

# The Roles of Identity Formation and Moral Identity in College Student Mental Health, Health-risk Behaviors, and Psychological Well-Being

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**Objectives:** This study examined the roles of identity formation and moral identity in predicting college student mental health (anxiety and depressive symptoms), health-risk behaviors (hazardous alcohol use and sexual risk taking), and psychological well-being (self-esteem and meaning). **Method:** The sample comprised 9,500 college students (aged 18–25 years, mean = 19.78, standard deviation = 1.61; 73% female; 62% European American), from 31 different universities, who completed an online self-report survey. **Results:** Structural equation models found that identity maturity (commitment making and identity synthesis) predicted 5 of the health outcomes (except sexual risk taking), and moral identity predicted all of the health outcomes. In most cases identity maturity and moral identity also interacted in predicting mental health and psychological well-being, but not health-risk behaviors. **Conclusions:** The maturity and specific contents of identity may both play unique and often interactive roles in predicting college student health. Thus, college student health might be bolstered by helping them establish appropriate identity commitments. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J. Clin. Psychol.* 69:364–382, 2013.

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Much research has examined correlates of identity formation (Kroger, 2007; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Such research often finds that individuals with a more mature sense of identity have better mental health and psychological well-being, and engage in less risk-taking behaviors. In other words, people who have made salient identity commitments and have a more coherent sense of who they are tend to be better off. But most of this research measures the sense of identity as a unitary construct, viewing the content of one's identity as less important. Little attention is paid to the relative importance or utility of various identity contents, even when multiple identity domains are assessed. However, some have suggested that in addition to identity formation, the types of things one bases his or her identity on are also important (i.e., identity contents; Blasi, 1993, 2004). In particular, when morality is central to identity (i.e., one has a *moral identity*), it motivates engagement in positive behaviors (e.g., volunteerism) and avoidance of negative behaviors (e.g., antisocial behavior; Hardy & Carlo, 2011a, 2011b). However, few studies have examined links between moral identity and mental health, health-risk behaviors, or psychological well-being.

Further, little is known about the relative roles of identity formation or maturity and identity contents (e.g., moral identity) in predicting such outcomes. Some suspect that the two interact (Blasi, 1993, 2004; Hardy & Carlo, 2011a, 2011b); in other words, identity content acts as a

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moderator such that identity formation more strongly predicts outcomes for people who center their identity more on morality. Unfortunately, this interaction hypothesis is yet to be tested empirically.

Last, while relations between identity and health may be important across the lifespan for many people worldwide, it may be particularly important to understand these processes among Western college students. This is because issues of identity and morality are particularly salient among these demographics in contemporary society (Arnett, 2004; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Snell Herzog, 2011). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine identity formation (indexed by commitment making and identity synthesis) and moral identity as predictors of college student health and well-being and moral identity as a moderator of the link between identity formation and outcomes.

### *Identity Formation and Health*

Theory and research linking identity to health has largely been grounded in Erikson's (1963, 1968) work on identity formation. He proposed that the key challenge of adolescence and young adulthood is resolving the identity conflict and argued that exploring identity possibilities and making identity commitments laid the foundation for healthy adult functioning (e.g., intimacy and generativity). Identity formation brings a sense of agency (i.e., autonomy and self-directedness), responsibility, integrity, commitment, and psychological maturity (Côté & Levine, 2002). Thus, people who have made identity commitments (i.e., decided certain things are important to who they are), ideally through a process of exploration, tend to engage in less risk behaviors, have fewer mental health problems, and experience greater psychological well-being.

Empirical studies have fairly consistently validated Erikson's ideas regarding identity and healthy psychosocial functioning (Kroger, 2007). Specifically, individuals who have made identity commitments have fewer mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety and depression; Crocetti, Klimstra, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009; Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, & Wouters, 2008), engage in fewer health-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use and sexual risk taking; Bishop, Weisgram, Holleque, Lund, & Wheeler-Anderson, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2009), and report higher levels of psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem; Basak & Ghosh, 2008; Dunkel, Mathes, & Harbke, 2011). In short, theory and research on identity points to identity formation as protective against mental health and behavioral challenges.

### *Identity Formation and Identity Content*

The studies just reviewed assume that identity formation is key to healthy psychosocial functioning, and that the type or quality of identity commitments is less important. However, in addition to identity formation (i.e., the formation of a mature identity structure), the specific contents on which one's identity is based might also be important (Hardy & Carlo, 2011a, 2011b). Waterman (1993; Waterman et al., 2012) has argued that not all identity commitments are equivalent. Some are more "personally expressive" and thus conducive to feelings of flourishing or self-actualization. Likewise, based on the Self-Determination Theory, identity commitments that are in line with our intrinsic motivations and goals are more likely to fulfill innate psychological needs and yield value-congruent behaviors (Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Papini, & Vansteenkiste, 2011). In the possible selves literature, the specific contents of our ideal or desired selves, and our feared or dreaded selves, have important motivational implications, as people try to approach or avoid particular selves (Oyserman & James, 2011).

Last, Blasi (1993, 2004) has pointed to individual differences in the organization and structure of identity as well as the specific issues around which identities are based. Of primary interest to Blasi is the moral domain; thus, when people heavily base their identity on moral issues (such as being a moral person), it can lead to greater moral motivation and commitment. In other words, identity formation seems to provide the motivational impetus, while identity contents provide the direction, guiding individuals to specific courses of action.

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