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Moin Syed, Mary Joyce D. Juan & Linda P. Juang

University of Minnesota
San Francisco State University


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Might the Survey Be the Intervention? Participating in Ethnicity-Related Research as a Consciousness-Raising Experience

Moin Syed
Mary Joyce D. Juan
University of Minnesota

Linda P. Juang
San Francisco State University

The purpose of this study was to examine how the act of participating in a study about ethnicity may encourage individuals to reflect on the role ethnicity plays in their lives. The participants were 528 ethnically diverse college students from two public universities in California. The survey included Likert-type items and open-ended questions that facilitated personally expressive writing about ethnicity. Results indicated that how participants responded to the survey was conditional on their current developmental level of ethnic identity, particularly ethnic identity exploration. The findings provide initial evidence for the utility of participating in ethnicity-related research for raising college students’ awareness about their ethnic identities, and suggest that the form of awareness is moderated by individual differences in ethnic identity development.

The United States is becoming increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse, prompting the need for multicultural sensitivity and understanding in higher education, therapeutic practice, and the workplace (American Psychological...
Association, 2003; Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). As these social changes are manifest, it is vital to understand more deeply how individuals think about the role of ethnicity and culture, both for their own lives and for society at large. The purpose of this study was to examine how the act of participating in a study about ethnicity may encourage college students to reflect on the role ethnicity plays in their lives.

Ethnic identity refers to the degree to which individuals identify with their ethnic group (Phinney, 1990). The developmental model of ethnic identity comprises two dimensions: exploration, which is defined as how much individuals are actively engaged in learning about their ethnic background, and commitment, which is the degree of belongingness individuals feel with their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). There has been an explosion of research on ethnic identity over the past 20 years. There now is a clear sense of the developmental course of ethnic identity from early adolescence into young adulthood (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006; Syed & Azmitia, 2009) and its relation to mental health and well-being (Quintana, 2007; Smith & Silva, 2011). Although ethnic identity researchers have primarily relied on self-report rating scale instruments, they have also made use of experience sampling, narrative, ethnographic, and other qualitative methods (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008; Way, Santos, Niwa, & Kim-Gervey, 2008, Yip & Fuligni, 2002). With this increase in the number of research studies examining ethnic identity using a variety of methods, we began to wonder, “To what extent might participating in ethnic identity research prompt individuals to think more deeply about their ethnic identities?”

This question is reflective of a recent shift towards a greater awareness of the research setting and the role of the research process for human development (Quintana, Troyano, & Taylor, 2001). For example, researchers have suggested that participating in research using the experience sampling method, which involves repeated self-disclosure of personal information over a brief period of time, may be associated with similar physical, psychological, and academic benefits found with research with other methods of self-disclosure (London, Rosenthal, & Gonzalez, 2011). In addition, as psychological research has become increasingly inclusive of qualitative methods (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007; Lyons, 2009), participants have engaged in more writing and personal expression in the context of participation, even when the research is not focused on the writing process, per se. Thus, because research participants are engaging in activities that have been shown to act as interventions (e.g., expressive writing), the research project itself may serve as a form of intervention whether it was the researchers’ intention. A similar observation has been made elsewhere (Cooper, 2011). A college preparation program in California focused on
low-income, immigrant, and ethnic minority families had seventh grade students write an essay about their future dreams and goals. This essay was previously used solely for the basis of acceptance into the program, but teachers and administrators noted the value of this process for getting students to think about college and build college-going identities, and subsequently the essay assignment has become required in many schools in the district. All in all, it is becoming increasingly evident that the research we conduct has an effect on our participants’ lives, and we would do well to understand the nature of this effect.

Despite the potential for research participation to serve as an intervention in peoples’ lives, there is currently no direct evidence for this idea. The present study was meant to be an initial step in this direction by focusing on how college students responded to a research study that involved writing about ethnicity-related issues, and how their responses were related to individual differences in ethnic identity. As described in more detail in the Method section, the study consisted of numerous open-ended questions, including two ethnicity-related memories, that prompted the participants to reflect on and write about the role that ethnicity plays in their lives. It was the degree of writing that the participants engaged in that made us wonder whether participating in the research may spark their thinking about ethnicity. This question was situated within the strong evidence that relatively brief forms of personally expressive writing in experimental contexts can lead to greater physical health, psychological well-being, greater academic achievement, and reduced test anxiety (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Ramirez & Beilock, 2011). These findings suggest the possibility of applications of expressive writing to a wide variety of domains. Accordingly, writing about ethnicity-related issues may serve as a consciousness-raising experience that can potentially lead to identity development.

There has been relatively little research on interventions targeting ethnic identity development. Most of these interventions have been in the form of activities and discussions led by a trained facilitator in small groups that meet over a period a several weeks (e.g., Rowell & Benshoff, 2008; Whaley & McQueen, 2010). One recent study used group counseling to increase ethnic identity among Mexican American high school students (Malott, Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010). Over the course of eight sessions, the counselors educated the students about their heritage, structured writing exercises and role plays, and facilitated group discussions. Qualitative analysis of the students’ responses to the intervention indicated that they felt greater identification with their Mexican heritage and felt more proud to be Mexican than before the intervention began. These results suggest that
individuals’ ethnic identities are amenable to interventions, but the dearth of research studies on the topic paired with the very small samples of the studies that have been conducted suggests that research on ethnic identity interventions is a wide open area in need of new approaches (cf. Gurin & Nagda, 2006). The present study was not initially designed to be an intervention. However, at the end of the survey we included a question that probed the participants’ thoughts about taking the survey. This question was originally included as a means for the participants to relieve any stress or frustration that accrued while taking the survey; an open forum, of sorts. The frequency and content of the responses, however, piqued our interest, and led us to the present analysis.

In particular, it occurred to us that how students respond to a survey about ethnicity-related experiences may be associated with their current levels of ethnic identity development. In the present study, we examined how the two dimensions of ethnic identity—exploration and commitment—were related to how students responded to the survey at two levels. The first level examined whether ethnic identity exploration and commitment were related to the students’ feelings of being affected by the survey. In the second level, we looked more closely at those who did report being affected to explore whether ethnic identity was associated with how they felt they were affected.

Of course, any study examining ethnic identity or responses to ethnicity-related material must consider the ethnicity of the student. In particular, there may be important differences between White students and Students of Color. On the one hand, Students of Color may report being affected by the survey at a greater rate than White students because they may be more receptive to ethnicity-related topics (Syed, 2010). On the other hand, reflecting on one’s ethnicity may be a less frequent activity for White students given their position as the majority in the United States (McIntosh, 1989), and therefore doing so may have a more profound effect on them than for Students of Color. All of that said, ethnic identity has been repeatedly shown to have greater predictive power of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors than ethnicity, per se (e.g., Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Juang & Syed, 2010; see Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005, for a review), and thus we expect that ethnic identity will be the major discriminating factor (and not ethnic group) in how students responded to the survey.

In sum, the present study serves as an exploration of whether participating in a research study about ethnicity-related experiences may serve as a consciousness-raising experience for college students. In doing so, we were particularly interested in how the responses may vary by students’ ethnicities and current levels of ethnic identity exploration and commitment.
METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 528 college students from two public universities in California (61% women; $M_{age} = 22.25$, $SD = 6.34$; 82% born in the United States). On the basis of responses to an open-ended question, participants were classified into the following pan-ethnic groups: White (28%), Asian American (27%), Mixed-ethnic (21%), Latino (15%), Black/African-American (5%), Arabic/Middle Eastern (2%), Indian/Pakistani (1%), and other/not specified (1%). Socioeconomic status was computed as a composite of parent education and occupation using the Hollingshead Two-Factor Index of Social Position (Hollingshead, 1957). Values were reverse-coded so that higher values corresponded to higher socioeconomic status. Classifications spanned the entire range of the scale (1–5), with an average value of 3.16 ($SD = 1.11$).

The two universities that the students attended differed along a number of dimensions. These universities were targeted for inclusion in the study because of these differences to address questions about the similarities and differences in ethnic identity processes in different college contexts. The first university was moderate in size, located in a small town, and is primarily composed of middle to upper-middle class White students. In contrast, the second university was a large, urban school with an extremely diverse student body with respect to ethnicity, social class, and age. Variations in demographic variables by university are presented in Table 1. The only statistically significant difference between the two samples is the higher mean age for the urban university ($M = 24.63$, $SD = 7.68$) than for the small-town university ($M = 19.29$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(521) = 10.54$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.97$. Although the urban university is much more ethnically diverse, we oversampled ethnic minorities in the small town university so that the demographics between the two samples would be similar.

Procedure

Participants signed up for the study through the psychology departments' research pool. The study was titled “Ethnic Identity in Everyday Experiences” so the participants were aware that the study pertained to ethnicity prior to signing up. Although this could have resulted in self-selection for those who are more interested in ethnicity-related issues, all available indicators suggest that this was not the case (e.g., participants spanned the full range on an index of ethnic identity development; see Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Participants came to a psychology lab on campus and completed an
online survey hosted through surveymonkey.com. They were told that the
goal of the study was to understand how college students think about their
ethnicities. The survey was computer-guided and completed individually,
with only a research assistant in the room to answer any questions that arose.
Upon completion of the survey, participants received course credit. The entire
survey took approximately 50 to 60 minutes to complete (range = 20–90 min).

Measures

Participants completed the Ethnic Identity in Everyday Experiences
survey. This survey was created with the intention of casting a broad net

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity (%)</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic/Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Pakistani</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-ethnic</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Born in the United States</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>19.29</td>
<td>24.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>7.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>18–57</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic status</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>1–5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic identity exploration</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.00–4.00</td>
<td>1.00–4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic identity commitment</th>
<th>Small-Town University (n = 236)</th>
<th>Urban University (n = 292)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.43–4.00</td>
<td>1.14–4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean age is the only statistically significant differences between the two samples,
\( t(521) = 10.54, p < .001, d = 0.97. \)
to understand the various ways students think about and interact with their ethnicities. There were a few slight variations in the version of the survey given to the two samples, which are subsequently noted. Although the measures and questions reported below were not included in the present analysis, they are important for us to include here to describe the context of the participants’ research experience. Moreover, the question that we do analyze in the present study came at the very end of the survey, and therefore it is necessary to understand the content that preceded the question. The survey contained four major sections as follows:

**Demographics and Background**

This section requested students’ age, gender, year in school, immigrant generational status, parents’ education and occupation, hometown and high school attended, where they currently lived, how ethnically diverse they felt their current residence was relative to their home town, and whether they belonged to any ethnic clubs or organizations in high school or college.

**Open-Ended Questions About Ethnicity**

This section contained a series of open-ended questions that generally assessed their everyday experiences concerning their ethnicity. The specific questions were created for this study, but were based on interviews conducted in a previous 4-year mixed-methods longitudinal study on the transition to college (Azmitia, Syed, Radmacher, 2008; Syed, 2010). Most questions followed a two-step format in which the respondents first chose “yes” or “no” and then were asked to explain their answer. The questions included (a) whether people make assumptions about their ethnicity, (b) whether how much they identify changes in different situations, (c) if they feel similar to other members of their ethnicity in the way they look, their values, or the things they like to do, (d) whether they feel like they belong to more than one ethnic group, (e) whether there are other social groups that are more important to them than ethnicity, and (f) what stereotypes they feel are associated with their ethnic group.

**Ethnicity-Related Narratives**

In this section, participants were asked to describe two ethnicity-related memories. The prompt was as follows:

Please describe a particular time in your life, either positive or negative, when you felt aware of your race/ethnicity. Tell us how old you were when this happened, where you were, whom you were with, what happened, how you reacted. Include details that would help us see and feel as you did.
Rating-Scale Inventories

The final section of the survey contained several Likert-type rating-scale inventories. Both samples completed the 12-item revised Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Roberts et al., 1999), the 30-item Multidimensional Measure of Racial Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), the 11-item identity resolution subscale of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981), the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989), and the 20-item Center for Disease Control-Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). The small-town sample also completed the 41-item Functions of Social Identity Scale (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Cotting, 1999). The urban sample did not complete that scale but included the Family Ethnic Socialization Scale (Umana-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006) and the Ethnic Resource Availability Scale (Juang, 2004).

Measures Included in the Present Analysis

The primary question of interest in the present analysis was the last one, “Has participating in the study affected your thoughts or feelings about issues pertaining to race or ethnicity?” and the follow-up, “If YES, how so.”

The other component that we examined in the present study was the rating-scale measure of ethnic identity, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, which has been used extensively in ethnic identity research and has shown strong reliability and validity (Roberts et al., 1999). The scale contains a five-item subscale assessing ethnic identity exploration (e.g., “To learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group”) and a seven-item subscale assessing ethnic identity commitment (e.g., “I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group”). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Items were averaged for each subscale so that higher values represent greater exploration or commitment. Cronbach’s alpha for exploration was .75 and for commitment was .90. As indicated in Table 1, the two samples (urban university vs. small-town university) did not differ significantly in mean levels of ethnic identity exploration or commitment.

RESULTS

Links Between Responses to the Survey and Ethnic Identity

Approximately one third (30%) of participants responded “yes” to the question, “Has participating in the study affected your thoughts or feelings
about issues pertaining to race or ethnicity?” This frequency did not vary by age, gender, immigrant status, or socioeconomic status. It did, however, vary significantly by sample, $\chi^2(1) = 3.71, p = .05, \nu = .09$. Although the effect was small, participants in the urban university were more likely to report being affected by the survey than participants in the small-town university.

First, we examined whether the yes/no responses regarding being affected by the survey varied by ethnicity. This test was conducted in two ways: (a) comparing Whites and Students of Color and (b) looking at differences among the pan-ethnic groups for which we had reasonable numbers (i.e., White, Latino, Asian American, and Mixed-ethnic). Neither of these tests yielded significant differences, suggesting that the responses did not vary by ethnic group.

Next, we examined whether ethnic identity was associated with how the participants responded to the survey. We used listwise deletion to handle the approximately 6% of data for ethnic identity exploration and commitment that were missing. Because ethnic identity exploration and commitment are so highly correlated ($r = .68$ in the present sample), it may be more useful to attempt to partial out the shared variance to understand the unique role of each (Juang & Syed, 2010). Accordingly, we conducted two analyses of covariance testing for differences in responses to the survey in ethnic identity exploration and commitment, controlling for the alternate process on each analysis.

The analysis of covariance for exploration was significant, $F(1, 481) = 11.90, p = .001, d = .35$. Participants who were affected by the survey reported significantly higher levels of exploration (adjusted $M = 2.70, SE = 0.04$) than those who were not (adjusted $M = 2.55, SE = 0.02$). The results for commitment were also significant, $F(1, 481) = 3.97, p = .05, d = .19$. It is interesting that the findings were in the opposite direction compared with exploration, in that participants who said they were affected by the survey (adjusted $M = 2.96, SE = 0.04$) had significantly lower levels of commitment than those who were not (adjusted $M = 3.04, SE = 0.02$). However, it is important to note that the effect size for this difference was relatively small. Thus, it seems that current levels of exploration were more strongly associated with perceptions of the survey than were levels of commitment.

Variations in Awareness: Qualitative Analysis of How Students Responded to the Survey

The following analyses were meant to probe the responses of the 30% ($n = 154$) of the sample who reported being affected by the study. To accomplish this task, we used thematic analysis, a procedure for identifying
and analyzing patterns and themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible framework for qualitative analysis, in that it is not tied to a specific theoretical or epistemological framework. Rather, the method can be adapted as appropriate for specific research questions. Thematic analysis comprises six phases, which we subsequently describe.

The first phase involves becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the responses and taking relevant notes. In the second phase, the first author generated initial codes by systematically going through the data and generating a brief caption, or short phrase, that was meant to capture the essence of the psychological processes represented by the response. In the third phase, searching for themes, the captions generated in the previous phase were grouped together by similar thematic content to create a more parsimonious set of captions that served as candidate themes. The process of grouping the captions was informed by existing theory and research on ethnic identity development. Thus, although coding categories were not deductively assigned a priori based on prior research, the existing literature served as a guide for the grouping and naming of themes (e.g., affirmation, exploration, “triggers”). This initial grouping process led to five candidate themes: self-understanding, structural insight, prompting exploration, affirmation, and negative feelings. The fourth phase, reviewing themes, involved taking the reduced set of captions and applying them back to the original responses to ensure that the new, higher order caption, or theme, adequately captured the meaning of the responses. At this point in the analysis, it became clear that the self-understanding theme was too large and diverse to constitute a single theme. Upon further analysis of the captions subsumed under the theme, there was evidence that the single theme should be split into three: self-understanding, triggered reflection, and questioning oneself. Although these three themes share some similarities, in the course of the analytic procedure the themes were identified as distinct and potentially useful to pursue as separate themes. Acknowledging the similarity in content, these two new themes, “triggered reflection” and “questioning oneself” were classified as sub-themes of the broader, “self-understanding” theme. Due to the apparent differences, though, the three themes were considered distinct for the analytic phase. The fifth phase, defining and naming themes, involved further clarifying the nature of the themes and providing a meaningfully descriptive name for each theme. The seven themes were finalized and named as follows: self-understanding, triggered reflection, questioning oneself, structural insight, prompting exploration, affirmation, and negative feelings (more details on each theme are provided below). The final phase, producing the report, involves reporting on the themes and providing data examples, which we do below.

The thematic analysis procedure described earlier was carried out by the first author, who was blind to ethnicity, sample membership, and all other
sample characteristics. Following phase five, the second author coded 20% of the responses for reliability purposes. This yielded an acceptable level of reliability, $\kappa = .81$. The participants’ responses to the open-ended question were classified into one of the seven themes (see Table 2 for a summary description of the themes). The themes were coded as mutually exclusive because of the very low co-occurrence of themes in the responses. In the rare situation wherein more than one theme was evident in the response, the coders made a judgment about what appeared to be the predominant theme. A small number of responses were uncodable because of a lack of information ($n = 3$). An additional five did not provide an explanation despite responding “yes,” thereby leaving a final sample of 146 for the remaining analyses. The frequency of themes did not vary by age, gender, immigrant status, socioeconomic status, or sample (small town vs. urban). The seven themes are subsequently provided.

**Self-Understanding ($n = 48$)**

This category represents responses in which the participants mentioned learning something new about who they are in relation to their ethnic background, or otherwise gained new insights about the self. For some students the survey raised a new awareness, such as with this 18-year-old self-identified White woman: “It put things into perspective by the way many of the questions were asked. It made me think about how I identify myself as well as how I identify others without even thinking about it.” For others, taking the survey served as an organizational tool for existing beliefs. This is well-illustrated by a 21-year-old self-identified Chinese and Mexican man:

This survey has helped me gather my thoughts on my own ethnic identity and how I feel about it. All the thoughts were already there, they just haven’t been collected and made into something meaningful until now.

**Triggered Reflection ($n = 27$)**

This category shares similarities with self-understanding. What distinguishes this category is a statement that indicates that they rarely—or never—think about the issues raised in the survey, but the survey has caused them to think more deeply about the topic. An example response can be seen with this 18-year-old self-identified White man:

I never really thought about my race/ethnicity as it pertains to all my aspects of life. I usually go about doing things basing myself not on my ethnic group, but a smaller, different group. For example being a student, or ever smaller, being a first time freshmen in college.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-understanding</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Learning something new about who they are in relation to their ethnic</td>
<td>“I didn’t realize that my daily life and my identity was so connected to race/ethnicity.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>background, or otherwise gaining new insights about the self.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggered reflection</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Participants rarely or never think about ethnicity, but the survey has</td>
<td>“It has made me think about/write about experiences that I didn’t put much thought into before. I have gained a stronger understanding of my group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>caused them to think more deeply about the topic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning oneself</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Participants must now rethink or question their previously held beliefs</td>
<td>“It has reinforced my opinions, but also made me think of the opposites of my opinions, thus forcing me to question my opinions and rethink them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>about their ethnicity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural insight</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Responses not directly linked to the self, but reflect insights gained about</td>
<td>“It made me think more deeply about issues that cause certain kinds of racial problems within our society today.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>how ethnicity plays out within society.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompting exploration</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Inspired them to engage in exploration behaviors to learn more about their</td>
<td>“It gave me more motivation to get more involved in my ethnic community.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>own ethnicity or ethnicity in general.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Feelings of pride or connection to one’s ethnic background</td>
<td>“It has strengthened my pride of being a Filipino-American.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative feelings</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Feeling disconnected from their ethnic group or not liking to focus on</td>
<td>“I am realizing how detached I am from my own culture.”</td>
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A similar sentiment was shared by a 22-year-old self-identified Chinese-American woman, who said, “I really don’t think about my race this much until now and how much it affects me.”

**Questioning Oneself (n = 11)**

This category is also similar to *self-understanding*, but rather than gaining an understanding, the participants stated that they must now rethink or question thoughts on ethnicity or their involvement with and/or connection to their ethnic background. An example of questioning their connection to their ethnic background comes from a 27-year-old self-identified White and Native American woman: “If I am going to claim Native American I should probably know a little more about the culture associated with that ethnic group.” In contrast, this 18-year-old self-identified Canadian and Caucasian man illustrated a reconsideration of previously held attitudes: “It has reinforced my opinions, but also made me think of the opposites of my opinions thus forcing me to question my opinions and rethink them.”

**Structural Insight (n = 12)**

Some participants’ responses were not directly linked to the self, but reflected insights gained about how ethnicity plays out within society. For example, a 19-year-old self-identified Japanese and White woman stated:

> It made me think of some people who are part of an ethnicity who feel like their group has a lower chance of succeeding than others. Also if people really identify with their race by only having friends of their race or if they have diverse friends.

Similarly, a 21-year-old self-identified Latino man said, “that it is a universal thing, especially in the United States of America, to be questioned about my racial identity.”

**Prompting Exploration (n = 17)**

This category represents statements about how the survey has inspired the students to engage in exploration behaviors in order to learn more about their own ethnicity, ethnicity in general, or other people’s opinions on the topic. For some students, the survey inspired them to gain more knowledge about their own or other ethnicities, such as with this 21-year-old self-identified White/Caucasian man:

> I will definitely consider learning more about people of different races or ethnicities, especially since I live in one of the most diverse cities in the country.
I think it would be worth taking a class or two on the subject, or reading up on how important different cultures' backgrounds are to them and why.

For other students, the survey inspired them to get more actively involved with their ethnicity, such as joining ethnicity-based organizations or socializing with co-ethnics. This reaction is illustrated by a 21-year-old self-identified Asian American/Vietnamese woman: “There are a lot of good questions here that had me thinking for awhile. I’m going to definitely try my best to be involved with my racial/ethnic group members.”

**Affirmation (n = 17)**

Affirmation responses include references to feeling proud or connected to one’s ethnic background. For the response to qualify as affirmation, the survey must have served as a reminder of the students’ strong connection and not a new realization about the self. For example, a 20-year-old self-identified Filipino-American/Asian American woman stated emphatically, “[It] made me even more confident to be who I am” [emphasis in original].

**Negative Feelings (n = 14)**

This category represents negative responses participants had to the survey. They took on two forms: feeling disconnected from their ethnic group and not liking the survey because they do not like to focus on ethnicity or do not like the degree to which others focus on ethnicity. An example of the former was provided by a 20-year-old self-identified Middle Eastern woman:

I think it brought to my attention the negative feelings I have about my race and how that may affect my self-esteem and also I thought about why I can’t get along with people my own age and race but only with adults that are my race.

An example of a negative response to the survey, and how it is reflective of negative feelings about the concept of ethnicity, can be seen by a 21-year-old self-identified Caucasian and American woman:

It just reinforces that this university is so overwhelmingly wrapped up in this idea of ethnicity and it promotes it so strongly that I think it is slowly and steadily pushing people into their own groups. I don’t think it is creating hate towards other groups however it just keeps people to their own kind.

Although the two forms of responses that constitute the theme appear disparate, our rationale for including them under the same theme is that they
both represent a lack of connection and negative feelings about their ethnicities, albeit one form is expressed in a more direct and personal manner. Further, only 3 of the 14 participants in this group were categorized as such as a result of disliking the survey. To ensure that combining these two forms of negative feelings into a single category did not affect the findings, all analyses reported below were also conducted without those three participants’ data included. The findings were identical, and thus we only report the analyses conducted with both forms combined in the single category.

Linking the Content of the Response to Ethnic Identity

First, we examined whether the frequency of themes varied by ethnicity, once again both in terms of Whites and Students of Color and specific pan-ethnic groups. The results were not significant, indicating that the frequency of themes did not vary by ethnicity.

The next set of analyses examined whether the seven different themes described above were differentially related to levels of ethnic identity. We used the same analytic procedure as before, conducting analyses of covariance that controlled for the alternate ethnic identity process. By linking the response themes to a rating-scale measure of ethnic identity we are engaging in a type of mixed methods analysis referred to as data transformation triangulation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In this approach, qualitative data are quantified and then analyzed in conjunction with quantitative data to compare and contrast the findings from each method.

The analysis of covariance for exploration was significant, $F(6, 135) = 3.08, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .12$. This significant omnibus test was followed up using the Sidak confidence interval adjustment, which is similar to a Bonferroni correction but provides better protection against Type II error. The results of the post-hoc tests indicated that those who made structural insights reported significantly higher levels of exploration (adjusted $M = 3.02, SE = 0.11$) than participants whose responses were coded as prompting exploration (adjusted $M = 2.50, SE = 0.09, p = .009, d = 1.53$) or triggered reflection (adjusted $M = 2.61, SE = 0.07, p = .05, d = 1.23$). No other themes differed by levels of exploration.

The results for commitment indicated a significant overall effect, $F(6, 135) = 2.16, p = .05, \eta^2_p = .09$; however, the Sidak correction suggested that none of the pairwise comparisons differed significantly. Examination of the mean differences in commitment by response theme hinted that the overall effect was being driven by a large mean difference ($d = 1.14$) between affirmation (adjusted $M = 3.17, SE = .11$) and negative feelings (adjusted $M = 2.71, SE = 0.13$); those who wrote about affirmation reported higher levels of commitment than those who wrote about negative feelings. Because
the Sidak correction is a conservative one, we also examined the pairwise comparisons using the least significant difference procedure with an adjustment of our $p$ value threshold to .01. This test confirmed our suspicions, namely that the sole significant difference in commitment was between affirmation and negative feelings ($p = .005$).

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the present study was to explore whether participating in ethnicity-related research could serve as a consciousness-raising experience for college students. The results indicated that approximately one third of students reported being affected by the survey. This figure is likely an underestimate of the true effect of the survey, as there are a number of reasons why participants may have answered “no.” The participants may have been fatigued and were ready to be done with the survey, may not have been able to articulate their feelings at the moment, or may have experienced a delayed reaction whereby thoughts prompted by the survey occurred later (see also Gurin & Nagda, 2006). The findings in the present study suggest that participating in this type of research may stimulate students’ thinking about race, ethnicity, and culture.

Of greater value was our analysis of how participants reacted to the survey. Although they reported being affected, it is not surprising that they reported being affected in different ways. The seven themes identified in the study represent cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses to taking the survey, which corresponds to the three primary domains involved in the process of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). The majority of the types of responses (four out of seven) represented some level of cognitive reflection on the part of the participant, be it a new insight about the self or a reconsideration of previous held beliefs. In contrast, the prompting exploration theme moved beyond the cognitive domain and into the behavioral, as these responses contained explicit statements of the participants’ intention to learn more about their ethnic background. The final two themes represented divergent emotional responses to taking the survey. The affirmation theme simply reinforced participants’ pre-existing feelings of pride and belongingness. The negative affect theme, however, was disheartening in its reflection of participants who felt bad about themselves through becoming aware of how distant they were from their ethnicity or felt negatively toward the survey as a result of negative feelings about the concept of ethnicity itself. We find some solace in the fact that this response was one of the least common responses. Furthermore, past work on self-disclosure has sometimes found reports of negative feelings immediately
following the disclosure, but that the feelings fade over time and are associated with long-term benefits (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Individual Differences in Responding: Links to Ethnic Identity Development

In addition to finding that participants responded to the survey in different ways, our analysis indicated that current levels of ethnic identity were associated with these responses. On the whole, participants who reported being affected by the survey had higher levels of ethnic identity exploration but lower levels of commitment. Thus, the survey was even more influential for those who were already actively engaged in the identity exploration process and those who had less of an affective connection to their ethnic background.

More important, however, was that the content of the response differed significantly by ethnic identity. Participants at higher levels of exploration were more likely to make structural insights. This finding is congruent with the proposal that individuals must develop a clear sense of personal ethnic identity before being able to think meaningfully about how ethnicity and race play out in society (Syed, 2010; cf. Erikson, 1968). In contrast, participants at lower levels of exploration were more likely to declare their intention to become more involved with their ethnicity or were triggered to think about the relevance of ethnicity for the first time. Taken together, these findings indicate that those participants who think about ethnicity the least reported being affected the most in terms of cognitive and behavioral aspects of ethnic identity (see also Cohen et al., 2006; Fritz et al., 2004). The participants who reported the prompting exploration theme did not differ in levels of exploration from the group of participants reporting that they were unaffected by the survey at all. Of course, it is important to recognize that the prompting exploration theme is only indicative of participants’ stated intention to engage in exploratory behaviors, and cannot be taken to mean that they will necessarily follow through.

The finding that commitment was linked to the content of the responses was rather straight-forward. Participants who had higher levels of commitment were more likely to derive a sense of pride and connection from the survey, whereas those who were not very committed to their ethnicity were more likely to feel negatively. Several ethnic and racial identity theories suggest that individuals in the early stages of ethnic/racial identity (characterized by low commitment to their ethnicity), may be more likely to incorporate and internalize society’s negative images of their ethnic group or be resistant to the notion or ethnicity altogether (Cross, 1978; Phinney, 1990). Our findings reflect this possibility.
It is instructive to note that ethnic identity, but not ethnicity, was associated with how students responded to the survey, both in terms of whether they felt affected by the survey and how they felt they were affected. These findings are in concert with recent pushes to replace static categories (e.g., ethnicity) with dynamic attitudinal, behavioral, or affective constructs (e.g., ethnic identity) in psychological research (see Helms et al., 2005; Juang & Syed, 2010).

Applications and Implications of Findings

Although more research needs to be done, the findings in this study could have potential applications in multicultural training and education settings. The fact that at least one-third of participants reported being affected by this 60-minute survey suggests that this method could be a useful and inexpensive approach to consciousness-raising in higher education and other organizational settings. The few existing interventions for ethnic identity reported in the literature consist of facilitator-led group sessions over a period of several weeks (Malott et al., 2010; Whaley & McQueen, 2010). Given the mounting evidence for the effect of brief writing-based interventions (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999), future research that builds on the ideas and findings of the present study may be useful for creating ethnic identity interventions that are less time and resource intensive. As others have noted (Pope-Davis & Dings, 1995; Rowell & Benshoff, 2008), personal reflection on the topic of ethnicity and culture may be required for enduring change. Last, although the majority of students responded positively to the survey, the small minority of students who responded negatively should not be dismissed, particularly when considering potential implications of the findings for interventions. Gaining a deeper understanding of these negative feelings and the long-term effect of them would be an important area for future research. As noted previously, past research on self-disclosure found that initial negative feelings following disclosure were ultimately associated with positive benefits (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), highlighting the need for longitudinal studies to understand the true effect of study participation.

Understanding how individual differences in ethnic identity development are associated with differential responding to the survey is also helpful for planning when to implement the survey as an intervention. Ethnic identity exploration seems to be a key process associated with how participants responded. Thus, it may be beneficial to target interventions for a period in which exploration is known to be heightened. Research charting the developmental trajectories of ethnic identity exploration have indicated that exploration increases during the transition to middle school (French et al.,
The present study also has potential implications for research ethics. Most institutional review boards require a statement in the consent form that the participant may experience “slight discomfort” in participating in the study, no matter how innocuous the topic. However, there is no empirical data that informs these pronouncements of potential discomfort. The present study suggests that most students respond quite positively to ethnicity-related research, as indicated by the positive nature of the response themes. Those who do not respond positively tend to feel disconnected from their ethnic group or have preexisting negative feelings about the idea of ethnicity itself. Thus, peering inward to how participants respond to research participation may provide an empirical basis for what the likely form of discomfort might be. This is not only a consideration for future research on ethnic identity, but for other domains of identity as well as any research with human participants. The genesis of the present analysis was our decision to include a single open-ended question at the end of the survey so that participants could express their thoughts about the survey. This is a simple addition for practically any research study that can yield valuable data on how individuals experience research participation. We urge researchers to consider including such a question in their projects and to give consideration to the fact that participation in research is not a neutral act.¹

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few important limitations to the present study that must be considered. Most importantly, we only assessed the effect of the survey immediately following completion and did not have any follow-up data to assess the long-term effect. This is an imperative next step for testing whether a survey such as the one used in the present study could truly be used as an effective intervention tool. Furthermore, there is an obvious need for experimental research to document the utility of the survey as an intervention. In an ideal scenario, researchers would randomly assign participants to a survey condition, a facilitated group-discussion condition, and a control condition. Doing so would allow for reasonable conclusions about the effectiveness of taking a survey relative to the more standard approaches that are currently in use.

Another important limitation to the study is that we only asked the follow-up question about how the participants were affected by the survey

¹Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this particular phrasing.
if they answered “yes” to the question of whether or not they were affected. It would have been equally useful to know why participants were not affected by it. Furthermore, despite an initial denial of being affected by the survey, if given the opportunity the participants may have revealed ways in which they actually were affected (see also Syed, 2010).

In sum, the present study provides initial evidence for the utility of participating in ethnicity-related research for raising college students’ awareness about their ethnic identities. Furthermore, the form of awareness is moderated by individual differences in ethnic identity development, suggesting the need for developmentally tailored interventions. We hope to see more research of this nature in the future to gain a better understanding of how research participation may be associated with positive development.

REFERENCES


