008). When social support from same-minority community members is high, especially across microsystems, adolescents are likely to want to affiliate with that ethnic group. As social identity theory posits, this ethnic group affiliation fosters a positive self-concept by providing individuals with a sense of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is also likely that

positive ethnic group affiliation by the adolescent further enhances the social support coming from ethnic group peers and adults, creating a strong feedback loop between ethnic identity and social support from ethnic group members. Under these conditions, adolescents make close bonds with supportive friends, parents, teachers, and neighbors, providing motivation for those forming their identities to adopt the ethnic customs espoused by their parents, friends, and mentors.

Practice Implications

This study highlighted various factors associated with the ethnic identity of rural youth. Given the positive nature of ethnic identity as a developmental asset established in past literature, understanding which factors are associated with positive ethnic identity is useful information for intervention researchers. Interventions targeted at increasing positive functioning and development can be modified to target ethnic identity and the associated factors that affect ethnic identity. For example, our findings suggest that enhancing social support from parents, peers, teachers, and neighbors could be beneficial for ethnic identity as one component of social identity development. Fostering positive microsystem transactions, such as school satisfaction, and religious orientation, could also be connected to heightened ethnic identity. This information is helpful for practitioners who want to foster a salutogenic environment for positive adolescent development and is particularly relevant in a racially/ethnically heterogeneous environment where the importance of race and ethnicity might be intensified.

Limitations

The findings discussed in this article must be understood in light of the study's limitations. One limitation is the possibility that, despite efforts to make the survey a confidential experience, students might have been influenced by the presence of peers in the computer lab and might not have been honest in their responses. Second, although the rural, low-income sample used in this study provides unique information to extend previous research, this sample might limit external validity. The study sample represented an ethnically diverse population of low-income, rural, middle-school students in North Carolina; generalizing the results beyond the study sample should be done cautiously. Third, the data were cross-sectional and did not allow the assertion of causality; future research should include longitudinal studies. Fourth, the analyzed sample displayed some statistically significant differences to the full RAP sample, indicating that higher risk adolescents might be underrepresented. This loss of the highest risk adolescents because of missing data is common in social science studies. Consequently, our reported effects could be underestimating the actual relationships. Fifth, other variables that might be associated with ethnic identity

(e.g., foreign language proficiency, level of assimilation) were not measured in the current study, but would be interesting to investigate in future studies. Finally, although Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure has been empirically tested and widely used in investigations, ethnic identity is a complex construct and this six-item scale might not capture all aspects. This limitation is characteristic of nearly all social science research that uses self-reported psychosocial scales to measure key constructs.

Conclusion

A strong ethnic identity is related to many positive, prosocial factors. Correlates of ethnic identity came from different microsystems within rural adolescents' ecology. We found numerous positive relationships between individual characteristics, proximal processes, and microsystem transactions and ethnic identity. Consequently, ethnic identity appears to be an example of environmental influences coming together that could potentially bolster positive psychological development in adolescents. This study moved beyond the basic association between self-esteem and ethnic identity to consider a diverse array of environmental influences that help to explain this relationship. In so doing, this study also illuminated several areas with fertile ground for future research. Rural environments, especially low-income communities, often have unique stressors that are absent from urban or suburban environments. We were able to extend previous research results by showing that the results were applicable to rural environments, and explored several new predictors of ethnic identity. Ethnic identity was salient for adolescents across minority racial/ethnic groups, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Social support from friends, parents, teachers, and neighbors was strongly associated with high levels of ethnic identity, but future longitudinal research is needed to examine temporal causality. Religious orientation was also associated with ethnic identity and might be clustered with self-esteem and ethnic identity as interrelated developmental assets. These findings indicate the complexity of ethnic identity in rural adolescents and underscore the utility of an ecological framework in helping to explain positive psychological development. In delineating factors associated with ethnic identity, this study illuminated some of the key protective factors that may be associated with enhanced social identity development in rural adolescents.

Authors Notes

Caroline Bill Robertson Evans is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Paul R. Smokowski is Distinguished Foundation Professor for Child and Family Resilience in the School of Social Work, Arizona State University and is a research professor and

the director of the North Carolina Academic Center for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: smokowsk@email.unc.edu

Katie L. Cotter is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: klcotter@live.unc.edu

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Caroline Evans, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 325 Pittsboro St CB #3550 Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550, or via e-mail to careyroberson@gmail.com

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