

Overview: Identity Matters

1. Introduction and Objectives

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This module is: Identity Formation. This lesson is: Overview - Identity Matters.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Identify and describe how our identity is shaped, and the impact of adoption, guardianship, foster care, and kinship care on identity formation
- Understand adolescence as the pivotal time for clarifying identity, and
- Integrate identity work in your clinical practice with youth and families

2. Identity

2.1 Identity

Let's begin with a discussion about identity.

A simple definition of personal identity is the concept you develop about yourself that evolves over the course of your life; who you are as an individual, where you fit within family relationships, and social groups.

2.2 Identity Elements

Identity includes elements over which one has no control, such as physical attributes, biological heritage, gender, and physical challenges; and some elements about which one makes choices, such as embracing certain values, religious affiliation, membership in groups, or participation in activities.

2.3 Internal and External

There are both internal and external expressions of personal identity.

One might keep some aspects of identity private at different times in life, such as religious or other beliefs, political views, or the fact of being adopted.

On the other hand, one might express personal identity through clothing style, music choices, talents displayed, or the expression of opinions.

2.4 Who am I?

What comes to mind when you ask yourself the question “Who am I?”

Self-identity is how one defines oneself. Social identity is how one is defined by others.

Being judged by others may negatively affect one’s sense of self.

Knowing who you are matters, and confusion about who you are has implications for mental health.

2.5 Sense of Self

Adoption and foster care researcher, Jeanne Howard, describes our sense of self as being derived from a combination of our own internal appraisal and messages from others. Our self-identity emerges from the integration of multiple selves into a coherent whole:

- Our physical self
- Our psychological self (personality, intelligence)
- Our spiritual self (beliefs)
- Our social self (self in relation to others)
- Our self-esteem (judgments about self)

2.6 Why Does Identity Matter?

Click on each triangle to hear why identity matters.

1. When we consider the traumatic experiences of children and youth, it is easy to imagine how their self-esteem is impacted and how that affects their sense of identity.
2. It is common for children and youth who are maltreated to think of themselves as responsible for the abuse they sustain, as well as the belief that they are responsible for removal from their family. They may question why their birth parents didn’t take care of them or keep them, and believe that they do not matter and are not lovable.
3. Multiple moves, interrupted developmental stages, and a lack of continuity in relationships will interfere with the formation of an integrated sense of self and contribute to mental health problems, further compounding their identity formation.

3. Erikson's 8 Stages of Development

3.1 Erikson's 8 Stages of Development

Erik Erikson's 8 Stages of Development is widely viewed as foundational to the understanding of psychosocial development from infancy through adulthood and the formation of self-awareness and identity.

We are going to discuss a psychosocial model of adoption adjustment that is based on it.

3.2 Brief Review

Watch this video for a brief review of Erikson's stages.

[Video Transcript]

MODERATOR: Erikson's theory of psychosocial development identifies eight stages which a healthy individual should pass through from birth to death. At each stage we encounter different needs, ask new questions and meet people who influence our behavior and learning.

Stage 1: Basic trust versus mistrust. Infancy (1-2 years)

As infants, we ask ourselves if we can trust the world and we wonder if it's safe. We learn that if we can trust someone now, we can also trust others in the future. If we experience fear, we develop doubt and mistrust. The key to our development is our mother.

Stage 2: Autonomy versus shame and doubt. Early childhood (2-4 years)

In our early childhood we experience ourselves and discover our body. We ask, "Is it okay to be me?" If we are allowed to discover ourselves, then we develop self-confidence. If we are not, we can develop shame and self-doubt. Both parents now play a major role.

Stage 3: Initiative versus guilt. Preschool age (4-5 years)

In preschool, we take initiative, try out new things and learn basic principles like how round things roll. We ask, "Is it okay for me to do what I do?" If we are encouraged, we can follow our interests. If we are held back or told that what we do is silly, we can develop guilt. We are now learning from the entire family.

Stage 4: Industry versus inferiority. School age (5-12 years)

Now we discover our own interests and realize that we are different from others. We want to show that we can do things right. We ask if we can make it in this world. If we receive recognition from our teachers or peers we become industrious, which is another word for hardworking. If we get too much negative feedback we start to feel inferior and lose motivation. Our neighbors and schools now influence us the most.

Stage 5: Identity versus role confusion. Adolescence (13-19 years)

During adolescence we learn that we have different social roles. We are friends, students, children, and citizens. Many experience an identity crisis. If our parents now allow us to go out and explore, we can find identity. If they push us to conform to their views, we can face role confusion and feel lost. Key to our learning are our peers and role models.

Stage 6: Intimacy versus isolation. Early adulthood (20-40 years)

As young adults, we slowly understand who we are and we start to let go of the relationships we had built earlier in order to fit in. We ask ourselves if we can love. If we can make a long-term commitment we are confident and happy. If we cannot form intimate relationships we might end up feeling isolated and lonely. Our friends and partners are now central to our development.

Stage 7: Generativity versus stagnation. Adulthood (40-65 years)

When we reach our 40s we become comfortable, use our leisure time creatively and maybe begin contributing to society. Our concern is generativity. If we think that we are able to lead the next generation into this world, we are happy. If we did not resolve some conflicts earlier, we can become pessimistic and experience stagnation. People at home and at work are now who influence us the most.

Stage 8: Ego integrity versus despair. Maturity (65-death)

As we grow older, we tend to slow down and begin to look back over our lives. We ask, "How have I done?" If we think we did well, we develop feelings of contentment and integrity. If not, we can experience despair and become grumpy and bitter. A time to compare us with mankind.

Erik Erikson was a German American psychologist who, together with his wife, Joan, became known for his work on psychosocial development. He was influenced by Sigmund and Anna Freud and became famous for coining the phrase "Identity Crisis." Although Erickson lacked even a bachelor's degree, he served as a professor at Harvard and Yale.

Learning by trying, failing, doing.

[End of Video]

3.3 Environment

Erikson recognized that the environment in which a child lives is crucial to providing growth, adjustment, a source of self-awareness, and identity.

This is congruent with all that we have talked about in previous modules, as we have explored the impact of trauma, attachment, heritage, community, and other factors in the development and mental health of children and youth.

As children face each new stage of development, they encounter a new challenge that can help further develop or hinder the development of positive self-identity.

Successful completion of each stage of development in this theory results in an integrated sense of self and positive well-being.

3.4 Stages

Now let us discuss the psychosocial model of adoption adjustment, as developed by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Marantz Henig.

Click on each triangle to hear about each stage.

3.5 Stage 1

Stage 1: Basic Trust vs. Mistrust - This first stage covers the period of infancy, birth to 18 months of age, the most fundamental stage of life.

During this stage, Erikson posits that infants develop trust based on their caregiver's ability to meet their needs.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Adjusting to transition to a new home if placed during this stage
- Developing secure attachments, and
- Learning to trust adults to take care of them

Failure to develop this trust will result in a feeling of insecurity, fear, and a sense that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

Many of the children you work with have developed a basic mistrust that their needs will be met due to their early childhood trauma and inadequate nurture.

3.6 Stage 2

Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame - Covers early childhood around 18 months to 3 years old.

The child begins to discover the beginnings of their independence, and parents must facilitate and support the child's sense of self-esteem as they begin to master basic tasks all by themselves.

The adoption tasks at this stage are the same as those in Stage 1.

3.7 Stage 3

Stage 3: Initiative vs. Guilt – Preschool/3-6 years.

The child begins to ask "Why?" as they explore their world. The child should develop the ability to do things on their own, such as dress themselves. The most significant relationship is within the family.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Learning about where babies come from, and that they joined their family in a different way
- Adjusting to initial information about adoption
- Recognizing differences in physical appearances, especially in interracial or intercountry adoption

3.8 Stage 4

Stage 4: Industry vs. Inferiority - School-age, 6-11 years.

The child is capable of learning and creating new skills, and begins to compare their self-worth to others, such as in a classroom environment.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Understanding the meaning of being adopted; searching for answers and implications of being adopted
- Coping with physical differences from family members
- Coping with the stigma associated with foster care, kinship care, or adoption, or a sense of difference from others, and coping with peer reactions, losses, and grief
- Understanding the legal process of adoption, fear of being taken away again
- Can express anger, hurt, and sadness about feelings of abandonment and rejection

3.9 Stage 5

Stage 5: Identity vs. Role Confusion - Adolescent, 12-18 years.

These are the years of questioning of self. Who am I, how do I fit in? Where am I going in life?

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Exploration of meaning and implications of adoption, connecting adoption to one's sense of identity,
- Coping with identity in interracial adoption and physical differences from family members,
- Resolving birth family romance fantasy and experiencing increased curiosity about birth parents,
- The emergence of sexual assumptions sometimes related to adoption; for example, if an adolescent perceives their birth parent as promiscuous and they over-identify with that characteristic,
- Coping with loss of birth families, especially as it relates to one's sense of self,
- Considering a search for one's biological family.

3.10 Stage 6

Stage 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation - From young adulthood and beyond -- 18 to 35 years of age.

This is the first stage of adult development.

By successfully forming loving relationships with other people, individuals are able to experience love and intimacy.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Continued exploration of the meaning of adoption as it relates to self-identity and intimacy
- Further consideration of search and reunion process and adjusting to parenthood in light of one's own adoption.
- Facing one's unknown genetic history in the context of the birth of their own children
- Coping with adoption-related loss

3.11 Stage 7

Stage 7: Generativity vs. Stagnation - The second stage of adulthood happens between the ages of 35-64.

Career, work and family are most important. Also during this time, a person is enjoying raising their children and participating in activities that give them a sense of purpose.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Further consideration of the implications of adoption
- Unresolved loss and grief
- Search and reunion

3.12 Stage 8

Stage 8: Ego Integrity vs. Despair - This stage covers adults ages 65 and on.

This is a time for reflection on life, the victories and the defeats, what was accomplished and what was not accomplished. A sense of integrity is the result of successfully accomplishing this final developmental task.

The adoption tasks at this stage are:

- Continued resolution of adoption issues
- Search and reunion opportunities and challenges
- Acknowledgement and exploration of intergenerational dynamics; for example, loss of connections across generations – your children's children also have a loss of your birth family connections

3.13 Summary

In reviewing the 8 Stages of development, we have laid the foundation for understanding the importance of the earliest influences on personality development, and how they contribute to the development of identity formation.

Considering what we have learned about the importance of positive sense of self and identity formation to mental health, we can see that struggles with identity contribute to compromised mental health.

The table in the handout *Psychosocial Model of Adoption Adjustment* summarizes these adoption tasks.

4. Influences on Positive Identity Formation

4.1 Influences on Positive Identity Formation

Let's look briefly at some influences on positive identity formation.

4.2 Experiences that Impact Identity Formation

Along the developmental continuum, identity formation is influenced by many experiences.

These influences can come from the family, teachers, caregivers, caseworkers, peers, or other members of the community. Some may be subtle and unintentional, and some may be more overt. For instance, children may experience unfair treatment, teasing, or bullying by peers on the basis of their adoptive or guardianship status, and be asked such questions as why their birth parents "didn't want them," or why they were "taken away," magnifying their already vulnerable sense of self-worth.

Teachers may design exercises that unintentionally point out differences for adopted children, such as the family tree or assignments related to genetics.

4.3 Influences Reflection

Think of some of the other influences on identity we have covered in previous modules and list 4 you remember.

4.4 Influences Response

Some influences you may have listed are:

- Traumatic events
- Attachment history
- Stable caretakers
- Moves to different communities
- Scarcity of positive role models
- Large gaps of information about themselves and their past
- Stigma of adoption or guardianship
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Bullying
- Physical and emotional challenges

4.5 Sense of Self

All of these influences and more have an impact on the development of identity, causing the youth to come to terms with the experience in relation to their own sense of self.

When these influences occur at younger ages, the more powerful the negative influence is likely to be, setting the stage for troubling behaviors in adolescence.

The stronger the foundation of positive identity and sense of self-worth a child has, the more likely they are to mitigate these negative influences.

4.6 What Do Adopted Youth Think about Identity

Before we move on to the next lesson, let's watch as 12 adopted youth talk about how they define identity, and how they identify themselves. While their adoption circumstances vary from domestic to international, their insights are poignant.

[Video Transcript]

MALE-1: I think identity is kind of like how you are.

FEMALE-1: And like the characteristics that make up yourself.

FEMALE-2: And also how that person sees themselves.

FEMALE-3: So it's your personality with the group of people that you associate yourself with.

FEMALE-4: What separates me from other people, but also what makes me able to connect with other people and try to understand them.

MALE-2: What makes you do the things that you do and act the way that you do.

FEMALE-5: Not necessarily like your race, like white or black or Asian or Hispanic, but like your ethnicity, your culture, your religion.

FEMALE-6: I see it on a service level just like what you like to do, your hobbies, your family, where you come from. But then I feel like on a deeper level, it's like your morals and your reasoning and the way you were brought up and how you see things differently than other people.

FEMALE-2: I think identity is something that you need to be comfortable with just because it's you.

MALE-3: It's almost like home, but having the confidence you have in yourself as a person.

MALE-4: I think a lot of outside influences can kind of blur and skew you, who you think of yourself as, and how you think of yourself. And I just think it's really important to keep who you are at heart and don't let the struggles and the stresses of life affect your identity, even though it happens. Always try to get back to the roots.

FEMALE-7: If you don't have an identity, you're lost. You have a harder time of figuring out what you want to do, what you want to be. I think being in touch with yourself is key to life.

MALE-1: I identify myself as an African-American Male.

MALE-4: I identify as black, but I do feel like there's not really acting white or black, but I feel like I can act white sometimes. Sometimes I can act black sometimes. A lot of people say like, "You are a social chameleon."

FEMALE-5: For me, I would define myself as kind of like a white Irish Catholic. My dad's side of the family is Irish. My family is Catholic, along with my birth mother. I'm glad that we kind of share the same religion as my dad's family. It was kind of like a connection that we have with her.

MALE-2: I just say I'm a black Jew. That's it. I think overall I'm just proud of who I am, skin color, when it comes to me being black, and then the other races that I'm mixed with. I think I consider myself more Jewish because I've been brought up Jewish. It's been enforced on me a little bit harder.

FEMALE-8: I would define myself as Asian-American.

FEMALE-9: I would identify as Asian. I don't really identify as Asian-American or whatever it's called just because I was born there.

FEMALE-1: I identify with being an Asian-American because I do things like take Chinese and celebrate Chinese New Year with my family, but I was raised mostly as an American.

FEMALE-2: Chinese-American, to be more specific, because it's where I was born, and so it's still part of who I am.

[ON SCREEN] Beautiful China. Namas B. 7-17-2011

[ON SCREEN] Jewish. Daughter. Asian.

FEMALE-6: I think my biggest identifier, I'd say, is that I'm Chinese and Jewish. But usually, because like, obviously, physically you can tell I'm Chinese, I don't have a need to say that. But I always like first identify myself as Jewish, probably just because that's how I was raised. And my parents didn't make a big deal that I was adopted. I still sometimes actually think, before I look in the mirror, I'm like white. It's not a big deal to me. So when people ask, "What characterizes you," it's probably being Jewish because that's been the biggest part of my life since day one.

[End of Video]

4.7 Video Takeaways Reflection

If this was a group of adolescent you are working with, how might you begin the discussion about the various aspects that shape their identities as adoptees?

4.8 Video Takeaways Response

You may have thought about these:

- Ask the youth "How do you identify or define yourself?" or "How does the outside world see you?"
- Explore how they were raised and what influence this had upon their identity
- Assess whether the integration of birth family influence was valued
- Ask the youth "How does the outside world's perception of your identity match with your own sense of self?"

5. Conclusion

5.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we reviewed a theoretical construct of identity formation and laid the formation for our further discussion about the impact of adoption and guardianship on identity formation. We reviewed some influences on positive identity formation, and listened to youth with lived experience talk about identity.

5.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

5.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how will you apply these in your practice?

5.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

5.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You completed Overview – Identity Matters.

In the next lesson, we will focus on the adolescent years when identity formation moves to the forefront, important questions emerge, and the youth moves toward a more integrated sense of self.