



Identity processes and statuses in post-Soviet Georgia: Exploration processes operate differently



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ABSTRACT

Identity formation is one of the main developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Based on quantitative data on a five-dimensional model of identity formation, we concluded that the identity formation process has some different features in the Republic of Georgia than it does in many Western countries. Results obtained from young Georgian adults ($N = 295$, 82.6% female) yielded four exploration processes instead of three, which is in line with the recent Swiss findings. A key difference between Georgia and the Western contexts, however, is that exploration in breadth is highly correlated with ruminative exploration. Cluster analysis, which produced six identity clusters, also supported this pattern. Achievement, the most adjusted cluster in Western contexts, was relatively low on exploration in breadth. We discuss ways in which the Georgian transition from Soviet communism to a more globalized society may contribute to limited opportunities for identity exploration and may add some tension to the identity development process.

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Introduction

Erikson (1968) defined identity formation as a product of normative development, personal organization of experience, and cultural milieu. Young people interact with their social and cultural environments to develop a sense of self that can sustain a set of life choices and that is responsive to interpersonal relationships and societal standards (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). For Erikson, identity refers to the person's goals, values, and beliefs in a number of life domains (e.g., career, relationships, and religious beliefs).

However, the meaning and valence of identity has changed considerably since Erikson's writings. Over the last half century, many Western countries have transitioned from industrial to technological economies (Kalleberg, 2009), and gender roles have shifted toward egalitarianism (e.g., where both men and women pursue professional careers). Consequences of these shifts have included prolongation of education, frequent job changes, and later ages of entry into marriage and parenthood (Côté, 2000; Côté & Levine, 2014). The years between the end of formal education and the assumption of adult

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responsibilities and commitments have become a time when many young people are relatively uncommitted and spend time exploring potential life options (e.g., possible careers and romantic partners). In many Western countries, these years have been labelled as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000, 2012), and emerging adulthood is now the life period in which many Western youth continue to address the task of identity development (Côté & Levine, 2014). Because of the unstructured transition to adulthood, the Western socio-economic and cultural context creates conditions for identity exploration and its prolongation in to the late twenties. However, a prolonged period of exploration might not be functional in non-Western contexts with different socio-historical and cultural characteristics (Arnett, 2000). The goal of the present study was to examine the structure of personal identity formation in a non-Western context, namely, post-Soviet Georgia and its connection to psychological adjustment, such as depressive symptoms and anxiety.

Theories of identity development: the identity status model and its extensions

Among the empirically based frameworks introduced based on Erikson's work, Marcia's (1966) identity status model has inspired by far the largest research literature (for a review see Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Within the identity status model, two identity dimensions are proposed – exploration and commitment. *Exploration* refers to the process of evaluating different alternatives within important life areas (occupation, relationships, personal ideology, etc.). *Commitment* is the process of making a decision to adhere to a specific set of alternatives. The presence or absence of exploration and commitment can be used to derive four *identity statuses*. *Achievement* refers to a set of commitments enacted following a period of exploration. *Moratorium* refers to a period of active exploration during which most commitments are suspended or discarded. *Foreclosure* represents commitments made without prior exploration. *Diffusion* represents the absence of commitments, with or without non-systematic (and often short-lived and unsustained) attempts to explore alternatives.

Marcia's initial model has been extended by a number of process-oriented models, including the five-dimensional (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008) and three-dimensional identity models (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). In the present study, we used the five-dimensional identity model proposed by Luyckx, Schwartz, et al. (2008). Luyckx et al. unpacked Marcia's dimensions of exploration and commitment into two commitment dimensions and three exploration dimensions: commitment making, identification with commitment, exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, and ruminative exploration. Four of these five processes can be grouped into two identity cycles: commitment formation and commitment evaluation (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). When forming commitments, young people can proactively consider different identity alternatives (exploration in breadth) before deciding to adopt one or more of these (commitment making). This commitment formation cycle represents Marcia's (1966) original model. The commitment evaluation cycle can be described in terms of two processes as well – exploration in depth and identification with commitment. After individuals have formed commitments, they can start to evaluate these commitments. In so doing, people engage in an in-depth exploration of their commitments (e.g., by gathering additional information or talking with others about the choice made) and, if all goes well, increasingly identify themselves with and grow more certain and confident about these choices (Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, Beyers, et al., 2013).

A fifth dimension of identity formation, ruminative exploration, was added to the model later. As opposed to exploration in breadth and exploration in depth, ruminative exploration is a more dysfunctional type of exploration. Ruminative exploration represents difficulty in settling on satisfying answers to identity questions in spite of continued mental effort to do so, which results in intrusive feelings of uncertainty and incompetence. Studies have indicated that ruminative exploration is associated with maladaptive perfectionism and an avoidant coping strategy (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Schwartz, & Vanhalst, 2012; Luyckx, Soenens, Goossens, Beckx, & Wouters 2008).

Based on these five identity dimensions, identity statuses have been derived using cluster analytic methods (Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011). Because it is a data-driven approach, cluster analysis is more appropriate than median split procedures that have traditionally been used to classify participants into identity statuses (Steinley & Brusco, 2007). The *Achieved* status is characterized by high scores on all of the identity processes except for ruminative exploration. *Foreclosure* is characterized by high levels of the commitment processes and low levels of each of the exploration processes. *Searching Moratorium* is characterized by high scores on all three exploration dimensions and moderate to high levels of commitment making and identification with commitment. *Troubled Diffusion* is low on commitment making and identification with commitment, high on ruminative exploration, and moderate to high on exploration in breadth. These clusters resemble those originally proposed by Marcia (1966). In addition, Luyckx, Schwartz, et al. (2008), Luyckx, Soenens, et al. (2008) found two new clusters: the *Carefree Diffusion* status is characterized by low levels on all five dimensions, and the *Undifferentiated* status represents individuals whose scores on all dimensions are close to their respective sample means (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008). Research conducted using this process-oriented identity status model and adjustment outcomes has indicated that statuses high on commitment dimensions (especially achievement) are linked with the highest levels of well-being. Troubled Diffusion and Searching Moratorium tend to be linked with the highest levels of internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, whereas Achievement and Foreclosure generally score lowest on these symptoms (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2014). This process-oriented identity model has been studied in many different national contexts, including Belgium (Luyckx et al., 2006; Luyckx, Schwartz, et al., 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, et al., 2008), the United States (Schwartz et al., 2011), Italy (Crocetti, Luyckx, Scrignaro, & Sica, 2011), Switzerland and France (Zimmermann, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, & Cannard, 2013), and the

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