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Brief report: Academic amotivation in light of the dark side of identity formation



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ABSTRACT

The study intended to determine motivational profiles of first-year undergraduates and aimed their characterization in terms of identity processes. First, a cluster analysis revealed five motivational profiles: combined (i.e., high quantity of motivation, low amotivation); intrinsic (i.e., high intrinsic, low introjected and external regulation, low amotivation); “demotivated” (i.e., very low quantity of motivation and amotivation); extrinsic (i.e., high extrinsic and identified regulation and low intrinsic and amotivation); and “amotivated” (i.e., low intrinsic and identified, very high amotivation). Second, using Lebart’s (2000) methodology, the most characteristic identity processes were listed for each motivational cluster. Demotivated and amotivated profiles were refined in terms of adaptive and maladaptive forms of exploration. Notably, exploration in breadth and in depth were underrepresented in demotivated students compared to the total sample; commitment and ruminative exploration were under and overrepresented respectively in amotivated students. Educational and clinical implications are proposed and future research is suggested.

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For late adolescents, going to university is an important life transition. Students have to develop autonomy in learning that will promote intrinsic motivation and the academic skills expected at university (Sugimura & Shimizu, 2011). This new context provides young adults with ample opportunities to investigate different social roles and vocational possibilities. However, it also brings doubt, stress, fear of failure, and loneliness (Faye & Sharpe, 2008). Consequently, some young people may have great difficulty making decisions concerning their studies, their relationships, and their future (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). In this context, many studies have emphasized that identity and motivation share multiple and bidirectional relationships (see special issue, Flum & Kaplan, 2012).

The purpose of this study is thus to explore the relationships between academic motivation and identity dimensions in college students in light of two theoretical backgrounds, the *Self-Determination Theory* (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the *dual-cycle*

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model of identity formation (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008), in particular with regard to the dark side of identity formation.

Based on Self-Determination Theory, different types of motivation are classified according to goal internalization: *intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external regulation*. Both intrinsically motivated and well-internalized activities are said to be autonomously regulated, whereas activities that have been partially internalized or not internalized at all are said to be regulated by controlled motives. *Amotivation* refers to (a) absence of motivation; (b) complete lack of volition with respect to the target behavior, (c) no perception of contingencies between outcomes and their own actions, (d) feelings of incompetence and expectancies of uncontrollability (Ntoumanis, 2005; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992).

As far as we know, motivational profiles have been identified according to a person-oriented approach among first-year undergraduates in only two studies, Canadian and Belgian respectively. Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, and Senecal (2007), found three clusters labeled “high AU–C” (i.e., high autonomous, high controlled, low amotivation), “low AU–C” (i.e., low autonomous, low controlled, and high amotivation), and “AU” (i.e., high autonomous, low controlled, low amotivation). Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, and Lens (2009) found four profiles labeled “good quality motivation” (high AU–low C), “poor quality motivation” (low AU–high C), “high quantity motivation” (high AU–high C), and “low quantity motivation” (low AU–low C). The results of these two studies showed that students in the autonomous group were higher achievers than all other groups of students. Much less is known about the characteristics of college student amotivation per se. In contrast, amotivation was well described in high school students, particularly in physical education (e.g., Çağlar & Aşçı, 2010; Ntoumanis, 2005). Other research has revealed that autonomous/intrinsic motivation is linked to adaptive functioning and personal well-being, whereas controlled motivation and amotivation are associated with maladjustment (Baker, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Based on Erikson's theory (1968), Marcia (1966) identified two dimensions involved in identity formation: *exploration* (i.e., actively questioning potential identity alternatives before deciding) and *commitment* (i.e., adopting one or more such alternatives). Over the last decade, this model has been extended, such as in the dual-cycle model (for a review, see Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). It includes three forms of exploration (in-breadth, in-depth, ruminative) and two forms of commitment (commitment making and identification) to take into account both adaptive and maladaptive identity formation. Identity achievement characterizes those individuals who reach commitments by exploring different alternatives (i.e., *exploration in breadth*) or by actively questioning commitments (i.e., *exploration in depth*). If the commitment is unsatisfying, exploration in depth can be activated to gather more information about it, or to explore other possibilities. When the commitment is satisfying, the resulting feelings of security and certainty give the impression of having chosen wisely and in accordance with one's own desires. This leads to a higher *identification with commitment* (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Schwartz, Luyckx, et al., 2011). These two adaptive forms of exploration were positively related to self-reflection whereas *ruminative exploration* is characterized by hesitation, indecisiveness, and flawed decision-making (e.g. Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012; Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, & Wouters, 2008; Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2012).

Individuals who are not interested in exploring or committing may be most at risk for externalizing problems and health-compromising behaviors (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). In contrast, strong commitment is linked positively to well-being and positive functioning, and negatively to psychological distress (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Schwartz, Luyckx, et al., 2011). Ruminative exploration was found to be positively related to identity distress, self-rumination, depressive symptoms, anxiety and low self-esteem (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008; Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011; Schwartz, Luyckx, et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2013).

The present study

In France, anyone with a Baccalaureat (the final assessment of secondary school education taken at age 17–18) can go to university. This examination is not very selective (87.9% in 2014), and unlike other public higher education institutions or elite schools, university is inexpensive and not selective, thus attracting an extremely heterogeneous population often unprepared for university life (e.g., loneliness, low educational support etc.). In this context, we aimed to examine whether the motivational profiles observed in Canada and Belgium also emerge in France and how the retained groups differ with respect to identity processes, using an explorative approach.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 1014 voluntary French undergraduates ($M_{age} = 18.98$, $SD = 1.31$; 72.6% girls) recruited in three large French universities, as part of a larger sample from a French-Swiss project (Zimmermann, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, & Cannard, 2015). Only 47.3% of fathers and 59.3% of mothers had at least a high school diploma.

Self-report questionnaires were administered anonymously during a lesson.

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