

January 2005

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### Recommended Citation

Jolly, Suzanne (2005) "Using Chickering's Vectors: A Sexual Assault Survivor's Identity Development," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 26, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol26/iss1/4>

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# Using Chickering's Vectors: A Sexual Assault Survivor's Identity Development

Suzanne Jolly

*The author uses Scholarly Personal Narrative and Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of identity development to outline her own movement from the identity of a victim of two sexual assaults to the identity of a survivor. The application of survivor identity development theory is discussed in hope that higher education professionals will endeavor to recognize, celebrate, and facilitate the development of survivor identities.*

In higher education, we work to honor and celebrate the identities of those who have been historically and systematically oppressed. I have a new identity to add to the list: the survivor identity. In order to help higher education professionals better understand survivor identity development, I will share my own identity development from a victim of sexual assaults into a survivor. I will use Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology to make concrete connections to student development theory.

In the book, *Education and Identity*, Chickering (1969) outlined seven vectors of identity development. These vectors work well as a framework for survivor identity development and can aid student affairs administrators in better understanding how to support victims and survivors of sexual assault. I hope that drawing parallels between my identity development as a survivor and a commonly-used student development theory will increase the acceptance, acknowledgement, and development of this identity in higher education.

## Survivor Identity

I watch people living their lives on the roadsides walking or driving in their cars and I wonder how they do it. What do they live through? Where do they find that surviving piece? (S. Jolly, personal communication, March 24, 2004)

It is estimated that one in three women and one in seven men during their college years will face a sexual assault or an attempted sexual assault (Warshaw, 1994). These estimates point out that survivors and victims are common within our campus communities. This identity, however, is hidden and often buried by heavy layers of shame, societal blame, guilt, self-doubt, and fear. It is an identity that is rarely celebrated, except in Take Back the Night marches, women's centers, and victim advocacy services.

It has been difficult for me to speak about this part of who I am. It is something I feel I am told to gently cradle as a secret, wounded piece. This article, however, allows me to openly define my survivor identity. I do this in order to name what society wishes to remain unnamed in hope that others will feel comfortable identifying themselves openly as sexual assault survivors.

For the purpose of this article, I define a *survivor* as someone who is dealing with or has dealt with the physical, psychological, emotional, and societal ramifications of one or more sexual assaults. Survivors actively seek healing through a variety of methods and work to personalize this healing process for themselves. These methods of healing can be directly connected to Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of identity development: learning to manage emotions, reestablishing autonomy and moving through interdependence, developing competence, freeing interpersonal relationships, establishing survivor identity, and developing purpose and integrity. Survivors work their way through these stages of healing and, by doing so, begin to address the shame and blame that are attached to the labels of victim and survivor.

Developing a survivor identity is a complex and personal process. I suggest using Chickering's (1969) identity vectors as a way of understanding this personal process. No one will experience the developmental process in the same way, and my way of developing into a survivor is only one way of experiencing this identity development process. Robinson (2002) said about the healing process:

No matter what your trauma was, no matter what your coping mechanisms and reactions are, and no matter how mild or severe they are, it is possible for you to become healthier, stronger, happier, and more balanced. Look at this period in

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your life as a crossroads at which you commit to a path of growth and wellness. There's no one right way to get there. (p. 67)

Chickering's (1969) vectors can be used as guidelines that show a way of healing while still leaving room for every survivor and victim to find their own way. Chickering pointed out that "each [vector] seems to have direction and magnitude—even though the direction may be expressed more appropriately by a spiral or by steps than by a straight line" (p. 8). There is no linear process of becoming a survivor; sometimes moving backward is a step to moving forward. There is also no end to this development, and there is no finish line where kind people hand out water in tiny Dixie cups, wipe my brow with a towel, and furnish me with a beautiful shining survivor medal. I will never finish working on my survivor identity development; it is a consistent part of who I am.

### Rising with Competence

Did you want to see me broken,  
bowed head and lowered eyes,  
shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?  
...  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain,  
I rise. (Angelou, *Still I Rise*, lines 13-16, 31-32)

Chickering (1969) described his first vector, building competence, as a "three-tined pitchfork" (p. 8-9). The three tines that come together to create full competence are: intellectual competence, physical or manual skills, and interpersonal competence (Chickering). I built my intellectual competence in a variety of ways. One way was by rising up from the victim identity forced upon me by my rapists and society, as well as acknowledging my victimization ten years after my first sexual assault. I also built intellectual competence by learning about rape and sexual assault, what it means to be a victim, and eventually, what it means to be a survivor. I began to understand these things by devouring any information I could find about sexual assault victimization and healing. I was often preoccupied by these self-taught lessons late into the night and early into the morning. These lessons served a dual purpose: they built my intellectual competence and allowed me to avoid going to bed. When I slept too much, I often woke up in the morning feeling as though someone had pounded me with a baseball bat. So, instead of sleeping, I slumped onto my living room floor and searched the Internet yearning for voices of fellow victims. I found their voices scattered in hurt, fragile, and dark corners of the Internet, and I saw them, like me, frightened by the dark; shaking and alone. I rocked myself back and forth most of those nights as I cried. I sobbed for all of us with an overwhelming grief. Sometimes I still cry, but now I mostly cry because I am grateful that I could find their stories at all. Their stories make me feel less alone.

Eventually, my hours of Internet research turned from the raw, almost pornographic, sketches of wars raged upon bodies and spirits, to a search for a future. I wanted to understand this mystical, far-fetched concept of healing. In the words of another survivor, "I found it inconceivable that someone could be normal, much less happy, after experiencing what I had" (Robinson, 2002, p. 57). I wanted proof that I could someday be normal. I searched for stories of recovery and stories of victim rehabilitation. I wanted ways to heal that went beyond the cups of tea and warm baths consistently prescribed by family and friends. I clung desperately to the scraps of healing stories that I found.

This Internet research was my way of developing an "ability to identify problems and to define them in clear workable terms" (Chickering, 1969, p. 24). I was able to more fully understand my sexual assaults and my psychological and physical reactions to the violence incurred upon me. I was able "to synthesize and integrate information" (Chickering, p. 24) into my own experience, so I could explain to myself that my reactions were normal. After I built those first pieces of intellectual competence, I was able to move from my living room floor into a caring counselor's office for intense personal reflection and to the comforting warmth of the women's center for resource gathering.

I am developing my physical competence by attempting to take back my body. I have realized recently that since my first sexual assault ten years ago, I consistently refer to my body as "broken." It was not until recently that I started to understand how much my shame weighed down on my shoulders, bowed my head, and lowered my eyes (Angelou, 1996). As I moved along into my survivor identity, I tried, and continue to try, to open up and see my body as more than a vandalized object to be shunned and scorned.

This fall I signed up for a dance class that is forcing me to work on my physical competence. My dance class is filled with young girls who move their tender bodies with pride. I am determined to attend class each week, even though I am often stuck seeing a distorted image of myself in the mirrors contrasted with the idealized images of the young girls. It is torturous though, because I know that I used to be one of those young girls. When I was their age, around fourteen, I lost my ability to move without fear and shame when my boyfriend pinned me down and thrust himself into my mouth. I can still remember him shoving my sobs back into me. I watch the young girls move lightly beside me, and I realize that it is difficult to move my body. It has been hardened by years of pent-up fear, denial, and shame. I fear the same fate for the young girls that dance beside me.

Since that day ten years ago, I have often only been able to see myself as broken and vandalized. I find that my dance class gives me a “concrete, unequivocal, and public performance [that] provides clear evidence of achievement and of developmental progress” (Chickering, 1969, p. 29). Dance class is my “arena where competence or the lack of it must be faced squarely” (Chickering, p. 29). I am slowly feeling and using my body again. At age twenty-four, I am dancing my way into loving my body. I claim it with some degree of pride, and the image in the mirror is changing. I can see my development into a survivor.

Interpersonal competence in terms of my survivor identity can be seen most clearly in my personal relationships with men, since both of my rapists were men. Throughout my life, I have wrestled with power and control in relationships. I either hoarded power and control or gave it all away. Before my mother met most of my dates, she would often say to me, “Does this one have some strength? He’s not another puppy dog?” I tried to justify the imbalance of power and control in my relationships to my mom, yet I know deep down that my angry defensiveness was often because she was right. Most of my male partners have been fairly submissive, allowing me to maintain the power and control in the relationship. I have worked hard on developing better personal relationships with men that maintain a more equal balance of power and control. As discussed by Chickering (1969), one student’s own development in gaining interpersonal competence mirrors my own newly-found competence:

She recognizes that as part of a cooperative effort one must listen as well as talk, follow as well as lead, understand the concerns and motives of others, vary one’s role in response to the requirements of varying conditions, avoid excessive imposition of one’s own viewpoint. (Chickering, p. 33)

It has taken me years to come to this place in my development, and it is going to take constant work to ensure that I maintain a healthy sense of shared power and control.

### Managing Emotions

One of the key parts in becoming a survivor has been learning to manage my emotions. For me, fear is the most challenging emotion to manage. At the time of my second sexual assault, my life was overrun by fear and anxiety about unseen dangers. I wrote about my rapist in my journal during that tough time:

I fear that he is coming to me, entering my room in the middle of the night to get at me again. I fear that others are after me as well. I fear that all the men I know want to touch me while I sleep, steal from me what is mine to keep. (S. Jolly, personal communication, March 6, 2004)

Fear made me change the way I was living, and it still impacts me on a regular basis. I also faced having to manage my reactions to certain triggers, such as hugging friends whose bodies remind me of my rapists’ and simply having to intellectually discuss sexual assault in my professional life.

At first, in an attempt to manage my emotions, I denied their validity. This denial only seemed to multiply their impact. I would end up overwhelmed by fear, rushing home to huddle in the corner of my bed, wrapping my comforter around me as tightly as possible, as if it would act as impenetrable armor. Those days and nights happened often. I am happy to say that they are rare now. I am now grateful for my body’s fear mechanism, overactive as it may be. I recognize that my emotions can “often be a trustworthy guide and source of information about what is best” (Chickering, 1969, p. 46). My fear is in place for an important reason: protection. My body and mind alert me immediately if I am in a situation that might put me in a dangerous position. My body and mind, however, are very sensitive, and I have come to recognize that my fear can “serve as a basis for action and decision” (Chickering, p. 46). I now have the ability to make choices

about how to use my emotions. I can choose to act upon my fear or to simply acknowledge and accept its presence. It takes deep breathing, intentional inner dialogue, and comforting back-up plans to manage my everyday fear. It has been a slow process to come to a point where I can manage my fear, and I have had to make a very conscious decision to not allow fear to take over my life. I still have times when fear can override my rational decisions, but I accept this as part of my healing. It is not a failure but rather a part of the process. I am certain that this piece of my identity development will continue to improve over time.

### Developing Autonomy through Interdependence

In the weeks following my second sexual assault, I shriveled back into myself, scared and aching. I refrained from participating in my life as much as I could. When I left the house to walk to work or classes, I daydreamed about lying down on the sidewalk and becoming catatonic—a daydream that I believe expressed my intense desire to have others carry me through my own life. The idea of someone else carrying me through my life was my way of recognizing that the assault was way too much for me to handle on my own. I was exhausted from hiding my secret shame. I did not trust myself to partake in a world that I perceived as ruthless and cruel, and did not believe that I was strong enough to live my life. I relied on two dear friends to be my steadying guides as I slowly unfolded myself to once again be present in the world; I called them often and sent them long, sorrowful emails which expressed my pressing needs for reassurance, affection, and approval.

Slowly, I built what Chickering (1969) called “instrumental independence” (p. 71). At first I was certain that one of my rapists was waiting to harm me again, but I eventually learned that he was not there. I also learned that the monstrous men that had raped me were not lurking within every man I met. I began to learn how to trust myself again, and in doing so, I re-developed the ability to carry out activities on my own. I had the “ability to leave one place and get to another” (Chickering, p. 71). This sounds simple, but for me it was an enormous feat. I also developed “emotional independence” (Chickering, p. 58) by no longer requiring friends to remind me of my safety in the world. I no longer needed to be told that I was beautiful in spite of my rape. I finally came to realize that I had the ability to survive. I also created a voice within myself, which helped reassure me when I needed it.

Another significant piece of developing autonomy through interdependence is sharing my experience. Talking openly about my rapes has become a way to shed shame and build trust. It is a reflective trust that compounds as it bounces between me and my audiences. For example, I trust that you, my reader, will not further victimize me by blaming or shaming me. I also trust myself enough that I am able to survive even if you do try to victimize me. I trust that there is enough good in this world that speaking out about my own struggles will ease the struggles of others. By sharing my experiences, I become interdependent with the world: acknowledging, and even treasuring, my vulnerability.

### Establishing Identity

Just like many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, I have my own form of closet. It is a closet constructed by the boards of shame and blame. Some parts of society look at me as though I am dirty. I am often pitied. Some people believe that I could have avoided rape if only I had tried harder or been a better person. I fear I will be shunned by some religious communities. I fear not fitting into the stereotype of a rape victim and healing or hurting in the “right” way. I fear that having been a victim of violence means that I might be marked for violence in the future. I long for a community in which I can freely express myself. In order to be accepted, loved, or treated with respect, I feel as though I often have to hide a large piece of who I am.

I have slowly come out as a survivor. The forming and expression of my survivor identity is only a recent part of my development. I have learned intellectually about sexual assault and healing, developed a way to take back my body, taken control over my fear, and worked on trusting myself and others. I felt my survivor identity become what Chickering (1969) described as a “solid sense of self” (p. 80). This article is my way of coming out to the world. I will no longer speak about sexual assault in terms that leave out my identity, despite the looks of sympathy that I am certain to receive. I am grateful for who I am. I will always be angry that I was raped and that I was often unsupported as a victim, but I am proud of what I have become: a strong, empowered survivor with a loud voice. I believe it is important to speak out and share my story, for I agree with Estel (1994) who said, in reference to the importance of ending silence about sexual violence:

If we bring the fungus into the sunlight it will not grow. Over time it will wither and die. So too with the aftermath and pain of sexual assault at the level of the survivor and so too with the incidence of rape within a society. (p. 191)

By addressing sexual assault survivor victim identity development, we can address the fungus more intentionally and help victims find strength in the creation of a new identity.

### Freeing Interpersonal Relationships

Freeing interpersonal relationships has been difficult for me. I have seen a great “shift in the quality of relationships with intimates and close friends” (Chickering, 1969, p. 94). My sexual assaults forced me to re-evaluate those with whom I spend my time and to set new standards for being my friend or partner. Chickering spoke of “increased tolerance and respect” (p. 94) as an aspect of freeing interpersonal relationships. The word no, for example, has become extremely significant to me, and I expect it to be heard and immediately accepted. Every time I use the word no I am very intentional and determined. I do not tolerate those who try to convince or cajole me into changing my mind, even when it is something as simple as having a bite of dessert.

I have experienced a dramatic increase in tolerance for some things as well. In fact, a prime example was my extreme discomfort with hugs, even among the closest of friends. I regularly felt that they were being taken from me without leaving me the opportunity to refuse. It eventually led to me breaking down in front of friends and classmates and half-yelling at them, “I hate hugs!” That was about a year ago. Now, I am happy to say that close friends are overwhelmed by my requests for hugs. When they leave it up to me to choose to ask for a hug, they let me feel in control. I am then able to build my relationships with them.

### Developing Purpose

Chickering’s (1969) vector about developing purpose focuses specifically on vocational goals or clear plans for the future. In my survivor identity development a deeper sense of purpose had to be developed more fully before I could address the idea of a future or vocation. Purpose was an essential piece of my development in terms of what makes me choose to continue living my life. Often, when sobbing on the living room floor, not wanting to live a minute longer, I willed myself to die. I sometimes held my breath, waiting for my body to give out just as I felt my spirit had. I never intentionally harmed myself, but I longed for it to happen. In those sad moments, I remembered my family and friends, old and new, and I chose to get up again. I chose to continue living, simply because I knew that my death would negatively impact my loved ones. It was in these painful moments that I came to better understand, if not the exact details of my purpose, that at least I had one.

After that first sense of purpose was in place, I was able to focus on the “vocational goals” that Chickering (1969) saw as “developing purpose” (p. 109). It is significant to point out that Chickering assumed that students already have a purpose and reason for living. Questioning the purpose of life is not uncommon, and this needs to be acknowledged as an important part of identity development if we want to ensure student success.

### Developing Integrity

Writing is my way of developing integrity. It is a release for me, as it helps me reflect on where I have been, what I once valued, and how much I have grown. For example, I can look back at my writing from a year ago and see my own development:

I lost my morality the other night. . . . When I say I lost my morality, I mean that I lost my sense of duty to oneself and to others. . . . For brief moments, I felt as though life and living no longer mattered, and that any action was not worthwhile. (S. Jolly, personal communication, December 8, 2003)

Now I write much more joyfully, and I find a sense of gratefulness for where I am and who I have become. I realize these days that it is a privilege to be able to step beyond the threshold of my bedroom and find solace in the world. I search out this solace consistently, and it is as if Mother Earth grants me my wishes for beauty, peace, and comfort. Integrity is built through the sharing of my story, which allows me a way to find congruence between my new set of

values and the way I act in the world (Chickering, 1969). Writing is a way of reflecting on my development. It is also a way to project these reflections onto a path for the future. In a recent discussion with my mother about this article, I explained to her that it was important for me to use my own painful experiences to help others move through their own. I am discovering in the final workings of this article more and more integrity.

### Conclusion

Higher education can develop pride in supporting survivors who are part of college campuses by actively and intentionally supporting victims and survivors, creating programs to promote dialogue and awareness of sexual assault, and properly training higher education professionals. I could never have identified as a survivor without the intense amount of support, love, and patience of my victim's advocate, friends, colleagues, and professors. I was, however, a student well connected to my resources, and I still found many who did not support me as a victim or survivor. I cringe to think of how a first-year student not as connected to resources might feel after a sexual assault. Therefore, it is imperative that higher education professionals incorporate facilitating survivor identity into their roles.

Despite the support I have received, there are many community-wide efforts that would make me feel more accepted. I would love to see affirmations of my identity on campus. I am tired of seeing, in campus advertising addressing sexual violence, victims of sexual assault represented only as powerless and broken. This image is only representative of the victim identity, and while it is very important to have that message, I feel it is also important to give hope to victims. I would love to see positive, empowering images of survivors, demonstrating a future for victims of sexual assault. The victim image tells me that I will always be broken. I would also like to see higher education consider challenging the victim image more. There are many strong survivors on campuses who can be seen as proof that healing does happen.

In programmatic efforts, higher education professionals have a responsibility to include developmental theory as a basic foundation for the program. I suggest using my own story and the stories of other survivors and victims about building competence, managing emotions, developing purpose, and so forth, as a basis for trying to include survivor identity development as part of campus programs. For example, forms of expression, such as my dance class, can be an excellent way of building physical and intellectual competence. Creating programs that address the management of emotions, such as a workshop that teaches students how to face fear, would be an excellent way to acknowledge fear as a commonplace emotion. Such programs would normalize victim and survivor reactions and legitimize them as valued members of the university community. Properly training professional staff on how to facilitate the empowerment of victims and survivors, as well as fostering staff awareness about sexual assault issues, are other proactive ways to ensure that survivor identity development will become part of the academy.

As victims and survivors:

We feel that our pain, confusion, or fear is clear evidence that we must be doing something terribly wrong, and we must frantically struggle to make ourselves accept before we must earn the right to be loved. (Muller, 1992, p. 66)

Higher education can play a significant role in helping victims and survivors feel accepted and deserving of love through the naming and acceptance of the survivor identity. I know that I am not the only survivor and that my way is not the only way of developing this identity. I also know that I am not yet done healing. I offer my story in hope that higher education can work to better support and accept the identity of survivors of sexual assault.

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