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Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

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## Identity Development Across Adolescence

Madison Groff

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Identity Development Across Adolescence

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*Accepted by the Faculty of*

**The Department of  
Human Development and Family Science  
Messiah College, Grantham, PA**

*In fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Undergraduate Honors for the Bachelor of Arts in  
Human Development and Family Science degree*

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### **Abstract**

This study focused on the development of one's identity during adolescence. According to Erik Erikson's theory, adolescents experience the crisis of identity development vs. role confusion. These years are important for discovering who one is and one's role in society. Adolescents shape their identity through interpersonal relationships, family, friends, activities, and the overall society. Ecological Systems theory encompasses these categories in a layered model by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Both of these theories were explained and utilized in the exploration of identity development across adolescence. The primary objective of this study was to examine literature on identity development and apply these principles through the qualitative method of an autoethnography. Autoethnography is a method that uses an individual's experience for studying culture. This method allows for cultural understanding through the telling of personal stories. Additionally, this study included creating a code with the factors affecting identity and using the coding system to analyze the author's personal journals from ninth grade and twelfth grade. The coding system was broken down into categories based on the layers of Bronfenbrenner's model and factors that influence adolescents' identity. The results included themes of processing family dynamics, faith application, increased involvement, and social comparison. In conclusion, the themes and stories were analyzed in the context of the surrounding youth culture.

## Identity Development Across Adolescence

Identity is a concept that includes who one is and one's role in society. Adolescence is a time when identity starts to develop. This study focused on the development of identity across adolescence. The theories studied for this work included Erik Erikson's eight stages of development and Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model. Identity is developed through reflecting on the various environments and messages that impact an individual.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Erikson's Work with Identity**

Psychoanalytic theories are often based upon the work of Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalytic theories call attention to the role of the unconscious and understanding the structure of one's character (Corey, 2013). Childhood is theorized to be highly influential for later functioning in adulthood. One prominent psychoanalytic theorist is Erik Erikson. Erikson developed an eight-stage theory that focuses on balancing equilibrium between ourselves and our social world (Erikson, 1980). Each stage is centered around a developmental crisis at different ages. Erikson believed that individuals needed to wrestle with each issue in order to continue on a healthy path of development (Arnett, 2012). To resolve a current stage, individuals must have successfully resolved the stages prior to it (Jones, Vaterlaus, Jackson, & Morrill, 2014). Erikson believed that adolescence, the fifth stage of his theory, is a potential time of crisis for identity versus identity confusion. Adolescents need to resolve this stage to a degree before moving on to Erikson's next stages.

During their teen years, adolescents must discover and confirm who they are and how they fit into the world. When identity is not defined, individuals may find themselves in a time of identity confusion. This confusion can occur not just in adolescence but later in adulthood if this

stage is not successfully resolved (Erikson, 1980). For adolescents, identity formation occurs through times of reflection on skills, values, abilities, life choices, possibilities, cultural understandings, and commitments (Arnett, 2012). Such reflections are vital for interpersonal relationships, for later starting their own families, and for understanding their beliefs and values in decision-making, all of which are essential for subsequent stages. Failing to make commitments here leads to identity confusion.

Erikson (1980) expressed that adolescents develop a healthy identity through multiple identifications. This means that they reflect on who they have identified with in close relationships such as family or friends and accept or reject the ways in which they have started to become like those people. For example, adolescents may relate to money in a similar way as their parents do. Adolescents, through reflection, can decide if they want to accept this view of money or try to proactively change it. Adolescents then combine traits they learn from others and their own individual traits into their formed identity.

Erikson (1980) also mentioned how adolescents go through a time called psychosocial moratorium where they explore life choices without being committed to adult responsibilities. For example, they explore romantic relationships, friendships, career pathways, religious and political beliefs, and majors. Adolescents “try on” different identities in their quest to find a stable sense of self (Becht et al., 2016). Erikson (1980) emphasized the multitude of individual choices and decisions for adolescents within individualistic societies such as the United States. For Erikson, adolescents move toward independence and they develop an identity that will be adjusted in later stages of life.

### **Themes of Identity Formation**

Adolescents vary in the way they form their identities. Identity formation is not the same for every adolescent; although commitment, purpose, and psychosocial well-being are themes across the process. Becht et al. (2016) connects Erikson's stage of the identity crisis with commitment. Adolescents begin identity development with already established ideas and commitments from outside sources. They are not starting with a blank slate, but rather they begin with values and norms that are relayed to them by parents and society (Becht et al., 2016). Once recognizing what they have been told and what they have seen, these commitments can be challenged and either accepted or rejected. Being able to reconsider commitments and explore identifications can lead to a stronger sense of direction for individuals as they become more confident in who they are (Crocetti, 2017). This is a time for validating existing commitments and finding new commitments.

Adolescents may experience identity uncertainty during this transition time, but this ambiguity can be used to propel them into deeper identity formation. For example, a student preparing for college may question whether the next step of education is worth it. This identity uncertainty leads to asking questions and reflecting more on who the student is and what is ahead. The intentional effort to understand oneself can lead towards deeper identity formation. Crocetti (2017) connects identity to the search for purpose and meaning in one's life. This stage serves for two purposes for adolescents: to reflect on the kind of person they want to become and to discover the place they have in society.

Greater exploration of commitments and identity leads to some additional benefits for adolescents. For starters, self-confidence can be derived from making choices during this crisis period which leads to greater resiliency, self-concept clarity, healthy adjustment ability, and

positive well-being (Crocetti, 2017). These choices may include what career path to take, in which friends to invest, whether they agree with their parent's worldview, or what activities to join. Additionally, in-depth exploration and reflection on choices and commitments is associated with agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, social responsibility, and active social-cognitive abilities to evaluate self-relevant information (Crocetti, 2017). Furthermore, reflections on personal identity and commitments to that identity can lead to increased well-being, life satisfaction, and hope. People who are able to develop a strong identity formation are better situated to pursue valued goals, make choices towards their full potential, and have healthier psychosocial well-being and functioning (Hill & Burrow, 2012).

### **1950s to Today: Changes within Families and Adolescence**

Since Erikson's theory was established, economic and cultural conditions have shifted and have affected identity development in adolescents (Jones et al., 2014). For example, families now fit into multiple family types rather than one kind of traditional nuclear family model. Children tend to spend less time with parents and siblings and increased amounts of time influenced by same-aged peers than previous generations. Adolescents are experiencing multiple child-care arrangements, more education student services, and increasing extracurricular activities. Technology has been changing how parents socialize their children. These cultural experiences and conditions highly influence how adolescents develop today.

Such changes are influencing the process of psychosocial development and how adolescents form their sense of identity. Jones et al. (2014) argues that because of increased time in nonfamily settings researchers should shift their view on how social norms, peer influence, and friendships are affecting adolescence. These cultural influences may result in other categories of identity based on goals of popularity, acceptance, and the desire to be known.

In addition to focusing on the family's role in identity development, these changes in adolescent development are shaped by the role of peers, academics, involvement in activities, and society at large. The environment in which adolescents are raised largely impacts individual development. Therefore, various layers of the environment such as how family, friendships, and social institutions affect identity development are essential to study with the individual's development.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological Systems focuses on how humans develop within the context of their environment. Urie Bronfenbrenner (2000) is well-known for his ecological model that raises awareness of human development within contexts (Smith & Hamon, 2016). His model contains multiple layers: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Variables within these multiple layers directly and indirectly impact adolescents' development and identity.

At the core of Bronfenbrenner's model is the individual. The individual includes the person's genetic makeup and biology. These factors include age, sex, race, and other genetic dispositions which impact identity. Interactions between adolescents and the multiple layers of contexts influence the individual's development. Individuals can have active orientation toward their environment which includes engaging in the process of development and deriving meaning from the various environmental contexts (Rudasill, Synder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2017). An active role in development engages the individual in the process of identity formation. This process becomes more complex over time and meaning needs to be adjusted due to the changes of the environment.

The first system closest to the individual is called the microsystem. This circle illustrates the environment with immediate influence on a person including family, school, religious centers, and face-to-face interaction. An example in the microsystem is parental influence on gender development through discipline. When raising girls, discipline tends to be more love-oriented which fosters high compliance and sensitivity to social cues. In contrast, often boys are raised with a punishment orientation. Punishment-oriented discipline often fosters greater independence and autonomy (Darling, 2007). Discipline is one example of how parenting affects development. Parents may see adolescents' actions as irresponsible or rebellious while the adolescent may view their behavior as adventurous and fun (Arnett, 2012). Topics within the home such as discipline highly influence individual's development.

Another important factor of the microsystem is the emotional closeness and structure of the parent-child relationship. Within this relationship, the adolescents' control information and the level of voluntary disclosure with parents. There can be differences in knowledge between adolescents and parents depending on the disclosure of the adolescent and also the level of parental monitoring (Darling, 2007). Parental monitoring is how much the parents choose to try to gather knowledge from the behavior of their children. The parent-child relationship determines how much of identity formation is assisted by the role of the parent or if the adolescents choose to figure out identity on their own. These direct connections shape how adolescents see themselves by what they are told and shown by society.

The second level, the mesosystem, illustrates how two or more of the environments in the microsystem interact to shape the individual development. An example of two environments interacting would be discussions on religion in the home and in school. Adolescents may hear differing opinions about religion from family, teachers, and peers. Within youth culture,

adolescents may adjust to the image, demeanor, and vocabulary of their peers instead of parental opinions (Arnett, 2012). They are choosing which environment to value and where to place meaning. Of all layers in this model, the microsystems and mesosystems in developmental studies are examined the most due to the significant impact peers and family have on adolescents (Neal & Neal, 2013). Neal & Neal (2013) express the structure of the systems Bronfenbrenner created to be a “nested” model with the emphasis on settings involving face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face interactions within the family, religious centers, and school play the greatest role in identity development for adolescents.

The third level is the exosystem which contains settings or institutions that affect development but are not as directly involved. These settings include law enforcement, government, mass media, transportation, and community. At this level, identity can be shaped by the expectations and examples modeled by larger society, such as fashion choices and premarital sexual behaviors. For example, adolescent girls may choose to model their hair styles or outfits based upon what they have seen in their television shows or teen magazines. In addition, identity can be shifted based upon what kind of government is in control, what kind of traditions and rituals a community follows, and the impact of key historical events (Darling, 2007).

The macrosystem involves the culture that indirectly shapes the individual which includes customs, attitudes, values, and laws (Smith & Hamon, 2016). Adolescents see the world through a cultural lens, values, and attitudes that permeate everyday life. Adolescents learn these values, attitudes, and such as a result of socialization in their various microsystems. Adolescents need to adapt as they are exposed to changing environments and determine meaning from these experiences (Darling, 2007).

The chronosystem involves the dimension of time and how events and circumstances are shaped across time. What is going on in the world at a specific time impacts adolescent development. Transitions and shifts in one's lifespan are also part of the chronosystem. The four inner layers or systems focus on the context of the environment while the chronosystem illustrates how time changes individuals and environments. It is important to study all of these levels in order to gain a deeper understanding of individual development.

This study examined youth culture through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Youth culture includes the image, demeanor, and argot or vocabulary of a particular group of younger people (Arnett, 2012). Youth cultures are a part of the macrosystem and form to create meaning and structure worldviews where society has lacked guidance or direct answers. American youth culture takes on subterranean values including hedonism (seeking pleasure) and irresponsibility while emphasizing immediate gratification and postponing adult roles. The American value of individualism also influences how adolescents develop and construct their identity. These factors are what distinguish the youth from the adult society as they experience adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2012).

### **Conclusion and Research Questions**

The method of autoethnography was used in this study to understand more about themes of identity development throughout my own adolescence. Erikson and Bronfenbrenner's research played an integral role in the creation of a coding system and assisted in deeper understanding of the various factors influencing identity and the self. The coding system was broken down into categories of identity based upon the layers of Bronfenbrenner's model and influences Erikson studied. The following are research questions for this study:

- What identity themes emerge from the journals?
- How does youth culture impact identity?
- How is identity in ninth grade and twelfth grade similar or different?
- What levels of Bronfenbrenner's model are represented by direct and indirect influences on identity development?

## **Method**

### **Participant**

In this study, my own journal entries were used as data to analyze the content for themes on identity. The journal entries were from my ninth-grade school year and twelfth-grade school year. High schoolers tend to be anywhere from age fourteen to age eighteen. These ages cover a large majority of adolescence. Ninth and twelfth grade were chosen to see what factors affected identity over the course of high school.

The sampling technique utilized was cluster sampling. Cluster sampling does not randomly sample from the total number of individuals or entries. Instead, it identifies clusters and uses all the individuals, or entries in this case, from that cluster (Cozby, 2012). Clusters were separated by year in school. The clusters chosen were ninth and twelfth grade. This method was chosen because it included all the entries rather than only a few randomly selected ones. All entries were numbered and analyzed in this study. The ninth grade journal had 60 entries. The twelfth-grade journal had 216 entries. When a date was written before an entry, this counted as a new entry. If there were two entries in one day, they were counted as separate entries. Entries varied in length from one sentence to a few pages in the journal.

### **Use of Autoethnography**

The method used in this study was an autoethnography. Writing an autoethnography combines various ideas from reflective writing, qualitative research, and autobiography studies. The research process is the study of culture through the lens of an individual. It contains an ethnographic methodological focus, is interpretive on culture, and autobiographical (Chang, 2008). It is broken down into scientific data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Self-reflection is utilized with the self as a primary focus of interpreting cultural impact on the

individual and one's social surrounding (Chang, 2008). Cultural understanding is gained as the researcher seeks to understand others through self-analysis and interpretation. This method gives an opportunity to connect current research in an individual case study. The purpose of cultural research is combined with the celebration of an individual's story. Autobiographical experiences play a key part in cultural understanding (Chang, 2008).

The topic of an autoethnography is up to the author. Autoethnographies are written in various lengths from book to journal to article. The goal of each remains the same to gain meaning through the autoethnographer's personal and societal context (Chang, 2008). One of the initial steps of the process involves collecting the data by bringing forward memories and stories to be sorted, labeled, and contextualized into the social context. This step is followed by thorough analysis and interpretation.

### **Addressing Bias**

For autoethnographers, defining culture isn't always objective. Some define culture as being determined by the people who fit into the group while others see culture as uniquely dependent on the person's experience (Chang, 2008). This study used the youth culture within the United States, through personal experiences in Pennsylvania, as the cultural context for adolescents. Throughout this research project, it was necessary to address the possibility of bias due to subjectivity. Bias is a limitation or critique of qualitative research.

Bias is an example of a third-variable problem that can be found in qualitative research. Third-variable problems create alternative explanations that decrease overall validity in research (Cozby, 2012). Subjectivity creates the possibility for bias. When the data is subjective, researchers have a hard time replicating the study. Fortunately, tools exist and can be utilized to address this bias. Bias was counteracted by developing a coding system with specific definitions

and a detailed step by step process for coding. The method section addresses the tools available when creating a coding system. Overall, this solution is available to resolve this concern.

The limitation of the human mind and the concern of confidentiality are two areas that should be considered as well. The human mind has limits in its ability to recall personal memories as a data source (Chang, 2008). Researchers can attempt to gain further awareness and work with the concern of bias by following guiding reminders for autoethnographers. For example, the researcher should be proactive in making sure to connect findings on self to others and the broader goals rather than focusing on the isolated self. There should also be a focus on analysis and interpretation rather than overemphasizing narration (Chang, 2008). Additionally, one should be aware of the importance of confidentiality. Confidentiality can be difficult in this case, but the researcher must learn to write creatively about oneself without overstepping ethical boundaries regarding others' right to privacy (Chang, 2008).

Researchers should also be aware of the possibility for researcher bias or the expectancy effect. This type of bias can be evident in the coding piece of the research because the autoethnographers are familiar with themselves and may have expectations of the possible findings. Certain words or personal memories may be emphasized because of the autoethnographer's opinion (Cozby, 2012). Also, bias can occur due to differences in how the researcher records and interprets the findings. These biases can influence the outcomes of the research but can be minimized through well-trained researchers and being precise in defining the research procedures to be able to be replicated by others (Cozby, 2012).

Overall, one of the most influential solutions researchers can do is to focus on digging deeper into the analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008). This focus will assist in addressing and minimizing possible bias by understanding one's individual stories and relating the findings to

the broader group of adolescents. Also, it is important to remember memory is selective, and one can combat this through utilizing external research to help to support one's arguments.

### **Benefits of Autoethnography**

There are also many benefits in the research process of autoethnography. First, this method allows the researcher and reader to connect using the writer's personal writing style and voice (Chang, 2008). Connecting research to the writer's stories can help readers respond by drawing on their own personal experiences.

A benefit for the autoethnographer is the discovery and development of the self. This increased self-awareness is found through writing, interpreting, and analyzing self-narratives. Chang (2008) writes about self-narrative being a piece of this process focusing on childhood memories, family relations, and growing up. Self-narratives allow readers to see the researcher in a place of self-reflection and analysis which allows for increased ability to interact with the writing. The reader may find personal connections to what the researcher is writing. Howard Gardner (2011) emphasizes the importance of self-reflection in his work with intelligences. Gardner discusses how people have different strengths towards certain intelligences based on how their minds work and acknowledges the importance of each intelligence. Intrapersonal intelligence is understanding self and one's interests. Gardner highlights the need for increased development of the self.

Additionally, readers can gain cross-cultural understanding through the lens of another, meaning that individuals can correct misunderstandings and further develop cross-cultural sensitivity (Chang, 2008). Cultural understanding can grow through gathering the shared meanings between groups of people and learning people's perceptions through interactions and social expectations (Chang, 2008). How people interact plays an important role in how people

place meaning and understanding to culture. Because of this important piece, cultural and self-exploration through the method of autoethnography can create transformation within oneself and in relation to others.

### **Material & Procedure: Coding System Developed**

To do a content analysis of the entries using autoethnography, a coding system was created. The coding system was organized in a chart (See Appendix). Each entry received a row for its information. The first column in the chart was for the date of the entry. The second column was whether the entry is related to identity. Identity was defined as how I see myself, a part of who I am, or my role in society. These areas are influential in discovering purpose and meaning in life for adolescents in identity development (Crocetti, 2017). If the answer was no, the entry was skipped. If the answer was yes, the next column contained the category or categories of identity found in that entry.

The categories of identity were family, faith, involvement, and peers. These categories were chosen due to their influence highlighted in Erikson's theory and the multiple layers of Bronfenbrenner's model. The identity category of family was defined by descriptions or interactions recorded about or with my immediate nuclear family of two parents and siblings. Entries including my extended family were recorded as well, but the main focus was on nuclear family influence. The second identity category was faith. Faith was defined by describing thoughts about church, Christianity, my relationship with God, values, life choices, and morals. The third identity category was involvement. Involvement was defined by descriptions and details about extra-curricular activities, academics, music commitments, youth group, and achievements such as awards, college applications, and scholarships. Peers was the fourth category of identity. Peers was defined by descriptions, comments, or interactions with or about

all students at my high school. Each of these categories shaped my identity and impacted my place in this youth culture and in society. Refer to the appendix to see the definitions and coding system.

Once the entry was categorized, a brief summary was written in the next column about the entry and how it related to the category. After all of the entries were placed in a column, the entries pertaining to each category were read and grouped together to find themes that showed up throughout each category of identity. Along with these themes were example quotes from certain entries. This process occurred for both the ninth-grade entries and twelfth-grade entries. Finally, the themes were compared and contrasted from ninth-grade to twelfth-grade to see how each category contributed to identity development across the span of high school.

## Results

A summary of the results of this study are displayed in Table 1 *Themes Divided by Grade and Category*. This table includes the themes found for identity development based upon the grade and category of identity. Within this section, the results are broken down in the categories of identity studied: family, faith, involvement, and peers. Within those categories are the results of the themes found in ninth-grade and twelfth-grade.

### Adolescent Identity and Family

#### Ninth-Grade

As shown in Table 1, due to a limited number of entries on descriptions and interactions with family, no overarching themes were found from the ninth-grade data. Out of the sixty entries during the ninth-grade, four entries (7% of the total) were found including two describing family and two documenting interactions.

#### Twelfth-Grade

Within the 216 entries of twelfth-grade, 36 entries (17%) included descriptions or interactions with nuclear or extended family members which was the code's definition of family. Interactions were found in 12 entries of the 36 entries (33%). These entries included a brief comment that an event occurred or comment of who attended. An example of a recorded interaction was "went to a varsity soccer game with [my sibling]." The descriptions of family members were found in 24 entries of the 36 entries (66%). The themes that emerged from descriptions included *desiring family help* and *processing family dynamics*.

#### *Desiring family help.*

Desiring family help had two sub-categories of peers and the future. The topic of peers was found in 7 entries out of 36 entries (19%). The topic of the future was found in 8 entries out of 36 family entries (22%).

When discussing peers with family, these conversations were with an older cousin (2 entries = 29%) mother (4 entries = 57%), and father (1 entry = 14%). They included talks about boys, dances, and friendships. For example, in a discussion with an older cousin, it was stated, “I’ve consistently tried and get so nervous,” and the older cousin shared feelings of stress and advised to be straight forward with guys. A few of the entries were texting my mother about how to respond in a friend situation. An example said, “I texted Mom a message... to see what [if] I should say anything to the group friend message.”

The future conversations were with my mother (4 entries = 50%), father (1 entry = 13%), extended family (2 entries = 25%), or both parents (1 entries = 13%). These conversations were focused on college choices and decision making. For example, I was feeling “very nervous and this day made me even more confused for college decisions.” Another is from a conversation with an extended family member who said, “do what you want – what’s better for you – go where makes you happy – follow your heart and head.”

### *Processing family dynamics.*

Processing family dynamics was found in 7 entries out of 36 entries (19%). These conversations included comments about siblings or parents and thoughts anticipating the upcoming transition to college. For example, one entry said “I will be going out to dinner sometime with Dad.” Another entry said, “Mom was brave...she spoke in front of the whole service in her seat...I was so proud of her.” These entries included comments on how members

engaged with one another and comments about family dynamics. One entry said, “I’m stressed and worried about family.”

### **Adolescent Identity and Faith**

#### **Ninth-Grade**

Entries within the category of faith were coded as describing thoughts about church, Christianity, relationship with God, values, life choices, and morals. Within the 60 entries of ninth-grade, 23 entries matched the code for faith (38%). The themes that emerged from the faith entries of ninth grade were *prayers, personal relationship with God, and theological thought.*

#### ***Prayers.***

Prayer occurred in 11 entries out of the 23 entries on faith (48%). These conversations included prayer for personal friendships or prayer directly for other people. The prayers for personal friendships included desiring for new friendships and developing better relationships. For example, one entry said, “I have prayed about making new friends.” The prayers for others were about revealing who people were and for specific conversations. For example, one stated, “please God show me his real character.”

#### ***Personal relationship with God.***

Personal relationship with God showed up in 14 entries out of 23 entries (61%). These faith entries included notes on God’s character or a personal desire to grow. The entries about God’s character included trusting Him, following Him, reminders of God’s plan, and His faithfulness. For example, “I am so blessed that God fulfilled my dream of being in a worship band.” For desiring to grow closer to God, one entry was talking about needing to stay close to God in my decision making. Some of the entries mentioned a desire to see myself how God sees

me. An example of this stated, “thank you for making me a part of your beautiful creation. Help me believe that.”

***Theological thought.***

Lastly, a theological thought was recorded in 1 entry out of the 23 faith entries (4%). This entry included the concept of dating someone from the same denomination rather than dating someone who had a different view on faith.

**Twelfth-Grade**

Within the 216 entries of twelfth-grade, 19 entries (9%) were coded about faith. The themes found from these entries included *personal relationship with God, prayers, life choices, and theological thought.*

***Personal relationship with God.***

As shown in Table 1, personal relationship with God occurred 10 entries out of 19 entries (53%). These faith entries included comments about God’s character relating to remembering God’s timing, His plan, and faithfulness. Additionally, there were comments about the truth that He is with me day by day remembering to focus on Him. Examples of these entries included, “God is at work” and “God was with me the whole time” in reflections about multiple areas of my life.

***Prayers.***

For prayers recorded, there were 4 entries out of the 19 entries (21%). These entries included written prayers for others and for myself. Two entries were prayers written about other people including a teacher and youth group students. The other two entries were individual prayers for my own circumstances. One example stated, “I prayed and wished God would just give a huge sign.”

***Life choices.***

Life choices was a theme that occurred in 7 entries out of 19 entries (37%). These entries included processing values, decisions, and morals related to faith and daily living. Some of the decisions made included deciding to get a purity ring, reading the entire Bible, and teaching myself how to play worship songs on a guitar. These elements illustrate how time was used and what choices were considered valuable. For example, one entry said about the purity ring, “this was so special and pretty.” Also, there were a few entries that talked about being content with not dating until older to find a man more focused on his faith. For example, an entry stated, “both of us are so ready for college and to meet a new Jesus loving guy.”

***Theological thought.***

For theological thought, there was 1 entry out of 19 entries (5%). This entry was a criticism about the church. It stated about, “how I feel our church pushes people into ministry and not going to college.”

**Adolescent Identity and Involvement****Ninth-Grade**

Out of the 60 entries within ninth-grade, 14 entries (23%) were coded for involvement which included extra-curriculars, academics, music commitments, youth group, and achievements. Throughout these entries, there were three main themes: *social comparison*, *self enhancement*, and *sense of real or actual self*.

***Social comparison.***

The first theme was social comparison which happened in 6 entries out of 14 entries (43%). Many of these entries related to orchestra and placement of seats in relation to other students. One of these comments said, “I felt good about my abilities until I compared myself

against others.” There was an entry that recorded, “he then compared me to [peer] and said he is a big boy and has an instrument 1/3 size bigger so I would make sure you have the right strings that work best with your viola.”

***Self enhancement.***

Another theme was self enhancement which occurred in 11 entries out of 14 entries (79%). Self enhancement was evident in valuing or recording the opinions of others in efforts to improve self-esteem. Most of these entries were compliments and positive feedback from teachers and the church worship band. For example, one stated, “he said I showed lots of improvement as a player from the 1<sup>st</sup> playing test and that my hard work did not go unnoticed.” Another entry said, “that I have a good work ethic, I do homework, I have a positive attitude, and it would be a good challenge to get me ready for college if I do honors biology.”

***Sense of real or actual self.***

The final theme within ninth-grade involvement was sense of real or actual self which occurred in 9 entries out of 14 entries (71%). These entries included what mattered most to me, personal thoughts, and how I felt. The actual self was developed based on emotions related to orchestra highs and lows, excitement over worship band, and the possibilities of involvement in the future such as musical pit and career internships. For example, an entry stated, “I stayed quiet and just said thanks.” Another entry said, “I felt good about my performance/abilities.” A third example was, “I have no interest in being in the pit now b/c of not wanting to be involved with that drama.”

**Twelfth-Grade**

Throughout the twelfth-grade entries, 106 entries out of 216 entries (49%) were coded for involvement in a variety of areas. The themes that emerged from these entries were *social comparison, self enhancement, and desiring adult advice*.

***Social comparison.***

Social comparison was evident in 45 entries out of 106 entries (42%). These entries occurred often in relation to achievements and music commitments as success seemed to be defined by this comparison. Many entries recorded where I applied, where I got into, and applications for scholarships. Other areas of comparison include class grades, class rank, and number of scholarships awarded. For example, one entry talked about a grade in calculus where I was ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the class and said, “which is my best ranking yet & it was the midterm.” Another entry stated, “my second marking period class rank is 31 out of 412 – top 7%.” A third entry mentioned the number of times my name was in the bulletin for the high school’s award ceremony compared to my peers.

***Self enhancement.***

Self enhancement was another theme that occurred in 16 entries out of 106 entries (15%). These entries included valuing the words of the leaders and teachers in my life within academics, music commitments, and youth group. Within academics, these entries included feedback from teachers and the opportunities given. For example, one entry stated, “the teacher was so excited for me to teach.” Another said, “I was asked to speak at the middle school GOLD 7<sup>th</sup> grade event.” Within youth group, examples include: “she told me how she has seen so much growth in me in one year from a mature girl to a mature young woman. She sees me as a true leader at church and is so excited where God is going to lead me,” “it may not be in God’s plan and to continue praying,” and “she is the president of the Maddie Groff fan club.”

***Desiring adult advice.***

Desiring adult advice was a third theme that occurred in 12 entries out of 106 entries (11%). These entries included turning to adults during stressful times and decision making. Most of these entries included mentors and small group leaders from youth group. The topics of these conversations included processing friendships, dates for dances, cliques at youth group, college decisions, and family dynamics. The majority of these entries started off with “texted [friend] about.” For example, one entry stated, “texted [friend] about college decisions, I told her how stressed I was.”

**Adolescent Identity and Peers****Ninth-Grade**

Within the ninth-grade 60 entries, 40 entries (67%) were coded as peers with descriptions, comments, or interactions with students from my high school. The themes that emerged from these entries included *opposite sex information, relational aggression and others’ opinions, and youth culture distinctions.*

***Opposite sex information.***

Opposite sex information was evident in 28 entries out of 40 entries (70%). These entries included descriptions and interactions with male peers. This theme included dreams, analyzing in school, and specific interactions with male peers. The analyzing included writing comments about their character, physical appearance, and behavior. Most of these entries in ninth-grade included interactions and conversations with a specific male from my high school and youth group. Examples included descriptions of male peers who “caught my attention,” noticing similarities between me and specific peers, and “dreams about attractive males.” One entry

stated, “he asked me to join their group, and I was confused on if he asked me to go with him in addition to the group.”

***Relational aggression and others’ opinions.***

Relational aggression and others’ opinions occurred in 18 entries out of 40 entries (48%). These entries included noting the gossip and opinions of others. These entries included topics of conversation about others’ relationship statuses and people liking peers. Additionally, this theme included being concerned and valuing others’ opinions of me. Most of these entries were specific opinions or conversations about whether a guy and I were officially dating and what that meant. One entry said, “friends had mixed opinions about how I wanted to ask him.” Another entry stated, “I told a few friends and was frustrated that one friend was being too pushy about my date.”

***Youth culture distinctions.***

Youth culture distinctions were evident in 16 entries out of 40 entries (40%). These entries about youth culture included how my peers defined it, what we valued, and what pressures were felt. Dances, dates, texting, homecoming, and football games often were included in these entries. Sometimes, there was also indication of whether I individually accepted or rejected certain aspects of youth culture. The moments of accepting youth culture were experiencing the pressure to find dates and attend the above school functions. The entries that showed a rejection of youth culture included not appreciating the swearing of peers, grinding dance behavior, the sole use of texting to communicate, and male peers flirting with more than one girl. One entry stated, “I’m tired of the miscommunication and confusion through texting.” Another entry said, “I told the group I don’t like swearing and asked them to stop. I spent a lot of time wishing for a date for homecoming as we walked around.”

**Twelfth-Grade**

Throughout the twelfth-grade 216 entries, 106 entries (49%) were coded for peers. Since a more defined friend group emerged this year, most of the entries included were with about those peers in particular. The themes within twelfth-grade peer entries were *companionship support*, *relational aggression*, and *social information processing*.

***Companionship support.***

Companionship support was evident in 68 entries out of 106 entries (64%). These entries included peer interactions with reaching out, getting together in groups, or discussing shared experiences. These entries had a positive tone around peers, and the conversations included dating, boys, and senior year emotions. Examples included recording meals out, movie nights, ice cream together, sleepovers, and key senior year events. One entry stated, "I'm loving girls night cuz less pressure & all experiencing same drama & busyness & singleness." Another example was at a girl's night and said, "it allowed us all to be on the same page."

***Relational aggression.***

Relational aggression was the second theme that occurred in 23 entries out of 106 entries (22%). These entries recorded drama with the clique I was in with more frustrations, feeling annoyed, feeling left out, and gossip. These entries had a negative tone towards peers. Examples included descriptions about peers' character and emotions as well as how social media and texting played a role into starting or feeding drama. One entry stated that a girl "put a sarcastic rude-like comment on twitter which started the drama." Another entry said, "she didn't want to tell the girls for a while cuz they would probably be judgmental and flip out on her."

***Social information processing.***

Social information processing was evident in 30 entries out of the 106 entries (28%). These entries included descriptions, interactions, and opinions of peers outside of the more defined friend group. Examples included thoughts about male peers as homecoming approached, views of relationships as senior year continued, and processing the transition with graduating. One example stated, “elementary guy friend told me he nominated me for homecoming queen. How crazy is that?! I have a vote for homecoming!” Other entries focused on processing college decisions and shared experiences with others. For example, one entry said, “She was so excited I was accepted. If I choose to go to Penn State, she wants to be roommates.”

## **Discussion**

### **Adolescent Identity and Family**

In this study, there was an increase in percentage and number of entries for family. Ninth-grade included 4 entries which made up 7% of the total 60 entries. Twelfth-grade included 36 entries which made up 17% of the total 216 entries. Due to the decision making that occurs during senior year, students looking to adults for assistance may have contributed to the increase in entries. There was also an increase in number of entries communicating with an older cousin. This may have been due to spending more time with peers of a similar age (Jones et al., 2014). Therefore, this theme was not a surprise as adolescents may look to older siblings or cousins who have had similar experiences more recent than their parents.

The influence of family members in these areas shapes adolescents' identity in decision making for peer groups and the future. As adolescents process family dynamics, they gain awareness which impacts their differentiation from family (Arnett, 2012). Adolescents take in family beliefs as well as what the youth culture says as they start to shape their view of the world. Additionally, the increased family stress during senior year may have assisted in fine tuning components of identity while preparing for the transition into college.

### **Adolescent Identity and Faith**

In comparing ninth-grade and twelfth-grade entries, the percentage of faith entries decreased from 38% with 23 entries for ninth-grade to 9% with 19 entries for twelfth-grade. This decrease may be contributed to the individual commitment to faith as a form of identity during earlier years of high school (Becht et al., 2016). While faith appeared to still be an important piece of identity, other topics seemed to be the focus of reflection. By senior year, identity exploration shifted from faith to areas such as peers and future decision making. The results

illustrate this shift as more entries and higher percentage of the journals were occupied by peers and involvement.

During twelfth-grade, entries seemed to shift from processing thoughts and opinions about faith to recording more actions and decisions made about faith. This shift was seen within the life choices theme which was full of faith application that influenced daily living. These examples included choices in relationships, how to use time, and forming habits of Bible reading or playing worship songs. While faith continued to be a part of identity from ninth to twelfth-grade, the number of examples of faith application increased in twelfth-grade. In ninth-grade, the entries were more focused on who God was and following His will rather than practical examples of faith in daily life. In addition, faith in senior year was starting to impact other areas of life and identity including friendships, future planning, individual role in society, and time management. For example, there were specific prayers recorded about church worship band and whether to go to University of Delaware for college. The theological thoughts were notable because developing theological beliefs and opinions is an important part of faith development.

### **Adolescent Identity and Involvement**

Social comparison and self enhancement were themes that were evident in both ninth and twelfth-grade. These terms come from the literature of Arnett (2012) and Erikson (1980). During senior year, there was a large increase in entries related to success in the form of acknowledgement. This had to do with the nature of the year being oriented towards graduating high school and determining next steps compared to that of ninth-grade. Additionally, twelfth-grade students tend to be more involved in activities which shapes individual identity (Jones et al., 2014). For example, senior year entries included involvement in school orchestra, string

ensemble, York Youth Symphony Orchestra, working a part time job, teaching private viola lessons, youth group, Future Educators club, prayer club, and volunteer club.

The youth culture around me, especially the high school environment, pushed labeling students by the involvement in which they participated. Students were known by the crowds they joined. These pressures and realities may have influenced how 61% or 65 entries of 106 entries for twelfth-grade involvement included details on college applications, acceptances, and scholarships. These details influenced how I saw myself and where I ranked in my role in high school. For example, one entry stated, “my second marking period class rank is 31 out of 412 – top 7%.” The choices made during high school for involvement impacted what peers I would be surrounded by and how I was identified by others. The youth culture and crowd I was involved in with honors and AP classes pushed me towards social comparison. Class rank, grades, college acceptances, and involvement occupied many conversations within that crowd.

There was also the increase in recording the words of adults in a positive light. Due to increased involvement, there were more opportunities for adults outside of the family to speak into and shape my individual identity. These deepened relationships were also available throughout the entries for encouragement or support during times of stress or decision making. For example, when processing family dynamics or college decision making, I often reached out to one of my two small group leaders. Their encouragement helped to release stress and be reminded of God’s plan during these times.

### **Adolescent Identity and Peers**

For both ninth and twelfth-grade entries, the youth culture surrounding these years was highly focused on relationships and opinions towards relationships. Whether it was the possibilities of dating, finding people of the opposite sex attractive, or gossiping about other’s

relationships, all of these areas were highly discussed and valued in topics of conversation. The focus and pressure to find someone to date seemed to be very impactful in developing identity, especially during senior year which included two dances, homecoming and prom, where people were looking for dates. Entries seemed to refer to people by who they identified with or how people placed them in relation to their peers. The role of relational aggression seemed to increase in twelfth-grade as boys, dating, and relationships seemed to be much more the center of conversations and gossip in these areas also increased. This showed how common it was for people to be invested in others' personal lives and drama. Students were occupied with learning people's business within their crowd which is consistent with social information processing. Social information processing involves individuals taking in social cues and understanding how relationships work in society through emotion and cognition (Arnett, 2012). In high school, this may include understanding students in their sphere of influence which would be the same classes or activities. Technology played a role in this youth culture as there were comments on the use of social media and texting in communication, gossip, and interactions. Examples included reflections on texting while communicating with friends and possible dates to dances as well as a peer's gossip comments on twitter. Identity seemed to be determined by social information processing and relationship statuses.

In light of these conclusions, this youth culture assumed that everyone in the high school was interested in being in a relationship and actively judging the people around them to see who they could potentially date. It almost did not seem like an opinion that someone would choose to not be interested in dating or that someone could be content with being single. Within twelfth-grade entries, youth culture and personal acceptance or rejection was not explicitly written. It was rather an underlying concept that was analyzed based on what was important to me, what

pressures I was facing, and what events or things were valued. There was also a shift found from having a variety of friendships in ninth-grade to a more distinct friend group and spending more quality time with them outside of school during twelfth-grade. Overall, this study seems to support that youth culture had the largest impact in the category of identity of peers.

### **Bronfenbrenner Reflection**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model gives context to an individual's environment (Smith & Hamon, 2016). See appendix for the *Self Bronfenbrenner Model* as it relates to the themes that emerged in this study. This model displays factors within each context from information gained through this study. At the core is the individual which, in this case, was me, a female student from York County, Pennsylvania. Research shows adolescents decide how involved they will be in the identity exploration process. Through reflection and journaling, I had an active role in shaping and developing my identity. As I joined activities and processed the messages from those around me, I took steps in discovering who I was and my role of identity.

### **Microsystem**

The microsystem layer illustrates those who have immediate influence on me which included my family, teachers, cliques, crowds, and youth group. Throughout adolescence, I interacted with these people daily or weekly through face-to-face interaction and communication via technology (Neal & Neal, 2013). These people had direct influence on shaping my identity as indicated by the themes in this autoethnography. For example, within peers, the companionship support and relational aggression directly influenced awareness of how I fit into society depending on the cliques and crowds I joined. For involvement, the words of teachers and mentors was within self enhancement which directly influenced who I was. Language itself was powerful in shaping my identity whether it was received from peers or adults. I saw myself

through the lens of others and found this noteworthy. The number of entries with others' words increased from ninth grade to twelfth grade due to valuing the affirmation or opinions of others.

### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem involves the interactions of two or more environments such as family and friends. Within this sphere, the following areas were evident or developed: faith perspectives, social comparison, thoughts about dating, and appropriate behavior. First, faith perspectives were developed through reflection from opinions of parents, peers, and youth leaders. Additionally within faith, my personal relationship with God grew by viewing my faith as part of my identity. Conversations with adults, which was in the involvement category, and the words spoken to me influenced how I saw my role in society with peers and in the church.

Second, by going to family to discuss peers, I could learn how to engage and build friendships. When reflecting on what family and peers had to say, social comparison and building relationships were tied. For example, sometimes the social comparison pressure at school led to weakened peer relations due to competition and relational aggression. Two main areas where this was found was peer competition in orchestra and college searching during senior year. Friendship development seems to be an important piece for adolescents to begin to learn what makes relationships work and what does not. This relationship building laid a foundation for starting friendships at college.

Third, thoughts about dating and appropriate behaviors were related to developing life choices through the voices of family, peers, and mentors. For example, I decided it was important to have appropriate boundaries within relationships whether romantic or friendships. Also, I decided I wanted to be intentional with dating and who I spent time getting to know. Within youth group, I was encouraged to live life through the Christian lens, and this influenced

the choices I made with who to be friends with, whether to date, what to wear, and how to act.

The voices of this group as well as family directly influenced some key areas of my identity and role in society.

### **Exosystem**

The exosystem includes settings that affect development indirectly. For me, this layer includes the larger Christian church, dating pressure in media, teen magazines, and tv shows and movies. To begin, the messages from the larger Christian church were from Christian concerts or events. In the journals, this showed up when Christian artists came to perform or when I processed theological thoughts. The larger Christian church can establish how Christians act, speak, and interact with their faith within the context of their youth culture.

Additionally, media played a significant role in shaping identity during adolescence. Dating pressure was evident through valuing celebrity relationships, tips for dating that were publicized, and through tv shows and movies. Disney Studios portrayed many messages about life and relationships. Shows taught about dating, friendships, family dynamics, and school. These messages influence how adolescence see themselves and their peers. For me, one of the messages I was receiving was the value people feel when they are in a relationship compared to feeling they were missing out on something when they are single. When someone was single, there was anxiety, stress, and constant searching for a potential boyfriend. These examples influenced how I saw myself and my understanding of singleness. From ninth to twelfth grade, my interest on dating and relationships increased as students were more involved in dating by the end of high school.

### **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem involves the culture surrounding these systems and people of society.

Within this specific culture surrounding adolescents, there were some significant impacts: technology, social media, individualism, and the U.S. higher education system. First off, technology and social media were seen in the journals related to youth culture and relational aggression. Youth culture mainly focused on the use of texting for communication which included a lot of miscommunication and relational aggression. Social media also was utilized in relationships. These sources were ways to stay connected in building relationships and communicating with friends outside of school hours.

Also, individualism within the United States is a part of the macrosystem in influencing personal motivations and drive for success and achievement. This value shapes the environment I was in when transitioning from high school to college as well as the U.S. higher education system. My high school's academic-driven environment pushed for the best. In this atmosphere, individualism likely resulted in a lot of social comparison and pressure to get into top schools within my classes senior year. Identity in some way was shaped in how I saw myself and others by the college admissions results process. Value also seemed to be tied to these areas assuming that adolescents were more valuable if they were accepted into more prestigious places. I felt value in getting into specific colleges, receiving scholarships, or acceptance into their honors programs.

### **Limitations**

Some of the concerns stated earlier were the limitation of the human mind and maintaining confidentiality. The human mind was addressed by coding the entries based upon the exact words and stories written in the journals rather than memories from the author's mind. For example, an individual's personal memory from an event that occurred four years ago may differ than the written information from that night of the event. For confidentiality, a system was written with

code names in replace of people's actual names. Additionally, since culture is difficult to define, a specific youth culture needed to be defined. This youth culture was a high school environment in central Pennsylvania. When studying one individual, it can be limiting when trying to generalize to an entire youth culture without reading the stories and experiences of other students in that youth culture. Although, looking at an individual's experience gives the opportunity to see exact examples and impacts that cannot be seen in a larger study.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

In reviewing and studying the changes that occur across adolescence, future research may benefit by taking a closer look at the next stage of emerging adulthood. It may be beneficial to address the additional changes that occur during the college years and how identity shifts during that time. It would be interesting to see what themes of identity are deepened or altered as individuals continue to explore and create a differentiated self.

For the family category during emerging adulthood, family dynamics continue to shift as roles are adjusted and college students may leave the home. Communication in family dynamics and identity may be an area of interest during that next stage. Also, faith application in other areas of lifestyle would be helpful. For involvement, future research could include the views of success, role of extra-curriculars, and the impact of mentorship. For peers, the youth culture seems to play a significant role, so it is essential for future research to evaluate and determine the values, patterns, and habits of the specific youth culture in which one is immersed.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on the development of identity across adolescence. The author developed a coding system and analyzed data using the work of Erikson and Bronfenbrenner. The results included themes of processing family dynamics, faith application, increased

involvement, and valuing others' opinions. The literature and themes were applied in the context and impact of the youth culture. Future research suggestions include applying the changes and development of identity in the next stage of emerging adulthood.

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**Appendix**

Date	Entry related to identity?	Category of Identity	Brief Summary

**Code**

**Identity:** describes how I see myself, a part of who I am, or my role in society; areas that are influential in discovering purpose and meaning in life

- **Family:** Descriptions or interactions recorded about or with my immediate nuclear family of two parents and siblings
  - Examples: time around the house, family gatherings, conflict, and conversations
- **Peers:** Descriptions, comments, or interactions with or about any students at my high school
  - Examples: homecoming dance, lunch table choices, friend hangouts or texting
- **Involvement:** Descriptions and details about extra-curricular activities, academics, music commitments, youth group, and achievements
  - Examples: awards, college applications, and scholarships
- **Faith:** Describing thoughts about church, Christianity, my relationship with God, values, life choices, and morals
  - Examples: small group interactions, prayers written to God, questions about faith and God’s plan

Table 1  
Themes Divided by Grade and Category

Categories of Identity	Family	Faith	Involvement	Peers
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade</b>	No reoccurring themes found  <b>4 entries out of 60 entries (7%)</b>	1. Prayers <i>11 entries out of 23 entries (48%)</i>  2. Personal relationship with God <i>14 entries out of 23 entries (61%)</i>  3. Theological thought <i>1 entry out of 23 entries (4%)</i>  <b>23 entries out of 60 entries (38%)</b>	1. Social comparison <i>6 entries out of 14 entries (43%)</i>  2. Self enhancement <i>11 entries out of 14 entries (79%)</i>  3. Sense of real or actual self <i>9 entries out of 14 entries (71%)</i>  <b>14 entries out of 60 entries (23%)</b>	1. Opposite Sex Information <i>28 entries out of 40 entries (70%)</i>  2. Relational aggression and others' opinions <i>18 entries out of 40 entries (48%)</i>  3. Youth Culture Distinctions <i>16 entries out of 40 entries (40%)</i>  <b>40 entries out of 60 entries (67%)</b>
<b>12<sup>th</sup> Grade</b>	1. Desiring family help <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peers <i>7 entries out of 36 entries (19%)</i></li> <li>• The future <i>8 entries out of 36 entries (22%)</i></li> </ul> 2. Processing family dynamics <i>7 entries out of 36 entries (19%)</i>  <b>36 entries out of 216 entries (17%)</b>	1. Personal relationship with God <i>10 entries out of 19 entries (53%)</i>  2. Prayers <i>4 entries out of 19 entries (21%)</i>  3. Life choices <i>7 entries out of 19 entries (37%)</i>  4. Theological thought <i>1 entry out of 19 entries (5%)</i>  <b>19 entries out of 216 entries (9%)</b>	1. Social comparison <i>45 entries out of 106 entries (42%)</i>  2. Self enhancement <i>16 entries out of 106 entries (15%)</i>  3. Desiring adult advice <i>12 entries out of 106 entries (11%)</i>  <b>106 entries out of 216 entries (49%)</b>	1. Companionship support <i>68 entries out of 106 entries (64%)</i>  2. Relational aggression <i>23 entries out of 106 entries (22%)</i>  3. Social information processing <i>30 entries out of 106 entries (28%)</i>  <b>106 entries out of 216 entries (49%)</b>

\*Percentages given are the entries including that theme within the category of identity

Model 1  
*Self Bronfenbrenner Model*

