



# Identity status differences among Italian adolescents: Associations with time perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Based on Marcia's identity status model, this cross-sectional study examined adolescents' identity formation analyzing its association with time perspective. A sample of 1300 Italian adolescents filled in self-report measures assessing two major developmental processes: identity resolution and time perspective. Adolescents who achieved an integrated identity status seemed to primarily adopt a future time perspective and to have a positive view of the past. By contrast, Diffused adolescents reported negative experiences in the past, a lower future orientation and a greater inclination to fatalism compared to others.

The implications of the findings, limitations and suggestions for future theoretical and empirical development of research in this field are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial time of individuals' lives characterized by multiple transitions and changes in approach to cognitive tasks, moral issues and psychosocial concerns. They are faced with many challenges, the resolution of which can be influential in their adjustment (Adams & Berzonsky, 2008; Laghi, Baiocco, D'Alessio, & Gurrieri, 2009; Steinberg, 2001). Erikson (1968) argued that the major psychosocial task with which adolescents have to deal is the development of a coherent sense of identity. Adolescents experiment with alternative roles and ideals available in their society before making the relatively enduring commitments which provide them with a secure sense of identity within their community (Erikson, 1968; Solomontos-Kountouri & Hurry, 2008). This conceptualization about identity carried out by integrating self representations in the past, present and future as well as the self and social setting (Erikson, 1968; Laghi, D'Alessio, Pallini, & Baiocco, 2009; Seginer & Noyman, 2005; Pace and Zappulla, 2009, 2011). During adolescence, youths become increasingly aware of their own identity to the extent that they recover and make their past memories. At the same time they attribute a greater importance to the future, where they place the fulfillment of aspirations and projects (Laghi, D'Alessio et al., 2009;

Laghi, Pallini, D'Alessio, & Baiocco, 2011; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

Thus, adolescence can be conceived as that period in which individuals are confronted with developing an integrated and coherent identity and making plan and organizing for the future. Several authors (Bonniwell & Zimbardo, 2004; Laghi, Baiocco, Lonigro, Capacchione, & Baumgartner, 2012; Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) indeed suggested that time perspective can become a dispositional characteristic which may influence individual choices, actions and decisions, and as such can be a prerequisite to starting to build one's identity, above all during adolescence. Likewise, time perspective may be likely influenced by several factors, such as identity development throughout different contexts (Aspinwall, 2005; Kerpelman & Mosher, 2004). Specifically, an optimal sense of identity was associated with a sense of direction and investment in the future (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999).

The present study was aimed at investigating the association between each adolescents' identity status and their attitudinal and behavioral preferences for past, present or future perspective in a sample of Italian students. Before we proceed to our hypotheses, we outline the theories on identity resolution (Marcia, 1980) and time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) as used in the present study.

### 1.1. Identity formation

Identity formation process can be defined as a process that involves the ego's ability to synthesize and integrate important earlier identifications into a new form, uniquely one's own (Kroger, 2008).

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Erikson (1968) described ego identity as serving a variety of functions including sameness over time, inner coherence, the synthesis of successive identifications, and protection against experiences of sudden discontinuities. The achievement of a cohesive and stable set of personal values creates an integrated sense of self and, at the same time, allows for future development and adjustment throughout life (Adams et al., 2001; Laghi, Liga, Baumgartner, & Baiocco, 2012a,b; Schwartz, 2007; Cacioppo, Pace, & Zappulla (2012)). According to Erikson's theory, the processes of identity exploration and commitment have been viewed as crucial dimensions of personal identity formation (Luyckx et al., 2010; Waterman, 1999). *Exploration* can be defined as a problem solving behavior involving the active consideration of alternative possible identity elements in a quest for a more complete sense of self. Specifically, exploration is seen as increasing the likelihood that the element eventually selected will be one that has a reasonable chance of satisfying adolescents' needs especially related to the three main aspects included in Erikson's (1968) depiction of identity: having a sense of direction, coming to terms with one's body, and anticipating recognition by significant others (Seginer & Noyman, 2005). *Commitment* is the act of choosing one or more alternatives and following through them representing a decision to adhere to a specific set of goals, values, and beliefs, whether self-initiated or adapted from others. Because commitment is a decision to pursue a meaningful future course and to adopt a set of ideals, reaching it affects one's sense of purpose and continuity as it affirms individual sense of direction and of connectedness (Bosma, 1992; Marcia, 1980; Seginer & Noyman, 2005). Furthermore, commitment to selected identity elements increases the likelihood of successfully working through difficulties that might arise in the implementation of specific identity choices (Bosma, 1992).

In the attempt to better understand the relationship between exploration and commitment variables to the formation of ego identity, Marcia (1966) developed the identity status model that identifies four qualitatively identity statuses of resolution to identity. Each of these identity statuses represents a juxtaposition of levels of exploration and commitment that adolescent is experiencing or has experienced (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010).

*Identity achieved* (A): adolescents have experienced a phase of exploring several alternatives before committing a specific identity defining domain. As personality features, they have shown high levels of achievement motivation, self esteem and conscientiousness. In terms of cognitive processes, they have demonstrated the ability to use more planned, rational and logical decision-making strategies than other identity status (Kroger, 2008; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001). *Moratorium* (M): adolescents are in the process of active exploration, but they have not made significant commitments. They have shown to be associated with high levels of anxiety. Like the identity achieved, they seem to be able to integrate and analyze information from different perspectives and to be more experientially oriented than the other groups (Kroger, 2008; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001). *Foreclosed* (F): adolescents have made a commitment, but have not gone through a period of active exploration. They are characterized by high levels of conformity, aspiration changes and use of external locus of control. Furthermore, they are not generally open to new experiences and are especially oriented toward the more distant future than the other identity status (Kroger, 2008; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001). *Diffused* (D): adolescents have neither explored among different alternatives nor have made a commitment regarding a specific domain. They show low levels of autonomy, self-esteem and lowest sense of personal integrative continuity over time. They are also characterized by a diffuse-avoidant identity style tending to be low in self-awareness and avoid dealing with identity issues (Kroger, 2008; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001).

The different types of identity are each related in a unique way to psychological adjustment and problematic outcomes: adolescents

who experienced the less advanced identity status – foreclosure and diffusion – are more likely to report the most negative profile. When a synthesized and coherent sense of identity predominates over identity confusion, adolescents are likely to achieve high levels of interpersonal effectiveness, academic success and self-regulatory abilities (Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2009). Particularly, individuals who are in a diffused status may be more inclined to escape the distress using addictive behaviors or high risk ones for reducing anxiety and negative affect specifically concerning those decisions that have a significant impact on their personal identities and life paths (Berzonsky, 1990; Laghi, Baiocco, D'Alessio, Gurrieri, & Mazza, 2008; Seaton & Beaumont, 2008; Wheeler, Adams, & Keating, 2001).

## 1.2. Time perspective

Time perspective (TP) is a fundamental process of a person's subjective experience that we learn at an early age through our culture, religion, social class, education and family influences (Keough, Zimbardo, & Boyd, 1999; Zeleski, Cycon, & Kurc, 2001; D'Alessio et al., 2003; Worrell and Mello, 2007; Worrell, Mello, and Bhul (2012); Mello et al., 2009). Time represents an important basis for helping us to understand our experiences including shaping our thoughts, decisions and behaviors. According to Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), TP is considered to be a relatively stable individual difference dimension concerning one's relationship to the past, present and future and the attitudinal and behavioral preferences for each temporal frame. In their view, TP is a semi-conscious process in which temporal categories or frames constitute a socio-cognitive variable that influences perceptions and actions by marking them with a temporal composite (Apostolidis, Fieulaine, & Soulé, 2009; Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004; Keough et al., 1999; Laghi et al., 2008; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Likewise, these past, present and future temporal frames are used in forming everyday expectations, goals, and imaginative views helping individual to give meaning, order and coherence to everyday life events and to personal and social experiences (Carelli, Wiberg, & Wiberg, 2011).

It has been suggested that specific temporal categories may be favored or dominant and others may be used too little, leading people to become temporal "biased" and limiting optimal and healthy psychosocial functioning (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004; Crockett, Weinman, Hankins, & Marteau, 2009; Keough et al., 1999; Luyckx et al., 2010). The extent to which individuals are future-versus-present oriented depends on social cultural issues (Dawes & Finchilescu, 2002), family and educational context (McInerney, 2004; McInerney, Roche, McInerney, & Marsh, 1997) and also psychological and individual factors, such as self-esteem, achievement and motivation (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Barbarin and Richter (2001) state that "*enthusiasm (or lack of) about the future is tempered by the realisation that problems of the past will (not) be resolved easily*". Furthermore, above all during adolescence, the subjective awareness of personal past, present, and future may have implications for several psychosocial outcomes related to identity, motivation, coping, interpersonal interactions and risk behaviors (Adams & Nettle, 2009; Laghi et al., 2008; Webster, 2011; Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997).

The past time perspective is associated with the focus on family, tradition and continuity of self over time. Generally, adolescents inclined towards past may be excessively conservative, cautions avoiding change and openness. Youths can prefer a past-positive TP reflecting warm and sentimental view of one's past or they can adopt a past-negative TP focusing on personal experiences that were aversive or noxious (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004).

Individuals with a dominant present time perspective are primarily oriented towards living for the moment and are inclined to form goals and adopt behaviors that meet immediate desire. Focusing on the instant present life space as the determinant of their actions, they may be most likely to engage in a broad spectrum of high-risk

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