Psychosocial Identity Development in Millennial Students: A Cross-Cultural View

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James Marcia and Ruthellen Josselson’s psychosocial identity theory is based on the premise that all students experience crisis and commitment throughout their college careers and are sorted into one of four identity stages. However, this theory is based on research conducted over 20 years ago, and is rooted in Erik Erikson’s work that is more than 50 year old. This theory is fundamental to the work of student affairs professionals, but does it adequately apply to the students of today? How do millennial students develop identity? Is psychosocial theory still relevant in the modern age? Although many of the tenets of psychosocial theory seem like they would be easily applied to millennials, there are many characteristics of this generation that make holistic application of this theory difficult.

Psychosocial theory began with the foundational psychosocial theorist, Erik Erikson, and his work in the 1960’s. He came up with eight stages of development and postulated that each stage of development is characterized by some sort of crisis that must be overcome (1968). However, the ideas of this theory are based solely on the study of men, making it impossible to extrapolate these ideas to all emerging adults. Not only does Erikson not include women in his studies, but he also shows his bias when discussing ways that this theory might apply to them. Marcia’s and Josselson’s work stemmed from Erikson’s fifth stage of development, identity versus identity diffusion (Evans, 2010). This stage typically occurs during young adulthood, when adolescents begin to develop and identity, or lack thereof (Erikson, 1968).

James Marcia took Erikson’s stage of identity versus identity achievement and reconfigured it to be more about a young person’s crisis over identity and their commitment to identity. Adding this element leads to the theory becoming more researchable and Marcia conducted numerous studies looking at this relationship (Evans, 2010 & Marcia, 1966). Marcia also developed the idea that based on the relationship between crisis and commitment; young
adults typically fell within one of four identity statuses: identity achievement, identity moratorium, identity diffusion, and identity foreclosure.

Most of the studies conducted focused on the personality traits between each of the four identity statuses and how students in each status typically behave. Marcia conducted much of this research, but other theorists contributed as well. For example, Orlofsky found that identity status has an impact on whether or not men and women fear success in college (1978), and Waterman and Waterman found that each of the identity statuses have different types of decision making styles (1974). In a study published in 1966, Marcia looked at the differences between how men and women are sorted into each of the four statuses. By this time, Marcia had developed a system for reliably and validly sorting men into each of the statuses, but this study found that women could not be sorted so correctly by using the same measures. Ultimately Marcia concluded that identity is based on the contexts of occupation and ideology for men, and religious and sexual identity for women (1966).

Although Marcia conducted some research with female subjects, his work focused mostly on men (Evans, 2010). His research was also biased against women and took a stance introduced by Erikson that women’s development is wholly reliant upon the men in their life (Erikson, 1968 & Marcia 1966). This type of attitude motivated Josselson to conduct some of her own research specifically about the identity development of young women. Not many studies to this point had looked at women’s self-definition; most of the previous literature had claimed that women’s identity was determined at least in part by other people present in their lives. Psychosocial theory was developed at a time when many women did not have much choice and the concept of being able to make one’s own path was relatively new, instead of being defined by their husbands, family, and society (Josselson, 1987).
Josselson conducted a longitudinal study that followed 60 college seniors from 4 colleges in 1971-1973 to assess their identity formation. She was then able to follow up with about half of those participants 12 years later to investigate how their adolescent identity impacted their adult lives. Josselson makes note that up until this time most studies about women were conducted by psychologists with women who were not psychologically well, and so could not provide realistic representations of how women functioned in the general population. Josselson’s research differed in this regard because all of the women included in her study were functioning normally within society and were not receiving psychological attention (Josselson, 1987).

In her study, Josselson drew heavily on Erikson’s theories of identity versus identity diffusion, and Marcia’s four identity statuses which led her to conclusions about women’s identity development. Among her findings, she determined that adolescent girls seem to form identity more in connection to others than boys do (Josselson, 1987). While Marcia theorized that men form identity in terms of career, achievement, and independence, and women form identity in terms of religion and sexual attitudes (1966), Josselson found that women’s identity is more determined by relationships, achievement, and connection to others (1987). While Josselson made important contributions to psychosocial research and brought up essential gender-sensitive ideas, the scope of this research was very limited, and is not necessarily representative of all women or people. Josselson hoped that others might expand on her research, but unfortunately little has been done since her work was published, and much of the research on psychosocial identity theory is now outdated.

The four identity statuses are based on how individuals handle identity crisis or exploration, and how they resolve this crisis or commit to an identity. Crisis is the period in an individual’s life when they realize that they could be different from what they are (Josselson,
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1987), and that they are able to actively explore alternatives (Waterman & Waterman, 1974). During crisis, students tend to turn to trusted people in their lives to gain support in their exploration process. Ideally, students in crisis will end up in commitment. Waterman and Waterman characterize commitment as being “unswerving investment in a course of action” (1974, p. 2). At this point, individuals have come up with the direction they want to take, and have taken steps toward that goal.

Each identity status is the result of students coping with the task of developing an identity. In identity foreclosure, individuals tend to hold onto identities from their childhoods or the past; they have not undergone any exploration or crisis, but they are firmly committed in their identity. Individuals in this status tend to not question the messages received during childhood, and they may be psychologically tied to their families. They also tend to accept values and authority without much question (Evans, 2010 & Josselson, 1987). Sometimes this may result in more freedom, regret, and exploration later in life (Josselson, 1987), but some foreclosures will never experience crisis (Waterman & Waterman, 1974). It is thought that women may receive more outside support for staying foreclosed and carrying traditional values, while men are actively encouraged to search and explore other values (Orlofsky, 1978). Josselson renamed this status Purveyors of the Heritage, or Guardians, as they tend to carry on with traditional values passed on from their families (1987).

In contrast, the moratorium status is characterized by crisis or exploration, but no commitment. This may mean that individuals are exploring and may end up at identity achievement, or they may remain in moratorium. They may be questioning parental values or grappling with resistance and conformity with authority (Evans, 2010). Moratoriums may be conflicted between their past or family values and other ways of living, and their desire to please
their parents may conflict with their own interests (Josselson, 1987). This status tends to produce the most anxiety as individuals are unsure of a direction to take (Orlofsky, 1978). Josselson renamed this status Daughters of the Crisis, or Searchers, as they experience crisis and search for an identity to call their own (Josselson, 1987).

Josselson sees identity achievement as a misnomer, as identity is not something that one achieves because identity development can never be truly finished. She renames this status as Pavers of the Way, or Pathmakers, because individuals in this status have found their path and are committed to it (1987). Identity achievements have undergone crisis and have attained identity commitment. Individuals in this status tend to have high self esteem, be less impulsive, and more culturally sophisticated (Josselson, 1987). They also tend to work hard to solve problems, have realistic aspirations (Marcia, 1966), and have higher GPAs (Orlofsky, 1978).

Individuals are considered to be in the diffusion status when there has been no crisis, but there is also no commitment toward an identity. These individuals are sometimes impulsive (Waterman & Waterman, 1974), tend to go with the flow, rely on external forces to guide them, and are generally unconcerned with consequences (Evans, 2010). Josselson renames this group, Lost and Sometimes Found, or Drifters, as they seem to wander aimlessly without much direction. She also categorized this status into four subgroups: women with previous developmental deficits and psychopathology, women who are not psychologically healthy; moratorium diffusion, when there is crisis in identity but not in functioning; and foreclosed diffusion, when there is no crisis and no commitment. Josselson hypothesizes that many women fall into diffusion because there was lack of parental guidance in their past, which can leave young adults feeling disoriented and unable to process through any identity exploration (Josselson, 1987).
Any differences between the four stages are due to development and personality style, not intelligence differences (Josselson, 1987). Just because a person may be in foreclosure, does not mean that they are any less intelligent than someone who has reached achievement – it simply means that they are in a different developmental stage. Adolescents typically begin identity development either in foreclosure or diffusion; they are either stuck in their childhood identity or they may be lost without any guiding purpose. The height of crisis usually comes between ages 18-22, which is the typical age of traditional college students, when young people are granted a moratorium phase, and are expected to explore and experience different things (Josselson, 1987 & Waterman & Waterman, 1974). However, there is no “correct” order for developing an identity, and sometimes individuals may get stuck at one phase and may never make it to identity achievement.

Psychosocial theory, while an important student development theory, cannot be applied to everyone. Much of the research involved in solidifying this theory is biased toward women, conducted with incredibly small, non-representative samples, and is extremely outdated. This is especially problematic when applying this theory to millennial students, who are among the most diverse generation, and whose lives are significantly different than the baby boomer students that were the subject of most of this research (DeBard, 2004). However, some aspects of psychosocial theory may be applicable to many millennial students, specifically when describing the process of crisis and exploration, and the ability to commit to an identity. Great care must be taken because no one demographic group is homogenous (Bonner, 2011), and not all millennial students may fit into these generalizations.

Millennial students are defined as any individual born between 1982 and 2002 (DeBard, 2004). In DeBard’s discussion of the characteristics that make up the millennial generation, he
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cites Howe and Strauss’ groundbreaking 2001 work *Millennials Rising*, and goes through each of the defining elements of this generation. Howe and Strauss claim that the central tendencies of this generation are being special, millennials are made to feel important and everyone gets a trophy; being sheltered, millennials are protected from any harm and encouraged to follow the rules; being confident, millennials have been taught to believe in themselves; being conventional, millennials have come to accept certain standards but are generally accepting of diversity; being team-oriented, millennials like to congregate with others and work in teams; being achieving, millennials are optimistic; and being pressured, millennials are pressured to perform and achieve (DeBard, 2004).

These are all significant differences from the previous generations that served as research subjects for Erikson, Marcia, and Josselson. Baby boomers, born between 1943-1960 were all about becoming individuals and breaking away from authority. They value uniqueness and independence, which made them excellent participants in research about developing individual identity. In contrast, millennials are more likely to connect to others and are relationally focused (Strange, 2004). This difference is pronounced when determining identity status because baby boomers may consider identity formation more of an individual process, where millennial students may look to other to influence their development.

One example of millennials’ reliance and connection to others can be seen in the way they are sheltered by their parents. Parents of millennials tend to do everything in their power to protect their children from harm, and this leads to millennial children being watched over constantly. However, this incessant supervision can impede millennials’ ability to accept the increased freedom that comes with young adulthood and development may be hindered by parents’ over-involvement (Strange, 2004). A recent Boston Globe article highlighted this point
in more detail by describing the new phenomenon of “snowplow parents.” A relative of the helicopter parent, snowplow parents attempt to smooth things over and plow an easy path for their students. Parents are intervening on all levels of their students’ lives, often calling offices directly to try and fix problems ranging from disputing grades to resolving roommate conflicts (English, 2013).

However, although parents are trying to protect their millennial students, they may actually be hurting their students’ development by not allowing them to solve their own problems. Students may not be able to develop any significant competencies and will have low self-confidence when dealing with their own issues (English, 2013). Students who are not given the space to deal with their own problems may never be able to truly experience crisis or exploration because their parents are preventing them from living full, independent lives. This can impact a student’s identity development, and could possibly lead to more students ending up in identity foreclosure. More research into this topic would be necessary to indicate how the modern culture is impacting the way that students develop their identity.

Like psychosocial theory, aspects of millennial theory are not applicable to everyone. It is important to realize that this is not the reality for all students, and not all millennials will experience the central tendencies as laid out by Howard and Strauss. These principles are based on white, upper middle class students, and they can be applied to diverse groups of students with limited success (Bonner, 2011). Bonner details that the past is full of developmental models that try to put people into clearly defined categories, but that by doing so, part of their true identity is sacrificed. Not everyone fits neatly into their pre-determined boxes (2011). This is true of millennial characteristics and is also true of the identity statuses within psychosocial theory. As professionals, we need to be careful not to classify our students into prescribed categories that
may not be wholly representative of their personality or identity, otherwise we risk losing part of what makes students unique individuals.

For example, we expect that millennial students have experience working with technology. However, some students from certain ethnicities or who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not have had the same exposure to technology that upper middle class students may have experience. African American students specifically do not have the same access to computer tools and internet access, and thusly we cannot expect that technology tools and technology literacy is accessible to all students. However, a world where educators assume that all students have advanced technology skills is extremely detrimental to the students who do not (Bonner, 2011).

Because this generation of students is vastly diverse in all aspects, it would be challenging to apply psychosocial theory to them as a broad based group. All students may struggle with crisis and commitment (or lack of crisis and commitment), but placing students into four identity categories may not be completely realistic. For example indigenous and Native American students are included within the millennial generation, but not all of the attributes of millennials may apply to this group. We may assume that most students enter college in order to gain employment, and to generally serve themselves, whereas indigenous students go to college largely so that they can give back to their communities. While an institution may view its students as individuals, indigenous students see themselves as part of a collective family and community (Bonner, 2011).

This has a direct impact on how indigenous students may develop their identity. Because of their close relationship to family and community, identity development may be less of an individual process as Erikson, Marcia, and Josselson make it out to be, and more of a collective
process that includes many other important people in the students’ lives. This example aids us as a reminder that no demographic group is homogenous, and that we need to constantly check our assumptions to make sure we are inclusive of all individuals.

We must be reminded to consider differences and to be inclusive in all facets of our work, but especially when working with theory. For example, if a career service professional is preparing a workshop aiming to help students choose a major, she may assume that most of her millennial students will be able to access the career services website in order to participate in a career inventory test. She may also assume that students in attendance are either identity moratoriums who are grappling with the choices available to them. However, these assumptions may not take into account the student who commutes to campus and does not have reliable internet access at home, and who will not be able to take the career inventory. The identity status of moratorium may not apply to this student, as he may be more in tune with what his family wants him to do, rather than appealing to his own identity choices. For all of these reasons, we must be cognizant of the fact that general theories cannot replace our knowledge that we have of our individual students (Bonner, 2011).

As student affairs professionals, it is helpful to have basic knowledge of psychosocial theory and concepts concerning millennials, but neither of these constructs necessarily apply to everyone that we work with. Specifically, it is difficult to apply psychosocial theory to millennial students because most of the research is outdated, it is based on non-representative samples of students, millennials are very different than their counterparts 30-40 years ago, and millennial students are vastly diverse. Psychosocial theory can still be a valuable tool in working with any type of students, as long as we view it as one of many tools and not as a set of rules that apply to everyone.
References


