15.2: James Marcia – Theory of Identity Development

One approach to assessing identity development was proposed by James Marcia. In his approach, adolescents are asking questions regarding their exploration of and commitment to issues related to occupation, politics, religion, and sexual behavior. Studies assessing how teens pass through Marcia’s stages show that although most teens eventually succeed in developing a stable identity, the path to it is not always easy and there are many routes that can be taken. Some teens may simply adopt the beliefs of their parents or the first role that is offered to them, perhaps at the expense of searching for other more promising possibilities (foreclosure status). Other teens may spend years trying on different possible identities (moratorium status) before finally choosing one. 6

Marcia identified four identity statuses that represent the four possible combinations of the dimension of commitment and exploration. 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Status</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity-Diffusion status</td>
<td>The individual does not have firm commitments regarding the issues in question and is not making progress toward them. Those who persist in this identity may drift aimlessly with little connection to those around them or have little sense of purpose in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity-Foreclosure status</td>
<td>The individual has not engaged in any identity experimentation and has established an identity based on the choices or values of others. Some parents may make these decisions for their children and do not grant the teen the opportunity to make choices. In other instances, teens may strongly identify with parents and others in their life and wish to follow in their footsteps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity-Moratorium status</td>
<td>The individual is exploring various choices but has not yet made a clear...</td>
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Identity Status

status that describes those who are exploring in an attempt to establish an identity but have yet to have made any commitment.

Identity-Achievement status refers to the status for those who, after exploration, have made a commitment.

Description 8

commitment to any of them. This can be an anxious and emotionally tense time period as the adolescent experiments with different roles and explores various beliefs. Nothing is certain and there are many questions, but few answers.

The individual has attained a coherent and committed identity based on personal decisions. This is a long process and is not often achieved by the end of adolescence.

The least mature status, and one common in many children, is identity diffusion. During high school and the college years, teens and young adults move from identity diffusion and foreclosure toward moratorium and achievement. The biggest gains in the development of identity are in college, as college students are exposed to a greater variety of career choices, lifestyles, and beliefs. This is likely to spur on questions regarding identity. A great deal of the identity work we do in adolescence and young adulthood is about values and goals, as we strive to articulate a personal vision or dream for what we hope to accomplish in the future (McAdams, 2013).

To help them work through the process of developing an identity, teenagers may try out different identities in different social situations. They may maintain one identity at home and a different type of persona when they are with their peers. Eventually, most teenagers do integrate the different possibilities into a single self-concept and a comfortable sense of identity (identity-achievement status). For teenagers, the peer group provides valuable information about the self-concept. For instance, in response to the question “What were you like as a teenager? (e.g., cool, nerdy, awkward?),” posed on the website Answerbag, one teenager replied in this way:

I’m still a teenager now, but from 8th -9th grade I didn’t really know what I wanted at all. I was smart, so I hung out with the nerdy kids. I still do; my friends mean the world to me. But in the middle of 8th grade I started hanging out with which you may call the “cool” kids...and I also hung out with some stoners, just for variety. I pierced various parts of my body and kept my grades up. Now, I’m just trying to find who I am. I’m even doing my sophomore year in China so I can get a better view of what I want. (Answerbag, 2007). What were you like as a teenager? (e.g., cool, nerdy, awkward?). (Quoted from dojokills on http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/171753)

A big part of what the adolescent is learning is social identity, the part of the self-concept that is derived from one’s group memberships. Adolescents define their social identities according to how they are similar to and different from others, finding meaning in the sports, religious, school, gender, and ethnic categories they belong to.
Adolescents search for stable attachments through the development of social identities.

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