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The dominant paradigm in the literature of college student development reflects a cognitive or psychological bias when considering the effect that college has on students. This chapter offers an alternative perspective by recognizing college as a social process and subsequently examines students' identity formation from a sociological perspective.

The Sociology of College Students' Identity Formation

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When we consider the effect that college has on the development of students, we often think in terms of psychological or cognitive changes. Indeed, for over 40 years the majority of research on college students has tended to examine the outcome of the college experience almost exclusively from the perspective of the individual (see Feldman, 1972; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The fallacy with this approach is that college is not an individual experience; rather, it is a social experience. One might even say it is a social process. As such, if we want to have a more complete understanding of the impact of the undergraduate experience it seems necessary that we incorporate a social analysis into the preponderance of psychological and cognitive research. In this chapter, I argue for the importance of a social analysis of the college experience. Specifically, I examine how college impacts the formation of a college student's identity. Although identity is often posited as an individually based achievement, I use the sociological theory of symbolic interaction to explain how it is more appropriate to understand identity formation as a process of both personal avowals and social attributions. I conclude by suggesting future avenues of research as well as considerations for those who work closely with college students.

A Brief Primer on Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction is a theoretical perspective within sociology that focuses predominantly on the interactional processes of social life (Charon, 2009). Emerging from the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, symbolic interactionists are largely concerned with human conduct, the

construction and maintenance of meaning, and the extent to which individuals situate themselves as both subjects and objects of social action. The term symbolic interaction was coined by Herbert Blumer (1969) who outlined three premises of this theoretical perspective:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, social interaction. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process. (p. 2)

The majority of the sociological literature pertaining to self and identity grows out of the symbolic interactionist tradition. Individuals are viewed as social constructions—as becoming who they are more from nurture (external, social factors) than from nature (internal, biopsychological factors). Sociologists attempt to understand identity formation by situating the individual in a particular social world because it is the interactions in social settings that construct who we are. As George Herbert Mead (1934) argued, we come to understand who we are and form a self-definition by embracing the attitudes of the significant others with whom we interact. Symbolic interactionists also make the point that we commonly take the ascriptions and attributions that others make of us and internalize them as part of our identity (Rosenberg, 1981). Mead spoke specifically about this process as taking on the roles of others and having the ability to see oneself reflexively—from the perspective of others. In the identity formation process, the individual eventually learns to embrace the role of the generalized other and forms a more complete picture of himself or herself in the larger social world. This more complete sense of self incorporates the attitude of the entire group to which the individual belongs.

Mead's concept of the generalized other is crucial to the conception of the self as being socially rooted—as in a college environment, for example. Even the famous developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1968), coming out of the psychoanalytic tradition, recognized the importance of locating the individual in the social setting. He suggested that identity development is a psychosocial process not centered solely around the individual but also situated in the heart of the communal culture. According to Erikson, traditional psychoanalytic theory is unable to grasp a true sense of identity because of its inability to account for the *umwelt*—the external environment that both surrounds us and is in us. Since members of the same culture share the same *umwelt* this concept serves for Erikson a similar purpose as Mead's (1934) generalized other. Both represent the social setting the individual has internalized and which influences the individual's perception of self and others.

When the individual is able to take on the role of the generalized other she or he is also able to send and receive gestures. Gestures represent

symbols that link the individual to the social group. When the receiver of a gesture interprets it as the gesture was intended to be interpreted by the sender, Mead (1934) calls this language. Language in this sense may be understood literally, as a system of voice sounds, or figuratively, as a system of attitudes, meanings, and dispositions. Either way, it functions as the mechanism through which an individual forms an identity. It is through language that one becomes a member of a community by taking the "institutions of that community into his [or her] conduct" (p. 162). A prerequisite to identity formation then is locating oneself within a social group and, more importantly, internalizing the dispositions of that group.

With its focus on social interaction and the embracement of the group's attitudes, it should not be surprising that the symbolic interactionist approach to studying identity is more focused on social identity than personal identity. Personal identity is commonly understood as avowals or self-declarations: I am a good student, I am a friendly person, and I am hard working. Personal identity often falls more under the purview of the psychological development literature on student identity. In contrast, social identity is based on the imputations that others make toward us. Social identity emerges from the interplay of the individual and collective (Jenkins, 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000). It is one thing to feel that you are a friendly or hard-working college student, but unless others ascribe or reflect this identity back to you it is unlikely that your self-avowals will go very far. In this sense, social identity may be said to be a more accurate description of who we are.

Symbolic Interaction and College Student Identity Formation

So how does the symbolic interactionist approach to identity formation play out in the college environment? It should be clear from the preceding summary that college is an important social location where identity formation occurs. As a location of social interaction at a time when individuals are moving from one developmental stage (young adulthood) into another (adulthood), college is a crucial site whereby individuals strive to find consistency between their personal identity (self-avowals) and their social identity (ascriptions from others). Seeing college as a social institution where students' identities are constructed through social interaction is an important framework for faculty and professional staff. College is not just an arena for intellectual development and advancement; additionally, it is a site in which students construct a sense of self that situates them in a particular social location with a set of corresponding social roles. Let me briefly offer a concrete example of college students' identity formation from some of my own research.

Education has always been viewed as the medium through which individuals can achieve upward social mobility. Whether or not this is true, there is no denying that individuals who have a bachelor's degree are more

likely than those without a college degree to hold professional, middle-class occupations. For this reason, we may say that college is instrumental in preparing students for a professional lifestyle—even if this is not an explicitly stated goal of an institution's mission statement. Stated alternatively, we may say that the college experience helps students construct a specific class-based identity. In some of my own work (Kaufman, 2003, 2005; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004), I demonstrate how students construct their class-based identities in college. Students who are first-generation college students as well as those from middle- or upper-class backgrounds must actively construct a class-based identity that is reflected back to them by significant others. College is the prime location where students begin the transition from the role of student to the role of professional.

This identity formation process is somewhat easier for students who already exist in middle- or upper-class locations, but it is no less active, no less devoid of agency, than for students from lower social classes. In all cases, one's personal identity will not stick unless it is certified by having others reflect that identity back to the individual. In this sense, all students who are striving to have a certain class-based identity imputed to them must engage in identity-work activities to ensure that they achieve this desired social psychological result. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1967), whose work is central to the symbolic interactionist tradition even though Goffman himself rejected this label, explained the interplay between personal identity and social identity as such: "While his social face [identity] can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it" (p. 10). All of us no doubt have experienced what Goffman is getting at in this passage. For college students hoping to construct an identity that will propel them into the future, the stakes are obviously quite high and therefore it is necessary that faculty and staff recognize their role in this identity-formation process.

In my research, the identity-work strategies I focused on revolved around how students aligned themselves with certain groups or individuals and how they distanced themselves from others. Seeking categorical membership in a social group is a key component of social identity formation, and I examined how students achieved this through such dimensions as choosing a particular style of dress, employing specific speech patterns, and seeking out various leisure activities. Many students were consciously aware of how they altered or adopted certain ways of dressing, speaking, and socializing so that they were conducting themselves in a manner that was worthy of their desired social identity. The key point to keep in mind from a symbolic interactionist position is that students in college form their identities by taking on the attitude of the group to which they aspire to belong. From this angle, the college experience is significant not only because of how students develop intellectually or emotionally; rather, college is also

important because it plays a significant role in the construction of a class-based identity that situates individuals into socioeconomic positions.

My work was specifically on social-class identity formation, but the symbolic interactionist approach has wide applicability for understanding the college experience. For example, this sociological perspective is commonly used in the context of other social indicators such as race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality. In much the same way that students engage in identity-work strategies to solidify their desired social-class identity, college is also fertile ground in which students cement their identities along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Through their social interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, students learn to take the attitude of others with regard to these social locations. They learn what it means to identify and differentiate themselves as Black, Latino, bisexual, or even straight, and they work to behave in ways so that these identities are acknowledged and accepted by significant others.

Moving beyond the formation of identities based on these social variables, the symbolic interactionist perspective is useful for those who are interested in trying to better understand the college experience because it focuses specifically on the ways in which college students construct meanings—particularly about self and other. Whereas typical cognitive assessments ostensibly measure whether or not students are gaining intellect, the symbolic interactionist approach considers whether or not students identify as being intellectual. Administrators and policy makers who are motivated solely by number-based outcome assessments will not be particularly interested in this element of a college student's felt identity; however, the importance of understanding this process cannot be overstated. One of the major limitations of the current focus on cognitive assessment and psychological development is that it fails to see college students as whole persons. We are so focused on measuring *what* students are learning that we have given very little attention to *who* they are becoming. Students are not just going out into the world as containers of discipline-specific knowledge. They are also going into the world as individuals in the throes of important identity development. Symbolic interaction is distinctly suited to studying this process.

Studying the Impact of College Through Symbolic Interaction: Future Directions

By way of concluding this chapter, I offer two examples of implementing the symbolic interactionist approach described here: (a) a proposal for research and (b) a suggestion for faculty and staff who interact regularly with college students.

In terms of possible research, much could be gained by more ethnographic accounts of the college student experience. This methodological

approach—whether it be based on participant observation or nonparticipant observation—is ideally suited to the theoretical position of symbolic interaction. Much like symbolic interaction, ethnographers study social interaction, the social construction of reality, and the production and reproduction of shared norms—all of which are building blocks for a student's identity formation. Although there is a long and rich tradition of ethnographic studies of primary and secondary schools (see, e.g., Foley, 2010; Khan, 2010; Lareau, 2000; Lewis, 2003; MacLeod, 2009; Thorne, 1993; Willis, 1977), there is a noticeable dearth of similar work at the college level (for two exceptions see Moffatt, 1989; Nathan, 2005). If we accept the basic symbolic interactionist premise that “human society consists of people engaging in action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 7) then we surely need greater insight into the myriad of social interactions that occur in the daily life of college students. We need a better understanding of how students exchange gestures, how they take on the role of others, and how they see themselves as objects to themselves. Studying college students through the theoretical lens of symbolic interaction and the methodological perspective of ethnography gets at these important themes.

Symbolic interaction also provides instructive guidance for our daily interactions with students. With the awareness that all of our interactions serve as the foundation for the production and reproduction of identities, faculty and staff might be less cavalier and more sympathetic to students. I am not suggesting that it is necessarily common for faculty and staff to be dismissive of students; however, the recognition that students may be trying out identities and making avowals that they hope to be reciprocated as ascriptions might elicit a deeper level of understanding and attention among faculty and staff. As a specific example, consider the importance of student–faculty research collaborations. As Posselt and Black (2012) demonstrate, these ongoing interactions may contribute significantly to the formation of a professional identity among students—particularly first-generation college students. Faculty interactions in the classroom, during office hours, at extracurricular events as well as staff interactions with students in administrative offices and service centers are similarly poised to be potential occasions of college students' identity formation.

In his theoretical explanation of symbolic interaction, Herbert Blumer (1969) notes that life is a formative and unfolding process; it is not just the arena for human expression. He goes on to say that human beings are acting organisms and not mere responding organisms. These are important themes to keep in mind. Too much of the research on college student development approaches students as responding organisms—responding to cognitive and psychological assessments—so that we can see how they express themselves along these dimensions. A focus on the *process* of the college experience, as well as on college students' identity formation, is still untapped in the college development literature. There is a greater need to

understand college as an unfolding process in which students act toward themselves and others based on the socially constructed meanings of their actions. The sociological theory of symbolic interaction is ideally suited to studying this process and providing further insights into college students' identity formation.

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