

Meaning Making in Middle Childhood: An Exploration of the Meaning of Ethnic Identity

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Social identity, including identification with one's ethnic group, is an important aspect of social development. However, little is known about the subjective meaning associated with social group memberships, particularly during middle childhood. Using second- and fourth-graders responses to an open-ended question, we explored the meaning of ethnic identity with a sample of Chinese, Dominican, Russian, White, and Black American children. Analyses revealed that middle childhood is an active period for meaning making as children described the ethnic identity to include ideas such as language, physical appearance, pride, relative social position, and culture. While there were few differences in the ethnic identity meaning responses of second- and fourth-grade children, the meaning of ethnic identity varied considerably across the ethnic groups underscoring how the unique features and experiences of different ethnic groups shapes the subjective meaning of ethnic identity. These findings align with prior research on the meaning of ethnic identity among adults and adolescents and offer insight for future research regarding the conceptualization and measurement of the meaning of social group membership.

Keywords: ethnic identity, meaning, middle childhood

“[Being Russian] means to be from a different country, have different personalities, and speak a different language.”—*Russian American boy, fourth grade*

“[Being Dominican means] to talk in Spanish, eat different kinds of food and wear different clothes that Americans don't.”—*Dominican American boy, second grade*

“[Being White means] like, people are born black and white. A long time ago White people used to do whatever they want. And we have to learn that we're all the same.”—*White American girl, fourth grade*

Ethnic identity,¹ an individual's sense of belonging to an ethnic group, has received considerable empirical attention, particularly among adolescents (e.g., Quintana, 2007; Quintana et al., 2006). Recent work, however, calls attention to the emergence and relevance of ethnic identity in middle childhood (e.g., Marks, Szalacha, Lammare, Boyd, & Garcia Coll, 2007; Rowley, Burchinal, Roberts, & Zeisel, 2008). While prior studies have examined when children begin to use ethnic labels (e.g., Rhee & Ruble, 1997), researchers have seldom asked when children begin to ascribe

meaning to these labels or what is the content of such meaning. For example, how does an American child of Chinese immigrant parents define what it means to be Chinese? Does the child think of it largely in terms of speaking Chinese or in terms of the physical characteristics (e.g., having black hair and different-shaped eyes) that set the child apart from others? The meaning of ethnic identity may also look distinct at different ages and vary according a child's ethnic background. The current study sampled ethnically diverse second and fourth graders to examine: (a) the content of ethnic identity in middle childhood, (b) whether the content of ethnic identity varied across development, and (c) whether there were ethnic differences in the content of ethnic identity.

Social Identity Theory: A Framework of Ethnic Identity Meaning

Social identity refers to the part of an individual's self-concept derived from membership in a social group, such as an ethnic group (Tajfel, 1981). Social identification influences various social and psychological processes, including self-evaluation and in-group/out-group preferences (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Establishing a social identity is more than simply labeling oneself as a group member. It is a process whereby

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¹ We use the terms ethnicity and ethnic identity to encompass both ethnic and racial group membership. Though race and ethnicity are distinct concepts they are interrelated and often inseparable in the experience of identity. For further discussion see: Allen, Bat-Chava, Aber, & Seidman, 2005; Quintana, 2007; Quintana & McKown, 2008.

the individual comes to view the self as integrated with a social group, developing a sense of “we-ness” (Ruble et al., 2004; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). According to *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) the social self emerges from the interrelated processes of social categorization and social comparison: Individuals first organize the world into discrete categories, emphasizing the differences *between* and similarities *within* social groups, and then evaluate or attribute meaning to these categorizations. As such, the social status (e.g., rich, poor), personality traits (e.g., smart, kind) and physical characteristics (e.g., brown skin) of a group derive their meaning from “perceived differences from other groups and the value connotations of these differences” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 258). This meaning-making process is the foundation on which one’s social identity is constructed.

Empirical studies of the meaning of ethnic identity among adolescents and adults call attention to the “content” of ethnic identity (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Way, Santos, Niwa, & Kim-Gervey, 2008). For example, Niemann, Romero, Arredondo, and Rodriguez (1999) asked a community sample of Mexican Americans, “What does it mean to be Mexican?” and Torres and Magolda (2004) asked similar questions of Latino-identified college students. Their studies showed that the meaning of ethnic identity included language, cultural behaviors (e.g., celebrating holidays, eating ethnic foods), family heritage, and experiences of ethnic discrimination. Way and colleagues (2008) found similar themes among Puerto Rican American, Dominican American, Chinese American, and Black American adolescents who emphasized language, pride, culture, and physical appearance (i.e., skin color) in their ethnic identity narratives. In related studies, Syed and Azmitia (2008, 2010) revealed four themes in the content of emerging adults’ narratives about ethnicity: awareness of difference (e.g., social inequalities); awareness of underrepresentation (e.g., being the only Black student in class); connection to culture (e.g., family); and experiences of discrimination. Collectively, these works suggest that, at least among adults and adolescents, the content of ethnic identity meaning includes physical appearance (i.e., skin color), cultural experiences (e.g., language, celebrating holidays, heritage), group pride, and an awareness of group differences and their social consequences (i.e., discrimination). What remains unknown is whether ethnic identity holds substantive meaning prior to adolescence and, if so, whether its content reflects similar themes to what is observed among adolescents and adults.

Ethnic Identity Development and Meaning in Middle Childhood

Middle childhood (7–10 years old) is marked by social and cognitive developments that facilitate a more complex understanding of social categories (Aboud & Ruble, 1987) and allow children to form emergent social identities (Bennett & Sani, 2004). Children’s understanding of social categories begins with an awareness of social categories, followed by the ability to label individuals as members of specific groups (e.g., “White”) based on observable differences (e.g., skin color; e.g., Ruble & Goodnow, 1998). In middle childhood, with the emergence of abstract thought, children also begin to make categorizations based on more intangible features of social groups (e.g., behaviors, traits, heredity) and to use social comparison to interpret such group differences (Ruble & Frey, 1991). In other words, by 7 to 10 years of age, children possess the essential skills—social categorization and social com-

parison—for making meaning of social identities. As such, children’s early conceptions of meaning may serve as building blocks for ethnic identity development throughout the life span.

This article explored what “meaningful” ethnic identities might look like during this period of development. Prior research indicates that children establish ethnic group membership (*ethnic label*) and understand its permanence (*ethnic constancy*) before acquiring the more meaningful aspects of ethnic identity (e.g., Ocampo, Knight, & Bernal, 1997). Quintana’s research (1994) and review of empirical studies (1998) on ethnic understanding show that young children (3–5 years old) emphasize overt features, such as skin color, but in middle childhood (6–10 years old) children focus more on the behavioral and abstract aspects of ethnicity, such as language and heritage/ancestry. Ethnic understanding also appears to become multifaceted during middle childhood as children ascribe multiple meanings to ethnicity rather than singular descriptions (Quintana, 1994). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the content of ethnic identity in middle childhood might include observable features (e.g., skin color) but also see the emergence of behavioral (e.g., language), abstract (i.e., heritage), and evaluative (e.g., social comparisons) aspects of ethnic group membership. We also expected older children to provide more definitions of meaning than younger children or refer to multiple aspects of their ethnic identities.

Ethnic Identity Meaning in Context

Ethnic identity is shaped by contextual factors, such as cultural beliefs and social stratification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The social construction of ethnicity, in particular, might influence the meaning of ethnic identity. For example, while children of various ethnic backgrounds in the United States share many social experiences, including an American nationality, they are defined primarily by their differences—unique group histories (e.g., immigration patterns), social positions (e.g., socioeconomic status), physical features (e.g., skin color), and cultural practices (e.g., religion, language). U.S.-born Whites and Blacks, for example, have very distinct, though deeply intertwined, group histories and social positions in society. Likewise, children of immigrants share aspects of the immigrant experience, but also have different histories, cultures, and physical attributes (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Such differences may be reflected in the content of ethnic identity.

For example, Way and colleagues (2008) found that for Puerto Rican adolescents, ethnic identity meant group pride and celebrating cultural events, whereas language was the most salient for Chinese American youth. The Black and Dominican American youth in their research mentioned pride but also skin color and discrimination. Phinney and Tarver’s (1988) comparison of Black and White adolescents’ identity narratives also revealed that while Black and White adolescents emphasized skin color to define the meaning of ethnic identity, Black youth tended to mention pride and discrimination more than their White peers. Syed and Azmitia (2008) also found ethnic differences in the meaning of ethnic identity: ethnic minority students (Asian American, Latino) focused more on cultural connection and experiences of discrimination whereas the White and mixed-ethnicity students defined ethnic identity as an awareness of ethnic group differences. It is not yet known whether such ethnic group differences in meaning would be present as early as middle childhood, a period when children are becoming increasingly aware of group differences and

the social meanings attributed to particular ethnic groups. Examining meaning across ethnic groups can reveal if the unique features of ethnic groups are related to how children interpret the meaning of their ethnic identities.

Current Study

Three questions guided our analysis of the meaning of ethnic identity:

1. Does an understanding of the meaning of ethnic identity emerge in middle childhood, and in what ways does its content resemble prior research with adolescents and adults?

Based on prior research (e.g., Quintana, 1994; Syed & Azmitia, 2008), we expected children's open-ended responses about the meaning of ethnic identity to include: physical appearance, cultural experiences (e.g., language, holidays, heritage), group pride, and an awareness of group differences (e.g., being poor).

2. Are there age differences in the content of ethnic identity among second and fourth graders?

In accordance with theory and research on the development of social understanding (Knight, Bernal, Cota, Garza, & Ocampo, 1997; Quintana, 1998), we expected the content of older children's ethnic identities to include more abstract ideas and social comparisons than younger children's. For example, fourth graders may be more likely to describe the meaning of ethnic identity in terms of heredity while second graders may be more likely to focus on observable descriptions, such as physical appearance. We also expected older children to provide more multifaceted descriptions of meaning compared to younger children (Quintana, 1994).

3. Are ethnic differences in the content of ethnic identity evident during middle childhood?

Because ethnic groups have distinct characteristics (e.g., language, history, physical features) and ethnic experiences in society, we expected the content of ethnic identity to differ by ethnic group. Specifically, we expected references to language and cultural traditions to be more prevalent among Chinese, Dominican, and Russian American children (Way et al., 2008) and references to physical appearance more prevalent among Black and White children (Phinney & Tarver, 1988). Blacks and Dominican Americans may also refer to discrimination and pride more than Chinese American (Way et al., 2008) and White children (Phinney & Tarver, 1988), and White children may make fewer references to ethnic behaviors (Syed & Azmitia, 2008).

Method

Recruitment and Sample

Data were drawn from a larger study that examined the social and academic development of children of immigrants in New York City. Public schools serving an ethnically diverse population were invited to participate. Once schools gave consent, research assistants visited each second- and fourth-grade classroom to discuss

the study and distribute parent consent forms, which were later collected from teachers. Only children with signed consent forms participated. Inclusion criteria required that children identify as a member of one of the following ethnic groups: Chinese, Dominican, Russian American, White, or Black. Because ethnic identity has been shown to vary by generational status (e.g., Rumbaut, 2005), the Chinese, Dominican, and Russian children were U.S.-born, second-generation immigrants (both parents born in the country of origin and the child born in the U.S.) and the White and Black children were third or later generation (both parents and child born in the U.S.). These three immigrant groups were selected because they are all represented in the top 10 countries of origin for immigrant groups in New York City (NYCDCP, 2000).

In the larger study, 446 children participated. Forty-three had missing data on the measure of interest; these children were disproportionately older (74% fourth graders), female (65%), and Chinese American (60%). The sample for these analyses included 403 children in the second and fourth grades (228 girls; 184 second graders; 24% Chinese American ($n = 96$); 25% Dominican American ($n = 102$); 18% Russian American ($n = 72$); 22% White ($n = 89$); and 11% Black ($n = 44$). Children attended schools where the percentage of the school population eligible for free/reduced lunch ranged from 21% to 99%. The Chinese American, Dominican American, and Black children in our sample were more likely to attend schools with higher rates of free/reduced lunch than the Russian American and White children.

Procedure, Measures, and Coding

Given the range of topics relevant to the study (e.g., ethnic identity, gender identity, self-worth, in-group/out-group attitudes, school) the survey was administered in three sessions. Each session was conducted during school hours and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Because of the sensitive nature of some of the questions (e.g., ethnicity), each child was interviewed by a female researcher of the same race (Weeks & Moore, 1981).

Each child's *ethnicity* was established during the first session. Children were presented with the following ethnic labels and asked to select the correct one: Chinese, Dominican, Russian, White, and Black. All children included in this analysis accurately self-identified. *Ethnic identity meaning* was assessed during the third session via the open-ended question: "What does it mean to be [ethnicity]?" Because the project procedures did not warrant audio-recording, survey administrators hand-recorded children's responses verbatim and probed for full responses.

Children's open-ended responses were then coded. The coding process was both inductive and guided by prior research on ethnic understanding (Quintana, 1998). Following the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2003), all open-ended responses were read, meaning descriptors (e.g., "happy," "language," "the color of my skin") were highlighted, and similar ideas grouped together to form a preliminary coding scheme. Two independent researchers coded portions of the dataset to verify the clarity and suitability of the codes. Through analytical discussions about the data and the codes, the coding scheme was revised and reapplied to the data. The final scheme included eight codes (See Table 1). Each code was established as a dichotomous variable: 1 for *present*, 0 for *absent*. Codes were not mutually exclusive such that a single child's response could receive multiple codes. Using the final

Table 1
Meaning of Ethnic Identity: Content Codes and Sample Quotes

Code	Coding Definition	Example
<i>Language</i>	Speak native language, English, or bilingual	<p>“I think it means you just talk Chinese, not English, Spanish, and more” (Chinese American girl, second grade)</p> <p>“If I didn’t know Spanish, I wouldn’t be Spanish. I learned two different languages, Spanish and English” (Dominican American Boy, second grade)</p> <p>“It means that when you know your own language you can speak with everyone, you can speak to them” (Russian American girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>Heredity & birthplace</i>	Ethnicity as immutable and inherited; family and/or birthplace	<p>“Because you’re born that way, if your mother is Chinese, you’ll be too” (Chinese American boy, second grade)</p> <p>“If your mother is Dominican, then you are Dominican. You have to like your country, the Dominican Republic. You have to be born there” (Dominican American boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“It means that you were born White and you are going to grow up to be White” (White girl, fourth grade)</p> <p>“If your mom and dad were born black then you would be too” (Black girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>Physical appearance</i>	Observable features—hair color/texture; skin color	<p>“Mostly to have black hair, and different skin than black or white people” (Chinese American girl, second grade)</p> <p>“Most of my friends are white; they will like me more if I have their skin color” (White boy, second)</p> <p>“My skin color, my hair—different color people have curly hair” (Black girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>Relative social position</i>	Group comparisons; group differences; social hierarchy	<p>Children communicated these ideas in terms of:</p> <p><i>Power</i>: “You don’t get bossed around as much as Black people” (White girl, fourth grade)</p> <p><i>Socioeconomic status</i>: “It means to be poor and not speak English.” (Dominican American boy, second grade)</p> <p><i>Discrimination</i>: “It’s sort of hard; some people is black and they don’t have no place to stay. Some people they ask for change and they don’t get it “cause they black” (Black girl, second grade)</p> <p>“I think that it means some people make fun of you because you’re White but sometimes they make fun of you when you’re black. But in my school they mostly make fun of black people” (White boy, fourth grade)</p> <p><i>Behavioral differences</i>: “The way I talk—some white people use big words, I don’t, the way they dress—white people dress like they’re rich and I don’t” (Black girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>Pride</i>	Positive feelings about or toward one’s ethnic group	<p>“It means you are special since you learn another language” (Chinese American boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“You like what you have and you’re proud of what you are” (Dominican American girl, second grade)</p> <p>“I think it’s important to be Russian because to me it’s a part of who I am because Russia was my home country” (Russian American girl, fourth grade)</p> <p>“I think it means to me that it’s very important and I should be proud of being white” (White boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“It’s very important. I was born in a black family. I’m black and proud to be” (Black girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>Positive traits</i>	Attribute positive characteristics, traits, or attitudes to ethnic group	<p>“To want to learn” (Chinese American boy, second grade)</p> <p>“Dominicans are hardworking, responsible, take care of themselves” (Dominican American boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“To be smart, successful, and strong” (Russian American boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“To be proud, to be helpful, to be nice and kind” (White girl, second grade)</p>
<i>Culture</i>	Cultural practices (food, holidays, games); religious beliefs	<p>“It means loyalty” (Black girl, fourth grade)</p> <p>“You believe in a certain God (Buddha) and can speak Chinese well” (Chinese American boy, fourth grade)</p> <p>“To talk in Spanish, eat different kinds of food and wear different clothes that Americans don’t wear” (Dominican American girl, second grade)</p> <p>“It means that you speak Russian; you have come from Russia; you can talk to everybody who is Russian; You can play Russian games; you can play in Russian computer; you can live in Russia; you like to do everything Russian; and wear Russian clothes” (Russian American girl, fourth grade)</p>
<i>I don’t know</i>	Child’s only response was <i>I don’t know</i>	—

coding scheme, three independent researchers, unfamiliar with the initial coding scheme, coded the full dataset. Interrater reliability was strong ($\kappa = .80$ to 1.00).

Results

Describing the Content of Ethnic Identity Meaning

The coding process yielded eight content codes: *language*, *heredity and birthplace*, *physical appearance*, *relative social position*, *pride*, *positive traits*, *culture*, and *I don't know*. All children who initially answered *I don't know* were probed; those remaining unable or unwilling to answer and were coded into this category. Table 1 presents a description of each code and sample quotes. *Language* was the most prevalent content meaning code across the sample (30%), followed by *heredity and birthplace* (21%), *I don't know* (19%), and *physical appearance* (15%). The remaining responses about the meaning of ethnic identity included references to *relative social position* (12%), *pride* (12%), *positive traits* (11%), and *culture* (7%).

We further explored the content of children's ethnic identity descriptions by examining the multidimensionality of their responses; that is, the number of different content codes assigned to each child's response. For example, the response, "A little poor, don't have a very good job," was given one code for *relative social position* while the response, "Speak Spanish, have black hair, live in an island or country that speaks Spanish," was given three codes for *language*, *physical appearance*, and *heredity and birthplace*. The majority of the sample (63%) gave responses that referred to one content category and one third (32%) gave responses that referred to two or more content codes. The remaining 5% of the sample gave responses that were uncoded, generally signifying that they did not understand the question (e.g., "It means to play outside"). ANOVAs revealed no ethnic differences in the mean number of codes received. However, as expected, fourth graders received more codes than second graders ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .57$; $M = 1.20$, $SD = .52$, respectively), $F(1, 402) = 5.96$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Though this effect was small, it suggests that older children defined ethnic identity in a more multidimensional way.

We also quantified how much children said about the meaning of ethnic identity by counting the total number of descriptors children gave in their responses (even if those descriptors referred to the same content category). For example, the response "I speak Chinese" received one descriptor whereas the response "It's fun, good, happy, and amazing. Nobody can speak in Russian, but I could" received a total of five descriptors: four for *pride* ("fun," "good," "happy," "amazing") and one for *language* ("speak in Russian"). The total number of descriptors assigned to a child's response ranged from 0 to 8 ($M = 1.51$, $SD = .99$). Most children (82%) provided fairly short responses that included one (59%) or two (23%) descriptors. However, fourth graders ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.11$) gave slightly more descriptions of their ethnic identities than did second graders ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .82$), $F(1, 383) = 3.31$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2 = .01$; although this effect was small and only marginally significant. Russian and Dominican American children ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.21$; $M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.09$, respectively) gave significantly more descriptions than did White, Chinese American, and Black children ($M = 1.25$, $SD = .77$; $M = 1.25$, $SD = .54$; $M = 1.36$, $SD = 1.18$, respectively), $F(4, 383) = 6.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$.

In sum, older children, as expected, elaborated on their ethnic identities more than younger children did, and, interestingly, Russian and Dominican American children spoke more about the meaning of their ethnic identities than children of other ethnic groups.

Age Differences

Next we examined whether the meaning of ethnic identity differed among second- and fourth-grade children by conducting 2 (grade) \times 5 (ethnicity) ANOVAs. In each model, the dependent variable was one of the content meaning codes (e.g., *language*). Because these models violated the assumption of equal variances, Dunnett's C post hoc test of significance was used to evaluate ethnic group differences. Main effects for grade and ethnicity are reported separately; differences by grade in school are reported in this section and ethnic differences (alongside significant interactions) are reported in the subsequent section.

Overall, the prevalence of content codes was quite similar across grade levels (see Table 2), but results revealed significant grade differences in three of the content meaning codes (see Table 3). In accordance with social-cognitive perspectives, we expected older children to refer more often to the abstract (e.g., *heredity and birthplace*) and evaluative (e.g., *social comparisons*) aspects of meaning and give less attention to the observable features of ethnic group membership (e.g., *skin color*, *language*). These predictions were supported for *heredity and birthplace*, $F(1, 393) = 7.86$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with older children using this code more often than younger children, but not for the other categories. Unexpectedly, older children referred to *physical appearance* significantly more often than younger children, $F(4, 393) = 17.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$.² Finally, second graders were slightly more likely than fourth graders to say, "*I don't know*," when asked about the meaning of ethnic identity, $F(4, 393) = 3.88$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, though this effect was quite small. Overall, results for the content of ethnic meaning did not show as many age differences as we had expected.

Ethnic Differences

Lastly, we examined whether the context of ethnicity was related to the meaning of ethnic identity. In alignment with our predictions (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Way et al., 2008), we found that the content of ethnic identity varied considerably across ethnic groups with significant ethnic differences for each of the content codes except *culture* (see Tables 2 and 3). Results from the post hoc comparisons are discussed below.³

We expected references to the cultural aspects of meaning—*language* and *heredity and birthplace*, *culture*—to be more pre-

² Given that fourth graders talked more than second graders (as indicated by the total number of codes and descriptors), we conducted ANCOVAs, controlling for amount of descriptive language, for each of the content meaning codes. Age differences for *heredity and birthplace* and *physical appearance* remained significant.

³ We conducted ANCOVAs on each content code controlling for amount of descriptive language. All of the findings remained significant, suggesting that even though some ethnic groups had more to say about the meaning of their ethnic identities, it did not explain the differences in content of their identities.

Table 2
Relative Frequency of Content Meaning Codes by Grade and Ethnic Group

	Language	Heredity and birthplace	Physical appearance	Relative social position	Pride	Positive traits	Culture	I don't know
Grade								
2nd ($n = 184$)	.28	.14	.12	.11	.13	.13	.06	.24
4th ($n = 219$)	.26	.25	.20	.15	.13	.09	.10	.16
Ethnicity								
Chinese American ($n = 96$)	.54	.21	.02	.03	.02	.03	.05	.28
Dominican American ($n = 102$)	.38	.31	.10	.13	.21	.19	.10	.03
Russian American ($n = 72$)	.35	.29	.04	.04	.15	.17	.12	.25
White ($n = 89$)	.02	.07	.38	.25	.08	.06	.03	.26
Black ($n = 44$)	.05	.09	.25	.21	.18	.11	.09	.20
Total ($N = 403$)	30%	21%	15%	12%	12%	11%	7%	19%

Note. Because children's open-ended responses were coded as 0 = present or 1 = absent, the relative frequency values represent the proportion of responses containing the code specified, and thus, can be interpreted as percentages.

alent among the children of immigrants and references to *physical appearance* and *relative social position* to be more salient among the White and Black children. Results supported these predictions except for *culture* for which no differences were found. Specifically, Dominican and Russian American children referred to *heredity and birthplace* more frequently than did White and Black children, and Chinese American children referenced *heredity and birthplace* more often than did their White peers, $F(4, 393) = 6.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Similarly, *language* was more commonly mentioned by children of immigrants as compared to the children of U.S.-born parents, $F(4, 393) = 22.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$. Interestingly, Chinese American children gave more references to *language* than Dominican and Russian American children did. A grade by ethnicity interaction for *language* also emerged, $F(4, 393) = 2.65$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. There were significant ethnic differences in how often language was mentioned for both second and fourth graders, $F(4, 179) = 7.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$; $F(4, 214) = 19.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$, respectively, but the pattern of ethnic difference varied across grade levels. Both Chinese and Dominican American second graders ($M = .44$, $SD = .06$; $M = .46$, $SD = .06$, respectively) referenced *language* more than did White and Black second graders ($M = .03$, $SD = .08$, $ps < .001$; $M = .09$, $SD = .09$, $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively), but among fourth graders, only Chinese American children ($M = .63$, $SD = .05$) differed significantly from their peers in their references to *language* (all p values $< .01$; see Figure 1). Finally, as expected, *physical appearance* and *relative social position* were referred to more often by White and Black children than by Chinese, Dominican, and Russian American children, $F(4, 393) = 17.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$; $F(4, 393) = 6.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, respectively.

We also expected ethnic group differences in children's references to *pride* and *positive traits*. Results indicated that Black and Dominican American children mentioned *pride* more often than did Chinese American children; Dominican American children also referred to *pride* more frequently than did White children, $F(4, 393) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. *Positive traits* were also mentioned frequently among Dominican and Russian American children as compared to Chinese American and White children, $F(4, 393) = 4.12$, $p < .002$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Finally, we unexpectedly found that Dominican American children were less likely than Chinese American, Russian American, and White children to say

I don't know when asked about the meaning of ethnic identity, $F(4, 393) = 6.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$; the other ethnic groups did not differ significantly from each other. In sum, results supported our predictions for ethnic group differences in the content of ethnic identity meaning and generally followed the patterns found in prior research with adults and adolescents.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to extend research on the conceptualization and measurement of the meaning of ethnic identity to younger children from diverse ethnic groups. Children's open-ended responses reveal a striking sophistication in their awareness of the social meanings that are attached to ethnicity. Our data indicate that ethnic identity does have substantive meaning in middle childhood, and that the content of this meaning is diverse and resembles themes found among adults and adolescents. While there were few age differences in the meaning of ethnic identity there was considerable variation across ethnic groups.

The Content of Ethnic Identity Meaning

Although meaning is a theorized dimension of social identity (Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Ruble et al., 2004) there is little research on it, especially prior to adolescence. Our findings suggest that meaning emerges as a clear dimension of ethnic identity as early as in middle childhood and its contents are similar to adolescence and adulthood (Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Way et al., 2008). This is not to say that 8-year-olds have the same level of sophisticated social understanding as 18-year-olds have but they do reference similar ideas including: physical appearance, cultural experiences, group pride, and an awareness of group differences. These early understandings of meaning may provide the framework in which more complex understandings are subsequently organized and expanded with greater experience and cognitive capabilities. For example, during middle childhood children recognize language as a defining feature of the meaning of ethnic identity, and through experience and socialization they learn the social implications of language, such as discrimination based on linguistic accents (e.g., Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002). Likewise, children's recognition of skin color may or may not fully

Table 3
Group Differences in the Content of Ethnic Identity Meaning: Summary of ANOVA Models With F Values

	Language	Heredity/ birthplace	Physical appearance	Relative social position	Pride	Positive traits	Culture	I don't know
Grade	.21	7.86**	5.17*	.91	.06	1.45	2.91	3.88*
Ethnicity	22.67***	6.02***	17.77***	6.90***	5.23***	4.12**	1.67	6.73***
Grade × Ethnicity	2.65*	.11	.73	.18	.63	.47	1.07	.76

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

capture the accompanying discrimination that corresponds with having dark skin but children's awareness of skin color as it relates to ethnic identity may shape how they interpret and experience ethnic identity in subsequent developmental stages.

Consistent with prior work (e.g., Niemann et al., 1999; Torres & Magolda, 2004), our findings also illustrate that the content of ethnic identity meaning is diverse. In our sample, there was no content code that was used by all children or even the majority of the children in the sample. References to *language* were the most common, but were present in only 30% of children's responses. The multifaceted nature of children's meaning responses aligns with the work of Syed and Azmitia (2008) who subsequently recommend a "multidimensional conceptualization of content" that includes "ethnic behaviors, values, beliefs, affect, and ethnicity-related experiences" (p. 1022). Indeed, the content meaning codes that emerged in our analysis suggest potential dimensions of meaning: physical (e.g., skin color), biological (e.g., heredity), behavioral (e.g., language, food), comparative (e.g., relative social position), and affective (e.g., pride). Thus, rather than defining and measuring meaning solely as ideologies (e.g., Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) or behaviors

(e.g., Phinney, 1993), future work may benefit from considering the multiple aspects (or "contents") of ethnic identity meaning as well as how such meanings overlap with each other.

Age Differences

Surprisingly, we found few age differences in the content of ethnic identity. However, in accordance with prior research (Quintana, 1994), we found that compared to younger children, older children tended to refer to multiple aspects of meaning. Meaning for older children often included abstract as well as concrete or observable meanings. Though the finding that older compared to younger children mentioned physical appearance more was unexpected, it corresponds with research that has also found frequent references to physical appearance among adolescents (Phinney & Tarver, 1988). Skin color could be considered an elementary method for categorizing individuals into different ethnic groups (e.g., Ruble & Goodnow, 1998), but it is also a highly salient and significant aspect of an ethnic self that can influence both self- and other-perceptions (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Thus, older children may reference skin

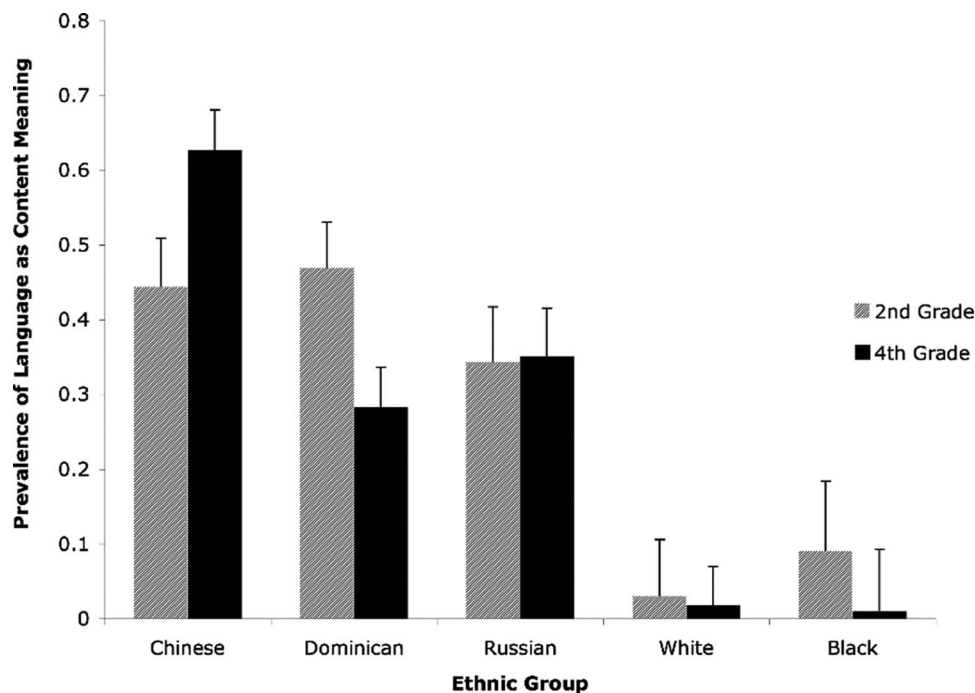


Figure 1. Language Content Meaning: Grade by Ethnicity Interaction.

color more frequently than their younger peers because they are becoming increasingly aware of the symbolic meaning of this observable difference.

Younger children also said *I don't know* more often than older children, which may reflect the fact that second grade is a period when children just begin to grapple with abstract ideas such as ethnicity beyond mere categorization. Observational studies suggest that even young children (3–5 years old) exhibit sophisticated understandings of ethnicity, using ethnic markers to exclude peers (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). Thus, the more frequent use of *I don't know* among the second graders in our sample does not necessarily indicate that they do not understand the meaning of ethnic identity. Instead, it may be that these children are still formulating the vocabulary to express meaning in an open-ended format.

Ethnic Differences

Finally, our data show that ethnic group differences in meaning of ethnic identity were evident among children and paralleled those found among adults and adolescents. Children of immigrants were more likely to reference *language* and *heredity and birthplace* (Way et al., 2008) while White and Black children were more likely to reference *physical appearance* and *relative social position* (Phinney & Tarver, 1988; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Also, the Dominican American and Black children in our sample were more likely to discuss *pride* than were White and Chinese American children (Way et al., 2008) and references to *positive traits* were more common among the Dominican and Russian American children. There were no ethnic group differences in references to *culture*, which may be due to the overall low prevalence of this meaning category—present in only 7% of the responses. It may be that one's own cultural practices are “invisible” at this age, perceived as normal rather than cultural. That is, fourth grade may be too young for one to realize that not everyone takes their shoes off in their house or eats rice every day.

The salience of *language* among the children whose ethnic group (as a whole) speaks a language other than English (Chinese, Russian, and Dominican American) is unsurprising, as their bilingual environments set them apart from their monolingual English-speaking peers. In fact, Kinzler, Shutts, DeJesus, and Spelke (2009) recently showed that linguistic accents “trump race” in children's peer preferences, underscoring the centrality of language in children's social lives. Similarly, the frequent references to *heredity and birthplace* among the children of immigrants may reflect their awareness of being different—knowing that they have ties to two countries and that their families come from, and perhaps still live in, a different country (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Thus, for children of immigrants, ethnicity is familial and generational—being part of an ethnic group means being part of a family. It was interesting, however, to find that Chinese American children, particularly fourth graders, mentioned language more than their Russian and Dominican American peers. This difference may be due in part to the U.S. context where Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language and is spoken by many non-Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). As a Chinese American boy (second grade) explained: “[It means] to speak Chinese, but in the movies White people speak Chinese, but it's fake, I never saw it in real life.”

Among the White and Black children, *physical appearance* and *relative social position* were the primary contents of ethnic identity meaning. Their descriptions often referenced Black–White comparisons: “I don't know, you're born being Black, you're from the ghetto, you're cooler than the White people, you get in more trouble. And in the police department they're more Black people in jail than White” (Black girl, fourth grade); “Well, a lot of people are White or Black, and some jobs you have to be White and some you have to be Black; so, you get those choices” (White girl, second grade). Thus, White and Black children's references to skin color and social positioning seem to reflect the longstanding racialized Black–White climate of the U.S. that continues to shape the meaning and experience of the ethnic self (Omi & Winant, 1994; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Importantly, however, the sociohistorical and political meaning of skin color carries different implications for each group. For White children, skin color is an asset that comes with social and political power and privilege (Omi & Winant, 1994). Though it is unlikely that White children are aware of the depth and breadth of “white privilege” (McIntosh, 1998), they are aware of the preference for White skin in our culture (as are Black children), which informs their emerging views of ethnic identity. For Black children, on the other hand, dark skin is associated with a host of negative stereotypes, which have implications for social interactions (e.g., discrimination) and may influence global self worth (e.g., Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001). As such, children's emphasis on skin color in describing the meaning of ethnic identity may have important implications for other domains of development, such as well-being, as well as other dimensions of ethnic identity, such as private and public regard.

The ethnic differences in *pride* and *positive traits* also aligned with prior research. Specifically, the Chinese American children in our sample referred to *pride* less often than their peers did (Fulgini, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Way et al., 2008). This pattern may reflect the idea that East Asians are less likely to self-enhance (Heine & Hamamura, 2007) as well as the negative societal messages regarding the social status of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. (Wu, 2003). Alternatively, it may be the case that *language* and *heredity/birthplace* were so central to Chinese American children's definitions of ethnic identity (accounting for 76% of their responses), that they gave little thoughts to expressions of *pride*. More so than the other ethnic groups in our sample, the Chinese American children demonstrated a collective view of ethnic identity meaning that did not center on pride. At the same time, the higher references to *pride* among Black and Dominican American children and *positive traits* among Russian American children may reflect more parental ethnic socialization among these groups (compared to White children), which may provide them with the vocabulary necessary to articulate these more affective meanings (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006).

Finally, it was interesting, though unexpected, to find that Dominican American children were the least likely to use *I don't know* responses. It is unclear why these children were less likely to say they did not know the meaning of ethnic group membership, but it may suggest that Dominican American children are more comfortable speaking about their ethnic group or possess a larger vocabulary for articulating their understandings about what it means to be Dominican.

Limitations and Future Directions

Alongside the contributions of this research there are limitations that point toward future research. First, the findings are based on children living in New York City who are second-generation immigrants or later. It would be interesting to compare first- and second-generation immigrant children's descriptions of ethnic identity meaning in a future study. We found few age differences, perhaps because the age span was short and covered a stage when children are just beginning to make meaning of social categories; a longer age span may be necessary to detect differences. We also used grade level to categorize age groups, which may muddle age differences. This analysis was also cross-sectional; a future study using longitudinal data could better explore whether these content categories change over time. An additional limitation was the lack of a socioeconomic class measure. The ethnic minority children in our sample (Chinese American, Dominican American, and Black) were disproportionately represented in the schools with higher rates of free/reduced lunch thereby confounding the potential effects of social class with ethnicity on the meaning of ethnic identity. Other contextual factors, such as parent ethnic socialization (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006) might also be considered in examining the social forces that inform the meaning of ethnic identity, as well as the extent to which children's own social experiences, such as ethnic discrimination, may influence ethnic identity meaning (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009). Also, our measure of meaning was limited to one direct question, which captured the most salient meaning description. Future research could use more questions to elicit children's ethnicity-related stories. Or, based on our findings, a multidimensional meaning scale could be developed including items referring to the eight dimensions of meaning that we found.

Finally, different constructions of ethnic identity meaning may be consequential for other aspects of children's social development. Future research could examine how the content of ethnic identity meaning relates to other dimensions of ethnic identity (e.g., centrality, regard) and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., in-group/out-group preferences, self-esteem). For example, *pride* meanings may be related to the importance of ethnic identity (Sellers et al., 1998; Ruble et al., 2004), while meanings that emphasize social differences may affect children's relationships, such as their willingness to form cross-racial friendships (Pfeifer et al., 2007; Marks et al., 2007).

This research is an important extension of the study of the development of ethnic identity, specifically the concept of the meaning. Because middle childhood is an important transitional period of development, understanding when and how children make meaning of social groups and their own social identities during this stage may shed light on the development of future social interactions and group attitudes.

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