Conceptualizing Identity Development: Unmasking the Assumptions within Inventories Measuring Identity Development

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The purpose of this qualitative research was to analyze the dimensions and manifestations of identity development embedded within commonly used instruments measuring student identity development. To this end, a content analysis of ten identity assessment tools was conducted to determine the assumptions about identity development contained therein. Findings suggest the importance of determining and assessing all dimensions and manifestations of identity development.

Erikson (1968) laid the foundation for research regarding identity through the development of his age-linked, stage model of identity development. Building upon his work, many researchers have examined identity as it relates to the psychosocial development of college students. Models of particular dimensions of student identity development are becoming more abundant as scholars in the field of student affairs are recognizing the need to describe the unique experiences of students from different backgrounds and life experiences.

Deaux (1993) suggests that there are 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” (p. 6). Jones and 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).

Many assessment instruments have been developed based on these models and conceptualizations of identity. For the most part, the purpose of these instruments is to measure the degree to which a student has achieved a particular level of identity (i.e., last stage) along a specific dimension (i.e., racial identity). The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to gain a broader, more complex understanding of the dimensions and manifestations of identity development embedded as assumptions within identity instruments. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. What dimensions of identity, personal and social, are represented in instruments measuring identity development?

2. What types of manifestations of identity are represented in instruments measuring identity development?

**Method**

**Sample**

Ten identity-measuring instruments were content analyzed in this study. The ten chosen were selected since, for some time, they have been the instruments most commonly used to assess dimensions of identity development in the field of student affairs (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Table 1 displays the instruments used in the content analysis.
Procedure

Upon accessing copies of the instruments described earlier, each was typed as a separate document. Only the instructions and items were included, as opposed to information about the content and/or constructs contained therein, in order to prevent biasing the results with the knowledge gained through others’ prior analyses. Theories of identity development (Brady & Busse, 1994; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1978; Helms, 1990; Phinney, 1992) were used as the framework for the analysis.

Content analysis, a set of methods for analyzing the symbolic content of any communication, was used to answer the research questions for this study. The purpose of this analytical technique is to reduce the total content of a communication to a set of categories that represent some characteristic of research interest (Singleton & Straits, 1999). While there are various forms of content analyses, some quantitative analysis (i.e., frequency counts) as well as some interpretative analysis (i.e., placement into identity categories) techniques were adopted as part of the overall content analysis procedure used in this study.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Author and Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ)</td>
<td>Brady &amp; Busse, 1994</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS-B)</td>
<td>Helms &amp; Parham, 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)</td>
<td>Phinney, 1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa Managing Emotions Inventory (IMEI)</td>
<td>Hood &amp; Jackson, 1983a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Developing Competency Inventory (IDCI)</td>
<td>Hood &amp; Jackson, 1983b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa Developing Autonomy Inventory (IDAI)</td>
<td>Hood &amp; Jackson, 1983c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mines-Jensen Interpersonal Relationship Inventory (MJIRI)</td>
<td>Mines, 1977</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing Purposes Inventory (DPI)</td>
<td>Barratt, 1981</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI)</td>
<td>Winston, Miller, &amp; Prince, 1987</td>
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First, the content categories were selected and defined; theoretical constructs related to identity development formed the basis for the categories. In effect then, the two content categories for this study were the following: dimensions of identity and manifestations of identity. The recording units, or units of analysis, were single words or short phrases in the identity instruments. Small recording units were chosen because they may be recorded more reliably than larger units due to containing less information (Weber, 1990).

The system of enumeration, or quantifying the data, was based on the frequency with which a unit within a category appeared in the instruments. Two assumptions form the basis for this system: the frequency of unit within a category is a valid indicator of its importance or value, and each individual count is of equal importance or value (Singleton & Straits, 1999). Finally, the material was coded according to the coding categories and system of enumeration; a total of 617 units within the 10 assessment tools were analyzed. Peer debriefing, by a colleague in the field of student affairs, was used as a method for increasing the validity of the results by providing a second analytical perspective (Patton, 1990). The small sample size forming the basis for the study is a limitation of the research.

Results

Dimensions of Identity

While analyzing the instruments, the identity dimensions represented within each were noted. A total of seven identity dimensions were represented both within and across instruments. These dimensions included both personal layers of identity as well as social layers (Deaux, 1993). The identity dimensions, the type of dimensions they represent, and the name(s) of the respective instruments from which they were gleaned are displayed in Table 2.

Only two instruments contained references to more than one dimension of identity: the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory and the Developing Purposes Inventory.
Manifestations of Identity

Suggested goals, or end states, of identity development were prevalent throughout the identity instruments. Parker (1999) describes the “goals” of student development as “statements of final states rather than processes of development” (p. 495). A common assumption expressed within the identity instruments was that there are certain behaviors, emotions, beliefs, knowledge, and values that should become manifest as a result of identity development. Examples of each of these manifestations are given below.

Behaviors

The following items from the instruments characterize the assumption that behaviors are goals, or end states, of the development of dimensions of identity. Behaviors, for the purposes of this study, were defined as “actions, reactions, and interactions in response to external or internal stimuli, including objectively observable activities, introspectively observable activities, and unconscious processes” (Corsini, 1999). This type of manifestation of identity development is illustrated by the following items:

I don’t act like most homosexuals, so I doubt that I’m homosexual. (Gay Identity Questionnaire, Item 17)
I have investigated my anger by letting myself get angry and then dealing with it.
(Iowa Managing Emotions Inventory, Item 46)

Emotions
Individuals are believed to experience certain emotions based on their level of identity development. Emotions were defined as “mental states characterized by various degrees of feeling” (Corsini, 1999). The following items illustrate this assumption:

I feel excitement and joy in Black surroundings.
(Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale, Item 20)

I feel self-confident in mathematics.
(Iowa Developing Competency Inventory, Item 13)

Beliefs
Related to this, a third assumption that was found throughout the instruments is that identity dimensions are also made manifest through the beliefs that one holds. Beliefs are “attitudes of acceptance about the validity of a doctrine, that may or may not be correct” (Corsini, 1999). This assumption is noticeable in the following items:

I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups didn’t try to mix together.
(Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, Item 7)

My mismanagement of time is causing me to get bad grades.
(Iowa Developing Autonomy Inventory, Item 15)

Knowledge
Another assumption that was found throughout the instruments was that individuals possess a certain type or amount of knowledge on the basis of their identity. Knowledge is “a type of experience that includes a vivid representation of a fact, formula, or complex condition, together with a strong belief in its truth” (Corsini, 1999). The following items exemplify this goal of identity development:
I believe I know a lot about Black people’s customs.  
(White Racial Identity Attitude Scale, Item 39)

I am aware of the extent to which material things contribute to my happiness (car, house, clothes, etc.).  
(Developing Purposes Inventory, Item 18)

Values

A final assumption about the manifestations of identity is that certain values are indicative of a certain level of identity development. Values are “goals or standards considered especially worthy by an individual or a society; denoting the degree of excellence assigned to an object or activity” (Corsini, 1999). This assumption can be seen in the following items gleaned from two of the inventories:

It would not matter to me if someone I was going to marry had sexual relations with another person before I met them.  
(Mines-Jensen Interpersonal Relationship Inventory, Item 7)

Sharing my innermost thoughts with my partner is the thing I value most in our relationship.  
(Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory, Item 92)

Some intriguing findings emerged upon reviewing the frequency with which each type of manifestation was present in the identity instruments. Table 3, below, displays the type and frequency of manifestations present within the instruments measuring personal identity dimensions as well as within those measuring social identity dimensions. Total frequencies are also presented in this table.

Moreover, differences exist between the manifestations prevalent within different types of identity instruments. For instance, behaviors are the most common manifestation of identity development (54%) within the instruments measuring personal dimensions of identity. On the contrary, emotions appeared most often (28%) within the instruments measuring social dimensions of identity; this type of manifestation was followed closely by behaviors (27%) and beliefs (25%). In terms of the lowest frequency represented, beliefs and values only accounted for 7%, each, of the manifestations present in the instruments measuring personal dimensions of identity. Values accounted for 5% of the items
within the instruments measuring social dimensions of identity; this category of manifestations was the least represented within this group of instruments. In all instruments, behaviors were the manifestations of identity development represented the most (47%), and values were the least (6%).

It is also noteworthy to mention the largest discrepancies, in percentages, between the manifestation categories within both sets of instruments: personal and social. Behaviors were represented far more in the instruments measuring personal dimensions of identity (54%) than in
those measuring social dimensions of identity (27%). Beliefs, however, were more highly represented in the instruments measuring social dimensions (25%) more than in those measuring personal dimensions (7%).

**Discussion and Implications**

Scholars, such as Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998), have described some of the limitations of the assessment procedures used in identity development research. For instance, the Iowa instruments need further validation due to the fact that they are based on earlier definitions of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors, which have since been revised. The SDTLI measures only three vectors and defines those vectors differently than do Chickering and Reisser. Additionally, there is evidence of psychometric deficiencies in the WRIAS (e.g., Alexander, 1993; Davidson, 1992; Gilchrest, 1994). Moreover, measurement of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development and factors related to that development is preliminary at best. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito state that more effort needs to be focused on the development of assessment instruments and the completion of validation research.

By conducting more research about the end states, or manifestations, of identity development in all dimensions of identity, researchers and practitioners can determine the best ways in which to measure identity development among the students with whom they work. Only by knowing the accurate manifestations of identity development can student affairs practitioners provide the appropriate type and level of challenge and support necessary for students to develop in this regard. It is not only difficult but also often unproductive to work towards an ill-defined goal.

Because identity development is multidimensional and complex, its assessment is not easy. Development is continually occurring in many different arenas, and assessment can provide only a limited evaluation of a particular aspect of that development at a particular point in time (Miller & Winston, 1990). The results of this study point to some salient implications, related to the assessment of identity development among college students, which should be considered.
First of all, new identity-related instruments need to be developed that assess additional layers of identity: the personal layers of identity (e.g., relationships, purpose, and competency) and the social layers (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, religious identity, and gender identity). Currently, there are no assessment techniques specifically designed to measure the four statuses of Josselson’s theory of identity development in women (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Moreover, the WRIAS is one of only two instruments available to measure white racial identity (Rowe, Behrens, & Leach, 1995). No measure exists for D’Augelli’s (1994) model of gay, lesbian, and bisexual development. It is clear that various dimensions of identity (e.g., religious identity) are not adequately represented in the identity assessment tools used in the field of student affairs. Student affairs practitioners can take a proactive role in this process of instrument development. Those who work closely with students have the opportunity to translate their experiential knowledge to theory.

Moreover, it is imperative that scholars and practitioners in the field of student affairs determine whether or not the common conceptualizations of the manifestations, or end states, of identity development are complete and accurate. More research needs to be conducted in order to highlight the salient components of the identity development process. For instance, should all five manifestations, found in this study, be considered salient goals of identity development for all dimensions of identity? As was displayed in the data in this study, some identity instruments place primary emphasis on only one of the manifestations of identity development. For instance, the SDTLI and DPI primarily measure behaviors. Others seem to be more balanced in the measurement of all five manifestations. The instruments measuring social dimensions of identity tend to emphasize each manifestation to a certain degree; the GIQ seems particularly balanced in this regard.

Student affairs practitioners can rise to the challenge inherent in this theoretical work by using their experiential knowledge of student identity to guide further research. Scholar-practitioner collaboration, such as this, is greatly needed and could result in painting a more complex and holistic conceptualization of identity development among college students.
References


