

**School Counselors' Use of Marcia's Identity Status Theory for Career Advisement  
and Consultation and Collaboration**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we describe how school counselors can use Marcia's theory of psychosocial identity development to provide differentiated career advisement for adolescent students. Furthermore, we identify how school counselors can use Marcia's theory of psychosocial identity development when collaborating and consulting with teachers and parents to assist them in supporting the career development of students. We explain how school counselors can determine a student's identity status, and we provide highly specific strategies for career advisement for adolescent students in accordance with each of Marcia's identity statuses.

*Keywords:* school counseling, identity development, advisement, college and career readiness

## **School Counselors' Use of Marcia's Identity Status Theory for Career Advisement and Consultation and Collaboration**

Within the *ASCA National Model* (2019), school counselors provide appraisal and advisement to students to help them to develop academic and career plans. ASCA's (2017) position statement on advising indicates that academic and career planning should involve the exploration of students' self-concepts and identities. In this paper, we describe how school counselors can use Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory of psychosocial identity development to provide differentiated career advisement. Furthermore, we identify how school counselors can use Marcia's theory of psychosocial identity development when collaborating and consulting with teachers and parents to assist them in supporting the career development of students

### **Marcia's Theories of Adolescent Identity Development**

In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1968) asserted that personality develops through a series of stages. Within the identity versus identity confusion stage, adolescents (13-18 years) face the challenge of acquiring a coherent identity in which they define their place and purpose in society. This stage helps individuals make critical life and career decisions and assists them in overcoming novel and unfamiliar challenges in career and life pursuits (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Marcia (1966, 2007), expanding upon Erikson's theory, proposed that within the identity versus identity confusion stage, people can be generally characterized as undergoing either exploration or commitment.

Exploration refers to the individual's active self-questioning, examining their values, worldview, abilities, and interests, and pursuit for and testing of identity

alternatives before deciding which goals, values, and interests to prioritize (Crocetti, 2017). Commitment can be characterized as the selection of an identity and engaging in behavior that is consistent with such lifestyle choices in pursuing their vision of the future. Marcia (1966, 2007) contended that, based on the extent to which an individual has explored and/or made specific commitments, such an identity exists within one of four statuses: diffused status (low/no commitment, low/no exploration), foreclosure status (high commitment, low/no exploration), moratorium status (low/no commitment, high exploration), and achievement status (commitment following exploration). It should be noted that the term, identity development, has different meanings within the research literature (Verhoeven et al., 2019). Most of the studies regarding adolescent identity development in educational settings use a social perspective that concerns adolescents' racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender identity. Erikson's (1968) and Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory of identity development is concerned with the more general and abstract aspects of adolescent's personal identity.

Researchers suggest that most individuals reach the identity achievement status around the age of 20 (Meeus, 2018). Most early adolescents demonstrate identity diffusion or identity foreclosure. In the identity diffusion status, the individual is neither exploring nor is committed to a worldview. Typically, students exhibiting diffusion cannot name a career or educational pathway beyond high school, and are likely to demonstrate anxiety or avoidance when questioned about the future and career choices. In contrast, in the identity foreclosure status, the individual is committed to a particular worldview/set of values, which the student has typically acquired from their parents without a period of reflection/exploration.

In terms of career development, the student with an identity foreclosed status often can readily identify a career he or she wishes to pursue, and typically, the career that the student identifies is of high status (e.g., doctor, lawyer, engineer). However, the student may have difficulty explaining what they find appealing about a profession. In the identity moratorium status, the student is in the process of exploring their worldview; in other words, the student is within the midst of an identity crisis and is not firmly committed to a worldview. The student in the identity moratorium status may have a variety of career interests and have difficulty differentiating among these interests. The identity achieved student has undergone an exploration of self and has a mostly consistent worldview/set of values. Finally, the student in identity achievement has moved beyond career exploration and has entered the phase of career decision-making in which they are pursuing a career path compatible with their worldview.

There is empirical support for aspects of Marcia's theory. A meta-analysis of 73 longitudinal and cross-sectional studies found that among adolescents and young adults, identity diffusion and foreclosure decrease over time while identity achievement increases (Kroger et al., 2010). Identity commitment is associated with aspects of resiliency, such as extraversion and emotional stability (Morsunbul et al., 2014), self-concept and self-esteem (Sugimura et al., 2015), and nurturing family relationships (Crocetti et al., 2017). Identity commitment is also strongly related to a number of indicators of mental health and adjustment, including low levels of internalizing symptoms and externalizing problem behaviors (Crocetti et al., 2013), positive well-being (Karas et al., 2015), life satisfaction (Sugimura et al., 2015), and academic achievement (Pop et al., 2016).

In contrast, reconsideration of identity commitment, which involves a search for alternative commitments because one's current commitments are not satisfactory, is negatively associated with self-concept and self-esteem (Sugimura et al., 2015) and desirable personality traits such as agreeableness and extraversion (Hatano et al., 2016), and is predictive of low academic achievement (Pop et al., 2016). Additionally, reconsideration of commitment is strongly correlated to internal (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety) and external (e.g., involvement in delinquent behavior) psychosocial problems (Crocetti et al., 2008).

### **Promoting Identity Status Development in Schools**

There are no identifiable articles in the school counseling literature that reference Marcia's (1966; 2007) identity status theory. However, there is some research regarding the general impact of education upon on identity status development. Yeager et al. (2012) found that high school students pursuing a combination of self- and beyond-the-self-oriented life goals through their intended future work were more likely than those with under-developed life aims to exhibit and develop psychological well-being, and were also more likely to report their school work as personally meaningful. The study also revealed that over the course of middle- and high-school attendance, teachers' influence on students' identity-relevant goal pursuits decreases.

Rich and Schacter (2012) found that middle school students' perceptions of teachers being worthy role models and their school's commitment to students' holistic development were positively related to their identity development. A cross-cultural study of early- to mid-adolescents revealed that students who perceived their teachers as being supportive of their perceived purpose in life were more likely to have identified a

life purpose, be oriented towards achieving their goals, and to have life goals that include contributing to society and others (Bundick & Tirri, 2014). Furthermore, school-based interventions, though scarce, have been found to enhance adolescents' identity development (Verhoeven et al., 2019), goal directedness, and life satisfaction (Bundick, 2011).

Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory of identity status development appears to offer several advantages to secondary school counselors for promoting students' career and personal/social development. A critique of many of the career development theories, such as Super's (1980) theory, is that they only provide a broad understanding of the likely developmental career challenges at a particular life stage. In contrast, Marcia's theory provides a more differentiated assessment of adolescent students that has clear implications for advising. Marcia's theory provides practitioners with a framework for assessing adolescents' progress in developing a psychosocial identity, identifying four levels of psychosocial maturity. In contrast, most career developmental theories simply identify the tasks of a particular career development phase, and do not provide a framework for comparing adolescents' career identity development, or suggest how adolescents undergo a phased process of psychosocial maturity related to career development. There are many articles in the school counseling literature that call for the use of a particular counseling theory for providing individual or group counseling (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused, Adlerian, etc.). However, there are hardly any articles that suggest the use of a particular theory to promote students' career development for use in advising. Marcia's theory also appears to satisfy the profession's expectation that school counselors use theories that are empirically supported

(Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020). In summary, we suggest that Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory of identity status offers a relevant framework for secondary school counselors to meet the profession's expectation that they provide appraisal and advisement to help students by developing systemic plans for managing students' learning and development, educational transitioning, and self-appraisal for decision-making (ASCA, 2017).

Many schools, particularly at the middle/junior high and high school levels, require school counselors to meet individually with each student on their caseload every year to complete the student's individual student plan. For example, in New York students in grades 7-12 must receive an annual review of their educational progress and career plans (New York State Education Department, n.d.). Typically, classroom lessons and group activities are conducted in the first half of the year to provide career and educational information to students, and in the second half of the school year, the school counselor and student meet individually, processing the results of the student's career exploration activities, in order to select classes that support the student's career and postsecondary goals. In such individual meetings, the school counselor has the best opportunity to assess the student's career maturity, which may be defined as the degree to which the student's selected career path is based upon a thoughtful reflection of the student's career interests and abilities and life goals. There are a number of career development theories that may be used to assess career maturity, such as Super's (1980) theory. We recommend Marcia's identity phases to assess career maturity because it more broadly incorporates the entire student, assessing the student's psychosocial maturity, and thus has more clear implications for both career

and personal/social development. In contrast, most career developmental theories have a narrower focus, being limited to information and decisions concerning the individual's career and educational choices. Marcia's (2002) theory is concerned with the adolescent's construction of an identity: "A sense of who is, based on who one has been, and who one imagines oneself being in the future" (p. 199).

### **Using Marcia's Identity Status Theory in Advising**

#### **Identity Diffusion**

The adolescent who is in identity diffusion lacks commitment to personal values and a career path, and is not yet engaging in such exploration (Marcia, 2002). According to Marcia (2002) and Erikson (1968), the task of adolescence is to engage in a process of self-exploration in order to eventually achieve a clearer sense of identity, in which one has a general commitment to one's values, a career path, and a path for pursuing life meaning. Researchers have found that exploration of one's personal goals (Crocetti et al., 2016) and career options (Pisarik et al., 2017) are associated with anxiety, and that those with greater anxiety are more likely to withdraw from career exploration (Hardin et al., 2006) to avoid the threatening situation of career decision-making. School counselors must assist the adolescent who is not exploring learn to manage the anxiety associated with such exploration, and relatedly, strategies for assisting students to manage their anxiety will be discussed later in this paper.

For students with identity diffusion, the objective is to support the student's initiation of career- and self-exploration, either by engagement in exploration of multiple alternatives (i.e., exploration in breadth), or by focusing on deep investigation of one alternative (i.e., exploration in depth) (Marcia, 1966). When providing advising, school

counselors can promote such self-awareness through processing the results of career interest inventories, asking the student to describe their ideal picture of themselves within ten years, inquiring regarding what strengths the student thinks that others see in them, investigating what school subjects or elective school activities tend to interest the student, and exploring the student's ideas for how to obtain additional experiences and information. School counselors may ask questions such as, "What do you think your friends think that you particularly excel in?", followed by, "Do you agree, and if so, what are some potential careers that you are aware of that might align with your strengths?", "What careers have you ever thought looked interesting or what you would like to learn more about?"

Given that students may not be aware of the indefinite number of potential careers, school counselors may co-explore various online resources (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics) to initiate the student's exploration of financial outcomes, typical job responsibilities, required training or education, etc. Students may also be interested, although through prompting and encouragement, in job shadowing, and visits to local colleges and career technical centers, to gain a better sense of potential post-secondary interests. Additionally, since the rigor of academic course selection is strongly associated with postsecondary planning and success, particularly for underprivileged youth (Ohr et al., 2009), school counselors should strive to identify student strengths and encourage their enrollment in advanced courses. It is through the combination of such discourse and activities that students can be empowered to make highly-important decisions about their future (ASCA, 2019).

## **Identity Foreclosure**

Students with identity foreclosure are committed to a career path, but they have not undergone sufficient exploration (Marcia, 2002). Often such students can readily identify their career interest; however, they struggle to explain what they think they would like about that career or they have limited knowledge of the occupation or educational and training requirements for that career, as they have not actively investigated that career option. Students exhibiting identify foreclosure may be particularly challenging for the school counselor to advise, as the student may appear confident in their career path, and may not recognize that they have simply adopted the perspectives of their caregiver(s) or peers regarding their strengths and values and the career they should pursue in order to avoid the anxiety associated with career exploration. School counselors want students in the identity foreclosed status to think more critically about their career choices, asking such questions as “What do you think of your dad’s encouragement to become a carpenter? Does that fit with how you see yourself?”, “What do you think you would like about that career?”, “What do you know about the activities of carpenters?”, "What do you see as the potential things you would not like about that career?"

## **Identity Moratorium**

We assert that the hope for middle/junior high and high school students is that they are in the identity moratorium status, exploring various career options as they learn more about themselves and are in the process of developing a worldview that is differentiated from their parents and peers, while being able to also maintain that connection with parents and peers. School counselors can support students’ self- and

career exploration by helping them make sense of contrasting thoughts and values. The exploration process involves uncertainty and anxiety, which may manifest in the student wanting to avoid assuming responsibility for such large life choices by seeking others who will make decisions for them. School counselors should avoid pushing students to make large life decisions without the student having undergone a considerable process of reflection (Marcia, 2002). School counselors can normalize the student's anxiety, and explore with the student how he or she effectively balances self-exploration and managing the anxiety associated with such self-exploration. Self- and career exploration involves a focus on the future, as the student thinks about the self they wishes to become. However, the student can also be encouraged to think about how he or she can alternate between thinking about the future and maintaining a present focus through leisure activities, exercise, relaxation exercises, mindfulness, etc. For example, school counselors can ask students such questions as "What is it like to be thinking about the future while also enjoying being in high school?", "How do you balance the stress of thinking about your future while also enjoying yourself"?

### **Identity Achievement**

Students exhibiting characteristics of identity achievement have undergone a process of self- and career exploration, and is committed to a set of personal values and at least a general career path. Marcia (2002) asserts that the form of assistance persons in identity achievement seek is information gathering. In regards to school counselors, students in identity achievement likely want specific information regarding academic course selection, extracurricular opportunities (e.g., internships), and career and postsecondary options (e.g., prestigious and competitive programs). Given that this

type of student has already determined important questions about their future, the school counselor would likely be primarily involved with providing information about finances (e.g., Free Application for Federal Student Aid, tuition) and deadlines of post-secondary options (e.g., college, career technical schools).

The identity-achieved student that has demonstrated in-depth exploration may also be searching for deliberate opportunities to make them more competitive and prepared for their post-secondary plans. School counselors can encourage these students to seek out school and community-based opportunities that would complement their aspirations and current experiences. For example, school counselors may coordinate college application write-in activities in which students have an opportunity to share a cooperative workspace to write their personal essays, ask questions about their portfolios, and acquire feedback from peers. Additionally, students can be connected with local colleges and outreach programs that may offer a variety of opportunities for students to advance their critical thinking, work-based skills, and understanding of civic responsibility. Relevant questions that school counselors may ask students in identity achievement include “How can be of help to you”, “What would you like to know more about?”, “How is the information you seek related to your future goals?”

### **Managing Anxiety**

Exploring one's personal goals (Crocetti et al., 2016) and career exploration in general (Pisarik et al., 2017) is associated with distress and uncertainty. According to Marcia's theory, anxiety is likely to be a prominent issue for students exhibiting identity diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium. Identity diffused and foreclosed students may be more likely to avoid the anxiety of career exploration. Identify diffused students may

seek to avoid the topic altogether. Identity foreclosed students may manage their anxiety by simply adopting their parents' or peers' perspectives of who they are and what they should pursue in terms of a career. Identity moratorium students may demonstrate elevated levels of anxiety as they undergo exploration. When advising students, school counselors should look for signs of anxiety and avoidance and help students with managing their anxiety related to career exploration. School counselors should also be concerned about students who exhibit ruminative exploration, which is defined as extensively lingering on the fear of possibly making a bad choice (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016).

School counselors should normalize the experience, affirming the fact that not-knowing is normal and essential for self-exploration, and that most of their peers are having a similar experience. School counselors can help identify a student's ambivalence, and offer that thinking about one's future career self can be scary, but also exciting. The school counselor can explore, from a solution-focused theory approach, strategies that the student has used to effectively manage their anxiety. Finally, the school can introduce mindfulness concepts, having the student engage in some typical introductory mindfulness practices as intentional breathing or sensation awareness (Orsillo & Roemer, 2011). Mindfulness practices may be particularly useful for adolescents who exhibit ruminative exploration. Indeed, present-mindfulness has been found to promote the development of identity in the transition to young adulthood (Shirai et al., 2016).

## **Consultation and Collaboration with Parents and/or Legal Guardians**

Marcia (2002) agreed with Erikson's (1968) that adolescents' development of an ego identity is related to their caregivers' ability to support their identity exploration. Caregivers who help to "grow" younger members of the society achieve a sense of generativity, whereas caregivers who fail to effectively support younger generations experience a sense of stagnation (Marcia, 2002, p. 199). ASCA's (2017) position statement regarding advising indicates that school counselors are expected to collaborate with families and/or legal guardians in ensuring that students develop academic and career plans. From the perspective of Erikson (1968) and Marcia (2002), by assisting caregivers, including parents, legal guardians, and teachers, in supporting adolescents' identity exploration, school counselors are helping caregivers satisfy their psychological need for generativity.

School counselors should be sensitive to the likelihood that contextual variables, including family and environmental characteristics, influence the student's identity status and career maturity. Lower levels of family cohesion are associated with career commitment anxiety among college students (Lustig, 2018), while adolescents who are highly attached to their parents are more likely to have a higher level of career maturity (Emmanuelle, 2009). Dietrich and Kracke (2009) assert that adolescents prefer parents allow them to select their career and encourage them to explore various career interests and alternatives. In contrast, adolescents are likely to avoid career exploration when they perceive their parents as controlling them (Savickas, 2002). Lim and You (2019) found that career activities that are selected and suggested by parents do not promote their adolescent child's career maturity, leading the authors to conclude parents should

act as assistants rather than leaders of their child's exploration, providing their adolescent child with relevant information and allowing them to make decisions independently.

School counselors should seek to educate parents, either through workshops or literature, about developmentally-appropriate ways to engage their child in career exploration. The entrée into adolescence is considered to require a qualitative transformation of the parent-child relationship, involving parents moving from a directive approach to that more of a consultative position (McGoldrick et al., 2016). Whereas in pre-adolescence, parents provide high structure and information to their children, with adolescence, the parent should be asking more questions of their adolescent, with such general questions, "What do you think about it", "Does that fit with how you see yourself" Unfortunately, adults in the life of the student who is faced with career decision making may seek to alleviate their anxiety by encouraging the student to commit to a life/career decision to decrease their anxiety. Making a decision about one's career path may alleviate the student's anxiety in the short-term, but curtails the exploration that is considered necessary for understanding one's values, strengths, limitations, etc. Parents can be made aware of the tendency to wish to minimize their child's anxiety by offering them advice. Furthermore, school counselors can encourage parents to identify and manage their emotions in knowing that their child is experiencing anxiety with career decision-making, and help them to recognize the ways in which they can support their child in learning to manage their anxiety.

## **Consultation and Collaboration with Teachers**

School counselors can use Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory as an overarching framework for training teachers to use evidence-based strategies to promote students' career development. Verhoeven et al. (2019) conducted a narrative review of the literature regarding teachers' role in facilitating students' sociocultural and personal identity development. They authors identified that the following instructional activities were associated with students' identity exploration: exposing students to unfamiliar learning contents, on-site and hands-on activities, encouraging self-reflection through writing and classroom discussions with peers, and supporting students in connecting academic knowledge to their personal lives. A supportive school climate was identified as a contributor to students' identity exploration, with research suggesting that students need to feel secure with their peers and teachers in order to engage in psychological risk-taking.

Teacher support may take the form of close, personal relationships with students and complimenting students. Teachers can facilitate peer support by using learning activities that invite mutual encouragement among students and making adolescents aware of their commonalities. Interestingly, Verhoeven et al. (2019) concluded that learning activities that facilitate students' identity exploration are currently not well integrated in the formal academic curriculum. Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory can serve as an understandable framework in training teachers to facilitate students' exploration. Teachers would likely grasp the developmental need for adolescents to explore their academic and career interests, and be able to help students identify strategies for managing the anxiety associated with exploration. Moreover, knowledge of the four

statuses can assist teachers in identifying students who are avoiding self- and career exploration.

### **Influence of Poverty and Race in Identity Exploration**

School counselors should be sensitive to the fact that contextual variables may contribute to an adolescent's failure to engage in identity exploration. Students who live in poverty have weaker job-seeking networks (Kneebone & Holmes, 2016), often lack sufficient career information and career development guidance (Turner & Conkel, 2020), and have fewer opportunities to investigate educational and career options (Bloom, 2007). A lack of identity exploration among minority students has been linked to teachers' failing to have high expectations of minority students (Verhoeven et al., 2019). Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory may be used to help stakeholders understand the need for adolescents to have access to a comprehensive school counseling curriculum that facilitates students' career and personal/social development, which is an ethical mandate of the ASCA (2019).

When advising students, school counselors should attempt to determine whether a lack of adult support is related to the students' career exploration. In such cases, the school counselor may help the adolescent identify other persons, such as other family, community members, or teachers, who may serve as a support for managing the anxiety associated with career exploration. Furthermore, school counselors can collaborate with stakeholders and community organizations to create school-based programs that promote identity exploration, such as mentorship programs (Hughes et al., 2013).

## Conclusion

Although the process of acquiring a well-integrated identity has historically been considered the central developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 2007), the recognition of the role that school-related contextual factors have in facilitating the development of youths' identities (Verhoeven et al., 2019) is in its infancy. We encourage school counselors to consider adopting Marcia's (1966, 2007) theory to support students' career exploration, as it satisfies the profession's desire to use empirically-supported theories, it has clear implications for advising and consultation, and it may serve as a broad framework for helping parents, teachers, and community members understand the objectives and interventions for promoting student identity exploration.

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