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Abstract

The concept of identity, the development of one's sense of self, is a dynamic concept that shifts with both internal and external changes. For African immigrants who come to the United States, the concept of identity has multiple shifting layers of meaning. This paper outlines both a chronological developmental model as well as an ethnic minority model of identity development and illustrates the ethnic minority model with examples from interviews of thirteen African immigrants from five African countries living in the Denver, Colorado, metropolitan area. The reader is introduced to these thirteen persons, first and second generation African immigrants from five separate families. These persons have come to the United States from Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Uganda during the years 1977 to 1992. They share their stories and their insights into US culture and the unfolding of their own identities as they become part of the social fabric of the United States of America.
Keywords: 1. Identity development, 2. African immigrants, 3. United States, 4. Denver, Colorado.

Identity Development

The concept of identity—the development of one's sense of self—is usually a

psychologically derived construct, generally described in the developmental psychology

and counseling or clinical psychology literature. However, the importance of an

individual's identity and self-esteem and a group's collective identity and self-esteem has

a major impact on the broader political nature of a group. An individual's identity

development has generally been defined using a chronological developmental model. A

minority identity model shares some similar components; some major differences,

however, exist.

Erik Erikson's model of individual development as described in his classic book

Childhood and Society is the chronological developmental model of identity development

(Erikson, 1963). This model generally divides the lifespan into five stages:

1. In infancy (0-2 years), the child is initially unable to differentiate between the

self and the world around it. These first two years are significant as the child develops a sense of self as separate from its own surroundings.

2. A young child (3-6 years) begins to compare self with siblings and the adults in its world. The child begins to notice differences: smaller, larger, darker, lighter, fatter, thinner. Children during this age identify preferences and their own possessions. "I like ice cream." "These are my clothes." Gender identity is achieved during this period. Boys and girls can identify themselves by their biological gender, but without much understanding of its meaning and little understanding of its constancy. It is during this period that racial awareness first begins to develop, an awareness that skin comes in different shades and colors. During this period race and ethnicity is primarily a superficial awareness only; awareness of the meaning of racial differences in a culture is not yet understood.

3. In middle childhood (6-11 years) identity takes the form of trait labels. During this stage a child is likely to define self and others based on traits such as attractiveness, popularity, and ability. "I'm good at soccer." "I'm the prettiest girl in the class." Gender constancy is achieved during this period, i.e. "I'm a girl and I'll always be a girl." It is during this period that prejudice may begin to develop, for children are first aware of the "in-groups" and "out-groups." They will not understand the meaning or derivation of these groups, but they are aware of "difference" and those who are considered desirable and undesirable by their family members or other reference groups. Racial and ethnic constancy also develops during this period; that is, not until this time are children aware that ethnicity is unchangeable and that an Irish person cannot become an American Indian by wearing Indian clothes.

4. Adolescence (12-18 years) marks the beginning of self-knowledge. There is more abstract awareness of how one is regarded by others. For the first time a person is capable of formulating a philosophy or theory about self—the way things are and the way the person would like them to be. The individual who sees these selves—the actual and the ideal—as similar will be better prepared to adapt to the world and be successful in it than the person who sees the real self as inferior to the ideal self.

5. Adulthood is a combination of continuity and change—continuity of the developmental process described above as well as change in self-concept based on major life events such as education, employment, commitment, children, illness, and war. These events cause a person to reexamine who she/he is related to her/his life experiences.

Ethnic Identity Development

Henri Tajfel (1981, p. 255) defined ethnic identity as that part of an individual's self-concept that derives from her/his knowledge of her/his membership in a social or ethnic group or groups together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. This development of ethnic identity, like the general identity development described above, is an age-related progression in the ability to perceive, process, and integrate or interpret racial or ethnic stimuli that lead to the establishment of ethnic identity. Just as with the above model, ethnic identity is a dynamic concept that is modified by life's events, both positive and negative. It is similar to, but not identical with the concept of acculturation, which is the manner in which ethnic identity changes with contact with another group or other groups. This concept of acculturation has been studied particularly with immigrant groups and changes in generational status.

African-American Identity

Ethnic identity is central to the psychological functioning of members of racial and ethnic minority groups, but research is fragmentary and inconclusive. The distribution of studies has been uneven; most have been on African-Americans, with few on Asian-Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, or African immigrants. Ethnic identity is to a large extent defined by context; it is not an issue except in terms of a contact group, usually the majority culture. It has been shown to be positively related to the ethnic density of a neighborhood and negatively related to the occupational and residential mobility of subjects.

African-American identity development, particularly African immigrant groups, is particularly complex in that African immigrant groups are not members of a common culture, but represent a diverse cultural tapestry. African immigrants can differ from one another in their culture as widely as their Eurasian counterparts. Thus, many of the issues in African immigrant identity development will exist based on the individual's level of acculturation. African immigrants living in populations where density of a population is high and mobility is lower will have a very different experience of "Africanness" than a person in an area where density of their particular ethnic group is low and neighborhood mobility is higher.

Africans in America: The Unfolding of Ethnic Identity (Watson, 2002) is a video project comprised of a compilation of interviews with African immigrants. These edited video interviews with an accompanying *Instructor's Manual* (Watson & LeJeune, 2002) were completed Summer 2002. This video material was initially planned as a simple

supplementary resource for a presentation for the African Studies Association meetings for Fall 2002 in Washington, DC. The subject was to be family pressure concerning choice of spouse for first generation immigrants in the United States. As the filming of the five immigrant families proceeded and as the subject matter became broader, the vision of the documentary expanded, and the subject of the unfolding of African into American identity became central. Ultimately, the thirteen interviewees for this video project became the educators of this series.

The questions to be answered by this series were the following: Who are these people? What do they believe? How are they fitting into American society and adjusting to American culture? To answer these questions, the documentary introduces viewers to two generations of five African families living in the Denver, Colorado, metropolitan area:

From Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Yenealem Kebede, her husband Gedion Fanta, and their children Bethlehem and Sophanite. Yenealem Kebede came to the United States for education in 1982 and met her husband Gedion Fanta a few years later. They married and have two daughters, Bethlehem (13), and Sophanite (9). Both Yen and Gedion are from central Ethiopia where the Amharic language is dominant. Yen works for the Internal Revenue Service as a customer service agent in the accounts management department. Gedion owns, and is the primary cook for the Abyssinian Café, an Ethiopian restaurant in Denver. They are members of the St. Mary's Ethiopian Orthodox church in Denver, Colorado.

From Accra and Bawku, Ghana: Muntari and Ramatu Awini and their daughters Rahina and Jemila. Muntari Awini came to the United States from Ghana in 1989 to

serve as a financial officer in the Ghanian embassy in Washington, DC. His wife Ramatu followed with their two daughters Rahina and Jemila. A son, Jaleel, was born in the United States several years later. Muntari is presently in pharmaceutical sales; Ramatu is a Director of Nursing at an area nursing facility while completing a BS in nursing at Regis University. Both Rahina and Jemila are college students – Rahina at Metropolitan State College of Denver and Jemila at Grambling State University in Louisiana. The parents are practicing Muslims.

From Kafanchan, Nigeria: Christy Kanwai and her daughter Princess. Christy Kanwai came with her husband and children from Nigeria for his schooling in 1992. Christy's husband has recently died, but Christy has decided to stay in the United States as her children become educated. Christy is a Certified Nurse Assistant and works in an Alzheimer's unit of a nursing home. Princess is Christy's 16-year-old daughter, a junior in an Aurora, Colorado, high school. They attend a small Nigerian and Ghanaian Christian church that has a Nigerian pastor. Christy is from the Kataf ethnic group in Nigeria where Hausa is the native language.

From Freetown, Sierra Leone: Isatha Tarawally and her daughter Khadijatu Fofanah. Isatha Tarawally came to the United States initially in 1977 to join her husband who was receiving his advanced degree at the University of Denver. He has returned to Sierra Leone and Isatha has remained in the United States with their children. Isatha is a Certified Nurse Assistant doing home health care nursing. Khadijatu is a college student at Metropolitan State College of Denver who works in the college's financial aid office. Isatha and Khadijatu practice the Muslim religion.

From Gulu, Uganda: Marcellina Otii and her daughter Ageno. Marcellina Otii and her daughters came from Uganda via Kenya in 1979 to join her husband Albert Otii who was in the United States for education. They came to escape the murderous reign of Idi Amin, the Ugandan president/dictator. Ageno and two other siblings were born later to the Otiis in the United States. Marcellina is a Montessori teacher in the Denver Public Schools while Albert is an instructor of accounting and business education at the Community College of Denver. Ageno's older sisters have graduated from college. Ageno is a sophomore at the University of Colorado majoring in communication. Marcellina and Albert are members of the Acholi group in northern Uganda. The family is Christian Catholic.

Besides being the land of opportunity, the United States is also the land of acculturative stress –the stress resulting from contact between numerous different cultural groups with different traditions, beliefs, and values. What then are the coping mechanisms that these families have incorporated? What are their sources of strength within this fast-paced society with often seemingly dangerous surroundings? How do these persons – first and second generation immigrants – see themselves? Do they fit in with African-Americans? Or are they many separate groups? Their sense of self unfolds as they live in the United States and interact with others. How do these peoples see their futures? Will they stay in the United States or return to their homelands? What are the first generation hopes for their children and future grandchildren?

The establishment of an ethnic identity is a dynamic, not a static process. Identity unfolds as persons interact with those in their home, as well as with those at work and school, and in play situations. In principle, change occurs in both groups. In practice,

however, the minority group is faced with many, many more challenges, and the

incentives to assimilate into the dominant culture are high, because the rewards could

encompass economic, political, social and psychological payoffs.

Developmental Models for Minority Identity

Researchers have proposed a number of developmental models consisting of

several stages in minority identity development (Table 1).

Table 1

Minority Identity Development

Cross [1]	Pre-encounter	Encounter	Internalization
Phinney [2]	Unexamined Ethnic Identity	Ethnic Identity Search	Achieved Ethnic Identity
Atkinson, Morten,& Sue [3]	Conformity	Dissonance Resistance/ Immersion Introspection	Synergetic Articulation and Awareness

These models of ethnic identity development are not chronological developmental

models as was the Erikson model initially described above, but are adult mental health

models. These models are more appropriate and fitting when evaluating and

understanding the African immigrant population in the US. The first of the three stages of

minority identity development—differently labeled as pre-encounter, unexamined ethnic identity, and conformity by the three researchers above—consists of a period in the life of a minority individual when there tends to be little self awareness of one's ethnic identity and when a denial of the problems that minorities experience seems to exist. There is in this period, a strong dependence on, and identification with the majority or dominant group. This first stage, for most adult African immigrants, is experienced prior to coming to the US. For their children, this initial stage likely follows the Eriksonian stages listed prior. In most all cases these African adults have identified with their ethnic groups or with those whom they have indigenous language affinity on the continent of Africa. They are the majority, and their African identity is assumed to be the norm, and is unquestioned.

The second stage of this model—variously called encounter; ethnic identity search; and dissonance, resistance-immersion, introspection—is the period in one's life where one immerses oneself in ethnic identity. This is a period of high emotional intensity with a clear realization of the status of the group to which one belongs in the larger community. During this period persons are likely to view all of their psychological and ethnic community problems as a product of their oppression. Persons in this period have a great deal of anger and distrust, even of their own minority group members, particularly those who are symbols of the majority establishment. There may even be evidence of racial self-hatred during this time. One example of this unfolding self-discomfort comes from an interview of a mother taken from a previously completed video series titled *Videocases in Human Development.[4]* As this Chicana/African-American woman is bathing her five-year-old son, he says in a sincere tone as he is

lathering himself in the bath, "I haven't figured out how to get my skin white enough." The mother responded, "I died on the inside. I cried on the inside, and tried not to cry on the outside. Then I said to him, 'If you were white I couldn't be your mommy. You'd have a different mommy, but I couldn't be your mommy.'" In many of the minority groups, those persons who are seen as "selling out" by integrating into the majority and rejecting their ethnic identity are labeled "oreos" or "apples," indicating that internal ethnic color is different than their outer color. Dissonance occurs when persons are unable to resolve conflicts or value differences that occur between the majority culture and those of their minority group. Introspection during this period leads in many cases to modification and change, as the person is torn between their identification with their minority group and their need to exercise greater personal power and freedom. The following case excerpts and quotes taken from the thirteen interviews of African immigrants in the video series *Africans in America: The Unfolding of Ethnic Identity* [5] illustrate the theme of the discovery of an ethnic identity and the dynamic nature of the struggle to define oneself as African and American within this country.

"Kids here are a little less strict – a little less disciplined. Our parents are more strict with us. That's OK with us." (Sophie and Beth Gedion)

"The first thing I noticed when I got here was individualism. People are not open. I didn't even know my next-door neighbor. It's not like that in my country. We are open. We try to know each other. We try to socialize. We sit down together for a cup of tea or a bottle of beer." (Muntari Awini)

"American schools were different….a lot of white kids. They treated us bad. They didn't treat us equally at all. When we were growing up in Ghana we were used to being treated equally. They didn't accept us. It was because of our skin color." (Rahina and Jemila Awini)

"My biggest challenge (coming to the US and raising children here) was too much freedom. My African culture is different than this American culture. I wasn't raised like that. I looked aside and down to my mother. American children look directly at their parents. They look them in the eye. That doesn't convey the respect we show in Africa." (Isatha Tarawally)

"I miss home a lot. Some day I'll go back. I'm a Nigerian." (Christy Kanwai)

"The thing I found most surprising in the US was the speed of conversation and everyday work. People would say 'Hi,' 'Hi,' and then they were gone. I didn't know where they were running to or what was their intent." (Marcellina Otii)

"My fear is that my children will become too Americanized…too focused on making money. I'm fearful that they will forget who they are. I'm proud of Africa. I don't see the myriad of limitations that so many others see. Africa is my home forever. I want my children to know that Africa is the home of their ancestors." (Marcellina Otii)

"Our home is a Ugandan home. I'm taught in that manner yet when I leave

the house I'm treated in a different way. I'm treated as an African-American.

I have black skin, yet that's not my history at all. What are we supposed to be?

Are we Ugandan enough? Are we American enough?" (Ageno Otii)

The third period—internalization, achieved ethnic identity, and synergetic articulation and awareness—is the culmination of this adult mental health model of ethnic identity. This is a dynamic model that is composed of periods of constancy and periods of change. This is marked by flexibility, not narrowness, and an awareness that individual and group power and success depends upon acquiring the internal skills necessary to experience a desired level of personal and group freedom and power. Their sense of minority identity is balanced by the appreciation of other cultures, as well as the majority culture. Persons during this period can discriminate between persons of their own and other cultures who are responsive and sensitive to difference and those who are not. It is the ability to look beyond the surface skin color or ethnic label that distinguishes a person at this stage.

Personal quotations from the interviewees in the video series *Africans in America: The Unfolding of Ethnic Identity* [6]and *Wearing Hijab: Uncovering the Myths of Islam in the US* [7] exemplify this third stage of ethnic identity development.

"Ethiopians are always together. Even though they mix with everyone else, they

try to keep a sense of who they are – through restaurants, churches, and social

affairs." (Yenealem Kebede)

"I tell them (my children) every day. This house is Ghana. When you go outside, that is America. Inside my house, this is Ghana and you will do according to the Ghanaian culture. They respect that." (Ramatu Awini)

"My parents worry that when I have children that they may forget their heritage… where they came from. They feel that if I marry a Nigerian man they (my children) won't forget. They'll know where they come from." (Princess Kanwai)

"I like being different from other African-Americans. I want people to know I'm from Nigeria. I like bringing Nigerian food to school to show I'm different." (Princess Kanwai)

"They (my parents) never said I needed to date a Ghanian or a Muslim. As long as someone respected and loved me, that would be alright. They may prefer that I marry a Muslim but they've never said so. Deep inside I know who I am. Any negativity from others (based on nationality or religion) just makes me stronger." (Rahina Awini)

"A Muslim can date a Christian or anyone who practices Judaism. This is because these two religions all testify to the unity of one God. A Muslim can marry a Christian or a Jew as long as the Muslim can continue practicing as a

Muslim. The only problem is if the other one is trying to force the other one to become part of his or her religion. That is not acceptable." (Muntari Awini)

"Adapting the two cultures I've become a better person. There are things about the African culture I love; things about the American culture I love. Africans help others first; Americans help themselves first." (Khadijatu Fofanah)

"I do want them (my children) to learn the good things of human life in America. I want them to balance the speed of life in America and the need to make money with the important things in life – the things you remember on your deathbed. I want them to know Uganda – the land of their ancestors." (Marcellina Otii)

While discrimination and prejudice remain difficult and painful parts of their life experience in the US, African immigrants have generated individual and community resources to combat these barriers more effectively. These resources include churches and other religious and spiritual groups, ethnic restaurants that serve as ethnic meeting places and social clubs, celebrations of national and tribal holidays, and educational resources for teaching indigenous languages and other ethnic and national practices. As this sense of ethnic identity unfolds, recently arrived Africans move through the three stages of identity development – pre-encounter, encounter, and internalization – and more confidently add to the rich tapestry that is the United States of America.

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