



# Life on hold: Staying in identity diffusion in the late twenties



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## ABSTRACT

This study adds to the understanding of the dark side of identity development by investigating what it means to experience long-term identity diffusion during the late twenties. In a study of change and stability in identity status between ages 25 and 29 ( $N = 124$ ; 63 women), seven participants were assigned to identity diffusion at both ages. Longitudinal analysis of interviews with these participants showed that long-term experiences of identity diffusion may be described through individuals' approach to changing life conditions, the extent to which they engage in meaning making, and how they develop their personal life direction. In questionnaires, participants reported few signs of psychological distress. Even so, qualitative analyses showed a general trend among participants to keep life on hold through decreased activity or increased haphazard activity in relation to changing life conditions, to make little new meaning, and in some cases to dissolve their personal life direction.

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Experience of a long-term identity crisis has been suggested to result in symptoms of identity diffusion, such as lethargy and intimacy problems (Erikson, 1968). This study explores what long-term identity diffusion actually mean, by investigating how identity narratives from people who stay in identity diffusion in their late twenties change over time.

## Long-term identity diffusion

Lack of identity commitments and exploration is viewed as an indication of identity diffusion (Marcia, 1966), which is suggested to be one of the starting points for identity formation (Waterman, 1982). However, a meta-analysis showed that in adolescence and young adulthood a mean proportion of 0.36 remained in identity diffusion between measuring points (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). One study found evidence of stability in identity diffusion over three measuring points in adulthood (ages 27, 36, and 42 years; Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005). In a six year follow-up of individuals first interviewed in college only one of seven participants initially in identity diffusion had developed an achieved sense of identity (Marcia, 1976). Instead, four were stable in identity diffusion and two were considered to be in-between foreclosure and diffusion. Investigations that form the basis for this study found that in the late twenties the most common development for participants initially in identity diffusion was to remain in this identity status four years later (Carlsson, Wängqvist, & Frisén, 2015). Despite this documented long-term stability in identity diffusion in the twenties, little is known about what it actually means to remain in this identity status over time.

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## Experiences of identity diffusion

Individuals in identity diffusion are described as less autonomous and more sensitive to external pressure compared with people in the other identity statuses (identity achievement, moratorium, and foreclosure; Marcia, Waterman, Mattesson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). The identity diffusion experience also differs between individuals (Kroger & Marcia, 2011) and several studies have suggested that there are subcategories of this identity status (e.g., Born, 2007; Marcia, 1989), often differentiating between individuals in identity diffusion who are troubled and those who are not. Troubled individuals show ruminative tendencies and psychological distress (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2008). In accordance, studies (for a summary see Berman & Montgomery, 2014) indicate that it is the strive for identity, particularly in association with rumination (e.g., Sica, Aleni Sestito, & Ragozini, 2014), that is related to identity distress rather than identity diffusion itself. Other individuals in identity diffusion appear unbothered about their situation (often referred to as being carefree diffused; e.g., Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005). However, these individuals sometimes show elevated levels of psychological distress, particularly externalizing symptoms (e.g., physical aggression; Schwartz et al., 2011), suggesting that they might not always be as carefree as they seem.

It has been suggested that among emerging adults in postindustrial societies the flexibility that characterizes identity diffusion can be culturally adaptive (e.g., Sica et al., 2014). However, this adaptiveness might diminish as individuals get older, and are expected to make decisions concerning responsibilities connected to adult life (e.g., occupational positions or parenthood), that require long-term commitments (Wängqvist & Frisé, 2011). This study explores this issue in detail, by investigating what it means to experience identity diffusion across time in the late twenties.

## Combining the identity status model with a narrative approach

To investigate individual experiences of identity diffusion across time this study turned to the narrative approach to identity development (e.g., McAdams, 2001), and more specifically qualitative investigations of change and stability in individual identity status interview narratives across time (Carlsson et al., 2015). From a narrative perspective people form their identities through elaborate narratives, which need to be reworked in relation to new experiences throughout life (e.g., McAdams & Cox, 2010). Therefore, a narrative approach can be used to gain a nuanced understanding of how people develop their identities across time (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Thematic changes in emerging adults' identity narratives have been related to increased identity exploration (Syed & Azmitia, 2010). However, also individuals who experienced long-term stability in the same identity status after the making of identity commitments (i.e. identity achievement or foreclosure) change their identity narratives across time (Carlsson et al., 2015). This change can be described through three processes: (1) approach to changing life conditions, (2) meaning making, and (3) development of personal life direction. In this study these findings serve as a starting point for investigations of the processes involved in experiences of long-term stability in identity diffusion.

## The present study

The aim of this study was to explore what experiencing long-term identity diffusion actually means, by investigating self-reported experience of psychological distress, and change and stability in identity narratives across time among individuals who stay in identity diffusion in their late twenties. The investigations addressing this aim were guided by three research questions:

1. Do individuals who are assigned to identity diffusion at both ages 25 and 29 report identity distress or psychological symptoms at either age?
2. How do identity narratives from individuals assigned to identity diffusion at both ages 25 and 29 change and remain stable over time?
3. What do individual patterns of narrative change and stability reveal about experiences of identity diffusion in the late twenties?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were part of the GoLD (Gothenburg Longitudinal study of Development), which started in 1982 with a community sample of 144 one-to two-year old children who were overall representative of families in Gothenburg, Sweden (Lamb et al., 1988). This study draws data from the eighth and ninth wave of GoLD when participants were approximately 25 ( $M = 24.9$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) and 29 ( $M = 29.3$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) years old. A total of 124 (63 women) participants took part in both these waves. This study involves those assigned to identity diffusion at both ages 25 and 29 ( $n = 7$ ; Carlsson et al., 2015). Only men followed this trajectory (for discussions concerning gender differences in GoLD see Frisé, Carlsson, & Wängqvist, 2014;

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