



The role of best friends in educational identity formation in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

This 4-year longitudinal study examined over-time associations between adolescents' educational identity, perceived best friends' balanced relatedness, and best friends' educational identity. Adolescents ($N = 464$, $M_{\text{age}} = 14.0$ years at baseline, 56.0% males, living in the Netherlands) and their self-nominated best friends reported on their educational commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration. Target adolescents also reported on the level of balanced relatedness provided by their best friend. Cross-lagged panel models showed that balanced relatedness significantly predicted adolescents' reconsideration, and was predicted by in-depth exploration and, in an inconsistent pattern, by commitment. Best friends' educational identity did not positively predict adolescents' educational identity. Perceiving a best friend as high on balanced relatedness seems to reduce adolescents' problematic educational reconsideration, while, in turn, adaptive educational identity processes might foster balanced relatedness.

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One of the main developmental tasks adolescents in Western societies face is the formation of a coherent sense of identity (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). An important domain in which adolescents construct their identity is education. Adolescents often have to choose schools, specific educational levels or tracks, and curricula. These choices not only affect their future vocational pathways, but also their interests and social position. Adolescents' friendships are thought to be related to this development of educational identity. During adolescence, friends show increasing respect for each other's needs and opinions (Shulman & Knafo, 1997). These developments in adolescent educational identity and friendships might positively influence each other (McLean & Jennings, 2012). Erikson (1968) already stated that identity is constructed within social interaction, and that a coherent identity is necessary to develop intimate friendships. Current cross-sectional studies support this interdependence between the developmental domains of identity and friendships (Doumen et al., 2012; Johnson, 2012). However, longitudinal studies on the links between friendship and identity formation are rare (cf. Dumas, 2011; Reis & Youniss, 2004). The present longitudinal study examined whether adolescents' educational identity is associated over time with their perception of the level of balanced relatedness provided by their best friend and with their best friend's educational identity.

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Identity formation

According to the Meeus–Crocetti model, which builds on Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm, identity develops in a continuous interplay between making commitments, exploring commitments in-depth, and reconsidering commitments (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, Van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). *Commitment* refers to making firm choices with regard to various domains and the self-confidence derived from these choices. *In-depth exploration* represents the extent to which present commitments are actively explored. It involves searching for information about these commitments, reflecting on one's choices, and discussing them with others. Finally, *reconsideration of commitment* refers to the willingness to discard one's present commitments and to search for alternative commitments. Commitment and in-depth exploration are generally thought to be adaptive processes, whereas reconsideration is thought to reflect the crisis-like aspect of identity formation (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008).

Adolescents' educational identity development is expected to be triggered by several institutionalized moments of choice (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998), such as choices regarding educational tracks or specific curricula during secondary education, and the choice for a major when entering tertiary education. The educational system expects adolescents to explore and to be committed to their educational choices. However, some adolescents might doubt whether their educational choices fit their needs. This could result in lower educational commitment and increased reconsideration, and might worsen their psychological well-being, academic adjustment, and later work identity (Branje, Laninga-Wijnen, Yu, & Meeus, 2014; Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Therefore, it is important to examine factors that relate to interindividual differences in adolescents' educational identity.

Interindividual differences in identity partly result from the interpersonal contexts in which identity is developed (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Erikson, 1968). Intimate friendships are thought to form a safe interpersonal context for adolescents' identity development (McLean & Jennings, 2012). By talking to friends about lived experiences, adolescents are thought to be able to integrate these experiences within their identity (McLean & Pasupathi, 2010). It is theorized that during this process friends provide support and feedback, which might influence adolescents' identity formation (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010).

Friends' balanced relatedness

During adolescence, individuality becomes more and more accepted within friendships (Selfhout, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). Adolescents increasingly accept the opinions and ideas of their friend, even when they differ from their own. This characteristic of an intimate friendship is referred to as balanced relatedness (Shulman & Knafo, 1997). Specifically this aspect of adolescent friendships might be associated with identity development, because it encompasses the acceptance within the friendship of the individual as an autonomous, independent individual who has own ideas and needs. Friends who are perceived as higher on balanced relatedness might form a safer environment for educational identity formation, because adolescents expect it to be likely that this friend will tolerate their view (Thorne & Shapiro, 2011). Moreover, adolescents might feel supported in expressing personal views and in exploring and making their own educational choices. Findings from an earlier study indicated that peer groups open to and supportive of adolescents' opinions stimulate adolescents' general identity by relatively increasing in-depth exploration, but not commitment (Dumas, 2011). Although this prior study focused on the actual degree of balanced relatedness, adolescents' perceptions of balanced relatedness might have a stronger influence on their identity (Ryan, 2010).

In turn, adolescents' identity might affect the perceived level of balanced relatedness provided by their friend. The formation of a coherent identity is thought to stimulate the development of intimate friendships, characterized by a high level of balanced relatedness, because there is less fear to lose the self in the friendship (Erikson, 1963). Adolescents who have constructed a relatively stable identity might feel more secure when expressing their views and be less likely to perceive their friend's reactions as confronting (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008). Therefore, adolescents with a more stable identity might experience an increase in the degree of perceived balanced relatedness provided by their friend. Our study examined whether the level of perceived balanced relatedness provided by best friends is reciprocally positively related over time to adolescents' educational identity.

Friends' identity

Adolescents and their friends are facing the same developmental task of constructing their identity. Identity control theory suggests that adolescents' identity is influenced by the identity of their friend (Kerpelman et al., 1997). When friends narrate about their experiences they provide self-relevant feedback to each other on their identity choices. We suggest that this self-relevant feedback might contain information on how one should develop an educational identity, such as "you should be committed to your educational choice". This way, highly committed adolescents might stimulate their friend to commit as well. Identity control theory states that when one's identity is not in line with the feedback received from friends, adolescents will adjust their identity to restore the balance (Kerpelman et al., 1997). Consequently, the development of identity of both the adolescent and best friend will be shaped, and as a result, will become more similar over time.

In line with this perspective, friends were found to be more often in a similar state of general and domain-specific identity than random pairs (Akers, Jones, & Coyl, 1998). Specifically, adolescents who had low levels of both educational exploration

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