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Vocational identity and psychological adjustment: A study in French adolescents and emerging adults

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present research was to study vocational identity in French adolescent and emerging adult students by using a French adaptation of the Vocational Identity Status Assessment (VISA), and to analyze the links between vocational identity formation and negative and positive psychological adjustment. Participants were 1077 French students who completed self-report scales about vocational identity, depression and satisfaction with life. The French version of the VISA showed good psychometric properties and six identity statuses were derived by means of cluster analysis: achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, searching moratorium, diffused diffusion and carefree diffusion. The main findings show that diffused diffusion and moratorium represent the dark sides of identity because of their negative psychological adjustment, and that the two processes of reconsideration of commitment were differently associated with psychological adjustment. These findings demonstrate that clinical interventions should be adapted to the individual's identity profile.

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Vocational identity development represents a primary developmental task in adolescence (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989; Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Erikson, 1968; Savickas, 1985). Although it has been strongly associated with the period of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), sociocultural changes occurring in recent decades and in numerous countries, particularly the lengthening of the period of schooling, have led to the extension of this developmental task into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Studying at university represents an opportunity for young people to continue to question their identity (e.g., Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2008; Montgomery & Côté, 2003). Moreover, in industrialized countries, vocational identity is recognized as one of the most important developmental tasks (Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011) and as a key component in the identity formation process (Holland, 1985; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998; Super, 1980). The purpose of the present research was to study vocational identity in French adolescent and emerging adult students, and to analyze the links between vocational identity formation and psychological adjustment.

Career theories and identity formation

Although career theories and the construct of identity came from two separate theoretical and research domains, various authors have examined the links between career development and vocational identity in the light of Erikson's hypotheses

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about identity formation in late adolescence (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). For example, Vondracek (1992) has proposed a “developmental conceptualization of the construct of vocational identity” (p.130) with reference to Erikson’s construct of identity. Empirical studies provide support for the relations between career development and identity formation, for the link between vocational identity and ego identity (Blustein et al., 1989; Savickas, 1985), and for a leading role of vocational identity development in other identity development domains (Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998, 2011). According to the Eriksonian approach, the operationalization of vocational identity has usually been guided by Marcia’s (1966) identity statuses paradigm (see Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011 for a review). Marcia specified two processes of identity formation: exploration (i.e., consideration of various potential identity alternatives) and commitment (i.e., adoption of firm convictions or choices). In vocational identity development, career exploration and career commitment are considered as the two major processes (Porfeli et al., 2011). Referring to the combination of exploration and commitment, Marcia (Marcia, 1966; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993) defined four identity statuses: identity achievement (high exploration and commitment), moratorium (high exploration, commitment still vague), foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment), and identity diffusion (with or without exploration, absence of commitment).

Marcia’s identity paradigm inspired and still inspires many identity researchers. In the last decade, two broader process-oriented models of identity have extended Marcia’s conceptualizations and engendered new empirical identity statuses (Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missot, 2011; Meeus, 2011).

The dual-cycle model (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky et al., 2008) includes five identity processes: exploration in breadth and commitment making as in Marcia’s identity paradigm, exploration in depth (i.e., the extent to which individuals actively evaluate and maintain their current choices), identification with commitment (i.e., the way that individuals feel certain about their choices and identify with them) and ruminative exploration (i.e., a locked cycle of repetitive exploration that prevents commitment formation) in order to capture the maladaptive process of identity formation. With its five identity processes, the model therefore extends Marcia’s status paradigm to include achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and two different forms of diffusion, – diffused diffusion and carefree diffusion –, both characterized by low scores on reflective exploration dimensions (in breadth and in depth) and low scores on commitment dimensions, but different on ruminative exploration (very high score in diffused diffusion vs. very low score in carefree diffusion).

Another model proposed by Crocetti et al. (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008) suggests that identity formation results from the interplay between three identity processes: commitment, in-depth exploration (corresponding respectively to identification with commitment and exploration in depth processes in the dual-cycle model) and reconsideration of commitment (i.e., the possibility of revising current commitments by comparing them with alternatives and exploring a wide range of new alternatives). This three-factor model includes five empirical identity statuses: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, diffusion and searching moratorium. The latter status is defined by high scores on all three processes. It could characterize individuals who are no longer satisfied with their current commitments and are therefore reconsidering them.

Vocational identity: a six-process model of identity formation

On the basis of the two previous conceptual identity models, Porfeli et al. (2011) proposed a model of vocational identity processes including career exploration, commitment and reconsideration of commitment dimensions. Each dimension comprises two identity processes. As in the dual-cycle model, career exploration includes in-breadth exploration (i.e., exploration of different career possibilities) and in-depth exploration (i.e., exploration of a specific career choice). Career commitment includes commitment making (i.e., certainty of current career choice) and identification with commitment (i.e., degree of identification with career choice). The reconsideration of commitment dimension is based on the three-factor model, but the construct of career reconsideration is expanded and includes two processes: self-doubt and commitment flexibility. The self-doubt process is characterized by “*doubt, uneasiness, and worry about one’s current career choice and a sense that others share the same feelings and ideas*” (Porfeli et al., 2011, p. 857). The commitment flexibility process is an “*active and ongoing consideration of alternatives and recognition and acceptance that one’s career choice, interests, and values might change in the future as a consequence of learning and experience*” (p. 857).

From this new model, Porfeli et al. (2011) developed a scale named the “*Vocational Identity Status Assessment*” (VISA) to measure the six theoretically defined identity processes. Six empirical identity statuses were derived from the identity processes: achievement (high on exploration and commitment dimensions, and low on reconsideration of commitment dimensions), moratorium (high on exploration in breadth and commitment flexibility, and low on commitment dimensions), foreclosure (low on exploration and reconsideration dimensions, and high on commitment dimensions), diffusion (low on exploration and commitment dimensions, and high on self-doubt dimension), undifferentiated status (moderate on all dimensions), and searching moratorium (high on all dimensions).

Identity statuses and psychosocial adjustment

More than 40 years ago, Erikson underlined the fact that achieved identity allows the integration of the individual into society, and a personal feeling of well-being and self-confidence. Empirical studies support this assumption and emphasize the reciprocal links between identity formation and mental health (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2011), even specifically in the vocational

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