

Resolving Ethnic Identity Conflicts

By Susan Spedalle

Maria Nicolaidis, Ed.D., C.A.S., a psychologist at Interfaith Medical Center and a psychotherapist in private practice, specializes in serving children, adolescents and adults who experience conflicts with their ethnic identity and self-esteem. Nicolaidis attended Deree College in Athens and received a masters and doctorate from Teachers College at Columbia University in New York, where she minored in bilingual education. She is a certified addiction specialist, with proficiency in the treatment of alcohol and other substance use disorders. She is a board member of the Greek American Behavioral Sciences Institute, as well as a number of Greek community groups, and both the State and American Psychological Associations.

Susan Spedalle: What exactly is ethnic identity?

Maria Nicolaidis: The psychological definition is a self-perception that is formed from the experiences of feeling an attachment to, and being a member of, a particular ethnic group. Your ethnic identity changes throughout your life, and has multiple layers. It's a multi-dimensional concept. Your ethnic identity depends on where you are in your life, and what is important and meaningful to you at that time. "Ethnic identity conflict" is when someone feels conflictual about the cultural

sociate my being Greek with discipline and all the things that other kids could do that I couldn't do.

When I became a teenager, I went to boarding school in Greece and found out that all the restrictions my parents placed on me because I was Greek weren't being followed by parents and teenagers in Greece. Greece had moved forward from some of those old ideas.

The problem is that when people emigrate, their values tend to crystallize and become stagnant. They feel threatened and they become rigid and scared and they become dysfunctional in American society. They don't move forward. They hold on to old ideas because they are not functioning fully in their new mainstream society. In Greece, things had loosened up, but my parents had kept the old values of the village intact. The problem was we no longer lived in the village.

SS: You eventually overcame the challenges associated with your ethnic identity, but what is the cost to people who do not?

MN: I did overcome them. I learned that my identity as a Greek American person was based on more than just those restrictions I experienced as a child. I learned to value the things I love about the culture, which are so many.

The risk in not dealing with an ethnic identity problem is that you will not have a healthy sense of belonging to your ethnic

their ethnicity. You need to integrate both.

SS: But the two cultures have marked differences, don't they?

MN: Yes. Because the cultural norms and expectations in the American and Greek American cultures vary, Greek American kids can wind up with a sense of confusion and negative feelings about themselves.

SS: Why? What's an example of the differences in cultural norms and expectations?

MN: American kids are supposed to move out of their homes when they graduate from high school and either move on to college, or get a job. In the American culture, children are recognized for their competencies, and are taught to feel good about themselves by being independent.

Greek American kids are encouraged to go to college (sometimes not very far from the family), but after college, they're encouraged to come back to the family home, at least until they marry. If they don't, and they act as independently as their American counterparts, they are criticized by the family. It's not a case of one culture being right and another wrong, but you can see the differences.

A Greek child knows that above all, he or she must not shame the family. In addition, they must maintain the family's cultural traditions. Greek parents are used to teaching their children that their sense of self comes

MN: Because from the Greek cultural perspective, if the child has a problem it means there was bad parenting. Of course, this isn't true. Children have their own problems based on their own issues and development. The Greek parent is likely to identify low self-esteem or depression as a "personality flaw," and call the child "lazy." In Greek American culture, there is no concept of someone having an emotional problem, or emotional stressors.

SS: So do these children get the help they need?

MN: If someone recognizes that there is a conflict. In Greece, emotional difficulties tend to be seen as a "case of nerves," a physiological thing. You go to the doctor and get a prescription. It's not viewed as something in the realm of the emotional because then someone would have to take responsibility, and someone would feel shame. How do you tell your next-door neighbor your son is depressed? Greek parents feel: "I gave this child money, food, everything. This kid is not supposed to have emotional problems." In the US, there is a wide variety of ways to deal with emotional problems, more support systems and resources.

SS: If someone suspects they might have a problem with ethnic identity, what should they do?

and what is important and meaningful to you at that time. "Ethnic identity conflict" is when someone feels conflictual about the cultural differences between the values of the Greek and American cultures.

SS: Why were you drawn to the concept of ethnic identity in your studies?

MN: It was a personal interest. I first came to the US from Greece as a two-year-old and spent twelve years here. Then I returned to Greece for high school and college and I came back to the US when I was 23. I thought I would feel more comfortable in America. But when I came back as a young adult, I was thoroughly confused about my own ethnic identity. It didn't matter that I had lived here as a child, at 23 I had to emigrate all over again.

SS: How did you know something about your own ethnic identity was not right?

MN: I was living in America, but I was still Greek and I did not have positive feelings about being Greek. That's an important sign. If you don't have positive feelings about your ethnic identity, it's going to cause problems.

SS: Why weren't your feelings about being Greek good feelings?

MN: When I was young, I realized I was different and the way I was different was that I had to be a "good Greek girl." Because I was Greek I had to follow certain norms and behaviors, so I couldn't wear pants because girls didn't do that, and I couldn't go to other children's homes because no one there would be Greek. I couldn't go out and play, because Greek girls stayed in the house. I came to as-

erty problem is that you will not have a healthy sense of belonging to your ethnic group, which means you will not feel good about certain aspects of yourself. If I'm not connected to my Greek American identity, it raises issues of whether or not I feel good about who I am.

SS: What is a healthy ethnic identity and good self-esteem?

MN: Those Greeks who came to the US and their Greek American children, have a healthy ethnic identity if they feel good about being Greek American, and have integrated their Greek identity with their American identity. They have a healthy sense of ethnic identity if they feel that they belong to their ethnic group and have accepted and dealt with being in the Greek American ethnic group, as well as being an ethnic minority in the host -- or American -- culture.

Self-esteem is literally an individual's sense of self-worth, how you feel about yourself. Good self-esteem in relation to ethnic identity means that you have good feelings about coming from a Greek background. The Greek American part of you is a positive part, a strength. You feel you've balanced both cultures within yourself. Greek Americans who feel balanced tend to be more achievement-oriented and high on both endurance and nurture.

SS: What would be an example of an ethnic identity problem?

MN: People can get immersed in the Greek American community and not benefit from the mainstream culture, or inversely, go so mainstream that they don't identify with

their children that their sense of self comes from their role in the family, and the extended family. Doing what the family wants is what is most important, not recognition for competencies.

The Greek American child has to make sense of the differing values. This can become a problem if a child's personal goals are incompatible with Greek cultural norms. Psychological uncertainty develops, and there is an unclear sense of self along with feelings of ambiguity and confusion.

SS: What kinds of problems can this lead to?

MN: It may lead to a situation where a child can be suffering from low self-esteem, or from depression. Low self-esteem develops when no one gives you positive reinforcement for who you are. You're not being nurtured. Often I see that the parents can't recognize this. They don't see that their child has a problem.

SS: Why?

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MN: Acknowledge it. Recognize it. Don't feel bad it is there. Other people have struggled with these questions and made sense of them. The worst thing someone can do is ignore it. Or get into a relationship. Many of my patients are children and adults who have experienced abuse, or are depressed, or have relationship problems. If someone hasn't figured out their dilemma, they'll play it out in a relationship.

SS: Is a particular kind of therapist necessary?

MN: You need to ask yourself what is my issue and struggle? How do I feel about being Greek American? If the answer isn't positive, maybe there's a problem. The patient needs to find someone who will help them bridge the two cultures and not feel that they have to choose one over the other. The therapist chosen would not have to be the same ethnicity as the patient, but should be sensitive to the issues of ethnic identity.