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**DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**  
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION  
DIVISION 7



# Developmental Psychologist

*APA Division 7*

*Winter 2020*

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## Our Journeys of Identifying Paths of Identity Development

**Yerin Park and Carolina Goncalves**

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“No two individuals are the same,” was Dr. Richard Lerner’s ostensibly banal statement on the first day of class during the fall semester of our Ph.D. program. Everyone in the class believed in the veracity of the statement, without a doubt. However, Dr. Lerner’s following question challenged the way we had been thinking about development. “Then why do we look mainly at averages to study development?” This question altered our theoretical and methodological understanding of the study of human development as more multifaceted and complex than previously believed.

As doctoral students in the Child Study and Human Development program at Tufts University, we both began graduate school with a background in psychology and with an interest in identity development. During our undergraduate training, courses on research methods provided us with plenty of practice computing means from numerical data sets to arrive at what is considered as the “average” or the “norm.”



For instance, computations on how first-year students feel about entering college would rely on an average score from all responses, ranging from “feeling extremely excited” to “feeling extremely terrified,” that would indicate that those who are outside of the average are abnormal, anomalous, or deviant.

We entered graduate school with questions about the normal trajectory of identity development, such as the critical experiences for identity achievement, or contextual factors that make youth deviate from the ideal path of identity development. However, Dr. Lerner made it evident that such a way of thinking contradicts our belief that everyone

is unique and develops in their own individual way.

Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Vygotsky, among others, proposed stage theories that provided explanations of human behavior and cognition at different ages or stages of our lives. Stage theories, such as Erikson’s psychosocial developmental theory and Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory, place human development on a continuous trajectory emphasizing these stages as the normal developmental trajectory.

For instance, the process of identity development presumably begins and concludes during the period of adolescence as demonstrated by Erikson. However, as many of us can agree, we are constantly in the process of identity development after adolescence, as we transition from college, to being employed, and then perhaps going back to school and adopting the student identity again. We are certainly not anomalies.

## Our Journeys of Identifying Paths of Identity Development (Continued)

Throughout the fall semester of this year, we were privileged to work on a research project focused on idiographic (individual) data while also taking a course on the concepts and theories of human development which emphasized person and context mutual relations. The MMDC (Measures and Methods across the Developmental Continuum) project seeks to understand individual developmental pathways by focusing on specific components of developmental trajectories such as executive function, relationship skills, and intentional self-regulation in students across Grades K-12. Through this project, we are hoping that focusing on individual pathways, especially of those who have experienced adversity, can help maximize the opportunities to improve their lives because it will allow us to learn more about specific individuals' needs independent of the group's needs.

Although the MMDC project focuses on the development of skills that are not directly related to our research interests, we are finding it helpful in altering the way we approach our own research. For instance, we are no longer seeking a typical or ideal



path of identity development that is applicable to all youth or, even more, to youth of color, or even youth of a particular racial or ethnic group. We will focus our identity development research on first identifying specific pathways associated with specific youth within the specific racial or ethnic groups we study, and then ask questions about what are the contextual relations that moderate these person-specific trajectories. The MMDC project has taught us that we should be sensitive to the potentially diverse ways in which youth of any racial or ethnic group develop their identities. Moreover, we now acknowledge that even with similar experiences, adolescents can develop different identities, depending on other intraindividual or contextual components of development.

Stage theories were fundamental in shifting the focus of human development from biological factors to include the environment as an essential component of human development. Nevertheless, stage theories still contained several limitations and were utilized to identify "normal development" among individuals. We are very enthusiastic about exploring the domains of individual human development through relational developmental systems theories which deviate from stage theories and averages to emphasize mutual relations between individuals and their environment and the importance of focusing on the uniqueness of every individual. We also hope to work with other graduate students and new scholars who are interested in this approach to studying human development.

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