Career and Identity Development:

Bringing Erikson, Marcia and Adler into the 21st Century

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Late adolescence and young adulthood can be a very trying time for most. In high school, there are certain expectations of graduates, such as finishing and attaining a diploma. However, after the high school diploma, not all expectations are very clear. For many, college is an expectation. For others college is not the expectation; rather, the assumption is that they would join the workforce. Furthermore, in the high school years, many decisions are made for the adolescent, but for the young adult, they are expected to make their own decisions. It is a complicated time of life for many individuals in this situation, and they face myriad choices.

To make matters even more difficult for young adults, now more than ever, they can “select from among a wider assortment of identity choices and can take a more active role in their own development and future planning” (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, L. & Pollock, 2008, p. 567). For those young adults who are driven to succeed or for those that know what they want, this freedom and variety of choice holds much potential and promise. Yet for what seems like the majority of young adults, confusion is what lies at the forefront.

Further complicating this time of life is that it is also a period of identity development. Luyckx et al. (2008) contends that the opportunities for freedom and variety of choice does
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not just extend into vocational and social realms, but also into opportunity for “identity change, exploration, and experimentation” (p. 567). Young adults have a great deal to contend with at this point in their lives, from grappling with their own self-efficacy and self-concept, to sorting out their life experiences to date. It is no wonder why evidence points to career indecision for this age group (Nauta & Kahn, 2007). As possible evidence of this indecision, the Pew Research Center (2010) reported that 66% of young adults responded as either very likely or somewhat likely that they will switch careers at some point. However, the most astounding statistic is that nearly 6 of 10 employed young adults have reported already switched careers (Pew Research Center, 2010).

**Experiential Project Objectives**

An experiential project was designed to educate and encourage a group of young adult leaders involved in a church community. The project was a presentation with four components, given in an informal setting. First, this presenter shared his interest in this topic, followed by a discussion of the current state of young adults relevant to career decision-making. Second, the young adults received an overview of career decision-making theory and identity development theory. As part of this review, the young adults also learned some of the key names involved with identity development, specifically Erik Erikson, James Marcia and Alfred Adler. Third, the participants received a challenge as to what to do with this information. The final objective was a spiritual/biblical tie-in. Because the group is affiliated with a church, this component was important as it gave added credence to the presentation for a group that can be somewhat skeptical of social sciences, especially psychology.

A spiritual and biblical tie-in also gave added encouragement to this group.
First, knowing the information would help the group to understand what they are currently experiencing. Sperry (1989) outlined steps to therapeutic change, and one which is significant is the need for providing insight. While this was not a group intended for therapeutic purposes, the hope was that this modicum of insight could nudge some individuals toward a potentially meaningful change in their lives. Second, they were encouraged with “next steps.” Simply knowing the information maybe a very good beginning, but if members of the group are currently in the midst of their own identity or career exploration, recommended next steps could be invaluable. Third, a spiritual and biblical tie-in would bring added encouragement to their faith journeys. Ansbacher and Ansbacher pointed out that “Adler considered God as an idea but a powerful idea that played an important role in people’s lives” (as cited by Baruth and Manning, 1987, p. 430). A spiritual tie-in during the presentation brought attention to possibly the most important idea for many of the group members.

**Career Decision-Making Theory**

While there are several career decision-making theories, the primary theory of emphasis in this presentation is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). SCCT lays down the theoretical foundation for understanding the process by which people form and choose their career interests and aspirations (Schauba & Tokarb, 2005). According to Zunker (2006) this theory looked at various factors such as environment, behavior, physical attributes, and learning experience. These factors are interrelated and interact with each other, ultimately contributing to beliefs and patterns of thinking. For example, the environment may impact learning experiences or a person’s physical attributes may directly affect what behavior is possible for an individual. From a holistic perspective, it is nearly impossible to separate these four factors from each other when examining what has contributed to an individual’s pattern
of thinking. In addition, Zunker (2006) listed three particularly important constructs from SCCT: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008). These three constructs, as well as the aforementioned factors, are fundamental in the process of choosing and developing career interests.

**Career Decision-Making and Self-Efficacy**

Of special interest to this discussion was self-efficacy. According to Kroger (2007), self-efficacy referred to “perceived capabilities within specific domains: (p. 97). This idea of self-efficacy was derived from Social Cognitive Theory. It is thought that people choose “to engage in or avoid a specific task based on their self-judgment of their competency in accomplishing the task” (Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008, p. 285). It should be noted that from these definitions, it was believed that self-efficacy is task and domain specific. However, more recently it has been believed that self-efficacy can be generalized from one domain or task to another. For example, Schunk and Pajares (2005) posited that children are proficient in mathematics would feel more self-efficacious when it comes to learning new content compared to those children who have a learning disability (97).

This generalizability of self-efficacy could have a profound effect on career decision making. In fact, Nauta and Kahn (2007) utilized the term career decision self-efficacy which referred to “a person’s confidence in her or his ability to engage in career decision-making tasks” (p. 55). It is believed that if a person had low career decision self-efficacy, that person would steer clear of investigating career options, much less committing to any one career path. This idea of career self-efficacy has not just been drawn out by SCCT, but it also plays a central role in the theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).
Also, self-efficacy seems to be a mediator between a person’s background and his or her outcome expectancy. This means that as a matter of process, self-efficacy would “influence one’s interests and outcome expectations, which eventually would influence one’s career choice” (Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008, p. 285). It should also be noted that three major effects or specific behaviors are derived from self-efficacy. They are “approach versus avoidance, level of performance, and persistence” (Betz, 2007, p. 403). In other words self-efficacy may affect whether an individual attempts or avoids a task or opportunity; whether that individual attempts to perform at a high level or simply seeks to complete the task; and whether that individual has the determination to see a task or opportunity through to completion.

**Career Decision-Making and Learning Experiences**

Often tied to self-efficacy is the study of learning experiences. It is difficult to overstate the importance of learning experiences considering the influence they can have on self-efficacy. For example, Jackson, Potere, and Brobst (2006) stated that the learning experience is “the most essential concept for understanding how individuals develop occupational preferences and related skills and beliefs” (p. 335). It is argued that from the perceived successful learning experiences an individual will build his or her preference of occupation, skill or belief. In other words, successful learning experiences will breed positive self-efficacy which promotes a particular vocation or skill-set.

The impact of family and family experiences contribute to the development of self-efficacy. Schunk and Pajares (2005) wrote that “initial self-efficacy sources are centered in the family” and that “parents also are key providers of self-efficacy information” (p. 95). The influence that parents and families have on self-efficacy is generally without question. As
for the how this happens, Schunk and Pajares (2005) would argue that parents are providers and supporters of a variety of positive experiences (p. 95). This would help children to feel more capable of meeting new and varied challenges. By providing these experiences, parents are fostering sources of self-efficacy.

**Erikson and Identity Development**

Often when studying career-making decisions and career development, it is helpful to reference issues of identity development. With the inclusion of ideas such as self-efficacy in SCCT, that there is an element of crossover between developmental psychology and career development. After all, for many people personal identity is tied directly to vocational identity (Kosine, 2008).

This intersection of career development and identity development specifically impacts young adults. Recent research has indicated that many in this population segment undergo a sort of “quarter life crisis.” However, Arnett (2007) pointed out that there had already been an expression coined for what young adults are going through: identity crisis, a term described by Erik Erikson (1968). This expression is much older, and it may be more appropriate because it describes more accurately what is developmentally happening within the young adult.

Erikson was a developmental psychologist who took Freud’s ideas of psychosexual stages and instead used “psychosocial stages.” Erikson (1968) identified eight stages in the developmental process from birth to old age. Each stage is centered on a conflict, and it is believed that these conflicts are significant in shaping our lives and our personalities.

Of these stages, most relevant to young adults is what is sometimes known as the fidelity stage. This stage is also known as “identity versus role confusion”. It typically begins
in adolescence and continues through the mid-twenties. It is the questioning of self. It is in this stage that questions arise. Who am I? How do I fit in? Where am I going in life? Thus, it can be an intense period of exploration. Johnson, Buboltz, and Seeman (2003) pointed out that it was Erikson that “stressed the importance of an active search for identity during adolescence” (p. 192). Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, and Vansteenkiste (2005) also argued that this formation of stable identity may be “the most important developmental task for adolescents” (p. 605).

Also overlapping with this stage is the “love” stage. This is often considered the sixth stage and is also known as Intimacy versus Isolation. Erikson (1968) posited that this stage begins after adolescence and continues well into mature adulthood. In this stage, a new set of questions arise. With whom do I want to spend my life and what will I do with my life? Will I settle down?

The questions asked in both of these stages are incredibly important for the young adult, as they address both the present and the future. Those in the young adult population are not only interested in who they are now, but also who they will be in the future.

**Marcia and Identity Development**

It was Marcia (1994) who further explored Erikson’s identity versus role diffusion psychosocial stage. He developed the theory that there are four ego identity statuses in which adolescents and young adults may be categorized. He reasoned that “the original dichotomy of identity-identity diffusion (confusion) did not capture adequately the variety of styles of identity resolution” (Marcia, 1994, p. 72). This led him to develop the four identity statuses: identity achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and diffusion.
The four statuses, while individually unique, are premised on the common factors of a “combination of two underlying dimensions, that is, exploration and commitment” (Luyckx et al., 2005, p. 605). It is thought that those who have arrived at identity achievement have gone through their own personal exploration as it relates to ideology and interpersonal concerns before finally settling on a commitment. This idea of commitment refers to the convictions that one holds to certain beliefs and views. The belief or view is chosen among several alternatives and is acknowledged as a genuine commitment when only with great reluctance would it be abandoned (Marcia, 1994, p. 72). Meanwhile, exploration refers to the active seeking and evaluation of those beliefs and views. Marcia (1994) held that this may involve “questioning the childhood positions and some departure from them: ideally, in the form of a unique individual integration” (p. 72).

Again, it is from within these two categories of exploration and commitment that the four statuses are derived, with the two statuses of “foreclosure” and “achieved” specifically tied to commitment while the other two statuses of “moratorium” and “diffusion” are linked to exploration. The difference between the statuses of foreclosure and achieved is that those in the foreclosure status usually have not gone through exploration of their own. Instead they have adopted their parents’ views or simply retained beliefs and views from childhood. Meanwhile those in identity-achievement status have made their commitment as a result of their own exploration process. As foreclosure relates to vocation, it has been shown that those in this status have “consistently shown high levels of authoritarianism, low levels of autonomy, and use of an external locus of control” (Kroger, 2007, p. 104). Those in identity-achievement, on the other hand, have been shown to use “more adaptive defense mechanisms
and to have high levels of ego development, personal autonomy, and self-esteem (Kroger, 2007, p.104).

In regard to exploration, it is in the statuses of moratorium and diffusion where a person has not arrived at a place of commitment; however, there are some significant differences between the two. In a moratorium, an individual is still exploring. Marcia (1994) believed that this person is “struggling actively to arrive” at commitment (p. 73). Yet, the person characterized by identity diffusion can barely be described as exploring. Marcia (1994) described it as more of a “wandering” with most definitely no commitment. These two statuses have also been tied in some ways to vocation. The status of moratorium has been linked to high anxiety and also a high level of openness to new experiences (Kroger, 2007, p. 104). On the other side, those with identity-diffusion have shown low self-esteem, low personal autonomy, and are typically shyer than others that may fall into one of the other three identity statuses (Kroger, 2007, p. 104).

Furthering evidence that there is a link between vocation and identity, Kroger (2007) argued that “choice of vocational direction in late adolescence will set up the initial framework for the way in which one’s early adult years will be structured” (p. 101). This is because young adults frequently cite the area of vocation to be fundamentally significant. Yet, if vocation is important to the identity of the young adults, but they are still attempting to sort out their identity, it would be beneficial to look at other factors affecting career interest and choice such as self-efficacy and learning experiences.

**Alfred Adler and Identity Development**

While Alfred Adler does not specifically address identity development, his ideas and theories do contribute to how people uniquely view themselves in the world. There are many
ideas from Adlerian theory which can be argued as having correlation with identity. Five of his ideas are examined here: lifestyle, social interest, purposefulness of behavior, life tasks, and birth order.

**Lifestyle**

One of the cornerstones in Adlerian theory is the lifestyle. Mosak and Maniaci (1999) explained that the lifestyle is a “subjective, unarticulated set of guidelines individuals develop and use to move them through life and toward their goals” (p. 47). Furthermore, the lifestyle is essentially a set of convictions that people utilize to see themselves in the world: the Adlerian definitions of the self-concept and self-ideal. Mosak and Maniaci (1999) described the self concept as how a person defines him- or herself, while the self-ideal is the standard by which the individual will measure him- or herself.

So while examining the lifestyle and its convictions, it is easy to see the connection with identity. If a part of identity is about how one perceives oneself in relationship with the world, the lifestyle undoubtedly contributes to, and is intertwined, with identity.

**Social Interest**

Another significant component of Adler’s theories is the idea of social interest, an indirect translation of the German term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Another translation is “community feeling.” According to Huber (2006), the embodiment of the original meaning is “behaving with others in a cooperative and empathic way” (p. 114). Essentially, the idea is that every individual has a social context. Furthermore, all problems are considered social problems. In other words, an individual’s problem will have a social effect. Because of this profound impact, social interest is known as the bellwether of human psyche. In fact, Adler
(1937) stated that the “degree of social interest is the main characteristic of each person and is involved in all his actions (p. 774).

It is easy to see the connection of social interest to a young adult population. During these years young adults are not just looking for a job, but instead an identity that fits well into society. Mosak and Maniacci (1999) further explained social interest as a “sense of feeling at home in the world at large” (p. 113). They also stated that “people don’t necessarily have it; they use it… social interest is an action based upon the feeling of community” (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999, p. 113). This sum up the position of the young adult population: They are trying to find their place in this world not just in terms of position, but also movement.

**Behavior is Purposeful**

Another aspect of Adler’s theory is how it is teleological in nature: the idea that all behavior is purposeful. Bitter (2007) explained that the “individual's movement through life is purposeful...implies directionality, and requires a goal” (p. 8). Thus, it is argued that within each individual’s lifestyle is a goal or an end cause toward which the individual works. This is sometimes known as a “final fiction: because it is something that is not necessarily tangible and not necessarily known to the individual, yet it is still a “goal that directs us as to what we should be or accomplish in order to belong” (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999, p. 16). These goals lie in the future and may not even be attainable, but still, a person’s lifestyle is influenced heavily by this fiction.

This idea that behavior is purposeful in nature would seem to contribute to identity development by the way it exerts influence on a person’s lifestyle. This goal-directedness or final fiction implies that the individual is not static, “but as one who is always becoming”
(Jones, p. 232). It is in this process of “becoming” that lifestyle is impacted, and thus, contribution to identity development occurs.

**Life Tasks**

A fourth of Adler’s theories is the premise that there are “three tasks of life.” These life tasks represent areas in which all must cope and find solutions, include building friendships (social task), establishing intimacy (love-marriage task), and contributing to society (occupational task). Adler (1956) believed that all people must work towards all life tasks, regardless of age, culture, or nationality. Mosak and Dreikurs (2000) argued later that there were two additional tasks: coping with oneself and spiritual development.

Of all of the tasks, the occupational task is sometimes considered the most important because it is argued that most people will find themselves fulfilling the occupational task (Baruth & Manning, 1987). Considering the aforementioned link between identity and career, it easy to see how this occupational task can be considered so important. Yet despite the emphasis on the occupational task, it is hard to ignore the correlative influence of the other two original tasks: the social and love tasks. In regard to the social task, Baruth and Manning (1987) explained that it is this that people are “satisfying everyday needs through social relationship that embrace an interest in society and other people” (p. 432). If we embrace the fact that people and their problems are socially embedded, then there is no escaping the social task. Yet, the love task, on the other hand, is said to be rarely fulfilled in comparison with other two tasks (Baruth & Manning, 1987). It requires greatest courage and faith in self, as to attempt intimacy and love with another person requires vulnerability which may discourage many from even attempting to fulfill the love task.
In regard to the additional two life tasks, Mosak and Dreikurs (2000) explained that coping with oneself is introspective and is indicative of a struggle to be at peace with oneself or to find one’s place in society. The spiritual task as described by Mosak and Dreikurs (2000) refers to the search for meaning. The five aspects to the spiritual task are: relationship to God, the role of religion, an individual’s place in the universe, immortality, and the meaning of life.

These are life tasks are very apparent in the lives of young adults. They struggle to find occupation that is meaningful to them, work to establish lasting friendships and social circles, and strive to find that one individual with which to spend the rest of their lives. This is not to mention the existential exercises with which young adults often grapple. It is in the wrestling with these life tasks that the exploration of identity in young adults is most evident.

**Birth Order**

The final idea briefly explored in my presentation was birth order. This does not refer simply whether a person was born first, second or third. Instead, Adler (1956) argued that “it is not the child’s number in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the situation into which he is born and the way in which he interprets it” (p. 377). Campbell, White and Steward (2006) explained that “every person has a self-perceived place in his or her family” (p. 325). This self-perceived place does not mean that it is that individual’s chronological birth order. Instead it is referred to as the psychological birth order of the individual (Campbell, White, & Stewart, 2006).

All of these ideas from Adlerian theory correlate with identity and career development. While the Adlerian ideas were not all inclusive, these five seem to identify and explain how people view themselves in the world and how people see themselves moving
through life. The holistic nature of Adlerian theory means that it does not just explain human psychology or psychopathology, but explains identity development clearly. This does not appear to be discussed much in available literature on Adlerian theory. More research on this area of Adler’s theory is needed and could possibly open the door to the greater discussions of identity and career development.

The Spiritual Discussion

Again, this experiential project was given as a presentation to a group of young adults associated with a local church community. The main purpose of this group would seem to fit with the spiritual task of life. Yet, that was not the focus of the presentation. The brief discussion that did take place regarding a spiritual tie-in with career and identity development and spirituality focused on anecdotal evidence in the Bible. Listed as examples were various young adults found in the Bible, such as Jesus’ own disciples. An aspect of the story of Moses was also given as a metaphor. It should be mentioned that the use of biblical allusions in therapy is not unique, as Mosak (1987) thought that reference to they could prove beneficial in working with clients. He argued that “since the number of spiritual, existential, and religious problems brought to the attention of the therapist has proliferated, the use of religious allusion, and the knowledge of such allusions, had best become part of the armamentarium of the therapist” (p. 500).

A spiritual tie-in was important to make with this focus group, as from a holistic perspective, the spirituality of the individuals simply could not be ignored. Many of the individuals were undoubtedly in the various statuses outlined by Marcia (1994) and mostly they were in an exploration status such as moratorium. An important aspect of this exploration is the spiritual side of their identity. Most had grown up in families where
spirituality was of the utmost importance, so for many of these young adults, understanding a spiritual tie-in was not just important; rather it was essential because, given the setting of the group, these young adults may primarily be grappling with the spiritual life task. Thus, while the discussion regarding career and identity development was more holistic in nature, examining all facets of life tasks and development, it may have been the spiritual tie-in that legitimized the discussion.

**Conclusion**

The topic of identity has been seemingly studied to no end. It has been discussed, theorized, and researched for decades. The theories on identity are constantly improving and evolving. In addressing the link between identity and career development, Hartman and Betz (2007) claimed that it has only been relatively recently that vocational psychology has “been enriched by at least two relatively new theoretical emphases, social cognitive career theory and the integration of personality theory and measurement as a major variable in the understanding of vocational behavior and career development” (p. 145).

From a developmental viewpoint, it is not surprising that young adults have low self-efficacy in terms of career decision-making. This may be because many of them are still in the moratorium or diffusion status and have not “yet formed stable or clear pictures of themselves” including their career identities (Nauta & Kahn, 2007, p. 56). Again, drawing from Marcia’s ideas, it is thought that “identity formation as a developmental process has implications for career decision-making because both exploration and commitment are critical parts of decision-making” (Nauta & Kahn, 2007, p. 56). If this is true, it would be beneficial for counselors to take aim at identity formation and help young adults wrestle with this
process in their lives. It may provide insight and guidance for their college career or vocational direction in helping them set a proper course of action.

There seemed to be a natural connection of the ideas of self-efficacy, learning experiences, and identity formation, a relationship that can be expounded on much more. Especially intriguing is the link to Adlerian theory. Adlerian concepts such as lifestyle could potentially add a great deal to the discussion of identity development. It provides better explanations as to how people view themselves in the world and would be extremely interesting to research on the connection between the various Adlerian concepts and career development.

Finally, the experience of this project and presentation has been very rewarding. There has been a greater understanding achieved of the young adult population, which has blossomed into a growing interest for this writer. Of course, there were some limitations of this project. In a forty-minute presentation, it was difficult to present an in-depth conversation of all the nuances of identity development. If another presentation were to be given, it might be beneficial to pare down the information even more, so that greater explanation could be given to some of the larger ideas of the discussion. Yet, the insight provided seemed to benefit this group, as all the feedback from participants was positive. It is hoped that from this presentation the young adults from this church community would have a greater clarity in their own path of identity and career development.
References


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