WHO AM I?
UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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WHO AM I? BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

• Education and Training
  • 2010-2014 Ph.D. in Applied Developmental Psychology
    Florida International University
  • 2014-2017 NIAAA Post-Doctoral Fellow
    University of Miami
  • 2017-Present Assistant Professor
    Old Dominion University

• Research
  • Largely focused on identity development and its links to general function and health risk behavior.
OUTLINE

1. General Overview of Identity Theory
2. Application of Identity Theory to
   a. Cultural Identity
   b. Parental Identity
   c. Military Identity
3. Summary Remarks
WHAT IS IDENTITY?

- Simplest definition:
  - People’s explicit or implicit response to the question: “Who are you?
- The Woven Quilt
  - Multiple aspects of identity can and do coexist.
  - Different aspects of identity will be more or less salient and relevant in different social contexts.
  - They often intersect and interact with each other.
WHAT IS IDENTITY?
APPROACHES TO IDENTITY THEORY

• Content versus Process
  • Identity Content refers to the “stuff” of ones’ identity.
  • Identity Process refers to the mechanism(s) underlying the formation of ones’ identity.

• Although several frameworks, most widely used:
  • Developmental Neo-Eriksonian Perspective (Process)
  • Social Identity Perspective (Content)
ERIKSON AND NEO-ERIKSONIAN APPROACHES
ERIKSON’S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY

• For Erikson (1950), identity
  • Refers to the subjective sense of sameness and continuity across time and contexts.
  • Represents a multidimensional construct that
    • Taps into the cognitive, moral, cultural, and social aspects, and is
    • Socially-embedded: resolution lies in our interaction with others.
    • Historically-culturally constrained: Determines what are possible, genuine, and desirable options.
Erikson’s (1950; 1968) writing was largely conceptual and placed little emphasis on operationalizing his terms.

Neo-Eriksonians were thus left with the task of operationalizing Erikson’s ideas about identity.

- Widely used operationalizations developed by James Marcia (1966).
- Identify two psychological/behavioral markers underlying identity development.
MARCIA’S IDENTITY STATUS MODEL

• Identified processes underlying identity development:
  • **Exploration**: Refers to a period of “rethinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans”.
  • **Commitment**: Refers to the “degree of personal investment the individual expresses in a course of action or belief”.

• As such, Marcia’s Identity Status focused on the process rather than the *content*. 
SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE
SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

- Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) emerged in the mid-70s in reaction to prevailing individualistic approaches.

- Argues that “social identification”
  - Connects us to groups thus telling us who we are/are not.
  - We derive value from group memberships to the extent that we can compare our own group positively with others.
  - Motivated to gain and maintain a sense of positive group distinctiveness from the other group(s).
SOCIAL IDENTITY MODEL OF IDENTITY CHANGE (SIMIC)

• Life transitions involve change in social identities due to changing social group memberships.

• During life transitions,
  • Social identities provide continuity.
  • Negative effects of transition are buffered by
    • Maintenance of previous group memberships and social identities.
    • Emergence of new accessible social groups and social identities.
Evidence for changes in social identity during life transitions has been found in the context of:

- Moving to university (Iyer et al., 2009)
- Brain injury (Jones et al., 2012)
- Retirement (Steffens et al., 2016)
- Recovery from addiction (Dingle et al., 2015).
• Healing the Split
  • Within ethnic/racial identity theory, there has been increasing recognition for need to incorporate:
    • Developmental/Process Models: Speak to how such identities develop over time.
    • Social Identity/Content Models: Speak to the nature of these identities.
  • Attention to both is necessary as it provides a richer conceptualization.
CULTURAL IDENTITY
CULTURAL IDENTITY

• Cultural identity
  • Refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to the cultural groups to which they belong and is a salient identity domain for ethnic/racial minority youth.
  • Typically focus on two specific aspects:
    • Ethnic/racial identity
    • U.S. identity
CULTURAL IDENTITY

• Ethnic/Racial Identity (ERI)
  • Represented as a multidimensional construct that reflects
    • individuals’ beliefs and attitudes about their ethnicity as well as
    • the process by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time.

• United States/American Identity
  • Similarly, includes individuals’ beliefs about being Americans and
    the process by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time.
CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Research on cultural identity largely focused on four dimensions
  - **Exploration:** considering what it means to belong to a particular cultural group.
  - **Commitment:** Subsequent decisions about its role in one’s life.
  - **Affirmation:** Feeling positively or negatively about one’s cultural group membership.
  - **Centrality:** how central is one’s cultural group membership to one’s overall sense of self.
Meca et al. (2019)

Purpose
Examine the unique effects of ethnic/racial and U.S. identity among Latinx young adults.

Sample
416 Latina/o college students (83.7% female; Mage = 20.57 years; SD = 2.378 years, range 17–29 years).
UNIQUE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

• Meca et al. (2019)
  • Ethnic/Racial Affirmation was positively associated with well-being, self-esteem, and negatively with symptoms of depression.
  • Ethnic/Racial Commitment was positively associated with well-being.
  • U.S. affirmation was negatively associated with symptoms of depression.
  • U.S. exploration though was negatively associated with well-being and self-esteem.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

1. Understanding Biculturalism and its development
   • Understanding how ethnic/racial and U.S. identity mutually develop over time and identifying key promotive factors.
   • Exploring unique effects of ethnic/racial and U.S. identity over time across the lifespan.

2. Code Shifting
   • Exploring how individuals shift between cultural frames as they navigate situations.
MILITARY IDENTITY AMONG VETERANS
VETERANS AND MILITARY IDENTITY

• Transition to civilian life represents a major identity shift.
  • Military
    • operates with its own values, traditions and norm.
    • tasked with adopting a military identity.
  • Process of reintegration to civilian life
    • Represents an abrupt culture shock
    • Indeed, veterans express
      • disconnection and/or conflict with people in their communities
      • and tasked with “searching for a new normal”.
VETERANS AND MILITARY IDENTITY

• Consistent with SIMIC, difficulties with this transition may be counteracted by
  • Maintaining other core identities
  • and/or replace lost identities with new ones.

• Despite this, we know very little about identity development and its impacts on adjustment among veterans.
EFFECTS OF U.S. IDENTITY AMONG VETERANS

• Meca et al. (in press)
  • Sample
    • 195 U.S. military veterans ($n = 184$, 53.3% women; 73.3% White; $M_{age} = 35.12$ years, $SD = 9.60$ years).
  • Results
    • U.S. Affirmation was negatively associated with Alcohol Use, Symptoms of Depression, & Symptoms of Anxiety.
    • However, U.S. Centrality positively associated with Alcohol Use, Symptoms of Depression, & Symptoms of Anxiety.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Examining impact of identity among veterans.
  • Transition to civilian life involves a total identity transformation.
  • As such, important for future research to
    • understand how this identity transformation unfolds throughout the transition to civilian life and
    • explore how other identity domains (e.g., life goals, religious, etc.) impact transition to civilian life.
Similarly, transition to parenthood involves:

- A variety of changes including renegotiate their current roles and identities to accommodate that of a “parent”.

Parental identity reflects:

- Beliefs and attitudes about their role as a caregiver and the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes are developed.
PARENTING IDENTITY

• From a SIMIC framework,
  • Establishment of parenting identity may
    • ameliorate the identity loss associated with transition into parenthood.
    • And serve as an anchor during the transition into parenthood.
  • At same time, being a parent but not strongly identifying as one, may lead to a form of social discontinuity and social displacement that compromise mental well-being
  • Given prevalence of post-partum mood disorders among both mothers and fathers, understanding parental identity may be particularly critical.
Purpose

- Examine associations between parental identity commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitments with symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety.

Sample

- 328 current and expectant parents (82.6% female; $M_{age} = 35.36$ years; $SD = 11.34$ years, range 18-76 years)
MECA ET AL. (2020)

• Meca et al. (2020)
  • Consistent with our hypothesis, **parental identity commitment** was negatively associated with generalized anxiety and depression.
  • However, **reconsideration of these commitment** was positively associated with generalized anxiety and depression.
  • **Exploration** was positively associated with symptoms of anxiety, possibly as a result of lengthy periods of apprehension or questioning of parental identity.
FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Examining the impact of parenting identity among expectant parents throughout the transition to parenthood.

2. Exploring how parental identity may serve as a source of strength in face of stress associated with parenthood.
SUMMARY REMARKS
SUMMARY

- As a whole, these studies support the idea that
  - Identity plays an important role in understanding risk and resilience for a variety of populations.
  - Beyond these studies, research supported identity is malleable.
    - Thus, by supporting adaptive identity exploration, we can encourage positive identity development.
    - In turn, this can assist as a mechanism by which we can prevent problematic outcomes and help in major life transitions.
QUESTIONS

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