

## Reflexive Identity and Self-authorship Development on Psychology Students

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the results of a research about cognitive development and identity construction of psychology students. The key concepts in this work are: a) Identity, assumed as an individual's narrative construction based on a reflexive analysis of his own biography; b) Self-authorship, understood in this context as the capacity to make meaning of one's experiences based on one's own internal foundation. The main purpose of this study was to comprehend how college students construct their identity and how does it relate to the development of their self-authorship. The sample was taken from sophomore psychology students of National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), aged between 18 and 22 years old. The research was divided in two stages: 1) Development, validation, and application of the instrument Self-Authorship Written Stories Survey to forty-two volunteers, 2) Biographical interviews with five participants, one of each position described on first stage. Data analysis allowed describing five different self-authorship positions, the first position is characterized for total reliance on external models and the last, for an incipient autonomy on constructing individual's own perspective. Majority of the participants were on initials self-authorship positions and was found that as students' progresses on self-authorship development, their identity becomes more complex. At the same time, the conflict that structures identity and the way they deal with it also gets more complex.*

**Keyword:** Students, Self-Authorship, Identity, Developmental Psychology.

### **1. Introduction**

In the current context of an increasingly competitive labor market, young people face with new challenges in their professional and personal training. They do not require only technical knowledge, but must have the ability to contextualize their knowledge in practical, real situations. In addition, they must be able to make important decisions for themselves, to be critical of their own professional practice and working environment. Above all, they must be able to build their own vision about themselves.

Therefore, two notions become central: self-authorship and reflexive identity. In this sense, it is important to question how these two notions relate to the process of development of young people who begin to build the bases for their future as adults and as professionals (Bontempo, Flores and Ramírez, 2012).

### **Reflexive identity**

Based on Giddens' conception of reflexive identity (Giddens, 1997), we understand identity as a narrative construction that the individual produces by reflecting on his experiences and (re) composing his life story. This way, identity is essentially dynamic, for with each new experience and with each new knowledge, past events are reconfigured and recontextualized in the new version of the story that is told by the individual, giving it a new meaning and constructing a new identity. Therefore, we call it reflexive.

For Giddens (1997), at the individual level, reflexivity is the act of constantly rethinking and reassessing its actions, beliefs and decisions in the light of new knowledge and experience. Reflexivity is triggered whenever individual faces a situation of sudden change, in which he is forced to assume a new posture; these are special moments in which the consequences of the decisions are much more relevant for the individual or collective life. These situations are what Giddens (1997) calls decisive moments and they can be planned or not, like marriage or the beginning of a postgraduate studies, as well as the birth of a son or the loss of a job.

This way, decisive moments lead the individual to become aware of the lack of control he has over the world and the risks that constantly threaten his life, putting at stake the sensation of ontological security and generating anguish. Finally, they represent a call to reflexive action. Conceiving reflexivity not as an exclusively rational attitude, but includes emotional aspects and may even represent a reflex movement adaptive to social changes (Holmes, 2010; Burkitt, 2012).

### **Self-Authorship**

The concept of self-authorship originally comes from Kegan (1982) who defines it as the individual's capacity to construct his or her own beliefs, identity, and relationships, based on his or her own internal foundation. According to the author, self-authorship represents an evolution on meaning making ability, changing its foundation that once was based on external expectations and beliefs, to an internal foundation, grounded on their own beliefs and experiences. Baxter Magolda (2008) later appropriated this concept to propose an adult developmental model in which three interdependent dimensions transforms by gradually developing self-authorship. Such dimensions are the interpersonal (relationships that the individual constructs with the others); intrapersonal (perception that the individual has of himself); and the epistemological (beliefs that the individual has about nature, certainty and limits of knowledge). Changes in these dimensions occur when contextual conditions challenge current structures, demanding more complex ways of thinking, being and acting.

Baxter Magolda (2009) describes the journey towards self-authorship as passing through three basic positions:

- External Formulas –definition of self and beliefs bases on the authorities; relationships bases on the need for approval; and there is a decontextualized and dualistic view of knowledge.
- Crossroads –individual begins to question authority in constructing hisown beliefs about knowledge and about himself; individual realizes the need for more authentic relationships based on the acceptance of his and other's individuality.
- Self-authorship –individual perceives himself as a coproducer of knowledge; individual has a vision of himself based on an internal foundation, making possible the construction of relationships based on the authenticity and acceptance of the other.

Baxter Magolda (2004) emphasizes that the movement between these positions is not linear and present, but always occurs in context, so that changes only occurs when the context demands new ways of seeing the world and acting, and offers favorable conditions for the change to occur.

In this context, this article briefly presents the results of a doctoral research that aimed to analyze how the construction of reflexive identity and the development of self-authorship in first semester undergraduate students in psychology of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

### **Method**

With the objective of answering the question: How is the development of self-authorship related to the construction of the reflexive identity of psychology students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)? We carry out a qualitative research of a biographical-narrative approach.

## **Population**

The sample was taken from third-semester undergraduate students from the Faculty of Psychology of UNAM, aged between 18 and 22 years. There were 42 students, of whom 30 were women and 12 were men. The gender proportion occurred spontaneously, and it reflects the gender ratio of students enrolled in this particular degree. The sampling was intentional theoretical, so that subjects are not chosen at random, but based on an intentional determination. This sampling is more appropriate in this type of research, since it does not seek representativeness, but the choice of the subjects that are going to be more relevant for the generation of theories.

## **Instrument**

The instrument used to describe the self-authorship development, called "Self-Authorship Writing Stories", is composed of a questionnaire of 12 open-ended questions about an experience that participants consider important (Bontempo and Flores, 2016). The instrument was developed, tested and validated for the studied population. Subsequently it was applied in Study I, the first part of the research, as we will describe next.

## **Process**

### **Study I**

Initially I<sup>1</sup> inserted myself in the context, participating actively as assistant teacher in two disciplines of the degree in psychology of the UNAM. As mentioned before, in the first semester, the instrument was developed and tested. In the second semester, after building a trust relationship with students, I invited them, in class, to participate in the study, distributing Informed Consent. The students who returned it signed received an email with the Self-Authorship Written questionnaire, and returned it in approximately two weeks, by the same means. This was denominated Study I and its purpose was to identify the manifestation of the three dimensions of the Baxter Magolda's (2004) model. At this stage, 42 students participated voluntarily, being 30 women and 12 men.

We interpreted information through structural narrative analysis, using the technique of open thematic codification, so that the main referents to define categories were the content of the writings and Baxter Magolda's model. From this first study, it was possible to group the participants in five different positions that emerged from the data.

### **Study II**

In the first stage of this research were identified five self-authorship positions, as will be described in the results section. To participate in study II, we chose a representative of each position found in the first stage. Study II aimed to identify the structuring elements of reflexive identity and to understand the relationship they have with self-authorship manifestation. To do this, we applied in depth biographical interviews with five participants selected. There was at least two interviews of approximately one and a half hours duration with each student. Both the length and the number of interviews were determined by the saturation point, when the investigator observes that the new data collected are beginning to be repetitive and no longer provide new information (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2009).

We used unstructured interviews, so the only initial indication was that they tell us their life story, in the way they thought most convenient. The objective was to make the least interventions as possible, allowing the participant to speak freely. Interviews were audiotape, transcribed word for word and peer-reviewed (Stake, 2007). Subsequently, the information was analyzed based on what Schütze (2007) calls structural biographical analysis, with the aim of understanding the life story as a whole. As the biographical interviews generate a vast amount of information, we decided to focus on the decisive moments, which represent a dividing line on the story, and which, according to Giddens (1997), represent a call to reflexivity and the resignification of past experiences building a new sense of identity. Based on these specific events, we performed a structural narrative analysis, using as main reference the content of the interviews and the concept of reflexive identity.

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**Results**

In study I, the categories constructed in the process of data analysis allowed to describe the development of young people in three dimensions: intrapersonal, interpersonal and epistemological. From participants comparison it was possible to identify and group them into five different positions that emerged from the data. The aim of the research was not to frame students in the positions described by Baxter Magolda (2004, 2008, 2009) but to describe development in the specific population. However, using Baxter Magolda’s (2009) work, comparing the positions described in the present study with those of the author, we note that the first three positions would be within the broader position of Baxter Magolda (2009) called: External Formulas, and the other two positions would be found in: Crossroads. In the present study, there were no participants on the most advanced position, Self-authorship.

Table 1 presents a brief description of the positions found in this work and its relation with the model of Baxter Magolda (2009). As can be seen, most students are in the first two positions, while position 5 groups the least amount of people.

**Table 1: Positions of Self-Authoring**

Dimensions / Positions	External formulas			Crossroads	
	Position 1 (26,2% )	Position 2 (28,6%)	Position 3 (19%)	Position 4 (16,4%)	Position 5 (9,5%)
Personal Epistemology	Knowledge is absolute and received from the authorities.	Knowledge is absolute and received from the authorities.	Knowledge is manifold. Every point of view is valid. Question authorities.	Knowledge is manifold. Every point of view is valid. Question authorities.	Knowledge is uncertain, contextual. Authority questioned, sometimes seen as interlocutor.
Intrapersonal	They are not responsible for their life; Need to meet other people's expectations.	They realize the importance of taking responsibility for their life. Need to meet expectations.	Need to reaffirm and differentiate; Assume responsibility for their life.	They are responsible for their life; They recognize their inner voice; There is guilt about not meeting expectations.	They are responsible for their life; They recognize their inner voice; There is guilt about not meeting expectations
Interpersonal Relations	Need for acceptance and approval. There is no dialogue or commitment to the other	Need for acceptance and approval. There is no dialogue or commitment to the other	Need to impose on the other. There is no dialogue or commitment to the other	Need to set limits; Incipient dialogue; Conflict with commitment.	Need to set limits; There is dialogue and commitment to the other.

According to Baxter Magolda (2004), individuals in the External Formulas position are characterized by having a slightly complex view of knowledge, by relying on the authorities to guide their lives and build their beliefs, so that they need to feel approved by others, especially by the authorities. As we can see in Table 1, the first three subheadings labelled describe the movement of young people towards Crossroads position.

This way, Position 1 of this model groups students who are most clearly and firmly dependent on authorities and external models in all three dimensions. In Position 2 there is a perception of such dependence, especially in the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. In Position 3, there are expressive changes in the way of conceiving knowledge, recognizing the possibility of existence of different truths, but it is a naive view because it is based on the idea that everything can be equally correct, since there is no link with the context. At the same time, in the three dimensions there is a need to assert themselves and to deny authority and external models, being equally dependent on them (Bontempo and Flores, 2016).

According to Baxter Magolda (2009), at Crossroads are those individuals who perceive the need to build an internal foundation on which to base their beliefs and decisions. They are beginning to form an idea of their own identity but cannot detach themselves from external models yet. In the present study, we find two positions that describe how young people move towards Self-authorship. As we can see in Table 1, Position 4 groups the individuals who recognize the uncertainty of knowledge; they begin to take charge of their lives and make their own decisions, and do not need to deny the other to assert themselves, so that they begin to recognize and to dialogue with each other. Participants in Position 5 also recognize the uncertainty of knowledge, but they begin to realize the need to relativize it with contextual evidence. In addition, these young people take an active role in their lives, and begin to recognize their own voice, although the external models and the voice of the other still exerts some pressure on them, especially when they have to define limits in their relationships.

We then chose one representative from each of those five positions to participate in study II. In the interviews, students freely told their life story and answered some questions. The transcripts were analyzed as a whole, in their biographical structure, using Giddens's (1997) theory as the main reference on reflexive identity. Next, we focus on the decisive moments and other events that seem to have more weight in the life story.

Based on this information we did a narrative structural analysis, trying to describe participants in certain categories that emerged from data, always taking into account as a theoretical basis the work of Giddens (1997) on reflexive identity. The categories that were most important and that we used to understand the participants in terms of their reflexive identity were:

- **Conflict**: refers to a dilemma or challenge that the individual lives and appears directly or indirectly throughout the narrative. In order to be clear about the main conflict, the following question is asked: "What is at stake for the participant?" Therefore, the answer, which is conflict, is a first person singular and present tense phrase.
- **Support institution**: Refers to the institution (space-time in which students participate, offering resources for meaning making, and the opportunity for learning) in which student feels more comfortable, safe and capable. Because of the security they feel in this institution, they can experience their first advances towards a position of greater self-authorship.
- **Narrative form**: It refers to the organization, rhythm and depth of the story. The most important aspects of this category are: temporal or thematic linearity (characteristic of a story of following a specific order); and the coherence (characteristic of the text to establish relationships between events giving meaning and integrity to the story, that is, the text can be seen as a whole).
- **Relation to uncertainty**: It refers to how individuals perceive uncertainty in their life, and how they relate to it once they perceive it.
- **Reflexivity**: It is a process of change or reevaluation of postures motivated by any type of experience of the individual with the world, whether mental, corporal or emotional. As a category, we describe participants' reflexivity regarding the complexity level of the process (how many elements and points of view are taken into account for analyzing a specific situation), whether or not they support authorities, and how points of view or contradictory aspects are faced in the same event.
- **Security**: Refers to what aspect of student life supports them to feel reassured that the world is stable and reliable, that there are no major risks.
- **Anxiety**: Refers to an affective state that relates to the perception of danger, with the knowledge and feeling of loss of control and security of the individual with respect to the world.

Based on the analysis, we could observe that the support institution and the conflict are the main elements that structure identity, as they give order and continuity to the life story. In addition, it offers security and ground to support them as passing to next self-authorship position. As shown in Table 2, in most cases, students deposit all their safety on the support institution. In the case of linear narratives, the individual usually arranges his narrative based on the events of the supporting institution.

Conflict, in turn, seems to be the element that connects the different "stories" within the life story, giving them meaning, and offers a perspective from which the story is told. We can understand conflict as the lens from which the story is seen. In this way, we can say that reflexive identity is a dynamic construction that changes as the conflict changes. At the same time, as individual advances in self-authorship, the conflict moves from the preoccupations with the external gaze to a stronger self-definition.

**Table 2: Reflexive Identity 1**

Participants/Categories	Conflict	Support institution	Narrative form	Security
Juliana – Position 1	How to be accepted? How can I meet external expectations?	school	Linear, detailed, ordered by the school trajectory, contradictions in the argumentation.	School performance
Gabriela – Position 2	How can I balance my own expectations with the external ones?	Family	Linear, detailed, ordered by changes in the family, jumps and contradictions in both the argumentation and the narrative of events.	Idea of a stable and unite family.
Bianca – Position 3	How to break with external models without being able to offer a model of my own?	School	Nonlinear, superficial, ordered by theme (by different institutions), few jumps and contradictions.	School performance
Lucas – Position 4	How to be authentic without fear of disappointing the other?	School	Nonlinear, superficial, ordered by the school trajectory and memory, many jumps and evasion.	School performance and the idea of a stable and united family.
Edgard – Position 5	How to mark and respect my limits?	School	Linear, detailed, ordered by the school trajectory, few jumps, evasion in difficult subjects.	School performance and sense of control over their lives and the lives of others.

Regarding the form of the narrative, we note that: differences in linearity; the existence or not of contradictions and the jumps in the narrative, are not related to self-authorship development, or to more complex forms of reflection, as many authors suggest (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007; Reybold, 2002; Torres, 2003). In this study, usually the thematic jumps, as well as contradictions or superficiality, help participants not to touch topics that can be difficult for them, or poorly worked, that is, relate to the affections of the narrators. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the stories are not linear only in the transition positions (3 and 4), when there are normally more ways of thinking and mental structures to rearrange.

As we see in Table 3, there is an evolution in the complexity and independence on authorities presented by the students in their reflexivity and relation with the uncertainty. The relationship with uncertainty always relates to anxiety in young people. Simultaneously, the different ways of experiencing anguish relates to how students see themselves. In this way, students in the initial positions feel inadequate to externally defined patterns, while those in the more advanced positions recognize what they are and what they want to be, but they show anguish at not being able to change only to satisfy others. Thus, in spite of feeling an anxiety similar to that of the students of the initial positions, on advanced positions, the anxiety is no longer related to a feeling of central inadequacy to their identity.

**Table 3: Reflexive Identity**

Participants/Categories	Relationship with uncertainty	Reflexivity	Anguish
Juliana – Position 1	She does not recognize it. She evades uncertainty.	Evades contradictions; complex reasoning; based on authorities.	To not accept the changes and uncertainties in life. To not feel appropriate.
Gabriela- Position 2	She does not recognize it. She evades uncertainty.	Evades contradictions; complex reasoning; based on authorities.	To not accept the changes and uncertainties in life. To not feel appropriate.
Bianca – Position 3	She recognizes it, but believes that the correct answer is the one that suits her.	She is looking for correct answers in contradictions, usually based on authorities, complex reasoning.	To recognize uncertainty in life and to seek for correct answers.
Lucas – Position 4	He recognizes it, but believes that the correct answer is a matter of personal appreciation.	He is looking for correct answers in contradictions, sometimes based on authorities, complex reasoning.	Be aware of the uncertainty in life. To feel guilty for disappointing the other.
Edgar – Position 5	He recognizes it and begins to recognize his active role in knowledge construction.	He is looking to contextualize contradictions, sometimes based on authorities, complex reasoning.	Be aware of the uncertainty in life and the lack of control over it.

**Discussion**

With the evidence of the present investigation, we conclude that the development of self-authorship is intimately related to the construction of reflexive identity. Consistent with previous research (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Reybold, 2002; Torres, 2003; Diaz, 2006; Flores, Otero and Lavalloé, 2010; Zaytoun, 2005), it was possible to observe that those who are autonomous connoisseurs and who were able to build a strong internal foundation rarely get carried away by the socially approved models of life, in addition they elaborate future plans more real and coherent with their possibilities and desires.

As mentioned in the results, most of the participants are in the initial self-authorship positions. This is in agreement with previous research which has reported that it is common for university students to present less complex positions on personal epistemology and rely on external models to act (Flores, Otero and Lavalloé, 2010; Creamer and Laughlin, 2005; Lewis, Forsythe, Sweeney, Bartone, Bullis and Snook, 2005). However, as it is necessarily linked to the context, previous investigations have shown that age does not determine evolution in self-authorship. This way, there may be cases of young people reaching advanced positions well before their generation, but at the same time there are cases of adults who never develop self-authorship, who remain dependent on external models and the authorities to think and act (Reybold, 2002; Rodier and Lavalloé, 1990).

We also note that, as they advance in self-authorship development, students base their security on their own achievements and less on meeting external expectations. Similarly, the anguish they experience relates more to the awareness of the impossibility of meeting others’ expectations, and less with the continuous intent to please them.

As a conclusion, we recall that the aim of the present research was to understand the relationship between self-authorship development and reflexive identity construction. In this sense, it was possible to conclude that the essence of narrative and identity is the central conflict that the student is living. As the conflict defines both: the issues addressed and how they are addressed. It is interesting to note that this does not appear to be the result of a

cognitive effort. Rather, the conflict is so present in students' life that it manifests itself in his narrative, is at the bottom of the life story, so it is inevitable for him to put it there. Therefore, we understand that conflict is the lens that the individual uses to see, signify and tell their story. Respect to relationship between self-authorship development and the conflict, we observe that as participant's self-authorship advances, both the issue of conflicts and the way the individual deal with it change, moving from dependence on pre-established models and authorities, and focusing more on their self-definition, limits and autonomy.

Finally, this study showed that reflexivity is more complex in students located in advanced self-authorship positions. So that they adopt a relativistic view, and have more resources to deal with uncertainty and contradictions: taking into account more aspects of the same situation, seeking to understand their origins and possible consequences, they are able to contextualize it, as well as they can contextualize different points of view and form their own opinion. Therefore, as they move forward in building their self-authorship, identity changes, so these students appear to be better prepared to make difficult decisions and to understand complex situations in a more mature and autonomous way and more faithful to their own center.

In conclusion, it was possible to observe the intimate relationship between the development of self-authorship and the construction of students' reflexive identity, and the importance of supporting these processes to train more autonomous, critical and independent professionals and individuals. It was also possible to observe the important role played by school in the construction of reflexive identity and in the development of students' self-authorship, once it appears as the support institution in most cases. In addition, in all stories, without exception, school appears as one of the most important contexts in which individuals develop. This way, it becomes relevant to question how this institution could support, in a more active and directed way, the development of self-authorship and the construction of reflexive identity on students. Therefore, it is necessary that future research explore alternatives for university intervention (and perhaps other educational levels), in order to support the construction of autonomy on learning, relating to others, seeing themselves and acting as professionals.

This research makes important contributions in the field of self-authorship and identity, especially for the understanding of university students. However, as an exploratory study, it does not exhaust the subject; rather it opens more questions than offer answers, inaugurating a field of research in the Latin American context. From the described method, it is possible to carry out similar research in other contexts, with different populations. We also leave the invitation to propose forms of intervention and questions such as: Is there a relationship between socioeconomic level and the development of self-authorship? What is the role of friendships in the construction of reflexive identity? Will there be a difference between students of different universities or different careers? Finally, a very relevant question that complements this research is: are there differences in self-authorship position when students face everyday situations and when they face decisive situations?

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