

Chapter 17

Relations Between Identity in Young Adulthood and Intimacy at Midlife

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This study examines the relation between the development of ego identity by young adulthood and the establishment and maintenance of stable and enduring intimate interpersonal relationships by midlife. This relation was investigated further in order to discover how it might differ between men and women. The Identity Scale was first cross-validated with other personality measures before being related to subsequent intimacy patterns. The achievement of ego identity was found to be important for the establishment (for men) and stability (for women) of marital relationships. Additional sex differences in happiness and spheres of life satisfaction were also explored. These differences suggest differing developmental courses for young men and women as they establish themselves in the adult world.

Do people who achieve a strong sense of identity by the end of adolescence lead lives that are different from those who do not? There is no systematic evidence concerning the long-term consequences of the attainment of a personal identity during young adulthood. The availability of longitudinal data from a sample of art students across a period of 18 years from 1963 to 1981 makes it possible to address empirically questions regarding the applicability and validity of the Eriksonian construct of identity for this subsample of the population.

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The present article will attempt to identify the relations, if any, between a measure of identity taken during early adulthood and measures of the achievement of intimate relationships and other related factors collected 18 years later. The specific questions addressed are (a) Can a measure of personal identity administered during young adulthood predict the achievement of intimate relationships years later? (b) Should the intimacy resulting from a strong sense of identity be conceived of as a similar or different situation for men and women? and (c) Is the relation between early identity and indicators of well-being in midlife different for males and females as well?

The first question emerges from Eriksonian theory. According to Erik Erikson's epigenetic stage theory of psychosocial development, the establishment of a firm sense of ego identity is an essential bridge between childhood and adulthood. Although the process of identity formation is lifelong, the "time of ascendancy" occurs during late adolescence. The main challenge during this period is the integration of past identifications, present drives, and social roles. The outcome of this integration is a sense of personal continuity or inner sameness (Erikson 1963).

The stage following adolescence is young adulthood. The bipolar outcomes of this stage are intimacy and isolation. Erikson (1963) claimed that a successful resolution of the crisis of identity is necessary before one is capable of successfully resolving this next crisis. In turn, a positive resolution of the tensions at this stage is a requirement for success in the following adult stages and challenges. Intimacy can be defined as "the capacity to commit [oneself] to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments" (Erikson 1963, p. 263). Genital maturity and mutuality are also important aspects of intimacy. The lack of these qualities can lead to isolation.

The Eriksonian paradigm is that "it is only after a reasonable sense of identity has been established that real intimacy with the other sex (or for that matter, with any other person) is possible" (1959, p. 95).

In terms of the second question, whether different paths lead to identity for the two sexes and whether the outcomes of identity achievement are different for men and women, Erikson has written little. Statements about female identity have been limited to the processes inherent in the female "productive inner space," that is, the female anatomy, specifically the reproductive system (Erikson 1968, pp. 261–294, and 1975, pp. 225–247). Marcia and Friedman claimed that "a consistent theoretical formulation and the experimental operations necessary to establish its validity have not been carried out for ego identity in women" (1970, p. 247). Gilligan (1982) argued that Erikson's developmental theory is based on male development and claimed that his writings on the "inner space" are inadequate (pp. 11–13). Both Douvan and Adelson (1966) and Erikson (1968) suggested that the achievement of intimacy may occur concurrently with, or even prior to, the achievement of identity in women. Gilligan concluded that women need to be understood on their own developmental terms and discussed the necessity of further research as well as the creation of new models that focus specifically on women's development.

The third question, concerning behavioral-emotional outcomes of identity achievement, is implied by the Eriksonian model. Presumably, those individuals who have attained ego identity are reasonably well adapted to their social environment and should consequently experience a sense of well-being.

Method

Sample

In 1963, a wide range of demographic and psychometric data were collected from 281 of the 321 sophomores and juniors enrolled at that time at one of the foremost art schools in the country, although each student did not necessarily complete all the measures. A complete description of the sample and procedures can be found in the work of Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976). These data make up the Time 1 data base.

In 1981, 208 of these subjects completed a follow-up questionnaire. This questionnaire contained both open-ended and checklist type questions regarding the students' personal, family, and professional life since leaving art school (Time 2). The final sample comprises 166 individuals who both completed the Identity Scale in 1963 and provided information concerning intimacy in 1981.

Measures

Identity scale (Time 1). The measure of identity used in this study is a paper-and-pencil test based on the Eriksonian model, the Identity Scale (Hess et al. 1968). It consists of 56 pairs of words or phrases meant to elicit responses pertaining to the issue of identity. One item of each pair denotes the negative possibility of a developmental issue, the other, the positive (Henry and Sims 1970, p. 60).

The scale is constructed as a 7-point bipolar choice semantic differential. The measure used in the present study is the general identity factor isolated in previous studies (Henry and Sims 1970), which sums 14 of the 56 items for men and 17 of the 56 for women. The scores for men and women assess male and female aspects of identity, based on the clusterings found in the factor analytic studies on over 500 men and women in various professions. The differences in content between the male and female factors are that for men, there are additional items reflecting instrumental competence aspects of identity (e.g., *unprepared-ready, skilled-unskilled*), whereas for women the additional items seem geared more toward measuring emotional integration and control (e.g., *emotionally disorganized-emotionally integrated, anxious-secure*).

Although the Eriksonian identity construct is complex and multidimensional, the broad outlines of the differences between identity achievement and identity diffusion seem to be effectively assessed by this instrument. It was originally developed in conjunction with extensive interviews with a group of 14 actors. This semistructured interview was quite similar to the Marcia (1966) interview (which it predates by a number of years) although only two rather than four identity statuses were assessed.

Intimacy (Time 2). The measure of intimacy used in this study is marital status as reported on the 1981 questionnaire. Subjects were asked to check one of the following categories: never married, living together, married, separated, divorced, or widowed. A second question elicited the number of divorces. From these two questions the following categories could be discriminated: married-never divorced, married-previously divorced, married-marital history unknown, and never married.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to using marital status as a measure of Eriksonian intimacy. Erikson describes intimacy in broad terms, focusing on the aspects of heterosexual mutuality and genital maturity. He also views intimacy as the foundation for future generativity, which is defined as the provision of care and sustenance to future generations. Marriage is the socially normative institution in which these functions occur. As with other Eriksonian concepts, it is difficult to operationalize intimacy and at the same time succeed in capturing its richness and complexity. While recognizing that intimacy can and does occur outside of marriage and that marriage does not necessarily insure intimacy, the normative environment on which Erikson bases his claims is that of marriage (Erikson 1963). Marriage is, in addition, a clearly defined social institution and as such, it provides a socially based context for intimacy. Furthermore, the status of marriage is clear and explicit, making it easily measured. Finally, in light of the apparent waning of the institution of marriage, it is likely that those individuals who continue on in a marriage also maintain a strong sense of intimacy as well.

Additional measures. Other scales from both 1963 and 1981 are used in this study to draw a more complete picture of what identity and the process of its achievement look like for men and women. These additional measures will be described as necessary in the Results section.

Results

To investigate the validity of the Identity Scale as a measure of Eriksonian identity, scores on the Identity Scale were correlated with those obtained on the 16 Personality Factors Scale (16PF) and the Paired Direct and Projective Questionnaire, all of which were administered at Time 1. The 16PF is a widely used broad-based measure of personality that is designed to measure 16 basic characteristics. Taken together, these characteristics produce a comprehensive personality profile (Cattell and Stice 1962). The resulting pattern of correlations, shown in Table 1,

Table 1 Construct validity of the identity scale by Cattell's 16 personality factors (16PF) and the paired direct and projective questionnaire (PDPQ)

Measure	Men (<i>n</i> = 67)	Women (<i>n</i> = 75)	Total
16PF	–	–	–
Ego Strength	0.51***	0.28**	0.41***
Superego	0.16	0.36***	0.24***
Self-Sentiment	0.24*	0.38***	0.30***
Parmia	0.39***	0.35***	0.37***
Shrewdness	0.23*	0.35***	0.28***
Ergic Tension	–0.47***	–0.33***	–0.41***
Protension	–0.33***	–0.15	–0.25***
Guilt	–0.37***	–0.35***	–0.37***
Self-Sufficiency	0.10	–0.18	–0.03
Surgency	–0.03	0.16	0.08
Cyclothymia	0.06	0.26**	0.16*
PDPQ	–	–	–
ProjNeg	–0.02	–0.32***	–0.19**
DirNeg	–0.29**	–0.45***	–0.37***
Consist	0.23*	0.21*	0.19**

Note. ProjNeg = negative responses on projective (third person) form; DirNeg = negative responses on direct (first person) form; Consist = difference between ProjNeg and DirNeg

* $p < .05$

** $P < .01$

*** $p < .001$

lends support to the premise that the Identity Scale is indeed measuring something that approximates what Erikson means by *identity*.

As can be seen in Table 1, individuals with an established identity tend to be more controlled and practical. Scores on the Identity Scale are positively correlated with the following 16PF items for both men and women; stability (Ego-Strength), venturesomeness (Parmia), worldliness (Shrewdness), conscientiousness (Superego; significant for women, approaching significance for men), and awareness of social norms (Self-Sentiment).

Identity is correlated negatively with the following 16PF items for both men and women: tension and anxiety (Ergic Tension), guilt and insecurity (Guilt), and suspicion and jealousy (Protension; significant for men, approaching significance for women).

There were certain sex differences in the pattern of results. The women, but not the men, displayed a significant correlation between identity and the 16PF factor that measures social outgoingness (Cyclothymia). The negative relation between identity and a measure of autonomy (Self-Sufficiency) approaches significance for women, as does the positive relation between identity and a measure of enthusiasm and frivolity (Surgency).

The Paired Direct and Projective Questionnaire yields a direct measure of negative or antisocial feelings (DirNeg in Table 1) as well as a projective measure of negative or antisocial feelings (ProjNeg). In addition a measure of personality

consistency (Consist) can be created by computing the difference between projective negative responses and direct negative responses (see Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976; Getzels and Walsh 1958). The stronger the identity for both men and women, the less unsocialized feelings emerged on the direct measure. The women also displayed a relation between higher identity and lower projective negative responses. Even more striking is the fact that for both men and women a strong identity goes hand in hand with personality consistency.

As a composite picture, individuals having a strong identity are self-confident, relaxed, reasonably comfortable in society, secure, and integrated. This picture parallels Erikson's description of people who have been successful in achieving identity, in other words, who are comfortable with themselves as well as comfortable within their social roles. In terms of the sex differences mentioned, it is clear also that women's identity is for the most part similar to men's in terms of its personality correlates, except in the case of autonomy-dependency. Dependency clearly represents a part of female identity, whereas this is simply not the case for men. This rather striking exception is consistent with the notion that identity for women is intertwined with intimacy concerns. Sex differences in identity have surfaced in a number of studies (Marcia and Friedman 1970; Matteson 1975). As Gilligan (1982) put it: The elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle. Woman's place in man's life cycle is to protect this recognition while developmental litany intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights. (p. 23).

Identity and Marital Status

The central focus of this study is the relation between identity and intimacy. Table 2 contains the results of the analyses. The sample was first divided across the median on the independent variable (i.e., the identity factor score); this yielded two groups: those high and those low on identity at Time 1. Then the sample was divided into two groups in terms of intimacy: (a) an ever married group, consisting of respondents who were in the married-never divorced, married-previously divorced, married-marital history unknown, separated, and divorced categories, and (b) a never married group. Analyses comparing ever married and never married by identity level were performed for the total sample as well as the two sexes separately. The chi-square statistic was used to test the significance of these relations. This first test indicates that there is a relation between identity and marital status. Of those who had not married by 1981, twice as many had been below the median on identity in 1963.

However, the overall pattern is overshadowed by sex differences. For men, there is a strong relation between having low identity and remaining single. Of 11 men who in 1981 reported that they had never been married, 10 had scores that fell below the median on identity. Put differently, only 1 of the 35 men with high

Table 2 1981 Marital Status by Identity and Marital Disruption by Identity

Measure	Women	Men	Total
<i>Marital status</i>			
Ever married	–	–	–
Low identity	34	26	60
High identity	41	34	75
Total	75	60	135
Never married	–	–	–
Low identity	6	10	16
High identity	7	1	8
Total	13	11	24
Both groups	–	–	–
Low identity	40	36	76
High identity	48	35	83
Total	88	71	159
χ^2	.003	8.14**	4.03*
<i>Marital disruption</i>			
Absent	–	–	–
Low identity	8	11	19
High identity	18	12	30
Total	26	23	49
Present	–	–	–
Low identity	18	9	27
High identity	11	12	23
Total	29	21	50
Both groups	–	–	–
Low identity	26	20	46
High identity	29	24	53
Total	55	44	99
χ^2	5.38*	.11	2.3

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

identity was unmarried by 1981. Women, on the other hand, show little difference in identity between the ever married and never married groups. This lack of a difference is surprising considering that marriage is traditionally thought to be more a part of female identity.

Next, respondents in the ever married group who had achieved marital stability were contrasted with those who had experienced marital disruptions. Respondents who were in the married-never divorced category made up the marital stability group, and those who were either divorced, separated, or married-previously divorced constituted the marital disruption group.

As shown in the lower half of Table 2, for women there was a strong relation between identity and marital stability. More than two thirds of the low identity women experienced marital disruption. Men with stable and unstable marriages did not differ in terms of identity. Identity in young adulthood does appear to be

Table 3 Correlations Between Identity and Well-Being for Men and Women

Measure	Men		Women	
	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>
Satisfaction	–	–	–	–
Total	71	.27**	84	.17
Family life	71	.17	80	–.01
Standard of living	72	.26**	85	.24**
Occupation	72	.20*	81	.02
Friendships	73	.01	86	.16
Happiness	–	–	–	–
Total	55	.25*	74	.24*
1964	55	–.02	74	.02
1966	57	–.01	75	.16
1968	57	–.04	75	.16
1970	57	–.03	75	.20*
1972	57	.12	75	.02
1974	57	.23*	75	.28**
1976	57	.26*	74	.17
1978	57	.22*	74	.07
1980	57	.39**	75	.21*

Note. Correlations are for happiness and satisfaction as reported in 1981

Total happiness = average of happiness scores from 1964 to 1980

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

predictive of future marital status for both men and women, but in different ways. Men with low identity are more likely to remain unmarried. Women with low identity, on the other hand, are just as likely to marry as are women with high identity. The difference is that low identity women are more likely to experience breakups in their marriages. For men, identity bears little relation to the stability of marriage.

Identity and Well-Being

To further explore the relations between identity and intimacy, the identity factor was correlated with various measures of retrospectively reported well-being in the 1981 questionnaire. The results are presented in Table 3.

The questionnaire contained five questions relating to the self-reported satisfaction with various aspects of life. The areas of family life, occupation, standard of living, friendships, and life as a whole (total satisfaction) were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from *complete satisfaction* to *complete dissatisfaction*.

These results again indicate patterns of sex differences. For men, the correlation between scores on the Identity Scale and reported degree of total satisfaction is

significant. This relation appears to be accounted for by the significant relations between identity and two of the sources of satisfaction measured by the subscales, namely, satisfaction with occupation and standard of living. There is also an indication of a mild relation between identity and satisfaction with family.

The only significant correlation found between identity and satisfaction for women is that between the Identity Scale and satisfaction with standard of living. There is an indication of a mild relation between identity and satisfaction with friendships. The relation between identity and total satisfaction approaches significance.

In brief, for men, identity as observed in early adulthood is correlated with satisfaction with occupation and possibly with satisfaction with family life as reported at midlife. These correlations are not found for women. The relation between identity and total satisfaction is clearer for men than for women. Identity correlates most strongly with total satisfaction and with standard of living for both men and women.

Respondents were also asked to report on how happy they remember themselves being since 1963. The questionnaire contained a 6-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from *very happy* to *very unhappy*. Respondents were asked to rate themselves for each 2-year period from 1963/1964 to 1979/1980. A total happiness score was computed by averaging responses across all years.

Once again, clear-cut sex differences emerge. Although identity is positively related to total happiness for both men and women, different patterns are obtained for the 2-year retrospective happiness ratings making up the total happiness variable. The correlation for men between identity and happiness was not significant for the periods between 1963/1964 and 1971/1972. Beginning in 1973/1974, identity appears to be related to happiness, and this relation gets stronger over time through 1979/1980. However, the pattern of correlations for women seems to be random.

Discussion

Identity and Intimacy

The relation between identity and successful establishment of stable, intimate interpersonal relationships (as measured by marital status) is noteworthy both in terms of supporting part of the Eriksonian paradigm and in suggesting gender-related differences in how this relation shows itself. What is particularly impressive is that the Identity Scale, administered in 1963, was a good predictor of marital status (for men) and marital stability (for women) 18 years later.

It is clear that, overall, those individuals who had a strong sense of identity in 1963 were able to establish more enduring marital relationships. The finding that 10 of the 11 never married men had low identity in young adulthood certainly

supports the claim that for men, a solid sense of identity helps to attain intimacy through marriage. The women in our sample are just as likely to get married as not, regardless of identity achievement. But in terms of staying married, again a high level of identity bodes well, whereas low levels of identity seem to make for marital problems. These patterns suggest that the paths for achieving intimacy may be different for the sexes. The road to intimacy is paved with a solid sense of identity for both, but one that is different for each sex. The identity measure accounts for these sex differences. Intimacy, likewise, has different features that become salient for men and women. For men the attainment of intimacy centers around the decision whether or not to get married. It is at this point that identity achievement based on the traditional male roles of instrumentality, effectance, and competence becomes crucial. Women, on the other hand, may be bound by the social prescription of marriage, so that identity achievement has little to do with whether they get married. However, the attainment of intimacy for these women seems to hinge on the ongoing stability of the relationship. It is here that an identity based on anxiety management and a facility with more emotional, expressive tasks comes to fruition in the establishment of stable marriage.

The mild correlation between identity and later satisfaction with friendship that exists for women but not for men may indicate a further sex difference. Women may be finding a source of intimacy in friendships rather than in the marital relationship alone.

Identity and Well-Being

The relations between identity and later happiness are also different for each sex, suggesting developmental differences between men and women. The fact that a measure of identity is predictive of happiness ratings up to 18 years later (particularly for men) clearly supports the claim that a successful resolution of the crisis of identity is required for a personally satisfying adulthood.

The relations between identity and satisfaction are suggestive in a number of ways. As with total happiness, total life satisfaction is positively correlated with identity, especially for men. When satisfaction is assessed in different spheres, it can be seen that the story is somewhat different for men and women. Although one might expect women to base their sense of identity much more in the area of intimate relationships and family (Marcia and Friedman 1970; Matteson 1975), this expectation is not supported by the data. Identity for women does not relate more strongly to satisfaction with family than for men. There is, however, some relation between identity and satisfaction with friendships for women that is not obtained for men. The strongest relation for both sexes is between identity and satisfaction with standard of living. This is surprising in light of the lack of relation between identity and income. What this indicates is that people who achieve a strong sense of identity early in their lives go on to be satisfied with whatever standard of living they achieve in their 40 s, regardless of their actual income. The

strongest difference between men and women occurs in the correlation between identity and occupational satisfaction, which holds for men but not for women. Men who achieved a strong sense of identity in their early 20 s ended up much more satisfied with their work in their early 40 s. The work arena thus continues to be an important aspect of male development and may be the path by which men establish their identity early on; having done so, men can derive satisfaction from their occupation during middle age.

Generalizability of the Findings

The fact that a subsample of artists is used to address these issues may raise questions regarding the generalizability of the findings. However, it should be noted that artists tend to be viewed as recalcitrant individuals who are self-centered, irresponsible, and difficult to get along with. In fact, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) described the respondents in this study (art students) as highly unconventional, socially aloof, radical, sensitive, imaginative, and naive in comparison with non-art students. If a sense of identity is valuable for these individuals who presumably have difficulty sustaining intimate relationships, it may prove all the more valuable for the population at large.

Conclusion

In summary, these results show a relation between ego identity and the achievement of intimacy, a relation that differs between men and women. Whereas men who lack a well-developed sense of identity in young adulthood are likely to remain single into midlife, the decision to marry for women is independent of their achievement of identity. Women without a well-developed sense of identity instead have problems maintaining stable, enduring marriages. The successful resolution of the crisis of identity is predictive of future well-being for men in a clear and dramatic manner. For women, identity is related to future happiness and satisfaction in ways that are varied and complex. The discovery of these two differing patterns for men and women highlights potentially important differences in development. These differences suggest that social as well as psychological factors contribute to the formation of gender-related differences in the relation between identity and patterns of intimacy.

The relevance of this study to the work by Gilligan (1982), which suggests the existence of a distinct and unique developmental path for women, is that it provides evidence for this unique path in actual behavior over time, “When women construct the adult domain, the world of relationships emerges and becomes the focus of attention and concern” (Gilligan 1982, p. 167). Remaining true to this self-conception, a woman almost inevitably gets married. The test of whether she

can endure in this situation is if she has integrated a caretaking ability into a strong sense of identity during her adolescence. For men, whose tendency is to “represent powerful activity as assertion and aggression” (Gilligan 1982, p. 167), the test comes much earlier. A strong identity, based on occupational and ideological commitment, is necessary before the maturing male can venture into the world of intimacy.

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