



# The relationship between identity processes and well-being in various life domains



Dominika Karaś\*, Jan Ciecuch

*Institute of Psychology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the relationships between identity processes and well-being across various life domains. We adopted a three-dimensional model of identity formation that consisted of three processes, namely, in-depth exploration, commitment, and reconsideration of commitment, and applied a domain-specific approach to examine the contribution of identity processes to well-being in various life domains. This study included 1312 participants aged 19 to 35 years. We used the Mental Health Continuum - Short Form and Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-Being to measure well-being and the Warsaw Measurement of Identity Commitments Scale to examine identity processes in the following domains: Personality characteristics, Worldview, Hobbies and interests, Experiences from the past, Future plans, Family relationships, Relationships with friends and acquaintances, and Occupation. The results indicated that, in many identity domains, commitment and indepth exploration were found to be significant positive predictors of well-being, while reconsideration of commitment was found to be a negative predictor. However, after analyzing all domains and controlling for shared variance, it was concluded that the domains were not equivocal in their contributions to well-being but rather that the personality domain was the most important with respect to well-being.

## 1. Introduction

Identity formation is a life-long developmental task connected with the development of a relatively stable understanding of the person and his/her relationships to various life domains (Erikson, 1968). Developing an identity is connected to the process of exploring various alternatives that are provided by life and choosing the alternatives that are appropriate to one's personal goals, beliefs, values and desires. Identity explorations and decisions vary with respect to difficulty depending on the individual's various life domains. Thus, developing a stable sense of identity in one life area does not necessarily result in stability in another life area (Marcia, 1966).

Erikson observed the relationships between identity formation and adjustment and argued that "... an increasing sense of identity is experienced precociously as a sense of psychosocial well-being" (Erikson, 1980, p. 118). To provide a comprehensive picture of identity formation, a domain-specific approach is recommended because of the possible differences in identity processes among the different life domains (Goossens, 2001). Moreover, as Arnett (2015) observed, the identity domains proposed by Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1966) approximately fifty years ago, i.e., education, ideology, and relationships, and still often studied, may differ from those of contemporary individuals.

Therefore, questions arise regarding how identity formation in various life domains contributes to well-being and which domains are crucial in promoting well-being. This research aims to answer these questions.

### 1.1. Identity

Erikson's psychosocial theory was expanded upon by Marcia (1966, 1980), who defined identity as a structure composed of values, drives, ideologies, abilities, and life history. He (Marcia) described two key processes of identity formation, namely, the exploration of various alternatives and a commitment to one of those alternatives.

In recent years, several extensions of Marcia's theory have been proposed (cf. Meeus, 2011). One of the most used models is that proposed by Meeus, Crocetti, and colleagues (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, Van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). This model considers three identity processes rather than two, namely, commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment.

Commitment is the relatively firm choice made in an identity-relevant domain and the extent to which the individual identifies with this choice. In-depth exploration is the process of seeking information about existing commitments and is understood as the extent to which

\* Corresponding author at: ul. Wóycickiego 1/3, 01-938 Warsaw, Poland.  
E-mail address: [d.karas@uksw.edu.pl](mailto:d.karas@uksw.edu.pl) (D. Karaś).

one addresses his or her commitments. Reconsideration of commitment is the comparison between an existing commitment and other possible commitments and the efforts made to change these commitments when they are no longer satisfactory to the individual. This model emphasizes the possibility of changing and revising existing commitments.

### 1.2. Identity and well-being – former and current research

Previous research on the relationship between identity and well-being has been conducted using one of two approaches. The first approach conceptualizes well-being as the lack of negative symptoms (see Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Findings have consistently shown that regardless of the theoretical orientation, higher commitment is strongly related to well-being (Schwartz, 2001). Moreover, commitment has been found to be negatively associated with depression (Berzonsky, 2003), procrastination, rationalization, pre-decision panic, public self-consciousness (Berzonsky, 1992; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996), general anxiety (Crocetti et al., 2008) and maladaptive perfectionism (Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, & Wouters, 2008). With respect to in-depth exploration, its association with negative aspects of identity has been confirmed, for example, by high levels of depressions and general anxiety (Crocetti et al., 2008). However, the association between in-depth exploration and positive aspects of identity has also been supported, for example, by the positive connections with adaptive personality dimensions (Luyckx, Soenens, & Goossens, 2006). Finally, the negative effects of reconsideration of commitment have been confirmed by positive associations with depression, general anxiety and delinquent behaviors (Crocetti et al., 2008).

The second approach, which is crucial for this research, proposes examining the interconnections between identity and positive aspects of well-being (cf. Berzonsky & Ciecuch, 2014; Hardy et al., 2013; Pesigan, Agaloo, Luyckx, & Alampay, 2014; Pilarska, 2014; Ritchie et al., 2013). In this approach, the linkages between identity processes and positive aspects of well-being were also confirmed, *inter alia* by the relation of a commitment to high life satisfaction and positive affect (Hofer, Kaertner, Chasiotis, Busch, & Kiessling, 2007) and by the negative association between the reconsideration of commitment and life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2012).

Furthermore, based on the three-process model, Karaś, Ciecuch, Negru, and Crocetti (2015) proposed a model of relationships between identity and well-being that was derived from the assumption that well-being cannot be considered as only the lack of illness (Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). In this model, three-dimensional well-being, which includes emotional, psychological, and social aspects (Keyes, 2002), is associated with high commitment, high in-depth exploration, and low reconsideration of commitment. However, this model has only been tested in the educational and occupational domains (Karaś et al., 2015), which is a serious limitation with respect to this model. Accordingly, the present paper adopts the Karaś et al. (2015) model to examine the relationships between identity and well-being in various life domains.

### 1.3. Identity – the domain-specific approach

The main assumption of the domain-specific approach (Goossens, 2001) is that identity processes may differ among the various domains, and it is also important to consider the content of identity in addition to these processes (Berzonsky, Ciecuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011; Hardy et al., 2013). As individuals often engage, to varying degrees, in identity activities and choices in different life domains, many life areas may be relevant to their identity.

Marcia's (1966) work investigating commitment and exploration within the domains of occupation and ideology has been claimed as insufficient because the identity domains proposed approximately fifty years ago may differ from those of contemporary individuals (Arnett, 2015). Recently, the domain-specific approach has become increasingly popular with many additional areas being examined by other researchers. These domains include education (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011; Klimstra et al., 2011; Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012), relationships (e.g., Bartoszuk & Pittman, 2010; Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2011; Klimstra et al., 2011; Meeus, Iedema, & Maassen, 2002), occupations (e.g., Eryigit & Kerpelman, 2011; Goossens, 2001), and ideologies – such as religion, political beliefs, and life philosophy (e.g., Bartoszuk & Pittman, 2010; Goossens, 2001). However, in previous studies, there were no clear criteria expressed regarding the selection of the examined domain. Thus, it remains to be determined which domains, other than the traditional ones, should be considered.

To answer this question and identify the identity domains that are relevant to young people today, Karaś (2015) conducted a qualitative study. She found that the domains of particular importance to young adults when answering the question, “Who am I?” are: Personality characteristics, Past experiences, Family, Friends and acquaintances, Worldview, Hobbies and interests, Aims and plans for the future, and Occupation (from most often to least often indicated by respondents). Because the domains found in this empirical research were quite different from those usually assumed in the research (Crocetti et al., 2008), Karaś and Ciecuch (2015) applied the questionnaire usually used to measure the three processes, i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment, using the Utrecht Management of Identity Commitment Scale (U-MICS) and measured these processes for each empirically found identity domain. The primary results of their study included the confirmation of the three-factor model (commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment) for each domain and the confirmation of the joint model with 24 latent variables (three processes in eight domains). These results suggest the structural validity of the differentiation among all domains, and the possibility to use this model in further research, including the study of relationships between identity formation and well-being.

## 2. The current study

The main aim of the present paper was to examine the relationships between identity processes in various life domains and well-being. We adopted a model of relationships between identity and well-being in which three identity processes predict three-dimensional positive well-being (Karaś et al., 2015). Particularly, we hypothesized that commitment and in-depth exploration are positive predictors of well-being and reconsideration of commitment is a negative predictor of well-being (see Fig. 1) in each domain. Moreover, we identified the identity domains that are most important for the development of well-being, and we focused on young adulthood because it is a period during which individuals make numerous life decisions and may explore many alternative areas and life paths.

We ran the analyses in three steps. First, we tested the model proposed by Karaś et al. (2015) in each domain separately to determine whether the model is robust across domains. This already published model was expanded into different identity domains. Second, we tested the model of relationships between identity and well-being, including, in one model, all the examined identity processes in all identity domains to control the shared variance across processes and domains and

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