Dark shadows of rumination: Finnish young adults' identity profiles, personal goals and concerns

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ABSTRACT

Young adults actively construct their identity by exploring and committing to opportunities through the setting of personal goals. Typically personal goal contents are related to young adults' developmental tasks but sometimes goals are self-focused. This longitudinal study explored personal goal and concern contents in relation to identity profiles among young Finns (N = 577) followed from age 23 to 25. Applying the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale, identity formation was measured at age 23. Latent Profile Analysis yielded five profiles: moderate achievement, moderate diffusion, achievement, diffused diffusion, and reconsidering achievement. Two "dark side" identity profiles, characterized by low commitment and high ruminative exploration, were identified: moderate diffusion and diffused diffusion. The moderate diffusion profile seemed to have developmental task-related personal goals and concerns. In the diffused diffusion profile, self-focused personal goals and concerns were typical and personal goals and concerns towards relationships atypical. These findings persisted over the two-year follow-up.

Young people in transition to adulthood take an active and goal-oriented role in their own development (e.g., Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Salmela-Aro, 2009). The identity formation process of finding out "who I am, and what are my goals" (Schwartz, 2001), is closely tied to the construction of personal goals that optimize young people's ability to handle their upcoming lifespan development (Baltes, 1997; Salmela-Aro et al., 2012). This requires young people to compare their individual motivation and needs with the opportunities, challenges, and constraints typical of the life situation at hand (e.g., Heckhausen et al., 2010; Nurmi, 1992; Salmela-Aro, 2009; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). The transition to adulthood poses a number of demands called developmental tasks, which, if met by a young person, are thought to lead to adaptive development (e.g., Havighurst, 1948). Developmental tasks in young adulthood include the completion of education, engaging in one's future career, finding and committing to an intimate relationship, and starting a family. While scholars have theorized about the links between identity development and the construction of personal goals, empirical research involving both kinds of engagement with the transition to adulthood is still missing (Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012; Seiffke-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008). This however, would complete our understanding which kinds of personal goals and identity processes can be considered adaptive or maladaptive. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the intertwined processes of

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young adults' identity formation, operationalized as identity profiles, and the contents of their personal goals and concerns, examined as the extent to which these are related to developmental tasks or not. Specifically, we examine to what extent there is a "dark side" to certain identity profiles, where individuals not only experience poor well-being, but also differ from individuals in other identity profiles in the kinds of personal goals they set and the concerns they struggle with.

Identity processes, statuses, and profiles

Much research has been conducted on the topic of identity statuses, and dimensions (for a review, see e.g., Crocetti, Sica, Schwartz, Serafini, & Meeus, 2013; Schwartz, 2001). The process-oriented dual-cycle model of identity (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006) describes identity development within the cycles of commitment formation and commitment evaluation. Both cycles include, first, an exploration of possible future states, and, second, commitment to particular choices. More specifically, first the individual explores alternatives (*exploration in breath*), and chooses and commits to particular choices (*commitment making*) (Luyckx et al., 2006; Luyckx, Teppers, Klimstra, & Rassart, 2014; Marcia, 1966). Second, the individual goes through her current commitments (*exploration in depth*), and unites these into the sense of self (*identification with commitment*) (Luyckx et al., 2006, 2014). A recent study by Zimmermann, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, and Cannard (2015) demonstrated that exploration in depth could have two sides: exploration leading to better understanding and a firming up of commitments already made, and a "darker side" where exploration leads to a re-evaluation of commitments. Luyckx et al. (2008) have further identified a fifth process (*ruminative exploration*), where the individual gets stuck in the exploration process and ruminates on life without direction.

Several studies have identified identity statuses on the basis of empirically measured profiles of identity processes, and these have often been drawn from cluster analysis (HYPERLINKCrocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012; Luyckx et al., 2008; Luyckx, Duriez, Klimstra, & De Witte, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Zimmermann et al., 2015), and latent class analysis (Meeus, Van De Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). These studies have found some of the profiles proposed by Marcia (1966): *achievement* (moderate or high exploration of alternatives, without ruminative exploration, and then clear commitment), *foreclosure* (very clear commitments without exploring alternatives), and many refined statuses, including *ruminative moratorium* (weak commitments, high exploration, and, in particular, ruminative exploration), *searching moratorium* (strong and clear commitments, but returning to consider these with high exploration of new alternatives), and *diffused diffusion* (weak exploration, weak definite commitments, and elevated ruminative exploration) (Crocetti et al., 2008; Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011; Zimmermann et al., 2015). Ruminative moratorium and diffused diffusion have been found to be associated with problems in general psychological functioning, such as heightened depressive symptoms (Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011), and lowered satisfaction with life (Schwartz et al., 2015), and in domain-specific functioning, such as academic burnout, and low career engagement (Luyckx et al., 2010), lower intrinsic motivation, and feelings of incompetence (Waterman, 2004).

Personal goals and concerns during the transition to adulthood

Identity formation is closely related to goal pursuit (see Dietrich et al., 2012). Goals refer to future-oriented states, outcomes, or representations of what young adults are striving to achieve (see Austin & Vancouver, 1996). These can range from very explicit personal projects (Little, 2014) to current concerns (Klinger & Cox, 2011), which refer to latent and implicit processes towards particular, yet explicitly unformulated, personal goals. Young people can mentally represent their personal goals in different ways, such as positive desired states ("I want to get job"), hereafter named personal goals, or negative, often more implicit worries ("my relationship won't last"), hereafter labeled personal concerns. Identity development and personal goal striving are cognitive processes, as both include efforts to construct goals and identity commitments, efforts made to pursue goals and express identity commitments, and efforts made to renegotiate these, for example, in light of difficulties (Dietrich et al., 2012).

Scholars in developmental psychology have stressed that the kinds of personal goals and concerns people set (i.e. goal and concern contents) are bound to developmental tasks arising at different points in their lives (e.g. Heckhausen et al., 2010; Nurmi, 1992; Salmela-Aro, 2009). In the process of personal goal formulation, the individual compares and explores her motivation in relation to current opportunities and challenges, and makes commitments to personal goals. Thus, if young people's personal goals reflect the developmental tasks at the transition to adulthood, this has been shown to benefit their well-being (Salmela-Aro et al., 2007, 2012), lower their stress (Dietrich, Jokisaari, & Nurmi, 2012), and promote domain-specific attainment (Ranta, Dietrich, & Salmela-Aro, 2014). However, young adults also have personal goals and concerns that are self-focused (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997; HYPERLINKSalmela-Aro, Pennanen, & Nurmi, 2001). The contents of these self-focused personal goals and concerns reflect active striving to work out the meaning of one's life, or changing or improving the sense of self, identity, and one's own life-style, or coping and adjustment (Marttinen & Salmela-Aro, 2012; Salmela-Aro et al., 2012). Thus, self-focused personal goals are different from personal goals related to developmental tasks. Optimal identity development has been described to include exploration of self-related issues (Erikson, 1968), and self-focusing has been found to be self-reflective, and thus related to positive outcomes (Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997; Salmela-Aro et al., 2012). However, in turn, self-focused attention is reported to be associated with negative thinking and rumination (Mor & Winquist, 2002), and self-focused personal goals are found to be