

On Snowflakes and Gardens: Multiple Methods in the Field of Psychological Research on Identity Development

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Conference Essay:

International Conference: "Identity Development—Towards an Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods". Braunschweig, Germany, November 4th-6th, 2005, organized by Aristi Born (Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Magdeburg) and Meike Watzlawik (Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Braunschweig)

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Abstract: This conference report gives an overview of the international conference: "Identity Development—Towards an Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods" that took place in Braunschweig, Germany, in November 2005. The six invited speakers introduced the scope of current psychological approaches to research on identity development by means of plenary sessions and in-depth discussions about their research objectives. All contributions focused on the identity status approach, its advancements and possible alternatives. This report attempts to give a summary of the individual contributions and the conference as a whole.

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1. Overview

The international conference "Identity Development—Toward an Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods" took place at the University of Braunschweig during the first weekend of November, 2005. It was co-organized by two psychologists, Aristi BORN (University of Magdeburg) and Meike WATZLAWIK (University of Braunschweig). The aim of the conference was to invite leading scholars conducting psychological research on identity to present their concepts and methods and to stimulate discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of particular approaches. The overarching aim of this conference was to throw light on the possibilities and limitations of an integrated approach that blends different methodologies in identity research. [1]

Five leading scholars were invited to present their perspectives by explaining and commenting on the theoretical and methodological approaches used in their mainly psychological research on identity development. James E. MARCIA gave a talk and a workshop on interviews to determine identity status. Wolfgang KRAUS gave a presentation on the lessons he learnt concerning long-term trends in identity development from a qualitative longitudinal study. Wim MEEUS and Luc GOOSSENS each reported on new studies on identity development in adolescence and early adulthood, respectively, each using innovative questionnaires and statistics. Jane KROGER shared reflections upon the strengths and weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative methods in identity research and the prospects for their integration. In an additional workshop, Alejandro IBORRA CUÉLLAR introduced his approach of qualitative content analysis to examine personal experiences during the processes of identity change. Although the schedule of presentations and workshops was fast paced, the organizers reserved time for questions, discussions, and interaction between the speakers and the participants. The concluding day of the conference was exclusively reserved to summarizing thoughts, discussions, and feedback to bring the contents of the conference together. [2]

This report will summarize the various presentations and workshops and will attempt to reflect on the discussion and reflections from the participant's point of view. For more detailed information on the contributions, participants, and organizers (including a conference picture) please visit the [webpage for the conference](#) [3]

2. Key Speakers and Workshops

The first talk of the conference was given by James E. MARCIA, a prominent scholar in the field of psychological identity research and founder of the "identity status" approach. Since the 1960s he has published numerous relevant books and articles on identity, identity development, identity statuses, and interview methods (MARCIA, 1966, 1994, 1998, 2002; MARCIA, WATERMAN, MATTESON, ARCHER & ORLOFSKY, 1993). In his presentation, he gave a comprehensive introduction to understanding identity as "a personality structure that evolves through the synchronization and organization of the person's representation of oneself and a person's representation of the context" (my notes, HL). MARCIA began with a summary of current knowledge on the eight stages of identity by Erik ERIKSON and the four different identity statuses developed by himself that were inspired by ERIKSON's work. MARCIA's Identity Status Model is based on two core variables: commitment (which is determined within a certain life domain) and exploration (describing the way in which a person came to have or not to have a certain commitment). With the help of these two core variables four statuses can be defined:

- Moratorium: exploration currently taking place, commitment absent (vaguely present),
- Foreclosure: exploration absent, commitment present,

- Diffusion: exploration absent or present, commitment absent,
- Achievement: exploration present, commitment present. [4]

After having outlined ERIKSON's theory and his own theory, MARCIA emphasized the difficult question concerning the context in which identity development takes place. He raised important questions such as: Can we give a psychological definition of the end of young adulthood (see "Emerging Adulthood" by Jeffrey ARNETT, 2004)? Does this go beyond the definition of age 25 as a threshold? Could we instead consider the completion of certain psychosocial tasks as the crucial benchmark? In what way could we as psychologists include the relevance of changes in the societal context as they have been claimed by other disciplines, such as sociology and economics? Could we hypothesize, for instance, that for 20 to 30-year-old adults today it may be more beneficial to have an identity status of achievement with some diffusion and moratorium rather than achievement and some foreclosure, as it may have been several decades ago? MARCIA showed that these may be crucial and rewarding questions for psychologists who aim to bring context back into research on identity research. This is a claim that has often been made, but has rarely been addressed. [5]

In his following workshop, MARCIA gave an in-depth, hands-on introduction to the Identity Status Interview, which is used to evaluate exploration and commitment in the following life domains: occupation, religion, politics, sex role attitudes and sexuality. Exploration as well as commitment can range from non-existent and to being accomplished. MARCIA administered the interview to a volunteer respondent and then handed out the guidelines to let the participants try it. For this purpose, the audience was divided into small groups, to each of which an interviewer, an interviewee, and observers were assigned. MARCIA then provided concise feedback on what he noticed while listening to the trial interviews, and the participants were encouraged to discuss with the author their impressions about their experience with the interview technique. The combination of the proceeding talk and the workshop provided both insight and instruction into the foundations and practice of identity status research. Nevertheless, questions arose about the degree to which experience alters the course of the interview. It seemed quite obvious that a student using the guidelines would lead a completely different interview than MARCIA, whose psychotherapeutic experience entered the interview in many different ways (atmosphere, altered questions, etc.). It has to be considered that this might influence the interview's outcome and therefore the data collected. [6]

On the methodological side it became clear that MARCIA himself favors a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in identity research. Although the interview itself is qualitative, he often rates numerically the identity statuses, calculates inter-rater reliabilities, and analyzes statistical rates. [7]

The talk by Wolfgang KRAUS provided extensive methodological reflections and insights from a leading German scholar in qualitative research on identity and identity development. The empirical basis of his talk stemmed from a unique qualitative longitudinal study that the research group of Heiner KEUPP, Wolfgang

KRAUS and others has kept alive since 1989 (cp. KRAUS, 2000a). KRAUS highlighted many central issues of the current scientific debate about qualitative research and identity through discussing results from studies on "identity, work career, and social networks" (cp. KRAUS, 2000b). According to his presentation, these issues center on questions of the interrelatedness of different life spheres; on the predominance of MAMA (moratorium-achievement- moratorium-achievement) or MDMD (moratorium-diffusion- moratorium-diffusion) circles in the life course; future-orientation vs. past-determination of the life course; the coherence of identity and what is the most adequate qualitative methodology to approach it ("sometimes your qualitative sibling is more critical than your quantitative alien"; my notes, HL); the use of graphical tools in interview settings, such as a network chart and the drawing of a storyline; and questions on the adequate stance of the researcher in the qualitative research process ("beige voice," "listening to small stories," my notes, HL). The presentation by KRAUS impressively displayed how far qualitative research has advanced in this field of research, and highlighted the innovations in the development of qualitative tools and analyses in identity development, as well as how strongly this research benefits from openness to sociological and ethnographic concepts. [8]

The talks by Wim MEEUS and Luc GOOSSENS each displayed a high level of quantitative sophistication and conceptual innovation. In the presentation by MEEUS the issues of operationalization, testing, and the potential for advancing MARCIA's identity status theory were discussed. For this purpose, he presented two recent scales that were designed to capture the identity statuses of adolescents: the U-GIDS and U-MICS. Around these scales MEEUS launched into a fireworks display of psychological constructs that were tested to see if they can explain what drives identity development (MEEUS, 1996, 2003). Examples of such constructs were measures of parent-adolescent relationships, core and surface personality traits, self concept clarity, and anxiety. These methodological fireworks added a considerable amount of new insights into the dynamics of identity development. MEEUS finds the expected identity trends in adolescent development (an increase in commitment and in-depth exploration with age), but the quality of parent-adolescent relationships does not drive these trends. Furthermore, self concept clarity seems to be positively linked to the trends of identity development in adolescence (to commitment, especially) and negatively so to the trends in anxiety. Moreover he reveals that there are correlated and consistent paths of adaptive and non-adaptive developments of identity in adolescence which can be traced back to sequences of identity statuses. In his future work, MEEUS expects new insights from person-centered analyses with different identity types and statuses as well as path analyses of longitudinal reciprocal influences between identity and core personality measures to be important. [9]

Luc GOOSSENS presented findings from a longitudinal study, a collaboration with his colleague Koen LUYCKX and others, on the identity formation of college students in Belgium. This study followed college students over five waves an over two years, and it applied state-of-the-art multivariate statistics, including Latent Growth Curve Modeling and Latent Class Growth Analysis. GOOSSENS and

colleagues tackled the following research question: What are young people's changes in identity like? In which way is identity change related to changes in its determinants? And in which way is identity change related to changes in its consequences? GOOSSENS used the wealth of data and statistical potency to illustrate the benefits of the quantitative approach to identity and identity development (GOOSSENS, 2001). One of the core messages of the presentation was that the methods described allow us to calculate differences between people's identity at a certain point in time and differences in the trends over time *within the same statistical approach*. GOOSSENS' presentation took the audience on a demanding tour of comparisons of intercepts and slopes—which was rewarding as it revealed important correlations of students' identity development. On the side of the antecedents of identity changes, GOOSSENS revealed connections between parents' psychological control on their kids and their commitment and identification behavior as well as the connection between neuroticism and commitment making and openness and exploration. On the side of the consequences of identity development, GOOSSENS' results revealed close linkages between certain aspects of identity and depressiveness, self-esteem and psychological adjustment. [10]

After the long strings of numbers in the previous two presentations, Alejandro IBORRA CUÉLLAR flipped the methodological coin back on its qualitative side. Providing a wealth of examples and cross-references, he presented extensive methodological reflections on qualitative research in general, and results from his inquiry into the process of identity change that occurs during a selected rite of passage, namely marriage. IBORRA CUÉLLAR explained that we typically have clear hypotheses on the processes that are involved in an identity-related biographical transition; processes such as identification, exploration, commitment, differentiation, and integration. However, we often lack a model for the precise course and interrelatedness of these processes. IBORRA CUÉLLAR's study applied a qualitative approach to complement and frame to greater detail the theoretical concepts involved. By iteratively comparing the results of single cases across his sample, he established relationships between the single categories and processes. Examples of such relationships are the connection between the subjective meaning of the marriage event, the emotional syndrome experienced, and the type of commitment. IBORRA CUÉLLAR showed, for instance, that identity change during marriage is particularly *strong* (1) if the moment of marriage is perceived as he calls it *digital* (i.e., before and after the marriage one's own personal state is regarded as strongly different, like 0 is different from a 1); (2) if emotions of *numinosity* are experienced (i.e. deep feelings of respect and gratitude); and (3) if a form of strong commitment is involved (either to the family as a whole, to the partner, or to the institution of marriage). This presentation concluded with a series of remarks that gave the audience a glimpse into diverse qualitative methodologies, such as eclecticism of methods and problems with the adequate display of results. An example is the following statement (IBORRA CUÉLLAR, 2006, p.7):

"[...] quotations can be interesting as examples of a category of 'changes in personal identity', but they are only meaningful when they are related to other categories. Only

then can a reader or researcher try to understand not only that an identity change happened at least in these participants, but how it happened, what connections it had with other categories, etc. ... These quotations need to be framed in a wider perspective concerning the relationship between the categories. The categories should then be framed in the narrative of one participant, framed in the comparison of other participants, and finally framed with some relevant theories." [11]

The previously mentioned presentations had a clear focus on either the quantitative or the qualitative methodology. Jane KROGER gave a well-received talk on the benefits of using a *mixed-methods approach* to identity. She presented findings from a retrospective study of identity development in mid-life adults. In this study, the quantitative part examined the identity status developmental pathways of 100 adults and asked for the most common pathways of identity status transitions (KROGER, 2003). The qualitative part examined the pathway from foreclosure and moratorium to achievement in-depth. KROGER illustrated the potential and draw-backs of each of the individual methods. She explained that only by the quantitative approach was she able to find out the most common pathways of a group or the likelihood of some phenomenon in identity development. For instance, she found that in general identity statuses depend heavily on demographic variables, such as education, age, and migration, and that one always has to consider results for each separate subgroup. Within these groups, however, she was able to define the average duration times for specific identity statuses and calculate probabilities for identity transitions. For instance, she saw that the most frequent transition chain was given by the foreclosure □ moratorium □ achievement chain. The qualitative part of the study, by contrast, revealed the fundamental elements from the perception of people in these chains. Her results showed that there are several personal differences that actually shape the subjective reality of these transition chains. Instances of such personal traits are an individual's readiness to make new experiences, relations with internalized others, the existence of "bridging others", the personal ability to withstand guilt, or the experiences of differentiation and new forms of connections. KROGER concluded her talk with the statement that the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches taught her more than the sum of the individual contributions. Her plea was thus one against methodological one-sidedness and one for methodological openness, depending on the questions identity researchers wish to ask. [12]

3. Summary

The chief goal of the conference was to explore the prospects of methodological integration in identity research in psychology. With this aim the conference coincided with the highly topical discussions on methodology. Methodological integration was found to be of vital importance and very relevant to the future of psychological research. This can be seen in the large number of journal issues addressing the "combination question" (see for example the *FQS*-issue edited by Margrit SCHREIER and Nigel FIELDING, 2001; or the new *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* by Sage, coming out in 2007). While the debate on methodological integration has often been led on a rather abstract and general

level, the transfer to identity research has been overdue and was seen as a great contribution of this conference. [13]

This conference had among many positive outcomes one particular feature that made it unique. Limiting the number of presentations and keeping all the participants together instead of dividing the participants into working groups allowed all presentations to take place in plenary sessions. This had both a disadvantage and an advantage. As to the former, it was obvious that it was neither possible nor desired by the organizers to catch the full range of epistemological, methodological, performative, and analytical problems related to the issue of quantitative and qualitative integration in the research process. In case the participants expected such an overarching discussion on research strategies (which I guess was not the case), there were and are other, more specialized conferences that would satisfy this interest in a better way (see, for instance, the instructive conference report by Silke-Birgitta GAHLEITNER & Leo GÜRTLER on the Fifth Annual Meeting of Qualitative Psychology in FQS, 6(3) or the symposium on the "1. Berlin Annual Meeting on Qualitative Methods" dedicated to this topic, see texts and video-files on the [website of the Berlin meeting](#)). The program was dense and parallel paper presentations would have given more time and space for introducing the participants' own work. However, and this relates to the advantage of the conference design, it proved to be a great benefit to bring to a centralized conference the leading scholars in identity research and many other renowned scientists and interested participants involved in theoretical or empirical identity research. Not splitting the group at any time provided the opportunity to exchange personal views, experiences, and judgments on the benefits or hazards of one or the other approach to identity research in a way that larger more distributed conferences typically do not allow. Two examples from conversations with participants and subsequent discussions about the conference are given below and focus on the highlights of the conference. [14]

During the concluding discussion, the question was raised whether psychology should strive for a unified and integrated methodological framework that includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches to identity (see the conference report by GAHLEITNER & GÜRTLER, 2005). On this occasion, Karl HAUßER formulated a much-discussed metaphor by describing that his view on methodological integration is one of two separate gardens in which each methodology grows on its own ground. In his view, the prospective harvest of integration will be abundant if we allow each method to develop on its own without forcing it to give up its own strengths by an early dilution with its counterpart. An example of this view can be seen in the statement that the continuous advancement of quantitative techniques such as Latent Growth Curve Analyses, as well as the continuous development of qualitative techniques such as Grounded Theory (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967) or the Constant Comparative Method is both essential and desirable for the advancement of identity research in general. These types of developments, however, require specialized experts and carefully selected study designs that can, almost by definition, not be intermingled. The importance of paying attention to the contributions of both

methodologies and that no one approach solves all psychological questions on identity development was noted by almost all conference attendees. [15]

In another part of the discussion, many questions revolved around the concept of identity and identity status itself. One of the questions to James MARCIA was whether he views identity as a static (state), or as a dynamic (trait) concept. In his previous publications, MARCIA had referred to this concept by claiming that identity can be both (MARCIA, 2002, p.16). In his discussion, MARCIA provided a thoughtful and instructive metaphor on the characterization of self as dynamic or static. He offered the concept of personal identity statuses as *snapshots* with a built-in time perspective. He described identity as images of *snowflakes* that have different shapes and structures, but are made of the same substance. In addition, the snowflakes tell a story of what they have been before and what they may become in the future. The snowflake *achievement*, for instance, indicates a history of exploration and commitment and rules out a future of *foreclosure*. The snowflake *moratorium* indicates a history of exploration and suggests a future of diffusion or achievement. The inner crystalline structure of a person's identity can, following this metaphor, be regarded as a crucial part of his or her personality, leading to different forms of identity, each being unique. [16]

From my perspective, the strength of the conference did not lie in the number of attendees or in the comprehensive approach to covering the entire field. The success of the conference was grounded in in-depth exploration and peer interaction on the perils and potentials of integrating different methodologies in identity research. [17]

4. Future Developments

During the conference, an often unrecognized distinction between German and international identity researchers was identified. Many of the German participants are seen or see themselves as being part of a small, "non-mainstream" research community; the participant international researchers did not share this view and considered identity as one of the most "normal" and important research fields in psychology. In order to foster the inter-exchange of approaches and insights into identity development, the organizers of the conference, Aristi BORN and Meike WATZLAWIK plan to publish a conference volume and are currently reviewing submissions. The publication produced from the conference is scheduled for late 2006. It will be announced on the [conference webpage](#). [18]

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