The Future of Identity Development Research:
Reflections, Tensions, and Challenges

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Post-print version of:

Syed, M., & McLean, K. C. (2015). The future of identity development research: Reflections, tensions, and challenges. In K. C. McLean & M. Syed (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of identity development* (pp. 562-573). New York: Oxford University Press.

Thanks to Cade Mansfield, Lauren Mitchell, Sarah Morrison-Cohen, and Monisha Pasupathi for feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter. Contact moin@umn.edu.

Abstract

In this chapter we review the contents of the Handbook and discuss important future directions for research on identity development. First, we reflect on the three major sections of the book: debates, applications, and extensions, highlighting why the sections are important and what we have learned. Second, we discuss tensions in the study of identity development that we identified as we edited this Handbook. These tensions include what aspect of identity is being studied, how culture is defined, and the strong emphasis on individual agency over context and opportunity. Finally, we discuss two major challenges to the field of identity development: conceptualizing what exactly is developing in identity development, and bridging the divide between identity process and identity content. Taken together, this chapter, like the Handbook more broadly, is meant to serve as a catalyst and inspiration for future identity development in the coming decades.

Keywords: Identity development, identity process, identity content, culture.

When we agreed to edit this Handbook we were determined to do something different. Handbooks serve an important function within a field. They contain authoritative reviews by leading scholars, providing a snapshot of the state-of-the-art of an area of inquiry. We wanted to honor this tradition of the Handbook format while at the same time pushing our thinking about what a Handbook *can be*. In particular, rather than only looking backward by reviewing an area, we sought to create a resource that looked forward. Additionally, we were committed to bringing together researchers from different perspectives on identity development to facilitate cultural exchange. We felt that this approach would be best suited to getting researchers' creative juices flowing and push the field into new, important territory. We enlisted an incredible team of authors, and invited them to share our vision, encouraging them to be provocative in their writings. The contributors enthusiastically accepted our invitations, and we could not be happier about the rigor and thoughtfulness that they brought to the task.

This concluding chapter contains three broad sections that are consistent with our general approach of looking backward to where we have been, but emphasizing a forward-looking orientation to where we are headed. First, we reflect on the content of the Handbook. In particular, we evaluate the effectiveness of the three major sections of the book—debates, application, and extensions—and discuss areas for further development within each. In the second section, we highlight a few of the tensions in the field that we feel are still unresolved. Finally, in the third section we discuss challenges to the future of identity development research.

How Did We Do? Reflecting on the Success of the Editorial Vision

Ultimately, it is up to the readers of this handbook to gauge its success. The true impact of a product is best assessed through its generativity—the degree to which it leads to more and/or different research—which cannot be known for some time. However, now that we have

completed the project, we thought we would reflect on the degree to which the final product fits our vision. Our review below largely focuses on the sections and chapters as a whole, rather than reviewing each individual chapter, although we do draw upon specific chapters to illustrate our points.

Debates

The debate section of the book is the first section that we developed. As soon as we began discussing ideas for the handbook we began honing in on the debates in the field, how to best represent them, and how to include them in the book. As we discussed in our opening chapter (McLean & Syed, this volume), there was some initial resistance among authors to the use of the word “debate.” For some, they felt like there was not really a debate at all, rather a matter of preference among researchers. For others, they felt we had miscast the “sides” of the debate altogether. Still others grappled with what exactly it was we were asking them to do. We made it clear that what we were looking for was conversations, which we felt were lacking in the literature on these topics. We likened this approach to the Swedish cultural practice of *fika*, in which people take time out of their day for coffee, treats, and conversation. Furthermore, although the topics included in the debates section may not be *active* debates where scholars are trading barbs, we view them as *implicit* debates, as authors are making choices about one approach over another.

To be clear, it was not at all our intention to declare a winner of the debates. We were explicit about this fact to the authors whom we asked to write the commentaries. Furthermore, we wanted the chapters to both stand alone and fit together, and therefore the authors were not charged with “responding” to one another. The end product was a cluster of three to four chapters on the same topic written from different perspectives. While they are not debates in the

traditional sense, they bring these differing perspectives in alignment with one another, which represents an advance in how these topics are currently treated.

When taking the five debates together, one of the most striking features we see is the detail and clarity about *why* the authors use the approaches that they do. In the course of editing the debate chapters, we pushed the authors—hard—for such clarity. In our view, too much in the identity literature is taken for granted, and we wanted to see the origins of thinking among these prominent scholars. The debate cluster on internal, external, and interactional approaches to identity is an excellent example. Both of the debate chapter authors (Waterman and Korobov) and the commentary author (Schachter) detailed the philosophical backgrounds to their thinking, clearly linking these origins to their research practice and theorizing. This type of treatment is not typical of the identity development literature. However, including it can help readers better understand the perspective at play, whether or not they agree with it, and whether or not they want to adopt it in their own work.

We hope to see more of this kind of conversation in the written pages of journals and books, as well as conferences and other venues designed to encourage interaction amongst scholars. There is already evidence that this approach is valued among researchers. The journals *Human Development* and *Developmental Review* have long included critical commentaries on target articles. The signature event of the Conference on Emerging Adulthood is a debate between two scholars on a pressing issue in the field. More recently, SRCD and SRA have included “Views by Two” sessions, which are essentially debates between two scholars with differing views. We wholeheartedly support this movement, and hope to see even more of it in the future.

Applications

Why does identity matter? Any researchers worth their salt could readily supply answers to this question. When considering the identity literature as a whole, however, there is relatively little attention paid to practical applications of identity development. The purpose of this section was to make some of these applications more apparent. Identity sounds like (and is) a highly abstract construct, one that does not have immediately evident connections to the important and pressing issues with which people around the world are wrestling. However, when you stop to think about it, identity lies at the core of some of the major problems of human society. Much of the conflict around the world can be traced to issues of identity, whether they are disagreements over national identity or religious identity (e.g., Hammack, 2011). Although modern research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is largely disconnected from identity, the roots of PTSD go back to Erikson's (1950) work with combat veterans returning from World War II, struggling to reconcile the stark contrast between their pre-war and post-war selves. Chandler and colleagues have linked identity problems with suicidality among indigenous youth in Canada (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). Few problems in this world are as distressing and compelling as suicide. Thus, it is clear that the problem of identity is not simply an academic exercise, but that it has real meaning for people around the world. This section provides a view of those real meanings.

The first two chapters in the applications section focus on the positive aspects of development, how we can support individuals to thrive via a healthy sense of identity. Both Eichas et al. (this volume) and Singer and Kasmark (this volume) discuss interventions to promote identity, but in different ways: Eichas et al. seek to develop large-scale interventions that are relatively easy and affordable to implement. In contrast, Singer and Kasmark are

concerned with individually-focused interventions through one-on-one therapy. Despite these differences, both approaches are deeply rooted in identity theory and involve direct translation of theoretical ideas into points of action. In general, interventions have not been a substantial focus within the identity literature. However, those who have advanced identity interventions have demonstrated their effectiveness to support positive development (Kurtines et al., 2008).

In contrast to the intervention approach of Eichas et al. and Singer and Kasmark, the other three chapters in the applications sections draw attention to the role and relevance of identity development for adolescents and adults in their “natural” contexts, specifically school (Cooper et al., this volume), work (Mortimer et al., this volume), and political conflict (Wainryb & Recchia, this volume). That is, rather than seeking primarily to intervene in the process of identity development, these researchers describe how these contexts of development can be fundamentally seen as vehicles for identity development. Understanding first that these are contexts of identity development then allows for a more tailored approach to interventions.

Taken together, these chapters make a clear and direct case for the real-world importance of identity. In particular, they highlight how identity underlies institutions and contexts that are foundational to modern human existence: school, work, political systems, and living a psychologically healthy life. We urge our colleagues in the field to think deeply about the significance of identity, beyond the issues of general psychological distress and well-being that are typically examined and into the life decisions and experiences that have a profound influence on how we live our lives.

Extensions

In many ways, the extensions section is the most exciting aspect of the book. With all due respect to the authors in the other sections, we believe that the extensions authors had the most

difficult assignment. Our view is that identity is one of the major developmental tasks of the lifespan, and as such must be inextricably linked to other major aspects of development.

However, the field of identity development has been rather narrow in its view of identity within the broader context of development. In an attempt to correct this trend, we asked non-identity researchers to author chapters for this section. We posed a two-part reciprocal question for them to consider: what can research in their area of expertise offer to the study of identity development, and what can the study of identity development offer to the study of their area of research? Given the relative lack of research they had to work with, these authors are to be commended for learning new literatures, masterfully synthesizing these new ideas with their existing ways of thinking, and offering creative and provocative speculations. Indeed, these chapters provide some of the most fertile ground for new directions because of the relative lack of attention to how identity relates to other aspects of development. The results, we think, are better than we even could have imagined. Below we highlight a few of the innovations that have come about through the chapters in this section.

It became clear in examining the chapters on the body and biology that there is a near total lack of attention paid to the body in identity development research (Daniels & Gillen, this volume; Matsuaki, et al. this volume; see Wängqvist & Frisé, in press, for a recent exception). This is despite the fact that Erikson (1968) wrote that one of the key features of mature identity is “a feeling of being at home in one’s body” (p. 165). Of course, there are many features of Erikson’s theory that have not been taken up by researchers, but this omission is somewhat ironic given that the transformations that the body undergoes during adolescence are some of the most obvious ‘discontinuities’ in self that must be reconciled. The chapters in this book will help to forge this new and important direction for identity (and body) research.

Two of the chapters in the extensions section move the study of family and identity to new territory. Working within social domain theory, Rote and Smetana (this volume) provide a more nuanced perspective on how parenting might be related to identity, moving beyond the broad notion that authoritative parenting styles support identity exploration whereas authoritarian parenting restricts it. Cookston and Remy (this volume) bring attention to the potential importance of divorce—both for the parents and for the children. The title of their chapter includes the question, “Who am I if we are not us?” That question gets at the heart of identity, and how disruptions throughout the lifespan can require individuals to reconsider and possibly reconfigure their identities.

Finally, Lilgendahl’s (this volume) chapter takes on a perennial question: what is the relation between identity and personality? There have been numerous empirical studies over the years examining the relations between identity status classifications and personality traits (e.g., extraversion, openness; see Klimstra, 2012). These studies, however, have not led to a very sophisticated understanding of the similarities and differences between these two constructs. Lilgendahl’s chapter takes us into that territory, in part by going beyond equating personality with personality traits. She adopts McAdams’ (2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006) tri-level model of personality, in which traits are but one of the three levels. The other two levels, characteristic adaptations and life stories, capture the more dynamic aspects of personality. She moves beyond this three-level approach, however, to consider how various aspects of personality interact in predicting pathways of identity development. Focusing on these aspects of personality—in addition to traits— as well as their interaction, provides an excellent way to conceptualize the complexities that we know exist in the individual differences in how identities develop.

The “extensions” section of the Handbook highlights the potential directions for the next generation of identity development research. A hallmark of developmental psychology is viewing domains of development as interconnected and reciprocally related (Baltes, 1987; Lerner, 1996). Thus, if identity development is a major task of adolescence and emerging adulthood (as well as other phases of the lifespan), it *must* be related to other major aspect of development, such as family, personality, and biological changes. The question is not one of “if” but rather “how.” The chapters in this section help get those kinds of conversations going.

In sum, we are very pleased with the degree to which the final product fit with our vision for this Handbook. We aimed to assemble a collection of chapters that adequately took stock of what we know about identity development, while at the same time generated ideas for new directions in research. That is not to say that all extant issues in the literature were “settled” through this Handbook. Indeed, there are many remaining questions and, of course, plenty of research still to do. In the remainder of this chapter we discuss some of these unresolved issues. First, we examine some tensions that we feel underlie the chapters when taken together as a set. These tensions have to do with different approaches, perspectives, or assumptions that are not often explicitly addressed. Second, we discuss some challenges to the future of identity development research. These challenges are what we see as major issues in the field that researchers should place close attention to in their work.

Tensions in the Handbook, and Lurking in the Field

As we worked through editing this Handbook, we became acutely aware of several areas of tension that were running through the contributions. By tensions we mean potential conflicts in points of view that are rarely surfaced in written works. Some of these tensions were already known to us, which laid the foundation for the debates section. Others, however, came into

greater relief over time. In this section, we discuss a few of those tensions, providing the basic background and some possible solutions for how to diffuse the tensions to move the field forward. In particular, we discuss three tensions: levels of analysis, definitions of culture, and agency vs. opportunity. At the end, we suggest that consideration of *master narratives* may be one route to resolving all of these tensions.

First, we asked ourselves the question of what this handbook would look like if it were done by different editors. We think the strength of our co-editorship is in the breadth of perspective that we bring. While we both obviously share an expertise in identity development, Moin has focused more on issues of ethnic identity as it intersects with other domains, along with connections to academic experiences, and has done more work to connect status and narrative perspectives (see Syed, in press-b). Kate, in contrast, has focused more exclusively on narrative identity development and issues relating to personality and well-being (see McLean, 2008). Both of us have an appreciation for, and have focused on, ‘external’ and ‘internal’ approaches to identity, and we were both schooled in a graduate program that provided a rich and strong emphasis on the socio-cultural nature of human development. Thus, in our co-editorship we attempted to highlight a full representation of contemporary approaches to identity development.

In our aim for a full representation of the literature we return to the tension between narrative and status approaches to identity. We intentionally included a strong representation of narrative research because we both wholeheartedly feel that these two approaches should be viewed as equally viable. Yet, we also see that many current researchers still privilege the status approach, and that for those outside the field, the status approach is viewed as the dominant way of defining identity in developmental psychology (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2013). This can be seen

in the ways that those less familiar with identity defined the construct in their contributions to the volume, as well as in the broader developmental literature. While we could have included a debate section on narrative and status approaches (and perhaps we should have), instead we proceeded with the volume as though they were equally viable. We do not argue here that one is better or worse, but we do hope that researchers consider these approaches in their endeavors to understand identity, and are intentional in explaining their use of one approach over the other. Moreover, we do not believe that there are the only two ways to examine identity development, and we must all remain open-minded enough to accommodate new and different models.

As we discussed in the introductory chapter (McLean & Syed, this volume), our read of Erikson and the existing literature suggests an alignment between the narrative approach and *ego identity*, and the status approach and *personal identity* (see also McLean et al, under review). Not only are these two aspects of identity seldom brought together, but the third level of Eriksonian identity, *social identity*, is rarely integrated with either of the other two (Way & Rogers, this volume). In fact, research on links between Erikson's three levels – ego, personal, and social – would be a lovely way to target the intersection of various aspects of identity development. As we all know, but seldom investigate in our work, ego identity does not develop separately from personal identity, which does not develop separately from social identity (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Weisskirch, 2008). What happens when one's personal story does not match the cultural narrative of one's group, or the values to which one has committed? Despite the excellent work that does exist on culture and identity processes and content, culture is a comparatively less well-developed component of identity development than are other components.

While most identity researchers acknowledge the importance of culture in their theoretical approaches, the specification of how culture relates to particular identity processes

and contents is relatively lacking. Within the study of identity development, most of the work linking identity and culture has focused on ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., in press), or the degree to which individuals identify with their ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). However, as with any aspect of identity, there are multiple approaches to culture, which can create diffusion or confusion in how to approach the question of culture and identity development (Cooper & Denner, 1998). The contents of this Handbook reflect these various approaches. Arnett (this volume) and Manago (this volume) both wrestle with the impact of globalization on identity, linking cultural and historical changes of industrialization to expanded notions of what it is possible to be. Both Way and Rogers (this volume) and Cooper et al. (this volume) take a much more local approach, examining how local conditions within schools and neighborhoods shape the interrelations of identity process and content. Indeed, these chapters may come closest to integrating Erikson's three levels of identity, as they focus on how youth adopt specific roles, how multiple roles are interrelated, and how youth conceptualize their futures, all within a cultural and social context. These authors, along with the chapters by Worrell (this volume) and Azmitia (this volume), push identity researchers to think about culture in terms of its complexity, and urge them to embrace rather than shun the complexity.

The chapters on culture, along with other chapters that draw heavily from sociological perspectives (Côté, this volume; Hammack, this volume; Mortimer et al., this volume), highlight another major tension in the identity development literature: the tension of agency and resources. On the whole, regardless of the approach one takes to identity development, most people view it as an agentic process. One *chooses* to explore or not, to commit or not, to reflect on the past or not. But there are a variety of resources, outside of one's control, which likely play into the ability to engage in this developmental task. What are the domains available to choose from –

what kinds of occupations, religions, dating partners? What are the developmental assets that one holds upon entry into adolescence? An inquiring personality style that is comfortable with uncertainty? A history of supportive scaffolding from parents? Finances to travel or go to college? In short, adolescents and emerging adults have a developmental history that can support or impinge upon identity development. They have traits and geography and relationships that can constrain and support them. Thus, as researchers it is important to remember that identities always develop in context, and can be thought of as a collaboration between parties near (e.g., parents), far (e.g., political systems), and everything in-between.

So how to approach and resolve these tensions? We are both taken with the idea of using *master narratives* as a way to examine how culture intersects with personal and ego identity development. Master narratives represent culturally agreed upon stories or structures for how to interpret experiences. McAdams (2006) has written about redemption as a narrative form to which Americans respond especially well. This does not mean that Americans are more redemptive in their stories (they could be, we don't know yet), but that in storying the difficult parts of their pasts, this is a structure available for use, and in many ways it is a structure that is expected from one's audiences. That is, if one does not story the self in a redemptive fashion, this creates a dissonance that needs to be explained.

Phil Hammack (2011) has linked the master narrative approach to Israeli and Palestinian youth defining themselves in the context of larger narratives about what it means to be Israeli in reference to Palestinians, and vice-versa. We have both also touched on master narratives in terms of gender roles (Thorne & McLean, 2003), sexuality (Weststrate & McLean, 2010), and in reference to an understanding of the meaning of emerging adulthood (Syed, in press-a) and of one's ethnic group (Syed, 2012). Taking this approach we can begin to see how the different

levels that Erikson proposed were critical to identity development might come together. One's personal experiences (ego identity) are examined in relation to the roles one takes (personal identity), which are in reference to the larger culture in which one is defining the self (social identity). Despite the emphasis on master *narrative*, this approach does not negate the status approach, as processes of exploration and commitment are likely closely related to these intersections. For example, if one has explored and committed to a role that is contrary to cultural expectations, the intersection of levels will likely function differently, and be storied differently, than if one has explored and committed to a role within the master narrative. The point here is that it is in the *intersections* that we are likely to see a full representation, a fidelity, to Erikson's theory.

Challenges to the Future of Identity Development Research

Taking the contents of the Handbook and putting them in the context of the field, we have identified two key areas of progress and future development: 1) understanding what it is that is developing within identity development, and 2) the importance of examining identity content in addition to identity process. As we discussed in the introduction to this volume (McLean & Syed, this volume), these two issues are major themes in contemporary identity development research and should be key foci of future research. In each section, we will highlight what we have learned and areas in which work still needs to be done.

What is Development?

Despite the decades of research on identity development, it is still reasonable to ask a number of questions about how identity actually develops. There remains plenty of work to be done to address fundamental questions such as *when* does identity develop, *what* develops, and *how* does it develop. To be sure, there is plenty of existing research focused on identity

development. For example, Kroger, Martinussen, and Marcia's (2010) meta-analysis of longitudinal identity status studies supported the hypothesized move from the moratorium to achieved status across adolescence and emerging adulthood. From a narrative perspective, Habermas and de Silveira (2008) demonstrated that coherence in autobiographical memories, a key indicator of narrative identity, increases across adolescence. Despite these and many other efforts to address development, different perspectives and approaches in the field have not been integrated into a clear portrait of the developmental processes of identity. Part of the impetus for this Handbook was to bring together researchers wrestling with questions of development in order to take stock of what we know and provide directions for where we should head. As always, the outcome of the collective effort was to produce many more new questions rather than satisfactory answers. In this section, we provide a summative view on the topic of development, drawing upon the chapters in the Handbook and the broader literature.

The first question that likely arises for most researchers is the question of *when* identity develops. At first glance, it would seem that this question has some reasonably clear answers. Most identity researchers will readily cite Erikson (1968) for identifying adolescence as the period of the lifespan in which identity issues take center stage. While this is accurate, it is not entirely clear what Erikson meant by "adolescence." Seen through a contemporary lens, most researchers interpret Erikson's adolescence to be approximately ages 10-18. However, adolescence was not so rigidly defined in Erikson's day, and when reading his original works it becomes clear that the 10-18 age range had little meaning to him. Indeed, the struggles of the search for love, work, and a guiding ideology that he described involve decidedly adult themes. Looking at the empirical research that followed, particularly within the identity status model, shows that the foundational researchers understood this, as a great deal of the research was

conducted with college-aged youth (see Kroger, 2013, for a series of meta-analyses). In developing his theory of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) took the theoretical stance that identity development is primarily centered in emerging adulthood—roughly ages 18-29—and not adolescence. Contemporary identity researchers would likely agree that identity development is centered in adolescence and emerging adulthood, which is essentially what Erikson outlined in the first place. So what's the problem?

One limitation of arguing for adolescence and emerging adulthood is that it privileges the role of age for identity development. Developmentalists, practically by definition, seek to understand age-graded changes among individuals, so privileging age should not be a surprise. However, a fundamental truth for developmentalists is that *age is not the explanation* (Baltes, 1987). That is, age, in and of itself, does not have a causal influence on developmental processes. Rather, age acts a proxy for underlying and co-occurring processes. For example, several major identity theorists cite the beginning of adolescence as the beginning of identity development in earnest (Erikson, 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Harter, 1999; McAdams, 2013). This is not because there is anything special about age 10 or age 12, per se. It is because the dawn of adolescence is associated with qualitative shifts in individuals' cognitive abilities, allowing for the abstract thinking necessary to reflect on who one is and develop a sense of identity that is extended in time, as well as a greatly expanded social sphere. In this way, age is similar to other demographic markers that are similarly void of explanatory power, such as race (Helms et al., 2005), gender (Egan & Perry, 2001), and immigrant generational status (Cooper, García Coll, Thorne, & Orellana, 2005). Indeed, there is very little mention of specific age markers for identity development in this Handbook.

So if age is not singularly useful for thinking about development, what is? There is certainly no clear answer to this question, but taking together the contents of this Handbook provides some initial clues. As we discussed in the introductory chapter, Erikson's original writings points to the importance of coherence, synthesis, or integration of one's identity through time and space. This focus fits with Erikson's view of identity as optimally providing a sense of continuity to one's life. Thinking of identity development as fundamentally about integration allows for a true lifespan conceptualization of identity. The need for integration of the self can be seen in the first few months of life, as infants are working to coordinate their thoughts and actions through circular reactions (Piaget, 1954). The need for integration continues across the first three decades of life, as children increasingly coordinate an integration between self and other (Decety & Sommerville, 2003; Ruble et al., 2004), adolescents integrate the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of a given identity domain (Phinney, 1993), and emerging adults work to integrate the multiple identity domains that are important to their lives (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008). The need for integration continues throughout adulthood as identity enters a relative maintenance phase, needing to integrate both the non-age-graded (e.g., birth of a child, career advancement) and non-normative (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce) life events that occur (Cookston & Remy, this volume; Kroger, this volume). Thus, integration is not an end-point to be reached but rather an optimal state of balance to be maintained throughout life.

Surprisingly, however, there is relatively little discussion of integration of identities in the chapters in this book. So have contemporary researchers moved away from the idea that integration is the critical task for identity? Not quite. Throughout the chapters, there is a strong theme of the importance of *challenge* or *conflict* for identity development. These are most often discussed, explicitly or implicitly, as challenges to continuity. Thus, it seems that rather than

focusing on how people integrate their identities successfully, researchers have tended to train their gaze on potential barriers to integration. To put it another way, rather than focus on integration per se, researchers examine the challenges that individuals face that necessitate integration. In this way, integration and challenge are intimately linked, with challenges as situations that prompt the need for integration, and thus identity development (Bruner, 1990; Cross & Cross, 2008; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). In this way, one could argue that integration is the *what* of identity development, whereas challenges are the *how* of identity development.

Interestingly, the focus on challenge is one commonality among narrative and status researchers, although the challenges seem to play a larger role in process-oriented status studies vs. categorical status studies (see, e.g., Kunnen & Metz, this volume vs. Crocetti & Meeus, this volume). A common approach to conceptualizing challenges to identity can be traced back to Piaget's distinction between the cognitive processes of assimilation and accommodation in contributing to adaptation. Generically, assimilation is the ability to integrate new experiences into existing cognitive structures, whereas accommodation is when new experiences necessitate the creation of new structures or modifications of existing ones. Periods of rapid change involve a greater need for accommodation over assimilation, whereas periods of stability involve more assimilation relative to accommodation. Successful adaptation involves reaching a state of equilibration, when individuals can mostly assimilate but also easily accommodate when necessary without serious disruption to functioning.

When surveying the identity literature, Piaget's ideas on adaptation are much more prevalent than one might think at first glance, as Piaget is not typically associated with the field of identity. However, Piagetian adaptation seems to pop in a number of places, both explicitly and implicitly. Within the narrative identity literature there is a history of thinking of identity in

terms of adaptation to challenge, in part due to Bruner's (1990) thesis that conflict lies at the heart of storytelling (c.f., Labov & Waletzky, 1967). However, it can also be seen within some of the identity status research as well. Saskia Kunnen, in particular, has examined the processes of exploration and commitment in the context of identity conflicts (Kunnen, 2006; Kunnen & Metz, this volume). In her chapter on identity in adulthood, Kroger discusses Whitbourne's *identity processing theory* approach to adult identity (Whitbourne, Sneed, & Skultety, 2002), which is a direct application of Piaget's assimilation and accommodation to understand how adults maintain balance in their identities. Other work that focuses on role-based identities also tend to emphasize disruptions to the ability to successfully maintain those roles, including occupation (Mortimer et al., this volume) and spouse (Cookston & Remy, this volume). The focus on adaptation also nicely interfaces with related work in personality psychology, both old and new. Block's (2002) classic constructs of ego-resiliency and ego-control map onto accommodation and assimilation, respectively, as do DeYoung's (2010) recent higher-order trait model of plasticity (shared variance of extraversion and openness) and stability (shared variance of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and low neuroticism). The purpose of the preceding laundry list is to bring attention to the fact that there is a large collection of similar ideas on how individuals adapt to their environments that are being discussed in various niches of identity and personality—niches that do not often dialogue with one another. As a field we need greater awareness of points of similarities in what we are up to, as doing so can lead to deeper and farther-reaching theorizing on the nature and consequences of identity development.

What is the Content of the Identity?

One of the limitations of being able to understand identity development has been the over-emphasis on the *processes* of identity development at the expense of examining the *content*

of identity. That is, there has been a historical privileging of examining and understanding how individuals arrived at their identities (process), with little regard for what those identities actually are (content). This can be seen in both the identity status and narrative identity perspectives, but in different ways.

Research within the identity status model has either focused on the four statuses or on their two component processes of exploration and commitment. Recent work has extended this model considerably (Crocetti & Meeus, this volume), but the major extensions have been increased differentiation, leading to a greater number of statuses based on more nuanced aspects of exploration and commitment. There are two ways in which identity content has been overlooked within this literature. First, the precise identity domains in which exploration and commitment are assessed do not figure prominently in the interpretation of the findings. From the very first identity status study to the present day, exploration and commitment have been sampled across several identity domains and then aggregated into an overall identity status classification (e.g., Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Marcia, 1966). In the early 1980s there was some attention given to the importance of domain content, as this is when the interpersonal identity domains of friendships, family, and sex roles were added to the standard assessments of identity processes (Grotevant, Thorbecke, & Meyer, 1982). Yet, overall, the implied message attached to this approach is that identity domain content is not particularly crucial for understanding identity processes; any domain will do. This is a hard position to defend, however, as research has demonstrated that different domains develop at different rates (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999), casting doubt on the meaningfulness of an overall status classification.

Some areas of identity research that operate within the identity status model have focused on a single domain. Phinney's (1990) model of ethnic identity is one of the most prominent examples, along with some aspects of research on occupational identity (Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011). These domain-specific investigations, however, have largely operated in isolation. That is, there has been little comparative work to examine how ethnic identity develops in relation to other identity domains.

While there have been some investigations into identity domain content, there has been very little work looking into the content of the identity itself. For example, within the occupational domain, identity achievement is considered a positive developmental state, but does it matter what occupations the individuals have settled on? If they choose stock broker or pro surfer, does that matter? Is this important for understanding identity development? There are few answers to these questions, because they have hardly been asked.

In contrast to the identity status approach clearly privileging process over content, the narrative identity approach has been largely disengaged from thinking about identity in this way at all. That is, the language of process and content will be familiar to most status researchers, but perhaps not as much for narrative researchers. However, looking at the practices in the field, the distinction clearly applies. Take, for example, McAdams' (2008) life story interview. The interview protocol comprises requests for several key scenes from an individual's life: high point, low point, turning point, self-defining memory, earliest memory, and so on. The interview requests different types of memories, but these memories are not tied to specific identity domains. Moreover, the aspects of the narratives that are typically coded correspond to identity processes, namely various forms of autobiographical reasoning (e.g., meaning-making, personal growth, self-event connections) or story construction (e.g., complexity, coherence), and then

aggregated across memories (McAdams et al., 2006). The closest thing to content that is studied is the emotional tone of the narrative, either in terms of overall tone or the sequencing of emotion from the beginning to the end of the story (e.g., redemption, contamination), but it is not entirely clear whether emotional tone is process or content (or both!). What the story *is actually about* seldom factors in to the analysis. Some narrative studies will code for event type (e.g., achievement, relationship, mortality), but doing so is largely for descriptive purposes and the event types rarely figure into the primary analysis (e.g., McLean, 2005; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Other studies focus in on one identity domain, but do not examine content variations within that domain (e.g., McLean & Thorne, 2003).

The importance of identity content and how exactly to study it remain unresolved questions. Interestingly, some of the chapters in this Handbook take on this issue without directly acknowledging it. Numerous chapters in this volume invoke William James' distinction between the "I" and the "me" (Waterman, this volume; Motti-Stefandi, this volume; Habermas & Köber, this volume; McAdams & Zapata-Gietl, this volume). The "I" is the self as the subject, the agent who creates, manages, and synthesizes the self. In contrast, the "me" is the self as the object, the description of who one is. In reviewing these chapters, we became aware of how the "I" maps on to identity process and the "me" maps on to identity content. Although the I and the me were discussed in numerous chapters, the nature of their interaction was not consensual.

In his chapter on interactional identities and storytelling, Korobov (this volume) indirectly theorizes on the role of process and content. Korobov argues that social categories and identities are synced up through positioning in conversation. Thus, the practice of storytelling is the glue that binds different parts of the self. In terms of identity process and content, this is a fairly traditional view, in which process (the I) is privileged and seen as the main "action"

through which identities are managed. This perspective is similar to the one expressed by McLean and Pasupathi (2012), who suggested that storytelling promotes consolidation—or commitment—to identities. In contrast, in their chapter on autobiographical reasoning, Habermas and Köber (this volume) describe the *me* as being the anchor for self-continuity, allowing the *I* to do its work. To put it another way, having a sense of self as an object—what one is—facilitates the ability for the higher order synthesis of the self across time and context. Thus, in this formulation identity content is privileged over identity process.

So which is more important for identity development, the *I* or the *me*? The process or the content? When one of us (Syed) began conducting narrative studies of ethnicity-related experiences, the primary interest was in examining narrative processes, such as meaning-making, resolution, and coherence. After getting into the stories, however, the research team was struck by the variety of types of stories that people told. We felt like we first had to understand what people were telling stories about before we endeavored to understand how they were telling them. In other words, we were captivated by the content of the identities. We maintained this focus on narrative content for some time, as we found that the content of the stories was linked to ethnic identity processes assessed using survey measures (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010). In short, focusing on the content of ethnic identities allowed us to better understand the process of ethnic identity development.

One of the challenges of studying identity content is that it does not have a clear taxonomy. Content can include attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, and lived experiences (see Syed & Azmitia, 2010), which constitutes a vast and diffuse set of constructs for investigation. How can we even begin to wrangle these constructs into a meaningful set that can be studied with consistency? In our view, this question represents a major challenge to the future of identity

development research. Sadly, the fact that we are discussing identity content at all already reflects some progress in the field. But we will take whatever progress we can get.

Concluding Thoughts

As we edited this book we had constant conversations with each other about our process. Reading and commenting on the chapters made us think deeply about what we were trying to accomplish with this project, but also about the field more broadly. We view the different approaches to identity development research as akin to different cultures, each with their own beliefs (e.g., theories), practices (e.g., methods), and language (e.g., terms). Looking back, what we were really trying to do was build a new, common culture through cross-cultural exchange. This prompted us to think about who goes about the business of initiating cross-cultural interaction. Generally, the burden falls on the minority view to reach out to the majority about the value of their perspectives. This is the process in society at large (i.e., ethnicity, gender), but also within the niche-happy fields of psychology. As we noted in the introductory chapter (McLean & Syed, this volume), all of the studies examining the interface of status and narrative approaches to identity have been initiated by narrative researchers, which constitute the minority view in the field. However, we feel that this minority view is slowly emerging into the mainstream, which has led to initiations from the other side. This type of interaction is critical for both cultures, as it will doubtlessly lead to new ways of thinking about a construct as complex as identity.

But how do we truly facilitate cultural exchange? An important theme throughout this Handbook is researchers being explicit about their approach to identity development. Why do you emphasize adolescence vs. other ages? process over content? reasoning vs. experience? Doing some self-examination allows us to see what possible narratives are being silenced due to

maintenance of the status quo. Outsiders looking in can be particularly helpful in this regard, as they view a field with fresh eyes and little investment in one approach over another. We need to engage in conversations, debates, and fika to push our thinking and re-think our assumptions. This is the only way through which we can truly understand how and why we become the way we are.

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