Ethnic-Racial Identity in Action:
Structure and Content of Friends' Conversations about Ethnicity and Race

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Abstract

Among emerging adults, peers are central to ethnic-racial identity (ERI) exploration, acting as primary interlocutors in discussions about ethnicity and race. Although ERI development is understood as adaptive, particularly for young people of color, ethnicity and race related conversations are often highly charged, and can consist of both positive, self-affirming exchanges, as well as negative experiences of identity denial, disinterest, and discrimination. The valence of such conversations, and their role in ERI development, may relate both to *what* is being said and *how* the conversation is structured. The current study examines in vivo, unguided conversations between 36 friend pairs coded for mention of ethnicity and race ($N = 64$ individuals; 56% women, 75% born in the U.S., M age = 20.54, $SD = 2.73$; ethnic composition: $n = 11$ ethnic-racial minority (EM)-EM, $n = 14$ EM-White, $n = 9$ White-White). Based on a two-step qualitative analysis, we found wide variation in conversation *content* and *structure*. Despite no differences in the length of ethnicity and race related discussion, the types of stories told were shaped starkly by ethnic-racial inequality, discrimination, and the largely segregated experiences of White students. We discuss our findings in light of the little investigated link between ERI exploration and maladaptive psychosocial outcomes.

Keywords: Ethnic-racial identity, identity exploration, emerging adults, qualitative analysis, conversation

Traditionally, ethnic-racial identity (ERI) development has been measured at the individual level, using surveys or interviews to assess beliefs and attitudes about one's ethnicity and race (Sellers et al., 1998), as well as the related processes of identity exploration and commitment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Decades of work in this realm has shown that identity processes are heightened during the period of emerging adulthood (Syed & Mitchell, 2013), and that ERI development is generally adaptive, particularly for adolescents and emerging adults of color (e.g., Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Among emerging adults, peers play a central role in ERI development, including as primary interlocutors in discussions about ethnicity and race (Syed, 2012). Yet, few studies have examined the actual content of ethnicity and race related exchanges between friends, or how such conversations are structured.

Survey research has found that discussions with peers can consist of and lead to positive, self-affirming identity development, for instance by sharing childhood experiences or talking about values and beliefs (Priest et al., 2014; Vietze et al., 2019). Yet, conversations about ethnicity and race are often highly charged (Sue, 2013), and can also consist of negative experiences of identity denial, disinterest, and discrimination (Goodyer & Okitikpi, 2007; Sue, 2013; Svensson, Berne, & Syed, 2017). This may be particularly true if friends hold differing beliefs or have had divergent ethnicity and race related experiences.

For instance, if an individual tells a story about a discrimination experience and their friend fails to ask supportive follow-up questions or abruptly changes the subject, they may feel invalidated by their friend's behavior and less motivated to pursue such conversations in the future (Thorne & Shapiro, 2011). Such an experience can influence the nature of ERI exploration both down the line and in vivo, as the conversation is taking place. Conversely, if the listener provides positive conversational scaffolding, showing active engagement with the story, this can shape the teller's meaning-making about the event (McLean & Jennings, 2012) and impact the perceived acceptability of recounting such stories (Eagan & Thorne, 2010).

Structural elements of a given conversation are interwoven with conversation content. The same friend who changes the subject at the mention of discrimination may be happy to discuss a "less charged" topic, becoming a very different type of conversation partner once the content of the discussion has shifted. Thus, although ethnicity and race related conversations occur at the micro-level, they are necessarily situated in a broader societal context, and should be interpreted through this multi-level lens. The types of ethnicity and race related discussions peers engage in (i.e., reflecting on beliefs, telling stories about family, or recounting experiences with racism) and the form they take (i.e., active and co-constructed, short and one-sided, or abruptly interrupted by one conversation partner) can alternately reiterate or resist the ethnic-racial inequity shaping U.S. society.

In ERI research, discrimination experiences are generally considered highly relevant to but separate from ERI development itself (e.g., Cheon & Yip, 2019; Zeiders et al., 2019). Work in this realm has made clear the detrimental impact of discrimination and the often protective and promotive effect of ERI, specifically among young people of color (Sladek et al., 2020). Yet, investigating discrimination experiences *as part of* the ERI exploration process may help shed light on the nuanced, everyday, and subtle ways in which discrimination is manifested, and how its affects may alternately be ameliorated or exacerbated. Moreover, examining exchanges

among friend dyads that include both White and ethnic minority emerging adults will further help us parse the interactional nature of conversations about racism and discrimination in particular and ERI development more broadly (Rogers, 2018). Thus, we will examine both *what* peers talk about and *how* their ethnicity and race related conversations are structured, while also examining differences across ethnic-racial groups.

Studying naturally occurring conversations of any kind can be quite difficult, however, let alone conversations about ethnicity and race. To address this issue, the current study draws on a straightforward yet rarely used data collection method involving “catch-up” conversations, which allows two friends to simply talk about any topic of their choosing for 10 minutes (Thorne, Korobov, & Morgan, 2007). In this case, these conversations occurred directly after the two friends had each filled out a survey focusing on ERI. Thus, although not prompted to do so, many friend pairs mentioned something to do with ethnicity and race in their conversations. We focus on a sub-sample of these conversations among friend pairs who reported a mismatch regarding their general frequency of ethnicity and race related discussions, in an effort to capture potentially charged or difficult discussions. We use a two-step qualitative analysis to examine both the conversation content (*What kinds of stories are being told?*) and structure (*What is the length, depth, and form of the conversation?*). By using this innovative method, this intentionally exploratory and descriptive study goes beyond traditional individual-based analyses, helping to move forward inquiry into contextualized ERI development. In the following sections we review relevant literature on ERI exploration in context and in interaction with peers before delving into the current study.

Ethnic-Racial Identity Exploration

Ample identity development research has indicated that individuals tend towards an achieved status of ERI over time, which generally includes processes of exploration followed by commitment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). What is often missing from this research, however, is an investigation of *why* individuals may alternately continue or discontinue ERI exploration, and relatedly, *what* the content of their exploration entails. A meta-analysis found that, although ERI relates positively to well-being overall (Smith & Silva, 2011), links between ERI *exploration* and both self-esteem (Lee & Yoo, 2004; Romero & Roberts, 2003) and well-being (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig, 2011) are less conclusive. One study found that what the authors called *search* behaviors, which includes ethnicity and race related conversations, can be ambivalent, offering little clarity regarding the valence or outcome of participants' reported experiences (Syed et al., 2013). This ambivalence may relate to the content and structure of a given interaction—if an individual perceives their conversation partner to be supportive, open, and engaged in the discussion, this may lend a positive valence to ERI exploration. On the other hand, if an individual feels their identity has been invalidated during a discussion with a peer, it would make sense for such an experience to negatively affect their wellbeing. Thus, the content and structure of ethnicity and race related conversations, and the recognition of discrimination as a potential aspect of the exploration process, may help explain the extent to which individuals engage in ERI exploration, as well as what types of outcomes are associated with it.

Research shows that both ethnic-racial minority and White individuals avoid discussions related to ethnicity and race, though for different reasons. Among ethnic-racial minorities,

reasons include wanting to preclude microaggressions (Sue, 2013) and not wanting to have to explain or defend their experiences (Spencer et al., 2012). These findings reflect the pervasiveness of institutional and interpersonal discrimination, indicating that societally perpetuated inequity and bias play a role as ethnic-racial minorities alternately engage in or avoid this component of ERI exploration. Furthermore, given the frequency of ethnic-racial microaggressions (e.g., Nadal, 2011; Smith, David, & Stanton, 2020), these findings underscore the importance of examining the role they play in ERI relevant conversations between friends.

White college students also report high levels of anxiety in regards to talking about ethnicity and race (Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010), though a key reason they cite for avoiding these topics is the maintenance of “politeness” (Sue, 2013). White individuals, particularly those growing up in racially segregated areas, are often eager to maintain “racial comfort,” a feeling of being entitled to a status quo free of discussions about and recognition of ethnic-racial inequity (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006). When the topic of race does come up, White individuals may engage in what are called mitigating strategies, changing the structure of the conversation by laughing, overtly downplaying the importance of race or the existence of discrimination, or simply changing the subject (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; van Dijk, 1992). Doing so reinforces the prevailing norm of colorblindness, which promotes silence on the topic of race and washes over the existence and impact of racism and discrimination (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010). Colorblindness is significantly more supported by White than Black individuals (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007), as it works to uphold an inequitable status quo privileging whiteness.

ERI as Dynamic and Co-Constructed

Beyond these between-group differences, there is also ample within-group variation in ERI development (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2010). One factor shaping this variation may be the social feedback individuals receive in interaction with their friends. Although discursive psychologists, sociologists, and others have examined for decades the ways in which people tend to talk (or not talk) about race, little of this work has spilled over into ERI development research. Viewing ERI development as a relational and interactive endeavor (e.g., Rogers, 2018; Svensson, Berne, & Syed, 2018), we can draw on such work to examine not only self-reported ERI levels and static social category variables, but also *how* ERI is enacted in interaction and *what* this process looks like across individuals. Doing so entails conceptualizing identity development not only as an intrapsychic, long-term process, but also as something performative, social, and situated in interaction (Thorne, 2004).

For instance, an individual can tell a story, but how it is received, including the lack or nature of follow-up questions, conversational reciprocity, etc., can all be meaningful, particularly when the topic at hand is highly charged (Thorne & Nam, 2007). These elements of a conversation’s structure—the ways in which a listener responds to and encourages their interlocutor—are referred to as scaffolding. Structural elements, such as asking supportive questions for elaboration or repetition, and building on interpretations of a story, are deemed positive scaffolding, and have been linked to greater meaning-making following conversations about past events between adolescent peers (McLean & Jennings, 2012). Conversely, negative scaffolding can include changing the topic, not asking any supportive follow-up questions, and

negating the other person's experiences, including through questions that undermine the storyteller's interpretation of an event (McLean & Jennings, 2012; Spear, 2019). Negative scaffolding can be detrimental to the conversation, and may also have an impact regarding which topics are perceived as important, valid, and relevant. For instance, previous research with friend dyads found that when one friend seemed distracted while listening, the friend talking told a shorter story and reported less interest in the topic at hand than in dyads with either an agreeable *or* disagreeable listener (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005).

For emerging adults, receiving everyday cues from friends that ethnicity and race are not interesting or worthwhile topics may play an important role in the process of ERI exploration. If individuals experience negative scaffolding during conversations with their friends, it could help explain the negative relation sometimes found between ERI exploration and wellbeing (Syed et al., 2013). Moreover, stories told in interaction tend to be less well ordered and messier than when written down—if and how they are listened to, encouraged, and reciprocated may impact the meaning *both* parties make about the specific content being discussed and the broader subject at hand (Thorne & Shapiro, 2011). Given the societally fraught and highly personal nature of ERI, both *how* stories related to ethnicity and race are told and received, as well as *what types* of stories are being told may be key elements shaping ERI exploration among emerging adults.

Talking about Ethnicity and Race as Doing ERI

As in previous narrative research in this area (e.g., Syed & Azmitia, 2008), we conceptualize ERI relevant content as representing a part of the lived experiences of participants, which can be examined in vivo during conversations (Thorne et al., 2007). There are numerous reasons why it is helpful and important for researchers to take content into account when examining identity processes. First, content-focused longitudinal research has shown that emerging adults who engage in increased ERI exploration over time are more likely to tell different types of ERI narratives than those whose exploration stays steady, with the majority shifting to more nuanced stories about experiencing prejudice or connections to culture (Syed & Azmitia, 2010).

Second, examining content allows for a deep engagement with individual narratives, including those told in conversation with friends. Among narrative researchers in the life-story tradition, the content of a story is understood as constitutive of an individual's identity, as people use the stories they tell to construct an overarching narrative about who they are (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Yet, content and structure are inextricably linked—the length of a discussion, the types of follow-up questions posed, and ultimately the meaning made from the interaction, all reciprocally relate to the content of what is being discussed. Bamberg's (e.g., 2004, 2011) research on "small stories" highlights how meaningful the ways in which individuals position themselves in brief interactions can be. Bamberg situates his research from the starting point not that individuals, "*have* a sense of self as first located in the person and subsequently locatable in their stories, but that, in the process of telling stories, they engage in 'identity work' that results in (local and situated) displays of a sense of self" (Bamberg, 2008, p.184, emphasis in original).

Numerous scholars have argued for an intertwining of these approaches—recognizing the situated nature of storytelling as embedded within a given interaction and societal context, while

also as something from which individuals can and do make identity relevant meaning (e.g., McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Thorne, 2004). Similarly, some researchers have argued that we need to examine everyday interactions as ways of *doing* identity (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Following this perspective, and given the broader societal context of ethnic-racial stratification and inequity, the ways in which individuals *do* and *experience* ERI in conversations with friends can tell us something not only about individual development but also about how identity negotiation at the micro-level alternately reiterates or resists macro-level structures (Lewis, 2003).

The Present Study

To capture the diverse elements of ERI exploration discussed above, we will analyze both the content and structure of 10-minute “catch up” conversations between emerging adult friend pairs coded for any mention of ethnicity and race. As such, the current study is guided by the following overarching research questions:

1. What is the *content* of ethnicity and race related conversations among this sample of emerging adult friend dyads? Which topics and issues are discussed?
2. What is the *structure* of ethnicity and race related conversations among this sample of emerging adult friend dyads? What types of scaffolding are enacted? Are ethnicity and race related conversations brief or in-depth?

A key strength of this approach is the unprompted nature of the conversations being analyzed. In a focus group or interview setting, both the content and structure of dialogue is guided by the researcher, making it difficult to meaningfully probe if and how individuals approach topics related to ethnicity and race in natural conversation with their peers. Moreover, even in focus groups including friend pairs, the mere presence of the interviewer is very likely to inform the nature of the conversation (McLean et al., 2007). Although differences can and likely do arise in how friends talk with one another when they are aware they are being recorded (Thorne, Shapiro, Cardilla, Korobov, & Nelson, 2009), previous research using the same “catch-up” conversation format yielded rich analyses in the areas of introversion/extroversion (Thorne et al., 2007) and intimacy (Korobov & Thorne, 2006). To our knowledge, however, this is the first study using this format to study ERI and conversations about ethnicity and race.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants for the current study were drawn from the larger “Ethnicity and Friends Study,” which was conducted at a large public university in the U.S. Midwest. Participants responded to recruitment flyers posted both on campus and online. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years of age and having a friend of a similar age (+/- two years) who was also willing and able to participate. Because a key aim of the larger study was to investigate identity among ethnic-racial minorities, a quota was established of roughly no more than 25% of the target *N* (100 friend pairs) identifying as White. However, only the ethnicity/race of the initial friend was regulated, but not the friend who they brought with them to take part in the study.

The full sample included 107 friend pairs ($N = 214$ individuals; 56% women, 68% born in the U.S., M age = 20.39, $SD = 2.25$). Based on their self-reported ethnicity, 63% of target participants were ethnic minorities and 37% were White. Compared to ethnic diversity on campus, which included a 78% White student body at the time of data collection, this demographic breakdown was a result of oversampling of ethnic-racial minority students. Since this oversampling only related to the target participant, three types of friend pairs were included in the study in relation to their ethnic composition: ethnic minority-ethnic minority (EM-EM; $n = 51$), ethnic minority-White (EM-White; $n = 32$), and White-White ($n = 24$). Target participants were not asked to bring a same-gender friend. Although the survey included a third gender option beyond the female/male binary, no participants selected that option, though four did not respond. Thus, the resulting gender composition was $n = 43$ female-female, $n = 29$ male-male, $n = 33$ female-male, and $n = 2$ no response. Gender composition did not vary significantly with ethnic composition, and all gender pair groups reported similar levels of relationship closeness.

Following the eligibility screening, the target participant and friend were scheduled for a one-hour session in the second author's laboratory on campus. Participants completed a computer-based survey while a research assistant sat facing away, available for questions and to ensure that the friends did not talk to one another while filling out the survey. The survey included measures related to ethnicity, identity, personality, well-being, and friendships, including the item, "How frequently do you discuss issues of race, ethnicity, or culture with your friends?" to which participants could respond using a four-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 2 = A little bit, 3 = A fair amount, 4 = A lot). In addition to survey measures, participants were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Please describe a particular time in your life, either positive or negative, when you felt aware of your race/ethnicity. Tell us how old you were when this happened, where you were, whom you were with, what happened, and how you reacted. Include details that would help us see and feel as you did." Following their open-ended response, participants were asked a series of questions regarding the event they discussed, including how they felt when it occurred, how they feel about it now, how it affects how they view their ERI, and how important it is to who they are.

Participants took between 20 and 40 minutes to complete the full survey. After both participants finished, the research assistant brought them to a simulated "living room" and instructed them to engage in a 10-minute "catch-up" conversation (see Thorne et al., 2007). The research assistant told participants to talk about whatever they wanted, without further instructions. All participants agreed to have their conversations audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Participants were compensated with \$15.00 US each. Trained research assistants conducted orthographic transcriptions of each friend dyad discussion after study participation took place.

Participants in the Current Research

In the current study, we examine conversations between pairs for whom there is a misalignment in reported general frequency of ethnicity and race related discussions with friends. For instance, pairs in which one friend reported they regularly have ethnicity and race related conversations with their friends and the second stated they rarely do. In choosing this

subpopulation, we are hoping to unearth rich information on the types of tensions that can arise within peer interactions in which at least one friend may feel uneasy discussing ethnicity and race. This choice relates to our particular interest in gaining a deeper understanding of why, among some individuals, ERI exploration is linked to negative outcomes. Because unease in race and ethnicity related conversations occurs with regularity in everyday life, we believe it warrants greater empirical investigation.

To select our sub-sample, two subsequent steps were taken. First, only dyads were included in which a discrepancy existed between the friends' reported general frequency of ethnicity related conversation with friends, comprising roughly half the original sample (49 friend pairs; $N = 98$ individuals). Among these 49 friend pairs, only three included responses more than one point apart on a four-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all" – 4 = "A lot"). To complete the second step of sub-sample selection, the first author and a trained research assistant carefully read through each remaining transcript, noting any instance of ethnicity and race related discussion. There was 100% agreement that 34 dyads ($N = 64$ individuals; 56% women, 75% born in the U.S., M age = 20.54, $SD = 2.73$) included discussion in which ethnicity and/or race were mentioned, resulting in the final sample included in the current study. The current sample therefore included the following pairs, based on ethnic composition: $n = 11$ EM-EM, $n = 14$ EM-White, $n = 9$ White-White, and gender composition: $n = 14$ female-female, $n = 9$ male-male, $n = 1$ unreported by both individuals. As compared to the broader study participants, those included in this sample did not vary significantly in terms of reported relationship closeness, which was moderate to high ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.60$ on a 7-point scale). Additionally, there were no significant differences in reported frequency of ethnicity relevant conversations with friends in terms of either participant gender or ethnicity.

Analytic Procedure

Thematic Analysis: Conversation Content

An iterative coding procedure was used, beginning with the first author reading through each transcript to gain familiarity with the types of discussions occurring. The first author and a trained research assistant then re-read each transcript, generating a list of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on instances of ethnicity and race related discussion. During this process, nine initial themes were decided upon and further discussed by both authors. After comparison with previous work using a narrative approach to investigate ethnic identity among emerging adults (Syed & Azmitia, 2008), the authors decided to partially adapt the initial themes to align with the coding manual used in this previous research, as many were closely overlapping. Thus, the following five conversation *content* themes were selected, the first four of which parallel those from Syed & Azmitia's (2008) study: *Awareness of difference*, *Awareness of underrepresentation*, *Experience of racism/discrimination*, *Positive connection to culture/ethnicity*, and *Discussion of not thinking about ethnicity and race*. The subthemes created within each of these five themes differed from those in the previous study, however, perhaps due to the conversation format of the current study, as well as differences in participant demographics.

Thematic Analysis: Conversation Structure

While conducting the *content* coding, the first author and a trained research assistant simultaneously began the iterative process of coding for conversation *structure*. To do so, the first author took notes on salient characteristics of the conversation, including scaffolding—when and how discussions related to ethnicity and race were initiated, structured, and concluded—as well as length and depth of conversation. This coding was based on previous research using the “catch up” conversation format (Thorne et al., 2007), as well as research foregrounding the performative nature of identity (Bamberg, 2008). The aim of this study is not to investigate the minutiae of individual utterances, however, as is the case in discourse analysis, but rather to examine the identity work occurring in interaction between friend pairs and to investigate the types of conversational scaffolding occurring (McLean & Jennings, 2012). We were also interested in whether or not the conversations proceeded beyond a retelling of the ethnicity and race related events participants wrote down during the survey, and if patterns emerged regarding which friend tended to be the one prompting such conversations versus changing the subject. As a result of the iterative coding procedure, and following discussion between the first author and a trained research assistant, 10 dichotomous (presence-absence) themes and subthemes were selected. The themes were each phrased as questions, and dyads were coded if we deemed the answer to the given question to be “yes,” for instance, “Did one friend change the topic away from ethnicity and race related conversation?” For the purpose of clarity, the themes are written as statements in the section below.

Results and Discussion

Because the findings of the *content* coding rather closely mirrored previous studies (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010), we center the *structure* findings while incorporating examples and discussion from both rounds of analysis. Throughout coding, the dyad was the unit of analysis, meaning that the coded segments generally contain conversation rather than individual narrative. After independently coding all 34 dyads using MAXQDA 18, the first author and a trained research assistant discussed any discrepancies in *content* coding to reach full consensus (Adler et al., 2017), resulting in 180 *content* segments. An overview of *content* themes, subthemes, and their overall frequencies can be found in Table 1. The first author and the same research assistant then presence/absence coded all 34 dyads to examine *structure*. Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was calculated for this round of coding, resulting in 82.53% agreement and a *kappa* reliability score of .77. All coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion. An overview of *structure* themes, subthemes, and frequencies can be found in Table 2.

Re-Telling the Survey Story

Of the 34 dyads included in analysis, 28 were structured primarily around a re-telling of at least one friend’s experience shared in the survey. Among these, there were 15 instances in which the friend with higher reported general frequency of ethnicity and race related conversations with friends initiated the discussion (higher as compared to the other friend in the dyad, not as compared to others in the sample), meaning there was no discernable trend regarding which friend was more likely to initiate discussion. Although the majority of dyads included at least one re-telling of the stories told in the survey, not all encompassed extensive

discussion, with the likelihood and type of discussion hinging primarily on the nature of scaffolding coming from the listener. For instance, in this discussion between Friend 1, a U.S. born Asian American woman and Friend 2, a U.S. born White man, although both friends mentioned their stories, there was very little in-depth discussion and no follow-up questions regarding details or meaning drawn from the events:

F2: Mhm. What was your event?

F1: Oh (laughs) um in Spain.

F2: Oh.

F1: What was yours?

F2: Mmm, I said when I went to that uh, Hmong barbeque and I was like the only White person there. Yup. Ohh, I should have said like when I was in the ghetto neighborhood and—

F1: (laughs) Where was that? Midway?

F2: Yup, every time I go to Midway.

Although Friend 1 did not offer a detailed description of the event she included in the survey, Friend 2's "Oh" gave her little encouragement for elaboration. Although this brief response seemed to end further discussion regardless of reasoning, it could be due to existing familiarity with the events being referenced. When Friend 2 recounts his story, both the content (*Awareness of underrepresentation*) and framing ("Yup") provide little room for meaningful exchange regarding identity. Instead, Friend 2 moves on to talk about the "ghetto neighborhood," indicating that he is aware of his ethnicity-race in that context, while also implying that ethnicity and race are something that only concern him when he chooses to enter specific spaces, which he frames in a casually pejorative light. This type of commentary was common among White participants and reflects the notion that White individuals *choose* whether or not they engage in meaningful ERI exploration (Helms, 1990; Schooley, Lee, & Spanierman, 2019), with most doing so at significantly lower levels than people of color (Syed & Juang, 2014), who tend to be consistently reminded of their ethnicity and race, including as a result of systemic racism.

Across most dyads, instances in which racism and discrimination were discussed tended to begin as a recounting of the survey story. The content theme *Discussion of racism/discrimination* included both accounts of personal experiences as well as broader discussions of racism, discrimination, and inequity, and overall the number of conversations within this theme was divided roughly equally across friend pairs in regards to their composition by ethnicity. However, within the *Discussion of racism/discrimination* subtheme *Personal experience*, in which only individual experiences were being recounted, eight of 12 stories occurred within EM-EM dyads, two in EM-White dyads, and two were from a single White-White dyad in which the participant relaying the experiences was an immigrant from Eastern Europe. Within the *Personal experience* subtheme, nine of 12 stories told were re-tellings of the events participants described in the survey. This can be seen in the following excerpt between Friend 3, a U.S. born Hmong-American woman, and Friend 4, a U.S. born Hmong-American man:

F4: Because umm, what, there was one, if you remember there was one page that asked about an experience that you had whether it's positive or negative—

F3: Um huh—

F4: So I talked about a time ah during my first year in college—

F3: Uh huh—

F4: And it was definitely negative and I basically hung out with a group of Caucasian boys and things did not go well that night umm, something happened and—

F3: Is it that one night?

F4: Which night?

F3: The one where like—

F4: The one where ah, well I was the only minority in the group and then ah one of them decided to use the word “n****r” and everybody turns and looks at me again because I’m the only minority in the group! (laughs/sighs) And so umm one of the guys, actually the guy who used the word just asked me and said, “Oh what! Are you offended by that word too?” And I just didn’t even know what to say. Umm, my response in the survey was that the reason I didn’t say anything was because it was towards the beginning of the school year and I was just a freshman at the time and I was just getting used to the people in college at the time so I was, I had a lot of mixed feelings between you know being nervous, scared, ah just frustrated, angry so I didn’t really say anything then. I also said you know I tried to chuckle it off because I wanted to ruin the awkward moment but shortly after I just, I wanted to avoid the whole group, the group as a whole so I just said you know what guys it’s getting late and I have to go, so I just took off. Took off, went to bed frustrated --

F3: (giggles) It’s so frustrating--

F4: So I was really tense when I took the survey—

F3: (laughs) Were you? —

F4: Yeah—

F3: Aww!

F4: Got me mad, still gets me mad—

F3: Yeah

As Friend 4 recounts this event, he uses the survey as a way to frame his telling, including why he is explaining how this encounter made him feel both then and now. He situates his lack of outward response to the other people involved in this racist incident in terms of being new to the university and feeling unsure of what to do. Like nearly all stories within this subtheme, he does not explicitly name the behavior as racist or discriminatory, instead focusing on his own emotional and behavioral responses. This is in line with previous qualitative research in which participants actively avoided labeling racist experiences as such (Fish & Syed, 2020), perhaps due to ongoing societal taboo (Goodman, 2014). In this exchange, Friend 4 makes clear that this incident has stayed with him, however, noting that the memory made taking the survey itself a tense experience for him. Despite Friend 3’s initial encouraging scaffolding (“uh-huh”), her repeated laughter and lack of follow-up questions may serve as a mitigating strategy to diffuse tension. That said, Friend 4’s perseverance in recounting a story that seems to have been previously shared (F3: “Is it that one night?”) may have an impact on both friends’ ERI, as he underscores the longstanding effects of racist microaggressions like the one he experienced, while demonstrating his willingness to broach such a difficult subject matter.

Changing the Topic Away from Ethnicity and Race

Roughly 30% of coded dyads included an abrupt shift away from ethnicity or race related conversation, either by interrupting or changing the topic. These are key examples of negative scaffolding, which can affect both the structure and content of the discussion. Of the 10 conversations included in this theme, three topic changes were instigated by the friend with a higher general frequency of ethnicity and race related conversations, meaning no conclusions can be drawn regarding how this behavior relates to reported frequency of ethnicity and race related conversations. The following exchange between Friend 5, a U.S. born Black man and Friend 6, a U.S. born Black woman was content coded as *Awareness of difference* and *Discussion of not thinking about ethnicity and race*. This excerpt offers an example of a topic shift following a conversation with little in-depth discussion:

F5: Whatever, what did you say about the time that you noticed your race?

F6: Huh—

F5: What, what story did you say for the time that you noticed your race?

F6: Uh, the time I went to Africa.

F5: You had to go all the way over there to notice your race? (laughs)

F6: (laughs) Yeah, I said, but I said, I said it was a positive experience.

F5: That's good.

F6: Yeah so, how about you?

F5: I put when I went to junior high, I didn't know I was Black until I got to junior high, I don't know (yawning) I really didn't think about it—

F6: Hmm.

F5: (yawns)

F6: So what do you, so whatcha wanna do? So what you wanna do when we, when we get outta here?

Reflecting the finding that distracted listeners are linked to shorter stories being told (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005), this excerpt seems to indicate that this can be a reciprocal experience, with both participants only briefly referencing their survey stories with little follow-up or interest expressed. Interestingly, however, Friend 5's question, "You had to go all the way over there to notice your race?" indicates that ERI exploration is self-evident for him. However, following a lack of positive scaffolding on the part of either friend, Friend 6 abruptly shifts the conversation away from the survey stories and ethnicity and race related discussion altogether.

Ethnicity and Race Related Conversation Beyond the Survey Story

In 21 of 34 dyads, ethnicity and race related conversations occurred which did not directly relate to the survey. In many cases participants shifted from survey-specific to general discussions relating to race and ethnicity, but some pairs either meandered back to the topic or had in-depth discussions spanning the full ten minutes. The excerpt below came from a very rich conversation between Friend 7 and Friend 8, two U.S. born Hmong-American women, which was content coded in the subtheme *Immigrant experience/child of immigrants*:

F7: Like you know how people always talk about oh you know Hmong girls should get married early and they should become housewives and blah blah blah and all that! Right! But like for me you know taking Hmong values and American values I'm like well you know I wanna be a good wife one day but I would define that in what my terms of a good wife means you know—

F8: Um huh—

F7: And yeah you know like people may see that as like a very traditional role and conservative but I'm like you know but that's who I want to be but I also want to be a professional and I know that I can be a professional and be a good wife you know like I don't think that they're mutually exclusive.

F8: So for you to think that way you think that's your American side?

F7: No—

F8: Or would you say you're Hmong American—

F7: Yeah, I would say it's Hmong American—

F8: Or do you think it's just—

F7: 'Cause I would say that I have integrated the two values—

F8: Um huh—

F7: To make it what I want—

F8: Um huh—

This excerpt highlights a meaningful back and forth reciprocally encouraged through positive scaffolding. As Friend 7 discussed her integrated bi-cultural identity, Friend 8 showed engaged listening through brief follow-up questions and supportive responses. This is a clear example of the co-constructive nature of ERI—the friends are building off of each other, not recounting a specific event but rather negotiating their beliefs and behaviors in relation to familial and societal norms and expectations—they are actively shaping their narratives in real time and *doing* ERI.

Yet, more in-depth conversation did not directly map on to deeper meaning-making regarding ERI, particularly in conversations which moved beyond the stories told in the survey. Within the *Discussion of racism/discrimination* subthemes *Someone else's experience* and *Discussion of White privilege*, the breakdown of dyads was roughly equal in terms of participant ethnicity. When examining the content in more detail, however, it becomes clear that the type of experiences being discussed varies widely. The excerpt below between Friend 9 and Friend 10, two U.S. born White women, was included in the *Discussion of White privilege* subtheme:

F10: But, I don't even know, but yeah, I'm not like uncomfortable talking about it I guess like in the White privilege thing that we went to, it was—

F9: Did you even talk to anyone at that?

F10: Mhm, well cause we had to split up so I talked to that one girl. It was fine.

F9: Oh yeah.

F10: Like it's only uncomfortable when like fingers are pointed.

F9: Yeah.

F10: Well like all the stuff that like you would like read in class, it's like oh great, make me feel bad.

F9: Yeah, well like, all your classes are like that bring it up, ours like you don't even—

F10: Oh.

F9: Marketing maybe.

F10: We talked about it yesterday too in my film class too, cause like they always talk about like how we don't, in elementary schools we don't teach it, like we don't teach anything about anything, like—

F9: Yeah.

F10: They don't teach that we stole the land from everyone and all that jazz.

F9: I don't, yeah I think that's okay though, cause when you're little you don't get it anyway.

F10: Yeah.

F9: Or like you won't really understand.

F10: Mhm

F9: So then you kind of like, already have different, I don't know.

F10: I don't either.

F9: (yawns)

As in the conversation about Hmong-American identity, Friend 9 and Friend 10 are engaging in positive scaffolding, discussing beliefs and referencing previously discussed experiences rather than telling specific stories. Throughout this exchange, which followed a brief conversation on stereotypes regarding who is likely to commit crime, both friends avoid mentioning specific examples of structural inequity along the lines of ethnicity and race, which seems to be broadly what they are discussing. Friend 10 situates the conversation in terms of how “all the stuff” makes her “feel bad.” Her remarks reflect the shame and guilt present in early stages of White racial identity development (Helms, 1990), in which White individuals are aware of their whiteness but tend to minimize the impact of racism and may act defensively when countervailing evidence is provided. After Friend 9 notes that her classes don't teach “anything about anything,” she then indicates that the history of genocide against and colonization of Native Americans and their land should not be taught because, “when you're little you don't get it anyway.” In doing so, she is reiterating the norm that learning about the history and present of violence and discrimination perpetuated by White individuals is something from which White children should be shielded (Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

This discussion ends with both friends stating “I don't know,” which, when used in this way, can act as a conversational hedge, removing responsibility of a given statement from the speaker (Weatherall, 2011). Thus, these friends are also enacting ERI—they briefly recognize inequity before explaining why such recognition is inappropriate, doing so without fully committing to any stance. Although the conversation captured here lacks what may be considered meaningful ERI exploration, the exchange should not be viewed as meaningless. Instead, this brief exchange reflects trends in White ERI development, making clear the importance of examining *content* and *structure*, in addition to *process*.

Peer Education on Ethnicity and Race

This theme, although included in the structural coding, necessarily also involves content, offering key examples of ERI constructed in interaction. These discussions capture not just participants' beliefs or previous experiences, but real-time examples of the ways in which perceptions of the importance and meaning of ethnicity and race can shape relationship

dynamics. Peer educating on a race or ethnicity related topic occurred in six dyads, four of which were EM-W, one EM-EM, and one W-W. The excerpt below is from the conversation in which Friend 11, a U.S. born White man, recounted to Friend 12, a Hong Kong born Asian-American man, about his surprise that an African-American woman on a bus had called out other passengers using racialized terms:

F12: So it's kinda different for me—

F11: (laughs)

F12: For a so called racial minority being in a, in a more Westernized country where div- where majori- quote-unquote “majority” is White people you know you think the color white is a more prevalent you know. I don't know I think White people take it for granted uh that, that their color is supposed to be white—

F11: Yeah.

F12: And (clears throat) for, for people of color you know like the African American woman on the on the bus—

F11: Yeah.

F12: What she sees maybe is merely the color the skin color of people because she is so... exposed to you know all these judging by color—

F11: Yeah.

F12: So you, you might not see her as a Black woman but she sees everybody as the color they they are because that's the central idea of her whole life everybody keep pointing out to her that you know what's important about you what sets you apart from everybody is the color of your skin, which for a White person it's not, you know.

F11: Yeah—

In this exchange, Friend 12 is explaining to Friend 11 why not everyone has the option of embracing a colorblind racial ideology or remaining oblivious to the role that ethnic and racial categories play in shaping everyday lived experience. Without explicitly naming racism, Friend 12 is emphasizing the constructed nature of race, focusing on an example taken from Friend 11's survey story to help him understand why his own understanding of ethnicity and race differs from that of his friend. Although not every instance of “peer education” occurred in EM-White dyads, this excerpt highlights the emotional labor involved in this sort of identity explanation. Friend 11 does not cut off Friend 12, instead offering positive scaffolding (“Yeah”), though not asking follow-up questions. This excerpt helps makes clear why the same interaction may be interpreted very differently by the two friends involved—why it may matter greatly for ERI development if an individual is consistently called upon to be the one educating those around them, or the one benefitting from such education.

Peer Harassment and Teasing

In contrast to the emotional labor visible in the above excerpt, there were five incidents of one friend openly teasing or making fun of the other in a way we coded as ethnic-racial microaggressions. This code also blurs the line between content and structure. By engaging in highly negative scaffolding—making fun of one's friend—the peer shapes both what is being talked about and how the conversation unfolds. This type of teasing also puts valence on the kinds of stories being told. One example of such teasing can be seen in the following

conversation between Friend 13, a U.S. born Hmong-American woman and Friend 14, a U.S. born Black woman:

F14: Freak. So what'd you say when they asked you about what you talk about? Do you talk about race, ethnicity, and culture with your friends?

F13: Yeah.

F14: What'd you say?

F13: I said that my friends [Name] and F14 like to pick on me 'cause I'm Asian.

F14: (laughs) You did not say that.

F13: Totally said it.

F14: You identified names?—

F13: How you like to pick on my Hmong name.

F14: Aw—

F13: Mm hmm.

F14: Aw, made us sound bad.

Friend 13 couches the teasing she experiences with Friend 14 and others as something lighthearted. This is similar to previous qualitative research on ethnic-racial microaggressions between friends, wherein participants described pretending they were not as hurt as they really felt when a peer made a racist comment (Chapman, 2012). This excerpt thus reflects the existence of casual racism between close friends, making clear that such behavior can and does happen between friends of color, who should not be regarded as a monolith. We cannot extrapolate from these few instances, but given the damaging impact of experiencing ethnic-racial discrimination (e.g., Cheon & Yip, 2019), such exchanges might have ERI implications, particularly if they occur regularly (Smith, David, & Stanton, 2020). Conversely, for the friend engaging in the teasing, this can also be viewed as an element of ERI in action—whether or not she has actively reflected on her actions, they can be situated as one aspect of her own ERI development.

Length of Ethnicity and Race Related Conversation

In this theme we included any dyad in which at least half of the discussion was content coded for ethnicity and race related conversation, resulting in a total of 14 dyads. Based on the information gathered from the previous sections, however, it is clear that just because nearly half of these friends were talking about ethnicity and race related topics for roughly five minutes or more does not mean that their conversations included in-depth meaning-making about their identities. However, from a performative perspective, these discussions can help us understand what is perceived as appropriate and acceptable ethnicity and race related conversation.

The following excerpt, coded in the content subtheme *Immigrant experience/child of immigrants* was between Friend 15 and Friend 16, two Black men born in Kenya:

F16: Do you think it's right, cause I know that many American, like they're so straightforward with their parents? But like, if we try to be straightforward with our parents we kind of get in trouble. (laughs)

F15: Yeah, I mean—

F16: So it's like...

F15: It's because like, for us, it's more... more, more of our culture and religion is intercultured. Like, the... our parents push their religion factor more. Like, some White parents, like, they don't really care. Religion is not a major thing, so—

F16: No, but I feel even though, because your parents tell you to be honest—

F15: Yeah.

F16: But then when you're honest, you get in trouble.

F15: Yea because they don't wanna be, they don't want to know the truth—

F16: But then, so it's like—

F15: Like my dad tells me he'd rather, like, know like when I'm at school, like, when I'm out—

F16: Yeah, he'd rather know you're out then to feel—

F15: Yeah, like me, from home, I'd rather, like, be home before ten o'clock, because... he just knows that I'll be safe. But if I'm out there and he does know what I'm doing, that's ten, or if I'm up till one he doesn't care.

F16: Yeah like, so, like, it's like they want to know where you are but sometimes, like, when you tell them where you are—

F15: Mmhm.

F16: They get pissed off at you. It's kind counterintuitive. Why should I tell you where I am if you're not gonna... if you're gonna, like, make a big deal out of it.

F15: Yeah. I already... told them next week... about...

F16: But I mean, the ASA is gonna have stuff like that, like they're gonna talk about parents, like, actually this might have been just our parents, like basically any minority parents... Basically like, the way they treat their children.

F15: Is, yeah—

F16: It's pretty uniform, if you're an immigrant, the way you're treated with, by your parents. We're gonna have forums discussing such stuff. Cause that's one of the things that the ASA Speaks wants to do.

This exchange gets at the intersectional nature of identity, as the friends discuss issues common to the children of immigrants in the U.S., which may cut across heritage, ethnicity, and race. The conversation flows naturally, with the quick back and forth, and consistent positive scaffolding throughout. As Friend 15 is discussing parental expectations, he primarily speaks in generalizations, using “us” and “our” to include Friend 16 in his construction of norms and experiences rather than simply relaying a story. The two friends not only acknowledge their shared experiences, but Friend 16 also brings up how this issue will be discussed at the African Student Association (ASA), linking the ERI exploration elements of *search* and *participation* (Syed et al., 2013). As such, this discussion allows for both a co-construction of experience, as well as a concrete link to a space that underscores their importance and helps make them visible.

In contrast to this, the following excerpt was content coded as *College as first experience with ethnic-racial diversity*, a subtheme of *Awareness of underrepresentation* comprised entirely of White-White and EM-White dyads. The conversation below, between Friend 17 and Friend 18, two U.S. born White women, offers a very typical example of this subtheme:

F18: (Laughs) what was your story that you said?

F17: Um, I talked about the first time I went to the U and sitting in the classroom (laughs). How I realized that umm the U is very diverse and I wasn't used to being around such diverse people from Hopkins 'cause my high school was like, basically a lot of Caucasian kids. What about you?

F18: Uhm, I talked about in the dorms, like [Name]—

F17: Really?

F18: —and how like, I met him and he was like my best friend. And I remember like, the first time like, [Name] and [Name] and like some of those other guys came over. And I just remember being like wow [Name] like super different. Like he was super gentleman to me, you know prior to that. And then I was just like all of the sudden one night just like super ghetto super Ebonics and everything...and I just like...Of course I just love that. And it was just awesome!

F17: Did you have any of Black kids in like, uhm [town where F18 is from]?

F18: We had one family, but it was like a huge family. But otherwise besides that—

F17: Are there any other diversity or?

F18: No. We had a maybe a couple. Um like, I won't even say they're Mexican but kind of a Mexican descent. And then we had one or two friends that were Jewish and that was it.

F17: Really?

F18: Everyone else was either Lutheran or Catholic.

In this exchange, neither friend engages in deep meaning-making regarding their encounters with ethnic-racial diversity. Similarly, neither reflects on what it means to have grown up in racially segregated areas or how their socialization in majority White spaces impacts their identities. Friend 17 precludes follow-up questions regarding her survey story by immediately asking, "What about you?" In Friend 18's response she recounts meeting someone who is presumed to be Black by her description of him acting, "super ghetto super Ebonics and everything," which she explicitly valences as something she likes, perhaps as a way to discount the stereotyped nature of her description. She recounts his behavior as something put on for show, contrasted with her lived experience in a segregated White community, which is framed as normative and unquestioned until encountering non-White peers at college. Many stories from White peers in this theme were similar—one off examples of when they became aware of diversity or lack thereof, without investigating what that means at either the macro- or micro-levels.

In the related content subtheme *Awareness of one's Whiteness*, numerous conversations involved participants relaying stories of going to neighborhoods or cities that were new to them and suddenly becoming aware of their own racialized existence. Such a story was told in the following excerpt between Friend 19, a U.S. born Hispanic man and Friend 20, a U.S. born White woman:

F20: I don't really think about it very often either, like but then like, but then like I was trying to remember I'm like, "I don't know," you know? And then I thought about like when I was 10 and I went with my dad (inaudible) and my mom and my sister to Kansas City.

F19: Uh huh.

F20: And there was, we went to this gospel choir—

F19: Mhm.

F20: Or not gospel choir, the African-American church service and um I just remember 'cause there was a gospel choir and, but we're the minority in this case, cause everybody else was African-American we were the only like White people, there may have been one other couple there.

F19: Mhm.

F20: But it was really different because, I think like that's when like I . . . realized kind of like, it was like one of the few times in my life where I've real—ya know, the different, you know that I'm White and cause it was weird. Like I don't really think about it that way cause so many of my friends, ya know, are—

F19: Yeah.

F20: Like [Name] and like other people. Umm, but . . . I guess like it was just different because I was the only person that was . . . umm I felt like, cause it just showed me how it felt to be the minority.

F19: Yeah.

F20: In any case, I mean it kinda changed my outlook um and how I view things. And I realize when I remembered it I haven't thought about it for a while and then thinking about it, I don't know.

F19: Yeah.

In this exchange Friend 20 seems to indicate that she has non-White friends, but that she was never previously made aware of being White through being in the numerical minority in any setting, as she was during this visit to an African-American church. In previous research (Syed & Azmitia, 2008) it was found that individuals who told stories coded as *Awareness of difference* or *Awareness of underrepresentation* tended to be in an unexamined ERI development status. In the excerpt above, though Friend 20 notes that the experience, "kinda changed my outlook um and how I view things," her description does not include meaning-making regarding her own identity. Friend 19 does not engage in negative scaffolding, yet he also does not offer his own experience in relation to his friend's revelation, possibly indicating that this is not a perspective he shares. We cannot conjecture how Friend 19 experienced this conversation, though the one-sided nature of the discussion again highlights the importance of recognizing that the same exchange may be interpreted differently by the parties involved, based on their previous experiences and particular identities. Even as Friend 10 is emphasizing how meaningful this event was for her, she notes that she had not thought about it for a while, finally ending this part of their conversation with "I don't know." As in the previous excerpt in which the women hedged the impact of their discussion with this phrase, her usage minimizes her claim, allowing the conversation to move on without delving more deeply.

General Discussion

Using a two-step qualitative analysis, this research examined both *content* and *structure* of ethnicity and race related conversations between friend pairs mismatched on their reported general frequency of ethnicity and race related discussions with friends. Our analysis was guided by three interrelated premises laid out at the beginning of the paper, namely that: (1) Ethnicity and race related conversations, as a component of ERI exploration, can be identity affirming or disaffirming; (2) ERI development is dynamic and co-constructed, including in interaction with

friends; and (3) the act of discussing ERI, including the structure and content of such discussions, is itself a form of “doing” ethnicity-race. Attuned to each of these, we sought to gain greater insight into why conversations about ethnicity and race can lead to maladaptive psychosocial outcomes by examining the reciprocal relations between *what* is being said and *how* each friend is contributing to the structure of the conversation, as well as in which ways conversations may play out differently across friend pairs depending on their ethnic-racial composition. Although we were conscientious about differences in experience and expression based on ethnicity and race, we did not anticipate the breadth and depth of differences we found.

Interestingly, in most EM-White dyads, the White individual reported a higher general frequency of talking about ethnicity and race than their ethnic-racial minority friend. Taken at face value, this indicates that the White individuals in our study are engaging in high levels of ERI exploration. Yet, by analyzing the content and structure of the conversations we could see substantive differences in how ethnicity and race influence the types of experiences recounted, the meaning drawn from them, and the ways in which they are told. Overall, White participants were more likely to engage in conversations coded as *Awareness of Difference*, *Awareness of Underrepresentation*, and *Discussion about Not Thinking about/Valuing Ethnicity and Race*. There were very few instances of White participants reflecting in meaningful ways on interpersonal or systemic racism, or on how being White has shaped their experiences, opportunities, and overall identity. There were also few instances of White friends engaged in conversations coded as *Positive Connection to Culture*, which most closely reflects the focus on learning about cultural values, beliefs, and traditions captured in ERI development scales such as the widely used MEIM (e.g., Roberts et al., 1999). These findings underscore the utility of alternate tools and frameworks to examine White identity development (Helms, 1990; Schooley et al., 2019), as relying on universal survey measures may reveal little about both individually and societally relevant ERI processes among this group.

Through our analyses we aimed not to naturalize ethnic and racial group differences, however, but instead to probe their (re)constructed and interactional nature. Our varied findings indicate that it is not just important to examine the process of ERI exploration in terms of *how much* of it is happening, but also to take heed of the nuanced nature of *what* that exploration looks like, including in peer interactions. The types of conversations friends of color were more likely to engage in were the inverse of their White peers, with more EM-EM and EM-White than White-White dyads located in the *Positive Connection to Culture* and *Discussion of Racism/Discrimination* themes, in particular within the *Personal Experience* subtheme. Many of the stories recounted in *Positive Connection to Culture* included discussions about family and community, offering good examples of how ERI exploration can be positively valenced and reinforced through peer discussion. Conversely, it was not a surprising finding that friends of color have more discussions about personal experiences of discrimination, but it is important to note that, overall, their conversations about ethnicity and race were not more in-depth or longer than those of White individuals. This could be because of a greater regularity of having such conversations, meaning they did not feel a particular need to delve into the ethnicity and race related stories shared in the survey, while for White individuals this often seemed to present a chance for a rarely held conversation.

By examining conversation structure, we could also see that White friends were more likely to experience some form of “educating” than their ethnic-minority peers, with the ethnic-minority friend in a dyad engaging in the emotional labor of providing it. While such a conversation may prove novel, illuminating, or uncomfortable for the White friend, the friend of color may find such work taxing. The line between a positive exchange and a burdensome or disappointing endeavor may be thin, and it might be in a very different place for the two parties involved. This theme in particular also highlights the potentially unclear boundary between peer ethnic-racial socialization and ERI exploration, which have traditionally been studied as separate but related constructs. Ethnic-racial socialization includes messages about heritage, culture, and race (Priest et al., 2014). Survey research found that a particular socialization component called “preparation for bias” related positively to ERI exploration among emerging adults (Nelson et al., 2018). Arguably, in co-constructed conversations about race and ethnicity, where socialization stops and exploration starts may be hard to discern. It may in fact be the case that who is engaging in socialization and who is engaging in exploration can shift over the course of a discussion. Greater qualitative research with friend pairs could help to disentangle this conceptual question.

Limitations

A major limitation to the current study is the age of the data used for analysis. Data collection occurred in the 2009-2010 academic year, meaning they represent what was already a very different socio-historical time, in which race and ethnicity were not as salient on the national stage as they are now. That said, broader questions related to ERI development have not substantially changed. Racism, colorblindness, and the dynamics of peer relationships between emerging adults were all highly relevant at the time of data collection. Because the socio-historical context is integral to identity development (e.g., Rogers, 2018), however, it would be very interesting to conduct such a study again to examine the ways in which such interactions may differ in the current environment.

The length of conversations analyzed in this study also posed a drawback, as they were limited to 10 minutes. Although the variation in both content and structure made clear the breadth of possible conversations in such a short period of time, capturing longer discussions or multiple conversations between the same friends would allow for deeper engagement into patterns of identity development. Relatedly, using mixed or multiple qualitative methods would help triangulate findings and strengthen our understanding of the nuanced ERI development process. Although our coding and analysis included intentional reflection and discussion of diverging perspectives across our team of research assistants and authors (e.g., Fine, 2006), we recognize that we brought our own biases and experiences to the work at hand and acknowledge that other researchers may interpret the data differently. Our convenience sample of college students also posed a limitation. Although ERI development is not unique to college-going emerging adults, they are more likely than their non-college-going peers to move locations and be exposed to new experiences and individuals (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). To gain a more thorough understanding of the content and structure of ethnicity and race related discussions and the role they play in ERI development, however, future research should include a broader sample.

Conclusions and Implications

Capturing naturalistic conversations about ethnicity and race between friends can be extremely difficult. For this reason, we believe the use of the “catch-up” conversation format and the analyses it afforded can offer an important addition to the growing study of contextualized ERI development. Although some individuals may have been hesitant to speak openly while being recorded (Thorne, Shapiro, Cardilla, Korobov, & Nelson, 2009), the rich data we were able to collect underscore the utility of this methodological format. Relatedly, since exploration is a key element in how individuals come to grant meaning to their ERI, gaining a better understanding of what ethnicity and race related conversations consist of and how they are structured is imperative.

For instance, if a given conversation includes supportive follow up questions, if it is in-depth or superficial, or if one friend alternately teases or educates the other, each of these aspects can have in the moment and longer term implications for the ERI development of both friends involved. Moreover, taking an interactional and performative perspective on identity helps frame such conversations as an outcome in and of themselves. As friends talk with each other about their experiences related to ethnicity and race, the conversations *themselves* are constructions of ethnic and racial identity. As such, this study offers a new direction in qualitative ERI exploration research, going beyond interviews on subjective experience and instead examining real life conversations between friends.

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Table 1*Overall frequency of content-related themes and subthemes*

Theme and subtheme(s)	Total n (% of coded segments*)
Discussion of racism/discrimination	40 (22.2)
Personal experience	12 (30.0)
Someone else's experience	11 (27.5)
Explicit recognition of racism/discrimination	5 (12.5)
Discussion of White privilege	4 (10.0)
Positive connection to culture	39 (21.7)
Immigrant experience/child of immigrants	12 (30.8)
Involvement in clubs/groups/classes	17 (43.6)
Awareness of difference	34 (18.9)
Learning about cultural differences	15 (44.1)
Awareness of underrepresentation	39 (21.7)
College as first experience with ethnic-racial diversity	6 (15.4)
Awareness of one's whiteness	14 (35.9)
Discussion of not thinking about/not valuing ethnicity and race	28 (15.6)
Support for colorblindness	7 (25.0)

Note: Some segments of text were coded into subthemes and others only into the theme itself; the theme total includes the sum of both.

*Among themes the percentage is out of the 180 total coded segments, within subthemes it is the percentage of coded segments based on the total in that theme.

Table 2*Overall frequency of structure-related themes and subthemes*

Theme and subtheme(s)	Total n (% of dyads*)
Did at least one friend re-tell survey story?	28 (82.4)
Did both friends tell survey stories?	19 (67.9)
Did first storyteller ask for story from friend?	10 (35.7)
Did one friend change topic from E-R conversation?	10 (29.4)
Was there non-survey related E-R relevant conversation?	21 (61.8)
Did both friends talk roughly equally?	17 (81.0)
Did one friend educate the other?	6 (17.6)
If yes, was the other receptive?	4 (66.7)
Did one friend make fun of the other?	5 (14.7)
Was the majority of the conversation E-R related?	14 (41.2)

Note: In this table E-R is an abbreviation for ethnicity and race.

*Among themes the percentage is out of the 34 total dyads coded, within subthemes it is the percentage of dyads based on the total in that theme.