



# The association of identity and motivation with students' academic achievement in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

Two main reasons for dropping out of higher education are making an erroneous educational choice (an identity commitment) and lack of motivation. This study examined whether identity formation and motivation among prospective students at the moment of choosing a bachelor's program ( $N = 8723$ ) predicted their academic achievement in their first year. Participants were divided into four students' achievement groups (i.e., “successful dropouts”, “successful stayers”, “unsuccessful stayers”, and “unsuccessful dropouts”). We examined whether identity and motivation separately predicted academic achievement, whether identity and motivation dimensions could be combined into new distinct profiles, and whether these new profiles predicted academic achievement. Results indicated that motivation was associated with academic achievement, whereas identity was not. Furthermore, five new combined motivation-identity profiles were identified (i.e. “moderately positive”, “amotivated”, “moderately negative”, “autonomously achieved”, and “controlled & troubled diffused”), which predicted academic achievement. In general, the moderately positive profile was positively and both the “amotivated” and “controlled & troubled diffused” profiles were negatively associated with academic achievement, respectively.

## 1. Introduction

Student retention problems are manifest worldwide (Fonteyne, Fruyt, & Duyck, 2014). Each year, roughly 30% of first-year students at US baccalaureate institutions do not return for their second year (Schneider, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development reported that 32% of tertiary students did not graduate from a program at this level (OECD, 2013). These high rates lead to a drain in public finance and also to a drop in the wellbeing of these students because of their failure experience.

Two of the main reasons for high dropout rates in higher education are making an erroneous educational choice and lack of motivation (Wartenbergh & Van den Broek, 2008; Van den Broek, Wartenbergh, Bendig-Jacobs, Braam, & Nooij, 2015). Regarding the former, choosing a bachelor's program (making an educational choice) is linked to the process of identity formation (Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012). This process is complex, as it comprises exploring different programs, comparing them, reflecting on them, and finally choosing one. Students can also have different motives for making these educational choices. Whereas some choices are based on autonomous

reasons like interest and curiosity, others are based on controlled reasons like pressuring parental expectations or self-worth concerns.

Research has linked well-explored commitments (e.g., Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, et al., 2012) and being autonomously motivated (e.g., Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Senécal, 2007; Taylor et al., 2014) to favorable educational outcomes that reflect a person's goals and values. Conversely, students who are either not fully involved in identity exploration or not committed to their choices on the one hand, or who base their choices on controlled motives might be more prone to unfavorable educational outcomes. In fact, a combination of both could bring students in an even more vulnerable position. Therefore, empirically combining the constructs of identity formation and motivation in one study could be relevant for better identifying and understanding students who are at risk for dropout or other unfavorable educational outcomes.

Previous conceptual work has already linked the domains of identity formation and motivation. For instance, Wigfield and Wagner (2005, p. 228) argued that “a discussion of motivation would be incomplete without considering the effects that identity development processes may have”. Furthermore, Waterman (1990, 2004) argued that in

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research on identity formation, the construct of motivation is typically overlooked and proposed that intrinsic motivation could serve as a third defining dimension of identity, along with the dimensions of exploration and commitment. From > 3000 identity status interviews, he recognized that there were differences in motivation between people who had formed their identity in a healthy way (also called identity achievers). For some of these identity achievers, commitments were intrinsically motivated choices, but for others within this group this was not the case. In this same line of reasoning, Ryan and Deci (2000a) have proposed that life paths (as might be reflected in identity commitments) might be experienced as exciting and interesting if they are autonomously or freely chosen, whereas the same life path might be viewed as aversive if it is pursued out of obligation or coercion (see also Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). It therefore seems promising to examine the extent to which the adoption of any given identity co-occurs with autonomous or controlled motivation, because the motives and the goals behind one's identity commitment are important for optimal functioning (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011).

Although previous work has discussed conceptual links between identity formation and motivation, these links have not often been examined empirically. As one important exception, Luyckx, Schwartz, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, and Goossens (2010) found that motivational orientations were related to forming clear identity commitments and adhering to them. More specifically, an autonomous motivational orientation (which is the source of initiation and regulation toward behavior) among first year students, characterized by seeking out opportunities for self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985), was positively related to making commitments and to feeling certain about these commitments. Impersonal orientation, in which actions are perceived as being influenced by factors over which one has limited control, was negatively related to identity commitment. Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Papini, and Vansteenkiste (2011) found that an informational identity style (i.e., actively seeking out information and reflecting upon choices) was associated with autonomous types of motivation and that these motivations mediated the association between identity style and personal adjustment. Lastly, Cannard, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, and Zimmermann (2016) explored the relation between identity and motivation in college students. They found clear linkages, as for example, exploration was underrepresented in demotivated students and commitment was underrepresented in amotivated students, compared to the total sample.

The central assumption in this study is that identity commitments and choices can be regulated either by autonomous or controlled motives, with autonomous regulation resulting in deeper internalization of identity commitments. In this study, we aim to contribute to scientific literature by combining constructs from theories of identity formation and motivation in an educational setting to gain a better understanding of students' academic achievement in higher education. Specifically, we aimed to make the following three contributions. First, we wanted to examine the separate and unique roles of motivation and identity in predicting students' achievement. For this purpose, a variable-centered approach was combined with a person-centered approach. A variable-centered approach might give insight into the dimensions predicting students' achievement, whereas a combination of dimensions in a person-centered approach might identify specific groups of students in relation to their achievement. Second, we wanted to examine whether identity and motivation can be integrated into combined profiles that predict students' achievement. This analytic framework has the potential to establish that specific identity profiles might co-occur with different motivational profiles. Third, we aimed to better understand an educational outcome variable (dropout and academic achievement) that has not yet been examined in combination with the constructs of identity and motivation. Unlike many previous studies, this is an objective measure that does not rely on self-reports: either obtaining the required 60 credits in the first year, or staying in or leaving the bachelor's program the student started with.

Before we present the research questions and hypotheses, we will present the theories that informed our conceptual framework as well as our measures. First, we will review Marcia's identity status paradigm (1966) as a theory of identity formation. Second, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000), a well-known motivation theory, will be presented.

### 1.1. Identity formation

Contemporary research on identity formation employs models that expand Marcia's (1966) distinction between dimensions of commitment (i.e., the degree of feeling certain about current choices and engaging in relevant activities toward the implementation of these choices) and exploration (i.e., the degree of examining and comparing several possible alternative choices). One of these models is the dual-cycle model by Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens (2006) and Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006). This model describes identity formation along four dimensions, placed in two consecutive cycles. The first cycle, identity formation, comprises Marcia's original dimensions of exploration in breadth (i.e., active exploration of alternatives) and commitment making (i.e., choosing and adhering to one of these alternatives). For instance, after a prospective student has explored various possibilities for a bachelor's program by reading internet sites or by talking to others (exploration in breadth), he or she might choose one specific program (commitment making). The second cycle, known as commitment evaluation, describes how existing commitments are evaluated and re-evaluated. It comprises exploration in depth (i.e., the degree of evaluation and exploration of current commitments, to become more aware of the chosen commitments) and identification with commitment (i.e., the degree of identifying with and growing certain and confident about these commitments). With respect to an educational choice, a prospective student might reflect on and evaluate the chosen bachelor's program (exploration in depth). On the one hand, this might lead to a growing conviction that this program is the right one, and identification with commitment will strengthen. On the other hand, the commitment made might also be reconsidered, leading to new exploration.

In subsequent research (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008), a fifth dimension was added to this model to differentiate healthy or reflective exploration in breadth from ruminative exploration. Previous research has suggested that some individuals get stuck in the process of exploring different identity alternatives (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008). Ruminative exploration refers to individual differences in delaying or inhibiting progress in identity formation and might be displayed as ruminating about the educational choice without deciding.

Based on these five identity dimensions, identity profiles have been derived using cluster analytic methods (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, & Wouters, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011). Four of these profiles map onto Marcia's (1966) original statuses. Specifically, the "achievement" identity profile is characterized by high scores on all five identity dimensions except for ruminative exploration. The "foreclosure" profile is characterized by high levels of the commitment dimensions and low levels of each of the exploration dimensions. The "ruminative moratorium" profile is characterized by high scores on all three exploration dimensions and moderate to high levels of commitment making and identification with commitment. The "troubled diffusion" profile is low on commitment making and identification with commitment, high on ruminative exploration, and moderate to high on exploration in breadth, and exploration in depth. In addition, Luyckx, Schwartz, et al. (2008) and Luyckx, Soenens, et al. (2008) found two new clusters: the "carefree diffusion" profile is characterized by low levels on all five dimensions, and the "undifferentiated" profile represents individuals whose scores on all dimensions are close to their respective sample means (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008).

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