Two kinds of identity crisis

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Abstract

In order to outline a model of identity crisis, it is necessary to distinguish two types In an identity deficit ("motivation crisis'), the individual experiences a lack of guiding commitments but struggles to establish personal goals and values In an identity conflict ("legitimation crisis"), the person has several commitments which prescribe conflicting behavioral imperatives in some situations, such that at least one commitment may have to be betrayed The literature on identity crisis is reviewed in connection with this distinction, and an attempt is made to delineate the causes, the subjective experiences, behavioral consequences and modes of resolution of each type of crisis

An apparently central assumption underlying the writings on identity crisis is that there is a single, definable phenomenon that constitutes identity crises Erikson (1956) described a unidimensional continuum ranging from firm identity to confused or diffused identity Prelinger and Zimet (1964) relabelled the problematic end of Erikson's continuum as "diffuse-conflicted,' but they continued to think of a unidimensional continuum Our review of the literature led us to conclude, however, that there are basically two kinds of identity crisis

Habermas (1973) proposed on conceptual (analytical) grounds that there are two types of identity crisis, which he called "legitimation crisis" and ' motivation crisis " A legitimation crisis is the inability of a social entity to fulfill demands and expectations it has placed on itself It refers to an inability to justify actions that are called for A motivation crisis, on the other hand, refers to a lack of "action-motivating meaning" (1973, p 49) In this case, existing (internal) motivations are inadequate Of special importance is Habermas'

assertion of analytical completeness for his scheme of crisis tendencies, which means that this dichotomy of identity crisis types is exhaustive Habermas was primarily interested in crises of social systems, but his concepts can be applied to individual persons' crises as well We propose the following distinction between two major crisis types for individual identity crises

The motivation crisis or *identity deficit* refers to the problem caused by an inadequately defined self It is characterized by a lack of commitment to goals and values, the person lacks a basis for making consistent choices and decisions An identity crisis arises when the person struggles to make such commitments If the person is content to remain uncommitted, then the identity deficit is simply "identity diffusion" (Erikson, 1968, Marcia, 1966) Thus, motivation crises combine the lack of guiding commitments with the personal desire and struggle to make commitments An example of a motivation crisis would be the crisis of the adolescent who engages in protracted self-questioning and seeks new sources of meaning, fulfillment, and value

The legitimation crisis or *identity conflict* refers to the problem of the multiply defined self whose definitions have become incompatible It is characterized by severe difficulty in reconciling the demands that follow from diverse commitments, the situation makes it impossible to choose and act consistently with all the person's values and goals An example would be the crisis of the person whose spouse and parental home are each seriously committed to different religious faiths in a way that makes the person feel committed to both

A motivation crisis may appear to involve conflict and some observers describe it that way If it is a conflict, then our distinction between conflict and deficit is blurred This difficulty can normally be resolved by asking whether commitments exist The identity conflict crisis is more than just having conflicting attractions to incompatible possibilities, it is a conflict between existing, felt commitments

In this paper we shall attempt to sketch models of the two crisis types with regard to their causes, subjective experience, behavioral consequences, and modes of resolution Where evidence is lacking we shall advance speculative hypotheses for future research

Causes

Habermas' discussion of the causes of identity crises suggests that motivation crises tend to be caused by internal changes, whereas the

conflicts of legitimation crises are brought about by situational changes In the psychology of individuals, situational changes may often coincide with internal changes, as in retirement However, there is an important sense in which Habermas' comment is applicable An identity deficit such as an adolescent moratorium may be a product of the normal course of development, whereas an identity conflict may tend to result from extraordinary developments, especially in situational changes

Causes of Identity Deficit

Most research has failed to find identity crises to be universal In particular, Marcia (1966) describes "foreclosure status" persons as those who have never experienced identity crises and "diffusion status" persons as those who never *resolved* an identity crisis but are not experiencing a crisis at present Although identity crises may not be universal, they may be desirable The bulk of research tends to indicate that persons who have identity crises—especially those who have had them and successfully resolved them—are superior to the others on various dimensions (cf Bernard, 1981, Bourne, 1978), including academic achievement (Cross & Allen, 1970), achievement motivation (Orlofsky, 1977), and interpersonal intimacy (at least for males, Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973, Marcia, 1976) The value of identity crisis is also suggested by Rubins' (1968) observation that people who pass smoothly through adolescence tend to be regarded as deficient (e g , "square") by their peers

If one accepts that not everyone experiences an identity crisis during adolescence, then the question of causality can be reformulated as follows Why do some people and not others have identity crises?

The known causal antecedents of adolescent identity crisis (usually deficit) primarily concern ambivalence in the relationship to parents Bourne (1978) notes the methodological obstacles for systematic studies and places confidence in the findings of only one study (Jordan, 1971) This study noted that sons with current or past (resolved) identity crises perceived their parents as inconsistent and ambivalent, that is, alternately accepting and rejecting Sons with "foreclosed" identities, in contrast, were close to their parents (especially fathers) and perceived them as consistently supportive Consistently disapproving and rejecting parents were associated with adolescents with "diffuse" identities (and diffusion, like foreclosure, signifies the absence of current or past identity crisis) Similar findings are reviewed by Bernard (1981) and Waterman (1982)

Clinical case studies are consistent with the picture of parental ambivalence as a cause of identity crisis In particular, Levi, Stierlin, and Savard (1972) report a series of cases of sons' adolescent identity crisis In these, typically, the father had conflicting feelings about the son, including envy and admiration, the desire for a protege, feeling that his own values were repudiated by the son, and enjoyment of his son's failings as consolation for his own felt inadequacies The mothers often proffered support to and demanded appreciation from their sons in ways the sons rejected Erikson's (1968) clinical observations are consistent with the picture of clinging, intrusive mothers and ambivalent fathers as causing identity deficit crises in sons Psychoanalytic theorists (Falk, 1976, Schafer, 1973) suggest that the identity crisis is provoked by the son's ambivalence toward the parents, especially his fear of his own regressive desires to merge with them

The implication that the adolescent identity deficit is provoked by the repudiation of parental values, thereby creating a vacuum, is intrinsically plausible but may turn out to be too facile an explanation, or at least an incomplete one Further research is needed to determine what sort of specific event immediately precipitates the adolescent crisis One possibility is the cognitive advance that facilitates the increased self-consciusness of early adolescence (Elkind, 1978, Elkind & Bowen, 1979), thereby enabling adolescents to exert greatly increased control over their identities The contribution of cognitive development to identity crisis is also suggested by Leadbeater and Dionne's (1981) demonstration that such crises correlate with use of formal operations in thinking about identity problems, as well as Blos' (1962) observation (also inspired by Piaget's work) that adolescents, unlike children, develop systems of thought to understand themselves and their world More recently, Slugowski, Marcia, and Koopman (in press) have associated superior cognitive complexity and integration with having and resolving an identity crisis

Another possibility is the situational demand for choices The adolescent often must face the incompatibility of various future identities The reluctance to let go of any of one's potentialities could constitute a reluctance to commit oneself Such reluctance, coupled with a sincere desire for commitment, may be the hallmark of the identity deficit crisis

Ginsburg and Orlofsky (1981, see also Orlofsky, 1977) have observed that female adolescent identity crises show much more conflict than do male ones This implies that female adolescence may be more likely to give rise to identity conflicts than to identity deficits

These authors go on to suggest that women do not get the ' social support' that men do for having identity crises One way of inter-preting this observation in the context of our discussion is to suggest that male adolescents feel more comfortable repudiating their par-ents fundamentally and categorically than do females It is a common observation (e g Blos, 1962, Friday, 1977) that male adolescents, unlike female adolescents, often seem genuinely willing to break with their parents in an apparently final and definitive way The importance of this pattern is that females may continue to feel committed to the values and aspirations they internalized from their parents, often including becoming mothers Attending college may make them feel committed to having some sort of career Many late adolescent women may perceive career and motherhood as incom-patible, however, so they face a choice of betraying one or the other felt commitment—an identity conflict crisis If future research ver-ifies this pattern, it would support the view that adolescent motiva-tion crises depend on the repudiation of parental teachings to create the deficit in identity

The causes of the "mid-life" crisis have been described more carefully than those of the adolescent crisis Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) describe the male mid-life crisis as the failure of the values and goals that have sustained the male for the past two decades of his life Either he has to recognize that he will not fullfill his main ambition (his ' Dream"), or he fulfills it and has to discover that its fulfillment is far less satisfying than he had expected Thus, the identity deficit comes about because the existing commitments come to be perceived as inadequate Levinson et al emphasize that these earlier commitments developed parts of the self and neglected others and that during the mid-life crisis these neglected parts of the self make their nonfulfillment acutely painful for the individual, possibly owing to an enhanced sense of mortality

Causes of Identity Conflict

The identity deficit seems to be elicited by a combination of the impending necessity of making choices and the lack of guiding commitments The identity conflict seems to be commonly provoked by the necessity of making choices when one s existing commitments entail conflicting prescriptions for behavior "Commitments' must be understood in a broad sense here, for confict crises also refer to conflicts between socialized values or motivations and individual aspirations

Thus, Roeske and Lake (1977) suggested that identity conflicts

emerged among female medical students because the commitment
to being a woman made demands and prescribed behaviors (e g ,
having babies, being noncompetitive and nonaggressive) incompati-
ble with those of the commitment to being a physician An obvious
example of identity conflict is provided by immigrants who expect
to retain allegiance to their native culture while participating in their
adopted one (Goldstein, 1979, Mostwin, 1976)

Reconciliation of seemingly contradictory findings underscores the
importance of situational circumstances for eliciting identity con-
flicts Peres and Yuval-Davis (1969) recorded that Israeli Arabs
experienced conflict due to incompatibility between being an Israeli
and being an Arab Zak (1976) found that being an Israeli and being
an Arab do not *necessarily* conflict The actual occurrence of conflict
in Peres and Yuval-Davis' sample presumably was due in part to the
fact that those researchers collected their data at the time of the Six-
Day War between Israelis and Arabs War obviously calls for choices
if one has allegiances to both sides In times of peace, however, two
such allegiances may be compatible, such that no identity conflict is
experienced

Our general point is that identity conflicts are jointly determined
by situations and personal commitments It seems unlikely that very
many people have simultaneous commitments that are always inev-
itably in conflict Rather, the commitments become incompatible
only in the context of circumstances in which the two commitments
imply contradictory prescriptions for behavior

Thus, the essential precondition for the identity conflict is the
status of having a strong personal (and presumably emotional) com-
mitment to two distinct identity components that become incompat-
ible There seem to be two ways the crisis can arise In the first, the
two components have always been compatible but suddenly begin
to make conflicting prescriptions for action In the second, circum-
stances or choices dictate the acquisition of a new identity compo-
nent that is soon found to be in conflict with long-standing compo-
nents The first model might be regarded as an emergence of latent
conflict, whereas the second is an adjustment problem following
change or transition of identity

Subjective Experience

It is noteworthy that colloquial expressions for identity crises have
tended to favor search or quest metaphors This pattern appears to
apply to both types of identity crises "Finding yourself" seems to
describe the resolution of an identity deficit, whereas "soul-search-

ing" might describe the struggle with an identity conflict We spec-
ulate that the appeal of search metaphors lies in their correspond-
ence to one feature of the subjective experience of identity crises
Faced with major and self-defining choices to make, the individual
seeks a single, unimpeachable criterion from which the "correct" or
optimal decision can be logically derived Such criteria are supposed
to be contained in one's identity, according to the prevailing cultural
conceptions of selfhood Persons may therefore believe that solutions
to their dilemmas are hidden "inside" themselves and may conse-
quently construe crises of self-definition as searches

Subjective Experience of Identity Deficit

Subjects having identity deficits are characterized by a lack of
commitments but an ongoing struggle to make some The struggle
differentiates them from people who apathetically lack commitments
("identity diffusion status," Marcia, 1966) and those who have cho-
sen to live without commitments ("alienated achievement" status,
Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973)

The subjective experience of an identity deficit crisis probably
varies from day to day Recurrent themes seem to include "vacillating
commitment and confusion about values" (Newman & Newman,
1978), periodic feelings of vagueness (Marcia, 1966), emptiness
(Rubins, 1968, Schafer, 1973), or "generalized malaise" (Bickford,
1971), preoccupation with great, seemingly unresolvable questions
(Marcia, 1966), often with the result of an apparent detachment
from or disinterest in the mundane concerns of everyday life (Bick-
ford, 1971), self-consciousness, including rumination about impli-
cations of one's actions, leading to an "overexamined life" (Keniston,
1965), anxiety (Marcia, 1966), tension (Slugowski et al , 1984), and
feelings of confusion, bewilderment, and occasional discouragement
(Bickford, 1971, Marcia, 1967, Schenkel & Marcia, 1972) There is
also some suggestion of a tendency to be dissatisfied and hostile
toward authority (Bourne, 1978, Marcia, 1966, 1967, Marcia &
Friedman, 1970, Podd, Marcia, & Rubin, 1970, Schafer, 1973,
Schenkel & Marcia, 1972) Contempt and hostility toward parents
may fit into this category (Rubins, 1968)

We propose that underlying these diverse experiences is a basic
emotional conflict between the desire for commitment and the
reluctance to give up any of one's possibilities (Commitment is
essentially a renunciation of certain possibilities in order to pursue
others) Conceptualizing the (deficit) identity crisis in that way
allows us to view the diffusion and achievement statuses as resolu-

tions of that basic conflict If the desire for commitment predominates, identity is achieved, if the reluctance to forfeit any of one's options predominates, identity diffusion results (cf Waterman, 1982)

The subjective states listed above may be linked to this basic ambivalence The desire for commitment can explain the vacillating feelings of commitment, the emptiness, the preoccupation with ultimate questions, the self-consciousness The reluctance to forfeit any possibilities could be the basis for the confusion about values, the vagueness, the self-consciousness The anxiety may also be linked to the reluctance to give up any of one's possibilities, perhaps because the prospect of giving up options creates the existential anxiety called "ontological guilt" (cf Heidegger, 1927, May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958) This suggestion is supported by the finding that identity diffusion subjects, whom we characterize as chronically refusing to relinquish any options, also score very high on anxiety (at least for female subjects Marcia & Friedman, 1970, Schenkel & Marcia, 1972) The tension between the two opposing desires could explain the confusion and bewilderment, the discouragement, the anxiety, and the "generalized malaise " As for the anti-authoritarianism, it may be due to the fact that identity deficits are often started by a repudiation of the values and goals one has received from one's parents (In other words, most children have foreclosed identities) This is consistent with the finding that identity foreclosed subjects (usually, those who never repudiate their parental aspirations and values) have the highest levels of authoritarianism (Marcia, 1966, 1967)

Levinson et al (1978) describe the subjective experience of male mid-life crisis in terms reminiscent of the adolescent identity (deficit) crisis In their discussion and examples, all the subjective features can be seen that we associated with the adolescent crisis, except perhaps the anti-authoritarianism The underlying reluctance to make any commitments that we suggested for adolescents is not there in the same literal form Reluctance to forfeit part of one's potential is clearly in evidence, however In the mid-life crisis (unlike the adolescent), it derives in part from the awareness of mortality Thus, the tension between fear of unfulfilled potential and desire for stable commitments is common to identity deficit crises of adolescence and mid-life

Subjective Experience of Identity Conflict

The subjective hallmark of the identity conflict crises would presumably be the feeling of being in an impossible situation The

impossibility is not purely situational but derives from the individual's felt commitments that are situationally irreconcilable The person feels it is impossible to act without betraying oneself and one's loyalty to other persons, to an ideology, or to an institution Insofar as action is required, the person must feel some guilt over being a "traitor "

Peres and Yuval-Davis' (1969) portrayal of Israeli Arabs sheds some light on the subjective aspect of acute identity conflict They suggest that the basic problem for these persons was maintaining "dignity and integrity" despite the conflict They observed that the conflict made Israeli Arabs feel they were neither real Israelis nor real Arabs They note a pronounced feeling of impending doom in connection with the onset of the Six-Day War, although the onset of war portends doom for many, it is plausible that part of the feeling of impending disaster derived from the necessity of taking sides and thus betraying part of one's identity Peres and Yuval-Davis record that these persons seemed to want to postpone taking sides as long as possible and that they responded to external coercion with hostile resentment but no overt revolt All of this seems to suggest an emotional paralysis, indeed, the person resents being forced to act, but not enough to abandon passivity and resist this force

Behavior

Behavior during Identity Deficit

"At their best, moratorium subjects are active, engaging, and creative, at their worst, they are paralyzed by an inner turmoil of indecisiveness" (Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973, p 211) Erikson's (1968) concept of the "psychosocial moratorium" emphasizes the active experimentation that allegedly characterizes an identity crisis of this type Waterman (1982) cites evidence that college is a common time and place for identity crises, partly due to the diversity of experiences and ideologies that confronts the student (also see Morash, 1980)

An identity deficit may leave one susceptible to external influence, as long as this influence does not manifest itself in an overtly authoritarian fashion (Podd, Marcia, & Rubin, 1970, Toder & Marcia, 1973) The susceptibility to influence may also be related to a generally affiliative pattern in the behavior of persons undergoing identity crises Slugowski et al (1984) found increased empathic, supportive, and comradely behavior among people who had identity crises On the other hand, these behaviors apparently persisted after the identity crises were successfully resolved, so that they should

perhaps be regarded as permanent changes in behavior which begin with the identity crisis, rather than as behavioral symptoms of the crisis itself

The dramatic plunge into new activities can be seen in some instances of the mid-life (identity deficit) crisis as well as the adolescent Levinson et al (1978) record various examples of change in career and marriage (and other aspects of life) that derive from the mid-life identity deficit These authors emphasize the experimental, exploratory character of such behaviors at mid-life, including "false starts" (p 199) similar to those of adolescents

Behavior during Identity Conflict

Studies of conflict-type crises are often noticeably devoid of behavioral indications It is plausible that the hallmark of the identity conflict is the subjective experience of being torn between incompatible commitments, which does not logically entail any particular behaviors The identity conflict differs from the identity deficit in that the former has no vacuum to fill, so new information and activities need not be sought The conflict crisis is essentially a surplus of commitment, and resolving it is the negative process (see below) of divesting oneself of one set of behavioral prescriptions Therefore, an identity conflict may not bring about the dramatic changes in behavior such as finding a new hobby, new sex partner, or new job that are associated with an identity deficit Additionally, if our hypothesis of "emotional paralysis" in identity conflict is correct, the lack of remarkable behavior may follow from that paralysis

The only behavior characteristic of identity conflict may be attempts to affiliate with role models who have successfully managed to resolve such conflicts (see esp Roeske & Lake, 1977)

Resolution

Little is known about how identity crises are resolved As Bourne (1978) aptly notes, research on the identity statuses has been structurally oriented rather than process-oriented, in other words, it has typically sought features that distinguish the different statuses rather than asking how one status evolves into another We exhort clinicians who manage to effect cures in pure identity crises to report how they did so and what constituted the change Longitudinal empirical studies are especially needed

Resolution of Identity Deficit

Marcia (1966) conceptualizes the identity crisis as the struggle to adopt an ideology and choose a career This can be broken down into a two-step process The first involves resolving issues of *value*, the second addresses the *instrumental* issue of how to put one's values and goals into practice It is conceivable that the first step could be bypassed if the person has foreclosed values

Resolving the value aspect of an identity deficit is probably the more difficult of the two Probably this stage tends to require protracted and detailed rumination, as the adolescent attempts to question and doubt each possible value and belief in order to ascertain which ones hold up This process may help explain the apparent paradox that moratoriums (people having adolescent identity crises) tend to be both anti-authoritarian (e g , Bourne, 1978) and vulnerable to influence (Toder & Marcia, 1973) Because they question everything, they will tend to be recalcitrant toward authority that expects unquestioning compliance However, once they find a value acceptable, they can readily introduce it into the inner vacuum that constitutes the identity deficit, so they will adapt to influence more easily than will others

How some values come to be judged acceptable is obscure Intrapsychic attitudes may preclude the questioning of certain basic values or assumptions We suspect that values may be accepted uncritically from other persons (including peers) who have gained the person's trust Other situational sources (e g , the mass media) may also play an important role Once a set of basic values is accumulated, the process of resolving the value phase of the deficit crisis is completed by testing other values for compatibility with that set

Resolving the issues of value enables the person to form an abstract goal, a vague concept of a desired future self The identity deficit is fully resolved when the person can make that into a fairly concrete image and initiate activity toward fulfilling it This constitutes the instrumental phase Translating the abstract goals into specific ambitions would seem to be a process of collecting ideas of various options that are possible on the basis of one's situation and then eliminating them as they fail to satisfy the requirements of the abstract goal The person then settles on one and begins to work toward it This constitutes the commitment and resolves the identity deficit

Our two-step model is consistent with some observations that identity-related psychotherapy with adolescents can evolve from a

ruminating, present- (and past-) centered stage to one of focusing on the future (Engle, 1960, Kahn, 1969) The forward-looking stage, a favorable indication, seems to signify that one (the more difficult) stage of the crisis has been resolved It is also consistent with Matteson's (1972) argument that identity crises involve two processes exploring among alternatives and making commitments

Most writers seem to have followed Erikson's emphasis on the synthesis of a new identity as the modal resolution of adolescent identity deficit Another possible path out of identity deficit may however be to return to the values and aspirations one had before the crisis In principle, this could be either a proper resolution of the crisis, entailing new commitment to these old values, or a mere abandonment of the struggle One prototype of this process is suggested by Greven's (1977) portrayal of individual development among early American (male) Puritans Many of these youths went through a phase of adolescent rebellion against the strict behavior patterns they had been brought up by This period of the "sins of youth,' marked by activities such as blasphemous cursing, gambling, sexual misbehavior, and inebriation, typically ended with a powerful religious conversion experience After that experience the young man returned to the pious and sober Puritan mold

Blos (1962) suggests that the ideological aspects of adolescent identity deficit crises derive from the fundamental psychodynamic conflict between the adolescent male and his parents He suggests that once the male breaks his emotional attachment to the parents by finding new love objects (during late adolescence), he will begin to integrate parental attitudes and values Blos' suggestion constitutes a model for a return to precrisis values and it probably fits many cases However, it seems to imply that achievement of identity follows adaptation to heterosexual intimacy rather than preceding it, as proposed by Erikson (1968) and indicated by the findings of Orlofsky, Marcia, and Lesser (1973) Blos' model cannot be taken as a general pattern until this contradiction is resolved

Resolution of Identity Conflict

Whereas a resolution of identity deficit in principle requires the resolution of both the issue of criterial values and the issue of behavioral implementation, the resolution of identity conflict may normally require only one of those It may be either one, depending on the type of conflict The point is that individual resolution of a conflict crisis is a one-stage process, unlike resolving a deficit crisis

In some cases, the situation enforces that a particular allegiance

be the victor, so to speak The resolution of such cases of enforced solutions is primarily a matter of the individual accepting the new (or victorious) identity and situation Possibly some compromise can be found that enables the individual to integrate some aspects of the rejected commitment into the final identity Psychotherapy can help the individual find this type of adjustment (Sommers, 1969)

The other type of situation that can contain an identity conflict is one in which the individual must make the choice, presumably because the situation does not enforce one of the options The person essentially must decide which commitment to betray If it is to remain value-neutral, psychotherapy can do no more here than help the person perceive the meaning of the conflicting choices more clearly The search for this type of resolution boils down to a quest for a solid, unimpeachable criterion by which to evaluate the conflicting commitments Unfortunately, such criteria are relatively rare Therefore, it is plausible that situational factors often prove decisive, perhaps especially social support for one option

The role of compromise formation cannot be discounted Thus, for example, Roeske and Lake's (1977) female medical students typically decided not to *forego* motherhood but to postpone it until after completing their residency At that point, presumably, their physician identities would in turn be relegated to a secondary position for a few years

Compartmentalization may be another variety of compromise as resolution to identity conflict In compartmentalization, the person maintains the different components in enforcedly separate spheres of his or her life This strategy requires that the two spheres be kept rigidly separate in order to avoid conflicting prescriptions for behavior Peres and Yuval-Davis (1969) observed, for example, that some Israeli Arabs seemed to sustain these two components by acting as Israelis in public but as Arabs in private life

Implications for Future Research

We have already identified a number of topics on which current knowledge is inadequate In this concluding section, we shall discuss how future research might use our distinction between identity conflicts and deficits

An initial problem is the refinement of assessment techniques in order to distinguish the two crisis types Our definitions suggest assessing the presence and adequacy of commitments in order to decide whether a particular person's identity crisis is a conflict or a deficit crisis If the person is committed to multiple values, roles, or

goals, and the crisis arises because the various commitments pre-
scribe incompatible behaviors, then it is an identity conflict If, on
the other hand, the crisis is a struggle to form an identity, because
existing commitments are inadequate to guide behavior, then it is an
identity deficit

We have suggested that the identity deficit is developmentally
caused whereas the identity conflict is not If that is correct, then
identity deficits should occur mainly among adolescents and at mid-
life Identity conflicts may occur at any time Alternatively, it is
plausible that identity conflicts would occur most when someone has
recently made commitments and is trying to fulfill them, for it may
be then that one discovers the conflicts with other commitments If
so, identity conflict crises may be most likely to occur in the post-
adolescent, young adult period(s) (cf Levinson et al , 1978, also
Beit-Hallahmi, 1977, Roeske & Lake, 1977)

The hypothesis of gender differences in crisis type at adolescence
deserves further study It is plausible that adolescent females may
tend to have identity conflicts whereas adolescent males may be
prone to identity deficits (cf Ginsburg & Orlofsky, 1981) This may
be either because females are less likely than males to repudiate
parental influences (Blos, 1962), or because current social develop-
ments have posed particular identity dilemmas for women (Whit-
bourne & Waterman, 1979) such as role conflicts

A last developmental issue is the relation between adolescent and
mid-life identity deficit crises In Erikson's view (echoed by Levinson
et al , 1978), a failure to resolve a developmental task at the appro-
priate age creates further problems later on By applying that ap-
proach to identity development, one could plausibly argue that a
failure to have a proper identity crisis at adolescence might increase
the likelihood of mid-life crisis The opposite prediction is also
plausible, however Certain individuals may be especially prone to
introspect and to question themselves, whereas others may habitually
deny or rationalize potential challenges to their belief structures (cf
Slugowski et al , 1984) If stable dispositions do account for differ-
ences in proneness to identity crises, then people who have adoles-
cent identity deficits may be more (not less) likely to experience
mid-life crises

The possibility that traits predispose certain individuals to have
identity crises raises the question as to what those traits are Some
research has already begun to consider what traits are associated
with the occurrence of identity crises, although there are several un-
studied traits that seem to be likely candidates (For example, high
private self-consciousness indicates a tendency to question and ex-

amine oneself, which may be a prerequisite for identity deficit crises) Beyond such research, however, we would hypothesize that such personality traits would be less effective at predicting identity conflicts than identity deficits As we proposed, the identity conflict is typically precipitated by circumstances in which a previously effective identity suddenly makes conflicting prescriptions To predict such a crisis, one would need to know both the structure of the individual's commitments and the future circumstances

Because conflict crises are brought on by the abrupt encounter with conflict-ridden circumstances, the onset of such crises may be clear in time It seems plausible that individuals may be better able to say precisely when their identity conflicts began and to cite a particular, precipitating event for them than they could for identity deficits For the latter, individuals may associate their onset with broad transitions in life but should be quite willing to agree that their identity crisis did not really start so abruptly Thus, someone might say in retrospect that his identity crisis started when he went to college, but it probably was not apparent during the first week of freshman classes In other words, we suggest that identity deficits begin gradually whereas identity conflicts begin rather abruptly

We noted a need for further study of the behavioral consequences of identity crises One hypothesis that needs verification is that exploratory behavior will characterize deficit but not conflict crises As we suggested, exploration seems useless for resolving identity conflicts, what is needed is not new information but rather a way of ridding oneself of commitments Thus, various behavior patterns should be associated with identity deficit crises but not conflict crises, and these should include impulsive behavior, receptivity to new ideas, broad interests, and general susceptibility to influence One might speculate further that preferred coping strategies would differ For identity deficit crises, individuals may use active and expressive coping, even acting out For identity conflicts, individuals may prefer passive, avoidant coping strategies, presumably because they are more likely to feel they have something to lose by taking initiative or even by impulsive action

Several researchers have expressed dismay over empirical findings that suggest the retrospective disappearance of identity crises (e g , Slugowski et al , 1984, Waterman, 1982) Longitudinal studies have found persons to have and resolve identity crises but in subsequent interviews those same individuals are sometimes classified as never having had identity crises (e g , Marcia, 1976) In our view, a likely reason for such findings is that persons continually reinterpret their lives As they get older, they may invent or distort memories of their

precrisis activities to make their postcrisis commitments seem more like outgrowths of long-term trends rather than radical departures Such reinterpretation may be a normal part of human cognitive activity and maturation, alternatively, there are plausible motivational reasons for it In the first place, as one becomes increasingly involved in the activities connected with one's commitments, one may want to deny the viability or attractiveness of the alternatives, and so one may want to deny that one ever seriously considered such alternatives In the second place, the male adolescent crisis (at least) may be due in part to emotional conflicts with parents, and as that conflict dissipates during adulthood, the adult may lose his desire to define himself as different from parental values (cf Blos, 1962) Whatever the cause of such reinterpretations, they potentially explain why one interviewer may classify someone as having an identity crisis whereas a subsequent interviewer may classify the same person, years later, as never having had one

It would be useful to study this phenomenon of retrospective disappearance of identity crises in connection with our distinction between conflict and deficit crises On a cognitive basis, we would predict that retrospective disappearances would characterize the latter more than the former A deficit may be easier to forget or reinterpret than a conflict-ridden surplus On the other hand, if identity conflicts turn out to be susceptible to retrospective disappearance just like identity deficits, this finding would support a motivational interpretation of retrospective disappearance The reason for forgetting identity conflicts would presumably be that people feel a need to rationalize their acts of betrayal, and as we have said, resolving identity conflicts may often be a matter of betraying certain commitments

Finally, we have suggested that the process of resolving identity crises differs for the two types Although resolving an identity deficit means relinquishing some options and possibilities, the essential feature(s) of that resolution process is *adding* new commitments to one's inner self Resolving an identity conflict, on the other hand, essentially calls for *subtracting* (ridding oneself of) commitments Thus, another way for future research to use our distinction is to confirm the contrast in processes of resolution

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