When We Talk About American Ethnic Groups, What Do We Mean?

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American ethnic groups are often thought of as discrete categories to which people belong and that explain some aspects of psychological functioning. However, ethnicity is a complex multidimensional construct that, by itself, explains little. To understand its psychological implications, it is necessary to identify and assess those aspects of ethnicity that may have an impact on outcomes of interest. In this article, the author examines three key aspects of ethnicity that may have an impact on outcomes of interest.

Ethnicity is becoming an increasingly important topic in psychology. The American Psychological Association (1994) recommended description of samples by ethnic group, and concern with ethnicity as a variable is evident across all areas of the field. Increased interest in and attention to ethnicity promises important benefits to psychology. The growth of psychological information about American ethnic groups can help to fill in theoretical and empirical gaps that have resulted from the focus of mainstream research on largely White middle-class samples (Graham, 1992). Greater awareness of ethnic issues can bring increased sensitivity to the treatment of clients from diverse backgrounds (Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). However, the increased attention to ethnicity poses complex problems that are often ignored. Although ethnic group membership clearly has important psychological implications for individuals, the exact nature of the relationship between ethnicity and psychological outcomes is unclear. Simply knowing the ethnicity of an individual or group of individuals does little to explain specific social, emotional, cognitive, and mental health outcomes.

To achieve a better understanding of the implications of ethnic group membership, it is necessary to unpack the packaged variable of ethnicity, as has been recommended in the case of culture (Poortinga, van de Vijver, Joe, & van de Koppel, 1989; Whiting 1976); that is, we must identify and assess the variables associated with ethnicity that may explain its influence. Although this point has been made by various writers (e.g., Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Phinney & Landin, in press), it remains unclear what variables should be considered in attempting to understand ethnicity. My first goal in this article is to examine three aspects of ethnicity that are assumed to account for its psychological importance: culture, ethnic identity, and minority status. In addition, although each of these aspects contributes something to the understanding of ethnicity, they are not categorical variables that differentiate clearly among groups. My second goal is to demonstrate that these aspects are best understood in terms of dimensions along which individuals and samples vary, rather than as categories into which individuals can be classified.

The focus in this article is on ethnic groups of color in the United States, that is, groups of non-European origin, primarily African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. Americans of European descent can of course also be considered as members of ethnic groups. However, in this article, I use the term ethnic group to refer only to members of nondominant groups, in order to avoid the repeated use of the term minority to distinguish non-European groups (which in many places are no longer minorities) from the dominant White majority. The discussion also does not include ethnic groups in other parts of the world, where ethnic conflicts have escalated into internecine wars (see Calhoun, 1993; Williams, 1994). Although American ethnic groups are not without conflict, most Americans support the idea of a multiethnic society in principle, even though they may differ in how to attain it.

The term ethnicity is also used here to encompass race. The term race is avoided because of the wide disagreement on its meanings and usage for psychology (Jones, 1991; Wilkinson & King, 1987; Yee, Fairchild, Weizmann, & Wyatt, 1993; Zuckerman, 1990). Although race is used conventionally to distinguish non-European groups (which in many places are no longer minorities) from the dominant White majority, the term race is used conventionally to distinguish among people, for example, of European, African, or Asian descent, biologists find more differences within so-called racial groups than between them (Zuckerman, 1990). The psy-
The psychological importance of race derives largely from the way in which one is responded to by others, on the basis of visible racial characteristics, most notably skin color and facial features, and in the implications of such responses for one’s life chances and sense of identity. In this discussion, these implications of race are subsumed as aspects of ethnicity that are of psychological importance. Thus, the term ethnicity is used to refer to broad groupings of Americans on the basis of both race and culture of origin.

There are at least three aspects of ethnicity that may account for its psychological importance. These include (a) the cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors that distinguish ethnic groups; (b) the subjective sense of ethnic group membership (i.e., ethnic identity) that is held by group members; and (c) the experiences associated with minority status, including powerlessness, discrimination, and prejudice. There are certainly other important aspects of ethnicity, such as political, economic, and historical factors, that are relevant in other contexts. However, the three named components are the critical features from a psychological perspective. They correspond closely to the three defining criteria for ethnic groups identified by Sue (1991), and they provide the focus for this discussion.

These three aspects are not independent; rather, they are overlapping and confounded. However, they can be separated conceptually for purposes of discussion. Before examining these three aspects of ethnicity in detail, I explore the categories and labels that have been commonly used to designate ethnic groups.

**Ethnic Categories and Labels**

Categories are necessary for human discourse, and without categorical labels, discussion of psychological phenomena is virtually impossible. Similarly, ethnic groups need to be defined and labeled for purposes of discussion. However, many psychologists, perhaps because of the typical training in experimental research methods, tend to think of ethnicity as a categorical variable, either an independent variable that is assumed to influence psychological outcomes or as a nuisance variable to be controlled. Sociologists, who have a longer tradition of studying ethnicity (e.g., Yinger, 1985), tend to see more clearly the problems of ethnic categories. Sociologists who have wrestled with problems of categorization to describe ethnic differences in indexes, such as self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1993), mental health (Vega & Rumbaut, 1991), or economic well-being (Waters & Eschbach, 1995), generally agree that ethnic categories are imprecise and arbitrary, “social constructions rather than natural entities that are simply ‘out there’ in the world” (Waters & Eschbach, 1995, p. 421). Both ethnic categories and the labels for these categories vary over time, context, and individuals. The United States Bureau of the Census has changed categories and labels over the years, and currently uses 5 basic groups (Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, Black, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander), which are in some cases expanded into 14 groups by subdividing the Hispanic and Asian groups into subgroups (Entwisle & Astone, 1994).

As has been noted by Entwisle and Astone (1994) and others (e.g., Vega, 1992; Waters & Eschbach, 1995), the Census categories are problematic. Entwisle and Astone suggested a series of questions exploring both race and place of origin in order to determine ethnic category clearly for research purposes. However, even within an ethnic group whose members share a relatively precise ethnic label there is tremendous heterogeneity. Many writers have pointed out that there is greater variation within than between groups (e.g., Jones, 1991; Reid, 1994; Zuckerman, 1990). This heterogeneity has been examined in terms of social class and education, generation of immigration, geographical region, family structure, and size and composition of the ethnic community, among other factors that differentiate subgroups (e.g., Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; McLoyd, 1990; Tatum, 1987). Because of this within-group variation, ethnic group membership alone cannot predict behaviors or attitudes in any psychologically meaningful way.

Marin and Marin (1991) recommend analyzing groups separately by core variables such as acculturation, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. However, many demographic variables, such as income and family structure, are confounded with ethnicity (Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994; Johnson, 1992), and their effects are interactive (Kessler & Neighbors, 1986). Even if groups could be divided into more homogeneous subgroups on the basis of criteria such as these, the resulting categories, although more fine grained and accurate, would often be too small to be statistically viable (Vega, 1992).

There are additional problems with ethnic category labels. Many groups have several alternative labels available, and these various labels have different meanings both for members and nonmembers of a particular group.
(Huddy & Virtanen, 1995). The different connotations of ethnic labels have been well documented. For example, Larkey, Heck, and Martin (1993) have demonstrated the diversity of meanings associated with the terms Black and African American. The diverse labels used by individuals of Mexican origin, such as Mexican, Chicano, Latino, Hispanic, and Mexican American, have different psychological correlates (Buriel, 1987). Not only do different labels for the same group have different meanings, but also the same label can have varied meanings for different individuals. Ferdman (1995) provided descriptions of the various ways in which a group of individuals, all of whom described themselves as Mexican American and were of similar social position, interpreted that label.

Because of these varied meanings associated with ethnic labels, individuals may use different labels in different situations to convey a particular sense of themselves (Waters, 1990). As Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty (1994) noted, “Self-categories do not represent fixed, absolute properties...but relative, varying, context-dependent properties” (p. 456). Use of self-labels changes depending on circumstance. Labels can, for example, become a political choice, particularly in cases where resources are allotted on the basis of membership in particular groups. A recent study found that of 259 university students who claimed to be American Indian or Alaska Native, only 52 were able to verify their status as a member of one of those groups (Pavel, Sanchez, & Machamer, 1994).

However, although there is some choice as to self-label usage is constrained to varying degrees by the way one is perceived by others. As Reid (1994) pointed out, African Americans are defined by a combination of self- and societal identification, “somewhere between the notion that whoever identifies as African American is one and the idea that whomever society defines as African American is one” (p. 5). For some individuals, the two definitions differ; also, some individuals have dual or multiple ethnic identities. When distinct racial features are evident, individuals have less freedom as to the self-label they can choose (Chung, 1991).

An additional problem in the use of ethnic categories involves the growing number of individuals of mixed ethnicity (Root, 1992). In a recent report on high school and college students in several ethnically diverse settings, researchers found that over one tenth of adolescent and young adult respondents were of mixed backgrounds when parental ethnicity was assessed (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). Self-labels for mixed ethnic individuals varied with the context and the form of the question. About two thirds of multiethnic respondents used a monoethnic label in an initial open-ended question. When provided with a list that included the label mixed, some respondents switched their response from monoethnic to mixed, but over one third continued to use a monoethnic label. Therefore, if self-labels alone are used to categorize research participants, the categories may include individuals from mixed backgrounds. The implications of such blurring of categories are unclear, but they are likely to differ depending on the particular combination involved and the phenotypic appearance of the individual (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996).

In summary, it is increasingly clear that for a number of reasons ethnic categories and labels are problematic. Labels are not consistent indicators of group membership; rather, they vary over time and situations, carry different connotations among individuals and groups, and gloss over within-group variation. To get beyond simplistic ethnic categories, we need to examine the meanings associated with ethnicity, specifically culture, identity, and minority status.

**Ethnicity as Culture**

Ethnicity is perhaps most often thought of as culture. A common assumption about the meaning of ethnicity focuses on the cultural characteristics of a particular group, that is, the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors that are typical of an ethnic group and that stem from a common culture of origin transmitted across generations. American ethnic groups of color are assumed to reflect the cultures of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the indigenous peoples of North America. To understand the psychological implications of ethnicity, it is essential to identify the specific cultural characteristics associated with an ethnic group and with the outcomes of interest such as educational achievement or mental health (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Phinney & Landin, in press).

Recognition of the need to describe specific cultural variables has a long history in the literature. A theme that runs through the writings of anthropologists, cross-cultural psychologists, and others concerned with understanding ethnicity is the need to identify the specific components that may account for observed cultural differences; that is, to unpack culture, to peel off its layers, like the layers of an onion, to explain cross-cultural differences in terms of specific antecedent variables (Feldman & Rosenthal, 1994; Poortinga et al., 1989; Segall, 1984; Whiting, 1976).

In spite of the long-standing recognition of the need to identify cultural variables that distinguish ethnic groups, little has been done to accomplish this. A number of articles and books have appeared in recent years that attempt to describe and characterize the culture of particular ethnic groups (e.g., Gibbs & Huang, 1989; Harrison et al., 1990; McAdoo, 1993; McGoldrick, Pearce, & Giordano, 1982; Mindel & Habenstein, 1988). Writers who are attempting to generalize about ethnic cultures typically qualify their descriptions by pointing out that research is limited, that groups are heterogeneous, and that many conclusions are based on informal observations or clinical experience rather than on empirical data (e.g., Uba, 1994). Nevertheless, there appear to be core characteristics that many accounts agree on. I present here selected examples of these global descriptions for the major American ethnic groups, because these characteristics are frequently cited in empirical articles as "explanations" of reported ethnic differences.
African Americans have been described by White and Parham (1990) as reflecting the continuing African influence in contemporary Black lifestyles, an influence that results in characteristics such as emotional vitality, collective survival, oral traditions, time perception, and interdependence, particularly within the extended family. Jones (1988) described Black culture in terms of five dimensions: time, rhythm, improvisation, oral expression, and spirituality.

Marin and Marin (1991) summarized evidence about Hispanics from a variety of sources and proposed that they are characterized by high levels of interdependence, conformity, and a readiness to sacrifice for the welfare of ingroup members. They are said to avoid conflict in interpersonal situations and are likely to show strong attachment, loyalty, and reciprocity toward members of their extended family. They also may have more clearly defined gender roles in the family. They tend to value obedience to people in authority and have more flexible attitudes toward time.

Asian Americans, according to Uba (1994), have been characterized by an emphasis on maintaining harmony in relationships, the precedence of group interests over individual interests, and the importance of fulfilling obligations, particularly obligations to the family. Native Americans were described by Attneave (1982) as present oriented, in harmony with nature, and focused on the welfare of the group over the individual. Bennett (1994) pointed out common themes underlying the diversity among American Indian tribes, primarily the values placed on generosity, cooperation, community, and family.

A theme running through many of these descriptions is the broad cultural difference between individualism and collectivism that has been observed to distinguish mainstream American and Western European cultures from the cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and many indigenous peoples (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1990). Western industrialized countries are said to emphasize the importance of the individual over the group and to construe the individual as independent, autonomous, and self-contained. Many non-Western countries emphasize the group over the individual and view persons as interdependent and connected. Members of American ethnic groups from collectivistic cultures, such as Asian, African, or Latin American, are assumed to reflect this difference, that is, to emphasize interdependence and orientation toward the group, in contrast to the mainstream American tendency toward independence. Recent research provides support for the greater interdependence among ethnic minority children in the United States (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994). There is, in addition, a tradition of cross-cultural research aimed at identifying broad dimensions of cultural differences across nations worldwide (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990).

In spite of some agreement both on descriptions of specific ethnic cultures and on broad differences between Western and non-Western cultures, there are serious problems in using culture as a basis for understanding the psychological implications of ethnicity. The most obvious problem is the tremendous heterogeneity among members of American ethnic groups, as noted earlier with regard to ethnic labels. Ethnic cultures differ in terms of particular country of origin within a broad cultural group (e.g., Asian Americans of Japanese vs. Korean ancestry), generation of immigration, region of settlement in the United States, socioeconomic status, and community structure (Marin & Marin, 1991; Reid, 1994). Furthermore, because of their dispersion and mixing with both mainstream American culture and with other ethnic groups in the United States, ethnic cultures are not discrete entities but rather part of a diverse cultural mix (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, in press; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Finally, even if particular subcultures can be described with some accuracy, cultures are not static, but continually evolving and changing (Roosens, 1989; Vega, 1992).

Because of this heterogeneity, cultural blending, and cultural change, it is not clear whether particular individuals or samples actually reflect the culture they are thought to represent. A common practice is to interpret empirical results or clinical observations in terms of cultural characteristics that are assumed to exist but that are not directly assessed (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Phinney & Landin, in press). In such cases, group membership is used as a "social address" (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) that is assumed to be linked to particular traits or behaviors.

To make sense of the cultural implications of ethnicity, it is important to determine whether cultural attributes of particular samples in fact conform to broad descriptions of the group and whether these attributes can be linked to psychological outcomes. To do so, we need measures of cultural attributes. On the basis of the descriptions presented above, we would expect that measures of culture should focus on attributes such as independence and interdependence, strength of family affiliation, generosity, maintenance of interpersonal harmony, spirituality, and so forth. In fact, this is rarely done.

Attempts to measure culture in particular ethnic samples have often focused on acculturation, that is, the extent to which individuals have maintained their culture of origin or adapted to the larger society. Items used in acculturation scales deal primarily with specific behaviors, such as language usage, food practices, television viewing, and participation in traditional activities such as holiday celebrations (see, e.g., Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995; Felix-Ortiz, 1994; Landrine & Klonoff, 1994; Marin, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987). Acculturation scales that measure behavioral indicators of cultural retention or involvement but do not assess the cultural values and norms per se cannot show direct links between culture and outcomes.

Furthermore, acculturation is often measured indirectly: instead of assessing behaviors and values, demographic indicators such as generation of immigration
are often used as a surrogate for acculturation. Such practices ignore the complexity of the acculturation process. It is increasingly accepted that acculturation is not a linear process, with individuals ranging from unacculturated to assimilated, but rather a multidimensional process that includes one's orientation to both one's ethnic culture and the larger society and possibly to other ethnic cultures as well (Berry, 1990; Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Rogler et al., 1991). Thus, individuals may participate to varying degrees in their ethnic culture and that of the larger society and may be bicultural (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, in press).

Although relatively little research includes measures of cultural characteristics, several recent studies have done so. Interestingly, when these characteristics are measured, results often show that measured variables do not actually characterize the ethnic groups of interest or distinguish them from other groups. In a study of first- and second-generation Chinese immigrant adolescents, Feldman, Mont-Reynaud, and Rosenthal (1992) included a measure of Chinese values (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), the Rokeach Value Survey (Rokeach, 1973), and the Individualism–Collectivism Questionnaire (Triandis et al., 1986). This study is one of the few that compares members of an ethnic group (foreign-born and American-born Chinese American adolescents) with members of the culture of origin (Hong Kong Chinese) and to Euro-American adolescents in the United States. Results revealed that American-born children of Chinese immigrants showed more similarities to, than differences from, the Euro-American adolescents; for example, there were no differences in individualism or traditional values. Furthermore, discriminant function analysis showed that, on the basis of cultural values, 28% of the American-born Chinese Americans would be classified as Euro-Americans.

Other studies have shown that cultural values do not necessarily differentiate among subgroups who vary in acculturation. A scale of cultural identity developed for Latino adolescents (Felix-Ortiz, 1994) included cultural values such as respeto (respect for authority) and feminism (attitudes toward traditional sex roles). However, those cultural values did not differentiate among subgroups of Latinos identified as Latino, American, or bicultural. In a study of Hispanic adults, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, and Perez-Stable (1987) found that a key component of the Hispanic value familialism, namely, perceived obligations to provide support for extended family members, did not differ between non-Hispanics and acculturated Hispanics. More generally, Chilman (1993) noted that Hispanic families in the United States are changing their traditional cultural patterns and becoming similar to other Americans.

In summary, although cultural norms and values are an important component of the construct of ethnicity, they cannot alone explain the role of ethnicity in particular psychological outcomes. The problem is in part methodological; at present, there is a lack of reliable measures of cultural characteristics. However, in cases where such measures exist and have been used, they often do not clearly distinguish between members and nonmembers of particular groups. Because of the overlap and blending of cultures, measures of culture yield continuous scores that reveal differing degree of adherence to particular cultural norms and values (e.g., Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Ethnic cultures, rather than unified structures to which one belongs, can be thought of as clusters of dimensions along which individuals or samples vary. Although these dimensions are typically correlated in the group as a whole, individuals differ in the extent to which they adhere to any given value or attitude.

**Ethnicity as Identity**

In addition to variation in the adherence to cultural values and practices, individuals differ in the strength of identification with their ethnic group, that is, their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity may remain strong even when there is little direct cultural involvement, a phenomenon that has been termed symbolic ethnicity or ethnic loyalty (Keefe, 1992; Keefe & Padilla, 1987). To understand the role of ethnicity in human behavior, it is therefore important to consider individuals' ethnic identities.

The term ethnic identity is sometimes used to refer simply to ethnic group membership or label. However, ethnic identity is not a categorical variable, something that one does or does not have. Rather, it is a complex, multidimensional construct that, like culture, varies across members of a group. Ethnic identity has been conceptualized as an enduring, fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Keefe, 1992; Phinney, 1990). The view of ethnic identity as the link between ethnicity and psychological outcomes is based on the assumption that ethnicity is a meaningful psychological variable to the extent that it has salience and centrality for the individuals involved. For most Americans of European background, ethnicity is not a salient or important part of their identity, and they can choose what role, if any, it will have for them (Waters, 1990). Many, in fact, do not think of themselves as "ethnic" (Alba, 1990), although there are enduring communities of White ethnics.

In contrast, ethnicity is salient in cases where one's group membership is evident, as in the case of ethnic groups of color and specifically in the case of racial differences (Deaux, 1992). Ethnic identity has been shown to be a more important component of the self for these individuals than for most White Americans (Aries & Moorehead, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). In addition, ethnic identity varies in importance and strength among ethnic group members (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). Research suggests that the stronger one's ethnic identity, the greater the contribution that that identity makes to one's self-concept. For example, in a study of Black, White, and Asian college students, Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, and Broadnax (1994) found that the Black stu-
...dents who rated their group identity as being of greatest importance also showed the highest correlation between self-esteem and their evaluation of their group and of themselves as group members. These results indicate, at least at the group level, that identification with one's ethnic group may be more important than group membership per se in understanding the psychological role of ethnicity.

Furthermore, ethnic identity comprises a number of different components, including self-labeling, a sense of belonging, positive evaluation, preference for the group, ethnic interest and knowledge, and involvement in activities associated with the group (Phinney, 1990, 1995). The various components of ethnic identity relate differently to psychological outcomes; a recent meta-analysis showed that some aspects of ethnic identity, notably preference and evaluation, contributed to self-esteem, but others, such as self-identification, did not (Bat-Chava & Steen, 1995). The components of ethnic identity may be combined in different ways across individuals. Gurin, Hurtado, and Peng (1994) documented different identity structures among individuals of Mexican descent depending on their place of birth and language usage.

Ethnic identity can have qualitatively different meanings for ethnic group members. In a study of Mexican American managers in a large corporation, Ferdman (1992) found that individuals may have a clear identity as Mexican American but have quite different interpretations of that identity. Interviews with African American and Mexican American adolescents in ethnically diverse school settings (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, in press) revealed qualitative differences among adolescents in the meaning of their ethnic identity, with some expressing a close, participatory sense of their ethnicity and others conveying a more impersonal view based largely on historical aspects or traditions.

Differences among individuals in the quality of their ethnic identity are also related to developmental changes over time, as people explore and evaluate the meaning and implications of their group membership. The research on ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1989, 1993) and racial identity attitudes (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990) suggests that ethnic identity can be conceptualized as a process: Individuals progress from an early stage in which one's ethnicity is taken for granted, on the basis of attitudes and opinions of others or of society; through a period of exploration into the meaning and implications of one's group membership; to an achieved ethnic identity that reflects a secure, confident sense of oneself as member of a group. Furthermore, an achieved ethnic identity is not necessarily a static end point of development; individuals are likely to reexamine their ethnicity throughout their lives and thus may reexperience earlier developmental stages (Parham, 1989). Different stages of ethnic or racial identity have different mental health correlates (Phinney & Kohatsu, in press). Thus, the psychological implications of ethnicity will vary over the life cycle, with changes in one's identification with the group.

In summary, ethnic identity is a complex cluster of factors that define the extent and type of involvement with one's ethnic group. It differs both qualitatively and quantitatively among ethnic group members, two individuals who belong to the same group may differ widely on their identification with the group and their commitment to it. They may vary in how salient the group is for them and in what it means subjectively. Furthermore, ethnic identity can vary within one individual over time. The psychological correlates of ethnicity are likely to differ depending on the quality of this identity.

**Ethnicity as Minority Status**

The importance and centrality of ethnic identity are strongly associated with one's situation and experiences within society. For members of groups of color, the significance of their group membership may lie in part in the struggle to gain equality, recognition, and acceptance within a predominantly White society. Therefore, a final variable to examine in order to understand the meaning and impact of ethnicity is the status of the ethnic group within the larger society.

For ethnic groups of color, ethnicity implies less power and status and often the experience of prejudice and discrimination. There is ample documentation of the disproportionately low representation of ethnic group members in positions of authority and leadership, their unequal social and economic position even when education is controlled, and the continuing experience of prejudice (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Hacker, 1992; Huston et al., 1994; Jones, 1988, 1991; Keele, 1992; Lee & Hall, 1994). For Sue (1991), the term minority group carries with it the connotation of the unequal relationships among groups within society, in which some groups are subjected to greater prejudice and discrimination. He suggested that to fully understand ethnic groups, it is necessary to analyze patterns of exploitation. This theme has been developed in greatest depth with reference to African Americans. Boykin and Toms (1985) suggested that the minority experience is one part of the "triple quandary" (p. 39) faced by African Americans. In addition to issues related to being Black and to being American, Blacks must deal with a third aspect of their ethnicity, namely, racism and oppression.

The fact that the minority experience has a psychological impact has been documented in various ways. Gaines and Reed (1995) made the case that there are predictable psychological outcomes of "belonging to a group that has been oppressed or exploited throughout an historical period" (p. 97). They noted that one effect is the tendency to emphasize collective values over individualistic values. (Thus, the greater collectivism of ethnic group members may be as much a product of their experience in the United States as a result of transmission from their culture of origin.) Furthermore, they pointed out that the conflicting pressures to which ethnic group members, and Blacks in particular, are exposed, result in an inevitable duality within their personalities. This point has been made most strongly in DuBois's (1903/1989)
often cited statement that the Black person "ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 5).

Another obvious correlate of minority status is the presence of negative stereotypes. Although all groups are subject to stereotypes, the effects of such stereotypes are likely to be more detrimental for groups with less power and status (Fiske, 1993). Stereotypes can both restrict the way other people view ethnic group members and make the group members themselves vulnerable to believing or acting on them (Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Jones (1991) described a number of studies that show clearly the ways in which unequal treatment affects outcomes. For example, interviewees who were treated in a subtly negative way actually behaved in ways that confirmed their inadequacy.

As with other aspects of ethnicity that have been discussed, the impact of minority status is not uniform across individuals or groups. This diversity is due in part to varying historical experiences that differentiate groups, including slavery, internment, relocation, and immigrant or refugee status. There is, in addition, variation within groups. For example, Hughes and Hertel (1990) documented the differences in the experiences of African Americans in relation to variation in skin color.

Furthermore, there is individual variation in the extent to which discrimination is perceived and in the way it is responded to. Stable personal characteristics such as self-esteem can influence the extent to which discrimination is perceived (Phinney, Santos, & Madden, 1996). Also, as discussed earlier with reference to ethnic identity, there are changes over time in the ways in which individuals interpret and respond to the experience of prejudice and racism (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1989); the impact of ethnicity varies in relation to the extent to which one has examined and resolved issues related to one's ethnic or racial group membership (Phinney & Kohtsu, in press).

In summary, minority status, defined by lower status and the experience of discrimination, involves a number of complex variables. As with the other aspects of ethnicity that have been discussed, it cannot be considered a categorical variable that does or does not apply; rather, its psychological impact on any given individual and group will vary along a number of dimensions. The history and present status of one's ethnic group in society, personal experiences with prejudice, and one's response to perceptions of stereotypes and discrimination are among the factors likely to interact in complex ways in influencing psychological outcomes.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Given the wide variation in the ways in which ethnicity is expressed, there is a need for new approaches to understanding ethnic groups among both researchers and practitioners. Ethnic categories will continue to be needed because of the importance of exploring and understanding the many differences associated with aspects of ethnicity, but they should be used with caution (Azibo, 1988).

First, ethnic categories need to be used in describing research samples, as required by American Psychological Association (1994) guidelines. However, for all the reasons discussed, a simple label is not sufficient. Authors should describe ethnic samples thoroughly in terms of all variables that may be relevant, such as social class, geographic region, and level of acculturation (Azibo, 1988), so that readers can determine the particular subgroups involved. It is important also to indicate how participants were assigned to an ethnic category, for example, on the basis of school records, appearance, last name, self-report, or some other means. In the case of self-report, the options given to respondents should be described, including whether the option "mixed" was included, and whether parental ethnicity was solicited and used in classification.

Ethnic categories are also necessary for making descriptive comparisons of societal indexes such as income, health status, mental disorders, and educational achievement. However, such comparisons can only serve as a starting point, with the recognition that these descriptions do not explain anything. The important question for psychologists is why the differences exist. To answer this question, we need more information on the variables that may explain variation among groups. The present article suggests that these differences can be found in the areas of culture, identity, and status in society.

Thus, an additional appropriate use of categories is as a basis for describing group differences along the dimensions of culture, identity, and status. Research is needed to identify precisely the cultural norms and values that distinguish ethnic groups, as well as differences related to a group's status in society and variations in response to such experiences. For example, there is considerable evidence that ethnic identity is stronger and more salient among African Americans than among other ethnic groups or among Whites (e.g., Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, in press); the basis for the strength and salience of this identity may lie in experiences associated with a group's status in society. For exploring such differences, comparisons can be made between minority and White groups and among minority groups.

In cases of group comparisons, all possible efforts should be made to match the groups being compared, to minimize confounding with the many demographic variables that covary with ethnicity. However, because of the many ways in which ethnic groups differ, groups can never be exactly matched. Thus, ethnicity cannot be treated like an independent variable that explains an outcome, and a comparison group cannot be a control group.

Therefore, the best way to control for ethnicity is to hold it constant, that is, to study processes within groups, rather than make comparisons across groups. Researchers should consider carefully which dimensions associated with ethnicity may be germane to their particular concerns and then assess them, in order to be able to link specific predictors to outcomes of interest within groups. As ethnic variables are described and linked to psycho-
logical processes, it becomes possible to consider to what extent the processes are similar or different across groups.

Finally, it is important to recognize that as in other areas of human functioning, ethnicity is far more complex than most of our models allow. The three dimensions that have been identified are likely to interact in complex ways that will challenge researchers and clinicians to develop more sophisticated models. For example, the particular form that one’s ethnic identity takes is likely to reflect an interaction of cultural socialization, experience in society, the way one is perceived by others, and one’s own construction of these experiences. Simple research designs are not adequate for studying such phenomena. There is need both for in-depth qualitative studies that can describe processes in detail and for large-scale multivariate studies that can include and examine a wide range of factors.

Conclusion

Although there is increasing recognition that ethnicity is a complex multidimensional construct, it continues to be treated in many cases as a categorical variable. For the study of ethnicity to progress, it is important to recognize that the psychological implications of ethnicity can be best understood in terms of clusters of dimensions: “Race [and] ethnicity . . . are dimensions, not categories, of human experience” (Goodchilds, 1991, p. 1). These dimensions clearly cluster together in ways that make ethnicity a highly salient and meaningful construct in American society. Yet the boundaries are blurred and flexible, and the implications of ethnicity vary widely across individuals.

Therefore, to explain outcomes that are influenced by ethnicity, we need to explore at least three dimensions of difference that vary within and across ethnic groups. First, cultural norms and attitudes that may be influential in psychological processes need to be identified and measured to determine the extent to which they covary with membership in a particular group or sample and have an impact on specific outcomes. Second, the strength, salience, and meaning of individuals’ ethnic identities, that is, their sense of belonging to their group, need to be assessed as variables that may impact psychological outcomes. Third, individuals’ experiences as members of a minority group with lower status and power need to be considered, together with the ways in which individuals respond to and deal with such experiences. As these dimensions are more clearly defined and studied within and across groups, we will begin to get a better comprehension of the role of ethnicity for psychology. Furthermore, a greater awareness that individuals vary along a number of underlying human dimensions and cannot simply be categorized by group membership could help to break down stereotypes and contribute to understanding among all people.

REFERENCES


