

A Queer Approach to Women's Identity Development

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Introduction

The goal of this paper will be to move Josselson's Women's Identity Development Theory (1973) from a sexed and gendered constructivist perspective to a queer post-structuralist perspective by utilizing Queer Theory to deconstruct sex, gender, and gender identity assumptions, and by reconstructing Josselson's Theory while attending to the key tenets of heteronormativity, performativity, desire, and becoming as defined by Jones and Abes (2013).

The investigation of assumptions and power structures within theories is understood as a best practice which moves the research field forward. Deconstructing a theory utilizing a post-structuralist approach is intended to assist theorists, researchers, and practitioners to identify potentially harmful assumptions and power structures (Robbins & McGowan, 2016). Reconstructing the theory re-operationalizes and applies the theory to future practice, accounting for the identified areas of potential harm.

Terminology

When working in gendered identity development it will be important to utilize a consistent vocabulary. While many constructivist theories do not differentiate between biological sex, gender, and gender identity (Robbins & McGowan, 2016), this paper will attempt to detangle these concepts. For the purposes of this paper, biological sex will be understood as the "biologically based difference between males and females" (Bussey, 2011 as cited in Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 175) and intersex individuals. Gender will refer "to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate [to gender categories]" (World Health Organization, 2014 as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p. 175). And gender identity will be defined as "a person's internal self-concept with regard to gender categories" (Catalano & Shlasko, 2010, p. 424 as cited in Robbins & McGowan, 2016, p. 73).

Since this paper takes a queer and post-structural approach to identity development, these definitions are intentionally chosen due to their resistance to specificity. Attention to the differentiation between sex, gender, and gender identity, will be given during the deconstruction portion of this paper.

Josselson's Women's Identity Development Theory

Established from research first conducted in 1973, Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development attempts to make sense of patterns related to identity development among cisgender females (individuals assigned female sex at birth and who personally identify and express themselves as women). Grounded in Erik Erikson's (1950) model of psychosocial development, Josselson challenged Erikson's all-male research on identity. Although Josselson challenged Erikson's willful blindness toward female research participants, she is highly inspired by him and his perception of identity formation in late adolescence. To Josselson, "identity is a conceptual idea that refers to the integration of a felt sense of continuity as a person and aspects of one's place in the world that one has chosen or been given by others" (Josselson, 2017, p. 15), or more simply "[Identity] is a sense of who we are" (Josselson, 2017, p. 16).

Beginning her study with 60 female college seniors from four Boston Universities, Josselson conducted semi-structured interviews until 48 participants were placed into one of four identity statuses. These statuses were modeled after Jim Marcia's (1966) ego identity statuses, and in Josselson's first book, "*Finding Herself: Pathways to identity development in women*," (1987) featured the same categorical names. Later in the 1996 book "*Revising Herself: The story of women's identity from college to midlife*" the statuses were renamed to feature titles more representative of the processes occurring during the status. For the sake of this paper both the 1987 and 1996 titles will be used. Josselson re-interviewed the 1973 participants at 10 to 12-year

increments for each of these books, with fewer individuals involved at each iteration. In her latest book (2017), *Paths to Fulfillment: Women's search for meaning and identity*, she re-engaged 26 of the original participants.

Marica's (1966) ego identity statuses and Josselson's (1973; 1987; 1996; 2017) identity statuses are the result of two interacting variables: crisis/exploration and commitment. Marcia's original study was conducted using 86 college men and focused on occupational and ideological exploration and commitment. Josselson expanded the interview questions, based on feedback from one of Marcia's female research assistants, to additionally capture information related to sexuality and relationships, pressing female topics at the time of the initial 1973 study (Josselson, 2017; Caffarella & Olson, 1993). The four statuses are described below:

foreclosure/guardians.

Foreclosed individuals, guardians, have committed to an identity without having explored alternatives. Female participants express "little doubt or questioning of messages received during childhood" (Patton et al., 2016). Josselson viewed these individuals as guarding their socialized value set by limiting their exposure to competing ideals.

moratorium/searchers.

Moratorium participants, searchers, explore identity topics without committing. Marcia described the original moratorium status as the "most engaging among the statuses" (Marcia, 1994, p. 75 as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p. 291). Josselson's research suggested that participants experienced moratorium for the shortest period, and often progressed toward identity achievement/pathmakers (Josselson, 2017).

identity achievement/pathmakers.

People who have reached the identity achievement status, pathmakers, have experienced crisis/exploration and have committed to an identity. These individuals have successfully defined themselves, often through a departure from socialized expectations (Josselson, 1973; Patton et al., 2016). Josselson adds through her subsequent books that participants tended toward this status (1987; 1996; 2017).

identity diffusion/drifters.

Erikson's (1950) diffused identity, Marcia's (1966) identity diffusion, Josselson's (1996) drifters are hallmarked by a lack of both commitment and exploration/crisis. Having not encountered new definitions of identity and having not committed to existing identities, these individuals lack a sense of self and future direction. Many drifters continued to experience identity diffusion for decades, waiting for life to bring them a sense of self without a sense of when this may occur (Josselson, 2017).

Queer Theory

As mentioned, this paper will examine Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development for sex, gender, and gender identity-based assumptions and inappropriate power structures using Queer Theory. According to Jones and Abes (2013), "Queer theory is a theoretical perspective within critical theory that examines, challenges, and deconstructs social norms attached to gender and sexuality" (p. 197). Within queer theory literature there are four key tenets. First of these tenets is Heteronormativity. Heteronormativity challenges the "binary between heterosexuality as normal (or superior) and any expression of identity that is not explicitly heterosexual as abnormal (or inferior)" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 198). In more recent years underlying components of heteronormativity have been used to explain socially

constructed relationships between sexuality and gender, known as heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2017). Second of the key tenets is performativity, or the concept that “social identities...are something that individuals *do* rather than something individuals *are*” (emphasis in original) (Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 199-200). Closely related to performativity is the third tenet, becoming. Becoming is recognition that identity development is an ongoing and fluid process. While the concept of becoming is a tenet of Queer Theory, it is recognized by Josselson (2017) in her most recent book when she refers to research suggesting that identity continues to evolve as individuals experience later Eriksonian stages of psychosocial development. Desire, the last tenet of Queer Theory, serves as an individual's impetus for action; Described as “a compulsion and incompleteness that needs fulfillment” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 202), desire acts as a “challenge to heteronormativity, frequently in the form of performatives” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 202).

In summary, Queer Theory “dramatizes incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire” (Jagose, 1997), through the understandings that 1) identity is hegemonically defined through socially constructed binaries; 2) identity is performed; 3) identity is fluid and does not develop toward a singular end-point; and 4) identity is developed through the reconciliation of internal and external congruences.

Deconstruction

With clear language and an understanding of both Josselson's Women's Identity Development Theory and Queer Theory, I will now examine assumptions and power structures within Josselson's Women's Identity Development Theory through deconstruction. To deconstruct the theory, I will utilize the key tenets of queer theory as introduced above, as well as the core tenets of critical social theory (Dugan, 2017). Dugan (2017) outlines Stocks of

Knowledge, Ideology & Hegemony, and Social Location as the three core tenets of critical social theory. As a critical social theory, Queer Theory, is complemented by these additional tenets.

Stocks of Knowledge/Becoming

Josselson notes through her years of research that participants have tended toward identity achievement (pathmakers) with some exception to diffused identities (drifters) (Josselson, 2017). This assumption, of a primary developmental end-point, is challenged in the post-structural queer approach. The queer tenet of becoming serves to counter the stock of knowledge (“socially constructed and often-fallible assumptions about how the world should operate” (Dugan, 2017, p. 34)) that development is linear. A more fluid or dynamic approach to development is necessary to move the theory forward and evidence exists that this fluid approach is more applicable to identity development (Caffarella & Olson, 1993).

Ideology & Hegemony/Heteronormativity

The greatest flaw of Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development is the conflation of sex, gender, and gender identity based on heteronormative and heterogenderist hegemony, or the willful blindness to the developmental experience of sex and gender minoritized populations. Josselson's 1973 study included 46 white women and two black women, of which 47 identified as heterosexual, leaving only one sexually minoritized person (a cisgender white woman who identified as lesbian during follow-up study). Given no illuminating information regarding cisgender or transgender identity of the participants, the normative assumption frames the study as entirely composed of cisgender females. The importance of the heteronormative and heterogender narrative is clear, as the women's relationship/marital and child-rearing status is central to each of the case studies (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Josselson herself acknowledges the limited diversity of her longitudinal study along racial lines (Josselson,

2017), but no discussion of sex, gender, or gender identity diversity is given. The heteronormative challenge to this hegemonic exclusion asks if the theory could be applied without regard to sex, gender, or gender identity, specifically centering the experiences of sex and gender minoritized individuals. This could be done by challenging the performativity of gender identity expression altogether. More discussion on performativity will be given in the “Performativity and Desire” subsection of this paper.

Social Location

It is worth noting that Josselson did address the social location (“the position one holds in society based on a variety of social identities... that are considered important to and in turn frame how the world is experienced” (Dugan, 2017, p. 39)) of her participants. A discussion of familial background, race, ethnicity, age, and parental educational attainment is given (Josselson, 1973). However, the socio-cultural similarities outlined in that discussion raise concerns regarding the applicability of the theory to populations other than “traditionally-aged,” white, Bostonian college women of the 1970s (Jones, 1997 as cited in Karkouti, 2014). In her 2017 book, Josselson attempts to apply the theory to two college seniors, who are daughters of participants in the longitudinal study. While she finds success in her re-application, the limited sample and method of participant selection does not guarantee modern applicability to a larger population.

Performativity & Desire

The ways in which Josselson presumed women would enact their sex and gender in pursuit of identity development is the second greatest flaw with the Women's Identity Development Theory. There is an overarching assumption that women prioritize relationships in their establishment of personal identity (Karkouti, 2014; Caffarella & Olson, 1993). This

contrasts the male individuation priorities measured by Marcia (1966). If however, people were able to establish agency in regard to their sex and gender performance, this assumption of stereotypical performativity may no longer hold true. In fact, Downing and Roush (1985) highlight this very issue and suggest that gender-based identity theories be “interfaced” with Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky’s (1976) theory of sex-role (gender performance) transcendence. According to the three-stage theory of transcendence, individuals develop the ability to transcend stereotypical categorizations of gender and to self-define behaviors as they see fit through the reconciliation of situational crises. This theory of transcendence fits well with Queer Theory’s key tenet of desire, which drives people to congruence between internal and external performatives of sex and gender.

Reconstruction

Research related to the previous application of Josselson’s Women’s Identity Development demonstrates the theory’s limited operationalization. In some regards, this may be due to the fact that the study is not yet concluded. In other regards, this may be due to criticisms related to Marcia’s statuses, which underlay Josselson’s work (Van Hoof, 1999). The coming section of this paper will address the identified assumptions and power structures.

As identified in the deconstruction portion of this paper, the hegemonic assumption of sex, gender, and gender identity congruence, along with the assumption of conventional gender performance will be addressed. I will also address the non-linear nature of the revised identity statuses and provide examples of the impact socio-cultural diversity may have within the new theory.

To first address sex, gender, and gender identity expectations of congruence, the theory must be re-envisioned to include all sexes, genders, and forms of gender identity. Our queer

approach to identity development requires this re-envisioning be particularly aware of minoritized sexes and genders, such as intersex and trans* identities. By stripping Josselson's theory of sex and gender application, including its name, we come to a new theory of Queer Identity Development. In this sense, queer is not used as a term to define, especially in regard to sex or gender identity, but rather to resist definition (Jagose, 1997).

Once the new theory is positioned as Queer Identity Development, it must attend to the value inappropriately placed on conventional (stage 2) gender performance, as defined by Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky (1976). As Women's Identity Development, marriage and child-rearing is positively regarded, and as Ego Identity Development the individuation of occupational and ideological identity is promoted. In the remodeled theory, stage 3 post-conventional gender transcendence should receive focus. Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky (1976) define stage 3 as:

“... the individual can move freely from situation to situation and behave/feel appropriately and adaptively. Choice of behavioral and emotional expression is not determined by rigid adherence to “appropriate” sex[/gender]-related characteristics. Individuals feel free to express their human qualities without fear of retribution for violating sex[/gender]-role norms. There has been a transcending of the stereotypes and a reorganization of the possibilities learned in Stage 2 into a more personally relevant framework” (p. 204).

By lending value to all experiences, rather than solely sex/gender-role conforming experiences, the new theory increases its accessibility to all sexes and genders.

A post-structural criticism of many constructivist theories, the statuses should be seen as more fluid and less fixed or linear. That being said, due to the foundation of both Marcia's and

Josselson's identity statuses, movement between statuses is limited even in this more fluid Queer model. Individuals may move in any direction along the commitment axis, acknowledging that some commitments may be temporary, but they may only move toward having experienced crisis/exploration, noting that experiences occur with respect to linear time. Even in the case that an experience/crisis ceases to have meaning as time progresses, the impact of the experience/crisis in the past must be acknowledged. In this new model individuals will tend toward moratorium/searcher and identity achievement/pathmaker statuses, but movement between the two will be more freely occurring as commitments are made and discarded before new commitments are formed.

Lastly, the theory must ideologically disconnect itself from the Eriksonian belief that identity achievement is the preferred or "correct" status for future "healthy" development. Our redeveloped theory must remove implicit socio-cultural bias toward a particular identity development pathway (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Karkouti, 2014). Understanding the socio-cultural diversity of the modern world, particularly collectivist orientations, guardianship (foreclosure) may serve just as equally as a psychologically fulfilling status. The maintenance of harmony and the prioritization of familial (socialized) values should not be dismissed as an unwillingness to explore identity crises. Similarly, the length of time a person experiences moratorium/searcher should not be critiqued as a reluctance to make a commitment.

Application

Having now given an overview of the existing theory, deconstructed it with tenets of Queer and critical social theory, and reconstructed it attending to identified weaknesses, I will suggest two potential uses in the student affairs profession. The first of these applications will be through an admissions process, screening applicants for their likelihood to make identity

commitments and explore identity crises while on campus. Second, I suggest use within an LGBTQ+ resource center as individuals encounter crises and make commitments related to gender identity within identity development.

College is a known time of identity development for traditionally-aged students (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). However, this orientation toward identity development does not hold true for individuals with a diffused identity, drifters. Individuals with a diffused identity have been described as scoring “lowest among the four identity status groups ‘on all measures of healthy psychological functioning’” (Josselson, 1978/1991, p. 140 as cited in Patton et al., 2016, p. 295). Now able to capture the identity status of all individuals, regardless of sex or gender identity, Queer Identity Development Theory could help admissions committees identify these individuals and remove them from the admissions process – promoting the psychological health of the incoming cohort. Additionally, it could be argued that identity achieved/pathmakers, foreclosed/guardians, and moratorium/searchers would be expected to utilize more campus resources as they searched for identity, and engage in healthier behaviors once they had committed to a grounded self-image. An applicant’s status could be identified by asking two questions (related to each theoretical axis) or asking a singular double-barreled question. Two examples of the double-barrel approach could include: “Describe your social identity (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, faith/spirituality, etc.) and how you developed or became aware of that identity.” or “Who are you (with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, faith/spirituality) and how do you know?”

A second proposed application of the redeveloped Queer Identity Development Theory situates the theory within an LGBTQ+ resource center for the purpose of evaluating programming effectiveness. By interviewing individuals who participate in programming

throughout their collegiate experience, it may be possible to relate duration of program participation to identity exploration and potential commitment. This would be seen as participants tending toward moratorium/searcher or identity achievement/pathmakers with increasing involvement. In the lens of an LGBTQ+ resource center, semi-structured interviews could be held focusing on gender transcendence as described by Rebecca, Hefner, and Oleshansky (1976). An example interview question might include "How do you describe your gender identity and how does this fit or not fit with conventional definitions of a gender binary?" Individuals who have developed a sense of identity, and transcended gender barriers, would be understood to have explored and committed to their gender identity in a non-stereotypical way. As a program evaluation instrument, you may expect individuals who have participated in more programs to more likely exhibit this level of development.

Implications

There are many more opportunities for application beyond these two examples. Identity development is an important topic within college student development (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009; Patton et al., 2016). By more fully understanding students' self-image, services may be more individualized. And by evaluating the process by which students develop their identity, programs may be targeted toward identity exploration (Karkouti, 2014). Students should be encouraged to embrace the moratorium environment of their early collegiate experiences, while being led to make commitments in their later college years. Students leaving college having explored and made commitments to an identity are more likely to experience a satisfied and fulfilling life, ready to encounter and pass through future crises.

The approach taken in this paper is also worth note as a future implication. I have challenged heteronormative and heterogenderist assumptions and rebuked stereotypical gender

performatives through the use of Queer Theory. While it is true that we live and are socialized in a gendered world, it is also true that our students may be experiencing internal disagreements with external (social) gender expectations and may be developing gender transcendence.

Examining current student development theory for these assumptions and hegemonic narratives helps ensure the applicability of theory to all student populations.

Conclusion

Having begun this paper with an overview of significant definitions, including an introduction to Josselson's Women's Identity Development Theory and Queer Theory, I intended the paper to appeal to readers of all levels of familiarity with developmental and critical theory.

Next, attention was directed toward investigating assumptions and inappropriate power structures through deconstructing the theory utilizing tenets of Queer Theory and critical social theory. Through this deconstruction it was found that Josselson may have hegemonically/willfully avoided investigation into identity development of individuals who did not identify as cisgender women. I then identified that it was Josselson's assumptions regarding women's gender performance which revised Marcia's identity statuses to account for the perceived importance of relationships to women. Similarly, assumptions about the linear nature of development (toward identity achievement) demonstrated a flow of power which defined certain statuses as preferred or natural. Lastly, the social location of Josselson's longitudinal study was determined to be limited to cisgender white Bostonian college women of the early 1970s – a social location which challenged modern applicability of the theory.

Following deconstruction, the theory was reconstructed, attending to the noted deficiencies. The reconstructed, Queer Identity Development, challenges heteronormative gender performatives and acknowledges students potential desire to transcend stereotypical sex-roles.

The reconstructed theory also acknowledges a fluid and less linear approach to develop, typical of post-structural theories.

Concluding the paper, two examples of application were given – through university admissions processes and program evaluation within an LGBTQ+ resource center. An encouragement for future theoretical review was given through implications, noting that this sort of review will be necessary as we continue to gain greater insight into the diverse ways students make meaning of and develop identity in the collegiate setting.

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