The Child
An Encyclopedic Companion

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The Child: an Encyclopedic Companion provides a remarkable one-stop resource for parents and students interested in a variety of topics about children and childhood. The authors, all experts in their respective fields, cover topics such as adoption, child psychology, child development, and more. The book is divided into sections that provide a comprehensive overview of the topic at hand. Each entry in the encyclopedia is written by experts in their fields and is written in a clear, accessible style. The book is an essential resource for anyone interested in the latest research and best practices in the field of child development.
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IDENTITY. Identity development can be linked in our answers to lifelong questions such as: Who am I? What do I want to make of myself in the future? How can I attain my dreams despite the obstacles I am facing? To what groups and communities do I belong? Researchers across the social sciences have mapped how our identities can reach across family generations, social networks, institutional settings, national borders, and cultural communities. Recent studies have shown that identities emerge in childhood and are linked into areas of competence, such as career aspirations, self-worth, and intergroup cooperation, as well as social vulnerabilities, such as alienation, prejudice, and intergroup conflict. More broadly, global demographic and social changes are raising interest in identity for a wide range of scholars, in progress in defining identity and mapping its development is sparking productive debate and advancing both understanding and applications.

MEANINGS OF IDENTITY. Two contrasting approaches to understanding identity have proved especially useful. One defines identity in terms of evolving pathways or strata of meaning that reach across generations and historical time. From this viewpoint, we construct a sense of identity from the ongoing interplay among our experiences as individuals, in our social relationships, and within broader institutional frameworks and constraints, such as education and work. Cultural similarities or differences among pathways through the life span can be seen in common rites of passage, such as ceremonial marking of infants’ naming and adolescents’ coming of age, or an Apache camp maiden ceremony, an Australian Aborigine wedding, a Jewish bat or bar mitzvah, or a Mexican descent girl’s quinceañera on her 15th birthday. Other identity milestones include school graduations, weddings, births of the dialect and hosting ancestors. Virtually can be seen when times of prosperity or war may boost, slow, or halt children’s progress along their identity pathways.

The second approach to understanding identity focuses on the social categories that mark divisions between social groups. From this viewpoint, our identities are defined by both stable and mutable exclusive sets of social categories, such as those used in census counts, which mark boundaries between social groups. For example, in ancient China, Persia, Greece, and Egypt, census officials counted free men and slaves to plan for who could serve in the military and pay taxes, while others were excluded from women, children, and the elderly. It is now common among modern research systems to seek to count all men, women, and children using demographic categories to define identities in terms of age, gender, and social class (based on education and income). Variations in the use of these social categories among nations can be seen in some who count and categorize residents by their national origin, home language, and ethnic heritage.

In linking the past to future identity development, Erikson was especially interested in concerns stemming from identity in terms of class, race, and economic success. In Identity: Youth and Crisis (1968), Erikson traced the central role of conflict in forging a positive identity, whether a prejudiced youth participating in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Native American youth from the Navajo Sioux community on their vision quests, or African American teenagers facing extremes in prejudice and psychosocial stress. Erikson drew evidence for this theory from his clinical interviews and case studies from his collaborations with developmental psychologists based on standardized measures and large-scale longitudinal studies. Erikson also noted how adolescents who have difficulties integrating their past, present, and future are vulnerable to depression and other mental health issues.

Erikson was a pioneer in setting the central role of culture in defining significant markers of work and family life for identity development. For Erikson and the many researchers who have built on his work, identity development during adolescence is the teen’s intellectual and collective exploration and commitment among life choices within the range and across domains valued in one’s cultural community, such as schooling and careers as well as relationships with families and friends.

Studies of identity development in many cultural settings have shown that career identity is particularly important for men and that life stage is a key predictor of overall identity development. It also appears to emerge early compared to other domains, and fostering it may facilitate development in other domains. Recent longitudinal research shows that youth may not go through a single process of exploration and then commitment to their life pathways. Instead, they may move through cycles of exploration and commitment that may be repeated over time.

Among dimensions related to identity development, researchers have pointed to changes in understanding interpersonal relationships and family communication. Rather than identity exploration being driven only by adolescents’ desire for autonomy or independence, studies of conversations upwardly mobile teenagers, studies of conversations between youth and their families reveal the importance of both individuality, even in expressing one’s own point of view, and connectedness, even in expressing opinions and for others’ viewpoints. This link has been found among European American and Haitian immigrant youth in the United States, among British youth, and among Tunisian immigrant adolescents in Italy.

Both cultural parallels and differences have been found in adolescents’ communication with their families and peers about identity-related topics like education, careers, dating, sexuality, and marriage. When college students from Vietnam, the Philippines, Mexico, and China were compared with European American students, students in all cultural groups expressed more individuality—such as personal opinions or disagreements—with their mothers, siblings, and peers than with their fathers. Still, for youth whose cultural traditions consider open disagreement with their fathers as disrespectful, communicating can take more indirect forms, such as asking their mother or sister to convey sensitive messages to their fathers. Researchers know less about these issues among youths who do not attend college from these cultural backgrounds.

Both challenges and resources shape how youth develop their identity pathways. Economic challenges can constrain identity exploration and commitment. Interviews with youth from lower-income families in New Zealand, Canada, and the United States have revealed that during economic downturns, compared to better times, these youth actively explore or change their educational or career pathways. In immigrant families, cultural traditions may create both challenges and resources. For example, parents who immigrated to the United States may expect to continue their tradition of choosing mates for their children, and conflicts may arise when parents disagree on their parents’ expectations for them with what their American peers are doing. Scholars have described how Vietnamese- and Hmong parents emphasize the importance of their children successfully attaining career and educational goals for the benefit of the family. In contrast, Klasner (Cambodian) American parents may hold traditional beliefs in the power of their children’s individual destinies for their educational success and see them as individuals with distinctive capacities and goals, so parents’ roles are to discover these dispositions as they guide their children. These findings show important variations in the interplay of individuality and connectedness across Southeast Asian communities, which are often viewed as similar in their endorsing collective values.

Beyond group patterns in how experiences shape identity pathways, researchers have been keenly observing the interplay between variation within cultural groups. Scholars have been particularly interested in mapping under what conditions low-income, immigrant, and cultural groups develop more similar to their immigrant or cultural group others’ viewpoints. It is well known that youth whose parents have gone to college are more likely to...
develop college-based career identities, compared to youth who live in the city. Their identities are based on the experiences of attending college. Still, under some conditions, the challenges of immigration, poverty, race, or other obstacles can motivate youth to work to succeed on behalf of their families and give back to their communities. For example, in college preparatory programs, students from low-income and immigrant families, most parents have not had a college education, and they dream their children will have a better life and become doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Students of urban high schools most often frame their parents as their most important resources in helping them understand the path to college, and in spite of their modest education but because of them. These findings provide further evidence of the interplay of challenges and connections in identity pathways.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES OVER TIME AND PLACE

Just as Erikson's writings have led to new discoveries of how identity positively link individuals, social relations, institutions, and cultural changes over time, social identity researchers have also made surprising discoveries about how youth de- velop their personal and social identities. Scholars using social identity theory agree that children and adults use social categorization and reconfiguring of their social identities as one way to maintain their self-esteem. These patterns of thinking and behavior interlock prejdicts and conflict as well as cooperation. Our motivation to claim and express social identities depends on our needs for both uniqueness and belonging. Our personal identities include features that mark us as different from others, like family roles or personal traits, while our social or collective identities mark our membership in groups of belonging in social groups.

Among the core dimensions of a personal or social identity is in salience, which can be seen in how readily we use that particular social category, among other identities, in perceiving and thinking about our selves and our experi- ences. In contrast, the centrality of a social identity measures in people's importance for our self-definition compo- sed of other social identities. Salience and centrality of our identities may shift over time and across settings, but we also lean to see ourselves in stable and consistent terms and even create situations that support our views of our- selves. Likewise, children's many social identities become more or less salient to them in different settings. For exam- ple, a classroom with many boys, a girl's gender identity may be particularly salient to her, but in a high-priced store, but family's income or social class may become more salient in other settings.

Early studies of social identity by Tajfel and Turner involved observing artificial groups of college students and adults in a variety of classes, situations, but much of the recent research has involved children and adolescents and used interviews, surveys, and observations of everyday settings.