

Exploring the Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract

Multicultural theories of intersectionality state that identity is never monolithic but rather a lens of experience formed by interrelated cultural factors, with two such factors being socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnic identity. This exploratory study investigates whether SES is associated with three dimensions of ethnic identity (exploration, resolution, and affirmation) among Latino college students (N=36) at a Hispanic serving institution. Results suggest a negative relationship between reported income and affirmation, and between perceived social status and all dimensions of ethnic identity. Latino college students who self-identify as working and lower-middle class feel a stronger sense of identity than higher-SES Latino students and may consider themselves more positively regarded by non-Latinos.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, Latino students

Multicultural theories of intersectionality state that identity is never monolithic but rather a lens of experience formed via a mix of interrelated cultural factors, with two such factors being socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnic identity. However, previous literature examining correlations between SES and identity is limited. This study explores whether SES—as determined by both reported income level and perceived social status—among Latino college students at a large

Western United States university is related to three particular dimensions of identity: ethnic affirmation/pride, searching for connection with one's ethnic group, and perceived public regard for one's ethnic group.

Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Intersectionality

This study is based in the larger framework of social justice and Critical Race Theory. Travino, Harris, and Wallace (2008) define Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a method of critical examination that illuminates structural marginalization:

At its core, CRT is committed to advocating for justice for people who find themselves occupying positions on the margins – for those who hold ‘minority’ status. It directs attention to the ways in which structural arrangements inhibit and disadvantage some more than others in our society. It spotlights the form and function of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and discrimination across a range of social institutions, and then seeks to give voice to those who are victimized and displaced. (p. 8)

Though the research conducted here does not aim to address racism per se, it is meant to explore the understanding of what it is to be part of an often overlooked and underserved ethnic minority community, given that the complex and intertwined dimensions of perceived class and identity may produce feelings about one's ethnicity that are hardly homogenous across even a specific geographic and social subset of members. Indeed, Latino Critical Race Theory, or “LatCrit” – a Latino-specific adaptation of Critical Race Theory (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) – seeks to contest the notion that the Latino community in particular is as monolithic as often portrayed. Stefancic (1997) poses the concept rhetorically: “Is the Latino community one, or many? How do middle, working class, and immigrant Latinos differ? Is language their only common trait?” (p. 426).

If to be considered monolithic is to be stereotyped and thus marginalized with regard to the important intersectional differences that underlie an ethnic community, it is necessary to then build upon a body of literature that paints a more textured view of Latinos as a diverse group with varying and complicated notions of identity. This study aims to illuminate potential differences between Latinos of various self-reported income and perceived social status, particularly with regard to how they feel about their ethnicity and about public regard for their ethnicity. Though the body of literature examining differences among Latino populations is by no means insignificant, SES itself

is rarely examined as a possible factor that may indeed account for some of the subtle identity variations to which Stefancic (1997) alludes when pointing to class.

Ethnic Identity

Although ethnic identity is sometimes defined differently depending on the aims of a particular study, it generally means maintaining and retaining heritage, cultural values and practices, and a sense of belonging (Rogers-Sirin & Gupta, 2012, p. 556; see also Phinney & Ong, 2007). Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bámaca-Gómez (2004) identified three components of ethnic identity: exploration (engaging in cultural-specific behaviors and roles), resolution (understanding group membership), and affirmation (the development of “positive feelings about the self and the group”; p. 1427). In a sense, the first two components can be understood as being related to identification broadly and the third specifically to pride. These concepts inform our treatment of the data, wherein we measure exploration/search and pride/affirmation. Our data also include measurement of another component – perceptions of the “public regard” for one’s ethnicity – the extent to which individuals feel that others view members of their race positively or negatively (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) theorize that others’ perceptions may influence individuals’ views about their own group.

In terms of ethnic identity as it pertains specifically to Latinos, much of recent scholarship has focused on the correlation of identity with (a) attitudes, and/or (b) success-related outcomes. With regard to the first correlate, research indicates that the formation of ethnic identity and pride are strongly linked to both parents and peers (Hernandez, Conger, Robins, Bacher, & Widaman, 2014), and shifts in identity may occur throughout life, at times corresponding to major changes in life circumstances and environments (Torres et al., 2012). The resulting level of affirmation/pride is critical in that it may impact values regarding collectivism versus individualism, traditions, and even the intrinsic goodness of human nature (Carter, Yeh, & Mazzula, 2008). Moreover, strong ethnic identity among Latinos – whether via enhanced identification or pride – is positively related to self-esteem and well-being (Hernandez et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002), attitudes regarding civic engagement (Anglin, Johnson-Pynn, & Johnson, 2012), and predicts fewer withdrawn and depressed symptoms (Rogers-Sirin & Gupta, 2012).

Much of the literature surveyed also associates strong ethnic identity with positive academic outcomes (Hernandez et al., 2014; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). In a study of Latino high school students, Gushue (2006) found that ethnic identity is associated with self-efficacy and related task-oriented strengths. Specifically, as adolescents achieve an ethnic identity they may gain confidence in their career decision-making skills such as gathering information, setting goals, and problem solving.

Similarly, Morales (2010) states that some low-SES students of color, including Latinos, use ethnic identity itself as the platform for success. Students in Morales' (2010) study were aware of their cultural history and felt they were defying stereotypes by exceeding expectations (p. 171). Although the present study does not directly add to the body of literature on the relationship between identity affirmation and academic outcomes, it helps to illuminate the larger context in which high ethnic affirmation and other positive identity factors may preexist for those in the Latino college student sample with low reported SES.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

SES corresponds disproportionately with negative outcomes in employment, education, and physical and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2014). However, few studies have explicitly focused on the association between ethnic identity and SES. For example, Calaff (2008) uses a framework of immigrant status, class, and SES to describe how a sample of academically successful, yet socioeconomically diverse, Latino schoolchildren have adopted their parents' work ethics and attitudes about educational achievement but does not specifically examine SES related to ethnic identity (pp. 209-215).

One study that drew clear connections between SES and identity did not include Latino samples. Specifically, Sanchez and Garcia (2012) analyzed SES data among three multiracial segments (black-white, Latino-white, and Asian-white) according to neighborhood and asked participants to identify the importance and perceived social value of their minority component identity. The authors found that "multiracial people from higher SES and neighborhoods and largely White contexts reported lower private regard (pride) and importance (centrality) for their minority background" (para. 4). In other words, high SES is negatively correlated with racial affirmation/pride.

Given the observed gap in extant literature, it is perhaps telling that Sanchez and Garcia (2012) confirm, “little attention has been given to the interplay between [SES] and race” (para. 1), and naturally, this limitation of the research would seem to extend to ethnicity as well. Our study attempts to begin to plug a rather considerable hole in the present scholarship.

Methodology

Study Design and Sample

The current study uses survey data from a larger study that focused on biological indicators of stress among Latino students who experience subtle discrimination. Participants were recruited through the use of flyers. All students provided written consent to participate. The California State University Standing Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects approved this study.

Participants ($N=36$) included 24 female and 12 male students ranging in age from 18-36 ($M=20$, $SD=3.4$). The analytic sample included 35 participants due to a single missing response in each set of ethnic identity ratings. In each of these instances, the respondent was not counted towards the mean score or correlation coefficient. Participants were asked to self-report their SES and ethnic identity.

Instrumentation

The measures were adapted from two established ethnic identity scales: the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM-R) and the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI).

The MEIM-R. The MEIM-R has subscales to measure identity “exploration” and “commitment” (Phinney & Ong, 2007). The 5-item exploration subscale was used in this study with demonstrated reliability ($\alpha = .85$). Example items include “I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better” and “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.” All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.”

The MIBI. The MIBI assesses four dimensions of ethnic identity as outlined by the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). We focused on the regard dimension of this model, which comprises *private regard* (7 items; pride/affirmation; $\alpha = .93$) and *public regard* (5 items; how one feels their ethnicity is viewed by non-members; $\alpha = .68$). Example items for pride/affirmation include “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me” and “I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.” Example items for public regard include “In general, others respect members of my ethnic group” and “Society views members of my ethnic group as an asset.” Though the MIBI was originally designed to be used with black participants (Sellers et al., 1997), it has been adapted for use with other populations, including Latinos (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree.”

Data Analysis

There were two independent SES variables in the survey data: reported family income level and self-identified “socioeconomic status” category. Family income level was broken into 12 separate income ranges in the survey, though given the small sample size this was condensed into three broader ranges: less than \$25,000; \$25,001 to \$50,000; and greater than \$50,001. Socioeconomic status was strictly categorical, with choices offered as “working class,” “lower-middle class,” “middle class,” “upper-middle class,” and “upper class.” None of the participants identified as “upper class” and only one identified as “upper middle class.” Due to the sample size, responses comprising “middle class” and “upper middle class” were combined into a single category for the sake of statistical comparison and analysis, resulting in the socioeconomic status variable containing three categories instead of the original five.

Univariate analysis was used to determine frequency and distribution of scores among the sample. Given the limited sample size, a bivariate analysis was performed using a Spearman’s Rho correlation, the non-parametric alternative to Pearson’s R correlation and better suited to smaller data sets.

Results

The sample is primarily low income, reports low SES, and has higher ethnic identity pride/affirmation than search/exploration or public regard. For participants with a reported family income of less than \$25,000 ($n=13$), the mean rating for affirmation was 3.80; for \$25-50,000 ($n=14$), it was 3.68; and for those reporting over \$50,000 ($n=9$), it was 3.52. Mean ratings for search were 2.44, 2.85, and 2.57, respectively. Mean ratings for regard were 2.64, 2.89, and 2.66, respectively. Affirmation scores on the whole were noticeably higher than those for search and regard, with an average rating of 3.68 compared to average ratings of 2.64 and 2.74 (see Figure 1).

Those reporting an SES category of “working class” ($n=14$) rated their affirmation an average of 3.76, “lower-middle class” ($n=16$) rated a similar average of 3.84, while “middle class and above” ($n=6$) rated only an average of 3.07. Mean ratings for search were 2.84, 2.70, and 2.00, respectively. Mean ratings for public regard were 2.80, 2.73, and 2.63. Again, affirmation scores were noticeably higher than those for search and public regard (mean of 3.68 compared to 2.64 and 2.74) (see Figure 2).

The relationship between reported income, avowed SES, and the three measures of ethnic identity – affirmation, search, and public regard – was investigated using a Spearman’s Rho correlation. As seen in Table 1, there was a negative correlation between reported income and affirmation, $r = -.13$, $p = .42$, with higher reported income associated with a lower affirmation rating. Correlations of income and both search and regard ($r = .06$, $p = .73$ and $r = -.01$, $p = .95$, respectively) were negligible. Analysis of SES as correlated were more illuminating: Negative correlation was observed between SES and affirmation ($r = -.21$, $p = .22$), search ($r = -.22$, $p = .19$), and public regard ($r = -.10$, $p = .56$), with notable drops in expressed affirmation and search for respondents identifying themselves as middle class or above, as identified by the mean scores previously reported. In all cases, results were statistically insignificant likely due to the limited sample size, however the magnitude of the correlation coefficients was moderate suggesting the likelihood for statistical significance given a larger sample size.

Discussion

The findings reveal a disparity between income and perceived SES as they pertain to ethnic identity. While this may seem counterintuitive due to how often income and SES are conflated, a number of factors may account for the incongruity, including student respondents not knowing their family's household income, students not being supported by their family and individually having a low SES, the general fluidity of SES labels within society, and the difference between one's income and the way one actually perceives himself/herself in terms of social status. Indeed, there were multiple instances in which a respondent would report a relatively high or low family income yet select a contrasting SES. For example, one participant reported a total family income between \$75,000 and \$100,000, yet identified as "working class," the lowest SES option available. It is both conceivable and justifiable that this individual simply does not identify as anything other than working class despite a seemingly moderate family income because class is a matter of their perception rather than an objectively determined quantity. In this sense, it is possible to *feel* working class and perhaps even to embody working class identity (however fluid or subjective the concept may be) despite fiscal proof to the contrary – a class identity negotiated somewhere between the dual forces of self-perception and evolving societal definition. As an alternate explanation, a seemingly moderate amount of family income could still be considered "working class" depending on family size.

Is that negotiated SES identity at all related to one's ethnic identity? Examining the relationship between reported income and the dimensions of ethnic identity yields a mixed picture: We found a slight inverse relationship between affirmation and reported income, perhaps indicating on some level a correlation between class-as-defined-by-income (the most typical social definition of class) and ethnic pride. However, no such relationship was found for search and public regard, perhaps casting some doubt on a potential connection between how status is defined socially (e.g., income) and how ethnicity is experienced.

On the other hand, results for perceptions of status were clearer and potentially support the findings of Sanchez and Garcia (2012) who found that in a sample of multiracial participants, people with a higher SES were more likely to categorize themselves as White than Black. It is possible that the findings of the present study point to a similar connection between self-categorization of both ethnic identity and SES: As self-perception of SES increases, self-perception of pride, the desire to seek connection with one's ethnicity, and the sense of how one's ethnicity is viewed by others may actually decrease. Again, it is impossible to pinpoint the cause for this correlation given the limited

scope of the present study, including a sample with an age range that includes students who may have completed their identity exploration, but one possible reason may be the prevailing sense that identification with minority ethnicity is somehow “lesser” than, or otherwise separate from, what it is stereotypically considered to be “average” or “high-up” in class. In the context of the present study, this tension between class and ethnicity may result in higher-SES Latino students feeling like outsiders among other members of their own culture and perceived status, and more likely to perceive social marginalization.

Inversely, the findings here suggest that Latino college students who identify themselves as working and lower-middle class may also feel a stronger sense of identity and even consider themselves more positively regarded by non-Latinos. Again, potential reasons for this are numerous and require future inquiry. However, as previously mentioned, research has shown that strong ethnic identity is an indicator of positive self-esteem and academic success (Hernandez et al., 2014; Morales, 2010; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006; Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002). Thus, it is possible that a strong sense of ethnic identity allows some Latino college students to succeed in spite of what they feel are humble origins (that is, lower avowed SES), thereby reinforcing the sense that their ethnicity is a source of strength and may be seen by others as going hand-in-hand with industriousness, as indicated by overall higher ethnic identity scores.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that ratings for affirmation were higher across the board, regardless of income level or SES, when compared to search and public regard, suggesting that the examined population likely has pride in its ethnic background even when connections to, and perceived outsider impressions of, said background are not as strong. Moreover, because affirmation ratings were relatively high in all cases, this potentially indicates that even if ethnic pride is negatively associated with higher income and avowed SES, deleterious effects among this population are limited and perhaps mitigated by other factors (for example, a strong sense of personal pride due to academic advancement). Finally, it appears that regardless of income or perceived social status, Latino college students did not differ in their perceptions of how society views their group. Thus, status does not appear to protect or enhance Latino students’ feelings of public regard.

Data from the current study are drawn from a pilot study that focused on biological indicators of stress among Latino students who experience subtle discrimination. Given the

relatively small sample size, this study is meant to be largely exploratory and the convenience sample limits generalizability of results. However, such research does afford the opportunity to begin to explore potential larger trends among this specific population, illuminates a potential relationship between SES and the three dimensions of ethnic identity, and lays the groundwork for future research.

Implications & Conclusion

Given the population studied, a potential relationship between SES and ethnic identity carries implications for those in both the academic and social work professions. With regard to SES, college educators and counselors should keep in mind the potential for ethnic minority students with seemingly high avowed SES – often assumed to be a protective factor – to be vulnerable to feeling like outsiders or perceive social marginalization. These students may need additional support in order to maintain academic wellbeing. Similarly, counselors and educators may want to consider how individual students will react to cultural content, whether in class material or when provided with opportunities for socialization elsewhere on campus.

More broadly, this study reinforces for those in education the centrality of intersectionality as both a concept and basis for practice. Conceptually, this study supports the idea that even with a particular ethnic group, the manner in which ethnicity is experienced can depend on several other factors, one of which may be SES. In terms of practice, these findings indicate that positive ethnic identity may indeed be a protective factor in the face of economic hardship. Likewise, as a factor involved in the negotiation of one's overall social identity, SES may be a complicating factor, perhaps impacting perception of one's own culture in sometimes surprising ways. This in turn reinforces the notion that a student's narrative, cultural expertise, and avowed identity must all be taken into account in order to get a full picture of what affects their psychosocial wellbeing and academic success.

Author Biographies

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Table 1

Spearman's Rho Correlations between Income, SES, and Ethnic Identity

| Variable of Interest | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----------------------|---|------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. Income | - | .38* | -.13 | .06 | -.01 |
| 2. SES | | - | -.21 | -.22 | -.10 |
| 3. Pride/Affirmation | | | - | .68** | .28 |
| 4. Search/Exploration | | | | - | .56** |
| 5. Public Regard | | | | | - |

Note. * $p < .05$ (2-tailed); ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

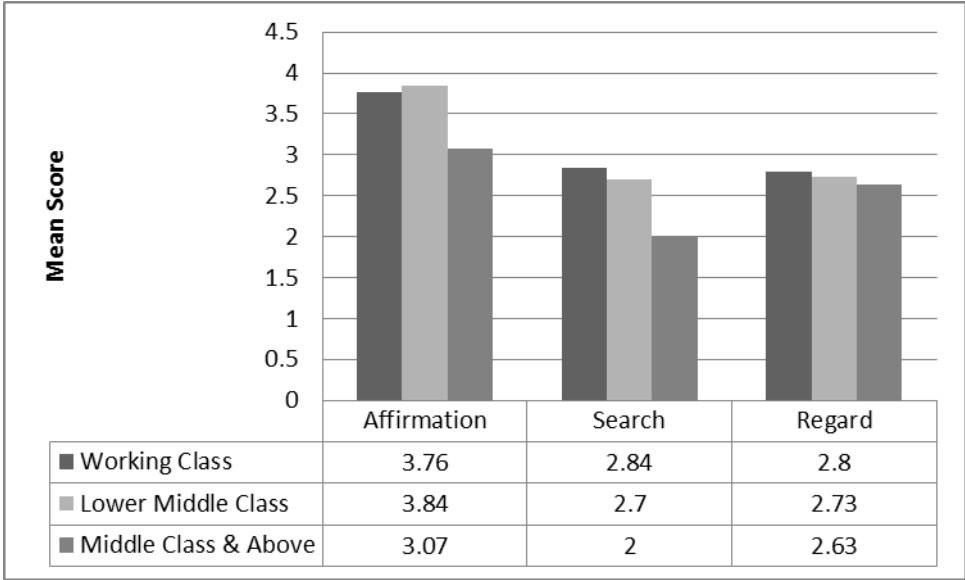


Figure 1. Income level by ethnic identity.

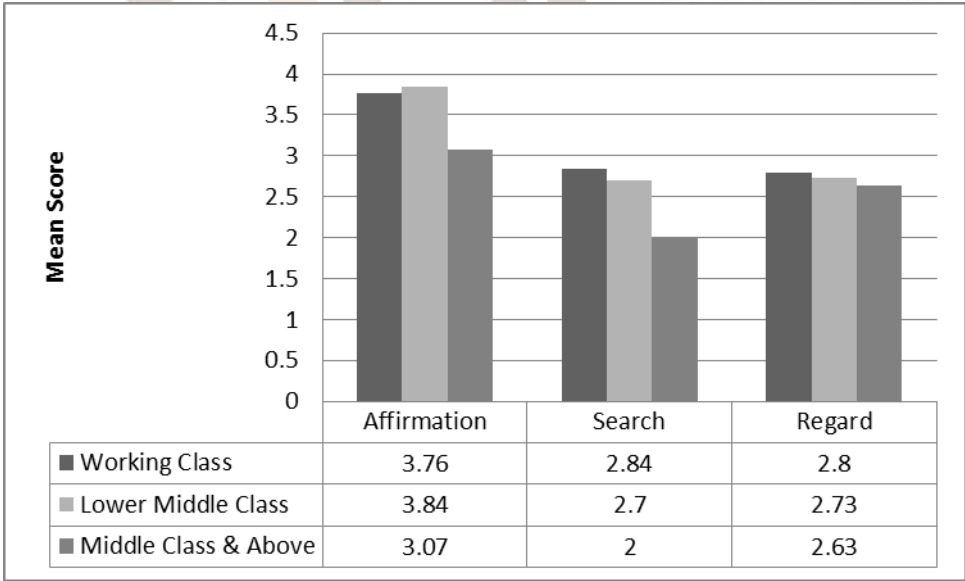


Figure 2. Socioeconomic status by ethnic identity.