



# PERSISTENT CONCERNS: QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON ETHNIC-RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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Research on ethnic-racial identity (ERI) and its development has increased exponentially over the past decade. In this paper we discuss five questions that the Lifespan ERI Study Group grappled

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with in our effort propose a lifespan model of ERI: (1) When does ERI development begin and end? (2) How do we account for age-dependent and contextually-initiated factors in ERI? (3) Should there be a reference point for healthy ERI, and if so, what is it? (4) How do the multiplicities of identity (intersectionality, multiracialism, whiteness) figure into our conceptualization of ERI? (5) How do we understand the role of ERI in pursuit of equity, diversity, and social justice? We note that these are persistent questions in ERI research, and thus our goal is to present our collective reckoning with these issues as well as our ponderings about why they persist. We conclude with recommendations for the kinds of research questions, designs, and methods that developmental science, in particular, needs to pursue.

Across disciplines and literatures, there is widespread interest in ethnic-racial identity (ERI), which scientists have defined as: the process and content of developing an understanding of and a sense of belonging to one's ethnic and/or racial groups (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). As a field, psychology has devoted considerable attention to the study of ERI processes among ethnic-racial<sup>1</sup> minority youth and their families (Cokley & Vandiver, 2012; Cross, 1991; Quintana et al., 2006; Sellers et al., 1998; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Verkuyten, 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013). Yet, the widespread interest in ERI is relatively new. A keyword search in the PsycINFO database revealed that during the 42-year period from 1934–1976, there were 47 publications that included the terms “ethnic identity” or “racial identity” in the Abstract. In the less than 42 years that followed, 1977–2018, the same search uncovered 3,691 publications. This exponential rate of growth yields a robust literature on ERI—its conceptualization, development, and implications (Cokley, 2007; Cross et al., 2017; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

In 2014, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century ERI Working Group, comprised of ethnic and racial identity scholars, integrated and summarized the existing models, measures, and constructs of ERI as well as the antecedents and consequences of ERI development (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). This report also noted the limited scholarship on ERI prior to adolescence, and in 2018, the Lifespan Model of ERI Study Group convened to formulate a lifespan model of ERI. This task surfaced many questions about ERI and its development. For example, when does ERI development actually begin? If children establish gender identity by the age of two, what theories do we have to describe ethnic and racial identity processes before the mid-childhood years? In the midst of a racially-fraught sociopolitical climate, how do historical moments influence the developmental timing and content of ERI development, and where does such dynamism fit into existing models? Are children growing up in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and amidst immigration ICE raids, deportations, and family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border having identity-relevant experiences and thus initiating ERI processes earlier or differently?

In this paper, we discuss five questions that our study group grappled with and had to unpack in order to propose a lifespan model of ERI:

1. When does ERI development begin and end?
2. How do we account for age-dependent and contextually-initiated factors in ERI?
3. Should there be a reference point for healthy ERI, and if so, what is it?
4. How do the multiplicities of identity (intersectionality, multiracialism, whiteness) figure into our conceptualization of ERI?
5. How do we understand the role of ERI in pursuit of equity, diversity, and social justice?

The questions we discuss here are not meant to be comprehensive, nor do we contend that these topics are *never* examined in ERI research. Yet, as we reviewed the literature to design a lifespan model, the gaps were visible. Thus, our goal here is to present our collective thinking around these questions and our ponderings about why they persist in order to move some of these lingering questions from limitations and future directions to the current research agenda.

We organize the paper in three parts. Part I briefly situates ERI development within broader history of developmental theory, providing a backdrop to some of the persistent issues in the field that inevitably shape the discourse and interpretation of ERI scholarship. Part II discusses the five questions and their implications for ERI scholarship more broadly. Part III concludes with research recommendations.

### ERI: SITUATING THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Identity, with respect to ethnic and racial background, broadly refers to the sense of self and one's understanding of and positioning within their social groups (Cross et al., 1991; Sellers et al., 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014); it is a psychosocial process, nesting self and society, that unfolds over time and across contexts (Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 2018). Though studied from diverse perspectives across the subfields of psychology (e.g., social, personality, clinical, developmental, multicultural counseling, and educational psychology), the formative roots of this field of study can be traced to the early 1970's when seminal scholars, namely, Cross (1971; 1991), Parham and Helms (1981), and Thomas (1970), laid the groundwork for studying how Black people come to understand what it means to be Black in a racist society predicated on anti-blackness and white supremacy. Sellers et al.'s (1997, 1998) subsequent theory and measurement framework, The Multidimensional Model of Black Identity, continued to transform the conceptualization, scope, and impact of racial identity scholarship through the current era.

When developmental scholars and researchers entered the racial identity conversation, it was from the perspective of Erikson's (1968) major developmental theory, *psychosocial identity theory*. Identity, from an Eriksonian perspective, was posited as universal, a process that was normative and for which there was a single, unified path to optimal or healthy development. Early developmental theories, conceptualizations, and measures of identity centered White (western, male, heterosexual, Christian, middleclass, educated) as the benchmark of success and therefore assumed (and continue to do so), at its core, that whiteness was not only normal but also superior. The identities of racial and ethnic minority peoples ("Negroes") were an afterthought in Erikson's (1968) theory, a comparison group used to evaluate deviations in development, the unhealthy pathways and "negative identities" that ultimately reaffirmed whiteness as normal, good, and ideal. The damage of white supremist, white-centric theorizing and research is well-documented and has been countered in critical theories of human development (Bang et al., 2012; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Lee, 2012; Spencer, 1995). Yet the discipline of developmental psychology, rooted in a rhetoric of universal processes, has taken a slow and winding road to reckoning with its Eurocentric and racist assumptions of human development. Unsurprisingly, then, the developmental perspectives on ERI carry a similar historical grounding and a white-washing of the diverse human experience .

The mainstream and widespread story of ERI as a developmental process begins with the work of Jean Phinney and the Multi-Ethnic Identity Model (MEIM; Phinney, 1990, 1992), as previously noted by Cross and Phagen-Smith (1996). As identity scholars trained in the study of human development, the authors of this paper were also taught Erikson and Phinney as the foundational theories for thinking about identity and studying ERI development. Even though race identity scholars shaped the early foundations of this area of study through research on the identities of Black (Cross, 1991; Sellers et al., 1998) and White people (Helms & Carter, 1990), the MEIM quickly gained acceptance among developmental scientists and ushered in a generation of developmental scholarship on ERI. The rapid uptake and proliferation of the MEIM was facilitated by its direct extension of Erikson's (1968) theory and related identity status model (Marcia, 1986). It was further elevated by its "universal" structure. Diverging from race-specific identity models (Cross, 1991; Cross et al., 1995; Helms & Carter, 1990; Sellers et al., 1998), the MEIM was premised on its applicability to *any* racial/ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). There is ample and important critique of Phinney's theory and measure (e.g., Cross & Phagen-Smith, 1996), which is not the focus of this paper, but its impact on the trajectory of research on ERI development (the questions, measures, samples, and outcomes studied) cannot be understated.

## FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ERI SCHOLARSHIP

This history of developmental theory came to the fore as our Study Group worked to chart a lifespan model of ERI development. Cognizant of this history, and responsive to recent calls and commentaries addressing diversity and equity in developmental science (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers, 2019; Seaton et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), we were intentional in our efforts to think through the universal conceptualization of ERI processes, not as acontextual or acultural, but as a shared human experience that is varied by sociocultural affordances and constraints (Spencer, 1995; Velez & Spencer, 2018). We see ERI and development not as separate from overall identity development, but as basic to it. ERI is also not unique or relevant only to ethnic-racial minority populations nor is it separate from other identities; it is a part of each individual's experience. It involves both explicit and implicit processes. ERI is dynamic, unfolding across the lifespan, in relation to multiple developmental, contextual, historical factors, and an individual's own meaning-making (Williams, this issue).

We found ourselves in good company in grounding a lifespan model in these principles (Cross et al., 2017; Seaton et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018; Velez & Spencer, 2018; Verkuyten et al., 2019). And while there are important examples and exemplars showing how racial identity depends on contexts (Carter et al., 2017; Witherspoon et al., 2016) and transforms through adulthood (Neville & Cross, 2017), that the meaning of ERI is interlaced with gender and social class (Azmitia et al., 2008; Ghavami & Peplau, 2018), and that young children can report on their own ERI in meaningful ways (Derlan et al., 2017; Marcelo & Yates, 2018), these topics typically reside in the limitations and future directions sections of our publications and in summative reviews and commentaries rather than empirical reports. We believe the following five questions that informed the Lifespan ERI Model (Derlan Williams, this issue) can serve as guideposts for fellow scholars studying ERI development.

### 1. When does ERI development begin and end?

Erikson (1968) located the “identity crisis” in adolescence—a period of self-discovery in which youth explore and clarify their sense of self. Although a focal task in the adolescent years, Erikson (1968) also argued that identity “begins” in infancy and is “never established” as something “static and unchangeable”, underscoring its evolution across the lifespan (p. 24). Most scholars also agree that identity likely begins *before* adolescence and continues *after*. Yet, there is little consensus (or discussion) about when ERI development begins and how the ERI experiences that come before and after adolescence are linked to key ERI constructs (e.g., centrality, exploration) in the field. In short, we know more about the adolescent and young adult years because much research has focused here, but less about the bookends of the developmental spectrum.

In building a lifespan model, we had to consider when ERI begins and what evidence exists of the early foundations of ERI. In the early years, infants can discriminate faces based on race, and research on priming shows an accumulation of identity-relevant experiences, including exposure to people who are of the same or different races during infancy (Quintana et al., 2017). Research on facial recognition and same-race preferences in infants (Xiao et al., 2013) demonstrates a capacity that may undergird the ability to distinguish between E-R categories, even though this skill is not explicitly observable until early childhood. Are race perception and prior experiences part of ERI development, and if so, in what ways and to what extent can an ERI theory integrate these developmental capacities? How and in what ways does awareness or knowledge of race and racial stereotypes inform ERI? Does early exposure to racial diversity carry into a child’s own race-perception, labeling, or centrality, and does this vary by the child’s own ethnic-racial background and position in society? If early experiences are indeed relevant to ERI development, are there important moments or sensitive periods in which to be especially focused on supporting ERI development in children?

A robust empirical literature also shows that children are aware of ethnic/racial group status, labels, and stereotypes, engage in ethnic/race-based exclusion, and have in-/out-group preferences early in development (Aboud & Doyle, 1993; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Spencer, 1985; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). This gives solid grounding for studying ERI in the childhood years (Bernal et al., 1990; Byrd, 2012), and there are a few recent empirical examples. One study with 4- to 6-year old Latinx children found that positive feelings toward one’s ethnic-racial group were associated with fewer behavior problems (Serrano-Villar & Calzada, 2016), and a study of 7-and 8-year old children found that ERI moderated the relation between ethnic discrimination and behavior problems (Marcelo & Yates, 2018). Derlan et al. (2017) studied various ERI components (i.e., self-labeling, centrality, knowledge, and attitudes) with 5-year-olds, designing an effective, age-appropriate, implicit measure in which children used images, puppets, boxes, and marbles to discuss their ERI. It is clear that by early elementary school, children can recognize incidents of bias (Brown et al., 2011), subjectively assess the importance of ethnicity/race, and discuss what it means to be a member of their respective ethnic/racial group (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017; Turner & Brown, 2007).

We also noticed that existing constructs in the adolescent/adult literature, such as centrality and regard, guide the research questions: such as “when do children grasp public regard?” and “how do 5-year-olds evaluate their ethnic-racial groups?” Yet, in building the lifespan model, we found value in exploring what the earlier phases of ERI might look like beyond established

constructs. That is, what aspects of ethnic-racial groupings and social stratifications do children pay attention to and why? Van Ausdale and Feagin's (2001) classic ethnography on race in preschool is revelatory in this way, showing the significance of free play as contexts for children's constructions of race, ethnicity, and power. Children used skin color as a social tool – orchestrating games where the children with "darker skin" were positioned by White children to do service activities (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). How does such "play" translate to identity? What do children learn from and through such social activities, even before they have cognitive capacity for concepts such as ethnic constancy? Existing developmental models locate "skin color" and other physical descriptions of race as the basic or early racial knowledge, and then chart how children progress to "more complex" ways of thinking about race (Quintana, 1998). Yet, what does skin color awareness mean for ERI—not as basic knowledge but as ongoing racial understanding? Colorism is indeed a powerful racial construct, and the fact that young children are attentive to and can utilize skin color to make judgments and evaluations may be a key framework that is accessible to children for making sense of race and racism. This approach to conceptualizing childhood ERI shifts our view of children from only *becoming* to *being*.

Looking ahead developmentally, how does ERI develop beyond the adolescent and emerging adult years? Cross (1994) wrote: "The challenges of being Black are modified through the exploration of new questions that crop up at different points across the life span of development" (p. 122). ERI stage models for adults (e.g., Cross, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1985) have long contributed to our thinking about ERI processes. Moments of change, such as shifts in social roles (e.g., marriage, childbirth, becoming a grandparent), entering the work force or changing one's career field, or moving to a new geographical location, can introduce new social circles and expectations. The college years, for example, are a time of normative change in ERI stages (or statuses) as young people encounter and negotiate race (Syed & Azmitia, 2009; Syed et al., 2007). But, beyond the college years, evidence of how ERI continues to develop across the lifespan is scarce. Are there normative developmental changes in ERI during the aging years? Cognitive development and growth are acknowledged as key to ERI development during childhood and adolescence, but what is the influence of cognitive and biological changes that accompany aging? What does ERI development look like in the grandparenting years?

Such developmental questions are of course contextual as well. Positionality - race as it intersects with socioeconomic status, for example, will shift when "aging" begins and what it looks like. In multigenerational homes, for example, grandparents may be focal (or even primary) in socializing grandchildren. The age at which one can retire economically and thus experience an employment and life stage shift, can depend on multiple positionality factors that will interact to shape how ERI continues to evolve during this period of life. A lifespan view of ERI makes room for studying the evolution of ERI across the life course.

## **2. How do we account for the age-dependent and contextually-initiated factors in ERI?**

ERI development results from the joint influence of developmental affordances and contextual forces. Yet, as we discussed a lifespan perspective, we noted how age is often deployed as a universal and uniform marker of "development" and "capacity" (especially in the early years) and found it difficult to parcel what processes are indeed age-dependent rather than contextually-initiated and nested. Thus, as we considered *when* ERI begins, we asked what

developmental capacities must be in place and what contextual forces may facilitate it. Developmental stage models have relied heavily on cognition to explain early ERI processes (e.g., Byrd, 2012; Quintana, 1998), which may underestimate children's early ERI-relevant experiences. Identity-relevant experiences from socialization (e.g., Huguley et al., 2019), discrimination (Zeiders et al., 2019), and other race "encounters" (Cross et al., 1991; Neville & Cross, 2017) in the environment influence when and how ERI develops. The call for contexts of ERI is not new (Phinney, 2008; Seaton et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018), yet in our study group we faced two topics that warrant greater attention and specificity in empirical and theoretical ERI scholarship: *implicit socialization* and *sociopolitical and historical moments*.

A robust literature shows the frequency and types of race-related messages that children receive from various sources (Hughes et al., 2006). Scholars have distinguished between proactive (i.e., messages that *prepare* children for encountering bias) and reactive (i.e., messages in *response* to a race-related interaction) forms of socialization (Juang et al., 2018). Researchers acknowledge, but fewer have studied, implicit socialization. Paasch-Anderson et al. (2019) found that over 60% of adolescents interviewed in their study reported implicit or indirect socialization messages (e.g., noticing the clothing that a parent wears). The Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) also includes a subscale on parents' covert socialization strategies (e.g., displaying cultural heritage artifacts), similar to Caughy's (2002) research examining African American families that have Africentric items in their homes as a form of racial socialization. The type and relevance of implicit messages are also contextually and culturally situated. For example, in Black families, hair can be a powerful cultural socialization experience and tool. Black hair is personal and political; to wear an afro or locs is an identity statement—whether one intends to make this intentionally so or not (Norwood, 2018). How might Black parents' own hair choices, or the ones they make for their children (to use relaxers, to initiate locs, to braid and twist) serve to socialize ERI? Ethnic-racial language and linguistic patterns and child naming practices and choices are other examples of socialization messaging that is worth considering in the implicit socializaiton of ERI development. The significance of such implicit, nonverbal processes is well-acknowledged in research on racial attitudes broadly (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Skinner et al., 2017) but scarcely incorporated into research on ERI and its development.

Beyond the tangible and proximal implicit influences of one's home and family, there are the statistical patterns to observe in society and nonverbal messages to pick up. For example, young people in racially diverse (yet segregated) schools readily observe who is in advanced courses and who is not; a nonverbal (often combined with verbal) message about race (Bigler et al., 2001; Legette, 2018). Legette (2017) found that such observations were part of how Black students understood their own racial and academic identities. We also know that young children pay close attention to social patterns, and acquire social knowledge through implicit means. For example, Skinner et al. (2017) showed that young children "catch social bias" by attending to subtle and nonverbal cues, or implicit biases, from adults. Hagerman's (2018) recent work, *Raising White Kids*, also demonstrates the clear impact of nonverbal, behavioral, implicit racial socialization—showing that what is *not* said—the silence from parents around ERI-related events or experiences—and who is *not* included are part of how White children understand race. Thus, attending to implicit socialization as well as those messages that exist beyond the parent-child unit, opens new directions for ERI research through media (news, social media, books) and movements, which we sought to focalize theorize in the Lifespan Model of ERI (Williams et al., this issue).

A related question concerns the extent to which our theories are designed to account for the sociopolitical moment as integral to ERI and its development. Tatum (2017) eloquently makes this point in the introduction for the 20-year anniversary printing of *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* Tatum outlines major events in U.S. history that gave birth to its current racial climate—from 9/11 to the War on Iraq to the election (and reelection) of President Barack Obama to Trayvon Martin to the Black Lives Matter movement and, ultimately, the 2016 presidential race. In these 20 years, Tatum argues, the racial climate has dynamically shifted. This is likely to affect the timing and trajectory of ERI development (*when* youth encounter and begin to negotiate race) as well as its content—the types of experiences and information available to process. In the wake of the White Supremacist march in Charlottesville (Spencer & Stolberg, 2017), the White male terrorist who gunned down nine people in an all-Black church in Charleston, South Carolina (Horowitz et al., 2015), the increased scrutiny and fear of Muslim Americans and public devaluation of Islam (Fine & Sirin, 2008), and online social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, there are new contexts, concepts, and language to contour the path of ERI development.

Our understanding of the timing and course of ERI development may need to shift across sociohistorical moments. For example, Patterson et al. (2013) examined children's awareness of race in politics *before* and *after* the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Although the focus was not explicitly on children's developmental knowledge of race politics, their analysis showed how a specific sociohistorical event can give meaning to children's narratives. Similarly, Rogers et al. (in press) analyzed children's racial identity interviews at two time points, 2014 and 2016, which were conceptualized as "before" and "after" the death of Michael Brown, the unarmed Black teenager who was shot and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, MO. Rogers and colleagues' (in press) analysis of change in children's racial identity narratives suggested that the sociopolitical moment, more so than developmental age, shaped how children described their own racial identities over time. Others have shown similar patterns of historical change shaping identity by examining narratives of sexual identity in different generations (Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Weststrate & McLean, 2010).

Of course, the sociopolitical context is not only relevant to ERI as an outcome but the mechanisms, such as socialization, that shape it. Brown and Lesane-Brown (2006) showed how parents' racial socialization messages varied pre- versus post-Civil Rights Era. Rather than a static model tied to ages and developmental stages, we found the need for dynamic language for conceptualizing and measuring ERI and its development. A small yet potentially impactful change, for example, is to denote time and space in our research questions: "How were White children in diverse elementary schools making sense of the importance of ERI during the 2018–2019 school year?" As our society navigates the global health pandemic of COVID-19, this same question examined during the 2020–2021 is likely to differ because the world has shifted in meaningful ways. This shift in language also precludes the assumption of a universal, timeless interpretation that "children of this age" possess the "developmental capacity" to conceptualize identity in these ways (Galliher et al., 2017). To situate age-related change in context is to disrupt old ways of thinking about static developmental universals that necessitate norms and default comparisons.

### **3. Should there be a reference point for healthy ERI, and if so, what is it?**

Designing a lifespan model necessitates consideration of the question “to what end”? What is/are the endpoints for ERI, and what outcomes should be represented? Research on the associations between ERI and developmental outcomes invites questions about the reference point for healthy or mature ERI. This is not to say that all theories assume a particular outcome as valued and valuable. Indeed, Cross et al. (1991) and Sellers et al. (1998) are explicit that their models do not specify a healthy or ideal “type” of racial identity. Nonetheless, empirical studies that link identity patterns to outcomes convey a message of positivity or negativity, of good and not-so-good, ERI attitudes/statuses/stages/beliefs.

The “healthy” benchmark is often denoted by indicators such as academic achievement, psychological well-being, mental, and behavioral health (e.g., substance abuse, externalizing behaviors, risky sexual behavior), which are incorporated into hypothesis testing and conceptual models as related to ERI. These indicators of adjustment are expedient for quantitative measurement and are often included in large nationally available datasets such as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Questionnaire (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). As research studies find associations between ERI and adjustment, these outcomes are often treated as proxy measures or heuristics from which to benchmark positive or well-adjusted ERI development. However, in a racially-stratified and unequal society, that which constitutes positive adjustment is not neutral (Philip et al., 2018). Consider academic achievement. It is conventional to endorse education as the pathway to equality. But, what does academic success mean in a system that is rooted in inequality? Fine (1991), in her classic book, *Framing Dropouts*, describes mechanisms of urban public schools that contribute to school dropouts, highlighting the ways in which teachers and administrations silence Black students and undermine their sense of human dignity by upholding racist and classist ideologies. In this context, is it “healthy” for Black students to persist to earn their high school diploma? Masta (2018) similarly argues that education systems often act as colonizing spaces that position Native students as outsiders in the classroom unless they adopt White behaviors and practices. Critical race scholars similarly call attention to the false belief that academic achievement is equivalent to adjustment (e.g., DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Evidence on health outcomes further complicates the idea that academic success is a neutral (or ultimate) marker of adjustment. Longitudinal research with rural Black adolescents found that, compared to their peers who dropped out of high school, Black youth who attained higher levels of academic success (e.g., college) scored higher on psychosocial well-being indicators, but significantly worse on physical health measures (Brody et al., 2013). This phenomenon of “skin-deep resilience” challenges us to consider what gets defined as “well-adjusted” and whether disparities are actually being reduced or redirected. Similar comparisons have been documented across several ethnic/racial minority groups; for example, with the “model minority myth,” Asian Americans are characterized as “successful,” at the expense of mental well-being (e.g., Suárez-Orozco et al., 2006).

To be sure, there is value in understanding ERI in relation to a range of developmental outcomes, including learning and scholastic achievements. However, the interpretation of study findings would benefit from greater consideration of the ways in which a given outcome that is deemed “positive” (high academic grades, high-status careers) or “negative” (poor academic

grades, low-status careers) is culturally and politically situated. Too much attention on links between ERI and conventional adjustment factors can limit our view of healthy human development. We can, for example, consider a more holistic view, including outcomes such as empathy toward others, self-compassion, curiosity and openness, authentic relationships with the self and others, interdependence and care and responsibility for others, sense of purpose, and environmental and ecological justice (Jagers et al., 2019; Philip et al., 2018). A narrow set of valued outcomes risks defining ERI in terms of its capacity to perform within constraints of a racial hierarchy and inequality. It is worth interrogating the ways in which markers of adjustment are also part of the unequal system itself (e.g., an education system that is structured for inequality), which means that our benchmarks of positive ERI are sometimes predicated on upholding, rather than disrupting, systems of inequality.

#### **4. How do the multiplicities of identity (e.g., intersectionality, multiracialism, whiteness) figure into our conceptualization of ERI?**

ERI is not an isolated process and does not exist in a vacuum. Ethnicity/race is but *one* slice of a highly nuanced and dynamic sense of self (Spencer, 1995; Verkuyten et al., 2019). This slice of identity is made salient and relevant by a societal structure and context that is organized by race and racism. This is not to say that all individuals view ethnicity/race as important (they certainly do not), nor that healthy development is only (or always) defined by a centrality of ethnicity/race. Rather, in societies wherein ethnicity/race are sociopolitical structures, defining access, opportunity, and health and well-being, ERI is an important component of human development and must be theorized as part of the human experience (Spencer, 1995, 2017). In developing a lifespan model there were three areas of multiplicity that our working group found short in empirical supply: *intersectionality*, *multiracialism*, and *whiteness*.

##### **Intersectionality**

It is well acknowledged that ERI is not the only relevant (or even primary) component of a person's identity. An intersectionality perspective has been increasingly acknowledged as necessary for understanding developmental processes and addressing social inequalities (e.g., Ghavami et al., 2016; Syed & McLean, 2016; Velez & Spencer, 2018; Verkuyten et al., 2019). For the ERI literature, intersectionality has provided motivation and rationale to study how multiple identities may work together to shape developmental outcomes (Azmitia et al., 2008; Kiang et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2015; Turner & Brown, 2007), including, for example, the role and implications of the intersections of ethnicity and race among Black immigrant youth (Seaton et al., 2010). And although there have been important assessments of intersectionality-relevant ideas in ERI research, intersectionality has had less impact on our *theorizing* of ERI development to date. That is, scholars increasingly examine ERI alongside other types of identities, but existing models of ERI are not intersectional.

The significance of intersectionality comes into play when considering the developmental timing and content of ERI. Across development, some aspects of identity (e.g., gender, religion) might be more or less salient than others, which could in turn shape when and how youth engage with their ERI. For sexual minority youth, for instance, questions about sexuality and gender identity may take primacy over ERI, but in ways that are inextricably linked to experiences and socialization of ethnicity/race and thus ERI development (Azmitia et al.,

2008; Ghavami & Peplau, 2018). Verkuyten and Yildiz's (2007) research with Turkish-Dutch Muslim adults provided compelling evidence of the ways that religiosity, national, and ethnic identity function in tandem (though not necessarily in uniform), shifting the reported importance of ERI for participants. Qualitative research also shows that individuals often tell intersectional identity narratives, without prompting. For example, adolescents tend to describe their ERI through an intersectional lens, implicitly and explicitly referring to gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality (Nasir, 2011; Rogers & Way, 2016; Way et al., 2013). Carter's (2006) analysis of racial identity among African American youth showed that the notion of "acting white" was a gendered and sexualized experience; while both Black boys and girls negotiated iterations of "acting white," Black boys who were accused of "acting white" were simultaneously accused of being gay, such that their sexuality was questioned in a way that Black girls' sexuality was not.

Other points of intersectionality relevant to ERI include phenotype and physiology. How does physiology or the biological context shape the developmental timing of ERI, as well as its content? Carter et al. (2017), for example, showed that pubertal timing was associated with ERI content dimensions (centrality, public regard) and moderated associations between ERI and youth adjustment. Moreover, what are the unique intersectional identity experiences that impact ERI? For example, colorism, a system that privileges phenotypically "white" skin (and more Eurocentric features), has multifaceted implications for individuals and families and can be found across diverse ethnic/racial groups and societies, including Latinx and Asian (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Burton et al., 2010). Cielto and Rogers (2019) also found that hair was a salient phenotypic feature in Black girls' identity narratives, with 93% of Black adolescent girls spontaneously referencing hair while describing their racial and gender identities. Black girls used hair to illustrate and articulate their experiences of oppression, discrimination, and resistance (Cielto & Rogers, 2019). Spencer's (1995) *Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory* nicely frames this intersectional perspective wherein one's identity is perceived and experienced differently not only based on external contexts and internal cognitive abilities, but also filtered through the nexus of one's multiple social locations and identity features—skin color, hair texture, biological development and maturation (Spencer, 2017). This contextualized perspective moves beyond multiple identity group memberships to consider the social oppressions associated with those memberships and their phenotypic features (e.g., skin tone).

### Multiracialism

Demographers have been charting the increase of Multiracial people in the U.S. over recent years, predicting that by the year 2050, Multiracial will be the dominant racial category in the U.S., with nearly half (42%) of those selecting two or more races being under the age of 18 (Saulny, 2011). What does multiracialism mean for ERI and how do our ERI models account for the socially and politically constructed lines between racial groups? The belief that there is a pure race has long been at the root of dehumanizing and abhorrent policies, practices, and atrocities across the world. President Barack Obama was claimed as the first "Black" president of the United States, not the first biracial president nor the 44<sup>th</sup> White president, though he can lay claim to any of these identities. This question of multiracialism is relevant also to the invisibility of those who are phenotypically White but are members of a cultural/ethnic group,

such as those who “pass” but indeed navigate the explicit and implicit boundaries of more than one race or ethnicity, including those with parents of different ethnic/racial groups, light-skinned Latinx individuals, or many Indigenous people.

In engaging this topic, we do not submit that the experiences of Multiracial individuals are equivalent to monoracial experiences but rather that our ERI conceptualizations will be better for considering ERI development across this spectrum. While the content of ERI might differ across heritages, many processes are likely similar. For example, the ability to place oneself within a particular social category using a social label (e.g., to call oneself “Black”) is a component of ERI and plays a central role in securing a child’s sense of belonging (Ruble et al., 2004). Certainly, ERI self-labeling is unique for Multiracial people because they reside within or between multiple racial categories. However, the process by which individuals explore, make, and understand these decisions could be similar to those from other groups. Similarly, while past research on biracial individuals has focused on the unique stress and confusion of multiple identifications and affiliations (Roquemore & Brunsma, 2002), we rarely consider monoracial people as struggling with labeling per se but also know that they do indeed shift their ethnic and racial labels over time and across contexts (e.g., Nishina et al., 2010), and that such labeling changes can be normative, with implications for their behavior and well-being (e.g., Fuligni et al., 2008). Moreover, current research with Multiracial individuals underscores the flexibility and adaptability that comes with more fluid and complex identity processes (Pauker et al., 2018).

Pushing the accepted boundaries of monoracial identity constructions recognizes that ethnicity and race are socially constructed, contextually embedded, and fluid constructs (Echols et al., 2018; Gaither et al., 2013; Nishina et al., 2010). Indeed, as illustrated by experience sampling methods (Cross et al., 2017; Fuligni & Yip, 2002; Yip, 2005) and research with multiracial individuals (Gaither et al., 2013), “dual consciousness,” and “codeswitching,” call into question race singularity and constancy (DuBois, 1903, 1973; Kiang et al., 2007).

## Whiteness

How do we situate whiteness (white supremacy, privileged positionalities) in a lifespan model of ERI? Generally, the ERI literature focuses on the identity processes and experiences of youth of color. While this orientation has contributed significantly to understanding the normative developmental experiences of ethnic and racial minority adolescents, it also carries the assumption that the ethnic majority, which in the U.S. context includes members of the White racial group, are absent from this process. On the contrary, the social construction of race is inextricable from whiteness. Quantified measurement of race, starting in the U.S. with the first 1790 Census, has anchored “whiteness” as the exclusive pinnacle of racial hierarchy and power. Although racial categories in the Census have evolved over the centuries, the primary racial anchor of White remains. This is important because it shows explicitly that whiteness, and the preservation of whiteness, is the pinnacle of power within the racial hierarchy. As such, what it means to be a member of the E-R minority is defined implicitly and explicitly in contrast to what it means to be White (the E-R majority group). Yet, focusing on only one side of the racial system reinforces the normalcy and supremacy of whiteness and problematizes the experiences of ethnic and racial minorities as separate from the White experience. Research in social epidemiology, for example, uses the White racial category as a referent group to estimate

a baseline for a given health outcome under the condition of access to the most available resources (Krieger, 2011). For ERI development, such comparisons may (re)construct White as normative and superior, and place the burden of positive ERI development on people of color without acknowledging the role of whiteness.

When researchers do examine ERI among Whites, there seems to be a lack of attention to the racialized experiences of whiteness, instead substituting ethnic heritage, practices, and traditions as synonymous with the ERI experience of minority groups. Hence, it is not surprising that Whites score lower on ERI measures. Such low scores, however, should not be interpreted to denote the absence of ERI or even its underdevelopment. Instead, it calls us to question what we are measuring. For example, when White children are asked about being White, they often resort to ethnic heritage, listing the immigrant origins of their family, or reorienting toward religious (e.g., Jewish) identities. Perry's (2001) poignant finding from interviews with White youth that, "White means never having to say you're ethnic" (p. 56), is the essence of White invisibility in our constructions of ERI. White youth might also default to thinking about their national identity as being "American," which reinforces another dangerous implicit assumption that White = American (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Yet, when pressed about whiteness—their racialized identity in the U.S. context—White youth also vary in how much primacy they place on their racial identities as well as the content meaning assigned to them, often engaging in colorblind rationalizations that deny the relevance of race but sometimes acknowledge the racialized structures and stereotypes they observe (e.g., Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017).

The study of the progression of White identity among adults has been chaperoned by Helms' work (2020; Helms & Carter, 1990), which centers racism and the process of recognizing and unlearning White supremacy. Today, there is more research on constructs of White identity, such as *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2011), but this literature and inquiry has not been expanded to include children or a lifespan perspective. Research on White identity is also important because ERI is relational; individual identities matter for social interactions and political attitudes (Helms, 2020; Mathews et al., 2019; Verkuyten, 2016). As Irving (2014) eloquently articulated in her memoir, "Waking up White," the racial identities of Whites are important not only for their own sense of self, but also for their anti-racism efforts and engagement with members of E-R minority groups and their political and behavioral choices, such as where they live, where they send their children to school, and for whom they vote. In other words, whiteness and White identity are part of the social context in which E-R minorities negotiate their own ERIs. Our call here is not for research to compare ERI among "majority" and "minority" groups but to attend to the relational processes of ethnicity/race as co-constructed. For Whites and non-Whites alike, the dynamic variations within the local and sociohistorical context, such as the ethnic-racial diversity of communities or schools (Allen et al., 2005; Witherspoon et al., 2016), and the historical moment (Kiang & Witakow, 2018; Rogers et al., in press), will shape the salience and trajectory of ERI as part of a holistic identity process.

## **5. How do we understand the role of ERI in pursuit of equity, diversity, and social justice?**

Issues of equity, diversity, and justice are focal to the study of ERI. Still, most ERI research focuses on individual-level measures and outcomes, which seems to underestimate the role and influence of ERI on broader questions and issues of social equity (e.g., Matthews et al., 2019). Rather than

a unidirectional process whereby various levels of the context (school, parent, peer, media) shape identity, individuals also engage, respond to, and transform their contexts (Rogers, 2018; Seaton et al., 2017; Verkuyten et al., 2019). This perspective led our study group to ask how our model incorporates society-context-level variables and outcomes, such as equity, diversity, and social justice? This is not to propose that the only (or ideal) ERI is an activist; however, it does suggest that our benchmark of productive ERI ought to go beyond individual wellbeing and success and include considerations of equity and justice more broadly (e.g., Jagers et al., 2019). Practically, this means that the individual is no longer the sole unit of analysis, which makes space for alternate structures and analyses. For example, Santos et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal network analysis finding that, over the middle school years, patterns of ERI development were influenced by the ERIs of peers within the network.

Beyond individuals, ERI also involves attitudes and actions that question, challenge, and resist inequality. For example, research on racial identity with youth of color, in particular, reveals the patterns and strategies of resistance as young people name and reject negative stereotypes for themselves and others, and how one's own identity processes can reinforce or disrupt cultural narratives of oppression (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers, 2018; Rogers & Way, 2016). Toward this end, Matthews and colleagues (2019) provided an important theoretical piece documenting the links between ERI and critical consciousness, one's awareness and rejection of societal inequalities, and outlined a compelling research agenda to begin mapping the intersections of these constructs in adolescent development. Critical race theories have also been used to frame ERI development and socialization among Asian Americans (Juang et al., 2017). Other equity-relevant variables could include environmental justice (Pulido, 2000) and empathy and morality (Rutland & Killen, 2017; Turiel, 2003). An intersectional lens is valuable here as well; how do we assess equity attitudes across dimensions of inequality? Rogers and Way (2016), for example, found that Black boys challenged racial stereotypes but also reinforced gender hierarchies with male dominance and homophobia. Measuring single dimensions of inequality may silence the sexism and homophobia that reside in racial narratives. Our intent is not to propose a type of healthy ERI but to situate ERI in context and conversation with the work of equity and justice. In a context of oppression, the development of an identity that is deemed "healthy" and "good" can be seen not only when it benefits the individual, but also when it transforms oppressive structures and systems (Rogers & Way, 2018). This stance represents opportunities to incorporate the forms of transformative resistance that people use and its relation to broader social justice as integral to the study of ERI.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF ERI RESEARCH

The issues raised by our working group are not necessarily novel, and in many cases have been discussed by scholars in the past (Cokley, 2007; Seaton et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2016). Still, we highlight them because we found empirical support for these topics scarce or that they were neglected in extant models of ERI. To encourage more scholarship related to our central questions, we conclude with recommendations for the types of research questions, designs, samples, and methods that can move forward the next generation of ERI research.

## Research Questions

Our first recommendation is to prioritize research questions that move across the multiple identities of individuals, consider the multiple levels of the ecosystem, and address the dynamic nature of relationships and their role in ERI development. Seaton and Carter (2018) offer an excellent example, examining the role of neighborhood, pubertal timing, and racial identity, interweaving the contextual and biological to understand how racial identity processes can serve to promote healthy developmental outcomes. With a lifespan lens that extends ERI research into and through the adult years, we can examine the transactional ERI processes that occur *between* parents and children and grandparents (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013), not only to assess, for example, how parent socialization affects child ERI development (a unidirectional pathway), but how the act of socializing one's child/grandchild about ethnicity/race in turn shapes parents' and grandparents' own ERI development. That is, how do parents' and grandparents' ERI development not only shape children's ERI and socialization, but the parents' and grandparents' own ERI development through the adult years? We can also ask questions that explicitly target intersectionality: What does the development of ERI look like alongside other relevant identities? How does one's understanding of their own gender or sexuality, for example, influence how they understand their ethnicity/race? Such questions call not just for studies that compare multiple identities but also for *intersectional theorizing* about what ERI is, what intersectional dimensions are relevant (e.g., hair, skin color), and attention to what we capture as well as what we miss through the lens of a single identity.

Next generation ERI questions will explore the consequences of ERI for relationships and societies. This will require more intentionality in considering the development of ERI with a historical lens, as well as reevaluating how we define and assess positive or 'healthy' ERI. For example, the growing literature on critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2017), which concerns the extent to which individuals are aware of and interpret inequalities as structural rather than individual, seems like an important outcome to assess in the context of ERI. The construct of identity has far-reaching implications—it shapes how we feel about ourselves and the kinds of futures we envision, but also shapes how we interact with others, how we parent, educate, police, and serve. Building a literature that explores how ERI is related to social processes and societal outcomes that extend beyond the individual is a challenge worth pursuing.

## Research Designs and Measurement

It is clear that we need more longitudinal research designs that include both earlier and later points on the lifespan spectrum(e.g., infancy/early childhood, mid-late adulthood, aging), and that allow us to document ERI content and processes. This will inevitably require the collaboration of multiple research teams with more varied expertise across different developmental periods. This will allow us to specify processes across diverse developmental periods of the life course. For example, in the early years of ERI development, socialization may emphasize the implicit E-R processes embedded in infant-caregiver interactions (Quintana et al., 2017), with later developmental stages focusing on both the implicit *and* explicit messages that foster individuals' cognitions and attitudes about their ERI group.

Research designs are needed that diversify *who* is included and *how* they are included in ERI research—not only in terms of developmental stage, but also multiracial and racially White individuals, as well as the variation within pan-ethnic/racial categories (e.g., Black, Latinx, Asian). Of course, integration of these samples requires careful consideration of our measures and most specifically beliefs about the construction of whiteness, the racial hierarchy, and monoracial ideologies. Our call is not for more research that compares White youth to youth of color, nor is it to examine only what White youth think about the ethnicity/race of *others* or how multiracial individuals are perceived by monoracial individuals. Rather, we call for research that interrogates the meaning of whiteness across the developmental spectrum (see Williams et al., this issue). Such interrogations may be bolstered by examining ERI in international contexts where ethnicity/race are constructed differently (e.g., Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016; Moffitt et al., 2018). Deeply theorizing about multiracialness and whiteness can shift how we conceptualize race/ethnicity and ERI theory.

Of course, asking different questions often means applying different methods. We will need to (re)consider ERI measurement, in particular the reliance on self-report surveys, which is tied to the overreliance on explicit indicators of ERI as well as the age of samples, and focus on singular identities. For example, an ERI measure asks specifically about ethnicity/race – “I’m happy to be Black” – but does not allow us to capture how gender or social class, for example, informs the response. Also, self-report scales are generally not developmentally appropriate for children and cannot capture the more implicit learning processes that underlie ERI. It is certainly reasonable that what we can see on the surface is important, but we caution against leaving the more invisible processes beneath the surface. Indeed, Marks et al. (2011) assessment of physiological stress responses provided rich insight into adolescents’ explicit race discussions; specifically, youth with colorblind racial narratives showed elevated stress-response while answering questions about their racial identities. The implicit underbody of ERI and its development across the lifespan calls for greater methodological diversity. Including more mixed-method and interdisciplinary approaches also means broadening our disciplinary range to sociological, historical, and neurodevelopmental approaches and techniques.

### Structures and Systems: Funding, Publishing, and Graduate Training

In naming the above recommendations we also recognize the structures in which researchers are embedded and often limited by. Conducting longitudinal research and asking intergenerational questions, for example, requires a shift in our approach to training and scholarship. We must attend to what our graduate students learn in their courses, whose theories they read, and what methods they are trained in, and how the “stages” of human development are conceptualized. To move beyond surveys and single-site studies, we need structures that encourage interdisciplinary collaborations and funding to support graduate students and early career scholars in such endeavors. The traditional publication timeline is based on a particular research paradigm – community-based, participant-led projects that build rapport, learn from and with young people, and develop valid measurement tools for assessment operate on different timelines. Despite the structural barriers, collectively, we see the innovation and new directions burgeoning in the field. By naming the limits of our existing perspectives, we hope to

encourage ourselves, our colleagues and students, as well as universities and funding agencies to think and do science differently.

## Conclusion

In a racially-stratified society, ERI is a core component of the identity process—and of human development. Yet, our current understanding of ERI has blind spots. A lifespan perspective of ERI challenges assumptions and brings key research questions into view. We hope that naming these blinders will encourage us to question our approaches and existing limitations and to move beyond them. Good science depends on awareness of research gaps and of our biases. When we are too fixed in what we know, reliant on the familiar measures and models, we cannot discover what is not yet known. We should test our assumptions when we can (and we offered some recommendations toward this end). When we cannot, we should acknowledge them and recognize how they influence our interpretations.

## Note

1. In the current paper we use the term “ethnic-racial” to represent the broad categorization system in the U.S. that similarly racializes individuals based on heritage and/or phenotypic characteristics such as skin tone, facial features, and hair texture. These experiences are inextricably linked to the allocation of power and resources in U.S. society and do not differentiate between ethnicity and race but rather between mainstream (i.e., White) and other.

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