The Development of Ethnic Identity in Immigrant Children from Latin America Living in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

The last decades have brought with them diverse changes in the way people relate to each other. In some cases, new technological, political, social, and economic trends have broadened the gap between less economically developed countries and more highly developed ones. One of the effects of this is the consistent migratory flow towards the latter. Contacts between people and cultures have propitiated the study of the psychological processes and relations between majority and minority groups in multiethnic societies (Lo Coco, Cristiano, Pace, 2005). In order to explain such processes and relations, researchers have used the term "ethnic identity", which has been defined as the feeling of belonging to an ethnic group or as that part of one's thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and values that result from membership of such a group (Phinney, 1990). One of the approaches to the study of ethnic identity is represented by developmental psychology.

Different developmental studies concerning how ethnic identity evolves in minority children living in multiethnic societies have been carried out in the last twenty years. Some of them emphasize the effect of social stratification (Morland and Hwang, 1981), the relationship between the development of general cognitive abilities and the social cognitions that determine the trend of ethnic identity (Aboud, 1984, 1987), the role played by emotional components and social perceptions (Tajfel, 1981; Ullah, 1985; Vaughan, 1987), and the effect of socialization processes on the development of ethnic identity (Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota & Ocampo 1993; Quintana & Vera, 1999). Most studies have been carried out in multiethnic societies with a long tradition as immigrant recipients (Canada, United States).

In Europe, massive migration movements are relatively new. In the last ten years, for instance, Spain has become the country with the highest percentage of immigrants in the European Union (Etnia Comunicacion, 2007). The impact of such migratory changes has attracted the interest of the Spanish scientific community. As a result, a number of developmental studies about ethnic identity from the perspective of both the majority group (Enesco, Navarro, Giménez & del Olmo, 1999; Enesco, Navarro, Paradela & Callejas, 2002) and minority groups (Gomez, 2005; Gonzalez, 2005; Troncoso, 2006) have been conducted in recent years.

This study derives from the author's doctoral dissertation, currently in progress, which focuses on the development of ethnic identity in ethnic minority children living in a multiethnic society represented by the city of Austin, Texas. Ultimately, its findings will be contrasted with those obtained in a previous study conducted in Spain with a similar population. This research addresses different questions regarding the issue described above:
1)   At what age ethnic minority children begin to show awareness of the existence of different ethnic groups?
2)   At what age minority group children identify themselves with their own ethnic group?

3)   Is there a correspondence between the way they perceive themselves and their own physical characteristics like skin and hair color?
4)   How do minority group children categorize ethnic diversity?
5)   What kinds of justifications are given to support these categorizations?
6)   What type of preferences and rejections are formulated by these children regarding different ethnic groups and how do they justify their elections?

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 72 Latin American children (36 boys and 36 girls) recruited from two elementary schools in Austin, Texas. The sample was divided into 6 age groups according to the participants' school level (K, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades). Since this is a work in progress, the analysis of 33% of this sample (24 children) is presented here. All participants have lived in the United States for less than three years. They were enrolled in bilingual programs and belonged predominantly to Mexican families. However, some Central American (3 Salvadorian, 2 Guatemalan, 3 Honduran) children took part in the study. All interviews were conducted in the participants' dominant language (Spanish) by a same-ethnicity interviewer. Only children whose parents gave written consent, and who themselves gave assent, participated in the study. Table 1 shows the mean age of the participants by grade level.

Table 1. Mean age and residency in US by grade level

Grade Level	Boys	Girls	Mean Age (months)	Mean residency in US (months)
Kindergarten	2	2	71	13
1st Grade	2	2	82.5	26.5
2nd. Grade	2	2	100.5	16.2
3rd. Grade	2	2	112.2	21.7
4th. Grade	2	2	122.2	23.5
5th. Grade	2	2	138.5	15.2

Materials and Instrument

A total of 12 photographs depicting children of 4 different ethnic groups (Asian, African American, Latino, Anglo) were used as visual support. Members of the research team took most of the photographs with children not participating in the study. The photos matched the gender and age group (determined by the school grade level) of each interviewee in the self-identification task. The photographs were displayed randomly on a wooden board for the categorization task. Also, a set of crayons showing diverse skin tones was used in a self-portrait task.

A semi-structured clinical interview format was designed. This format combined both specific tasks to be performed by the children and verbal interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. It included the following components:

1) Self-identification
Task 1. Self-portrait ("Make a picture of yourself")
Children were asked to make a self-portrait using multicolored crayons to color their facial traits.

2) Self-identification
Task 2: Self-portrait classification ("Put your picture in the box where it belongs")
Four photographs depicting children from four ethnic groups were shown.
After identifying them, the participants put each photograph in a different box, and then, they were asked to place their self-portrait in the box where they thought it belonged.

3) Categorization
Task 3: Photographs grouping ("Put together the pictures that go together")
4 pairs of photographs portraying children that differed in gender, age, ethnic characteristics, and a colored dot (sticker) placed at the bottom of each photo were presented to the participants. Then, the participants were asked to group the photos freely.

4) Ethnic preferences and rejections
Participants were asked to look at the photos in the boxes (from task 2) and to tell which one the children they liked most/ least.

Procedures

Data collection

All children were individually interviewed and visual support (photographs and drawings) was used. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes, and was audio-recorded. Verbal protocols were created based on those recordings. In order to explore into the participants' ideas and justifications, a series of open-ended questions guided the verbal interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Also, the interviewer described some hypothetical situations to facilitate the elaboration of the participants' responses. In addition, the consistency of the participants' responses was tested through the use of a counterargument. Participants were described a situation where a child about his/her age, and from the same ethnic group had used a different categorization criteria. The participants then had the choice to re-categorize the photographs or leave them the way they had originally arranged them.

These strategies aimed to explore the students' justifications in order to obtain qualitative information. A series of categories of response were developed based on this information.

Data Analysis

Table 2 displays the resultant categories for each section of the interview according to the students' elections and justifications.

Table 2. Categories of response for each section of the interview and their justifications.

SECTION	CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION

Self-identification (Self-portrait)	Realistic portrait	Own physical traits matched those depicted on the self-portrait.
	Non-realistic portrait	Mismatch between own physical traits and those depicted on the self-portrait.
Self-identification (Belonging group election)	Own ethnic group	Participants selected their own ethnic group as their belonging group.
	Other ethnic groups	Participants selected a different ethnic group as their belonging group.
Justifications (Belonging group election)	Ethnic	It describes the statements that referred national origin ("He is Mexican just like me") or physical traits.
Categorizations and Justifications	Ethnic	It describes the use of the physical traits depicted on the photographs as a categorization cue ("these are blond").
	Sticker	It refers the matching of the photographs according to the colored dots placed at the bottom edge of each photo.
	Physical Appearance	It describes physical traits not necessarily related to ethnic cues ("they smile the same way", "they look alike".

Ethnic preferences and rejections	"Chinese"	It refers to the election of the child depicting physical traits related to Asian people.
	"Black"	It refers to the election of the children depicting African American traits.
	*"Latino"	It refers to the election of the child depicting a dark-skinned face and black hair.
	"American"	It refers to the election of the child depicting a clear tone of skin and blonde hair.
Justifications (Ethnic preference)	Physical appearance	It refers those elections based on physical traits as preference criteria ("I like the color of her hair")
	Personal attributes	It refers to the facial expression depicted by the children on the photographs and the presumed attitude ("I like her smile. She seems to be happy")
Justifications (ethnic rejection)	Physical appearance	It refers those elections based on physical traits ("I don't like his eyes", "She has a big nose"),
	Personal Attributes	The children's election was based on presumed behaviors, attitudes or emotions ("they steal sometimes"). The participant did not provide an answer.
	No election	

*The participants provided the ethnic labels for the children represented in the photos in a previous task, except for the category "Latino". Since there was a not a consistent label for them, it was decided to use the cultural label for this ethnic group.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, the percentage and frequency of the participants' responses by age group, category, and justifications were calculated through descriptive procedures.

RESULTS

Self-identification

Figure 1 shows the data related to the self-identification tasks (realistic self-portraits, identification with the own ethnic group and the ethnic justifications that supported such election). The majority of participants (63%) chose crayons with shade colours that matched their own ethnic traits (skin, hair, and eyes colour). Despite the absence of a clear a pattern of response related to age, it is notorious how older children (5th grade students) showed a more "realistic" perception of them. On the second part of this task, identification with the own group, it was observed an increasing pattern of response as age progressed. Typically, young students (K-1st grade) selected a different ethnic group to put their self-portrait. This tendency reverses with age, and reaches its peak in 4th grade, where 100% of the participants chose their own ethnic group to place their portraits. Ethnic justifications are barely mentioned in the first age groups. Only 25% of K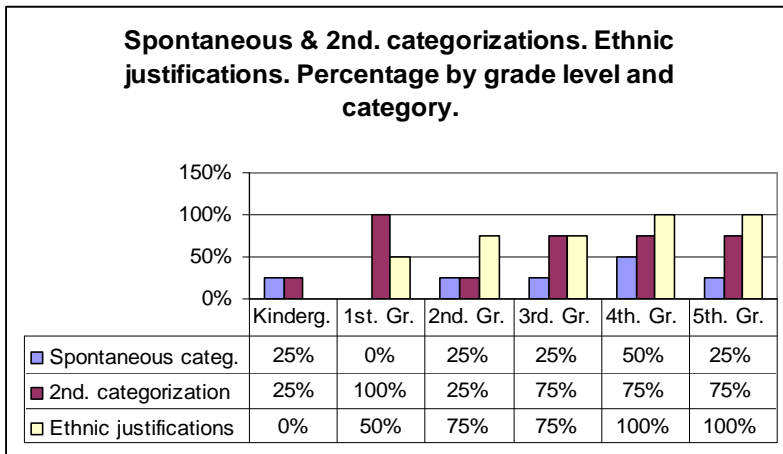indergarteners uses ethnic justifications to support their election while in 1st grade this type of justification is absent. Again, the use of ethnic remarks increases with age, and reaches its peak in 4th grade.

Figure 1: Realistic Self-portrait, own group identification & ethnic justifications. Percentage by grade level and category.

	Kinderg	1st.	2nd.Gra	3rd.	4th.	5th.Gra
▣ Realistic Self-portrait	75%	25%	75%	50%	25%	100%
▪ Own group election	25%	0%	50%	75%	100%	75%
☐ Ethnic justifications	75%	75%	75%	75%	100%	50%
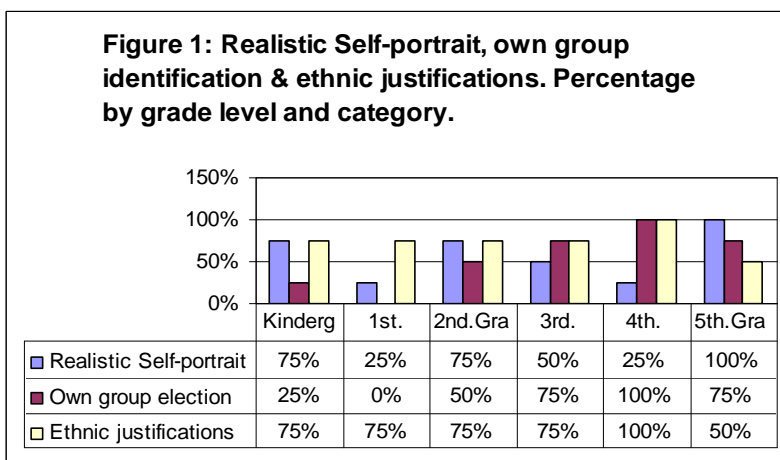
Ethnic categorizations and justifications

Ethnic categorizations were present in all age groups. However, as in the case of the self-identification task, there is not a clear developmental pattern of response on the spontaneous categorizations. Children of all age groups (38%) used ethnic cues in this particular task. The rest of categorizations were divided among coloured dots (25%), gender (0.04%), and "others" (33%) that included physical appearance (not related to ethnic traits) and facial expression. The Second Grade Group was the one with more use of ethnic cues. It must be mentioned, however, that when the consistency of the participants' categorizations was tested through the counterargument strategy, previously mentioned, the percentage of all participants who used ethnic cues increased to 63%. After this second categorization, a developmental tendency in both the use of ethnic cues and ethnic justifications was observed as can be seen in Figure 2.

Spontaneous & 2nd. categorizations. Ethnic justifications. Percentage by grade level and category.

	Kinderg.	1st. Gr.	2nd. Gr.	3rd. Gr.	4th. Gr.	5th. Gr.
■ Spontaneous categ.	25%	0%	25%	25%	50%	25%
■ 2nd. categorization	25%	100%	25%	75%	75%	75%
□ Ethnic justifications	0%	50%	75%	75%	100%	100%

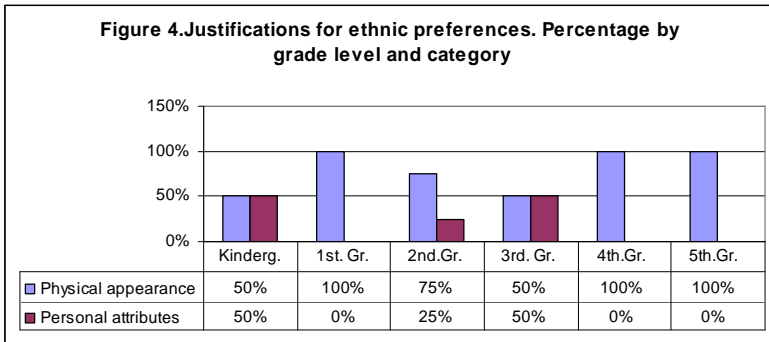*Ethnic preferences and justifications*

Figure 3 shows the trend of responses regarding ethnic preferences. Overall, it is observed that the majority group (Americans) was the most liked one by all age groups (38% of the total sample), followed by Latinos (29%), Asians (17%) and Blacks (17%). It is remarkable that, again, the preference for the majority group reaches its peak in the 4th grade group (9-10 years of age). This inverted "U" has been observed in other studies with ethnic minorities (Aboud, 1987), but in younger children (7-8 years of age). Preference for the own ethnic group was distributed among all age groups. This contrasts with the self-identification task where older children showed a clear tendency to identify with their own group. In other words, self-identification and ethnic preferences did not seem to be related. From a developmental perspective it is interesting how the second graders (7-8 years) responded to this task. It was the group where no one preferred the own group.

Figure 3. Preferences per ethnic group. Percentage by age group and category.

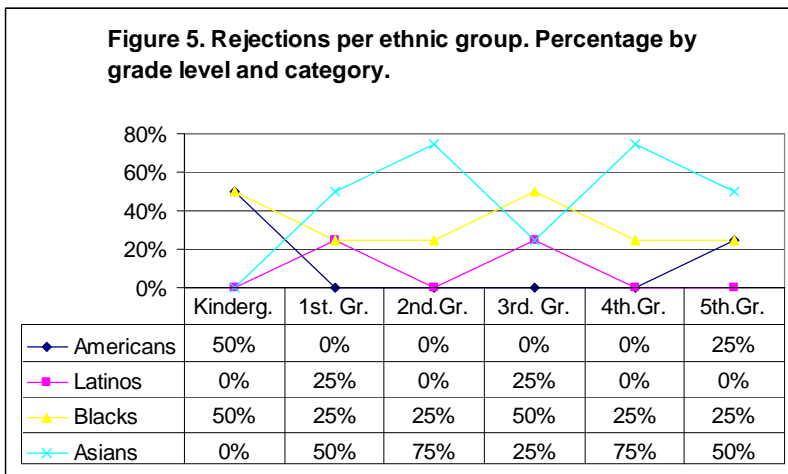|	Kinderg.	1st. Gr.	2nd.Gr.	3rd. Gr.	4th.Gr.	5th.Gr.
◆ Americans	0%	25%	50%	25%	100%	25%
■ Latinos	50%	50%	0%	25%	0%	50%
▲ Blacks	0%	25%	25%	25%	0%	25%
✕ Asians	50%	0%	25%	25%	0%	0%
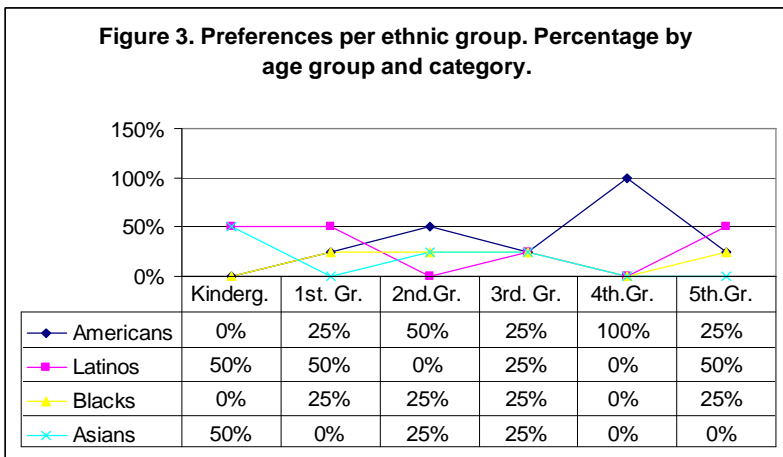
Regarding the arguments that supported their elections, a vast majority used physical appearance justifications (79% among all groups) to either favor their own or the majority group.
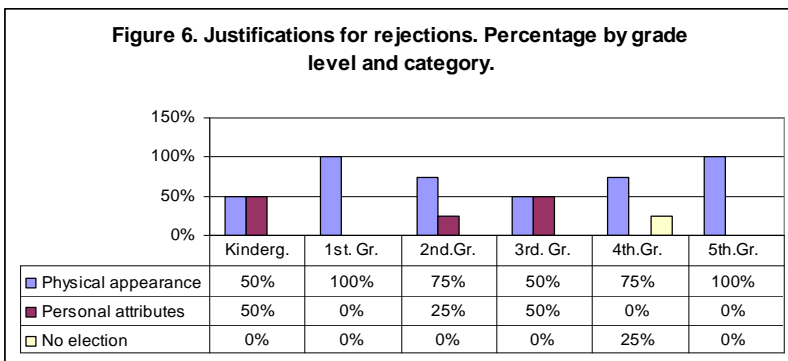
Figure 4.Justifications for ethnic preferences. Percentage by grade level and category

	Kinderg.	1st. Gr.	2nd.Gr.	3rd. Gr.	4th.Gr.	5th.Gr.
■ Physical appearance	50%	100%	75%	50%	100%	100%
■ Personal attributes	50%	0%	25%	50%	0%	0%

Ethnic rejections and justifications

Overall, the Asians group was the most rejected one (46% of all elections), followed by the Blacks (33%), and the Americans (13%). Rejection for the own group was virtually inexistent in all age groups (See figure 5). This shows that even if the own group was not the most liked one, this did not seem to be related to the participants' rejections pattern. It is interesting to observe that the two groups rejected by the fewest number of participants were the Latinos (own group) and the Americans (majority group). Rejections for Chinese and Blacks reached its peak, again, in the second grade group (7-8 years), but it was not observed a clear rejection pattern across ages.

Figure 5. Rejections per ethnic group. Percentage by grade level and category.

	Kinderg.	1st. Gr.	2nd.Gr.	3rd. Gr.	4th.Gr.	5th.Gr.
◆ Americans	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%
■ Latinos	0%	25%	0%	25%	0%	0%
▲ Blacks	50%	25%	25%	50%	25%	25%
✕ Asians	0%	50%	75%	25%	75%	50%

Justifications for rejections were based predominantly on physical appearance (See figure 6).

Figure 6. Justifications for rejections. Percentage by grade level and category.

	Kinderg.	1st. Gr.	2nd.Gr.	3rd. Gr.	4th.Gr.	5th.Gr.
■ Physical appearance	50%	100%	75%	50%	75%	100%
■ Personal attributes	50%	0%	25%	50%	0%	0%
□ No election	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%	0%

DISCUSSION

This study presents partial data of a broader study with Latin American children living in the Austin area that is currently in progress. In some cases, it responds to the findings of other studies with ethnic minority children (Gomez, 2005, Gonzalez, 2005). However, it also presents some interesting differences with respect to other studies with ethnic minorities.

Self-identification

This study introduced a novel procedure in one of its tasks: each participant was able to create his self-portrait using a series of multicoloured crayons. Interestingly, it can be observed that even if a good number of the participants (37%) chose physical traits that differed from their own, a higher percentage of them (55%) classified their portraits with their own ethnic group. This was more evident with the older children. Also, they supported their elections with ethnic justifications.

Ethnic categorization

When asked to spontaneously categorize the photographs, the participants used diverse cues. However, they changed their criteria when ethnic cues where suggested through a counterargument technique. Most participants rearranged their categorizations using ethnic cues and justified their new elections with ethnic arguments. It seemed like once they realized that ethnic cues in the categorization task were "allowed", they decided to use them. This contrast the findings of a previous study conducted in Spain with a similar sample, where ethnic cues where used consistently across the age groups (Gomez, 2005). It is possible that the cultural context had to do with this: the American society is more reluctant to openly express ethnic remarks than the Spanish society.

Ethnic preferences

The fact that the majority group was the most favored one responded to the findings of other studies with minority groups (Lo Coco & Pace, 2005). What is interesting here is the mismatch between ethnic identification and preferences. Participants, particularly the older ones, seem to know "who they are" in terms of ethnic belonging, but this doesn't mean that they like it. The ethnic arguments they used to justify their elections support this interpretation.

Ethnic rejections

All the participants expressed rejection for an ethnic group across the age groups. This contrasts the results obtained in Spain with a similar population (Gomez, 2005) where more than 50% of the older children refused to express any kind of rejection, and when they did, they used presumed personal attributes instead of physical traits. Interestingly, despite of the initial reluctance to use ethnic cues spontaneously on the categorization task, the majority of participants in this study (67%) expressed rejections using this type of criteria. It seemed like once they realized that it was "politically correct" to talk about ethnic differences, they use them to justify their rejections. In addition, there seem to be a relative independence between preferences and rejections when selecting the own group. That is, less preference does not necessarily relate to more rejection.

These findings must be regarded as preliminary ones. As mentioned before, only 33% of the total sample is presented here. However, some clear tendencies can be observed. On the one hand, it is evident that since the early years, children show awareness of the existence of ethnic diversity and use this knowledge in their identification and categorization processes. From a developmental perspective, it is clear that as children grow older they use ethnic cues more consistently in both their elections and their justifications. However, at the

same time, they seem to be more sensible about the "hidden rules" of the cultural context. At first, they avoid discussing ethnic differences but once they realized that it is "safe" to do it, they express their elections and justifications in a more open way.

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