Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hidn20

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Available online: 14 Feb 2012

To cite this article: Moin Syed (2012): The Past, Present, and Future of Eriksonian Identity Research: Introduction to the Special Issue, Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 12:1, 1-7

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2012.632362

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The Past, Present, and Future of Eriksonian Identity Research: Introduction to the Special Issue

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My reading of Erik Erikson’s theory of identity development leads me to a single word: integration. Identity integration over time, across life contexts, and across self-other perceptions are all critical elements of the theory (Grotevant, 1997; van Hoof, 1999). Given this, the irony of the need for a Special Issue of Identity aimed at reintegrating Eriksonian theory with contemporary identity theory and research is not lost on me. The impetus for this Special Issue was the 2008 Society for Research on Identity Formation conference where I observed the group’s heavy emphasis on Marcian and neo-Marcian approaches to identity, an emphasis that is not surprising given the role of these approaches in the creation of the field. At the 2009 conference, I was the coleader of a session aimed at discussing the utility of integrating status approaches to identity with narrative approaches to identity. The ensuing fervor suggested that the time was ripe for more formal dedication to the matter.

The Past: What Have We Done?

The need for expanding and integrating perspectives within the neo-Eriksonian tradition is evident when one consults the available reviews of the literature. The landmark review by Schwartz (2001), which launched this journal into existence, was almost entirely limited to Marcian approaches to identity. Indeed, the review was divided up into extensions...
and expansions of the identity status model. Although some of these newer models incorporate aspects of Erikson’s original ideas (e.g., the interface of personal and social identities; Adams & Marshall, 1996), Marcia’s (1966) identity status model is the starting point for their development and conceptualization. The irony of that considerable focus on the identity status model is that many have questioned whether it is truly an operationalization of Erikson at all (e.g., Côté & Levine, 1988; van Hoof, 1999). Two years prior to Schwartz’s (2001) review, van Hoof (1999) urged researchers to return to the source material and pay attention to other kinds of Eriksonian identity research. Waterman (1988) highlighted how Erikson offered scores of definitions and facets of identity and that Marcia (1966) took the pragmatic route of operationalizing one of them that, for him, held the most promise as a subject of psychological research. Given the explicit acknowledgment of the limitations of the status model and the need for greater use of Erikson’s rich body of work, it is surprising that there has been little effort on the part of status researchers to branch the model and seek further connection with other areas of Eriksonian scholarship.

That is not to say that identity status researchers have not been busy. Meeus, Luyckx, Crocetti, Goossens, and colleagues from across Europe have been working diligently and prolifically to expand insight into the processes involved in the identity status model (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; see Meeus, 2011, for a review). This research produced a more nuanced conceptualization of the traditional identity status model and has contributed to a greater understanding of how individuals cycle through the identity statuses. At the same time, Kroger and colleagues have conducted a series of meta-analyses, the most recent of which (Kroger, Magnussen, & Marcia, 2010) provides strong support for the developmental hypotheses concerning the identity status model offered by Waterman (1982). In sum, we have witnessed tremendous progress during the past 5 years in our collective understanding of the identity status model.

All of this work has resulted in advancing identity theory and research, but these are advances in Marcian identity theory, not Eriksonian identity theory, per se. In recent times, Schachter (2004, 2005) has answered the call of bringing Eriksonian ideas back into the fold. Schachter (2004) applied the Eriksonian concept of identity configurations through a narrative analysis of young people’s life stories. The methodology was not new—some years earlier McAdams (2001) had articulated his autobiographical life story model of identity, a model that is decidedly Eriksonian. Unlike McAdams, however, Schachter situated his work in relation to the identity status model, clearly drawing connections—and boundaries—between narrative identity and the identity statuses. To borrow a phrase from narrative
research, Schachter’s analysis may well be a “turning point” in the study of identity from an Eriksonian perspective.

Shortly after Schachter’s (2004) article, there began to appear additional studies looking at connections between identity status and narrative models of identity (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). These studies, however, were not the first to undertake such an examination. A few decades earlier, there were several studies attempting to link autobiographical memories to the identity statuses (Josselson, 1982; Neimeyer & Rareshide, 1991; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986). These studies sought to link motivational themes in narratives of earliest memories to concurrent identity status classification. In general, they found that membership in statuses that are high in identity exploration (i.e., identity achievement and moratorium) is associated with more developmentally advanced themes relevant to Freudian psychosexual concerns than is membership in statuses low in exploration (i.e., identity diffusion and foreclosure). These studies, however, faded into obscurity (e.g., they were not cited in McLean & Pratt, 2006, or Syed & Azmitia, 2008). A potential reason for this is that the memory side of the analysis, and why memories would be related to identity status membership, was rooted in Freudian psychoanalytic theory of development and not a well-developed theory of identity.

The current zeitgeist comes at a very different time for identity research when there are an articulated theory of narrative identity based in Erikson’s work, greater sophistication in identity status research, and a renewed interest in Erikson’s own writings. This Special Issue was developed to capitalize on, and further, this zeitgeist—providing fuel for continued work on Eriksonian identity development, not just Marcian identity development.

The Present: Contents of the Special Issue

The four articles in this Special Issue represent a theoretical articulation, an empirical assessment, an explicit focus on the cultural context, and an area of discovery. I elaborate on each in turn.

Despite the growth in empirical reports drawing connections between the identity status and narrative models of identity, there has not yet been a thorough theoretical treatment of the underpinnings of the connections. In this Special Issue, Kate C. McLean and Monisha Pasupathi take on this task. They offer the provocative idea that identity status and narrative researchers have inadvertently shown interest in different portions of the identity time frame, with identity status researchers emphasizing how the present orients individuals to the future whereas narrative researchers explicate how the past is linked to the present. Further, they suggest that the identity status model has provided insight into identity development
at the expense of understanding identity processes. Although exploration and commitment are conceptualized as processes, relatively little research has examined how individuals explore identities and consolidate commitments. In contrast, the narrative model has detailed these types of identity processes, but has not contributed much to an understanding of identity development. Drawing on these cleavages, McLean and Pasupathi offer two broad hypotheses about how the elements of the status and narrative models may work together in the process of identity development: (a) that narrative is the means by which identity exploration occurs, and (b) that narrative can consolidate commitments to create consistency between commitments and behaviors. These hypotheses should be a helpful guide for future researchers who traditionally adopt either status or narrative perspectives.

Susan Alisat and Michael W. Pratt’s article can be considered a follow-up to McLean and Pasupathi’s, as theirs is an empirical study about the relations between identity status processes and religious narratives. In general, they find detectable—yet modest—linkages between current levels of identity status and the ways in which young people narrate their religious stories. Alisat and Pratt suggest that the modest associations are not surprising, as each model examines a distinct aspect of Erikson’s theory; the identity status model is more concerned with the integration and consolidation of multiple identity domains whereas the narrative model is more concerned with the integration of identity across time.

One need take only a quick glimpse of Erikson’s writings to glean the importance that he placed on culture for the identity development process. Not only did he write quite a bit about culture, but he also wrote about race and ethnicity and the many barriers to identity development faced by ethnic minorities. In this vein, Monisha Pasupathi, Cecilia Wainryb, and Michelle Twali’s study of discrimination narratives and their relation with ethnic identity is an important contribution to this collection. The way that individuals narrate experiences of discrimination, an instance of how individuals are externally viewed by others, is contingent on their current levels of ethnic identity, particularly for ethnic minorities.

Finally, it is important to note that connections between identity status and narrative are not the only fruitful directions for future Eriksonian research. The fourth article in this Special Issue, by Patrick L. Hill and Anthony L. Burrow, integrates Erikson’s writings on identity with his writings on purpose. Research on youth purpose has gained in popularity over the past several years (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). On the surface, purpose appears to be similar to identity. Hill and Burrow’s study is a valuable contribution in that it articulates the conceptual differences between the constructs, demonstrates empirically that they are distinct, and also highlights significant ways in which they are
related. This study is useful since it is based on Erikson’s writings, but not restricted to the realm of identity per se.

The Future: Where Do We Go From Here?

This Special Issue is far from the final word on the topic. Rather, this collection represents but one effort toward consolidation in an ongoing shift in identity research, a shift that is characterized by a deep desire to understand the developmental processes involved in identity.

There are a variety of limitations that still will need to be overcome. Measurement issues are a prime concern. Most identity status measures sample across identity domains (e.g., political, religious, or occupational). There are, as yet, few solid measures that are domain specific, with notable exceptions being the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) for ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992) and the new Vocational Identity Status Assessment (VISA) for vocational identity (Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011). Given that incongruence in development across domains has been well documented (e.g., Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005; Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974), which dovetails with the low Cronbach’s alpha coefficients consistently observed in identity status measures that sample across domains, it is surprising that there is a dearth of domain-specific measures.

Although identity status measures typically assess identity across a variety of domains, narrative approaches to identity either focus on one domain exclusively (e.g., ethnicity or religion) or are defined by their attention to a particular aspect of the life story (e.g., self-defining memory, high point, or turning point) rather than by identity domain. Narrative studies that sample across multiple identity domains within the same individuals appear non-existent. As future researchers seek to understand the connection between identity status and narrative models of identity, it will be critical for these discrepancies in measurement to be resolved.

Of course, the identity status and narrative models are not the only operationalizations of Erikson’s theory. Operationalizing Erikson’s entire theory is not really feasible. Also, as described by Waterman (1988), Erikson’s goals differ markedly from the goals of present researchers. Although Erikson weighed more heavily the idiographic understanding of individuals’ identities within their broader life context for clinical purposes, contemporary identity researchers tend to take a more nomothetic approach by placing greater value on aggregated group-level trends and characteristics of identity. These thoughts lead to some important questions for identity researchers to consider: Can contemporary researchers reintegrate the numerous elements of Erikson’s theory to produce empirical research that is consistent with the totality of the theory? Is there too much there? Should we take pieces of
the theory and investigate them individually, but keep the broader outline in mind? What is the broader outline? It is my hope that this Special Issue will encourage researchers to ponder these and other questions for years to come.

REFERENCES


