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Counselling as commutative Identity compass for adult learners

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Higher education today, particularly with individualized mentoring, provides a *context* that is conducive to adult identity development. Within the "*transitional identity space*" of the mentoring relationship, adult learners may experience a secure base from which to explore, share, and bridge their past, present, and future identities. Building on the identity work of Erikson (1950), Marcia (1966), and Kroger (2003) and integrating concepts from Vygotsky (1934) and Winnicott (1953), the authors analyzed case studies from their own mentoring experiences with adult learners. The psychosocial dynamics of adult identity development within this mentoring context (transitional identity space) were discussed, providing a conceptual framework that goes beyond developmental stages and statuses to a more *fluid* and *process-oriented* model of adult identity development.

Keywords: Adult learners, mentoring, seeking self, transitional identity space.

INTRODUCTION

Why do individuals return to college as adults? More and more adults, who already juggle a multitude of roles, responsibilities, and demands on their time, energy, and finances, are motivated to take on the additional role of "student," with all of the potential challenges and stress that may accompany it. Some adults pursue degrees required by their employers or certifying agencies; others are unemployed and attempting to become more marketable, especially during these hard economic times. Some adults strive to finish something they once started but could not complete due to earlier life circumstances or the choices and actions of their younger selves. Some adults want to set good examples for their children or grandchildren; some adults just love to learn. The act of starting or returning to college as an adult entails multiple motivations for any given individual, some of which are clearly expressed and some of which the individual may not even be aware.

The choice to become an adult student is consistent with the tendency to become more introspective with age (supported by theories such as Brookfield, 1987; King & Kitchener, 1994; King, 2005; Jung, 1933; and Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000). Many adults turn inward and go through periods of questioning and re-evaluating their life choices and goals (Basseches, 1984; Kegan, 1982; Levinson, 1978, 1996; and Perry, 1970, 1981) and formal educational settings can provide a welcoming context for such exploration and reflection.

From years of mentoring adult learners, the authors recognize that some adult students prepare to assume new roles, while others deepen or expand their current or past roles. Some are confused and uncertain about their

future commitments; some want to decrease an uncomfortable gap between their current and ideal lives; and others are ready to shed the skin of an old identity and replace it with a new, albeit vulnerable one. Many adults grappling with identity issues embark on educational journeys to help resolve them. Other adult students resist change, yet within a supportive and engaging learning environment, begin to ask questions and see new possibilities. Through education, some find renewed commitment to previously formed identities, while others move towards new ideologies and roles. Some adult learners persevere and reach their academic, personal, and professional goals, but many do not. As mentors of adult learners, our focus is on facilitating each student's "success," leading to different paths and outcomes for different individuals, some earning a college degree, some exploring new adult identities, and others realizing that college is not a good choice for them now.

Literature Review

Why do some adults use a mentored educational context as the opportunity for personal growth? How does the learner-mentor relationship positively contribute to adult identity development? As developmentalists who respect Erikson's lifespan psychosocial stage theory (1950, 1959) and Marcia's ego identity status model (1966), we began to investigate this question with insights from these theories. This led us to more recent research and theory about adult identity development, particularly that of Kroger (2000, 2003, 2007). Through application of theory to practice and reflection on our own mentoring experiences with adult learners, we have moved toward a fuller understanding of the mentoring context and how it effectively serves adult identity development. We view the learner-mentor relationship as providing a *transitional identity space* for adult learners, extrapolating from Winnicott's (1953) concept of the "holding environment" or "transitional space" in object relations theory. Winnicott described the psychic space between individuals (traditionally mother-child) that provides the opportunity for greater autonomy and emergence of self. Recently, connections have been made among this psychoanalytical concept, the anthropological concept of "liminality," and organizational studies (see Korotov, 2005 for an overview and an application in a leading European business school). Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) describe "studenthood" as a type of identity that develops within the "liminal transition space" of higher education,

although their focus is on student participation and retention, whereas our focus is on adult identity development. We build upon the lifespan developmental theory of Erikson (1950) and Marcia's (1966) expansion of his identity crisis and research on identity statuses. Our current objective, though, is to move beyond stages and statuses to more fully understand the *process* of adult identity development using the dynamic *"transitional identity space"* framework (with the learner-mentor relationship as a prime example of a potential context for adult identity development).

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and Adult Identity

There are many theoretical approaches that illuminate identity development in adulthood (e.g., Basseches, 1984; Brookfield, 1987; Kegan, 1982; Kolb, 1984; and Mezirow, 1991). However, as mentors of adult learners, the authors find Erikson's integrative view of the psychological and social dynamics of development across the entire lifespan to be particularly useful as a framework in itself and also as a foundation for further adult identity theory. Erikson (1950) described eight developmental age-frames from infancy to old age during which certain dichotomies or crises are faced: basic trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair. In Erikson's epigenetic theory, specific crises are most significant during particular developmental stages. However, since psychosocial development is a lifelong process, individuals typically experience these crises repeatedly during the life-span, each time with re-framed psychological and social experiences.

According to Erikson, "identity versus role confusion" is the developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1950). *Identity Achievement* serves as a sometimes stable and sometimes shifting point of reference, providing a bridge between past and future selves and as a social and emotional anchor for reflection about the self. In Erikson's theory, identity achievement involves an "identity crisis," successfully resolved through commitments to life roles and ideologies, such as occupation, religious identity, education, and marriage. Such commitments become possible following a period of active questioning and exploring within social contexts, with fidelity to the chosen commitments developing as ego strengths and even as personal virtues (Erikson, 1959).

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Yet many adolescents do not attain the equilibrium of identity achievement that Erikson describes (Kroger, 2007). This may result from previous developmental crises that were not positively resolved, a lack of opportunity to explore who the self could be (educationally, socially and emotionally), developmental delays, lack of identity support in home, school, and other community environments, and larger economic, political, social, and historical conditions. Individuals struggle to find and maintain continuity within themselves and in relation to their social world in the face of internal and external changes. Those who do not experience equilibrium for any facet of their identity may find themselves in a state of role confusion (doubting who they are and where they belong) and/or diffusion (feeling unable to "take hold"), as per Erikson (1959). They may over-identify with certain groups, form negative identities in reaction to others' expectations, or simply be spread across various identities without making personal choices. Such individuals would not emerge from adolescence with the ego strength of fidelity to an identity and therefore would not be fully prepared for subsequent adult developmental tasks.

Regardless of how individuals resolve an identity crisis during adolescence, identity issues will re-emerge in the future. As Erikson (1959) explained, "While the end of adolescence thus is the stage of an overt identity *crisis*, identity *formation* neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society" (page 122). Adult learners, not unlike adolescents, may question their past decisions, present situations, and future possibilities, wondering, "Who am I?" "Where do I fit in?" "How does my past relate to my future?" The questions of each individual vary depending on the developmental issues that have been faced and how they were resolved, in combination with interpretations of past and current social experiences. From the psychological perspective, any issue once introduced will continue to interact with former issues and with expanding social world and external experiences. For example, the resolution of the "autonomy versus shame/doubt" crisis in the toddler years will be based on "trust versus mistrust" that was already faced in infancy, and both of these experiences will impact the resolution of the next crisis, "initiative versus guilt" in early childhood. In turn, we see these early crises and resolutions influencing developmental patterns in adulthood, such as the degree to which an adult learner is independent and self-directed. Becoming an adult student provides opportunities for individuals to face previous developmental crises again and to resolve them

differently than in the past, thereby possibly developing new social, emotional, and reflective strengths.

In addition, many adult learners have anxiety about returning to college due to previous difficulties in the resolution of the "industry versus inferiority" crisis that was initially faced upon entering a formal educational setting in childhood. If that crisis was resolved well, the learners are able to industriously apply themselves to the tasks of school as children and adults. If not, then the learners may feel inferior to others and anxious about pursuing their education. Yet in spite of negative experiences and crisis resolutions in childhood, individuals who have successful learning experiences in adulthood gain an enhanced sense of competence as they re-face old issues and resolve them more positively. This in turn influences forthcoming developmental tasks, providing ego strength for adult developmental goals such as fidelity, love, care, and wisdom, each respectively associated with Erikson's adult stages.

Marcia's Theory and Adult Identity

In 1966, Marcia expanded Erikson's theory, delineating and empirically researching four modes of reacting to the identity challenge: identity achievement, identity moratorium, identity foreclosure, and identity diffusion. According to Marcia, these modes or statuses depend upon an individual's response to two criteria: first, actively experiencing a crisis, and secondly making a commitment to a role (particularly occupational) or ideology (e.g., religious and political). Marcia's (1966) ego identity status framework can be summarized as follows:

☐ An **identity-achieved** individual has experienced a crisis and then made a commitment

☐ An individual in a **moratorium** is experiencing a crisis, not yet having made a commitment

☐ An **identity-foreclosed** individual has not experienced a crisis, but has already made a commitment

☐ An **identity-diffused** individual is not actively experiencing a crisis and has not made a commitment

Characteristics and correlates of individuals with each of the four identity statuses began to emerge with Marcia's (1966) research on college males and have been supported and expanded by subsequent studies (see Kroger, 2007). For instance, identity-achieved individuals tend to be autonomous and self-reflective about the future; exhibit high and realistic task attainment; have resilient self-esteem; and are relatively

high in fidelity. Individuals who are in a moratorium tend to actively question choices and possibilities; and tend to be skeptical, anxious, low in authoritarianism, and open to change and revision. Those who are identity-foreclosed tend to be rigid, vulnerable, and seek approval; they have relatively high authoritarian values and external locus of control beliefs; and they have unrealistic goals and pseudo high self-esteem. Individuals who are identity-diffused tend to be undecided about their roles and unconcerned about their diffusion; and they may exhibit non-adaptive defense mechanisms, even potential psychopathology. As Kroger (2007) summarized, numerous studies over the years have reported relatively adaptive features associated with identity achievement and less adaptive features associated with identity foreclosure and diffusion among late adolescents and young adults in Western societies.

While theoretically ego identity achievement is the adaptive psychosocial developmental task of adolescence in our culture, many adolescents and young adults are not identity-achieved. This fact is reflected in the title of Kroger's 2007 article, "Why is identity achievement so elusive?" She compared cross-sectional and longitudinal studies and reported that fewer than half of those sampled tend to be identity-achieved upon entering young adulthood (Kroger, 2007). Perhaps adolescents and young adults are on a developmental journey towards identity achievement. Waterman (1982) provided a descriptive model of potential identity status changes and proposed that movement from adolescence to adulthood would most likely involve "progressive developmental shifts" (i.e., from identity diffusion to foreclosure or moratorium; from foreclosure to moratorium; and from moratorium to identity achievement). Kroger et al. (2010) conducted meta-analyses on relevant research from 1966 through 2005 and found overall support for Waterman's predictions. In cross-sectional studies, the mean proportion of those in moratorium increased until age 19 and then declined; the mean proportion of identity-achieved increased in late adolescence and young adulthood; and foreclosed and diffused statuses declined over high school years and fluctuated during late adolescence and young adulthood. Across ten different longitudinal studies, the mean proportion of adolescents making progressive identity status changes was 0.36, while only 0.15 showed regressive changes; and 0.49 remained stable. Kroger et al. (2010) concluded that, ". . .

large proportions of late adolescents and young adults do not complete the identity formation process. Ongoing development should be anticipated in the years beyond adolescence and young adulthood" (page 696).

The psychosocial development of college students and college alumni were compared by Whitbourne and Tesch (1985). Alumni were more likely to be identity-achieved than students (who were more likely to be foreclosed) and alumni were at higher levels of intimacy than students. Identity and intimacy were positively correlated only for the alumni. The researchers concluded that much of identity achievement happened after college graduation (traditional age) and then it became associated with levels of intimacy (which is consistent with Erikson's theory of intimacy being the central developmental task in young adulthood, following the identity crisis of adolescence). More recently, Whitbourne et al. (2009) conducted sequential research with more than one cohort and time in history, following college students through their early forties and fifties. While industry, identity, and intimacy tended to change in linear patterns, cohort and life history factors were found to be important variables (as was gender in terms of intimacy).

Research points to the influences of both individual and social factors on adult identity development. For instance, in a retrospective study of 40-63 year olds, Kroger and Green (1996) found that changes to identity achievement, moratorium, and diffusion across most domains were perceived as being caused by internal factors, while change to foreclosure in most domains was perceived as being influenced by a significant other. Overall, Kroger and Green (1996) noted the strong role that internal change processes play in transitions to all identity statuses across all domains, explaining that while social variables may set broad limits (e.g., with exposure to new cultural environments), individual personality variables may play more important roles in transitions to identity achievement.

In a study of middle and late middle adulthood over 24 years, Cramer (2004) found that the ego defense mechanism of identification was strongly positively related to identity achievement, both alone and in interaction with intelligence, but that intelligence alone is not as likely to lead to identity change. In addition, life experiences in areas of work, marital and family relationships, social network, and political orientation were also involved in adult identity change, as "satisfaction in work, positive interpersonal relationships, and finding a 'niche' in society are all contributors to the development of an Achieved Identity" (Cramer, 2004, page 312). Longitudinal analyses indicated that foreclosed and diffused statuses were the most stable, while moratorium and achieved statuses were more likely to change. "The results of this study indicate that identity development continues to occur during adulthood. Most

of the change occurred during the period from early to middle adulthood; only Foreclosure showed an increase in late middle age. While the increase in Achieved Identity was consistent with the expectation that change would be in the direction of greater maturity, the increase in Foreclosure was not predicted." (Cramer, 2004, page 310). Foreclosure could be an adaptive identity status for individuals who believe they have attained a stable life or as Cramer (2004) proposed, when there are threatening historical or social conditions.

Identity development indeed occurs throughout adulthood and is affected by individual and social variables and their interactions. With the affirmation of fidelity to an identity, an individual confirms *identity achievement* in that domain at that time and may perceive a sense of closure. Yet as life continues, new psychological and social challenges arise which test prior identity achievements and the values they represent. When these challenges occur, the most likely and common change is towards an identity moratorium involving active identity questioning and resulting in a delay to commitment until the current crisis is resolved. Longer life expectancies and greater opportunities for personal growth increase the likelihood that past identity achievements will be reviewed in light of emerging roles.

As Marcia (1987) explained, "This first identity configuration is not the last. Identity status at late adolescence represents only a first answer to the identity question. It is assumed that a successful solution at this age permits that openness to experience that will initiate subsequent periods of disequilibrium, identity crisis and re-resolution. In other words, initial identity achievement at late adolescence should guarantee a Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement cycle throughout adulthood . . ." (page 89). In this way, adults who are already identity-achieved are still expected to question their ideologies, roles, and goals and to explore alternatives at various times in their lives and as influenced by social context.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The Context of Mentoring as *Transitional Identity Space* for Adult Learners

Some social and institutional contexts may be particularly conducive to adult identity development and may even attract adults who are in the midst of changes in their ideologies and roles or anticipating future changes. Formal educational settings are a prime example of such contexts, especially as more adults today are returning to

college or going to college for the first time for personal, professional, and economic reasons. In 1959 Erikson described school as providing adolescents with an "institutionalized moratorium" and in 1977 Munro and Adams proposed that college may serve as an "extended moratorium" for young adults. Perhaps higher education presents a similar opportunity for today's adult learners – not necessarily in terms of putting their "adult roles" (career and family commitments) on hold – but in providing a temporary psychologically and socially sanctioned period of active exploration. What if adult learners were supported and guided by a trusted mentor during this individualized questioning and learning process?

For a combined quarter of a century, the authors have had the privilege of working with adult learners (the average age of our undergraduates is 36 years old) at The State University of New York (SUNY) - Empire State College, a non-traditional liberal arts and sciences college serving over 20,000 students (*SUNY-Empire State College 2011-2012 Fact Book*). In various modes of guided independent study and on-line courses, whether face-to-face, at a distance, or via a blended delivery model, the learner-mentor relationship plays a significant role. This mentoring relationship develops especially during "Educational Planning," a credit bearing study that has been required of all those seeking an undergraduate degree with SUNY- Empire State College. Learners explore, share, and reflect on their backgrounds, interests, and goals (personal, educational, and professional), as they: (1) develop individualized undergraduate degree programs, (2) prepare rationale essays to explain the degree plans, and (3) often request assessment of prior college-level learning. Each learner, mentor, and mentoring relationship is unique, but each mentoring experience emerges from the shared foundation of our college's core values and mission. Specifically, we work to acknowledge individual starting points; value prior experiences, knowledge, and interests of individual learners; build a trusting and collaborative relationship between mentors and learners; engage learners in ongoing dialogue; acknowledge uncertainty; promote learners' autonomy; and encourage questioning, critical thinking, multiple perspective-taking, integration, application, and reflection.

These ideals and "best practices" coincide with the principles of mentoring described by two experienced and respected mentors at SUNY-Empire State College, Lee Herman and Alan Mandell (2004). In their book, *From teaching to mentoring: Principle and practice, dialogue and life in adult education*, Herman and Mandell (2004) discuss philosophical foundations and real world

practices for engaging adult learners in meaningful educational experiences. As they summarize in their "Epilogue:"

> *The professor will have to learn, as Socrates tried, how to ask his associates to examine themselves. He will disturb them while he engages them in unanswered questions about what they believe they know, the power they possess, what they desire to learn, and how they want to live. As we move from teaching to mentoring, examining our implicit principles and habitual practices, we have to keep asking ourselves what we must still learn in order to live lives that we love – "the very best thing we can do." (page 221).*

In this way, mentoring provides fertile ground for adult identity development. Following the leads of adult learners, mentors serve as "scaffolds," supporting learners' psychosocial and cognitive development via verbal and social interactions, parallel to the social mediation process in childhood described by Vygotsky (1934). This scaffolding supports identity achievement, the adolescent developmental task which Erikson (1959) described as seeking continuity both within the self and in relation to the social world. Kroger (2003), in her case studies of adults experiencing moratorium, noted that there was a "bridging other" who facilitated the "initial steps of publicly expressing a changed way of being" (page 211). Mentors may serve in this role, assisting adult learners in bridging from past selves to new identities within a secure social environment.

The *Process* of Adult Identity Development Within Transitional Identity Space

Adults' identity statuses may change repeatedly over time, but *how* do they change? As Marcia (1987) described, the ego identity statuses are *outcome* categories. They may be *temporary outcomes* as described by Marcia (1987) with the Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement ("MAMA") cycle, but what is the *process* of adult identity development? What is involved in this movement from one identity status to another? What "holds" the individual and allows for such change? The mentoring relationship may serve as a secure "holding environment" during this potentially unsettling period, as per Winnicott's developmental theory (1953). As a safe bridge between adult learners' past, present, and future selves, the mentoring context serves as a *"transitional identity space."* It provides a socially acceptable space in which adult learners may question, try out, and further develop ideologies and

identities, trusting the support of the mentor and the process, along with trusting the self to commit to emerging possibilities.

The mentoring context is not the only holding environment for adult identity development nor does it necessarily serve as a transitional identity space for every adult learner. What learners seek in the mentoring relationship will certainly influence the role it plays in the learners' identity development. What are the attributes and experiences of a *"Seeking Self"* that are most likely to benefit from the mentoring relationship in terms of adult identity development? Based on our mentoring experiences, the key aspects include:

☐ **Trust** – the capacity to trust the mentor as a guide

☐ **Fidelity –** the commitment to at least one positive experience in the past, perhaps to a relationship or a job, leading to trust in oneself

☐ **Foundation** - an identity base from which to grow: 'This is who I am now'

☐ **Goal** - a direction, perhaps even a very general goal, such as 'helping people,' 'teaching children,' 'being an accountant,' 'or 'learning how to learn' that becomes a shell within which to develop ("future possible selves" as per Markus and Nurius, 1986)

☐ **Role** - a desire to move from 'mentored' to 'mentor' as the educational path continues (not unlike 'finding one's mentor' in early adulthood to 'BOOM – becoming one's own mentor' in middle adulthood, as per Levinson, 1978, 1996).

☐ **Authentic Process** - a belief that this learning environment is a safe place within which to grow from the actual self to the projected ideal future self or away from an undesired self (Ogilvie, 1987).

Since we see similarities between the mentoring process and the transitional space concept of Winnicott (1971) and Turkle (2005), we give the name of *'transitional identity space'* to mentoring relationships that have these attributes. This process does not quite fit within the identity status model because, for instance, adult learners may already have relatively secure identities and are in the process of integrating knowledge, application, and roles within their identities; they are not static and yet not visibly changing from one discrete identity status to another. The adult learner's questioning may not appear to be an "identity moratorium" per se since it could involve a long term process rather than an identifiable time period or it could be too short to even gather into data (Kroger, 2003). The transitional identity space provides a vista on a guided path rather than a treacherous jump across chasms. With the mentor relationship serving as a secure base, even when neither

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learner nor mentor knows the desired "end state," the Seeking Self is ready to engage in a structured (and therefore committing) movement in the direction 'that calls.' The transitional identity space protects the Seeking Self and offers security as she moves from one sense of self to another (Turkle, 2005). It is an identifiable and socially accepted place to stand upon, to view from, and to use as a stepping stone to move into a new identity or identity space (or upon which to more firmly secure one's stance).

Some adult learners, although fearing failure in a new academic venture (similar to ones at which they may have failed in the past), still have a faith to risk (some) failure in order to achieve a newer envisioned, but distant self. Perhaps a learner presents us with a fairly stable slice of life between major transitions. Perhaps the experience of a student is a continuation of a projected path which was interrupted by the birth of an unexpected child, financial losses in the family, or medical setbacks. Perhaps a student comes to us as the result of an encouraging and persistent internal message that was once planted by a loving grandparent or attentive teacher: 'You are worthy of a college education.' The sources are many that create the 'initial conditions' for a Seeking Self that benefits from mentoring as an adult learner.

As mentors, one of our first steps is to question, 'Why are you here?' The answer to this simple question is important. If the student gives an answer related to fidelity to a future self, such as one to existing relationships ('to be a role model for my children'), to an action ('to influence the direction of the greening of the environment'), or to a future professional self ('to become a Certified Public Accountant, CPA, and serve small businesses') then the signs are there that this student is seeking 'a transitional identity space' within which to grow. All three of these examples of fidelity involve the learner's desire to move from being mentored to becoming a mentor by connecting to a stable, if liminal, future self.

The identity emerging from the 'transitional identity space' is more complex than the jump from one identity status to another. The complexity is, in part, a result of the learner incorporating and integrating new identities with existing identities, such as appropriate aspects of models for the new role (counselor, director of child care center, accountant, or mentor). The Seeking Self has some openness to new experiences, advice, and relationships, as demonstrated by trying out appropriate roles to achieve new identities. Since future identities integrate not only information for the anticipated role, but also actions, emotions, and frames of meaning, openness is not mindless, but directed toward

experiences that may lead to the future potential self. This exploration may lead to new frontiers, but exploration of the new frontiers is motivated by the desire to grow in positive, enriched and relatively defined ways. This openness may frequently arise from a moratorium status, but it could also arise during diffusion or from prior achievement, or even slip through a formerly foreclosed state as a 'hobby.'

As the learners share their motivation and excitement about their new possibilities, they open their internal selves to the mentor. It is this disclosure that enables the mentor to engage in an 'I – Thou' relationship with the learner (Buber, 1958). Buber, an existentialist, presented a philosophy wherein the nature of reality is disclosed through personal dialogue. Buber's major theme is that human existence may be defined by the way in which we engage in dialogue with each other, with the world, and with God.

The more authentic the search of the learner, the more engaged the mentor can also be in the process. It leads to a sense of trust on the side of the mentor that even if the student has academic difficulties or experiences financial setbacks preventing continual enrollment in studies, the student, if supported, will make it through because they believe in themselves and in the mentoring process. The mentoring relationship permits an 'I-Thou' relationship between learner and mentor, in contrast to an "I-It' relationship of separation and detachment.

So authenticity in the search for a future self and fidelity to a future goal are as characteristic of the Seeking Self as exploration and commitment are to the identity statuses of Marcia (1966). The 'transitional identity space' is a context in which the identity statuses of Marcia can develop. Mentors see authenticity of the search and fidelity to a future self as internal anchors for continued learning: The 'authenticity and fidelity' may become externally manifested as 'exploration and commitment' to researchers in the field of identity. If the learner and mentor bring their authentic selves to the mentoring relationship then mentoring becomes reinforcing as learners formulate and work towards their goals and both learners and mentors experience a secure environment within which to explore and learn as partners.

'Seeking Selves' in the *Transitional Identity Space* of Mentoring Relationships

From our experiences with adult learners, the concept of "transitional identity space" more fully captures the dynamic context of mentoring and the *process* of adult

identity development than does a snapshot of a learner's current identity status or *state*. Bosma and Kunnen (2001) reminded us of the importance of emotions and relational aspects of identity development (consistent with Erikson's psychosocial theory). They referred to the "self and identity as dynamic, self-organizing systems." Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) further applied systems theory as a conceptual framework for understanding identity development as "taking place on several interconnected time scales." The movement from 'status' to 'transition in space' is a movement in the same spirit, framing identity development as *process* instead of *change in status*. We find that conceiving of adult identity development as process within a transitional identity space has advantages:

☐ **Seeing identities as multi-faceted.** We know that most successful adult learners come to us with fidelity to some aspects of their identities, such as parent, professional, or learner. Working within the framework of *transitional identity space* helps us to recognize and honor the foundations the learner has already built upon, to assist the learner in seeing those foundations as flexible supports, and to help the learner scaffold new identities upon the strengths established through those foundations.

☐ **Focusing on authenticity in a search and fidelity to a future self enables an "I-Thou" view – one from within the frame of meaning of the adult learner.** It is a transition from a macro-view upon the work of the learner (categorizing the student's identity status) to a micro-view from within the perspective of the learner. This encourages dialogue about the process of learning rather than simply the assessment of achievement.

This transitional identity space framework is also compatible with Kroger's (2003) examination of content and structure as separate aspects of identity development. A transitional identity space may support many different structures and processes, enabling us to focus on the process of learning as a positive result in itself. The content of learning changes when the focus is on the learning process because reflection on the learning becomes an additional dimension of the learning, as do the relationships that enable the processes to take place. The transitional identity space supports the process of guidance from a "bridging other" leading to the development of a "bridging self."

RESULTS

Five Case Studies

In this section, we introduce five case studies of our adult learners to illustrate the variations and complexities of adult learning and adult identity development within the mentoring context or transitional identity space. Our experience qualitatively supports the premise that adult learners, whether labelled 'externally' as having identity diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, or identity achievement, succeed when they have the ability to: 1) be authentic in a trusting relationship with the mentor and 2) have fidelity to the learning and mentoring process. The transitional identity space opens up the identity process to the multiple types of identity that have been represented in the MAMA cycle. Many of our successful students show identity achievement in at least one area and are consolidating that achievement or moving towards identity achievement in an emerging area.

(1) **From Within a Secure Place -** Alex was an Irish policeman in his mid-twenties who worked with inner city youth. He saw his job as his life's work. Alex, whose father died when he was young and whose mother works with preschool children, would be the first person in his family to earn a college degree. He created both associate and bachelor's degree programs in Human Development, thereby creating reasonable midpoint and end goals towards which to work.

Alex took each new thing he learned in his courses and applied it directly to his work. For example, as soon as he learned about the identity needs of adolescents through his 'Adolescence and Identity' course, he immediately used those concepts to help him talk with the inner city youth about what they wanted (which Alex recognized as their identity searches), posing questions about home, school, and community. He successfully translated 'theory talk' to 'real talk' in an impactful way, seeing the connections between theories and practice as potentially seamless. **Reflection from Transitional Identity Space Framework:** This learner had a strong trust that what he was learning would be useful: He trusted both his capacity to learn and his learning path. Alex chose degrees in Human Development because he thought they would be most useful for him in his work – and then he showed his prediction to be true. He

demonstrated the strengths of a student who is within his identity achievement. He exhibited the openness, receptivity and conceptual flexibility associated with Marcia's (1966) identity achievement. The transitional identity space for this student was visible to him. The mentoring role with this student was to help create a map which he could then negotiate successfully.

(2) **Creating a Secure Place -** Darrel is a forty year old Hispanic male who grew up in the rural south among migrant workers who did not value education. He followed seasonal work and occasionally got into trouble with the law. When a rural opportunity group gave him the chance to work in their office, it introduced him to the possibility of a different way of working and living; it opened up new ways of seeing himself. With this motivation, he stayed behind in upstate New York when the other migrant workers moved on. Darrel enrolled in a local business institute and worked various jobs on the small campus. There he earned an associate degree in business and obtained steady work in the institute's janitorial department. Darrel enrolled with Empire State College to continue his education, though still questioning what type of bachelor's degree he should seek and what type of work he could do. He seemed to straddle different worlds, questioning where he fit in (no longer with his old friends, but neither with his co-workers who seemed racist towards him); instead he was eager to engage his mentors in intellectual discussions and political debates and he befriended a business teacher at the institute where he worked. Darrel's roles continued to change, as he and his girlfriend became new parents. He persisted in his studies, earning a bachelor's degree in business management and gaining some business experience through an internship. He chose to stay in his full-time janitorial job, however, because it was the longest job he had ever held and it provided security and health benefits for his new family. **Reflection from Transitional Identity Space Framework:** Perhaps from Erikson's perspective, Darrel is gaining fidelity. Through these struggles he remained committed to his current and sometimes frustrating occupational role, boyfriend role, and new father role, even while adapting to his new role as an educated person. He integrated the new role of father and partner with commitment while gaining further motivation to find and commit to his occupational identity. The mentoring context served as transitional identity space, providing a safe space in which to hold on to aspects of his previous identity and to try out aspects of his new identity. Darrel's journey is a process; his identity is a work in progress – with one step at a time and sometimes with a few steps backwards, but it is definitely not static.

It appears that Darrel can trust himself to make constructive changes and keep commitments in his life, but he may face another identity crisis in the future as he has recently been experiencing a tension between his current occupational role and his identity as an educated person. He is also negotiating the impact of social and cultural contexts, peer pressure, and perceived racism. From the mentor's perspective, Darrel 'felt' the safety of the transitional identity space before he 'saw' his new location. With his trust in the process, himself, and others, Darrel is gaining fidelity and he sees hope for the future (particularly with his young son).

(3) Expanding a Secure Place - Nancy, a happily married 'WASP' (white Anglo Saxon Protestant) woman in her early thirties was another 'typical' adult student. As a capable, inquisitive, and integrative learner, she sought to understand in a broad way how one's geographical, cultural and social 'location' impacts personal development as a human being. Given these interests, Nancy created a bachelor's degree program in Human Development on 'human ecology,' exploring all avenues of education that were offered through online courses, independent studies, group studies, and residencies. Her program started off in a general direction ("I think I want to learn about how physical location impacts human development"). As she progressed, her direction became more clear to her ("I like learning about different ways that cultural and social realities are expressed and how they impact people of different ages and genders and backgrounds"). Upon graduation, her 'academic GPS' was even more precise ("I am fascinated by the intersect of various cultures and my husband and I want to bring those issues and opportunities into our daily lives by adopting a child from a totally different culture and raising that child to know both their own culture, which we will honor and respect, and also the culture that we provide"). Over three years, Nancy 'located' her education to more precisely align with her interests and life goals, ultimately focusing on how these human ecological issues impact an adoptive child, the adopting parents, and others in a cross-cultural adoption. **Reflection from Transitional Identity Space Framework**: Nancy said that what she learned in this program gave her and her husband the support to take the life-changing step of intentionally adopting a child from another culture and race, in the midst of what she calls 'the white toast' mentality of those around them.

This student came to us in what Marcia (1966) might describe as an 'identity moratorium.' Her educational interests were like 'buckshot.' As time progressed, her interests continued to be broad, but her focus within those interests became more intentional. She used her

education directly and immediately in her social and emotional life, involving a change in identity to 'parent of a cross-cultural child,' as well as a foundation for the rest of her intellectual life. Her personal, academic, and professional goals worked together to bring her great pleasure. The transitional identity space provided this learner with a stable and respected place from which to expand her intellectual and emotional framework, essentially integrating the various levels of the 'human ecology' she defined. The concept of 'human ecology' provided a meaningful framework for Nancy's transitional identity space. The goal of the mentor was to share the intellectual quest, helping Nancy focus on what she wanted to learn and why it was important to her that she learned it. Nancy was seeking fidelity to a self that more successfully integrated her world values and concerns with her everyday actions. Learning about human social and cultural patterns within the mentoring context gave her the knowledge and confidence to do this.

(4) **Forging a Positive Secure Place -** Bonnie, a woman in her forties, enrolled in a one-on-one introductory psychology study with her mentor. She was very capable and very busy, taking care of everyone and everything in her life. As Bonnie shared her educational narrative with the mentor, she disclosed that her family had been worried about her, confronting her about her possibly being anorexic, which she had adamantly denied. The mentor listened attentively, trying not to react with her own perception of Bonnie's 'skeletal' appearance. The topic of anorexia came up during the study because Bonnie chose to do her final project on this topic, in her own words, "to prove her family wrong." Carefully, the mentor helped Bonnie organize her research, explaining that the final paper needed to be academic and not centered on personal experience. At times, the mentor reminded her that she could choose an alternative topic. Bonnie pushed forward, researching the eating disorder, even contacting a local organization to find out more (although she chose not to sit in on a support group as she had originally intended). She wrote an excellent paper, summarizing and integrating information from numerous academic sources and providing her own grounded interpretations. Bonnie did not reveal any personal insights to the mentor at that time, but eventually on her own Bonnie sought help from various professional sources, including a nutritionist and a therapist. When the mentor subsequently saw her, she looked healthier and happier and she talked openly about her struggles. As Bonnie started taking care of herself, she ended an unhappy marriage, earned a master's degree in counseling, and began a fulfilling career in psychology. **Reflection from Transitional Identity**

Space Framework: It appeared to the mentor that Bonnie had been 'foreclosed' at least with respect to the possibility of suffering from an eating disorder, but the educational mentoring context provided the security and opportunity to open up to that possibility. The transitional identity space played a small, but significant part in Bonnie's identity development and journey towards a healthier self. Through her actions, Bonnie also found the strength to leave an unfulfilling marriage, readdressing her need for intimacy (reflective of Erikson's young adulthood developmental crisis of intimacy versus isolation). Having effectively dealt with these developmental crises, she will have the tools to face new identity challenges as she continues through middle and late adulthood. Bonnie's trust in herself and in the learning process, along with the security she experienced within the educational mentoring context, enabled her to seek further identity development.

(5) Seeking a Secure Place - Jane is a 'twenty-something' single mother of two children, one of whom has a developmental disability. Living with an alcoholic boyfriend has provided her with minimal social support. Each time she met with the mentor, Jane announced very matter-of-factly that she had decided upon yet another career - among them, doctor, psychologist, and neuroscientist, although she had no realistic conception of what any of these careers entailed either with respect to preparatory education or the requirements of the profession itself. For example, she expressed an interest in being a doctor so she could have flexible hours and work around her children's schedules. She was not aware, however, that she would need to go to medical school. Through Educational Planning, which is a key part of the individualized mentoring process, Jane explored each profession, specifically investigating the required education and work involved. When she enrolled in a course on the 'Biology of the Brain,' she discovered, experientially, that these professions were not for her.

At one point, Jane and her children were sleeping in her car to avoid her boyfriend who was drinking again. Needing to provide more safety and security for her children motivated Jane to continue towards her educational goal, but it also slowed down her progress. Jane eventually earned a bachelor's degree in Community and Human Services with a concentration in Early Childhood, but she still seemed confused/diffused in terms of her occupational identity. She recently applied for a master's in business administration program because her boyfriend thought that she could make a lot of money with an MBA. Jane didn't seem at all concerned with the fact that she had never taken any business courses, did not have any interest in the field,

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and did not have any management experience. She applied to the program following the expectations of a significant other and without questioning her own commitments, including the fact that her education and previous employment were in a completely different field.

Reflection from Transitional Identity Framework: Understandably, pressing crises in her personal life distracted Jane from her educational journey, but they may also have helped her confront real life dilemmas (a capacity needed to gain fidelity to a reflective and stable adult identity). Jane's trust in her mentor as a 'bridging other' kept her connected to an educational process to which she had only a nebulous and wavering attachment. It was this trust that enabled Jane to begin to explore her own identity space (albeit not very deeply), even while being plummeted within a complex social world. Jane's story demonstrates how the process of learning and developing one's identity is not necessarily the same as the externally apparent identity status. There is often an underlying process that may not result in status change or may involve various movements back and forth that we cannot capture in a single snapshot. This case also illustrates the importance of considering multiple and overlapping social contexts (including emotional and relational aspects) in understanding adult identity development. The educational mentoring context may have provided a secure space, but this was not enough in light of Jane's larger social environment; also experiencing trust with a mentor may not be enough if the individual does not fully trust herself.

DISCUSSION

Our mentoring experiences with adult learners called us to reflect on the powerful changes we have seen with some of our students (often extending beyond the educational realm). The five case studies presented here helped us organize our perceptions in relation to identity theories, specifically the adolescent developmental crisis in Erikson's (1950) psychosocial life-span theory and Marcia's (1966) theoretical expansion and empirical research of the four subsequent ego identity statuses. Both Erikson and Marcia asserted that the developmental task of identity achievement is not necessarily confined to adolescence and that adult identity development is not only possible, but even expected, for instance with the Moratorium-Achievement-Moratorium-Achievement cycle (Marcia, 1987). As Kroger (2007) summarized, over the years researchers have found that many adolescents and young adults do not appear to have attained "identity achievement" - i.e. having experienced an identity crisis and then committing themselves to an identity.

Kroger (2000) had put out a call for further research into "the contents, course, and *contexts* of identity development in adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood." All of this provided a base for our reflection and a foundation for viewing the educational mentoring relationship as a *context* that is particularly conducive to adult identity development. Winnicott's (1953) object relations theory deepened our understanding of adult identity development within and across such contexts with the concept of the *transitional identity space.* This has led us from focusing on identity *states* or *outcomes* toward a more dynamic *process-oriented* model of adult identity development.

The educational mentoring environment is not the only context that is conducive to adult identity development nor does it serve this purpose for every adult learner. There are many different reasons why adults come to higher education today and there are various individual and social factors that influence adults' educational objectives and experiences. Many adult learners do not seek to explore or commit to new ideologies, roles, and identities and may remain uninterested in such experiences throughout their educational journeys. But some adult learners do set out with such goals or at least they are open to possible shifts in their identities (contents and/or structure) as they actively engage in questioning, considering multiple perspectives, analyzing, integrating, and applying new information in personally meaningful ways. Key aspects of this *"Seeking Self"* include the commitment to at least one positive experience in the past leading to trust in oneself; the capacity to trust the mentor as a guide; a foundational identity upon which to grow; a goal or at least a shell that provides direction for future possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986); a role – desire to move from mentored to mentor along the educational path; and authentic process – belief that the learning environment is a safe place within which to decrease the real-ideal self-discrepancy or to increase the real-undesired self-discrepancy (Ogilvie, 1987). *Authenticity* and *fidelity* within a supportive mentoring context constitutes a transitional identity space in which the adult learner feels secure enough to try out and practice different ideologies, roles, and identities. As a "holding environment," the mentoring context lends continuity between past, present, and future identities. The mentor may serve as the "bridging other" described by Kroger (2003), eventually to be replaced by the adult learner's own "bridging self."

Now that we have framed a model that seems to best reflect our observations of adult learners in the mentoring context, we are drawn to test it empirically. Our initial approach has the typical advantages and disadvantages

of case studies and self-reports. That is, our sample of adults who have chosen the non-traditional guided independent study of SUNY – Empire State College may not be representative of the wider population of adults or adult students (in Western culture, let alone broader cultural contexts). Yet this idiographic method is valuable as it provides in-depth information from numerous interactions and discussions with each adult learner, typically over the course of a few years. Though as mentors working with adult learners, our experiences and perceptions may not be objective. It is important to hear the voices of adult learners themselves to compare with our reports of the mentoring context and its significance in some adult learners' identity development. In future research we plan to survey our college's alumni who have earned bachelor's degrees in the past few years with open-ended questions about their experiences and perceptions of the mentoring context and its significance in their own learning and developmental processes. We expect this research to enlighten our proposed model, which we can then take to other adult learners, mentors, and alumni for further review and convergent validity. At some point, it would also be interesting to explore the role of the mentor and what she/he brings to the transitional identity space, as well as what the mentor might gain by engaging in the mentoring relationship and process.

The *transitional identity space* framework has the built-in limitations of any model in that it emerged from specific experiences at a particular point in time. The richness of our experiences with students, however, reinforces our commitment to using it as a lens for reflection. It is a *process* model that provides the benefit of being both visually concrete and meta-cognitively distant: This makes it effective for students to 'envision' their own identity space and how they are traversing within it and such self-awareness may facilitate greater autonomy and self-directed lifelong learning, as well as adult identity development.

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