Identity Development

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Identity development is a critical psychosocial task with relevance across the lifespan, but which plays a central role in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Broadly, identity development involves constructing an understanding of who one is, and how one came to be that person; that is, identity is an understanding of self that is integrated and coherent across time and context. Successful management of this developmental task facilitates psychological health, the ability to connect with others, and the ability to contribute to one's society.

Contemporary Approaches to Identity Development

Though there are somewhat divergent contemporary approaches to the study of identity development, which are described below, these approaches share roots in Erik Erikson's lifespan development theory. Erikson proposed that there three basic aspects of identity: ego, personal, and social identity. *Ego identity* has a focus on personal continuity, which is found when one is able to integrate one's most important, basic, and private beliefs about the self, particularly in terms of how those aspects of self change or remain the same across time. *Personal identity* centers on how one defines one's values or goals to others, which is represented in the negotiation of culturally relevant roles across various contexts (e.g., political affiliation). *Social identity* is the emphasis on the connection one has to a larger group, such as language or country of origin. Thus, identity development is a broad and multi-dimensional task, and, for healthy development, requires an engagement at all of these levels. These processes are represented somewhat differentially in the two most common empirical approaches to identity development: identity statuses and narrative identity.

The Identity Status Approach

Jim Marcia proposed the first empirical application of Erikson's theory, the identity status paradigm, which most clearly captures the assessment of personal identity, with the developmental issue at play focused on finding one's roles in society. In particular, researchers examine the processes of exploration and commitment in various identity domains, such as politics and religion. Exploration involves seeking out new information, talking to others, reflecting on one's beliefs, and other activities that facilitate thinking about one's take on these culturally important domains of consideration. For example, in exploring one's political identity, one may talk with others about their political beliefs, examine party platforms, and consider one's personal values. Commitment involves staking one's claim to these various roles, such as registering as a Republican or a Democrat.

One can take these two processes of exploration and commitment and determine four different places to be in the process of identity development, each with different implications for psychological health. *Achievement* involves commitment after a period of exploration, and is viewed as the most complete, and thus the healthiest resolution to this task. *Moratorium* represents the state of exploring, without yet committing. Though this is developmentally normal in adolescence and emerging adulthood, individuals in this state can experience anxiety due to the uncertainty about who they are or who they might be. *Foreclosure* involves a commitment to valued roles, but without any preceding exploration. This can be

conceptualized as adopting the beliefs or expectations of others, such as one's family, without much thought. Individuals who are foreclosed tend to be more rigid in their thinking, but have strong relationships with their families and are relatively certain about who they are. There are also some suggestions that the degree to which foreclosure is psychologically healthy depends in part on the culture in which the individual resides, with foreclosure potentially a healthier outcome for those in more hierarchical cultures. The final category is *diffusion*, representing those individuals who have neither explored nor committed to these various domains. This state of being is associated with poor psychological health, given that it suggests that someone is not tackling the appropriate developmental task.

In recent years identity status researchers have tackled some of the drawbacks of Marcia's initial model, notably the implicit assumption that identity development is somehow complete with identity achievement, which is in contradiction to Erikson's theoretical proposals. The *dual-cycle* model is one antidote to this drawback. In this model both exploration and commitment are further delineated into more finely grained developmental processes. Here exploration can come in three forms: *exploration in breadth* represents Marcia's original conceptualization of exploration; *exploration in depth* represents the process of rethinking and evaluating one's commitments once they have been made; and *ruminative exploration* represents a place of being unproductively stuck in the process. Commitment is conceptualized as *commitment making*, again representing Marcia's original process, and *identification with commitment*, representing the integrating of commitments once made into the self.

The Narrative Identity Approach

The second approach focuses on narrative identity, and is most clearly rooted in Erikson's writings on ego identity. The emphasis here is on the need for the individual to find and establish a sense of personal continuity through time in order to commit to adult life. Thus, the developmental issue at play is how individuals manage and make sense of the inevitable personal changes that occur across the lifespan. The developmental task, from this perspective, is to form a coherent story that explains how one has changed and remained the same in a way that preserves a sense of personal continuity through time.

Narrative researchers place a heavy emphasis on what is called autobiographical reasoning. This process involves reflecting on past experiences and making sense of them in a way that connects those experiences to one's current understanding of self. This reflective process most often occurs in the context of negative events, or events that are disruptive or unexpected. That is, people do not need to make sense of events that are predictable and ordinary. This is consistent with other developmental theories that focus on challenge as critical to promoting learning or development, more broadly. Further, this reasoning process is facilitated by conversations with close others, such as parents, who can help a person to understand connections between the past and present self. Thus, engaging in reasoning processes, particularly as they help to resolve or make sense of disruptive events, is associated with healthy development.

Aside from the processes of identity development – exploration, commitment, and autobiographical reasoning – recent evidence suggests that the content of identity is also important to consider for a full understanding of this developmental project. In particular, certain topics appear to be especially salient, or require more work to make sense of. For example, across both status and narrative studies in adolescence and emerging adulthood, relationships play a large role in the content of identity development, particularly those relationships within the family. This suggests that others are a large part of how individuals define themselves. Individuals are also more likely to discuss the exploration or meaning-making in those content domains that are more likely to require some sort of decision process or action (e.g., political or religious affiliation). All in all, taking these two approaches into account, there are a variety of ways that individuals can construct an identity, and a variety of content domains to be integrated into that identity.

Identity Across Developmental Stages

Infancy. Although identity development is viewed as beginning in earnest in adolescence and emerging adulthood, there are roots and precursors to this developmental task in infancy and childhood. Perhaps the first event in this process is understanding that one's body is one's own, as we see when infants recognize themselves in the mirror. This earliest recognition of self is linked to subsequent pronoun use, self-concept, understanding of the continuity of the self through time, as well the understanding that one's mind is different from others. Thus, this early awareness of the body as one's own is linked to understanding the cognitive self as one's own.

Childhood. This understanding of the body as separate from others then leads to the ability to engage in increasingly autonomous behaviors across childhood. As children engage in more activities, with opportunities to be successful or not, and to enjoy them or not, they begin to develop a self-concept. This self-concept concerns their likes and dislikes, traits, and self-evaluations of skills and abilities. Self-concept increases in complexity and coherence across childhood as more domains become salient or relevant, some of which have the potential for conflict (e.g., the self with parents and with friends).

Adolescence. This overview of infancy and childhood highlights that adolescents do not start with a blank slate; they have a good idea of their general conception of self, but what they are lacking is an integration of the increasing multiple aspects of self. Indeed, Erikson viewed the culmination of the engagement with personal, ego, and social identity as 'identity synthesis,' which he defined as a process of reworking childhood identifications into a current self-representation. This new self-representation should be coherent across time and contexts, and is also represented by a commitment to adult roles. Since part of this process involves the realization that childhood identifications are no longer useful, adolescence is when this developmental work is viewed to begin. There are several other reasons that make adolescence an ideal time to begin work on this task. Adolescents gain new cognitive skills that make this kind of complex self-exploration possible. As individuals are able to think more abstractly, and with greater complexity, they are able to see contradictions between their own

beliefs and behaviors currently and over time. These new ways of thinking can put individuals in a vulnerable period of uncertainty as they work to resolve those discrepancies, or what Erikson called a 'crisis.' Indeed, the multitude of changes that occur in adolescence, such as puberty, new relationships with peers, a renegotiation of relationships with parents, demand sense-making.

Emerging Adulthood. In many contemporary industrialized societies a recent shift in life course expectations has resulted in the postponement of adult roles, with more time for self-exploration. That is, as more individuals attend some form of post-secondary education, and post-pone marriage and childbearing, a new stage has emerged that has identity development as its central task. Thus, adolescence is when the individuals first begin to engage in the work of constructing an identity, but emerging adulthood is when a lot of the action happens. Part of this is due to the cultural norms shifting towards greater self-focus. In other words, given a tolerance for, or even expectation of, delayed adulthood in modern society, this is a time to engage in role experimentation so that individuals can explore the possibilities for defining themselves within the larger society. In many contemporary societies it is in emerging adulthood when the opportunities for exploration of roles become more available, and when the lack of commitment to such roles is still acceptable. Thus, in adolescence there are a multitude of changes, coupled with increasing cognitive complexity, which both demand and facilitate attention to this task. In emerging adulthood increasing choice and autonomy allow for even greater strides towards defining the self.

Adulthood. Erikson was very clear that this developmental task was not one that was left behind once 'resolved.' Indeed, identity continues to be a concern across adulthood, particularly as events occur that demand revision to one's identity (e.g., marriage, parenthood, job loss, illness). Some events may transform identity, particularly those that dramatically change one's life structure (e.g., widowhood, parenthood). And some experiences result in a continued exploration of commitments once made. That is, one may explore one's role as a parent, commit to that role by bearing and rearing children, but may continue to explore that role with the passage of time and new experiences; this process results in a deepening of one's commitment, rather than a dramatic shift.

Older Adulthood. There is less research on the processes and contexts of identity development at the end of the lifespan, although there are important implications for identity work at this stage. First, the body may return as a central component of identity, as one reconciles physical declines. One way that older adults can manage the challenges of old age is to shift in focus from one's body, and maintain some form of self-efficacy. Further, in old age the relevant identity work may shift away from the exploratory and meaning-making work of earlier stages to finding a sense of peace, or integrity, with who one is.

Elaborations on Identity Development

Although Erikson was very clear about the importance of establishing oneself in a specific cultural context, so far we have neglected to elaborate on social identity, which represents how

one aligns with, or fits into the culture in which one resides. Our neglect in this chapter so far is related to the relative empirical neglect of this issue in the field of identity development. Part of this is due to the emphasis on personal *processes* of autobiographical reasoning and exploration, with less attention paid to the objects of those reasoning processes, or the content of identity. And one major component of identity content is the socially defined roles that one plays in society.

Attention to culture raises the issue of the constraints that individuals have in constructing their identities. For example, if there is only access to one type of religious practice available to the person, this may constrain possibilities for the development of religious identity. Further, when considering the role of culture, more attention is put to the specific domains, or experiences that individuals find salient or important. Thus, in some cultures the exploration or sense-making of one's religious beliefs will be much more important than others. This could occur because of a diversity of choice in religious beliefs, or because of the centrality of a particular religious belief system in a given culture.

Another barrier to studying social identity is that the term is not consistently defined. In addition to the Eriksonian sense in which social identity corresponds to fit within society, some define it as how individuals express their identities in everyday interactions, and still others define it as social group membership (e.g., ethnicity, gender, social class). This latter conceptualization has led to a large and complex body of research. Within developmental psychology, the focus has been on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of group membership. That is, rather than using group membership itself as an explanatory variable, this research seeks to understand the variations with which individuals think, feel, and behave in relation to their groups. Applying this approach to ethnic identity, developmental psychologists have established progressive developmental increases in ethnic identity and that an emotional connection to one's ethnic group has positive implications for well-being and academic success. A task still to be tackled by the field at large is the meaning of the intersection of these multiple groups identities. That is, what does it mean to be black and female versus white and female? In general, we do not have a lot of information about how individuals balance and integrate their multiple identities. Moreover, we know relatively little about the developmental process of social identities beyond emerging adulthood.

These issues of content and culture are relatively under-studied in the study of identity development, and are important directions for future studies. However, we can conclude by saying that we do know that engaging in identity development processes that facilitate seeking and developing an integrated and coherent understanding of self across multiple domains, across time, and within one's cultural context is a critically important developmental project with relevance across the lifespan.

Suggested Readings

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.

This book is a collection of Erikson's essays on the subject of identity, which ultimately was his greatest scholarly focus and undoubtedly his greatest contribution to psychology.

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative Identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 233-238.

A review of research on narrative identity.

McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of identity development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Containing 34 original chapters, this handbook represents the state-of-the-field of contemporary theory and research on Erikson's theory of identity development and related approaches.

Schwartz, S. J., Zamboanga, B. L., Luyckx, K., Meca, A., & Ritchie, R. A. (2013). Identity in emerging adulthood: Reviewing the field and looking forward. *Emerging Adulthood*, 1, 96-113.

A review of the identity status literature.