

# RESEARCH

# FACTS and FINDINGS

A collaboration of Cornell University, University of Rochester,  
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## Identity Formation in Adolescence

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The question, "Who am I?" is especially pertinent during adolescence. The combination of physical, cognitive, and social changes that occur during that time, plus the serious life choices to be faced (occupation, life partner) spur what Erik Erikson (1968) famously called an *identity crisis*. He used the term, "crisis," to mean a turning point rather than a period of profound or debilitating uncertainty. Erikson acknowledged that identity issues could arise throughout the life course, but saw identity formation as the critical "developmental task" of adolescence.

Parents may feel bewildered at rapid changes in who their adolescent children appear to be, as reflected in such things as musical tastes, appearance, friends, romantic partners, hobbies, decision-making, and moral conduct. However, recent research has made some headway in understanding adolescent identity exploration. For example, there is evidence that adolescents' identity differs across contexts. That is, teenagers often see themselves differently when they are with parents and



teachers, than they do when they are with peers. Middle adolescence (approximately ages 14-16) in particular is often marked by behavior that varies depending on where they are and whom they are with -- for example, being outgoing with friends, but shy at home (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Erikson described adolescent identity exploration as a crisis of *identity versus identity diffusion*: "From among all possible imaginable relations, [the adolescent] must make a series of ever-narrowing selections of personal, occupational,

sexual, and ideological commitments" (Erikson, 1968). Identity diffusion results when such choices remain unresolved. The person does not seem to know who she or he is. Erikson argued that achieving a solid identity requires a period of *psychosocial moratorium* -- a time when the adolescent is relieved from the obligations and responsibilities of adulthood that might restrict his or her pursuit of self-discovery. Adolescents who prematurely assume adult responsibilities, most often as parents or full-time workers, have a harder time achieving their own identity. They may prove fragile and immature later in life when faced with difficult challenges.



A central part of identity development, especially for those who are not in the white-Anglo majority, is ethnic identity. The process of ethnic identity development, according to researchers (Phinney, 1990), in some respects follows the process of identity development in general -- in short, an unquestioning view of oneself is altered during a period of "crisis." Many parents clearly attempt to teach children about their ethnic identity both explicitly -- by telling them about it -- and more subtly by exposing them to various experiences. For white adolescents, it appears that ethnic identity involves moving from a stage of naiveté about racial issues to a more reflective sense of self in a

multicultural society (Phinney, 1990). Research indicates that ethnic minority adolescents generally have four possibilities for integrating their ethnicity into their larger sense of self. First, *assimilation* refers to trying to adopt the majority culture's norms and standards at the expense of those in one's own group. Second, *marginalization* means living within the majority culture but feeling estranged. Third, *separation* refers to associating primarily with members of one's own culture and rejecting the majority culture. Finally, *biculturalism* means maintaining ties both to the majority culture and one's own ethnic culture. Many researchers believe that biculturalism is an especially adaptive approach for many adolescents, retaining the norms of both the majority and minority cultures and selecting between them, depending on the circumstances (Phinney, 1990).

During the sexual changes of puberty, issues of gender identity and sexual identity become especially relevant. These two forms of identity overlap somewhat. *Gender identity* refers to what it means to be male or female, which is linked to sexual expression, but also concerns broader issues of masculinity and femininity. Gender role socialization becomes very intense during adolescence. In early adolescence males and females (and important adults in their lives) are often especially vigilant to ensure gender role conformity (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Expectations about appropriate forms of identity expression for males and females appear to become more flexible in late adolescence.

*Sexual identity* is a matter of forming an enduring recognition of the meaning of one's sexual feelings, attractions, and behaviors (Savin-Williams, 1998). This often takes the form of labeling one's sexual orientation, an aspect of identity that is especially salient for many of today's teens. However, for many adolescents who are not members of sexual minorities, sexual identity development remains largely an unconscious process (Savin-Williams, 1998). Overall, issues of sexual, ethnic, and general identity intensify as children make the transition into adolescence. Although sexual identity exploration is critical in adolescence, it can also occur or re-occur in adulthood, especially if it was inadequately explored during adolescence.

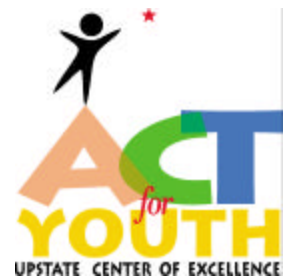
Families have the potential to be an important stabilizing influence in the development of adolescent sons' and daughters' identities. Although some assert that parents do not matter (Harris, 1998), family structure provides an important environment in which identity development occurs (Archer & Waterman, 1994). Two important concepts are *individuation* (where youth are encouraged to develop their own identity) and *connectedness* (which provides a secure base from which the youth can explore his or her identity). Parents and others can help youth reflect on their identity and achieve a strong and healthy sense of self by facilitating both individuation and connectedness. This applies to the development of ethnic and gender identity, as discussed above, and also to other aspects of youth identity, including religious identity and family identity. It means that parents

should actively help their children become independent individuals, not merely reflections of themselves and their own aspirations.

## References

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