Identity status and personal construct systems

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The relationship between identity status and the structural features of an individual's personal construct system or self-theory was investigated. Personal constructs relevant to ten contemporaneous roles (myself as a friend, student, son/daughter, and so on) were elicited from 75 late adolescents who also completed an identity-status measure. Correlational analyses between identity-status scores and structural features of the self-system revealed a theoretically interpretable pattern of interrelationships. The implications of these findings for future research is considered.

INTRODUCTION

According to Erik Erikson (1959, 1968), the construction of a clear and stable sense of identity is the focal task of adolescence. A crystallized identity structure provides a sense of integrative continuity over time and a subjective perception of self-sameness over contemporaneous roles. Although Erikson does not use these exact terms, identity can be conceptualized as a self-constructed theory of the self (see Berzonsky, 1986a, 1987). A self-theory, as Epstein (1973, p. 407) writes,

... is a theory that the individual has unwittingly constructed about himself [or herself] as an experiencing, functioning individual ... [It contains] major postulate systems for the nature of the world, for the nature of the self, and their interaction. Like most theories, the self-theory is a conceptual tool for accomplishing a purpose. [Major purposes are] to optimize the pleasure/pain balance of the individual over the course of a lifetime ... and to organize the data of experience in a manner than can be coped with effectively.

The effectiveness of one's self-theory, or system of personal theoretical constructs, can be evaluated in terms of its pragmatic usefulness: do the self-constructs provide explanations and interpretations that serve one's values, goals, and desires? Does the individual find the theory to be logically coherent and believable (Schlenker, 1985; Berzonsky, 1987). Of course, the physical and social reality within which a person functions constrains...
pragmatic utility (Berzonsky, 1986b). Therefore, to be optimally effective, one's identity or self-theory needs to be revised and restructured over time, e.g. when adolescents mature physically, establish new social relations, and individuate from parental figures.

Most recent identity researchers have utilized Marcia's (1966) operational system of identity-status classifications. Four statuses are operationalized by assessing self-reported commitments and self-exploratory crises: Achievers (committed types who have previously engaged in deliberate self-exploration); Foreclosures (committed types who have not experienced self-exploratory crises); Moratoriums (uncommitted individuals presently engaged in self-exploration); and Diffusions (uncommitted types not experiencing self-exploration).

Research indicates that this paradigm is a valid method for assessing individual differences in identity formation (see reviews by Marcia, 1980; Bourne, 1978; Berzonsky, 1981; Waterman, 1982). While most researchers have conceptualized the statuses as differential products or outcome variables, a process-oriented interpretation is also viable (see Berzonsky, 1986c, 1987). Research reveals that the statuses differ in the way they process, structure, and utilize self-relevant information.

For example, Foreclosures have been found to be intolerant of ambiguity and to possess rigid, authoritarian belief systems (Marcia, 1966, 1967; Schenkel and Marcia, 1972). A recent study by Slugoski, Marcia, and Koopman (1984) focused on the extent to which the statuses used complex integrative reasoning when dealing with interpersonal problems. In comparison to the self-reflective statuses (Achievers and Moratoriums), Foreclosures and Diffusions had difficulty adopting a self-determined perspective within which they could integrate multiple and conflicting sources of information. Likewise, Read, Adams, and Dobson (1984), in an investigation of interpersonal and attentional style, found that Foreclosures were least apt to integrate and evaluate information from multiple perspectives. Additionally, Foreclosures and Diffusions focused their attention so narrowly that they failed to attend to relevant information. In comparison, Achievers and Moratoriums processed greater amounts of information and reported feeling more self-certain about their ideas (Read et al., 1984).

Since there are differences in the way the statuses process self-relevant information (see also Berzonsky, 1986c, 1987), it seems reasonable to expect to find differences in the way their self-theories are structured and organized. They may operate as different types of self-theorists (Berzonsky, 1987). For example, an information-oriented, self-exploratory approach to identity questions would tend to produce a well-differentiated set of theoretical self-constructs. Firm commitments may be associated with a tightly organized and integrated set of self-constructs which is utilized in a
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self-certain fashion. A diffuse, situation-specific approach might result in an "fragmented" rather than unified self-theory.

Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs provides a means of operationalizing the structural features of an individual's self-theory. The present constructivist, identity-as-theory account is similar to Kelly's (1955) view that individuals actively construct reality as they live in it. According to his person-as-scientist metaphor, human beings attempt to predict, interpret, and control events in their lives by constructing theories, testing hypotheses, considering evidence, and the like. Internal representations or cognitive schemas are abstracted and/or built as people attempt to order their experiences into meaningful recurrent patterns called personal constructs. In Kellian (1955) terms, one's identity or self-theory is composed of idiosyncratic self-constructs.

Repertory grid techniques are used to elicit the conceptual dimensions or bipolar constructs (e.g. confident vs. insecure) individuals use to discriminate meaningfully among aspects of their social and physical world (see Fransella and Bannister, 1977; Neimeyer and Neimeyer, 1981). Individuals then rate a set of "elements" on Likert-type scales anchored by these personal constructs. A wide variety of elements can be used, including role titles, significant people, life stages, occupations, situations, and so on (see Neimeyer and Neimeyer, 1981). Statistical analyses of an individual's grid ratings are used to distinguish the structural properties of the person's construct system. For instance, intensity scores have been employed to assess construct integration (see Fransella and Bannister, 1977; Cochran, 1983). An indication of how "tightly" or "loosely" one's constructs are organized is obtained by considering the size of the correlations between all pairs of constructs. An overall Intensity score is calculated by squaring each correlation (to eliminate the sign), multiplying by 100 (to remove the decimal), and then summing across scores. Functionally independent constructions (FIC) scores have been used to assess construct articulation and differentiation (Landfield, 1971, 1977). Constructs that produce dissimilar ratings of the same element are functionally independent. In contrast, two or more constructs that produce similar element ratings, despite their differing linguistic labels, are functionally equivalent; they form an undifferentiated cluster. High FIC scores indicate a well-articulated set of constructs that are used in distinctive ways (Landfield, 1977). Finally, self-certainty in construct utilization is indicated by Extremity ratings: the extent to which an individual uses the extreme, as opposed to middle, points on the bipolar scale (Fransella and Bannister, 1977).

The present study was an exploratory attempt to ascertain if differences in these structural measures of personal construct systems (self-theories) were associated with identity status. In addition, an attempt to collect validity data
was made by examining whether the construct and identity status indices correlated differentially with measures of self-esteem, authoritarianism, and self-reported role and construct exploration.

Some evidence to support a relationship between identity status and personal constructs was reported by Cote and Reker (1979). As one might expect, Diffusions showed a high level of construct differentiation. Contrary to expectations, however, the highest self-integration was observed with the Moratoriums. The interpretability of these findings is qualified, however, by the nature of the sample. In contrast to virtually all other research in this area (see Bourne, 1978; Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1982), Cote and Reker (1979) were unable to identify any Foreclosures in their sample of male university students. Thus, the representativeness of their sample and the generalizability of their findings must be questioned.

METHOD

Subjects

A total of 75 undergraduates enrolled at the University of Florida participated in the study (57 per cent female, $M$ age = 20.5; SD = 2.2).

Measurements

Identity status

All of the subjects responded to the Adams–Grotevant objective measure of ego identity (Grotevant and Adams, 1984). This is a 64-item test that yields four total identity status scores based on self-ratings within two identity domains: the interpersonal domain and an intrapersonal domain composed of ideological beliefs and vocational plans.

Personal construct elicitation

A 10 × 10 grid (Neimeyer and Neimeyer, 1981) was used to assess construct integration and differentiation. The grid contained 10 fixed role elements: myself as a student; myself as a son or daughter; myself as a friend; myself as a roommate; myself as a dating partner; myself as a brother or sister; myself at a party; myself with people I don't know very well yet; the "real" me; and myself as I'd like to be. Subjects were asked to consider a particular triad of roles and to indicate a way in which they were the same in two of these roles (e.g. outgoing) and at the same time different in the third (e.g. reserved). This process was repeated until a total of 10 bipolar personal constructs were elicited. Subjects then rated themselves along each of the 10 constructs for each of the 10 roles (outgoing 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 reserved). For instance, if a construct was defined as outgoing vs. reserved, subjects indicated the extent to which they were outgoing or reserved as a student, as a
son or daughter, as a friend, etc. From the completed grid matrix of 100 self-ratings (10 roles × 10 constructs), structural measures of integration, differentiation, and self-certainty were generated.

**Personal construct measures**

Intensity scores (Fransella and Bannister, 1977) were used to define operationally integration. Intensity scores are calculated by obtaining the correlation between each construct dimension, squaring the coefficient, multiplying it by 100, and then summing the 10 scores. This score reflects the sum of all the correlations for all the constructs; it could vary from 0 (zero correlations between all 10 constructs) to 1000 (perfect correlations between all 10 constructs: \( \sum_{i=1}^{10} \frac{1}{100^2} = 1000 \)).

The total number of functionally independent role elements and constructs (FICT) served as the index of differentiation (Landfield, 1977; Landfield and Schmitt-Diel, 1983). A low FICT score indicates that subjects see themselves as being essentially the same in all 10 roles and that the 10 constructs reflect similar characteristics. For instance, a subject may rate herself as equally “assertive”, “confident”, etc. across all 10 roles; the constructs are functionally equivalent. Higher scores indicate more distinctive use of constructs and role ratings.

**Self-certainty.** This was measured by extremity ratings. Extremity scores were obtained by summing all of the ratings in the grid without regard to sign. Scores could vary from 0 (completely neutral) to 300 (all ratings of 3).

**Role and construct exploration.** A direct self-report measure of the extent to which subjects had actively thought about themselves in the roles used to elicit their constructs was developed and administered. The subjects rated, on a five-point scale, the amount of time they had spent considering each role (e.g., myself as a friend) and construct (e.g., confident).

**Self-esteem and authoritarianism.** Rosenberg’s (1965) measure of self esteem and the California F-test of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950) were also given. Standard instructions were employed.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The pattern of Status × Construct correlations was similar for ideological and interpersonal identity status scores. Therefore, combined total status scores are reported. The intercorrelations presented in Table 1 reveal a number of theoretically consistent relationships between the status and construct measures.

Regarding construct system differentiation, FICT scores were related to
moratorium \((r = 0.24, P < 0.05)\) and diffusion \((r = 0.28, P < 0.05)\) scores.
These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that active self-exploration (a Moratorium state) increases self-construct differentiation. The increased construct differentiation associated with diffuseness is consistent with research reported by Cote and Reker (1979), and suggests that a highly differentiated self-system may occur for different reasons. A diffuse or “fragmented” (Landfield, 1977) as well as a thoroughly explored self-theory may increase functionally independent constructions.

Status differences in self-certainty were also found. Achievement scores were positively related to rating extremity \((r = 0.31, P < 0.01)\), whereas diffuseness was negatively correlated with extremity \((r = -0.22, P < 0.05)\). These findings are consistent with the view that identity achievement provides a certain, unambiguous sense of self, whereas diffusion reflects self-uncertainty. One explanation is that an information-oriented approach to self-theory construction, i.e., personally achieving an identity, provides a basis for making self-certain judgments. However, the presence or absence of firm commitments may play a role as well. Since neither moratorium (being information oriented) nor foreclosure (being committed) scores were associated with extremity ratings, one could hypothesize that an Information Orientation \(\times\) Commitment interaction may be involved. If this were the case, it suggests that Achievers may have been making personally meaningful discriminations (see Adams-Webber, 1979). The significant Extremity \(\times\) Self-Esteem correlation \((r = 0.31, P < 0.01)\) is consistent with the meaningfulness interpretation.
Status differences in overall self-construct integration, as operationalized by Intensity scores, were not found. In fact, Intensity scores were not significantly related with any of the variables.

Interestingly, role and construct exploration were positively associated with identity commitment (achiever and foreclosure scores), construct-rating extremity, and authoritarianism (see Table 1). These findings suggest that subjects with firm (opinionated?) views were most apt to report that they had spent time considering the roles and constructs that they had rated. Perhaps these self-reported information-oriented explorations were "driven" by pre-existing beliefs and opinions.

Self-esteem was negatively associated with both construct differentiation (FICT) and diffusion scores (see Table 1). This is consistent with the hypothesis that a diffuse approach to self-theory construction may produce a "fragmented" self-construct system. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Marcia, 1966, 1967), foreclosure scores were significantly related to the endorsement of authoritarianism. However, contrary to expectations, the Achiever × Authoritarianism correlation was also significant, \( r = 0.35, P < 0.01 \). Assuming that this relationship is reliable, it may indicate that some subjects weighed the commitment component of the achiever items in the Grotevant and Adams (1984) test more heavily than the exploratory process component. That is to say, at least some individuals with firm (authoritarian) opinions may have rated themselves highly on achiever statements even though they had not personally engaged in personal self-exploration. This account is not necessarily incompatible with the personal-meaningfulness interpretation of the Achiever × Extremity relationship discussed above. The partial Achiever × Authoritarianism correlation \( (r = 0.32, P < 0.01) \) with the effect of Extremity removed, and the partial Achiever × Extremity relationship \( (r = 0.30, P < 0.01) \) with the effect of Authoritarianism eliminated were both significant.

These correlational analyses ignore the qualitative distinctions that may exist among identity status types. An attempt to categorize the subjects (see Adams, Shea and Fitch, 1979 for criteria), revealed that only 36 per cent (27) of the participants could be classified as pure status types: eight Achievers, seven Moratoriums, six Diffusions and six Foreclosures. One-way ANOVAS revealed that there were no significant status differences on any of the three construct indices. However, as may be seen in Table 2, the status means were generally in line with theoretical expectations. For instance, Diffusions had the lowest Intensity scores, highest FICT scores, and made the least extreme self-ratings (see Table 2). This is the type of self-theory construction one would expect to find if an ad hoc, situation-specific approach were being used. A follow-up investigation with a larger number of distinctive status types may reveal that these trends are statistically reliable.
Table 2. Mean construct scores by identity status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>FICT</th>
<th>Extremity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moratoriums</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1252</td>
<td>8.71</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1038</td>
<td>10.50</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosures</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F\text{-ratio (3,26)} = 0.79 \text{(n.s.)} \]
\[ 1.17 \text{(n.s.)} \]
\[ 0.87 \text{(n.s.)} \]

**SUMMARY**

Given the correlational nature of the present investigation, no firm conclusions about directional influences can be drawn. However, the findings do provide evidence that differences in the structural features of an individual's self-theory or personal construct system are associated with the process he or she reportedly employed when dealing with identity issues and decisions. Information-oriented self-exploration, coupled with commitments—achiever scores—was positively associated with self-certain, polarized judgments. Also, self-theory differentiation was associated with ongoing self-exploration (moratorium scores) and with a diffuse, *ad hoc* approach to self-theory construction. The possibility that differentiation may occur for different reasons was considered. No identity status differences in self-theory integration were found, however.

If these findings are reliable, they suggest that individuals within different identity status classifications may process, evaluate, and utilize self-relevant information in different ways. For instance, individuals who characteristically take an information-oriented approach may be influenced mainly by the quality of the information that is presented: high quality self-relevant information may cause them to alter their beliefs whereas specious information will be counter-argued and discounted. In contrast, a diffuse, *ad hoc* orientation may produce momentary verbal compliance or impression management with little long-term structural accommodation of self-views. Thus, information received during therapy may appear to increase self-construct differentiation. Its long-term impact, however, may depend on whether the client is actively evaluating the therapist's message, or simply attempting to conform to situation-specific demands. Status differences in the way self-relevant information is processed, and the manner in which self-constructs are conserved or revised in light of that information, need to be explored.

**REFERENCES**


