

M5X02165 - Critically evaluate the factors that affect the formation of identity in early childhood and adolescence

Introduction:

With the various social and economic pressures evidenced in the changing world, identity and identity formation has never been more important. But, just as identity has grown in importance, the ability to define both identity and identity formation has become a highly contested terrain. On the one hand identity is described as a set of meanings that help distinguish an individual from another (Burke and Stets, 2009) but for other researchers, identity is viewed as the characteristics that make up an individual, which impact their behaviours and attitudes (Ding and Littleton, 2005). Understandably, the definition an individual chooses to adopt will impact their outlook on identity formation and the various factors that drive this in children and adolescence.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss identity and identity formation, by exploring the various definitions and perspectives identified by researchers. This essay will then consider numerous identity theories that address the importance of identity formation on early childhood and adolescence including gender schema theory, social identity theory and self-categorisation theory, whilst critically evaluating the factors, which can impact the formation of identity, such as gender, nationality and culture.

Identity and Identity Formation

As discussed, there have been many debates surrounding the definition of identity (Fearon, 1999). From a social standpoint, identity has been defined as the set of meanings that distinguish who somebody is in both their roles within society and as a member of a specific group (Burke and Stets, 2009). However, from a psychological perspective, Ding and Littleton (2005) would argue that identity includes individuals' characteristics and ways in which they behave. Buckingham (2008) also suggests that identity should be viewed as something which individuals uniquely possess, enabling them to differentiate from others. It is clear from these definitions that identity is multi-faceted and when discussing identity all these elements need to be considered.

Furthermore, identity formation has been described as a lifelong process which individual's develop through experiences (Erikson, 1959). As identity formation develops it enables individuals to have a clear and unique understanding of sense of self (Steensma, Kreukels, Vries, Cohen-Kettenis, 2013). In history the formation of identity was always recognised as a simple process, where individuals replicated the role that their parents or grandparents had adopted (Cote and Levine, 2002). However, in more recent years, identity formation became more difficult for individuals because of human evolution, where they attempted to adapt to modern society, and its many pressures (Cote and Levine, 2002).

Evidently, identity and identity formation are contested subjects, but it is also clear that identity formation is of high importance for both young children and adolescence.

Gender:

When conducting research on gender identity it is important to define gender. However, the definition of gender is contested amongst researchers. For example, many researchers refer to 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably because of the debate surrounding their meaning. Ding and Littleton (2005) state that gender and sexuality are two separate things. The common preconception of 'sex' is that it is biological, which babies are assigned at birth because of their physical characteristics (Rafferty, 2018). Whereas 'gender' refers to the internal sense of self and the social characteristics defined by cultural norms and beliefs (Ding and Littleton, 2005). However, Maccoby (1988) would argue that there are problems in assuming that biological and social affects were the cause of separate characteristics. For the purpose of this essay gender will be utilising Bem's (1981) gender schema theory to explore the impact of gender on identity formation in young children and adolescence.

Gender is not fully understood by young children, as they will not know what it means to be a boy or a girl. However, they will begin to explore gender roles through society, with their family and cultural backgrounds being a particularly strong influence (Early Childhood National Centers, n.d). Throughout history, there have been stereotypical profiles of what is expected of a male and a female. For example, masculinity is associated with dominance, assertiveness, and competence, whereas femininity is associated with nurturance, sensitivity and compassion (Ding and Littleton, 2005). This

stereotypical behaviour can be extended to what children wear, the toys they play with and the activities they engage in.

Many theories surrounding gender identity raise the question, nature or nurture? Money (1985) suggests that nurture is stronger than nature, with the belief that children can be raised as the opposite sex with the strong support from parents and their surrounding environment. Bem (1981) also believes that society plays a crucial part in the development of gender. Bem's (1981) gender schema theory suggests that children learn their gender roles through the norms of their culture. Unfortunately, this stereotypical behaviour can limit the opportunities available for children if they do not match the expected gender role.

Bem's (1981) gender schema has had much criticism, and it could be argued that her theory is outdated (Starr and Zurbriggen, 2017). Evidently in society today, gender has and continues to change. For example, celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Adele and Will Smith raise their children as gender-neutral, taking the pressure from them to be especially masculine or feminine. Therefore, it could be argued that gender may have little impact on the formation of identity in children and adolescence if the historical norms surrounding gender no longer exist (Ghoshal, 2020).

National Identity

Another factor which has been found to impact identity formation within early childhood and adolescence is nationality. Koh (2010) states that national identity is intentionally cultivated into children at a young age by adults and is often a subconscious feeling. It is built upon shared history, culture, values, ideas and beliefs of the citizens of a country in which they reside (Liu and Turner, 2018). These shared matters add a sense of belonging to an individual within a societal group and also help young individuals to achieve a positive sense of self.

Although he does not make direct links to national identity, many researchers have applied Tajfel's (1978) Social Identity Theory to the development of identity within children (Ding and Littleton, 2005). Tajfel (1978) introduced the Social Identity Theory, where he believed that individuals belong to different social groups and that these groups can play a vital part in enabling individuals to distinguish who they are as a

person. He believed that the social group affiliations can become internalized as part of the development of an individual's self-concept and when this occurs the individual will strive to obtain a positive sense of self-worth from that particular social group.

However, Social Identity Theory has had much criticism, with many researchers stating there is insignificant evidence to back up Tajfel's theory. The lack of consideration regarding roles within the group has been questioned, with researchers stating that "roles provide a sense of distinct individual identity within a group" (Brewers, 1991 and 1993). It has also been mentioned that Tajfel's theory does not consider other factors, such as cognitive elements (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). Unlike Piaget (1969) who explains national identity development through cognitive stages, which include; egocentric, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational. He believes that as a child grows older, they make their way through these stages of development, and because of this their societal understanding increases, such as national identity (Koh, 2010). Both of these theories have been criticised for their strong considerations of cognitive and social processes without much regard to other factors (Hogg, Terry, White, 1995) such as, the geographical location, different ethnicities, language, the media and schools (Ding and Littleton, 2005).

Furthermore, with the increasing move towards globalisation research suggests that national identities are becoming less important in more globalized countries (Ariely, 2019). This suggests that the shared beliefs and behaviours of a country could be changing to suit the change in economic pressures. Therefore, identity may not be suitable for explaining identity formation in children and adolescence, if a national identity is being diminished.

Cultural Identity

The first factor which arguably impacts identity formation in young children and adolescence is culture. Durham (1992) suggests that culture solely consists of shared and socially transmitted ideational or mental entities, such as values, ideas and beliefs. Arguably, individuals often have little control over their cultural identity, as it is something in which they are born into; the shared beliefs, traditions, practices, values and language, which interact to create societal expectations (Berry and Candis, 2013). Therefore, children will start to learn these cultural expectations as soon as they are

born and will continue to develop these throughout adolescence and adulthood, forming their own cultural identity, which in turn creates a sense of belonging and acceptance.

As an extension of the social identity theory, Turner (1988) introduced the self-categorisation theory, where he emphasises that human beings are both individuals but also belong to different social groups. He believes that individuals possess different identities, such as personal identity and their social identity. The self-categorisation theory is broken down into four stages, and once an individual has worked through each stage, it is only then they will feel a full sense of belonging to different societal or in this context cultural groups (Amiot, Doucerain, Zhou, Ryder, 2017). This will then directly contribute to an individual's self-concept. Although there is limited research linking the self-categorisation theory with cultural identity within early childhood and adolescence, there are many ways in which they can be relatable. An example of this is stage two of Turner's theory, categorisation, where he illustrates that individuals will favour a social group and predominantly identify with that group (Amiot et al, 2017). Within the context of culture, children will mostly favour their cultural identity, however this could be threatened when beginning school. Much like Eriksons (1958) stages of psychosocial development theory, where he believes that if an adolescent is unsure of themselves within society, they will experience identity crisis. Therefore, whilst it is clear that the culture a child identifies with will impact their identity formation, cultures impact cannot be viewed as static, but rather it continuously evolves as children and adolescence experience different cultural groups.

Evidently, from the research discussed culture appears to have an impact on identity formation in children and adolescence, however, culture as a construct has a number of limitations, which, may affect its validity. For example, understanding culture comes with its own challenges, because of the disputed nature surrounding its definition. In fact, Segall (1984) stated that culture was not worth the effort of articulating a universally acceptable definition and Jahoda (1984) stated that it was the most indefinable term in the vocabulary of social science. Therefore, whilst utilising Durham's (1992) definition of culture, may link culture with identity formation in children and adolescence, Hofstede's (1994) definition which states that culture is based upon the collective programming of the mind which differentiates the members of one group, could suggest otherwise.

Also, culture as a factor in identity formation does not account for the individual difference's children display. For example, siblings born in the same environment with the same norms, can be very different to one another. This suggests that cultures impact on identity formation may not be as influential as previously suggested by Lindholm (2001). Further research in this area is needed to fully understand the concept.

Conclusion

Evidently, identity and identity formation are important for the development of children and adolescents. But, the factors that determine a child's identity represent contested concepts, which make it difficult for researchers to identify the exact points or interactions that help determine identity. For example, whilst stereotypically it is believed that a child's gender assignment will affect their identity formation, the theory that underpins this is significantly outdated (Starr and Zurbriggen, 2017), which impacts the reliability of the data. Furthermore, it is clear that societal advances have meant that the once static concept of gender, no longer exists and instead the notion of being 'gender neutral' has developed, which removes gender stereotypes. This consequently, has lead researchers to question genders impact on identity formation at all (Ghoshal, 2020).

Additionally, like gender, national identity was once viewed as static, which means the shared beliefs and societal expectations in different countries would determine a child's identity formation. However, the increased move to globalisation has seen the blurring of boundaries between country lines and national expectations (Ariely, 2011), which means the values that once underpinned a national identity are arguably changing to suit the new globalised world. This leads researchers to question, whether national identity has the same impact on identity formation it used to.

Finally, culture represents a significant factor in identity formation as its suggested the values, beliefs and ideals children are born into create societal expectations, which become the norms throughout their childhood and adolescence, creating a sense of belonging with their group. However, culture is a highly complex concept, which encompasses many different elements, which as with the other constructs limits its ability to explain identity formation.

Despite, the critiques of these factors it is clear that identity formation is integral to the development of children and adolescence. But, to understand this further in modern day society, further research is needed to determine, which factors, and theories truly highlight and affect the formation of identity in early childhood and adolescence.

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