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PREVIEW

Development of Self-Understanding during the College Years

by

Rodger Narloch

A DISSERTATION

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

Major: Psychology

Under the Supervision of Professor Lisa J. Crockett

Lincoln, Nebraska

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DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING DURING THE COLLEGE YEARS

Rodger Narloch, Ph. D.

University of Nebraska, 1998

Adviser: Lisa J. Crockett

The current study investigated three primary issues relating to self-understanding during college: differences in self-clarity and self-complexity across identity status, the relationship of self-clarity and self-complexity to college exposure, and the roles of exploration, perceived diversity, and self-reflection in the relationship between college exposure and self-understanding. To examine these issues, college students (N=224) completed a sorting task and a series of self-report questionnaires.

Different amounts of self-clarity were found across the identity statuses. Identity-achieved individuals had the highest levels of self-clarity, followed by those in foreclosure and diffusion, with students in moratorium exhibiting the least self-clarity. In contrast, self-complexity was not found to be related to identity status.

Self-complexity showed a general positive linear relationship with college exposure. Analyses also revealed a curvilinear effect with self-complexity at its highest for juniors and a slight drop for individuals near the end of their college years. Exploration and perceived diversity did not mediate this relationship. Moreover, contrary to expectations, self-clarity was not related to college exposure. However, post-hoc analyses revealed interesting relationships among the variables in the model such as positive relationships between exploration and perceived diversity, between exploration and self-clarity, and between self-reflection and both exploration and

perceived diversity. These relationships suggest that exploration and perceived diversity may play an important role in the self-understanding of college students.

The current study pointed to the potential use of self-clarity and self-complexity as constructs helpful for conceptualizing the development of self-understanding during the college years. Such increased knowledge of the development of self-understanding may provide practical benefits in making policy and teaching decisions regarding the promotion of the personal development of college students.

PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Overview of the Conceptual Background for the Current Study.....	3
Identity Development during the College Years.....	7
Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity.....	11
The Relationship of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity to Identity	14
The Relationship of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity to College Exposure	17
Aspects of College Exposure which may Influence Self-Understanding....	19
Exploration and Perceived Diversity as Mediators of the Relationship	
between College Exposure and Self-Understanding.....	23
Exploration as a Mediator.....	23
Perceived Diversity as a Mediator.....	27
Self-Reflection as a Moderator of the Relationship of Exploration and	
Perceived Diversity to Self-Understanding.....	30
Overview of the Proposed Model.....	31
Review of Goals and Hypotheses.....	33
List of Primary Hypotheses.....	35
METHOD.....	37
Participants.....	37
Procedure.....	38
Measures.....	38
Self-Complexity.....	38
Self-Clarity.....	40
Identity.....	40
Self-Reflection.....	42
Amount of Exploration.....	44
Amount of Perceived Diversity.....	44
Social Desirability.....	45
Demographic Information.....	45

RESULTS	46
Preliminary Results.....	46
Exploration Questionnaire Factor Analyses.....	46
Perceived Diversity Questionnaire Factor Analyses.....	49
College Exposure.....	52
Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OMEIS) Classifications....	52
Relationships of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity to Identity Status.....	54
Examination of the Proposed Mediation Model of the Relationships of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity with College Exposure.....	58
Self-Clarity and College Exposure.....	62
Self-Complexity and College Exposure.....	68
Summary of Results.....	75
DISCUSSION	77
Relationships of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity to Identity.....	77
Self-Clarity and Identity.....	77
Self-Complexity and Identity.....	81
Patterns of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity Across the College Years.....	83
Self-Clarity and College Exposure.....	83
Self-Complexity and College Exposure.....	84
Investigations of Exploration and Perceived Diversity.....	87
Absence of Mediation.....	87
Correlates of Exploration and Perceived Diversity.....	90
Implications of the Current Study.....	93
Relationships of Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity to Identity.....	93
The Relationship of College Exposure to Self-Clarity and Self- Complexity.....	95
Exploration and Perceived Diversity: Related But Not Identical Constructs.....	96
Implications for College Administrators and Faculty.....	97
Issues to Resolve in Future Research.....	99
Further Clarification of the Relationship of College Exposure with Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity.....	99
Defining College Exposure for Self-Understanding Research.....	100
The Influence of Transitions To and From College on Self- Understanding.....	101
Summary.....	102
REFERENCES	104
APPENDICES	117

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Rotated factor loadings of the Exploration questionnaire items.....	47
Table 2: Rotated factor loadings of the Perceived Diversity questionnaire items.....	50
Table 3: Means, standard deviations, and cutoff scores of the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status scales.....	53
Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of participants in each identity status by classification rule.....	55
Table 5: Mean self-clarity scores for each identity status using the pure and total samples.....	57
Table 6: Mean self-complexity scores for each identity status using the pure and total samples.....	59
Table 7: Bivariate relationships between the variables in the current study...	60
Table 8: Hierarchical regression raw parameter estimates for the relationship between self-clarity and college exposure.....	64
Table 9: Hierarchical regression raw parameter estimates for exploration and self-reflection as predictors of self-clarity.....	66
Table 10: Hierarchical regression raw parameter estimates for perceived diversity and self-reflection as predictors of self-clarity.....	69
Table 11: Hierarchical regression raw parameter estimates for the proposed exploration mediation of the relationship between college exposure and self-complexity.....	70
Table 12: Hierarchical regression raw parameter estimates for the proposed perceived diversity mediation of the relationship between college exposure and self-complexity.....	73

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the proposed mediating factors of the relationship of college exposure to self-clarity and self-complexity.....	32
Figure 2: Regression of self-clarity on exploration for three levels of self-reflection.....	67
Figure 3: Regression of self-complexity on perceived diversity for three levels of self-reflection.....	74

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Self-understanding is a topic that has been formally contemplated at least as far back as ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, and Pythagoras. The famous inscription "Know thyself" on the oracle at Delphi, where kings and generals went to reflect and seek advice on matters of supreme importance, indicates the significance of self-understanding to people more than 2,200 years ago (Gergen, 1971). The self has continued to be one of the primary issues of philosophical reflection and debate ever since that time and was addressed by such philosophical scholars as Saint Augustine, Rene Descartes, and John Locke (Hothersall, 1990).

As the discipline of psychology emerged in the late 1800s, early influential psychologists further discussed the issue of the self. William James (1890, 1892), for example, differentiated multiple "Me's," which are the contents of the self. James identified the Material Me, the Social Me, and the Spiritual Me as the primary aspects of the self which are discriminable yet related. He further described the "I" as the active agent which may engage in reflection about the Me's. Early sociologists also addressed issues of self-understanding, with Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (1934) stressing that one's self is ultimately understood only in relationship to significant individuals in one's life.

As the field of psychology began to grow, self-understanding continued to be a central issue. Early developmental psychologist James Mark Baldwin (1897) explained how self-understanding may be a derivative of one's imitations of others and discussed how one's own views of the self may influence one's perceptions of others. Freud (1901/1965) also elaborated on self-understanding through his conception of the ego, a construct similar to the self. Erik Erikson (1950, 1968)

later modified Freud's ideas and proposed the prominent construct of "identity" which has generated a tremendous amount of research on college student development that will be discussed at length throughout this thesis.

Given the long and pervasive history of reflection on self-understanding, one would expect self-understanding to be a key aspect in the empirical study of human behavior and cognition. Empirical research on self-understanding has in fact proven to be an important area of study within psychology. Self-understanding has been shown to be related to numerous concepts that are central to psychology including: cognition (see Markus & Wurf, 1987; Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984; and Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984 for reviews), motivation (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Cross & Markus, 1991), affect-regulation (see Greenwald, 1980 for review), decision-making (e.g., Burnett, 1991; Cella, DeWolfe, & Fitzgibbon, 1987; Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993), and attitude formation (Aronson, 1968; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). Indeed, the self holds a prominent position in psychological research and theory.

Developmental research has examined the issue of the self beginning at a very early age (see Thompson, 1998 for review). For example, an initial awareness of the self has been shown to originate as early as 15 months of age (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979) and quickly progresses to an understanding of the self and others in categorical terms, such as "boy" and "big" (Stipek, Gralinski, & Kopp, 1990). While children's initial self-understanding is concrete, as evidenced by self-descriptions comprised primarily of physical characteristics and behaviors, by middle childhood they begin to describe themselves using psychological traits, indicating a more abstract understanding of the self (Miller & Aloise, 1989; Narloch, 1993; Rholes & Ruble, 1984). Furthermore, older children begin to understand themselves in comparison to others (Damon & Hart, 1988). In

addition to an increase in the salience of social comparison, adolescents' conceptions of self tend to focus on psychological characteristics and become more differentiated (Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, 1986). Adolescents use a greater variety of self-descriptors and organize them into multiple dimensions (Harter, 1985, 1986; Marsh, 1986). For example, Harter and Monsour (1992) demonstrated that self-descriptors often vary in regard to the particular role (e.g., friend, daughter, student) adolescents are thinking of at any given time. By late adolescence, teens have the capacity to integrate and coordinate possible contradictions in their role-related selves to arrive at an overarching understanding of the self (Harter & Monsour, 1992). A more global understanding of the self is possible, in part, because late adolescents begin to establish a set of personal belief systems and philosophies that serve to guide future behavior (Erikson, 1950; 1968; Hart & Damon, 1986). While some have also suggested that the self changes throughout adulthood (e.g., Levinson, 1978), such changes may also be viewed as alterations of one's personal belief systems initially established in late adolescence. Therefore, late adolescence appears to be a key period of development where individuals first form a self-understanding based upon personal belief systems and philosophies which may provide the foundation for future life choices and decisions.

Overview of the Conceptual Background for the Current Study

Research investigating the development of self-understanding in late adolescence has been based primarily upon Erikson's (1950; 1968) notion of identity. According to Erikson, adolescents go through an identity crisis in which they struggle with defining who they are and how they fit into society. After exploring a variety of roles and belief systems during this crisis, late adolescents may then personally commit to a particular set of roles and perspectives which

form their identity. Elaborating upon Erikson's notion of identity, Marcia (1966) proposed a conceptual framework in which individuals are classified within one of four identity statuses (i.e., diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, achievement) which represent the extent to which they have explored and committed themselves to a particular point of view regarding ideology and occupation.

An expansive body of research has been based on this perspective (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Waterman, 1982, 1985 for reviews). Generally, it shows that late adolescents enter college in either diffusion or foreclosure, experience a period of moratorium during college, and finish college either still in the moratorium status or having achieved an identity (Waterman, 1985). While providing a wealth of information regarding the sequences of identity classifications through which individuals progress during college, the identity status approach is limited in several ways: 1) it utilizes a categorical measure which may miss small developmental shifts in self-understanding; 2) it fails to independently assess multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., exploration, commitment) and thus may miss patterns of development unique to specific components of self-understanding; and 3) it fails to assess specific factors or processes which may facilitate the development of self-understanding (Grotevant, 1987). Such drawbacks of the identity status approach may limit its value in further elucidating the development of self-understanding.

A second line of research that has investigated self-understanding among college students can be found in the adult personality literature. In particular, self-concept clarity and self-complexity are two constructs which have been used to assess structural aspects of personality. Self-concept clarity is defined as "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and

temporally stable" (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley, & Lehman, 1996, p. 141). Self-complexity refers to the number of independent dimensions which underlie an individual's organization of self-attributes (Linville, 1985; 1987).

While these constructs have typically not received much attention within the identity literature, they bear a striking resemblance to descriptions of identity and may represent components of identity. For example, Erikson (1968, p. 161) states that identity "...includes all significant identifications, but it also alters them in order to make a unique and reasonably coherent whole of them." It seems plausible that a mature form of identity may be characterized as being both clear and complex.

Despite the potential overlap, the relationship of self-clarity and self-complexity to identity status has yet to be examined. Furthermore, self-clarity and self-complexity have been studied as stable individual difference variables among adults, and there has been no attempt to investigate the extent to which self-clarity and self-complexity might develop over the college years. Examining the development of self-understanding using these constructs may provide valuable information on this topic that is unobtainable via the identity status approach.

Based on these considerations, a primary goal of the current study was to examine the relationship of self-clarity and self-complexity to identity status. Empirically demonstrating a relationship between these constructs would provide an initial step toward using self-clarity and self-complexity as measures of self-understanding which are complementary to identity status. The second major goal of this study was to investigate the relationship of self-clarity and self-complexity to college exposure in order to determine if these constructs show any indication of developing across the college years. While a longitudinal design is ultimately needed to show such developmental patterns, the current study investigated clarity

and complexity across individuals with different amounts of college exposure to determine if such longitudinal studies would be warranted. If self-clarity and self-complexity are related to identity and if they show differences across college exposure, this study would lay the foundation for an alternative approach to investigating the development of self-understanding among college students that is not subject to the limitations of the identity status approach.

The final goal of the current study was to extend prior research on the development of self-understanding by testing factors related to the college experience that may mediate the relationships of college exposure with self-clarity and self-complexity. One of the limitations of identity status research has been its failure to specify factors or processes surrounding the college experience that may facilitate the development of self-understanding. Although Erikson (1950; 1968) suggested that identity was achieved through the process of active exploration, exploration has typically been assessed only through a categorical judgment of whether or not one has engaged in some exploration. It has not been assessed independent of identity status nor using a continuous and quantitative measurement. Such measurement of exploration would allow this construct to be examined in relationship to, rather than embedded in, identity status. Therefore, the amount of accumulated exploration in which individuals have engaged was one factor included in the current study as a possible mediator of the relationship of college exposure to self-clarity and self-complexity.

A second factor expected to mediate this relationship was the amount of diversity that students perceive in their college context. Given the current emphasis on many college campuses to promote cultural diversity and awareness (Astin, 1993a), it seems appropriate to examine whether such factors are related to self-understanding. The current study, therefore, investigated the extent to which

a larger awareness of alternative backgrounds, values, and points of view is related to having a clearer and more complex self-understanding.

Finally, individual differences in self-reflection were examined as a possible moderator of the relationships of exploration and perceived diversity to self-clarity and self-complexity. Although the precise definition of self-reflection has taken on slightly different forms based on the assessment tool, self-reflection can be defined as a "voluntary, emotionally positive form of self-focus associated with epistemic interest in the self" (Campbell et al. 1996, p. 143). Since highly self-reflective individuals tend to process self-relevant information more extensively and efficiently (Nasby, 1985; 1989), their self-understanding may be more strongly influenced by their experiences. Therefore, the relationships of exploration and perceived diversity to self-understanding should be particularly strong for individuals who have a tendency to reflect upon such experiences and relate them to their self-understanding.

After reviewing the relevant literature on identity development, the following sections further elaborate upon the three primary goals of this study: 1) to demonstrate a relationship of identity to self-clarity and self-complexity; 2) to examine whether college exposure is related to self-clarity and self-complexity; and 3) to test the proposed mediational model linking college exposure to self-clarity and self-complexity.

Identity Development during the College Years

Much of the research investigating self-understanding among college students derives from Erik Erikson's concept of identity development. Erikson (1950, 1968) first discussed the concept of ego identity as part of his psychosocial theory of development. Basically, Erikson believed that during adolescence individuals must establish a sense of self that balances society's and one's own

expectations for oneself. Erikson (1968, p. 87) has described such identity formation in adolescence in the following way:

"The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on. Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age mates and with leader figures outside the family."

Erikson (1968) further explained that identity is typically achieved only after a period during which individuals try out or explore a variety of roles. Erikson (1968, p. 157) describes this key period of exploration as a psychosocial moratorium:

"By psychosocial moratorium, then, we mean a delay of adult commitments, and yet it is not only a delay. It is a period that is characterized by a selective permissiveness of the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth, and yet it also often leads to deep, if often transitory, commitment on the part of youth, and ends in a more or less ceremonial confirmation of commitment on the part of society."

As Waterman (1985, p. 5) points out, Erikson's descriptions of identity development are "richly associative without, however, clearly specifying the boundaries of the term." James Marcia (1966) made significant contributions to identity theory by operationalizing the process of identity development. Marcia (1966) proposed a process of identity development in which individuals can be

classified into four distinct identity statuses (foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement) which reflect whether or not individuals: 1) have struggled with identity issues (i.e., crisis or exploration) and 2) have committed to a particular perspective (i.e., commitment). Although there is no universal, hierarchical sequence to the statuses through which people typically move in establishing identity, adolescents generally begin in either foreclosure or diffusion (Adams & Fitch, 1982; Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974). Foreclosure describes individuals who have not truly questioned their perspective nor explored other perspectives on the issues, yet they are committed to a particular viewpoint, typically that which is held by their parents. Those in the status of diffusion also have not struggled with identity issues; however, they do not have an identifiable perspective on the issues (self-chosen or otherwise). Basically, those in diffusion have not committed to a particular view and are not yet concerned about doing so. In contrast, one is classified in moratorium if one is in the process of working through the issues, yet has not committed to any particular point of view. Finally, identity achievement is the classification used for individuals who have questioned or struggled with the issues and have chosen a particular perspective to which they have committed.

Identity research among college students has provided a wealth of descriptive information about the paths of identity development. In general, more students show increasing personal commitment to identity issues (i.e., identity achievement) as their college careers progress. This trend has been found using cross-sectional (Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979; Meilman, 1979; Prager, 1986), one to two year longitudinal (Adams & Fitch, 1982, 1983; Fitch & Adams, 1983; Kroger & Haslett, 1988; Waterman & Waterman, 1971) and four-year longitudinal designs (Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974; Waterman & Goldman, 1976). In addition

to showing an increase in identity achievement, identity development research has provided a valuable description of the general progression of identity change while in college. While studies have typically failed to separate the effects of age and college, research has identified a relatively consistent general pattern of identity change throughout the college years (Meilman, 1979; Waterman, 1982). Students typically begin college either having committed to a particular perspective without questioning (foreclosure) or not having considered identity issues (diffusion). While the timing of the next step depends on the particular content domain of identity issues (e.g., occupation, political, religious), students, in general, next enter into moratorium where they struggle with the issues. Finally, some individuals may finish college having achieved identity in some or all of the areas, while others may not resolve certain identity issues until well into adulthood, if at all (Waterman, 1985).

As can be seen in the research reviewed above, Marcia's elaboration of identity statuses has concretized Erikson's nebulous construct of "identity" enough to foster an enormous body of empirical research. However, there are at least two major limitations of using Marcia's operationalization of identity to understand the process of the formation of the self. One limitation of the identity status approach is that its measurement of identity does not separate the construct into multiple dimensions. Are there distinct components of identity development? While it is clear that Marcia envisioned the process of identity development as being comprised of two distinct components (i.e., crisis and commitment), identity status research has not examined the development of each of these distinct features or other components that may underlie identity. Research needs to investigate the possibility that identity is comprised of multiple complementary components (e.g.,

self-clarity and self-complexity), each of which may be explored to more precisely capture the nature and development of self-understanding.

A second limitation of the identity status approach is its categorical measurement properties (see Matteson, 1977, for a similar argument). Some forms of identity development may be too subtle to be reflected by the major shifts represented by the four identity status classifications. It is not uncommon for individuals to remain within a particular status for a significant portion of their college years or to undergo only one change in status during college (Waterman, 1982, 1985). Identity status classifications for such individuals would reveal little evidence of development change, especially over short time periods. Using a continuous measurement approach would enable researchers to better examine changes that are obviously missed when considering only the identity status as an indication of self-understanding. Therefore, research on the self-understanding of college students may be revitalized by examining constructs complementary to identity, but which are structurally multidimensional and quantifiable.

Self-Clarity and Self-Complexity

Self-concept clarity and self-complexity are constructs which have been frequently examined in the social and personality psychological literatures when investigating issues related to self-understanding. Self-concept clarity is defined as "the extent to which the contents of an individual's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable" (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141). It should be noted that the clarity of an individual's self-concept need not be objectively related to actual behavior (Campbell et al., 1996). For example, one may have a very clear system of beliefs about oneself which is not consistent with one's actual behavior. Individuals' subjective perceptions of their own self-concept clarity, however, still

play an integral role in self-understanding. For instance, self-clarity has been shown to be an instrumental variable in the evaluative and emotional components of the self such as self-esteem. While one might expect those with high self-esteem to have a clear and positive notion of self and low self-esteem individuals to have a clear and negative self-understanding, self-clarity has provided a dimension which reveals a different understanding of the distinction between high and low self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem do tend to also have high levels of self-clarity (Campbell, 1990); thus, they have sets of beliefs about themselves that are both clearly articulated and positive. Individuals with low self-esteem, however, do not have clear, but negative, notions of self-concept; rather low self-esteem tends to be related to low self-clarity (Campbell et al., 1996). Thus, differences in self-clarity have provided a useful theoretical explanation for findings in self-esteem research that have not been accounted for by positivity or negativity of self-beliefs (e.g., Baumeister, 1993; Setterlund & Niedenthal, 1993). Along a similar line, some evidence exists that suggests that self-concept confusion may promote negative self-affect (Baumgardner, 1990).

Self-clarity also appears to play a role in the ways in which people gather information from their environment and make decisions. Campbell (1990) found that low self-clarity individuals showed low congruence between self-reported ratings of trait descriptors prior to a 15-minute conversation with another participant and ratings after the conversation. From this it was concluded that individuals with low self-clarity tend to be more dependent upon their social environments for self-definition. Furthermore, Setterlund & Niedenthal (1993) investigated the relationship between self-clarity and the use of the prototype-matching strategy for decision making where one makes a choice based on the match of one's self-concept to the prototypical person who would choose a