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Personal growth initiative and identity formation in adolescence through young adulthood: Mediating processes on the pathway to well-being

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A B S T R A C T

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Developing a personal identity is a challenging task throughout adolescence and the transition to adulthood. The present study sampling 551 14–35 year olds (54.1% female) examined personal growth initiative (PGI) as a potential predictor of core identity processes and explored whether identity functioned as a mediator on the pathway from PGI to self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Path analyses from a structural equation modeling approach indicated that all four components of PGI (i.e., planfulness, readiness for change, intentional behavior, and using resources) predicted different commitment and exploration processes, with planfulness being the most consistent predictor. Important age differences linking PGI-components to identity exploration were found. Finally, especially the degree to which individuals identified themselves with their identity commitments and the degree to which they relied on ruminative or maladaptive forms of identity exploration mediated pathways from PGI to self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Adolescence through young adulthood constitutes a core period for identity development (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) viewed identity formation as a tension between synthesis and confusion, and the stronger one's sense of identity synthesis, the more aware individuals are of their capacities and abilities. Identity confusion, however, renders individuals vulnerable for ill-being (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011). Hence, numerous pleas have been made to examine variables that contribute to and facilitate optimal identity development. Previous research focused on determinants such as personality traits (Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012; Luyckx, Soenens, & Goossens, 2006) and coping strategies (Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Schwartz, & Vanhalst, 2012). To identify factors that energize young people to put effort into identity-related work and that optimize young people's opportunities to attain an integrated identity, the present study focused on personal growth initiative (PGI; Robitschek, 1998), defined as active and intentional engagement in the process of personal growth (Robitschek, 1998). In the present study PGI is conceived of as a potential antecedent of identity work (Robitschek & Cook, 1999) and identity is hypothesized to function as an intervening mechanism between PGI and well-being in adolescence and young adulthood (Robitschek & Keyes, 2009; Spring & Robitschek, 2007).

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Identity processes in adolescence and young adulthood

From Erikson's identity work, Marcia (1966) extracted two identity processes: exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to actively questioning identity alternatives and experimenting with various social roles. Commitment signifies adhering to and implementing a set of convictions, goals, and values. Marcia's work has inspired decades of empirical work (Kroger & Marcia, 2011) and various process-oriented models have been proposed during the last decade substantially extending and refining Marcia's work.

One such process-oriented model has been introduced by Luyckx et al. (2006, Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, and Wouters, 2008), who unpacked exploration and commitment into five interrelated processes. Exploration was originally defined as the degree to which adolescents search for alternatives before making commitments. This type of exploration was referred to as *exploration in breadth*. More recent theories (Meeus, Iedema, & Maassen, 2002) have stressed that exploration also entails an in-depth evaluation of one's already existing commitments to assess how well their commitments fit with their inner standards (i.e., *exploration in depth*). Further, Bosma (1985) has argued that, apart from the degree to which one has made commitments (i.e., *commitment making*), the degree to which adolescents feel certain about their commitments and experience them as self-endorsed is an important aspect of identity formation (i.e., *identification with commitment*). For instance, adolescents can differ with respect to how certain they feel about or how strongly they identify themselves with the college major they have chosen.

Luyckx et al. (2006) integrated these two processes of exploration (i.e., exploration in breadth and exploration in depth) and commitment (i.e., commitment making and identification with commitment) into one model. This model carries the assumption that exploration is productive and helpful to the person. However, ongoing exploration has been linked with anxiety, depression, and distress (Kidwell, Dunham, Bacho, Pastorino, & Portes, 1995; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). Hence, Luyckx, Schwartz et al. (2008) extended this four-dimensional model with a fifth identity dimension, that is, *ruminative exploration* (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999), to capture exploration characterized by hesitation and indecisiveness. Some individuals become "stuck" in the exploration process and experience considerable difficulty arriving at firm choices.

Personal growth initiative

In line with contemporary conceptualizations of personality as a dynamic construct that influences how people regulate their behavior and process information (Caspi, 1998), the present study views PGI as a predictor of identity (Robitschek & Cook, 1999). Individuals scoring high on PGI generally are pro-active with respect to their personal development and are willing to invest a substantial amount of energy in their identity quest. There are two important aspects to PGI. First, personal growth is intra-individual change (at a cognitive, behavioral, or affective level) that is subjectively being experienced as positive, that is, change towards self-actualization. Second, this personal growth is intentional or purposeful in nature, that is, the individual invests in this growth process to improve one's sense of self, which makes PGI qualitatively different from unintentional change. Individuals who change unintentionally are expected to display lower levels of self-efficacy and mastery than individuals who grow intentionally (Robitschek et al., 2012). Research demonstrated that individuals scoring high on PGI evidenced high levels of well-being (Robitschek & Kashubeck, 1999; Robitschek & Keyes, 2009), partially because they view challenges as opportunities for personal growth. These findings are in line with eudaimonic theorizing and self-determination theory indicating that self-actualization and basic need satisfaction, both being conceptually related to PGI (Robitschek et al., 2012), are related to mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Although cognitive (e.g., efficacy expectations) and behavioral (e.g., capitalizing on opportunities for personal growth) components constitute the core of PGI, the original Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS; Robitschek, 1998) failed to distinguish between such components. Hence, Robitschek et al. (2012) developed the PGIS-II which consists of four subscales. Whereas readiness for change (i.e., preparedness for making personal changes) and planfulness (i.e., planning to grow as an individual) comprise the cognitive mindset situated at the heart of PGI, intentional behavior (i.e., actions aimed at producing growth) and using resources (i.e., obtaining help from external resources) capture the extent to which individuals translate these cognitions into behaviors.

Especially in adolescence and the transition to adulthood, PGI can be expected to be of crucial importance for individuals establishing an identity. Planning for the future and committing to a set of goals are core features of this identity quest (Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010; Seginer & Noyman, 2005). PGI is believed to influence both the setting of clear future-oriented goals and the ways in which individuals strive for and implement these goals (Shorey, Little, Snyder, Kluck, & Robitschek, 2007). Robitschek and Cook (1999) found that PGI predicted vocational exploration and identity strength in college students.

The present study

The present study had three main research objectives.

Research objective 1

Linking PGI to identity. We investigated the extent to which PGI was related to personal identity. Such a link can be derived from an integration of PGI and identity theorizing, which both state that humans are pro-active organisms acting on their inner and outer environments to develop a more unified self (Robitschek, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2003; Soenens, Berzonsky,

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