

2020

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Steven L. Berman

Marilyn J. Montgomery  
*George Fox University*, [mmontgomery@georgefox.edu](mailto:mmontgomery@georgefox.edu)

Kaylin Ratner

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### Recommended Citation

Berman, Steven L.; Montgomery, Marilyn J.; and Ratner, Kaylin, "Trauma and identity: A reciprocal relationship?" (2020). *Faculty Publications - Graduate School of Counseling*. 31.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gsc/31>

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# Trauma and identity: A reciprocal relationship?

Steven L. Berman, Marilyn J. Montgomery, Kaylin Ratner

## Abstract

Trauma can alter the course of identity development and destabilize existing identity commitments. Trauma, whether past or current, can also impact the resources a person brings to identity work. However, identity can also be a lens through which trauma is perceived and interpreted, helping to determine whether a traumatic experience results in posttraumatic stress disorder or posttraumatic growth. Despite the apparent implications each construct has for the other, the scholarship at the intersection of trauma and identity remains sparse. This Special Issue explores how and when trauma and identity influence one another by considering their association across various adolescent populations, methodologies, traumatic event types, and facets of identity. In doing so, this Special Issue lays the groundwork necessary for exploring, proposing, and testing more complex and nuanced reciprocal relations models between identity and trauma.

## Keywords

Identity, Trauma, Event centrality, Posttraumatic stress, Posttraumatic growth

Identity has been hailed as a core developmental milestone of adolescence for more than half a century (Erikson, 1959). Surveying adolescents' developmental challenges in both contemporary and historical times, Erikson noted that for those maturing in a rapidly changing culture, questions of identity can result in a personal crisis in knowing who one is and what is worthy of one's commitments. Recently, scholars have empirically examined how distressing circumstances and distress related to identity formation itself appear to be linked (Ertorer, 2014; Merrill, Waters, & Fivush, 2015; Scott et al., 2014; Wiley et al., 2011). In addition to the normal levels of identity distress that typically characterizes adolescence, some youth face profound hardship and adversity, and these experiences seem to promote identity development for some but complicate or hinder it for others.

As Berman (2016) argued, it is logical that adverse or traumatic experiences and identity development influence one another. Yet there is a considerable lack of research dedicated to examining these influences, although some studies indicate that trauma can alter the course of identity development by destabilizing existing identity commitments (Sandole & Auerbach, 2013; Tay, Rees, Chen, Kareth, & Silove, 2015; Zheng & Lawson, 2015). Likewise, identity can serve as a lens through which trauma is perceived and interpreted, thus moderating its impact on the individual, (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Fitzgerald, Berntsen, & Broadbridge,

2015; George, Park, & Chaudoir, 2016). An individual's perception and interpretation of events can make the difference between whether that trauma results in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other related sequelae, or posttraumatic growth (Boals & Schuettler, 2011; Groleau, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2013).

This Special Issue explores the potential for a conceptual and potentially reciprocal relationship between trauma and identity by sketching the association across a number of different populations, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and in relation to different traumatic event types and facets of identity. In doing so, the issue adds to what is known about how identity and trauma may be linked. As a result of this contribution, scholars will be better equipped to explore the phenomenology of the intersection of identity and traumatic experiences, elaborate conceptual and theoretical models of their relationship, and to test empirical models that can illuminate how dynamic influence between identity and trauma experiences unfolds over time.

### **1. Identity and its associations with trauma**

Identity is a term often used to describe the roles, goals, values, and beliefs about the world that people adopt in order to give their lives a sense of direction and purpose. Traumatic events can cause people to question and re-evaluate their commitments to those roles, goals, values, and beliefs. For instance, some people might define their identity to a large degree around their role as parent or spouse. The death of a child or partner might have profound effects on an identity vested in a role that no longer exists. Similarly, traumatic events might make certain goals seem less obtainable, and can challenge one's beliefs about the world (e.g., the world is a safe place, people are basically good), resulting in a change in values and perspectives. Worry and anxiety about the inability to resolve various identity issues has come to be called identity distress (Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004). Identity distress has been linked to trauma (Ertorer, 2014; Merrill, Waters, & Fivush, 2015) and PTSD (Scott et al., 2014; Wiley et al., 2011). Waterman, 2019 (this issue) has created a taxonomy to describe the various ways that trauma can affect identity (e.g., identity delay, identity threat, identity loss).

In addition to trauma having effects on identity, identity can also affect the ways in which trauma is perceived, interpreted, and experienced. Our beliefs about the world (e.g., everything happens for a reason, people are basically cruel and selfish), our religious beliefs (e.g., God would not give me more than I can handle, my suffering will be rewarded), and political beliefs (e.g., the ruling factions are evil and need to be overthrown) all serve to place our traumas in a certain perspective which can make them easier or more difficult to endure. Kira and colleagues (Kira et al., 2018, 2019; Kira, Shuwiekh, Rice, Al Ibraheem, & Aljakoub, 2017) have developed an identity trauma model that identifies various ways in which identity salience can mediate and moderate the effects of trauma on mental health. Traumas based on discrimination and existential threat to one's group and individual identity can be particularly harmful (Bombay et al., 2014). The degree to which an experienced trauma is related to one's identity has been termed event centrality (Fitzgerald et al., 2015; George et al., 2016), and is a significant factor in trauma recovery, helping to determine whether the resultant distress will lead to PTSD or posttraumatic growth (Boykin, Anyanwu, Calvin, & Orcutt, 2019; Kramer, Whiteman, Witte, Siverstein, & Weathers, 2019). In

general, traumatic events with higher reported centrality tend to be more positively related to the development and maintenance of PTSD symptoms (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Brown, Antonius, Kramer, Root, & Hirst, 2010).

Traumatic events can also be incorporated into one's identity as they become defining moments in a person's life. These events can become turning or reference points in their expectations about their future (Berman, 2016; Webermann et al., 2019). They might see themselves from that point forward as a victim or a survivor (Morris, Campbell, Dwyer, Dunn, & Chambers, 2011). Hate crimes committed against them may deepen or fracture their affiliation and identification with the targeted group. For example, Yi (2014) suggests that when ethnic identity is tied to trauma, some people may defensively dissociate from their culture of origin. Similarly, preventing others from having to experience a similar trauma might become a career goal or inspire a sense of purpose in life. Kashdan and McKnight (2009) call this type of purpose acquisition “reactive development,” and it shares consistent associations with identity-promoting resources such as agency, social well-being, and purpose commitment (Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014).

## **2. In this issue**

The articles in this Special Issue on Trauma and Identity examine a variety of types of trauma among varying adolescent populations, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The Issue was constructed in such a way to shed light on when, how, and why the association between trauma and identity takes shape in toxic versus transformative ways. The first article by Waterman, 2019 (this issue) proposes a taxonomy of developmental impacts of traumatic events on identity functioning (e.g., identity delay, identity threat, identity loss). He also puts forth a series of propositions to predict the developmental impacts of trauma, which could serve as a useful guide for future research. This article offers a conceptual framework into which other articles in the Special Issue can be placed.

Several articles examine traumatic events within a general population of adolescents. Marin and Shkreli, 2019 (this issue) used a qualitative approach in examining trauma narratives of college students who were asked to write about the most recent traumatic event that they had experienced. Participants also completed self-report surveys of identity status and identity distress. The analyses revealed that those who constructed their narrative in ruminative ways, characterized by brooding, self-doubt, or criticism exhibited unsuccessful meaning-making efforts. Conversely, those who constructed their narratives in adaptive self-reflective ways tended to find meaning in their traumatic experience that reflected an integrated sense of self. Further, those who lacked identity commitment and reported high levels of identity distress had particular difficulties in making sense of their traumatic experiences in adaptive ways. Based on their results, they recommend interventions focused on storytelling to provide support and guidance during selfreflection for those who have experienced a trauma, in order to help them make meaning of their experiences in ways that promote psychological growth. Malin, Morton, Nadal, and Smith, 2019 (this issue) used a mixed-methods approach to analyze data collected from eight middle schools located in four different regions of the United States, to study the relationship between purpose and coping with adversity. Quantitative analyses showed that purpose was associated with positive reframing coping, a strategy that many people use to overcome adverse experiences. Based

on their pattern of results, the authors question whether (a) similar processes or (b) similar antecedents underlie both purpose and the propensity to turn to positive reframing coping. Qualitative interviews with purposeful youth tended to contain themes of adversity and, more often than not, youth drew connections between the content of their purpose in life and the various hardships they have encountered. The results of Malin and colleagues' work offer new avenues for prevention and intervention programs aimed at overcoming adversity. In a study of the effects of stressful life events on identity among a sample of Dutch adolescents, de Moor, Van der Graaff, Van Dijk, Meeus, and Branje, 2019 (this issue) examined whether having to repeat a grade and or death of a loved one were related to changes in educational or relational identity. Data from a longitudinal study, collected annually starting at age 12 or 13, were analyzed using latent difference score models. Contrary to expectations, they failed to find evidence that experiencing a stressful event predicted regressions in identity. Still, social support was related to identity change, suggesting that the social environment may, at times, be more important than actual events. The authors suggest that there are individual differences in the tendency to make connections between an event and the self, and the need for more research into identifying personal and environmental factors that are involved in distinguishing between adolescents who do and do not make such connections.

Two articles in this special issue looked at trauma within refugee populations. The first article exploring identity and trauma in refugee adolescents (Park, 2019; this issue) is a qualitative analysis of the life-course narratives of North Korean youth who resettled in South Korea. Thematic content analysis yielded a proposed six stage model of identity development, from the Vulnerable stage of helplessness in North Korea, through an Invisible stage while hiding in China, to four additional stages (Renewal, Turmoil, Achieved, and Self-Transcendence) after moving to South Korea. Park argues that traditional approaches to identity development do not adequately address the issue of life interruptions and identity fragmentations caused by forced migration or defection. Despite experiences of excruciating adversities, including intense and prolonged social conflict, the findings indicated that such trauma can spur positive identity development. In a quantitative study, Guler and Berman, 2019 (this issue) looked at acculturation, identity distress, and internalizing symptoms among adolescent refugees resettled to the United States from a number of other countries. Based on their analyses of the data, they suggest that native cultural identity and native acculturation may serve as significant protective factors against identity distress and internalizing symptoms. The authors suggest that in the face of increasing forced migration around the world due to war, conflict, and life-threatening persecution, resettlement programs could facilitate positive adjustment to life in new host countries in a more developmentally appropriate way by fostering the maintenance of identification with native cultures while also promoting the skills and knowledge necessary for successful adaptation to the new culture, rather than sacrificing the former in pursuit of the latter.

Finally, three articles in this special issue examine the relationship between trauma and identity within distinct populations. Tyrell, Marcelo, Trang, and Yates, 2019 (this issue) examine associations between trauma, placement disruption, and ethnic-racial identity among newly emancipated foster youth. Using path analysis, they found that childhood maltreatment severity and placement disruption were associated with lower ethnic-racial private regard. Ethnic private regard was associated with higher self-esteem and social support while ethnic centrality was related to poorer adjustment. The authors suggest that efforts to promote

positive feelings toward their ethnic-racial group membership can support minority foster youth's capacity to negotiate developmental challenges in and beyond the child welfare system.

The relations between identity and trauma in an adolescent clinical population were also explored (Penner, Gambin, & Sharp, 2019 this issue). Path analysis was used in a study of psychiatric hospital inpatient adolescents to explore these relations. These authors found that sexual and emotional abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect, were significantly associated with identity diffusion. Reflective function (the social-cognitive ability to recognize thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in self and others) mediated the association between emotional abuse and identity diffusion, and partially mediated the association between overall level of maltreatment and identity diffusion, thus suggesting the importance of enhancing reflective functions as potentially productive foci for ameliorating identity problems. Recognizing that maltreatment may be a risk factor for adolescent identity diffusion, the authors recommend targeting reflective functioning to help build more adaptive identities among adolescents with symptoms of psychiatric disorders and a history of maltreatment.

The final article in this special issue by Price, Polk, Hill, Liang, and Perella, 2019 explores identity-based victimization using cluster analysis among a diverse sample of high school students, including three major groupings: LGBTQ youth, heterosexual youth of color, and heterosexual white youth. The first two groups experienced the most identity-based victimization, and had higher levels of depression, lower well-being, and lower GPAs. Discrimination was found to partially mediate the association between identity and outcomes for LGBTQ youth, and fully mediate this association for heterosexual youth of color. Given their results, the authors make an appeal for targeted treatments that address identity-related victimization in stigmatized populations. Such tailored interventions could be especially meaningful for youth with intersecting stigmatized identities whose unique experiences and mental health concerns have been under-studied.

Taken together, it is hoped that the set of articles in this special issue will inform prevention and intervention efforts at addressing trauma by focusing on its relation to identity issues. Moreover, this collection will foster further research into the complex reciprocal and interactive associations between identity development and traumatic experiences.

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