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Research Paper

Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood: The Intersection of Identity Distress and Social Cognition in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Transition from adolescence to adulthood is a crucial period that can significantly impact one's social cognition and identity. This phase involves navigating multiple developmental challenges, including forming a stable identity, gaining independence, and establishing oneself in the broader social and academic world. Identity and social cognition are deeply interconnected, as our understanding of ourselves is often shaped by how we perceive and interpret social interactions and relationships. This paper attempts to explore the intersection of identity distress and social cognition in higher education. Further, it discusses the reasons for identity distress and social cognition and the impact of this intersection on adolescents' and adults' educational journeys. Furthermore, the paper highlights how societal expectations and norms shape our identity and behaviour. It discusses what can be effective interventions like mentorship programmes, mental health services, awareness & sensitivity training, and academic support programmes during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially in the context of higher education. These intervention programmes aim to support identity formation and reduce identity distress. Ultimately, it discusses the relevance of these intervention programmes in adolescents' and adults' education.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Adulthood, Higher Education, Identity Distress, Social Cognition*

"Adolescence is when the very worst and best impulses in the human soul struggle against each other for possession."-G. Stanley Hall

Identity formation is a pivotal milestone in the age range of emerging adulthood ("EA"; ages 18-29; Arnett, 2000; 2014). Jeffrey Jensen Arnett coined the term 'Emerging Adulthood', which refers to the developmental period from the late teens to the mid-twenties. Adolescence, the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, is the key developmental phase for identity formation (Erickson, 1968). According to G. Stanley Hall, adolescence is a period of 'storm and stress'. This time is characterized by high emotions, frequent mood swings, and an increased sense of conflict, both internally and externally. Identity distress refers to the confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety that individuals may experience regarding their sense of self. This distress can be exacerbated during significant life transitions, such as entering higher education, due to the many new roles and

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responsibilities. The process of identity formation during the transition from adolescence to adulthood and its determinants are currently a central issue in the social sciences (Brzezińska et.al. 2021). The interplay between identity distress and social cognition during adolescence to adulthood, especially within higher education, is a nuanced and critical area to explore. Louise J. Kaplan has rightly and very wisely remarked, "Adolescence represents an inner emotional upheaval, a struggle between the eternal human wish to cling to the past and the equally powerful wish to get on with the future." Parents, teachers, and all others responsible for their healthy growth and development must provide them with a healthy environment, training, and appropriate skills so that they can successfully cope with the stresses and difficulties of this phase and become achievers. Psychological problems mediated the linkages between identity distress with academic, social, and personal-emotional functioning at university (Gfellner, 2020). Also, psychological problems and their contextual variables were independent predictors of students' identity distress.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Crocetti et al. (2023) used a cross-fertilisation approach and studied how identities are formed and changed over time, and how identity processes are genuinely social, being embedded in social contexts and fed by social contents. They used a parsimonious approach for understanding the dynamics of identity development and outlined the three-factor identity model, and discussed the interplay between personal and social identities. They highlighted the developmental perspectives can significantly advance the theoretical understanding of identity dynamics. They addressed similarities and differences between personal identity and social identity approaches, and provided an agenda for future research.
Potterton et al. (2022) explored three databases, i.e. PsycInfo, Medline, Embase, and findings were qualitatively synthesized and (where possible) meta-analyzed. They identified 20 studies that examined longitudinal associations between identity development and social-emotional disorders in adolescents and emerging adults. The narrative synthesis found evidence of bidirectional relationships between identity synthesis/confusion and depression, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms. Meta-analyses and meta-regressions of a sub-sample of studies (N = 9) indicated no significant associations between identity synthesis or confusion and anxiety or depression symptoms. They concluded that more high-quality research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

Gfellner and Córdoba (2020) found positive relationships among the variables studied. Specifically, they observed that heightened identity distress in Spanish students and greater maladjustment among students in Canada were linked to the contextual differences in their respective environments. Psychological issues played a mediating role in the connections between identity distress and academic, social, and emotional functioning at university. Additionally, psychological problems and the context or country in which students studied were independent predictors of identity distress. These findings highlight the importance of examining various factors that influence student adjustment to university, especially concerning identity development and mental health. Furthermore, the results suggest specific directions for future research and provide insights for counseling services aimed at supporting student well-being.

Samuolis et al. (2015) investigated the prevalence of identity distress among college students and assessed the extent to which participants met the DSM-IV criteria for identity issues. The study focused on how students with high levels of identity distress may report symptoms of depression and other negative emotions. Their findings revealed that 8.1% of

the sample met the DSM-IV criteria for identity problems, as determined by the Identity Distress Survey. Additionally, students who met these criteria reported significantly higher levels of loneliness, overwhelming anger, hopelessness, and depression compared to those without identity issues. The study discusses the implications for prevention programming aimed at emerging adults, particularly college students.

Jung et al. (2013) studied the differences in identity development among adolescents with various psychiatric diagnoses. The research utilized the AIDA questionnaire and two semi-structured psychiatric interviews: the SCID-II and K-DIPS tests. The study included 86 adolescent psychiatric inpatients and outpatients aged 12 to 18 years. The participants were divided into three diagnostic groups: personality disorders, internalizing disorders, and externalizing disorders. Differences among these groups were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The findings revealed that patients with personality disorders had the highest scores across all AIDA scales, with T scores exceeding 70.

Research Questions

i. What are the key factors that contribute to identity distress among emerging adults in higher education?
ii. What are the impacts of the intersection of identity distress and social cognition in higher education?
iii. How does identity distress affect the mental health and academic performance of students in higher education?
iv. What are the key challenges faced by students during the transition from adolescence to adulthood?
v. What are the strategies or support systems in reducing identity distress and enhancing social cognition among emerging adults in higher education?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a conceptual framework supported by a qualitative method of analysis in which data are collected through semi-structured interviews with students, educators, and family members of students. Further, focus group discussions are conducted to explore the lived experiences.

KEY FINDINGS

Factors Affecting Identity Distress Among Emerging Adults

The transition to adulthood is a crucial period for identity development. This period is marked by disquisition and vacillation. This state is known as emerging adulthood, which brings both positive and negative feelings related to distress, adjustment, and well-being. This area of research examines how young adults navigate the challenges of forming their identities during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially within the context of higher education.

1. **Self-Discovery and Exploration:** During this period, adults undergo self-exploration. They often question their beliefs, values, and goals. They face problems in adjusting to new roles and responsibilities, such as managing finances and making career choices, which can significantly subsidize identity distress. This process leads to a period of identity confusion and distress.
2. **Impact of Higher Education:** Academic pressure on higher education students promotes stress and anxiety because students in colleges or universities are

experiencing high expectations, tight deadlines, and pressure to achieve good grades, which significantly impact their mental health and well-being. This high level of demand and expectations of higher education are exacerbating identity distress in students. Students are struggling to define their future paths while meeting academic requirements. Students face difficulty in making connections and finding a sense of belonging, which is very crucial during this period. Building new relationships and integrating into the social fabric of a higher education institution can impact identity development.

3. **Social Cognition and Peer Influence:** During this transition, developing the ability to understand and interpret social interactions is essential. It is very challenging to navigate the complex social dynamics of a higher education setting. Peers play a significant role in shaping identity and social cognition. When peer interactions are positive, it can support healthy identity development, while negative interactions can lead to higher levels of stress and confusion. The Social Identity Theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner focuses on the role of social groups in shaping an individual's identity. This theory suggests that people derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in various social groups, including cultural, ethnic or professional groups.
4. **Mental Health and Emotional Well-being:** During this transition, many adults are facing mental health challenges such as anxiety, stress, and depression. These challenges can impact their sense of identity and overall well-being. The implementation of a healthy coping strategy is crucial for the management of identity distress and emotional well-being.
5. **Support Systems:** Mentorship, guidance, and support can be valuable in helping young adults navigate identity distress. Counselling and mental health services could assist young adults in coping with the emotional upheavals that they face during this transition. Educators can make students engage in extracurricular activities, which may provide a sense of belonging and help in building social skills and resilience.

Intersection of identity distress and social cognition in higher education

The intersection of identity distress and social cognition in higher education is complex and multifaceted. Identity distress and academic pressure are significant issues in higher education that can profoundly impact students' mental health and overall well-being. Adolescents develop their identity in the educational and interpersonal domains become more closely intertwined over time, identifications with classmates and with the group of friends are interconnected, and personal and social identity processes are associated both concurrently and longitudinally, with most cross-lagged effects showing that social identifications influence personal identity formation and consolidation in the interpersonal identity domain (Albarello et al, 2017). A review of recent studies of transition to adulthood revealed that identity development is just as significant a psychosocial indicator of maturity as assumption of adult social roles and sense of adulthood, and should therefore be taken into account in analyses of developmental trajectories at the transition from childhood to adulthood (Brzezińska et al., 2012). The academic demands of higher education can exacerbate identity distress. Heavy workloads like multiple assignments, projects, meeting academic deadlines, and exams lead to significant stress. The pressure of achieving higher grades, and attaining strong academic records are creating intense stress and anxiety. Students are struggling to get admission to graduate programs, and concern about securing a job contributes to academic pressure. Social cognition plays a crucial role in how students form and maintain social relationships, which can affect their academic and personal well-

being. Successfully integrating into the social fabric of a higher education institution can influence both identity development and social cognition. Building new relationships and networks is crucial but can also be a source of stress. Students from minority backgrounds may experience identity distress when their cultural values and experiences do not align with the dominant culture of the institution (Hernandez, Ruiz et.al. 2024). Experiencing discrimination or bias can lead to feelings of isolation and identity distress. Uncertainty about future career paths and long-term goals can contribute to identity distress, especially during times of significant life transitions. Challenges in forming and maintaining friendships and social connections can exacerbate identity distress.

Impact on Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance

The above-mentioned challenges have a profound impact on academic performance. During the transitional period, students face significant mental health challenges. Song & Hu (2024) studied the relationship between the mental health and academic achievement of college students and found it is not only related to their individual growth and development but also has a profound impact on the quality of higher education and the cultivation of social talent. As we all know, mental health is as important as physical health. If a student does not have sound mental health, then it can significantly affect the student's concentration and focus on their studies. It also diminishes students' motivation to attend classes and complete the assignments assigned to them. They may be less likely to participate in the class activities. It leads to identity distress, which results in absenteeism and isolation. They feel disconnected from peer groups and don't want to build new relationships. They feel isolated from the classroom, which leads to class absenteeism. The combined effects result in lower grades and poor academic performance. It also affects students' cognitive functioning, such as their retention power, information processing ability, and ability to make sound academic decisions.

Key Challenges Faced by Students During the Transition

i. **Social and Emotional Challenges:** The college years are often a period of self-discovery, and students grapple with questions about their careers, identity, and values. This transition can be challenging for the students as they are afraid of forming new relationships and social networks. They don't want to interact in an unfamiliar environment. These all lead to the feeling of homesickness and loneliness.

ii. **Mental Health Challenges:** During the period of this transition, students face the pressure of academic performance. Depression, anxiety, and eating disorders ("social-emotional disorders") are common during adolescence and emerging adulthood (i.e., 10–30 years of age) (Gibb et al., 2010; Kessler et al., 2012). Social integration and their future career prospects often lead to stress and anxiety. Many of them may experience depression due to poor academic performance and struggle to adjust to the new environment. Even high-achieving students commonly doubt their abilities or feel inadequate. Large prospective cohort studies indicate that 40 to 50% of adolescents and emerging adults meet diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder (Gibb et al., 2010; Kessler et al., 2012). Transitioning to adulthood can bring about various mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress, therefore, developing healthy coping strategies to deal with stress and emotional turmoil is essential.

iii. **Financial Challenges:** During the transition period students are learning to manage finances and budget effectively is a significant aspect of becoming independent, but the cost of higher education is a significant burden that leads to financial stress. It

becomes difficult for the students to manage their living expenses such as food, accommodation, transportation, etc. therefore they try to do part-time jobs with academic responsibilities that add extra burden and pressure.

iv. **Adjustment challenges:** In higher education, students from diverse backgrounds come where different cultures meet which leads students to cultural adjustment problems and identity distress as they navigate a new environment. There are some negative stereotypes related to one's ability group that can affect students' social interactions and academic performance. A sense of belonging and acceptance within the campus community is crucial for social cognition and overall well-being.

v. **Academic Challenges:** The pressure to perform well academically can lead to stress and anxiety. Balancing coursework, extracurricular activities, and social life requires effective time management skills. The academic demands in higher education are typically greater than in previous educational stages. Students may struggle with the volume and complexity of assignments, projects, and exams. Students may need to develop new study strategies to cope with the rigors of higher education.

Different Strategies to Overcome these Challenges

i. **Institutional support**: Students spend most of their time in schools where they experience pressure of academic performance, mental health challenges, and poor cognitive development. Academic pressure may create a lot of mental health issues for students that should be resolved in institutions. Institutions should provide personalized academic advising to help students balance course loads and set achievable goals. Institutions should conduct regular surveys to understand students' experiences and address their concerns effectively. They should encourage an open dialogue between students and administration to implement meaningful changes. Institutions should provide access to mental health services, including counseling and workshops, which may help pupils to manage stress and identity distress.

ii. **Coping Mechanism:** It is strongly recommended to encourage practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation techniques to help students manage their stress level and improve their mental health. Techniques like meditation and mindfulness can help you stay present and reduce anxiety related to identity confusion. Physical activities, exercise, yoga, and sports should be incorporated into their daily practice to build resilience and enhance self-esteem through physical and mental well-being. Extracurricular activities can also provide a healthy balance to academic responsibilities. Students should be encouraged for skill development. They can participate in activities outside academics, which allows students to develop new skills according to their interests, and it will enhance their overall personal growth. Students should challenge their negative thoughts and try to replace them with positive and constructive perspectives. This will build a healthier self-image.

iii. **Peer Support:** Students should surround themselves with friends who are supportive and understanding, where they can share their thoughts and feelings and build strong relationships. group-based comforting rituals significantly enhance emotional well-being and social cohesion (Arena 2025). They should be encouraged to form a study group where they can get academic support and reduce the feeling of isolation. Peer mentorship programs should be implemented where they can share their experiences, exchange knowledge, provide emotional and professional development. This collaborative relationship can foster skill development and build confidence. Having someone to share challenges and solutions with can alleviate stress and promote

emotional well-being. Students should keep themselves away from excessive exposure to social media or situations that encourage unhealthy comparisons. Peer groups should be trusted, reliable, and supportive so that they can share their thoughts and feelings where they feel valued and understood.

CONCLUSION

Coping with identity distress is a journey of self-discovery and growth. The journey of finding identity and self-determination is one of the most profound and personal experiences anyone can undertake. It's about understanding who you are at your core, what you stand for, and where you want to go in life. A well-formed identity and strong social cognition skills contribute to psychological well-being, while difficulties in these areas can lead to challenges such as low self-esteem and social anxiety. Identity distress refers to students' emotional and psychological challenges as they navigate their sense of self and identity during their college years. Academic pressure is the mental and emotional strain that students experience due to the demands and expectations of their academic workload. Adolescents are particularly influenced by peer interactions and social feedback, which play a crucial role in their identity development. Understanding others' perspectives through the Theory of Mind helps us navigate social relationships and develop a more nuanced sense of self.

Recommendations

- Mandate routine climate assessments across departments to identify identity-related stressors and invest in data-informed, culturally competent mental health services.
- Incorporate identity development and social cognition concepts into orientation and first-year experience curricula.
- Support longitudinal research to monitor transitions and interventions in order to identify the changes evolved in the intersection process of identity distress and social cognition.

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Conflict of Interest

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