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Research Article

Vocational Identity and Ego Identity Status in Korean Nursing Students

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SUMMARY

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to investigate the association between vocational identity and ego identity status among Korean nursing students.**Methods:** The participants were 311 nursing students in South Korea who were attending either a 4-year bachelor's program or a 3-year diploma program. Data were collected using self-report questionnaires that addressed vocational identity, ego identity status, and demographic information. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance, *t* test, and Chi-square test.**Results:** In terms of ego identity status, 31.5% of nursing students were classified as being in diffusion status, followed by 28.3% in low profile moratorium status, 14.8% in moratorium status, 14.1% in foreclosure status, and 11.3% in achievement status. Vocational identity differed according to ego identity status; vocational identity among students who were in achievement status was higher than for those in all other statuses. Vocational identity also differed according to grade level and monthly family income. Ego identity status was related to the type of program enrolled in, grade level, and monthly family income.**Conclusions:** These findings show that nursing students in identity achievement status have secure and clear vocational identities. Further longitudinal and qualitative studies are needed to find out if identity formation among nursing students changes with age.Copyright © 2016, Korean Society of Nursing Science. Published by Elsevier. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Introduction

Nursing students aim to become professional nurses who can call on their own abilities to take care of patients in clinical fields. To become professional nurses, students must have a clear understanding of their capacities and a commitment to their vocational interests in the nursing profession [1]. Nurses who have an understanding of their capacities and a commitment to their vocational goals usually have well-established vocational identities. These nurses are confident in their decision-making ability even in the face of environmental ambiguities [1]. Nursing students start to develop their vocational identity in nursing school and continue to cultivate it throughout their nursing careers [2]. Vocational identity is defined as having a clear and secure understanding of one's career goals, abilities, educational interests, and personal values [1].

Nursing students' vocational identity has been known to be correlated with the successful transition from school to work [3].

Nursing students with low levels of vocational identity were more likely to leave a nursing career [3], while students with high levels of vocational identity were likely to stay fixed on this career path [4]. Likewise, adolescents with strong levels of vocational identity felt more positive about their future work possibilities [5]. In other words, the progress of vocational identity can be recognized as a central component of career development [6] and as an adaptation to the social context [7].

Vocational identity in adolescents and young adults is related with psychological well-being [5,8] and high levels of life satisfaction [9]. Adolescents with strong vocational identities experienced relative increases in life satisfaction within a year's time [6]. Research suggests the achievement of a well-established vocational identity is an important developmental task for adolescents and young adults [5].

Vocational identity is known to be related to ego identity status. Ego identity is defined as the sense of self, developed through social interactions; it is constantly changing due to new information an individual gains through experiences both in the past and in the future [10].

Ego identity is denoted as a comprehensive developmental task that an individual achieves as a result of psychosocial crises in late

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adolescence and in preparation for adulthood [10]. Marcia elaborated upon the concept of Erikson's ego identity by adding two dimensions to the theory [11,12]. Marcia distinguished four identity statuses based on two dimensions of crises including exploration (i.e., choosing among alternatives) and commitment (i.e., personal investment in the alternatives chosen) [11,12]. Two crucial areas in which an individual is forced to explore alternatives or commit to a choice are occupation/career and ideology.

The four identity statuses defined by Marcia include achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. Youth in achievement status have both explored their options and made a commitment to a preferred option [11]. Individuals in moratorium status experience exploration, but commitment to a single choice is vague [11]. Youth in foreclosure status have made a firm choice, but this choice is often dictated by the values of parents or peers, and the youth have not explored alternatives [11]. Youth in diffusion status display no apparent commitments and no interest in exploring alternatives [11]. Each identity status has unique characteristics. Individuals in achievement status scored higher on well-being and lower on psychological problems, while individuals in moratorium status scored higher on anxiety and lower on psychological well-being [13]. Individuals in foreclosure status showed high authoritarianism and conventionality but low anxiety, while individuals in diffusion status lacked motivation to move out of this developmental stage [13].

It has been proposed that ego identity status develops progressively through the four stages beginning with diffusion and progressing to foreclosure, moratorium, and finally, achievement [12,13]. Kroger, Martinussen, and Marcia [14] meta-analyzed 124 studies and verified that progressive changes of ego identity status (i.e., from diffusion to foreclosure, moratorium, and then achievement) were more prevalent than regressive changes (i.e., from achievement to moratorium, foreclosure, and then diffusion). The results of a 5-year longitudinal study [15] showed that some ego identity statuses changed progressively, but at the same time, other ego identity statuses were stable. The authors [15] reported that ego identity status was changed by dealing with commitment. Waterman [13] suggested that the change to achievement status is more likely to occur during adolescence and in the transition to adulthood, especially when individuals are in college. Therefore, the ego identity statuses of college students, including nursing students, should be recognized by educators, while individual students should be encouraged to progress toward achievement status.

Luycks, Duries, Klimstra, and Witte [16] found that young adult employees in achievement status scored higher on work engagement and lower on burnout than did employees in diffusion status, and that they considered the attainment of identity achievement to be a personal resource that affected their career outcomes. Marcia [11,12] proposed that ego identity was based on exploration and commitment of occupation/career, and that ego identity was related to the thought of vocation. In addition, previous studies found that vocational development was associated with identity achievement [5,17]. However, one study reported that the development of ego identity status in college students was not in accord with vocational identity development [18]. The development of vocational identity and ego identity status is important for nursing students so that they can become fully engaged, professionally-satisfied nurses. However, there are few studies on vocational identity and ego identity status among Korean nursing students. Therefore, research on the relatedness of vocational identity and ego identity status among Korean nursing students is needed to build knowledge on identity development among this subset and to support their identity achievement.

Waterman reported that there was no gender difference in ego identity status [13], but Guerra and Braungart-Rieker found that male students showed a higher degree of identity diffusion than did female students [19]. Worthington et al [6] found poorer vocational identity among male nursing students than among their female counterparts [3]. Studies on both vocational identity [6] and ego identity status [13–15] reported that higher grade levels correlated with more advanced identity status in students. Also, social barriers such as a low socioeconomic status, a lack of educational opportunity, and a dangerous external environment were known to hinder individuals in exploring identity alternatives and in fulfilling identity commitment [20]. Thus, this study looked at vocational identity and ego identity status in connection with several demographic factors including gender, grade level, the type of educational program being pursued, parents' educational level, and family income.

Therefore, the first aim of the study was to examine the association between vocational identity and ego identity status. The second aim was to examine vocational identity and ego identity status in relation to demographic factors of the participating Korean nursing students, including student gender, grade level, the type of educational program enrolled in, parents' educational level, and family income.

In addition, the specific questions posed by the study were as follows: First, is the vocational identity of Korean nursing students associated with ego identity status? Second, are the vocational identity and ego identity statuses related to demographic factors of Korean nursing students?

Methods

Study design

This study used a cross-sectional descriptive study design to investigate the relationships between vocational identity and ego identity status among Korean nursing students.

Setting and samples

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of nursing students in South Korea who either attended a 4-year bachelor's program or a 3-year diploma program and who voluntarily consented to participate. The sample size for one-way analysis of variance was calculated with the G-power 3.1.2 program. The study required 305 participants to achieve a medium effect size of .25, a statistical power ($1-\beta$) of .95, and a significance level (α) of .05. Thus, this study targeted 335 nursing students, including potential dropouts. Of the 335 nursing students invited in this study, 330 answered the questionnaire and of that, 311 (94.2%) provided complete and usable data to be included in data analysis.

Participants (91.0% female, 9.0% male) were between 18 and 48 years old ($M = 21.11$, $SD = 4.69$). Fifty-four percent attended a 4-year bachelor's program and the rest attended a 3-year diploma program; 32.2% were freshmen, 27.3% were sophomores, 26.7% were juniors, and 13.8% were seniors. Additionally, 52.8% of the participants' fathers and 38.4% of the participants' mothers had earned a 4-year college degree or higher. The monthly family income for approximately 16.2% of participants was 2,000 USD or less; for 47.7%, between 2,001 and 4,000 USD; for 25.2%, between 4,001 and 6,000 USD; and for 10.9%, 6,001 USD or more.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (CR-14-046) of the hospital. After explaining the purpose and method of

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