

Self and Identity in Early Adolescence

Some Reflections and an Introduction to the Special Issue

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This article reviews contemporary issues in the study of self and identity and introduces the special issue. Particularly highlighted are the need to integrate the various currents in self and identity, the need to study the role of context in the development of self and identity, research on self and identity in ethnic minority and international populations, and studies of national identity. The article concludes with recommendations for future research on self and identity.

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The study of the self and of identity has been ongoing for more than a century. Cooley (1902) and James (1890) were among the first psychologists to theorize about the self. Many psychoanalysts—most notably Freud (1923/1961) and Erikson (1950)—wrote extensively about the self and its development. Research on self remains prominent; witness the recent launching of journals such as *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *Self and Identity*, and *Identities: Global Studies in Structure and Power*.

In contemporary social science, however, the study of the self has become increasingly fragmented (Côté & Levine, 2002). Literatures on “self” and “identity” have been largely—and perhaps unnecessarily—separated

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(Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006). Moreover, *within* the study of identity, for example, different aspects of identity have inspired entirely separate literatures (Côté, 2006). Work on personal identity, for example, has been almost completely segregated from work on ethnic and cultural identity (Schwartz, 2005; Sneed, Schwartz, & Cross, 2006). For a more in-depth discussion of these separations and fragmentations, readers are referred to Côté (2006) and to Côté and Levine (2002).

The fragmentation of the study of self and identity has been compounded by research traditions that focus on different age and ethnic groups. The identity-status literature, based on Marcia's (1966) operationalization of Erikson's (1950) dimensions of crisis and commitment, has inspired more than 500 theoretical and empirical publications (Kroger, 2000). However, the bulk of this literature has focused on largely White samples of college students (Schwartz, 2005). Literature on ethnic and cultural identity, on the other hand, has focused primarily on immigrants and ethnic minorities (Constantine, Gainor, Ahluwalia, & Berkel, 2003; Lam, 2005) or on cross-ethnic or cross-national comparisons (e.g., Ghorbani, Bing, Watson, Davison, & LeBreton, 2003; Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006).

Simply put, it is time to put Humpty Dumpty together again. It is time to bring together different perspectives on self and identity and to identify commonalities between and among them (Schwartz, 2001). It is time to study both personal and ethnic/cultural identity across ethnic groups (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2007; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Wang, 2007). It is time to map the nomological network among various constructs included under the umbrella of self and identity.

There is also a dearth of identity research focusing on early adolescents. Most identity-status research focuses on older adolescents and on emerging adults (Schwartz, 2005), assumedly based on the premise that little or no identity activity takes place during the early adolescent years (cf. Archer, 1982; Archer & Waterman, 1983). Somewhat more research has been conducted on ethnic identity in early adolescence (e.g., Pegg & Plybon, 2005; Weisskirch, 2005), and a great deal of work has been done on self-concept in early adolescence (e.g., Bellmore & Cillessen, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2006; Young & Sudweeks, 2005). Because early adolescence is such a fertile stage of self-development, it is necessary to study multiple aspects of self and identity, so as to ascertain the network of interrelationships among them, during this period. For example, do various aspects of self and identity develop simultaneously, or is there a developmental progression among them?

One dimension of identity that has received increasing attention in recent years, especially since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on

New York City and Washington, D.C., is *national* identity (e.g., Schildkraut, 2003; Tsai, Mortensen, Wong, & Hess, 2002). The increasing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the United States and many other Western countries has called into question what it means to be an American, a Canadian, an Australian, and so forth. One can walk down the street in New York City, Toronto, London, or Paris and hear 20 or more languages being spoken. Are there any unifying principles underlying national identity in multicultural societies—and does the answer differ depending on whom we ask? Clearly, there is much left for us to learn about national identity and its relationships to other aspects of self, but in the aftermath of September 11th—as well as of other terrorist attacks in Great Britain, Spain, Israel, and elsewhere—national identity is clearly of increased interest both to researchers and to the public.

Context, Self, and Problem Behavior

Yet another area of interest to researchers in self and identity is the way in which the self is influenced by contextual processes in the family, peer, and school domains. It is well known, for example, that a cohesive and well-functioning family environment, including involved and supportive parents, is associated with a positive and coherent sense of self and identity (e.g., Lam, 2005; McClun & Merrell, 1998; Mullis, Brailsford, & Mullis, 2003). There is also some evidence that support from peers (Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002) and from teachers (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005) is related to a positive sense of identity, and that peer acceptance and academic performance are related to self-concept in early adolescence (Harter, 1996; Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992). Umaña-Taylor and colleagues have demonstrated the importance of familial influences in the development of ethnic identity among ethnic minority adolescents in the United States (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001).

Various aspects of self have also been implicated in the genesis and maintenance of problem behaviors. Personal identity, operationalized from either an identity status or an Eriksonian viewpoint, has been negatively associated with conduct problems (Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2005), drug and alcohol use (Bishop, Weisgram, Holleque, Lund, & Wheeler-Anderson, 2005; Jones, Hartmann, Grochowski, & Glider, 1989), and sexual risk taking (Hernandez & DiClemente, 1992; Schwartz, Mason, Pantin, & Szapocznik, in press). Ethnic identity also has been found to protect youth against all of these outcomes (Arbona, Jackson, McCoy, & Blakely, 1999; Belgrave, Marin, & Chambers, 2000; Marsiglia, Kulis, & Hecht, 2001). Some research has also identified self-concept as a protective factor, along with

family and school processes, against problem behavior (e.g., Henderson, Dakof, Schwartz, & Liddle, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2006).

Methodological Advances in Research on Self and Identity

The study of self and identity has come a long way in the past several years. Not long ago, researchers had to choose between narrative-qualitative research, which provides a great deal of richness and information about each individual participant but does not lend itself well to statistical analysis, and variable-centered quantitative research, which is useful for mapping relationships among variables but often leaves the person out of the equation. Either way, something was lost.

Two important statistical advances have helped to heal this divide and to allow researchers to have the best of both worlds. First, mixed-method research, using both quantitative and qualitative strategies, has gained increasing popularity in recent years (Sale & Brazil, 2004), so much so that some journals have begun to prefer mixed-method studies (Arnett, 2006). Second, person-centered quantitative analyses, which focus on identifying clusters of participants with similar profiles on specific variables, have become increasingly prevalent in the research literature (von Eye & Bogat, 2006). Person-centered and variable-centered analyses may be used nicely together, especially when they produce similar results and reinforce one another's conclusions (Laursen & Hoff, 2006).

Mixed-method (e.g., Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhjamsdottir, 2005; Schwartz, Kurtines, & Montgomery, 2005) and combined variable- and person-centered (e.g., Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005) studies have begun to appear in the identity literature very recently. These studies have suggested that the confluence among methods leads to stronger and more persuasive conclusions. Not only do we understand the structural relations among variables, but we can also appreciate the experiences and viewpoints of the participants.

The Articles in This Issue

The articles in this special issue all address the issues reviewed above. Roeser et al. (2008 [this issue]) utilize a mixed-method approach, using both variable-centered and person-centered quantitative analyses, to explore correlates of identity and self-concept in a multi-ethnic sample of adolescent

girls. This kind of approach is both innovative and informative, and it demonstrates that adolescent girls are an extremely heterogeneous population in terms of self-perceptions and in terms of the correlates of these self-perceptions.

Bohanek, Marin, and Fivush (2008 [this issue]) use a mixed-method approach to explore patterns of family reminiscing and the effects of these patterns on subsequent adolescent adjustment. Again, the innovation lies in the richness of narrative approaches, combined with variable-centered quantitative analyses to show that the detailed information from these narratives has important implications for how adolescents make sense of themselves. Norris et al. (2008 [this issue]) take up an extremely interesting, important, and timely research question: How do adolescents in South Africa, one of the most multi-ethnic countries in the world, identify with their nationality in the shadow of apartheid? This research has considerable implications not only for South Africa, but also for other multi-ethnic nations and those undergoing rapid political change. Hall and Brassard (2008 [this issue]) examine relational predictors of identity status across three prominent United States ethnic groups—Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. This kind of work is much needed because the majority of identity-status research has not attended to ethnic diversity (Sneed et al., 2006), and because identifying contextual correlates of identity development is a must if we are to intervene to promote identity work in young people.

Houlihan, Gibbons, Gerrard, Yeh, and Reimer (2008 [this issue]) explore the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between self-concept and sexual onset in African American adolescents. Because sexual behavior has traditionally been viewed as an outcome, and self-concept (and other variables) as predictors, our knowledge of the effects of sexual debut on subsequent self-perceptions is not well understood. The research presented by Houlihan et al. will hopefully inspire more research adopting this kind of perspective. Moreover, given the rates of sexual activity among African American adolescents, exploring the predictors and consequences of this activity is a critical research direction. Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, and Gonzales-Backen (2008 [this issue]) explore the longitudinal relationships of ethnic identity, coping with discrimination, and self-esteem in a sample of Hispanic adolescents. This research is innovative for a number of reasons. First, the longitudinal design allows for examination of the directionality in the relationships between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Second, the study examines a potential mediating mechanism within this relationship. Third, the authors attend to the ways in which ethnic minority adolescents cope with discrimination. Given the growth rate of the United States Hispanic population, this kind of research will become more and more necessary as the 21st century progresses.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The articles in this special issue point to a number of important directions for research on self and identity. Perhaps the most important of these is to inspire more research on self and identity development among early adolescents. There clearly *is* identity activity occurring during early adolescence, and our task is to refine and develop measurement instruments so that we can best detect and understand this activity (Schwartz, Pantin, et al., 2005). The identity-status literature may need to follow in the footsteps of the self-concept literature and focus on domains that are most germane to young adolescents—such as academic performance, family relationships, body image, and fitting in with peers. Domains traditionally used in identity-status measures, such as political preference, religious affiliation, and occupational goals, may not be relevant to early adolescents.

Second, all of the studies in the special issue used either ethnic minority or multi-ethnic samples. This stands in contrast to prior research on self and identity, much of which has used primarily White samples (Schwartz, 2005; Sneed et al., 2006). Given the increasingly multicultural populations in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Israel, Australia, and many other postindustrial countries, ethnic-minority and multicultural samples will be needed to facilitate generalizability and to increase our understanding of the groups who are comprising increasingly greater shares of the population.

Third, two of the studies in the special issue used designs employing multiple analytic methods. More studies using (a) both quantitative and qualitative analyses and (b) person-centered and variable-centered analyses are needed so that we understand both relationships among variables *and* the experiences of individual participants. Some studies, such as Roeser et al. (2008), select a subset of the participants from quantitative analysis for follow-up qualitative interviews. This type of strategy can help to garner narrative information about each of the groups extracted from person-centered analyses, or about specific experiences or relationships emerging from variable-centered analyses.

Fourth, national identity represents an important and growing segment of identity research. Although national identity research is certainly important in any country, it is likely most important in three types of settings: (a) countries undergoing rapid social and political change, such as the former Yugoslavian republics, Iraq, and Venezuela; (b) countries receiving a mass influx of immigrants who are culturally different from the majority population, such as the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia; and (c) countries that have historically comprised multiple linguistic, ethnic, or

cultural groups—such as Belgium, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and the United Kingdom. South Africa, the country studied by Norris et al. (2008), fits all three of these descriptions. National identity is also important to study in countries characterized by only one of these categories—such as the countries listed above.

Fifth, the role of self and identity in public health concerns such as substance use, sexual risk taking, and delinquency needs to be more thoroughly investigated. As Houlihan et al. (2008) have found, the self is intricately involved in the genesis and maintenance of health risk behaviors. This kind of evidence can then be used to develop interventions, based both in self and in social context, to alleviate these behaviors (Schwartz, Pantin, Coatsworth, & Szapocznik, 2007).

Finally, the articles in this issue have addressed various dimensions of self and identity, including identity status, self-concept, self-esteem, ethnic identity, and national identity. As I (Schwartz, 2001, 2005) have suggested, an important direction for self and identity research is to study these dimensions *together*. For example, although the extent to which *self* and *identity* represent distinct constructs has been addressed conceptually (Roeser et al., 2006), empirical evidence needs to be brought to bear on this issue. Moreover, the relationships between *personal* and *ethnic/cultural* identity have not received much attention. My colleagues and I (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2007; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Wang, 2007) have begun to map the associations between personal and ethnic/cultural identity, both within and across ethnic groups. Still, much more research is needed in this area. We need to follow the advice of Côté (2006) and put the pieces of the self-identity puzzle together to create a larger and more coherent whole.

In closing, I sincerely hope that this special issue represents both a coming together of important work from various dimensions of self and identity—as well as a starting point for more integrative, visionary, and applied work. Self and identity have occupied a special place in the writings of many classic psychological theorists, and the mantle has been passed to us to bring their ideas to fruition.

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