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Forming a Personal Sense of Identity in the Contemporary World: Challenges and Difficulties[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article considers some normative cultural changes that have contributed to the identity "crises" faced at least by persons living in Western cultures. Identity is conceptualized as a self-structure that provides a frame of reference for processing self-relevant information, answering questions about the meaning and purpose of one's life, and regulating the processes that individuals use to cope and adapt in everyday life. Individuals living in the modern world characterized by accelerating technological, social, and economic changes face major challenges and problems as they attempt to form and maintain a coherent sense of personal identity. Not all people, however, deal with these identity conflicts in the same fashion. Research reveals reliable differences in how individuals negotiate or manage to avoid the tasks of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing a sense of identity in the modern world. Three identity processing orientations are highlighted: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. Although an informational processing orientation is associated with resources and skills that maximize adaptability in the modern world, those resources do not provide a set of values or frame of reference for deciding what goals people should commit to or what they should live for. Some of values used to justify identity choices in the modern world are considered.

Key words: identity, identity processing style, identity crisis, self-reflection, values, informational, diffuse-avoidance, normative; ego-integrity, wisdom

INTRODUCTION

This article considers some of the problems and difficulties people living in the contemporary world encounter as they attempt to construct a stable and coherent sense of personal identity. The quest to form an identity has become a pervasive theme, especially in contemporary Western cultures. According to Erik Erikson (1968), personally resolving an "identity crisis" is a legitimate, perhaps essential, step in human development. James Marcia (1966) has emphasized the role that self-exploration and personal commitment play in achieving a well differentiated and integrated sense of identity. Concerns about identity or selfhood did not originate in the twenty first century. In ancient Greece, the dictum to "know thy self" was inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and over two thousand years ago Socrates (c. 470–399 B.C.) proclaimed "The unexamined life is not worth living." Do these admonishments imply that conflicts about personal identity are universal human problems? Were processes such as self-reflection, self--differentiation, and self-integration as central to the lives of, say, the ancient Greeks, as they are for citizens in contemporary cultures?

The position I argue in this article is that the problems and crises about personal identity faced in the modern world are **not** enduring aspects of the human condition. People do not have an inherent nature, nor do they encounter identity-relevant crises that are trans-historical or trans-cultural. A sense of identity is always formed locally – the process by which it is formed and the significance attached to it always depend upon a particular historical and cultural context (see Berzonsky, 1990, 2005). Of course, cultures do not mechanically create and randomly assign identities to passive recipients and people do not willfully construct an identity and seek out supportive cultures. Some form of a reciprocal Person by Cultural Context interaction is involved.

First, I consider some of the changing historical and cultural conditions that have influenced the identity conflicts people face and the way in which identities are formed. I then discuss the role personal identity plays in how individuals approach or attempt to avoid coping with and adapting to those changing demands and conditions. I conclude by focusing on the values youth and adults may use to guide and evaluate the identity choices they make and commitments they form.

HISTORICAL CHANGES RELEVANT TO PERSONAL IDENTITY

A number of cultural trends during the past 500 years seem to have influenced modern conceptions of selfhood and identity. These trends include changes in: the nature of personal identity; the process by which it is formed; and the frame of reference or system of values used to derive a personal sense of meaning and purpose (Baumeister, 1987). My brief and selective sketch of these trends relies heavily on the views and interpretations of others including: Charles Taylor (1989), Ken Gergen (1991), M. Brewster Smith (1994), Philip Cushman (1990), Lionel Trilling (1971) and especially Roy Baumeister (1986, 1997).

First, some cautionary notes are in order. The concept of identity has different meanings. Personal identity, as I use it, refers to an individual's internal or private conception of who he she is. The concept is grounded in Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, especially as defined in Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm. This is similar to William James' (1890/1950) concept of the self-as-knower: How does one form and maintain a sense of being the same person who acts, thinks, and makes choices over time and place (Berzonsky, 1990). Second, the macro analyses provided by historians and anthropologists are social constructions (Berger, Luckmann, 1966). While these constructions convey a sense of normative literary or cultural trends, they obscure numerous exceptions and counter-examples. For example, even though the concept of a literary villain emerged in the 16th century (Trilling, 1971), obviously not all or even most people were villainous. Or, although organized religion was challenged and criticized during the Enlightenment, many if not most people were and continue to be religious. What appears as a dominant theme in the intellectual history of a particular era was not necessarily embraced by most lay people at that time. Also, the historical and literary evidence I summarize clearly reflects an American, Western European bias. Finally, for convenience in presentation, I have organized this historical sketch in terms of three somewhat artificial time periods: the Middle Ages prior to the 16th century; the 16th to 19th centuries; and what I will call the modern era beginning in the 19th century.

The Middle Ages

There is little indication that personal identity formation was a problem before the 16th century. In an excellent analysis of the changing nature of identity, Roy Baumeister (1987) found that through the Middle Ages identities were assigned primarily on the basis of observable characteristics such as gender, birthrights, and family status. Although an eternal soul was assumed to exist, it was nonmaterial and could not be seen. Calvin Trilling (1971) found little literary interest in intrapersonal themes such as introspection, self-insight, or autobiography prior to the 16th century.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus (1955) insisted that ultimately everyone must judge whether or not life is worth living: What is the meaning and purpose of my life? Through the 16th century, institutional traditions and formal religion provided the moral frame of reference for existential meaning. As Roy Baumeister (1997, p. 199) noted: "[M]oral discourse requires that there must be some things whose moral goodness is not derivative but that are accepted as good in themselves. God's will is a traditional example: if something is consistent with God's will, then it is good, but God's will does not require further justification. No believer challenges this justification by asking: «So what?»".

During this era, a sense of identity was not individualized, it was based on cultural values and dictates, especially those sanctioned by organized religions (Levin, 1992).

The 16th to 19th Centuries

Literary evidence suggests the concept of a private inner self appeared during the 16th century. For example, Trilling (1971) reported that the notion of a villain – someone whose wickedness is not immediately apparent – appears in 16th century drama. Thus we find concern about personal honesty and whether public statements correspond to private motives and intentions (Trilling, 1971). Of course, as Machiavelli (1469–1527) pointed out self interest could be advanced by being insincere and deceiving others.

In the 17th century, the philosopher John Locke (1694/1959) planted the seeds of personal identity when he asked how he could know he is the same person today that he was yesterday or last week. In contrast to Descartes' concept of an immortal soul, Locke provided a secular explanation: Personal identity was the result of self-reflective, metacognition: the mind's (self's) ability to think about itself.

The intellectual Enlightenment in Europe (17th century) emphasized reason, tolerance, individuality, and self-governance of both individuals and nations. It also forcefully challenged and devalued dogma, totalitarian rule, and organized religion (Chisick, 2008; Wokler, 1998). During the romantic literary period, individuality and self-awareness continued to be highlighted but self-expression, spontaneity, and human emotion took center stage (Taylor, 1989).

In the wake of these historical changes and others, identity formation became increasingly problematic. As the Enlightenment undermined the importance religious obligations and duties played in justifying peoples' lives, the work ethic, cultural tradition, and family increasingly became more important as bases for existential meaning and purpose (Baumeister, 1997).

The Modern Era

Forming a personal sense of identity became progressively more difficult and complicated during the 19th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, expanding educational and economic opportunities increased the career, lifestyle, and identity options available to many people. On the other hand, the legitimacy of institutional values that had been used to make meaningful identity choices was continually being questioned (Baumeister, 1991; Fromm, 1941). For example, industrialization weakened the importance that a work ethic and craftsmanship played in providing a sense of personal meaning. Of course, careers are still important in peoples' lives, but they have become important as means to enhance and glorify the self, rather than ends in their own right (Fromm, 1941). Creating the impression of being productive and successful became more important than the quality and, especially, permanence of what was produced (Whyte, 1956). In fact, production of long-lasting, quality goods was at cross purposes with an ever-expanding capitalistic economy.

Other changes in the twentieth century lessened the importance family played as a basis for personal meaning (Baumeister, 1991). These developments included increased social mobility, geographic distance between family members, and more liberal attitudes toward divorce (Baumeister, 1997; Bellah, et al., 1985). Increased urbanization contri-

buted to changes in the relationship between people and their community. In agricultural economies, relationships between people and their communities were fairly stable (Demos, Demos, 1969). Within tightly-organized, collectivist (Triandis, 1990) settings, for instance, one found at least verbal agreement among adults about good character and values. I'm not suggesting that people in such cultures are necessarily more honest or virtuous than people in other types of cultures. However, there is a public consensus about moral character and how good people should act, which provides a clear basis for defining a meaningful life: A higher purpose to strive for. With increasing geographic mobility and ever-changing interpersonal relations, consistent character became less important than more superficial attributes such as being charming, attractive, witty, and skillful at creating and managing impressions to please others (Baumeister, 1997; Carnegie, 1981; Goffman, 1959).

IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE MODERN WORLD

Against the backdrop of these historical and cultural trends, the concept of a self-contained, individualized person with a well-differentiated and integrated sense of personal identity emerged (Sampson, 1988). Identity crises (Erikson, 1968) and the multitude of difficulties associated with modern identity appear to be unique to a particular set of cultural conditions. Those conditions include an accelerated rate of technological and social change; public access to educational opportunities that increase the range of career and life options potentially available to most people; and a general cynicism about the relevance of most social institutions and value systems to personal lives (Baumeister, 1997; Cushman, 1990; Fromm, 1941; Smith, 1994).

Self as a Value Base for Personal Meaning

As the legitimacy of traditional value systems has declined, the inner personal self progressively became the basis for justifying personal existence. Historically, morality restrained self-interest; in the modern age self-interest, self-enhancement, and self-expression have increasingly become the standard for determining what is "morally" right or at least desirable (Baumeister, 1997; Fromm, 1941; Lasch, 1978; Smith, 1994). In addition, a trend toward smaller families with closer emotional bonds (Burgess, Locke, 1945; Demos, Demos, 1969) and more permissive child rearing practices (Spock, 1946), has contributed to generations of young people who collectively feel more special, unique, and entitled than previous generations (Campbell, Buffardi, 2008; Lasch, 1978; Twenge, *et al*., 2008).

Given these changes adolescents and young adults face daunting challenges as they attempt to form and preserve a coherent and meaningful sense of identity. First, they are confronted by a multiplicity of career options, role models, and media images they could potentially choose or aspire to. Second, they are expected to make choices and form a viable sense of identity on their own! They are expected to find or "discover" their identity by looking within themselves (Waterman, 1984). Third, and perhaps most important, there is no general public consensus about which values or standards youth should use to evaluate and legitimize the identity choices and commitments they make.

These cultural demands and expectations have led to the seemingly paradoxical views that the identity of the modern self is both "empty" (Cushman, 1990) and "saturated" (Gergen, 1991). According to Philip Cushman (1990) the modern self lacking traditional institution-based anchors, has an insatiable "need" to constantly be replenished by romantic partners, possessions, accomplishments, consumer goods, and the like (see also Fromm, 1941). Ken Gergen (1991) provides a slightly different take on the same empty self: he sees it as being overly populated with images and identities of disparate others. In both cases, the common denominator seems to be an absence of a legitimate set of values or standards within which a coherent sense of identity and personal meaning can be justified. Barry Schwartz (2000) referred to this state of affairs as a tyranny of freedom!

IDENTITY PROCESSING ORIENTATIONS

In my own research I have been focusing on differences in the social-cognitive processes young people use to engage or attempt to avoid the tasks of constructing and reconstructing a sense of personal identity. I have identified three what I call identity processing orientations or styles: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. These orientations comprise the mental resources and strategies used to process identity-relevant information, cope with identity conflicts, and form commitments (see Berzonsky, 1990, 2004, in press).

Informational Processing Orientation

Youth with an informational style deal with identity conflicts by deliberately seeking out, processing and utilizing self-relevant information. They are open to alternative views and ideas, skeptical about their own self-views, and willing to examine and test their self-constructions. They are rational agents who have or seek informed reasons to justify their choices and actions (Berzonsky, 2008). Research indicates that an informational identity style is associated with being open minded, self-reflective, self-disciplined, and empathic. It is also associated with the use of problem-focused coping, vigilant decisional strategies, and an achieved identity status (see Berzonsky, 2004, in press for reviews). Information-oriented youth define themselves in terms of personal self-elements such as personal goals, values, and standards (Berzonsky, 2006; Berzonsky, Macek, Nurmi, 2003).

Normative Processing Orientation

Not everyone approaches identity conflicts in an open, thoughtful fashion. Youth with a normative orientation more automatically or mindlessly internalize and adhere to values and expectations of significant others. They are dogmatic, have a low tolerance for ambiguity, and a high need for structure and clarity (Berzonsky, 1990). A normative style is associated with firm commitments and a definite sense of purpose, but a low tolerance for uncertainty and a foreclosed identity status (Berzonsky, 1990, 2004, in press). Normative youth define themselves primarily in terms of collective self-elements such as religion, nationality, and family (Berzonsky, 2006; Berzonsky, Macek, Nurmi 2003).

Diffuse-Avoidant Processing Orientation

Youth with a diffuse-avoidant orientation procrastinate and attempt to avoid dealing with identity conflicts as long as possible. Their actions and choices are mainly determined by external demands and cues. Situational adjustments, however, are likely to involve temporary acts of behavioral or verbal compliance rather than stable, long-term revisions in their identity structure. Diffuse-avoidance involves more than just a confused or fragmented sense of self; it reflects strategic efforts to avoid or obscure potentially negative self-diagnostic information. It is associated with impulsiveness, concern about impression management, weak commitments, and a diffusion identity status (Berzonsky, 1990; in press; Berzonsky, Ferrari, 2009). Diffuse-avoiders are hedonistic and present oriented; they focus on immediate rewards and social considerations such as popularity, reputation, and the impressions of others (Berzonsky, 2006; Berzonsky, Macek, Nurmi, 2003; Luyckx *et al.*, in press).

Research on Identity Processing Style

A substantial literature accumulated over the past 20 years in a number of different countries, indicates that youth with a diffuse-avoidant style are less effective and well off than their informational and normative counterparts. For instance, diffuse-avoiders have been found to be at greater risk for problems such as delinquency, conduct disorders, non-clinical depression, neuroticism, poor peer relations, eating disorders, and alcohol and substance use. They also possess less effective coping and decisional strategies and social skills, and they have lower levels of subjective well-being, academic success, behavioral regulation, and im-

pulse control (Adams *et al*., 2001; Berzonsky, in press; Berzonsky, Adams, 1999; Berzonsky, Kuk, 2005; Nurmi *et al*., 1997; White, Jones, 1996).

Youth with a normative style have stable goals, commitments, and a sense of life purpose. In well-structured situations with relatively stable demands and problems, they tend to be reasonably successful. However, they tend to be less effective in settings characterized by change and diversity where flexible, resourceful, self-regulated efforts and behaviors are required (Berzonsky, 2003, in press; Soenens, Duriez, Goossens, 2005).

An informational style is associated with resources and characteristics such as resilience, internal control, autonomy, conscientiousness, openness, and independence of judgment (Berzonsky, 1990, in press). In the modern world, these skills and resources should enhance the likelihood that information-oriented youth and adults will be able to effectively accomplish the goals and priorities they commit to. These resources, however, do not provide a frame of reference for deciding which goals people should commit to or what they should live for. They do not provide a system of values within which existential meaning can be legitimized and grounded.

PERSONAL VALUES AND IDENTITY PROCESSING STYLES

Jeffrey Arnett (2002, 2006) has suggested that one solution to the identity confusion and crises created by the modern world may be to form a global identity. He suggested: "[I]n addition to their local identity, young people [need to] develop a global identity that gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture and includes an awareness of the events, practices, styles, and information that are part of the global culture" (Arnett, 2002, p. 777).

Certainly more and more young people in the modern world are confronted by a proliferation of styles, fashions, images, and career and ideological alternatives from which to choose (Schwartz, 2000). However, Arnett's speculation about local and global choices seems to ignore the question about which choices youth should make or, more important, what frame of reference they should use to decide whether or not their choices are sound or wise.

Of course, I don't have answers to these questions either! One way to at least begin to explore these issues descriptively is to consider which values young people and adults currently use to guide and direct their lives. What values do youth hold and are identity processing styles associated with different value orientations?

Some data collected by Bart Duriez at Catholic University in Leuven and Bart Soenens at Ghent University indicate an association between identity processing style and personal values as measured by Shalom Schwartz's (1992) Value Inventory (Duriez, Soenens, 2004). Schwartz conceptualized values as personal representations of desired objectives or goals that serve as life-guiding principles (see also Rokeach, 1973). The Value Inventory requires participants to rate the extent to they consider various markers of the values to be a "guiding principle in their life." It measures abstract values considered to be transsituational including: Hedonism, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Conformity, Security, and Power.

Duriez and Soenens (2004) found that informational scores were positively associated with values that emphasize both self-direction (being autonomous, independent thinking) and universalism, which highlights broadmindedness and concern about social justice and the welfare of humankind. Informational scores were negatively associated with life choices or actions based on hedonism, security, power and conformity. Thus an informational style was associated with values that transcend self-interest and personal gain.

Normative scores were positively associated with tradition, security, power, and conformity, which indicate a reliance on institutional rather than personal standards. Individuals with high normative scores appeared to indicate an in-group bias in that they scored

low on universalism despite general concerns about security. Diffuse-avoidance was positively associated with values such as hedonism and power, which is consistent with a self-serving, present-oriented approach to self-relevant issues (Duriez, Soenens, 2004).

Of course, there are alternative explanations of these correlational findings, but they are consistent with the view that the actions and choices of individuals with different identity processing styles are grounded within different value or assumptive bases (Berzonsky, 1993, 2004). They suggest that individuals with high informational scores are more likely than their normative or diffuse-avoidant cohorts to emphasize values that transcend their own security and self-interest. If this line of reasoning is credible, it raises the question about why information-oriented individuals would adopt a more universal frame of reference to guide their lives. Eriksonian theory offers one possible answer.

EGO-INTEGRITY, IDENTITY PROCESSING STYLE, AND WISDOM

According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of personality, identity development is precursor to the development of ego integrity. In his words: "[Integrity] is the acceptance of the fact that one's life is one's own responsibility. It is a sense of comradeship with men and women of distant times and of different pursuits who have created orders and sayings conveying human dignity and love. [It involves an]…awareness of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving…" (p. 140).

Erikson's view on integrity seems similar to the concept of wisdom (Clayton, 1975). Robert Sternberg's (1998) balance theory of wisdom offers some hints as to why individuals with an informational identity orientation may emphasize values that transcend their own self interest (see also Ardelt, 2004; Baltes, Staudinger, 2000). Sternberg (2004) defined wisdom as: "…the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge to the common good by balancing intrapersonal (one's own), interpersonal (others'), and extrapersonal (institutional or other larger) interests over the long and short terms, though the mediation of values, so as to adapt to, shape, and select environments" (p. 287).

Of course, wisdom requires more than informed, rational thinking but it is doubtful that one could be wise without engaging in critical rational thinking. Research has shown that individuals with an informational style are rational and self-reflective (Berzonsky, 2008; Berzonsky, Luyckx, 2008). They assume truth is relative and that they play a role in constructing and interpreting facts and knowledge. They know that even though the truth of their constructions cannot be established with absolute certainty, intellectually defendable decisions about which views and options are better or more credible than others can be made relative to a particular set of values, standards, and criteria (see Berzonsky, 2004, 2005). They are motivated to generate rational explanations to justify their choices and actions. They also attempt to consider the perspectives others might take and different counter-arguments that could made.

I am not suggesting that adolescents or even adults with an informational identity style necessarily possess wisdom or ego integrity. Certainly intelligent, well informed people can act very foolishly at times. However, it is unlikely that one could have wisdom in the modern world without engaging in rational, self-reflection and without attempting to take into account multiple perspectives and alternatives when dealing with problems and conflicts. Consequently, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that individuals with an informational identity style would perform relatively better on measures of wisdom and integrity than those with a normative or diffuse-avoidant style.

Beaumont (2009) found that an informational style was uniquely positively associated with self-actualization and self-transcendence, two aspects of wisdom. Relevant to the present discussion, both self-actualization and

self-transcendence mediated the positive relationship between an informational style and meaning in life. Perhaps in the future, identity researchers need to devote more attention to the values or virtues youth can use to justify identity choices and achieve a sense of existential meaning in the modern world.

FOOTNOTES

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