

**Josselson's Pathways to Identity  
In Women**

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Impact of College on Students  
7C:336**

Who am I? What do I want? The processes by which women answer these questions are critical to the formation of identity. Identity development forms the foundation of a woman's sense of self, and how she will structure her life. Yet, identity is also complex and full of nuances. The work of Ruthellen Josselson has added greatly to our understanding of women's identity development and the many pathways that lead to identity formation.

### ***Development in the Context of Women***

Past theories of human development were often conceived in terms of male development, with female development either ignored or tacked on as an addendum. (Evans, 1998; Josselson, 1987; Kuk, 1990;) Erikson, Freud and other researchers used only male subjects, and based their theories of identity on men. However, some psychologists argued that the concepts of autonomy, independence, and separation did not describe the central issues of women's development. They pointed to the inadequacy of the models in including the importance of relatedness and attachment in women's lives, and stated that the models lacked flexibility to "encompass the multiplicity of roles and circumstances in women's lives." (Josselson, 1987, p. 26)

Josselson began her research in an effort to "view identity in women in women's own terms." (Josselson, 1987, p. 27) Her research explored the lives of individual women, and she used these stories to develop a theory of identity development that would be useful in our understanding of women. By following women's lives from adolescence through adulthood, she was able to illustrate the paths that lead to identity formation. These paths are complex and vary between women. Josselson was careful to avoid the tendency to generalize about "all women", or to assume that all women are fundamentally alike. She also did not compare women based on particular variables (such as lesbians and heterosexuals or working mothers and stay-at-home mothers) because she understood that these dimensions are only smaller parts of a larger identity. Though past research focused on "parts" of women, she sought to understand how the parts fit together into some meaningful whole.

### ***Understanding Identity***

At the core of Josselson's work is the concept of identity. Erikson defined identity as "a primarily unconscious process that unites personality and links the individual and the social world." (Josselson, 1987, p. 10) It is a stable and consistent sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world, yet is also continually refined and gradually modified throughout time. Critical to identity formation is the concept of separation-individuation in which an individual begins to define the boundaries of the self that are distinct from others, while operating in the context of relationships and connectedness to parents and others in one's life (Josselson, 1987).

Josselson's work is based on Marcia's model that operationalized Erikson's concept of ego identity. The model describes four types (statuses) of identity formation based on the presence or absence of crises and commitment in occupational and ideological (religious and political) realms; 1) Identity Foreclosure, 2) Identity Achievement, 3) Moratorium, and 4) Identity Diffusion. Using extensive interviews to place students into these four identity statuses, the research paradigm, known as identity-status research, became the dominant one for research in identity formation. However, the paradigm did not seem to apply consistently once researchers attempted to produce the same results with women as subjects (Josselson, 1987).

### ***Methods to Research Women's Lives***

In 1971, Josselson began her work in the field, and used Marcia's paradigm to understand the internal and developmental roots of identity formation in women. To do this, she chose a cross-sectional, representative sample of college women in their senior year. She chose college seniors because prior theory had predicted that identity status would be more stable at this point, and because the women had the opportunity to explore choices within college, and were now poised at the brink of adulthood with many important life decisions ahead. Josselson stressed that the women in the study were in many ways, ordinary women; women who were not chosen because of special achievements nor known for any deviance, and thus were often not studied or understood (Josselson, 1987).

She selected 60 female college students, age 20-22, whose names were drawn randomly from class lists at four institutions: a large, co-educational, private university; two large, co-educational, state universities in different parts of the country, and a small, private, somewhat exclusive women's college. Over a span of three years, Josselson and other clinical psychologists conducted intensive interviews with these women using Marcia's Identity-Status Interview and an open-ended semi-structured interview. Interviews were analyzed by multiple individuals in order to establish reliability. Based on this analysis, researchers assigned each woman to one of the four identity statuses based on assessment of her level of crisis and commitment in four areas; occupation, religion, politics and sexual values and standards.

After ten years, Josselson became curious to know what became of these women, and the choices they made since leaving college, so she conducted a follow-up study in 1983. After contacting the original respondents, 34 women could be located and agreed to participate. The women provided information through responses to extensive questionnaires and/or interviews. This data collected over time in the form of stories told by women, formed the basis for Josselson's insightful look at the four pathways to identity.

### ***Foreclosures: Purveyors of the Heritage***

The first pathway discussed was Foreclosure, in which the women had made commitments to identity without undergoing a period of crisis. They continued the values and beliefs of their childhoods without questioning or testing them. They seemed to somehow have gone through college "with blinders on", and avoided exploration and peer influence. Twelve years later, all eight women in the group were again classified as Foreclosures. The women continued to cling rigidly to their views with no internal desire for change.

The Foreclosures lived their lives based on tradition and conviction. Josselson described the Foreclosures as hardworking and capable women who were highly successful in their careers. However, career success was not as fulfilling as relationships. The Foreclosures' lives were dominated by the need to feel loved and cared for. Their families were central in their

lives, and provided them with the sense of safety and security they sought. In college, the women had histories of difficult peer relationships, and ten years later still had few relationships outside the family. Foreclosed women had high self-esteem and low anxiety, and seemed to function well. Their identities appeared to be assigned externally, and thus development appeared to occur through identification rather than individuation.

### ***Identity Achievements: Pavers of the Way***

The Identity Achievement women had separated themselves from their childhood and formed separate, distinct identities. They explored options and reworked their identity in a way that accounted for who they were in the past and who they wanted to become in the future. Identity Achievements needed to feel as if they had an impact on the world. They were more intrinsically motivated, and internal satisfaction was more important than obtaining external affirmation from others. At times, these women felt a sense of guilt for betraying their parents, yet they learned to live with it, and moved on. The term “achievements” can be confusing, since these women were not necessarily higher achievers in college or in their careers than the other statuses. Rather they were women who had individuated, and were following a life plan that was their own.

Of the eight women, seven were Identity Achievers at the follow-up, with one returning to a Moratorium state and questioning her choices and trying to make new ones. The follow-up showed that these women did not solely define themselves by their work, nor did they only define themselves by their role in the family. Women in the Identity Achievement status tried to achieve balance among work, relationship, and other interests. Some women found their chosen career to be unsatisfactory and changed jobs after a crisis period in which they realized they could not reach their goals or felt unfulfilled. Identity Achievements had the highest self-esteem and low levels of anxiety. They were flexible, confident, and open to new experiences. Thus, they were likely to continue exploration, and were still in the process of becoming.

### ***Moratoriums: Daughters of Crisis***

The Moratorium phase is one of testing and searching for new identities. As college students, these women were “aware of choice and often paralyzed by their awareness.” (Josselson, 1987, p.106) Moratoriums felt guilt about loosening family ties, and the process of separation and individuation. They believed there was “one answer” and that their families were always right. When they learned otherwise, they became disoriented, searching for something stable to hold on to. Moratorium women reported grand daydreams, yet did not know how to make these dreams a reality. They focused on relationships, but their need for others was based primarily on their quest to find new identifications.

Of the ten former Moratoriums, three went on to resolve the crisis state, one still struggled to decide what to commit herself to, and the remaining six were somewhere on the Foreclosure/Achievement continuum where they had made commitments but returned to old values and life patterns. The Moratoriums showed lower self-esteem and greater anxiety than did Identity Achievements and Foreclosures. Josselson (1987) described these women as “the most interesting lively, and engaging women who took part in the study,” (p. 107) partly because of their capacity for reflection and self-analysis, as well as their intensity and risk-taking behavior. They were insightful, yet perpetually in conflict.

### ***Identity Diffusions: Lost and Sometimes Found***

Identity Diffusion is a stage of no crisis and no commitment. These women were adrift and lost, but for different reasons. Because of this variance and complexity, they were the hardest to understand as a whole group. Josselson identified four different patterns of Identity Diffusion; severe psychopathology, previous developmental deficits, Moratorium Diffusion, and Foreclosed Diffusion. The first two groups fell outside the normal range of healthy personality, and were considered to have borderline personality disorders. Those in Moratorium Diffusion were in extreme conflict about the choices in their lives, but were more plagued by philosophical questions about the meaning of life. They were experimental, and

tried many different ways to experience the world. The Foreclosed Diffusions drifted through life neither in crisis nor able to commit. They felt little control in their lives and waited passively for an authority to take charge.

The Identity Diffusions all experienced failures in internalization, where aspects of experience become part of one's self. Experiences occurred, but did not produce learning or change. The women had a tendency to act on impulse or to withdraw from situations. They were lowest on all measures of healthy psychological functioning. For half the women in this status, identity was no longer a central concern twelve years later, and they implemented the choices they made earlier. For the other half, identity formation remained unresolved, and they were no closer to settling these issues than they were in college.

### *Connections Among Identity Statuses*

Josselson (1987) found that women in the four identity-status groups differed consistently, and that the women's identity status at the end of college predicted largely the course of her early adulthood. Women characterized as Foreclosures, Identity Achievements, or Diffusions at the end of college remained there, with a few exceptions. Josselson also stated that there was not necessarily a hierarchy of statuses. Though identity diffusion is clearly an undesirable state, the other statuses merely represented differences in ways of searching for meaning in life. These identity statuses describe different pathways toward identity, and we may not know the true success of each path until much later in adulthood.

A consistent thread woven throughout the stories was the importance of relational connections. The identities of the women in each status seemed to reflect the degree to which separation-individuation had occurred. Yet the notion of a separate identity is not the same in women as in men. The problem of separating is the problem of not only becoming different but of becoming different and maintaining connection at the same time. "Meaning and identity reside in connectedness." (Josselson, 1987, p. 178) This relational nature carries through all aspects of women's lives, including work. For women, there is not a clear separation between

relating and work, since both are dependent on interpersonal relationships. Women do not leave the relational part of themselves behind when they go to work. Instead, they tend to bring with them qualities of concern and care and integrate these aspects into their jobs.

Though similarities have been pointed out, ultimately, identity formation is a process unique to each individual. The identities of the women were a complex blend of “anchors and webs” that were continually modified, though the central core remained (Josselson, 1987, p. 178). Though prior models stressed independence and autonomy as hallmarks of adulthood, Josselson (1987) found that “communion, connection, relational embeddedness, spirituality, affiliation” were the cornerstone of how these women constructed an identity (p. 191).

### ***Critique of Josselson's Research***

I chose Josselson as the theorist to study, because I wanted to learn more about a theory of development that I had not been exposed to yet. The more I read about her research, the more I delighted in my decision. I found the stories of the women she studied engaging, revealing and fascinating. When reading development theory, I cannot help but reflect on my own development, and how it “fits” into the various models. As I read the book *Finding Herself* (Josselson, 1987), I remembered having the same feeling that I did when I first read Carol Gilligan during my graduate work; “Finally, someone understands.” I could relate to her understanding of development that emphasized the importance of relational connections, instead of holding autonomy and separateness as the standard by which we all must aspire. Josselson's work is important since it represents another perspective, often not heard in identity research whose foundation has been based primarily based on men.

Josselson goes into depth describing identity, and her conceptualization gave me a better understanding on this sometimes amorphous concept. In one reference, she described identity as a “jigsaw puzzle where each person has different pieces to fit together” (Josselson, 1973). Identity is a process greater than the sum of its parts, and one which is not quantifiable. “One cannot have a lot of identity or a little bit of it, although one can be without a sense of

identity.” (Josselson, 1987, p. 28) Therefore, it seems natural to look at the qualitative differences among identities, so that the holistic nature of identity can be maintained.

Josselson’s study provided a great deal of insight and depth. The interview process was intensive, and allowed us to glimpse factors influencing women’s lives in ways that they may not have been aware of or able to articulate via more quantitative methods. Josselson had a way of extracting meaning from the layers of complexity, which she was able to weave so articulately into a whole that was vivid, intriguing and very readable. In qualitative studies, the researcher is also the research instrument, and Josselson excels in this capacity through her ability to engage with the women in the study and give them their own voice. Many of the women eagerly anticipated her visits every decade, and appreciated that someone would show such a deep interest in their lives over such a long period of time. Josselson (1987) too spoke about the impact these women had on her own life. This is the nature of reciprocity, in which there is a mutually beneficial relationship between researcher and respondents (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Josselson seems to have provided the women a sense of empowerment and connection that is a goal of qualitative research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

The longitudinal nature of the study also provided a deeper look at issues of development. So often, studies are only a “glimpse in time” and only describe identity at one point of a person’s life. Yet, with what we know about identity development, it is a dynamic, not stationary, process. Josselson’s interviews at important junctures in these women’s lives allowed us to see how their orientations to their lives change over time. It is admirable that she has devoted her life’s work to understanding these processes.

My primary concern with her study was the diversity within the sample. The sample was all white (with one African-American woman who died shortly after college), and were all traditional-age students who completed college degrees. Thus, this may not represent the experiences of women of color, or other women who do not share this background. The sample is small and should not be considered representative of all women. However, it is also

important to state that qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings. Qualitative research aims for understanding, and it is up to the reader, not the researcher, to determine the transferability of the results to other settings (Peshkin, 1993; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Nevertheless, Josselson's description of the women in the study as "normal" may be a somewhat limited definition of typicality. Future research may want to investigate identity among women of color and non-college educated samples.

Josselson also did not convey detailed information about the nature of the statistical analyses, and thus the reader is left to wonder about the methodological soundness and the strength of the findings. She discussed that multiple individuals analyzed the data, but did not describe other strategies employed to establish trustworthiness and rigor, such as respondent debriefing, triangulation, etc. She also did not discuss much about how she handled the ethical considerations in the study, which are especially critical within naturalistic inquiry.

Strategies such as member checks would seem especially important in a study such as this, in which she was inferring meaning from the women's comments. For example, I was a little unsure about some of her analysis of the dreams of the women. Though I know that this is in the psychoanalytic tradition and can provide a glimpse (albeit unconscious) of the inner processes, I question whether it is always an accurate depiction. Also, I would have like to hear more about how the experiences these women had impacted them. In focusing on the psychological nature about women's identity, we often do not address the sociological realities of the women's lives. We must place these women within the context of the time, and to understand both the internal and external influences on their development.

My final concerns lie in the application of Josselson's findings. Even the researcher herself gave a guarded answer in discussing whether the data tell us how to assist someone in moving to another status. Josselson suggested a few strategies such as helping young women develop a sense of competence in their abilities, and providing them support and affirmation without controlling or coddling them. She also discussed the importance of mentoring for

women in the Identity Achievement stage. Yet she went on to say that these processes are still not fully understood and are so internal that it is difficult to determine how external conditions could foster or inhibit development. Indeed, there is a paucity of information related to applying Josselson's theory to practice (Evans, 1998). As a student development professional, I found her work intriguing, but would be interested in learning more about how I could apply the findings to my work with students.

I also believe caution must also be taken in applying the findings, because the conclusions could easily be misused by some. There could be a tendency to imply that the differences between men and women imply inequality, or that women can't be successful in careers because their jobs are secondary. Josselson (1987) is clear to say that this sense of relatedness does not detract from women's capacities to work or imply that women should be deprived of occupational equality. I believe the findings must not be used to diminish women based on a cultural view that relegates a sense of relatedness to a lower form of development. Instead, the findings point to the fact that we need to rework our concept of identity in a way that is inclusive of over half our population.

### **The Work Continues**

Josselson's work is still not complete. Due to the scope of this paper, I chose to write primarily from information contained in her seminal book, *Finding Herself*. She has since written another book, *Revising Herself* (Josselson, 1996), which describes her interviews with the women at age 43. She plans to interview the women again when they turn 53 (which should be around 2003). Josselson's 30 years of research represents an important contribution to research on identity by revealing the complex, multidimensional, and evolving nature of identity in women. I look forward to reading the unique stories of these women as they age. Their voices can not only help me to increase my own understanding of the identity of college women, but also how identity unfolds throughout the life cycle.

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