

IDENTITY OVERVIEW

"Who am I?" "Why am I so different?" "What do other people, especially my friends, think of me?" "What do I really want in life?" "What in the world should I do to make money and reach success?" These are all identity questions. And working out a clear, functioning identity is the principal life task of a teenager.

The great developmentalist, Erik Erikson, outlined eight stages of human development. An infant's life task is to develop trust. If abuse or neglect fail to produce trust, the baby may grow up plagued with mistrust. Similarly, childhood moves through developmental crises (autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority). The principal life task of adolescents is the clarification and development of personal identity versus identity diffusion.

Writer and actor Sam Shepard spent a year or so with photographer Mary Motley Kalgis interviewing 51 U.S. teenagers ([1998]. *Seen and Heard*. NY: Stewart, Tabori being thrust out by nature itself, free falling with no net. I need to come up with something! 'Who am I?' As hackneyed and simplistic as this question might sound to us of the dot-com E-mail computer age, it may still remain the most important one we can ever ask—and these young people seem to be asking it for real. (p. 7)

We read writers in ancient classical and biblical literature bemoaning—or being criticized for—their youth and its confusions (e.g., 1 Kings 3:7, Jeremiah 3:7, 1 Samuel 17:33, Jeremiah 31:19, 1 Timothy 4:12). Hamlet and Ophelia struggled with their identities. Especially in traditional societies, identity was largely ascribed. Young people knew their place in society. Their social place and vocations, perhaps even their marriages, were chosen for them. Modern, urban, democratic societies open up a complex plethora of choices. We are not only expected to make our own decisions; we are expected to make the right choices and rise above our parents to higher levels of success. That's a lot of pressure.

Erikson explored the importance and modern complexities of identity in his *Childhood and Society* (1950). He went on to call his well-known study of adolescence *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Students find Erikson difficult to read, but this is his approach to the issue of identity:

...the conceptualization of identity has led to a series of valid investigations which, if they do not make clearer what identity is, nevertheless have proved useful in social psychology. And it may be a good thing that the word 'crisis' no longer connotes impending catastrophe, which at one time seemed to be an obstacle to the understanding of the term. It is now being accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development

must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation...

Identity, Erikson goes on, has to do with "a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity" (italics his), and he calls on a letter of William James to elaborate:

A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: 'This is the real me!' (Erikson, 1968: 16, 19)

Some social scientists have argued with Erikson's basic portrayal of adolescence and the identity struggle; others have refined the foundation he laid. (For a brief, excellent summary of Erikson's developmental theory see Nelson, L. (1996). Adolescence, 122-123.)

James Marcia (1966) developed a framework for studying identity that has been helpful to many. He chooses six areas or domains in which adolescents work out their identities:

- Vocational plans.
- Values and preferences.
- Religious beliefs.
- Gender roles.
- Ethnic identities.
- Political beliefs and choices.

Marcia also suggests four ways or states of identity development:

- **Foreclosure.** Someone may merely accept the values of parents, authority figures, religion or culture. Internalizing someone else's identity. Accepting role without exploring alternatives.
- **Diffusion.** If this describes someone who had not yet explored alternatives, it may be considered the first stage. It may also describe someone who accepts values from media or peers in an indiscriminate way without a solid sense of self. They may absorb ideas and values from whomever they're with. This could lead to an anti-social personality.
- **Moratorium.** This can describe the process of exploring roles and reference groups. It also connotes taking time off to get away from home in military service or travel, etc.
- **Resolution or Achievement.** Commitment to a personal value and belief system, a particular role and reference group. This stage can be seen as the transition into adult maturity.

David Elkind, a very perceptive expert on childhood and adolescence, approaches the issue in these words: "When we speak of a 'mature' person, we usually mean, to some extent, an individual with a healthy sense of identity and self acquired during adolescence." He explains the contemporary struggle combining the second and fourth possibilities above. A young person can work out his or her sense of self by differentiation and integration (i.e., by distinguishing possibilities of feelings, values, beliefs and priorities and then integrating those choices into one's own personality). Or, one can avoid this responsibility and struggle by substitution (a young adult can go on merely substituting what others feel and believe for previous childish ways).

Elkind sees young people, especially since the 1970s, as hurried children, forced to grow up without the time and care offered previous generations. Pushed from home to daycare, schools, and friends while inundated by electronic media, they learn by imitation rather than integration, and develop a compartmentalized personality, a "patchwork self." (Elkind, 1998: 18, ff)

Our class discussions of identity usually bring out the following aspects of identity development with which teenagers must deal (going a bit beyond Marcia). Each feature of one's identity must be discovered, clarified, and accepted:

- Physical (body appearance).
- Gender (male manhood, female womanhood, or something else).
- Sexuality (what is desired and how can it be acceptably expressed).
- Family (what kind of family and what kind of relationship to it).
- Ethnic and National (how defined and what relationship between these two issues).
- Social (class and economic level; also relationships within subcultures and cliques).
- Intellectual (kind of intelligence and academic pursuit).
- Vocational (Erikson stressed the way the above helps resolve this quest).
- Religious or spiritual.

The resolution of all these factors is important, not only in determining life choices of career and marriage, but for understanding ourselves holistically. This is a challenging quest. All parenting, education, and youth work should acknowledge the identity quest as a central issue.

From the early psychoanalysts on, description of the "identity crisis" was weighted toward middle-and upper-class European/American boys—though Erikson deals with the experience of Jill and other girls. It was necessary for developmentalists like Carol Gilligan to respond to such bias from girls' and a female perspective (In a Different Voice, 1982). For a fine review of the literature

and an insiders' perspective on African American identity issues among black youth, see Daphna Oyserman (University of Michigan) and Kathy Harrison (Wayne State University) "African American Identity in Adolescents," African American Research Perspectives, Fall 1999, Vol. 5, Issue 1. Unique issues among bi-racial, multi-racial, and third culture kids also need to be addressed. Identity issues among the poor in developing countries similarly call for special study.

In whatever context we are with young people these days, it is important to test all this "theory" by adolescent descriptions of their feelings and sense of self. Lisa Biggs ,13, offers us this advice:

'If people are really concerned about today's young people, they should stop complaining and get to know them. We're not all slackers. We do have goals and opinions—each one of us different in our own way. The key to understanding is respect. When you understand people's differences, there's more respect in the family, and that makes for more respect in the community.' (Seen and Heard, p. 10)

Ryan's parents divorced when he was in junior high, and his mother, finding it hard to raise four kids, kicked him out when he was thirteen.

'I have very little self-respect right now. When your own mom thinks you're a jerk, it makes it hard. She thinks I'm the biggest f...-up in the world, but I'm her f...-up, she gave birth to me.'

Ryan was too much for his maternal grandparents and wore out his welcome at several friends' homes. He ended up, against everyone's advice, with his dad's father, who was living with a 27-year-old crack addict. She acted like Ryan's friend, but betrayed his trust by manipulating her man through disclosure of Ryan's confidential thoughts. Grandfather couldn't get him out of bed for school one morning so he threw a bucket of cold water on him. Rudely awakened, Ryan called his grandfather an a..hole.

'He said, "If you think I'm an a..hole, pack your stuff and get out." I tried to take it back, but he said go. I stayed with my dad in his camper at the marina. He'd moved out of the house again because he and my mom were fightin'.' (Seen and Heard, p. 25)

Ryan, at age 17, can only describe his personal identity in swear words. Someday, we hope, he will meet a teacher, youth worker, counselor, sergeant or employer who will become a role model. It will take time, encouragement, and instruction for Ryan to work out his identity. We know the alternative path all too well.

Aaron, 17, says he got through his parents' divorce (when he was in eighth grade) pretty well. " `Right after my dad left, I got really depressed. I couldn't bring myself to talk to my mom about it. It's like it was important for me to feel totally alone in order to get to know myself. Now I have a close relationship with both my parents.' "

`The day of my Bar Mitzvah was an awesome experience. While I was reading the Torah, my dad was just weeping and it struck me how much more there is to life than we normally see. It was a very spiritual moment when I realized how much I don't know. I was just standing there, a little basketball player with short hair, in awe of how much knowledge is out there for the taking. At thirteen I realized there is something very real surrounding all the ritual.'

Four years after this rite of passage, Aaron sports long hair in awesome dreadlocks. His childhood love of music has taken him to the guitar—as his "way of communicating with others."

`My dream is to become a teacher and teach kids just like a good parent raises a child—with love and acceptance.' (Seen and Heard, p. 17)

Aviva, 14, explains the dilemma many young people feel about their ethnic identity:

`I really feel like a citizen of the world more than an American. I feel just as German as I do American. Those little blocks that you have to check on applications, to identify your race, make me really mad. Sometimes I check "other," if that's an option. If not, I'll check "black," since a majority of the people in this country are white, so I might as well balance things out! Funnily enough, having a black mother and a white father has made the subject of race almost a non-issue in our house.' (Seen and Heard, p.16)

Lewis is a 15-year-old farm-boy whose identity seems to have come to him easier than it does for many others.

`My family has worked this farm since long before I was born...My brother and I will probably raise our own kids right here on this farm one day. I don't daydream about leaving here, except to go to college and then I'd bring everything I learned right back home. My girlfriend comes from a dairy farming family, so she understands all the hours I have to put into the place. Whoever I marry one day would have to accept this way of life.' (Seen and Heard, p. 22)

For many young people, clarifying their identities is far from easy. The absence or busyness of role models, the complexity of postmodern societies, the power of media and peer pressure thwarts this central task of youth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why are you, or should you be, interested in this topic?
2. Remember the difficulties or special issues you encountered in working out your own identity. Would you say, with Sam Shepard, that some mystifying elements still remain in your own quest for self-understanding?
3. Can youth leaders, who have not completely worked out aspects of their own identities, help young people work out theirs? How so?
4. What most impressed you in this article?
5. How did the issue of respect come up in this article, and how can you show respect more effectively?
6. Are there points here to which you would take exception? How might those issues be discussed?
7. How can you study the issue of identity further?
8. How can you apply your understanding of this issue to your teaching, youth work, or parenting?

IMPLICATIONS

1. The theoretical arguments about identity and identity confusion should not prevent us from dealing seriously with this issue.
2. At the heart of relationships, future plans and faith, lies the issue of who and how we see ourselves to be.
3. Young people need and want to talk about their own sense of identity.

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