

Personality Structure and Identity Status in Women as Viewed Through Early Memories

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Early memories were obtained from women in the four identity status categories and rated for developmental level in an effort to assess deeper aspects of personality development that underlie identity formation. In contrast to some previous research which has found similarities between Achievement and Foreclosure women and between Moratorium and Diffusion women, this study found that Moratorium women show greater ego development in contrast to the Foreclosures. Achievement women were found to blend aspects of both Foreclosure and Moratorium patterns, suggesting that their approach to identity formation may be through a form of rapprochement.

INTRODUCTION

Several investigators have recently addressed the puzzling sex differences obtained in identity status research (Marcia, 1980; Matteson, 1977; Hodgson and Fischer, 1979; Bourne, 1978). In numerous studies (Marcia and Friedman, 1970; Toder and Marcia, 1973; Schenkel, 1975; Prager, 1976) the recurring phenomenon is that for females, Identity Foreclosure subjects behave much like Identity Achievements, while Moratorium subjects more closely resemble Diffusions. (For males, the "high" identity statuses are Achievement and Moratorium, who behave similarly, in contrast to the "low" statuses of Foreclosure and Diffusion.) It has been

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postulated by these researchers that, for some reason, Foreclosure is a more adaptive form of identity formation in women, while the Moratorium status for women brings great stress, leading to disequilibrium. Investigators who have attempted a deeper examination of the character structures of women in these statuses (Josselson, 1973; Ginsburg and Orlofsky, 1981) have found that Moratoriums, despite their greater conscious anxiety and uncertainty, have, on a more profound level, greater ego development and self-differentiation. In other words, Moratorium women appear to show a foundation of strength underneath a shaky exterior. Concurrently, these same investigators have found that Foreclosure women, despite their apparent strength and solidity of character structure, show evidence of a fairly infantile ego organization and fewer deeper signs of psychological health.

The present study endeavors to extend the "deeper look" approach in assessing character structure among the identity statuses through analysis of their earliest memories. Following Mayman (1968), the hypothesis is that early memories are "retrospective inventions developed to express psychological truths about a person's life; that early memories are expressions of important fantasies around which a person's character structure is organized" (p. 304). The difficulty in research on identity formation has been preserving the holistic nature of Erikson's initial concept. Identity resides in the dynamic interconnection of aspects of the self, and certain aspects of the self—the less crucial or highly cathected ones—may remain independent of (and tangential to) the major identity crystallization. But the personal myths, embodied in early memories, must be at the nexus of a person's identity. These memories represent the experience of the sense of self in the past as it is experienced in the present, a form of coercing the past into conformity with the present: "Childhood memories... are not fixed at the moment of being experienced and afterwards repeated, but are only elicited at a later age when childhood is already past. In the process they are altered and falsified, and are put in the service of later trends..." (Freud, 1953). Freud compares early memories produced at a later age to historical writing, which compiles the past in order to make it congruent with a nation's contemporary goals.

An analysis of the early memories of women in each identity status should provide information about the current organization of their inner world. The themes that they choose as central from their childhood should elucidate the nature of their identity strivings.

METHOD

Sixty-three randomly chosen college senior women were subjects in this study. Each was interviewed to determine identity status following Mar-

cia's (1966) interview schedule with Schenkel and Marcia's (1972) modification. The distribution and description of identity statuses follows:

1. Achievement. Those who have made identity commitments following a period of crisis ($N = 18$).
2. Moratorium. Those in a period of crisis regarding identity commitments ($N = 20$).
3. Foreclosures. Those who have made identity commitments with no period of crisis ($N = 10$).
4. Diffusions. Those who have neither experienced a crisis nor made commitments ($N = 15$).

As part of a larger interview, 30 subjects were asked to give the following sequence: their earliest and second earliest memory, their earliest memory of mother, earliest memory of father, earliest memory of being happy, earliest memory of being unhappy, and earliest memory that was special to them—seven early memories in all. The remaining 33 subjects, as part of a different longer interview, were asked for their two earliest memories.

All memories were transcribed from the tapes and coded according to Mayman's (1968) coding scheme, which designates the developmental phase from which the relationship paradigm contained in the memory is drawn. Six categories of such self and object representations were obtained:

1. "Oral" configurations. Themes of basic mistrust, deprivation, sense of unfulfillment, gratification themes, themes of nurturance, and role reversal.
2. "Anal" configurations. Themes of defiance, compliance, expulsiveness, rebelliousness.
3. "Phallic-locomotor." Themes of pleasure in mastery, pleasure in one's strength, competence and/or fear of punishment in regard to these themes.
4. "Phallic-sexual." Themes that are frankly or covertly sexual, including excited self-display.
5. "Oedipal." Themes related to the family triangle, including both hostile-competitive and positive-harmonious strivings.
6. "Latency." Themes of sublimated peer group activities.

RESULTS

Because results on both data sets (i.e., those with two memories and those with seven memories each) were precisely the same, the data sets were

Table I. Frequency Distribution of Early Memories by Identity Status^a

	Oral	Anal	Phallic-locomotor	Phallic-sexual	Oedipal	Latency	Total <i>N</i>
Moratorium	18 (20)		39 (43)	9 (10)	18 (20)	6 (7)	90
Achievement	22 (32)	2 (3)	31 (46)	3 (4)	8 (12)	2 (3)	68
Foreclosure	20 (40)	4 (8)	13 (25)	5 (10)	7 (14)	2 (4)	51
Diffusion	17 (44)	2 (5)	11 (28)	4 (10)	3 (8)	2 (5)	39

^aPercentages are shown in parentheses.

combined to obtain more statistical power. Thus, the memories were rated rather than the individuals. The distribution of memories by identity status is given in Table I.

For statistical analysis, developmental phases were grouped into "pre-Oedipal" and "phallic-Oedipal" categories. The rationale was that the pre-Oedipal themes of trust, mistrust, and differentiation of the self are markedly distinct from the later developmental themes of initiative, striving, competition, and fears of being overpowered.

Table II depicts the significant difference among the identity statuses in the developmental phases from which their earliest memories are drawn. Foreclosures and Diffusions are similar in distributing their memories fairly equally between the pre-Oedipal and later phases. Moratoriums draw their early memories significantly more often from the phallic and Oedipal phases. Achievements, while their memories are weighted toward the later themes, give fewer later-phase memories than the Moratoriums.

The most striking finding comes from a serendipitous discovery. Often, complex memories were difficult to rate as belonging to only one phase. Therefore, secondary ratings were also given to express the existence of the two separate themes. Although only the primary rating was used in the main analysis, a note was made in the tabulation of these "blends."

Table II. Chi-Square Analysis of Early Memories: Pre-Oedipal Versus Oedipal and Post-Oedipal Stages^a

	Pre-Oedipal ^a	Oedipal and post-Oedipal ^b
Moratorium	18	72
Achievement	24	44
Foreclosure	24	27
Diffusion	19	20

^a $\chi^2 = 15.48$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$.

^bPre-Oedipal stages = oral and anal. Oedipal and post-Oedipal stages = phallic-locomotor, phallic-sexual, Oedipal, and latency.

While the Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Diffusion groups each contained 2 blend memories, the Achievements memories contained 26 blends. That is, unique to the Achievements, more than one-third of their memories integrated themes from two developmental phases, usually a pre-Oedipal and a phallic-Oedipal theme.

Examples of such blend memories follow:

When I was 5, we moved to a new house and I was really excited about going to school. We had a kitchen table and my head just reached it and I remember thinking I'd like to be taller than the table and I remember thinking soon I'd be going to school. And my mother was washing dishes and I was talking to her about going to school (Feelings?) Felt really good, secure, happy, and expectant. [Scored 3 for its phallic-locomotor themes, secondarily 1 for the security and closeness to mother.]

Being home with my mother. She used to read to me a lot and take me places. I remember I always thought she had really black hair. Mine is darker now, but that made a real big impression on me. I thought she was really pretty. [Scored 5 for Oedipal-competitive theme, secondarily 1 for nurturing closeness with mother.]

DISCUSSION

These findings highlight several significant aspects of the different ego organizations found among the identity statuses. In light of previous research, the greater emphasis on themes of basic security among the Foreclosures is not surprising. Stuck in conflicts about dependency and safety, these women cling to the past both in their identity formation and in their current self-representation. Their early memories reflect the greater concern with basic issues of nurturance and safety, which has been found elsewhere.

The homogeneity of memories among the Moratoriums, however, adds new information to our developing picture of them. What we seem to find in them is an effort to "do it alone." Their memories abound with the efforts of the self to go exploring, to expand its own capacities, and with the pained helplessness of being the victim of others' aggression. When Moratorium women feel scared, they experience their fear without running to be comforted. And they more frequently thrust themselves wholeheartedly into the Oedipal competition, enjoying the excitement and protection of father. The Moratoriums are preoccupied with their own abilities; they are more interested in what they can and cannot do and less so in who is there and who is not. Their memories seem to suggest a great capacity to bear anxiety, and if we view this ability as adaptive and healthy, these results become congruent with Ginsburg and Orlofsky's (1981) findings.

The data on the Achievements is, perhaps, most interesting. They are neither as bound to pre-Oedipal security issues as the Foreclosures nor as relentlessly bent on their own capacities as are the Moratoriums. The

Achievements' major theme seems to be integration, as characterized by their compound blend memories. The Achievements seem to have successfully traversed the identity stage through their capacity to amalgamate divergent aspects of themselves. They "do," but in the context of a secure relationship. Their inner world appears to be a scene of balance between their needs for relatedness and their needs for self-assertion, almost as though they use the relationship as a wellspring to draw strength for their efforts. The emphasis is on their own potential, but with a glance backward at who is standing behind them, or with them. The Achievements demonstrate a style of development best characterized as "rapprochement" (see Mahler *et al.*, 1975; Josselson, 1980), a pattern wherein closeness is maintained to the person from whom the individual is separating and individuating. In contrast, the Foreclosures are preoccupied with the relatedness and cannot free energies for striving. The Moratoriums, who are making great efforts to sever relationships in the past, bear the anxiety of being too much on their own. Their absorption in their own capacities seems to preclude (or perhaps precede) the rapprochement which appears to be necessary for identity consolidation.

The findings with regard to the Diffusions add little to what is already known. They are like the Foreclosures in their emphasis on early developmental issues. But this group continually shows itself to be a diverse one, without internal sameness. This is to be expected in that this group is defined by the absence of either crisis or commitment. Diffusions most likely comprise individuals with varying forms of character pathology which interfere with their ability to progress on identity tasks.

SUMMARY

Early memories of 63 college senior women were analyzed for developmental level. Moratorium women were found to emphasize later developmental themes, issues of striving, and Oedipal anxiety in contrast to Foreclosure women, whose memories showed a significantly greater emphasis on pre-Oedipal themes of trust and issues of closeness to nurturant others. This finding is seen as evidence of the greater ego development of the Moratoriums and suggests that the Moratorium status may be adaptive for women, despite its greater superficial stress. Conversely, the apparent adaptiveness of the Foreclosure status for women may rest on a relatively undifferentiated character structure, so that Foreclosures show less long-term success in their form of identity resolution. Achievement women were found to blend themes of striving and nurturance, which suggests that their approach to identity formation is through a form of rapprochement.

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