

Learning Activity 6

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PY 202: Lifespan Development

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### **Identity Development and Cognitive Processes**

The physical changes that take place in the brain and nervous system in adolescence lay the groundwork for cognitive processes that will be used to help individuals construct their identity. The brain continues to develop in adolescence, with new neural connections being formed and unused connections being pruned (Berk, 2018). Myelination of nerve axons, especially those in the prefrontal cortex, links the neurons that remain and allows faster communication between neurons. The result of the pruning and myelination is a more efficient brain (Spear, 2013). The prefrontal cortex is thought to be the area responsible for executive function, which includes reasoning, problem solving, planning, and impulse inhibition. The pruning and myelination occur later in the prefrontal cortex than other areas of the brain, usually beginning in adolescence and finishing in the 20s (Arain et. al, 2013).

All of this adds up to adolescents having more developed thinking and reasoning abilities. Piaget called the last stage of development the formal operational stage, characterized by abstract and systematic thinking. Adolescents are able to think about thinking, known as metacognition, and gain a better understanding of the way their minds work and how to use them to solve problems (Berk, 2018). Adolescents are more capable of deep thinking about a wide range of topics, like politics and religion, and moral or ethical concerns like justice (“Cognitive Development in the Teen Years”, n.d.). Another notable characteristic of adolescent's cognitive development is the ability to more deeply evaluate themselves, both in terms of personal strengths and weaknesses, and in how their values and beliefs compare to those of others. The end result of the self-evaluation and examination of personal beliefs, plans, and goals is a coherent identity. The increased abstract and critical thinking skills conferred by cognitive

development in adolescence makes possible this development of a personal identity (Berk, 2018).

### **Louis and Darryl's Identity Statuses**

Louis displays characteristics of someone who is in identity moratorium. He is thinking about what he wants and what he believes in, and where he fits in. Louis envies the fact that his brother “seems to know more about where he is going”, while Louis himself is “up in the air about it” (Berk, 2018). Identity moratorium is characterized by being actively in the process of exploring information and ideas, and trying to figure out the principles and goals that will guide them in their path through life. Individuals going through identity moratorium haven't yet committed to any single path yet, though. Louis hasn't made any concrete decisions that would demonstrate commitment, he seems to be early in the process of exploration. He is not showing behavior consistent with identity foreclosure, since he seems very open-minded and hasn't blindly accepted the values of another person or group. Likewise he doesn't show signs of being in identity diffusion, because he is actively trying to figure out who he is, and hasn't simply given up or become apathetic (Berk, 2018). He seems open to new ideas and experiences and intent on figuring out who he is and what type of person he will become.

I would also characterize Darryl's status as being in identity moratorium. Darryl says that he feels the same as Louis, trying to figure out who he is and wondering what type of person he will ultimately become. If he was in identity diffusion he wouldn't have answered Louis' question of “You ever feel that way” as he did, he likely would have just said he didn't care about concerns like that or didn't want to think about it (Berk, 2018). If he were in identity foreclosure he would already have commitments, albeit with little exploration, but he does not profess to having any plans or goals already figured out. The same goes for identity

achievement, if he were in that state he would not have responded with “I wonder, what am I really like? Who will I become?” (Berk, 2018). Darryl’s serious answer to Louis’ question indicates to me that he has begun to think deeply about who he is, and will explore in earnest to find the answer.

### **Personal Identity Progress in Religious Beliefs**

My identity development in religious beliefs changed dramatically over time. Both of my parents were Christians, and I was raised as one. I went to church every Sunday from soon after birth through high school. I took part in a church youth group program that met once a week throughout that time too. I went to church every Sunday with my family, and youth group every Tuesday, and never had a thought to putting up any resistance or refusing to do so. I had never really explored my faith or religious beliefs; I had simply adopted those of my parents. I enjoyed the experiences of church and had a lot of friends there and in the youth group. I would characterize myself as being in a state of identity foreclosure until I was 16 years old, since I had never critically examined my faith. I started thinking about it a lot the summer I turned 16.

I remember thinking that if I simply followed and accepted blindly the religious practices of my parents, then my faith really didn’t mean much. I had never tested it or delved down into the reality of what I believed, and it seemed like I had not “earned” it. Going along with the only religious ideas I had ever been exposed to since birth was comforting before then. I felt like it would all be a sham, my “foreclosed” faith meaningless, if I didn’t explore as deeply as possible the way that I felt about religion and faith. I went through several very difficult major surgeries junior and senior year of high school, and remember this as the turning point for me in terms of religious identity. Dealing with immense physical pain and prolonged recovery periods gave me a long time to dive down in my mind and search for truth. I read extensively from the Bible and

sought advice from others about the issue of faith, and came away with an understanding that was very personal and real, and earned through the forming fires of tribulation. My faith became something I felt to the core of being, and my religious identity became part of the bedrock that made up my identity.

## References

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