

EARA 2020 Lifetime award

Identity, relationships, and psychopathology: Changing identity development as a challenge for counseling and therapy

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Since Erikson's conception, there have been significant changes that affect all phases of life, but in particular have led to a considerable time lag and qualitative change in the identity development of emerging adults. The recent increase in mental disorders indicates that identity development, combined with the developmental pressure to attain relevant adult markers, has today for an increasing number of young people become problematic. The number of patients with identity diffusion is currently increasing. This continues a difficulty that already began in adolescence. Parents are of particular importance as “identity brakes”, they may block the development of their children's identity through too much support, separation anxiety and psychological control. Extended exploration and an increase of short-term, uncommitted romantic relationships is noticeable.

The lecture is based on two long-term longitudinal studies and a cross-cultural research on over 5000 adolescents, emerging adults and patients from seven countries. Identity exploration and commitment of young people from Central Europe was significantly lower than in young people from Eastern Europe, South America and Asia. Patients were significantly delayed in their identity development (with scores close to those of adolescents) and suffer from high parental psychological control. Identity diffusion and parental psychological control consistently predicted high scores in internalizing symptomatology and body complaints across cultures

The lecture reflects the therapeutic consequences and uses clinical cases to show how identity crises, identity diffusion, identity conflicts can be distinguished from one another-an aspect that is relevant in relation to the increase in personality disorders. The question how clinical work with patients can look like involves a decision of how much support is appropriate and when structural work – self-object-differentiation - is necessary. Aspects of the framework and the commitment for therapy are also strongly affected. Parent work can make sense if parents act as a potential “identity brake”.