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Racial-ethnic and National Identification among Children in Middle Childhood:  
What does it mean to be American?

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Education

by

Victoria Calip Rodriguez

2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Racial-ethnic and National Identification among Children in Middle Childhood:  
What does it mean to be American?

by

Victoria Calip Rodriguez

Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Rashmita S. Mistry, Chair

This mixed methods study explores children's emerging sense of American identity during middle childhood. Conducted in a school setting which is committed to celebrating diversity across multiple domains, researchers investigated the extent to which children in middle childhood identify as American, and explored their beliefs and attitudes about Americans. Open-ended responses indicated that children frequently associated Americans with identifiable symbols and emblems, nationality, and particular racial and ethnic groups. In addition, children from diverse socioeconomic and racial and ethnic backgrounds endorsed positive beliefs about Americans. Quantitative analysis revealed that the ways in which children self-identify as American, differs as a function of generational status, indicating that notions of what it means to be American may be different for children from immigrant families, who tend to explicitly separate notions of racial and ethnic identity from their national American identity. Implications and suggestions for future research on American identity are discussed.

The thesis of Victoria Calip Rodriguez is approved.

Sandra Graham

Carola Suarez-Orozco

Rashmita S. Mistry, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my master's thesis to my parents, Ray and Cheryl Rodriguez, and my grandparents, William and Leonila Calip, and Francisco and Rosalia Rodriguez, for their unconditional love and support.

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## Racial-ethnic and National Identification among Children in Middle Childhood: What does it mean to be American?

As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, the cultural practices and values among different racial, ethnic and immigrant groups continue to influence mainstream ideas about what it means to be American (Rodriguez et al., 2010). Children in our nation's schools mirror the increasingly diverse racial and ethnic composition of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the race/ethnic breakdown of elementary school-aged children is as follows: European American/White (55.8%), African American/Black (16.2%), Hispanic/Latino (22.1%), American Indian/ Alaska Native (1.4%) and Asian/ Pacific Islander (4.5%). In addition, more and more school-aged children in America are either foreign-born themselves or have at least one is foreign-born (i.e., immigrant families); representing the fastest-growing population of youth in the U.S. (Mather, 2009). A recent analysis by the Center for Immigration Studies found that children from immigrant households represent over 20% of the total school-age population (Camarota, 2012). This number is projected to grow such that by 2020, close to 30% of students in American schools will be from immigrant families.

Given the changing demographics of students within our nation's schools and previous research associating identity development with a range of social and academic outcomes for youth (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman & Caldwell, 2012; Phinney, 1995), there is a need to further investigate what it means to be American among children in middle childhood. This can be a very complex process as more and more American children hold multiple identities, particularly among those from immigrant households. These children are culturally American in that they

live and go to school in the U.S., but this emerging sense of American identity is also informed by their familial and cultural heritage (i.e. generational status and racial-ethnic background).

While recent studies have shed light on American identity among adolescents, young adults and European American children (Brown, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2012), no studies have explored what it means to be American among children in middle childhood who come from diverse native and immigrant, racial and ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The current mixed methods study sought to extend understandings about American identity by exploring three research questions:

- 1) To what extent do children from diverse racial, ethnic and immigrant backgrounds use the term “American” to describe themselves?
- 2) What are the meanings that children ascribe to the term “American?”
- 3) What are children’s attitudes towards Americans?

### **American Identity in Middle Childhood**

Middle childhood (i.e., between the ages of 6 and 12; Eccles, 1999) is an optimal time to examine the formation and establishment of an American identity. While research on national identity development shows that children are able to categorize themselves according to nationality by about 5 years old, middle childhood marks a time when nationality becomes much more important to children (Barrett, Lyons & del Valle, 2004). During middle childhood, children develop a preference for their national in-group, often associating the national in-group with positive stereotypes (Barrett, et al., 2004). In addition, the extent to which children identify with their national in-group often increases during this period (Barrett, et al., 2004).

### **What it Means to be American: Labels, Meanings, and Attitudes**

**Labels as Markers of Self-Identification.** Extant research on racial, ethnic, and national identity shows that children develop an understanding of labels in early childhood and begin to attach nuanced meanings to those labels as they move from middle childhood into adolescence and adulthood. Self-identification through the use of labels is indicative of one's understandings of the social groups to which they belong, and is an important aspect of social identity development among children and youth (Kiang, 2008; Kiang, Perreira, & Fuligni, 2011). These nationality, racial and ethnic labels convey specific meanings regarding one's country of birth, family heritage, cultural background and values; allowing individuals to characterize their own identities within society (Kiang et al., 2011). In addition, research on ethnic self-identification has also shown that the ways in which individuals self-identify with an ethnic group (i.e. through the use of particular label types) is associated with various psychological and social outcomes (Kiang, 2008; Phinney, 2003; Umana-Taylor, 2004).

Drawing on previous research on ethnic identification among adults and adolescents (Kiang, 2008; Kiang et al., 2011), the three main types of labels that individuals tend to use to self-identify with particular ethnic groups are: (1) heritage national labels (e.g. Chinese, Mexican), (2) heritage national-American labels (e.g. Chinese American, Mexican American), and (3) panethnic-American labels (e.g. Asian American, Latino American, African American). A heritage national label (e.g. Chinese, Mexican) is used to identify one's ethnic heritage by acknowledging that one's family background is linked to a particular country of origin (Kiang, 2008). A heritage national-American label (e.g. Chinese American, Mexican American) acknowledges connections to a particular country of origin, while also identifying with the broader national-American identity. In addition, a panethnic-American label (e.g. Asian

American, Latino American, African American) is a means of self-identifying with the culture of the broader panethnic group while also recognizing ties to a national-American identity.

A study by Kiang (2008) on adults from Chinese backgrounds found that, compared to foreign-born adults, those who were born in the U.S. were more likely to use the term American to describe themselves. In particular, foreign-born adults were more likely to use a heritage national label (e.g. Chinese), whereas those born in the U.S. were more likely to use either a heritage national American (e.g. Chinese American) or a pan-ethnic American label (e.g., Asian American). Similarly, another study that assessed racial and ethnic label use among adolescents demonstrated that U.S.-born adolescents were more likely than foreign-born adolescents to use the term American to describe themselves (Kiang, et al., 2011). More specifically, second generation adolescents were more likely to use hyphenated American labels (e.g., African-American, Asian-American, Mexican-American), while recent immigrants were more likely to use ethnic heritage (e.g., Mexican, Chinese) or pan-ethnic (e.g., Asian, Latino) labels (Kiang et al., 2011).

**Meanings.** Research has also shown that the meanings that individuals associate with self-identification labels seem to be a particularly important aspect of children and youth identity development (Gillen-O'Neel, Mistry, Brown, & Rodriguez, *in preparation*; Kiang, et al., 2011). While self-identification labels may connote specific meanings in broader society, children in middle childhood are still developing nuanced understandings of what those labels mean (Ruble et al., 2004), and thus it is important to explicitly investigate children's beliefs about what it means to be a member of particular social groups.

With respect to research on what it means to be American, empirical evidence suggests some common themes. First, being American is strongly associated with being White (DeVos &

Banaji, 2005; Brown, 2011), speaking English, respecting federally recognized holidays in the U.S. and particular symbols or emblems (e.g., American flag, bald eagle, apple pie; Bush, 2005). Americans are also identified as those who love America and abide by its laws (Brown, 2011). There is also some indication that adolescents view ethnic diversity as an essential aspect of American identity (Rodriguez et al., 2010).

**Attitudes.** Previous research suggests that as social groups become more salient and children develop their own social identities, children begin to form distinct attitudes regarding social in-groups and out-groups (Pfeifer, Ruble, Bachman, Alvarez, Cameron & Fuligni, 2007). In general, children prefer their social in-group, and these attitudes become even more biased over time (Pfeifer et al., 2007).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that in-group favoritism, the tendency to express positive associations with one's in-group, is an attempt to maintain a positive self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This suggests that once the individual has self-identified as a member of a particular national group, that individual will be motivated to have positive attitudes about their national in-group. However, the research on national identity is less clear in that in-group favoritism is not always explained by the need to maintain a positive self-concept (Barrett, et al., 2004). That is, children do not necessarily have to identify with the national in-group to hold positive attitudes about their national in-group. In a study among British children, Bennett, Lyons, Sani, and Barrett (1998) found that children associated their national in-group with positive attributes even when they did not explicitly identify themselves as members of the national group.

Research in the U.S. has demonstrated that young adults tend to have positive attitudes toward their national in-group (DeVos & Banaji, 2005). Using a word-association task with

college students, DeVos and Banaji (2005) found that both racial and ethnic majority (i.e., European American) and minority students (e.g., African Americans and Asian Americans) held positive attitudes about the term “American.” As previous research suggests, these attitudes may help inform children’s emerging sense of a national identity (Barrett, et al., 2004).

**The Current Study.** Employing a pragmatic approach, the primary research questions regarding American identity in middle childhood determined the concurrent mixed methods design (Mertens, 2010), with equal priority given to both the quantitative and qualitative data collected (Creswell, 2009). The primary goal of the current study was to understand children’s conceptions of what it means to be American by addressing three research aims. The first aim of the current study was to examine the extent to which a sample of elementary school children from diverse racial, ethnic backgrounds and of varying generational status use the term American to describe themselves.. The second aim of the current study was to examine the meanings that children associate with being American and whether these conceptions vary by race, ethnicity, and generational status. In addition to examining children’s self-identification as American and exploring the meanings that they associate with the term “American,” the third aim of the current study was to investigate children’s attitudes about Americans.

## **Methods**

### **Research Site**

Data for the current study were collected at a private elementary school in Los Angeles County, California. The school is tuition-based, but scholarships are available on a sliding scale. This particular school was chosen as the primary research site because of its commitment to diversity. The school’s mission states that it strives to provide a learning environment that honors diversity across multiple domains including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (SES),



language, family structure, nationality, religion, learning style, and physical ability. The student population includes approximately 450 students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds: 32% of students are European-American, 23% Latino or Latin American, 10% African American, 10% Asian or Asian American, 4% American Indian, 18% Multiethnic, and 3% Other. In addition to being racially and ethnically diverse, the school is also diverse in terms of SES. Students' families have household incomes that range from less than \$10,000 to more than \$1 million per year, with a median household income between \$150,000 and \$199,999 annually. Parental education levels range from less than a high school degree to professional degrees. Over 75% of parents earned a college degree or higher (Mistry, White, Chow, Gillen-O'Neel & Brown, 2013). While the school is tuition-based, scholarships are available to students whose families demonstrate financial need.

## **Participants**

The sample for the current study included 102 students (51% female) and their parents. Signed parental consent and child verbal assent was obtained for all participants. Students were in the upper elementary school grades (4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup>) and ranged in age from 10.03–12.61 years ( $M = 11.45$ ,  $SD = .70$ ). The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was based on child responses to an open-ended interview question prompting children to describe their racial or ethnic group. Child reports indicated a racially and ethnically diverse sample: multi-panethnic (38.24%), European American (25.49%), Latino or Latin American (16.67%), Asian or Asian American (7.84%), African American (2.94%), and other (8.82%). Since only a small number of the participants themselves were foreign-born ( $n=3$ ), each participant's generational status was classified based on the parents' birthplace: 51 children had at least one parent who was foreign-born (first and second generation, including the 3 participants who were themselves foreign-

born), 38 children had two parents who were U.S.-born (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation), and 13 children did not have enough information to classify their generational status. It should be noted that in our study sample, children of foreign-born parent(s) were overwhelmingly second generation. Among children of foreign-born parents (first and second generation), 15.7% were European American, 13.7% were Asian or Asian American, 23.5% were Latino or Latin American, 9.8% were Middle Eastern, 33.3% were multi-panethnic (e.g., European American and Latino/Latin American, European American and Asian/Asian American) and 3.9% could not be categorized by race or ethnicity based on child reports (e.g. child self-identified as Jewish, Christian, Atheist, or American). Among children whose parents were U.S.-born (i.e., third and fourth generation), 34.2% were European American, 5.3% were African American, 7.9% were Latino or Latin American, 50% were multi-panethnic (e.g., European American and African American, European American and Latino/Latin American, European American and Asian/Asian American), and 2.6% could not be categorized by race or ethnicity based on child reports. Table 1 includes descriptives for the current study sample.

## **Procedures and Measures**

**Overview.** The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study examining elementary students' social group identification. Study measures required students to complete: (1) a survey covering topics such as self-concept and intergroup attitudes, and (2) an open-ended interview with questions covering topics such as racial and ethnic identity, family background, and friendships. All measures were administered to children individually in a private room at the school by the study authors. Children responded orally to all open-ended questions and completed survey items on their own, with the interviewer present. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by members of the research team. In all instances, children were asked

social group identification questions first and attitudinal questions in a latter portion of the interview protocol. The data for the current study come from the open-ended interview as well as from the survey, which assesses children's attitudes about Americans.

**Aim 1: To what extent do children self-identify as American?** In order to address the first research question which aimed to investigate the extent to which children used the term American to describe themselves, children were asked an open-ended interview question.

Researchers read the following prompt:

*Now, I'd like to know a little bit more about your ethnic group. In this country people come from a lot of different places and there are many different words to describe the different backgrounds, or ethnic groups that people come from. So, when I say ethnic group or race, do you know what I mean by that?*

If participants indicated that they did not understand, researchers clarified the term "ethnic group or race" with the following definition:

*An ethnic group is the name we sometimes give to a group of people that come from the same culture. Some examples of the names of ethnic groups are Mexican, Hispanic, Latino, Black, African American, White, Caucasian, Asian, Chinese, American Indian, Italian, Greek, and many others.*

Once the child verbally acknowledged understanding the term, researchers asked: *How would you describe yourself in terms of your ethnic group or race?* Children's responses to this open-ended interview question were coded and analyzed in order to investigate the ways in which children use the term American to describe their racial and ethnic background. Drawing upon previous research regarding self-identification (Kiang, 2008; Kiang, et al., 2011), two independent coders documented all instances in which children used the term American to describe their racial or ethnic group (100% agreement,  $\kappa=1.00$ ). Children who used an American label tended to use the term American in two distinct ways: National American Labels (e.g., American) and Hyphenated American Labels (e.g., Mexican American, African American,

Korean American) (Table 2). Two independent coders agreed on 99% of the codes ( $\kappa=0.99$ ), and resolved the remaining disagreements by consensus.

**Aim 2: What meanings do children associate with being American?** To capture children's ideas about what it means to be American, participants were read the following prompt:

*I'm going to read some words and phrases to you and I want you to tell me whatever comes to your mind when I read those words. Whatever you see, just whatever you think of. What do you think of when you hear the word/phrase American?*

The coding scheme developed to address this second research question was informed by previous research on American identity (Brown, 2011; Bush, 2005; DeVos & Banaji, 2005). However, to allow for a fuller understanding of the children in our sample, we let themes emerge from participant responses to the open-ended question regarding their spontaneous associations with the word "American." Once the coding scheme was determined, two researchers independently coded participant responses, identifying all relevant themes. The themes were not applied exclusively, allowing coding for as many themes as were present in participants' responses. Two independent coders agreed on 87.3% of the codes and resolved the remaining disagreements by consensus.

**Aim 3: What are children's attitudes toward Americans?** Collected concurrently with the qualitative data, we assessed children's attitudes toward Americans quantitatively by administering an attitudinal measure with 12 counter-balanced attributes. This trait-stereotyping measure is comparable to the Multiresponse Racial Attitude measure (MRA; Doyle & Aboud, 1995), the Preschool Racial Attitude Measure (PRAM II; Williams, Best, Boswell, Mattson, & Graves, 1975) and other similar adaptations of these measures (Mistry et al., 2013), which have been used in other studies with elementary school age children. Six attributes were positive (e.g.

smart, hardworking, clean, good, honest, polite), while the remaining six attributes were negative (e.g. dumb, lazy, dirty, bad, liars, rude). For each of the 12 attributes, children were asked to rate the statement: *How many Americans are [insert attribute]?* Responses were based on a Likert-type scale, ranging from one to five (1 = None; 5 =Almost All). Consistent with prior studies and based on results from exploratory factor analyses using principal axis factoring with Promax rotations, two intergroup attitudes scores—positive and negative—were created by averaging responses for each of the 6 positive (e.g., smart, hardworking, clean, good, honest, polite) and 6 negative (e.g., dumb, lazy, dirty, bad, liar, rude) items separately. Cronbach’s alphas for ratings of Americans were: .79 for positive attitudes and .81 for negative attitudes.

## **Results**

### **Aim 1: Children’s Self-Identification as American**

Overall, 51 children (50%) used the term American to describe themselves, and 51 participants did not. There were two distinct ways in which children self-identified as American (Table 2). The sub-sections that follow describe in detail how children utilized National American Labels and Hyphenated American Labels to describe themselves.

**National American Label.** Children who used a National American label used the term “American” on its own and separate from racial and ethnic labels. Most children who self-identified as American used a National American Label ( $n = 29$ ) to identify where they lived and/or their place of birth. For example, a second generation child stated, “[I’m] Latino and I’m like a little bit American ‘cuz I was like born here in California.” Only one second generation participant used a National American Label in isolation without reference to any other racial or ethnic label (i.e., “American”). Due to the phrasing of the interview prompt which asked children to describe their racial or ethnic group, almost all children who used a National American Label

also mentioned a racial and ethnic label when describing their background. For example, when read the open-ended prompt regarding their racial and ethnic group description, a second generation (i.e. one foreign-born parent) child explained that, “Well, I’m like Chinese, but I’m also American, and my mom’s family says I’m an ABC, an American born Chinese.” While this child self-identified as both Chinese and American, his identification as being ethnically Chinese is distinct and separate from his identification as American.

Another child of U.S.-born parents (fourth generation) first identified his racial and ethnic background by describing his family heritage, and later described himself as American:

*CH: Well, my dad’s dad is from Ireland and my mom’s family comes from Russia mostly and a lot of other places in Asia and Europe and I have pretty far relatives from Israel.*

*I: So if somebody asks you what race or ethnic group you are or you’re from what would you generally say?*

*CH: I’m an American.*

Similar to the child who described himself as Chinese and also American, this child differentiated his identification as American from his racial and ethnic identification as a descendent of Irish, Russian, Asian and European parents.

It is important to note that individuals coded under this National American Label category used both National American Labels, and racial and ethnic labels in a way that was distinct from the use of Hyphenated American Labels (described in detail in the next section). That is, children who used a National American Label did not explicitly combine racial and ethnic labels with the term American (e.g. Asian American, Korean American, etc.).

**Hyphenated American Label.** A second group of children ( $n = 16$ ) used a Hyphenated American Label by combining the term American with an ethnic or panethnic label (e.g., Mexican American, Latin American, Native American, etc.). To distinguish them from children

who used National American Labels, children who used Hyphenated American Labels self-identified as American by identifying themselves as members of particular racial and ethnic American groups (e.g. Mexican American, African American, etc.). For example, a second generation girl stated:

CH: *I'm Korean American. I was born here, so.*

I: *So, first, what does it mean to you to be Korean American?*

CH: *Well, it makes me like, feel like, I'm part of two ethnic groups. Like, my parents are from Korea, but I was born here, so it just makes me feel like I'm part of two groups.*

While this child acknowledged that she was American because she was born in the U.S., her identification as American was also intimately tied to her ethnic identification as Korean. In other words, she did not identify herself as Korean and American. She self-identified as Korean American.

Another child of U.S.-born parents (third generation) used a Hyphenated American Label to describe her ethnic identity in the following way:

*I'm like Mexican American because my parents were born here but my grandma was born from Chilala, Mexico and my other grandma was also born in Mexico and my grandpa's also Spaniard.*

This child also recognized that her identification as Mexican American was informed by her family heritage as well as her parents' place of birth here in the U.S. Similar to the child who identified herself as Korean American, this child's identification as Mexican American explicitly linked her national identification as American to her ethnic identification as Mexican.

A few participants ( $n = 6$ ) used the term "American" in both ways: in combination with their racial or ethnic label (i.e., Hyphenated American Label) and separately to refer to their

nationality (i.e., National American Label). For example, a child of U.S.-born parents (fourth generation) stated:

*Well my family comes from a lot of different places...some of me is African-American, a tiny bit of me is Irish and French, and then I'm just American. That's it.*

By referring to himself as African American, this child used a Hyphenated American Label that connected his identification as American to his racial and ethnic background. However, he also used a National American Label by identifying himself as “just American,” distinct from his identification as African American.

In order to assess group-related differences in the labels children used to identify their racial and ethnic identity and nationality, we quantified children's open-ended responses and compared the extent to which children's use of labels varied by sociodemographic characteristics using chi square analyses. Results indicated that compared to European American children, racial and ethnic minority children were more likely to use an American label,  $X^2(1, N=102) = 4.206, p < .05$ . More specifically, whereas 57.9% of racial and ethnic minority children used the term American in their self-identification only 34.6% of European American children did so. While there was no statistically significant difference by generational status,  $X^2(1, N=89) = .160, p > .05$ , in the frequency with which participants used an American label, there was a difference in the type of American label (i.e. Hyphenated American Label or National American Label) used by generational status:  $X^2(2, N=84) = 6.021, p < .05$  (see Table 2). Third and fourth generation children were more likely to use a Hyphenated American Label, whereas first and second generation children were more likely to use an National American Label. Chi square analyses indicated no statistically significant differences between racial and ethnic groups in terms of the types of American labels used,  $X^2(2, N=95) = 4.407, p > .05$ . It should be mentioned that the children who used both types of American labels (e.g., Hyphenated American Label, National



American Label) were excluded from this portion of the analyses since few participants ( $N = 6$ ) made up this group.

In summary, our results suggest that the ways in which children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds identify as American differs depending on their familial and cultural heritage (i.e. generational status and racial-ethnic background).

## **Aim 2: Meanings Associated with Being American**

The second goal of this study was to understand the meanings that children associate with the word “American.” Our results suggest that children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds hold many different ideas about what it means to be American. While a few participants could not articulate the meanings they ascribed to being American (3.9%), a majority of the responses converged around several common ideas. Participants most often associated being American with: (1) Symbols/Emblems, (2) Nationality, (3) Race/Ethnicity, (4) Behavioral Trait Stereotypes, and (5) Culture (see Table 3). A small percentage of children noted that they thought of Americans as being racially and culturally diverse, and another small group of children also expressed a sense of American pride. Chi square analyses indicated that the meanings children spontaneously associate with the word “American” did not systematically differ as a function of the child’s generational status or racial and ethnic background.

**Symbols/Emblems.** When asked to express what they spontaneously think of when they hear the word “American,” many of the children (48%) named specific symbols, emblems, places and historical events. For example, a fourth generation European American child who identified as White responded, “President. American Revolution. I can go on, and on...Civil War. Valley Forge. Constitution. Declaration of Independence. Liberty Bell. And Independence Hall

in Philadelphia.” A number of children also mentioned that hearing the word “American,” led them to think of the American flag.

**Nationality.** Another common theme mentioned by a third of our sample was nationality (33.3%). This theme captures all children who described Americans as people who are born and/or live in America. For example, a second generation, participant of Mexican and Columbian heritage said, “People who were born in America or have lived most of their lives in America.” Similarly, a second generation multi-panethnic child who identified as Spanish Armenian, European and American stated, “people who live in the United States are Americans. American citizens and people live in the United States.” This child exemplified the nationality theme, and was also among the few children ( $n=3$ ) coded under this theme who specifically mentioned U.S. or American citizenship.

**Race/Ethnicity.** The third most common theme present in children’s responses was race/ethnicity (21.6%). Children who explained that being American means to be of a particular race or ethnicity (e.g. White, Native American) were assigned this code. For example, a third generation, multi-panethnic child, who identified as, “really mixed, Swedish, Polish, Cuban, Costa Rican and German,” explained, “I think of White people probably. I think that’s it.” While some of the children similarly described that being American was synonymous with being White, others mentioned that hearing the word American spurred thoughts about Native Americans, “Well, actually that kind of makes me think of Native Americans compared to present Americans like us.” This idea was communicated by a few children (2.9%).

**Behavioral Trait Stereotypes.** A number of participants also described Americans as exhibiting particular behavioral trait characteristics (20.6%). A second generation child who described herself as Muslim, half Lebanese and half American articulated this idea, “...like some

of them are bad people- they steal things and stuff but also a lot of Americans are really good people so it kind of varies.” Although children did not commonly describe specific behavioral traits, children who were assigned this code expressed that Americans exhibit both positive and negative behavioral traits.

**Culture.** Some participants communicated that being American means enjoying in the cultural behaviors of the U.S., including speaking English, eating American foods and possessions (13.7%). For example, a second generation participant who identified as Latina and American with parents from the U.S. and Mexico, said: “White, social, eating hamburgers, um...English.”

**Diversity.** A small number of participants specifically expressed the idea that Americans come from many different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (8.82%). A third generation child who described herself as Mexican American illustrated this belief about Americans:

*I just think of everybody from different backgrounds. I think of Japanese, Mexican, African American. It's not all like Caucasian and stuff. It's mixed around.*

This child and several others similarly indicated that the term “American” is not only used to describe Whites or Caucasians. Instead, “American” is associated with people from many different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

**Pride/Commitment/ Sense of Belonging.** A few children indicated that hearing the word “American,” elicited a sense of pride and belonging (3.9%). For example, a second generation boy who identified as half American and half Mexican, explained:

*You get to make a lot of friends and well I'm proud to be an American because we have a good country here. It's strong and it's fair.*

This child and three others expressed the idea that they were proud to be from America and they felt a sense of belonging with other Americans.

### **Aim 3: Children's attitudes about Americans**

An attitudinal measure with 12 counter-balanced attributes was used to address the third research question which aimed to assess children's attitudes about Americans (see Figures 1 and 2). To examine differences in children's average positive and negative stereotypes about Americans, a repeated-measures Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The model included one within-subject factor: the valence of the attribute (positive and negative) and two covariates (children's gender and parent education level), to control for factors other than racial-ethnic background or generational status, that may be associated with systematic differences in children's attitudes about Americans. Overall, children tended to have more positive attitudes about Americans than negative attitudes,  $F(1, 96) = 50.10, p < .01$ . On average, children in this sample indicated that some to most ( $M = 3.61, SD = 0.50$ ) Americans exhibited positive attributes (e.g. smart, hardworking, clean, good, honest, polite). In contrast, on average, children in this sample indicated that few to some ( $M = 2.67, SD = 0.55$ ) Americans possessed negative attributes (e.g. dumb, lazy, dirty, bad, liars, rude).

To examine whether children's attitudes toward Americans vary as a function of generational status and race or ethnicity, we conducted two separate mixed-factorial ANCOVAs. The model investigating differences by generational status included one within-subject factor: the valence of the attribute (positive and negative) based on scores from the attitudinal measure, two between-subject factors: children's generational status (U.S.-born parents and foreign-born parents; see earlier description for criteria), as well as two covariates: children's gender and parent education level. Children's attitudes about Americans did not differ as a function of racial and ethnic background,  $F(1, 99) = 1.079, p > .05$  (Figure 1), or generational status,  $F(1, 87) = .926, p > .05$  (Figure 2). In summary, our results suggest that children from diverse racial and

ethnic backgrounds tended to associate Americans with positive attributes, and these attitudes did not systematically differ as a function of the child's generational status or racial-ethnic background.

## **Discussion**

Overall, results from the current mixed methods study suggest that by middle childhood, children from a racially and ethnically diverse sample are already self-identifying as American and are expressing nuanced understandings about what it means to be American. In addition, similar to adolescents and adults, children tend to hold overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward Americans, and far fewer negative attitudes.

### **Children's Self-Identification as American**

First, our results indicated systematic differences in children's self-identification as American. Our finding that racial and ethnic minorities were more likely than European American children to use the term "American" to describe themselves may be due to the fact that many European Americans described themselves as White. Given that we did not find any differences by generational status in the frequency with which children used American labels, our results differ from the findings of previous studies which examined ethnic identification among adolescents and adults (Kiang, 2008; Kiang et al., 2011). In both studies, researchers found that U.S.-born adolescents and adults were more likely than foreign-born participants to self-identify using a label that included the term "American." It is possible that we did not observe these differences, because very few of our participants themselves were foreign-born. The majority of children from immigrant families were second generation and thus may share common self-identification patterns as U.S.-born adolescents and adults described in previous research.

Interestingly, the differences observed by generational status in this study were such that children of U.S.-born parents (i.e. third and fourth generation) were more likely to use a Hyphenated American Label, while children of foreign-born parent(s) (i.e. first and second generation) were more likely to use a National American Label. By explicitly combining “American” with their racial or ethnic label, children from later generations (U.S.-born parents) demonstrated that their identification as American is inextricably tied to their racial and ethnic identity. On the other hand, children from newer immigrant families (at least 1 foreign-born parent) seem to separate notions of American identity from their racial and ethnic identity. These children self-identify as American, but do so as a means to indicate their national identity (i.e., where they live and/or were born).

### **Meanings Children Associate with Being American**

In line with previous research among adults and European American children, the children in our sample frequently associated being American with symbols and emblems representative of the U.S. (e.g., American flag, historical events, etc.; Brown, 2011; Bush, 2005), as well as nationality (e.g., being from and living in America, U.S. citizens), and culture (e.g. speaking English, eating American food). Children in the sample also associated American identity with race/ethnicity (e.g., White, Native Americans). This finding is consistent with past research which has shown that adults and European-American children often associate American with being White (Brown, 2011; DeVos & Banaji, 2005).

A few of the children in our sample also described Americans as racially and culturally diverse. That is, Americans are of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds, come from many different places in the world and bring with them different cultural practices. The notion that America is a melting pot is consistent with prior research conducted among adolescents who

similarly expressed that racial and ethnic diversity is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be American (Rodriguez, Schwartz & Whitbourne, 2010). This finding indicates that as early as middle childhood, children are becoming increasingly aware of the changing racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population at large. Since the social context has important implications for how individuals construct stereotypes about social groups, it is important to take into account that these children are themselves from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds situated within a school context that explicitly communicates a commitment to celebrating diversity. Thus, the social context of the school, which highlights diversity, may be reflected in children's conceptions of what it means to be American.

### **Children's Attitudes about Americans**

As expected, children in this sample tended to associate Americans with positive attributes. These results are in line with the findings from Devos and Banaji (2005), which demonstrated that American participants tend to evaluate Americans positively. The finding that most children, regardless of whether the child identified as American, held positive attitudes about Americans, contradicts the assumptions of SIT, which suggests that this in-group favoritism is a consequence of subjective identification (Barrett, et al., 2004). Instead, children's attitudes about their national in-group (i.e. Americans) seem to be operating somewhat differently than other social groups. While children's positive attitudes about Americans are not driven by subjective identification with a national American identity, these results are consistent with the findings from Bennett et al. (1998), which found that children associated their national in-group with positive attributes even when they did not explicitly identify themselves as members of the national group. Similarly in the current sample, even children who did not identify as American tended to associate Americans with positive attributes.

### **Study Limitations, Implications and Future Directions**

As with all research, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. In particular, it should be noted that there was some overlapping coding of children's responses to the question regarding what they think of when they hear the word American. That is, some segments of children's responses were coded as representative of more than one theme. It should also be acknowledged that this study was conducted in a diverse school setting, representing students from a broad range of racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, the school expresses an explicit commitment to celebrating diversity across multiple domains. This particular setting's emphasis on diversity may have influenced participants' responses to interview questions, and thus, readers should take caution when considering the generalizability of these findings.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design of the current study significantly contributes to the existing research by using both qualitative and quantitative methods to fully explore children's emerging sense of what it means to be American in middle childhood. Based on these data, it seems that middle childhood is an important developmental period in which children are beginning to express complex understandings about what it means to be American. Since results indicated that the ways in which children self-identify as American (i.e., through use of a Hyphenated American Label versus a National American Label) differs as a function of generational status, it is evident that forming an American identity is a complex process. This is especially true for children from the U.S. who are increasingly from immigrant families, and tend to explicitly separate notions of racial and ethnic identity from their national identity. Compared to adults and European American children, it is evident that children from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds tend to hold similar ideas about what it means to



be American, often mentioning symbols and emblems, nationality, culture, and particular racial and ethnic groups (primarily White). In addition, children tended to have positive attitudes about Americans.

Given that a number of children in the sample mentioned Americans as being racially and culturally diverse, future research should extend the findings from existing research (Devos & Banaji, 2005) to explore whether children from diverse backgrounds more readily associate particular racial and ethnic groups with the category “American.” In addition, to further understand children’s attitudes toward Americans, future research should investigate whether children’s attitudes differ depending on the particular group of Americans they are asked to rate. For example, children’s attitudes about Americans may differ than their attitudes about Asian Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans or other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.

While the present study provides rich, descriptive information regarding American self-identification among a diverse sample of children in middle childhood, future research should examine predictors of American identity development among children. In particular, previous research has shown that racial socialization processes, particularly among ethnic minority families, play an important role in the development of racial and ethnic identity (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Cole, Cole & Lightfoot, 2005). Because the current study found some significant differences based on children’s generational status, as well as racial or ethnic background, it may be that ethnic minorities and children from immigrant families are being socialized to perceive an American identity very differently than their White American and/ or U.S.-born peers.

In addition to studying predictors of American identity development, future studies should also examine the outcomes that are associated with an American identity. Since prior research has demonstrated that identity development is related to a wide range of social and

academic outcomes for youth (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012), as well as health outcomes for adults (Kiang, 2008), it is important to investigate whether the same associations exist for American identity development. Future research which examines early predictors of and outcomes associated with American identity may inform our understandings about this complex process, and may have implications for how we can best support positive identity development among children learning to navigate a social world in which they hold multiple social identities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this mixed methods study suggests that children from a diverse sample are already beginning to self-identify as American during middle childhood, and are developing complex ideas about what it means to be American. This is a significant contribution to the literature on American identity which has previously focused on perceptions about what it means to be American among adolescents, adults and European American children (Brown, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2012). Most notably, children in this sample differed in the ways that they self-identified as American (i.e., through use of a Hyphenated American Label versus a National American Label), depending on their generational status. This indicates that forming an American identity may be a distinct process for children from immigrant families (i.e., first and second generation). With strong links between identity development and well-being across multiple domains (Hurd, Sanchez, Zimmerman & Caldwell, 2012; Kiang, 2008; Phinney, 1995), understanding the process of American identity development among children from immigrant families is vital. These children represent a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population, and it is important to understand how they are developing a sense of self and a sense of what it means to be American.

Appendix

Table 1  
*Descriptives for Study Sample (N = 102)*

	%	Range	Mean	SD
<b>Child Characteristics</b>				
Gender				
Female	50.98			
Male	49.02			
Generational Status				
First Generation	2.94	1 to 4	2.65	0.91
Second Generation	47.06			
Third Generation	14.70			
Fourth Generation	22.55			
Missing	12.75			
Race and Ethnicity				
Multi-Panethnic	38.24			
European American	25.49			
Latino	16.67			
Asian	7.84			
African American	2.94			
Other	8.82			

Note: Racial and ethnic backgrounds are based on children's responses to the open-ended interview question which asked children to describe their racial or ethnic group.

Table 2

*American Label Types: Children of U.S.- vs. Foreign-born Parents*

American Label Type	Definition	Example Response	U.S.-born Parents (N=34)	Foreign-born Parent(s) (N=48)	TOTAL (N=82)
Hyphenated American Label	A label which combines the term American with an ethnic or panethnic label	<i>"I'm a mixture – I'm African American and I'm Latina."</i>	12 (35.3%)	8 (16.7%)	20 (24.4%)
National American Label	A label which includes the term American used on its own to identify where one lives and/or where one was born	<i>"[I'm] Latino, and I'm a little bit American 'cause I was born here in California."</i>	6 (17.6%)	19 (39.6%)	25 (30.5%)
None		Participant did not use any variant of <i>American</i> .	16 (47.1%)	21 (43.7%)	37 (45.1%)

Note: The above table does not include the full sample, as information regarding generational status was not available for all participants.

Table 3

*What does it mean to be American?*

Meaning	Definition	Example Response	TOTAL (N=102)
Symbol/ Emblems	Evoking symbols, emblems, places and historical events	<i>“President. American Revolution. I can go on, and on, and on... Civil War. Valley Forge. Constitution. Declaration of Independence. Um, Liberty Bell. And Independence Hall in Philadelphia.”</i>	49 (48%)
Nationality	To be from a country	<i>“To be from America and live in America.”</i>	34 (33.3%)
Race/Ethnicity	To be of a certain race or ethnicity	<i>“I don’t feel different than White.”</i>	22 (21.6%)
Behavioral Trait Stereotypes	To exhibit particular behavioral trait characteristics	<i>“...like some of them are bad people- they steal things and stuff but also a lot of Americans are really good people so it kind of varies.”</i>	21 (20.6%)
Culture	Enjoying in cultural behaviors of the U.S. including speaking English, eating American foods, and possessions	<i>“...eating hamburgers...English.”</i>	14 (13.7%)
Diversity	Americans come from many different racial and cultural backgrounds	<i>“I just think of everybody from different backgrounds. I think of Japanese, Mexican, African American. It’s not all like Caucasian and stuff. It’s mixed around.”</i>	9 (8.82%)
Pride/Commitment/ Sense of Belonging	Proud to be from America, or to feel a sense of belonging amongst Americans	<i>“You get to make a lot of friends and well I’m proud to be an American because we have a good country here. It’s strong and it’s fair.”</i>	4 (3.9%)
I don’t know	Doesn’t know or offer response	<i>“I don’t really know.”</i>	4 (3.9%)

Note: Since codes were not exclusively applied, percentages do not add to 100%.

**Attitudes about Americans:  
European American vs. Racial and Ethnic Minority Children**

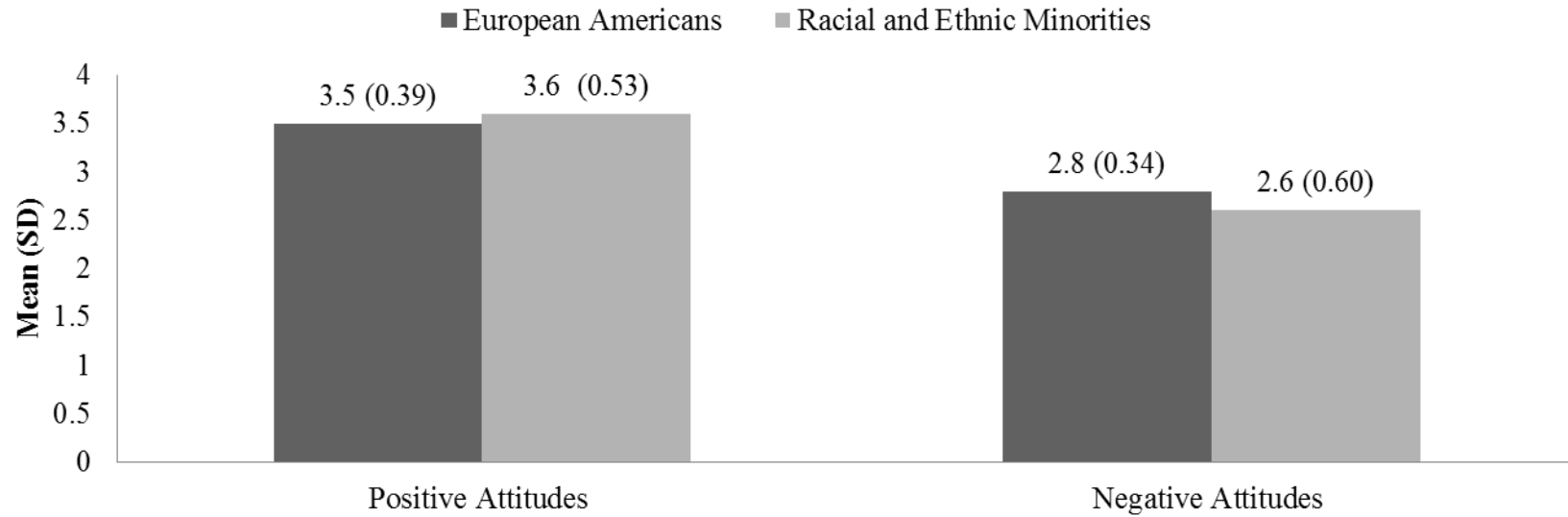


Figure 1. Mean responses to attitude measures regarding Americans for European American and racial and ethnic minority children.

**Attitudes about Americans:  
Children of U.S.-born parents vs. Foreign-born parent(s)**

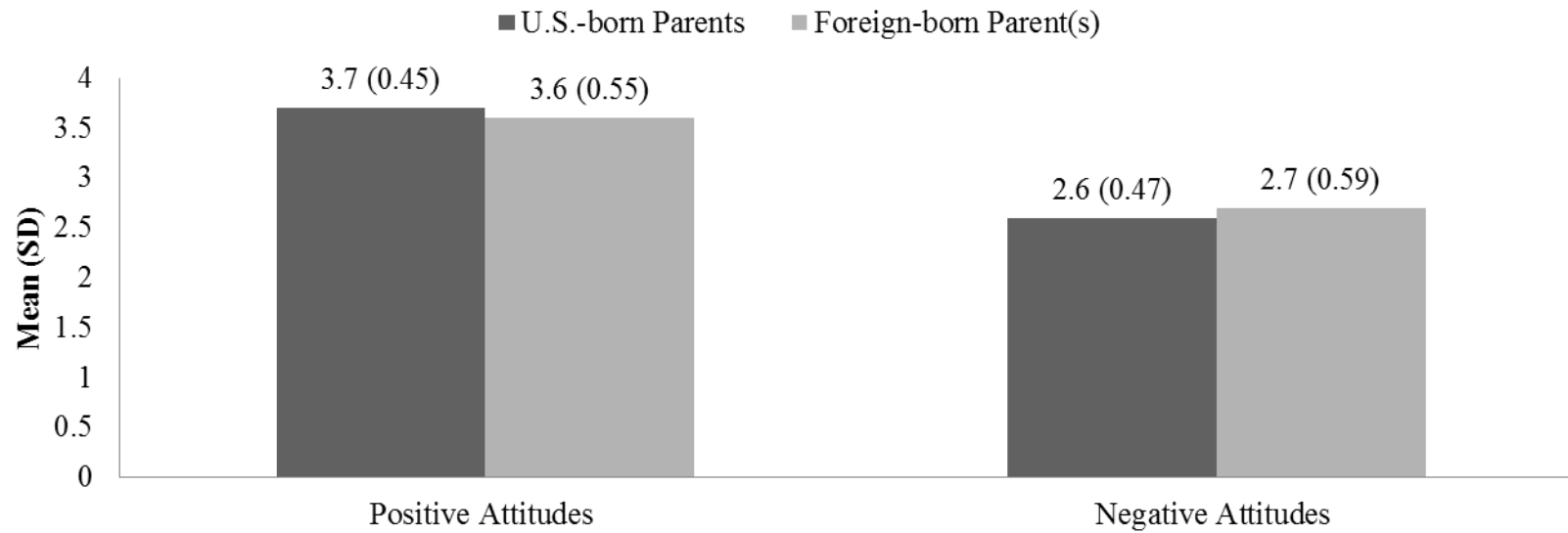


Figure 2. Mean responses to attitude measures regarding Americans for children of U.S.-born parents and children of foreign-born parents.

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