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## Exploring sense of ethnic identity among a small Midwest sample of social work and counseling practitioners

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### Abstract

*The U.S. is transforming into a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society in which factors such as ethnicity and race are important variables to consider in social work practice and service provision to racial and ethnic minority populations. This multi-ethnic and multi-racial transformation presents many challenges for professional social work and counseling practitioners. It is important for practitioners to have a clear and concise definition of key concepts such as ethnicity and race in order to develop a sense of self-ethnic identity. This research study examines self-ethnic identity among a small sample of Midwest social work and counseling practitioners.*

**Keywords:** ethnicity, social work, practice, race.

### Introduction

A Transforming Racially and Ethnically Diverse Society Racial and ethnic minority populations are the fastest growing populations in the United States. In 2013, the U.S. Census reported the total U.S. population for the Latino population at an estimate of 17.1%, African American at 13.2%, Asians at 5.3% and Native Americans at 1.2%. The 2013 U.S. Census reported that these racial groups referred to as the “minority” population combined exceeded 100 million, thus representing about one third of the entire population (U.S. Census, 2013). Projections for 2056 indicate that the Latino population will rapidly increase by 21%, Asians by 22%, and African Americans by 12% (Horst, Mendez, Culver-Turner, Amanor-Boadu, Minner, Cook, Stith & McCollum, 2012; Querimit & Conner, 2003; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of racial and ethnic minority populations, it is imperative for social work to develop a framework outlining a clear and concise

definition of key concepts such as race, ethnicity and culture. In the 2008 edition of the Encyclopedia of Social Work, there is no entry defining or recognizing the concept of race (Coleman, 2011). Current social work practice, research and education fail to conceptualize a concrete understanding of race and ethnicity which is acknowledged throughout the profession. When discussing concepts such as race, ethnicity and/or culture the profession also lacks a clear distinction among the terms, often utilizing “culture” as an umbrella term synonymously with race and ethnicity. The social work profession continues to demonstrate inconsistent approaches to race such as: using the term “race” without producing an exact definition, explicit rejection of the concept of race, substituting race for ethnicity and using lay definitions based on assumptions (Coleman, 2011).

**Social Work's need for a Racial & Ethnic Inclusive Framework:** The rapid growth of diverse racial and ethnic minority populations within the U.S. creates challenges for the social work profession. To fully examine and address the implications of a transforming racial and ethnic society, it is essential for social work to address racial and ethnic minority concerns directly relating to the profession. Demographically, the social work profession is predominately composed of White professionals. Approximately 88% of social workers are White; comparatively the racial and ethnic minority composition of the social work profession has remained relatively constant. Among professional social work members of the NASW, approximately 5% are African American social workers, 3% Hispanics, 2% Asians and .5% Native Americans (NASW, 2001, 2003; ). Although these statistics do not represent the racial and ethnic demographics of all members of the social work profession, they do demonstrate an urgent need for the social work profession to become more inclusive of racial and ethnic minority social work professionals, who will offer valuable contributions and perspectives to the field.

The development of practical and quality services, interventions, research and education addressing the needs of racial and ethnic minorities is another challenge for the social work profession. The recent growth and transformation of racial and ethnic minority demographics demands that the social worker becomes better equipped to provide services in these marginalized communities. As a result, the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) implemented the requirement for the social work profession to develop effective approaches conceptualizing racial and ethnic diversities, beneficial to practice, research and education (Oriz & Jani, 2010). This conceptual approach should address “a broad social context that includes institutional/structural arrangements, recognize the intersection of multiple identities, and integrate an explicit social justice orientation” (Oriz & Jani, 175, 2010).

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This research study explored sense of ethnic identity among white and non-white practitioners.

## Methods

**Population and Sample Selection** The population of interest in this study was professional social work and counseling practitioners working within four “urban” Midwest regions. For the purpose of this research study, “urban” was conceptualized as regions possessing the characteristics of a city, such as higher population density of racial and ethnic communities. study sample was systematically selected from several online directories: Psychology Today, Network Therapy and Therapy Tribe. The researcher used several qualifiers to select practitioners. The qualifiers included practicing in one of the four urban Midwest regions of interest and educational attainment at minimum of a Masters’ degree in Social Work or Counseling. Approximately 21% of practitioners completed the questionnaire ( $n = 175$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 166$ ) completed the online questionnaire, while a small group ( $n = 9$ ) preferred to complete the questionnaire via telephone.

**Sample Characteristics** Participants consisted of a sample of 175 professional social workers and counseling practitioners ( $N=175$ ) providing professional services to racial and ethnic adult populations. Practitioners varied across race, ethnicity, gender, age, marital status, educational attainment, specific client population, and levels of education, skills and training pertaining to racial and cultural knowledge.

**Measurements** The online questionnaire consisted of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measurement (MEIM) and a demographic questionnaire. All participants received the same questionnaire.

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure consisted of a 12 item scale measuring awareness of ethnic identity. The MEIM measures three aspects of ethnic identity: ethnic affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement and ethnic behaviors. The MEIM consisted of a 4 point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). For the purpose of bivariate and multiple regression analysis the 4 point Likert scale was collapsed into two categories, disagree and agree. MEIM items instruct the respondents to rate their level of agreement with statements such as: “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me,” “I am active in organizations/social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group,” and “I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.” Scores range from 12 to 70 with higher scores indicating greater identity awareness and commitment (MEIM; Phinney, 1992). Past studies indicated high internal consistency ranges (.81-.90) and high reliability based on Cronbach’s alpha (89- 76) for the MEIM (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1999; Schmitt, 1996; Worrell, 2000). The construct validity of the MEIM was reported by several research studies (Clark & Watson, 1995; John & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). MEIM’s structural validity was confirmed by several studies (Lee, Falbo, Doh & Park, 2001; Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Stracuzzi & Saya, 2003; Worrell, 2000).

**Demographic Questionnaire.** The Demographic Questionnaire consisted of eight multiple choice questions in which participants identified their race, majority of client racial population, age, educational attainment, sex, marital status, region which one practices and percent of domestic violence related work.

## Results

Ethnic identity component measured participant's sense of belonging to their ethnic group, active participation in ethnic or cultural customs and knowledge and understanding of their ethnic identity. The ethnic identity measurement consisted of twelve items. Results indicated several differences among white and non-white practitioners ethnic identity. Non- white practitioners indicated higher levels of agreement for items: 6. I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group; 8. In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group; 9. I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group; 10. I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs; 11. I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group; and 12. I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background. Whites, however, indicated higher levels of agreement for items 2. I am active in organizations/social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group and 5. I am happy I am a member of the group I belong to.

Chi-square statistical analysis illustrated significant correlations (at an alpha level of .05) between white and non-white participants for items 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 (Refer to Appendix 3). Chi-square statistical analysis concluded no statistically significant relationships between white and non-white respondents for items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 12 (item 1 =X1 (1) = .484, p = .487; item 2 = X2 (1) = .001, p = .974; item 3 = X3 (1) = .647, p = .421; item 4 = X4 (1) = 3.283, p = .070; item 5 = X5 (1) = .035, p = .785; item 7 = X7 (1) = .010, p = 1.000 and item 12 = X12 (1) = 3.159, p = .075 (See Appendix 3).

Bivariate analysis indicated a statistically significant relationship between ethnic identity and race (Appendix 3). Findings indicated one's sense of belonging, decision to communicate with others to learn more about ethnic identity, high pride in ethnic group, participation in cultural practices and strong attachment to ethnic identity was statistically correlated to race. Non-white practitioners indicated to have a higher sense of ethnic identity in comparison to white practitioners

## Discussion

Ethnic Identity Measures. When exploring ethnic identity findings demonstrated non-white practitioners indicated a higher sense and awareness of ethnic identity, in comparison to white practitioners. Non-white practitioners indicated higher levels of attachment, feelings of belonging, pride, participation and happiness toward their ethnic group, in comparison to white practitioners. These findings suggest the need to further explore the concept and sense of ethnic identity among practitioners of diverse racial and ethnic identities. Another limitation is the use of the MEIM measurement which fails to clearly distinguish between ethnic identity and race. It may be effective to provide participants with a definition or understanding of the concepts of race and ethnicity. The examination of practitioners' ethnic identity is valuable to understand

how practitioner's sense of ethnic identity may impact practitioners' perceptions, attitudes and experiences with racial and ethnic minorities. An examination will produce social work practitioners who are cognizant of their social location of privilege and power. Importantly, practitioners will become informed of how race and ethnicity significantly impacts interactions and engagement with racial and ethnic minority clients within the practice setting.

### **Conceptualizing Race, Ethnicity and Culture**

Conceptualizing race continues to be a challenge for many social work professionals, due to its fairly recent emergence and establishment as a concept and its historical and institutional connection with racism. The concept of race remains a truly complex and multifaceted idea, which meaning has changed nationally and historically. It would be very difficult to limit the meaning of race to one single, concrete definition, due to its constant transformation throughout history. Critical race scholars suggest a clear conceptualization of race recognizes that race remains a product of human creation, which racial meanings and associations are constructed by social interactions and institutions (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012). Omi and Winant's (1994) "racial formation" is a concept referring to the sociohistorical construction of race. Racial formation acknowledges the historical processes and social organizations through which racial categories are produced. Racial formation highlights the significance and function hegemony has in the social construction and organization of race. Racial formation also examines the concept and significance of race in relationship to forms of inequality, oppression and differences, along with exploring the perplexity of racial identity and racial categories. Inherently, race functions as a social phenomenon rooted in social interactions and definitions situated within a social order structured along the lines of inequality (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Omi and Winant (1994) "Race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies; the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (i.e. phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process" (p. 55).

Omi and Winant's conceptualization of race provides a key definition for understanding that race is socially constructed. Associations and meanings of race are consistently transformed by political, social, economic and historical processes. Omi and Winant (1994) highlight the integral role societal institutions and political systems such as the government, federal legal system, criminal justice system and educational systems; have in shaping our understanding of race. These political and institutional systems serve as powerful agencies which define race and designates which individuals can be classified and belong to distinct racial groups. Race as a social construction suggests the concept of race developing from historical and social institutions and practices through which racial and ethnic minority groups (races) have experienced exploitation, inequality and oppression. Recognizing race as socially constructed posits the classification, associations and meanings of race as the product of human conception. The emergence of human racial classification has resulted in the formation of economic, social,

institutional and political privileges and advantages which racial and ethnic minorities groups do not experience. It is essential to understand race has been utilized as a tool to group or classify individuals on the basis of perceived biological or physical differences to signify racial superiority and inferiority among individuals, hence recognizing the construction of “races” produced from a system of dominance. According to Higginbotham and Andersen (2012) the key concepts in this conceptualization of race incorporate perception, belief and social treatment, thus factors such as biological differences are not core concepts. Hence, race is understood and learned through socialization and interactions in which specific characteristics, perceptions and assumptions are ascribed to distinct racial and ethnic populations. Race does not serve as a fixed or objective variable. Nor can race be understood as a mere illusion or ideological construct, due to its continual fundamental and functioning role in institutional, political, social and economic systems. Defining race as an ideological construct alone denies the “racial” experiences and realities of racial and ethnic minorities, resulting from a racialized society Still, race is often associated strictly with biological and physiological features such as skin tone, hair texture, eye color or skin complexion. Definitions that conceptualize race as solely biological or physiological characteristics and traits fail to explore issues addressing racial and structural inequality. For instance, the fifth edition of The Social Work Dictionary defines race as “the major subdivisions of the human species whose distinguishing characteristics are genetically transmitted,” while the majority of social work’s generalist social work texts indicate “...race refers to physical characteristics, with special attention to skin color and facial features” (Coleman, 2011, p. 92). The biological conceptualization of race fails to acknowledge the “racial realities,” or real life experiences racial and ethnic minorities are most likely to encounter. The biological stance of race further ignores the fact that race functions as a way of “comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world,” which “...race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized...” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 60). Hence, the importance of recognizing the true definition of race does not rely on biological features, yet the historical, social and institutional treatment of racial and ethnic minorities remains significant in the understanding of race.

Ethnicity, similar to race, has been conceptualized by identifying biological and physiological characteristics among individuals. Cardemil and Battle (2003), however, suggest a complete definition of ethnicity incorporates the “...historical cultural patterns and collective identities shared by groups from specific geographic regions of the world” (p. 279). Ethnicity “represents a peoplehood based on common physical appearance, language...homeland, and on norms, traditions, values, and history that make up the content of culture” (Ashton, 2010, p. 130). Other shared identities such as religion, nationality, music, art and customs serve as elements defining ethnicity. Often there is a shared sense of group unity, fulfillment and belonging which members’ experience (Higginbotham and Andersen, 2012). Race and ethnicity continue to function as mechanisms used to explain and organize social differences, while also maintaining social order among racial and ethnic populations. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed, primarily by members of the dominant racial group as tools to further protect social, economic,

and political interests. Historical conceptualizations of these terms have become accepted as common knowledge, impacting multiple aspects of racial and ethnic minorities' social interactions, opportunities and experiences (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Fundamentally, race and ethnicity are social constructs, sharing several commonalities; however the construction of such terms continues to promote separation and stratification among distinct racial and ethnic populations. Integration of Critical Race Theory The integration of CRT within the social work profession will provide a theoretical framework promoting a clear conceptualization and understanding of race, ethnicity and culture. Developing a concrete understanding of race, ethnicity and culture is vital to the social work profession, which often omits a significant discussion of race in social work education. CRT promotes an in-depth understanding of race as a social construct, important to challenge and deconstruct social work's current biological stance on race. CRT will provide social work educators and students with the knowledge to recognize the commonalities and distinctions among race, ethnicity and culture, which is imperative to service delivery and provision among racial and ethnic minority populations. Advance knowledge and understanding of CRT will also provide social work professionals with a modern and effective theoretical framework critical for deconstructing current social work paradigms and ideologies which support Eurocentric values, beliefs, practice, knowledge and education. According to Ortiz and Jani (2010) social work's current Eurocentric paradigm excludes variables such as race and racism, which "by isolating...decontextualizes the social experience of the individuals and groups being studied by assuming a dualism that reflects Euro-American cultural beliefs and individualism," as well as "potentially reify a positivistic, universalist, dominant epistemological stance" (p. 182).

CRT provides social work practitioners with a race competent framework which offers practitioners with the tools and knowledge to effectively serve racial and ethnic minorities. It is also important for practitioners to critically assess and examine perceptions, attitudes and interactions involving racial and ethnic minorities. Critical awareness of one's perceptions, attitudes and interactions is essential to the field of social work, which is a profession surviving from the ability to fairly and justly serve diverse and marginalized communities. Therefore, it is essential for social work professionals to be critical of perceptions, actions, behaviors and thoughts impacting practice and serve toward racial and ethnic minority populations. It is important for practitioners to identify and challenge negative perceptions, attitudes or assumptions which may impact how practice and ability to interact and engage with clients of diverse racial and ethnic identities.

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