1

What Does It Mean to Move below the Surface?

“Bias Isn’t Just a Police Problem, It’s a Preschool Problem”

Ethnic-racial tensions in US society are not new. They bubble up in all types of places, from rural communities in California to the multicultural mecca of New York City’s neighborhoods. We can look to historical and current events that not only reflect our society’s tense atmosphere concerning ethnic-racial relations at any given point in history but also continue to ignite and exacerbate such tensions. For instance, the US government has passed immigration policies to exclude individuals from certain countries. This was true in 1882 with the Chinese Exclusion Act and in 2017 with Executive Order 13769, also known as the Muslim ban. Our society has also forced ethnic minorities to choose between their culture and their survival. We have seen this with the government-imposed boarding schools for American Indian children and in English-only legislation that persists despite well-documented evidence of the benefits of bilingualism. Moreover, we have consistently witnessed the disproportionate use of force and violation of basic human rights as
the default in how law enforcement approaches communities of color. As the headline above illustrates, these issues persist and make their way into the lives of our young people.

To some, these tensions convey that there is a devaluing of members of groups that do not represent the historically dominant group (i.e., White, European descent, Christian, economically advantaged). This devaluation is like salt in a wound for those who are all too acutely aware of social inequalities that have pervaded US society since its founding. Indeed, there are myriad disparities in the life outcomes of members of marginalized groups compared to members of the dominant group. To others, however, these tensions are thought to be blown out of proportion, exaggerated, or of no relevance to their lives. There is a sense that those who are actively voicing their concerns about the racial tensions are being too sensitive.

Although ethnic-racial tensions are typically presented as an “us” and “them” issue, it’s important to recognize that mere membership in a particular social group (e.g., being Latino) does not provide enough information with which to predict how committed or engaged individuals are to addressing the ethnic-racial tensions that exist in our society. To really understand what is driving or informing the perspectives that people have on these different topics, we must go beyond surface-level categorizations and assumptions made about individuals based on their age, gender, race, or ethnicity. Instead, we must consider the psychological and subjective meaning-making processes that underlie how people respond to situations or events such as those above. One way to go below the surface, then, is to better understand how people experience these tensions differently based on their personal understanding of themselves and the social groups to which they belong.

Ethnic-racial identity is an important lens through which individuals experience events and situations related to race and ethnicity. On the one hand, for individuals who have not thought about race or believed they were living in a postracial society, the events “shake them up” and may ignite a reexamination of their views and
understandings of race and ethnicity. On the other hand, for those who have examined or considered the role of race in their lives more thoroughly, the event or situation may confirm their existing understandings. Moreover, each individual may view the culpability or responsibility of other social groups differently depending on their sense of how their own group relates to other groups. Consider the following remarks in response to the 2016 election by two individuals who both identify as Muslim American:2

How is it possible that here in America in 2016 could a man who has based his campaign on hatred, bigotry and divisiveness win the hearts and minds of so many American people? —Shadin Maali, well-known Chicagoan social activist

The Republican Muslim Coalition is looking forward to working with [P]resident Trump. —Saba Ahmed, leader of the Republican Muslim Coalition

According to the report from which these quotes were taken, Shadin Maali was “in a state of disbelief,” whereas Saba Ahmed was “super-excited that Republican candidate Donald Trump had won the presidency.” These individuals are referring to the same event, yet their characterization of the result is radically different. Certainly, at the core of these divergent perspectives are differences in awareness, understanding, and tolerance of xenophobia and racism. It will be impossible to align understandings and awareness, and to decrease tolerance of prejudice and racism, if people do not examine the role of race and ethnicity in society and in their daily life.

In the context of the United States, one does not need to go far to encounter situations in which racial and ethnic dynamics are at work. Youth in the United States are bombarded with messages about race and ethnicity in their everyday lives. Such stories, images, situations, and broader conversations often evoke fear, pain, and guilt among even the most socially conscious adults who consider themselves well versed in the complexities of ethnic-racial relations in US society. It’s challenging to reconcile the disparate
perspectives on these ethnic-racial tensions, much less have open dialogue about them, but our social fabric is weakened by not engaging in meaningful dialogue about these issues.

To be fair, there are a number of barriers to such dialogue. First, as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has explained, some people espouse a blatant denial of racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice. But the reality is that in the United States, racism is part of the social fabric, and young people learn it whether they want to or not. Recent findings regarding the dehumanization of Black children in the United States merit consideration in this regard. In one study, Philip Goff and his colleagues asked predominately White college students to rate their perceptions of innocence of Black and White children. When the children who were being rated were nine and younger, there were no differences in how innocently—that is, needing of protection and deserving of care—they were viewed by participants in the study. But when asked to rate children who were ten or older, Black children were rated as significantly less innocent than White children. In another study, Rebecca Dore and her colleagues asked a predominately White sample of five-, seven-, and ten-year-olds to rate their own pain in response to a series of events, and they were then asked to rate the pain of Black and White children in response to those same events. Five-year-olds did not differentiate the pain of Black and White targets, but the ten-year-olds thought Black children’s pain would be less than that of White children in response to the same events. Together, these studies indicate that young Black youth may not be afforded the privilege of innocence or the same humanity in terms of pain as their White counterparts. Studies that have focused on evaluations of Black adults show that they are also similarly dehumanized.

Avoiding the topic of racism altogether is arguably justifiable, given that it can be complicated and, for some, emotionally overwhelming to think about. Other people are aware and willing to have the conversations but are unsure about how to begin such a dialogue. They may believe that merely talking about race is racist, or they may be overly concerned about political correctness or about engaging in such discussions from an uninformed place and
saying something that would inadvertently offend others. And yet others are ambivalent because of the seemingly insurmountable barriers and what appears to be a lack of progress since the civil rights movement.

People respond to the challenges of open dialogue differently. For example, one response might be “don’t tell me what to think or try to make me more ‘politically correct,’” whereas another person may rightfully be tired of being tasked with teaching others. An illustration of this latter sentiment is evident in a blog post by multicultural education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings, titled “I’m Through.” She writes:

I am through acting like I don’t notice when I’m the only black person in a room of white people with authority and power;

I am through pretending like I don’t notice that college football fields and basketball courts are filled with black players earning enormous sums of money for universities that have stadiums and arenas filled with white fans;

I am through indulging comments like, “everything is not about race,” when most times it is;

I am through explaining my style—hair, dress, swagger;

I am through being your teacher when I am not paid to do so.

Yet another response to racial dehumanization is greater resolve and commitment to social justice. This alternative involves conscious engagement with inequality, prejudice, and racism as a step toward combating them. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is an example of such a response. In the words of founder Alicia Garza, Black Lives Matter is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” And the commitment to raising consciousness and promoting social justice not only emerges from people who belong in the groups most immediately impacted by racial disparities but
from others as well. For example, in 2016 a group of Asian American young people were concerned about their family members’ lack of understanding and empathy for the dehumanization of Black lives in the United States, so in an effort to communicate their concerns to their elders, they created a template letter to their family that others could modify and share to increase understanding and empathy. Among other things, the letter stated,

Even as we hear about the dangers Black Americans face, our instinct is sometimes to point at all the ways we are different from them. To shield ourselves from their reality instead of empathizing. When a policeman shoots a Black person, you might think it’s the victim’s fault because you see so many images of them in the media as thugs and criminals. After all, you might say, we managed to come to America with nothing and build good lives for ourselves despite discrimination, so why can’t they?

It’s true that we face discrimination for being Asian in this country. Sometimes people are rude to us about our accents, or withhold promotions because they don’t think of us as “leadership material.” Some of us are told we’re terrorists. But for the most part, nobody thinks “dangerous criminal” when we are walking down the street. The police do not gun down our children and parents for simply existing.

I support the Black Lives Matter movement. Part of that support means speaking up when I see people in my community—or even my own family—say or do things that diminish the humanity of Black Americans in this country. I am telling you this out of love, because I don’t want this issue to divide us. I’m asking that you try to empathize with the anger and grief of the fathers, mothers, and children who have lost their loved ones to police violence. To empathize with my anger and grief, and support me if I choose to be vocal, to protest. To share this letter with your friends, and encourage them to be empathetic, too.

Although this example illustrates how young people can open lines of communication with their older parents, it is also important to consider how parents and others who have regular contact...
with young people can foster contexts that support open dialogue about these issues with youth. Though many of us already work hard to emphasize the importance of treating everyone equally—respecting the differences that exist and celebrating the diversity around us—this is not enough. These messages are certainly important, but we must also teach children about the injustices that disproportionately affect members of some groups and not others. For nonminority children, this raises awareness and helps create a space for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups. For minority children, this validates their lived experiences, sends a message that the experiences of injustice are real (not imagined, not blown out of proportion), and that those in more powerful positions of authority (parents, teachers, youth leaders, clergy) are not going to sit by and let these injustices go unnoticed or unaddressed. Everyone benefits from this more transparent approach because, as eloquently stated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “No one is free until we are all free.”

In this book, we openly discuss many current ethnic-racial disparities and tensions about which conversations are usually stifled. We discuss why these conversations are challenging but also provide ideas for language and approaches to use when engaging in this difficult, yet crucial task with youth. Furthermore, we present information to help readers understand the different developmental capabilities of young people at different ages and what types of conversations and activities can be most effective with children, adolescents, and young adults.

**Why Focus on Youth?**

From a child development perspective, children have a strong preference for equality and fairness, and they demonstrate an increasing concern for fairness and others’ welfare with age. Scholars such as Melanie Killen, Adam Rutland, and their colleagues have shown the prevalence of children’s moral concerns regarding equality and justice. Children’s moral concerns about fairness and justice are in direct opposition to the realities of various manifestations of inequality in society. As youth become increasingly aware of the
disconnect between their moral ideals and the unequal opportunities afforded to non-White Americans, adults have an important choice to make. We can be silent, teach them to blame the victimized groups for the oppression they experience, or choose to have the difficult conversations that expose the imperfections of our society. The last option is likely the most challenging for adults who themselves have not explored these topics in great depth; however, this approach shortchanges youth. To paraphrase noted scholar bell hooks, we cannot empower young people to critically examine the inequalities they perceive in society without personally facing these issues in ways that may make us feel vulnerable, too.

Young people understand this vulnerability all too well. As they mature during the course of adolescence, youth are thrust into a meaning-making process about society’s racial and ethnic zeitgeist. They must develop a sense of who they are and who they can be in a deeply conflicted society, and the experiences and knowledge gained during childhood serve as the foundation for this process. Making sense of diversity in a developmentally attentive way involves helping adolescents grapple with the question “Who am I, and how do I fit in this diverse world?” To best foster the development of skills and competencies that will help adolescents make sense of their identities and of the diversity that exists in society in productive ways, adults must engage in the difficult conversations—both among ourselves and with our youth. Indeed, some of the most significant opportunities to engage in these conversations occur during adolescence. During this developmental period, youth gain more freedom to explore the world outside their immediate family and gain the cognitive abilities to think about more complex and abstract social issues, such as racism and societal hierarchies. As one fifteen-year-old Latino male adolescent study participant wrote in response to a survey question asking, “What does your ethnicity mean to you?”:

I am proud to be Mexican even if White people (some, not all) might [not] think we are as smart or as equal to them. I love my ethnicity. I love the foods, culture, people, and many more. Some White people out there want us to go back to our country. (I
guess they haven’t tried our food.) I am proud of my ethnicity and I wouldn’t change. It is the best.

As noted in the work of Melanie Killen and her colleagues, without knowledge of how social groups function in relation to one another in a given context, youth are at a loss for understanding why differential treatment based on a particular group membership is unfair and unequal.

Events that highlight ethnic-racial tensions and inequality, such as those that are well publicized in the national news—as well as those situations taking place closer to one’s community that are less well publicized—strike a chord because we may have uncritically accepted the rhetoric that we live in a color-blind society where individuals are judged by their merits and treated in a just and fair manner. In fact, following the 2016 presidential election, many of us, Democrats and Republicans alike, were shocked to learn that white nationalism is not a relic of the past and, quite to the contrary, is a thriving movement that had enough momentum to shape the discourse during the election. Cabinet appointments, such as the one announced in the following news account, underscore their influence:

White nationalist leaders are praising Donald Trump’s decision to name former Breitbart executive Steve Bannon [prominent leader in the white nationalist movement] as his chief strategist, telling CNN in interviews they view Bannon as an advocate in the White House for policies they favor … The leaders of the white nationalist and so-called “alt-right” movement—all of whom vehemently oppose multiculturalism and share the belief in the supremacy of the white race and Western civilization—publicly backed Trump during his campaign for his hardline positions on Mexican immigration, Muslims, and refugee resettlement.

Furthermore, news stories following Donald Trump’s election suggest that this agenda will continue to gain steam in the coming years:

Trump, hail our people, hail victory!” The man they were saluting was the white nationalist who coined the term “alternative right,” Richard Spencer, who had just given an anti-Semitic speech in which he quoted Nazi propaganda and called the United States a “white country.”18

Much of this racist rhetoric, and the election of a candidate who is perceived by many to be overtly racist, galvanized many people to express their opposition to and outrage about the white nationalist perspective, for instance, by making record-setting donations to organizations such as the ACLU.19 This is a useful way for adults to feel a sense of agency in combatting separatist agendas. Another way for adults to be agentic in this effort is to work with youth to help them develop the skills needed to recognize social injustices, understand their own social identities, and work constructively toward improved intergroup relations. As we discuss in greater depth in chapter 2, this work is critical because such injustices have real implications for the health and the literal survival of members of marginalized groups via poorer health, shortened life spans, exposure to stress, and diminished life chances.20

Undoubtedly, parents, educators, and others who work with young people want all youth to reach their full potential; the problem, however, is that many of us struggle with how to best help our youth understand the complicated issues that arise as a function of ethnicity and race. The activities of a White, award-winning former English Language Arts teacher in Texas, Emily E. Smith-Buster, provide an excellent example of the potential challenges for educators.21 In a speech to her colleagues at the time, she explained her evolution from being an excellent teacher who was hesitant to talk about race to one who accepted the challenge of questioning her own views on race and ethnicity; this consequently transformed her pedagogical approach so that it more fruitfully met the needs of her Latino, Black, and White students:

[T]hings changed for me the day when, during a classroom discussion, one of my kids bluntly told me I couldn’t understand because I was a white lady. I had to agree with him. I sat there
and tried to speak openly about how I could never fully understand and went home and cried, because my children knew about white privilege before I did. The closest I could ever come was empathy.

My curriculum from then on shifted. We still did all of the wonderful things that I had already implemented in the classroom, except now the literature, the documents, the videos, the discussions, the images embodied the issues that my children wanted to explore. We studied the works of Sandra Cisneros, Pam Munoz Ryan and Gary Soto, with the intertwined Spanish language and Latino culture—so fluent and deep in the memories of my kids that I saw light in their eyes I had never seen before. We analyzed Langston Hughes’s “Let America be America Again” from the lens of both historical and current events and realized that the United States is still the land that has never been …

Looking back, I think that my prior hesitation to talk about race stemmed from a lack of social education in the classroom. A lack of diversity in my own life that is, by no means, the fault of my progressive parents, but rather a broken and still segregated school system. Now that I’m an educator in that system, I’ve decided to stand unflinching when it comes to the real issues facing our children today, I’ve decided to be unafraid to question injustice, unafraid to take risks in the classroom—I am changed. And so has my role as a teacher.

I can’t change the color of my skin or where I come from or what the teacher workforce looks like at this moment, but I can change the way I teach. So I am going to soapbox about something after all. Be the teacher your children of color deserve. In fact, even if you don’t teach children of color, be the teacher America’s children of color deserve, because we, the teachers, are responsible for instilling empathy and understanding in the hearts of all kids …

So teach the texts that paint all the beautiful faces of our children and tell the stories of struggle and victory our nation has faced. Speak openly and freely about the challenges that are taking place in our country at this very moment. Talk about the
racial and class stereotypes plaguing our streets, our states, our society. You may agree that black and brown lives matter, but how often do you explore what matters to those lives in your classroom?22

As demonstrated by Smith-Buster’s comments, understanding others’ ethnic-racial experiences can be critical for developing an understanding of one’s own ethnic-racial identity. With an informed sense of one’s own self, one can begin to align diverse perspectives of ethnic and racial dynamics.

Throughout this book, we present what we know about ethnic-racial identity and how fostering its development in all young people can provide building blocks with which they can begin to reconcile the diverse ways in which race and ethnicity matter in US society. We provide this information with the goal of helping to advance conversations not only about widely publicized incidents in which race is acutely salient to youth (for instance, the police brutality inflicted on Black people that is widely circulated on a seemingly daily basis online and in media reports) but also more subtle, everyday instances in which ethnic and racial dynamics bubble to the surface.

This increased understanding is valuable for all youth, regardless of whether they are members of socially dominant or marginalized groups in society. Furthermore, such understanding is absolutely essential for building the foundation for productive relationships between members of different groups. Finally, efforts to foster respect for the ethnic and racial diversity that exists in our society, and to which youth are regularly exposed in their communities and schools and via the media, are critical for developing ethnic and racial empathy.

In addition to developing empathy, we also need to be reflective about the role each of us plays in maintaining or actively resisting the status quo. It is through intergroup dialogue and the development of genuine relationships between people who are members of different social groups that we will be able to engage in this reflection and bridge the gap between our divergent understandings of race, ethnicity, and social injustices. Here, it’s instructive to consider a comment made by Derek Black—a former prominent white
nationalist who famously disavowed those ideologies—about the need for “honest listening” when interacting with members of other groups. His willingness to reexamine his own identity involved intensive, thoughtful discussions with others who held quite disparate views and identities from his own. When asked to provide advice on how to change others’ mind-sets about race, he commented, “That kind of persuasion happens in person-to-person interactions and it requires a lot of honest listening on both sides. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn’t understand why anyone would fear me” (emphasis added). While reflecting on his journey, Black explained how his identity evolved from white nationalist to social justice activist, and how those honest conversations with diverse peers were critical in this transformation.

I was born into a prominent white nationalist family—David Duke is my godfather, and my dad started Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website—and I was once considered the bright future of the movement. Several years ago, I began attending a liberal college where my presence prompted huge controversy. Through many talks with devoted and diverse people there—people who chose to invite me into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize me—I began to realize the damage I had done. Ever since, I have been trying to make up for it.

Black’s experience is an extreme case, but we know from the work of Derald Wing Sue, and Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, respectively, that we all carry implicit biases. Reflection is necessary for individuals of all persuasions, and it is most certainly a lifelong process.

Can Youth Have a Strong Ethnic-Racial Identity and Still Value Other Groups?

At this point, you may be thinking, “Okay, that’s great. Everyone needs to feel good and proud about their ethnic-racial group membership. But won’t this just lead to more divisions because, by
feeling more connected and proud of our own group, don’t we have to downgrade the value of other groups?” You are not alone in this logic. For many, the concept of ethnic-racial identity conveys a sense of pride in a particular group, and only that group. Working from this perspective, it may be difficult to imagine how promoting ethnic-racial identity can help promote positive intergroup relations. This may be why public and academic communities alike continue to wrestle, uneasily, with the presumed tension between a desire to support youths’ ethnic and racial identity, on the one hand, and promoting positive interracial interactions, on the other hand. At first glance, these two goals seem to be at odds with each other, but they need not be. First, in work conducted by Jean Phinney and her colleagues, adolescents from Latino, Black, Asian, and White backgrounds who had thought more about their ethnic-racial identities actually reported more positive views about engaging with others who were from different ethnic-racial groups, a skill that has been referred to as “ethnic-racial competence,” or the ability to behave in ways that invite positive relationships with peers from other ethnic groups. Second, having a positive sense of one’s ethnic-racial identity promotes social competence with peers, such as the ability to productively navigate social interactions and form friendships. In Denise Newman’s work with American Indian youth, those who were more interested in learning about their culture were more likely to have prosocial relationships, and less aggressive interactions, with their peers. Thus, rather than impeding the ability to interact or engage with others, a stronger ethnic-racial identity actually promotes competencies in youth that help them engage in more positive relationships with their peers.

In addition to adolescents’ ethnic-racial identity informing positive social relationships with peers, in our own work, we also find that having more ethnic-racially diverse friendship groups promote increases in ethnic-racial identity exploration among middle school boys and girls six months later. Furthermore, in our focus group discussions with Black, White, Latino, and Asian American high school students, they explained that the process of learning about their own ethnic-racial background was facilitated by learn-
ing about others’ ethnic-racial backgrounds. Thus, when youth engage in dialogue or share experiences with each other regarding either person’s background, this engages both peers in their own ethnic-racial identity development process.

I have a lot of friends who aren’t of the same like ethnicity and stuff, and they’re very, they’re very into their own faith, but they’re very open to other faiths. Like, you say something like out of the blue, like, you’re like “oh I have to do this type thing” or you know like, “oh today is this day” and they’re like “what is that?” and you’re like, you explain it to them, and they’re so intrigued by it, and then, that’s … and they’re like “oh well, I have something like that in my fest- or in my culture and stuff” and then you learn about their culture, and then it really opens up the spectrum to say “wow” like there’s not one single culture.
—Eighteen-year-old Asian Indian female adolescent

[I]f you go in a mixed group, like, and you see what other people’s culture is like, then you get to see, like the differences between yours and theirs and then like you can think about yours more. —Sixteen-year-old Latino male adolescent

From the adolescents’ perspectives, exposure to and increased understanding of groups different from their own increased their curiosity about their own background and motivated them to learn more about themselves. Such curiosity opens up possibilities for youth from different ethnic and racial groups to form bonds based on their shared engagement in the process of developing their identities in ways that are mutually beneficial.

We also know from the work of Patricia Gurin and her colleagues that young people of diverse backgrounds need to engage in intergroup dialogue to develop an understanding of their identities, not only on a personal level but also within a broader context of power and oppression. Doing so comes with many benefits. In their own words:

IGD [intergroup dialogue] also promotes understanding one’s racial-ethnic, gender, and other social identities as well as
understanding those of others … Furthermore, these identities are located in systems of power and privilege, which are not viewed as static but rather as dynamic and allowing for change … Thus … a critical analysis of inequality and commitment to social responsibility and action are tied to identities as central issues in intergroup dialogue.30

In their work, Gurin and colleagues emphasize the need to keep social identity at the forefront and intentionally use teaching methods that encourage students from different backgrounds to learn about one another both as individuals and as members of social groups.

In sum, theory, research, and practice suggest that having a secure sense of one’s ethnic-racial identity can, under the right conditions, actually help to promote positive intergroup experiences through increased understanding of ethnic-racial injustices and the emergence of ethnic-racial empathy. Furthermore, the extent to which youth have engaged in examining their ethnic-racial identity is, for many, intertwined with their awareness of prejudice, because in the process of learning about themselves, they learn about the status of their group compared to others. Drawing from everything we have learned from our work and that of many others, we conclude that not only can youth have a strong ethnic-racial identity and still view other groups positively, but having a strong ethnic-racial identity actually makes it possible for youth to have a less superficial or more genuine understanding, and therefore value, for other groups. Indeed, the title for this book was inspired by the idea posed by the famous social psychologist Gordon Allport in his seminal work, The Nature of Prejudice. Briefly, he commented that for intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, it must be based on experiences that help us get beyond the superficial and toward those that allow us to form meaningful common bonds. We believe that providing opportunities for youth to figure out their ethnic-racial identities together is a kind of meaningful connection that is essential for positive intergroup relations.

In the chapters that follow, we provide tangible language and tools to help parents, teachers, educators, school administrators, and
clergy—essentially, anyone who has regular contact with youth—engage productively with young people regarding these issues. We end the book with an overview of existing programs and approaches that show promise for engaging with youth to promote empathy and perspective-taking, positive intergroup relationships, awareness of racism and prejudice, and positive development of ethnic-racial identity. Readers will find many of the resources presented to be useful in their work with youth moving forward.

**Organization of the Book**

We’ve organized this book to first present a general introduction of the significance and relevance of race and ethnicity for those living in diverse societies such as the United States. In this chapter, we have introduced the notion that nurturing young people’s ethnic and racial identity development will be an important way to promote positive intergroup relations and, ultimately, a better-adjusted society. In addition, we place this topic in the current historical context to help readers understand why this is a timely topic, and one that merits our immediate attention. Chapter 2 provides readers with a detailed demographic portrait of the US population. Beyond presenting basic demographic characteristics, we discuss some of the most pressing concerns involving ethnic-racial disparities that fuel stereotypes and related tensions in our society, which inevitably pose significant risks to youths’ positive adjustment in multiple realms. We also introduce the critical need to engage in productive dialogue regarding race and ethnicity and explain that an essential ingredient for engaging in such dialogue is understanding our own biases. In order to understand our own biases, however, we explain that we must first come to understand our own ethnic-racial identities.

Chapter 3 provides readers with an in-depth understanding of ethnic and racial identity. We walk readers through the relevance of this topic for all members of a diverse society—those who are members of socially dominant and marginalized groups alike. This chapter provides readers with basic definitions, but it also provides an
in-depth discussion of how individuals develop their ethnic-racial identity, what it consists of, and the consequences that this aspect of the self-concept can have for well-being. We also devote a significant portion of this chapter to distinguishing ethnic-racial identity from the labels that are often used to classify individuals according to their race or ethnicity. Chapter 4 is devoted to presenting how the multiple settings in which youths’ lives are embedded—such as family, schools, and neighborhoods—are constantly sending messages regarding race and ethnicity, which play a significant role in the identity that youth develop, as well as their dispositions toward having positive relationships with those who are different from them. In this chapter we discuss the many opportunities that authority figures in these various settings have for promoting positive ethnic-racial identity development in young people.

Chapter 5 synthesizes what we know about ethnic-racial identity development and positive intergroup relations to introduce readers to the notion that promoting positive ethnic-racial identity development among youth can ultimately lead to youth engaging in more positive and productive relationships with those who are different from them. Relying largely on decades of research that has been conducted on both intergroup contact and ethnic-racial identity, we walk readers through the evidence that supports the idea that understanding and developing our own ethnic-racial identities can help, rather than hinder, our ability to have more positive relationships with others. In chapter 6, we provide concrete examples of how those who interact regularly with young people can promote ethnic-racial identity development in youth and, in turn, help youth engage in more positive relations across difference. Together, the chapters in this book provide readers with a more profound understanding of what ethnic-racial identity is, how it can help promote positive interactions across difference, why this is a timely and important issue, and how those who work with youth can promote this important developmental competency in young people.
As we will outline in chapter 2, the population of youth in the United States is more ethnically and racially diverse than ever before. Ethnic and racial minorities currently comprise more than 45% of the population under the age of eighteen, and these numbers are only expected to increase. According to a December 2012 Census projection, the United States will become a majority-minority nation in 2043 and, by 2060, ethnic and racial minorities will comprise 57% of the US population; non-Latino Whites will remain the largest single group, but no group will make up a majority. Alongside these demographic projections, recent highly publicized and traumatic events taking place across the United States reveal persistent tensions that threaten to perpetuate a deeply divided society in which experiences with ethnic-racial discrimination and marginalization are commonplace and will continue to pose significant threats to our collective health. Furthermore, the prominence of these events increases the likelihood that youth from all ethnic-racial backgrounds are aware of ethnic-racial tensions and thus must develop a sense of who they are and who they can be in a deeply conflicted society. If we leave youth underprepared to navigate well-established racial and ethnic tensions in the United States, we do so at our own peril, as these conditions threaten to undermine the potential for youth of all groups to develop healthy, integrated communities as adults.