



# Ruminative exploration and reconsideration of commitment as risk factors for suboptimal identity development in adolescence and emerging adulthood<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Rather than looking at quantitative differences in exploration and commitment as indicators of (un)healthy identity formation, this study focuses on two qualitatively different forms of exploration using cross-sectional data of 4259 Belgian adolescents and emerging adults (aged 14–30 years; 64% female). First, ruminative exploration or brooding and worrying without being able to decide what you want in life, emerged as a risk factor for weak commitments and maladjustment. Its strong relationship with maladjustment was only slightly buffered by healthy forms of exploration. Second, reconsideration of commitment or feeling uncertain about current commitments and start looking for new commitments, showed similar negative relationships with commitment making and identification. Moreover, reconsideration of commitment rendered healthy forms of exploration ineffective (i.e., not predicting strong commitments or identifications with life choices). By focusing on the exact meaning and role of these two risk factors, this study sheds light on the dark side of identity formation and might be relevant for counselors working with youth that struggle with identity formation.

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## Introduction

A strong identity entails that a person has a stable and coherent idea about him- or herself and his or her future life (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Being a primary developmental task of adolescence (Havighurst, 1972), healthy identity development predicts better adjustment, whereas failing to address this developmental task renders individuals vulnerable for maladjustment, both in terms of internalizing and externalizing problems (Schwartz, Beyers, et al., 2011). Gaining insight in the exact processes contributing to identity confusion is an important question for counselors helping youngsters that struggle with their identity. Hence, the present study aims to shed light on this dark side of identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood by (1) identifying two risk factors for suboptimal identity development,

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that is, ruminative exploration and reconsideration of commitment; (2) examining unique relationships of identity processes with depressive symptoms and self-esteem; and (3) testing whether the identified risk factors undermine healthy commitment development and adjustment.

#### *Identity development in adolescence and emerging adulthood*

As Erikson (1968) wrote in his seminal work, “In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (p. 130). As such, Erikson stressed that developing a strong and stable sense of identity, that is, a coherent set of goals, values, and commitments that define who you are, is of crucial importance for human well-being. According to Erikson (1968), adolescents who fail to successfully address this developmental task and remain in a state of identity confusion, have vague or even non-existent commitments and seem disconnected from their inner self.

Marcia (1966, 1980) elaborated on Erikson’s writings by defining and operationalizing two core processes of identity formation: exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to actively searching for and experimenting with identity alternatives, whereas commitment means choosing one of these alternatives and adhering to it. By defining these core processes, Marcia (1980) did shed light on what identity confusion or diffusion exactly means, that is, having no clear commitments and not being engaged in systematic exploration. Other identity statuses defined by Marcia and validated by abundant research (for reviews, see Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Meeus, 2011) include achievement (strong commitments after a period of active exploration), moratorium (exploring alternatives without having current commitments) and foreclosure (strong commitments but without active exploration). As such, Marcia (1980) described a diffused identity mostly in quantitative terms, that is, a lack of exploration combined with a lack of commitment.

#### *Contemporary process models of identity formation*

Based on critiques of Marcia’s model (Côté & Levine, 1988; Grotevant, 1987; Van Hoof, 1999) that stressed the importance of looking at underlying processes of commitment and exploration, new process models of identity development have suggested that also qualitatively different and maladaptive ways of exploration and commitment exist. For instance, Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens (2006) empirically differentiated four identity processes that describe identity development in two consecutive cycles. The first cycle, *identity formation*, is mainly described using Marcia’s dimensions and comprises *exploration in breadth* (i.e., active exploration of alternatives) and *commitment making* (i.e., choosing and adhering to one of these alternatives). The second cycle, *commitment evaluation*, describes how existing commitments are evaluated and comprises *exploration in depth* (i.e., evaluation and exploration of current commitments, to become more aware of the chosen commitments) and *identification with commitment* (i.e., increasingly identifying with and growing certain and confident about these commitments).

In subsequent research (Luyckx et al., 2008), a fifth dimension was added to this model to differentiate healthy or reflective exploration in breadth from *ruminative exploration*. Adolescents high on ruminative exploration experience difficulties with active and purposeful exploration of alternatives. When confronted with identity questions, they brood and worry constantly without being able to close down this exploration process and make strong commitments. This tenet was supported in empirical studies, using the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS; Luyckx et al., 2008) measuring the five above defined identity dimensions. In these studies a strong negative correlation between ruminative exploration and commitment making or identification with commitment was found (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2008; Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, & Beyers, 2013).

A second process model of identity development was developed by Meeus and Crocetti (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, 2011; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) who emphasized that during adolescence, commitments already exist and that they are evaluated and revised through *in-depth exploration* (similar to exploration in depth in the Luyckx et al. model) and *reconsideration of commitment*. These processes can subsequently result in a synthesized identity based on the experienced confidence in present commitments (similar to identification with commitment in the Luyckx et al. model). Hence, this second process model forwarded reconsideration of commitment as a new identity dimension. Reconsideration of commitment means that adolescents compare their present but unsatisfactory commitments with possible alternatives (Crocetti et al., 2008, 2015). Defined as such, scoring high on reconsideration may undermine identity formation and synthesis, for instance as shown in studies using the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti et al., 2008) which measures the three above defined identity dimensions. In these studies non-significant or negative correlations between commitment and reconsideration of commitment were reported (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2008; Pop, Negru-Subtirica, Crocetti, Opre, & Meeus, 2016).

Based on these two new models, we may identify four dimensions contributing to healthy identity (i.e., exploration in breadth, commitment making, exploration in depth, and identification with commitment), and two risk factors that might undermine healthy identity development (i.e., ruminative exploration and reconsideration of commitment). For instance, in the domain of vocational identity, Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, and Weigold (2011) have found positive correlations between the four healthy identity processes defined above. However, self-doubt (i.e., doubt, uneasiness, and worry about finding a job and about one’s current career choices), which is quite similar to ruminative exploration, and commitment flexibility (i.e., driven by an unsatisfactory career choice, ongoing consideration of alternatives and intention to change to another job), which is similar to reconsideration of commitment, showed negative correlations with job commitment and identification

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