

Student Interview

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For the second interview with Gina, I focused on the specific areas I thought to be emerging themes during our initial conversation a few weeks prior; these were Women's Identity Development, Sexual Orientation Development, and Moral/Religious Identity Development. Although racial and ethnic development was a salient topic during our first interview, I felt that much of our initial conversation revolved around her growth in that area, and as a result I felt it would be more beneficial for us to dialogue around topics she seemingly had limited exposure to but were underlying in our conversation. As it turns out, Gina had never explored many of the questions raised as offshoots of the original question posed and in reflecting on our conversation, she found it to be very thought provoking.

I was intentional about forming the second interview's questions around the theoretical frameworks applicable to the emerging themes from our first interview in order to better understand her development in comparison to the models. The emerging themes from the second interview were focused around generating a deeper understanding of the issues Gina had already presented but not really explored, such as what it meant to be a woman at Penn State. This provided me with the opportunity to increase my understanding of the applicability of the theories as well as gauge her progress and growth in each of these areas. My protocol for the second interview followed a similar structure as the first; I generated a few questions and then separated the questions into themed sections, each of the sections corresponding with a particular theory. In focusing on specific themes I utilized Josselson's Theory of Identity Development in Women, Chickering's Theory of Identity Development, and Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development.

Josselson's Identity Development in Women theory emphasizes four statuses: Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement. Her theory emphasizes

understanding how women create themselves through personal reflection as well as their external relationships. Individuals in the Diffusion state refuse to or have trouble committing to anything and even though they may have experienced changes or challenges in their lives, they do not solidify thoughts or behaviors. Individuals in the Foreclosure state are seen as unquestioning receivers of parental information as they accept knowledge without challenge. Individuals who are in the Moratorium state question parental values and knowledge in order to continuously develop their personal identity but do so without committing. And finally, viewed the healthiest psychological status that can be achieved of the four, individuals in the Identity Achievement state arrive here after deliberation between necessary decisions, established commitments, and are in the process of solidifying their identity.

Reflecting on Gina's understanding of herself, her commitments, and the decisions she makes I would say that she presently would be considered to be in the state of Identity Achievement this however, would be a recent transition from the past few years. We weren't able to discuss her personal development from when she was a bit younger too extensively but from what I've gathered she portrayed some characteristics of Identity diffusion, such as being field dependent "making decisions on external stimuli" (pg 61) which was apparent when she was describing the changes in her leadership and communication style while working with men.

"...being surrounded by women was easier...I thought that guys would question me, if you're not running in a 'dictator style' you might not be able to get the job done so I had to constantly appeal to both genders...and I thought about it after the fact, but I also noticed differences when I was dealing with conflicts. When I sat down and thought about how I wanted to address issues it always occurred to me that I acted differently. It just seemed to be the right way to act, using different tactics would get through easier or harder depending on if

it was a male or a female so I had to change how I approached people and that's how I realized the differences.”

This change in behavior can be seen as flexibility and adapting to one's environment, an essential quality of great leaders, but because of the way she described the memories as well as the point in her life she was in, I believe these comments and actions were signs of making decisions as a result of others. She now seeks out opportunities to challenge what she feels to be the status quo at Penn State, which is not having many women leaders of student organizations. As a leader as well as a woman, Gina's decision making process has become more independent instead of being based on others, as the trust in her and her abilities have increased.

Although I believe Gina most closely can be identified in the Achievement category currently, I make this assertion with a bit of hesitation about the applicability of this theory on her life. Gina conforms to the Josselson's Identity Achievement state in multiple ways. Independence from her parents and the freedom to make her own decisions were always central to her continuous development and one of the reasons why I believe she falls into the Identity Achievement state. “I am much more of an independent person (in reference to someone else). I've never had the constant support or stable lifestyle...I've always decided things for myself and *my* opinions are what matters most to me.” As stated earlier however, I make this claim with reservation; one of the reasons Gina does not completely conform to this aspect of Josselson's theory is that this distancing and eventual separation from her parents began at an earlier age than the theory implies to be common. As a young adolescent Gina's parents divorced and although she wanted to grieve herself, she felt obligated to role model positive behavior for her younger siblings. After the separation Gina lived with her mother, but felt suffocated as her independence was very important to her and she eventually chose to move in with her father.

Due to his schedule, her father was unable to enforce many parental guidelines or place any restrictions on Gina's behavior, ultimately leaving her with a large portion of unsupervised time, "...I practically lived by myself in high school..." which was an aspect of living with her father that she very much appreciated.

In reviewing the literature as it pertains to adolescents and college students, I believe this is where Gina does not conform to the stated theory. Identity Achievement women are said to retain a bit of guilt and depression because of the loss of and psychological separation from their parents but that this would dissipate with age and maturity. Gina has yet to express any type of guilt, remorse, or depression because of her distant relationship with her parents. She exudes independence and thrives off of her ability to make decisions on her own. "[When I was younger] whether my parents wanted me to do something or not, I would do it anyway just to experience it on my own and if I was wrong, or I made a wrong decision, I had no problem telling them they were right but if I just listened to them about everything I would never know for myself." On that same note, I would also have to say Gina currently no longer fits into the notion of developing who she is in relation to others which is another quality of women in the identity achievement state. Concluding Josselson's theory is the idea that Identity Achievers are "forever becoming" and I wholeheartedly agree that Gina conforms to this idea. She is independent but open to new experiences and new learning, and continues to challenge herself in her relationships and interactions.

For the second set of questions posed to Gina, I formed them out of pure interest in her level of exposure to orientations different than her own. Sexual orientation is a topic she and I had never discussed prior to this assignment and one that I was very interested in following up with her about after a few of her comments during our first interview peaked my interest. Gina

identifies as heterosexual and I do not know of any theory targeting the development of allies, so I chose to integrate Chickering's Theory of Identity Development into my interview protocol.

Chickering's theory can be described as a spiral, each vector having the potential to interact with one other, but also building on the vector before. In addition, individuals are able to revisit and work through stages previously resolved as new situations arise and challenge the thought process. There are seven vectors each describing a stage of development that Chickering felt contributed to the formation of identity, they are: *Developing Competence*, which focuses on the intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence, *Managing Emotions*, which focuses on students' ability to recognize, accept, express, and control emotions, *Moving through Autonomy Toward Interdependence*, which focuses on increasing emotional independence, *Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*, which focuses on the relationships as contributing to self development, *Establishing Identity*, which focuses on being comfortable with how you chose to identify as well as your outward appearance, *Developing Purpose*, which focuses on developing clear vocational goals, and finally *Developing Integrity*, which focuses on humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence.

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships is the vector I feel most appropriately describes Gina's development and current understanding of sexual orientation. From what I know of her experience and skills, I believe she has worked through the three vectors before this as well as begun exploration of the remaining three. This particular vector describes the development of self through relationships and, as Reisser (1995) is quoted in the text, involves "the ability to accept individuals for who they are, to respect differences, and to appreciate commonalities." (pg 39) After reflecting on our first interview I felt that Gina had limited exposure to orientations other than her own, and I wanted to further explore her progress in her

own identity development as well as her understanding of others' but once beginning dialogue around this topic I realized Gina had more exposure than I originally perceived and has reflected on this topic before. She was able to articulate her present understanding and thoughts more than I had anticipated and in describing her first encounter with a person whose sexual orientation differed than hers I believe her ability to move through this fourth vector quickly is promising.

“When I went abroad which was before college was the first time I can remember being exposed to it, I was probably exposed through media but I never noticed it. I was in France with family and I didn't think much of it because I didn't know much about it, we were walking downtown after dinner and I saw two guys holding hands, France is really open with their PDA (public display of affection) a lot of people in china hold hands or link arms too, but then the guys started kissing. The culture of France was so open and accepting that no one even had a reaction, so I didn't have one either. My opinions might have been different had other people been worried about it, I would've been a follower because a lot of my opinions and understanding is affected by the environment and those people around it, but I've never had an experience where people were not accepting of Gay or Lesbian people.”

In telling this occurrence, Gina recognizes not only her limited exposure at this point, but also the fact that her reactions were affected by external factors. In processing this experience she reflected a great deal on how accepting her family is and that she also was raised to accept others regardless of any difference. Which brings me to the third section of our interview, Gina's Moral and Religious development.

During our first interview, Gina was quick to mention that she had no religious affiliations; this was another area of surprise for me, not that I expected her to have any affiliation, but it was never something I questioned when considering Gina's identities. This

exposure allowed me to contemplate about the level of privilege I had, not only in identifying with a religion, but a dominant one at that. I also had to reflect on my perspective when realizing that I was surprised, why was I surprised? I was surprised because I identified with a religion and assumed those around me did a well. This realization may or may not be considered privilege for some, but in knowing that I have assumptions of others being just like me, I feel that it provides luxuries for me that others do not have, which makes me privileged.

To understand Gina's development in her moral and ethical decision making I utilized Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. I chose to focus on this theory because Gina does not have a religious affiliation but we both felt that religion and ethics do not necessarily depend on one another. Kohlberg's theory is cognitive-developmental and focuses on the ways in which individuals make moral judgments. He saw decision-making played out in three ways: "an emphasis on value rather than fact, an effect on a person or persons, and a requirement that an action be taken." (pg 173) The theory is a six-stage process arranged into three levels, each being defined by its socio-moral perspective. The first grouping is the pre-conventional level which includes the first two stages: Heteronomous morality and individualistic, instrumental morality. In this level the individual focuses on personal benefits without considering societal norms exuding a "what's in it for me" perspective. The second grouping is the conventional level which includes interpersonally normative morality and social system morality. In this level individuals acknowledge societal rules and expectations and hold a "member of society" perspective. The final grouping is the post-conventional level which includes the final two stages: human rights and social welfare and morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles. In this level individuals establish their own set of moral principles outside of societal regulations forming a "prior to society" perspective.

I believe Gina is somewhere between the second and third level, the fourth and fifth stage. Although she acknowledges that many current societal rules that are supposed to be fair and equal for all people are not, she is not in a place to challenge those rules or create new personal ones based on her own evaluations. Gina believes she develops her moral reasoning from a more global and humanistic perspective and one of the reasons she is not religious is because she had a wide array of exposure to various religions as a young child. “My mom likes to travel a lot and even though she’s not religious she likes to learn about various religions in different countries so we would always visit temples or churches and at everyone my mom would do whatever is considered ‘good luck’ and because I was exposed to so many different religions is part of the reason I think why I’m not religious.” As a result of this exposure she says she has learned acceptance and to appreciate difference.

On the contrary, others in Gina’s life have proven to not be as accepting of difference as she and her family; for Gina religious affiliation, or lack thereof, has recently become a very difficult topic of conversation. For most of her social interactions, religion has not affected Gina’s relationships, but with the one she is closest to, her significant other, it has. Her boyfriend’s parents are pastors of a church where he lives “so naturally he goes to church every Sunday with his family back home. It’s always so awkward with them [his parents] though. Ever since our first interaction I already felt out of place. We were eating dinner and literally the entire conversation revolved around religion, from the opening Grace to the ending prayer. His parents want him to marry a Christian girl and it’s always lingering in my mind because that’s not me. I’ve tried to be open and understanding but I just don’t believe in any of it.” We also discussed Gina’s thoughts on religion as compared to spirituality; she does believe there’s a difference and

does feel comfortable identifying as spiritual as she desires to follow a guiding principle that encompasses a more humanistic world view.

Theory provides a broad framework for understanding the students we work with, it is a general application and one in which many students will not always fit neatly inside. For Josselson's Identity Development in women, its integration of familial importance is an integral part of many women's development, but this theory does not take into account race or ethnic differences as well as cultural expectations. Depending on the culture, some may value women who adhere solely to parental expectations, and thus Identity Foreclosures may not be seen as "unhealthy." Conversely, some cultures may promote independence at a very young age thus nullifying some of the four categories from the onset. For my interviewee, who strongly identifies with her Asian heritage, I believe this theory is limited in that it provides a very western perspective of what women's development should reflect. Chickering's Theory of Identity Development in its original form is limited in its applicability to many populations, including that of my interviewee. His original theory was formulated for white, upper-middle class, males which my interviewee is not. This theory has been critiqued, added to, and made applicable for variety of populations over the years but still tends to overlook the Asian and Native American populations, making it not necessarily one Gina can identify with were it not for the broadness of the theory. And finally Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory is limited in its application to Gina because of its claim of cultural universality. His concepts assume similar ideals carry beyond western lines or even beyond dominant culture in North America.

It is difficult for any theory to be simultaneously all-encompassing (applicable to all populations) yet also be specific enough to be credible. The theories that are broader do allow for more connections to a variety of student populations but are critiqued because of its general

nature and potential reduction in reliability. Leaving room for and actively integrating multiple identities should be an element of consideration when developing new theories. Although intersectionality is a growing topic of exploration, more intentionality about combining salient student identities is essential. Most seminal theories have many cultural limitations yet continue to be explored because of their history. Newer theories and up-and-coming scholars should be a focus when learning about Student Development theory. This activity has forced me to apply what I have been learning in the classroom, to our out of classroom experiences, and I use the word force intentionally! Applying theory to my personal experiences has been a headache as well as an epiphany and as much as I would prefer to exert as little energy as possible, this assignment has provided me with great insight and I look forward to future opportunities throughout the program to actively integrate as well as reflect on the knowledge being gained and its applicability to my work.

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References

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. E., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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