

# Black Undergraduates' Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Perceived Social Support

## Background

This study focuses on the ways ethnic identity development informs perceptions of social support and self-esteem in Black undergraduate students. Ethnic identity is developed through exploration of the meaning of one's commitment to the ethnic group (Yoon, 2011). Stronger ethnic identity is associated with better psychological functioning like high self-esteem and lower anxiety. Self-esteem is essential for adolescent development (Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz, 1997). It was hypothesized that social support and self-esteem would be higher at later time points for students higher in ethnic identity development.

## Method

**Participants:** As part of a larger study, 16 undergraduate students (68.8% men;  $M$  age = 18.4 years,  $SD = .63$ ) who self-identified as Black were recruited from a Predominantly White Institution population.

**Procedure:** Participants completed online measures at three monthly time points. At baseline, participants completed measures of ethnic identity development. At the one-month and two-month follow-ups, participants completed measures of self-esteem and perceived social support from family, friends, and romantic partners.

### Measures:

- **Ethnic Identity Development** (Phinney, 1992): Identity Exploration (3 items,  $\alpha = .89$ ); Identity Commitment (3 items,  $\alpha = .83$ )
- **Self-Esteem** (Rosenberg, 1965): Ten items ( $\alpha s \geq .90$ )
- **Perceptions of Social Support** (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 2010): Family support (4 items,  $\alpha s \geq .93$ ); Friend support (4 items,  $\alpha s \geq .96$ ); Romantic Partner support (4 items,  $\alpha s \geq .97$ )

**Analytical Plan:** Correlation analyses were conducted between the baseline ethnic identity measures, one-month follow-up outcomes, and two-month follow-up outcomes. Because of the small sample size, we focused on the magnitude of correlation effect sizes, rather than significance value indicated in correlation analyses. We focused on large ( $r \geq |.50|$ ) effect sizes.

## Results

Reports of ethnic identity development were not robustly associated with outcomes of self-esteem or perceived social support at the one-month follow-up. However, reports of both ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment were robustly associated with outcomes at two-month follow-up. Specifically, ethnic identity exploration was positively associated with self-esteem and perceived romantic partner support, whereas ethnic identity commitment was positively associated with all outcomes at the two-month follow-up.

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## Table 1. Bivariate Correlations

	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Ethnic Identity Exploration	<b>.80</b>	-.24	.00	.11	-.39	<b>.51</b>	<b>.52</b>	.38	.08
2. Ethnic Identity Commitment	--	-.09	.04	.37	-.14	<b>.86</b>	<b>.94</b>	<b>.92</b>	<b>.80</b>
<b>Time 2 Reports</b>									
3. Self-Esteem		--	.19	.48	.70	<b>.93</b>	<b>.67</b>	<b>.60</b>	.41
4. Romantic Partner Support			--	-.05	-.23	<b>.92</b>	<b>.99</b>	<b>.95</b>	<b>.71</b>
5. Close Friend Support				--	<b>.54</b>	<b>.75</b>	<b>.90</b>	<b>.96</b>	<b>.98</b>
6. Family Support					--	.32	<b>.50</b>	<b>.65</b>	<b>.92</b>
<b>Time 3 Reports</b>									
7. Self-Esteem						--	<b>.90</b>	<b>.85</b>	<b>.59</b>
8. Romantic Partner Support							--	<b>.99</b>	<b>.76</b>
9. Close Friend Support								--	<b>.84</b>
10. Family Support									--

Note. Bolded values have large effect sizes,  $r > |.50|$ .

## Discussion

Results showed that students who had greater ethnic identity development—they had explored what it means to be a Black individual and/or committed to their ideals as a Black individual--tended to also view themselves (self-esteem) and their relationships (social support) more positively.

Associations between ethnic identity and student adjustment were more pronounced for the two-month follow-up period. This is important for students because as the semester progresses, the course load typically gets more difficult. Hence, having greater resources in perceptions of support and self-esteem could help students succeed in college. **This is especially relevant to the experiences of underrepresented college students** who are more likely to struggle with discriminatory behavior and feel less connected with faculty members (Karkouti, 2016). Putting an emphasis on ethnic identity and exploration could be a central component for success in education.

Our study was limited by a small sample size. Future work will require larger samples of young adult populations from a range of settings to replicate these findings. Our study benefitted from a multi-phase approach that moved beyond concurrent associations between these self-reports. We found benefits of earlier ethnic identity development on ongoing student adjustment, particularly as students entered the midpoint of the academic semester.

In **future studies**, researchers should study the relationship between ethnic identity development with academic disidentification with a larger sample of underrepresented students—replicating and extending these findings. Researchers should also look at long term benefits of ethnic identity and exploration (e.g. career, family life, life satisfaction, etc.).