

## African American Racial Identity Across the Lifespan: Identity Status, Identity Content, and Depressive Symptoms

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Cluster analytic methods were used to create 4 theorized ethnic identity statuses (achieved, foreclosed, moratorium, and diffused) among 940 African American adolescents (13–17 years old), college students (18–23 years old), and adults (27–78 years old). Evidence for the existence of 4 identity statuses was found across the 3 age groups. The distribution of individuals differed by age group, with the older participants disproportionately occupying the more mature statuses. Identity status was related to identity content such that achieved individuals reported higher levels of racial centrality and private regard. Finally, there was a significant interaction between developmental age group and identity status for depressive symptoms such that diffused college students reported higher symptoms than achieved college students. No status differences were found for the other 2 age groups.

The concept of ethnic and racial identity has been one of the most frequently studied psychological constructs among persons of color. Despite the fact that there is a large body of research suggesting that ethnic and racial identity are related to a variety of outcomes, there is little consensus as to how best to conceptualize and operationalize these constructs (Smith, 1989). The most prominent approaches to conceptualizing and assessing ethnic and racial identity have focused on how persons of color *develop* attitudes and beliefs about the meaning of their ethnic and/or racial identities (Burlew, Bellow, & Lovett, 2000). Many of these developmental approaches (e.g., Cross, 1991; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Phinney, 1989, 1990) have origins in the ego identity development literature (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980). Among these concepts is the

idea that individuals' attitudes regarding their ethnicity and race unfold systematically as part of a normative lifespan model of psychological development (Marcia, 2002). One of the most prolific of these developmental models of ethnic identity has been proposed by Phinney (1989, 1990, 1993).

Phinney's model of ethnic identity development borrows heavily from Marcia's (1966, 1980) operationalization of Erikson's (1968) theories of ego identity development. Consistent with Marcia (1966, 1980), Phinney (1989) argues that individuals' level of ethnic identity development can be viewed within four statuses as a function of the extent to which they have explored the meaning of ethnicity in their lives and committed to a particular definition of what their ethnicity means to them. These four statuses include a *diffused status* in which the individuals have neither explored the meaning of their ethnicity nor committed to a particular identity meaning. Individuals in the *foreclosed status* have firmly committed to a definition of what their ethnicity means to them based on influential others such as their parents, without engaging in any exploration. Individuals in the *moratorium status* are actively exploring the meaning of their ethnic identities but have not reached a point of commitment to a specific definition. Finally, individuals who have both actively engaged in exploration and have committed to a specific definition of what their ethnicity means are

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Data collection for portions of this project was funded by a National Institute of Mental Health Grant (NIMH 5 R01 MH 061967-03) awarded to the third author. The first author was supported as a postdoctoral fellow with a National Science Foundation Grant (NSF SES-0409492) during the preparation of this article. The second author was also supported as a postdoctoral fellow with a National Institute of Mental Health Postdoctoral Training Grant (NIMH T32 MH 067555). We would like to acknowledge Tabbye Chavous, the RILS project, and the African American Family Project for assistance with and utilization of their data sources. We also thank the MIBI group for their feedback during the preparation of this article.

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considered to be in the *achieved status* of identity development.

Although Phinney (1989, 1990, 1993) clearly delineates these four discrete statuses in her model of ethnic identity, few studies that have used the model have actually operationalized the developmental statuses. As a result, several fundamental questions of ethnic identity development remain unanswered. First, what evidence is there that the four identity statuses exist? Although several authors have discussed a lifespan approach to ethnic and racial identity development (e.g., Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Parham, 1989), to our knowledge there are no empirical studies investigating the four identity statuses across developmental periods. Another important question that has yet to be addressed is whether individuals in different statuses of identity development differ with regard to the content of what their ethnicity or race means. Finally, the dearth of research operationalizing the four identity statuses has left unanswered the question of whether there are systematic status differences in psychological functioning. Specifically, do individuals in the less advanced statuses of ethnic identity development (e.g., diffused) have less optimal functioning than those at more advanced statuses? The present study attempts to address these questions using a sample of African American adolescents, college students, and adults.

#### *Identity Status and Identity Development Across the Lifespan*

Although Marcia (1966) initially placed his status model of ego identity development within late adolescence, a growing number of ego identity researchers have expanded the model to include all of adolescence (Meeus, Iedemaa, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999) and adulthood (Marcia, 2002). In their meta-analysis of ego identity development studies, Meeus et al. (1999) concluded that samples of high school students exhibited greater progression out of the diffused status while the college and young adult samples yielded greater movement from a foreclosed status to an achieved status. While this research suggests that older adolescents compared with younger adolescents are more likely to transition into the later statuses, it is unclear whether this developmental trend extends beyond adolescence to adulthood and whether it extends to the development of ethnic or racial identity.

As one component of ego identity, the developmental nature of racial identity construction has also been explored among African Americans over the

life course (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Parham, 1989). While Phinney (1992) proposes an invariant and unidirectional identity development model, Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) allow for understanding the identity development of African Americans through a variety of pathways. Specifically, Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) delineate three patterns of racial identity development across the lifespan. Nigrescence Pattern A emphasizes the socialization that African American children and adolescents experience regarding the meaning of race in their lives. While all four statuses are possible at this developmental stage, there is likely to be a significant number of individuals in the diffused and moratorium statuses as they attempt to develop an understanding of what race means. Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) also point out that a foreclosed identity can also represent a successful identity resolution for many African American adolescents if it is based on positive racial socialization practices by parents, family, and the community. Individuals who do not commit to a racial identity during adolescence (either via achievement or foreclosure processes) are likely to be vulnerable to a second pattern of racial identity development that can be triggered at any point in the life cycle: Nigrescence Pattern B (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). This pattern of racial identity development results in a process of conversion whereby an event or a series of events causes an individual to rethink one's racial identity. The result is that the individual emerges with a new identity. The final pattern of racial identity, Nigrescence Pattern C, results in a re-examination of identities as a result of experiences and developmental life tasks that are inconsistent with these identity beliefs (Parham, 1989). Such individuals do not go back to a diffused or foreclosed identity status; they usually return to a state of heightened identity exploration (moratorium) before committing to a new racial identity.

Using Cross and Fhagen-Smith's (2001) conceptual framework, one can make predictions about the relative distribution of individuals in the four identity statuses across the lifespan. Given the fact that adults who have not committed to an identity in adolescence can go through Nigrescence and that adults who have committed to a racial identity can recycle, we expect that all four of the identity statuses are likely to be represented throughout the life cycle. As the Cross and Fhagen-Smith model is not progressive, it would predict that each of the four identity statuses could be found in each of the three age groups. However, as Nigrescence Pattern A is considered to be "normative" (Cross & Fhagen-

Smith, 2001, p. 243) and “probably applies to the great majority of Black people” (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001, p. 243), we would expect a greater proportion of adolescents in the diffused and foreclosed statuses relative to college students and adults. Similarly, we would expect fewer adolescents in the achieved status relative to college students and to adults.

#### *Identity Status and Content of Racial Identity*

Whereas identity statuses reveal the extent to which an individual has explored and committed to one’s racial identity, they do not provide information on the meaning and content of that identity for the individual. Phinney (1993) makes a distinction between a process approach and a content approach to the study of ethnic identity development. The process approach focuses on how individuals come to develop an integrated sense of the role of ethnicity in their lives, whereas the content approach focuses on the qualitative meaning of one’s identity and how important the identity is to the individual. In other words, although an individual may have an achieved racial identity, it is not clear what role racial identity plays in an individual’s self-concept (Cross, 1991; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Phinney, 1990). Phinney (1990, p. 503) has said, “achievement does not necessarily imply a high degree of ethnic involvement; one could presumably be clear about and confident of one’s ethnicity without wanting to maintain one’s ethnic language or customs.”

Phinney (1993) and Marcia (2002) suggest that whereas process and content are conceptually distinct, they are likely to be related. For example, an individual who has both explored and committed to one’s identity is more likely to make race important to the construction of one’s overall social identity. On the other hand, an individual who has neither explored nor committed to one’s identity is unlikely to make race central. Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) have argued for a far more complex and nuanced relationship between content and process. Nonetheless, they have noted an association between a lack of racial salience (or centrality) and earlier stages of racial identity development (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). By examining the intersection between racial identity process and content, we allow for a variety of ways in which African Americans can construct a racial identity, including individuals who choose not to make being Black relevant to their overall self-construal (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). The Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) perspective suggests that process and content go hand in hand. For example,

many adolescents have not yet explored their identity (i.e., foreclosed status), but then begin a process of search (i.e., moratorium) in which “the emergent identity is subjected to intense examination . . . . This tumultuous testing and sorting period allows a young person to hold up for examination the ideas about race and Black culture which she or he wants to accept or reject” (Cross and Fhagen-Smith, 2001, p. 254). As such, in order to appreciate what the process of exploration and commitment means for an individual, it seems imperative to couple it with an examination of the content of that identity.

In order to assess the content and meaning that individuals ascribe to their racial identity, we apply the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), which is a conceptual framework designed to articulate the heterogeneity in the significance that African Americans place on race and how they define what it means to be Black (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). As such, the primary focus of the MMRI is on explicating individual differences in the content of African Americans’ racial identity attitudes. The MMRI is based on the unique sociohistorical experiences of African Americans in the United States (Sellers et al., 1998). Specifically, this includes centuries of slavery, legalized segregation, and overt oppression; however, the MMRI does not assume that these are necessary for the development of a racial identity. Yet, these experiences have served as a backdrop for the historical experiences of African Americans in the United States. The MMRI is comprised of four related dimensions: salience, centrality, ideology, and regard.

To the extent that racial identity content provides information about how important and what racial identity means to an individual, one might expect differences according to identity status. Specifically, individuals with an achieved racial identity might be expected to report that race is central to their self-definition and may feel very positive about being a member of their racial group (i.e., private regard). Conversely, an individual who has not explored or committed to a racial identity may not think that race is important or feel positive about being a member of one’s racial group. One might also expect that individuals who have explored and committed to their identity may be expected to espouse an ideology that emphasizes the uniqueness of the African American experience (i.e., nationalist beliefs). Yet, individuals who have neither explored nor committed to their racial identity may be likely to emphasize the commonalities that all people share, regardless of race and/or ethnicity (i.e., humanism).

### *Identity Status and Psychological Functioning*

Both Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) have explicitly linked ego identity development processes to the psychological well-being of the individual. Meeus et al. (1999) conducted a review of the literature on ego identity development and psychological well-being and reported that individuals in the achieved and foreclosed statuses had the highest levels of well-being, while individuals in the moratorium status reported the lowest levels of well-being. Phinney and her colleagues have also proposed a consistent link between ethnic identity status and well-being (Phinney, 1990, 1991; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997; Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997). Specifically, they argue that the achieved status should be associated with optimal psychological functioning. Consequently, Phinney (1989) indicated that African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and White adolescents classified as having achieved ethnic identities scored significantly higher on psychological adjustment. Several other studies utilizing samples of adolescents of color have found positive relationships between higher composite scores of the MEIM and a variety of well-being outcomes (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; McMahon & Watts, 2002; Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999). Unfortunately, the use of ethnic identity composite scores prevents insight as to whether individuals in different ethnic identity statuses differ in their psychological well-being. Furthermore, no studies, to our knowledge, have examined the relationship between ethnic identity development and psychological well-being across the lifespan. As adolescence is considered the period for identity development (Marcia, 1980; Phinney, 1993), it is possible that the relationships between the ethnic identity statuses and psychological functioning may be the strongest during this developmental period.

### *Current Study*

This study has four primary goals. The first goal is to investigate the four statuses proposed by identity development models in a sample of adolescents, college students, and adults. As found in existing research on ego identity development (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999), it is hypothesized that there will be evidence of the four identity statuses in all three age groups. Second, this paper will examine whether the distribution of the four statuses is different across the three development periods. Specifically, we wish to examine whether adolescents are more likely to be in the diffused, foreclosed, and moratorium statuses

compared with college students and adults, which is consistent with ego and racial identity theories. Next, differences in racial identity content will be examined across the identity statuses. Individuals in identity statuses high on exploration and commitment are expected to report higher endorsement of identity content items such as centrality and private regard. Also, interactions between developmental period and identity status on identity content will be explored. Finally, we will investigate whether there are ethnic identity status differences in depressive symptomatology, and whether the relationship between ethnic identity status and depressive symptomatology differs across the lifespan. Identity achievement is expected to be associated with lower levels of depressive symptomatology.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The total sample was comprised of 940 African American adolescents, college students, and adults. Participants were evenly distributed among the three age groups. The adolescent participants consisted of 304 African Americans ranging in age from 13 to 17 years. The sample was composed of 144 male (47%) and 160 female (53%) high school students, with an average age of 15.79 ( $SD = 1.0$ ) years. The participants reported that their mothers had the following educational levels: less than a high school diploma (8%), high school diploma (45%), 1 year of college or an associate's degree (28%), a bachelor's degree (13%), or a graduate degree (6%).

The college sample consisted of 362 African Americans ranging in age from 18 to 23 years, with an average age of 19.05 ( $SD = 1.26$ ) years. The sample was comprised of 100 males (28%) and 262 females (72%). The participants reported the following for their mother's education levels: less than a high school diploma (10%), high school diploma (23%), some college (22%), a bachelor's degree (17%), or a graduate degree (28%).

The adult participants consisted of 274 African American adults ranging in age from 27 to 78 years, with an average age of 42.07 ( $SD = 7.97$ ) years. Eighty-five percent of the sample was female ( $n = 233$ ). The participants reported the following education levels: less than a high school diploma (4%), high school diploma (13%), some college (49%), a bachelor's degree (13%), or a graduate degree (21%). The adult participants indicated the following for their employment status: employed (69%),

self-employed (4%), and other statuses such as a homemaker, retired, unemployed, or disabled (27%).

### *Procedure*

The adolescent data were collected as part of a study on racial identity and perceptions of racial discrimination among African American youth. Participants were recruited from high schools in a large, northeastern city. Approval was obtained from the school district, and 51 public high schools were targeted for recruitment. The schools were selected on the basis of the principals' willingness to participate in the study. The principals identified specific classes where participants could be recruited. Researchers visited classrooms, explained that the study focused on African American youth, and distributed parental consent forms. Participation in the study was granted only if parental consent forms were returned, and the response rate ranged from 30% to 60% per classroom with a mean response rate of 45%. The survey administrations occurred in small groups in the school libraries. The participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that their results would remain confidential. The interview time ranged from 30 min to an hour and the participants were debriefed and allowed to ask questions upon completion. The participants were not compensated for participation in the study.

The college student data were collected from two separate studies, which used similar data collection procedures and were exclusively focused on African Americans. The first study ( $n = 155$ ) was a longitudinal investigation of African American racial identity development at two predominantly white institutions in the southeastern and midwestern regions of the United States. Participants were recruited from lists of first-year African American students provided by the registrar. During their first semester on campus, and each subsequent semester over their first 2 years of college, participants completed a questionnaire that included measures of racial identity, racial discrimination, and psychological functioning in medium-sized group administrations (i.e., 4 and 15 individuals). Only data from participants' first administration of the questionnaire are used in the present study. Participants were compensated \$15 for completing the survey. The second study ( $n = 207$ ) surveyed African American college students' racial identity and psychological well-being. Participants attended the same predominantly White university in the southeastern United States as the previously described college student study, resulting in over 80% of the college sample

coming from the same institution. Participants for this second study were recruited through introductory and advanced psychology courses. The introductory psychology participants received course credit while other participants were paid \$5. Participants completed the measures in group administrations and were assured that their information would be kept confidential. All participants were debriefed. There were no differences between paid and credit participants.

The adult participants were enrolled in a longitudinal study designed to examine the racial socialization practices of African American families in a midwestern town. In this larger study, only African American middle-school students and one of their primary caregivers were targeted and recruited to participate in a study of race socialization practices. The present sample consists of the primary caregivers who participated in the initial cohorts of the first wave. Data were collected in small group administrations in the local community. Participants were paid \$50 in the larger study.

### *Measures*

*The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM).* A set of items drawn from the MEIM was used in the present study (Phinney, 1992). The three exploration and two commitment items are consistent with recommendations from Roberts et al. (1999). Previous research has not focused exclusively on the achievement subscale, which includes measures of exploration and commitment (Phinney & Chavira, 1992). Before extracting the exploration and commitment items, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to discern whether the achievement subscale consisted of two oblique latent factors. The CFA supported the presence of both exploration and commitment dimensions ( $\chi^2 = 17.09$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 4.27$ , TLI = .94, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .06). The exploration subscale ( $\alpha = .60$ ) consists of three items and examines the extent to which the individual is searching for information about their racial/ethnic group (i.e., "I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as history, traditions, and customs," "I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership," and "In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group"). The commitment subscale ( $\alpha = .68$ ) has two items and entails the degree to which an individual has committed to membership in their racial/ethnic group (e.g., "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and

what it means to me," and "I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me, in terms of how I related to my own group and other groups"). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*) such that higher scores suggest higher levels of exploration and commitment.

*The Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity Short (MIBI-S)*. A shortened version of the MIBI (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) was utilized to assess racial centrality, private regard, public regard, nationalism, minority, assimilation, and humanist ideologies (Martin, Wout, Nguyen, Sellers, & Gonzalez, 2005). This shorter version of the MIBI was developed recently using CFAs. With data from African American college students at predominantly White and historically Black college, as well as with an adult sample, a subsample of items from each of the original seven MIBI scales was selected. The results indicated that the MIBI-S was a more reliable measure and provided a better fit to the data than the original MIBI (Martin et al., 2005). For the current study, in order to test the fit of the MIBI-S found in previous research (Martin et al., 2005), a CFA with seven latent factors was conducted. The results indicated a strong fit to the data with  $\chi^2 = 1,150$ ,  $df = 303$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.80$ , TLI = .98, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .06.

The racial centrality subscale ( $\alpha = .68$ ) consists of four items measuring the extent to which being African American is central to the respondents' definition of themselves (e.g., "Being Black is an important reflection of who I am"). The public regard subscale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) has four items and measures the respondents' belief of others' evaluations of African Americans (e.g., "In general, others respect Black people"). The private regard subscale ( $\alpha = .58$ ) has three items and measures the extent to which respondents feel positively toward African Americans (e.g., "I feel good about Black people"). The nationalist subscale ( $\alpha = .55$ ) consists of four items that measure the extent to which respondents emphasize the uniqueness of being African American (e.g., "Blacks would be better off if they adopted Afrocentric values"). The minority subscale ( $\alpha = .65$ ) consists of four items that measure the extent to which respondents emphasize the commonalities between African Americans and other minority groups (e.g., "There are other people who experience racial injustice and indignities similar to Black Americans"). The assimilation subscale ( $\alpha = .70$ ) consists of four items that measure the extent to which respondents emphasize the similarities between African Americans and mainstream society (e.g., "Blacks should strive to integrate all institu-

tions which are segregated"). The humanist subscale ( $\alpha = .55$ ) consists of four items measuring the extent to which respondents emphasize the similarities among individuals of all races (e.g., "Being an individual is more important than identifying oneself as Black"). Responses range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) such that higher scores represent a stronger endorsement of each dimension.

Internal consistency was investigated within each sample (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002), and the coefficients were consistent across all three samples. Internal consistency is dependent on the number of items; therefore, scales with fewer items may be as reliable as larger scales with adequate interitem correlations (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Using the interitem correlations, the Spearman-Brown formula was used to calculate the estimated Cronbach's alphas if the subscales contained the same number of items as the original MIBI (Alsawalmeh & Feldt, 1999). The estimated Cronbach's alphas for the smallest and largest reliability coefficients were as follows: humanist ( $\alpha = .73$ ) and public regard ( $\alpha = .84$ ). The results indicate that the MIBI-S subscales are as reliable as previous research using the full-item MIBI.

*The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)*. The CES-D assesses the frequency of depressive symptoms (Radloff, 1977). The scale consists of 20 items ( $\alpha = .87$ ) with responses ranging from 0 (*rarely*) to 3 (*most or all of the time*). Participants are asked to indicate how frequently they have experienced symptoms associated with depression (e.g., "I did not feel like eating, my appetite was poor") within the past month. Higher scores are indicative of more depressive symptoms. Previous research using the CES-D has identified one factor based on four dimensions (Cole, Rabin, Smith, & Kaufman, 2004), and a CFA was conducted in the present study. The results indicate a mediocre fit to the model ( $\chi^2 = 2,242$ ,  $df = 170$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 13.19$ , TLI = .92, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .11).

## Results

### *Identity Statuses*

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented for the overall sample (Table 1) as well as for each age group (Table 2). *t* Tests were conducted to examine differences between the two college samples. To control for type I error, a Bonferroni correction was used such that .05 was divided by the number of tests (in this case, 10), yielding a new  $\alpha$  level of .005. The results indicated that the two

Table 1  
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Exploration	—	0.48**	0.40**	-0.09**	0.19**	0.32**	-0.00	0.09**	-0.17**	0.02
2. Commitment		—	0.38**	-0.08*	0.27**	0.18**	0.04	0.11**	-0.05	-0.04
3. Racial centrality			—	-0.12**	0.46**	0.42**	0.03	0.20**	-0.16**	0.10**
4. Public regard				—	0.09**	-0.12**	0.21**	0.02	0.24**	-0.22**
5. Private regard					—	0.24**	0.08**	0.20**	0.04	-0.06
6. Nationalism						—	0.00	0.09**	-0.22**	0.02
7. Minority							—	0.29**	0.37**	-0.02
8. Assimilation								—	0.27**	0.09**
9. Humanist									—	-0.60
10. Depressive symptoms										—
Mean	2.97	3.33	5.34	3.76	6.22	4.35	4.79	5.79	5.37	30.53
SD	0.64	0.64	1.08	1.20	0.93	1.07	1.18	0.96	1.03	10.58

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

samples differed significantly on commitment,  $t(360) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .005$ , public regard,  $t(360) = 5.10$ ,  $p < .005$ , private regard,  $t(360) = 6.15$ ,  $p < .005$ , nationalism,  $t(357) = 5.47$ ,  $p < .005$ , minority,  $t(359) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .005$ , assimilation,  $t(359) = 3.18$ ,  $p < .005$ , humanist,  $t(360) = 6.79$ ,  $p < .005$ , and depressive symptoms,  $t(357) = 5.19$ ,  $p < .005$ . There were no significant differences on exploration or centrality.

Cluster analysis is an objective methodology for quantifying the structural characteristics of a set of observations (Magnusson, 1998). In order to test the first hypothesis, K-means cluster analyses were uti-

lized to identify homogenous ethnic identity statuses among standardized exploration and commitment variables. K-Means analyses are the most appropriate technique when there is a theoretical rationale for a specific number of clusters (Hair & Black, 2000). Given that the identity status model hypothesizes that there will be four distinct groups, four clusters were specified. Hierarchical analyses were used to assess convergence with the K-Means method (Hair & Black, 2000). Unlike the K-means method, hierarchical methods do not require a priori decisions about the number of clusters one expects to derive from the data. Using Ward's method with the

Table 2  
Age Group Differences

	Adolescents <sup>a</sup>		College students <sup>b</sup>		Adults <sup>c</sup>		<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Exploration	2.83	0.55	2.97	0.65	3.12	0.69	15.55**	.05
Commitment	3.14	0.62	3.35	0.63	3.51	0.62	25.28**	.03
Racial centrality	5.56	0.09	5.78	1.10	5.71	1.12	3.31*	.01
Public regard	4.24	1.16	3.39	1.05	3.69	1.26	44.94**	.09
Private regard	6.18	1.03	6.15	0.79	6.38	0.95	5.66**	.01
Nationalism	4.32	1.09	4.39	1.00	4.34	1.11	0.51	.00
Minority	4.92	1.02	4.87	1.25	4.55	1.22	8.53**	.02
Assimilation	5.61	0.97	5.90	0.86	5.83	1.05	8.18**	.02
Humanist	5.58	0.98	5.28	1.00	5.26	1.09	9.19**	.02
Depressive symptoms	21.84	7.78	37.29	8.65	31.34	8.60	282.75**	.38

Note. <sup>a</sup>Adolescents were 13–17 years old.

<sup>b</sup>College students were 18–23 years old.

<sup>c</sup>Adults were 27–78 years old.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Squared Euclidean Distance, the agglomeration schedule was used to identify the maximum number of distinct groups. The cluster memberships derived from the K-means and the Hierarchical analyses were consistent 81% of the time. To further validate the clusters extracted using the K-means method, a Monte Carlo procedure was used where a 50% subset of the sample was randomly selected, and the K-Means cluster technique was repeated on this subset (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Cluster membership for this subset was compared with the initial membership in the full sample. This procedure was repeated two additional times and the cluster memberships for the subset and full sample were consistent 90% of the time.

The four-cluster solution (Figure 1) was theoretically consistent with the identity status model (Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 1989). The first cluster ( $n = 54$ ) was designated as the diffused identity status and had exploration and commitment scores almost two standard deviations below the mean. A second group ( $n = 190$ ) was labeled foreclosed and had exploration scores one standard deviation below the mean, and commitment scores that were about .20 standard deviations above the mean. A third cluster represents moratorium ( $n = 289$ ), with exploration scores at the mean and commitment scores almost a standard deviation score below the mean. The final group was classified as achieved ( $n = 407$ ), with exploration and commitment scores almost a standard deviation above the mean.

*Age Differences in Identity Statuses*

In order to test the second hypothesis, cross-tabulation analyses were conducted to examine age group differences among the identity statuses (Table 3). Chi-square results indicate significant differences across the identity statuses,  $\chi^2(6, 940) = 56.35, p < .01$ .

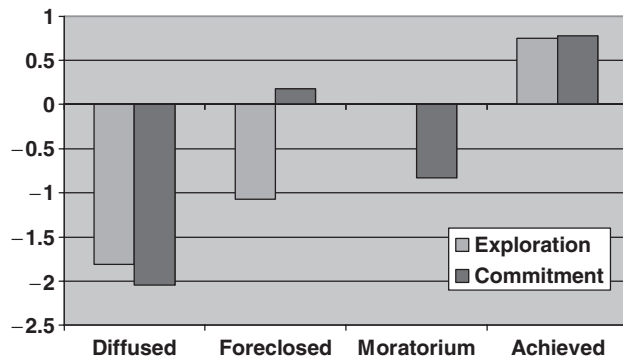


Figure 1. Ethnic identity status clusters.

Table 3  
Proportion of Participants in Each Ethnic Identity Status Cluster by Age Group

Cluster	Sample			Row total (%)
	Adolescent (%)	College students (%)	Adult (%)	
Diffused	19 (6)	23 (6)	12 (4)	54 (6)
Foreclosed	76 (25)	71 (20)	43 (16)	190 (20)
Moratorium	127 (42)	97 (27)	65 (24)	289 (31)
Achieved	82 (27)	171 (47)	154 (56)	407 (43)
Column total (%)	304 (32)	362 (39)	274 (29)	940 (100)

Note.  $\chi^2(6, 940) = 56.35, p < .01$ .

In methods described by Gonzalez (2005), post-hoc contrasts for the overall chi-square were conducted to examine specific age differences. This procedure involves using the proportion and sample size of individuals in a particular cell and multiplying it by a contrast weight specified by the researcher. For instance, guided by theoretical expectations, one could test whether adolescents are less likely to be achieved (weight = -3) as compared with diffused (weight = 1), foreclosed (weight = 1), and moratorium (weight = 1). These values are then converted into a Wald statistic. As the Wald statistic approximates a normal distribution, one can then find the probability of observing the data given that the null hypothesis were true. The results indicated that adolescents were more likely to be in moratorium ( $Z = 2.78, p < .01$ ) and less likely to be in achieved ( $Z = 3.81, p < .01$ ) than college students and adults. Additionally, college students ( $Z = 6.28, p < .001$ ) and adults ( $Z = 8.05, p < .001$ ) were more likely to be in the achieved status compared with diffused, foreclosed, or moratorium.

*Identity Status Differences in Content*

Although research literature on the interaction of gender and racial identity is equivocal (Phinney, 1989; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Sellers et al., 1997), we conducted preliminary analyses to examine gender differences. There were no significant gender differences for the status groups,  $\chi^2(3, 940) = 6.15, p = .11$ . *t* Tests were also conducted for the eight outcome variables (i.e., the seven MIBI dimensions and depressive symptoms) using a Bonferroni correction to control the Type I error rate ( $.05/8 = .006$ ). Males reported significantly higher public regard,  $t(933) = 2.93, p < .006$ , and females

reported significantly higher depressive symptoms,  $t(932) = 5.36, p < .006$ . As such, gender was included in subsequent analyses.

Analyses of covariance were used to test the third hypothesis regarding status differences in racial identity content (Table 4). Gender, age group, Status  $\times$  Gender, and Status  $\times$  Age group were also included as covariates in the analyses. A Bonferroni correction was used to control for the eight tests ( $.05/8 = .006$ ). Eight tests were conducted, one for each of the seven MIBI subscales and another for depressive symptoms. The results indicated differences in racial centrality and private regard. Specifically, achieved individuals considered race to be more important to their identity than diffused, foreclosed, and moratorium individuals. Also, moratorium and foreclosed individuals were more likely to believe that race was central to their self-concept than diffused individuals. Additionally, achieved individuals felt more positive about being African American than moratorium and diffused individuals. Also, moratorium and foreclosed individuals also felt more positive about their racial group than diffused individuals. There were no differences among the identity statuses for the minority, assimilation, and humanist ideologies.

#### Identity Status Differences in Depressive Symptoms

Analyses of covariance were conducted with gender, age group, Status  $\times$  Gender, and Status  $\times$  Age group as covariates to test status differences across identity status in depressive symptoms and there was no main effect (Table 4). Yet, the Status  $\times$  Age group interaction was significant,  $F(3,934) = 7.42, p < .001$  (Figure 2). In order to examine the simple main effects, three one-way

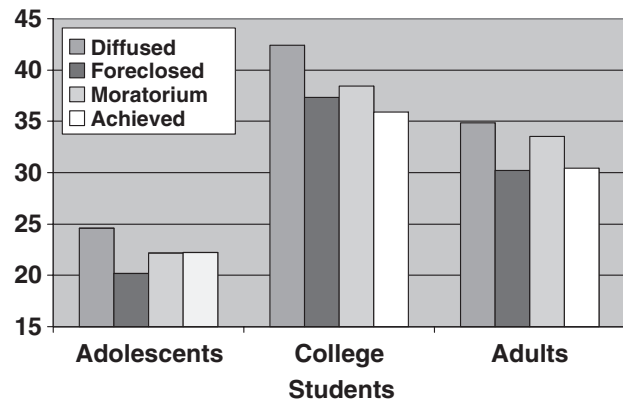


Figure 2. Ethnic identity status clusters by developmental age group for depressive symptoms.

ANOVAs were conducted separately for each age group. The results indicated no significant differences by identity status for adolescents,  $F(3,304) = 2.08, p = .10$ , but significant differences for college students,  $F(3,358) = 4.83, p < .001$ . Specifically, diffused college students ( $M = 42.39, SD = 8.63$ ) endorsed higher levels of depressive symptoms than achieved college students ( $M = 35.91, SD = 8.83$ ). The omnibus test for depressive symptoms among adults was significant,  $F(3,272) = 2.96, p < .05$ , but the post hoc tests were nonsignificant.

## Discussion

### The Identity Status Model

Using cluster analytic methods on levels of identity commitment and exploration, this study provides evidence of the four theorized identity statuses among a sample of African American adolescents,

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Racial Identity Content and Depressive Symptoms by Ethnic Identity Status Cluster

	Diffused		Foreclosed		Moratorium		Achieved		F	$\eta^2$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Racial centrality	4.36	1.18	5.03	1.12	5.04	0.97	5.84	0.88	8.05**	.03
Public regard	3.83	1.10	3.91	1.10	3.89	1.17	3.58	1.27	3.32*	.01
Private regard	5.63	1.37	6.25	0.96	6.06	1.00	6.41	0.69	5.11**	.02
Nationalism	3.71	1.04	3.97	1.04	4.34	0.96	4.62	1.06	3.23*	.01
Minority	4.86	1.26	4.90	1.21	4.73	1.05	4.77	1.24	0.08	.00
Assimilation	5.83	1.05	5.77	1.00	5.62	0.97	5.91	0.91	0.93	.00
Humanist	5.69	1.04	5.67	1.00	5.31	1.01	5.22	1.02	0.36	.00
Depressive symptoms	34.44	10.96	28.88	11.10	30.17	11.00	31.06	9.81	2.07	.01

Note. Owing to the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests (i.e., eight), only findings significant at the .01 level are considered to be statistically significant for the purposes of this paper.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

college students, and adults. Even so, it is important to note that relatively few individuals were classified as having diffused ethnic identities. It is possible that the concept of race is so ubiquitous in American society that it is very difficult for African Americans at any age to not explore what race means to them in this context. The achieved identity group was the largest of the four with over 400 individuals. The replication of these four identity statuses is consistent with previous research among African American college students and adolescents (Scottham, Cooke, & Sellers, 2004; Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006) as well as research on general ego identity development (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Marcia, 1966; Meeus et al., 1999).

It should be noted that while the four clusters observed in these data are theoretically consistent with those described in identity status approaches, what constitutes a "high" or "low" value depends upon characteristics of the specific sample. For example, exploration scores for the moratorium status are actually the same value as the standardized mean for exploration. Similarly, for the foreclosed status, commitment scores are only .18 standard deviations above the standardized mean for the sample. In contrast, exploration scores for the achieved status are .75 standard deviations above the mean, and commitment scores are .78 standard deviations above the mean. For these data, foreclosure may be better described as moderate levels of commitment and low levels of exploration, whereas moratorium seems to depict low levels of commitment and moderate levels of exploration. It would be interesting to examine patterns found in future empirical studies to observe whether these patterns are unique to the current data or whether it would be more appropriate to modify the description of the four statuses. Nevertheless, these findings serve to complement existing research (Marcia, 1966; Phinney, 1989) that has aimed to place individuals in each of the four identity statuses through the examination of relative levels of exploration and commitment across the four statuses.

#### *Identity Development Across the Lifespan*

For the second study goal, we examined differences in the proportion of individuals in the four ethnic identity statuses as a function of developmental period. To our knowledge, there is no literature that explicitly examines the distribution of identity statuses across the lifespan. As expected according to the Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) perspective, there are individuals from all three age groups in each of

the four identity statuses. This finding is consistent with a nonprogressive perspective that allows for returning to earlier statuses, a process that has been described as recycling (i.e., reporting an achieved identity at one point in time and being in moratorium at a later point in time) (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; Parham, 1989). Indeed, moratorium-achievement-moratorium-achievement patterns have also been discussed in the ego identity literature (Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992). For example, Waterman (1999a) states, "the pattern of movements among the statuses *across groups of individuals* [emphasis added by Waterman] is relatively orderly and predictable. However, *at the individual level* [emphasis added by Waterman], it is evident that identity development is not unidirectional, nor is it necessary to go through each status in a prescribed sequence" (p. 477).

Yet, we find evidence that developmental period influences the distribution of individuals across the four identity statuses. The results indicate that only 27% of the adolescents, 47% of the college students, and 56% of the adults are classified as achieved. While the achieved status is the modal status for the college student and adult groups, moratorium is the modal ethnic identity status for adolescents. Thus, it seems that a greater proportion of adolescents were in the process of exploring what it means to be African American without yet having made a commitment. This finding is consistent with the framework proposed by Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) as it describes a developmental pattern that would be predicted by Nigrescence pattern A, which is considered to be the normative pattern. This finding is also consistent with the ego identity literature, which observes decreases in diffusion and foreclosure and increases in achievement over the life course (Meeus et al., 1999).

As predicted by the conceptual framework of racial identity development delineated by Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001), the foreclosed ethnic identity status seems to be particularly prevalent in our adolescent sample. Research on ego identity also focuses on adolescence as a key developmental period (Meeus et al., 1999). Assuming that Nigrescence pattern A is normative from infancy through adolescence, for the majority of individuals, identity processes are the result of formal socialization, particularly familial socialization. In fact, as a number of authors have demonstrated, parental racial socialization processes play a particularly important role in the way in which African American adolescents form their attitudes about the meaning of race (Coard & Sellers, in press; Hughes & Chen, 1999; Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

Taken together, these findings support conclusions drawn by ego identity researchers. For example, Meeus et al. (1999) conclude that "the identity status model fails to offer a theory of identity development but may be appropriate as a descriptive system for the development of identity" (p. 423). The data in this paper are consistent with this statement in that we do find some evidence for hypotheses predicted by the identity status model, but we also find that the strictly progressive model cannot explain all of the observed data. As such, some of the current debates among ego identity scholars about the developmental nature of the identity status model seem applicable to the study of racial and ethnic identities (see Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Cote & Levine, 1988; Marcia, 2002; Stephen et al., 1992; Waterman, 1982, 1984, 1988).

#### *Identity Status and the Content of Racial Identity*

The third goal of this study is to examine content differences according to identity status, and the results indicate an association between the two on various dimensions of racial identity content. As expected, individuals in the achieved status are more likely to report feeling better about being African American compared with individuals who were low on commitment (i.e., moratorium and diffused). However, individuals who report high levels of either commitment or exploration (i.e., moratorium and foreclosed) report more positive regard for being African American compared with individuals who are low on exploration and commitment (i.e., diffused). Therefore, it seems that being in the achieved status seems related to more positive esteem for being African American. It is possible that any level of engagement in one's racial identity, whether through exploration or commitment, includes positive attitudes for the group; however, it is not clear what the direction of association between identity process and positive group affect is. From a developmental perspective, it may be that to explore or to commit to one's identity requires that an individual first hold that identity in positive regard. Phinney and Chavira (1992) tested the association between personal regard and ethnic identity in a longitudinal study of 18 young adults over a 3-year period and were not able to disentangle the cause-and-effect association between self-esteem and ethnic identity achievement. Instead, they concluded that these two components may have a synergistic relationship. It seems that there is still work to be carried out to determine the association between personal and group-based esteem and ethnic identity.

In addition to feeling better about being African American, achieved individuals are also more likely to report that race is central to their identity, regardless of developmental period, a finding observed in previous research (Scottham et al., 2004). Individuals who have neither explored nor committed to their ethnic identity (i.e., diffused) report that race is least likely to be central compared with individuals who report high levels of exploration or commitment (e.g., foreclosed). In contrast, individuals who have both grappled with and integrated race into their identity (i.e., achieved) are more likely to report that race is an important component of their identity.

Despite some differences between identity content and identity status, ideologies around the commonalities of oppressed minorities, assimilationism, and humanism do not systematically differ according to identity status. Common across these ideologies is the notion that the African American experience is not more unique than any other racial group in the United States. These data suggest that irrespective of the extent to which an individual has either explored or committed to one's racial identity, there may not be differences in how much individuals endorse these beliefs. When examining beliefs and attitudes that do underscore the uniqueness of the African American experience (i.e., centrality, private regard, public regard, nationalism), however, there do appear to be differences according to identity status. Coupled together, these findings suggest that the process of exploration and commitment may be related to some acknowledgement of the specific challenges of being African American.

Whereas previous theoretical formulations suggest that the development of racial and/or ethnic identity and the content of these identities are distinct (Phinney, 1993), our results suggest that they are also related in systematic ways. Because the present data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to determine whether content precedes process or vice versa. However, one might expect that when an individual for whom race is highly central encounters a racially relevant life-transforming event, that individual may embark upon a period of identity exploration that may culminate in identity commitment (Cross, 1991; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). Conversely, an individual for whom race is not highly central may not engage in the same process of exploration or commitment when faced with the same event.

#### *Identity Status and Psychological Functioning*

The final goal of this study is to examine whether identity statuses are associated with differential

reports of depressive symptoms. Our analyses found a relationship between ethnic identity status and depressive symptoms only in our college student sample. Specifically, college students with diffused ethnic identities report higher levels of depressive symptoms than college students with achieved ethnic identities. This finding is consistent with Marcia's (1980) original assertions that ego identity is a developmental task that should reside primarily in late adolescence (ages 18–22 years), as well as his empirical work on the identity statuses conducted with college students (Marcia, 1966). If ethnic identity resolution is also a primary developmental task for college students, then we might also expect that there would be greater psychological consequences for resolving such a task within this developmental period. It is also possible that college experiences may intensify the process of developing a racial and/or ethnic identity for African Americans. In fact, Deaux and Ethier (1998) found that the college experience itself served as a catalyst for ethnic identity development. Student groups organized around race (e.g., Black Students' Association) and the opportunity to study the experiences of specific racial groups (e.g., African American history) may result in environments on college campuses in which students' race and ethnicity are often made salient. Such environments may have particular consequences for African American students who may be diffused with respect to their racial identity and have never had to grapple with issues of race. For these students, being in a racialized environment may require adjustment.

Finally, unlike research on ego identity and psychological well-being (Meeus et al., 1999), individuals in the moratorium status do not differ from the other groups in depressive symptoms. In interpreting our results, it is important to note that depressive symptoms is our only measure of psychological functioning; measures such as self-esteem and psychological well-being may yield different results. However, early empirical work by Marcia (1966) did not find differences in self-esteem across the four identity statuses. Therefore, even the work in ego identity seems to be equivocal. Clearly, further research is needed before definitive conclusions can be made regarding the relationship between ethnic identity status and psychological functioning.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Although this study represents an important advancement in the understanding of ethnic identity development from a lifespan perspective, some

questions remain. Because these data were not longitudinal, these findings cannot speak to developmental trajectories over time. In the future, it would be interesting to follow the intraindividual changes in ethnic identity across time to identify profiles or trajectories of change. For example, are individuals who develop achieved identities earlier in life more likely to remain stable across time? Are these same individuals more likely to report stable ethnic identity content over time? Are some statuses more stable than others? Does this vary by age group? Research in ego identity suggests that moratorium is the least stable of the four identity statuses and that stability increases with age (Waterman, 1999b); however, this type of analysis has yet to be conducted in the domain of ethnic and racial identity. What are the mental health consequences of relative stability or fluctuation in identity status over time?

It should also be noted that in the current study, the emerging adulthood period was represented by individuals attending college; therefore, these data cannot speak to the experiences of individuals in the same developmental period who do not participate in the tertiary educational system. Also, these data come from various data sources and therefore represent the experiences of African Americans from different parts of the country; therefore, age and region of the country are confounded in our sample. In the future, it would be interesting to see whether these findings can be replicated with nationally representative samples and to test for possible regional differences. In addition, it would be important to consider how context may lead to possible cohort differences. For example, African Americans exploring racial identity during the Civil Rights movement may have different beliefs about the meaning of their identity as compared with other sociocultural contexts in which race is less salient. Nonetheless, the present study represents an important foundation upon which other research can build.

In conclusion, the results suggest the utility of the identity status model as a framework for operationalizing ethnic identity development. The results also represent one of the few sources of empirical evidence for the validity of the identity status model in understanding ethnic identity development. Our results linking ethnic identity status to particular racial identity attitudes suggest that *where* African Americans are in their development of a racial identity is associated with *what* they think it means to be Black. Our results linking ethnic identity status and depressive symptoms suggest the importance of *where* the individual is in the life cycle. In sum, the

present study reiterates the need to understand ethnic and racial identity development as a complex process that has implications for the functioning of African Americans across the lifespan.

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