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The Role of Social Support in Identity Formation: A Literature Review

Elizabeth A. Para

Abstract: Social support influences the major developmental task of adolescents, the formation of a personal identity. This literature review examines the role of familial and peer support on the process of identity development. Families often lay the groundwork for identity by helping children successfully negotiate earlier developmental stages and acting as models for the individual. Peers offer a variety of opportunities and may influence attitudes related to the identity process. Although the research on identity formation is vast, there are many areas which need further investigation. Several limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

The periods of adolescence and emerging adulthood during the lifespan often signal a restructuring of the self. Adolescence (and emerging adulthood, as some may argue) is the point in development in which individuals begin to explore who they are, what they personally value and believe in, and what directions they will follow in life. In essence, they start forming their identity. Another way of defining identity formation is “the problem-solving behavior aimed at eliciting information about oneself or environment in order to make a decision about an important life choice” (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001, p. 52).

Erikson (1950) was the first to establish identity formation as the major task for adolescence. He suggested adolescents typically experience an identity crisis as they attempt to negotiate this task. This crisis is characterized by a period of distress as young people explore their souls and experiment with options before they determine their beliefs and values. The outcome, according to Erikson (1950), can be positive (formation of a personal identity) or negative (confusion about adult roles). It is dependent upon resolutions in prior life stages (i.e. trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, and industry vs. inferiority). Those who have successfully negotiated previous life challenges (developed trust in the world, self, and others, for example) will have an easier time developing their identity.

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Building upon Erikson's (1950) work, Marcia (1966) proposed a different model of identity. Instead of the polarized identity vs. role confusion, Marcia (1966) suggested four different identity statuses: achievement, moratorium, diffusion, and foreclosure. Achievement in Marcia's model is the equivalent to the positive outcome in Erikson's theory. Individuals who develop identity achievement have explored alternatives to their values, and have chosen and committed to their current belief system. Moratorium occurs when an individual is actively exploring, but has not committed to the values. Diffusion is characterized by an absence of exploration and commitment. Foreclosure happens when individuals are strongly committed to their beliefs, but have not actively explored alternatives. Marcia's model has become the dominant model for identity development in adolescence (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

Although early researchers believed identity development begins in adolescence, current research purports that the formation of one's identity begins during emerging adulthood (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Emerging adulthood is the period of life after adolescence before young adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Researchers argue society and culture have changed, allowing individuals to delay adult tasks (such as, employment, marriage, and parenthood) until later in life (Arnett, 2000; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Therefore, some people tend to postpone the exploration and commitment related to identity development until emerging adulthood. However, because most of the existing literature examines identity formation in adolescence, the current review will focus on the same life stage.

Different factors are assumed to affect the development of one's identity. Some suggest the support and opportunities offered by an individual's environment have a large influence on identity formation (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Considering the impact of these factors is crucial to understanding the formation of identity. The goal of this paper is to examine one of these characteristics, social support, on the process of identity development.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Social support can be defined as supportive relationships with others (DuBois, et al., 2002). Often times these relationships act as resources encouraging favorable adjustment in adolescents. Particularly in adolescents, strong positive interpersonal relationships are beneficial

because they function as a source of comfort and safety throughout the multiple life changes that occur during this stage of development (Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat, & Silsby, 2002).

Two sources of support appear to have the greatest influence on the individual: family and peers. Families stimulate and support the development of distinctive points of view; peers offer models, diversity, and opportunities for exploration of beliefs and values (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Both play a part during one's development of personal identity.

Some studies show that youth are more likely to have difficulty adjusting when sources of social support are not balanced between peer-oriented and adult-oriented domains (DuBois, et al., 2002). This argument contends both sources of social support are equally influential. Therefore, it is important to consider both familial and peer influences on the development of identity.

Familial Support

Familial interactions influence the initial status of identity development (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). The relationships with one's family are typically the first an individual experiences, thus providing a foundation for identity formation. Consistent with Erikson's model of identity development, Bosma and Kunnen (2001) suggest the outcomes of earlier developmental crises impacts the search for one's identity. For example, positive outcomes from previous life challenges are more likely to produce a positive outcome in identity formation. In the early stages, parents help the individual develop a sense of trust by providing resources (e.g. food, water, shelter, etc.) and comfort when the individual enters the world. Similarly, the family also fosters autonomy and initiative in children when they allow children to make appropriate decisions and engage in new activities. Since family members play such a crucial role in the early experiences of children, it is easy to see the role that familial support plays in the formation of an individual's identity. Successful negotiation of the early crises depends on support from the family. Individuals will have greater ease in developing a strong identity if they successfully complete the prior challenges.

Aside from Erikson's theory, other researchers suggest families provide the basis for the beliefs and values an individual holds (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Adolescents are exposed to their parents' and other family members' belief systems. They then use those values as a starting place in

the exploration of their values. In the case of the foreclosed individual (one who does not actively investigate alternatives), the family may be the only source of principles for that individual's identity.

The quality of the interaction between the family and individual influences the development of identity (Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002). High quality relationships (those which demonstrate love, acceptance, support, encouragement, etc.) are associated with increased levels of competence in adolescents (Kenny, et al., 2002). Competent individuals are better prepared to explore options and make commitments regarding their beliefs and values. Thus, close and supportive relationships with family members act as a valuable resource for individuals in the process of identity formation.

Peer Support

Although many times family can provide sufficient support for an individual, familial relationships do not always produce the positive outcomes desired. When these interactions are weak sources of support, it may reduce an individual's ability to cope with challenges (DuBois, et al., 2002). In such cases, peer connections may become increasingly important sources of support.

Friends influence important attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics (Berndt, 2004). For example, peers can affect an individual's attitudes about school or may encourage substance use. Individuals often strive to fit in with their peers. They often adopt similar beliefs and values to their friends. They may shape their identities around their friends' attributes.

Just as family can influence identity achievement by providing support through earlier challenges (i.e. trust, autonomy, and initiative), friends can affect one's identity by helping an individual successfully negotiate developmental crises (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). For example, friends can foster industry in one another by developing their abilities to work and cooperate with others. Getting along with others may expand an individual's peer network. A large peer network provides more opportunities to explore more alternatives to current beliefs.

Research suggests the quality of friendships affects the impact of peers on an individual (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001). High quality friendships may enhance development in children (Berndt, 2002). High quality friendships are those which demonstrate loyalty, trust, self-disclosure, and intimacy. According to Berndt (2002), these positive

characteristics in friendships are correlated with greater school involvement, higher self-perceived social acceptance, and higher self-esteem. More involvement in school and other social activities, then, may foster identity exploration (and therefore, moratorium) in an individual. They will be exposed to diverse ideas and will have more opportunities to test out these values, encouraging identity achievement.

Bosma and Kunnen (2001) support the idea that peers can act as models and provide diversity and opportunity. They discussed several decisions related to identity formation that are influenced by peers: whom to date, whether or not to break up, having intercourse, using drugs, and going off to college. These decisions help determine who an individual is, and friends can play a significant role in the decision-making process. The people with whom an individual associates all have their own beliefs, which may or may not reflect those of the individual. One searching for identity can identify features of a friend's identity to explore and perhaps add to the individual's own belief system. One's peers, therefore, can influence the status of one's identity.

As suggested above, peers can influence individuals in the moratorium or achievement statuses of Marcia's (1966) model. Peers offer alternative viewpoints and new experiences to foster exploration. However, friends can also have an impact on those in identity diffusion or foreclosure, as well. For example, individuals in Marcia's foreclosed status may choose friends that are restricted in their tolerance of diversity and reflect only similar values to their own (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). When those around them do not offer different belief systems, individuals may not feel the need to explore their own identity. They may not have models to follow. Similarly, Bosma and Kunnen (2001) suggest diffused individuals may lack role models for relevant identity formation. These individuals are often apathetic, neither actively exploring options nor making commitments to any values or beliefs. Individuals with diffused statuses are more likely to go along with the crowd and accept whatever the crowd accepts because they do not have their own ideas to follow.

There have been a number of studies linking poor peer relations in childhood to poor school adjustment, psychological health, loneliness, and problem behavior later in childhood and adolescence (Bagwell, et al., 2001; Berndt, 2004; DuBois, et al., 2002). Individuals who do not have positive interactions with friends may experience high levels of conflict and are often motivated by self-interest (Berndt, 2004). These individuals often remain in identity foreclosure because they have no desire to consider

alternatives to their own ideas. They only take into account their beliefs and do not appreciate other people's values. This contrasts starkly against those with positive interpersonal relationships.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research concerning identity formation is vast. Many different models of identity have been proposed, although Erikson's (1950) and Marcia's (1966) models have become the most widely accepted. Research on these theories suggests the process of identity achievement is complex and multidimensional (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002). Many factors, including social support, influence this process. In particular, two types of social support, familial and peer, greatly affect the development of one's identity. Family provides a foundation for the values and beliefs an individual holds. Families also foster exploration and commitment in young adults through their influence on earlier crisis resolutions. Peers can negatively and positively affect the formation of identity in young adults. Friends act as models for development, and provide a variety of alternatives for individuals to explore.

Although there is an abundance of research regarding identity formation available, there is surprisingly little empirical literature available concerning the role interpersonal relationships play on the development of one's identity. Most of the research does indicate the two may be correlated, but does not examine the specific mechanisms behind the relationships.

Because this type of research is not readily available, several assumptions underlie the literature concerning the role of social support on identity formation. First, the research provides support that positive interpersonal relationships promote favorable adjustment in adolescents (DuBois, et al., 2002). This idea presumes that favorable adjustment leads to the successful resolution of one's identity. Although adjustment may be related to identity formation, the literature reviewed in this paper did not provide specific evidence to make causal relationships.

Similarly, the literature assumes competence levels are positively correlated with identity achievement. Research has demonstrated that familial support can increase competence levels (Kenny, et al., 2001), but it has not shown that competence is related to the exploration and commitment associated with identity development. Furthermore, research shows friendships can increase an individual's self-esteem

(Berndt, 2002). The literature then presumes self-esteem predicts identity achievement. It does not show specific evidence for this assumption. Future research examining the effects of adjustment, competence, and self-esteem on the development of one's identity would be beneficial.

Another assumption is that the roles of these specific types of social support are as influential in emerging adulthood as in adolescence. As the research advances, and the task of identity formation continues longer in development, it is important to examine possible changes in the importance of familial and peer support. One or the other may become more important as the individual journeys through the lifespan. The current literature does not address these potential changes.

The existing literature also assumes that the identity statuses of achievement and moratorium are positive statuses, while diffusion and foreclosure are negative. This may be the case for many individuals, but not necessarily for all. While one person may desire to achieve moratorium in the search for identity, another may be satisfied with achieving diffusion. It is important to consider individual differences when discussing identity research, because the results will not always generalize to the entire population.

In addition to these assumptions, the available research regarding the role of social support on identity formation has other limitations. One such shortcoming is that it rarely discusses cultural differences. Very little research (especially that concerning peer influences) addresses diversity or multiculturalism. Therefore, the roles of immediate family and peers on identity formation in different cultural groups are unknown. One may expect familial and peer support to be instrumental in many cultures, especially collectivistic ones. Often people from collectivistic groups tend to value interpersonal relationships and encourage individuals to consider others' needs before their own.

However, collectivistic cultures do not typically promote individual identity; they focus on group identity and cohesion. The process of individual identity formation most likely is different in these cultures. Thus, the role of social support on identity achievement in collectivistic societies probably is distinct from those in individualistic cultures. Future research regarding individual identity formation in collectivistic cultures and the roles that family and friends play in contributing to the process would be interesting.

Some researchers question the validity of utilizing Marcia's model to understand identity formation because it is not a developmental model

(Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). They argue that the status model does not completely capture the process of identity formation. They suggest the need for more theoretical development on the process in future research. More information concerning the process can enhance the literature regarding the role of interpersonal relationships in this regard as well.

Despite these limitations, it can be concluded that family and peer support influences identity formation. It seems as though those individuals experiencing positive interpersonal relationships progress toward moratorium and achievement identity statuses; while those individuals who do not have as strong (or negative) interpersonal relationships stay in diffusion and foreclosure. Understanding the link between positive interpersonal relationships and identity formation can be helpful in examining differences in individual identity.

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