

Socio-Educational Contexts and Beginning University Students' Identity Development

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Erik Erikson (1968) views the development of personality within a social context. He emphasizes the importance of the individual's interaction with the family, social institutions, and culture within a given historical period. Erikson indicates that it is during adolescence that one's identity, based upon one's synthesis of childhood identifications, is integrated. This identity yields a subjective sense of continuity with the past that provides a meaning to the present, a direction for the future, and a framework for making choices in different areas of life.

Erikson's theory arose from his clinical experience and it has been the task of others to operationalize his concepts in order to investigate them in different settings. Marcia (1966) formulated the identity statuses, four styles of identity resolution, in order to validate Erikson's identity construct. The identity statuses are assessed by means of a semi-structured interview. Each identity status is defined by the presence or absence of *exploration* of alternatives and of *commitment* in three major areas: occupation, ideology (religion and politics), and interpersonal/sexual (sex role attitudes and sexuality). The exploration dimension refers to a period during which strong and active questioning is undertaken by the individual. The commitment dimension refers to relatively firm choices of identity elements and to actions aimed at the implementation of these choices.

An individual is placed in an identity status according to the following criteria: *Identity Achievement* - he/she has consolidated an identity having gone through an exploration period and having made relatively strong commitments; *Moratorium* - he/she is presently in an exploratory period and is actively searching among alternative decisions; *Foreclosure* - no previous or present exploration period is acknowledged and the existing commitments usually reflect the choices and projects of parents or other significant figures; *Identity Diffusion* - the individual has neither experienced a significant exploratory period nor are there any firm commitments evidenced.

While Marcia's perspective has engendered many research efforts in the past twenty years, most have focused on the definition of the different identity status characteristics. Hence, description has been dominant over explanation and little is known about the factors which contribute to the different styles of identity neither nor about those which are important in the passage from one status to another. According to research reviews already undertaken (Bourne, 1978; Costa, 1986; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1982; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, in press), it is clear that, aside from age and sex differences, little investigation has been conducted to determine the influences of various social developmental contexts on the distribution of identity statuses.

The paradigms used for the research on human development-in-context are, according to Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983), the social address, the process - context and the person-process-context models.

The social address model which is used in the present studies compares the behavior and the characteristics of persons living in contrasting environments "with no attention to what that environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing or how the activities taking place could affect the child". In other words, "no explicit consideration is given in research operations to intervening structures or processes through which the environment might affect the course of development" (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983). Although primitive, this model is justifiable in a first phase for identifying the existence of differences in development, according to the life context. As Bronfenbrenner (1986) states, the "social address model constitutes the strategy of choice for exploring uncharted domains" (p. 724). Once the social address model has shown differences between subjects as a function of their contrasting environments, there is a justification for the study of structures and processes through which these contexts affect development.

One very important developmental context is the college or university setting. The primary objective of the studies presented here is to determine the differential distribution of identity statuses in university students according to the major area of study they have chosen. Although most identity status studies have been undertaken on university students, none has investigated status according to major study areas. The only two studies addressing this topic are those of Marcia and Friedman (1970) and Adams and Fitch (1983). The first study found that female students in the Identity Achievement status tended

to choose the most difficult college majors. The second explored the relationship between perceived academic environments and identity status; the findings suggest that scholastic or academic oriented programs attract students with committed identities (Foreclosures and Achieved). However, an analysis of identity status according to the content of the major was not reported.

The majority of identity status studies have been done in North America. Notable exceptions to this in Europe have been the work of Bosma (1985) and Bosma and Graafsma (1982) in the Netherlands and Matteson (1977) in Denmark. Hence, the present study on a Portuguese population will also furnish information concerning the applicability of the identity status paradigm to a new national group.

Study 1 — Area of study and identity status distribution in second year university students

Method

Subjects were 250 students (125 males, 125 females) in Porto, Portugal, ranging in age from 18-23 years old, attending the second year in one of five university course areas: Law, Engineering, Medicine, Economics and Arts. In Portugal, the University area of study differentiation begins in the first year of higher education. In order to obtain the sample, application files of all students attending the second year of the above courses in 1984/85 were perused. Men and women in each course area were randomly selected and telephoned in order to solicit their participation. Anyone who was under psychiatric care, over the age of 23, or who had failed in his/her courses, was excluded. Telephone solicitation continued until 25 persons of each gender for the five course areas were obtained. Our sample is randomized, including 250 students who were attending for the first time their second year in different courses and whose age ranged from 18-23. In most of the existing studies, the samples are smaller and constituted by volunteers, which is not the present case.

All subjects were administered the Ego Identity Status Interview (Marcia, 1980) by an interviewer of the same sex who had majored in psychology and who had previous training in interviewing skills. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and rated by two raters knowledgeable in the identity status perspective. The presence or absence of exploration and of commitment was identified for each subject and used as the criterion to establish identity status. Agreement among the two independent raters as to overall identity status was 85%; differences were adjudicated by a third rater.

Results

The distribution of students according to identity status, gender and major area of study is presented in Table I. Chi-squares performed on various aspects of these data yielded the following findings.

Table 1
Frequencies and Percent of Students According to Identity Status and Study Area

Identity Status	Study Area						
	Law	Engineering	Medicine	Economics	Arts	Total	
Identity	n	25	12	7	16	19	79
Achievement	%	50	24	14	32	36	31.6
Moratorium	n	5	15	14	7	10	51
	%	10	30	28	14	20	20.4
Foreclosure	n	17	18	27	24	11	97
	%	34	36	54	48	22	38.8
Diffusion	n	3	5	2	3	10	23
	%	6	10	4	6	20	9.8

More students were found in the Foreclosure status and fewer in the Identity Diffusion status than would be expected on a chance basis ($X^2 = 67.306$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). No gender differences were found among the identity statuses. The distribution of identity statuses in the five major areas was significantly different ($X^2 = 36.216$, $df = 12$, $p < .001$). Identity Achievers were predominant in Law and Arts; Foreclosures were more numerous in Economics and Medicine. Although there were relatively few Diffusions, more of them were in Arts than in other areas.

Discussion

Culture and the social educational context contribute towards the organization of human action and decisions, thus shaping the development of identity. Entering university is considered to be a transition period in the sense that previous occupational directions and ideological stances may become problematic when the individual is confronted with more information about his/her abilities, a wider array of career directions, and sometimes challenging alternative world views. The second year of university, that from which our subjects were drawn, might be considered especially important as a transitional phase, since individuals, by this time, have had an opportunity to become acclimated to the college environment and may be more receptive to new information. That the university environment may, in fact, be associated with exploration and problem solving in the form of critical reassessment of social and personal values and decisionmaking is seen in our relatively high proportion (52%) of Identity Achievement and Moratorium individuals. The distribution of subjects in our Portuguese sample coincides generally with that found in North American populations (Marcia et al., in preparation).

The most significant finding in this investigation concerns the distribution of identity statuses in the major areas of study. What this innovative study has demonstrated is that differences among identity status with respect to major area of study do exist. The greater proportion of Identity Achievements in Law and Arts may be due to the demands these areas make on students to be self-reflective, i.e., to explore the assumptions underlying their beliefs. Tasks in these areas concern human interaction and sometimes involve a confrontation between an internal frame of reference and external demands. In contrast, Medicine, Economics, and Engineering, areas which had higher proportions of Foreclosures, involve more memorization of factual material, more interaction with the physical than with the social world, and an adherence to external standards. The kind of self-critical reassessment that is important for the construction of identity via exploration and subsequent commitment is not particularly encouraged in these areas and it might actually hamper an individual's progress in them.

Clearly, there are some limitations to the interpretation of the data in the present investigation: the differences in distribution of identity statuses among the different areas of study may have already existed before enrollment in the particular area. For this reason, the study which has been described has been expanded into a cross-sectional study.

Study 2 — A cross-sectional study of identity status development from the first to the second university year

Since the differences in identity status were most marked in the first study for Medicine and Law students, and in order to compare first and second-year students, identity status data were obtained from 48 male and female Medicine and 50 male and female Law students. All of them attended the first semester of the first university year.

Method

We followed the same method as in the first study. The two interviewers were different from those of the first study. The two main raters were the same.

Results

Differences between these study areas exist already at the beginning of the University studies ($X^2 = 9.094$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$): the Foreclosures are again more numerous in Medicine, while in Law, the Moratoria are the more numerous.

By comparing the distribution among the first and second year of each study area, we see that significant differences occur only in Law ($X^2 = 18.207$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$) where the Moratoria are more numerous in the first year and the Achievers in the second year. These results show that a) in Law, students progress from the first into the second year while they stagnate in Medicine; (b) there is already a difference between the study areas at the beginning of the first year of University.

Table 2
Frequencies and Percent of First Year Law and Medicine Students According to Identity

Identity Status		Study Area		Total
		Law	Medicine	
Identity	n	14	9	23
Achievement	%	28	18.75	23.47
Moratorium	n	23	13	36
	%	46	27.08	36.73
Foreclosure	n	13	23	36
	%	26	47.91	36.73
Diffusion	n	0	3	3
	%	0	6.25	3.06

Discussion

These results show that development differs according to the University study area. The fact that differences can already be found at the beginning of university attendance may perhaps be attributed to the Portuguese school system. Pupils in the last three years of secondary schools have to follow different curricula in order to be admitted to the medical or the legal schools. In order to verify this hypothesis, studies have to be conducted at this level of the secondary school. A third study is presently being conducted from the second to the fifth university year according to a longitudinal design and will help to clarify the issue of developing identity statuses as a function of the study area. By using more fine-grained variables subsequent studies will have to operationalize the processes by which study areas are related to identity development.

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