

Feeling Typical, Looking Typical: Physical Appearance and Ethnic Identity Among Mexican-Origin Youth

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This study explores the dialectic between feeling like and looking like a typical member of one's ethnic group in relation to ethnic identity. The study combines participant-rated ethnic identity private regard and typicality with observer-rated data on Mexican-origin youths' physical appearance with a sample of 138 Mexican-origin adolescents ($M = 13.4$ years, $SD = .49$). The positive relation between perceived ethnic typicality and ethnic identity private regard was moderated by physical appearance, such that there was a stronger positive association for participants who were rated as having a more Latino appearance, whereas the association was nonsignificant for participants rated as having a less Latino appearance. Implications of these findings for the study of ethnic identity are discussed.

Keywords: ethnic identity, Latinos, physical appearance, typicality, skin color

Scholars have shown that ethnic minority youths' ethnic identity is a normative developmental task that has implications for their socioemotional development and well-being (Phinney, 1992; Quintana, 2007). Drawing on social psychological (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and developmental psychosocial theories (Erikson, 1968), research has shown that ethnic identity can be a source of resilience and strength for ethnic minority youths' psychological adjustment (e.g., Juang & Syed, 2008). Ethnic identity has been shown to buffer the negative psychological consequences associated with rejection perceived in the larger society by members of

an ethnic or racial minority group (e.g., Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Branscombe et al., 1999). In addition, research also has shown that ethnic identity is a dynamic and multidimensional construct (see Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Absent from these dimensions is an emphasis on *ethnic typicality*, or one's perceived similarity to others who belong to one's ethnic group. As noted by Ashmore and colleagues (2004), one's sense of how typical one feels as a member of a group is an important component of whether one identifies and categorizes oneself within that group. Furthermore, research has not yet explored the dialectic between *feeling typical* and *looking typical* as it relates to one's ethnic identity. There is a small, but growing body of research suggesting that physical appearance plays an important role in shaping experiences of ethnic identity (Gonzales-Backen & Umaña-Taylor, 2011; López, 2008). Our study is the first to explore the dialectic between feeling and looking typical as it relates to feeling positively about one's ethnic group identity.

This dialectic is especially important to consider during early adolescence, a period when youth strive to develop a coherent and healthy sense of self (Erikson, 1968), and a period of increased exposure to interactions outside of the family that can make ethnicity and race more salient (Hughes, Way, & Rivas-Drake, 2011). In addition, early adolescence is a period

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marked by changes in physical appearance and increased attention to body image (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004), and researchers have shown that physical appearance (e.g., having darker skin) may influence the treatment youth receive by others (McCombs & Gay, 1988; Spencer, 2005). Changes in physical appearance during early adolescence may increase youths' reflexive thinking of what others think of oneself based on appearance, and this increased attention to physical appearance may make early adolescence a particularly important developmental period to explore the relation between feeling and looking like a typical member of one's ethnic group. It is also especially important to consider the dialectic between feeling and looking typical among Mexican-origin youth, the largest nationality group of United States immigrants (Motel & Patten, 2012), as these youth belong to a heterogeneous group characterized by variation in racial make-up (e.g., 64.9% European ancestry, and 30.8% Native American ancestry; see Bertoni et al., 2003), and consequently, physical appearance.

Moreover, it is important to explore the dialectic between feeling and looking typical as it shapes ethnic identity because ethnic identity has been positively associated with self-esteem in samples that include Latino youth (Bracey, Bámaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007) and negatively associated with internalizing (e.g., McHale et al., 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003) and externalizing symptoms among African American youth (e.g., McMahan & Watts, 2002). The most common dimension of ethnic identity to be associated with positive outcomes has been private regard—or feeling positively about one's ethnic identity (Neblett et al., 2012). This dimension has been linked to a host of positive outcomes in studies conducted with Latino samples (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Romero & Roberts, 2003). These patterns underscore the importance of further investigating ethnic identity as a critical construct for the well-being of racially and ethnically diverse youth, including Latinos, and of better understanding the correlates and predictors of ethnic identity private regard.

Additionally, ethnic identity private regard, or *feeling good* about one's ethnic group, has been shown to be high among African American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Chinese

American early adolescents, stable over the course of middle school, and consistently associated with positive outcomes (see Hughes et al., 2011, for reviews). Despite of the importance of this dimension of ethnic identity for racially and ethnically diverse youth, no studies have explored the relation between looking and feeling typical as it relates to one's ethnic private regard, or feeling positively about one's ethnic group.

Physical Appearance and Ethnic Identity

There are both conceptual and empirical reasons for an increased sensitivity to physical appearance when studying the way that individuals experience their ethnic identity. McCombs and Gay (1988) found that after viewing pictures, even with IQs reported equal, teachers had lower expectations for Latino-appearing children compared with White, non-Latino children. Spencer (2005) found that darker skin students reported greater negative teacher attitudes toward them. Among Mexican-origin youth, an increased sensitivity to the role that physical appearance plays in shaping identity development is important given the great variation of skin color and ethnic appearance that exists within this group (Bertoni et al., 2003).

Ethnic identity has been shown to play a moderating role in the association between physical appearance and well-being (in a study of Puerto Rican women using a skin tone measure; see López, 2008). Telzer and Vazquez-Garcia (2009) found that a strong sense of ethnic identity buffered against negative self-perceptions associated with having darker skin among Latina college students. Gonzales-Backen and Umaña-Taylor (2011) considered *European* and *Latino* appearance (via facial appearance; coded via the use of yearbook photos), in addition to skin tone, and found a positive relation between self-reported ethnic identity affirmation and familial ethnic socialization among youth rated as having a more Latino appearance. Our study explores the moderating role that skin tone and European and Latino appearance may have in the association between ethnic typicality (i.e., feeling like a typical member of one's ethnic group) and ethnic identity private regard (i.e., how positively one feels about one's ethnic identity). Our study is the first to combine in-person observer ratings of multiple dimensions of youths' physical appearance (i.e.,

skin tone, European, and Latino appearance) with participant-rated ethnic typicality and ethnic identity private regard.

Feeling Typical and Looking Typical

Ashmore and colleagues' (2004) work on collective identities highlighted the importance of exploring group identity typicality or "a person's subjective assessment of the degree to which he or she is a prototypical member of the group" (p. 83). They state that "measuring the goodness of fit of a person to a particular category [is] important . . . because different levels of perceived prototypicality have been linked to distinct identity-relevant behaviors" (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 85). Despite this call to measure how typical one sees oneself as a member of a group, scholars have not explored *ethnic typicality* as a dimension of ethnic identity. This omission stands in sharp contrast to research on gender identity, which has emphasized the dimension of gender typicality (Egan & Perry, 2001). Given variation in individuals' orientation toward their ethnic group identity, and the fact that individuals have a choice of how much they choose to align themselves with what they perceive to be "typical" of their group, there are compelling reasons to explore ethnic typicality as a dimension of ethnic identity. Additionally, there are multiple factors that may influence the perception of ethnicity (by self and others), including one's immigrant and documentation status, language ability, generational status, and levels of acculturation, among others (e.g., Halim et al., 2013). However, it is unclear from the extant research whether feeling typical because of phenotype plays more or less of a role than feeling typical because of other factors (e.g., language use, cultural practices, etc.). Despite these limitations in the literature, it is plausible that looking like a typical member of one's ethnic group may be associated with how typical one feels because appearance is an important marker and may play a prominent role in others' perceptions (and perhaps one's own) of group membership. Existing research, however, has not explored the dialectic relation between feeling typical and looking typical as a critical process of reflection related to group membership. Although some attention has been paid to within-group variation in physical appearance among Latinos, this research does not explore

the relation between feeling typical and looking typical as predictors of ethnic identity. Given the vast heterogeneity among Mexican-origin youth, there is likely variation in the extent to which individuals feel typical and look typical. We explore the role of these important dimensions of within-group variability in Mexican-origin youths' ethnic identity.

Finally, it is important to explore these associations because empirical and theoretical work on rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) suggests that when individuals belonging to an ethnic or racial group perceive greater discrimination or devaluation (e.g., because of physical traits or appearance) resulting from their group membership, they are more likely to identify strongly with that group. Scholars have reported evidence of this phenomenon among Latinos in the United States (Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Cronin et al., 2012), as well as other ethnic or racial groups. From this perspective, it is plausible that Mexican-origin youth who appear to be more like typical members of their ethnic group, and who consequently may be more vulnerable to discrimination and devaluation directed toward Mexicans, may as a result be more likely to identify strongly with being Mexican. Furthermore, research has shown that perceiving rejection has a negative effect on psychological well-being, but that this association is buffered by a strong ethnic identification (Wiley et al., 2013), which has been shown to have a positive effect on well-being (Armenta & Hunt, 2009; Spencer-Rodgers & Collins, 2006). Thus, it is plausible that looking and feeling more typical as a member of one's ethnic group is associated with feeling more positively about one's ethnic group.

The Current Study

The present study explores the relation between feeling and looking like a typical member of one's ethnic group among a sample of Mexican-origin youth. Given heterogeneity in physical appearance among Mexican-origin youth, there is likely variation in the extent to which individuals feel and look typical, and consequently, how this process relates to ethnic identity. We draw on a collective identity perspective (Ashmore et al., 2004), and gender typicality research (Egan & Perry, 2001), to

introduce a new dimension of ethnic identity—*ethnic typicality*. We combine participant-rated data on ethnic identity private regard, or how positively one feels about one's ethnic group identity, and ethnic typicality, or how typical one feels as a member of one's ethnic group, with observer-rated data on Mexican-origin early adolescents' physical appearance (i.e., skin tone, Latino and European appearance).

It is important to note that Latinos are a pan-ethnic group comprised of several different nationalities, each with their own distinct culture, and each with a history of ethnic mixing that typically includes European, Asian, African, and various indigenous tribes across the Americas. There is, however, variation in the degree to which these different groups are represented among Latinos of different nationalities. Studies exploring genetic distribution of ancestral populations have shown that Latinos in the U.S. southwest, a region characterized by the presence of Mexican-origin Latinos, tend to have a dihybrid genetic structure marked by European and Native American influences (Bertoni et al., 2003). It may also be important to consider both, the role of European and "minority" appearance in terms of discrimination because the former appearance could be less likely to elicit racial or ethnic discrimination compared with the latter. Thus, in the present study, we obtained observer ratings of youths' European and Latino appearance as well as skin color.

We explored the following research questions: (a) What is the association between ethnic typicality, physical appearance ratings (skin color, Latino, and European appearance) and private regard in a sample of Mexican-origin youth? (b) Is the association between ethnic typicality (i.e., feeling typical) and ethnic identity private regard moderated by physical appearance ratings (i.e., looking typical)? We hypothesized that there will be a positive association between ethnic typicality and private regard because there are conceptual reasons to believe that one's perception of how good of a fit one is as a member of one's ethnic group will be reflected in how positive one feels about one's ethnic identity. Drawing on rejection-identification theory, we hypothesized that looking Latino will be positively associated with ethnic typicality and private regard; we expected that the association between ethnic

typicality and private regard would be moderated by Latino appearance ratings, such that the association would be stronger for adolescents who appear more typically Latino because these individuals may be more vulnerable to discrimination and devaluation in the larger society, and from a rejection-identification perspective, these experiences lead to a stronger sense of ethnic group membership.

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited to participate in a larger study exploring gender and ethnic identity development during early adolescence (Kornienko & Santos, 2014; Kornienko, Santos, & Updegraff, in press; Santos & Menjívar, 2013; Santos, Menjívar, & Godfrey, 2013). This larger study is being conducted at a middle school located in a southwestern metropolitan city. Youth of Mexican descent make up the largest group at the school: 58.6% of students surveyed at the school marked "Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano" to the question of "Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?"; 31.9% responded that they were not of "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin"; 1.5% responded that they were of "Puerto Rican" origin; and 8% responded that they were of "another Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin group." We asked subject's race separately, and 17.7% reported being European American, 17.5% reported being African American, 9.8% Native American, 3.1% Asian American, and 52% reported being of "another race." Virtually all of participants who reported being of another race wrote in Latino or Mexican as their race. Thus, most students at the school wrote in Latino when this option was not provided for the race question, suggesting that being Latino or Mexican may be a more proximal identity for many regardless of race. Indeed, during survey administration many students expressed frustration with the separation of race or ethnicity. For the present analysis, we focused on 8th grade students for whom data on observer-rated physical appearance were available. We also focused on students who identified as being of Mexican-origin because of our interest in exploring variation within this particular group. The final sample for the present study consisted of 138,

8th grade adolescents (46.4% boys and 53.6% girls) of Mexican origin.

Procedure

During recruitment, parents and students were informed about the aims of the study and had the option to opt out of participating. Consent forms were provided in both English and Spanish to accommodate Spanish-speaking parents; students completed assent forms before the survey. Surveys were administered during two social studies class periods (~90 min) by two to four trained research assistants. One assistant read the survey aloud while the other assistants circulated throughout the classroom to answer students' questions. All participants were fluent in English, and thus, completed the survey in English. After completion of the survey, each student received a rubber bracelet with the project's name embossed on it.

Data collection for the observational coding occurred during survey administration. While students filled out the survey, coders walked around the room and coded students' skin color and appearance. Coders were given no instructions as to how to rate participants other than to code consistent with what the descriptors meant to them (see [Gonzales-Backen & Umaña-Taylor, 2011](#)). All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

Measures

Ethnic identity. Ethnic identity was measured using the private regard subscale of the *Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen* (MIBI-T; Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyễn, 2008). This subscale has been shown to be reliable and valid in prior studies of Latino youth ([Hughes, Way, & Rivas-Drake, 2011](#)). The private regard subscale consists of three items that assess the extent to which participants feel positively toward their ethnic group membership. A higher score indicates more positive feelings about one's ethnic identity. Response options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*; $M = 4.11$, $SD = .80$. Cronbach's α was .88.

Ethnic typicality. We adapted [Egan and Perry's \(2001\)](#) measure of gender typicality, which consists of six items, to assess how typical adolescents felt as a member of their ethnic group. Example items include: "I feel like I am just like

all others of my ethnic group" and "I feel that I am a good example of a person who belongs to my ethnic group." In our adapted version, response options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using varimax rotation of the six adapted items. Results revealed a clear single factor solution with five of the six items loading at .60 or above; one reverse coded item did not load very high (.32), and led to a reduction in the internal consistency of the scale. Thus, we excluded this item and followed up with a confirmatory factor analysis of the remaining five items, which confirmed the one factor solution. The five items were averaged to create a score measuring ethnic typicality, with a Cronbach's α of .71. Higher scores indicate higher levels of ethnic typicality.

Physical appearance. Coding of physical appearance was conducted in-person during survey administration. Each participant was rated by four coders in terms of ethnic appearance and skin color. The coding of skin color was done using a table of color blots with nine shades of skin color with end points (1) *very light* to (9) *very dark*. This method of coding skin color has been utilized with participants' reports of their own skin color ([Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001](#)), and coders' ratings of participants' skin color using yearbook photos ([Gonzales-Backen & Umaña-Taylor, 2011](#)). Averaged skin color ratings across coders ranged from 1.50 to 8.75 ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.43$). Ethnic appearance was assessed using responses to questions stating, "This person looks . . ." followed by two different Likert-type scale with end points of (1) *not at all Latino/a* to (9) *very Latino/a* and (1) *not at all European* to (9) *very European*. Collapsed across coders, Latino and European appearance ratings ranged from 1 to 8.25 ($M = 5.83$, $SD = 1.60$) for Latino appearance, and 1 to 8.33 ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.42$) for European appearance. To control for potential ethnic and gender differences in the coding of ethnic appearance, coders were of diverse gender and ethnic backgrounds. There were a total of seven coders, comprised of four males (three European Americans and one Latino) and three females (one Latina and two European Americans). Given the larger number of coders of European American background, participants were coded by European American coders more often than Latino coders; however, each participant was

coded by a total of four coders and a combination consisting of at least one male and one female, and one European American and one Latino/a coder. Coders were undergraduate students of a large research university in the U.S. southwest, located in a region composed of a large Latino population (30% at the county-level), primarily of Mexican origin. We explored whether in-group coders (Latino coders) differed from out-group coders (non-Latino coders) in their coding of physical appearance. No significant differences were detected between in-group ($M = 5$, $SD = 1.89$) and out-group coders' ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.18$) ratings of participants' skin color, $t(373) = 1.04$, $p = .29$; European appearance (in-group coders, $M = 2.62$, $SD = 2.42$; outgroup coders $M = 2.93$, $SD = 2.57$), $t(351) = -1.59$, $p = .11$. There was, however, a significant difference between in-group and out-group coders' ratings of Latino appearance, such that in-group coders averaged significantly higher ratings of Latino appearance ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 2.82$) compared with out-group coders ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 2.62$), $t(316) = 3.46$; $p = .00$. Finally, no gender differences were found between coders with regard to how they rated participants' skin color (male coders $M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.02$; female coders $M = 5.22$, $SD = 2.19$; $t(750) = 0.20$; $p = .84$), and Latino appearance (male coders $M = 4.88$, $SD = 2.65$; female coders $M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.54$; $t(717) = -0.06$; $p = .95$). There was, however, a significant gender difference in coders coding of European appearance, such that female coders averaged significantly higher ratings of European appearance ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 2.82$) compared with male coders ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 2.35$), $t(751) = 2.88$; $p = .00$. Given that coding reliability should be conducted at the level of precision that one reports the data (Suen, Ary, & Covalt, 1990), and because in our study interval scale data was simultaneously coded by four coders, average scores of the four coders' ratings were calculated for *skin color* and *Latino* and *European appearance* for each participant. Reliability estimates of coding were high based on α s (ICC-average) of .89, .79, and .70, respectively.

Control variables. Drawing on previous research that has shown that ethnic identity measures may vary according to sex (Dion & Dion, 2004), generational status (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001), and language use (Phinney, Ro-

mero, Nava, & Huang, 2001), we controlled for sex, generational status, and language use. Generational status was assessed using a composite variable ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.05$) based on nativity of participants and family members, ranging from (1) *first generation (child and parents born abroad)*, 16.7%, (2) *second generation (both parents born abroad, child born in United States)*, 41.3%, (3) *second generation (one parent born abroad, other parent and child born in United States)*, 15.9%, (4) *third generation (child and parents both U.S. born)*, 26.1%. In terms of language spoken at home by the adolescent, 23.9% report speaking English only, 12.3% report speaking Spanish only, and 63.8% report speaking both English and Spanish at home.

Results

Preliminary analyses explored the distributions of and correlations among study variables. All variables were normally distributed. Results from a t test revealed that males were more likely than females to be coded as having darker skin, $t(125) = 2.12$, $p = .036$, Latino appearance, $t(125) = 2.26$, $p = .026$, and less likely than females to be coded as having a more European appearance, $t(125) = -2.39$, $p = .018$. Results from an analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there were significant differences in Latino appearance among youth of diverse language ability, $F(2, 135) = 6.67$, $p = .002$. Post hoc analysis using Bonferroni correction revealed that youth who reported speaking English-only were less likely to be rated as having a more Latino appearance than youth who reported speaking English and Spanish, or Spanish-only at home. We conducted Pearson bivariate correlations to explore the association between all continuous study variables. We found that skin darkness was positively associated with Latino and negatively associated with European appearance. Latino appearance was positively associated with ethnic typicality in this sample of Mexican-origin youth. Ethnic typicality was positively associated with private regard. Generational status was negatively associated with Latino appearance and positively associated with European appearance (see Table 1).

Tests of hypotheses were conducted using hierarchical regression analyses. Each set of

Table 1
Correlations, Means, and SDs of Study Variables (N = 138)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | M | SD |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|------|--------|--------|------|-------|----|------|------|
| 1. Sex ^a | — | | | | | | | | | | .46 | .50 |
| 2. Generational status ^b | -.04 | — | | | | | | | | | 2.49 | 1.05 |
| 3. English only ^c | .09 | .65** | — | | | | | | | | .24 | .43 |
| 4. Spanish only ^d | .09 | -.26** | -.21* | — | | | | | | | .12 | .33 |
| 5. English and Spanish ^e | -.15 | -.39** | -.74** | -.50** | — | | | | | | .64 | .48 |
| 6. Skin color | .19* | -.03 | -.12 | .02 | .09 | — | | | | | 5.04 | 1.43 |
| 7. Latino appearance | .20* | -.30** | -.31** | .11 | .20* | .36** | — | | | | 5.83 | 1.60 |
| 8. European appearance | -.21* | .17* | .19* | .00 | -.16 | -.76** | -.59** | — | | | 2.52 | 1.42 |
| 9. Typicality | -.09 | -.07 | -.14 | .05 | .09 | -.02 | .20* | -.07 | — | | 3.21 | .70 |
| 10. Private regard | -.15 | -.16 | -.08 | .03 | .05 | -.16 | .05 | .05 | .44** | — | 4.11 | .80 |

^a 0 = female, 1 = male. ^b Ranges from (1) first generation (child and parents are born abroad) to (4) third generation (child and parents are both U.S. born). ^c 0 = other language use at home, 1 = English only. ^d 0 = other language use at home, 1 = Spanish only. ^e 0 = other language use at home, 1 = English and Spanish.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

analyses controlled for sex, generational status, and language, and these variables were introduced in Step 1 of the regression model. Ethnic typicality and physical appearance scores were entered in Step 2 to examine the effects of each of these variables on private regard. In Step 3, we entered an interaction term between ethnic typicality and physical appearance (see Tables 2-4). Predictors were centered before creating the interaction terms; when significant, these interactions were graphed at 1 SD above and below the mean of the moderator to indicate high and low values.

Multiple regression analysis revealed that, when accounting for sex, generational status, and language use, the association between ethnic typicality and private regard was not significant. Similarly, none of the physical appearance ratings (i.e., skin tone, Latino, and

European appearance) were significantly associated with private regard; however, Latino appearance significantly moderated the association between ethnic typicality and private ethnic regard (see Figure 1). The simple slopes tests revealed that the regression slopes were significantly different from zero at high levels of Latino appearance (i.e., 1 SD above mean; $t(119) = 3.14, p < .01$), and nonsignificant at low levels of Latino appearance (i.e., 1 SD below mean; $t(119) = 0.13, p = ns$). These results suggest that there is a significant association between ethnic typicality (i.e., feeling typical of one's ethnic identity) and private regard (i.e., feeling positively about one's ethnic identity) among participants rated as having a stronger Latino appearance, but this relation was nonsignificant among participants rated as looking less Latino.

Table 2
Ethnic Typicality and Latino Appearance Predicting Private Regard (N = 138)

| | β | R^2 | R^2 change | F change | df |
|--|---------|-------|--------------|----------|-----|
| Step 1: Sex ^a | -.11 | .03 | .03 | .80 | 120 |
| Generational status ^b | -.11 | | | | |
| English and Spanish ^c | -.10 | | | | |
| Spanish only ^d | -.10 | | | | |
| Step 2: Typicality | .12 | .05 | .03 | 1.64 | 118 |
| Latino appearance | -.02 | | | | |
| Step 3: Typicality × Latino appearance | .23* | .10* | .05* | 6.41* | 117 |

^a 0 = female, 1 = male. ^b Ranges from (1) first generation (child and parents are born abroad) to (4) third generation (child and parents are both U.S. born). ^c 0 = English only, 1 = English and Spanish. ^d 0 = English only, 1 = Spanish only.
* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Ethnic Typicality and European Appearance Predicting Private Regard
 (N = 138)

| | β | R^2 | R^2 change | F change | df |
|---|---------|-------|--------------|----------|-----|
| Step 1: Sex ^a | -.11 | .03 | .03 | .80 | 120 |
| Generational status ^b | -.11 | | | | |
| English and Spanish ^c | -.10 | | | | |
| Spanish only ^d | -.10 | | | | |
| Step 2: Typicality | .11 | .05 | .03 | 1.64 | 118 |
| European appearance | -.02 | | | | |
| Step 3: Typicality \times European appearance | -.09 | .06 | .01 | .79 | 117 |

^a 0 = female, 1 = male. ^b Ranges from (1) first generation (child and parents are born abroad) to (4) third generation (child and parents are both U.S. born). ^c 0 = English only, 1 = English and Spanish. ^d 0 = English only, 1 = Spanish only.

Discussion

Little attention has been paid to the contributions of physical appearance to one's ethnic identity, yet variation in physical appearance represents an important dimension of within-group variability, particularly among a heterogeneous group such as Mexican Americans. Adopting a collective identity perspective (Ashmore et al., 2004), our study builds on research conducted by gender identity scholars to examine *ethnic typicality*. The study explores the association between physical appearance (as coded by observers) and self-perceived ethnic typicality and private ethnic regard. It is important to note that average ratings of ethnic private regard were high in this sample indicating that participants felt, on average, positive about their ethnic group membership. Such positive sense of group membership is consistent with other studies conducted with ethnically diverse early adolescents, which include samples of Latino participants (e.g., Hughes, Way, & Rivas-

Drake, 2011). Furthermore, exploring the correlates of having a positive sense of ethnic group membership (i.e., a positive private regard) is important since research has shown that this dimension of ethnic identity is associated with a number of indicators of well-being among Latinos (Fulgini, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Romero & Roberts, 2003).

In terms of appearance ratings as coded by observers, males were more likely than females to be rated as having darker skin, a stronger Latino appearance, and a weaker European appearance, suggesting a possible observer bias to see Latino males as darker and more Latino-appearing, compared with their female counterparts. Although the study did not explore why this may have happened, it is plausible that there was a conflation between sex stereotypes, skin color, ethnic appearance, and ethnicity. Research has shown, for example, that darker skin males are more likely to be portrayed as violent or threatening in the media

Table 4
Ethnic Typicality and Skin Color Predicting Private Regard (N = 138)

| | β | R^2 | R^2 change | F change | df |
|--|---------|-------|--------------|----------|-----|
| Step 1: Sex ^a | -.11 | .03 | .03 | .80 | 120 |
| Generational status ^b | -.11 | | | | |
| English and Spanish ^c | -.10 | | | | |
| Spanish only ^d | -.10 | | | | |
| Step 2: Typicality | .12 | .06 | .03 | 2.07 | 118 |
| Skin color | .07 | | | | |
| Step 3: Typicality \times skin color | .05 | .06 | .00 | .29 | 117 |

^a 0 = female, 1 = male. ^b Ranges from (1) first generation (child and parents are born abroad) to (4) third generation (child and parents are both U.S. born). ^c 0 = English only, 1 = English and Spanish. ^d 0 = English only, 1 = Spanish only.

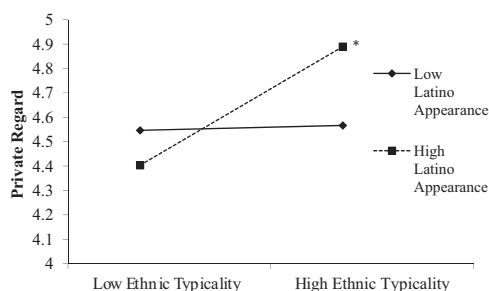


Figure 1. Ethnic typicality interacting with Latino appearance as a predictor of private regard.

(Hall, 1995). A sex-specific stereotype of males concerns being viewed as more violent than females; therefore, it is plausible that Latino males were coded as darker because there may have been some degree of conflation by coders between stereotypes about males in general, and having darker skin or Latino appearance. Additionally, generational status and speaking English-only was negatively associated with Latino appearance and positively associated with European appearance. It is plausible that coders used more than just physical appearance to code for Latino and European appearance; however, youth reported language spoken at home and generational status, both of which are not easily observable variables. It is, however, plausible that coders observed other aspects (e.g., presence of Americanized clothing, accent in speech if student spoke during coding) to make their determination of appearance. Skin color was also positively correlated with Latino appearance, however, this association was weak-to-moderate, suggesting that although skin color may play a role in how Latino appearance was coded, these two ratings did not correlate strongly.

Additionally, participant-rated ethnic typicality was not correlated with observer-rated skin color or European appearance, but it was correlated with Latino appearance. Although significant, this association was weak, which could be because of the weak conceptual link between these two assessments—observers were rating physical appearance primarily, while participants could consider a wider range of dimensions in relation to feeling typical as a member of their ethnic group. For example, in completing the typicality scale, participants may consider immigrant status, language skills (being fluent in Spanish or not) in terms of how typical they see themselves relative

to others of their group. Coders relied primarily on physical information, even if other cues (clothing, speech) may have been accessible to them on occasion.

It is also important to note that although none of the appearance ratings were directly associated with ethnic private regard, ethnic typicality was positively associated with ethnic private regard. That is, feeling typical was positively associated with feeling positive about being a member of the ethnic group. This finding underscores the importance of exploring ethnic typicality as a key dimension of ethnic identity. The association between ethnic private regard and typicality was moderate, suggesting that these dimensions are correlated, but conceptually distinct. These findings support the notion that ethnic identity is multidimensional, even though a significant focus of the literature has been on measuring ethnic identity as a unidimensional construct (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004, for critiques), and it adds to this literature by introducing and emphasizing the unique contribution of ethnic typicality to research on ethnic identity.

Of interest to the authors, when accounting for control variables (sex, language use, and generational status), the association between ethnic typicality and private regard became nonsignificant. Latino appearance, however, significantly moderated this association, such that there was a significant association between ethnic typicality and private regard among participants rated as having a stronger Latino appearance; this relation was nonsignificant among participants rated as looking less Latino. If one appears to have a stronger Latino appearance, others are more likely to categorize the individual as Latino. As a result of being more readily identified as Latino by others, one's self-concept may become more closely connected to a sense of feeling typical because others' perceptions of oneself may be more tied to one's ethnic group membership.¹ Coupled with *feeling typical*, *looking typical* may help the individual navigate internally a strong external emphasis on one's ethnic group membership, and this may result in more positive feelings toward one's ethnic group membership. Feeling typical as well as

¹ It is important to note that participants could have identified as Chicano/Mexican-American/Mexican-origin rather than as Latinos, per se. Coders, on the other hand, were specifically instructed to code for "Latino" appearance.

looking typical may help the adolescent arrive at an integrated sense of self, which is associated with a positive sense of identity (Phinney, 1992). These findings appear consistent with research showing that when individuals' identities are accurately classified (via experimental assignment to conditions where identities are either classified accurately or not), group loyalty is stronger (see Barreto & Ellemers, 2002). It may be that individuals whose identity is accurately classified by outside observers (e.g., based on physical characteristics), develop a stronger sense of feeling positively about their group membership because of the consistency between how they identify themselves and how others typically identify them.

Furthermore, from a rejection-identification perspective, individuals who are perceived as having a more Latino appearance by others may be more vulnerable to discrimination and devaluation and these experiences may lead to a stronger sense of group membership. In the state where the study took place, ethnic appearance has been at the forefront of state-level legislation regarding immigration. Much of the argument challenging these state-level attempts to regulate immigration have centered on the fact that these laws may promote racial profiling (Ortega Melendres et al., 2013). Mexican-origin youth and families have been the focus of these debates, making the rejection-identification hypothesis a fitting perspective in describing why appearing and feeling more typically Latino within a context of discrimination and devaluation may be an important predictor of a stronger, more positive ethnic identification. Finally, the association between typicality and private regard was not significant among adolescents who were rated as having a less Latino appearance. For youth who were rated as having a weaker Latino appearance, feeling typical may be less important than other aspects of the self in contributing to a positive sense of ethnic identity.

Limitations

Although the strengths of coding appearance in the study of ethnic identity have been noted, our approach has limitations. One limitation concerns the fact that the coding took place while students completed a survey. Manner of speech, demeanor, style of walk in the context of social interactions were not the focus of

coding. At the same time, we did detect a negative association between Latino appearance and speaking English only, as well as a positive association between speaking English and European appearance coder ratings. This suggests that in the present study coders may have used other cues and aspects of the self in their coding of physical appearance. Future studies may want to either make a broader definition of appearance an explicit part of its coding (and the training of coders), or to isolate these aspects further. Concerning the latter, future studies may also want to explore typical appearance in the context of interactions in experimental and nonexperimental settings. Furthermore, given the aforementioned dihybrid genetic structure marked by European and Native American influences among Mexican-origin individuals in the U.S. southwest (Bertoni et al., 2003), future studies with this population may want to consider coding each of these dimensions of appearance separately (e.g., by also coding Native American appearance, in addition to European appearance, as we did), and in conjunction (e.g., by coding for *mestizo* appearance). Additionally, there were significant gender differences among coders in how they coded European appearance, and there were significant differences among in-group (Latinos) versus out-group (non-Latino) coders in terms of how they coded Latino appearance. Future studies may benefit from restricting coders to be in-group (e.g., all Latino vs. non-Latino), screening potential differences among coders before data collection, and/or providing training with detailed directions to coders on how to code participants' appearance.

Another limitation concerns the fact that we did not collect individuals' own rating of their appearance. Given possible discrepancies between observer- and self-ratings of how typical one looks as a member of one's ethnic group, future research may also want to explore self-ratings of appearance in relation to ethnic identity. Although adapting a measure of gender typicality serves as a jumping off point for thinking about ethnic typicality, there is considerable room for scale development in terms of measuring ethnic typicality. Additionally, an important direction for future research is to explore the relation between feeling and looking typical as predictors of other ethnic identity subscales (e.g., ethnic centrality). We focused

on private regard in particular, given its prominence in the literature and the role it has shown to play in promoting the well-being of Latinos; however, other dimensions of ethnic identity are also important to explore so that we can further understand the association between looking typical, feeling typical and ethnic identity.

Findings of this study are specific to Mexican-origin youth sampled at a public middle school located in a southwestern U.S. city where Mexican-origin youth constitute the dominant group at the school. Our findings may not generalize to youth in other settings, and future research may want to explore how findings may differ in a context where Mexican-origin youth are a minority group. Additionally, an exploration of the dialectic between feeling and looking typical as it relates to the intersections of multiple social identities is an important area for future exploration. For example, we found that Mexican-origin males were coded as having darker skin and a stronger Latino appearance compared to females suggesting possible interactions between ethnic identity, sex, and physical appearance. Issues that are commonly associated with self-report data (e.g., social desirability) need to be considered as possible limitations of the findings presented in this study. The use of mixed-methods (e.g., a combination of qualitative and quantitative strategies), may further elucidate the mechanisms behind the relation between feeling typical, looking typical, and ethnic identity. Finally, the correlational nature of this data prevents us from making causal claims. Despite these limitations, we believe that our study represents a novel direction for ethnic identity research by introducing the idea of ethnic typicality as an important dimension of ethnic identity and by exploring the dialectic between feeling and looking typical as it relates to ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Mexican-origin youth comprise a large and rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population, and are a heterogeneous group with substantial variation in background, physical characteristics, and cultural involvement in their ethnic identification. Research on ethnic minority youth development generally has paid more attention to between-group differences and less attention to *within-group* variation. This study

takes a step in documenting how within-group variation in Mexican-origin youths' physical appearance interacted with their self-perceptions of ethnic typicality to predict ethnic identity. In future work, it will be important to further explore how variations in Mexican-origin youths' physical characteristics interact with both, how they perceive themselves, and how others perceive them, in efforts to better understand the development and well-being of this important segment of the U.S. population.

Abstracto

Este estudio explora lo dialectico entre sentirse como y verse como un típico miembro del grupo étnico de uno con relación a la identidad étnica. El estudio combina la consideración privada sobre identidad étnica calificada por participantes con datos sobre la apariencia física de jóvenes de origen Mexicano en una muestra de 138 adolescentes de origen Mexicano calificados por observadores. La relación positiva entre tipicidad étnica percibida y la consideración privada sobre la identidad étnica fue moderada por apariencia física de tal forma que hubo una asociación positiva más fuerte en participantes que fueron calificados como teniendo una apariencia mas Latino, mientras que la asociación no fue significativa para participantes que fueron calificados como teniendo una apariencia menos Latino. Las implicaciones de estos hallazgos para el estudio de la identidad étnica son discutidas.

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