Ethnic-Racial Identity Among Young People in Sweden

Measurement, Development, and Context

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To Lisa, Ramses, and Lucas.

Abstract

Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) refers to how individuals understand, feel about, and engage with their ethnic, racial, cultural, and national group memberships. Although ERI has been widely studied, much of this research has been conducted in the United States. Less is known about how ERI can be conceptualized and measured, or how it matters, in contexts where ethnicity, race, culture, migration background, and national belonging are understood differently. This dissertation examines ERI among young people in Sweden, a sociocultural context marked by increasing ethnic-racial diversity, strong egalitarian ideals, an often colorblind public discourse, and contested meanings of what it means to be Swedish. The overarching aim of this dissertation is to advance an understanding of ERI in Sweden as a multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded construct. The dissertation comprises three studies based on data from the Gothenburg Research Study on Ethnic Identity and Youth (GREY).

Study I examined the multidimensionality and psychosocial relevance of ERI among late adolescents in Sweden. Using survey data from 665 adolescents in their final semester of upper secondary school, the study investigated the dimensionality and measurement invariance of commonly used ERI subscales across ethnic-racial majority and minority youth, and examined associations between ERI dimensions and psychosocial adjustment. Study I showed that established ERI measures captured theoretically recognizable dimensions, including belonging-affirmation, clarity, exploration, centrality, and public regard. However, some subscales contained overlapping content and full scalar invariance was generally not supported, indicating that mean-level comparisons between majority and minority adolescents require caution. There were some similarities between the groups in terms of associations with adjustment. Specifically, belonging-affirmation was positively associated with well-being in both groups, with small-to-moderate effects among majority and minority youth, respectively (β = .32 and β = .41). Public regard also showed consistent positive associations with well-being (β = .30–.31) and institutional trust (β = .23–.40). Centrality, exploration, and clarity showed more dimension- and group-specific patterns, highlighting the contextual embeddedness of ERI. Centrality was linked to lower well-being and institutional trust among minority youth (β = −.28 and β = −.31), but not among majority youth. Exploration was positively associated with generativity in both groups (β = .26–.29), but also showed minority-specific associations with higher well-being (β = .14) and lower institutional trust (β = −.15). Clarity was positively associated with generativity only among minority youth (β = .39).

Study II examined ERI development and its associations with well-being across three waves spanning the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. Using longitudinal survey data from 674 adolescents at T1, the study examined trajectories of clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration and distinguished wave-specific between-person associations from concurrent wave-specific within-person associations with well-being. Clarity was stable from T1 to T2 and increased from T2 to T3; belonging-affirmation declined from T1 to T2 and increased from T2 to T3; and exploration showed no reliable mean-level change. At the between-person level, belonging-affirmation was consistently associated with higher well-being, with medium-sized effects across waves (β = .28–.42), whereas the clarity–well-being association was small at T1–T2 (β = .15–.16) and moderate at T3 (β = .38). At the within-person level, higher-than-usual clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration were concurrently associated with higher-than-usual well-being, with small effects for clarity (β = .19–.22) and exploration (β = .13–.17), and medium-to-large effects for belonging-affirmation (β = .43–.50). Minority youth had higher T1 levels of all three ERI dimensions, and belonging-affirmation change differed between groups, but the magnitudes of the ERI–well-being associations did not differ reliably. These findings indicate both relatively enduring differences between youth and systematic within-person covariation across measurement occasions.

Study III examined how 18 adolescents whose ERI included both Swedish and at least one additional ethnic-racial background negotiated ERI across everyday social settings. The interviews were conducted at T1, before the post-graduation transition examined longitudinally in Study II. Study III showed that ERI was formed through cross-contextual negotiation. Adolescents compared heritage-linked and Swedish-majority influences, coordinated identity expression across settings, and described how ERI had been reorganized through earlier contextual transitions and maturation. Family, school, peers, public spaces, work-related expectations, and transnational ties shaped whether aspects of ERI were recognized, expressed, constrained, or integrated.

The three studies show that ERI is meaningful among young people in Sweden, while also highlighting how its structure, development, and adaptive significance vary across dimensions, social positions, developmental timing, and everyday contexts. The findings broadly underscore that ERI develops in a dynamic way through young people's efforts to understand who they are in relation to family, peers, school, heritage-linked contexts, Swedish-majority settings, and broader public discourses of belonging.

Keywords: Ethnic-racial identity; adolescence; emerging adulthood; Sweden; identity development; psychosocial adjustment; belonging; measurement invariance; context

Swedish summary

Etnisk identitet handlar om hur människor förstår, värderar och förhåller sig till sina etniska, rasifierade, kulturella och nationella grupptillhörigheter. I avhandlingen används det engelska begreppet *ethnic-racial identity*, som enligt underliggande teoretiska ramverk fångar identitetsbetydelser kopplade till etnicitet, rasifiering, kultur, ursprung och nationell tillhörighet. I denna svenska sammanfattning används begreppet etnisk identitet som en förenklad svensk benämning, men med denna bredare innebörd.

I Sverige är etnisk identitet ett relativt outforskat fenomen. Tidigare forskning, främst från USA, har dock visat att etnisk identitet kan spela en viktig roll för ungas välbefinnande, tillhörighet och identitetsutveckling, särskilt bland ungdomar med minoritetsbakgrund eller andra former av mångkulturella erfarenheter. Idag präglas det svenska samhället av omfattande etnisk, kulturell och migrationsrelaterad mångfald, samtidigt som många helst undviker att explicit tala om etnicitet, och särskilt om ras. Skillnader kopplade till etnicitet, hudfärg, ursprung och kultur benämns i stället ofta genom begrepp som invandrarbakgrund, integration, svenskhet och kulturell tillhörighet. Detta innebär att unga människor kan möta etniska och rasifierade gränsdragningar i vardagen, samtidigt som sociala och språkliga ramverk för att förstå och benämna dessa erfarenheter kan vara begränsade. Mot denna bakgrund undersöker avhandlingen etnisk identitet bland ungdomar i Sverige som en mångdimensionell, utvecklingsmässigt dynamisk och kontextuellt formad identitetsdomän.

Avhandlingen består av tre delstudier inom forskningsprojektet *Gothenburg Research Study on Ethnic Identity and Youth* (GREY). GREY är ett longitudinellt forskningsprojekt om etnisk identitet bland ungdomar i Sverige, med fokus på övergången från sista tiden i gymnasiet till året efter gymnasiet. De tre studierna använder kompletterande metodologiska ingångar: psykometriska och korrelationella analyser i Studie I, longitudinella analyser i Studie II och kvalitativa analyser i Studie III.

Studie I undersökte tidigare använda mätskalor för etnisk identitet i en svensk kontext, med fokus på om skalorna fångade de dimensioner som avsågs och om de fungerade på jämförbara sätt bland ungdomar med etnisk majoritets- respektive minoritetsbakgrund. Studien byggde på enkätdata från 665 ungdomar som gick sin sista termin på gymnasiet. Mer specifikt analyserades skalornas dimensionalitet och mätinvarians, samt hur de dimensioner som identifierades genom skalorna relaterade till välbefinnande, mellanmänsklig tillit, institutionell tillit och generativitet. Resultaten visade att flera etablerade dimensioner av etnisk identitet kunde identifieras, däribland tillhörighetbekräftelse, klarhet, utforskande, centralitet och uppfattningar om hur den egna

gruppen värderas av andra eller av samhället. Samtidigt visade resultaten att vissa skalor överlappade varandra och att jämförelser av medelvärden mellan majoritets- och minoritetsungdomar bör göras med viss försiktighet. Vidare framkom flera samband mellan dimensioner av etnisk identitet och psykosocial anpassning. Dessa samband skilde sig delvis mellan grupperna, på sätt som kan spegla vad det innebär att tillhöra majoritets- respektive minoritetspositioner i Sverige. Exempelvis var centralitet kopplat till lägre välbefinnande och lägre institutionell tillit bland minoritetsungdomar men inte hos majoritetsungdomar.

Studie II undersökte hur etnisk identitet utvecklades över tid och hur den samvarierade med välbefinnande under övergången från gymnasietiden till vuxenblivande. Studien byggde på tre vågor av enkätdata från GREY-projektet och fokuserade på tre dimensioner av etnisk identitet: klarhet, tillhörighet-bekräftelse och utforskande. Resultaten visade att etnisk identitet var utvecklingsmässigt dynamisk, men på olika sätt för olika dimensioner. Klarhet ökade senare under övergångsperioden, tillhörighet-bekräftelse minskade efter gymnasieavslutningen men ökade sedan igen, medan utforskande var relativt stabilt på gruppnivå. Tillhörighet-bekräftelse var konsekvent kopplad till högre välbefinnande över tid, medan klarhet blev starkare kopplad till välbefinnande senare i övergången. Detta tyder på att en tydligare förståelse av den egna etniska identiteten kan få större betydelse för välbefinnande under en period då ungdomars vardagliga sammanhang förändras. Studien visade också att etnisk identitet var kopplad till välbefinnande på två sätt. För det första rapporterade ungdomar med generellt högre nivåer av klarhet och tillhörighet-bekräftelse också högre välbefinnande. För det andra rapporterade ungdomar högre välbefinnande vid mättillfällen då deras egen nivå av klarhet, tillhörighet-bekräftelse eller utforskande var högre än vanligt. Detta tyder på att etnisk identitet både kan fungera som en relativt stabil psykosocial resurs och som en föränderlig del av identiteten som samvarierar med välbefinnande över tid. Resultaten beskriver hur variationer i ERI och välbefinnande inom individer hänger samman över mättillfällen med cirka sex månaders mellanrum, inte kortvariga eller momentana förändringsprocesser.

Studie III undersökte hur ungdomar förhandlade sin etniska identitet över olika sociala sammanhang i vardagen. Studien byggde på intervjuer med 18 ungdomar som identifierade sig som svenska och med minst en ytterligare etnisk bakgrund. Analysen genomfördes som en abduktiv tematisk analys och resulterade i tre teman: *att förhandla kulturella influenser*, *att koordinera uttryck och synlighet av etnisk identitet*, och *att omorganisera etnisk identitet över tid*. Det första temat – *att förhandla kulturella influenser* – visade hur ungdomarna utvecklade och omförhandlade sin etniska identitet genom att jämföra familjens och hemmets språk, värderingar och kulturella uttryck med

svenskhetsnormer i skola, kamratrelationer och andra vardagliga sammanhang. Det andra temat – *att koordinera uttryck och synlighet av etnisk identitet* – visade hur vissa sammanhang gjorde etnisk identitet möjlig att uttrycka och ta för given, medan andra sammanhang krävde anpassning eller gjorde identiteten synlig, t.ex. genom ifrågasättande eller diskriminering. Det tredje temat – *att omorganisera etnisk identitet över tid* – visade hur etnisk identitet kunde omorganiseras genom övergångar, exempelvis genom nya skol- och kamratkontexter. Studien visade därmed att etnisk identitet inte bara formas inom enskilda sammanhang, utan också genom rörelser mellan sammanhang.

Sammantaget visar avhandlingen att etnisk identitet är en meningsfull och psykosocialt relevant identitetsdomän bland unga i Sverige. Resultaten visar vidare att dess struktur, utveckling och psykosociala betydelse varierar beroende på vilken dimension av etnisk identitet som studeras, vilken social position ungdomar har och när i utvecklingen identiteten undersöks. De påverkas också av hur identiteten förhandlas mellan olika sociala sammanhang. Avhandlingen bidrar därmed till fältet genom att visa hur etablerade teorier och mått kan användas i Sverige, men också hur de behöver anpassas och tolkas i relation till den svenska kontexten. Den visar också att etnisk identitet utvecklas dynamiskt genom ungas försök att förstå vilka de är i relation till familj, kamrater, skola, ursprungsland, svenskhetsdominerade miljöer och bredare samhälleliga diskurser om tillhörighet.

Preface

This thesis consists of a summary and the following three papers, which are referred to by their Roman numerals:

I. Reinholdsson, T., Frisén, A., Hwang, C. P., Juang, L., Stern, P. D., & Syed, M. (2026). Ethnic-racial identity in Sweden: Dimensionality, measurement invariance, and psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 36, e70197.

II. Reinholdsson, T., Frisén, A., & Syed, M. (2026). *The development and adaptive function of ethnic-racial identity across the transition into emerging adulthood*. Manuscript under review.

III. Reinholdsson, T., Syed, M., Berne, S., Hwang, C. P., Vlasman, S., & Frisén, A. (2026). *Ethnic-racial identity across social settings: Belonging, expression, and identity integration among multicultural adolescents in Sweden*. Manuscript under review.

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Acknowledgments

A PhD is certainly a journey, and its contours are shaped by the people who help us along the way. But where did this particular journey begin? I found myself thinking about this as I started writing these acknowledgments, realizing that there are many moments that could be said to mark its beginning. Perhaps mine began in kindergarten, when, as I was smashing clay pebbles – lecakulor – to discover what was inside, a teacher (I think her name was Marie) joyfully encouraged this curiosity in a child. Thank you, Marie.

Of course, this journey into identity research could also be said to have begun much further back in time. I like to imagine a dark night somewhere in Africa, eons ago, when one of our ancestors stepped out of the forest, raised their head toward a sky full of stars, and somewhere in their mind a simple question emerged: *Who am I?* Thank you, whoever you were.

I have also heard that one can choose not to overthink things, so let us settle on a more practical beginning. My PhD journey began, in a clear and concrete sense, when I entered the doctoral program at my dear Department of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. In considering the question *Who am I?*, one thing has become increasingly clear to me: the answer is, to a considerable extent, social. This journey has been no different. It has been shaped by the people who traveled alongside me, and they have my deepest gratitude.

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To my family, thank you. I value you more than I am probably capable of adequately expressing here, and I carry all of you with me in the person I have become.

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Which brings me, I suppose, back to beginnings.

Introduction

Identity formation is a central developmental task during adolescence and emerging adulthood, organized around the fundamental question 'Who am I?' (Arnett, 2023; Erikson, 1968). This question is answered by young people in relation to the social categories, cultural narratives, and institutional conditions through which they understand themselves and are understood by others (Erikson, 1968). Identity is therefore personal, but also fundamentally social and responsive to the surrounding context (Ashmore et al., 2004; Crocetti, 2026; Galliher et al., 2017). In diverse societies, ethnicity, culture, and race often become salient dimensions of identity formation. The present thesis examines this through the construct of ethnic-racial identity (ERI), which refers to the aspect of an individual's self-concept that derives from and develops in relation to ethnic, cultural, and racial group memberships, and the significance and meaning attached to those memberships (Ashmore et al., 2004; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

Prior ERI research has generated substantial knowledge about the developmental processes through which young people explore and make sense of their ethnic-racial backgrounds, and about the role ERI can play in psychosocial adjustment, particularly among minority and multicultural youth (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). However, important uncertainties remain concerning how ERI should be understood in sociocultural contexts where ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging are organized differently than in much prior research. First, because much ERI theory and measurement has been developed in the US, questions remain as to whether commonly used ERI measures capture comparable dimensions across sociocultural contexts and across majority and minority positions. Second, although ERI is understood as developmental and potentially adaptive, less is known about its psychosocial significance in Sweden and about how ERI changes and relates to adjustment across developmental transitions commonly accompanied by contextual reorganization, such as the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. Third, ERI research has often emphasized broad developmental processes, such as exploration and commitment, more than the specific contextualized content of what develops and how young people come to understand, value, negotiate, and incorporate ERI in everyday life (Galliher et al., 2017; McLean et al., 2016). This is important because adolescents rarely form ERI within a single, uniform field of meaning. Instead, they move across social settings that may provide partly compatible and partly conflicting expectations

about who they are, where they belong, and what forms of identity expression are possible (Galliher et al., 2017; Mims & Williams, 2020; Verkuyten, 2016).

These issues are highly relevant in contemporary Sweden, where young people form their identities in a society marked by substantial ethnic-racial and cultural diversity, while public discourse has often avoided explicit language about ethnic and racialized differences. Instead, these differences are constructed in relation to having an immigrant background, while also being implicitly associated with appearance, ancestry, and social status (Hudson et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2023; Medin et al., 2025). This creates a sociocultural context in which questions of belonging, recognition, ethnic-racial positioning, and national identity are likely to be developmentally consequential. At the same time, these developmental consequences are likely to vary between youth. For minoritized youth, ERI may involve negotiating heritage-linked and Swedish-linked influences across contexts that differ in recognition, norms, and possibilities for belonging. For majority youth, ERI may be less explicitly marked, but still embedded in broader social structures and narratives concerning Swedishness, diversity, and social position.

Sweden is therefore both an understudied and theoretically informative context for examining ERI as multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded. Against this backdrop, the overarching aim of this dissertation is to advance understanding of the structure, psychosocial significance, development, and contextual negotiation of ERI among adolescents transitioning into emerging adulthood in Sweden. Specifically, the dissertation investigates three interrelated issues. First, it examines the dimensionality and measurement invariance of commonly used ERI subscales among ethnic-racial majority and minority adolescents, and how the ERI dimensions emerging from these measures relate to well-being, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and generativity. Second, it examines longitudinal trajectories of ERI clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration across the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, and how these dimensions relate to well-being over time and across majority-minority positions. Third, it examines how adolescents who identify as both Swedish and another ethnic-racial background negotiate ERI across everyday social settings, focusing on how meanings formed in one setting are carried into, revised in, or challenged by another.

The background that follows is organized around the three conceptual premises guiding the dissertation. First, I situate ERI in the Swedish sociocultural and developmental context and then conceptualize it as a multidimensional construct, with particular attention to dimensionality, measurement, and construct validity outside the US. I then review the psychosocial significance and developmental dynamics of ERI across the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. Finally, I discuss the contextual premise of the

dissertation, focusing on how ERI is formed, negotiated, and integrated across multiple everyday social contexts.

Ethnic-racial diversity in Sweden

Sweden is a small country in northern Europe that is often associated with progressive social values, gender equality, and an expansive welfare-state model. In comparative value research, Sweden is positioned among the countries highest in secular-rational and self-expression values, reflecting a cultural emphasis on autonomy, individual choice, tolerance, and egalitarian ideals (World Values Survey Association, 2023). The country also ranks highly on international gender-equality indicators (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025), and research on Swedish youth suggests high levels of self-reported tolerance toward others (Sandberg, Frisén et al., 2024). These features contribute to a national self-understanding of Sweden as egalitarian, tolerant, and individualistic. At the same time, these ideals coexist with tensions surrounding ethnicity, race, culture, migration, and Swedishness.

These tensions are partly rooted in how the meanings of ethnicity and race in Sweden have shifted over time. In the early twentieth century, the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology played a notable role in the development of eugenics as a "science" (Ericsson, 2016). Following World War II, the country distanced itself from this past and became associated with international antiracism and decolonization (Hübinette et al., 2023). At the same time, explicit public discussions of race and ethnicity became increasingly taboo (Hübinette et al., 2023; Svensson & Syed, 2019). Against this backdrop, Sweden has come to be described as a distinctly colorblind national context, where public discourse tends to avoid explicit language about ethnic-racial differences and instead addresses such differences through vocabularies of culture, migration, and integration (Hübinette et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2023). However, this colorblind orientation does not mean that Sweden is free from racialized perceptions; discrimination related to ethnicity remains a frequently reported form of discrimination there. In 2024, the Equality Ombudsman received 1,570 complaints concerning discrimination related to ethnicity, corresponding to 35% of all discrimination complaints (Swedish Equality Ombudsman, 2025). Thus, young people may encounter ethnic-racial boundaries in everyday life while having limited socially available frameworks for naming or interpreting them.

Although Sweden is often described as having become diverse through recent immigration, ethnic and cultural diversity is not new to the Swedish

context. The country has long included Indigenous and national minority populations, including the Sámi, Swedish Finns, Tornedalians, Roma, and Jews (County Administrative Board of Stockholm, n.d.). Historical migration has also shaped Sweden, including Walloon migration connected to early modern iron production and later forms of labor and refugee migration (Frohnert & Byström, 2017; Swedish Institute, 2025). What has changed in recent decades is thus not the existence of diversity as such, but rather its scale, composition, visibility, and political meaning. Post-war immigration initially included many labor migrants from other Nordic countries and Western Europe, whereas later decades have seen increasing refugee migration from, for example, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and the Balkans (Frohnert & Byström, 2017; Swedish Institute, 2025). Migration from countries with fewer historical, linguistic, or institutional ties to Sweden has made questions of integration, Swedishness, and cultural difference increasingly salient in public discourse, while immigration has become more negatively politicized in Swedish media and politics (Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2025; Parusel, 2024).

The scale of migration-related diversity has also increased substantially. In 1930, less than 1% of Sweden's population was foreign-born; by 1970, this proportion had increased to 6.7%, and by 2016 to 17.8% (Frohnert & Byström, 2017). These figures are higher when diversity is defined in terms of foreign background rather than foreign birth. As of 2024, 35% of the Swedish population consisted of individuals who were either born abroad or had at least one foreign-born parent; among those aged 18 to 29, this proportion increases to 42% (Statistics Sweden, n.d.-a; n.d.-b). Despite comparatively progressive integration policies (Solano & Huddleston, 2020), social tensions surrounding immigration have intensified and have been linked to political polarization, civil unrest, and segregation (Petridou et al., 2024). In this sociocultural context, public discourse frequently revolves around concepts such as Swedish values and concerns about whether, and how, individuals with immigrant backgrounds integrate into Swedish society (Hudson et al., 2023).

In this diverse and politically charged landscape, ERI is likely to be developmentally salient for many adolescents, although its meaning and implications may differ by social position. For minoritized youth, ERI development may involve navigating othering, exclusion, and the need to reconcile heritage-linked and Swedish-linked influences across contexts (Erentaitė et al., 2018). This is reflected in self-descriptions such as being "another kind of Swede" (Gyberg et al., 2018), which illustrate how minority youth may experience Swedishness as partly available but also conditional. These dynamics are shaped by a broader European cultural climate in which diversity is often framed through discourses of migration and foreignness (Juang et al., 2023). At the same time, ethnic majority adolescents in Sweden may face distinct

identity-related questions, such as how to understand Swedishness in an increasingly multicultural society (Medin et al., 2025; Svensson & Syed, 2019). They may feel uncertain about how to relate to cultural diversity and how to describe Swedishness in a non-exclusionary way (Lazëri et al., 2024). Thus, while majority adolescents may not encounter the same forms of identity threat or marginalization as minority adolescents do, they too engage in identity formation in relation to ethnicity, culture, and national belonging.

The Swedish developmental context is also important when considering the sociocultural framework of this dissertation. In Sweden, the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood is structurally marked by graduation from upper secondary school. After graduation young people move into differentiated educational, occupational, and non-participatory pathways. In a follow-up of youth who completed upper secondary school in spring 2020, 54% were working during the following autumn, 38% had gone on to further studies, and 8% were neither registered in studies nor had work income (CSN & UHR, 2022). Although these figures refer to a cohort graduating during the COVID-19 pandemic, the broader pattern of differentiated postsecondary pathways is supported by national register statistics. For example, among students who completed vocational programs in 2021/22, 53% had an established labor-market position a year later, whereas among students who completed higher-education preparatory programs, 43% were studying in higher education and 21% had an established labor-market position a year later (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2025). Thus, the transition out of upper secondary school reorganizes young people's everyday contexts into multiple educational, occupational, and social pathways.

Overall, Sweden provides a theoretically informative context for studying ERI. It combines strong egalitarian and colorblind ideals with increasing diversity, politicized debates about migration and integration, and unequal recognition of Swedishness. These conditions make it important to examine whether established ERI measures function in Sweden, how ERI develops and relates to psychosocial adjustment, and how young people negotiate ERI across the different settings of everyday life.

Conceptualizing ethnic-racial identity

ERI concerns how individuals understand, evaluate, and give meaning to their membership in ethnic, racial, cultural, and national groups, as well as how these meanings are shaped through social experience (Ashmore et al., 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Verkuyten, 2016). In the present dissertation, ERI is used as an umbrella construct for identity meanings linked to ethnicity, racialization, culture, heritage, and national belonging. This broader use is particularly relevant in Sweden, where ethnicity and race are often articulated through categories such as culture, migration background, foreignness, and Swedishness. This section provides a conceptual foundation for the dissertation by outlining the ERI dimensions examined in the studies and by briefly situating ERI as a developmental and contextually embedded identity domain. The sections that follow then elaborate on these premises in a more specific way by discussing how it can be measured outside the US, how it may function adaptively, how it develops across the transition into emerging adulthood, and how it is negotiated across everyday social contexts.

Theoretically central dimensions

A central feature of ERI is its multidimensionality. Earlier ERI research often operationalized ERI as a relatively unitary construct (Smith & Silva, 2011), whereas later frameworks define it as consisting of multiple, partly overlapping dimensions (Williams et al., 2020). These dimensions can be understood as involving behavioral, cognitive, and affective aspects of ERI experience (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). The behavioral aspect concerns how young people actively engage with ERI; the cognitive aspect concerns how they understand, interpret, and organize the meaning of ethnic-racial group membership; and the affective aspect concerns how they feel about this membership and whether they experience it as a source of belonging, value, and attachment. While these aspects are analytically useful, they should not be understood as fully distinct categories. Most ERI dimensions contain behavioral, cognitive, and affective elements, including those that are focal in this dissertation: exploration, clarity, centrality, commitment, belonging-affirmation, and public regard. These will be described in the following.

Exploration refers to active engagement with the meaning of one's ethnic-racial background, including learning about heritage, reflecting on group membership, participating in cultural practices, or seeking information and experiences that clarify what ERI means (Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Exploration emphasizes the behavioral aspect of ERI because it concerns what young people do in relation to their ethnic-racial background. However, it also involves cognitive and affective processes, including reflection, comparison, emotional investment, and attempts to make sense of one's group membership. Previous research suggests that different forms of exploration may have different developmental implications. Socially embedded or participatory exploration may support connection and meaning, whereas more uncertain or ruminative forms of exploration may reflect unresolved identity questions (Syed et al., 2013).

Clarity – or resolution – is another central dimension of ERI that concerns the extent to which young people have developed a coherent understanding of what ERI means to them. In the literature, particularly in work based on the Ethnic Identity Scale (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004), this dimension is often referred to as resolution. In this dissertation I use the term *clarity* when referring to the empirical dimension captured across the studies, because this term more directly describes the content of the items, reflecting having a clear sense of what one's ethnic-racial background means for the self. Clarity primarily emphasizes understanding, interpretation, and meaning-making, and links ERI to broader developmental theories of identity coherence. It should be noted, however, that clarity is not purely cognitive. It may be supported by exploration, experiences of recognition, and affective ties to one's group, whereas contexts that question a young person's belonging, or position them as not fully belonging, may disrupt or complicate it.

Centrality refers to the perceived importance of ERI within an individual's overall self-concept (Sellers et al., 1997). In other words, a highly central ERI is one that the individual regards as important for understanding who they are. Centrality thus concerns the organization and salience of ERI within one's broader self-concept, suggesting that ERI can be central without being clear, and can be central without being experienced positively. Moreover, centrality may have different implications depending on social position and context (Sellers et al., 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For minoritized youth, a central ERI may reflect the salience of ethnicity and race in everyday life, including experiences of recognition, belonging, exclusion, or discrimination (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Meanwhile, centrality may carry different meanings for majority youth, as majority ethnic-racial positioning is often less explicitly marked (Moffitt & Rogers, 2022).

Commitment is another influential concept in ERI research, especially in work drawing on Phinney's model and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). In general identity theory, commitment often refers to personal investment in an identity or identity choice (Marcia, 1980). In ERI research, however, commitment has frequently been operationalized more broadly, including content related to belonging, attachment, positive feelings, and clarity (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Roberts et al., 1999). Commitment is therefore conceptually important but also somewhat ambiguous. In this dissertation, commitment-related content is treated more specifically through the dimensions it appears to capture empirically, particularly clarity and belonging-affirmation.

Belonging and affirmation refer to positive feelings toward one's ethnic-racial group, a sense of attachment, pride, and belonging, and the experience of ERI as a valued part of the self (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 1999; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The dissertation uses the combined term *belonging-affirmation* to refer to ERI content that captures both positive evaluation of one's group and a sense of attachment or belonging to it. This dimension thus emphasizes the affective and relational aspects of ERI and is central to its adaptive significance, as shown by consistent links between positive affective ties to one's group, well-being, and other indicators of psychosocial adjustment (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Public regard refers to young people's perceptions of how their ethnic-racial group is viewed by others or by society more broadly (Sellers et al., 1998). It can be understood as a social-evaluative dimension of ERI, involving perceived societal recognition, respect, or devaluation of one's group (Ashmore et al., 2004; Verkuyten, 2016). Public regard therefore links ERI to the broader social context by capturing how young people interpret the status and value assigned to their group by others. This dimension may be relevant in contexts where ethnicity, race, migration, and national belonging are socially and politically charged (Hübinette et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2023; Svensson & Syed, 2019). If young people perceive that their group is devalued or not fully recognized this may shape their sense of belonging, their trust in others and in institutions, and the way they negotiate ERI across everyday contexts (Fretheim et al., 2024; Rivas-Drake et al., 2009; Willis & Neblett, 2020).

These theoretically proposed dimensions show that ERI is not a single attitude or developmental process, but rather a multidimensional identity domain involving engagement, meaning-making, attachment, self-organization, and perceived social evaluation. The dimensions are conceptually distinct but interconnected. Exploration may contribute to clarity; clarity may support belonging; belonging may motivate further exploration; centrality may shape

how consequential ERI experiences become; and public regard may influence whether ERI is experienced as affirmed, questioned, or socially constrained.

Development and context

Another conceptual premise of this dissertation concerns ERI as a developmental construct. From a developmental perspective, ERI formation can be understood as part of young people's broader effort to develop a coherent sense of self across time, roles, and social domains. Building on Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, Marcia (1980) operationalized identity formation through the processes of exploration and commitment. In ERI research this developmental logic has been extended to ethnic-racial group membership, focusing on how adolescents explore the meaning of their ethnic-racial background and develop clearer, more secure understandings of what this background means to them (Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Contemporary identity research further emphasizes that identity develops through iterative cycles of formation, maintenance, reconsideration, and consolidation (Crocetti, 2026; Luyckx et al., 2011). This perspective is particularly relevant for ERI because the meaning of ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging may shift as adolescents encounter new social relationships, institutions, and life situations.

Closely tied to the developmental nature of ERI, another aspect of conceptualizing ERI concerns its potential adaptive significance. Specifically, because ERI links the individual self to socially meaningful group memberships, it may help young people sustain continuity, negotiate belonging, interpret their social position, and orient themselves in relation to others (Ashmore et al., 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Verkuyten, 2016). This point is introduced here as part of the conceptual framework and is developed more fully in the later section on the adaptive significance of ERI, where ERI is discussed in relation to well-being, trust, generativity, and social position.

These adaptive possibilities also point to the contextual embeddedness of ERI. More specifically, ERI is shaped through everyday interactions in contexts such as families, peer groups, schools, neighborhoods, digital spaces, and public institutions, where different identities vary in salience and are activated through social roles and relationships (McLean et al., 2016; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Accordingly, ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging may be foregrounded in some contexts and backgrounded in others. An adolescent may rarely reflect on ERI in one setting but experience it as highly salient in another because of language use, cultural practices, peer composition, discrimination, or questions from others (Galliher et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018). ERI development therefore involves learning what one's ERI means across social contexts where identity meanings may fit together, remain separate, or come

into conflict. This contextual premise is returned to later in the section on ERI formation across multiple social contexts.

Overall, ERI is conceptualized in this dissertation as a multidimensional identity domain that develops over time, may have adaptive psychosocial significance, and is embedded in social contexts that shape how ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging become meaningful. This conceptualization underpins the dissertation's three empirical areas of focus: how ERI dimensions can be measured, how they develop and relate to adjustment, and how they are negotiated across everyday social contexts.

Measuring ethnic-racial identity

Measurement is crucial because empirical findings can only be interpreted as evidence about ERI if the instruments adequately capture the construct rather than reflecting artifacts of the measure, the sample, or the context in which measurement takes place. Given that ERI is clearly shaped by context, the validity of ERI measures cannot be assumed to go unchanged across sociocultural settings. This is important to consider because much ERI theory and measurement has been developed in the US, where ethnicity and race are historically, institutionally, and discursively organized in ways that differ from many European contexts (Hübinette et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2023; Svensson & Syed, 2019).

Two aspects of measurement validity that are important to consider are dimensionality and measurement invariance. Dimensionality concerns whether a set of items adequately captures the intended ERI dimension, such as exploration, centrality, or public regard. This is commonly examined through confirmatory factor analysis, which evaluates whether items cluster in accordance with the theoretical structure of a scale (Brown, 2006; Rios & Wells, 2014). In other words, assessing the dimensionality of, for instance, a subscale measuring ERI centrality means assessing whether it is a clean measure of centrality and does not capture subdimensions of adjacent ERI dimensions. In this dissertation, I distinguish between theoretically proposed ERI dimensions, the subscales designed to measure them, and empirically refined dimensions obtained from the measurement models.

Measurement invariance concerns whether a measure functions equivalently across groups. Configural invariance indicates that the same general factor structure is present across groups; that is, the same items, or survey questions, cluster together as indicators of the same underlying construct. Metric invariance indicates that these indicators relate to the latent construct in comparable ways. Scalar invariance indicates that item intercepts are equivalent; that is, individuals with the same level of the underlying construct (e.g. centrality) would be expected to endorse the item at the same baseline level across groups. Scalar invariance is required for meaningful latent mean comparisons (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). These distinctions are central for majority-minority comparisons in ERI research. If scalar invariance is not supported, observed mean differences may reflect differences in item interpretation as well as in the underlying construct. Metric invariance, in contrast, can support

comparisons of associations between ERI and other constructs, even when mean-level comparisons require caution (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016).

The most widely used instruments in ERI research include the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999), the Ethnic Identity Scale and its brief form (EIS/EIS-B; Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004), and the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al., 1997, 1998). These instruments have been central for establishing ERI as a multidimensional developmental construct. At the same time, they illustrate a challenge in ERI measurement: that dimensions that are theoretically distinguishable may overlap in their operationalization.

The MEIM commitment subscale is a useful example. It has often been used to capture a broad sense of commitment to one's ethnic group, but its items include content related to belonging, positive affect, and clarity about what one's ethnic background means (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). Similarly, EIS-B resolution captures clarity of ethnic-racial meaning, a construct that is conceptually close to some aspects of MEIM commitment (Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). These overlaps matter because they affect how associations with adjustment are interpreted. An observed association between "commitment" and well-being may partly reflect belonging, affirmation, clarity, or a combination of these components. Relatedly, in the MIBI, centrality refers to the importance of ethnicity or race to a person's self-concept (Sellers et al., 1997, 1998). However, some centrality items can be difficult to separate from belonging-related content. This creates both psychometric and theoretical ambiguity. If centrality partly captures belonging, then associations with adjustment may reflect the affective or relational quality of ERI, not centrality.

Exploration also varies across instruments. In the MEIM, exploration is understood as a search-oriented process involving reflection, learning, and efforts to understand one's ethnic background. In the EIS-B, exploration more clearly emphasizes participation in activities or events related to one's ethnicity (Syed et al., 2013). This distinction is important because treating these forms as interchangeable may obscure how different forms of ERI engagement relate to adjustment.

While these conceptual overlaps do not undermine the value of established ERI instruments, they highlight the importance of attending to measurement, especially when instruments are used outside the US. In the Swedish context, this question is relevant because ERI may be meaningful for both majority and minority youth while carrying different social meanings across these positions. For minority youth, ERI may be shaped by heritage-linked belonging, minoritization, othering, and the negotiation of Swedishness. For majority youth, it may be less explicitly marked and more closely tied to normative assumptions

about Swedishness, national belonging, and social position (Erentaitė et al., 2018; Gyberg et al., 2018; Medin et al., 2025; Svensson & Syed, 2019). Accordingly, the same item may evoke different frames of reference depending on whether respondents interpret ethnicity as heritage, culture, nationality, racialized position, or majority belonging.

For these reasons, examining ERI in Sweden requires attention to whether established scales show acceptable model fit, what their dimensions appear to capture, and whether they function similarly across majority and minority adolescents.

The psychosocial significance of ethnic-racial identity

While the previous sections have discussed the conceptualization and measurement of ERI, an important question remains: What does ERI do? A central premise of this dissertation is that ERI is not only a set of beliefs, feelings, and meanings concerning ethnicity and race; it may also serve psychosocial functions. For instance, it may help young people interpret their social position, sustain a sense of continuity, negotiate belonging, and orient themselves in relation to others. Put differently, ERI may provide a framework through which young people make sense of and respond to social experiences in which ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging are made to matter. Accordingly, ERI may be understood as a potentially adaptive and contextually contingent aspect of young people's development and orientation in everyday life.

This view is closely aligned with the social identity approach, which highlights identity motives; that is, basic psychological needs that people seek to satisfy through their identities, such as belonging, self-esteem, distinctiveness, efficacy, continuity, and meaningfulness (Verkuyten, 2016). These motives help explain why ERI can become psychologically consequential. It may provide young people with connection to others, positive group value, cultural continuity, collective history, and a sense of orientation within the social world. At the same time, these motives may be threatened when young people encounter exclusion, devaluation, stereotyping, or identity denial. For example, a young person may identify as Swedish while this identity claim is questioned by others because of this person's appearance, name, language, religion, or family background (Medin et al., 2025; Svensson & Syed, 2019). Such cases illustrate that ERI is shaped both through internal meaning-making and through the boundary-making of others.

A first way to examine the adaptive significance of ERI is through its associations with psychosocial adjustment. Well-being is the most common and general outcome in this literature, partly because it captures broad psychological functioning in everyday life, including affective, cognitive, and evaluative aspects of adjustment (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Smith & Silva, 2011; Tov, 2018). ERI may support well-being directly through positive feelings toward one's group and indirectly through identity coherence, meaning, direction, and belonging (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Syed et al., 2013). This interpretation is

consistent with identity-based motivation theory, which conceptualizes identities as contextually activated meaning systems that shape interpretation and action (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). In this sense, ERI clarity may be adaptive because it provides young people with a more coherent identity-based script for understanding who they are, what matters, and how to navigate everyday social contexts. Consistent with this view, clarity and belonging-affirmation generally show positive associations with well-being and lower depressive symptoms across development (Gillespie et al., 2024; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Longitudinal and intervention studies further suggest that young people who develop clearer understandings of their ERI and more positive affective ties to their group tend to report higher well-being over time (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2021).

However, the relation between ERI and adjustment differs across dimensions. Belonging-affirmation, which captures positive evaluation of and attachment to one's ethnic-racial group, is among the most consistently adaptive dimensions. Clarity is also generally linked to more positive adjustment, while exploration is more complex. Exploration is often theorized as indirectly adaptive because it may contribute to greater clarity over time (Gillespie et al., 2024; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). Yet its direct association with well-being appears to depend on the form of exploration being assessed. Socially oriented or participatory exploration may support connection and meaning, whereas exploration characterized more by internal questioning, uncertainty, or search for meaning may be associated with lower well-being in some developmental periods or contexts (Syed et al., 2013; Weber et al., 2021).

Centrality and public regard further illustrate why the adaptive significance of ERI must be understood as contextually embedded. Centrality, or the importance of ERI to the self-concept, may provide meaning, continuity, and collective grounding. At the same time, a highly central ERI may also heighten vulnerability when young people are exposed to discrimination, exclusion, or devaluation. Some studies suggest that centrality can strengthen the positive link between affirmation and well-being and buffer the negative effects of discrimination among minority adolescents (Brittian et al., 2013; Cobb et al., 2019), whereas other work indicates that centrality may be associated with poorer well-being in contexts where minority youth encounter discrimination, while functioning differently among majority youth (Wolfram et al., 2018). Public regard, or perceptions of how one's ethnic-racial group is viewed by others, is similarly context-sensitive. High public regard may support well-being because it signals recognition and social value, whereas low public regard may require other coping processes, such as preparation for bias (Rivas-Drake et al., 2009; Willis & Neblett, 2020).

These dimension-specific patterns are also likely to differ by social position. Most ERI research has focused on ethnic-racial minority youth, for whom ERI is often tied to belonging, recognition, resilience, exclusion, and the negotiation of multiple cultural worlds (Galliher et al., 2017). The adaptive function of ERI among majority youth is relevant but more conceptually complicated. For majority youth, ERI is often less salient because majority-group membership tends to be normalized and less explicitly marked as ethnic or racial (Syed & Juang, 2014). Nevertheless, majority youth also develop understandings of their ethnicity, race, and national belonging, often from positions shaped by structural advantage, normativity, and colorblindness (Lazëri et al., 2024; Moffitt & Rogers, 2022). Consequently, the psychosocial implications of ERI among majority youth may not mirror those found among minority youth. For majority youth, ERI may involve making sense of one's majority position, Swedishness, cultural diversity, injustices, and the social meaning of belonging to a dominant group.

Although well-being captures a broad intrapersonal aspect of adjustment, ERI may also matter for how young people relate to other people, institutions, and society. Trust and generativity are relevant concepts in this regard because they capture whether young people experience others and institutions as reliable, and whether they see themselves as able to contribute to a broader community. In this sense, these concepts extend the adaptive function of ERI from individual well-being to psychosocial connectedness. Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory positions basic trust as foundational for later development and generativity as a later capacity to contribute to others and society, with both capacities closely connected to identity formation (Kroger, 2018).

Social trust, commonly divided into interpersonal and institutional trust, refers to expectations that other people and social institutions will act in fair, reliable, and predictable ways (Fukuyama, 1995). ERI may be related to trust because identity develops in contexts where young people are either recognized as legitimate members of a social community or positioned as outsiders. For minority youth, experiences of acceptance and recognition within the national community may support social trust, whereas exclusion, discrimination, or identity denial may erode it (Fretheim et al., 2024). In Sweden, where young people encounter both egalitarian ideals and everyday ethnic-racial boundary-making, ERI may thus be linked both to personal well-being and to whether adolescents experience other people and institutions as trustworthy.

Generativity provides another way of conceptualizing the adaptive significance of ERI beyond the individual level. A secure sense of identity may support young people's capacity to imagine themselves as contributors to their communities and to society (Erikson, 1968; Mitchell et al., 2021). Specifically, in contexts where ERI is salient, ethnic-racial clarity, exploration, and

socialization may provide a basis for civic engagement, responsibility, and concern for others (Jensen, 2008; Phan & Kloos, 2023; Santana et al., 2024). Accordingly, ERI may become generative when it helps young people locate themselves within broader histories, communities, and social responsibilities. Conversely, when ERI is shaped by exclusion or devaluation, young people's sense of social contribution may become more ambivalent.

Associations between ERI and adjustment can also be examined at different levels of analysis. Between-person associations ask whether youth who generally report higher ERI than other youth also report higher adjustment than other youth. Within-person associations instead ask whether a young person reports higher or lower adjustment at measurement occasions when their ERI is above or below their own typical level. These associations address different substantive questions and need not show equivalent patterns (Curran & Hancock, 2021; Hamaker, 2026). Their interpretation also depends on the measurement timescale. With assessments approximately six months apart, as in Study II, the within-person estimates reflect whether wave-specific deviations from an adolescent's typical ERI level co-occur with deviations from their typical well-being at the same assessment; more closely spaced assessments would be better suited to capturing shorter-term psychological dynamics (Hamaker, 2025).

The literature reviewed above suggests that ERI may be psychosocially significant through its associations with well-being, belonging, coherence, and young people's relations to others, institutions, and society. The substantive meaning of these associations depends on which ERI dimension is examined, whether variation is considered between or within individuals, the timescale represented by the measurement design, young people's majority or minority position, and the contextual affordances and constraints surrounding belonging, recognition, continuity, and agency. The following sections turn to two further questions: how ERI develops across the transition into emerging adulthood and how young people negotiate ERI across the multiple social contexts of everyday life.

Development across changing contexts

Prior research has delineated how ethnic-racial identity develops through the interplay of developmental capacities and identity-relevant experiences (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). Emerging perspectives on identity and change also emphasize the intricate role of context in these processes, both during adolescence and emerging adulthood, when young people transition into new social settings with new demands and opportunities for discovery and reflection (Arnett, 2023; Galliher et al., 2017; Mims & Williams, 2020). This section brings together these two related aspects of ethnic-racial identity development: how it changes over time, with particular attention to the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, and how it is negotiated and integrated across the multiple social settings that young people navigate.

Development from adolescence into emerging adulthood

Adolescence is a crucial period for ethnic-racial identity development, with young people becoming increasingly able to reflect on social categories, group belonging, and how they are positioned by others (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). During this period, identity formation is shaped by expanding social worlds and broader societal narratives about ethnicity, race, culture, and national belonging (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Galliher et al., 2017). This expansion provides adolescents with opportunities to explore ethnic-racial meanings, develop clearer understandings of group membership, and evaluate whether their identities are recognized and valued. Adolescence is also a period in which experiences of inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, and social comparison may make ethnic-racial identity more salient and psychologically consequential (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). In this light, we can say that ethnic-racial identity development during adolescence involves both internal meaning-making and ongoing negotiation of belonging within everyday social contexts.

Building on these adolescent identity processes, a further premise of this dissertation is that ethnic-racial identity continues to unfold as young people encounter changing social contexts, revise earlier understandings of belonging, and make meaning of identity-relevant experiences. These processes may

become particularly visible during periods of contextual reorganization, making the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood a useful developmental case. As young people move beyond upper secondary school, they may encounter new forms of independence, social comparison, intergroup contact, institutional belonging, and ethnic-racial positioning (Arnett, 2023; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Such changes may alter how young people understand, feel about, and explore ERI, as well as how ERI relates to well-being under changing social affordances and constraints. Positive affective dimensions may be especially sensitive to these transitions. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014), for example, note that ERI affirmation tends to increase from early to middle adolescence and that these increases may be steeper during school transitions, possibly because transitions heighten ERI salience. Although this work concerned younger adolescents in the United States, it identifies a theoretically plausible process through which transitions may alter the salience and affective meaning of ERI.

From a lifespan perspective, ERI develops from an early awareness of one's ethnicity and race into more differentiated forms of ethnic-racial affiliation, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Williams et al., 2020). This development is shaped by identity-relevant experiences such as socialization, discrimination, and intergroup contact, as well as by young people's meaning-making capacities and the broader contexts in which these experiences occur (Williams et al., 2020). Broader identity-development theory similarly emphasizes that identity develops through iterative cycles of formation, maintenance, and reconsideration, in which individuals explore possible identities, make commitments, evaluate whether these commitments still fit, and revise them when they no longer provide sufficient meaning or coherence (Crocetti, 2026; Luyckx et al., 2011). In relation to ERI, this suggests that the meaning of ethnic-racial group membership may shift as young people move into contexts that differ in ethnic-racial composition, norms of belonging, institutional recognition, and exposure to inclusion or exclusion.

Emerging adulthood is often described as a period of intensified identity exploration, during which young people consider possible life directions in relation to education, work, relationships, and worldviews (Arnett, 2023). It is also important to note, however, that the choices young people face are shaped by affordances and constraints embedded in broader social and cultural structures (Elder, 1998). As youth move from school-based contexts into more direct participation in adult social institutions, they usually become increasingly exposed to the social structures that shape opportunity, belonging, and recognition (Syed & Mitchell, 2013; Williams et al., 2020). The transition between adolescence and emerging adulthood may thus be particularly consequential

for identity domains closely tied to social positioning, such as ERI (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Despite this theoretical relevance, few longitudinal studies have examined ERI development across the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, and most of the ones that do focus specifically on the transition into college. This is limiting because college entry is both a developmental transition and a specific institutional context, making it difficult to separate broader developmental change from the particular affordances of higher education. For example, Sladek et al. (2023) found modest increases in ERI exploration and relatively stable clarity among youth transitioning to college, whereas Tsai and Fuligni (2012) found slight declines in exploration and largely stable ERI commitment, a dimension that partly reflects belonging-affirmation and clarity. Both studies were limited to college samples, leaving open the question of how ERI develops among youth entering more heterogeneous educational, occupational, and social pathways. One study that did span this transition outside a college-specific context examined ethnic-racial pride from late childhood through emerging adulthood, finding declines across adolescence followed by increases during emerging adulthood (Desmarais et al., 2024).

Existing research thus supports examining ERI across shifting developmental contexts, but several questions remain unresolved. There is limited knowledge about how multiple ERI dimensions develop across heterogeneous postsecondary pathways, whether majority and minority youth follow similar trajectories, and whether between-person and concurrent within-person associations between ERI and well-being remain stable across this transition.

Formation in everyday social settings

The developmental and adaptive significance of ERI is closely tied to the everyday contexts in which it is formed, expressed, and responded to by others. These processes unfold across adolescents' families, schools, peer groups, neighborhoods, leisure settings, workplaces, digital spaces, public institutions, and transnational ties, each of which may communicate different meanings about ethnicity, race, culture, national belonging, and social status (Galliher et al., 2017; McLean et al., 2016; Syed et al., 2018). This contextual embeddedness may be particularly important for adolescents with multicultural identities, whose heritage-linked, Swedish-linked, and racialized identity meanings may be recognized, constrained, or valued differently depending on the setting (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Svensson & Syed, 2019; Verkuyten, 2016). In this dissertation, context is understood both as a physical and relational setting, and as a field of meaning involving recognition, norms, and power relations.

Families provide the primary context in which children learn values, norms, and a sense of belonging – and where they engage in an ongoing negotiation with their parents to develop autonomy while maintaining family connections (Benson & Johnson, 2009). In ERI research, familial ethnic socialization has emerged as a critical influence on ERI formation, linked to several markers of positive adjustment, including self-esteem, well-being, and resilience in the face of discrimination (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020). Familial ethnic-racial socialization has also been shown to predict ERI exploration and resolution, and affirmation when parents are more supportive and knowledgeable of their adolescent's life circumstances (Supple et al., 2006). ERI formation within the family context is also shaped by intergenerational dynamics, with second-generation youth often navigating tensions between parental expectations and the norms of the majority culture (Lindén et al., 2023; Scuzzarello & Carlson, 2019).

Schools, as one of the most influential social institutions, play a vital role in shaping ERI through peer interactions, teacher expectations, school climate, and curriculum representation (Byrd, 2016; Douglass et al., 2017; Kornienko et al., 2024; Schachner et al., 2021). In a Swedish context, national identity negotiation – which is intricately linked to ERI (Meca et al., 2023) – was closely linked to feelings of belonging among children and adolescents, and influenced by factors such as birthplace, appearance, and language (Medin et al., 2025). Within the Swedish school setting, there is also a noted perception among youth that ethnicity needs to be more explicitly addressed in schools to facilitate mutual cultural understanding (Sandberg, Berne et al., 2024).

Peer relationships further shape ERI by providing arenas for comparison, recognition, belonging, and social validation. Cross-ethnic friendships can promote ERI exploration, while secure ERI may support openness to intergroup relationships (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009; Rivas-Drake et al., 2017). Same-ethnic friendships may strengthen ERI centrality, particularly in settings where adolescents are otherwise surrounded by peers from different ethnic-racial backgrounds (Douglass et al., 2017). Peer contexts can therefore support both heritage-linked belonging and cross-group comparison. At the same time, peer environments may also reproduce stereotypes, exclusion, and ethnic harassment, including through prejudiced beliefs circulating in social networks (Bayram Özdemir et al., 2018; Sandberg, Berne et al., 2024).

There are other contexts that also shape ERI formation, even if they have received less systematic attention. Some of them include neighborhoods and local communities, which can influence adolescents' exposure to ethnic-racial diversity, segregation, belonging, and social comparison (Nystad et al., 2017; Pasco & White, 2020). There are also leisure contexts, sports, religious settings, and workplaces that similarly provide arenas where ERI is expressed and

negotiated (Emuka & Karras, 2024; Sandberg, Berne et al., 2024). Also relevant are digital spaces, where adolescents may encounter both cultural affirmation and ethnic-racial hostility through social media, gaming, and online communities (Hernandez et al., 2023; Sandberg, Berne et al., 2024). For adolescents with a migrant background, transnational ties to relatives' countries of origin may provide heritage-linked continuity while also making their Swedishness more visible (Scuzzarello & Carlson, 2019).

Cross-contextual negotiation and integration

Despite growing recognition of the contextual influences on ERI formation, much existing research examines contexts separately, focusing primarily on one or two settings in isolation. This is valuable, but it risks overlooking the fact that adolescents move between settings and must make sense of how identity meanings from one setting relate to those encountered in another. Cross-contextual ERI negotiation refers to the process through which adolescents interpret, compare, coordinate, and sometimes resist identity meanings as they move across different social settings. Messages from family, school, peers, public discourse, and transnational contexts may be compatible, as when family pride in one's heritage aligns with peer recognition or school-based cultural inclusion. However, they may also conflict, as when family expectations clash with peer norms, when school contexts reproduce stereotypes, or when majority-society ideals of Swedishness make adolescents' own national belonging feel conditional. In this way, ERI formation involves not only learning what ethnicity, race, and belonging mean in particular contexts but also how these meanings are carried across contexts, kept apart, revised, or integrated.

A few studies point directly to the importance of such contextual interplay. Mims and Williams (2020), for example, showed how Black girls' ERI developed through messages and experiences across schools, classrooms, families, and peers, including biased and stereotypical messages that shaped how they understood race and their own racial categorization. In another study, among European American young adults, greater variability in ethnic identity across relational contexts was associated with lower self-esteem and relational competence and higher negative affect (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009). Research on co-occurring identity domains in youth narratives also suggests that identity synthesis involves bringing multiple forms of identity content into relation, although this work has less directly examined how such content is negotiated across everyday contexts (McLean et al., 2016). These studies highlight the need to understand ERI formation both as shaped by distinct contexts and as organized across them.

The concept of identity integration helps specify what is developmentally at stake when adolescents negotiate ERI across multiple contexts. Identity

integration refers to the coordination of differentiated aspects of the self into a sense of continuity and coherence (Syed & McLean, 2016). In relation to ERI, integration mainly concerns how multiple ethnic-racial, cultural, or national identifications are understood in relation to one another. For adolescents with multicultural identities, this may involve making sense of how heritage-linked family practices, Swedish-majority norms, peer relationships, language use, experiences of racialization, and transnational ties can coexist, conflict, or be selectively combined. This process can be understood through the lens of bicultural identity integration, which refers to the extent to which individuals experience their heritage and majority-cultural identities as compatible and integrated rather than oppositional or difficult to combine (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). It involves at least two related but distinct dimensions: cultural distance versus overlap, and cultural conflict versus harmony (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Accordingly, adolescents may experience heritage and Swedish-linked identifications as separate but not necessarily conflicting, overlapping but still tense, or mutually reinforcing in some contexts and incompatible in others.

As a concept, integration can be understood as differentiated connectedness, reflecting how distinct identity meanings remain distinct but are understood in relation to one another. For instance, heritage identity is not dissolved into Swedishness, national belonging is not reduced to ancestry, and different cultural practices or values are not treated as if they must merge into a single uniform identity. Connectedness in this sense means that these differentiated meanings can nevertheless be understood in relation to one another. For adolescents with multicultural identities, this may involve understanding how family expectations, peer norms, school experiences, language practices, and public categorizations each shape ERI without any one context fully determining who they are. In this sense, integration is not necessarily the elimination of tension but the capacity to make tension meaningful and manageable within a broader sense of self (Schachter, 2004).

In contrast to integration, ERI can also be organized through compartmentalization. Compartmentalization refers to situations in which identity meanings are kept apart across settings, relationships, or roles (Galliher et al., 2017; Kunnen, 2006). This may be a pragmatic way of navigating settings that place different demands on adolescents. For example, an adolescent may express heritage language and cultural practices within family contexts while foregrounding Swedishness or minimizing ethnic difference in school-, peer-, or work-related settings. Such compartmentalization may reduce immediate conflict and allow adolescents to function across contexts. However, it may become burdensome when one's identity expression must be continually

monitored, hidden, or adjusted to avoid exclusion, misunderstanding, or devaluation (Schachter, 2004; Simich et al., 2009).

Summary of the studies

General purpose and aims

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to advance the understanding of ERI in Sweden as a multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded identity domain. Study I is a starting point for this investigation, highlighting the structure and significance of ERI in Sweden by exploring psychometric properties of commonly used ERI measures and how the constructs captured in these scales relate to psychosocial adjustment among majority and minority youth. Study II examines developmental trajectories of ERI clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration across three waves spanning the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. It also distinguishes wave-specific between-person associations with well-being from concurrent wave-specific within-person associations and tests whether trajectories or association magnitudes differ between majority and minority youth. Study III expands on the contextual embeddedness of ERI by examining how Swedish adolescents who identify as both Swedish and at least one other ethnic-racial background negotiate ERI across everyday social contexts, focusing on how meanings formed in one setting are carried into, revised in, or challenged by another.

The GREY project

The studies comprising this dissertation were conducted within the broader research program the Gothenburg Research Study on Ethnic Identity and Youth (GREY). GREY is a longitudinal research project designed to deepen understanding of ERI in Sweden and how it develops during a critical transitional phase – from the final year of upper secondary school into emerging adulthood.

GREY consists of two interrelated projects: one in which data were collected using a survey and the other relying on semi-structured interviews. Data for both projects were collected across three time points (T1–T3). For both projects T1 was in the spring of 2023, T2 the fall of 2023, and T3 the spring of 2024. The survey project involved a sample of adolescents recruited from upper secondary schools in the Gothenburg region. At each wave, participants completed detailed questionnaires measuring various aspects of ERI and life experiences. In the interview project, a selected group of participants who had completed the questionnaire were followed up for in-depth interviews. These interviews explored participants' reflections on their ethnic identity, social contexts, experiences of racism, and their thoughts about the future.

Study I

The aim of Study I was to expand the growing body of research on ERI by investigating its dimensional structure, measurement invariance, and relevance for psychosocial adjustment among majority and minority adolescents in Sweden. Specifically, the study investigated the dimensionality and measurement invariance of six commonly used ERI subscales among ethnic-racial majority and minority adolescents, and examined how the ERI dimensions captured by these subscales were associated with psychosocial adjustment. The study focused on subscales measuring ERI commitment, exploration-search, exploration-participation, resolution, centrality, and public regard. Psychosocial adjustment was assessed through well-being, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and generativity.

Method

Study I was based on survey data collected at T1 of the GREY project in spring 2023. Participants were recruited from ethnically diverse upper secondary schools in western Sweden. Invitations were sent to principals at 13 schools, of which nine agreed to participate, and data were collected during school hours by a team of researchers. Before completing the questionnaire, participants received information about the study and provided informed consent.

The analytic sample consisted of 665 late adolescents in their final semester of upper secondary school. Participants were categorized into majority and minority groups based primarily on open-ended self-identification. Adolescents who identified solely as Swedish were categorized as belonging to the majority group, whereas those whose self-defined ERI included at least one non-Swedish background were categorized as belonging to the minority group. This resulted in a majority group of 313 adolescents and a minority group of 352 adolescents.

ERI was assessed using six subscales from three established instruments. Exploration-search and commitment were measured using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999), while exploration-participation and resolution were measured using the Ethnic Identity Scale-Brief (EIS-B; Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015). Centrality and public regard were measured using adapted subscales from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al., 1997, 1998), and psychosocial adjustment was assessed through four indicators: well-being, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and generativity.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the dimensionality of each ERI subscale and to test measurement invariance across majority and minority adolescents. Invariance testing followed standard procedures, moving from configural to metric and scalar invariance, with partial invariance allowed

when theoretically justified. After evaluating the subscales, structural equation modelling (SEM) and exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM) were used to examine associations between ethnic-racial identity dimensions and psychosocial adjustment. ESEM was used for sets of items from conceptually overlapping subscales – particularly centrality, commitment, and resolution – because traditional models based on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) produced highly correlated factors and unstable estimates. This approach made it possible to more clearly distinguish between overlapping ERI dimensions while examining their associations with adjustment.

Main findings

The analyses supported the relevance of ERI measures among adolescents in Sweden, but also showed that several subscales required modification or more nuanced interpretation. The resolution, exploration-participation, and public regard subscales showed relatively clear dimensional structures, while the exploration-search, commitment, and centrality subscales showed more complex patterns. Exploration-search showed borderline acceptable fit, suggesting that some items may be interpreted inconsistently in the Swedish context. Commitment appeared to have content related to both belonging-affirmation and clarity, while centrality showed both method effects and conceptual overlap with belonging-related content.

Metric invariance was supported across majority and minority youth for all subscales. This indicates that the items were generally related to the underlying constructs in similar ways across groups, supporting comparisons of associations between ERI and other variables. Full scalar invariance was supported for the resolution subscale. Partial scalar invariance was supported for the MEIM exploration-search and commitment subscales and the MIBI centrality and public regard subscales. In the joint EIS-B model, all three exploration-participation item intercepts were freely estimated. These findings suggest that, while ERI is measurable in Sweden, making direct mean-level comparisons between majority and minority youth requires caution.

The analyses of associations between the refined ERI dimensions and psychosocial adjustment showed both shared and differential associations across the majority and minority groups. In the exploratory structural equation model including centrality, commitment, and resolution, three underlying ERI dimensions were identified; these were labelled centrality, belonging-affirmation, and clarity. The two exploration subscales, exploration-search and exploration-participation, were not clearly distinguishable in the data and were therefore treated as one exploration factor. Including public regard, this resulted in five ERI dimensions examined in relation to adjustment: centrality, belonging-affirmation, clarity, exploration, and public regard.

Belonging-affirmation was positively associated with well-being in both groups. Among majority youth, it was also positively associated with interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and generativity. Among minority youth, it was positively associated with well-being, but not with the more socially oriented outcomes. This suggests that positive feelings toward and attachment to one's ethnic-racial group may support well-being across groups, while broader social implications may depend on social position.

Centrality showed a different pattern. Among minority youth it was negatively associated with well-being and institutional trust, whereas it was not significantly associated with adjustment among majority youth. Clarity was positively associated with generativity among minority youth, but was otherwise not significantly associated with adjustment. Exploration was positively associated with generativity in both groups. Among minority youth it was also positively associated with well-being, but negatively with institutional trust.

Public regard showed the most consistently positive associations with psychosocial adjustment. It was positively associated with well-being and institutional trust in both groups. Among minority youth it was also positively associated with interpersonal trust, whereas among majority youth it was positively associated with generativity. These findings suggest that perceived societal valuation of one's ethnic-racial group may be an important dimension of psychosocial adjustment for both majority and minority adolescents.

Conclusion

Study I showed that ERI is a meaningful and measurable construct among adolescents in Sweden, while also highlighting the importance of attending to dimensionality, measurement invariance, and social position. Commonly used ERI subscales captured theoretically recognizable dimensions, but some contained overlapping content and functioned somewhat differently across majority and minority adolescents. The study also showed that ERI dimensions are associated with psychosocial adjustment, particularly well-being, trust, and generativity, although these associations vary by dimension and group. Overall, Study I provides the measurement and psychosocial foundation for this dissertation work by showing that ERI in Sweden is multidimensional, psychosocially relevant, and shaped by the social meanings attached to majority and minority positions.[1]

[1] A corrected version of Study I's Table 3 is provided immediately after the published version of Study I. The correction does not alter the interpretation of the findings.

Study II

The aim of Study II was to examine trajectories of ERI clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration across three waves spanning the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. The study tested whether rates of change differed between the T1–T2 interval, from before to after graduation, and the subsequent T2–T3 interval; whether trajectories differed between majority and minority youth; and how each ERI dimension was associated with subjective well-being at the between-person and concurrent within-person levels. In Study II, the adaptive significance of ERI was operationalized as the pattern and strength of these associations with well-being.

Method

Study II was based on three-wave longitudinal survey data from the GREY project. T1 took place in spring 2023, approximately two to three months before graduation from upper secondary school; T2 was conducted six months later; and T3 followed another six months after T2. Data were collected in classrooms at T1 and through online surveys at T2 and T3.

The initial sample at T1 consisted of 674 adolescents, of whom 378 participated at T2 and 237 at T3. Participants were categorized on the basis of ethnic-racial self-identification assessed through an open-ended question at each wave. Adolescents who identified solely as Swedish across the study were classified as belonging to the majority group, whereas those reporting at least one additional ethnic-racial background were classified as belonging to the minority group. Geographical region was used only to describe the composition of the minority group and did not determine classification. This resulted in two analytic groups: majority (n = 313) and minority (n = 353). Eight participants were not classified because of missing identification data.

ERI clarity was represented by three EIS-B resolution items and two clarity-focused MEIM commitment items (Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Roberts et al., 1999). These items were combined because they assess a coherent understanding of what one's ERI means and because prior psychometric analyses of the T1 data showed that they loaded on a common clarity factor; the five-item specification was also supported by the longitudinal measurement analyses in Study II. Belonging-affirmation was represented by five MEIM commitment items reflecting positive feelings toward and a sense of belonging with one's ethnic-racial group. Exploration was measured with the three EIS-B exploration items, reflecting active engagement with one's ethnic-racial background. Subjective well-being was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Manifest composites were calculated by averaging the relevant items for descriptive and preliminary analyses, whereas inferential analyses used item-level indicators in latent-variable models.

Measurement invariance was evaluated across waves and majority–minority groups before latent means, trajectories, and group differences were interpreted. For each ERI dimension, linear and piecewise latent growth curve models were compared. The piecewise models used a knot at T2, specified from the study design, to distinguish change during the T1–T2 transition interval from change during T2–T3. Between-person ERI–well-being associations were estimated as wave-specific model-implied associations in bivariate latent growth curve models, whereas concurrent wave-specific within-person associations were estimated in random-intercept structural equation models. The two levels were modeled separately after the preregistered unified model proved unstable. Multigroup versions of the models and Wald tests of unstandardized parameters were used to evaluate temporal and majority–minority differences.

Main findings

The results showed modest but differentiated and potentially nonlinear mean-level change. Clarity was stable across the T1–T2 transition interval and increased across T2–T3. Belonging-affirmation declined across T1–T2 and increased across T2–T3. Exploration showed no reliable mean-level change in either interval. These patterns show that ERI dimensions did not develop uniformly. Notably, because the study did not directly assess the contextual experiences accompanying graduation, the trajectories cannot be attributed to specific changes in school, peer, or postsecondary contexts.

Minority youth reported higher levels of clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration than majority youth did, consistent with the idea that ERI is generally more salient among youth whose ethnic-racial position is minoritized. Developmental trajectories were otherwise largely similar across groups. The main group difference concerned belonging-affirmation: minority youth showed a steeper decline from T1 to T2, whereas majority youth showed a stronger increase from T2 to T3. This suggests that the transition out of upper secondary school may disrupt ERI-related belonging more strongly for minority youth, while majority youth may become more aware of or positively connected to ERI later in the transition.

At the between-person level, youth with higher model-implied clarity and belonging-affirmation than other youth also tended to have higher model-implied well-being; exploration was not associated with well-being at this level. The clarity–well-being association was stronger at T3 than at T1 and T2, whereas the belonging-affirmation association did not differ reliably across waves. The stronger clarity association is consistent with the possibility that relatively enduring differences in clarity became more consequential later in the focal transition period.

At the within-person level, wave-specific deviations above an adolescent's typical clarity, belonging-affirmation, or exploration level were concurrently associated with deviations above their typical well-being level. These associations did not differ reliably across waves. Because the assessments were approximately six months apart, they represent concurrent within-person covariation across measurement occasions, not short-term fluctuation. Multigroup tests found no reliable majority–minority differences in either the between-person or within-person ERI–well-being associations.

Conclusion

Study II showed that ERI development across the transition into emerging adulthood was dynamic and differed across ERI dimensions. Clarity increased later in the transition, belonging-affirmation showed a decline from T1 to T2 followed by an increase from T2 to T3, and exploration remained relatively stable. ERI–well-being associations also differed by dimension and level of analysis. Clarity and belonging-affirmation were associated with well-being between and within individuals, exploration was associated with well-being only within individuals, and the between-person clarity association strengthened over time. Study II contributes to the dissertation by showing that ERI is meaningfully multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and linked to well-being across this transition. Importantly, the timing of these changes is consistent with the interpretation that ERI's significance may shift during the move into new postsecondary contexts. However, it does not establish that graduation or specific postsecondary contextual changes caused the observed patterns.

Study III

The aim of Study III was to contribute to ERI research in three ways. First, it foregrounds the content of ERI formation. Second, it examines cross-contextual movement, comparison, and coordination as central mechanisms in ERI formation. Third, it contributes to research on ERI in Sweden by showing how adolescents negotiate heritage and Swedish-majority meanings in a sociocultural context where belonging, distinctiveness, continuity, and recognition may be unevenly supported across settings. The study focused on adolescents whose ERI included both Swedish and at least one additional ethnic-racial background, and examined how meanings attached to heritage, Swedishness, belonging, expression, and recognition were formed, carried across, revised, or challenged between contexts. The guiding research question was: How is adolescents' ethnic-racial identity negotiated through the interplay of social contexts in everyday life?

Method

Study III was based on interview data collected at T1 of the GREY project. Participants were late adolescents who identified as Swedish and at least one other ethnic-racial group. They were drawn from the broader GREY survey sample and were invited to participate based on their ERI centrality and exploration scores. Participants were selected to have high ERI centrality, because adolescents for whom ERI was important to their self-concept were expected to provide richer accounts of ERI formation. They were also selected to vary in exploration, in order to capture variation in how actively they had engaged with the meaning of ERI. A total of 18 adolescents comprised the analytic sample in Study III.

All participants were fluent in Swedish, and all interviews were conducted in Swedish. Before the interview, participants were introduced to a broad definition of ethnicity based on the Swedish Equality Ombudsman's definition of ethnic affiliation. The purpose of this was to allow participants to speak about their ERI in ways that included ethnic, racial, cultural, national, and heritage-related meanings. The definition provided to participants stated:

> *Ethnicity is most often discussed in terms of where people come from, what their family background is, or where they were born. But ethnicity can also refer to the ethnic group a person feels they belong to. This may involve not only one's cultural background or the languages one speaks, but also skin color or different kinds of traditions, such as how one celebrates holidays. According to the Swedish Equality Ombudsman, ethnic affiliation means that 'someone belongs to a group of people who share the same national or ethnic origin, skin color, or other similar circumstance'. Everyone has an ethnicity, and a person can have several. So whether someone sees themselves as Finnish, Somali, Jewish, Swedish, or as a combination of many, we all have one or more ethnicities.*

The interviews covered what participants' ERI meant to them, how ERI was shaped by different social contexts, how ERI intersected with other identity domains, experiences of racism and discrimination, school experiences, and expectations about the future. The interview guide included prompts concerning a wide range of possible contexts, including family, relatives, friends, partners, school, work, neighborhood, Sweden, society at large, sports, hobbies, religious contexts, social media, and computer games. These prompts likely shaped which contexts became salient in the interviews, but participants also introduced contexts that were not explicitly prompted. Conversely, some prompted contexts, such as religion and neighborhood, were less central in the material. This suggests that the interview guide structured the conversations without fully determining which contexts became analytically important.

The interview material was analyzed using abductive thematic analysis. The analysis moved iteratively between close engagement with participants' accounts and sensitizing concepts from ERI development, contextual identity theory, and developmental perspectives on adolescence. The analysis was situated within a contextualist qualitative position. Participants' accounts were treated as meaning-making narratives produced in the interview context, while also being understood as shaped by broader social and developmental conditions, including family relationships, school and peer contexts, majority norms, racialization, and experiences of discrimination. Coding was conducted manually, with the first author leading the analysis and two coauthors involved in discussing candidate themes and theme boundaries. Analytic quality was pursued through sustained engagement with the data, documentation of coding and theme development, collaborative discussion of alternative interpretations, and repeated checking of candidate themes against the data.

Main findings

The analysis resulted in three themes describing how adolescents negotiated ERI across social settings: *Negotiating Cultural Influences*, *Coordinating ERI Expression*, and *Reorganizing ERI Through Transitions*.

The first theme, *Negotiating Cultural Influences*, showed how adolescents made sense of heritage-linked and Swedish-majority influences by comparing family, school, peer, and everyday settings. Family and home were commonly described as primary contexts of heritage-linked language, values, practices, and continuity, whereas Swedishness was often associated with school, peers, and everyday participation in Swedish society. ERI therefore acquired meaning through the relation between settings rather than within any single context alone.

Adolescents described becoming more aware of their heritage-linked identity when Swedish friends encountered their family practices, food, hospitality, or ways of interacting in the home. Such moments made difference visible, and could also make it understandable and valued. Family also functioned as an evaluative framework through which adolescents interpreted Swedish-majority norms and practices. Some Swedish values or practices were described as difficult to incorporate when adolescents expected family disapproval, whereas others, such as gender equality or fairness, were understood as compatible with values already present in the family. Selective incorporation therefore reflected how adolescents actively compared and combined heritage-linked and Swedish-majority influences in ways that could support coherence, tension, or compartmentalization.

The second theme, *Coordinating ERI Expression*, showed how adolescents managed the expression and visibility of ERI across settings that differed in

recognition, norms, and constraints. The findings suggested a continuum: At one end were settings where ERI was taken for granted, such as family or close friendship contexts in which others already knew the adolescent's background and active explanation was not required. In such settings, they could move flexibly between identity positions without having to justify who they were.

Moving along the continuum, in other settings adolescents described more active calibration of language, body language, demeanor, cultural expression, or ethnic-racial visibility. This calibration was often pragmatic and could be experienced as a valued capacity to adapt across settings. However, in more constraining settings, particularly those dominated by Swedish-majority norms or lacking shared frames of reference for heritage-linked expression, they described feeling less able to express certain aspects of themselves. At the most constraining end of the continuum, ERI was made visible through external questioning, discriminatory treatment, or anticipated structural disadvantage. ERI coordination was therefore shaped by both adolescent agency and contextual affordances and constraints.

The third theme, *Reorganizing ERI Through Transitions*, showed how adolescents described their ERI as having been reshaped through earlier changes in school, peer, and social environments, alongside a growing capacity to interpret and integrate multiple identifications. A particularly salient prior transition was entering upper secondary school, which participants described as involving changes in peer composition, emotional climate, and opportunities for recognition. For some adolescents, moving into more diverse or accepting school environments was experienced as reducing vulnerability and making it easier to express their ERI openly.

These retrospective accounts also suggested that transitions expanded opportunities for comparison and integration. Moving between differently composed school and peer settings exposed adolescents to new forms of Swedishness, heritage identity, and multicultural belonging. Participants described how such experiences contributed to reinterpreting differences between home, family, heritage-linked practices, and Swedish-majority peer contexts. What had earlier been experienced as difficult, uncomfortable, or stigmatized could later be reframed as a source of pride, perspective, or advantage. In this sense, repeated movement across settings was described as contributing to ERI reorganization over time, as adolescents came to develop more coherent and positively valued understandings of their multiple identifications.

Conclusion

Study III showed that ERI among Swedish multicultural adolescents was formed through cross-contextual negotiation. The adolescents compared heritage-linked and Swedish-majority influences, coordinated identity expression

across settings, and reorganized ERI through contextual transitions and maturation. Study III thus shows how ERI is contextually embedded and that adolescents' identities develop through everyday settings in which belonging, recognition, expression, and integration are made possible, constrained, or contested. Importantly, the study highlights the significance of understanding identity formation through cross-contextual processes, involving interacting influences linked to family, school, peers, public spaces, work-related expectations, and transnational ties.

General discussion

The overarching aim of this dissertation was to advance an understanding of ERI among young people in Sweden as a multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded identity domain. Across the three studies, the findings show that ERI is a meaningful and measurable identity domain among young people in Sweden, but also that it cannot be understood as a uniform construct. Its structure, development, and psychosocial significance varied depending on which ERI dimension was examined, young people's majority or minority position, the developmental period under study, and the everyday contexts in which ERI was formed and negotiated. The findings support a view of ERI as a differentiated identity domain through which young people make sense of their ethnicity, race, and culture in relation to belonging, recognition, social position, and changing developmental contexts.

The following discussion is organized around two broad contributions. First, I discuss what the findings suggest about ERI as a multidimensional and measurable construct in Sweden, with attention to how ERI dimensions function differently across social positions. Second, I consider ERI as an adaptive, developmental, and contextually embedded process, focusing on belonging, recognition, well-being, and identity integration across changing everyday contexts.

Multiple dimensions of ethnic-racial identity

A broad finding of this dissertation is that ERI in Sweden is meaningfully multidimensional, although this multidimensionality was not reflected in a straightforward correspondence between established subscales and theoretical constructs. This aligns with contemporary ERI theory, which conceptualizes ERI as consisting of several related dimensions that capture how young people engage with, understand, evaluate, and situate ethnic-racial group membership within the self (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). It also aligns with broader multidimensional models of collective identity, in which group membership involves self-categorization, evaluation, attachment, importance, and perceived social meaning (Ashmore et al., 2004). Study I showed partial correspondence between commonly used ERI subscales and theoretically recognizable dimensions. Some subscales, particularly resolution, exploration-participation, and public regard, showed relatively clear dimensional structures, whereas others, especially commitment, centrality, and exploration-search, required more nuanced interpretation. When overlapping item content

was modeled more flexibly, the analyses reflected refined ERI dimensions labeled belonging-affirmation, clarity, exploration, centrality, and public regard. The dissertation thereby extends previous ERI research by showing that core ERI dimensions are recognizable and measurable among adolescents in Sweden, while also highlighting overlap between dimensions and how the psychosocial meaning varies by dimension and social position.

The refined dimensions identified across the dissertation correspond to central constructs in prior ERI research. Exploration captures active engagement with the meaning of one's ethnic-racial background, including learning, reflection, participation, and efforts to understand group membership (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Clarity is closely related to resolution and concerns the extent to which young people have developed an understanding of what ERI means for the self (Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). Belonging-affirmation captures positive affective ties to one's group, including attachment, pride, and positive evaluation (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 1999). Centrality concerns the perceived importance of ERI within the broader self-concept, whereas public regard concerns perceptions of how one's ethnic-racial group is viewed by others or society more broadly (Sellers et al., 1997, 1998).

At the same time, Study I showed that these dimensions were not always cleanly separated in their empirical operationalization. This complexity appears to stem partly from how underlying ERI theories have been translated into measurement instruments. The MEIM commitment subscale reflected both belonging-affirmation and clarity, which is consistent with the broad way commitment has been operationalized in ethnic identity research (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). The centrality subscale showed overlap with belonging-related content, suggesting that some items captured this dimension in addition to self-concept salience. Exploration-search and exploration-participation were also difficult to distinguish empirically, despite a previously detected distinction between more introspective and more participatory forms of exploration (Syed et al., 2013). These findings thus suggest that ERI dimensions are conceptually distinguishable while also being empirically and developmentally connected.

Study I also shed light on the comparability of ERI dimensions across majority and minority adolescents. Metric invariance was supported across groups, indicating that associations between ERI dimensions and other constructs can be meaningfully compared. Scalar invariance, however, was generally not fully supported, indicating that mean-level comparisons require greater caution because some items may be endorsed differently across groups even at similar levels of the underlying construct (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). These findings extend the dimensionality results by showing that ERI dimensions are

shaped by the social positions from which adolescents interpret them. In the Swedish context this could potentially be understood in light of how ethnicity, Swedishness, migration background, and racialization may provide different frames of reference for interpreting the same item for majority and minority youth (Syed & Juang, 2014; Verkuyten, 2016). For example, an item concerning whether ethnicity is central to the self may carry different meanings for an adolescent whose Swedishness is taken for granted and an adolescent whose Swedishness is repeatedly questioned. Research on majority ERI further suggests that dominant group identities may be difficult to articulate because they are often normalized and taken for granted (Moffitt & Rogers, 2022).

The multidimensional view of ERI is further supported and highlighted by showing that dimensions that were distinguished in Studies I and II also appeared in adolescents' lived accounts of ERI in Study III, although not as scale-like categories. Belonging and affirmation appeared in accounts of attachment, pride, recognition, and the ability to feel at home across settings. Clarity was reflected in adolescents' efforts to make sense of their experience of Swedishness, heritage, family expectations, peer relationships, and future possibilities. Exploration appeared in processes of comparison, reflection, selective incorporation, and active engagement with cultural meanings. Public regard appeared in sensitivity to how others evaluated, categorized, or questioned adolescents' identities. Centrality appeared in the extent to which ERI was described as important for self-understanding, such as when adolescents reflected on how family background, Swedishness, and social positioning shaped who they were. The qualitative findings thus provide everyday illustrations of processes that are conceptually related to the dimensions examined in Studies I and II.

The multidimensionality of ERI is also important because the dimensions did not carry the same psychosocial significance. This is consistent with multidimensional and contextual approaches to ERI, which suggest that ERI dimensions reflect distinct but related processes whose meaning and function depend on the developmental and social context (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Verkuyten, 2016; Williams et al., 2020). Across the studies, belonging-affirmation, clarity, public regard, exploration, and centrality appeared to reflect partly different adaptive processes.

Belonging-affirmation emerged across the dissertation as a central affective and relational dimension of ERI, broadly in line with prior ERI research. Specifically, prior research has conceptualized belonging and affirmation in terms of positive feelings, pride, attachment, and evaluation of one's ethnic-racial group, and has linked positive ethnic-racial affect to adjustment (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The present findings support and refine this view. Study I showed that belonging-affirmation could be

distinguished from clarity and was positively associated with well-being among both majority and minority adolescents, although its broader associations with trust and generativity varied by social position. Study II further showed that belonging-affirmation functioned as a relatively stable psychosocial resource over time, while also being temporarily disrupted after the transition out of upper secondary school. Study III showed that belonging-affirmation was embedded in everyday contexts where ERI was recognized, expressed, taken for granted, constrained, or questioned. As these findings suggest, belonging-affirmation captures the affective grounding of ERI and is relationally and contextually supported. Study III further suggests that belonging and affirmation may motivate ERI formation, as adolescents appeared to coordinate and reorganize ERI in ways that supported belonging within the social settings they navigated. Future research could examine the temporal relations among belonging-affirmation, exploration, and clarity. For example, experiences of belonging and affirmation in a given social context may facilitate subsequent exploration and clearer understandings of ERI over time, while exploration and clarity may also strengthen later belonging-affirmation.

Public regard emerged as a social-recognition dimension of ERI with affective implications. In multidimensional racial identity theory, public regard refers to perceptions of how one's ethnic-racial group is viewed by others or by society more broadly (Sellers et al., 1998). Study I showed that public regard had some of the most consistent positive associations with psychosocial adjustment, including well-being and institutional trust among both majority and minority adolescents. Study III further illustrated the lived significance of the perception of recognition by others, showing how adolescents' ERI was shaped by their evolving perceptions of how others viewed their ethnic-racial group across everyday settings. In this way, public regard is closely related to belonging-affirmation but adds a more explicitly social-evaluative dimension. Whereas belonging-affirmation captures whether ERI is experienced as affectively meaningful and valued by the self, public regard captures whether this identity is perceived as valued in the broader social world. This dimension of ERI may be particularly informative in Sweden, where Swedishness, migration background, and racialization shape whether young people's identity claims are recognized as legitimate (Juang et al., 2023; Svensson & Syed, 2019).

Clarity emerged across the dissertation as a central cognitive and organizational dimension of ERI. In prior ERI research, clarity is closely related to resolution, which refers to having a clear understanding of the meaning of one's ethnic-racial background for the self (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The present findings support this conceptualization, suggesting that clarity should be understood as a developmental and contextually situated process. Study I showed that clarity could be distinguished from

belonging-affirmation, despite conceptual overlap in some established ERI measures, and that clarity was positively associated with generativity among minority adolescents. Study II showed that clarity increased from T2 to T3 and that its between-person association with well-being was stronger at T3, while its concurrent within-person association remained stable. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that relatively enduring differences in clarity became more consequential later in the transition (as will be discussed more in the subsequent section of the General Discussion). Study III further suggested that clarity was supported through adolescents' efforts to compare, coordinate, and organize heritage- and Swedish-linked meanings across family, school, peer, public, and transnational settings. These findings thus suggest that clarity captures an emerging capacity to organize multiple identity meanings into a coherent sense of self across changing developmental and social contexts. This interpretation links clarity to broader work on identity coherence and integration, in which differentiated identifications become organized in ways that support continuity and agency over time (Schachter, 2004; Syed & McLean, 2016).

Exploration emerged as an active but contextually variable dimension of ERI. Prior ERI research has conceptualized exploration as engagement with the meaning of one's ethnic-racial background, including learning, reflection, participation, and efforts to understand group membership (Phinney, 1992; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The present findings support this view, while also suggesting that exploration may take different forms with different psychosocial meanings. Study I showed that exploration-search and exploration-participation were difficult to distinguish empirically and they were therefore treated as a broader exploration factor. This factor was positively associated with generativity in both groups and with well-being among minority adolescents, but was negatively associated with institutional trust among minority adolescents. Study II added the distinction that between-person differences in exploration were not associated with well-being, whereas positive wave-specific deviations from an individual's typical exploration level were concurrently associated with higher-than-usual well-being. The relevance of exploration therefore differed between relatively enduring individual differences and concurrent within-person covariation across measurement occasions. Study III complements these findings by showing how adolescents explored ERI through comparison, reflection, and revision across everyday contexts.

Centrality emerged as the ERI dimension that most clearly illustrates why ERI should not be equated with adaptive significance. In prior work, centrality refers to the importance of ethnic-racial group membership within the overall self-concept and is conceptually distinct from belonging, evaluation, and perceived public regard (Ashmore et al., 2004; Sellers et al., 1998). Study I

showed that the MIBI centrality subscale was difficult to empirically separate from belonging-related content, indicating that some items may capture both self-concept importance and affective attachment. The associations between a refined centrality factor and adjustment further suggested the contextual embeddedness of centrality. Centrality was negatively associated with well-being and institutional trust among minority adolescents, whereas it was not significantly associated with adjustment among majority adolescents. These findings suggest that ERI may be important to the self not only because it provides meaning, continuity, or group attachment but also because ethnicity, race, culture, or national belonging are made salient through external categorization, othering, or contested belonging (Branscombe et al., 1999; Verkuyten, 2016). The significance of centrality may thus depend on why ERI is central, whether centrality is grounded in belonging and meaning or in constraint and imposed visibility, and how the surrounding context makes ethnicity, race, culture, and Swedishness consequential.

Further evidence for the multidimensionality of ERI was found in Study II, which showed why ERI dimensionality matters developmentally. Clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration followed different trajectories and showed different patterns of association with well-being. Clarity increased from T2 to T3, and its between-person association with well-being was stronger at T3 while its concurrent within-person association remained stable. Belonging-affirmation declined from T1 to T2 and increased from T2 to T3 and was consistently associated with well-being at both levels. Exploration showed no reliable mean-level change and was associated with well-being only through concurrent wave-specific within-person covariation. These patterns show that ERI dimensions are not interchangeable indicators of a single uniform identity domain; they have partly distinct developmental trajectories and psychosocial associations.

Overall, the findings support the theoretical notion that ERI consists of multiple dimensions that capture different aspects of identity, including engagement through exploration, affective belonging and affirmation, clarity of meaning, identity centrality, and perceived public regard. These dimensions are analytically distinguishable, empirically related, and differentially consequential across social position, developmental time, and everyday context. In this sense, ERI in Sweden can be understood as a multidimensional identity system whose parts are interconnected and dynamically shaped by the surrounding context, as will be further discussed in the following.

Ethnic-racial identity as a dynamic system

Having concluded that ERI in Sweden is multidimensional and contextually embedded, a next broad finding of this dissertation concerns how ERI is

dynamic in several related ways, regarding how its dimensions change across developmental transitions, its adaptive significance shifts over time, and its meanings and expressions are reorganized as young people move across social contexts. This view is consistent with contemporary identity development perspectives that conceptualize identity as an iterative process of formation, maintenance, reconsideration, and consolidation across changing life circumstances (Crocetti, 2026; Luyckx et al., 2011). It also aligns with ERI theory's emphasis that ethnic-racial meanings develop across the lifespan through changing forms of awareness, affiliation, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge, all embedded in social and cultural contexts (Williams et al., 2020).

Among the findings of this dissertation, Study II provides a particularly useful case for examining the dynamic quality of ERI. The transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood involves changes in educational, occupational, relational, and future-oriented pathways, while also being shaped by broader social structures that create different opportunities and constraints (Arnett, 2023; Elder, 1998). Against this backdrop, Study II showed the dynamic properties of ERI in three ways: through dimension-specific developmental trajectories, changing associations between ERI and well-being, and distinct between-person and within-person patterns of association.

One aspect of this dynamic pattern concerns how levels of clarity and belonging-affirmation changed across the transition. Clarity was stable from T1 to T2 and increased from T2 to T3, whereas belonging-affirmation declined during the first interval and increased during the second. From lifespan and multidimensional perspectives, this is consistent with the proposition that affective attachment, identity clarity, and exploration need not change synchronously (Luyckx et al., 2011; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020). Because these changes occurred during a period when young people commonly leave upper secondary school and enter more differentiated contextual pathways, their timing is consistent with the interpretation that shifting contexts may have mattered. The temporary decline in belonging-affirmation could reflect disruption in familiar contexts of belonging and recognition, such as school routines, peer networks, and established institutional environments, whereas the later increase in clarity could reflect emerging meaning-making as young people adapt to new postsecondary settings and understand their ERI in relation to new social positions and relationships. The initial decline in belonging-affirmation can also be considered alongside prior work suggesting that earlier school transitions may heighten ERI salience and be accompanied by increases in affirmation (French et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The present findings extend this line of research to this later developmental transition, where the opposite pattern was observed. Seen in this light, shifts in belonging-affirmation during transitions could be due to shifting salience of ERI,

but also because of a temporary loss of familiar peer networks, routines, and contexts in which ERI-related belonging was recognized or taken for granted. Belonging-affirmation may thus decline initially and recover as new contexts provide renewed opportunities for positive group connection and recognition.

Study II also showed dynamism in the association between ERI and well-being. Most notably, the between-person association between clarity and well-being became stronger later in the transition, indicating that between-person differences in model-implied clarity were more strongly associated with differences in model-implied well-being at T3. The stronger clarity–well-being association at T3 is consistent with the possibility that clearer understandings of ERI become more relevant as young people move beyond the more structured context of upper secondary school. This extends prior research linking ethnic identity meaning and coherence to well-being over time (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), as well as longitudinal and intervention work suggesting that ERI processes can support adjustment across development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2021), by showing that the psychosocial significance of clarity may become more pronounced during a period likely to involve contextual reorganization. One interpretation is that ERI clarity becomes more relevant when young people enter less familiar postsecondary contexts, because clearer identity meanings may help them interpret new social experiences and identify ways of acting that feel identity-congruent (Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

The distinction between between-person and within-person associations further clarifies the dynamic interpretation of ERI. These levels of analysis address different developmental questions (Curran & Hancock, 2021; Hamaker, 2025, 2026). The between-person estimates indicate whether youth with higher model-implied ERI than other youth also had higher model-implied well-being. The within-person estimates indicate whether concurrent wave-specific deviations from a youth's typical ERI level coincided with deviations from their typical well-being. Because measurement occasions were separated by approximately six months, these estimates represent covariation across waves rather than short-term fluctuations. Study II showed evidence for both patterns. At the between-person level, belonging-affirmation and clarity were relatively stable individual-difference dimensions associated with higher well-being. At the within-person level, clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration also varied over time in ways that were linked to concurrent well-being. These findings thus suggest that ERI operated both as a relatively stable individual-difference dimension and as a time-varying construct that covaried concurrently with well-being across the transition into emerging adulthood.

The dynamic argument is extended further by Study III, into everyday social contexts, showing that developmental change can occur through shifts in

the social worlds in which ERI is expressed and recognized. In Study III, adolescents described their ERI as having been reorganized through school transitions, changing peer groups, increasingly diverse environments, public categorization, and anticipated future contexts such as the labor market. This provides a qualitative extension of the transition-salience-affirmation interpretation. Previous work suggests that ERI affirmation may increase during school transitions, possibly because such transitions heighten the salience of race-ethnicity (French et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Study III extends this interpretation by suggesting that this process may, in addition to changing salience, depend on the social affordances of the new setting. Transitions into more diverse, accepting, or identity-recognizing school and peer contexts appeared to make ERI more positively valued, socially recognized, and easier to integrate. Thus, increases in belonging-affirmation during transitions may reflect heightened salience in combination with new opportunities for belonging, recognition, comparison, and identity expression. Such findings align with contextual perspectives on identity, which emphasize that identity development depends on the content of identity meanings and the contexts in which these meanings are enacted (Galliher et al., 2017; McLean et al., 2016; Syed et al., 2018). They also extend work showing that ERI may vary across relational contexts, such as family, same-ethnic peers, and cross-ethnic peers, and that discrepancies across these contexts can be linked to adjustment (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009).

These developmental patterns clarify why the adaptive significance of ERI should be understood as dynamic and contextually contingent. Study II shows that ERI trajectories and ERI–well-being associations vary across dimensions, time, and levels of analysis. Study III shows how contextual recognition, expression, and identity coordination are experienced in everyday life. The combined findings therefore support context as a theoretical framework for interpretation while leaving the specific contextual mechanisms behind Study II's trajectories unresolved.

A further point concerns young people's social position. Social position was relevant in different ways across the studies. In Study I, associations between ERI dimensions and adjustment varied by majority-minority position, suggesting that the adaptive significance of ERI is contextually embedded. In Study II minority youth reported higher levels of clarity, belonging-affirmation, and exploration than majority youth did, consistent with prior research suggesting that ERI is often more salient among young people whose ethnic-racial position is minoritized (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Overall, the findings of Studies I, II, and III suggest that ERI development can be understood as dynamic and contextualized. As young people move across developmental transitions and everyday social worlds, different ERI

dimensions become more or less salient, more or less coherent, and more or less closely tied to well-being. This dynamic view thus highlights identity development and context as intertwined. ERI changes as surrounding social systems change, and its function may depend on the conditions set by the surrounding context.

Theoretical considerations

The findings of this dissertation have theoretical implications for how ERI can be understood in Sweden and other sociocultural contexts outside the US. Across the studies ERI appeared as a meaningful identity domain, but not as a uniform one. Its structure, development, and psychosocial significance depended on which dimension was examined, young people's social position, the developmental period under study, and the everyday contexts in which ERI was negotiated.

The findings refine multidimensional ERI theory by showing that ERI dimensions have partly distinct developmental trajectories and psychosocial associations. Study I supported the distinction between belonging-affirmation, clarity, exploration, centrality, and public regard, drawing on dimensions represented in earlier measures and models (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999; Sellers et al., 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The findings indicate that these dimensions should not be treated as interchangeable indicators of a general "strong ERI." Belonging-affirmation and public regard were most consistently associated with positive indicators of adjustment, suggesting that affective attachment and perceived social recognition are central to ERI's psychosocial significance. Clarity appeared to function as an organizing dimension, and its between-person association with well-being was stronger at T3 in Study II. Exploration and centrality were more contextually ambivalent, suggesting that active engagement with ERI and the importance of ERI to the self may carry different meanings depending on social position and context. This supports the broader theoretical emphasis in this thesis on specifying which ERI dimensions matter, for whom, at which level of analysis, and under what conditions.

The dissertation also contributes to developmental identity theory by highlighting contextual change as a theoretically important condition for ERI development. Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian approaches emphasize identity formation as a central developmental task involving exploration, commitment, coherence, and continuity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Contemporary process-oriented perspectives further describe identity development as iterative, involving cycles of exploration, consolidation, and reconsideration across time and life domains (Crocetti, 2026). Study II showed that ERI dimensions followed differentiated trajectories across a developmental period commonly accompanied by contextual reorganization, although the study did not directly

measure the contextual experiences underlying those trajectories. Study III provided qualitative accounts of how changes across school, peer, family, heritage-linked, Swedish-majority, and public contexts can alter conditions for belonging and identity expression. Taken together, the studies support a contextual-developmental interpretation through different forms of evidence.

The majority–minority findings further illustrate the contextual embeddedness of ERI. ERI was psychosocially relevant in both groups, while its levels, developmental patterns, and some associations with adjustment varied by social position. These patterns suggest that the meaning and significance of ERI are shaped by the social conditions in which identities are experienced and recognized. Notably, because the minority category encompassed heterogeneous experiences related to migration history, racialization, language, religion, multicultural identification, and recognition as Swedish, the studies cannot determine which specific processes accounted for the observed group patterns.

Overall, the findings help specify what appears to travel across sociocultural contexts and what requires greater contextual qualification in ERI theory. The broad multidimensional and developmental architecture of ERI was recognizable, while its operationalization, psychosocial meaning, and developmental expression were more context-dependent. The findings therefore underscore the distinction between theoretical ERI constructs and their conventional measures, and suggest that the significance of particular dimensions depends on the social conditions in which they are experienced. More broadly, they support a contextualized account of ERI development in which identity meanings are shaped through changing social settings, recognition, and cross-contextual negotiation.

Methodological considerations and limitations

The three studies in this dissertation were designed to examine ERI in Sweden from complementary methodological perspectives: psychometric and correlational analyses in Study I, longitudinal developmental modeling in Study II, and qualitative analysis of cross-contextual identity negotiation in Study III. These approaches supported a form of methodological triangulation across the dissertation, whereby different methods contributed distinct but complementary insights into the structure, development, meaning, and function of ERI among Swedish youth (Turner et al., 2017). However, it also needs to be acknowledged that the dissertation was not designed as a fully integrated mixed-methods study in which qualitative and quantitative data were systematically linked across all research questions. In this sense the design supports a broad understanding of ERI in Sweden, but there are limits to the extent to which findings can be directly combined. For example, Study III helps interpret what belonging, clarity, and integration may mean in lived experience, but

its qualitative themes are not direct reflections of the constructs or statistical associations in Studies I or II. Accordingly, Study III can inform the contextual interpretation of Study II but does not identify the mechanisms underlying Study II's longitudinal trajectories or association patterns.

Several limitations also concern the measurement and comparability of ERI in the Swedish context. Study I used established ERI instruments developed largely in US contexts and examined whether theoretically central ERI dimensions could be identified among Swedish adolescents. This made it possible to connect the findings to the broader ERI literature. However, using existing measures also meant that the study inherited some of the conceptual and psychometric ambiguities of previous research. Some subscales contained overlapping content, particularly around commitment, belonging-affirmation, and clarity, and some relevant aspects of ERI were not fully represented, including an explicit EIS-B affirmation scale (Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015). At the same time, these measurement challenges are also part of the dissertation's empirical contribution, as they clarify how established ERI measures function in a Swedish context. Using established instruments was therefore important for evaluating the extent to which ERI theory and measurement can be translated to Sweden.

These findings also have implications beyond the specific instruments evaluated here. They suggest that transferring ERI measures across sociocultural contexts requires more than linguistic translation or demonstration of acceptable overall factor structure. Researchers should examine whether theoretically named dimensions retain similar empirical content, whether items evoke comparable frames of reference across social positions, and whether scalar invariance supports the mean-level comparisons being made. This may be particularly important in European settings where ethnicity and race are often articulated through migration background, nationality, culture, religion, or foreignness rather than through the racial-ethnic categories that have structured much US-based ERI research.

A related issue concerns how participants were instructed to think about ERI when answering survey items. Many ERI measures ask participants to respond in relation to the ethnic group they feel most connected to (e.g. Douglass & Umaña-Taylor, 2015; Phinney, 1992). While this may reduce ambiguity and increase comparability, it also simplifies the experiences of adolescents with multiple ethnic-racial identifications, particularly in Sweden where youth tend to express multiple ethnic-racial identifications in a more alternating, divided manner, compared to youth in the US (Svensson & Syed, 2019). This is made further relevant given Study III's finding that ERI was often shaped through the relation between Swedishness and other ethnic-racial or cultural meanings. Nevertheless, this instruction reflects a common measurement strategy in ERI

research and was useful for producing interpretable responses across a heterogeneous sample. Similarly, although Study I examined measurement invariance across majority and minority adolescents, scalar invariance was not consistently supported, and the later ESEM models allowed cross-loadings that were not strictly tested for invariance. At the same time, the use of ESEM was motivated by the empirical complexity of the data and provided a more realistic representation of overlapping ERI dimensions than stricter CFA models.

Another point for methodological consideration concerns sampling, group categorization, and contextual generalizability. Across Studies I and II, the distinction between majority and minority adolescents was useful because it captured a theoretically important difference in social position in Sweden. However, the categorization is broad and conflates adolescents with different backgrounds. The minority group included adolescents with different migration histories, racialized appearances, languages, religions, and degrees of identification with Swedishness, while the majority group likely included adolescents with varied family histories and understandings of Swedishness. This binary distinction thus conflates several aspects of social positioning that may be important for understanding ERI and its relation to adjustment. Nevertheless, it served an important analytic purpose by allowing the studies to examine broad differences between groups differently positioned in relation to Swedishness and ethnic-racial normativity.

Study II's longitudinal design provided an important developmental perspective, but it also involved limitations related to attrition and unmeasured mechanisms. Attrition was substantial across waves, especially by T3. Although missingness analyses suggested limited systematic dropout, the analyses relied on full information maximum likelihood under the assumption that data were missing at random. FIML uses all available information and can reduce bias under ignorable missing-data conditions, including MAR (Schafer & Graham, 2002), but it does not rule out bias. The use of FIML and the missingness analyses therefore reduced, but did not eliminate, concerns that attrition affected the findings. Another limitation is that contextual reorganization was central to the theoretical framing but was not measured directly. The study followed youth across a period commonly associated with changes in peer networks, institutional settings, daily routines, and future pathways, but it did not assess these changes or test them as explanatory mechanisms. Nor could the design separate changes specifically associated with graduation from normative age-related development or historical and period-specific influences. Study III provides complementary qualitative evidence that contextual transitions can matter for ERI negotiation, but it does not identify the mechanisms responsible for Study II's trajectories. Future research should assess

postsecondary pathways, peer composition, recognition, discrimination, and belonging directly and test whether they explain or modify ERI change.

Study III addressed contextual processes qualitatively, but with a specific sample who were purposefully selected based on high ERI centrality and variation in exploration. This was considered appropriate and useful for generating rich narratives, but likely overrepresented adolescents for whom ERI was already salient and reflectively available. The sample was also restricted to adolescents who identified as Swedish and at least one other ethnic-racial background, and all participants were fluent in Swedish. The findings therefore most directly reflect multicultural adolescents who can articulate their ERI in Swedish and who have some degree of identification with Swedishness. In contrast, they may not capture the experiences of adolescents who identify only with a minoritized background, recent arrivals with weaker Swedish fluency, youth who reject Swedishness, or youth whose ERI is less central. However, this purposive sampling procedure was consistent with the logic of qualitative research, in which participants are selected because they can provide information-rich accounts of the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The interviews and analysis in Study III were also shaped by the research design. The interview guide included prompts about several possible contexts, which helped ensure breadth but may also have influenced which contexts participants discussed. At the same time, participants also introduced contexts that were not explicitly prompted, indicating that their narratives were not overly constrained by the prompts. The analysis was abductive and contextualist, moving between participants' accounts and theoretical concepts from ERI research and developmental identity theory. This approach was deemed appropriate in light of the study's aim. Specifically, an abductive approach made it possible to remain closely grounded in participants' narratives while using concepts such as contextual salience and identity integration to develop a theoretically informed interpretation of the material. Moreover, coding reliability was not calculated in Study III, which is consistent with the analytic approach, although it limits claims about coder-independent categorization. Notably, in reflexive and theoretically informed forms of thematic analysis, coding reliability is not typically viewed as a universal quality criterion because coding is understood as an interpretive and situated practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The quality of the findings instead rests on sustained engagement with the data, collaborative discussion, attention to alternative interpretations, reflexivity, and transparency in the analytic process (Tracy, 2010).

A final limitation of the studies concerns causal inference. While it is cognitively tempting to think of ERI as causing the adaptive adjustment indicators used in Studies I and II and described in Study III, the studies were not designed to provide evidence of causality. Specifically, the relationships

modelled in Study I were concurrent associations, and the models in Study II were based on concurrent associations rather than lagged effects. In addition, while mechanisms of change over time were described in Study III, these descriptions are participants' subjective accounts and do not provide robust or generalizable evidence for causal mechanisms. At the same time, causal explanation was not the primary aim of the dissertation. Study I was designed to examine dimensionality, measurement comparability, and associations; Study II was designed to describe developmental trajectories and distinguish between-person and within-person links with well-being; and Study III was designed to understand how adolescents made sense of ERI across contexts. The studies therefore expand the understanding about structure, development, association, and meaning-making, but do not establish causal mechanisms.

Overall, the studies provide converging evidence that ERI is meaningful, multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded among young people in Sweden. This convergence is strengthened by the use of multiple designs and analytic approaches. However, the findings are shaped by the instruments used, the majority-minority categorization, the school-based sampling frame, longitudinal attrition, the lack of direct measures of contextual change, and the interpretive nature of the qualitative analysis. These limitations clarify the scope of the findings and point to the need for future research. Specifically, future research would benefit from using more context-sensitive measurement, more differentiated group comparisons, direct measures of changing social environments, and designs that more fully integrate quantitative trajectories with qualitative accounts of lived identity development.

Reflexivity

A further methodological consideration concerns my own role in the research process. As the first author and the researcher leading the thesis work, I brought particular social and interpretive perspectives to the studies. I identify as majority Swedish and have not had personal experiences of racialized minoritization comparable to those described by many participants. This is likely to have shaped how I understood participants' accounts of belonging and exclusion, and how I interpreted the Swedish context in relation to ethnicity, race, and national belonging.

This is particularly relevant in Study III, in which the interview material concerned young people's experiences of recognition and constraint across everyday contexts. For one thing, the interview situation involved an asymmetry between researcher and participant, and participants may have adjusted what they said in relation to how they perceived me. During analysis, my majority position may also have made some experiences less immediately

familiar, requiring careful attention to participants' own descriptions and to the broader literature on ethnic-racial identity, racialization, and belonging in Sweden. Moreover, as a qualitative study, Study III necessarily involved a greater degree of interpretation on the part of the researcher. Because of this, reflexivity was important both during interviews and during analysis.

Several steps were taken to reduce the risk that the analysis would rely too heavily on my own assumptions. The analysis was grounded in repeated close reading of the interview material, close attention to participants' own wording, documentation of coding and theme development, and discussion of candidate themes with coauthors, who had other ethnic-racial backgrounds and identifications. Across the thesis I also avoided treating majority and minority positions as fixed or homogeneous categories, endeavoring to represent participants' accounts in nuanced ways, involving not only exclusion and constraint – often focal in previous research – but also belonging, agency, pride, ambivalence, and identity integration.

Nevertheless, reflexivity does not remove the researcher's influence. It does, however, clarify that the findings are produced through an interpretive process shaped, in part, by the researcher's social position.

Ethical considerations

The two data collections that the studies in this dissertation are based on received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (survey study: Dnr 2022-06372-01; interview study: Dnr 2023-01185-01). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and that they could withdraw from the studies at any point and without giving a reason. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, and participants were provided with information about where they could turn if their participation elicited thoughts, feelings, or concerns they wanted to discuss further. These procedures were central to protecting participants' integrity and well-being.

Beyond these formal procedures, ERI research involves specific ethical considerations because it asks young people to reflect on their ethnicity, race, and culture. These are sensitive topics, particularly in Sweden. For many, these concepts may be connected not only to pride, family history, and belonging but also to exclusion, discrimination, identity conflict, or experiences of being positioned as not fully Swedish, as reflected in the study findings. In the Swedish context, where ethnicity and race are often indirectly discussed through categories such as culture, migration background, foreignness, and Swedishness, asking adolescents to name and reflect on ERI may also make visible

distinctions that are otherwise left implicit. While this may, for some, feel uncomfortable, I believe that our decision to conduct this research is appropriate in light of our measures to ensure the participants' well-being and the value it may add to the understanding and continued discussion of these sensitive issues. Furthermore, in an open question at the end of the survey, several participants expressed appreciation that the project addressed these issues. While this does not remove the ethical sensitivity of the research, it suggests that many participants experienced having the opportunity to reflect on these topics as meaningful.

In Study III, the qualitative interviews required additional attention to participant comfort and the interactional nature of the research situation. The interviews were conducted in a participant-centered manner, with efforts to create a calm and respectful atmosphere before moving into sensitive topics. When discussing discrimination, exclusion, or identity conflict the interviewer proceeded cautiously, attended to participants' verbal and nonverbal responses, and avoided pursuing topics when participants seemed unwilling or uncomfortable. This was important because qualitative interviews can invite deeper reflection than surveys and may therefore also elicit more emotionally charged accounts.

A further ethical consideration concerns the interpretation and representation of the data. The dissertation deals with young people's accounts of ethnicity, Swedishness, belonging, and discrimination, and these accounts are embedded in broader social and political debates. There is thus an ethical responsibility to avoid overgeneralizing from participants' narratives, reducing adolescents to their ethnic-racial backgrounds, or presenting minority youth primarily through problems of exclusion and majority youth as oppressors. To avoid this and other overgeneralizations, the aim during analysis and writing was to represent participants' perspectives in a complex form, reflecting meaning-making, experiences of belonging, pride, negotiation, constraint, and agency. While this is important in all kinds of socially oriented research, it may be particularly important in ERI research because of the deep and dark history related to the simple categorization and stereotyping of people within strict boundaries of ethnic-racial categories.

Implications for policy and practice

From a systems-level perspective, the findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive approaches to ERI. Study III showed that ERI is negotiated across multiple social worlds, including family, school, peers, heritage-linked contexts, Swedish-majority settings, public spaces, and anticipated future settings. Schools are important in this broader social ecology because they are institutional settings where several of these social worlds meet. As shown

particularly in Study III, young people bring family- and heritage-linked identities into peer relations, encounter public narratives about Swedishness and diversity, and begin to imagine future educational and occupational pathways. Schools therefore have an important role as contexts where young people encounter and negotiate meanings of Swedishness, heritage, belonging, and recognition. Educators and school staff could thus benefit from paying attention to how Swedishness is defined and enacted in curricula, institutional routines, peer interactions, and everyday classroom practices. For instance, this could include reflections on whether multiple ways of being Swedish are made visible and legitimate.

Study III suggests that adolescents may experience ERI differently across contexts, with some settings allowing identity expression and belonging whereas others require adjustment, explanation, or strategic management of visibility. This highlights that identity conflict, exploration, or uncertainty not only resides within the individual but is also an expression of contextual affordances and constraints. In this sense, conversations about ERI in schools, youth services, and clinical settings could benefit from making room for complexity, including the possibility that adolescents may feel Swedish in some contexts, questioned in others, and connected to heritage-linked identities in ways that vary across family, peer, and public settings.

Studies I and II further indicate that ERI has implications for psychosocial adjustment. Dimensions such as belonging-affirmation, public regard, and clarity were linked to well-being and other indicators of adjustment, although the patterns differed across groups and dimensions. A practical implication is that educators, families, and professionals could support environments in which young people can develop positive and coherent understandings of ERI. This includes creating spaces where young people can reflect on ethnicity, culture, race, migration background, and Swedishness in respectful ways that are neither colorblind nor essentializing.

The longitudinal findings in Study II also add an important developmental implication. The transition from upper secondary school into emerging adulthood appears to be a period in which ERI may be reorganized. Clarity increased later in the transition, whereas belonging-affirmation showed a temporary decline before recovering. This suggests that the period after graduation may involve disruption, potentially in familiar contexts of belonging, such as school, peer groups, and everyday institutional routines. Educators, student health services, career counselors, universities, workplaces, and youth support services could thus benefit from paying attention to the identity-related dimensions of this transition. While practical support focused on educational or occupational pathways during this period is important, it could also be of value to support identity development through young people's changing social

worlds. Specifically, supporting opportunities for young people to reflect on and clarify their ERI during periods of change may be relevant to their well-being as they navigate such times.

The findings also suggest that ERI is relevant for both majority and minority adolescents in Sweden, although under different social conditions. For minority youth it may be tied to heritage continuity, racialization, discrimination, and questions of belonging in relation to Swedishness. For majority youth it may be less explicit but still relevant, as they make sense of Swedishness, diversity, and their own social position. This has implications for schools and policy. Reducing colorblindness means, in part, recognizing that ethnicity, race, culture, and Swedishness shape the developmental conditions of both majority and minority youth, albeit asymmetrically.

Finally, policymakers should consider how public discourses around identity and belonging shape the broader developmental landscape of ERI. The findings suggest that narrow or exclusionary understandings of Swedishness may constrain young people's possibilities for belonging and integration, whereas broader and more plural understandings may support identity clarity and affirmation. Policies, curricula, and institutional practices that validate multiple expressions of Swedishness and acknowledge the social reality of ethnicity and race can contribute to more inclusive developmental contexts.

Future directions

While the three studies in this dissertation advance an understanding of ERI in Sweden, they also point to several areas in which further research is needed. A first direction for future studies concerns the continued development and validation of ERI measures for the Swedish context. Study I showed that established ERI scales developed largely in US contexts can capture theoretically meaningful dimensions among Swedish adolescents. At the same time, some subscales, such as centrality, commitment, and exploration-search, showed conceptual or psychometric complexity. Future research should therefore examine whether existing instruments can be further adapted, or whether new measures are needed to better capture how young people understand ethnicity, race, culture, migration background, heritage, and Swedishness. A related direction concerns how measures can be developed in a way that attends more carefully to adolescents with multiple ethnic-racial identifications, as measures that focus on one ethnic group may not fully capture how Swedishness and heritage-linked identities are experienced in relation to one another.

A second direction concerns more differentiated and contextualized analyses of ERI development. The present dissertation broadly distinguished between majority and minority adolescents, which was useful for examining differences in ERI levels, measurement, development, and psychosocial

associations. However, future studies should examine how ERI varies based on more nuanced groupings, for instance concerning migration generation, phenotype, religion, language, socioeconomic position, gender, and local ethnic-racial setting. The need for a more contextualized understanding of ERI is highlighted in Study II, which showed that ERI changed across the transition from upper secondary school into emerging adulthood, while contextual reorganization was not measured directly. Future longitudinal research should directly assess changes in school, work, higher education, peer networks, family relationships, discrimination, and perceived recognition and test whether these experiences explain or modify ERI trajectories.

A third direction concerns the adaptive significance of ERI under changing circumstances. Across Studies I and II, psychosocial associations differed by ERI dimension and, in Study II, by developmental timing and level of analysis. Study I identified some group-specific associations, whereas Study II found no reliable majority–minority differences in the magnitudes of ERI–well-being associations. Future research should therefore move beyond asking whether ERI is adaptive in general and examine when, for whom, and under what contextual conditions particular ERI dimensions are associated with adjustment. More waves, more frequent assessments, lagged designs, and direct measures of context are needed to distinguish longer-term developmental covariation from shorter-timescale processes and to establish temporal ordering.

Finally, future research should further examine identity conflict and cross-contextual negotiation. Study III showed that adolescents with multicultural identities often navigated tensions between heritage-linked and Swedish-majority expectations across family, school, peer, public, and future-oriented contexts. Future studies should examine when such tensions support reflection, exploration, and integration, and when they become sources of strain, compartmentalization, or exclusion. More integrated mixed-methods designs would be especially useful here, for example following the same adolescents over time through both surveys and repeated interviews. Such designs could connect quantitative trajectories of ERI clarity, belonging-affirmation, exploration, and well-being with qualitative accounts of changing contexts, recognition, discrimination, and identity function.

Conclusion

This thesis examined ERI – ethnic-racial identity – among young people in Sweden as a multidimensional, developmentally dynamic, and contextually embedded identity domain. Across the three studies, ERI was examined in terms of how it can be conceptualized and measured, how its different dimensions relate to psychosocial adjustment, how it develops across the transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood, and how it is negotiated across

everyday social settings. The findings show that ERI is a meaningful identity domain in Sweden, while also highlighting that its meaning and function depend on the dimension, social position, developmental timing, and context.

The thesis contributes to ERI research by showing that ERI in Sweden is a measurable and developmentally relevant concept through which young people make sense of themselves and their place in society. Study I showed that several theoretically recognizable ERI dimensions could be identified among Swedish adolescents, while measurement and interpretation require attention to majority-minority positioning. Study II showed differentiated and potentially nonlinear ERI trajectories across the transition into emerging adulthood and demonstrated that ERI dimensions were associated with well-being through both between-person differences and concurrent wave-specific within-person covariation. Study III showed that ERI is negotiated across multiple social settings, as adolescents compare, coordinate, and reorganize meanings of Swedishness, heritage, belonging, and identity expression.

The findings broadly underscore that ERI should be understood as contextually embedded. Study III showed directly how recognition, affirmation, questioning, and constraint shaped adolescents' accounts of ERI across everyday contexts. Studies I and II showed that ERI's structure, levels, developmental trajectories, and psychosocial correlates varied across dimensions, social positions, and developmental time. Belonging-affirmation, public regard, and clarity were most consistently linked to positive indicators of adjustment, whereas exploration and centrality showed more variable patterns. The combined findings suggest that the adaptive significance of ERI may depend less on salience alone than on the forms of belonging, clarity, recognition, and integration that young people can develop in particular social conditions.

Overall, the dissertation advances a view of ERI as a dynamic system linked to belonging, meaning-making, recognition, and adaptation. ERI develops through young people's efforts to understand who they are in relation to family, peers, school, heritage-linked contexts, Swedish-majority settings, and broader public discourses of belonging. It is shaped both by stable social positioning and by the changing contexts young people navigate as they move from adolescence into emerging adulthood. The thesis thus shows that ERI is both valid and consequential in Sweden, and that its structure, development, and adaptive significance are shaped by the contexts in which young people's identities are formed, expressed, and recognized.

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