

CHAPTER ONE

SITUATING OURSELVES IN THE STUDY OF IDENTITY

Robert Coles, author, psychiatrist, and professor, has eloquently written on the relationship between stories and theories. In his book *The Call of Stories*, he urged for “more stories, less theory” (Coles, 1989, p. 27). Coles recounted that during his many years as a psychiatrist he was armed with the best education, superior medical techniques, and widely regarded expertise; however, he was most effective when he was able to nudge his patients to tell him the stories of their lives. He wrote:

I explained that we all had accumulated stories in our lives, that each of us had a history of such stories, that no one’s stories are quite like anyone else’s, and that we could, after a fashion, become our own appreciative and comprehending critics by learning to pull together the various incidents in our lives in such a way that they do, in fact, become an old-fashioned story. (p. 11)

Coles (1989) went on to refer to “a respect for narrative as everyone’s rock-bottom capacity, but also as the universal gift, to be shared with others” (p. 30).

It is in this spirit that we begin this book focused on the complexities of identity development among college students. The study of identity may be considered an investigation into the stories of one’s life; as an

individual constructs a sense of self, tempered by the external world, a story unfolds and gets written. As Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) suggested, identity stories are “told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by stories we tell” (p. 7).

We hope to make explicit the stories that have framed our respective worldviews, our beliefs, and our commitment to an understanding of identity. Thus, we begin by offering our stories to you. And, like Coles (1989) summarizing what he had learned from his mentor in medical school, William Carlos Williams, we believe: “Their story, yours, mine—it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (p. 30).

Susan’s Story

The roots of my interest in identity research took hold long ago. I am a product of the 1960s, and among my most vivid and significant memories is my eighth-grade field trip to Washington, DC, during the Vietnam Moratorium Day—there was a huge antiwar protest, during which we walked alongside those wearing black armbands as a symbol of protest and singing, “Where have all the young men gone . . .” I remember clearly where I was when all four assassinations of my childhood occurred (John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.). I listened carefully to the lyrics of the likes of Peter, Paul, and Mary and Simon and Garfunkel. And at a young age I was reading books like *Soul on Ice*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Black Like Me*. I was tuned into injustices, inequality, and the importance of social action as I watched the civil rights movement unfold, large-scale protests against the Vietnam War, and the war on poverty. As a student affairs practitioner, teacher, and scholar for many years now, thinking about, teaching, and researching identity have enabled me to extend these roots and plant new seeds.

My fascination with identity and Erik Erikson began as an eighth grader (apparently eighth grade was a pivotal year for my intellectual growth!) when I wrote my “big” final paper on Erikson’s stages of identity as I understood them. I was particularly intrigued by his notion of psychosocial moratorium (a different moratorium than the antiwar protest) because it sounded like something I would want to experience. This introduction to a theory of identity, reflected against what I considered to be my own identity quirks, led me to more formal study of identity and

student development, most likely in an attempt to understand my own. When I was in graduate school it was fashionable to have a problem with William Perry Jr. and the other “White guys who studied White students.” This led me down paths of both self-reflection on my own social identities that were silenced in what I was reading and critique because of what I perceived as a lack of relevance to my own life. What follows is something of my story and several of the “moments in it” (Coles, 1989, p. 11) as I describe what led me to the study of identity.

For reasons of which I was mostly unaware at the time, I understood at a young age that a privileged background gave me a number of choices and options that others did not have and permitted me a childhood I was able to enjoy. And yet, I also, from a young age, felt like an “other” in the world, and this, I believe, is what propelled me toward such experiences as studying abroad in Kenya for four months in college, working in a dry cleaning factory as the only White person “in the back room,” and volunteering in Appalachia (Kentucky) after graduating from college. In all of these experiences I was keenly aware of being different. In one instance, I was ostracized as an “other” and not trusted (Appalachia); in another, I was included and treated as a member of the “family” (Kenya); and in yet another, I was regarded deferentially only because I was White (dry cleaning factory). I thought about what made me similar to the people I was with and what made us different. I wondered about what drew us together and what pushed us apart. I was also aware that in some experiences I was a visitor in another culture, able to return to my comfortable world when I wanted to—an option not always available to those with whom I interacted and worked. These early stirrings of difference inform who I am today.

My earliest feelings of difference I now know are related to my sexual orientation. I carried around this secret about myself for a very long time because I knew my parents would not want to acknowledge this dimension of who I am. When I disclosed my “secret” to my mother, of course she knew. Mothers know these things. But I also think my mother was quite certain that none of her friends had gay children, and if they did, they certainly would not talk about it. So we did not talk about this dimension of my life either. For many years, I lived what felt like a double life. I could present the face of the “dutiful daughter” in some settings and that of the increasingly comfortable lesbian in others. I worked hard to maintain my parents’ approval of me while wrestling with how that could include presenting a more authentic self. I made sure that I achieved in all dimensions of my life so that it could never be said that my failings were due to my

sexual orientation. I was a good student, an accomplished athlete, and a loyal family member.

It is probably not an accident that I spent ten years working at a Catholic college, which in many ways replicated the identity constraints of my family—“We all know who you are, but just don’t talk about it or be too obvious.” I experienced the dynamic of feeling at once invisible and silenced because of who I was and highly visible as an “other.” I learned how to move through very different environments and, like a chameleon, blend into the setting. This is both the privilege and the potential liability (because it results in inauthentic ways of living) of sexual orientation. However, I think I am the person I am today because of my sexual orientation, or more precisely, because of the process of coming to terms with my sexual orientation. It is why I read the books I did as a kid, chose certain educational experiences, and developed early stirrings of empathy and a social conscience, and even why I research and teach what I do.

In the early 1990s I began a doctoral program as a full-time student after many years of practice as a student affairs administrator. My years as a dean of students were rich and full, providing me with ample experience on which to draw in my doctoral courses. When I wrote my application for the doctoral program, I looked to these experiences to come up with the requested statement of my research interests: leadership development, service-learning, and women college students. However, I also brought with me the question that nagged me during my master’s program ten years prior: How could I locate myself in the theories I was studying?

During my first semester as a doctoral student in the college student personnel program at the University of Maryland, I enrolled in a women’s studies class titled “Race, Class, and Gender” taught by professor and sociologist Bonnie Thornton Dill, a leading scholar in the areas of African American women and families and Black feminist scholarship (and, as the reader will see in subsequent chapters, a very significant influence on my intellectual and scholarly development). In this class I was introduced to theoretical frameworks and a literature base that helped address some of what I found missing in the student development scholarship (in part because this literature had not been written yet—Carol Gilligan had just published *In a Different Voice* as I was finishing my master’s program). The class also placed an explicit focus on populations previously absent from the dominant literature I had studied in my master’s program. My final paper in this class focused on African American women college students and represented an early effort to integrate two theoretical frameworks (student development theory and Black feminist scholarship) to extend an understanding of an underrepresented student population.

The next year, I completed a course in phenomenology that introduced me to the philosophical underpinnings of a phenomenological worldview as well as the methods of phenomenological research. In this class I was introduced to and investigated the phenomenological concepts of lifeworld, essence, empathy, and difference. I was intrigued by Jacques Derrida's and Martin Heidegger's concept of *difference* and the relationship between identity and difference. Intertwined with my own experiences of feeling different during my adolescent years was a curiosity about the juxtaposition of identity and difference in relation to student development. Heidegger took on the seemingly incompatible association between difference and identity, suggesting that the trappings of Western thought created a tradition of oppositional frameworks and produced the discourse of identity as sameness and difference as distinct. Instead, Heidegger emphasized the essential relationship between the two and a conception of identity as emerging from the central human experience of difference. I concluded then that exploring identity through the construct of difference requires that multiple dimensions of identity be considered and that individual voices be heard.

At this time, the concept of voice was popular in the identity discourse. Many scholars noted their motivation to "give voice" to some set of previously silenced populations and experiences. It was Dr. Thornton Dill who pointed out to me that "giving voice" is actually antithetical to the presumed empowerment that is to result, as the power differential inherent in one giving voice and the other receiving it suggests. However, the concepts of silence and voice were linked in my mind to the study and experience of identity. Indeed, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), in their landmark study *Women's Ways of Knowing*, concluded that "the development of voice, mind, and self are intricately intertwined" (p. 18). What led scholars to the metaphor of voice was recognition that certain voices were missing from the scholarship on student development and an interest in providing a context for these voices to be heard. Success in this effort was impossible to achieve without wading into the larger structures of power and privilege that created the silencing in the first place. As Reinharz (1994) noted, "Voice, in particular, has become a kind of megametaphor representing presence, power, participation, protest, and identity" (p. 183). These ideas led me to an investigation of identity and difference as part of my phenomenology class.

My dissertation about multiple dimensions of identity was really about me—well, it wasn't about me, but the focus of the study was driven by my own life experiences and questions. I wanted to see myself in the theories I studied. The title of my dissertation reflected a focus on multiple

dimensions of identity, but it also included “voices of identity and difference.” I suggested then that the experience of difference highlights certain dimensions of identity. That is, power and privilege mediate those dimensions of identity that we experience most centrally (or saliently, to use the argot of the field) and those we take for granted; at least this was my experience. The inquiry I began with my dissertation has evolved over the years, but consistent throughout has been my abiding interest in understanding the complexities of identity construction, especially when social identities and structures of power and privilege are considered. I also realized that I could not effectively study these dynamics in others without also carefully considering their role in my own identity construction.

I was very aware of my sexual orientation as a nondominant identity, and of the complications wrought by the intersections of gender and social class. Becoming conscious of my own racial identity, however, was a very different process and began with my experiences during a study abroad program in Kenya during my senior year of college. This process of understanding has been challenging and ongoing—mostly because, I have come to realize, there are no real prompts for White people to think about their own racial identity. My Kenya experience could have remained all about *them*, and not at all about *me*.

My race and the social class of my background enable me to pass in the dominant culture. My gender—but more significantly, my sexual orientation—push me to the realm of “otherness” and marginality. I found I was able to more fully engage with my racial identity once I began to grapple with my sexual orientation. Despite lots of experiences as a child that highlighted prejudice and racism, and then as a young adult in which I was racially an outsider for a short period of time, I was able to safely keep my own racial identity as White out of any analysis of what I was observing about the “other.” This, I learned, is the way the structures of racial inequality and racism work.

I began to see this in the dry cleaning factory when I was asked to move into a management role after one week as a “bagger” and was working alongside individuals who had spent years at the factory. There was one difference, I was White (and educated, although no one really knew that from me), and they were Black. I saw it when I realized that my first Black faculty member was in my doctoral program (and that I had had only two women faculty in my entire undergraduate education)—and when I realized how long it took me to realize this. I saw it in the racial segregation in schools and neighborhoods, and in the racial climates on college campuses. But I really began to see it when I looked at my own

racial privileges as a White person and the advantages I accrued in my everyday life simply because I was White. And I saw it when I examined the “details” of my everyday life—what *my* neighborhood looked like, who attended *my* church, who *my* friends were. I was also consistently challenged (and continue to be) in teaching classes about racial identity and tuning in to my own feelings, anxieties, and reactions to classroom dynamics (such as when a White student critiqued Beverly Daniel Tatum’s use of the word *racism* as “just so harsh,” and a student of color was sitting right next to this person).

Finally, I saw it when I lived for five years in the wealthiest county in the United States, which also had the greatest proportion of African Americans; in a community that was probably 95 percent African or African American; in which my neighbors drove Mercedes, BMWs, and Lexuses and I drove a Honda Civic; in which there were no visible signs of other gay folks and no recognition of the twenty years I had been with my partner; in which there were churchgoing Christians and a HUGE African Methodist Episcopal church; and in which a neighbor showed visible surprise when he inquired if we lived in the house we were standing in front of (when we replied yes, he uttered, “I didn’t know White people lived here . . . and where are your husbands?”). So for the first time in my life, I was in a space where my race, social class, and sexual orientation, but particularly race, were very apparent to me; and for the first time in my life, I was a racial minority in my neighborhood. I have lived in towns and cities that boast that they are “diverse” (which typically means the presence of “diverse others” but relatively segregated neighborhoods). I experienced firsthand what it is like to be one of a few in a “diverse” environment (diverse for me)—and not as a result of a study abroad program or part-time job, but because of where I lived, the place I called home. And everyone knew my name!

This highlights for me the centrality of context in the (re)construction of identity and the constant negotiation that occurs between context and self, particularly when structures of power and privilege are considered. I think, then, of identity (including my own) as always in the process of becoming, and as a dynamic interaction between social identities and context. The dynamic nature of these interactions suggests both their multidirectionality, such that context influences identity dimensions and identity dimensions influence context, and that my experience of one social identity—for example, race—also influences the construction of another, such as sexual orientation. Here in this paragraph you see my language become encumbered by my theoretical knowledge and the

intersection of story and theory. My own life experiences and process of coming to understand myself led me to the exploration of multiple dimensions of identity and social identities, an enduring interest beginning with my eighth-grade paper on Erik Erikson.

Elisa's Story

Baruch atah adonai . . . Starting as a twelve-year-old girl, and then throughout much of my teenage years, I led Shabbat (Sabbath) services at my synagogue.¹ I read the Torah and led the prayers. I practiced so much that I had much of it memorized. My mother was the principal of my religious school, and I enjoyed spending time in her office or in the synagogue library. I distinctly remember the smell of the Hebrew National corned beef and matzah ball soup at the Jewish deli that we went to every Sunday for lunch after religious school. I looked forward to going to Hebrew school twice a week after “regular” school. I never once was sad that we didn’t celebrate Christmas. I loved lighting the menorah for Chanukah and taking turns with my brother lighting candles each night. I always hoped I’d be the one to light on the eighth night when the menorah looked most spectacular. I cherished the Jewish holidays and sharing holiday meals with my family. I never wanted to venture beyond the synagogue or my family’s house on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, because being with people who didn’t celebrate these holidays would somehow take away the special feel of the day. As I grew older and moved alone to different cities for school and jobs, I always found comfort in the familiarity and beauty of the music in the synagogue. The melodies were the same, no matter the city, always drawing me back into the security of home. It has been important to me to keep aspects of Kosher. I don’t mix dairy and meat, or eat pork or shellfish (I’ve led a happy life without a cheeseburger, pepperoni, or shrimp). Why? It’s tradition. And it’s nice to hold on to tradition in a world where life doesn’t always play out as planned.

Eloheinu melech haolam . . . I always imagined the day when I would take my own children, always pictured with dark curly hair, to religious school. And I had carefully written down my mom’s chicken soup and kugel recipes so I could make them for my own family after Rosh Hashanah

¹Parts of this story were published in Abes, E. S. (2011). Exploring the relationship between sexual orientation and religious identities for Jewish lesbian college students. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 15, 205–225.

services or Passover. But Judaism wasn't just about education, holidays, family, and food. It was also about a personal relationship I felt with God. I had and continue to have personal conversations with God, like a close confidant, to always protect my family, especially during my parents' many health scares. I never understood why more prayers didn't include "thank you," as I always believed it was important not only to ask God for protection but also always to express gratitude every time that protection was offered.

Shehecheyanu vkeyamanu . . . So when I was first attracted to another woman and identified as a lesbian—at age thirty—I never questioned my attraction, nor did I ever think there was anything wrong with being gay. Why should there be? Why question whom a person loves? But I did worry about whether or not I would be able to have a family—dark curly-haired children to take to religious school, make matzah ball soup for, light the menorah with. Would I have children who would learn about Judaism from my parents? Questioning whether I would have children was one of the few things that saddened me when thinking about my newfound identity, and this was the subject of my conversations with God. How different would my life look from what I had hoped? Indeed, it's nice to hold on to tradition in a world where life doesn't always play out as planned.

Five years later I met my partner, Amber Feldman, a wonderful Southern Jewish woman who speaks Yiddish, the cultural language of Jewish people, and she, too, wanted children. Three years later, with Amber at my side in tears, I gave birth to our daughter. We followed a Jewish tradition of naming her after a relative who passed away. We named her after my grandmother, my "Amaw," the same one who cooked many of my Rosh Hashanah meals. As a teenager, my grandmother received a small Torah as recognition for being the only woman in her religious school class in the early 1900s, a time when it was uncommon for women to receive a formal Jewish education. That Torah is now one of my most cherished possessions, and I'll give it to our daughter one day. Perhaps at her Bat Mitzvah, when she is called on to read from the Torah as a Jewish adult.

Our daughter's religious naming ceremony took place in the synagogue with her grandparents present. I was moved by the realization that this was her first time in a synagogue; the first time hearing the melodies that have been so comforting to me; the first time being enveloped in the Rabbi's warmth. I will never take for granted how welcoming our Rabbi is of all relationships; his belief that love transcends hate; and his commitment to the Jewish values of loving kindness and justice. Indeed, I shared that same feeling when our Rabbi lovingly presided two and a half years

later at our son's *brit milah*, his ritual circumcision, again at the synagogue and again surrounded by family.

V'higayanu lazman hazeh . . . Blessed are you Lord Our God King of the Universe who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this day. Thank you.

I write this story, which genuinely gets to the essence of me (if there is such a thing), with ease and a sense of fulfillment, keenly aware of how fortunate I am that two identities so important to me have smoothly coalesced. I am aware that this is not the case for many other Jewish lesbians, or for many people who desire positive interactions among other social identities important to their sense of self. I come to the study of identity aware of many of the privileges I have that have facilitated my ability to integrate my identities and curious to understand the nature of this process for others. I also come to the study of identity aware that although my current understanding of identity has its roots in my childhood, that understanding took a long time to more clearly reveal itself to me. I lost sight of aspects of my identity along the way with changing contexts, and my identity is still evolving, as I believe identity continuously does.

Despite my fortune in integrating my two most salient identities, I am aware that these identities make me an "other," different from the norm and lacking certain privileges. Although I have always greatly enjoyed being different as a Jewish person, I am sensitive to some of the negative ways I have felt different, ironically sometimes among other Jewish people. For instance, I was keenly aware as a young child that our family did not have the same financial means as some of the other people in my Hebrew school and Jewish youth groups. Although I had everything I wanted in my loving family, I remember as a child perceiving an unjust hierarchy grounded in social class that made itself apparent during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, among the holiest days of the Jewish year. Unofficial seating arrangements for these services seemed to be driven by social class. Those who came from the economically prominent families in the congregation sat in the front of the synagogue, closest to the Rabbi and Cantor, and seemed to find numerous reasons to walk up and down the aisle during services, almost as if the religious service were a fashion show.

My family always sat in the back of the synagogue in the overflow seating. I remember my father, an incredibly kind, very hardworking salesman who unabashedly demonstrates his love for his family, once saying during services that he wasn't comfortable sitting closer to the front of the synagogue because his financial contributions were smaller than those of

some of the other synagogue members. I remember how bothered I was by that statement, believing that love and kindness, not money, were measures of a good person—a person worthy of being not only showcased in the synagogue but also, more important, comfortable to pray within a community. Indeed, it was my father's values grounded in loving kindness that were truly consistent with Jewish values, as opposed to behaviors that drew lines between people based on economics. The latter, I realized, perpetuated ill-conceived stereotypes of Jewish people and was a basis of anti-Semitism.

My father's comment was the root of much of my sensitivity toward others who are marginalized and my interest in studying identity from critical theoretical perspectives that explore how systems of inequality shape identity development and identity development theory. Indeed, I find my social class, more so than my sexual orientation or religion, to be the most vexing identity with which to grapple. Despite my awareness of social class differences, I grew up believing we were well-off. My parents always bought me books, and we lived in a well-kept house in a safe neighborhood with a great backyard in which my brother and I wore holes in the grass playing endless baseball. I had no idea how closely my parents watched their budget to provide us with this simple but comfortable life. In college, where I befriended some people of greater financial means, I grew increasingly aware of the differences between my family and those with more disposable income. I considered my friends' luxury spending to be wasteful, and I became more proud of my parents' sacrifices and sensibilities and sensitive to those who struggled more than I did. Still, I was slow to truly understand social class differences and acknowledge the many privileges I had.

Prior to starting my doctoral program in higher education and student affairs, and uneducated about the drain student loans would have on my life for too many years to come, I graduated from a prestigious law school and worked as a litigation attorney in a large, prominent law firm. In the process of doing so, and as a result of some of the choices I made based on my relatively unexamined identity, I became socialized into a cultural status previously unknown to me and into professional expectations that reinforced rather than challenged norms. Although my understanding of my decision to leave the legal profession was not fully formulated at the time, I left knowing that I was not being true to my values and sense of self.

I then enrolled in graduate school, unsure what I was getting myself into and a tad resistant, but hopeful I would find work in higher education

more congruent with my values than my previous experience. As a graduate student, I was fortunate to quickly have the opportunity to learn about student development theory in the context of service-learning experiences. The new understanding of identity that I shaped through this opportunity took me back to the seeds planted in my childhood, reminding me how I value the “other” and making my privileges apparent to me, especially those associated with social class and my identity as a White person. Now, as I teach graduate students, especially in the context of intergroup dialogue courses in which we explicitly focus on privilege, power, and oppression in an effort to understand our differences, I learn more about the complexities of identity and my own oversights related to the implications of marginalization from the stories the students graciously share.

Despite some innate sense of inequity, I’ve always appreciated being different from a norm. Thanks to my growing up Jewish and more recently identifying as a lesbian, the idea of being in a majority is one that feels somewhat awkward to me. Yet I know that I am indeed privileged, including in my race; in regard to ability; and in many ways economically, especially through my numerous educational opportunities, despite the stress associated with maintaining my desired middle-class lifestyle. It disturbs me how unaware I was of these privileges until my thirties (clearly a pivotal decade in my development), instead proud to be color- and other-difference-blind. I am poignantly aware that I talk little of these privileges in this story about myself. I have been educated to understand them; I have been challenged by those with less privilege to open my eyes to how much I still need to learn, and I have pushed myself to continuously do so. I have reached a point where I understand how my identity as a White person is central to how I make my way through the world; and I have committed much of my recent professional life to using my privileges to educate others about systems of inequality and ultimately create change. Still, like many others with privilege, I don’t always think of the privileged aspects of my identity as central to who I am, as I do with the interplay between my religion and sexual orientation, with social class mixed in.

In short, my childhood awareness of difference, my current experiences as I begin to teach religious traditions in a family that looks different from what is typically considered “normal,” and my professional experiences whereby my understanding about identity is continuously challenged have shaped how I conceptualize identity. Based on my own experience with difference and my sensitivity toward others who experience marginalization, I come to the study of identity believing that identity ought to

be studied from a critical theoretical perspective that explores systems of inequality; that identity is a reflection of the intersections of multiple identities; that identity is a complex combination of privilege and marginalization; and that context and identity are inseparable, with both always in flux.



We recognize that the identity stories we share here, which have led both of us to explore critically how systems of inequality shape student identity development theory, are only two of many possible stories about our identities. Our identity stories change depending on the time and space in which we tell them. Likewise, we recognize that college students bring multiple identity stories with them to campus every day, also depending on the time and space in which they tell them. Some of these stories are visible, and some are not, both to others and to them.

Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie eloquently spoke to the nature of multiple stories in a talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story” that she presented as part of the TED Talks series. Referring to the manner in which her African identity has been represented as monolithic, she observed the danger of believing there is just one story that describes a group of people. She explained:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story . . . When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise. (Adichie, 2009)

Likewise, there is not only one story that describes an individual person. Changes in context, the passage of time, unfolding memories, new experiences, fresh perspectives, and evolving worldviews all contribute to a person’s multiple stories.

It is also in this spirit of multiple stories that we write this book. We offer several different theoretical perspectives, or assumptions about the nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), to reveal the multiple ways identity stories might be told, heard, and acted on, depending on one’s own assumptions. More specifically, by introducing theoretical perspectives that are critical in nature, we hope to uncover the inequitable ways in which people’s stories get told by others, especially those with more

power and privilege than they have. As Adichie (2009) stated: “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” By exposing such power in the realm of college student identity, our hope is that students will more readily be able to create and tell their own identity stories.

The remaining chapters in this book reflect our evolving thinking about the nature of theories pertaining to college student identity development. Our hope is that readers will situate their own stories within these theories while reading. We begin with a review of the evolution of identity development theory, recognizing that just as identity stories change, so, too, must the theories that help make sense of them.

Discussion Questions and Activities

1. Write your own “situating yourself” essay. Specifically, consider what experiences and aspects of your identity shape your interest in and perspectives on theories of identity development.
2. Watch Adichie’s TED Talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story” (http://blog.ted.com/2009/10/07/the_danger_of_a/). Have there been times when you have felt that other people have created a single story about you? What has been your reaction to that experience? In what ways do you find yourself creating or relying on single stories about other people? What causes you to do so? What do you see as the danger of a single story for understanding identity? For understanding theory?
3. How do you construct stories about others? About friends? Family? Peers and colleagues? College students? Whom do you include, and whose stories do you tend to miss? What explains which stories you include and which you miss?
4. How might you challenge yourself in regard to the stories you construct about others?
5. From a research perspective, how might studies be designed to counter a “single story”? Are there particular methodological approaches that lend themselves to incorporating multiple stories?