The Role of Contextual Influences on Self-Perceptions of Identity

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This qualitative study investigated contextual influences involved in college student identity development. It examined events, experiences, and relationships that alumni suggest either nourished or thwarted their perceptions of multiple dimensions of their identity during college. Findings suggest that self-perceptions of identity often change as a result of the emotions experienced by individuals in reaction to various contextual influences.

One of the major challenges faced by traditional-aged students while they are in college is the development of their own identity. According to Freud, identity is the integration of an individual within the group, how he or she learns to interact within that group, and how he or she interacts with other groups (as cited in Erikson, 1980). Erikson added to that conceptualization by describing identity as the ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness and to act accordingly (1968).

Models of student identity development are becoming more abundant as scholars in the field of student affairs are recognizing the need to describe the unique experiences of students from different backgrounds and life experiences. However, these models tend to focus more on the *outcomes* of development rather than on the *process* of development. Little is known about forces that may either facilitate or deter the identity formation process as well as how to facilitate students' movement through the proposed stages of development (Evans, 1996).

Although much work has been done to explore the impact of college-related experiences upon students (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), many other life experiences, not directly related to the collegiate experience, are also thought to influence student identity development (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Jones and McEwen refer to these as "contextual influences" and believe that they may include the following: childhood experiences, sociocultural conditions, and relationships. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) speak of these life events as "transitions" that result in "changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). These life transitions provide opportunities for growth and development in that they often create disequilibrium that demands reorganization of meaning and of self in relation to others (Kegan, 1982). Therefore, a variety of contextual influences needs to be considered when studying college student identity development.

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For this study, self-perceptions were chosen as the outcome construct of identity development in that self-perceptions are often more important to individuals than are the commonly measured behavioral manifestations of identity development. Interestingly, few scholars in higher education have focused on self-perceptions; a couple of models of homosexual identity formation, however, are the exception. Both Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994) suggest that self-perceptions are important outcomes of identity development. In Cass's model of homosexual formation, six stages of "perception" and "behavior" exist, each having both a cognitive component as well as an affective component. The cognitive component is described as how individuals perceive themselves. The affective component is described as how individuals feel about their own and others' perceptions of their sexual identity. D'Augelli's model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development also includes self-perceptions as an outcome of identity development. In D'Augelli's terms, homosexual identity development results in personal subjectivities as well as in actions. Personal subjectivities include the perceptions and feelings about one's own sexual identity; whereas actions include the actual sexual behaviors and the meanings attached to them.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of various contextual influences, both related to the college experience and unrelated to the college experience, upon college students' changing self-perceptions of various identity dimensions. To this end, a life narrative, retrospective approach was used to collect and to interpret stories from 15 college alumni about the life experiences that they believed shaped their self-perceptions of various dimensions of their own identity during their collegiate experience. Alumni were chosen since they had already completed their entire undergraduate experience. In effect then, the alumni served as the expert respondents about college students' changing self-perceptions of identity. The two research questions that guided this study are as follows: What contextual influences impact college students' self-perceptions of identity during college? How do contextual influences nourish or thwart these self-perceptions?

Method

Participants

All participants were alumni of the same large, public Research-Extensive university located in the southwestern United States. This institution enrolls about 35,000 students; of these, approximately three-fourths (26,250) are undergraduates, and one-fourth (8,750) are graduate and professional students. The university has a total of 14 colleges and, at the undergraduate level, offers degrees in 126 fields of study.

Decision criteria for selection of the sample were based on two dimensions of identity, sex and race, as well as on temporal proximity to college graduation. My intent was to maximize the variation within the sample in terms of sex and race; 7 males and 8 females, of various races, were represented in the final sample. I only included individuals who had graduated from college within the past 10 years. An assumption underlying this decision is that individuals who graduated from college

most recently may have an easier time recalling the events that occurred while they were in college than those who have been out of college for a significant period of time.

According to these criteria, participants were selected utilizing purposeful sampling which emphasizes sampling for information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). The maximum variation sampling strategy was appropriate in order to have a variety of backgrounds and experiences represented in the sample. The initial few participants were identified by colleagues of mine who were working at this institution at the time this study was conducted. Snowball sampling was then used to identify additional participants who met the criteria for involvement in this study; this sampling procedure involves a process of chain referral, whereby each contact is asked to identify additional members of the target population, who are asked to name others, and so on (Patton, 2002). Saturation was achieved and sampling was ended when patterns and themes in the data emerged and a diverse sample had been attained (Strauss, 1987).

The final sample was comprised of 8 females and 7 males, ranging in age from 21 to 30 years old. Seven different races or ethnicities were represented in the sample: Filipino, Pakistani, Chinese-American, African-American, Hispanic, Native-American, and Caucasian. Additionally, two participants identified themselves as being biracial. The purpose of having this cultural diversity was to ensure that various contextual influences would be represented in the research. For example, Native-American students might have been impacted by contextual influences (e.g., tribal experiences) that Caucasian students might not have encountered during college. The mean age of participants was 24.7 years old; the mode was 23 years old. All of the participants were currently living in the same area in which their alma mater is located.

Procedure

Lifelines. Research in developmental psychology and projective techniques indicates that the use of drawings (visual representations) in psychological assessment is a valuable and effective means of soliciting information about experiences (Howe, Burgess, & McCormack, 1987; Schildkrout & Schenker, 1972). The lifeline exercise helps individuals review important periods or events in their lives and helps them assess the impact of those events and experiences, both positive and negative. According to the literature in the field of psychology, the lifeline is a commonly accepted tool used for tasks requiring retrospective thinking, in spite of the fact that the developer of the exercise is unknown.

This exercise requires that individuals draw a horizontal line that represents a particular period of time. Above the line, experiences that were positive, happy, or rewarding are plotted chronologically. Below are plotted experiences that were negative, unhappy, or painful. The distance above or below the line indicates the degree of positive or negative impact or feeling. Individuals are asked to write at least two or three positive and negative events or experiences and to label these.

The main purpose of this tool, for this study, was to encourage self-reflection by the participants; hence, it was used to facilitate the data gathering process and not used as data itself. Unlike other tools used to investigate research questions concerning life events, this method allowed the participants to determine which events, experiences, and relationships to mention without being forced to choose from certain categories.

Interviews. Each of the 15 participants was interviewed twice; the second interview occurred approximately a week after the first. The length of each interview was approximately 45 minutes to one hour. To ensure accuracy, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in their entirety.

The initial interview occurred after I had contacted each participant by phone or e-mail to request participation in the study. The purpose of this interview was twofold. First, the participants were asked to identify and discuss various dimensions of their own identity. Second, they were asked to talk about significant events, experiences, and relationships that shaped their identity before going to college.

At the end of the first interview, the participants were given a blank lifeline upon which to plot the pivotal events, experiences, and relationships that occurred during their undergraduate careers and that they believed shaped their identity. Attached to this blank lifeline was a sample lifeline and instructions for completing one of their own. They were then instructed to bring this lifeline to their second interview. This allowed the participants the opportunity to think about these issues during the week between the two interviews. Research suggests that when people can practice unconstrained recall, elaborating their own account of the past at their own pace, they are much more accurate than when they are forced to report on the past under time limits (Neisser, 1988).

The purpose of the second interview was to discuss the contextual influences (events, experiences, and relationships) that shaped the participants' self-perceptions of their identity during college; the completed lifelines were used as the interview guide for this stage in the data collection process. For instance, participants were asked to describe each event, experience, and relationship that they had plotted on their lifeline. Furthermore, they were instructed to clearly describe the context of the occurrence (e.g., "What else was happening in your life when this event occurred?") as well as their beliefs concerning how those contextual influences shaped their identity. In actuality, then, the participants did the majority of the talking during the second interview; although I asked questions for clarification as needed. A benefit of using this open-ended, qualitative approach is that it allowed participants to choose which dimensions of identity they wanted to discuss; therefore, it became clear which dimensions they felt were most salient during their collegiate years.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interviews inductively through the use of two techniques: the pattern coding method and the constant comparative method. Pattern coding is a way of grouping "segments of data into smaller numbers of themes or constructs" by looking for recurring phrases and common threads (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Utilizing the interview transcripts from each of the participants, I developed theme lists by noting recurring phrases concerning the contextual influences upon self-perceptions of identity. I looked for types of contextual influences mentioned, such as events, experiences, or relationships, and coded each into one of those three categories.

Additionally, the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to determine how contextual influences nourish or thwart self-perceptions of dimensions of identity. By the term "nourish," I mean that identity dimensions became more salient in a positive way as perceived by that participant. Just the opposite is true for those dimensions that were "thwarted"; when this occurred, those dimensions were made salient in a negative way, meaning that participants developed a more negative view of those dimensions of their own identity. In this regard, I was looking for the process underlying the impact of contextual influences upon identity development; I was looking for how a particular influence nourished or thwarted self-perceptions of various identity dimensions. I developed a theme list for each type of influence: nourish and thwart. Within each theme list, I recorded how that impact occurred by describing, with a word or short phrase, the underlying process involved in the impact.

I analyzed the interview data on a constant and ongoing basis; during the time that I was conducting interviews, I was involved in an ongoing process of data collection, coding, analysis, and concept development. I interpreted the interviews through the use of grounded theory methodology (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987), in which the interpretation was "guided by successively evolving interpretations made during the course of the study" (Strauss, p. 10).

Some limitations to this study must be mentioned. First, the focus was on alumni from one institution only. It is possible that students attending various types of institutions—public and private, four-year and two-year—could have experienced different life events, experiences, and relationships both before and during their collegiate careers. Furthermore, only college alumni still residing in the geographic location of that one institution were respondents in the study. It is possible that other potentially important identity-shaping variables may not have been identified due to the fact that the sample was homogeneous in this respect. For instance, these individuals may still be in the area of their alma mater due to having family members living in that location. It is likely that the influence of their family upon the changing self-perceptions of their identity may have played a larger role for them than for other students who did not live near their families during their collegiate careers.

In spite of the limitations, as I designed the study and collected and analyzed the data, I used Merriam's (1998) tactics to ensure the trustworthiness of my results. In order to provide an audit trail, I retained all handwritten notes and theme lists; consent forms, interview tapes, and interview transcripts are also available. Additionally, I conducted member checks by sending each participant a summary of the information that I had gleaned from his or her interview transcripts, along with my analysis of that information.

Findings

The Nature of Contextual Influences

All of the participants mentioned the impact of contextual influences upon their self-perceptions of various identity dimensions during college. These contextual influences included various events, experiences, and relationships. In analyzing these events, experiences, and relationships, the following domains of contextual influence emerged: college entry, curriculum, co-curriculum, travel, life issues, and college departure. Various events, experiences, and relationships, within these domains of contextual influences, either nourished or thwarted the participants' perceptions of dimensions of their own identity. Some examples of these events, experiences, and relationships are displayed in Table 1.

The Role of Contextual Influences

Upon analyzing each event, experience, and relationship discussed by the participants, I found that a common theme emerged. When asked how each event, experience, and relationship affected or shaped the participants' identity, participants usually replied by sharing an emotion that was evoked due to those experiences. Each emotion either nourished particular dimensions of identity or else thwarted identity dimensions.

A total of 29 different emotions were evoked by the participants' events, experiences, and relationships; of these, 20 resulted in the nourishing of identity dimensions, while 9 resulted in the thwarting of dimensions of identity. Upon further investigation and coding, the prevalent emotions were identified and placed into the appropriate category: those that nourish identity and those that thwart identity. Table 2 displays this information.

When I examined the interview transcripts of each participant, it became clear that self-perceptions of various dimensions of identity were often nourished and thwarted over time as emotions were evoked due to particular events, experiences, and/or relationships. Stories told by Gina, Maria, and Matthew, chosen for inclusion in this article on the basis of the quantity of experiences shared, illustrate this process.

Gina: Changing self-perceptions of academic competence. Gina, a 25-year old American Indian, grew up in a Navajo tribe. Within this culture, females tend to be more highly educated and more powerful than males. Gina's father, having only a high school education, works as a highway patrolman; her mother, having

obtained a master's degree, works as a librarian in a public junior high school. Her mother and father were divorced when Gina was 15 years old.

Table 1

Events, Experiences, and Relationships within Domains of Contextual Influences

Domain of Contextual Influence	Example of Event, Experience or Relationship
College Entry	College orientation program (experience)
Curriculum	Faculty-student relationship (relationship)
Co-Curriculum	Being hired as a resident assistant (event)
Travel	Studying abroad (experience)
Life issues	Death of a grandparent (event)
College Departure	Parents expressing pride about graduation (relationship)

Table 2

Emotions that Shape Self-Perceptions of Identity

Emotions that Nourish	Emotions that Thwart
Pride	Feeling different
Acceptance	Shame
Challenge	Insecurity
Competence	Unhappiness
Happiness	Challenge

Upon gaining acceptance into college, Gina was awarded a Flinn scholarship. Interestingly, this prestigious academic status both nourished and thwarted her sense of her own academic competence. It was nourished due to Gina's feeling of pride for being selected as a Flinn scholar and due to her feeling competent in the academic realm, but it was thwarted as Gina felt challenged due to her American Indian background:

> I came here as a Flinn scholar, which was a really high achievement. And, I was the only, ever, American Indian Flinn scholar. So, there were all of these other expectations on me, because that's who I was. So, I was getting mixed things. It was like, "Oh, you are going to fail. You can't do it. Native Americans can't do it." And then it was like I had to live up to these standards from this other group of people that I was all of a sudden in. I came in as a Flinn scholar, and I thought, "I'm not going to fail. I'm a Flinn scholar. Why would I fail? I'm supposedly one of those special, scholarly-type people."

Along with this scholarship, came the "honor" of being an honors student. This, unfortunately, resulted in the thwarting of Gina's perception of her academic competence due to a particular experience during her freshman year that resulted in Gina's feeling ashamed:

> I didn't do well. My grade point average wasn't extremely low. But, for a Flinn scholarship, you have to keep a 3.2. So, my freshman year, I had just gone over that. It was like a 3.25 or 3.29. So, I could keep my Flinn scholarship, but I was also an honors student ... you have to maintain a 3.5. So, I was on probation ... for an honors student ... the next semester when I had come back.

This led to further confusion about her academic competence as she continued to remind herself that she was also an American Indian Flinn scholar. At times, her self-perception of her academic competence was nourished, and at other times, it was thwarted. Her reactions to her own social contexts determined the nature of her rapidly changing self-perceptions of this dimension of her identity:

> I came in [to college] not so much as an American Indian student. I came in as a Flinn scholar. Flinn scholars are an elite group of students. And, I was judging myself on that. Once you are named a Flinn scholar, pretty much everyone knows you are, whether you want that or not [laughing] ... or whether you even really understood what that meant. When I came here [to college], I knew what it meant. It gives you kind of this false sense. People really like to characterize you if you are a Flinn scholar, and it's not exactly in a good way. I had never been characterized that way, and I didn't like it. It was just that people were already setting up all of these parameters for me. And I went through, and I obviously didn't do well as a Flinn scholar. On Flinn scholar hierarchy, I was probably at the bottom [laughing]. But, when I was judging myself with all the other American Indian students that I knew, based on *that*, I was doing fine.

Gina's college graduation was a capstone experience that nourished her self-perception of her academic competence; this graduation experienced evoked feelings of pride, acceptance, competence, and happiness:

> It just felt really good [laughing]. And, I just felt like, "See? I can do it." There were all of these people saying, "She's going to drop out. She's going to drop out." And, it was just like, "You are wrong." It was like, I can slap all kinds of people in the face now [laughing]. And, I wore my traditional outfit to graduation. But, you couldn't see it, because you have to wear the gown. But, I took all of my jewelry out and put it on the top [laughing].

Currently, Gina is pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of higher education administration. She works part-time in an internship in Native American Student Affairs where she can be an "advocate of American Indian students."

Maria: Changing self-perceptions of racial identity. Maria, a 21-year-old biracial (half Hispanic and half White) master's level student, was raised in a small, southwestern community near the border of Mexico. Her father is a White concrete worker with a high school education, and her mother is a Hispanic (from Spain) educator with a master's degree. Her mother divorced her father because of his alcoholism when Maria was 9 years old.

Due to these experiences in her childhood, Maria started college with a negative self-perception of her Hispanic racial identity. However, it was not long after entering college that she experienced a negative event that actually nourished her racial identity due to the feeling of pride that was eventually evoked:

> My roommate was born in Korea and was adopted within a few weeks of her birth and brought up in Minnesota. I had a classmate, Veronica, who was White and in a sorority. Veronica and I studied together. She came over once and didn't say anything but "hi" to my roommate, who looks Asian in appearance. And they said "hi" and that was it. And, when Veronica and I left to go study, she said, "Oh, is your roommate a science major, too?" And, I was like, "No." And she said, "Well, music then, right?" And I said, "Actually, yeah, she's a music major. Why?" And Veronica said, "Well, she looked like she had to be one or the other." And, I just about died, because [laughing], I thought, "You have not met this person! You know nothing about her. But, based on her Asian appearance, she has to be either science or music." It just made me angry. But, I guess I was still proud of what I was [racial identity] and I was proud of my roommate being what she is [racial identity].

During her sophomore year, Maria dated an individual who had attended the same high school as she. Because this relationship ended up being negative, even a seemingly positive experience thwarted the Hispanic component of Maria's racial identity. This was because Maria was made to feel different and insecure:

> He was the first guy I dated. The race thing came up in the fact that he was White. His parents were prejudiced. But, I guess they saw me as White, too, because they were fine with me. And, he would just make comments about it.

Like, my eyes.... They were brown and they have blue around the edges. It's like a genetic thing. And, he attributes that to being Spanish, and so he would make Spanish comments, which were nice and sweet.... But, I picked up on the fact that he associated that with my being Spanish in some way. It just made it [racial identity] more noticeable. And, the fact that I don't like that type of individual ... that [racial identity] was brought up more.

A final example of the way in which a college relationship thwarted the Hispanic component of Maria's racial identity concerns a good friend of hers. Conversations with this friend led Maria to feel ashamed for being naturally dark:

Race came up again, because she's very White, and the tanning thing ... [Interviewer: What do you mean by the "tanning" thing?] Well, people [including Maria's friend] always say, "Oh, you are so lucky. You have this natural tan. Look at me, I'm White." They would want to compare their skin to mine to show how White they are and how dark I am ... whatever. There seems to be more value in society on someone who works for their tan and "gets" a tan. But, if you are already tan, it's not the same. So, growing up, I always hoped that people thought I was White with a tan [laughing]. I always wondered what people thought. Maybe they thought I was White with a tan.

Currently, Maria places high salience on the Hispanic portion of her identity. When forced between checking either the "White" or the "Hispanic" box for a question concerning her race, Maria usually checks Hispanic. She believes that "if you have any sort of minority in you, it overrides ... it overrides Whiteness. It's more noticeable." The social context in which Maria finds herself often determines which component of her racial identity is more salient. When surrounded by a group of people who are all White, Maria says that she "feels very Hispanic." When surrounded by a group of Hispanic people, she "feels very White." She states that she "never quite feels multi-racial."

Matthew: Changing self-perceptions of academic competence. Matthew, a 24-year old Chinese medical student, was raised in a small town in the southwestern United States. His father is a financial advisor, and his mother, once a stockbroker in Taiwan, currently owns a small greyhound racing business. Matthew reports that both his mother and father are "very giving" and spent much of their free time volunteering with Hospice when he was a child.

After having his self-perception of his academic competence thwarted on several occasions during his childhood, Matthew had some college experiences that nourished his perception of his academic competence. He speaks highly of a tutor that he had during his freshman year. This tutor helped him feel competent:

One of the things I was introduced to was the writing skills improvement program. And, I signed up for it, and Dr. Miller was the tutor assigned to me. She is somebody that I met first semester and that I still talk to even though I'm like three or four years out of undergraduate. She is somebody who definitely influenced my writing, somebody who has given me a lot of

inspiration, somebody who has helped build my self-confidence over the four years, somebody that I could always go to in times of stress. And, she could attest to this. There were times I'd be so stressed out, I'd be very intolerable [laughing]. She gave me very encouraging word, not only in terms of the way I was writing but in terms of life in general.

Unfortunately, Matthew had an advising meeting with a pre-medical advisor that ended up thwarting his self-perception of his academic competence due to Matthew feeling different and challenged:

The pre-medical advisor at that time made it seem like that unless you had some really extenuating circumstances, you shouldn't be applying into medical school. Well, my academic record was not that good. And, I was like, "Okay, it might take me 10 tries to get into medical school. I was kind of disenchanted. I thought I didn't fit in. I just thought I'd have to work twice as hard or work harder just to make myself stand out.

His next advising meeting, however, was with another advisor. This relationship served to nourish his self-perception of his academic competence by evoking a sense of competence and acceptance in Matthew:

Jenny was more of a person who kind of got to know who you were and kind of just built on the qualities that you had. She was very encouraging. She basically found out what you had, what you were made of, what your interests were … and kind of helped you build on it. Very encouraging, kind of nurturing type of person.… I think she had a significant effect on who I am.

Finally, Matthew's self-perception of his academic competence was once again nourished as a result of his military commissioning. This event evoked feelings of pride and competence in Matthew:

Had you asked me about military service back in high school, I would've.… If I had seen a recruiter within 200 yards, I would turn around and run as fast as I could out the door. Now, it was like, "Okay, this sounds fun." I signed up for it as a joke, really [laughing]. They sent this mailing to everybody who had taken the MCAT, which is the admissions test. I filled it in to see what would happen … without taking it too seriously. I sent it back. And then, low and behold, one thing led to another. The recruiters called me. Three months later, I get the letter saying, "Congratulations. You've been offered a scholarship. Do you want it?" Again, it's another one of those confidence-boosters, because, at that time, I was thinking, "What do I have above everybody else?" I guess I found out [laughing].

At the time of the interview, Matthew was completing his fourth and final year of medical school. Upon graduation, he will be serving four years in the military in the residency program. After that, he plans to complete a three-year fellowship, studying maternal-fetal medicine. His ultimate goal is to become an obstetrician.

Discussion

As the college alumni shared their stories, it became clear that self-perceptions of identity dimensions change over time, and significant contextual influences (life events, experiences, and relationships) are pivotal in this process. Congruent with research by Schlossberg et al. (1995), these contextual influences often included both positive and negative aspects for the same individual who experienced them. Moreover, individuals tend to make subjective, cognitive appraisals about the life events that they experience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Perceptions, then, play a crucial role in how the event, experience, or relationship is viewed and how the individual copes with that experience.

The personal, emotional reaction to these life events seems to be the key to the changing self-perceptions of identity. Time and time again, alumni shared their experiences, their resulting feelings, and then their changed self-perceptions. For instance, even though Maria's boyfriend made seemingly positive comments about Maria's appearance, those comments resulted in Maria's feeling "different." This emotional reaction, then, led to the thwarting of her self-perception of her racial identity.

At least a couple of stage-models of college student identity development also emphasize this emotional aspect of the identity formation process but do so without describing the impact upon the self-perceptions of the experiencing individual. In her model of homosexual formation, Cass (1979) discusses the role of emotion when describing the "encounter" stage. In this stage of development, students experience disequilibrium as a result of an event in their lives. In essence, this event sparks an emotional reaction (e.g., anger) that leads to a cognitive reaction (e.g., exploration). This cognitive reaction then leads to a new stage of identity. Helms's (1993) model of White racial identity development incorporates a similar sequence of events. In this model, the "dynamic interplay" of cognition and emotion gives rise to a new stage of identity. As in Cass's model, emotional reactions to experiences lead to cognitive appraisals of those experiences; this, then, influences the White racial identity development of the experiencing individual.

This research supports the proposition that life events influence individuals differently, based not only on their individual characteristics but also on how the individuals perceive those events. Hatcher (1989) speaks of this phenomenon when discussing the personal rites of passage experienced by young adults. In this regard, she states that "although a rite of passage may be classified as generally positive or negative, the personal translation of a presumably positive rite such as going off to college may indeed be experienced as a celebration, punishment, or a learning experience" (p. 179). Hatcher goes on to explain that sometimes events may be experienced as "false positives" (p. 189) in that a presumably positive experience actually leads to a negative reaction.

It is possible that developmental tasks and crises mentioned by scholars such as Erikson (1968, 1980), Chickering and Reisser (1993), Marcia (1966, 1980), and

Josselson (1987) are contextual influences manifested through various events, experiences, and relationships. The emotional reactions and changing self-perceptions that result from experiencing such contextual influences may provide the impetus for movement from one stage of identity to another. Of course, this is a hypothesis requiring further investigation. This is important in that Phinney (1992) and Cass (1979) both state that conflicts and inconsistencies in self-perceptions must be resolved in order to advance to higher levels of identity complexity.

Further research needs to be conducted into the underlying process of identity development. In particular, longitudinal research should be conducted in which students are interviewed each year during college, to further investigate the changing self-perceptions of their identity over time. This would allow researchers the opportunity to determine the *present* impact of various contextual influences. Furthermore, as students are actually dealing with events, experiences, and relationships that may impact self-perceptions of their identity, they might be reacting differently to those contextual influences based on their individual level of emotional development. This type of research could provide useful knowledge to those of us interested in learning more about the differential impact of contextual influences upon student identity development.

Another line of future research could involve investigating the interplay between the emotional and cognitive reactions to contextual influences as they facilitate identity development and the methods students use to cope with the impact of those contextual influences. Furthermore, students of various backgrounds (e.g., those raised in poverty; those with salient religious affiliations) should be included in future research in order to take into consideration the differential impacts of family background and childhood experiences upon identity development during college. In an attempt to understand the identity development of college students, more qualitative research is needed in which contextual factors are taken into consideration and in which students' voices about their own experiences are clearly heard.

Implications

There are some valuable implications of the results of this research. First, faculty members and student affairs professionals should be reminded that development in all domains does not occur within a sheltered higher education environment that is untouched by contextual influences (events, experiences, and relationships) from outside, either temporally or spatially, of that environment. Moreover, due to the individualistic nature of and reaction to these contextual influences, there are multiple paths of development even within the same domain (e.g., identity development). So, in effect, the interventions that might help some students develop healthy self-perceptions of their identity might not be useful or even relevant to other students. For faculty members and student affairs professionals in the higher education environment, both "preventive maintenance" and "crisis

management" are in order to help facilitate positive identity development among students.

Faculty members should be concerned about student development as well as about learning. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) argue that, "learning and development are not discrete personal dynamics that operate in isolation in easily compartmentalized processes" (p. 291). It is likely, then, that students' self-perceptions of their identity play a role in their learning process while in college. For example, as students are impacted by contextual influences while in college, the emotional and cognitive reactions that result from various events, experiences, and relationships most likely impact their ability to concentrate in class, the amount of study time they might have outside of class, and even their desire to succeed in college. Who would expect a student who has just experienced a death in her family, for example, to display her best academic performance within the first few months after the death?

Related to this, the learning experiences provided to students have the potential to assist in the development of either positive or negative self-perceptions of student identity. These learning experiences can result from or be related to individual tutoring and advising sessions as well as to actual classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Matthew's story clearly demonstrates this. In his experience, two different academic advising sessions resulted in the development of completely opposite self-perceptions of academic competence. "Preventive maintenance" for faculty might include the attempt to provide positive classroom and one-on-one experiences for students. Classroom discussions should include a diversity of perspectives. When faculty work one-on-one with students, whether advising them or helping them with homework, they can provide positive feedback about various aspects of their identity (e.g., "I believe that you are really good with math in spite of the fact that you are having some difficulty with this particular assignment"). While working with students, faculty members can strive to impart inspiration and confidence to students about all domains of the students' identity.

Student affairs professionals should be reminded of the dynamic nature of student development. Students' perceptions of certain aspects of their identity often change as a result of the contextual influences in their lives. For example, Gina's status as an "honor" student was not always perceived as being positive. Therefore, student affairs professionals need to try to prioritize time with students in hopes of having the opportunity to know how students perceive various aspects of their identity at different points in time.

For student affairs professionals, "preventive maintenance" might come in the form of providing programs and services that recognize the diversity of the experiences and identities represented in the student population. Programs that celebrate various identities serve to strengthen students' self-perceptions of their own identity. This, then, might lessen the negative impact of future experiences that students might face related to their identity. One-on-one time with students also provides opportunities to nourish students' perceptions of their own identity.

For instance, when meeting with a student for discipline, a judicial officer might spend some time finding out about the student's background before discussing the actual discipline issue at hand. This would provide knowledge that can be used to promote a positive student identity (e.g., "It sounds like you have worked hard in school all of your life. You must be a very conscientious student").

Faculty members and student affairs professionals would serve students well by taking the time to become more aware of the events, experiences, and relationships that are impacting the students with whom they work. This is where the "crisis management" comes in. As students share stories of the contextual influences in their lives, faculty members and student affairs professionals have the opportunity, through caring dialogue, to help them change negative emotional reactions related to their identity into positive self-perceptions. In a sense, they can help the students cope with various contextual influences in a manner that is nourishing to their identity by offering a positive interpretation for negative situations. For instance, if a student shares that his parents are disappointed that he has changed his major from physical therapy to music, a faculty member or student affairs professional can change the focus of the conversation to how much the parents care about the student, how much they are concerned that the student will be able to make enough money to live, etc. Rather than feeling like a failure for making this decision, the student can be confident in his decision and can better understand the underlying reasons behind his parents' disapproval.

The results of this research translate into the need for faculty members and student affairs professionals to prioritize time with students to discuss the personal aspects of their lives as well as the academic aspect. Students' lives are not only affected by what occurs on the campus but also by what occurs off campus during their collegiate experience. Contextual influences that are both related to and unrelated to the collegiate environment must be taken into account as we, in higher education, attempt to study and to facilitate the identity development of the students with whom we work.

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