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Know Thy Selfie: using contemporary art to teach adolescent identity exploration

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight how one high school psychology teacher helped students explore the concept of identity exploration and express their own personal identity through the use of contemporary art in a high school psychology course.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, techniques one high school teacher used for utilizing the visual arts to teach identity exploration in a high school psychology course are shared, including student discussion surrounding the visual analysis of contemporary artwork, thoughtful student application of developmental theories and the student production of original artwork to express one's identity.

Findings – Students participating in the lesson engaged enthusiastically in the discussion of the use of selfies in contemporary art and demonstrated thoughtful reflection in the creation of their own selfies.

Research limitations/implications – Future research is needed to systematically investigate the effectiveness of incorporating contemporary art as a means of teaching identity exploration to adolescents as part of a high school psychology curriculum.

Practical implications – Adolescent exploration is a key feature of the adolescent experience and is part of the psychology curriculum at the high school level. Such courses afford students the unique opportunity to apply developmental theories and theories of identity exploration to recent occurrences in their lives. One possibility for teaching identity exploration is through the visual arts.

Originality/value – This lesson advances psychology instruction through the purposeful scaffolding of identity exploration as both content and process using contemporary art.

Keywords Adolescence, Teaching psychology, Identity exploration, Contemporary art, High school, Identity development

Paper type General review

Introduction

Contemporary art changes with the times. Currently, as one art critic notes, "we live in the age of the selfie" (Saltz, 2014). A selfie is a self-portrait photograph taken with a handheld device (Selfie, n.d.). While self-portraits are not a new phenomenon, the selfie has become a standard form of self-expression in the twenty-first century (Saltz, 2014). Adolescents today are rather familiar with selfies and frequently share these photographs via text messaging and on social networking platforms such as Instagram or Twitter (Moreau, 2017). Adolescents' infatuation with selfies coincides with a period of time in their lives when they are simultaneously on a quest to formulate a sense of identity (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Webster, 2014). As adolescents grapple with their sense of self and begin to establish a firm sense of identity, it is beneficial for secondary educators to consider in what ways student self-expression may enhance curricular goals. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the potential for the inclusion of student identity exploration within the high school psychology curriculum, and to highlight how one high school psychology teacher helped students explore the concept of identity exploration and express their own personal identity through the use of contemporary art in a high school psychology course.

Adolescence

Early developmental theorists, such as Erik Erikson, consider the approximate years from 10 to 20 to be the "adolescent decade" host to an array of biological, cognitive and

psychosocial changes (Lerner and Steinberg, 2009). Contemporary theorists suggest a breakdown of adolescence into three stages: early adolescence (10–14 years), middle adolescence (15–17 years) and late adolescence (18–21 years) (Steinberg and Morris, 2001). As a whole, adolescence is a time of transition characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, neurological, moral and psychosocial development (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Hollenstein and Lougheed, 2013; Lerner and Steinberg, 2009; Morgan and Huebner, 2009). Biologically, the typical adolescent is experiencing growth spurts, greater sleep needs and the hormonal changes accompanying puberty (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Hollenstein and Lougheed, 2013; Morgan and Huebner, 2009). Cognitively, adolescents are developing formal and advanced reasoning skills, abstract-thinking abilities and have heightened levels of self-awareness (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Lerner and Steinberg, 2009; Morgan and Huebner, 2009; Steinberg and Morris, 2001). Neurologically, the development of the prefrontal cortex extends into late adolescence and may play a role in risk-taking behavior (Blakemore and Mills, 2014). Morally, adolescents become increasingly able to take on the perspective of others which is associated with prosocial behaviors such as helping and sharing (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2009). Psychosocially, the adolescent forms close relationships with peers, experiences increased social comparison and through peer relationships also establishes a more firm sense of identity (Caskey and Anfara, 2014; Morgan and Huebner, 2009; Steinberg and Morris, 2001). High school students are characterized as middle to late adolescents with developmental milestones and tasks that are similar, yet unique when compared to early adolescents. While early adolescents begin to conceptualize the self in relation to others, middle and late adolescents engage in experimentation and identity exploration (Steinberg and Morris, 2001).

Of all of the various developmental milestones reached during the adolescent decade, the formation of personal identity is a critical task faced by the mid-to-late adolescent (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) terms this developmental stage identity vs identity confusion (12–21 years) to highlight the identity crisis, or conflict, one encounters when making ideological and occupational commitments. During this period, the adolescent considers the commitments made to various aspects of identity and may enter into a period of identity exploration (Marcia, 1966). Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses build upon Erikson's original theory of identity development as possible outcomes to the psychosocial identity crisis in adolescence. The four statuses represent the adolescent's position on two continuums of identity exploration and identity commitment (Marcia, 1966). A lack of exploration without commitment to a particular identity is referred to as identity diffusion, while a lack of exploration with commitment to an identity set forth by parents or peers is referred to as identity foreclosure. An adolescent in a period of exploration without identity commitments is characterized by identity moratorium, while an adolescent that has explored various options and has made commitments experiences identity achievement. In order for the identity achievement to occur, an adolescent must go through a period of exploration. Thus, the statuses of moratorium and identity achievement are perceived as more mature identity statuses due to the importance of exploration (Njus and Johnson, 2008). While contemporary theorists look to dual cycle models of identity formation where an adolescent reconsiders early commitments and then engages in-depth exploration as a means of evaluating or maintaining previous commitments, Erikson and Marcia's initial continuums of exploration and commitment remain at the core of studies of identity formation in the twenty-first century (Crocetti *et al.*, 2008; Luyckx *et al.*, 2006; Meeus, 2011).

Identity exploration, and the associated statuses of moratorium and achievement, has been meaningfully linked with desirable traits in adolescents, such as a higher need for cognition, higher scores for Big 5 personality traits, such as extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness, and as well as increased civic

participation (Crocetti *et al.*, 2012; Meeus, 2011; Njus and Johnson, 2008). Identity exploration is critical to psychosocial development and has implications for education at the secondary level (Morgan and Huebner, 2009). Adolescents spend a bulk of their waking hours within the school context. Therefore, it may be necessary for secondary educators to consider in what ways identity exploration may be cultivated within the classroom. Learning activities can be designed in such a way to trigger, support and scaffold the identity exploration (Flum and Kaplan, 2006; Sinai *et al.*, 2012). While there are studies highlighting teaching methods that center on identity exploration in English/Language Arts, Mathematics and Environmental Education (Kaplan *et al.*, 2014; Sinai *et al.*, 2012), within the social studies and high school psychology, specifically, no studies known to these authors have been conducted to date.

High school psychology curriculum includes a focus on identity within the context of human development. The National Standards for High School Psychology indicate that students must be able to apply the tenets of developmental theories to their own personal life experiences (American Psychological Association, 2005). For instance, students may connect Erik Erikson's lifespan development stages to conflicts or crises they have faced in childhood and adolescence. Furthermore, the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies call upon social studies programs to provide experiences that include the study of individual development and identity (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010). The high school psychology curriculum affords students the unique opportunity to explore their own identity as an educational goal. The National Core Arts Standards call for students to interpret meaning conveyed in various works and to make connections between the visual arts and other disciplines (State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education, 2014). The integration of contemporary art into the psychology classroom is one medium that would allow for identity exploration in a manner that is accessible for both students and teachers.

Contemporary art as a medium for identity exploration

Art, particularly contemporary art, is often overlooked and is an untapped medium for the teaching of social studies themes (Marshall and Donahue, 2014). Social studies teachers are likely familiar with canonical works of art that are commonly addressed in the historical teaching of Western Civilization. Students and teachers alike are often less familiar with contemporary artworks. With contemporary works, there is frequently no correct interpretation for students to recognize; rather, students are able to experience and perceive works from their own perspectives (Marshall and Donahue, 2014). Similar to the daily task of a social studies teacher to illuminate the human experience and foster student inquiry, contemporary artists incorporate novel subject matter and utilize the latest techniques and materials in a manner that invites viewers to question social and cultural circumstances (Cruz *et al.*, 2015). The lack of familiarity and raising unconventional questions make contemporary art an ideal medium for sparking contemplation and conversation in the social studies classroom. However, for the same reasons that support its incorporation, contemporary art may bring pause to teachers, especially those who are more comfortable with traditional teacher-centered instruction (Marshall and Donahue, 2014). The Inside Art program, a university-school partnership between the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum (USFCAM) and Hillsborough County Public Schools, was developed with the intent to assist secondary teachers with the seamless integration of contemporary arts and social studies themes into classroom lessons.

The Inside Art program accompanies rotating exhibitions at USFCAM by providing local teachers with lesson plans, resources and regular workshops to facilitate the integration of social studies themes within the study of the arts. Program participants include museum educators, curators, teachers, artists and university faculty members who

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serve as curriculum developers. The Inside Art program offers curricular materials from past and present contemporary art exhibitions on their website (http://ira.usf.edu/ InsideART/index.html). Below, we will elaborate on the lesson derived from the Inside Art curricular materials created for the Spring 2015 Enhanced! exhibit at USFCAM.

The Enhanced! exhibit showcased works of photographers past and present in order to provide an expansive representation of photography as a medium. Jerome Favre's work, *Hong Kong Skyline with Selfie* (2013), provides a modern take on photography in which a selfie is captured by an observer (see Plate 1). The subject of the photograph is presenting a false reality to the viewers by posing in front of a backdrop of the Hong Kong skyline rather than the actual skyline that is muddled by pollution. Favre's photograph opens up the door to a line of questioning that equates the common practice of taking a selfie with the more in-depth subject of the way one presents one's self to others.

The lesson plans, materials and resources provided on the Inside Art website created by Cheryl, one of the authors of this manuscript, are available in editable formats that make personalizing the lesson to your students rather simple. Sarah, the other author of this manuscript, has taught this selfie lesson multiple times and has found that students engage almost immediately with *The Hong Kong Skyline with Selfie* visual analysis and discussion.

Teaching identity exploration: the lesson

Jerome Favre's *Hong Kong Skyline with Selfie* (2013) operates as a fitting introduction into a discussion of identity as many, if not all, adolescent-aged students have participated in the practice of taking a selfie at some point. Sarah conducts this lesson over the course of a single 90-min class block, in three separate sections of a regular-level psychology elective course including students in tenth through 12th grade (ages 15–18 years old). To initiate this lesson, Sarah begins by asking students to list all of the details they see in the image. Instead of moving the conversation immediately to student interpretations of the photograph, Sarah engages students in a visual analysis by asking them to identify what they see. As students respond, Sarah encourages students to provide visual evidence

Plate 1.
*Hong Kong Skyline
with Selfie*, 2013,
Jerome Favre

from the photo to support all responses. The work of the teacher is to acknowledge the contributions of all students throughout this activity. Discussion-based visual analysis is helpful in the formation of classroom community because of the natural flow that can occur in the sharing of ideas (Yenawine, 1998). Sarah then facilitates a student discussion about the photograph by asking questions such as:

- What is the man doing?

- Why is he standing in front of the backdrop of the city?

- What city do you think this is?

- What can you garner about this man based on the photograph?

- What do you think the man's "selfie" will look like?

- Do you think the man knows that he is being photographed?

- In what ways are "selfies" accurate or inaccurate representations of oneself?

Following each student's response, Sarah scaffolds student thinking by encouraging evidence-based claims to support each contribution. As students share their responses to the above-listed questions, Sarah inserts factual information about the photograph and the artist to encourage further discussion. Some facts about the photograph and artist include: Jerome Favre is a freelance photographer based in Hong Kong since 2007; Favre's work covers a variety of events including presidential campaigns, an SARS outbreak and typhoons; Favre has taken a unique interest in street photography and has captured a number of subjects while mid-selfie; and this photograph was taken along the Hong Kong waterfront skyline in 2013 on a day where the air pollution index reached such a high level that the government had to issue a public health warning. Student discussion quickly turned to normative selfie behaviors, personal experiences and emotions surrounding the topic of selfies.

Following the visual analysis activity, Sarah asks students: In what ways does a selfie represent who you are as an individual? Here the teacher can also inquire about the subject, the setting and recipients of selfies. Once again, student responses may vary and can be quite revealing. It is the teacher's job to help students see the common themes among their responses. As comments and reactions to selfie behavior dwindles, Sarah asks: What does the word "identity" mean to you?

At this point in the lesson, students have critically examined a work of art, reflected upon their own behaviors, and defined a term central to the topic of development. While certainly elongated, this anticipatory set has provided the complete "hook" for a brief content lecture reviewing the central tenets of Erik Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of identity crisis and James Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses. After explaining the relevant theories, Sarah then provides students with character examples from fiction that they can relate to each identity status (see Figure 1). Then, individually or in groups, students generate their own examples. Asking students to produce their own examples affords them the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and provides an opportunity for clarifications and re-teaching, as needed.

The selfie as authentic assessment
As an authentic assessment, Sarah tasks students with creating their own contemporary piece of art by taking a selfie that depicts their current identity status along with a written reflection that details the way they have represented themselves in their selfie and what identity status they feel best describes their current state according to the work of James Marcia. The students are also given the option to create a "symbolic selfie" in place

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Has exploration taken place?

		Yes	No
Has a commitment been made?	Yes	**Achievement** Pop Culture Example Katniss Everdeen *The Hunger Games* The protagonist of the *Hunger Games* trilogy rejects the expected social roles and behaviors of her community and commits to her role as revolutionary	**Foreclosure** Pop Culture Example Draco Malfoy *Harry Potter* The bully from the *Harry Potter* series accepts the social expectations and roles dictated by his father and does not question is position on the side of evil
	No	**Moratorium** Pop Culture Example Cady Heron *Mean Girls* The main character of *Mean Girls* is a new student in high school trying to find the right clique. She experiments with many roles including member of "The Plastics", math tutor, and friend	**Diffusion** Pop Culture Example Joey Tribbiani *Friends* As one of six friends on the NBC sitcom, Joey is a struggling actor portrayed as simpleminded with a good heart. He holds a series of odd jobs and has few serious relationships

Figure 1.
Identity status chart with pop culture character examples

of a self-portrait if they feel their identity is better captured by an object or scene. The assignment instructions include the following guidelines:

- take a self-portrait or "selfie" depicting your identity status;
- write a one-paragraph description of the ways in which your selfie reflects your identity based upon the theories of Erikson and Marcia; and
- as an alternative to taking a self-portrait, create a symbolic selfie depicting an object or setting that captures your current state of identity development.

Evaluation of the selfie assignment focuses upon the one-paragraph description and the ways in which students utilize terms, such as crisis, exploration and commitment, in addition to the statuses and stages described by Marcia and Erikson. In Sarah's classroom, students were tasked with the selfie assignment as a homework activity. Students spent approximately 15 min in the following class period sharing their selfies and reviewing the key vocabulary.

Lessons learned in the psychology classroom
This particular lesson set was used with three sections of Sarah's high school psychology course, and each class discussion surrounding the photograph was unique. One class debated the quality of the final selfie taken by the man in the image, pointing to the creases that are visible in the artificial backdrop as a giveaway that the representation on the man's social media feed is deceptive. Another class engaged in a caption contest where students broke into groups to guess what kind of description the man might use to

accompany his selfie. The last class supported the man's decision to take a selfie in front of the backdrop with many students stating they would probably make the same decision.

Almost all students in each class had recently taken a selfie; yet, the selfie behavior of students was surprisingly varied. Without very much prompting or probing, students offered up descriptions of their selfie usage such as "I send morning selfies to my friends when I am not wearing any makeup and usually it's my sleepy face," or "The selfies I post on Instagram are different than the selfies I send on SnapChat. Instagram has filters and SnapChat is more my real self." When asked about the ways the selfie represented their identities, students seemed to describe the concept of identity as a fluid construct with their many selfies representing their many facets of self. However, when asked to judge others on the basis of a selfie, the attributions made by students became more dispositional. For instance, "If someone posts a selfie everyday, that might be a sign that they are very into themselves." Student discussion of the reasoning behind selfie behavior was consistent with a preliminary qualitative research study of introductory-level college finding that adolescents take selfies as a leisure time activity, as a means of self-expression, and as a way of marking memorable moments (Soerjoatmodojo, 2016). Student contemplation of the potential meaning ascribed to selfies was an ideal segue into the theories of identity development.

When tasked with creating a selfie as a class assignment that served as an authentic assessment, several students who were less than enthusiastic about standing reading assignments in the course were the first to submit a selfie. The results of this assignment varied greatly with many students taking the alternative option of creating a symbolic selfie, while others got creative with unique backgrounds and filters on their traditional selfies. This authentic assessment helped reveal student understandings of course content, affording Sarah the opportunity to review Marcia's theory. It also served as a way for students to reveal their deep reflection and thoughtful consideration of their own identity. Especially interesting was the honesty students displayed, as in the case of one student who was genuinely uncertain with how to answer the question, "Who am I?" This student chose to use a crumpled blank piece of paper to represent Marcia's status of identity diffusion with the blankness of the paper, demonstrating a lack of commitment and the scrunched up ball to show a lack of effort in exploration.

Each student submitted a written explanation of how either Erikson or Marcia's theory of identity development corresponded with their selfie. Through this process, Sarah was able to discern whether or not students were able to accurately apply Marcia's concepts to themselves as a check for understanding, and she was able to invite students to actively self-assess their own progress on the developmental task of identity development. Students jumped at the opportunity to showcase aspects of self that are not typically discussed in the classroom setting. Several students chose to use selfies taken while traveling on vacation to demonstrate evidence of their identity exploration characteristic in either status of moratorium or identity achievement. Other students chose to include aspects of their current identity into their selfie by curating specific props or backdrops into their photographs, such as nature scenes, their bedrooms, pieces of artwork and even a depiction of peer relationships via a video game headset (see Plate 2). Such positive self-presentation is linked with greater identity clarity and higher self-esteem (Yang *et al.*, 2017). Overall, students responded favorably to the authentic nature of the assessment and were eager to receive feedback on their submitted selfies.

Conclusions and recommendations
The linking of contemporary art to high school psychology curriculum allowed for students in Sarah's classroom to both explore and express personal identity. Students' direct engagement with Erikson and Marcia's theories of identity development permitted deeper

This is a picture of me at my desk. I decided to have a more bored look, and that is my room in its natural state. And I feel like this photo shows my identity fairly well, and it shows that I have completed the 5th stage in Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development. I believe I have completed this stage as I know exactly who I want to be when I get older, and I know my personality fairly well. Demonstrated by the picture, I am a relaxed teen who can easily become bored, and spends most of his time at his desk hanging out with friends, as shown by the headset. And with James Marcia's theory, I don't really see myself in any of the areas, but in a happy middle ground of self-knowing and little to zero conflict with myself and others

Plate 2.
Sample student selfie

understanding and reflection on the self. The use of contemporary art, free of predetermined meaning, promotes a spirit of inquiry suitable for identity exploration. Sarah's comfort level with the presentation of contemporary art can be attributed to the Inside Art professional development workshops and museum visits. This lesson advances psychology instruction through the purposeful scaffolding of identity exploration as both content and process (Kaplan *et al.*, 2014).

The use of selfies and other methods commonplace and desirable to adolescents is worthy of consideration and further investigation. Future research may explore the role of contemporary art in social studies instruction as a means of meeting curricular goals, as well as empirical studies of the effectiveness of this method. Further, future research is needed to systematically investigate the effectiveness of incorporating contemporary art as a means of teaching identity exploration to adolescents as part of a high school psychology curriculum. As selfies are increasing in popularity as inspiration for contemporary art, they are also becoming an integral component of the adolescent experience. Inviting students to turn the lens on themselves is an essential step in the delivery of meaningful psychology instruction.

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