Ethnic-Racial Identity Among Young People in Sweden: Measurement, Development, and Context

Tommy Reinholdsson

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras onsdag, 21 oktober, 2026, klockan 10.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Elisabetta Crocetti, Universitetet i Bologna, Italien

Föreliggande uppsats grundar sig på följande artiklar:

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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Abstract

Tommy Reinholdsson (2026). Ethnic-Racial Identity Among Young People in Sweden: Measurement, Development, and Context. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 500, SE-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.

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 of ERI and psychosocial relevance 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

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