



Bringing light into the dark side of identity: Theoretical and clinical applications: A case study



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ABSTRACT

In the final part, a clinical reflection is presented on the dark side of identity formation and the empirical papers of this special issue. It is important that both researchers and clinicians ask themselves how theory and evidence about identity development can be used in clinical practice. Therefore, a relevant case study is presented about an emerging adult struggling with identity formation, Tim. Various facets of Tim's struggling are illustrated based on findings from this special issue. Starting from identity diffusion, Tim's transition to moratorium and achievement was examined from three complementary theoretical frameworks and related research on these topics as outlined in this special issue. Finally, change processes throughout therapy were discussed from various clinical frameworks.

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A case study: 'Tim'

The case is about Tim, a 23-year old emerging adult, who presents himself in therapy with identity problems regarding his study choice. Tim actively questions himself about his future: "What am I good at"? "What should I study"? "Is studying something for me"? Is it better that I start working instead of studying"? "How will my life be in the future"? "Will I be successful or not"? All these thoughts and the impossibility to make choices makes Tim feel anxious and sad.

Tim explains he experienced these thoughts every day since a couple of weeks. He already tried computer sciences at a college of higher education, just like his best friends, but he obtained disappointing results and finally gave up. Now he works in a hamburger restaurant two days a week, but that is just to earn some extra money. Besides of that, he joins almost all possible student parties in town and occasionally uses soft drugs. He worries a lot and just cannot decide which way to go, because he never thought about it when he was a teenager: "Having fun with my friends was my favorite subject at school"! Moreover, Tim is scared to fail again. His friends already call him a 'no-good' for fun sometimes, but Tim does not like that at all. It makes him even more uncertain about himself. Tim sees therapy as a way to gain more self-confidence in making a thorough choice about his future. This would save him a lot of worry.

In the diagnostic phase, Tim was asked about his life story. First, with regard to child factors, it turns out that Tim is an intelligent emerging adult, however with a sensitive temperament and a neurotic personality. He learned to cope problems and regulate emotions by avoiding them, by presenting himself as carefree and confident and by making fun among friends (e.g. watching TV, playing games, going out, etc.). At school he never had to work hard to succeed, something he could easily carry on till the end of secondary school. Second, regarding specific life events, Tim lost his father due to cancer when he was 11 years old. At the same time, his mother suffered a couple of years from alcohol abuse. Tim has no brothers or sisters and experienced little social support from outside his family. He lacks a clear role model and is thereby easily influenced by others.

Tim's mother is worried and 'enough is enough'. On the one hand, she understands the fact Tim had a difficult childhood and that he needs time to make decisions about his future. On the other hand, she wants Tim to become happy and that's not

the case right now. His friends make steps forward, while Tim remains behind. She wants Tim to find his place in society. Without a certificate, he will get himself into trouble in the long run.

Applying literature about identity development, motivation and emotion regulation

According to the literature about identity development in adolescents and young adults and as shown by Syed and McClean (2016), Tim is confronted with the task to develop a healthy *identity*, with a sense of *integration* across *context* and *time* (Erikson, 1968). It is clear that Tim experiences difficulties to integrate his educational, personal, social identities in a coherent horizontal fashion. Moreover, and as described in Carlsson, Wänqvist, and Frisé (2016), his educational identity is unclear till now. As shown by Marttinen, Dietrich, and Samela-Aro (2016), having no personal educational goals at his age conflicts with the developmental tasks at the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Furthermore, it also contradicts with the cultural expectations of western and postindustrial society. There is clearly no person-society integration considering his educational identity. Based on Aydinli and Dimitrova (2016), Tim's national identity is not integrated in his personal identity and as such is not adaptive and related to more negative affect.

In a temporal and narrative way and also shown in the contribution of Syed and McClean (2016), Tim's *confused* identity and social-emotional functioning (*now*) was influenced by personal risk factors, contextual stressors and compensatory mechanisms (*then*), that eventually result into 1) making no choices at all, 2) poor well-being and 3) finally questioning his choices regarding the future (*if/when*). Moreover, as shown by Morsunbul, Crocetti, Cok, and Meeus (2016) and Hatano, Sugimura, and Crocetti (2016), research shows associations between identity development and personal risk factors such as age, personality and well-being (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010).

At first, as applied within the identity status model (Marcia, 1966) and similar to the diffused adolescents and emerging adults in the Morsunbul et al. paper (2016), Tim originally didn't explore various alternatives and made no choices with respect to his educational identity. There was no *exploration in breadth* and a lack of *commitment*. This brought Tim into a state of identity *diffusion* (low on reflective exploration and low on commitment).

Subsequently, also in Morsunbul et al. (2016) and according to the three-dimensional process model of identity development (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010), Tim later made a commitment by studying computer sciences in the same college of higher education. However, related to the topic of motivation (Cannard, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Motay, & Zimmerman, 2016), this was a high extrinsically motivated choice because his focus was to keep in touch with his best friends (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There was no *in depth-exploration* regarding his choice, which eventually resulted in poor school results and into *reconsideration of commitment*. Tim started doubting about studying computer sciences and finally stopped attending lessons. Moreover, as shown by Pop, Negru-Subtirica, Crocetti, and Meeus (2016), Tim's case is a good example of how low academic achievement leads to higher levels of reconsideration of commitment and the weakening of his educational identity.

Due to the ongoing external pressure and influence of friends and family, which is experienced by Tim as a conflicting situation, he started exploring in breadth his educational identity. As shown by Carlsson et al. (2016), social support could be a protective mechanism in dealing with long-term identity diffusion. In line with these findings, and as shown by Skhirtladze, Javakhishvili, Schwartz, Beyers, and Luyckx (2016), Tim's mother follows an autonomy supportive parenting approach, which promotes adaptive identity development.

From an adaptive perspective, Tim should move from *identity diffusion* to *moratorium* (high on reflective exploration and low on commitment) and finally to identity *achievement* (high on reflective exploration and high on commitment). However, regarding the dual cycle model of identity development (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006) and as shown by Lannegrand-Willems and Clotilde (2016), Tim worries a lot about which way to go without making a commitment, which is conceptualized as *ruminative exploration*. As shown by Skhirtladze et al. (2016), reconsideration of commitment and when exploration in breadth or in depth go hand in hand with reconsideration of commitment, they become largely ineffective in adding to strong identity commitments (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016). Particularly the latter process is what makes Tim shift to a more maladaptive development. Tim moved from carefree diffusion (low on reflective exploration, low on commitment and very low on ruminative exploration) to the status of *diffused diffusion* (low on reflective exploration, low on commitment and very high on ruminative exploration).

Diffused diffusion goes along with a lot of self-focused personal concerns, as shown by Marttinen et al. (2016). In line with these findings, Tim is anxious, sad and scared to fail again at school and worries a lot about the future. As shown by Beyers and Luyckx (2016) and by Marttinen et al. (2016), diffused diffusion and ruminative exploration are risk factors for weak commitments and psychological maladjustment such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and poor satisfaction with life. Also other research shows that rumination is a maladaptive strategy in dealing with negative emotions and results into psychopathology such as depression and anxiety (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). Because Tim cannot find answers to his identity questions immediately, he finally starts therapy in the hope that exploration will lead to *commitment making and identification* and a state of achievement. As shown by Solomontos-Kountouri and Hatzitoffi (2016) and Skhirtladze et al. (2016), Tim hopes to gain and mobilize *identity capital* (Giddens, 1991) in order to construct and let grow his educational identity.

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