



Identity configurations across love and work in emerging adults in romantic relationships



Koen Luyckx^{a,*}, Inge Seiffge-Krenke^b, Seth J. Schwartz^c, Elisabetta Crocetti^d, Theo A. Klimstra^e

^a KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

^b University of Mainz, Mainz, Germany

^c University of Miami School of Medicine, Miami, USA

^d Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

^e Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Love and work constitute two life-defining identity domains for emerging adults. The present study utilized a five-dimensional identity model and examined identity configurations across these two domains, capturing the degree to which identity statuses correspond across domains. A sample of German 18–30-year-olds who were either working or studying and engaged in a romantic relationship was assessed at baseline and three years later. Six identity clusters emerged in each domain. Combining identity clusters across love and work domains, 7 identity configurations were distinguished. Whereas some configurations were characterized by strong commitments in one or both domains, other configurations consisted of individuals scoring low on commitment and high on exploration and rumination. These configurations were differentially related to psychological symptoms, work stress and satisfaction, and family–work conflict, both concurrently and longitudinally. Individuals characterized by high commitments in love and work provided the most favorable responses on all outcomes.

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Although one's identity can be expected to change through the life-span, the bulk of identity development occurs during adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Due to social–structural and economic changes in many Western nations, developmental tasks that were once normatively structured – such as the transitions from compulsory education to the workforce and from family of origin to romantic partnership – are increasingly left to individuals to navigate on their own (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). Due to these social–structural changes, emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) has become the period of life that offers the most opportunities for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Similar to their age mates in other Western countries, in Germany establishing a romantic partnership and committing to a career represent two primary tasks during the transition to adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008).

The present study examined ways in which German emerging adults navigate these challenging transitions within the domains of love and work. In addressing this research question, we made use of a recently developed process-oriented identity model capturing different exploration and commitment processes, which allows for a fine-grained

assessment of different identity types or statuses in both domains (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2008). Our first research objective addressed the extent to which individuals are successful in making commitments in love and work and how they are able to balance the often conflicting challenges and demands inherent in the interplay between these domains. In doing so, we examined identity configurations in love and work, where an identity configuration is defined as the degree to which identity statuses in both domains correspond (Crocetti, Scignaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012). To address this research question, we assessed emerging adults who were engaged in a romantic relationship and who were studying or at work. In our second research objective, we examined how these different identity configurations across both domains were related to health and psychosocial functioning – specifically, internalizing and externalizing symptoms, life satisfaction, work satisfaction and stress, and the amount of conflicts between the family and work context and the efficacy individuals display in resolving such conflicts. These outcomes were assessed both concurrently and three years later, to allow us to examine whether different identity configurations would be accompanied by different levels and/or changes over time in these outcomes. Before detailing how we examined identity configurations in the present study, we describe the importance of the domains of love and work for emerging adults.

* Corresponding author at: KU Leuven, Department of Psychology, Tiensestraat 102, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Tel.: +32 16325978; fax: +32 16326144.

E-mail address: Koen.Luyckx@ppw.kuleuven.be (K. Luyckx).

Love and work in emerging adulthood

Emerging adults are faced with the age-specific tasks of establishing a professional career and a long-term romantic partnership. As part of this maturational process, experimentations and evaluations in love and work become more prominent and intense during emerging adulthood (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). Hence, as adolescents move into emerging adulthood, identity exploration and commitment become increasingly salient in love and work.

Vocational or career identity is considered a core element of one's identity structure (Erikson, 1968; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Emerging adults generally have high expectations and hopes for their future careers. They view such careers not only as a way of gaining financial independence but also as a means towards identity expression (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Hence, combined with the fact that many entry-level jobs have been mechanized, outsourced, or otherwise made obsolete as compared to the mid-20th century (Kalleberg, 2009; Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2013), the increased emphasis on career as an identity expression often results in extending the period of time, and increasing the number of career changes, before emerging adults settle on a steady career. Moreover, a substantial proportion of emerging adults in Western countries are involved in extended higher education and training programs (Tanner & Arnett, 2011). Nonetheless, despite these increasing challenges and explorations, being committed to a specific career choice is often facilitative of well-being (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Developmental theorizing states that romantic development moves from initial attraction during adolescence to the consolidation of partnerships during the transition to adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Hence, establishing firm partnerships becomes increasingly normative and salient throughout emerging adulthood. Despite the fact that many individuals have the desire to maintain a long-term relationship (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009), during adolescence such relationships are often fragile and often serve to facilitate role experimentation and exploration (Fisher, 2006). Relationship breakups also occur in emerging adult couples, because partners may differ in their commitment to the relationship and as part of the difficulty in balancing different work and partnership needs (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Accordingly, emerging adulthood represents a key developmental period for examining exploration and commitment processes in the romantic domain.

This study was conducted on German emerging adults, who, like their counterparts in other Western countries, are currently experiencing an extended transition to adulthood (Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2010). New qualification requirements, greater job uncertainties, and higher unemployment rates as compared to a decade ago make it more difficult for today's emerging adults to develop a professional identity (Heinz, 2011), resulting in a substantial proportion of emerging adults still in education (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012). Partially due to the increasing insecurity in the work domain, a recent German national survey reported a shift in importance, with partnerships becoming more important for both men and women (Shell Deutschland Holding, 2010). Other research has also suggested that it is important to study identity processes in these two domains in tandem (Crocetti et al., 2012). Given that emerging adults are searching for their niche in life with respect to love and work, mutually reinforcing influences are inevitable. Previous research (primarily in married couples) has pointed to important interconnections between work and family life (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Heller & Watson, 2005). Experiencing difficulties at work or college indeed might weaken individuals' capacity to cope with problems at home. Similarly, if too much of one's personal resources are invested in one's family, duties at work can become neglected and career commitments can weaken (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). However, previous studies have not focused explicitly on how exploration and commitment processes are balanced or integrated across love and work during the emerging adult years.

From identity processes to identity statuses

Based on Erikson's (1968) lifespan theory of psychosocial development, Marcia (1966) delineated two core identity processes: *exploration* and *commitment*. Exploration refers to experimenting with alternatives, and commitment signifies adhering to a set of convictions and values. Based on these dimensions, Marcia defined four statuses: achievement (commitments enacted after exploring alternatives), foreclosure (commitments enacted without prior exploration), moratorium (exploring alternatives without strong current commitments), and diffusion (no commitments or systematic exploration).

As part of the changing developmental context for emerging adults, identity researchers have proposed refined process-oriented models of identity (Meeus, 2011). Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al. (2008) distinguished among five identity processes, subsumed under two complementary identity cycles. The first cycle (*identity formation*) captures the processes through which individuals explore alternatives and enact commitments. This first cycle, therefore, may be described in terms of two processes, that is, *exploration in breadth*, or the purposeful exploration of various alternatives, and *commitment making*, or the adherence to a set of convictions and values (Marcia, 1966). The second identity cycle (*identity evaluation*) captures the processes through which individuals re-evaluate their identity and assess the degree to which they feel certain about their choices. This second cycle, therefore, may also be described in terms of two processes: *exploration in depth*, or the evaluation and exploration of current commitments, and *identification with commitment*, or the degree to which these commitments become integrated in the individual's sense of self. Finally, a fifth identity process, *ruminative exploration*, assesses the degree to which individuals experience difficulty in settling on satisfying answers to identity questions. Partially troubled by what they perceive as inadequate progress towards important goals, they repeatedly ask themselves the same questions, resulting in uncertainty and worry. Research has demonstrated that ruminative exploration, and not so much the two other exploration processes, is associated with distress and lowered levels of well-being (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al., 2008).

Through the use of cluster analysis on these identity processes, identity clusters similar to Marcia's statuses, along with some new statuses, have emerged in the United States (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011) and Europe (Crocetti, Luyckx, Scrigano, & Sica, 2011; Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al., 2008). These studies addressed some of the concerns that have been raised regarding Marcia's (1966) paradigm. For example, because moratorium is associated with distress and lowered self-worth (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009), several authors have questioned whether moratorium is truly an adaptive step towards stable commitments (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al. (2008) found that individuals in moratorium scored high on ruminative exploration in addition to exploration in breadth and in depth, perhaps blocking them from forming commitments. Recently, a seemingly more adaptive variant of moratorium, "searching moratorium" (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) has been identified. This cluster consists of individuals who combine relatively high scores on the commitment processes with high scores on both proactive and ruminative exploration (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011). Hence, these individuals are reconsidering their commitments and, although they retain at least some of their commitments, they are also unsure as to which commitments would suit them best.

With respect to diffusion, Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al. (2008) found two diffusion clusters (Marcia, 1989). *Troubled* diffusion was characterized not only by high scores on ruminative exploration and maladjustment, signaling a desire to explore alternatives, but also by an inability to sustain such exploration. *Carefree* diffusion was characterized by a lack of interest in, and a seemingly untroubled approach towards, identity issues. In contrast to troubled-diffused individuals, carefree-diffused individuals did not appear to be distressed by their

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