IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE GAP:

Emerging Adult's Experiences in Structured Gap Year Programs

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75% of students are either undecided about their major or change their major at some point during their college career (Central College, n.d.).

Identity development is important for setting the trajectory of one's life and crucial for living a meaningful and satisfying life (Goth, 2012; Arnett, 2000; Crocetti et al., 2012).

Research on the specific impact of structured gap years on identity in emerging adulthood is lacking.

Statement of the Problem:

Current Literature

➢ The goal for identity development is to reach identity achievement (Erikson 1968), because commitments provide individuals with a sense of purpose and direction (Berzonsky, 2003).

➢ Individuals who explore their identity are less likely to engage in such activities, while those who have committed to certain aspects of their identity are the least likely to be involved in risky behavior (Schwartz et. al., 2011).

➢ Each gap year varies in length of time and can be either domestic or international; structured within a program or developed independently; taken individually or within a group setting; and include volunteer work or simply travel and more personal exploration (Simpson, 2004).

➢ Understanding themselves, independence, resilience and emotional regulation, self-confidence, a sense of purpose, maturity, positive body image, and improvement in mental health disorders were all internal benefits of emerging adults' experiences taking a gap year. (O'Shea, 2011)

Purpose of Study

This study examines students' stories of their participation in gap year programs as well as gap year program employees' observations of students' experiences in order to better understand what aspects of the programs most impacted identity development.
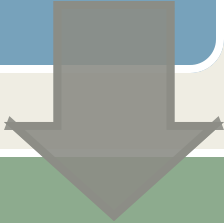
Research Questions

How do structured gap year programs influence identity development in emerging adults?

What types of experiences were the most effective in developing identity?

Research Procedure:

The researcher chose to use a qualitative, phenomenological approach to the study.

Fifteen semi structured interviews were completed either face-to-face or over the phone with both gap year alumni and gap year professionals.
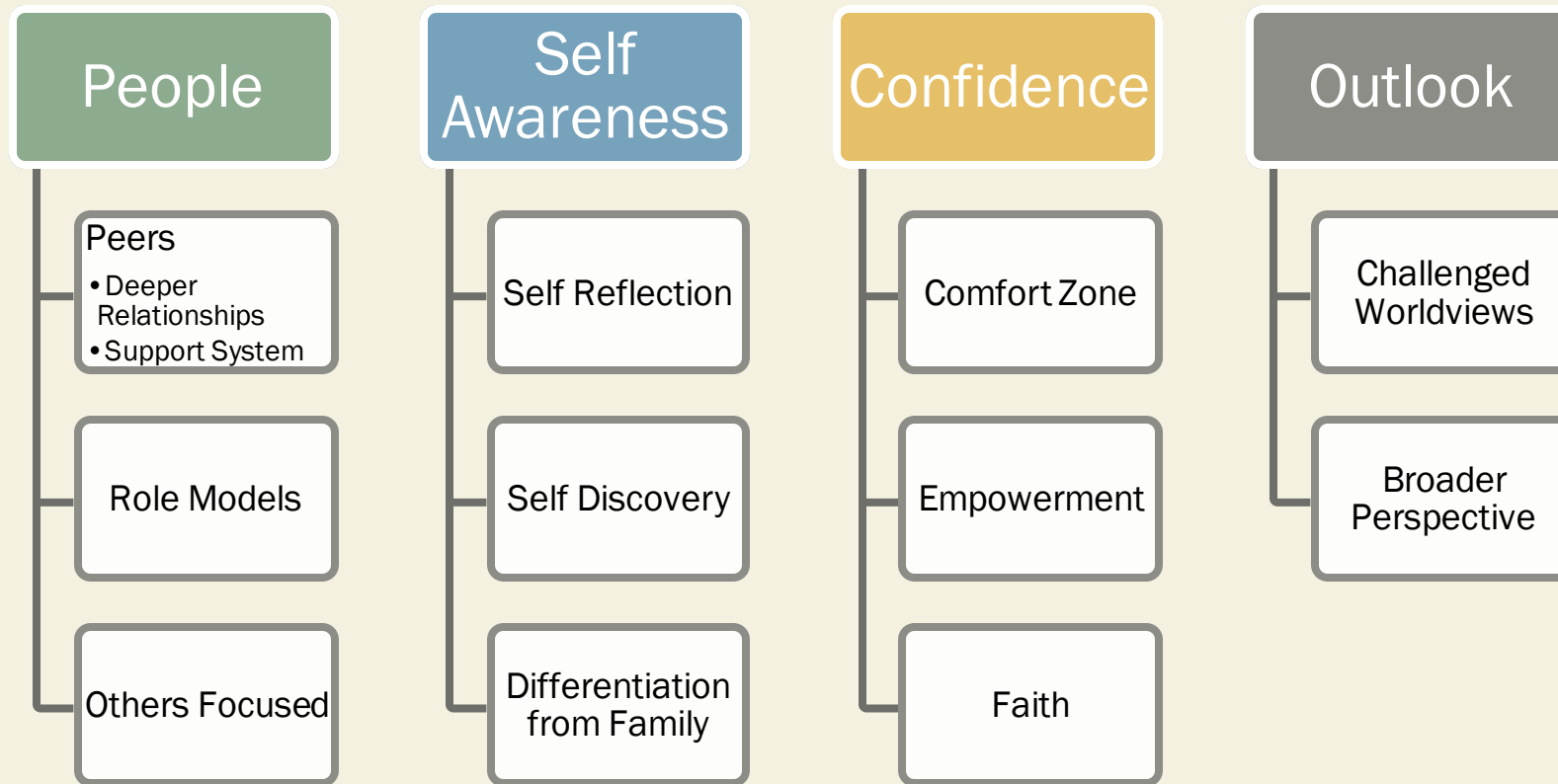
Demographics:

1 Most of the participants identified as white, upper or lower middle socioeconomic citizens.

2 There were 8 separate gap year programs represented, 5 of which were faith-based programs.

Results - Gap Year Alumni

Individuals who have completed and/or graduated from a gap year program reported they felt their identity grew in these four areas:

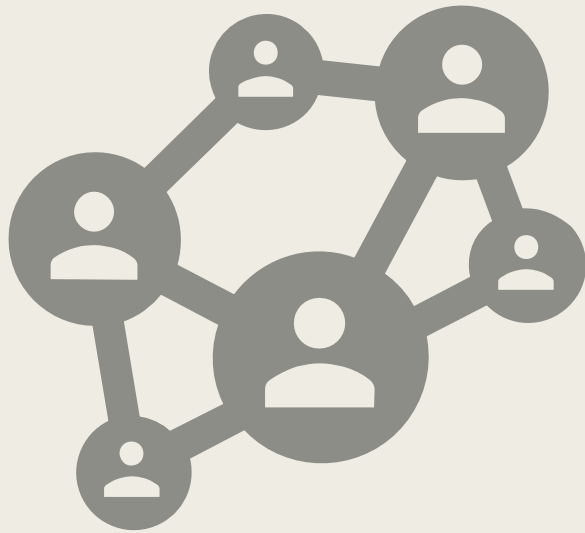| People	Self Awareness	Confidence	Outlook
Peers • Deeper Relationships • Support System	Self Reflection	Comfort Zone	Challenged Worldviews
Role Models	Self Discovery	Empowerment	Broader Perspective
Others Focused	Differentiation from Family	Faith	

Results - Gap Year Professionals

Current employees of a certified gap year program observed their students developed their identity through these four themes:
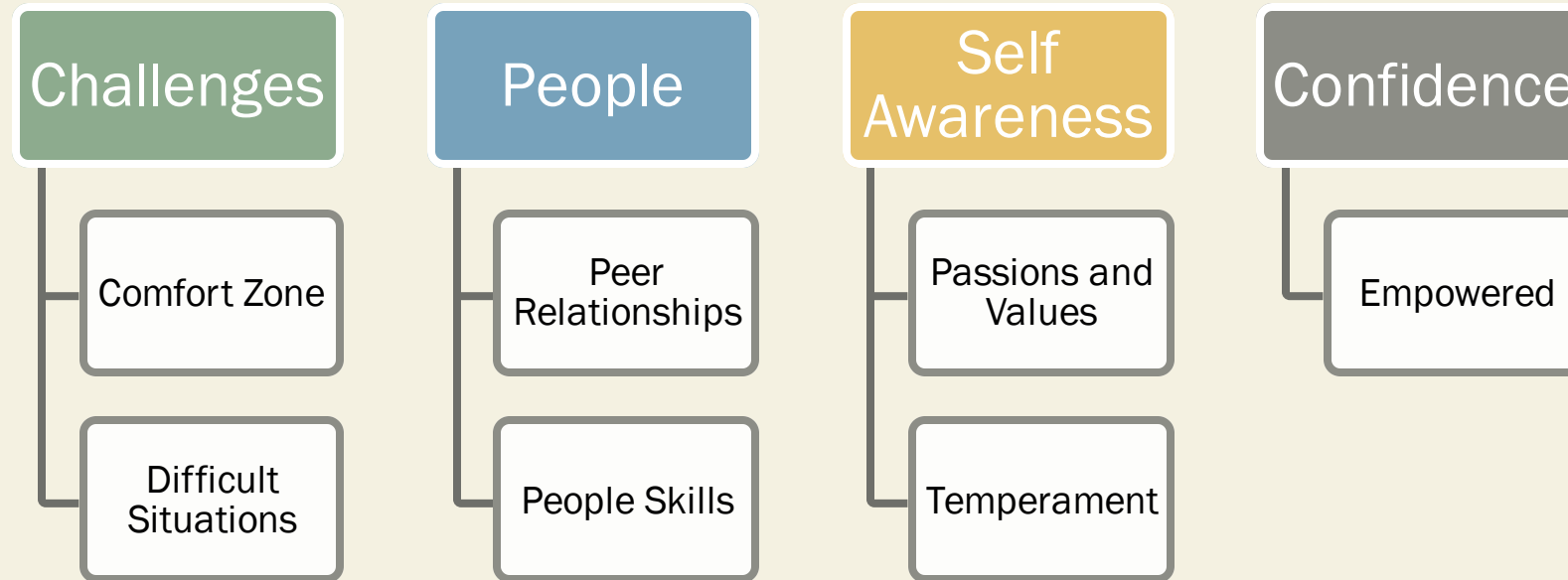
Notable Quotes

- "So yeah, just taking time to, to look and say, okay, what, you know, who are you? What is, what do you like to do? I'm going to have space to do that without the pressure of like, gah I need to choose now." (Grace)

- "But I like, do think that I've never been a person outside of a student context. And like several had an opportunity to step away from school, and there's a lot of fruit that I can see in my peers from that." (Laura)

- "So I think my gap year really helped me, um, just grow my personal confidence in the Lord, but also just as a person, um, and also just kind of helped me learn what, um, what friendship could be like with pursuing Christ together. So I think that was definitely a growing time for me." (Erin)

- "And then I think like, movin throughout my gap year after I came to Christ… like my identity moved from being a basketball player into like, being a follower… like, I love basketball so much, but I didn't find my identity in it anymore." (Tyler)

- "But the benefit of a gap year program is now you're away from mom and dad. But you also have guidance from people in an intimate environment rather than a college. Like in Arkansas there's 10,000 plus students. How do you not get lost in that?" (Justin, gap year Director)

DISCUSSION – Key Findings

Areas of Identity Development:

o During the gap year experience, the gappers reported they grew in their **self-awareness, confidence in themselves**, and in their **relationships** and **interactions with others** around them.

o One major theme was gappers' development of their **faith** and **worldviews**, which contributed to an increased **confidence** in themselves.

o Professionals' students felt **empowered** through their gap year program to continue to self-reflect, try hard things, and grow in their relationships with others in their lives beyond their program.

DISCUSSION – Key Findings

Components of Programs that Impacted Identity Development:

o Differentiating from their family

o Encountering challenging situations outside of comfort zones

o Intensive community environment

o Space and structure for self-reflection
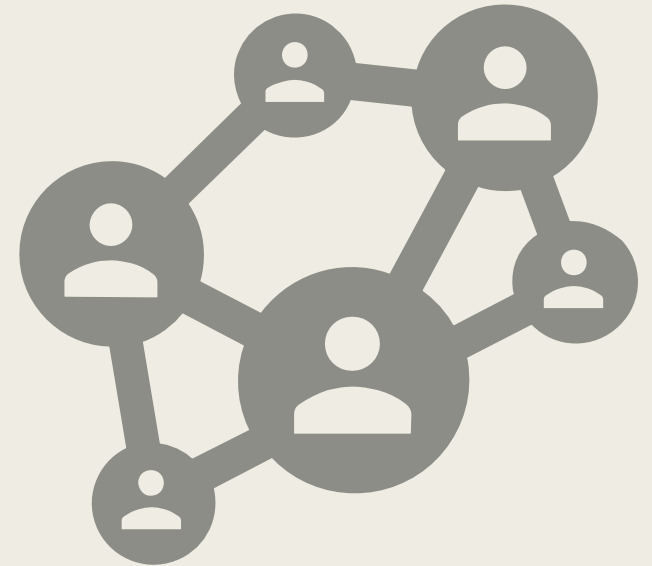
DISCUSSION- Implications

Having a stronger sense of their identity may ensure a better sense of wellbeing during their college experience despite the endless amount of challenges college students inevitably encounter.
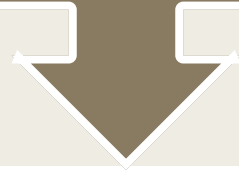
Gap year programs should seek to incorporate the following: intensive community aspect and mentor system; purposeful space for self-reflection; new contexts, new experiences, and opportunities to encounter challenging situations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research needs to address college students who did not take a gap year in comparison to those who did take a gap year as far as their identity development or college preparedness.

One participant discussed the concept of "post-gap depression." This is a subject outside the scope of this study that should be explored more in-depth.

Resources:

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. American Psychologist, 55(5), 469-480.

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THANK YOU