

Identity Development Theories in Student Affairs: Origins, Current Status, and New Approaches

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Enhancing the development of students has long been a primary role of student affairs practitioners. Identity development theories help practitioners to understand how students go about discovering their “abilities, aptitude and objectives” while assisting them to achieve their “maximum effectiveness” (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 69). The tasks involved in discovering abilities, goals, and effectiveness are part of creating a sense of identity that allows the student to enter adult life. Identity is shaped by how one organizes experiences within the environment (context) that revolves around oneself (Erikson, 1959/1994). Across academic disciplines, the view of how individuals organize experiences takes on varying definitions. Within the student affairs literature, *identity* is commonly understood as one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation) and the ways one expresses that relationship. Identity is also commonly understood to be socially constructed; that is, one’s sense of self and beliefs about one’s own social group as well others are constructed through interactions with the broader social context in which dominant values dictate norms and expectations (see Gergen, 1991; McEwen, 2003). Examples of these broader social contexts include both institutions such as education and work, as well as systems of power and inequality such as race, social class,

and gender (Anderson & Collins, 2007).

Social construction of identity occurs in different contexts on campus such as in how student organizations are created and which students are drawn to them, or in the social identities among those in leadership positions and those not, as well as in issues of institutional fit within access and retention. One of the components of identity development that arises quickly on most campuses is the process of students learning how to balance their needs with those of others (Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kroger, 2004). In working to create community and mutual respect on campus, student affairs professionals help students to understand this balance between self and others as well as expose students to the varied nature of what is encompassed in the “other.” A common program used to illustrate this process revolves around diversity issues. These programs often focus on exposure to other social groups and an understanding of how history supports society’s view of these groups. This influence of the other contributes to the social construction of identity; in other words, the context and interactions with others—including other people, societal norms, and/or expectations that evolve from culture—influence how one constructs one’s identity (Jones, 1997; McEwen, 2003; Torres, 2003; Weber, 1998). In addition, several researchers embrace a developmental approach to describe the shift that occurs when students

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move from accepting simple definitions of self based on external factors to more complex understandings of self within context (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato, 2010; Taylor, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

This article focuses on understanding how identity development is conceptualized in student affairs. The need to understand the person, context, and interactions between the two advances identity theories as relevant to student affairs practice. The more practitioners understand how students make meaning of their identities, the better they are able to assist in promoting student learning and development in higher education institutions.

Although much of the research on college student development that informs student affairs practice originated in psychology, other disciplines contribute different lenses that can add to a more nuanced understanding of how identity evolves. Identity is often conceptualized as a developmental construct, and this conceptualization persists in current identity research. However, newer conceptualizations in both psychology and other disciplines resist the notion of identity as a developmental and linear process, instead emphasizing the fluid, dynamic, and performative nature of identity. Performativity illuminates the more contingent nature of identity and suggests that individuals create and recreate identity through their actions, which are constantly shifting (Abes & Kasch, 2007). The review that follows includes both of these perspectives on identity. In addition, because identity is influenced by students' many roles, expectations, and beliefs, we also address the intersectionality of identity dimensions. Finally, we explore five future directions for research on identity development in college students.

DISCIPLINARY ORIGINS OF THE STUDY OF IDENTITY

Although college student development theo-

ries draw largely from developmental psychology, the study of identity also has a rich tradition in sociology, social psychology, and human ecology. In addition, postmodern and poststructural theories (e.g., queer theory, feminist poststructuralism, and critical race theory [CRT]) also contribute substantially to the multidisciplinary approach necessary to understanding identities and identity development. Each field locates the study of identity within its own disciplinary lens, but they share commitments to understanding the individual, his or her social context, the influence of social groups, and various dimensions of identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). This section summarizes the disciplinary origins of the study of identity.

Psychology

Student affairs practice, and the student development theories that have supported it since the middle of the twentieth century, grew from a counseling and vocational psychology approach (Miller & Prince, 1976). Therefore, it is not surprising that the most commonly taught theories related to identity and identity development are rooted in psychology. Psychological definitions of identity focus on understanding of self, or personal identity. Erik Erikson (1959/1994) expanded on Freud's thinking about the development of "ego identity," a concept that posits identity as a stage of ego growth (Marcia, 1993). Taking a lifespan approach, Erikson identified eight stages/phases in which individuals address a series of crises to arrive at more or less healthy resolutions to major developmental tasks. He proposed that development is governed in part by the epigenetic principle, a combination of genetic and environmental influences that governs the direction and timing of development (Erikson, 1959/1994).

A key middle stage in ego identity development is the adolescent identity crisis, and because the vast majority of college students at the time were adolescents, Arthur Chickering (1979) focused on this stage to propose seven “vectors” specific to college student identity within the Eriksonian stage of identity crisis. The legacy of Freud’s and Erikson’s thinking appears in Chickering’s focus on resolution of specific developmental tasks in each vector (e.g., managing emotions, developing purpose). Yet Chickering (1979) departed significantly from his forebears when he proposed that vectors differed from stages, because although they built on one another, they were not mutually exclusive or unilinear. The revision of Chickering’s student identity development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) elaborated further on its intellectual roots by focusing on dimensions of identity (race, gender, and to a much lesser extent sexuality) in the more contemporary context of a radically changed student body. Since Chickering’s first foray into describing student identities, the college student population in the United States has undergone a substantial diversification, from majority male to majority female, to include a higher proportion and diversity of students of color, and to include visible populations of adult students, immigrants, students with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students (Thelin, 2004).

Challenged to understand the identities of the new student population, student affairs as a field turned to emerging identity theories from psychology. Scholars and professionals brought into the field theories of racial and ethnic identity development (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1990, 1994; Phinney, 1993), women’s identities and moral development (Gilligan, 1979, 1982; Josselson, 1996), and sexual orientation (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994). In keeping with the psychological tradition, most of the early theories were stage based

and linear, although some provided for the possibility of the developing person cycling back through earlier stages. These theories also adhered to their discipline’s focus on the individual and his or her sense making in development.

Sociology

Sociological perspectives on identity generally consider an individual’s identification with a given social group. Sociologists focus on the identities and roles of individuals in groups, and on interactions among groups, including studies of identity politics and social movements. Important sociologists of identity include George Herbert Mead and Sheldon Stryker.

Within higher education, sociologists Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969) laid the foundation for applying sociology to the study of college students. They viewed:

the college as an arena of social interaction in which the individual comes in contact with a multitude of actors in a variety of settings, emphasizing that through these social interactions and other social influences the identities of individuals are, in part, constituted. (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004, p. 464)

Sociologists emphasize the role of higher education institutions in creating contexts for the development of situated “felt” identities, which may endure to become more permanent felt identities. Felt identities include those that encompass personal traits (e.g., intelligence, race) and roles (e.g., music major, college student, athlete). Sociological approaches to identity help to explain, from a broader perspective than does psychology, the forces that act on individuals as they make their way into adulthood and form self-concepts of, allegiances to, and aspirations toward various identities.

Social Psychology

Social psychologists who study identity focus, as the name of their field suggests, on where groups and individuals interact in theory and in practice. Many social psychologists use the term *identity formation*, instead of identity development, and emphasize questions of what drives individuals to adopt group identities and to express those identities through behaviors, alone or in the collective. Social psychologists in general may adopt a perspective that is more psychological or more sociological, but those who study identity typically understand that positive self-esteem from belonging to groups contributes to individual wellbeing, sense of community, and belonging. As Adams and Marshall (1996) stated, "Individuals need a sense of uniqueness and a sense of belonging" (p. 429), a personal identity that includes group membership.

James Côté and Charles Levine (2002) synthesized sociological and psychological theories of identity formation/development to posit that identities are the result of processes of culture and individual agency. Côté and Levine rooted their synthesis on the psychology side in Erikson's ego identity formation and on the sociological side in the personality and social structure perspective. The personality and social structure perspective relies on three levels of analysis to examine social behavior: personality, interaction with others, and broader social structure. Day-to-day interactions filter expectations, socialization, and social control to the individual, who in turn broadcasts his or her presentation of self into a socially constructed reality. So when a student is coming out as lesbian, the everyday interactions she has with family, friends, and community shape her understanding of what it means to be lesbian, and then as she projects that identity into those interactions through her world, she socially constructs the

reality of her lesbian identity. Combining ego identity formation and the personality and social structure perspective, formation of the student's lesbian identity proceeds through a series of crises and commitments experienced and enacted through daily interactions.

Social psychologists bring two important concepts to studying identity development that have not typically been included in the study of college students: *emerging adulthood* and *possible selves*. We introduce them briefly here to draw attention to them, recognizing that each has become a substantial research area beyond the scope of this article to describe in full. Emerging adulthood, as it sounds, represents a time in development after adolescence and before full adulthood (Arnett, 2004). The overlap of this time with so-called traditional college age (eighteen to twenty-four years) is undeniable, especially in the ways that college is sometimes said to buffer students from the realities of life and to forestall adult responsibilities and decisions (see Baxter Magolda, 2001). Possible selves represent an individual's hoped for or feared future self, and thus link cognition, motivation, and behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In terms of identity development, students' hoped for and feared possible selves may lead them into groups who share and reinforce, for example, racial identity, or groups that discourage the growth of certain identities. Only a few studies (e.g., Pizzolato, 2003, 2005; Pizzolato, Chaudhari, Murrell, Podobnik, & Schaeffer, 2008) have applied concepts of emerging adulthood and possible selves to the study of college students, but a number of researchers used them in the study of identity formation (e.g., Dunkel & Anthis, 2001; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005; Syed & Azmitia, 2008), and demonstrate their value to the study of student development.

Human and Developmental Ecology

Human and developmental ecology frames

identity as an individual characteristic that plays a role in influencing interactions between the developing person and his or her environment, and identity development as an interactive process between individual and environment that leads to increasingly complex understandings of self and self in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Bubolz & Sontag; 1993). All ecology theories are not developmental per se, because they do not focus on particular outcomes of developmental processes (e.g., identity, cognition, physical skills), but some can be used to explain the ways that personal characteristics interact with environments to promote or inhibit development (Renn, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Human and developmental ecology thus can legitimately be considered as a field that concerns itself, at least in part, with identity development.

Human and developmental ecologists (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993) locate personal identities within a nested context of individuals and the immediate, more distal, and broader societal settings in which they are located. For college students, those immediate settings might include a roommate, athletic team, clubs, classmates, faculty, and family. More distal settings could be the academic administration and federal agencies that make policy decisions that impact students' opportunities for learning and development (e.g., curriculum, study abroad offerings, financial aid). In the example of multiracial identity development, Renn (2003, 2004) demonstrated that the ability and propensity of mixed race students to identify with one or more of their racial heritage groups is influenced by immediate settings (e.g., campus racial climate and attitudes of students from various backgrounds), more distal settings (e.g., policies that determine what racial categories are available on institutional and government forms), and society as a

whole (e.g., the end of laws against inter-racial marriage, attitudes about mixed race people, role models). Conversely, the visible presence of mixed race people on campus and in society exerts a force that changes the environment from the immediate campus climate to the decennial census. The environment influences identity development and expressed identities in turn influence the environment.

Postmodernism and Poststructuralism

Brought to the social sciences from literary studies, postmodernism and poststructuralism are philosophies that provide theoretical context for research into and interpretation of students' identities. These philosophies are based on the idea that "there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become 'naturalised' in culturally and historically specific ways" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 39). Identity, then, is socially constructed and naturalized in temporal and cultural contexts. The study of identity, which is already acknowledged as socially constructed in psychology, sociology, and developmental ecology, becomes nearly impossible if postmodernism and poststructuralism are carried to their theoretical extreme, a condition in which identities are so constantly under construction and reconstruction that they cannot be fixed long enough to be measured or interpreted. Yet some psychologists, sociologists, and student development scholars (e.g., Abes, 2009; Gergen, 1991; Renn, 2004) incorporated postmodern approaches in their work on identities and identity development. Queer theory, CRT, and postmodern feminism (which are described elsewhere in this article) are among the perspectives that are gaining ground in research on student identities, and they represent important foundations for the emergent research described in the next section.

PRESENT STATUS OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

In the past 15 years, research on identity evolved to be more inclusive, nuanced, and interdisciplinary in its approach. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an overview of all existing identity development theories; we focus here on three key elements of current understandings of identity development. First, it is important to understand the commonalities that emerge among theories. Second, new perspectives on identity elaborate multiple theoretical lenses used to consider identity development. And finally, we describe the role of social status on identity to exemplify how theories can assist in understanding the growing population of diverse students in higher education.

Commonalities Among Theories

Identity development theories share some characteristics and assumptions about the nature of development, the social construction of identity, and the importance of considering environmental influences. Many of the theories used in student affairs focus on identity as a developmental progression from simple, conferred ideas about oneself to more complex understandings of what makes up identity (see Marcia, 1993; Quintana, 2007). A number of theories (e.g., Cass, 1979; Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Helms, 1990, 1994) mark development through progressive, linear stages or statuses that lead to an end point in which identities are internalized, synthesized, and permanent. The term *stage* has been criticized for representing an identity state that is rigid, stable, and defined externally to the individual (see Helms, 1994). Statuses take into account previous modes of coping while also acknowledging progress toward more internalized ways of seeing self. This more nuanced understanding of how individuals develop complexity prompted

Helms (1994) to change her terminology to *statuses* rather than *stages*. Still, both statuses and stages can be critiqued for being narrow and not taking broader contextual issues into consideration as individuals move from simpler to more complex understandings of self and identity (Côté & Schwartz, 2002).

A second common characteristic of identity development theories is the general understanding that identity is socially constructed and reconstructed. Previous sections of this article defined social construction and its influence on understanding identity. Through a social constructionist lens, identity development is not necessarily considered a linear phenomenon. Rather, development may involve a set of tasks that may be undertaken in any order (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994) or a revisiting of identity statuses that allows for identity reconstruction (Marcia, 2002). This process of identity reconstruction is typically initiated as a result of disequilibrium, a psychological state of mismatch between individual sense making and perceptions of self in context (environment), or life changes that can initiate dissonance between perception of self and attainment of possible selves (Marcia, 2002; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Pizzolato, 2003, 2005). Disequilibrium prompts the individual to enter a re-formation period that does not disintegrate his or her established identity; instead, the cognitive process of making meaning of changes prompts reconstruction of identity that incorporates change in environment, social status, or other life events.

A third characteristic common to identity development theories entails consideration of the environment or context, a complex system that influences behaviors, attitudes, and cognition (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Wozniak & Fischer, 1993). Because identity is socially constructed, societal changes, including changes in the campus environment,

are major influences on how one views one's own identity and others' identities. As ecology theories make clear, the context in which a person lives is determined by societal norms, values, and behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993). The influence of culture and societal norms creates an intricate web of unstated expectations on the individual. As society changes this web may expand or change, but it is always present. Individuals express their understanding of these expectations through a series of assumed behaviors or beliefs and are often unnoticed by most individuals. Yet this web dictates behavior and determines who or what is seen as appropriate (Collins, 2000).

As a result, members of the majority culture are in a position to determine what the norm is, what is valued, and what is socially appropriate. The power to determine the definition of a healthy identity, therefore, represents a privilege given to people with dominant social status. For this reason, examining the role that culture and dominance play in personal and societal beliefs about identity is critical to understanding socially constructed identities.

NEW APPROACHES

Although it is important to recognize commonalities among existing theories, several newer theoretical approaches to understanding identity are emerging. These approaches foreground both marginalized populations (e.g., by race, ethnicity, disability, or sexuality) as well as the societal structures and dynamics that produce and perpetuate marginalization and oppression (e.g., racism, heterosexism, ableism). Using these theoretical frameworks not only sheds light on particular populations but also on how power and privilege shape identity theories more generally (Abes, 2009). As Anderson and Collins (2007) noted, "Using a social structural analysis of race, class, and

gender turns your attention to how they work as systems of power—systems that differentially advantage and disadvantage groups depending on their social location" (p. 61). Three new approaches gaining in utility for student affairs are CRT, Latino critical theory (LatCrit), and queer theory. These approaches help researchers and practitioners to highlight the experiences of marginalized populations. Consistent with other approaches, identity is viewed as socially constructed. Yet, these newer approaches make critical a closer examination of how society defines the norm in relation to understanding of race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

CRT places the influence of culture, with an acknowledgement of the importance of race and ethnicity, at the center of what is being researched or considered (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Three underlying tenets characterize CRT: (a) structures that oppress must be deconstructed to understand how they influence others; (b) the value of every human being must be considered in the reconstruction; and (c) society should promote value in equal power among all involved (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Using this lens supports a belief that there is no such thing as colorblind research and that failure to recognize social identities perpetuates inequality (Parker, 1998).

CRT originated in legal studies and is broadly connected with critical theory (Habermas, 1987; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993) as a philosophical school of thought because of the shared interest in critiquing social realities and liberation from oppressive societal structures and redistribution of power through the challenging of these structures (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). However, CRT focuses on the centrality of race and the omnipresence of racism in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The use of CRT among Latinos is called LatCrit, which gives "credence to critical raced-gendered epistemologies that recognize students of color as holding and creators of

knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). In addition to placing race and ethnicity at the center, LatCrit considers contrasting European influenced perspectives against those that are Latino oriented. By acknowledging the power held by the majority European culture, researchers expand on the influence that marginalization has on a group of minorities. In expanding the influence, LatCrit also highlights the interconnectedness between societal norms and how norms can be used to oppress certain identities.

Queer theory considers identity and gender as fluid and recognizes the beliefs that historically categorized some behaviors and attractions as nonconforming (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Halperin, 2003). In addition, “Queer theory creates complex intersections of identity through multiple strategies of resistance” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 622). The opposition of power structures defines these strategies of resistance. By acknowledging that those in the majority tend to define norms according to their own privilege (typically White, heterosexual, and middle class values), researchers who use queer theory question the social construction of acceptable behaviors, the so-called normal and abnormal. Like CRT and LatCrit, queer theory enriches the study of identity development by drawing attention to previously unexplored perspectives—those from socially constructed margins and experiences. CRT, LatCrit, and queer theory draw attention to the critical role of social status of different identity groups in the construction of identities.

Potential Role of Social Status on Identity

Research that considers social status focuses on the relationship between context and developing person while acknowledging the influence of a person’s group membership within the larger societal context. For example,

those in the majority may retain power without acknowledging it (Helms, 1990, 1994). White racial identity theories posit that individuals who are members of the majority culture must understand and acknowledge the privilege their social status gives them to achieve an appreciation of diversity in their life and not impose majority culture on others (Helms, 1990, 1994). A different process occurs for those who are not in the majority and thus have limited power in deciding what is socially accepted.

Societal views of a privileged majority can influence how the identities of minority group members are seen and valued. The majority’s views are often associated with historical biases and can promote a negative image of the minority group and its members, thus prompting a tension between a minority group’s beliefs and societal views of the group. This majority view can be seen as oppressing identities that are nonmajority and therefore not consistent with definitions of the norm. Understanding and acknowledging the role oppression plays in the lives of marginalized populations is important to understanding how social status of different groups influences identity development (Torres, 2009). For example, Cross and Vandiver (2001) described the process involved in understanding racial and ethnic identity for people of color as moving from negative images that promote a desire to “fit in” and be more like the majority (Whites within U.S. culture) to a more internalized and integrated sense of self with positive views about one’s race or ethnic background. This more internalized sense of self includes valuing differences in society as well as within one’s own close circle of friends. Whether primarily a member of a majority or minority group, people of all racial and ethnic groups must understand the role social status plays in how individuals view race in the United States. Although racism is talked about, it is the

acknowledgement or experiencing of racism that more clearly prompts the understanding that race is central to the context within society (Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

Social status differences exist not only between monoracial groups, but also between individuals who are monoracial (of one racial heritage) and those who are biracial or multiracial (of more than one racial heritage). Students of mixed race or ethnicity may be keenly aware of the ways that their multiple heritages place them at odds with norms of appearance and cultural knowledge expressed by their monoracial peers (Renn, 2008). Older theories about racial and ethnic identity assumed that one race or ethnicity is nurtured in childhood, whereas multiracial development theories recognize the processes involved with growing up in a home that may encompass cultural aspects of multiple heritage groups. In the face of societal expectations that an individual belong to one racial category, multiracial youth may feel pressure to choose between races (Renn, 2008; Root, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Theories focused on multiracial students support a sense of self within and across multiple races and the integration of complex understandings of race as a part of identity.

These theoretical understandings of multiple races also highlight intersections that occur among the many roles, beliefs, and choices an individual makes within his or her context. Identities are constructed and expressed differently according to what values, norms, and expectations are made more or less salient (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Gergen, 1991; Renn, 2004; Stewart, 2009; Weber, 1998). For this reason, it is important to consider the intersections of identities.

IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONS

Ruthellen Josselson, noted identity scholar,

captures the dynamic tension that characterizes research on identity development by stating:

Living our identities is much like breathing. We don't have to ask ourselves each morning who we are. We simply are. . . . Identity is never fixed; it continually evolves. But something in it stays constant; even when we change, we are recognizably who we have always been. Identity links the past, the present and the social world into a narrative that makes sense. It embodies both change and continuity. (Josselson, 1996, p. 29)

As the previous sections of this article document, the focus of research on identity shifts with historical perspectives, discipline, and context, including the relationship between the parts and the whole of the self. The tension characterized by Josselson illustrates the competing conceptualizations of identity and the "split between theory and lived experience" (Zambrana & Dill, 2009, p. 279). Intersectionality is a new heuristic that addresses this tension by bringing together both the parts and the whole of self as well as the individual in context. In this section, research on multiple identities and intersectionality is explored for its potential to bring theory and lived experience more closely together and to capture the complexities of identity in contemporary times.

Hall (1992) provided an organizational framework to represent the evolution of thinking about identity (he used the term *subject* to describe the self) that reflects the tensions in differing conceptualizations of how the self is understood over time. He delineated three competing conceptualizations of the subject: the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. Each conceptualization conveys the way in which the self is understood and measured. For example, identity as enlightenment subject is presumed to be innate, described

as the core self and revealed along a linear trajectory. The social world is foregrounded in the sociological self and identity develops through the interaction and mediation between the self and sociocultural contexts. And assumptions behind the conceptualization of the postmodern self challenge the very notion of a stable, fixed, unified self, instead emphasizing fragmentation, fluidity, and performativity (Gergen, 1991; Hall, 1992; Yon, 2000).

As previous sections of this article describe, these conceptualizations are evidenced in the evolution of student development research on identity. For example, the epigenetic principle, a central tenet of Erikson's concept of identity development, reflects the enlightenment model; recognition of sociocultural influences and theories focused on specific social identities, as well as those that incorporate environmental and contextual factors reveal elements of the sociological model; and more recent identity work that questions whether or not an essence is even possible and that interrogates structures of power and oppression in relation to identity signals the postmodern subject. Researchers with an interest in more fully and explicitly addressing the larger social categories and contexts in which individuals are situated produced studies that more directly explore social identities and their intersections. Further, this research enabled a return to holistic development, albeit in new form—that is, capturing the whole of an individual more complexly, by emphasizing both social identities and the overlapping domains of identity, cognitive, and interpersonal development. Because another article in this special issue (see Marcia Baxter Magolda) addresses holistic development or the intersections of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive development, this article discusses the emerging scholarship examining intersecting identities, highlighting

the “postmodern subject.” In particular, the concepts of identity salience and contextual influences that inform an understanding of social identities, the analytic lens of intersectionality as a promising framework for identity research, and the challenges in conducting research that investigates identity intersections are explored.

Much of the earlier scholarship in the area of social identities examined social identities independently, as discrete units of analysis (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Further, as Weber (1998) pointed out, the view of individuals in identity scholarship was as “typically assigned a single location along a dimension, which is defined by a set of presumably mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories” (p. 18). This approach resulted in a rich set of developmental theories that examined, for example, the particulars of racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual identity. However, rarely were these brought together in a way that acknowledged that an individual's lived experience is not grounded in only one social identity, but more so in the way in which these identities intersect (Jones, 1997). Even when bringing social identities together, approaches resulted in additive strategies, rather than truly integrative ones (Bowleg, 2008) that would reflect more closely individuals' lived experiences. As a way to convey this distinction Bowleg titled her article addressing methodological challenges with symbols that represent additive and intersectional approaches: “When Black + Lesbian + Woman \neq Black Lesbian Woman” (p. 312). What Bowleg suggested is that most research presumes that each identity dimension exists independently and thus can be understood singularly. Rather, as Bowleg wrote, an approach that examines these identities together illustrates that “being Black and lesbian confers a unique experience, above and beyond being Black or lesbian” (p. 319).

Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Research addressing the possibility of intersecting social identities in student development was introduced in the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Drawing on the work of social psychologist Deaux (1993) and Reynolds and Pope's (1991) model of multiple oppressions, the MMDI distinguished between social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, religion) and a personal identity, depicted as a "core sense of self" (personal characteristics and attributes that the individual claims). The MMDI highlighted the notion of identity salience in the context of multiple identities suggesting that the more salient a social identity is to the individual, the closer to the core it moved; in other words, the more integrated that social identity was to a core sense of self. What contributed to the salience of social identities was depicted in the model as contextual influences, such as family background, sociocultural influences, and current experiences, all of which shift with changing circumstances.

The MMDI was reconceptualized first based upon data from a narrative inquiry exploring lesbian college students' identity development (Abes & Jones, 2004), and again with the integration of a cognitive filter to explore the role of meaning making in perceptions of self, the relationships of context to salience and between social identities and the core were further illuminated (Abes et al., 2007). This analysis and resulting reconceptualized model also raised additional questions about what constitutes the core identity, how social identities variously interact, and the role of larger structures of power and privilege operating in individuals' lives, in ways of which these individuals may not be aware.

Although some may suggest that these approaches to studying and conceptualizing

identity are still grounded in the basic Eriksonian tenets of psychosocial identity, what distinguishes earlier theories and models from those that followed is the explicit attention given to context and the interactions between these contexts and social identities. That is, contexts are patterned by larger structures of power and oppression that interact with individual identities in both particular and systematic ways. An example of this dynamic is found in the work of Torres (2009), who argues that dealing with racism is a developmental task central to identity development of Latino students. Abes (2009) provided another example by illuminating limitations in the use of constructivist approaches in identity research on lesbian college students for their failure to question the power of heteronormativity in a way that acknowledges the societal rather than individual forces at work. Therefore, it is not enough to simply acknowledge that all individuals possess multiple identities and these identities interact. Rather, as developmental ecologists posit, multiple identities must be connected to the larger social structures in which they are embedded. Further, although much of the research on multiple identities emerged from the study of oppressed identities, this focus brings to light the ways in which majority and minority identities interact and the reality that many individuals possess both privileged and oppressed identities. This perspective is reflected in the analytic lens of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as a framework for the study and understanding of identity, grew out of the field of critical legal studies (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991) and the scholarship of women of color (e.g., Collins, 2000; Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007). Seeking to address the absence of representation of their experiences in the literature and to put forward the lived

experiences of marginalized individuals, intersectionality expands the analytic lens to include both multiple identities and larger social structures of power and inequality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality is described as “an innovative and emerging field of study that provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality” (Dill & Zambrana, p. 1). Interdisciplinary by design and in its application, intersectionality provides a framework for new approaches to understanding and researching identity and student identity development. Intersectionality is also squarely focused on praxis. That is, the intent and outcomes of an intersectional approach and analysis is the transformation of practice to address inequalities and promote social change (Dill, personal communication, September 11, 2008) and, thus, may be applied to a full range of issues in student affairs, including the understanding of student identity development and other diversity issues.

Dill et al. (2007) noted, “To a large extent, intersectional work is about identity” (p. 630), and a central tenet of intersectionality is that “individual identity exists within and draws from a web of socially defined statuses some of which may be more salient than others in specific situations or at specific historical moments” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 4). More specifically, Dill and Zambrana suggested that intersectionality is:

Characterized by the following four theoretical interventions: (1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and

essentialized; (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize and structure inequality and oppression; and (4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions. (p. 5)

Dill and Zambrana’s intentional use of the term *theoretical intervention* is significant because it suggests that intersectionality is not a theory itself, but an analytic lens through which theories may be viewed and which results in a shifting frame of reference. Intervention implies both this movement and that the use of intersectionality will result in an improved analysis and greater understanding. It is important to note that intersectionality provides a lens both for investigating identity development and for bringing a focus on identity (e.g., dynamics of race, class, gender) to a full range of questions relevant to student development, such as retention, student involvement, campus community, and equity. For example, given the theoretical interventions noted here, student affairs educators could design programs or develop policy with the experiences of underrepresented students at the center of the process, rather than assuming majority student experiences apply to everyone. Family weekend programs, for instance, presume a traditional family structure and the financial resources to attend. Another example of viewing policy making through an intersectional lens suggests attentiveness to within-group differences rather than advocating for only one student organization focused on “Asian American students,” which runs the risk of ignoring the many cultural, generational, and immigrant status identity differences in this monolithic category.

Although intersectionality emerged primarily from the scholarship women of color and is intended to focus on the experiences

of marginalized individuals and groups by highlighting structures of inequality that influence these experiences, as Collins (2000) suggested, a “matrix of domination” exists which entangles structures of domination with those of privilege. Thus, intersectionality makes way for the examination of both privileged and oppressed identities and acknowledges the possibility of individuals’ inhabiting both (Dill et al., 2007). Much of the earlier research on identity and student development left this distinction untouched. In other words, scholarship typically addressed identity as though the developmental process was the same for all (e.g., psychosocial, cognitive, moral) or it delved more deeply into the process of specific groups (e.g., Asian Americans, Latino/as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students). The result is a lack of sophistication and complexity in understanding how these identity processes interact and the substantive within group differences. This lack of complexity leads to the problem of essentializing groups and failure to question the ways in which power operates differently in the lives of certain individuals and groups. However, studying identity using an intersectional lens is quite challenging.

Methodological Challenges

Studying identities as discrete, independent variables is far easier to accomplish methodologically and is one way of “managing the complexity” of intersecting identities (McCall, 2005). Some researchers moved toward embracing this complexity through qualitative methodological strategies that allow for a closer examination of the realities of lived experience. However, studying intersecting identities is not without challenges and is difficult to work out methodologically. The challenge, as Bowleg (2008) captured, is “how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and

mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach” (p. 314). What this means for student affairs educators is that the presence of intersecting identities (e.g., Asian American students with disabilities) does not necessarily constitute an intersectional approach. Indeed, all individuals possess multiple social identities. However, each is typically treated as distinct and independent. Rather, intersectionality centers analysis on how students’ experiences are enmeshed in systems of power and inequality. This analysis results in foregrounding an issue (e.g., sexual health, campus violence, academic achievement, campus community) rather than demographic categories and how understanding such an issue is enhanced by looking at the intersections of race, class, gender, and other social structures. Designing studies that are able to get to both micro and macro levels of analysis is very challenging and there are currently few good examples.

Jones (2009) recently used intersectionality as a theoretical framework for analyzing the self-authoring process. What such a lens provided to the discussion of self-authorship was a more explicit emphasis on social identities and the challenges involved in securing an internal identity when contextual influences of power and privilege are considered. Abes (2009) called for the use of multiple theoretical perspectives to explore student identities and expose the power structures that shape both identities and the student development theories formulated to explain those identities. Both of these examples also illustrate another methodological challenge of intersectionality and that is the role of implicit data (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Bowleg, 2008; Jones, 2010). Just as it is challenging to design intersectional research, it is also difficult for participants to fully articulate intersectional identities. This leaves considerable authority to the researcher to interpret mutually constitutive identities

when participants may not yet acknowledge these themselves and could also hinder the ability to accurately convey and represent their lived experiences. Research designs must contain mechanisms that illustrate the researcher's effort to interpret implicit data. These strategies include reflection on researcher positionality, member checking with participants, and other measures consistent with assuring trustworthiness of findings (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). As with all research, costs and benefits accompany researcher decisions. However, intersectionality holds great potential to more completely reflect the whole of self in context while also tending to the structures of inequality that exert powerful influences on the constructions of both privileged and oppressed identities.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

As evidence in this manuscript makes clear, substantial literature on college student identity development now exists to guide practice and inform the generation of new theory. By maintaining the multidisciplinary roots of identity development studies and by being alert to emerging theoretical approaches in social science research, student affairs researchers and practitioners are in a position to consider new ways of examining identities and identity development. Among these possibilities are the continued emphasis on intersectionality and the tension of examining both the whole student and his or her constituent parts; greater fluidity within identity categories (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation); a more nuanced exploration of environments; the influence of technology on developmental context, self-presentation, and identity construction; and the role of globalization on identities.

Examining the Whole Student and the Constituent Parts

The holistic approach of student affairs (American Council on Education, 1937) was echoed in early studies (e.g., Chickering, 1979) of student identity, which provided a foundation for understanding college student development and its place in Erikson's (1959/1994) life cycle. As college populations became more diverse and social scientists attended to racial and sexual orientation identity development in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, student development theory evolved to focus tightly on identity development of specific student populations (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, and women). In the last decade, although studies of specific populations have continued to enrich knowledge of identity development in distinct domains considered more or less in isolation, some scholars (Abes, 2009; Abes et al., 2007; Jones, 2010; Stewart, 2009) have begun to put the pieces back together to consider the whole student again, in all of his or her complex and intersecting identities.

This new way of focusing on the whole student brings the field full circle from a two-dimensional student to a fully three-dimensional, developing person in an ever-changing context. As Abes (2009) pointed out, student development researchers are unaccustomed to working across theoretical boundaries in the ways that may be necessary to fully understand wholeness through intersectionality. The tensions between understanding the whole without erasing its distinctive parts and between working with postmodern and critical theories in tandem with some of the useful and informative structural theories will become central to the study of college student identities in the next decade. We expect that studies of, for example, identity and identity

development in emerging adulthood, the presence of “college student” possible selves, and the influence of cultural milieu on identity development will inform theory and student affairs practice.

Greater Fluidity Within Identity Categories

In addition to expanding understanding and use of intersectionality, identity development researchers are beginning to take seriously the ways that students describe greater fluidity within identity categories (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation). Rather than view a biracial student who identifies herself situationally in the different heritage groups of her parents as less than fully developed because she has not selected one identity group (in many theories meaning the non-White heritage), a fluid approach to racial identity allows for the student’s racial identity to shift over time and place, even to the extent that she may deconstruct and reconstruct racial categories as they have been understood (Renn, 2004). A fluid approach to gender allows not only for transgender students to move across the spectrum of gender expression and identity, but for the acknowledgement that systematic genderism (the social structures and norms that require individuals to be one and only one gender, expressed as a woman or a man) affects people of all genders (Bilodeau, 2009). These examples point to the ways that social constructions privilege some identities over others within a category (expressed in racism, sexism, and homophobia, among other oppressions), and also privilege the concept of fixed identities within categories as opposed to fluid conceptions of racial groups, gender identities, and sexuality.

Queer theory (Halperin, 2003; Sullivan, 2003) offers language and tools for understanding how student development theorists might adopt more fluid approaches to identity.

Abes (2009) and Abes and Kasch (2007) offer good examples of how to study college student development without reinforcing heteronormativity (in their example) and fixed notions about identity and identity categories. Other scholars using queer theory provide additional examples of how to de-center identities related to the normalization of certain kinds of bodies (see Sherry [2004] for a discussion of queer theory and disability studies). Expansion of this kind of work will benefit the study of college student identities and the practice of student affairs.

More Nuanced Exploration of Environments

Throughout this article, we have emphasized the importance of environment, both micro and macro, in the development of identities. Yet the tools with which student development scholars currently assess and understand environments are not adequate to support the theoretical advancements currently underway in the field. In the person–environment system, the study of the person (student) has evolved to be much more sophisticated than the study of the environment. Currently, environmental assessment consists of small-scale studies of individual institutions, as in campus climate studies for gender, race, and sexual orientation or campus-level assessments of student involvement and outcomes, and large-scale studies of student engagement (e.g., with faculty, libraries, peers). Although these studies provide valuable information about the student experience and outcomes, they are not designed to facilitate the exploration of student identities or identity development. The role of environment in identity development remains undertheorized and understudied.

Promising work in this area is emerging from studies that use developmental ecology and those that use in-depth, longitudinal data collection (qualitative or quantitative) to

examine the influence of changing environments on identity development (e.g., Guardia & Evans, 2008; Renn, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). In the next decade, these studies and others underway may contribute substantively to what is known about how specific environments and changes in the environment interact with identity development processes.

Influence of Technology

Without a doubt, technology—specifically the Internet, but also telecommunications—has changed the nature of the college environment for student development. The World Wide Web has created new venues for identity exploration and on-line social networks (e.g., Facebook, My Space) create new venues for identity expression. Before their emergence, young people from any identity group could find themselves isolated before college and even on campus; now, any student with access to the Internet can find media, blogs, entertainment, support groups, political groups, and polemics related to any identity he or she wishes to explore. The influence of information by and about people of different identities on identity development in college students is not well understood, but some qualitative studies have shown that students believe it plays some role (see Gasser, 2008; Martínez Alemán & Wartman, 2009). Because on-line information is unfiltered, not always of reliable quality, and not necessarily affirming of all identities, more research is needed to understand how technology can influence identity.

Better understood are the ways that students use technology to present and construct their identities in on-line forums. Martínez Alemán and Wartman (2009) studied on-line student culture, and in the process uncovered the ways students talked and wrote about their evolving identity expression in on-line social networking sites.

Students' identities on Facebook and Second Life, for example, are constructed and kept more or less consistent with their "in-person" identities by the ways that students affiliate on-line with people who are friends in "real life." Greater congruence between on-line and "real-life" friendship groups results in greater consistency between on-line identity and "real" identity; identity development in "real life" is reflected in shifting expressions of self on-line through changing choice of images, quotes, group memberships, and so forth. So identity development may be observed through on-line expression of self, a potentially rich research approach. Additional research on the intersections between technology and identity offer much promise for future research and might be easily based on growing institutional practices using on-line social networks and simulations in, for example, recruiting, orientation, and advising.

Globalization and Identity Development

Finally, increasing internationalization and globalization of higher education and society are prompting interesting new research on student identity development. The meaning of, for example, ethnic and racial identities are different in the United States and in global perspective. Connecting African-American identity with a global reference group including Africans in diasporas and on the African continent provides a new dimension to racial identity. It does not, of course, reduce the impact of racism in the lives of African-American students or on their identity development as understood through the lens of CRT. International experiences (e.g., study or service abroad, having an international student roommate or instructor) may create disequilibrium, providing impetus for identity exploration that leads to further development (see King & Baxter Magolda,

2005; Martínez Alemán, 2000). Discussions of international issues such as global poverty, clean water, human rights, and immigration may expose students to opposing and supporting viewpoints that can also stimulate identity development (Miller & Fernández, 2007; Ortiz, 2000). Studies of identity development in international students are uncommon and often entail small-sample, single campus investigations of students from one country or region (e.g., Diangelo, 2006; Koehne, 2005). Research on the impact of globalization on identity development of domestic students in higher education is nascent and these areas are ripe for high-quality inquiries.

In conclusion, the study of identity development has a promising future that can build on a strong, multidisciplinary foundation. Student development scholars and student affairs professionals should be open to new theoretical approaches and to exploring

new combinations of well-known theories. Critical race theory, LatCrit, queer theory, and theories of intersectionality have much to contribute to understanding student identity development, yet further investigation of the ways that individuals and their environments interact in the social construction of both identity categories and individual identities is needed. It is impossible to predict precisely what direction identity development theory will take, but it seems likely that the productive tension between understanding the whole student and understanding what identities constitute that whole will stimulate new ways of understanding students and their development.

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