

APPLYING ERIKSON'S IDENTITY THEORY: A CRITIQUE OF MARCIA AND A PROPOSIAL FOR AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Identity is a central topic in personality psychology. After all, how can we study personality without studying what it means to be a particular person? Social identities are essential to studying the person and can consist of gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and ego identities, among many others.

Most models of identity formation are based on, or at least influenced by, Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity development. Erikson is generally considered the founder of identity theory, and his writings are the framework for several classic and contemporary models. One of the most applied of these is Marcia's four status model of ego identity. Marcia's model has become one of the standards of identity development and variations of the model have been used to measure and explain many types of social identities. However, I do not believe that this model is the most accurate interpretation of Erikson's theory of identity.

Drawing on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, along with various other identity models and empirical studies, I propose an alternative framework that I believe can better explain both Erikson's theory, as well as some of the empirical evidence from recent research.

ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Identity is the focus of Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development theory (1968). According to the theory, identity issues come to the forefront during an

individual's adolescent years. During this time, young people go through an identity crisis—a process of developing their ego identity while struggling with identity confusion.

According to Erikson (1982), identity develops through a process of interaction between the individual and the community. Identity development means nothing without considering the social contexts because identity is developed in relation to society. Society identifies, labels and stereotypes individuals according to the “social process of the time” (21). The individual reacts to this identification by accepting or rejecting these labels. In turn, the community reacts to the decisions made by the individual and re-identifies the individual accordingly and the process continues. For example, consider a youth who lives in a conservative suburban neighborhood. She may choose to react against this identity by dying her hair blue and getting tattoos. Society in turn re-labels the youth as a “rebel”; this new label in turn will effect how the youth views her identity. It is clear that this developmental interaction between individual and society heavily depends on the historical and social contexts. For instance, dying one's hair blue is a very different statement and would cause very different societal reactions depending on whether one lives in a small southern town in the 1950s or in San Francisco in 2007.

The drive to test alternative, often extreme, identities and rebel against societal standards is called *role repudiation*. This may include *diffidence*—a hesitation to develop an identity; *defiance* against society and identity development; and/or *negative identity*—affirming socially unacceptable identity aspects (Erikson 1982). This rebellion is articulated as being the antithesis of a committed, mature identity, and if maintained, may lead to a regression to earlier developmental stages. However, he also argues that

identity formation is impossible to establish without going through this process of being able to distinguish what may be incorporated into one's identity from what should be protested as "alien to the self" (Erikson 1988).

The result of the successful completion of this stage of development is *ego identity*. Ego identity is the formation of a unified and stable personality that can be recognized by the self as well as others as being characteristic of that person (Erikson 1982). Ego identity is achieved by identity exploration and determining which aspects of one's identity is to be kept and which aspects are to be discarded. This period of experimentation is called *moratorium*, during which individuals may take time to test out their identity before committing to them. While Erikson states that identity confusion is a necessary and normal step in ego development, he also cautions against the potential dangers a prolonged period of moratorium. This may result in attempts to end the moratorium hastily without reaching a mature identity which is believed to have negative consequences on psychological well-being. Additionally, lack of identity development – *identity diffusion*—may lead to feelings of alienation and estrangement. (Erikson 1968; 1982)

In Erikson's psychosocial theory, the goal of the identity stage is to establish an ego identity and *fidelity*, which in *Youth:Fidelity and Diversity* (1988) he describes as "something and somebody to be true to"(3) In other words, fidelity is the ability to commit oneself—to be certain and confident in one's identity, beliefs, personality and sense of self. This is associated with an end to role repudiation and learning to accept a positive and stable identity. It is an end to the moratorium and the beginning of the young adulthood stage. The attainment of fidelity signals the preparedness to advance to

the next psychosocial stage of development. Once again, Erikson emphasizes that fidelity “can arise only in the interplay of a life stage with the individual and the social forces of a true community” (3)

MARCIA’S FOUR STAGE THEORY OF EGO IDENTITY

Marcia (1966; 1980) used Erikson’s theory of identity to construct an experimental framework for identity development along two variables: *crisis* and *commitment*. The crisis dimension relates to Erikson’s concept of moratorium and exploring different identities before confirming one’s identity. Commitment refers to Erikson’s concept of fidelity, that is, the ability to determine and commit to one identity. Marcia uses the combination of high and low scores on these variables to develop four ego identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved.

A person with a *diffusion* identity status is neither committed to an identity nor experiencing an identity crisis. They have neither determined their identity nor are they concerned with developing their identity. This status is considered to have the most negative psychological outcomes. In contrast, *foreclosed* identity status is marked by a commitment to a particular identity without going through an identity crisis or properly exploring alternative identities. Often, these individuals simply commit to identities that authority figures, such as parents, assign to them. The third identity status is *moratorium*. During this time the individual is currently in the identity crisis stage. Here, there is exploration of alternative identities and attempts to reconcile what is expected from parents, society and the self. However, there is no commitment to a particular identity. The final status is an *achieved* identity. This is synonymous with successfully

completing Erikson's identity stage. To reach the achieved status, the individual goes through the identity crisis, explores various identities, and commits to one identity.

Later a fifth identity status, *alienated achievement*, was proposed (Orlofsky et al 1973) to describe a certain type of person who is committed to being not committed. These people at first appear to have a diffuse identity, however, their resolution to be defiant towards the social order and refusal to identify along conventional lines actually makes them more similar to an achieved identity. However, this identity status is often not used in many applications of this theory.

Marcia (1966) proposed a linear progression through these stages, in which people started either in the diffused or the foreclosed statuses and then progressed to the moratorium status and completed their identity development by reaching achieved identity status. Successful completion of each stage was believed to lead to an improvement of psychological adjustment.

Variations of Marcia's identity statuses have been applied to many different types of identity development, including ethnic, racial, cultural and sexual identities (Berry 2006, Eliason 2007; Phinney 1989, 1990, 2007; Seaton et al 2006). Perhaps the most well-known is Phinney's application of Marcia's ego identity statuses to ethnic identity development. Phinney's ethnic identity model is based on high or low levels of exploration and commitment to one's ethnic identity which then results in four identity statuses: *diffuse* (low exploration and commitment), *foreclosed* (low exploration, high commitment), *moratorium* (high exploration, low commitment) and *achieved* (high exploration, high commitment).

CRITIQUE OF MARCIA'S MODEL

Although Marcia's model has been tested empirically with reliability, I believe that this model does not accurately portray all aspects of Erikson's identity theory. Specifically, I believe that the four (or five) identity statuses do not fully capture the identity process described by Erikson. Furthermore, there are several aspects of Erikson's model that I believe are not properly addressed by Marcia's model, i.e., the impact of social contexts and the fluidity and nonlinearity of identity development.

Firstly, as discussed previously, Erikson's theory of ego identity development heavily focuses on the role of the community and the historical and social contexts in the individual's identity development. In fact, the central ego weakness and strength associated with the stage (role repudiation and fidelity respectively) can not be understood without considering the social contexts (e.g. rebellion can not occur independently of a society to rebel against). Therefore, I believe that the Marcia's identity statuses have little meaning or predictive value without taking social contexts into account.

Marcia's model does not account for the interactive role of the environment on identity development, nor does it allow space to take social contexts into account. For example, a young woman may go through a period of moratorium in which she is questioning her career, family and gender role goals. She may conclude that she wants to be an engineer and therefore would complete this moratorium status and continue to the achieved status. However, depending on the social contexts of culture, nationality, historical time period, social economic status, etc., this identity resolution could have very different outcomes for this individual. A white upper-class woman in America in

the 1940s would probably experience a great deal of conflict with her community for this decision, which would probably lead to psychological distress and possibly be considered maladapted. However, if she was an Indian upper-class woman in India in the current time period (where engineering is one of the most desired occupations and where there are currently more female than male engineers) she would probably receive a great deal of support from her community and as a result would experience positive psychological outcomes.

This issue is especially problematic in the foreclosure identity status. The argument that committing to an identity, especially one chosen by someone else, without exploration of other options, will lead to negative consequences is a decidedly western viewpoint. For instance, immigrants from “honor cultures” in America have very strict predetermined ideologies about their cultural identity. However, taking pride in this (foreclosed) identity is related to improved mental health (Mahalingam 2006). Furthermore, in societies in which sameness and uniformity is highly valued, such as Japan, rebelling against social norms may have more negative than positive results.

My second critique of Marcia’s paradigm is in regards to the linearity of the model. I am not the first to make this argument. In recent years, researchers have suggested that the statuses might not be linear and that there may be several different patterns of development (Waterman 1982; Meeus et al 1999; Phinney 2007; Seaton 2006). However, I still think it is important to note that Erikson’s identity theory was not one of linear progression. Rather, he called identity formation an *evolving configuration*. He describes a back and forth process in which the individual contemplates an aspect of identity, temporarily commits to the aspect, receives feedback from society, and then

readjusts the aspect accordingly and then once again tries out a different variation on the aspect. He proposed that a mature identity formation requires many cycles through this process, and that each circuit gradually integrates more and more specific rules, needs, defenses, roles, and identities (Erikson 1988).

Furthermore, I believe that breaking identity formation into four distinct categories is not an adequate way to measure identity formation. Erikson describes a fluid, spiraling process of identity formation. To pick four particular spots along this continuum seems slightly arbitrary. Additionally, it may be misleading to analyze] these particular points without taking into account exactly where the individual is in the spiral as well as what factors lead up to this point. Moreover, technically, according to Erikson, identity can not form without some exploration, so diffusion and foreclosure identities, as described by Marcia, are a contradiction in terms.

Finally, I believe the way that these points are measured may be problematic. For instance, the stage of moratorium is characterized by temporary identification with an identity while the achieved stage is characterized by a committed identification to an identity. However, Erikson notes that a person may be temporarily committed to an identity during identity exploration. Because of this, it may be hard to distinguish which of these phases one is in. Additionally, although research has shown that the diffusion status is related to negative psychological outcomes (Marcia 1966; Phinney & Kohatsu 1997; Seaton et al 2006), this may be in part due to measurements used. For instance, Marcia's identity status interview method (1966) requires participants to answer questions regarding their identity. Because identity diffused individuals do not have a clear idea of their identity, their uncertainty in answering such questions could lead them

to feel less competent and could result in lower consequent scores in psychological adjustment measures such as self esteem.

PROPOSED IDENTITY MODEL

Due to the limitations of Marcia's model discussed in the previous section, I will suggest an alternative identity model which I believe more closely parallels the developmental theory outlined by Erikson. The goal of this exercise is both to try to account for some other aspects of identity formation (such as social contexts) and to have a stricter model with which to evaluate Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory.

In this framework I attempt to highlight Erikson's evolving configuration concept of identity. I propose a multidirectional developmental progression through different phases of identity formation that emphasizes the interplay of social contexts formation (see figure 1). I use the term *phase* rather than status or stage in order to emphasize the temporarily quality of identity formation.

The initial phase of identity formation I will term the *pre-crisis/default identity phase*. This occurs before the individual reaches Erikson's psychosocial identity stage. This does not imply that individuals in this phase do not have identities or are not aware of their identity. Rather, because identity is not the focus of this phase, there will be little concern or consideration of identity issues. The key part of this phase is that the individual's identity is not questioned. Thus, during this time, a "default identity" is assumed. Because the individual has not yet begun to focus on their unique identity, this identity will reflect the community rather than the individual. Such default identities

could be the identity of one's parents, the identity of the surrounding community, or the identity of the majority.

The next phase is the *community-individual interplay phase* in which the individual experiences role repudiation. During this phase the individual and community interact with each other to create an aspect of identity that is unique to the individual. This phase involves many different components, including but not limited to the individual's rejection of community labels, questioning of current identity, reactions against the default identity, identity experimentation, and the community's rejection on the individual's experimental identity. Each of these components informs and constructs the other components. There is not one constant pattern through which the individual progresses.

This community-individual interplay phase continues until some compromise is reached and an aspect of identity is formed. This leads to *a more integrated identity*—the next phase that I will propose. It is important to note that this does not mean that the individual has reached a final stage of integrated identity, but merely a *more integrated* identity. From here, the individual simply goes back to the interplay phase and the process continues. Each time the community and individual develops a new element of identity the individual's identity becomes slightly more integrated, as well as more mature, complex and committed.

Because there is no end to this cycle, there can be no “achieved identity” status under this framework. However, it is assumed, as stipulated by Erikson, that each cycle through the evolving configuration of identity formation results in a more integrated, stable and committed identity. A great deal of empirical evidence has demonstrated that

more a integrated identity is positively correlated with desirable psychological outcomes (e.g. Berry 2006; Seaton 2006; Shih & Sanchez 2005; Vandiver et al 2001) while a less integrated identity will be correlated with less positive outcomes. Therefore, we have reason to believe that progressing through this model will lead to positive outcomes for the individual.

Furthermore, according to Erikson, identity formation progresses from large, general issues to more specific, minute details. Therefore, by the end of adolescence, most notable aspects of identity should be fairly well-integrated; however, less central aspects of identity will continue to evolve.

Finally, although this model is designed to more closely follow Erikson's theory of development, I acknowledge that the proposed framework deemphasizes Erikson's dimension of commitment and fidelity. This seems to be a necessary step in order to allow for the complex community-individual interplay and increasingly integrated identity formation that Erikson describes. I believe that this step is validated because there is empirical evidence that suggests that there is no one final end state of identity (e.g. Berry 2006; Seaton 2006). Furthermore, this concept is in agreement with Erikson's argument for the *epigenetic principle*, in which the different aspects of each psychosocial stage actually begins before and continues after the completion of each stage (1982).

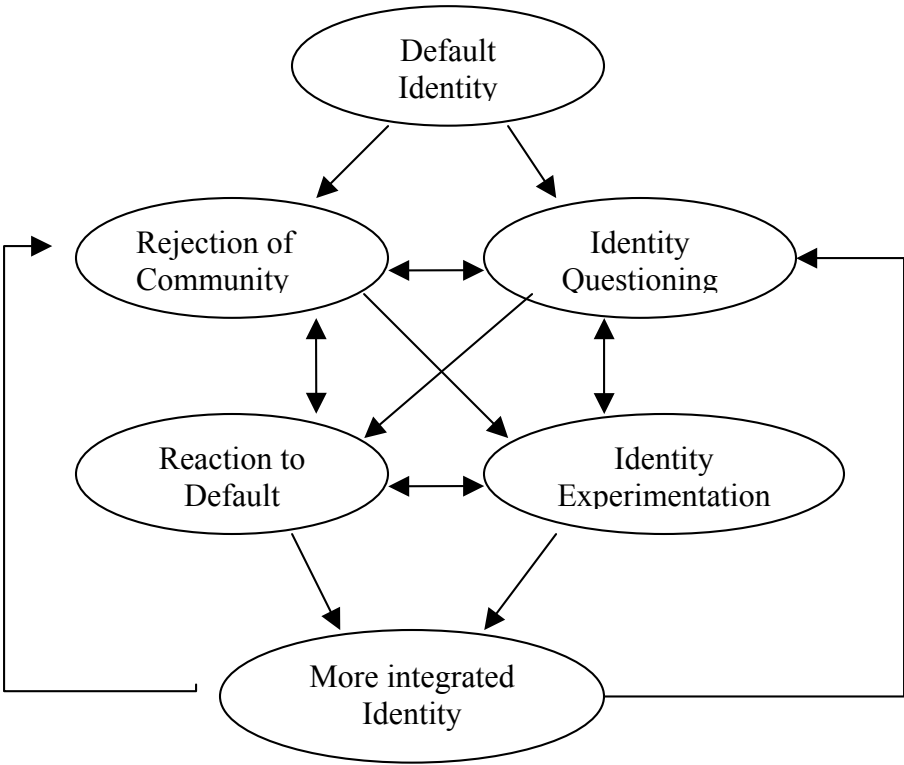


Figure 1: Proposed Identity Formation Model

PROPOSED MODEL VS. MARCIA'S MODEL

Although there are several marked differences between the proposed framework of identity development and Marcia's model, I want to point out they are not incompatible. The proposed model is simply more encompassing. For instance, Marcia's diffusion identity status would fall under the *default identity* phase in the proposed model. In both models, this is a starting point for identity development and is distinguished by a lack of exploration. Under Marcia's description (i.e. complete lack of exploration), foreclosure would also be a default identity. However, if a reaction against community expectations is at least considered (which is likely), foreclosure becomes a level of integration.

The moratorium status would fall under the community-individual interplay phase. However, the proposed model adds additional aspects to this phase by emphasizing the active aspect of identity exploration and accounting for community and social context factors. Marcia's achievement identity status is compatible with a level of increased identity integration. However, it is simply *a* level of integration and not *THE* level of integration. Furthermore, it is not the last stage in a linear model, but merely one point in a cycle. Finally, the fifth proposed status, alienated achievement, would also be considered a level of identity integration.

APPLYING THE PROPOSED MODEL TO OTHER IDENTITY MODELS

I believe that this model is useful not only for ego identity formation but for exploring the development of other social identities as well. This model supports findings from other empirical studies and is appears to be compatible with other types of

identity models. Although a thorough content analysis of the literature is beyond the scope of this paper, I will use a few of such findings to illustrate this point.

Cross (1978, 1995) proposed a model of black identity in which individuals progress through three stages. First is the pre-encounter stage in which individuals are “pro-white”, or orientated and assimilated towards the reference group (i.e. whites) and at the same time are “anti-black”, or devalue black aspects of identity. This stage can be viewed as the default identity/pre-crisis phase of the proposed model. The second stage is the Imersion-Emersion stage that is categorized by intense black involvement and anti-white attitudes. This can be seen as a reaction to the default identity and a rebellion against society. Again, it should be noted that without the social context of a White majority, this particular identity formation would not occur. Finally, under Cross’ model, individuals reach an internalization stage in which they feel black acceptance, pride and actualization. They no longer are anti-white and are more open to other cultures (Vandiver 2001). This stage can be seen as a more integrated identity that has been balanced and moderated thorough the process of community and individual interplay.

Berry (2006) proposed a model of four immigration acculturation profiles: integration, ethnic, national, and diffuse. Ethnic profile people strongly identify with their home culture and ethnic background, but do not identify with their new host nation. In contrast, the national profile is related to a strong identification with the new host culture, but a weak identification with ethnicity. Additionally, the integrated immigrant identifies strongly with both ethnic and national identities, while the diffused immigrant does not identify strongly with either identity.

Berry found that acculturation profiles were highly dependent on the community in which the individuals immigrated. Specifically, ethnic profile people lived in homogenous neighborhoods that were primarily of their own ethnic background; national profile people lived in communities that were mostly made up ethnicities that differed from their own background; diffuse profiles came from the least diverse communities; while integrated profiles come from the most diverse communities.

The proposed model can account for these findings. Different environments lead to different community-individual interactions, and therefore lead to different identity formations. Furthermore, environments that were less diverse would have simpler interactions and lead to a less complex and therefore less integrated identity, while more diverse environments will lead to more diverse interactions and more complex and integrated identities. Additionally, the study found that individuals with more integrated profiles had more positive adaptation outcomes—just as our model would suggest.

Finally, I will also compare our proposed model to Poston's biracial identity model. Poston (1990) proposes a five stage model of biracial identity. The first stage is personal identity, in which the individual does not necessarily see themselves as a member of either ethnic group. This fits with the pre-crisis stage of the proposed model. In the second stage, the individual chooses one racial identity to identify with. This can be seen as the beginning of the community-individual interplay because biracials generally chose a singular racial identity because of perceived social pressure (Shih & Sanchez 2005). In the next stage, individuals feel guilty that this identity does not reflect their whole identity. This is followed by a stage in which individuals learn to appreciate other identities. The final stage of Poston's model is a stage of integrated identity in

which the individual appreciates both of their racial identities. During these stages, we can see the community-individual interplay resulting in a progressively more integrated identity.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, I am not proposing that Marcia's model is not relevant or useful. Indeed, a great deal of empirical evidence suggests otherwise. I believe that the four status model has been helpful in making many conclusions about identity development. However, I do believe that this model falls short of explaining the theory of development proposed by Erikson. In particular, I believe that there is a need to focus on the role of social contexts when studying the development of identity.

There are limitations to this proposal. There is no evidence to suggest that the proposed model will be a reliable way to study identity. Furthermore, although I have outlined the conceptual framework for such a model, I have not suggested a methodology with which to measure or analyze this framework. I do realize measuring such a framework empirically would be challenging given the variability of various social contexts.

However, because this model seems to be able to explain, or at the very least support, several other established theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on various types of identity, I do believe that this model can be useful in future research.

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