Identity formation

Definition: Identity Formation from Dictionary of Information Science and Technology
the process by which an individual forms his or her personal identity. This will occur at different times during one’s life and will consist of many stages of recognition of self-identity and the identity others may perceive based on the information disclosed by an individual. This will allow an individual to understand who they are and for others to understand them as well. (Baptiste, Neakrase, & Ryan, 2011)

Summary Article: Identity Formation from The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science
There are numerous theoretical approaches that illuminate certain areas of identity development (e.g., Kagan's constructive-developmental approach or Blos's object relations approach), but Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial approach to human development appeals to many professionals because of its utility in many professional arenas, including clinical, theoretical, and empirical. Erikson's seminal work stressed the importance of history (personal and societal) and social contexts in influencing individuals' lives, and he incorporated these ideas into his concept of identity formation in adolescence.

Erik Erikson developed the construct of ego identity as an adaptive response to Freud's focus on neurotic personalities. He was interested in the development of healthy personalities and created a lifespan stage theory that addressed the development of the healthy ego. Obtaining a healthy ego identity evolves through unconscious and conscious mechanisms interacting dynamically in a process of discovering the self. According to Erikson, there are certain key crises inherent in different periods of a person's life, which are a direct reflection of the person's social maturity and societal expectations. The crises are then categorized into distinct psychosocial stages of development at which times certain ego strengths emerge as resolutions of these crises.

A person integrates into his or her ego identity the resolution of the crises for each stage of development. Each stage of psychosocial development culminates in a balance of both syntonic and dystonic outcomes. A syntonic outcome is a positive experience through which the individual strives to attain and consequently maintain the experience in the overall ego structure. Receiving accolades for achievement in school from a significant teacher is an example of a syntonic experience. Conversely, a dystonic outcome is a negative experience whereby the individual strives to avoid and consequently rectify the experience in the overall ego structure. Being the recipient of a disparaging remark from a significant teacher is an example of a dystonic experience. Healthy psychological development occurs when the number of syntonic experiences outweighs the number of dystonic experiences (Waterman, 1993, p. 53).

Adolescence, Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development, is the crucial period during which identity formation occurs. It reflects the accumulative syntonic and dystonic outcomes of the prior four stages of development. Identity formation is an integration in the self of the prior outcomes

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related to earlier stages of development. However, as Erikson noted, the formation of identity does not occur in a vacuum. The culture of society is crucial in how the adolescent integrates the prior stages of development. One’s culture is shaped by the contexts in adolescents’ lives. Hamachek (1985) uses a metaphor of ego growth rings, much like the growth rings of a tree, to facilitate an understanding of how an adolescent integrates the self in relation to contextual conditions when constructing an identity. Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development are embedded in a series of concentric circles such that the width between each ring of development identifies the context, both positive and negative, of growth. Development that is constricted by the environment and made up of mostly dystonic outcomes would show a narrower width in growth for a particular stage, whereas development that is enriched or expanded by the environment and made up of mostly syntonic outcomes would show a broader width in growth for a particular stage.

Identity development mirrors the outcomes achieved in various domains in a person’s life. Erikson delineated the identity domains in which this mirroring or self-reflection occurs as consisting of vocation; ideologies (religious, political, and economic); philosophy of life; ethical capacity; sexuality; gender, ethnicity, culture, and nationality; and “an all-inclusive human identity” (Erikson, 1968, p. 42). Through growth and integration in these domains, the adolescent’s identity becomes integrated and ideally forms a healthy and stable self.

Marcia (1980) applied Erikson’s concepts of ego identity by employing the two operational dimensions of exploration and commitment.

*Exploration refers to a period of struggle or active questioning in arriving at various aspects of personal identity, such as vocational choice, religious beliefs, or attitudes about the role of a spouse or parenting in one’s life. Commitment involves making a firm, unwavering decision in such areas and engaging in appropriate implementing activities.*

(Waterman, 1993, p. 56)

Relative to these two dimensions of exploration and commitment, Marcia delineated four identity statuses that exist for an individual in later adolescence: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. Identity diffused adolescents have not committed to an internally consistent set of values and goals, and exploration is superficial or absent. Identity foreclosed adolescents have committed to a set of values and goals with little or no exploration present. Moratorium adolescents are in the process of committing to a set of values and goals and intensely exploring alternatives to their decisions. Identity achieved adolescents have experienced a period of exploration (as in moratorium) and have come to an autonomous resolution of identity by committing to a set of values and goals (Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1993, pp. 10–12; Marcia, 1993, pp. 10–11). Through the theoretical underpinnings of Erikson and the empirical applications of Marcia and others, it is readily apparent that the earlier stages of psychosocial growth profoundly affect early adolescents’ potential to explore and commit to a set of values and goals consistent with their identity.

*For even within a wider identity man meets man always in categories (be they adult and child, man and woman, employer and employee, leader and follower, majority and minority) and “human” interrelations can truly be only the expression of divided function and the concrete overcoming of the specific ambivalence inherent in them: that is why I came to reformulate the Golden Rule as one that commands us to always act in such a way that the identities of both the actor and the one acted upon are enhanced.*

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Current work on identity formation has expanded empirically and theoretically (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Grotevant, 2001). First, the identity statuses include a more fluid or process approach of achieving identity. The process approach to identity includes an interplay among individual and contextual variables in how the self is cognitively perceived. Individual variables could include any number of variables such as sex, race, political affiliation, or even being raised in poverty (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). The complexity of this concept is clearly shown in this recent work while still following along the Eriksonian tradition that society does shape the individual.

See also
Adolescent Development; Ego Development; Eriksonian Developmental Stages.

References

Suggested Readings

KATHLEEN MCKINNEY
University of Wyoming,

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