



## Micro-level processes of identity development: Intra-individual relations between commitment and exploration



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### ABSTRACT

We investigate intra-individual processes of identity at the micro level. With an intensive longitudinal design in the general context of higher education, we explore associations between changes in pivotal identity concepts: commitment and exploration and elaborate on how we conceptualize these concepts on a micro level. With our within-individual empirical approach, we revealed a large amount of variation between individuals with respect to the associations between exploration and commitment processes. At the same time, similarities were found amongst individuals, which help extend and clarify existing findings regarding identity development. Our findings highlight the necessity to, firstly, distinguish between micro- and macro-level identity processes. Secondly, and in the same vein, our findings emphasize the heterogeneous nature of micro-level identity processes, and the necessity to use a within individual approach to study these processes.

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### Introduction

Since Erikson formulated his theory on adolescent identity development in 1968, many perspectives have been taken on what identity actually is, and how it develops over time. Because of the difficulty in translating such a complex, abstract construct as identity into something that can be measured in many ways, questions on what identity is and how it develops are still relevant. This is true even after more than half a century of both qualitative and quantitative identity research (e.g. Syed & McLean, 2015). In this article, we aim to further understanding and stimulate discussion on *micro-level* processes (which contrast macro-level processes) of identity development (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008). Building on the work of Klimstra et al. (2010) we elaborate the conceptualization and operationalization of identity on a micro-level, specifically in the domain of education/career choice. In our empirical study we explore associations between micro-level change processes of exploration and commitment within individuals.

#### *Macro and micro approaches to identity processes*

There is both a lot and little known about identity development, depending on the feature of identity that is the focus. A lot is known about what Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) termed the 'macro-level' feature of identity development. This feature

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of identity is a relatively stable characteristic of identity that can be measured by reflection by research participants (e.g. interviews). For example, identity-status approaches based on the work of Marcia (1966) capture macro-level features (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). Marcia (1966) conceptualized identity development as consisting of two main processes: exploring different identity options, and committing to a particular identity alternative. This conceptualization of identity as commitment and exploration has inspired a lot of research and can be considered a main stream in identity research (see for example Meeus, 2011).

In contrast to macro-level features of identity, little is known about – what Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) referred to as – the ‘micro-level’ feature of identity. This is the real-time expression of identity within everyday contexts in which people act and experience, where in depth reflection is much less common. This feature of identity is thus the fleeting and variable characteristic of identity, which is context dependent and can change over minutes, hours or days, and can be captured by repeated measures studies (e.g. observations, diaries). A number of identity process theorists emphasize the importance of micro-level processes of identity (e.g. Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Grotevant, 1987; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997; Korobov, 2015). The general assumption in these theories is that identity development on the macro-level is rooted in repeated interactions between person and context, in the here and now. Gaining an understanding of how identity emerges from these here-and-now interactions may be the key to developing more complete theory on identity. Furthermore, knowledge regarding micro-level processes of identity can be informative for identity interventions, which make use of micro level behavior and cognitions. Schwartz, Kurtines, and Montgomery (2005) for example, devised two types of identity interventions that can both be conceptualized as micro-level interventions that are translated from macro-level concepts, specifically, ‘goal strivings’ and ‘life choices’. For example, with regards to ‘goal strivings’, “going to law school was broken down to reading, studying, and memorizing” (Schwartz et al., 2005, p. 319). The participant’s experiences of the activities were then linked to the emotions that they experienced, such as stressed or fearful. These micro-level experiences were then incorporated back into the participants’ personal goal strivings. In their intervention, the micro-level experiences can thus be seen as vital for bringing about change on a macro level.

Although the importance of micro level identity processes has been emphasized, and theories on micro-level identity processes have become increasingly refined over the last two decades, empirical studies to support these theories are lacking. A notable exception is a study by Klimstra et al. (2010). These authors found indications that a particular form of micro-level identity processes indeed seems to operate on a day-to-day micro-level timescale. They consider commitment and reconsideration important aspects of the *identity synthesis versus role confusion* dynamic originally described by Erikson (1950) and derive their measures more specifically from the identity formation model of Crocetti, Rubini, and Meeus (2008). Using one item, they measured commitment and reconsideration each day over the course of five days, and repeated this three times. Among their group of university students, they found small negative associations between day-to-day changes in commitment and reconsideration in the educational and interpersonal domain.

#### *Expanding empirical research on micro-level identity processes*

Given that micro-level processes of identity are theorized to be fundamental to identity development, it is important that we expand this line of research. A first step in the understanding of micro-level identity processes, is gaining insight in the way in which different variables are related to each other, within individuals. A within-individual approach is necessary, as group-level associations (as presented by Klimstra et al., 2010) are only applicable to within-individual processes if the ergodicity assumption holds (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009). This is only the case when (1) the association between components, like commitment and reconsideration, is the same for all subjects (*homogeneity*) and (2) these associations stay the same over time (*stationarity*). For the ergodicity assumption to be valid, both of these two conditions need to be met. Violation of one of the conditions for ergodicity can have large consequences for what can be said about individual processes. For example, it may be true that, on average, individuals who have a high score on reconsideration are likely to have a low score on commitment in the next time step (a *group-level* relation shown by Klimstra et al., 2010). However, this does not mean that if an individual reconsiders more, this person’s commitment will subsequently become lower (an *individual-level* relation). This means that the micro-level relations found between reconsideration and commitment may only be true for a part of the individuals, and it is indeed theoretically even possible, that it is not true for any individual. It is therefore vital that we conduct our empirical analysis within individuals, as opposed to calculating group-level associations.

#### *The present study*

In this study we explore how micro-level changes in exploration can be related to micro-level changes in commitment, within individuals, in order to get a better understanding of the developmental process. This way, the ergodicity problem is taken into account while also gaining insight into possible individual differences in how concepts of exploration and commitment are related on the micro level. We use an intensive longitudinal design with weekly measurements spanning several months. We focus on one particular domain that is highly salient for adolescents; the domain of education/career choice (Bosma, 1985; Marcia, 1993; see also Goossens, 2001). In some European countries, for example in the Netherlands, students have to choose a specific topic (for example, international business, law, psychology etc.) to study for four years when entering university, a choice between more than a thousand relatively narrowly defined subjects. Especially in the first

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