

Identity Formation in Adolescents From Different Ethnic Groups

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The purpose of our contribution is to reflect on the link between ethnicity and identity formation in a specific developmental period, that is adolescence. In order to reach this aim we will firstly present the theoretical framework of identity research, and, secondly, we will review studies focused on ethnic differences on adolescent identity development.

Identity Issues

Identity development is a core task individuals need to resolve along the entire life span, but it is during adolescence that it becomes particularly urgent and challenging (Erikson, 1950; 1968). In fact, individual and societal factors make identity formation the most important task adolescents have to deal with. From an *individual* point of view, biological (the experience of puberty), cognitive (the acquisition of the formal-abstract reasoning), and social (the starting of new interactions with peers and modifications in parent-adolescent relationships) changes stimulate adolescents to find out their own personal and social identity. From a *societal* perspective, historical and cultural changes made the self become a problem more and more important (Baumeister, 1987). In our contemporary Western societies people are strongly pressed to find their own and unique identity by choosing among a large variety of alternatives, in a situation named the “*tyranny of freedom*” (Schwartz, 2000). This expression underlines that to have several opportunities is not always gratifying, especially when people do not have a criterion to choose what it is best for them,

since societal guidelines and meaningful referential frameworks are missing (Baumsteir, 1987; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Berzonsky, 2003).

Erikson (1950) proposed a developmental theory of the life span, which consisted of eight phases. Each phase was characterized by a core conflict that individuals need to resolve in order to face the succeeding conflicts. In adolescence the key developmental task is the achievement of identity. Erikson (1968) conceptualized ego identity both as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness and as an unconscious striving for continuity of experience. Adolescents may move toward two poles: *identity achievement* and *identity confusion*. Identity achieved individuals have combined and integrated relevant earlier identifications into a unique and personal mold. On the contrary, young people in a status of identity confusion have not chosen their own commitments and, thus, they move from one identification to another one, in a sort of “psychological tourism” (Palmonari, 1997).

The most important elaboration of Erikson’s (1950; 1968) views on identity formation is Marcia’s (1966) *identity status paradigm*. Marcia shared the notion that adolescence is a period of crisis in which important commitments need to be undertaken. From his clinical work, Marcia understood that, besides the two poles proposed by Erikson (i.e., identity achievement vs. identity confusion), other statuses should be considered. Specifically, these statuses could be meaningfully differentiated taking into account two dimensions: exploration and commitment. *Exploration* refers to the active questioning and weighing of various identity alternatives before making decisions about the values, beliefs and goals to pursue. *Commitment* involves making a relatively firm choice about an identity domain and engaging in significant activities geared toward the implementation of that choice. Four identity statuses have been obtained by crossing exploration and commitment: in the *achievement* status, adolescents have made a commitment in a specific identity domain, following a period of active exploration; in the *foreclosure* status, adolescents have made a commitment without any or little exploration; in the *moratorium* status, adolescents are actively exploring various alternatives and have not yet made a commitment; finally, in the *diffusion* status

adolescents have not engaged in a pro-active process of exploration of different alternatives, nor have made a commitment in a specific identity domain. A large amount of research has been conducted within the identity status paradigm. Evidence collected revealed that statuses could be clearly differentiated in terms of personality characteristics, psychosocial problems and well-being, cognitive processes, interpersonal behaviours, and family antecedents (for reviews see Marcia 1980; 1993; Meeus, 1992; Kroger, 2003).

Identity status research has been guided by the intent of providing a classification of individuals, rather than studying the process of identity development (Bosma, 1985). The identity statuses were conceived as various outcomes of the adolescent period described by Erikson's theory (Meeus, Iedema, & Maassen, 2002). However, Grotevant (1987), Stephen, Fraser and Marcia (1992) and Marcia (1993) himself recognized the importance of studying the process of identity formation rather than focusing exclusively on its outcomes. Bosma (1985) and Meeus (1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Meeus et al., 2002) took up this challenge. Recently, building upon previous work by Meeus, we (Crocetti, Rubini and Meeus, 2008) proposed a process identity model that comprises three key processes: commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. Specifically, *commitment* refers to enduring choices that adolescents have made with regard to various developmental domains and to the self-confidence they derive from these choices. *In-depth exploration* represents the extent to which adolescents think actively about the commitments they have enacted, reflect on their choices, search for additional information about their commitments, and talk with others about them. *Reconsideration of commitment* refers to the comparison of present commitments with possible alternative commitments because the current ones are no longer satisfactory. We demonstrated, through confirmatory factor analysis, that a three-factor model including commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment provided a better fit to the data than did a one-factor model (in which all three dimensions were collapsed into a single dimension) or a two-factor model (in which a pair of dimensions was collapsed into a single dimension). Furthermore, the three-factor model

fitted equally well for boys and girls, separately, and also for both early and middle Dutch adolescents. This research also established interethnic equivalence of the model, in that it fitted well also for ethnic minority individuals living in The Netherlands (most of these adolescents came from non-Western countries, such as Morocco, Turkey, and Surinam). Therefore, this model represents a useful theoretical and methodological framework to investigate the development of identity, across ethnic groups.

In one study conducted with a large sample of Dutch adolescents (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008) we demonstrated that, from the combination of commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment, is possible to obtain five identity statuses: *achievement* (high commitment and in-depth exploration, but low reconsideration of commitment), *foreclosure* (high commitment, medium exploration, and low reconsideration), *moratorium* (low commitment, low exploration, and high reconsideration), *searching moratorium* (high commitment, exploration, and reconsideration), and *diffusion* (low commitment, exploration, and reconsideration). Furthermore, we examined the association of these statuses with personality, psychosocial problems, and parent-adolescent relationships. We found that each of the five clusters revealed a theoretically meaningful and distinct profile on these variables. In particular, the adolescents in the achievement status displayed the healthiest personality profile, they had few psychosocial problems and they perceived a good quality of parent-adolescent relationships. The adolescents in the foreclosure status, on the one hand, were similar to the former individuals in reporting low psychosocial problems and good parental communication. They were, on the other hand, different with respect to their personality profile. Indeed, they were less extroverted, agreeable, conscientious, and open to experience than adolescents in achievement, but they reported high emotional stability. The adolescents in the moratorium and searching moratorium clusters were similar in reporting the lowest scores on several adaptive personality features and on the quality of parent-adolescent relationships. However, the moratorium cluster appeared to be much more troubled than the searching moratorium one, as revealed by higher scores on various psychosocial problems. Finally,

adolescents in the diffusion status displayed a personality profile similar to that of adolescents in the foreclosure status. They displayed low levels of psychosocial problems and some ambivalence in the relationships with their parents.

Ethnicity and Identity Formation

How ethnicity can affect identity formation in adolescence? Studies that have tried to answer this question can be grouped into two clusters considering whether they focused on the development of ethnic identity, or if they took into account identity formation in “normal domains”, such as educational and relational identity domains.

The formation of ethnic identity. A number of studies have considered the development of ethnic identity on the basis of Phinney's (1990) prominent model, which applies the identity status model to the domain of ethnic identity. Consistent with Marcia's (1966) model, Phinney (1989) stated that adolescents' level of ethnic identity could be examined considering four statuses, defined by the extent to which individuals have explored the meaning of ethnicity in their lives and have decided to which concept of ethnicity to become committed to. Specifically, young people in the *achievement* status are those who have actively explored the meaning of ethnic identity and have finally found their own position. Individuals in the *foreclosure* status are those who have firmly adopted a definition of what ethnicity means to them referring to the views proposed by significant others, like their parents. Adolescents in the *moratorium* status are still exploring the meaning of ethnicity, and they are not committed to any specific definition yet. Young people in the *diffusion* status are those who have not decided what ethnicity means to them, neither have explored any alternative.

In a study conducted with African American individuals Yip, Seaton and Sellers (2006) found that adolescents were more likely to be in the moratorium status and less likely to be in the achievement status than college students and adults. Thus, they concluded that whereas

achievement of ethnic identity is the modal condition for university students and adults, moratorium is the modal status for adolescents. Seaton, Scottham, and Sellers (2006) realized a 3-year longitudinal study on the development of ethnic identity among African American adolescents. They demonstrated that 39% of the participants remained in the same identity status (i.e., they were named *constant*), 33% of the participants moved from one identity status to another one considered to be higher, like from diffusion to achievement (i.e., they were labelled *progressive*), 28% of the participants moved from a higher status to a lower status, like from achievement to moratorium (i.e., they were called *regressive*). Those adolescents who remained constant in their identity status reported higher psychological well-being than those who were regressive (while those who were progressive exhibited medium levels of well-being).

Several studies conducted in the United States, involving individuals from different ethnic groups, have demonstrated that adolescents with a stronger ethnic identity exhibit higher self-esteem than those with an unstructured ethnic identity (see for instance, Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz, 1997; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Seaton et al., 2006). Finally, it is worthwhile taking into account that ethnic identity is not as salient for the majority group as it is for the minority group. In fact, findings of various studies consistently showed that White adolescents scored significantly lower on measures of ethnic identity than their ethnic minority counterparts (e.g., Branch, Tayal, & Triplett, 2000; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990).

Ethnicity and identity formation in “normal” domains. The second cluster of researches includes studies that have investigated whether people from different ethnic groups are differently represented in the various identity statuses reached in “normal” life domains, such as educational and relational domains. Studies, conducted in the United States, that have examined this issue by considering the identity status model proposed by Marcia have yielded contrasting findings. In fact, Abraham (1986) and Streitmatter (1988) found that ethnic minority adolescents were more foreclosed than their Caucasian peers. Conversely, Rotheram-Borus (1989), Grove (1991), and

Branch et al. (2000) found no differences in the identity statuses displayed by adolescents from different ethnic groups.

Recently, we examined this topic by considering the five identity statuses derived from the combination of commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment (Crocetti et al., 2008b). Interestingly, we have found that Dutch adolescents were more strongly present in foreclosure (35.7 vs. 23.4%) and diffusion (28 vs. 13.5%) statuses than ethnic minority adolescents were. On the other hand, ethnic minority adolescents were more present in the moratorium (30.3 vs. 19.6%) and in the searching moratorium (20.7 vs. 7.1%) statuses than Dutch adolescents were. Thus, our results clearly demonstrated that adolescents from ethnic minority groups (most of them came from non-Western countries, such as Morocco, Turkey, Surinam) were more present in the identity statuses of moratorium (both searching moratorium and moratorium) than were their Dutch peers. These findings can be understood through considering the issue of acculturation (Berry, 2001, 2005). In fact, for ethnic minority adolescents, the task of identity development is strongly linked to the challenge of acculturation. These individuals have to construct their own identity choosing among different values they are exposed to (Phalet & Hagendoorn, 1996). In particular, Phalet and Schönplflug (2001) demonstrated that, in Moroccan and Turkish families living in The Netherlands, mainly collectivistic values were transmitted from parents to offspring. On the other hand, ethnic minority adolescents are also exposed to more individualistic principles through mass-media communication, attendance in public schools, and interaction with their Dutch peers. It has to be said, however, that the contact with native Dutch adolescents is particularly demanding for ethnic minority adolescents. This has to do with the ethnic preference hierarchy held by Dutch children. In fact, Verkuyten and Kinket (2000) found that Dutch young people first preferred to have contact with other Dutch peers; secondly, they wanted to have contact with ethnic Indonesian and Surinamese adolescents (i.e., coming from ex-Dutch colonies); finally, the least preferred ethnic groups were Yugoslavians, Moroccans, and Turks, in that order. These findings are convergent with those reported with adolescents and adults by Hagendoorn and Hraba (1987). These results

consistently highlight that, even if The Netherlands are a multicultural country (Hammar, 1985), social contact between native and ethnic minority adolescents is not effortless. This might be an obstacle for minority groups who wish to explore and compare the values of their collectivistic culture with the more individualistic values of the Dutch society.

Summing up, findings of our study (Crocetti et al., 2008b) revealed that the formation of identity in “normal” domains is more complex for adolescents belonging to ethnic minority groups. These individuals, in fact, have to consider a broader array of identity alternatives than their Dutch peers, and this can reasonably explain why they are more present in the searching moratorium and moratorium statuses. These results, taken together with those indicating the stressful experience characteristics of the moratorium statuses (i.e., these statuses were associated with internalizing problem behaviours, such as presence of anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as with externalizing problems, such as aggressive behaviours), point out that young people from ethnic minority groups are an at risk group, that should be a priority target for interventions aimed at promoting a healthy adolescent development.

Suggestions for Future Research: Combing the Acculturation Framework with the Identity Research

Until now, studies on acculturation and studies on identity have proceeded on quite separate paths. Concluding this contribution we would like to propose a possible integration between the *acculturation* framework proposed by Berry (2001; 2005) and the identity literature, in particular referring to our identity model (Crocetti et al., 2008a; 2008b).

Berry (2001; 2005) proposed to consider four different *acculturation strategies*: individuals with an *integration* strategy are those who wish to combine their cultural heritage with the culture of the receiving society; individuals with an *assimilation* strategy are interested in adopting the culture of the receiving society and they do not want to preserve their heritage; individuals with a *separation* strategy wish to maintain their cultural heritage and they avoid contacts with the

receiving society; finally, individuals with a *marginalization* strategy are neither active in maintaining their culture nor in adopting the values of the hosting society.

Stevens, Pels, Vollebergh, and Crijnen (2004) investigated the presence of different acculturation strategies in Moroccan adolescents living in the Netherlands, by adopting Berry's acculturation framework. They found three specific acculturation strategies: the *integration* strategy (characterized by high identification with both Moroccan and Dutch people and culture), the *separation* strategy (characterized by high attachment to Moroccan and low attachment to Dutch people and culture), and an *ambivalent* acculturation pattern (characterized by moderate attachment with respect to both cultures). Interestingly, girls with an ambivalent acculturation pattern showed more problems than the other girls on parent- and adolescent-reported internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours. For boys, no effects of acculturation on problem behaviours were found. The high number of conflicts between parents and their ambivalently acculturated daughters partly explained the relation between acculturation and problem behaviours (Stevens, Vollebergh, Pels, Crijnen, 2007).

As already stated (Crocetti et al., 2008b) we suggest that the adolescents in the ambivalent acculturation patterns resemble, to some extent, the ethnic minority adolescents in the searching moratorium and moratorium statuses. In fact, both the ambivalent and the moratorium individuals seem to struggle with conflicting forces, that is, choosing or not choosing the identity alternatives offered by their cultural heritage and by the receiving society. This similarity also accounts for the finding that both the ambivalently acculturated and the moratorium adolescents exhibited high internalizing and externalizing problem behaviours. Future empirical studies are needed to confirm this hypothesis and to deepen the link between acculturation strategies and identity processes.

Summing up, for the adolescents from ethnic minority groups, the identity formation process might be more troubled than for native adolescents, because the former must explore more alternatives offered by both their heritage culture and their receiving culture.

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