Critical Life Events in Women’s Identity Development:
Lessons for the Course in Human Development

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ABSTRACT

Teaching identity development is vital to a thorough understanding of human development. However, little is known about identity formation in general, and women’s identity formation in particular. The purpose of this article was to document experiences that two groups of women perceive as important factors shaping their identity formation, and to propose applications for teaching human development. Interview data from Avery’s (1980) study of critical life events is used to compare college educated African American and European American women’s perceptions of the events that shaped their lives and their identities. Marriage and motherhood were the most frequently cited critical events for European American women. Returning to school and racism were the most frequently cited critical events for African American women. The article is specifically organized and conceptualized for classroom use and includes questions to challenge students’ thinking and to foster discussion.

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

-Simone de Beauvoir

Teaching about female identity development is often a difficult area in human development because many introductory texts derive ideas about human development from theoretical models that do not adequately take into account women’s development, a feminine perspective (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1976), or ethnicity (Robinson & Ward, 1991). Instead, they view the process of female...
identity formation as a variation on the white male pattern, and explain women's development in terms of what was known about men's life experiences. Consequently, potentially important differences in male-female and ethnic group identity formation are given little attention or overlooked.

The failure of traditional human development theories to consider important gender and ethnic differences is often not adequately addressed in mainstream human development textbooks (e.g., Berger, 1994; Olsen & DeFran, 1996; Strong & Devault, 1996; Vandet Zanden, 1997). Although women's and cultural studies courses may be addressing these issues, there is no guarantee that students in human development courses will enroll in a women's or cultural studies course. The absence of specifically female identity development is particularly remiss considering many classes in human development seem to be largely comprised of women, many of whom are in the midst of their own identity formation.

Gilligan (1979) pointed out that the theoretical work of Freud, Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg tried to "fashion women out of a masculine cloth" (p. 432) and thus perceived women as deviating from the masculine norm. In contrast, feminist theorists conceptualize female development as a process shaped by a patriarchal society and embedded in relationships to others, rather than in terms of a stereotypically masculine process of individuation and increasing autonomy (see Belenky et al., 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1976). How human development concepts are presented in the classroom has direct implications for the understanding of these processes and of the self.

Furthermore, when past research has specifically addressed female identity formation, it has not sufficiently accounted for differences in ethnicity: the majority of participants in studies have been European American, middle-class women. Ironically, some of the same scholars who have criticized researchers' generalizations about women drawn from studies with all-male samples have in a similar vein, made assumptions about African American women based on all-European American female samples. As a result, expectations about women's similarities to each other have replaced assumptions about women's similarity to men (Reid & Kelly, 1994).

The purpose of this article is to document critical events and influences that have shaped women's identity formation among two ethnic groups and to develop teaching applications. The themes that emerged from our analyses are organized and conceptualized in a format suitable for classroom discussion. We have provided questions designed to engage students in discussions that challenge common conceptualizations of human development and illuminate some of the factors impacting female identity formation.

**METHODOLOGY**

The critical events discussed throughout this paper were generated from Avery's 1980 research. The objective of Avery's study was to explore women's perceptions of major life transitions and the influence of these perceptions on their identity formation. She asked women to retrospectively identify and describe those critical events and turning points that contributed to their present identities as adult women. She used these data to develop a better understanding of the different ways in which women perceive their roles in society, life goals, risk and sources of fulfillment. In sum, she asked women to describe critical events that made a difference in their identities as self-defined.

The study included 64 European American women who formed comparable groups. All were between the ages of 30 and 39. Twelve were in their forties, 15% were in their fifties, and 6% were single. Nearly-five of the participants had had two or three children. In Avery's study, the critical events included were utilized to organize the women's descriptions of critical event described. This included associated strategies, factors related to the resolution of the frustration associated with the event. Initially reviewed to discover dominant themes. Basic categories—relational, educational, personal, and sources of fulfillment. In-person interviews were developed, and each critical event was reviewed to discover dominant themes. By counting the number of citations per category, eighteen variables, while the other four categories were developed, and each critical event was categorized as "relational" and were separated. Tabulations of the number of times that event received more emphasis and the relative importance of each event was determined. By computing the number of citations per event, we tabulated the critical events, as reported in the original data, in terms of the number of variables per event. We tabulated the number of critical events categorized as "relational" per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event. Although the average of 14 reports per event.
describe those critical events and turning points, which made a difference in their present identities as adult women. Specifically, she sought to develop a better understanding of the different ways in which women see themselves—for example, their roles in society, life goals, rights, needs, fears, responsibilities, and sources of fulfillment. In sum, she asked women about their experiences or critical events that made a difference in their feelings about and understanding of themselves.

The study included 64 European American and 36 African American women who formed comparable groups. Almost half of the participants (44%) were between the ages of 30 and 39. Twelve percent were under 30, 25% were in their forties, 6% were in their fifties, and 4% were 60 or older. The levels of education that these women attained were generally high: 85% completed college, and another 14% completed other types of post-secondary education. Nearly three-fourths (73%) of the women were married, 13% were divorced, and 6% were single. Ninety-five of the participants were mothers, the majority of whom had two or three children. In summary, this profile depicts a typical interviewee who was in her 30s, married with two children, employed, and highly educated. Although they were clearly middle-class in terms of income, the participants were also upwardly mobile, and combined the roles of wife/mother and worker. In-person interviews averaged two hours in length.

In Avery’s study, the critical events interview format (see Avery, 1980) was utilized to organize the women’s descriptions of various dimensions of each critical event described. This included associated thoughts and feelings, coping strategies, factors related to the resolution of the event and sources of support or frustration associated with the event. Initially, the pool of critical events was reviewed to discover dominant themes. Based on those themes, five broad categories—relational, educational, personal, work-related, and health-related—were developed, and each critical event was assigned to one of the categories. Tabulations of the number of times that events in each category were cited led Avery to conclude that relational events were the most important factor in shaping the identities of both African American and European American women.

Avery’s conclusions were based on differences in the number of variables (critical events) in each category. The relational category included eighteen variables, while the other four categories each contained nine or fewer. By counting the number of citations per category, those with more variables received more emphasis and the relative importance of each group of critical events was de-emphasized. For our alternative approach to the data, we used the themes identified by Avery but we computed the average number of citations per event in each category. We tabulated the actual frequencies of individual critical events, as reported in the original data analysis to accommodate the differences in the number of variables per category. For example, the 18 different events categorized as "relational" produced a total of 250 reports: an average of 14 reports per event. Although the total number of citations of the five critical events in the "educational" category was only 98, the average
number of citations per event was nearly 20. In the following paragraphs, we have included examples of the women’s descriptions of the influences that shaped their lives to more fully depict their perspectives.

RESULTS

Table 1 lists the events cited most often as critical influences in identity development. Based on these reports of critical events, the two most frequently cited critical events among European American women were marriage and motherhood. In contrast, the two most frequently cited critical events among African American women were returning to school and racism.

**TABLE 1**

Most frequently cited critical events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returning to school</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role models</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First job</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital difficulties</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in family</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with parents</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European American (n=64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First job</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving, traveling</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to school</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of fulfillment in married life</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital difficulties</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with children</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the heart of identity development for European American women was the issue of women’s relationship to other people—marriage and motherhood. Many European American women in Avery’s study reported intense societal, familial, and peer-group pressure to marry. Many, especially those who wed early, saw marriage as a necessary rite of passage, a demarcation between childhood and adulthood. Getting married was identified as defining their identity.

"...relief over the decision to get married defined by someone else."

"I was totally dependent on the in-laws. I was dependent on others for whatever I was doing."

These comments reflected a cultural ideal that failure to marry indicated a serious flaw. African American women interviewed indicated that the issues of being single.

"The worst thing that could happen was the risk of remaining single. In order to get married, I had to do whatever was necessary to get married."

"I had always seen myself as being married by the time I was 25. At 25, I was becoming old and I’d better start thinking about getting married, just in case I don’t marry."

Another theme was one of dependence on a man or husband. Participants cited marriage as a way to achieve emotional stability. This involved the social expectation to provide for and protect their families and their husbands failed to live up to societal standards.

"The overt message I got was educational attainment. Back then, it was really about getting a job to support the family. I saw only two careers for women—nurse or a teacher. Since I couldn’t be a teacher."

"I always wanted to marry and have children. I had always seen myself as being married by the time I was 25."

"I went to Ohio University to find some man to come along and take my feet."

European American women’s perceptions ran far deeper than just appearing attractive in interactions, but especially in their relationships.
between childhood and adulthood. Getting married was a pathway to adult identity.

"....relief over the decision to get married. I could now be defined by someone else."

"I was totally dependent on the idea of being married or dependent on others for whatever I was to become."

These comments reflected a cultural tendency to devalue women who, either by choice or circumstance, remained unmarried. Others seemed to believe that failure to marry indicated a serious flaw in a woman. Many European American women interviewed indicated that they married to avoid the stigma of being single.

"The worst thing that could happen is a woman being alone. In order to get married, I had to do what had to be done."

"I had always seen myself as being married and having kids. At 25, I was becoming old and I'd better marry. I'm a failure if I don't marry."

Another theme was one of dependence and the need to be supported by a man or husband. Participants cited marriage as a means to insure economic or emotional stability. This involved the societal expectation that men should provide for and protect their families and the resentment felt by women when their husbands failed to live up to societal standards in that regard.

"The overt message I got was education is something to fall back on. Other side of that message you will marry and have children. I saw only two careers to fit that message - being a nurse or a teacher. Since I couldn't stand blood - I became a teacher."

"I always wanted to marry and have children...I knew that I wanted the security and the influence of a father."

"I went to Ohio University to find someone to marry."

"I was looking for some man to come along and sweep me off my feet."

European American women's perceptions of the need to please others ran far deeper than just appearing attractive to men. In nearly all their interactions, but especially in their relationships with husbands or boyfriends,
the women reported a pattern of sublimating their own needs and wishes to those of others. To a certain extent, this suppression of the self may constitute a survival mechanism for women, who have historically been largely dependent on men (first their fathers and later their husbands) for economic reasons. However, even women in these studies who were financially self-sufficient and employed in professional positions reported experiencing difficulty in putting their own needs and desires before those of others.

In comparison to European American women having a "life plan" to get married and have children, African American women had no such plans and listed marriage as a critical event much less frequently than their European American counterparts. Only three African American women cited lack of marital fulfillment as a critical event, while twenty-two European American women cited that problem. Although lack of fulfillment in marriage was not a critical event often cited for African American women, they did report marital problems as important factors in their identity development at the same frequency (33%) as the European American women. This finding may suggest that both groups of women experience similar levels of marital strife, but that the African American women had fewer or different expectations about marriage than European American women.

Although both groups reported the importance of going back to school and/or attending college, it was the most frequently cited critical event among African American women. Many of the African American women expressed that their education centered on preparation for work and occupational advancement.

"I wanted a new career. I enjoyed being a secretary, but I wanted to see what it's like being a boss."

"I decided I should go back to school and get a degree."

In contrast, European American women focused on education as a source of stimulation and personal development.

"I started back to school and recognized I needed some resources beyond being a wife and mother."

"I felt alive again when I went back to school."

Many African American women (36%) cited racism as a critical event shaping their identities.

"There were conflicts at work because I was African American - I refused to be misused."

"I went to a school with very few African Americans and was viewed as a 'nigger.' I knew I had to achieve more."

"Because of being African American work harder than anyone."

Another woman spoke of turning down a job offer because she was offered a salary $10,000 lower than a male applied for the same job. Such dual discrimination may explain why African American women's sensitivity to negative work experiences such as, "I wouldn't have survived the background," were common. Not surprisingly, African American women reported racism as a critical event in shaping their identities.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1: To recognize the observations at a point in time.

Literature discussion. Many of the critical events disrupting women's lives would be rendered less disruptive if women were taught to recognize their needs of others. However, according to Bateson (1993), "conviction is difficult and painful for women whose identity is to bend to exterior winds" (p. 41).

Gilligan's (1977, 1982) studies on female development found that women tended to describe moral values in terms of responsibility for themselves and others. According to Gilligan, the "other," given that women have been socialized to value the needs of others, must include others even at the exclusion of her own needs. Bateson (1993) argues that because of the constraints of their own, girls and women are particularly prone to remarks; they tend to be deeply concerned with the central definition of self, if women were taught to recognize their needs of others. However, according to Bateson, "conviction is difficult and painful for women whose identity is to bend to exterior winds" (p. 41).

"Because of being African American work harder than anyone."

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Questions for discussion. Meaningful questions that focus on pleasing others at the expense of self?

- How does today's gender socialization encourage that focuses on pleasing others at the expense of self?
- The themes developed in this paper are related to the 1970s. If the same questions were asked of women today, would the same themes emerge? What differences might you expect between your cohort? your mother's cohort?
Others reported being subjected to discrimination due to being both African American and female.

"Because of being African American and female, I had to work harder than anyone."

Another woman spoke of turning down a professional position after being offered a salary $10,000 lower than a male colleague was offered for the same job. Such dual discrimination may explain why African American women identified job difficulties more frequently than their European American counterparts: the greater potential for discrimination may have increased African American women's sensitivity to negative work experiences (Avery, 1980). Comments such as, "I wouldn't have survived if I had come from a weaker background," were common. Not surprisingly, no European American women reported racism as a critical event in shaping their identity.

MODEL LESSONS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1: To recognize that Avery's data are based on observations at a point in time.

Literature discussion. Many of the conflicts and discontinuities that disrupt women's lives would be rendered less powerful, less disruptive to the central definition of self, if women were taught to balance their needs with the needs of others. However, according to Bateson (1993), "attaining such a conviction is difficult and painful for women who have always been encouraged to bend to exterior winds" (p. 41).

Gilligan's (1977, 1982) studies on moral decision-making among women found that women tended to describe moral dilemmas in which they felt torn between responsibility for themselves and for others. In a 1986 study, Gilligan pointed out the difficulty for women of choosing between the "self" and the "other," given that women have been socialized to believe that a good female must include others even at the exclusion of herself.

Bateson (1993) argues that because of their training to put others' needs ahead of their own, girls and women are particularly vulnerable to derogatory remarks; they tend to be deeply concerned with what other people think of them.

Questions for discussion. Meaningful questions to ask include:

- How does today's gender socialization encourage female identity formation that focuses on pleasing others at the exclusion of developing a unique self?
- The themes developed in this paper are based on data collected in the 1970s. If the same questions were asked of women of the same ages today, would the same themes emerge? What differences would you expect to find between your cohort? your mother's cohort? your grandmother's cohort?
LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2: To recognize that findings based on Avery’s data represent a select group of women who generally are well educated.

Literature discussion. The focus of women’s traditional socialization on dependence, passivity, and self-abnegation is inimical to healthy human development and is potentially problematic today, given current family demographics. Small families are common, two wage earners are often necessary to maintain a middle-class standard of living, and professional opportunities are becoming more available to women. On the other hand, rising rates of divorce and absentee fatherhood have left large numbers of women struggling to fill the traditional male roles of provider and protector, in addition to the historically female roles of nurturer and homemaker. Even those married women who prefer the role of traditional homemaker can expect to be employed outside the home for a considerable period of their adult lives.

Current research on adolescent female development reports a decline in self-esteem and self-confidence in many middle school girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990; Gilligan, Rodgers, & Tolman, 1991). Specifically, these researchers observed a pattern of European American adolescent girls losing their voices at around age 12 in exchange for wanting to be perceived as a “perfect” girl: passive, quiet, demure, and attractive to boys. This has been described as a relational crisis: a giving up of voice and an abandonment of self for the sake of becoming a good woman and having relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

However, Belenky et al., 1986 argue that the lack of a verbal voice is not indicative of silence or arrested development. Instead women are listening and observing and cultivating additional ways of being heard or of “having their voices.” What appears to be a lost voice may be a maturing young woman.

Questions for discussion. Meaningful questions to ask include:

- Does healthy psychological development for adolescent girls include some resistance to conforming to cultural standards for feminine behavior? How does this compare to healthy psychological development for adolescent boys?
- Today’s woman is likely to need professional skills, yet the literature indicates that she loses her voice at adolescence. This loss of voice seems incongruous with the demands of adult life. If adolescent girls were followed across time would we see that they generally regain their voices sometime later? How can women who have lost their voices be encouraged to regain them? Do some women avoid losing them in the first place and are these the women who go on to manage adult roles well?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3: To recognize the inadequacy of comparative analyses in which European Americans are used as a referent against which African Americans are compared. Also, to recognize that African Americans have to explicitly contend with race and racism as critical events in their identity formation.
Literature discussion. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), the concerns and challenges characteristic of the African American female identity formation have been largely ignored in the literature. They argue that developmental models that may be appropriate in European American, middle- and upper-middle-class settings should not be generalized to all girls in all contexts (Robinson & Ward, 1991). Other researchers agree that Gilligan's finding regarding female development should not be unquestioningly applied to other ethnic groups, as ethnicity accounts for variations in the experience of being female and mediates gender in ways that produce very different "female" experiences (Erkut, Field, Sing, & Marx, 1996).

Shifting from a deficit model in which European Americans are seen as the model and all other ethnic groups are compared to them, literature is now beginning to address the unique strengths found in families from many different ethnic groups. For example, African American adolescent girls have been described in recent literature to be assertive, powerful, resilient, and resistant (Fordham, 1993; Gibbs, 1996; Riley, 1985; Ward, 1996; Way, 1995). Among African American families, Gayles (1984) believes that mothers socialize their daughters to be independent, strong, and self-confident rather than passive. Peters (1985) found that mothers were acutely aware of and shared their personal experiences of racism with their children to truthfully portray the harsh realities of the world in which they must compete. This preparation included teaching children about racial pride, self-respect, and family love as protection against the detriment of racism on development. This is consistent with Collins' (1987) findings that the most important message that African American adolescent girls received from their mothers was to be self-reliant and resourceful.

Contrary to Gilligan's findings, these studies do not support the idea that young women lose their voices. In a society that devalues both being female and an ethnic minority, it seems logical that in these families child socialization practices would try to promote characteristics that combat the consequences of marginalization. Thus we see childrearing practices of African American families encouraging the development of attachment and loyalty to parents while supporting personal independence and inner strength (Fu, 1984).

The idea that middle-class, European American girls reach a relationship crisis where they lose their voices and African American girls do not, suggests different developmental pathways. However, not all research supports the idea of resiliency among female adolescent African Americans. For example, Fine (1988) discusses the ways that African American girls' dissent and desire are silenced in public schools, particularly for poor girls.

Questions for discussion. Meaningful questions to ask include:

- Can you propose a study strategy that informs about women without comparing them to men?
- Can you propose a study strategy that informs about African American women without comparing them to European American women?
LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4: To recognize the influence of valuing education and learning on female identity formation.

**Literature discussion.** Belenky and her colleagues, in interviewing 125 women, found that many of them believe that knowledge originates outside the self and look to others even for self-knowledge. Thus, their attempts to form an identity were expressed in questions such as "What do they think of me?" and "What would they want me to become?" (Belenky et al., 1986). Many women reported making major life decisions such as choosing a marriage partner, altering career plans, or having children based on external pressures from family and peers.

Within a patriarchal structure, the needs and priorities of men take precedence, men are valued over women, and the positions of power afforded men give them control over the major societal institutions (Spender, 1983). The result is a gender inequality that leaves women with less power, fewer resources, lower status, unemployed, and underemployed. As wives, housewives, and mothers, women's unpaid work as caregivers subsidizes and disguises the real costs of maintaining the work force (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantly, 1992). Thus, the societal structure of patriarchy shapes and impinges on the experiences of women.

Moreover, traditional female socialization does not encourage women to acquire the skills needed to equally participate in the work force. Most higher level positions require greater degrees of independence and assertiveness. Underdevelopment of the characteristics required to compete in the historically male realms of work leave women disproportionately disadvantaged (e.g., working in low-status, low-wage jobs). The resulting economic inequality is exacerbated for women who are solely responsible for supporting children.

The still-prevalent assumption that girls cannot and should not achieve does lasting damage to their abilities to succeed in the adult world. For example, even among accomplished professional women, McIntosh (1984) found them to feel illegitimate, apologetic, undeserving, anxious, tenuous, uncomfortable, incompetent, dishonest, and guilty. Socializing girls to embrace, not reject, their own intelligence and competence, and supporting them in their efforts to assert themselves would help prepare them for adulthood.

**Questions for discussion.** Meaningful questions to ask include:
- How adequately does today's gender socialization prepare women for survival on their own, whether being alone results from personal choice, divorce, desertion or widowhood?
- How do we assist women to enhance their own learning and the quality of their own lives as well as those of their families, communities, and the larger society?
- How are girls and boys in African American and European American families being socialized to help them face the challenges of contemporary families: (i.e., dual-career, single parenting, non-custodial parenting, divorce, blended families, urban isolation)?

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have argued that human development must consider race and social class pathways for various co-cultures. We used American and European American middle-class events and to highlight differences between the European American women on marriage and most to the emphases on returning to school and racism. These differences undergird our argument that human development includes appreciation of the social class and historical times in shaping identity.

**REFERENCES**


divorce, blended families, urban isolation)? How can we help women and men assume roles for which they were unprepared by early socialization?

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that the examination of identity development must consider race and social class as influences that alter the pathways for various co-cultures. We used interview data from African American and European American middle-class women to depict defining life events and to highlight differences between the groups. The emphases by European American women on marriage and motherhood stand in stark contrast to the emphases on returning to school and racism by African American women. These differences undergird our argument that a thorough understanding of human development includes appreciation of the influence of gender, race, social class and historical times in shaping identity development.

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