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Predicting Identity Status: The Role of Attachment, Differentiation, and Meaning Making

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Although identity is an important aspect of overall wellness, it is not yet understood how identity develops or how to accurately predict identity status. In this study of 192 emerging adult college students, the authors found that attachment, differentiation, and meaning-making subprocesses significantly predicted 3 of 4 identity statuses. Implications for counselors and counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords: identity status, identity development, emerging adults

Over 20 years ago, when discussing the historical and philosophical foundations of the American Counseling Association (ACA), Myers (1992) emphasized wellness, prevention, and development as the three cornerstones of professional counseling. In 1989, the American Association for Counseling and Development (the precursor to ACA) had adopted a resolution to highlight counselors' stance as professional advocates of health and wellness, and Myers focused on how these cornerstones supported counselors' work and identity. Today, wellness, prevention, and development are the main foci in our training and conceptualization as professional counselors, and these cornerstones undergird our work in helping clients to heal, grow, and develop.

While counselor education programs focus on human development to understand how people heal, change, and grow, it is yet unclear how a very important factor of development—namely, identity—evolves (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Identity formation

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is a significant aspect of development. Erikson (1950, 1968) named this the *identity versus role confusion stage* and focused much of his work on discussing how identity develops over time. Despite 50 years of interest in identity development, however, much remains uncertain about its important factors and processes (Årseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2009; Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, & Pollock, 2008; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011).

Many researchers (Årseth et al., 2009; Crocetti, Scrignaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012; Dezutter et al., 2014; Kroger et al., 2010; Marcia, 1966; Meeus et al., 1999; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007) have substantiated Erikson's (1968) claim that identity is an important part of human development and overall well-being, finding significant connections between identity development and greater wellness. Much of this research has been based on James Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses.

IDENTITY STATUS

Whereas Erikson (1950, 1968) proposed that an individual either has a sense of identity or is in role confusion, Marcia (1966) expanded upon Erikson's ideas of identity development. Instead of two dichotomous states, Marcia (1966) defined four statuses to describe where someone could be in the process of answering the question, "Who am I?"

The identity statuses are based on two components of identity: identity exploration and identity commitment. Exploration relates to an examination of possible identities to which someone can commit (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012), and commitment relates to a process of taking ownership of and making a commitment to an identity (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011). Marcia (1966) assigned to each of the four identity statuses high or low levels of exploration and commitment. *Identity achievement* has high levels of both exploration and commitment; *identity moratorium* has high levels of exploration and low levels of commitment; *identity foreclosure* has low levels of exploration and high levels of commitment; and *identity diffusion* has low levels of identity exploration and commitment. Researchers (Årseth et al., 2009; Crocetti et al., 2012; Kroger et al., 2010; Meeus et al., 1999; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007) have intensively investigated Marcia's identity statuses to determine whether Erikson's (1950, 1968) claims about the benefits of identity are accurate, and a large amount of evidence has accumulated over the last 50 years to support his hypotheses about identity leading to more optimal well-being.

Researchers have found that people with a higher identity commitment (identity foreclosure and identity achievement) tend to have higher wellness and lower psychological distress than people with a low level of commitment to identity (identity diffusion and identity moratorium). Identity commitment has

been connected to greater life satisfaction and positive affect (Hofer, Kärtner, Chasiotis, Busch, & Kiessling, 2007), greater self-esteem, presence of meaning in life, satisfaction in life, and psychological and eudaimonic well-being, as well as lower depression, general anxiety, social anxiety, rule-breaking, and social and physical aggression (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011). Because the benefits of committing to an identity have been well-documented, contemporary research is focused more on what leads to or predicts a person's identity status (Årseth et al., 2009; Berman, Weems, Rodriguez, & Zamora, 2006; Ford, Nalbone, Wetchler, & Sutton, 2008; Johnson, Buboltz, & Seemann, 2003; MacKinnon & Marcia, 2002).

Predictors

Three predictors of identity status (attachment style, differentiation of self, and intimacy status) have been investigated, although only attachment style (Årseth et al., 2009; Berman et al., 2006; MacKinnon & Marcia, 2002) and differentiation of self (Ford et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2003) have been found to significantly predict identity status. Because researchers tend to favor either an attachment lens or a differentiation lens, these predictors unfortunately have not been examined simultaneously, and only modest relationships have been individually found when investigating one of the predictors with identity status.

The mild-to-moderate correlations of identity status with attachment style and differentiation of self lead one to wonder if there are any other predictors of identity status that also should be considered. Eric Eisenberg, a communications scholar, developed one model that might help predict identity status. Eisenberg (2001) proposed the identity process model as a way to understand the process of how people make meaning of their selves. At the core of this model, there are three meaning-making subprocesses that people use to understand who they are even as they continue to take in new information about themselves and their surroundings. The subprocesses are *mood*, defined as "the individual's orientation to and beliefs about the individual's future"; *communication*, defined as "the interpersonal style of being open or defensive to others' worldviews"; and *personal narrative*, defined as "the life story that the individual continually creates, largely based on the perceived power and possibility in the individual's life" (E. Eisenberg, personal communication, June 8, 2012). Based on how these aspects fit with McAdams's extensive work on narrative identity (McAdams, 1988; McAdams & McLean, 2013) and with the work of others (Klimstra et al., 2010, 2016; Schwartz, Klimstra, et al., 2011) examining the bidirectional impact of mood and identity formation, these subprocesses are likely to be involved in how an individual builds a sense of self and also may be important in identity commitment.

However, Eisenberg's 2001 model has yet to be empirically investigated by anyone in the communication or counseling fields despite more than 100 citations to his article over the last 15 years.

Timing of Development

The age of the population of interest when studying identity statuses and identity development has shifted. When Erikson and Marcia developed their theories in the 1950s and 1960s, they pointed to adolescence as the focal point of identity development. This timing has changed as societies have industrialized, and Arnett (2011) has coined the term *emerging adults* for the population of 18- to 25-year-olds now focused on identity development. Many identity researchers are now commonly or solely investigating identity development and/or identity status in emerging adults (Årseth et al., 2009; Kroger et al., 2010).

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the identity formation process by investigating possible predictors of identity in emerging adults. We asked the research question, "Can identity statuses in emerging adults be significantly predicted by attachment (attachment-related anxiety and avoidance), differentiation of self, and the meaning-making subprocesses of Eisenberg's identity process model (mood, communication, and personal narrative)?"

METHOD

Participants (N = 192) were recruited from a variety of undergraduate classes from a midsize public university in the southeastern United States. The professors for each of the classes were asked if 5–10 minutes of their class time could be used to recruit participants and if any additional class time could be used for students to complete the survey packet. The first author, who served as the primary investigator, visited 21 different classes, read a recruitment script, and asked interested participants to fill out the survey packet either during class (five classes) or outside of class (16 classes). The survey packet consisted of 196 items from five different assessments and demographic questions. Participants had the opportunity to write their name on a separate piece of paper to be entered into a drawing to receive one of five Amazon gift cards worth $30 each.

Participants

Of the 350 survey packets that were distributed to undergraduate students, 193 were returned for a 54.86% response rate. Because data were missing

from one survey packet, responses from 192 participants were used for the data analysis. The mean age of participants was 20.53 years (*SD* = 1.69); most were female (*n* = 139, 72.4%). Just over half (52.1%) of the participants identified as European American or White; roughly a quarter (24.0%) identified as African American; 7.1% identified as Asian American; 7.1% identified as mixed ethnicity; 4.7% identified as solely Hispanic; and fewer than 2% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.0%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1.0%), or other (0.5%). (Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.)

Instruments

The instruments from this study included the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status II (EOM EIS-II; Bennion & Adams, 1986) to measure identity status, the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale–Short Form (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) to measure attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, the Differentiation of Self Inventory–Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) to measure differentiation of self, the Mood Survey (MS; Underwood & Froming, 1980) to measure mood, the Interpersonal Communication Inventory (ICI; Bienvenu, 1971) to measure communication, and the Personal Power and Possibility Scale (PPPS) for personal narrative.

EOM EIS-II. The EOM EIS-II (Bennion & Adams, 1986) is a widely used measure for identity status (Årseth et al., 2009; Kroger et al., 2010) that is composed of 64 items on a Likert-type scale. The instrument has 16 items for each of the four identity statuses in four ideological domains (politics, religion, occupation, and lifestyle) and four interpersonal domains (friendships, dating, gender roles, and recreation). The results can be given either as a categorical label based on cutoff scores on the identity status subscales or as a continuous measure for each of the identity statuses. We used the continuous measure in the current study. There have been several studies reporting various internal consistency results for the EOM EIS-II, including .67 (Bennion & Adams, 1986), .72 (O'Connor, 1995), and .79 (Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996). For the current sample, we found a Cronbach's alpha of .74 for identity diffusion, .83 for identity foreclosure, .72 for identity moratorium, and .73 for identity achievement.

ECR-S. The ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007) is a shortened version of the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale–Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) and has 12 items, with six items measuring attachment-related anxiety and six items measuring attachment-related avoidance. Both versions have been used extensively and have strong psychometric properties. Over a series of studies, Wei et al. (2007) found correlations between the ECR-R and the ECR-S of .94 for attachment-related anxiety and .95 for attachment-related

avoidance, and test–retest reliability for the ECR-S as low as .80 and as high as .89. The items on the ECR-S are on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .79 and .74 for attachment-related avoidance and anxiety, respectively.

DSI-R. The DSI-R (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) is a commonly used instrument to measure differentiation of self and its four subcomponents: fusion with others, emotional reactivity, "I" position, and emotional cutoff. The DSI-R is the most common assessment used to measure differentiation of self and has been determined to be psychometrically sound (Jankowski & Hooper, 2012). This instrument consists of 46 items scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 6 (*very true of me*). Cronbach's alpha for the full measure was found to be .92 with reliabilities of .89 (emotional reactivity), .81 ("I" position), .82 (emotional cutoff), and .85 (fusion with others; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .90.

MS. The Level subscale on the MS (Underwood & Froming, 1980) was determined to be the instrument that most closely approximates mood, which was defined for this study as an individual's general orientation toward time (e.g., hopeful, anxious, excited, happy, depressed, or angry; E. Eisenberg, personal communication, June 8, 2012). The MS has two subscales, Level and Reactivity, which have eight and seven items, respectively. Respondents can rate each item on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Underwood and Froming (1980) investigated test–retest reliability, internal consistency, and concurrent validity with the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). The test–retest reliability at 3 weeks was .80 and at 7 weeks was .63 for the Level subscale. The internal consistency was found to be .87, and the concurrent validity for the Level subscale with the BDI was found to be sufficient ($r = .47$, $p < .001$). Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .87.

ICI. The ICI (Bienvenu, 1971) was determined to be the best instrument to accurately assess communication, which was defined by Eisenberg for this study as an individual's interpersonal approach in terms of the openness and defensiveness to others' worldviews (E. Eisenberg, personal communication, June 8, 2012). Factor analysis (Bienvenu & Stewart, 1976) and reliability analysis (Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Vealey, Armstrong, Comar, & Greenleaf, 1998) have been completed for the ICI with resulting Cronbach's alphas of .78 and .93, respectively. The ICI has 40 items that are answered yes, no, or sometimes. Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .83.

PPPS. The PPPS is a 21-item instrument that we developed for this study to measure Eisenberg's (2001) concept of personal narrative. When the primary

investigator searched for an existing assessment on personal narrative, none matched the definition that Eisenberg described via personal communication as "an individual's ongoing authorship and editing of her or his life story and the perception of power and possibility of the individual as well as the individual's openness to change" (June 8, 2012). Therefore, the first author developed items based on Eisenberg's definition of personal narrative. The initial iteration of the PPPS included 17 items, which were then distributed for review to a counselor educator who is familiar with creating assessments, a communications expert who is familiar with Eisenberg's (2001) identity process model, and a statistician. After revisions were made, the face validity and language were discussed with two new counselor educators to investigate the clarity of the items. Additional items were created and existing items were modified to improve clarity and to expand the instrument to better assess the narrative authorship aspect of personal narrative. The items were again discussed with the second author and the communications expert. The final version of the PPPS contained 21 Likert-scale items and had a Cronbach's alpha of .84 with a pilot study of the measure with 33 individuals. Item analysis was completed to determine if any of the items should be removed to significantly improve reliability. When removing Item 13, the reliability increased to .85, and when removing Items 13, 4, and 7, the reliability improved to .86. Because there was a relatively small sample size in the pilot study and an acceptable reliability with all items included, all items were included in the full study. For the full study (n = 177), Cronbach's alpha was .87.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for all variables were calculated, and the means, standard deviations, internal consistency, and correlations statistics are presented in Table 1. All Cronbach's alphas were found to be acceptable (over .70), including for the PPPS that was created to measure personal narrative. The means and standard deviations were also analyzed by categorical identity status, and those means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

Linear regression was computed for each of the four identity statuses separately to determine whether the six predictor variables of attachment-related avoidance, attachment-related anxiety, differentiation of self, mood, communication, and personal narrative significantly predicted the score for each identity status. The relevant statistics from the regression analyses are presented in Table 3. According to the p values for each regression analysis, all identity statuses were significantly predicted. We found that the predictor variables explained 22% of variance in identity diffusion (R = .47, R^2 = .22, F = 7.561, p < .001), 8% of variance in identity foreclosure (R = .29, R^2 = .08, F = 2.343, p < .05), 25% of variance in identity moratorium (R = .50, R^2 = .25, F = 8.603, p < .001), and 15% of variance in identity achievement (R = .39, R^2 = .15, F = 4.715, p

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Correlations Among Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. DIF	45.5	11.1	.74	—								
2. FOR	39.4	13.9	.83	.17*	—							
3. MOR	50.4	10.2	.72	.45***	.12	—						
4. ACH	67.2	11.7	.73	−.40***	.02	−.17**	—					
5. ARAv	16.7	6.9	.79	.37***	.07	.36***	−.24***	—				
6. ARAx	22.7	6.9	.74	.15*	−.02	.32***	−.14*	.06	—			
7. DoS	169.5	29.5	.90	−.13*	−.01	−.35***	.15*	−.24**	−.66***	—		
8. Mood	28.9	3.5	.87	−.08	.20**	.04	.17**	.03	.04	.00	—	
9. Comm	81.0	16.7	.83	−.26***	.00	−.27***	.18**	−.30***	−.41***	.66***	−.08	—
10. PN	85.4	11.5	.87	−.31***	−.11	−.17**	.26***	−.32***	−.28***	.48***	.11	.52***

Note. DIF = identity diffusion; FOR = identity foreclosure; MOR = identity moratorium; ACH = identity achievement; ARAv = attachment-related avoidance; ARAx = attachment-related anxiety; DoS = differentiation of self; Comm = communication; PN = personal narrative.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

< .001). Interestingly, the importance of predictors varied by identity status, a finding that we explore more fully in the following discussion.

DISCUSSION

Significant wellness benefits are associated with certain identity statuses. Our study of 192 emerging adults was intended to provide a better understanding of factors that predict identity status. The findings support the hypothesis that the predictors from attachment theory (attachment-related anxiety and avoidance), intergenerational family therapy (differentiation of self), and the identity process model (mood, communication, and personal narrative) can significantly predict identity status in emerging adulthood,

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations by Identity Status

Predictor	Undifferentiated Status		Identity Diffusion		Identity Foreclosure		Identity Moratorium		Identity Achievement	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Attachment-related anxiety	23.88	0.82	23.85	1.08	22.68	1.43	25.36	2.30	19.26	1.29
Attachment-related avoidance	15.67	0.79	21.10	1.03	15.86	1.38	17.36	1.95	14.11	1.24
Differentiation of self	166.63	3.58	166.78	4.70	170.64	6.26	166.18	8.85	183.44	5.65
Mood	28.73	0.44	28.31	0.57	29.96	0.76	28.46	1.07	29.19	0.69
Communication	80.50	2.02	75.51	2.65	79.31	3.53	83.84	4.99	81.19	3.19
Personal narrative	85.57	1.29	79.20	1.70	84.19	2.26	86.91	3.20	93.44	2.04

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TABLE 3

Regression Analyses Findings by Identity Status

Status	B	SE B	Standardized Beta Weights
Identity diffusion			
ARAv	.50	.13	.30
DoS	.09	.04	.24
PN	−.20	.09	−.20
Identity foreclosure			
Mood	.96	.30	.25
PN	−.27	.11	−.23
Identity moratorium			
ARAv	.51	.11	.34
ARAx	.37	.14	.25
Identity achievement			
Mood	.66	.24	.21
PN	.18	.09	.19

Note. ARAv = attachment-related avoidance; DoS = differentiation of self; PN = personal narrative; ARAx = attachment-related anxiety.

even though the strongest predictors differed for each of the four statuses studied. Identity diffusion was most strongly predicted by attachment-related avoidance, personal narrative, and differentiation of self; identity foreclosure was most strongly predicted by mood and personal narrative; identity moratorium was most strongly predicted by attachment-related avoidance and anxiety; and identity achievement was most strongly predicted by mood and personal narrative. The variability in predictor strength for each identity status highlights the complexity of identity development. No one variable was able to significantly predict all four identity statuses, and only one of the six variables (communication) was not statistically significant in predicting any of the variables. While communication did have statistically significant correlations with three of the four identity statuses, the other variables are better able to explain the variance in those identity statuses in the multivariate model.

Previous research has focused on attachment and differentiation of self, rather than on mood, communication, or personal narrative, as predictors of identity status. Yet, five of the nine statistically significant findings in our study came from Eisenberg's (2001) identity status model. Therefore, expanding the possible pool of predictors of identity status was important.

Personal narrative in particular was a significant predictor for three of the four statuses, with a negative relationship to identity diffusion and foreclosure and a significantly positive relationship to identity achievement. Although these findings are correlational and causation cannot be inferred, this seems important. In the future, researchers should examine how supporting the development of a personal narrative among emerging adults affects identity achievement.

Our finding that mood had the strongest prediction for the two identity statuses associated with high identity commitment (foreclosure and achievement) is consistent with previous research (Crocetti et al., 2012; Hofer et al., 2007; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007), which has found significant correlations between identity commitment and higher mood and wellness states. Because of this connection and the cross-sectional nature of the completed studies, it is unclear whether (a) a more positive mood helps to stimulate identity commitment, (b) identity commitment leads to more positive moods, (c) identity commitment and positive moods co-occur, or (d) there is some recursive relationship between positive mood and identity status (Klimstra et al., 2010, 2016).

Implications for Professional Counselors

Our findings also have implications for counseling treatment. An emerging adult client currently in identity diffusion is likely to benefit from focusing on significant relationships, developing a personal narrative, and increasing differentiation of self to improve wellness. To address those needs, professional counselors may use relational approaches (i.e., attachment theory, interpersonal therapy, relational cultural theory, etc.); discuss the client's possibilities in life; increase the client's self-efficacy; help the client feel more empowered; and help the client see self and others, as well as emotions and thoughts, more distinctly.

An emerging adult client in identity foreclosure is likely to benefit from developing a clearer personal narrative. It may be useful to help the client explore options in life and accept personal choice and power, which could be accomplished by taking a narrative, existential, strengths-based, or person-centered therapy approach. A client in identity foreclosure would most likely progress next to identity moratorium, which might be associated with an increase in anxiety during an active identity search or clarification, and require appropriate support.

For emerging adult clients in identity moratorium, it is likely helpful to focus on significant relationships and anxiety because higher levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance are common for people in this identity status. Utilizing relational approaches and/or approaches that are effective with anxiety could be beneficial.

For emerging adults in identity achievement, it might be useful to focus on the integration and intersection of identities and to talk about intimacy and/or generativity issues (the next stages in Erikson's psychosocial development). Focusing on values, discussing a dialectic conceptualization of self, and/or using an existential or Gestalt approach is likely to aid emerging adult clients in identity achievement (Breen, McLean, Cairney, & McAdams, 2016; Dezutter et al., 2014; McAdams, 2013).

It may also be helpful for professional counselors to explain to clients what the identity statuses are and how they relate to the clients' lives as a way of increasing clients' self-awareness and possibly helping them to envision goals, desires, or directions for themselves. Although communication did not significantly predict the identity statuses in our study, talking with clients about how they view themselves and others in close interpersonal relationships may be relevant and beneficial.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there are significant takeaways from this study, there are a few limitations. The findings were drawn from one sample of emerging adults in college and may not generalize to other college students, to emerging adults who do not attend college, or to anyone outside the 18–25 age range. Further research is needed to better understand the predictors of identity statuses and to whom those predictors apply. This is especially important as counselors' foundations are built significantly on development (Myers, 1992) and identity is such an important part of overall development (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the design in this study is a limitation. Although we conceptualized attachment, differentiation, and meaning making as possible predictors of identity status, the cross-section design limits how the data can be examined. Therefore, it is important to conduct longitudinal studies on identity status, measures of wellness, and other possible predictors of identity to clarify this and to better understand the process(es) of identity development. This study expanded on the predictor variables from previous studies, but there seem to be even more variables that are important to consider for understanding the identity development process.

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