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Shedding light on the dark side of identity: Introduction to the special issue



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this special issue is to shed light in the dark side of identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood, that is, to provide some understanding in what exactly can go wrong in identity development. After summarizing the recent developments in identity development literature, in this introduction the main findings of all thirteen empirical papers are summarized into three overarching themes: (1) lack of identity integration as a risk factor, (2) reconsideration of commitment as a sign of identity uncertainty, and (3) ruminative exploration as another risk factor undermining healthy identity development. Finally, given that all papers in this special issue are based on conference presentations at the 14th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Research on Adolescence (EARA), some more information on that conference is included in this introduction.

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Identity literature: a look at recent developments of the field

Identity research represents a bulk of adolescent and emerging adulthood literature. Interest for identity formation has been largely prompted by Erikson's (1950, 1968) pioneering contribution and by subsequent models, such as Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm, which has operationalized more specifically the richness of Erikson's thought. In the last decades, the identity literature has undergone substantial developments, which have led to an enhanced interest for unraveling the fascinating process by which individuals define themselves, exploring identity alternatives and choosing meaningful commitments across various life domains. In particular, significant advancements in the identity field includes: development of theoretical and empirical extensions of Erikson's and Marcia's contributions; longitudinal focus on multiple antecedents, correlates, and consequences of identity; and study of identity in a large array of cultural and social groups.

First, a new lymph to the identity literature has been provided by the development of new process models that extended Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm (for reviews see Meeus, 2011; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2014). Luyckx and colleagues' five dimensional model (Luyckx, Goossens et al., 2006; Luyckx, Schwartz et al., 2008) and Meeus, Crocetti, and

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collaborators' three-factor model (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) offered new conceptualizations of the identity dynamics, highlighting different forms in which individuals can form, evaluate, and revise their identities. Furthermore, applications of both models showed that by considering more identity processes and applying empirically based methods of classification it was possible to disentangle various types of identity statuses, such as different forms of diffusion (carefree diffusion and diffused diffusion; Luyckx, Schwartz et al., 2008) and moratorium (moratorium and searching moratorium; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012), which were not initially encompassed in Marcia's paradigm. Also research based on an innovative narrative approach (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013), with strong roots in original Eriksonian theory, led to new insights and deeper questions about the developmental processes of identity. All these new contributions clearly showed that young people can enact different developmental patterns. Importantly longitudinal studies have revealed that identity is characterized by a combination of change and stability (Meeus, 2011). For instance, Meeus et al. (2010) found that over the course of adolescence, 63% of youth remained in the same identity status whereas 37% of them changed statuses, with progressive changes being more common than regressive changes. Thus, process models and narrative approaches have provided renewed frameworks to study identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood and have stimulated a new reflection on the specifics and meaning of various identity processes.

Second, a further main development of the identity literature has been given by an extended focus on various antecedents, correlates, and consequences of identity. An increasing number of longitudinal studies have disentangled reciprocal influences between identity and individual characteristics, such as personality (Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012; Luyckx, Soenens et al., 2006), time orientation (Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010; Shirai, Nakamura, & Katsuma, 2012), internalizing (Crocetti, Klimstra, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009) and externalizing (Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013) problem behaviors, and mental health (Schwartz et al., 2015). Furthermore, longitudinal evidence has provided new insights in how proximal and distal social contexts shape and are shaped at the same time by youth identity. In this respect, meaningful associations between identity and family (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Schwartz, Mason, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2009) and community (Crocetti, Garckija, Gabrielavičiute, Vosylis, & Žukauskiene, 2014) contexts have been unraveled. Thus, longitudinal studies have highlighted that identity is strongly intertwined to adolescent and emerging adult psychosocial development.

Third, a very important advancement in the identity literature has been given by the increase in diversity. While in the Sixties and Seventies most identity studies included only university students (see Schwartz, 2005; for a discussion), the last decades documented a large diversity in the origin, status, and culture of participating adolescents and emerging adults. First of all, a main advancement has occurred in the study of ethnic minority youth. A wide corpus of evidence has provided new insights on how ethnic minorities, growing up in the US and in other Western countries in which multiculturalism is constantly increasing, develop their ethnic identity and how this influences their mental health and well-being (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Umana-Taylor, Zeiders, & Updegraff, 2013). Furthermore, it has increased the number of studies that investigate how identity develops in community samples drawn from the general population as well as in understudied groups, such as juvenile delinquents and clinically referred youth (Klimstra et al., 2011) and youth with chronic diseases (Luyckx, Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2008). Finally, identity researchers took up the challenge of studying more in-depth the "neglected 95%" (Arnett, 2008), largely increasing the number of studies in non-American samples. These studies include both studies focusing on identity in specific understudied national groups (e.g., identity in Filipino youth; Pesigan, Luyckx, & Alampay, 2014) as well as cross-cultural comparisons involving youth from different continents (Crocetti et al., 2015). This increase in diversity is highlighting international perspectives in similarities and differences in how youth around the globe develop their identity (Berman, 2011; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012).

Moving the field forward: new insights from the current special issue

This special issue will further contribute to advance the identity field, by focusing particularly on the dark side of identity formation. All new insights on identity development summarized above clearly showed that young people can enact different developmental patterns. However, a question that remains and that is highly relevant for youngsters struggling with their identity development as well as for clinicians dealing with them, is whether and how these new insights on identity development help us to shed light on the dark side of identity. More specifically, a main question is whether these progresses of the identity research field help us to explain what is exactly going wrong with young people that in adolescence and even at the age of emerging adulthood are still confused or diffused.

The first set of papers in this special issue focuses on the importance of identity integration, a key feature of healthy identity development according to Erikson (1968). Without good identity integration, individuals experience lack of continuity and persistence. Syed and McLean clearly define identity integration and illustrate in their theoretical article how a lack of identity integration hampers psychological functioning. Doing so, they discuss four different forms of integration: contextual integration, temporal integration, ego integration, and person-society integration. How identity exactly is integrated is studied by Solomontes-Kontouri and Hatzitoffi in a sample of Cypriot young inmates, with a focus on temporal integration. Participation in educational programs inside prison turns out to be a strong vehicle towards positive identity integration. Aydinli and Dimitrova focus on the importance of contextual integration. Turkish immigrant youth in Germany and Bulgaria who show a coherent social identity (comprising ethnic, national, and religious identity) showed less negative affect. When one of these identity domains is not integrated in the overall social identity (e.g., national identity), it is not an

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