

RUNNING TITLE: Identity Development

Four Identity Statuses and Adolescent Development

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ABSTRACT

James Marcia (1991) published landmark work on how adolescents view themselves. It is essential to understand that the quality that allowed this work to be meaningful was the subjects' capacity for reflection. Once adolescents can step outside themselves, and have acquired the appropriate lexicon, they can BEGIN to define themselves in terms of the world around them. His statuses, or at least the way they are portrayed in the book, make the process appear to be completed by age 22. I contend that based on how people's ideologies mature throughout their twenties and thirties, adolescence is not the time when identity achievement occurs. I do not believe identity achievement solidifies until well-after adolescence. This is not to be confused with the current trend of deferring emotional maturity. This is based on a consideration of the number of people whose values change in adulthood.

Introduction

If I was learning about identity development while in my twenties, it would be obvious to me that my identity development was completed and I would face the rest of my life with the same values and self-image that I have today. As an introspective 52-year-old, I find this attitude amusing, and wrongheaded.

I can remember waiting for a bus to go home from college and work at 8PM in Downtown Newark, New Jersey. The *Horn & Hardardt* cafeteria by the bus stop had a full length mirror, and I could see myself waiting with my fellow strap-hangers. I saw how ordinary I appeared in this heterogeneous crowd. I thought how absurd it was that my college professors tried to make me feel 'special' because my grades were good, when all of the folks around me were hard-working, talented folks as well.

Graduate School and my first decade in biotech undid my egalitarian self-image. I identified myself very differently at age 35 than I did at age 20. Then the College of Hard Knocks forced me to realize my self-identity was the product of a number of lucky breaks, and I had to go through another arduous process of refining my identity to a more realistic one - where I had strengths and weaknesses, like everyone else.

Method

Procedures

Demonstration of understanding of the topic will utilize Bloom's Taxonomy of Levels of Thinking in the Cognitive Domain (Bloom, BS, Englehart, MD *et. al.* (1956) *Taxonomy of education objectives, handbook I: Cognitive domain* New York: David McKay). Analysis of understanding based on knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation will be described in the Results section.

Results

The four identity statuses for adolescents, according to James Marcia, are foreclosure, identity diffusion, moratorium, and identity achievement. These states are based on the subjects' 'firm' commitments to values and occupations.

Knowledge – Foreclosure is a state where the adolescent has never experienced an 'identity crisis' and so they have established an identity based on that of an authority figure. Diffusion is a lack of developmental clarity due to never having had or an inability to resolve an identity crisis. Moratorium describes people who try identities out but never commit to one. Identity achievement is, to directly quote

Slavin, “these decisions were autonomously and freely made, and that they reflect his or her true nature and deep inner commitment.

Comprehension – Foreclosure is one side of a coin where the other side is the positive utilization of a role model. Having a role model is not a negative, and does not, in my opinion, constitute an unformed self-identity. Diffusion is also not a negative. It also describes a process not unlike the quest for self-knowledge practiced by Buddhists. One does not stop refining their self-identity at the close of adolescence. Moratorium appears to be properly described as an attitude of ‘stop the world, I want to get off’. It is a luxury not everyone can avail themselves of, but it can be a valuable time of learning. Identity achievement was analyzed extensively in the Knowledge section.

Application – These steps are useful for understanding the identity development of Middle and High School students, providing one does not believe that these identities are immutable. The students that demonstrate foreclosure should be challenged with opportunities to grow. The students in the diffusion state can be challenged with scenarios that would allow them to refine what they believe. The students in a moratorium state should be exposed to many different growth strategies. Last, the identity achievers should be challenged to be certain that their identity is one that fits for life.

Analysis – Although presented as a fairly mature stage in identity development, students in moratorium may be trying to postpone emotional maturation. That does not appear to be any more advanced than students in foreclosure, since they may latch onto identities once confronted with identity crises. The students in diffusion may be more mature than those in identity achiever status because they may have a better understanding of the vagaries of life.

Synthesis – Role-playing would be an excellent way to determine the identity development of Middle and High School students. For example, challenging a small group of students with the idea for a dramatic play, and having them all choose characters like themselves to deal with the central issue, would be informative. Watching how the students' characters reflect their values would give an educator an idea of how well they know themselves.

Evaluation - Part of a student's education should involve self-discovery. For example, a student should be able to tell if they are completely confused about their identity or are well on the way to developing a working identity. The process should be without pressure to reach the identity achievement stage, because bonding too early to an identity may keep the student from achieving the flexibility they will need in the "real world".

Discussion

Students are having their childhood compressed by the popular media, and many are voluntarily extending their adolescence indefinitely. It seems apparent to me that labeling a student as having a foreclosed or diffused identity might be used as an excuse to take unreasonable amounts of time to 'find themselves'. The idea that having a role model may stifle their identity development is also misguided. This is all due to an over-dependence on labels.

I would have found his work more palatable if the four stages were points on a circle, and all were shown to be interrelated and one stage was not superior to the others. The student who thinks he or she has achieved a final identity is in for a shock later in life.

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