

James Marcia – Identity Status

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James E. Marcia is known for his research on identity development in late adolescence, specifically his identification of four identity statuses. He was born on February 10, 1937 in Cleveland Ohio. He was an only child and describes his family as to a stable, lower middle- to middle-class family. Spending his childhood in Columbus, Ohio, Marcia enjoyed tennis, drama, speech, and music (he played both piano and trombone). After exploring history, English, and philosophy, Marcia earned his undergraduate degree in psychology from Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. He also received master's and doctoral degrees from Ohio State University, both in clinical psychology.

During an internship at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center in Boston, MA, Marcia was intrigued by a teenage patient who was diagnosed as schizophrenic yet was discharged unusually early. After reading Erik Erikson's book, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959), Marcia noted that the teen patient was likely experiencing identity diffusion instead of schizophrenia. Marcia was intrigued by Erikson's theory of identity development and felt he was finally finding terminology that described many of his patients' ailments. This new interest in identity inspired Marcia's dissertation, in which he aimed to develop a way to measure the underlying aspects of identity (something that was previously considered immeasurable), validate Erikson's construct of identity, and expand Erikson's stage of "identity versus role confusion." Through the development of

the Identity Status Interview and continued research, Marcia's work helped ensure the inclusion of Erikson's theory in virtually all textbooks for adolescent development and inspired further research into Erikson's other stages of psychosocial development.

Marcia began his professional career teaching at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Upon visiting Vancouver, British Columbia on sabbatical, he applied for an open position at Simon Fraser University. He spent the rest of his professional academic career at SFU where he taught for 30 years before retiring in 2002. While at SFU, Marcia established the university's first clinical psychology center in 1986, offering counseling services and research and training opportunities for graduate students. During retirement, Marcia has stayed busy continuing to work as a clinical psychologist in private practice, as well as gardening and learning Italian. Additionally, Marcia attended the University of British Columbia from 1995 to 1998 for music performance and has been playing the trombone with symphony orchestras in his retirement.

The key criteria for determining one's identity are exploration (e.g., experience) and commitment (e.g., action). People's occupation, ideology, and interpersonal values are all affected by one's identity development. Upon examining Erikson's original dichotomy of committed versus uncommitted identities, Marcia noted that there were actually two forms of committed and two forms of uncommitted identities. In addition to Erikson's original identity categories of achievement and diffusion, Marcia identified foreclosure and moratorium, bringing the total to four identity statuses.

Identity achievement is characterized by high exploration followed by high commitment. In this status, people reflect on their experiences and construct their own identities by actively making decisions regarding ideology, interpersonal values, and

occupation. They feel more in control of their future than other identity statuses and feel comfortable making revisions to life plans when needed. Identity achieved persons do not yield to pressure to conform to others' expectations and are secure in their self-views. This security and confidence prime them for establishing intimate relationships in Erikson's next psychosocial stage of development (intimacy versus isolation).

Identity diffusion is defined by low exploration and low commitment and is the least stable identity status. Diffused persons often feel out of control of their futures and are limited in their capacity for intimate relationships.

High commitment and low exploration are characteristics of identity foreclosure. People in foreclosure adopt a given identity whose roots are likely defined by parents or similar authority figures. Foreclosed adult perspectives on ideology, interpersonal values, and occupation tend to be carried over from childhood, and are unchallenged and unmodified. Unlike persons in identity achievement, the self-esteem of a person in foreclosure is dependent on how well they fulfill the expectations of those who conferred the identity.

Moratorium is characterized by high exploration and low commitment. What could be referred to as an identity crisis, moratorium often describes people who are beginning to explore options as they transition from diffusion or foreclosure. Though they may exhibit signs of anxiety before they make identity commitments, they are often passionate about their exploration of social and moral issues.

Further Reading

Marcia, J.E. (2004). Why Erikson? In K. Hoover (Ed.) *The Future of Identity: Centennial reflections on the legacy of Erik Erikson* (pp. 43-61). Lanham, MA: Lexington Books.

Marcia, J. E., Waterman, A. S., Matteson, D. R., Archer, S. L., & Orlofsky, J. L. (1993).

Ego identity: A handbook for psychosocial research. New York, NY: Springer-

Verlag.