Nourishing and Thwarting Effects of Contextual Influences upon Multiple Dimensions of Identity: Does Gender Matter?

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate possible gender differences in the nature and role of the contextual influences (events, experiences, and relationships) that shape multiple dimensions of identity during college. Fifteen college alumni used lifelines to document their identity-shaping experiences during college; two interviews were conducted with each of these alumni. Findings suggest the existence of gender differences in the following areas: types of contextual influences that shape identity during college, reactions to those contextual influences, and attributions of salience to various identity dimensions.

Building upon the work of Erikson (1968, 1980), many researchers have attempted to conceptualize and describe the construct of identity. Recently, Deaux (1993) suggested that identity is defined internally by one’s self and externally by others and proposed the existence of two layers of identity: personal and social. Personal identity “refers to those traits and behaviors (e.g., kind or responsible) that the person finds self-descriptive, characteristics that are typically linked to one or more of the identity categories” (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). Jones and

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McEwen (2000) describe this layer of identity as the “core” identity (p. 409); this core identity includes personal attributes and characteristics of the individual. On a more visible level, social identities are “roles (e.g., parent) or membership categories (e.g., Latino or Latina) that a person claims as representative” (Deaux, p. 6). Dimensions of social identities include race, gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, and culture (Jones & McEwen, 2000). According to Reynolds and Pope (1991), people may actively or passively identify with certain dimensions of identity and may attribute salience to a particular dimension, or dimensions, at various times in their lives. Building on this work, Jones and McEwen (2000) have begun to focus on multiple identities. It is their belief that influences such as relationships, sociocultural conditions, and childhood experiences, referred to as “contextual influences,” may play a pivotal role in many dimensions of identity development.

Because most of the literature in the realm of identity development is based on the age/stage perspective, it is beneficial to review research that focuses on the impact of life events and experiences when studying identity development. Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1978) investigated life events and experiences and described them as occurrences that typically change the usual activities of most individuals who experience them. These experiences are not necessarily undesirable but include stressful episodes that require some degree of adaptation by the person involved (Furney, 1983).

Some research has focused on categorizing the types of life events experienced by people. For example, one method of categorizing life events is to determine whether or not they are perceived as being desirable or undesirable (Knapp & Magee, 1979; Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). Furthermore, daily hassles are often distinguished from major life events (Tolan, Miller, & Thomas, 1988; Wagner, Compas, & Howell, 1988). Other researchers have chosen to characterize types of life events by the nature of the underlying construct of those events. For instance, Compas, Davis, and Forsythe (1985) identified the following categories of life events: death/accident/illness, family, living situation, personal health and appearance, recreation, romance, school, social/friendships, and work.
Research suggests that there may be gender differences in regards to the types of life events and experiences faced by each gender as well as in their reactions to these events and experiences. For instance, Dohrenwend (1973, 1976) found that females generally report more stressful life changes than do males. Furthermore, Burke and Weir (1978) found that males and females tend to differ in their perceptions of many life events. It seems reasonable, then, to believe that contextual influences (events, experiences, and relationships), both related to the college experience and unrelated to the college experience, may significantly impact the multiple dimensions of identity of males and females in qualitatively different ways.

This study, which is part of a larger project, was conducted to explore this possibility. To this end, qualitative methods were used to collect and to interpret stories from college alumni about their undergraduate experiences. The guiding research question for this study was: What, if any, gender differences exist in the nature and role of the contextual influences that impact multiple dimensions of identity during college? In this study, fifteen college alumni were each interviewed twice. Part of this interview process involved the completion of a lifeline, on which participants documented the events, experiences, and relationships that shaped their identity during college.

Method

Participants
Participants were selected using “purposeful sampling,” which emphasizes sampling for information-rich cases (Patton, 1990). Decision criteria for the selection of the sample were based on two dimensions of identity: gender and race, as well as on temporal proximity to college graduation. The intent was to maximize the racial variation among each gender in order to represent a diversity of experiences within each gender group. Additionally, only alumni who had graduated from college within the past ten years were included. An assumption underlying this decision is that individuals who recently graduated from college may better recall the events that occurred while they were in college than those who have been out of college for a significant period of time. Alumni were chosen in order to gain descriptions of the entire collegiate experience.
Snowball sampling, a strategy for purposefully selecting information-rich cases, was used to identify participants who met the criteria for involvement in this study. This sampling procedure involves a process of chain referral, whereby each contact is asked to identify additional members of the target population, who are asked to name others, and so on (Patton, 1990). Saturation was achieved and sampling was ended when patterns and themes in the data emerged and a diverse sample had been accomplished (Strauss, 1987); in this study, saturation was achieved after interviewing fifteen individuals.

The final sample was comprised of eight females and seven males, ranging in age from 21 to 30 years old. The mean age was 24.7 years old; the mode was 23 years old. Seven different races and ethnicities were represented in the sample: Filipina, Pakistani, Chinese-American, African-American, Hispanic, Native-American, and Caucasian. All participants were alumni of the same large, public Research I university located in the southwestern United States, and, at the time of this study, were all currently living in the same area in which their alma mater is located.

Procedure

Lifelines

The lifeline exercise helps individuals review important periods or events in their lives and helps them assess the impact of those events and experiences, both positive and negative; this exercise stresses the holistic study of the individual. Versions of the lifeline, commonly used in student affairs, have been used in a variety of ways including as tools to facilitate team building among groups of individuals (Miller, 1993). The original developer of the lifeline exercise is unknown.

This exercise requires individuals to draw a horizontal line that represents a particular period of time. Above the line, experiences that were positive, happy, or rewarding are plotted chronologically. Below are plotted experiences that were negative, unhappy, or painful. The distance above or below the line indicates the degree of positive or negative impact or feeling. Individuals are asked to plot and label at least two or three positive and negative events or experiences. The inter-
view and interviewee work collaboratively to derive understanding from the lifeline (Goldman, 1990).

The main purpose of this tool was to encourage self-reflection by the participants. Unlike other tools used to investigate research questions concerning life events, this method allowed the participants to determine which events, experiences, and relationships to mention without being forced to choose from certain categories.

**Interviews**

Each of the fifteen participants was interviewed twice; the second interview occurred approximately one week after the first. The length of each interview was approximately forty-five minutes to one hour. To ensure accuracy, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The initial interview occurred after the participants had been contacted by phone or e-mail to request their participation in the study. The purpose of this interview was threefold. First, the concept of identity was discussed (e.g., “What is identity?”). Second, the participants described their own identity (e.g., “What is your identity?”). Finally, they were asked to think about how their identity was shaped before going to college (e.g., “Do you remember anything that happened during your childhood that may have shaped some aspect of your identity?”). The interview protocol for this first interview consisted of ten questions and follow-up probes including those used to glean important demographic data.

At the end of the first interview, the participants were given a blank lifeline upon which to plot the pivotal events, experiences, and relationships that occurred during their undergraduate careers that they believed shaped their identity. Attached to this blank lifeline was a sample lifeline and instructions for completing one of their own. The participants were then asked to bring their own lifeline to their second interview. This allowed the participants the opportunity to think about these issues during the week between the two interviews. Research suggests that when people can practice unconstrained recall, elaborating their own account of the past at their own pace, they are much more thorough than when they are forced to report on the past under time limits (Neisser, 1988).
The purpose of the second interview was to discuss the events, experiences, and relationships that were plotted on the participants’ lifelines; the completed lifelines were used as the interview guide for this stage in the data collection process. For example, participants were asked to describe each event, experience, and relationship they had plotted on their lifelines. Furthermore, they were asked to clearly describe the context of the occurrence (e.g., “What else was happening in your life when this event occurred?”) as well as their beliefs concerning how those contextual influences shaped their identity. Participants did the majority of the talking during the second interview, although questions were asked for clarification as needed. A benefit of using this qualitative approach is that it allowed participants to choose which dimensions of identity they wanted to discuss.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed inductively through the use of two techniques: the pattern coding method and the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pattern coding is a way of grouping “segments of data into smaller numbers of themes or constructs” by looking for recurring phrases and common threads (Miles & Huberman, p. 69). Using the interview transcripts and the lifelines, theme lists were developed by noting recurring phrases concerning the contextual influences upon identity development during college. The events, experiences, and relationships mentioned were each coded into the corresponding category. For each contextual influence, the period of time in which it occurred (i.e., first year of college, second year of college), the nature of the impact upon identity development (i.e., positive or negative), and the degree of impact (i.e., low, medium, or high) were recorded. Separate theme lists were developed for males and females.

The interviews were also used to determine how contextual influences nourish or thwart multiple dimensions of identity. In this regard, of interest was the role of contextual influences in shaping identity. The term “nourish” refers to the process of identity dimensions becoming more salient in a positive way as perceived by that participant. Just the opposite is true for those dimensions that were “thwarted”: When this occurred, those dimensions were made salient in a negative way, meaning that participants developed a more negative view of those
dimensions of their own identity. Theme lists were developed, one for each gender, for each type of influence: nourish and thwart. Within each theme list, words or short phrases that alluded to the underlying process involved in the impact were recorded.

The interview data were analyzed on a constant and ongoing basis; during the time that interviews were conducted, an ongoing process of data collection, coding, analysis, and concept development was occurring. The interviews were interpreted through the use of grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987) in which the interpretation was “guided by successively evolving interpretations made during the course of the study” (Strauss, p. 10).

Limitations
Some limitations to this study must be addressed. First of all, the focus was on alumni from one institution only. Moreover, only fifteen alumni comprised the sample; therefore, statements about males and females in the study are based on only seven or eight respondents, respectively. While qualitative methodology does not require large data sets, added richness of the data may have resulted by including more respondents. Furthermore, only college alumni still residing in the geographic location of that one institution were respondents in the study. It is plausible that geographic location could impact the type of events, experiences, and relationships available to participants.

In order to lessen the impact of the limitations mentioned above, Merriam's (1998) tactics to ensure the trustworthiness, or quality and credibility, of the results were used. In order to provide an audit trail, all handwritten notes and theme lists were retained; consent forms, interview tapes, and interview transcripts were also retained. Additionally, member checks were conducted with each participant. A summary of the information gleaned from the interview transcripts from each participant, along with my analysis of that information, was sent to that participant with a request that s/he respond if the data or interpretation was incorrect. Due to the rapport that was established between the interviewer and the participants, there is no reason to believe that participants would not respond if the transcripts did not accurately reflect their experiences. Only one individual responded; and a particular aspect of the data, corresponding to her interviews,
was revised to reflect her concerns about possible misinterpretation. Finally, confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms in all documents related to the study.

Findings

Participants mentioned the impact of numerous contextual influences upon the shaping of multiple dimensions of their identity. Gender differences in the nature and role of the contextual influences faced during college were evident. Both similarities and differences are discussed below.

Events

Events, as defined in this study, are significant occurrences that happened at a particular point in time and that had a short (one day or less) duration; the duration refers to the event itself and not to the impact of that event. Table 1 displays the events mentioned by the participants. Males mentioned events that were coded into several categories that were not mentioned by females: death, co-curricular, religious, and health. Both females and males mentioned relationship-related events, although females mentioned a greater number of such events.

Sarah, a Filipina, was thirty years old at the time of the study. She described an identity-shaping event that occurred at the beginning of her college career:

I was incredibly intimidated. And, when I sat down with the first counselor, she said, “Why are you here?” She was looking at my transcripts. And, when I first graduated from high school, I went to Saguaro Community College and ended up quitting. So, a lot of them just gave me “Fs” . . . they didn’t give me an official withdrawal or anything. And so when she was looking at that, she said, “What are you doing here? You are not university material.” I was just devastated.

This event, according to Sarah, resulted in the thwarting of her academic self-concept. Throughout her undergraduate career, she struggled with this dimension of her identity.
Moran

Travis is a 23-year-old, Caucasian male who majored in microbiology during college. He described a significant event that occurred near the end of his undergraduate career; he was denied entrance into a physical science program in graduate school:

That was really hard, because everyone told me, “Oh, don’t worry about it. You’ll get in. Don’t worry about it. Your GRE is a little low? Don’t worry about it. You’ll get in.” Then, all of a sudden, the letter comes in. I didn’t get in. And, I’m thinking, “What am I going to do with my life?” I’m just like freaking out. In the meantime, all of my friends are getting interviews and flying all over the country. And, I’m like, “What am I going to do?” And then I started questioning, “Oh, maybe it’s just this research. This is garbage. I don’t want to do this.”

What started out being perceived as a negative event in his eyes turned out positively as Travis came to realize, a year later, his interest in attending pharmacy school. Thus, his vocational identity was nourished by this event.

Table 1
Events that Shape Multiple Dimensions of Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Events</th>
<th>Examples of Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Gave birth to a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brother’s car accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Breaking up with boy/girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friend attempted suicide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Departure</td>
<td>Getting accepted into medical school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduating from college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Death of a grandparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-curricular</td>
<td>Hired as a resident assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resigning as a fraternity president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Confirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baptism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Diagnosed with a disease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Travis is a 23-year-old, Caucasian male who majored in microbiology during college. He described a significant event that occurred near the end of his undergraduate career; he was denied entrance into a physical science program in graduate school:

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What started out being perceived as a negative event in his eyes turned out positively as Travis came to realize, a year later, his interest in attending pharmacy school. Thus, his vocational identity was nourished by this event.
Experiences

Other contextual influences that shaped multiple dimensions of identity included significant experiences that the participants had both before and during college. Unlike events, these experiences lasted for more than one day; similar to the events mentioned earlier, the impact of these experiences often lasted much longer. Table 2 displays the categories of experiences that shape multiple dimensions of identity. In this study, females, unlike males, mentioned traveling and media-related experiences as being influential in the shaping of multiple dimensions of their identity. Males, unlike females, often spoke of volunteer work. Although both females and males mentioned relationship-related experiences, females spoke more often of these types of experiences than did males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Experiences</th>
<th>Examples of Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paid Job/Work</td>
<td>Working off or on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Study abroad experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traveling to work on a thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Enrolled in a particular class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Entry</td>
<td>College orientation programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-curricular</td>
<td>Living in the residence halls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involved in campus organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Watching certain television shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading certain types of literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Work</td>
<td>Tutoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beverly, a 23-year-old, Caucasian medical student, described a travel experience that occurred during her sophomore year in college:

We were in Germany for two weeks, and then we went to Poland for a week. There was a whole different atmosphere in Poland. It
seemed a lot more anti-Semitic . . . a lot more unaccepting. It was blatant. People would say things. There was graffiti. There were remembrances. The Jewish community there told more stories. There was more vandalism. Things along those lines were blatant signs.

Thus, a social dimension of identity, Beverly’s cultural identity as a Jew, was thwarted as she placed herself into an unfamiliar environment. In this new environment, she felt different and unaccepted due to being Jewish.

Referring to his involvement in MEChA, Hector, a 26-year-old Hispanic, discussed a significant identity-shaping experience that occurred during college:

MEChA is a Chicano movement organization that, at the time when I joined it, was both a political and a social group. It provided a safe atmosphere . . . something that was similar to my home environment. It provided me with a place where people understood what I was going through. There was always education about the culture, and people talking about their experiences. I think my ethnic identity was strengthened the most in this club, because it was an ethnic organization. So, there was a lot of pride about the culture, a lot of talk about history . . . so that’s kind of what pulled me in.

As he indirectly stated, Hector’s ethnic identity was nourished through this experience.

**Relationships**

The relationship category includes stories about the impact of relationships with other individuals upon the participants’ identity development. This category is different than the “relationships” subcategories within the events and experiences categories in that the impact of these relationships was not directly tied to a particular event or experience. For instance, simply having someone in a participant’s life (relationship category) is different than having a particular event or experience occur with that person.
Individuals involved in identity-shaping relationships with the participants included the following: spouse, boy/girlfriends, children, parents, other relatives, college faculty and staff, K-12 faculty and staff, friends, roommates, college classmates, and work supervisors. Boy/girlfriends, friends, and college staff were mentioned most frequently as being identity-shapers during college.

Melissa, a 22-year-old, Caucasian elementary teacher, spoke of her identity-shaping relationship with her fiancé:

He was the best thing that has happened to me. But, in getting in a relationship like that, I really started to learn who I was. When you get that close to another person . . . . So, from that point through my junior year, it was really a time of me learning that I was manipulative . . . and having to deal with that because it was hurting him. I learned that I had a real issue with sharing when I was upset . . . telling people about it. He really helped me to draw that out, so that I was more honest with people when people upset me. It was really good that he was helping me. He was really getting at who I really was. I look back on it, and it was really probably some of my biggest shaping and forming time.

This relationship served to nourish Melissa’s self-confidence as well as her degree of interdependence with others, in addition to helping her view herself more accurately.

Marco, a 24-year-old, African-American male working in the field of medical technology, felt a strong sense of gratitude when discussing the impact his best friend has had upon his identity:

We actually became best friends my sophomore year. He was a feelings person. He got me more in touch with my feelings. And he was the only person that I would listen to that could be critical to me, and that I would actually think about it (laughing). So, he allowed me to grow a lot. Because things that other people wouldn’t tell me, he would tell me. And, for whatever reason they wouldn’t tell me, or for whatever reason they would try to tell me and I didn’t see it, he could make me see it. When he said something, it meant something. And when somebody else said something, I didn’t value it as much.
Through this relationship with his best friend, Marco’s identity was nourished in that he is now more capable of realizing and accepting his own emotions.

Emotional Reactions
After having identified the nature of the contextual influences that are involved in identity development for males and females, the question then becomes whether or not the role of these contextual influences is the same for each group. Upon analyzing each event, experience, and relationship discussed by the participants, a common theme emerged. When asked how each event, experience, and relationship shaped the participants’ identity, participants usually replied by sharing an emotion that was evoked due to those experiences. Each emotion either nourished particular dimensions of identity or else thwarted identity dimensions.

A total of 29 emotions, evoked by the participants’ events, experiences, and relationships were recorded; of these, 20 resulted in the nourishing of identity dimensions, while 9 resulted in the thwarting of dimensions of identity. Upon further investigation and coding, the prevalent emotions were identified and placed into the appropriate category: those that nourish identity and those that thwart identity. Table 3 displays the emotions that nourish and thwart identity.

It is clear that the males in this study experienced more “nourishing” emotions than females, and females experienced more “thwarting” emotions than males. When challenged by a contextual influence, males usually had a positive, nourishing, response to that influence. The opposite is true for females: Dimensions of their identity were usually thwarted upon facing challenging contextual influences.

Upon analyzing the various dimensions of identity that were mentioned by the participants, it became clear which were most salient in their lives during college. Both personal (core) and social layers of identity (Deaux, 1993; Jones & McEwen, 2000) were mentioned. As mentioned earlier, personal identity “refers to those traits and behaviors (e.g., kind or responsible) that the person finds self-descriptive, characteristics that are typically linked to one or more of the identity categories” (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). On the contrary, social identities are
Table 3
Emotions that Nourish and Thwart Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOURISH</th>
<th>THWART</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride (26)</td>
<td>Pride (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance (19)</td>
<td>Challenged (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable (9)</td>
<td>Acceptance (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy (8)</td>
<td>Capable (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenged (3)</td>
<td>Happy (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“roles (e.g., parent) or membership categories (e.g., Latino or Latina) that a person claims as representative” (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). Table 4 displays the most frequently mentioned identity dimensions and how they were shaped by contextual influences.

Table 4
Most Frequently Mentioned Identity Dimensions
Shaped by Contextual Influences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Dimension</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic</td>
<td>Nourished (3); Thwarted (3)</td>
<td>Nourished (6); Thwarted (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Nourished (7); Thwarted (2)</td>
<td>Nourished (10); Thwarted (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>Nourished (12); Thwarted (1)</td>
<td>Nourished (1); Thwarted (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Nourished (18); Thwarted (2)</td>
<td>Nourished (6); Thwarted (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For males in this study, the identity dimensions of competency (including self-concept) and personality were the most commonly nourished identity dimensions during their college careers; these are both personal or core layers of identity (Deaux, 1993; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Male participants mentioned very few “thwarting” contextual influences. For females, purpose, a personal or core layer of identity, was the identity dimension most often nourished, while racial/ethnic identity and competency (including self-concept) were most often thwarted.

**Discussion**

For the participants in this study, the nature and role of contextual influences involved in the shaping of multiple dimensions of identity differed by gender. There were both qualitative and quantitative differences in the nature of contextual influences (events, experiences, and relationships) experienced by each gender. In addition, the role of these contextual influences was often quite different for females than for males in that they evoked different emotional reactions from each gender.

**Intriguing Findings**

There were several intriguing findings that emerged from this study that are worthy of discussion. First, both male and female participants mentioned numerous relationship-oriented events and experiences that shaped multiple dimensions of their identity. However, females mentioned far more of these than did males. This is congruent with prior research such as the work of Hodgson and Fischer (1979) and Josselson (1987), who believe that females tend to find their identity by relating to others. In relation to this study, the “finding” of their identity was, in actuality, either the nourishing or the thwarting self-perceptions of identity that resulted from experiencing these relationship-oriented events and experiences.

Second, there were a few categories of contextual influences that were only mentioned by one gender. Males were the only participants that spoke of events, experiences, and relationships that could be characterized as existential in nature. In particular, they mentioned many contextual influences related to death, religion, health, and volunteer
work. On the other hand, in contrast to males, females mentioned the identity-shaping impact of their travels as well as that of the media.

Third, each gender attributed salience to different dimensions of identity. For females, the dimensions that were most salient during college were the following: purpose and racial/ethnic identity, a personal and social layer of identity respectively. Males, however, spoke most often about the development of their personality and competence, both being personal layers of identity. In this regard, it is interesting to note that for males in this study, identity dimensions were usually nourished as a result of the impact of contextual influences; females, unfortunately, experienced many more events, experiences, and relationships that thwarted one or more dimensions of their identity.

Finally, the findings of this study show that dimensions of identity in these male participants were often nourished as a result of “challenging” contextual influences, while females’ identity dimensions were often thwarted when faced with such challenges. For the females in this study, racial/ethnic identity was the dimension of identity that was most often thwarted as a result of being challenged.

Implications for Practice
The question of whether or not college faculty and staff can shape the environment to facilitate development continues to puzzle researchers and scholars in the field of student affairs (Forney, 2001). In essence, how much influence over identity development do college personnel really possess, and how might that influence best be used to facilitate development? It is true that college personnel cannot control the life events, experiences, and relationships of their students. Nor can they control the students’ emotional reactions to such contextual influences. However, student affairs professionals and other college personnel may be able to assist students in the coping process following these experiences.

College personnel could draw on insights from counseling models to assist students in coping with life events, experiences, and relationships. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) revised a counseling model from Cormier and Hackney (1993) to assist professionals with this responsibility. Included in this model are five actions that could
assist college personnel in helping students who have been impacted by life events, experiences, and relationships during college. First of all, college personnel should continue to build relationships through the use of active listening skills and the display of genuine concern. Secondly, they need to assess students’ environments, their internal resources, their external resources, and their coping skills. The third aspect of this model includes setting goals with the students; these goals need to be related to the coping resources and skills mentioned earlier. Next, college personnel can intervene through the use of “reframing” in order to change students’ interpretations of the meanings of various experiences. In the midst of this intervention, college personnel should refer students to support groups or generate problem-solving strategies. Finally, college personnel need to continually follow-up with students to review what has happened and to talk with them about their identity.

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the identity-shaping power of contextual influences that occur during a student’s college career as well as the possible gender differences in this phenomenon. In light of this study and other research in the realm of student identity development, many questions remain: How might we encourage students to either change the nature of, or remove themselves from, relationships in which they are led to feel different, ashamed, insecure, or unhappy so as to prevent possible identity-thwarting repercussions? Similarly, how might we help students to develop relationships built on pride, acceptance, feelings of capability, and happiness in order to nourish various dimensions of their identity? How can we be sensitive to the possible gender differences, highlighted in this study, in the nature and impact of life events, experiences, and relationships?

There is certainly a need for additional research regarding gender differences in the shaping of multiple dimensions of identity. Additional knowledge about the “nourishing” and “thwarting” events, experiences, and relationships faced by students needs to be gathered. In the meantime, student affairs practitioners are advised to continue to seek out methods of facilitating identity development that involve nourishing as opposed to thwarting identity dimensions.
References


