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Identity: Theory and Clinical Implications

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## Identity: Theory and Clinical Application

The term identity refers to how one defines the self. As can probably be inferred based on the previous statement, the concept of identity formation is complex. Scholars from several schools of thought have hypothesized about identity for centuries, yet the concept of identity development remains an elusive one to say the least. The lack of consensus regarding what the term ‘identity’ encompasses has made research endeavors rather difficult. Nevertheless, there is an extensive literature base on identity and selfhood, making it all but impossible to provide an exhaustive review within the confines of one paper. Therefore, the current paper will review some of the leading identity theories that consider social forces to play a major role in how one comes to view and define the self. Furthermore, the clinical implications of such theoretical views will be discussed and illustrated through a case example.

### Theories of Identity

#### *Psychosocial Ego Development*

According to Berzoff, Flanagan, and Hertz (2008), Erikson was the first to theorize a truly psychosocial model of ego development. Moreover, he was the first psychoanalyst to propose that the ego is impacted by cultural and environmental factors; he believed that identity development occurred as a result of the interplay between biology, psychology, and social forces. Erikson saw identity as developing in the context of social relationships and social institutions that either work to promote or hinder an individual’s identity. He expanded on Freud’s theory linking biological erogenous zones with particular areas of ego functioning. In addition, where Freud proposed that identity occurs in its totality within the first 15 years of life, Erikson’s theory goes beyond childhood to capture identity development throughout the lifespan. He proposed a hierarchical stage theory in which “every individual negotiates basic developmental

tasks and basic biopsychosocial crises from birth to death in a predictable developmental sequence” (Berzoff et al., p. 100). Erikson organized these tasks into eight categories he called the eight stages of man (Berzoff et al, 2008).

The first stage is trust versus mistrust which occurs between birth and eighteen months. In this stage children learn to trust others based upon the consistency of affection they receive from caregivers, and whether or not their needs have been met. If trust develops, the child gains confidence and security however, if unsuccessful completion of this task will result in the child’s inability to trust (Berzoff et al., 2009).

The second stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt, occurs between eighteen months and three years old. In this stage children begin to assert their independence testing their boundaries and exploring their environments. When children are encouraged and supported they develop more independence and self-efficacy. However, if children are discouraged, they may come to feel inadequate, and may become overly dependent. This sense of inadequacy is believed to result in poor self-esteem and shame (Berzoff et al., 2009).

The initiative versus guilt stage occurs between three and six years old and is characterized as the play stage. Erikson proposed that as children begin play they often plan and initiate games or activities with others. These opportunities provide children with a sense of security in their ability to make decisions and lead others. If children are criticized for taking this initiative they are thought to develop a sense of guilt (Berzoff et al., 2009).

Industry versus inferiority occurs between six and eleven years old. During this period children begin to take pride in their accomplishments. Because these children are in the early school-aged years, it is not surprising that Erikson believed that within this stage teachers play an increased role in the child’s development. Successful completion of this stage leaves the child

feeling confident in his/her own abilities and motivates him/her to pursue new challenges and to follow through. However, if a child is not encouraged then the child comes to doubt his/her abilities (Berzoff et al., 2009).

Erikson's refers to his fifth stage of psychosocial identity development as identity versus role confusion, which occurs between 11 and 18 years old. The task to overcome in this stage is the smooth transitions from childhood to adulthood. Children become more independent and experiment with various roles and possible selves. The goal is to achieve a stable sense of self however; during this stage the sense of self can become confused (Berzoff et al., 2009).

In early adulthood individuals enter into the intimacy versus isolation stage in which they are tasked with forming and navigating interpersonal relationships. Successful completion of this stage results in meaningful relationships emerging as well as a sense of safety and security within such relationships. When young adults avoid intimacy it can lead to isolation, loneliness, and depression (Berzoff et al., 2009).

Erikson refers to the stage occurring in middle-adulthood as generativity versus stagnation. The task here is to gain a sense of the larger picture and give back to society. People do this through being productive workers, parents, and getting involved in their communities. If people do not successfully fulfill this task they become stagnant, feeling unproductive (Berzoff et al., 2009).

The final stage is ego integrity versus despair. This stage occurs in late adulthood and is characterized as a reflective period in which people contemplate their lives. If people feel they lived a good life they develop integrity. However, if they look back and have regrets they will develop despair (Berzoff et al., 2009).

*Identity Status Paradigm*

Marcia expanded upon Erikson's model with a focus on adolescent identity development. The theory proposes that there are two distinct processes that contribute to adolescent identity which are crisis and commitment. A crisis is thought to occur when the adolescent's values and beliefs are challenged forcing the adolescent to reevaluate them. Commitment refers to the end result of such a crisis, wherein the adolescent has committed to certain values or roles. Marcia proposed four concentration points along a continuum of ego-identity achievement that represent four ways in which a "person in the period of later adolescents might resolve the issue of identity and identity diffusion" (Marcia, 2002, p. 202). The four proposed resolutions are identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement.

Identity diffusion adolescents may or may not have experienced a crisis. The hallmark of this status is a lack of commitment. These individuals are "either uninterested in ideological matters or take a smorgasbord approach in which one outlook looks as good as another and [he/she] is not averse to sampling from them all" (Marcia, 1966, p. 552). Individuals in this category have not decided on a career path but do not seem concerned about it either. They may identify an occupation that appeals to them but likely have not considered what that position would entail (Marcia, 1966).

According to Marcia (1966) a person in foreclosure is characterized as not having had a crisis, but having already made commitments. The individual is thought to have adopted the values and beliefs of others (usually parents) as absolute truths not needing to be investigated or explored upon further. This person is described as becoming what others intended him/her to become. The personality is rigid and new experiences serve only to confirm already held beliefs.

Some adolescents never 'outgrow' foreclosure but instead become "as young adults, somewhat more complex and sophisticated versions of what they were at age 10" (Marcia, 2002, p. 202).

The individual in moratorium is an individual facing an identity crisis. This person is in a struggle to make commitments. He/she is characterized as exploring several commitment options, and wanting to make choices, but has only made vague commitments thus far. For this person, the struggle is in finding a compromise between parents' wishes, society's demands, and his/her own capabilities and desires. These individuals tend to be preoccupied by what seem like irresolvable concerns (Marcia, 1966).

The identity achievement status is just as it sounds; the individual has gone through an identity crisis and has committed to a sense of identity. It is not as if this identity emerges and all is well in that person's world. These individuals may still face struggles however; these people are characterized as less confused in self-definition and tend to have much less anxiety (Marcia, 1966).

### *Structural Role-Theory*

Structural role theory was developed primarily through Linton and Parsons, who focused on societies as functional units (Stryker, 2002). The premise of the theory is that individuals are influenced by the roles they occupy within society. Stryker (2002) provides a theater metaphor to illustrate the concept behind the theory. The image is of "actors playing parts in scripts written by culture and shaped by evolutionary adaptation. The parts are written to restore the play to its original form should improvisation threaten its fundamentals" (Stryker, 2002, p. 217). The theory posits that society is a functional system of groups to which each group has its own subgroups (Simon, 2004). Groups are structural systems made up of members with common

goals, and an acknowledged membership and interdependency (Stryker, 2002). Group members hold different positions as interdependent parts of the organized whole (Simon, 2004).

A particular role is assigned to each position within the group. A role is a set of fixed behavioral expectations that accompany a particular position (Stryker, 2002). Roles emerge from accumulated experiences and are shaped as generations adjust to the changing environment. That is, roles adapt alongside the environment to ensure the group's survival (Stryker, 2002).

Underlying roles are moral norms that reflect the culture's values and beliefs.

Socialization is the process by which norms are transmitted (Stryker, 2002). This occurs out of repeated interactions among group members. When people adhere to the expectations set forth by their role, they receive approval from others which reinforces conformity (Stryker, 2002). This positive reinforcement pressures people to maintain their roles.

### *Symbolic Interactionism*

The symbolic interactionism framework developed from the writings of the Scottish moral philosophers of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as the American pragmatic philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly James and Dewey. Many others such as Baldwin, Cooley (the looking glass self), Thomas, and Mead developed modified versions of this perspective (Stryker, 2007). It has been argued that Mead contributed more to the evolution of this perspective than did any other (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Symbolic interactionism has acted as the foundational framework to many emergent identity theories. Although there are several variations of this view, they all share the common premise that the self reflects society. The theory argues that "society shapes the self and the self shapes social behavior" (Stryker, 2007, p. 1089). This perspective insists on the reciprocal



nature of society and the self. Although this perspective holds to the belief that the self is socially constructed, it also contends that the selves that develop are creative and purposeful.

The symbolic interactionist view posits that society is a “web of communication or interaction, the reciprocal influence of persons taking each other into account as they act” (Stryker, 2002, p. 213). That is, interaction is symbolic and meaning is derived within the interaction itself. Stryker (2002) states that people use symbols developed in their interaction and act through communication of these symbols; society therefore, is a collection of such interactions. In this view then society is fluid and is continuously being recreated based upon how people act toward one another (their interactions). That is, social reality is a “flow of events made up of multiple persons” (Stryker, 2002, p. 213). Furthermore, symbolic interactionism argues that just as society is created through social processes, so are persons; each derives its meaning through social interactions. Thus within this reciprocal framework, “neither [society nor the person] exist except as they relate to one another” (Stryker, 2002, p. 213). Therefore, in order to understand human behavior one must understand the subjective experiences of the person. The contribution of these early scholars to the study of identity is that they acknowledged the importance of society in understanding human behavior, posing the idea that psychology is crucial to understanding society, and that social interactions are fundamental to understanding psychology (Stryker, 2002).

Mead was fundamental in the further development of this perspective in relation to identity development. His primary concern was how people were transformed from asocial creatures at birth to socialized beings, thus he was concerned with the socialization process. He argued the key to understanding the socialization process was in understanding the emergence of the self. Mead believed that individuals become socialized when they are able to take on the

perspectives of others and imagine how they are viewed through other people's vantage points. He argued that this perspective-taking ability develops through communication, specifically symbolic communication. The theory proposes that one must learn to imagine how his/her gestures will be received by others. When one acquires this perspective-taking ability and is able to conform to the perceived desires and expectations of others they become socialized beings. Mead believed that this perspective taking ability is synonymous with the development of the self (Brown, 1998).

According to Brown (1998), Mead believed that the self developed through one's ability to take on the perspectives of another toward the self however, he argued that socialization required the person to be able to adopt the perspective of society as a whole. He believed that the foundation for such ability can be observed in the manner in which children play. Very young children are characterized as egocentric and typically exhibit a preference for autonomous play. Over time children come to play with particular others. In some circumstances these are "imaginary playmates who take turns speaking to one another" (Brown, 1998, p. 85). Role playing is also characteristic of children and involves the ability to adopt another person's perspective. Eventually children come to play games involving multiple others. In this context the child must be able to take the perspective of all others involved in the game. This "ability to adopt multiple perspectives toward the self, prepares the individual to adopt the perspective of an abstract, generalized other, that represents the society at large" (Brown, 1998, p. 86). Mead believed that when this occurs the self is fully developed and socialization is complete (Brown, 1998).

*Identity Theory*

Identity theory builds upon both role-theory and symbolic interactionism incorporating the interactionally constructed and social structural aspects of the self. A fundamental premise of identity theory is that “modern society is a complex and multifaceted mosaic of interdependent but highly differentiated parts” (Simon, 2004, p. 23). In keeping with the reciprocal relationship between the self and society, it would seem obvious then that the theory postulates that the self in modern society is equally differentiated and complex. The theory suggests, it is the internalization of roles that define one’s sense of identity. Furthermore, it is believed that people form multiple identities, resulting from their participation in several different roles (Simon, 2004).

According to identity theory, the multiple identities are organized in a hierarchy of salience that is determined by one’s commitment to the various social roles that underlie each identity. Simon (2004) defines commitment as “the costs to the person could she no longer participate in a particular social relationship and thus no longer play the corresponding role or have the corresponding identity” (p. 24). Therefore, a person’s commitment to a particular role is determined by the importance of the social relationships that surround that role. There are characteristics of the larger social structure that affect commitment, and thus constrain identity. For example, organized principles of society that are based on gender, socioeconomic status, or age, can impact one’s ability to move in and out of certain social relationships (Simon, 2004).

Stryker (1987) proposed that “commitment impacts identity salience impacts role performance” (as cited in Simon, 2004, p. 24). That is, variations in role performance can be explained by looking at where a role lies on the identity salience hierarchy. Therefore, it is hypothesized that people will perform better in roles in which they identify more. Identities are

believed to motivate behavior through validation processes. People become motivated when their behaviors validate that they are the kind of person defined by their identities. Therefore, the more salient an identity is, the more acute a person will be to opportunities that support that identity. In addition, the person would be more motivated to perform such behaviors (Simon, 2004).

Although the relationship between identity salience and role performance emphasizes the effect of identity salience on role performance, the theory does not deny that this relationship can be reciprocal. People don't just act but they also observe their own behavior and learn about who they are from these observations (Bern, 1972, as cited in Simon, 2004). Observing one's own behaviors can inform the person about the salience of his/her own identities. This is particularly true in situations wherein activation of multiple identities is possible; the identity that is chosen will be observed as more salient (Simon, 2004).

Simon (2004) proposes that there are two types of related but distinct forms of commitment. Interactional commitment is a derivative of one's involvement in social networks. It reflects the breadth of relationships that would be lost if someone decided not to play a particular role. The second form is affective commitment and it reflects the subjective value one places on particular relationships that surround any given role. Therefore, where interactional commitment deals with the extent of relationships lost with the decision to no longer fill a role, affective commitment refers to the emotional cost of giving up certain roles. The theory posits that either type of commitment can impact identity salience.

### Clinical Application

These theories provide hypotheses that guide our understanding of the distress and resiliency we see in our clients. Berzoff et al. (2008) states that in order to use these theories appropriately “one must know and not know simultaneously; we must strive to be both ‘full’ of knowledge and theory while being ‘empty’ enough to be surprised, to learn, to appreciate the uniqueness of every person with whom we work” (p. 272).

#### *Homosexuality and Religion*

Clients who identify as religious and also as homosexual may struggle with reconciling the two, especially if their religion is intolerable of homosexuality. Around prepubescence, individuals begin to become aware of their sexuality. According to Erikson’s psychosocial stage theory, this occurs within the identity versus role confusion stage. Erikson proposed that identity is formed in the context of interpersonal relationships and social institutions that either promote or hinder its development. In the above example the social institution of religion appears to be hindering the individual’s ability to achieve an integrated sense of self.

According to Erikson (1968), “should a young person feel that the environment tries to deny him too radically of all the forms of expression which permit him to develop and integrate the next step, he may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals that are suddenly forced to defend their lives. For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (p. 130).

In this example, the young person feels forced to choose only one aspect of the self, as the two are not thought to complement one another. Feeling as though one must deny part of the self reflects a sense of shame. This feeling may lead the person into social

isolation. Furthermore, Erikson (1968) suggests that it is impossible to achieve intimacy without a firm sense of identity. Therefore, the identity crisis will impact all facets of the individual's future if it is not successfully overcome.

According to the identity status paradigm, this person would be in a state of moratorium characterized by the experience of an identity crisis. Remember, Marcia described an identity crisis as a period in which a person's beliefs are being challenged and the person is forced to reevaluate their values. The conceptualization from the identity status paradigm is very similar to that of Erikson's psychosocial model, likely a result of Marcia expanding upon Erikson's work. In the above example, the person's sexual identity does not coincide with his/her religious views. In many Christian religious circles for example, homosexuals are regarded as sinners destined for hell unless they "choose" not to act on their homosexual "impulses." The therapeutic goal would be to get the individual into a state of identity achievement in which he/she is able to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory aspects of the self.

From a structural role theory perspective, the above client's dilemma would be conceptualized as stemming from pressures to conform to the expectations that accompany the role of a Christian. The theory posits that underlying the roles that emerge within a given cultural context are the moral norms that define the group. In this case, one of the moral norms associated with Christianity is the sanctity of marriage. Many Christian groups believe that marriage should strictly be between man and women. Structural role theory proposes that norms emerge out of evolutionary needs for survival. Therefore, this norm may have emerged based on the evolutionary needs of the group—procreation. It would benefit the client suffering through this identity crisis to become educated about the social climate during the time the books of the

Bible were written. During this period the Jews were forming a new community, one in which relied on procreation in order for the movement to flourish thus insuring the group's survival.

The symbolic interactionist framework proposes that identity develops through a perspective-taking ability. When the individual is able to conform to the perceived expectations of others he/she is considered to have developed the self. In this view society shapes the person and the person shapes society. Therefore, in relation to the conflict between religion and sexual identification, the structural interactionist would argue that this person has yet to form an identity. In order to do so from this viewpoint, he/she would have to conform to the expectations of his/her environment, which in this case would be the expectations of the church (or seek a new environment).

Identity theory proposes that identities emerge out of the internalization of roles. In the case of homosexuality and religion, it is likely that the religious identity emerged prior to the sexual identity and thus the theory would likely propose that the child internalized the role of Christian. Identity theory suggests that people become motivated to act in accordance with their identity. In this case, the person would be more inclined to act as a Christian is perceived to behave. When the person acknowledges an attraction to someone of the same sex, he or she will likely feel that their behavior does not validate who they see themselves as being. However, this theory states that multiple identities emerge as a result of the numerous roles one participates in. These identities are arranged in the hierarchy of salience dependent on importance. A person's religious identity may take precedence over his or her sexual identity or visa versa. Although, the theory proposes multiple identities, Stryker does not hypothesize about the underlying processes involved when one identity is inconsistent with another.

The example provided here, homosexuality and religion is only one of several possibilities. Other illustrative examples include identity issues related to adoption, biracialism, gender identity, and so on. However, the theoretical conceptualization would remain extremely similar to those presented relating to homosexuality and religion.

### *Assessment*

#### *Identity Status Interview*

In an effort to develop an identity measure consistent with Erikson's psychosocial stage theory, Marcia created a semi-structured interview called the Identity Status Interview (ISI). Erikson had originally identified religion and politics as crucial factors in the identity development of adolescents. Commitment and exploration were used as process variables within these two domains. The interview is based on Marcia's identity statuses and is used to categorically locate an individual in an identity status (Marcia, as cited in Watzlawik & Born, 2007).

The interview reflects Erickson's notion that identity is not amenable to direct observation. What can be observed however, are the behaviors that should be present if an underlying identity is present. The idea is that this level of insight may not be readily available to some clients. Thus, the semi-structures interview a more focused conversation in which the therapist can guide the client. For example, one of the questions in the occupation part of the interview is "Most parents have plans for their children, things they'd like them to do or go into. Did yours have any plans like that for you?" (Marcia, as cited in Watzlawik & Born, 2007, p. 6)



## Conclusion

In summary, throughout history there have been many who have hypothesized about what defines the self and how one's identity develops. Of those scholars and researchers, Erik Erikson has arguably made the greatest contribution. His psychosocial stage theory has paved the way for other researchers who have sought to answer the age old question, "What defines the self?" Another major contributor is Mead, who proposed that identity emerges out of the socialization process. Out of his foundational framework, other theories emerged such as Stryker's identity theory. These theories provide us with guide that can be used in our clinical work and in our research but are not intended to replace clinical judgment.

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