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EGO-IDENTITY STATUSES OF UNDECIDED AND DECIDED STUDENTS AND THEIR PERCEIVED ADVISING NEEDS

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Research on the undecided student can be traced over a fifty-year period (Crites, 1969). Many research studies have tried to ascertain the differences between students who make no commitment to an academic major or career direction and those who are "decided." Although very few differences appear, Holland and Holland (1977) found that while students who consider themselves undecided do not differ in any group of personal characteristics, they do seem to lack a clear sense of identity. Apple, Haak, and Witzke (1970) also indicate that concern with self-identity is one of the factors associated with indecision. Jones and Chenery (1980) determined that decidedness was found to be associated with identity as well as decision-making stage and career salience.

It is generally assumed that students who say they are undecided when they enter college have made no commitment to an educational and/or occupational direction. Some researchers have found, however, that undecided students are at varying levels of commitment to a major and career field (Goodson, 1981; Gordon, 1982). Many students who are decided when they enter college, later change their majors (Elliot, 1984; Gordon & Polson, 1985; Titley & Titley, 1980). These students are also at different levels of commitment to an educational or career direction. While we put the labels of "decided" and "undecided" upon students, they may be less different in their varying levels of commitment than their labels imply. This ambiguity suggests that both decided and undecided individuals may have many of the same academic and career advising needs but different advising approaches may be indicated for levels *within* these two groups as well as *between* them.

Ego-Identity

Finding a satisfying life's work is an important aspect of an individual's healthy development (Erikson, 1968). According to Allport (1961), "the core of the identity problem for the adolescent is the selection of an occupation and life goal" (p. 126). Certain behaviors and attitudes can be associated with positive and negative ego development (Hamachek, 1988). Erikson's work regarding identity formation within adolescence was further examined by Marcia (1966).

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According to Marcia (1966), identity formation can be operationalized into identity statuses. He proposed that ego-identity statuses are modes of resolving the identity crises occurring in late adolescence. Through self-assessment of self-reported exploration and commitment to occupational and ideological decisions, adolescents can be categorized into four developmental identity statuses:

1. **diffusion status** involves individuals who have not made a commitment and who have experienced an exploration or crisis period;
2. **foreclosure status** refers to individuals who have made a commitment without an exploration or crisis period;
3. **moratorium status** indicates an individual has been involved in a period of crisis; and
4. **identity achievement** refers to individuals who have experienced exploration or a crisis before making a commitment (Read, Adams, and Dobson, 1984).

Other research indicates that specific educational and social environments can enhance progressive identity development (Adams & Fitch, 1983; Enright, Ganieve, Buss, Lapely, and Olson, 1983). The potential existence of a developmental process involving identity statuses has considerable relevance to the individual involved in the career decision-making process. Foreclosure, for example, implies that the individual has conceded to socially acceptable pressures to make a career decision before working through the normal developmental tasks of identifying and clarifying needs and values. Petitpas (1978) suggests that a large majority of late adolescents are identity foreclosed and that academic and career counseling interventions should be designed with these students in mind. While considerable research has been reported relating statuses to psychological issues (Marcia, 1980), the research itself reflects the notion that statuses may be better conceptualized as developmental stages or as alternative decision-making styles.

Andrews, Andrews, Long, and Henton (1987) found that students with differing academic and personal characteristics have different advising needs for information and personal support. They found that student perceptions of the relative importance of these needs depended upon certain personal characteristics such as age, emotional expressiveness, and social sensitivity.

Since the concept of ego-identity statuses is developmental in nature, the possibilities of affecting change have implications for advising. Can students who are diffused, for example, be advised in ways that can enhance movement toward moratorium by encouraging and supporting exploration, or supplying information about occupational and educational alternatives? Are the perceived advising needs of foreclosed students different from those in moratorium?

Purpose of Investigation

This investigation examined the advising needs of both undecided and decided students in each of Marcia's ego-identity statuses of commitment and compared them with advising needs. The participants indicated their advising needs from a list of items generated from a pool developed by Andrews, Andrews, Long, and Henton (1987). These researchers confirmed what others have found (Trombley, 1984; Winston and Sandler, 1984): advising needs can be characterized as information-oriented and personal-support-oriented.

While considerable gains have been made in the area of advising and counseling — especially with respect to personal exploration of interests, abilities, and values — knowledge of an individual's identity status could further aid in the educational and career decision-making process. There is a need to foster growth and change in students who are in a diffused, fore-

closed, or moratorium status. These needs can be identified and addressed in the safe and secure setting that advising affords.

Although previous research on identity statuses implies different levels of commitment between decided and undecided students, no study directly examines these two populations to determine if differences in ego-identity status do, in fact, exist. This study examined these two groups to determine the various levels of identity statuses within and between them. Patterns of relationships between identity statuses, levels of decidedness about a major and occupation, and perceived advising needs were also examined.

The following questions were addressed in this investigation:

1. ***What is the difference in ego-identity development of students declaring a career (decided) versus students declaring undecidedness?***
2. ***What is the relationship between ego-identity status and career decidedness and major decidedness?***
3. ***What is the relationship between advising needs and ego-identity status?***

METHOD

Participants

A sample of 502 freshmen were asked to volunteer for this study: 263 undecided students and 236 pre-engineering students. Engineering students were selected to represent the "decided" group because a previous study found freshman engineering students to be the most decided about a major and career when compared to over 5,000 students entering eighteen other academic programs (Gordon, 1984). All were enrolled in a freshman orientation course and were given the opportunity to obtain the results through individual advising sessions.

Instruments

The Revised Version of the Extended Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (Bennion & Adams, 1986) was used to assess ego-identity development. The instrument contains revisions of the interpersonal items on the Extended Version of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (EOM-EIS). It contains 64 items that assess self-reported presence or absence of crisis and identified commitment to ideological and interpersonal values. There is a six-point Likert scale for each item.

The revised questionnaire includes eight items relevant to each of eight domains: occupation, religion, politics, philosophicallifestyle, friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreation. Two items within each of the eight domains were written for each of the four identity statuses: Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Diffusion (Grotevant & Adams, 1984).

Three sets of scales are considered when reporting results from the revised EOM-EIS: Ideology (includes the occupation, religion, politics, and philosophical lifestyle domains), Interpersonal (includes the friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreation domains), and Total Identity (summing Ideology and Interpersonal scales). For each of the three sets, four scales corresponding to diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement are reported (Grotevant & Adams, 1984). For purposes of this study only the Total Identity score was used.

Cronbach alphas reported range was from .58 to .80, which are indicative of good to strong internal consistency for the four ego-identity status subscales on both the ideological and interpersonal identity measures. Convergent, discriminate, concurrent, and predictive validity analyses demonstrated that interpersonal and ideological items can adequately measure identity status during late adolescence (Bennion & Adams, 1986).

Advising needs were assessed by a questionnaire developed by Andrews, Long, and Henton (1987). Students' perceptions of advising needs are assessed using eight items from a general pool generated from advising evaluation instruments. Students rate the importance of receiving advice on each item by indicating its level of importance on a scale from 1 (not very important) to 10 (very important). A total score for information needs and a total score for personal needs were generated for each student.

The Career Decision Scale (CDS) (Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, and Koschier, 1980) consists of 19 items concerning reasons for vocational indecision. (Item 19 is a free response question.) Participants are asked to circle one of four numbers to indicate their similarity to the situations described in the item (4 = like me; 1 = not like me) except for items 1 and 2 where the scoring is reversed. Item 1 asks for level of decidedness about an occupation; item 2 asks for level of decidedness about a major. Items 1 and 2 were used in this study to determine levels of decidedness about a major and occupation. Test-retest correlation of items and total scores are .90 and .82 for two samples of college students over a two-week period. Validity data were also supportive.

Procedure

Students enrolled in a freshman orientation course were asked to participate in this investigation. Students were asked to complete the Revised Extended Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status, the Advising Needs Questionnaire, and the Career Decision Scale. All instruments were completed during a regular class period during the fifth week of the quarter.

RESULTS

Differences between Undecided and Decided Students

T-tests were used to determine if differences existed in ego-identity development between undecided and decided students. The t-tests revealed that both moratorium and achievement ego-identity statuses were significantly different for undecided students and decided ones (see Table 1). Moratorium ego-identity status was the most significantly different ($t = 2.37$, $p \leq .01$), with undecided students having a significantly higher mean moratorium score than the decided group. Achievement ego-identity status was also significantly different between the two groups ($t = -1.94$, $p \leq .05$). The decided group had a significantly higher mean score for achievement than the undecided group. No significance was found for diffusion or foreclosure between the two groups.

Major and Career Decidedness and Ego-Identity Status

T-tests were also used to determine if significant differences in ego-identity statuses existed between career decidedness and major decidedness (see Table 2). Three of the four ego-identity statuses were significant with both career and major decidedness. Students who were more career decided reported a significant higher mean score on achievement than those who were more career undecided ($t = 7.44$, $p \leq .001$). Students who were more decided about a career choice were significantly less diffused than those who were undecided about a career ($t = 4.41$, $p \leq .001$). Those respondents who were more career decided had a significantly less mean score for moratorium than those who were undecided about a career ($t = 7.43$, $p < .001$).

Table 1.

Differences in Ego-Identity Statuses between Decided and Undecided Students

	Decided		Undecided		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Diffusion	44.37	10.27	45.03	9.10	.76
Foreclosure	37.90	11.92	36.60	10.95	−1.26
Moratorium	52.45	9.01	54.51	10.24	2.37**
Achievement	61.92	10.65	60.15	9.63	−1.94*

** p .01
* p .05

Table 2.

Relationship between Ego-Identity Status and Career Decidedness

	Decided		Undecided		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Diffusion	42.72	10.06	46.42	8.81	−4.41***
Foreclosure	37.96	12.45	37.23	10.36	.71
Moratorium	50.14	9.36	56.11	8.64	−7.43***
Achievement	64.94	9.87	58.66	9.05	7.44***

*** p. .001

Relationship between Ego-Identity Statuses and Major Decidedness

	Decided		Undecided		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Diffusion	43.43	9.77	46.12	9.20	−3.19**
Foreclosure	37.61	11.99	37.35	10.63	.26
Moratorium	50.71	9.13	56.01	9.03	−6.53***
Achievement	64.42	10.33	58.62	8.73	6.84**

*** p .001
** p .01
* p .05

Significant differences were also found in ego-identity statuses and major decidedness. Students who were more decided about a major reported significantly lower moratorium scores than those individuals who were undecided about a major ($t = -6.53$, $p < .001$). The diffused mean score was significantly lower for those more decided about a major choice than those who were not ($t = -3.19$, $p < .01$). Also, those who were decided about a major reported a significantly higher mean achievement score than those undecided about a major ($t = 6.84$, $p < .01$).

Ego-identity Status and Advising Needs

A stepwise multiple regression was performed to determine if advising needs could be predicted based on ego-identity statuses. Six separate analyses were conducted to assess which of the six independent variables (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, achievement, career decidedness, and major decidedness) entered into the regression equations as a predictor of the two dependent variables (need for information and need for personal support). Undecided, decided, and the total group of students were examined on each of the two dependent variables.

Total group. Three variables entered the regression equation as predictors for the need for information for the group as a whole (see Table 3). The best predictor for the entire group was diffusion ($F = 18.01$, $p < .0001$). As the students' diffusion scores decreased, their need for information increased. The second variable to enter the equation was moratorium ($F = 7.02$, $p < .008$). This variable was positively predictive: as the students' scores for moratorium increased, so did their need for information. The third variable to enter the regression equation was major decidedness ($F = 5.43$, $p < .020$). As the students' scores increased on this variable (indicating major undecidedness), the need for information increased. The three statistically significant variables only accounted for 6 percent of the variability in the regression equation ($R^2 = .058$).

Table 3.

Summary of Regression Equations — All Students

Outcome Variable	Predictive Variable	Beta	F	Probability
Need for Information	Diffusion	−0.023	18.01	.0001
	Moratorium	0.016	7.02	.0083
	Major Decidedness	0.123	5.43	.02
Need for Personal Support	Achievement	0.024	8.24	.004
	Moratorium	0.019	4.76	.02
	Diffusion	−0.021	4.54	.03

Three variables entered the equation for all students on need for personal support. The first variable to enter the equation was achievement ($F = 8.24$, $p < .004$). As the students' achievement scores increased, so did their need for personal support. The second variable, moratorium, was positively predictive of the dependent variable as well ($F = 4.76$, $p < .029$). Finally, the third variable to enter the regression equation was diffusion ($F = 4.54$, $p < .034$). As the students' scores on the diffusion scale decreased, their need for personal support increased. As in the previous regression equations, the statistical significance of the variables was more profound than the cumulative percentage of variance accounted for in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .034$).

Undecided students. Diffusion served as a negative predictor for undecided students' information needs ($F = 4.07$, $p < .44$). Although three variables were statistically predictive of the need of undecided students for information in advising, the cumulative percentage of variance accounted for by these variables was about 6 percent ($R^2 = .059$) (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Summary of Regression Equations — Undecided Students

Outcome Variable	Predictive Variable	Beta	F	Probability
Need for Information	Achievement	0.022	9.16	.002
	Moratorium	0.013	3.75	.05
	Diffusion	−0.017	4.07	.04
Need for Personal Support	Moratorium	0.019	3.05	.08
	Achievement	0.020	3.06	.08

Two variables were significant predictors for the undecided group on their need for personal support. Moratorium was the first variable to enter the regression equation ($F = 3.05$, $p < .081$). As moratorium scores increased, so did the students' need for personal support. The second variable to enter the equation was achievement ($F = 3.06$, $p < .081$). As the undecided group's achievement scores increased, so did their need for personal support. As in the above regression equations, a small percentage of the variability is accounted for by these two variables ($R^2 = .022$).

Decided students. One independent variable, diffusion, made a significant contribution to decided students' need for information (see Table 5). Diffusion was the best predictor ($F = 16.03$, $p < .0001$) of information needs. As the students' diffusion scores decreased, their need for information increased. Although this variable was a significant predictor for information needs, the proportion of variance accounted for was not impressive ($R^2 = .066$).

Table 5.

Summary of Regression Equations — Decided Students

Outcome Variable	Predictive Variable	Beta	F	Probability
Need for Information	Diffusion	−0.029	16.03	.0001
Need for Personal Support	Achievement	0.033	7.28	.007
	Diffusion	−0.022	3.07	.08
	Moratorium	0.032	3.77	.05

Three of the independent variables entered the regression equation to predict the variability in the decided students' need for personal support. Achievement was the best predictor ($F = 7.28$, $p < .007$). Students with greater achievement scores reported more need for personal support. The second variable entering the equation was diffusion. Diffusion was negatively predictive of the students' need for personal support. As decided students' diffusion scores decreased, their need for personal support increased ($F = 3.07$, $p < .080$). Decided students' level of moratorium was the next best predictor of need for personal support ($F = 3.77$, $p < .053$). As levels of moratorium increased, so did the need for personal contact.

Discussion

The t-tests revealed statistically significant differences in ego-identity development between undecided and decided students. As predicted, undecided students had significantly higher moratorium scores than decided ones. Since moratorium is a state of exploration and is characterized by a lack of commitment, it is understandable that many undecided students would be in this stage of development. Also as predicted, decided students had a significantly higher achievement score than undecided students. This implies that students who are more decided about a career choice (in this case, engineering) are more likely to have experienced exploration as a requisite to an achieved identity state.

It is interesting to note that no statistically significant differences were evident between decided and undecided students on two ego-identity statuses: diffusion and foreclosure. As would be expected, undecided students' mean score for diffusion was higher than that of decided ones and decided students mean score for foreclosure was higher than that of undecided ones. The lack of significance for foreclosure is disconcerting, however, and could be related to a number of factors that will be discussed later.

The results of this study suggest that many freshmen college students are beyond foreclosure and diffusion. This revelation contradicts Petitpas (1978), who suggests that a large majority of late adolescents are identity foreclosed and that academic and career counseling interventions should be designed with these students in mind. The data also suggest that both undecided and decided students are in various stages of development. For example, some students in both groups are identity achieved, but there are significantly more decided ones in this status.

Decided and undecided students were not only grouped by their verbal commitment as they entered college, but the Career Decision Scale measured the ***degree*** of decidedness about a career and major as well. T-tests revealed significant differences on this measure. Although the same three ego-identity statuses were significant with career and major decidedness, the statuses were more significant with career decidedness. Many college students have a general idea about a career direction but are often more unsure about their college major choice during their first year.

A particularly interesting finding is the lack of foreclosure as a significant status in any of the t-tests. Foreclosure had the smallest mean score of the four statuses.

The regression analysis revealed different predictors for the two categories of advising needs. Three statuses (achievement, diffusion, and moratorium) were significant predictors of the need for personal support in the advising relationship. While diffusion was a negative predictor of the need for personal support, decided students in moratorium and achievement indicated a high need for personal support. The best predictor of the need for personal support among undecided students was for those in moratorium. The more individuals are in a state of uncertainty and exploration, the more they perceive a need for a personal relationship with their advisor.

Advising Implications

Diffused students. Although some diffused students in this study indicated no perceived need for either information or personal support, as the score weakened, the need for both these advising components increased. As students move out of diffusion into moratorium (an exploring mode) they become aware that information and a supportive adviser are important. Advisers who sense confusion and lack of purpose in their advisees may want to provide information and personal support in a manner that does not further confuse them. sensitivity to the amount and timing for offering these two advising services for students who are diffused may be the key to moving them into exploration.

Moratorium students. Students in this status are characterized as open, resilient, and flexible. As in other statuses, students will be at different levels within moratorium. Marcia (1976) indicates that the moratorium students in his follow-up study six years later had shown a 100 percent change rate. Advisers can help students in moratorium explore in a thorough, logical manner. Information resources may be used while helping students gather, reflect upon, and process this information in a personally supportive way. Providing a comfortable, caring atmosphere will lend support during this critical period.

Achieved students. Since many of the decided freshmen in this study were in the achievement status, it is particularly important to recognize the levels within this status. Marcia (1976) warns that while statuses may seem to have a static quality, identity formation is dynamic. Even though individuals may be identity achieved, they should be viewed as "coming from someplace and going to someplace."

While achieved students have explored and made a commitment, they still report a need for information and personal support. While they are characterized as open and flexible, advisers should be aware that an achieved student may move into foreclosure if they, as Marcia warns, are rigid in the identity formation process. It is important to question the ***degree*** of commitment with identity achieved students.

Since foreclosure was not significant in this investigation, the types of advising needs can only be speculated upon. Perhaps the students in the sample were not at a strong level of rigidity or as conforming to parental or society norms. They may have been at a diffused1 foreclosed level or an achieved/foreclosed level. Situationally foreclosed individuals lack exposure to information and ideas (Henry and Renaud, 1972). Perhaps the students in this sample *have* been exposed to information and ideas. This would explain the lack of foreclosed individuals in this sample. A more likely explanation is that the items on the ego-identity measure were not as sensitive to this particular population.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that entering freshmen are at many stages of ego-identity development and their perceived need for the type and degree of advising vary not only with being decided or undecided, but within their place on the ego-identity developmental continuum, as well. Many decided students in this study indicated a need for information and personal support even in the achieved status. These students might view their choice as tentative and feel the need to examine and confirm it.

Most advisers of undecided students realize that an individualized approach is particularly important in helping them through the exploration process. This investigation reinforces the notion that undecided as well as decided students are at varying levels of ego-identity development and that approaching all students in different levels of exploration and commitment requires a sensitivity to how and when information and personal support are offered.

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