



# **WHO AM I?**

## **UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

Dr. Alan Meca

# WHO AM I? BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

- Education and Training

- 2010-2014                      Ph.D. in Applied Developmental Psychology  
*Florida International University*
- 2014-2017                      NIAAA Post-Doctoral Fellow  
*University of Miami*
- 2017-Present                      Assistant Professor  
  
Old Dominion University

- Research

- Largely focused on identity development and its links to general function and health risk behavior.

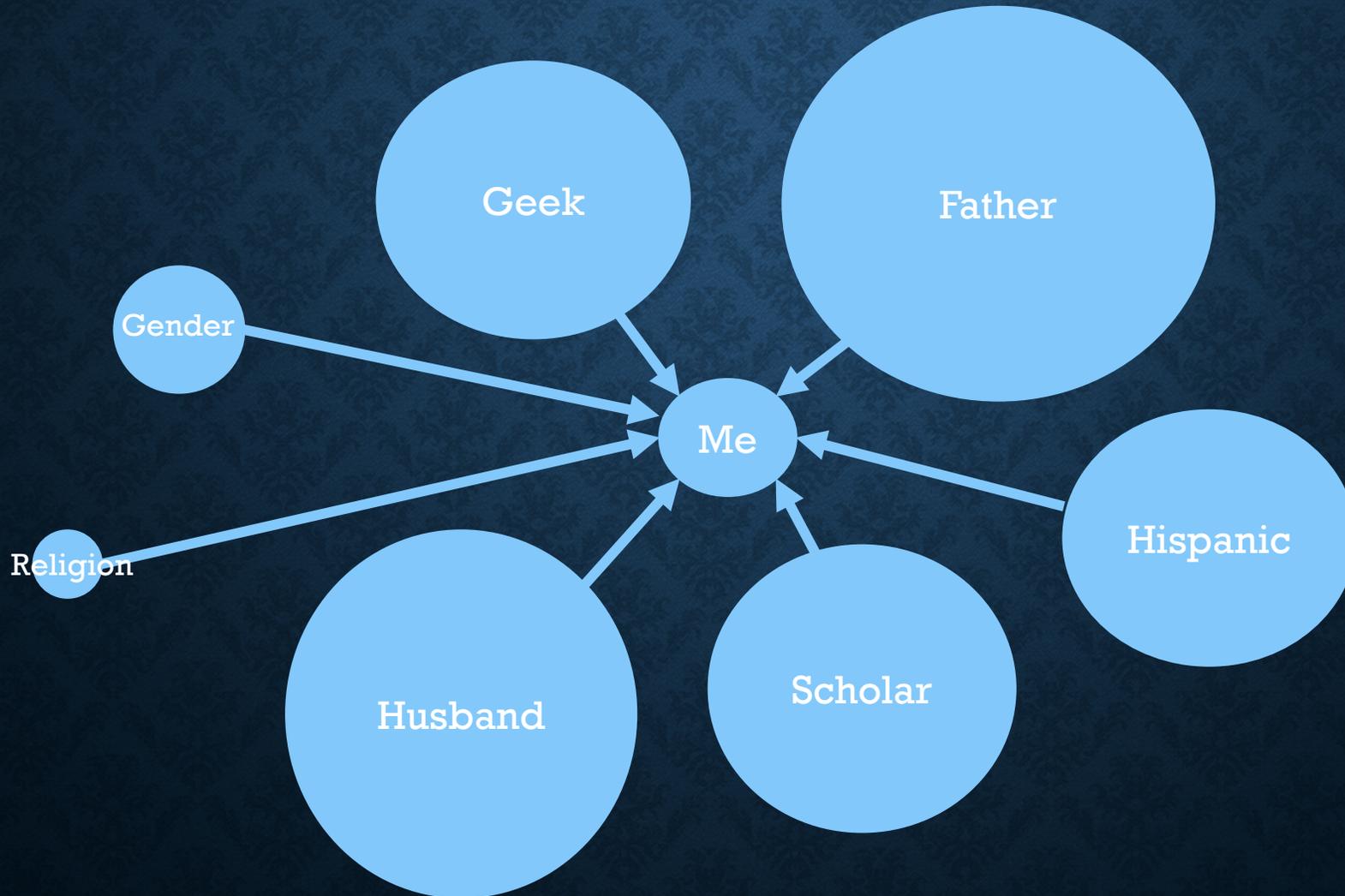
# OUTLINE

1. General Overview of Identity Theory
2. Application of Identity Theory to
  - a. Cultural Identity
  - b. Parental Identity
  - c. Military Identity
3. Summary Remarks

# WHAT IS IDENTITY?

- Simplest definition:
  - People's explicit or implicit response to the question: "Who are you?"
- The Woven Quilt
  - Multiple aspects of identity can and do coexist.
  - Different aspects of identity will be more or less salient and relevant in different social contexts.
  - They often intersect and interact with each other.

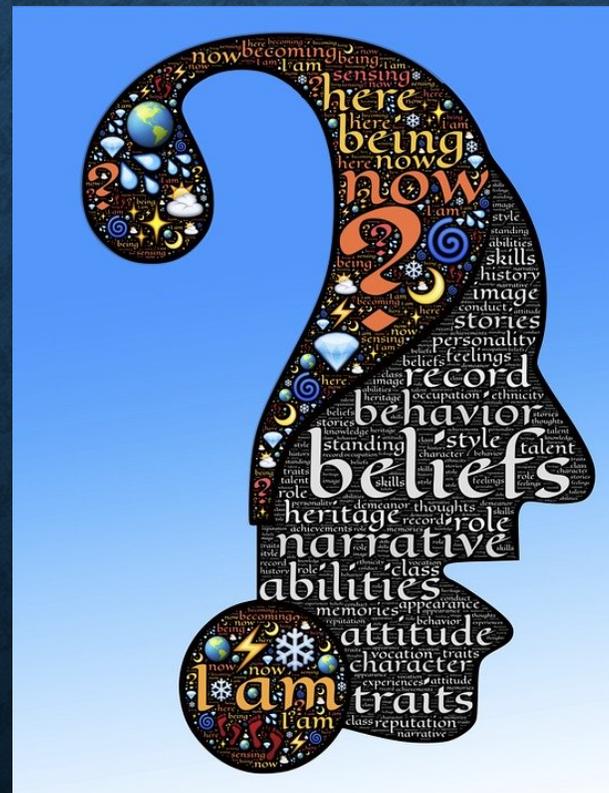
# WHAT IS IDENTITY?



# APPROACHES TO IDENTITY THEORY

- Content versus Process
  - Identity Content refers to the “stuff” of ones’ identity.
  - Identity Process refers to the mechanism(s) underlying the formation of ones’ identity.
- Although several frameworks, most widely used :
  - Developmental Neo-Eriksonian Perspective (Process)
  - Social Identity Perspective (Content)

# ERIKSON AND NEO-ERIKSONIAN APPROACHES



# ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY

- **For Erikson (1950), identity**
  - Refers to the subjective sense of sameness and continuity across time and contexts.
  - Represents a multidimensional construct that
    - Taps into the cognitive, moral, cultural, and social aspects, and is
    - Socially-embedded: resolution lies in our interaction with others.
    - Historically-culturally constrained: Determines what are possible, genuine, and desirable options.

# MARCIA'S IDENTITY STATUS MODEL

- Erikson's (1950; 1968) writing was largely conceptual and placed little emphasis on operationalizing his terms.
- Neo-Eriksonians were thus left with the task of operationalizing Erikson's ideas about identity.
  - Widely used operationalizations developed by James Marcia (1966).
  - Identify two psychological/behavioral markers underlying identity development.

# MARCIA'S IDENTITY STATUS MODEL

- Identified processes underlying identity development:
  - **Exploration:** Refers to a period of “rethinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans”.
  - **Commitment:** Refers to the “degree of personal investment the individual expresses in a course of action or belief”.
- As such, Marcia's Identity Status focused on the *process* rather than the *content*.

# SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE



# SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

- Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) emerged in the mid-70s in reaction to prevailing individualistic approaches.
- Argues that “social identification”
  - Connects us to groups thus telling us who we are/are not.
  - We derive value from group memberships to the extent that we can compare our own group positively with others.
  - Motivated to gain and maintain a sense of positive group distinctiveness from the other group(s).

# **SOCIAL IDENTITY MODEL OF IDENTITY CHANGE (SIMIC)**

- Life transitions involve change in social identities due to changing social group memberships.
- During life transitions,
  - Social identities provide continuity.
  - Negative effects of transition are buffered by
    - Maintenance of previous group memberships and social identities.
    - Emergence of new accessible social groups and social identities.

# **SOCIAL IDENTITY MODEL OF IDENTITY CHANGE (SIMIC)**

- Evidence for changes in social identity during life transitions has been found in the context of
  - Moving to university (Iyer et al., 2009)
  - Brain injury (Jones et al., 2012)
  - Retirement (Steffens et al., 2016)
  - Recovery from addiction (Dingle et al., 2015).

# PROCESS VERSUS CONTENT

- Healing the Split
  - Within ethnic/racial identity theory, there has been increasing recognition for need to incorporate:
    - **Developmental/Process Models:** Speak to how such identities develop over time.
    - **Social Identity/Content Models:** Speak to the nature of these identities.
  - Attention to both is necessary as it provides a richer conceptualization.



# **CULTURAL IDENTITY**

# CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Cultural identity
  - Refers to how individuals define themselves in relation to the cultural groups to which they belong and is a salient identity domain for ethnic/racial minority youth.
  - Typically focus on two specific aspects:
    - Ethnic/racial identity
    - U.S. identity

# CULTURAL IDENTITY

- **Ethnic/Racial Identity (ERI)**
  - Represented as a multidimensional construct that reflects
    - individuals' beliefs and attitudes about their ethnicity as well as
    - the process by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time.
- **United States/American Identity**
  - Similarly, includes individuals' beliefs about being Americans and the process by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time.

# CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Research on cultural identity largely focused on four dimensions
  - **Exploration:** considering what it means to belong to a particular cultural group.
  - **Commitment:** Subsequent decisions about its role in one's life.
  - **Affirmation:** Feeling positively or negatively about one's cultural group membership.
  - **Centrality:** how central is ones' cultural group membership to one's overall sense of self.

# UNIQUE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Meca et al. (2019)
  - Purpose
    - Examine the unique effects of ethnic/racial and U.S. identity among Latinx young adults.
  - Sample
    - 416 Latina/o college students (83.7% female; Mage = 20.57 years; SD = 2.378 years, range 17–29 years).

# UNIQUE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Meca et al. (2019)
  - Ethnic/Racial Affirmation was positively associated with well-being, self-esteem, and negatively with symptoms of depression.
  - Ethnic/Racial Commitment was positively associated with well-being.
  - U.S. affirmation was negatively associated with symptoms of depression.
  - U.S. exploration though was negatively associated with well-being and self-esteem.

# **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

## **1. Understanding Biculturalism and its development**

- Understanding how ethnic/racial and U.S. identity mutually develop over time and identifying key promotive factors.
- Exploring unique effects of ethnic/racial and U.S. identity overtime across the lifespan.

## **2. Code Shifting**

- Exploring how individuals shift between cultural frames as they navigate situations.



# **MILITARY IDENTITY AMONG VETERANS**

# VETERANS AND MILITARY IDENTITY

- Transition to civilian life represents a major identity shift.
  - Military
    - operates with its own values, traditions and norm.
    - tasked with adopting a military identity.
  - Process of reintegration to civilian life
    - Represents an abrupt culture shock
    - Indeed, veterans express
      - disconnection and/or conflict with people in their communities
      - and tasked with “searching for a new normal”.

# VETERANS AND MILITARY IDENTITY

- Consistent with SIMIC, difficulties with this transition may be counteracted by
  - Maintaining other core identities
  - and/or replace lost identities with new ones.
- Despite this, we know very little about identity development and its impacts on adjustment among veterans.

# EFFECTS OF U.S. IDENTITY AMONG VETERANS

- Meca et al. (in press)
  - **Sample**
    - 195 U.S. military veterans ( $n = 184$ , 53.3% women; 73.3% White;  $M_{age} = 35.12$  years,  $SD = 9.60$  years).
  - **Results**
    - **U.S. Affirmation** was negatively associated with Alcohol Use, Symptoms of Depression, & Symptoms of Anxiety.
    - However, **U.S. Centrality** positively associated with Alcohol Use, Symptoms of Depression, & Symptoms of Anxiety.

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Examining impact of identity among veterans.
  - Transition to civilian life involves a total identity transformation.
  - As such, important for future research to
    - understand how this identity transformation unfolds throughout the transition to civilian life and
    - explore how other identity domains (e.g., life goals, religious, etc.) impact transition to civilian life.



# PARENTING IDENTITY

- Similarly, transition to parenthood involves
  - A variety of changes including renegotiate their current roles and identities to accommodate that of a “parent”.
  - Parental identity reflects
    - Beliefs and attitudes about their role as a caregiver and the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes are developed.

# PARENTING IDENTITY

- From a SIMIC framework,
  - Establishment of parenting identity may
    - ameliorate the identity loss associated with transition into parenthood.
    - And serve as an anchor during the transition into parenthood.
  - At same time, being a parent but not strongly identifying as one, may lead to a form of social discontinuity and social displacement that compromise mental well-being
  - Given prevalence of post-partum mood disorders among both mothers and fathers, understanding parental identity may be particularly critical.

# MECA ET AL. (2020)

- Meca et al. (2020)
  - Purpose
    - Examine associations between parental identity commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitments with symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety.
  - Sample
    - 328 current and expectant parents (82.6% female;  $M_{age} = 35.36$  years;  $SD = 11.34$  years, range 18-76 years)

## MECA ET AL. (2020)

- Meca et al. (2020)
  - Consistent with our hypothesis, parental identity commitment was negatively associated with generalized anxiety and depression.
  - However, reconsideration of these commitment was positively associated with generalized anxiety and depression.
  - Exploration was positively associated with symptoms of anxiety, possibly as a result of lengthy periods of apprehension or questioning of parental identity.

# **FUTURE RESEARCH**

1. Examining the impact of parenting identity among expectant parents throughout the transition to parenthood.
2. Exploring how parental identity may serve as a source of strength in face of stress associated with parenthood.



# **SUMMARY REMARKS**

# SUMMARY

- As a whole, these studies support the idea that
  - Identity plays an important role in understanding risk and resilience for a variety of populations.
  - Beyond these studies, research supported identity is malleable.
    - Thus, by supporting adaptive identity exploration, we can encourage positive identity development.
    - In turn, this can assist as a mechanism by which we can prevent problematic outcomes and help in major life transitions.

# QUESTIONS



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