IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN RESIDENTIAL YOUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

Identity development is widely recognized as the most important developmental task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). This task is made much more difficult in high-risk adolescents as there is more trouble creating stable and coherent identities (Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus 2013). The proposed case study examined the personal narrative created by six adolescents transitioning out of a residential facility. Through a self-defining memory interview the adolescents described memories that reflected their identities today. This study hoped to create a better understanding of how youth in residential facilities create an identity from memories of the past. Major themes from the interviews were a mixture of positive and negative identity attributes: accomplishment, change/growth, determination, encouragement of others, future/goals, and relationships (particularly based out of fear).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity development cannot be examined unilaterally as it is a complex concept that encompasses multiple social and self-representations including individual and group identities (Bester & Quinn, 2010). The task of developing a coherent and authentic identity is widely considered to be the fundamental task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson (1968) during adolescence youth reevaluate and alter previous identities to produce a new identity but little research examines what happens when adversities such as life crises and transitions occur during the process of identity development. While many adolescents typically do not change identity once established (Meeus, vand de Shoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) and do not experience severe identity crises (Quintana, 2007), there have been few studies examining how adolescents with difficult life experiences form an identity.

The benefits of committing to an identity are numerous and life-long as adolescents that commit to an identity show less depression and anxiety and a positive personality profile (Meeus, 2011). Identity development can be defined as the "integration of various aspects of the self, either over domains or over time" that creates a continuity from past to present that accurately portrays an individual's true self (McLean, 2008, p. 254). This can be done by integrating experiences of change and revising the identity, or from perceiving stability from the past to the present and confirming identity (McLean, 2008). Whichever method taken to develop identity, the benefits of establishing a consistent and accurate identity with one's internal self are crucial to creating psychological health (McLean, 2008).

High-risk adolescents tend to show more trouble creating a stable and coherent identity (Crocetti et al., 2013). While both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors have been examined, Crocetti et al. (2013) found that adolescents with externalizing behaviors such as acting out and violence show a tendency to explore more identities and continually reflect on these identities. These externalizing high-risk adolescents also showed an increase in delinquent behaviors while internalizing behaviors may involve depression and self-harm (Crocetti et al., 2013). These risk behaviors combined with a lack of warm relationships and positive experiences both in the school and at home might limit identity development (Crocetti et al., 2013). According to Crocetti et al. (2013), identity development is particularly difficult for adolescents from hard backgrounds who are considered high-risk. Research should continue to examine how the task of developing an identity can be made easier.

Difficulties in establishing a true identity have been examined in many developmental stages. In a study performed by Robinson and Smith (2010), six early adults discussed life crises and the change of identity after experiencing transitions in life. These individuals, ranging from 25 to 37 years of age, discussed a general feeling of falsehood and shallowness before the identity change (Robinson & Smith, 2010). Their previous identities were constructed and molded by the standards of their culture and expectations but did not accurately reflect internal emotions and beliefs (Robinson & Smith, 2010). In describing this identity façade Robinson and Smith (2010) discuss the body as "a vehicle of concealment, rather than a medium of expression" in which a person can truly discover their identity (Robinson & Smith, 2010). The study found that after an identity crisis in early adulthood, the participants felt more balanced and in tune

with their "authentic identity" (Robinson & Smith, 2010). It can be concluded that such an identity crisis is experienced in adolescence as well and thus after such a process, adolescence can build an authentic identity.

While the process of going through such a life crisis was an "emotionally charged time, full of anxiety, anger, and guilt, as well as excitement and anticipation" ultimately the result of such a crisis was a more open, honest and generally positive outlook on personal identity (Robinson & Smith, 2010). Similarly, adolescents experience developmental crises in which identities are explored (Erikson, 1968) Many studies examine the general developmental crises of identity during the period of adolescence and young adulthood but few examine the effect of an event related crisis during adolescence, such as transitioning into and out of a residential facility. Studying the specific impact of such a crisis during a time when an adolescent is also exploring identities is fundamental in providing a secure and supportive environment to find the authentic self.

Vulnerable adolescents face many obstacles including poverty, addiction, and abuse that may inhibit the ability to create a fluent identity and create meaning from past memories (McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013). In a study of vulnerable adolescents in an alternative high school, McLean et al. (2013) found that meaning making does not necessarily equate to decreased delinquent behavior but the combination of meaning making and agency, or planning for the future and forming goals, did. The 31 participants discussed obstacles, such as death of a parent, abuse, living away from home, and suicidal ideation, as well as explained self-defining memories (McLean et al., 2013). These self-defining memories are considered very important memories that usually are

highly emotional, whether it is positive or negative, and aid in understanding who one is (Singer & Salovey, 1993; McLean et al., 2013, p. 436).

The ability to recognize important memories and how they form one's person today varies within each person. While some participants showed meaning making after describing the importance of their memory, it was not always positive (McLean et al., 2013). Some participants deduced from their process of reflection that people could not be trusted or they themselves are not good people (McLean et al., 2013). This negative meaning to memories inhibits the ability to resist delinquent behaviors and showed no correlation to a decrease in negative behaviors like violence, drug use, and alcohol use. McLean et al. (2013) did acknowledge that such negative meaning making, although not directly producing positive outcomes, might be adaptive for vulnerable adolescents in their environments.

Ultimately vulnerable adolescents, youth who have experienced adversities in their environment, do not seem to follow the normative patterns of meaning making through memories that contribute to a life story and identity that typical adolescents follow (McLean et al., 2013). While the adolescents in the McLean et al. (2013) study demonstrated significant differences from the typical adolescent in identity development methods, the individuals were still a part of the community or family in which they were delinquent. What happens when a vulnerable adolescent is separated from the environment that produced them? Separation from the community may provide time for adolescents to reflect in a different way and create a fluid life story and identity. As McLean et al. (2013) states, it is likely that the community's narrative needs to involve opportunities for people to change and move towards alternatives, therefore meaning an

adolescent cannot adapt unless resources are provided in the community such as vocational opportunities and positive stable relationships.

Salahu-Din and Bollman (1994) examined how adolescents in foster care, separated from their environment and placed in what is expected to be a supportive environment, develop their identity and self-esteem. Familial ties were found to be incredibly important for the adolescents self esteem and therefore their identity development (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994). Being separated from biological parents, no matter what the reason, is overwhelmingly emotional and distressing but these effects were mediated by continued connection with biological parents through visits, life-story books, or photographs (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994). In fact, Colon (1972, p. 298, as cited in Salahu-Din, p. 125) found that continued contact between the child and their birth family, though it may seem counterintuitive, provides stability, continuity, predictability and ultimately security for the child to form a fluid identity between birth and present. It also allowed the child to choose with whom to identify based on the knowledge of both families. The continuity that is provided by reflecting on life before foster care placement and the transition into foster care is essential for adolescents to build a self-image and to put their lives in perspective (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994). If the foster care home or placement does not allow for reflection and processing there are profound consequences not only for the adolescent but also for the family and community (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994). Integration of the past into the present to form an identity is difficult, especially for adolescents that have a difficult past, but it is a task that must be completed in order for a coherent identity to form (Salahu-Din & Bollman, 1994).

The current study examined the identity development seen in adolescents about to transition out of a residential facility due to graduation. Not only are these vulnerable adolescents forming an identity, but also they are doing so in an environment separated from their biological family while going through a significant transition from high school to life afterward. This study is an initial case study at how adolescents in a residential facility process their past and integrate it into their current identity.

METHODS

Participants

A total of six adolescents living at a residential treatment facility (RTF) in the southwest United States were interviewed using a modified self-defining memory interview (McLean, 2008). Participants were approached by staff members at the home and met the requirements of currently being juniors or seniors in high school. The six adolescents identified by the RTF were seniors and consisted of three males and three females. All participants were at least 18 years old. Adolescents for this study were identified by their willingness to discuss memories and their personal identity. Each participant completed a consent form and consent to be recorded before the interviews. The participants did not provide further demographic information.

Measures

According to McLean (2008) identity is continually being changed because experiences are constantly being incorporated into a working identity. Autobiographical reasoning, or creating an identity narrative, is argued by Habermas and Bluck (2000) as being the mechanism by which a life story, or identity, is developed. In order to examine the process of autobiographical reasoning, which in theory occurs during adolescence

while developing identity, a self-defining memory interview was performed with each participant (McLean, 2008). This interview was adapted from that of McLean (2008) due to possible comprehension difficulties with the participants in the current study. The interview consisted of imagining the participant had met a person they wanted to open up to and decided to do so by sharing three memories that represented themselves today. After describing each memory the participant was asked why the memory represented them, if they shared this memory with people at the RTF, and if so how people reacted to the memory. The interviews were then examined for overarching themes in memories.

Procedure

All participants completed a modified self-defining memory interview from McLean (2008) with the primary researcher at the residential treatment facility. Most participants only took 15 minutes to complete the interview process. At the completion of the interview, each participant was given a $10 music gift card for his or her time. Although compensation was given it did not seem to affect willingness or participation, as the participants were not aware of any compensation prior to the interview. All interviews were recorded then transcribed by the primary researcher. The researcher then found general themes found in the memories. A theme, for the purpose of this study, was an overarching, or general, idea or element that was demonstrated by multiple participants.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

All interviews were examined for overarching themes throughout each participant's responses. Six general themes were found throughout the interviews consisting of accomplishment, change/growth, determination/strength, encouragement of

others, future goals and relationships. Each participant produced reflections falling into these categories. While many found a positive outlook and change produced from these memories, others spoke of fear, especially in personal relationships, and distrust.

Accomplishment

Many participants noted a time in which they accomplished a goal as a definitive time in their identity largely due to the pride they felt afterwards. One participant spoke of a time when he conquered his fear of heights and related it to his nerves in general stating, "I don't like being nervous so I think one way to get past that is challenging that fear." His memory of riding a roller coaster, although fearful of heights, became a broader method of accomplishing goals in his life.

Another participant noted the first time he dunked in basketball. He found that after accomplishing something he had been working on since he was a little kid because his "dad always kept the ball away from [him]". This memory stuck out to the participant because after dunking he was "happy"; this particular action was significant to his pride. He continued to say that basketball in general was a large part of his identity as he could express his competitive side but also be a part of a team and support his teammates.

Change/Growth

One of the most prevalent themes throughout the interviews was that of change and growth. Many participants noted the difference between the person they were coming to the residential treatment facility compared to the person they are now. Much of this change was attributed to the RTF, the staff, and environment. One participant spoke about his family moving around a lot due to his parent's jobs. This lack of stability

in homes growing up meant that when he came to the RTF he was really nervous to speak to anyone and described himself as "in a shell." Even though he doesn't know what exactly brought him out of his shell he attributes this change in personality to coming to the RTF. Now he does not identify as being as shy to the point where he can now eat in front of most kids, something that he was unable to do at previous high schools.

Another participant found similarly that she had grown and changed a lot since coming to the residential treatment facility. Before coming to the RTF she did not recognize a family or support system that was available to her for help and unable to set goals but now she feels that she has grown to want to graduate and complete her goals. This change "makes [her] really happy to think about where [she] was and where [she] is now".

Some participants recognized that coming to the RTF was the beginning of their change. One participant detailed her troubled past before coming to the RTF. Being adopted she continually struggled with her foster parents and was in and out of juvenile detention centers. The last time she went to juvenile detention her mother gave her a notebook full of notes on her growth from when she was a baby and she realized that her parents did care for her and had her best interests in mind. This event changed her perspective and "made [her] a really better person…happier and grateful…and blessed because…a lot of children these days don't have that chance" to change their life. This participant later recognized that without the chance presented to her to change her life she would not be here today or graduating high school.

Determination

Many participants described themselves as determined and while many memories accurately portrayed determination the most salient was one participant's memory of growing up without available parents. This participant did not have a father present and his mother was always working and therefore unavailable to him and his brothers. He did not resent the fact that his parents were not around but instead found strength and determination to complete goals on his own with nobody pushing him forward. This participant also remembered how hard his mother worked and realized how valuable hard work is to him. He describes seeing his mother working so hard "showed [him] you can be somebody but you just have to work for it." Even his older brother who took care of him while his mother was working taught him to not give up even when things are difficult. This determination was transient throughout his memories of growing up.

Encouragement of Others

Another prevalent theme was that of taking the adversities faced throughout life and encouraging other suffering from those same adversities. One participant, after working through her own familial issues and lack of determination was able to become head cheerleader and now encourages girls on her squad going through similar familial issues. She encourages them to follow their passions just as she has and fight through, with determination, to continue to accomplish their goals. Through her experiences she has found "there's always an answer to something so that's [her] dedication".

Similarly, a participant found ways to encourage teammates on the basketball court for the good of the team. He expressed how he found his values through basketball and teamwork and now encourages others to not quit the team or school because of small struggles. While he never elucidated on his own experiences with school and struggles,

he recognized that the team needed each and every person and that for him to succeed, the team needed to stay together. He also spoke on his ability to connect and be kind to people to be able to make friends while his family moved around in his youth. It seemed that this participant found his identity in his peer group and team.

Future/Goals

Even though the self-defining memory interview asked for memories that reflected a personal identity, many participants incorporated into their memories their future and goals. These goals were often based upon the identity established through their memories and their life experiences. One participant explained how she graduated 8th grade at the RTF and was looking forward to graduating high school at the RTF because it demonstrates her growth and time at the residential facility. Graduation was important to her because she is the first person in her biological family to be in high school let alone graduate from school. She plans to continue her education further in college. Her goals were enhanced by a reflection on her past academic achievements and her family.

Another participant incorporated his passions for gaming and design into a dream career of graphic designer. He spoke of his memory of starting to play a game online that he grew to really love. Slowly he learned to recode programs by himself in order to alter the game. He was able to reflect on these memories of when he was most happy and impassioned and incorporate these instances into a future goal and profession. In reflection this participant moved away from his desire to become an architect and instead found something that truly represented his identity and personality.

One participant decided she would become either a physical therapist or massage therapist based on her memories of massaging her grandmother's feet growing up. Massaging has "been in [her] life ever since [she] was little" because she gives "people massages when [she] know[s] that they're stressing out" as a way to help. Her future is a mirror image of her previous memories of growing up and massaging people, especially her grandmother. Like this participant, many others reflected on their life and described memories when they were the happiest and found a future career or path that reflects those moments. The continuity of identity from the past into the future was apparent in many interviews.

Relationships

Most interviews reflected on memories in which relationships with peers and family were fundamental to their outlook on life and their personality. Some participants noted a negative experience with people leading to distrust of everyone while others, even though experiencing similar situations, still held positive outlooks on relationships. One particular participant described herself as shy and supported this description with a memory of her friend betraying their agreement of confidentiality. She was no longer able to trust her friend. Additionally she spoke about the nonchalant attitude she perceives when telling others about her memories and how frustrating it feels for nobody to care. All of these experiences led this participant to "isolate [herself]" behind "a big wall in front of [her] when it comes down to trying to trust people." Her experiences of negative relationships continue to influence her relationships today and even influence her shy identity.

Another participant spoke on the independence he has built due to the fleeting relationships in his past. He identified himself as closed off to people because "people come and go…[but] a relationship is supposed to stay there…and then it just leaves so [he] don't keep that tight of relationships with anybody." Even though he takes a closed off position when it comes to relationships, this participant mentioned his goal of trying to become more trustworthy of people and recognized positive relationships in his life with his brothers and his mother, even though she was gone a lot for work. His memory of how relationships have gone in the past influence how he feels about relationships today. Interestingly, this participant also recognized what relationships "should" be like and wanted to build healthier relationships in his life.

Other participants noted a fear of being rejected by peers because they were too goofy or nervous and as a result would shy away from their true identity. One even noted that her singing voice was different from everybody else's and so for a long time she would not sing in front of people. At the time of the interview this participant had just begun to sing in her church choir and feels "like [she] can express [herself] in a different way" now. Others still struggle with hiding away from interactions with others as a method to protect themselves from rejection.

Discussion

As seen in previous studies, the participants demonstrated a mixture of meaning making memories and agency taken from those memories (McLean et al., 2013). The active reflection, considered meaning making, was evident throughout each participant's reflections on where they have come since arriving at the residential treatment facility. The change experienced is significant and life altering. In addition to the positive

meaning making some participants expressed, a few memories were categorized as negative reflection such as histories of distrust and learning to avoid people based on that past experience. Like McLean et al. (2013) discusses, this combination of positive and negative meaning making is typical among adolescents who have experienced difficult life events.

The second component to identity development, according to McLean et al. (2013), is moving forward or agency. Almost every participant in this study took life events and lessons and applied them to future careers and goals whether that was long-term dreams or trying to build healthier relationships. These individuals were able to reflect on difficult memories from their past, make meaning from them, take appropriate responsibility and carry that responsibility forward; this is crucial for a successful transition to adulthood (McLean et al., 2013). It seems that because many participants were able to build agency in their life based on meaning drawn from memories, the transition from the residential treatment facility into adulthood may be smoother than expected for adolescents with a troubled history.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The themes gleaned from the self-defining memory interviews with adolescents at a residential facility show that while there are many positive reflections and meaning making from adversities in residential adolescents, there are still strong negative consequences to identity from negative experiences, mainly seen in relationships to others. Many participants struggled with creating and connecting with others in a healthy, trust-based relationship. This observation seems to be consistent with previous studies on vulnerable adolescents although there seems to be more meaning made in the

adolescents' reflections at MCH (McLean et al., 2013). Further research should be done to examine in depth the self-esteem and identity of youth in residential facilities in order to assist facilities like Methodist Children's Home to create spaces and an environment for youth to experience healthy relationships, reflect, and build identity.

This study was a mere introduction to the process of identity development for adolescents living at a residential facility. As it was in a case-study format the number of participants and the lack of objectivity to the research limit the study. More studies should be done to examine the unique process of identity development for youth in a residential facility.

APPENDIX: RTF MEMORY INTERVIEW

Imagine that you are getting to know a person and you really want to show them who you really are. To do this you think of 3 memories that help explain you as a person.

Please take some time to think of the 3 memories you would choose.

Please describe your first memory.

(after memory is described)

Why did you choose this memory to represent you?

Have you shared this memory before, if so with whom?

How did that person react? Was it in the way you expected?

Thank you for sharing this memory. Please describe your second memory.

(after memory is described ask the same questions as above)

Thank you for sharing this memory as well. Please describe your third memory.

(after memory is described ask the same questions as above)

Thank you for participating in this interview and sharing memories with me.

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