

Ethnic Identity, Other-Group Orientation, and Comfort with Sharing One's Ethnicity in an Online Graduate Learning Environment

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Abstract

As institutions of higher learning education continue to provide and as minority students continue to enroll in online courses, it is important to explore the degree to which these students' ethnic identities relate to their online learning experiences. The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether graduate students' ethnic identity and other-group orientation scores, as measured by the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Questionnaire (Gaines, Bunce, Robertson, & Wright, 2010), were associated with their comfort with sharing their ethnicities in an online environment. The sample was comprised of 287 psychology online graduate students at a professional psychology academic institution. European-American participants were significantly less comfortable disclosing their ethnicity than Hispanic or Latino participants. In addition, a significant positive relationship was found between feeling a strong attachment toward one's own ethnic group and feeling comfortable disclosing one's ethnicity in an online learning environment. Based on these findings, it seems that online graduate students' identifying more strongly with their own ethnic groups may potentially increase their level of comfort and likelihood of self-disclosing their ethnicities, which may result in a transparent and open online learning community.

Keywords: graduate students; ethnicity; ethnic identity; other-group orientation; MEIM; online education

As trends in educational settings continue to veer toward the incorporation of online components, it is important to examine online environments more effectively to understand students' experiences and the ways in which instructors can facilitate effective learning (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014). Although considerable research has been conducted on the relationship between ethnic identity and both mental health and well-being (e.g., Burnett-Zeigler, Bohnert, & Ilgen, 2013; Lee, 2003, 2005), the relationship between ethnic identity and online learning experiences remains uncertain. Inclusive and safe learning communities are prerequisites of student academic success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Further, acknowledgment of diversity issues for ethnic minority students is a major contributor to students' sense of inclusion (Gouthro, 2004; Uzuner, 2009). Therefore, it is critical to understand the ramifications of ethnic disclosure within an online environment to equip instructors and administrators to address diversity within online courses and effectively serve a diverse student population (Lewis & Lee, 2014). Without such understanding, opportunities for rich, multicultural, and diverse dialogue; diverse

perspectives on critical issues; and social benefits that may arise from student collaboration within a heterogeneous student body may be missed (Antonio et al., 2004; Fischer, 2008; Gurin, Dey, & Gurin, 2003).

Ethnic Identity

The concept of ethnic identity involves several components, such as self-labels, sense of belonging, and collective self-esteem (Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2009). A sense of belonging or commitment to one's ethnic group may be the most important component of ethnic identity; however, commitment alone is not sufficient to create a confident identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Exploring one's identity involves a range of activities, including reading and speaking with others as well as attending cultural events. Shared values are indicative of one's closeness to the group, but this information frequently is limited because there is often heterogeneity within ethnic groups in terms of shared values and beliefs. Therefore, ethnic identity must be understood in relation to the prominent group culture of most minority members, such as national identity (e.g., American identity) (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Higher scores on ethnic identity measures have also been associated with a decreased

likelihood of developing mental health diagnoses throughout one's lifetime for individuals who self-identified as African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, or Asian American (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2013). Moreover, ethnic identity has been examined as a potential protective factor or potential buffer against the deleterious effects of discrimination for a number of ethnic minority groups. Among Asian Americans, stronger ethnic identity and other-group orientation (OGO) were found to be positively correlated with psychological well-being (Lee, 2003). Ethnic identity may play an important role in the development of minority individuals' identities; however, it does not appear to be the only factor protecting against the effects of discrimination. In a related study examining ethnic identity and OGO, Korean Americans who endorsed significant ethnic pride reported fewer depressive symptoms and higher social connectedness when the levels of discrimination were low (Lee, 2005). Nevertheless, as discrimination increased, the buffering effects of ethnic pride diminished, and depressive symptoms increased (Lee, 2005).

Minority Student Learning Experiences

Given the challenges that remain at learning institutions relating to ethnic inclusion, it

is expected that certain factors may be more salient for ethnic minority students as they progress through systems of higher education. In a study conducted by Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2008), African-American graduate students reported that they believed that their experiences differed significantly from those of their Caucasian-American counterparts. Specifically, these African-American students stated that their Caucasian-American peers experienced a significantly more positive and friendlier traditional campus setting than they. In addition, they indicated that African-American professors provided significantly more support than did Caucasian-American professors, African-American peers provided significantly more support than Caucasian-American peers, and Caucasian-American professors provided significantly more support than Caucasian-American peers. According to Johnson-Bailey et al., a significant number of the African-American students sampled noted that having more African-American professors and classmates would have made their experiences in graduate school more positive.

In a similar study, Clark, Mercer, Ziegler-Hill, and Dufrene (2012) compared the academic,

social, and emotional experience of ethnic minority and ethnic majority graduate psychology students. They found that ethnic minority students reported a significantly more negative race experience than non-minorities, which was associated with a higher level of emotional stress. In addition, the minority students in the study also reported feeling lower levels of belongingness compared to their non-minority counterparts.

Most of the relevant research on ethnic identity has been conducted with students in face-to-face courses at traditional brick-and-mortar universities. It is still unclear whether ethnicity disclosure in an online learning environment may provide similar benefits for ethnic minority students, particularly if instructors also share their ethnicities. Recent researchers have noted that the degree to which instructors in online classrooms consider the diversity of their student body is determinative of student sense of inclusion during the course (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Forde, 2014; Uzuner, 2009). As students' abilities to feel included and supported in their learning have the capacity to influence academic performance, emphasizing a sense of community among students may be important for student success (Forde, 2014; Gouthro, 2004). This may be

particularly important for ethnic minority students, as these individuals have endorsed experiencing significant amounts of discrimination on their respective campuses (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Nevertheless, it is unclear whether ethnic minority students have a greater preference for sense of community or connectedness than non-minority students (Cokley, Hall-Clark, & Hicks, 2011).

Disclosure of ethnicity by minority students in online learning environments has been observed to be somewhat "high-risk" in nature, with many students preferring the option of anonymity when dialogues containing racially charged content arise (Guy, 2001). In addition, despite its observed benefits and contributions, many individuals still have negative perceptions toward the pursuit of ethnic diversity within an academic setting, as it has historically been met with resistance from both faculty members and students (Cokley et al., 2010). However, strong ethnic identity development has been correlated with social connection and personal well-being (Smith & Sylva, 2011). Given that it has been described as a potential buffer against the impact of discrimination, this construct is likely to play a similar role in online learning communities (Lee,

2003; Lee, 2005). Therefore, further examining student ethnic identity and ethnicity disclosure may shed light on the best ways to foster an inclusive online learning environment and potentially assist students in improving academic performance.

Current Study

The purpose of the current quantitative correlational study was to enhance understanding of how ethnic identity and OGO relate to comfort with the self-disclosure of ethnicity among graduate students enrolled in online courses. The corresponding objectives of this study were to examine (1) the structure of a newly developed instrument to measure disclosure of ethnicity (2) ethnic group differences in disclosure comfortability, (3) the relationship between disclosure of ethnicity and ethnic identity, and (4) the relationship between disclosure of ethnicity and OGO.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from all master's- and doctoral-level psychology graduate students with a valid school email address at a professional psychology academic institution enrolled in online courses. In total, there were 287

participants, including 49 men (17.1%) and 205 women (71.4%). However, 31 participants (10.8%) did not indicate their sex and 2 participants (0.7%) preferred not to answer. With regard to age, 73 participants (25.4%) were between 26-29 years, 72 participants (25.1%) were between 22-25, 53 participants (18.4%) were between 30-39 years, 30 participants (10.5%) provided no answer, 27 participants (9.4%) between 40-49, 20 participants (7.0%) between 50-59, 8 participants (2.8%) 60 and over, 3 participants (1.0%) preferred not to share, and 1 participant (0.3%) reported being between the ages of 18-21.

In terms of ethnicity, one participant (0.3%) reported being American Indian or Native American, 9 participants (3.1%) reported being Asian or Asian American (including Chinese, Japanese, and others), 21 participants (7.3%) reported being Mixed (parents are from two different ethnic groups), 24 participants (8.4%) reported being Hispanic or Latino (including Mexican American and Central American), 43 participants (15.0%) reported being African American, and 147 participants (51.2%) reported being Anglo, or European American (not Hispanic). In addition, 19 participants (6.6%)

provided no answer and 23 (8.0%) indicated Other. All respondents were included as participants because each respondent replied to at least one demographic question. In addition, for each inferential statistic performed, items with no response were treated as missing data; consequently, cases with missing data were excluded from the analysis.

Materials

Disclosure of ethnicity questionnaire.

A demographic/disclosure questionnaire was distributed that included questions on age, sex, and ethnicity. It also included seven statements related to the disclosure of ethnicity that were developed based on a review of the scholarly literature. For the items, participants indicated their level of agreement on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The items included in the instrument are included in Table 1.

MEIM. A revised 15-item version of the original MEIM (Phinney, 1992) was used to assess ethnic identity search and affirmation, belonging, and commitment. Ethnic identity is conceptualized as “a sense of self as a group member that develops over time through an active process of investigation, learning, and

commitment” (Phinney & Ong, 2007, p. 279). An example of a MEIM item includes, “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.” Participants indicated their level of agreement with the items on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The revised MEIM has been shown to have good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alphas above .80 across a wide range of ethnic groups and ages (Cheng, Kwan, & Sevig, 2013; Phinney, 1992).

The OGO is a separate six-item scale from the original MEIM that was not included in the revised-MEIM. OGO assesses individuals’ involvement and approach toward persons of different ethnic groups besides their own (Cheng et al., 2013; Phinney, 1992). An example of an OGO item includes, “I often spend time with people from ethnic groups other than my own.” Similarly to the revised MEIM, participants indicate their level of agreement with items on a Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The original MEIM subscales of Ethnic Identity and OGO were found to be distinct, with good levels of internal consistency and moderate degrees of construct

and criterion validity (Ponterotto, 2003). Results of previous research using the OGO showed that it had acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas of .72 (Cheng et al., 2013) and .74 (Phinney, 1992) in samples of diverse college students.

Procedure

An invitation to participate in the current study was distributed via email through SurveyMonkey.com to psychology master's- and doctoral-level graduate students with a valid email address obtained from the school's directory. Within the body of the email, participants were informed of the title of the study, approximate time needed to complete the survey instrument, types of questions asked, and voluntary nature of the study. The email also contained a link to participate in an online survey. Participants were first directed to an informed consent page. They were instructed to select "I agree" to the informed consent if they were interested in participation.

Results

Structure of Disclosure of Ethnicity Questionnaire

To identify the underlying factors of the disclosure of ethnicity instrument, an exploratory

factor analysis was conducted using the principal component analysis (PCA) extraction method combined with the direct oblimin rotation method. This rotation method was chosen to ensure that the factors generated were correlated. Factor analysis with multivariate examination was done to produce factor scores with the goal of detecting outliers. In all, three cases with factor scores greater than or equal to ± 3 were identified as outliers (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). Two factor analyses (one with all cases and the other excluding the outliers) were conducted. Due to the similarities in the factor loading and communalities results of both analyses, it was concluded that the three outliers did not have an adverse impact on the factor analysis results. After checking for multicollinearity, results showed that none of the items were highly correlated (see Table 1). According to Field (2005), having a correlation coefficient of .9 should be a cause for concern. The result of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy ($KMO=.634$) suggested that the sample ($n=287$) was factorable. Similarly, Bartlett's test of sphericity produced a significant result ($\chi^2 (21) = 253.87, p = .0001$). In all, three components were found with an eigenvalue of greater than 1: disclosure

comfortability, disclosure preference, and control. Using this cutoff and a significant factor criterion of .4, three factors were found to explain a cumulative variance of 66.47% (see Table 2). The Cronbach's alphas for the four disclosure comfortability items and two disclosure preference items were .70 and .52, respectively.

Due to the exploratory nature of the current study as well as the percent of variance explained, all three factors were included in the analyses below, despite the low Cronbach's alpha for preference as well as the minimal item loadings on preference and control (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Yong & Pearce, 2013).

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Items on the Disclosure of Ethnicity Instrument

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I am comfortable sharing my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	-						
2. I usually disclose my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.501**	-					
3. It is important to me that peers/faculty are aware of my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.226**	.434**	-				
4. There are opportunities for me to share my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.241**	.417**	.411**	-			
5. Being in an online learning environment provides me with control over whether or not I choose to disclose my ethnicity.	.064	-.046	-.033	.027	-		
6. I prefer taking online courses because I do not want my peers or instructors to know my ethnic background.	-.191**	-.049	-.010	-.029	.024	-	
7. In contrast to a traditional classroom setting, I appreciate having the option of whether or not to disclose my ethnicity when taking an online course.	-.123	-.041	.015	.101	.163*	.390**	-

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2

Component Loading for Disclosure of Ethnicity Instrument Items Using Direct Oblimin Rotation Method

Item	Component		
	Comfortability	Preference	Control
2. I usually disclose my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.816	-.092	-.020
3. It is important to me that peers/faculty are aware of my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.746	.101	-.154
4. There are opportunities for me to share my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.736	.149	.016
1. I am comfortable sharing my ethnicity in an online learning environment.	.576	-.366	.269
6. I prefer taking online courses because I do not want my peers or instructors to know my ethnic background.	.006	.808	-.092
7. In contrast to a traditional classroom setting, I appreciate having the option of whether or not to disclose my ethnicity when taking an online course.	.077	.804	.234
5. Being in an online learning environment provides me with control over whether or not I choose to disclose my ethnicity.	-.083	.104	.949
Eigenvalues	2.15	1.47	1.03
% of Variance	30.70	21.02	14.75

Ethnic Group Differences in Disclosure Comfortability

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether ethnic differences existed in disclosure comfortability (i.e., comfort level of disclosing ethnicity in an online learning environment) (see Table 3 for mean scores). Only one significant difference was found across ethnic groups ($F(5, 262) = 4.428, p = .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .078$). Using the Bonferroni post-hoc test, a significant difference was found between Anglo, European-American participants and Hispanic or Latino participants ($p = .008$), with the latter ethnic group showing significantly greater comfortability with disclosing ethnicity.

Table 3

Mean Disclosure Comfortability by Ethnic Group

Ethnicity	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Asian or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and Others	9	3.00	.47
Black or African American	43	2.81	.63
Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and Others	24	3.00	.60
White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American; Not Hispanic	147	2.58	.48
Mixed; Parents are from Two Different Groups	21	2.89	.50
Other	23	2.73	.67

Relationship Between Disclosure of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine whether a significant relationship existed between ethnic identity and disclosure comfortability, preference, and control. A significant positive relationship was found between ethnic identity and disclosure comfortability ($r(266) = .272, p = .0001$). No significant relationships were found between ethnic identity and disclosure preference ($r(254) = .066, p = .294$) or control ($r(250) = .123, p = .051$).

Relationship Between Disclosure of Ethnicity and OGO

Correlational analyses were conducted between OGO and disclosure comfortability, preference, and control. Results indicated that there were no statistically significant relationships between OGO and comfortability ($r(266) = .082, p = .183$), preference ($r(254) = -.042, p = .501$), and control ($r(250) = .091, p = .143$).

Discussion

Given the impact of ethnic identity disclosure on students' learning experiences at traditional brick-and-mortar institutions, the purpose of the current study was to enhance understanding of how self-disclosure of ethnicity for graduate students who are enrolled in online courses relates to ethnic identity and OGO. Previous researchers indicated that minority students' perceived discrimination is a significant (although weak) mediator between ethnicity and emotional distress, which may impact one's ability to engage fully in the learning process and have an overall positive learning experience (Cokley et al., 2011). Similarly, being considered demographically different from the majority of other students was found to have a negative

impact on an individual's class performance in a traditional graduate-level classroom setting (Flynn, Chatman, & Spataro, 2001). However, online settings must be given unique consideration, as one's ethnicity and overall appearance may be made more explicit in an in-person, face-to-face classroom setting. This is particularly true for courses without video-chat components, given that these learners are only able to identify classmates by their names and the information that they choose to share throughout the course. Instructors may benefit from a greater understanding of the online dynamics among students, particularly with regard to ethnic differences, to create an environment in which all students have the capacity to be successful.

In an attempt to capture ethnicity disclosure in an online setting, a number of items were developed in the current study. Three factors emerged through EFA (i.e., disclosure comfortability, disclosure preference, and control); however, only disclosure comfortability was usable in the current study. No significant relationships or differences were found for disclosure preference or control. This is likely due to one to two items loading on each of the latter factors as well as the low internal consistency

found for disclosure preference (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Yong & Pearce, 2013).

Nevertheless, important relationships were found regarding students' comfort with disclosing their ethnicity. For example, online graduate students who self-identified as being members of ethnic minority groups tended to be more comfortable with disclosing their ethnicities than their Anglo or European-American peers in general. However, further analysis revealed that significant differences in disclosure comfortability existed only between Hispanic or Latino and Anglo or European-American students. According to Archer (1980), "[S]elf-disclosure is an act of revealing personal information about oneself to others" (p. 183). It might be that because Anglo or European Americans are in the majority group, it might seem odd, uncomfortable, or unnecessary for students in this ethnic group to disclose their ethnicity. Perhaps ethnic majority group membership is assumed to be Anglo or European, unless otherwise stated, in an online educational setting.

Other factors, such as trust, might also be a factor in ethnic identity disclosure. Typically, a relationship of trust first needs to be established, where casual information is shared before

connections are solidified. It is reportedly only after trust is gained that individuals reveal more important personal information (Bargh et al., 2002). However, self-disclosure tends to occur more quickly in online settings than in face-to-face settings (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). According to Joinson (2004), discussions in online contexts lead to more than four times the amount of self-disclosure when compared to face-to-face conversations. In addition, Joinson (2004) found that self-disclosure significantly increased when visual anonymity was assured. Minority online graduate students might encounter the means in online education to self-disclose personal information, including their ethnicities, because anonymity is somewhat protected. Given that discrimination is still prevalent among ethnic minority students on traditional campuses (Hall, Williams, Penhollow, Rhoads, & Hunt, 2015; Rosenbloom & Way, 2014), online education may be considered the most favorable environment for self-disclosure.

In this study, higher ethnic identity scores were found to be positively correlated with disclosure comfortability. This finding is consistent with those of previous researchers who described the benefits of strong ethnic identities,

such as social connection, personal well-being, and buffering against the impact of discrimination (Lee, 2003; Lee, 2005). Further, social connection and personal well-being in online graduate education may increase the sense of belonging and assist in the development of strong communities, which are identified as relevant components to maximize students' academic experience (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Sense of community appears to positively influence students' sense of belonging, further enhancing the feeling that students are part of a group, which subsequently fosters their efforts to work together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community can potentially decrease students' isolation; encourage participation and social connection; and facilitate the decision to self-disclose. Therefore, ethnic identity disclosure may contribute to social connection, which may positively influence the online learning community as a whole, subsequently fostering a supportive learning environment (Gouthro, 2004; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Uzuner, 2009). Although previous researchers have deemed online ethnic disclosure to be "high-risk" for minority students (Guy, 2001), findings of the

current study suggest that a well-developed ethnic identity is positively correlated with the likelihood of self-disclosure.

Disclosure comfortability was not found to have a significant association with participants' involvement and approach toward those of other ethnic groups (OGO). This finding is not surprising, given that the majority of participants identified as Anglo or European American and preferred to not disclose; however, they self-selected to attend a university at which diversity was emphasized. In addition, one's attitudes toward interactions with people from diverse ethnic groups may be correlated with a desire for others to be unaware of one's ethnic background (Phinney, 1992). Individuals who prefer to engage only with persons belonging to their same ethnic group may prefer an online setting, as they might have the option to refrain from sharing their ethnic backgrounds with others. Perhaps online learning may benefit both those who disclose their ethnicities to foster community and connectivity and those who prefer not to disclose, thereby refraining from clearly identifying with a certain ethnic group in the online classroom.

Limitations

The limitations of this study should be considered when examining these study findings. Participants were graduate students enrolled at a psychology-oriented, private graduate institution with a major focus on diversity. For this reason, the students at this institution may have been more likely to value diversity and the development of ethnic identity than graduate students in the general population or perhaps in different areas of study. Moreover, women made up approximately 80% of the sample. Therefore, their reports may not be reflective of the experiences of both men and transgendered individuals studying in this program. It is also important to note that the majority of students identified as Anglo or European American and other ethnic groups had relatively low representation (e.g., Asian American $n = 9$). The capacity in which students engaged in online learning was also not explicitly addressed. It is possible that some students had significant histories of online learning, whereas other students may have only been enrolled in one or two online courses. The disclosure process might be different after one has had years of experience participating in online learning communities as

opposed to having only completed one online graduate course.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers might compare results from strictly online students with those from strictly on-ground students and blended (on-ground and online) students. Doing so may allow for comparisons regarding the opinions and comfort levels of students from various learning environments to others and may potentially reveal motivating factors for ethnicity disclosure among online graduate students. Further, in the current study, it was discovered that students from minority ethnic groups felt more comfortable with disclosing their ethnic backgrounds in online learning environments when compared to their Anglo or European-American (not Hispanic) peers. Future researchers might examine the elements that contribute to feeling comfortable and consequent disclosure as well as the reasons why European-American (not Hispanic) students were least comfortable with disclosure. The recognition of these elements might potentially assist instructors in developing specific strategies and online pedagogy to support students who are reticent in disclosing ethnicity.

Finally, future researchers might administer similar questionnaires to online graduates students who are not enrolled in diversity-focused programs. In addition, experiences with racial/ethnic discrimination should also be taken into consideration. Such research would allow for a comparison of students who have experienced racial/ethnic discrimination to those who have not. Findings may reveal that students who have encountered significant discrimination would view their self-disclosure as “high-risk” compared to those who have not.

Conclusion

Interactions with diverse peers in traditional, face-to-face learning environments reportedly foster positive learning and democratic outcomes for Caucasian, African-American, and Latino individuals. Specifically, learning outcomes have included engagement, motivation to think

deeply about social phenomena, and self-assessed gains in academic skills. This exposure fostered a commitment to promote racial understanding, perspective taking, and involvement in political affairs and community service (Gurin et al., 2003). Nevertheless, understanding of whether these outcomes would hold true for online learning communities is limited. If students refrain from disclosing their ethnicities online and/or instructors do not provide a safe space for them to do so comfortably, one may assume that these gains may be lessened if not lost entirely. Processing and acknowledging diversity in a classroom setting has been posited as a contributor to an inclusive learning environment in traditional classrooms, which fosters student growth (Gouthro, 2004; Uzuner, 2009). It is possible that this may be achieved in online communities via increased self-disclosure of ethnicity.

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