



Cognitive–motivational antecedents of career decision-making processes in Portuguese high school students: A longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

In this study we propose an integrated framework of the antecedents of identity development and well/ill-being for high school students ($N = 462$) in the transition to higher education/job market. One study was conducted to investigate the effects of basic psychological need-satisfaction/frustration (as proposed within self-determination theory) and career decision-making self-efficacy (posited by social cognitive career theory) on the identity dimensions and experienced well/ill-being. Three longitudinal nested models were tested: a need-satisfaction/self-efficacy main effects model, an identity main effects model and a reciprocal main-effects model. The reciprocal effects between the variables were favored by the data. Basic need-satisfaction and career decision making self-efficacy positively predicted proactive exploration and commitment-making, while basic need-frustration predicted both diminished well-being and ill-being. Reciprocally, proactive exploration investments positively predicted whereas ruminative exploration negatively predicted, need-satisfaction and career decision-making self-efficacy. Implications for the design of career interventions are discussed and suggestions for future research proposed.

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1. Introduction

The formation of an integrated sense of personal identity is a primary developmental task in adolescence. For Erikson, a well-developed identity allows the individuals to be more conscious of their strengths and weaknesses that are associated to experiences of psychological well-being, whereas an underdeveloped identity structure leaves adolescents more confused and vulnerable for ill-being (Erikson, 1968; Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Papini, & Vansteenkiste, 2011).

Identity development is key to understand the transitions that take place from adolescence to early adulthood, where youth is challenged to develop their identities in a variety of life domains, including career, ideology, and romantic engagement (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Much of the Neo-Eriksonian theorization on identity was based on the Identity Status Model (Marcia, 1980) and essentially focused on exploration and commitment processes of identity development (e.g., Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). *Exploration* was described as the degree of exploration of various social roles and self-appraisal about personal goals, values, and beliefs and *commitment* relates to having a stable set of life values, goals and convictions (Marcia, 1980). In one of the recent extensions of the identity status model, Luyckx and colleagues (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, et al., 2006) proposed a more dynamic view of identity formation by unpacking the dimensions of exploration and commitment. A model of identity development with five core dimensions is proposed. Identity exploration

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encompasses the dimensions of *exploration in breadth*, i.e., the degree to which adolescents search for different alternatives with respect to goals, beliefs, and values before making commitments, *exploration in depth*, featuring the in-depth evaluation of commitments, choices, and plans already made and their convergence with internal standards, and *ruminative exploration*, featuring indecisiveness, hesitation, worry, and flawed decision-making (Luyckx et al., 2008). Identity commitment encompasses the dimensions of *commitment-making*, tapping into the degree to which the individuals make firm identity choices, and *identification with commitment* describing the degree to which adolescents feel certain about and can identify with their identity commitments. As conceptualized, the five-component model has the advantage of capturing both the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of identity formation (Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Duriez, 2009).

Furthermore, it is also under discussion how global identity dimensions relate and distinguish from more domain-specific identity processes, such as vocational or career identity. Career identity is defined as central to the sense of self derived from one's development of an occupational career, being an important component of one's overall identity (Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012). Indeed, exploring and committing to a particular career pathway is one of the most important tasks for late adolescents that face the career transition from high school to higher education or to the job market (Stringer et al., 2012) and a successful resolution of these identity dimensions has an impact on immediate and future career opportunities (Luyckx, Duriez, Klimstra, & de Witte, 2010). However, the characterization of career-related identity processes was not, until recently, accompanied by an examination of their antecedents and correlates (e.g., Sartor & Youniss, 2002).

We believe that self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) is capable of shedding further light on the integrated versus derailed process of identity development. In SDT, the self is an innate growth-oriented *process* that guides individuals towards psychological development, integrity and identity synthesis. This integrative process is energized by the satisfaction of three innate and universal psychological needs (BPNT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 1995): autonomy, competence and relatedness. *Autonomy* refers to the experience a sense of volition and self-determination in one's actions, *competence*, describes feeling of effectiveness and self-efficacy related to the achievement of desired outcomes, and *relatedness* refers to feelings of being genuinely connected, appreciated and accepted by others within warm and intimate interpersonal relations. For SDT needs are innate universal energizing forces that drive the self towards greater identity development and synthesis, and constitute the necessary vitamins for one's well-being and health (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Research using SDT as a conceptual framework found that the satisfaction of the autonomy, competence and relatedness needs positively predicted proactive identity exploration, commitment-making and experiences of well-being and negatively predicted ruminative exploration (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Luyckx et al., 2009). Yet, the role of need frustration to predict trajectory identity development and adjustment in the transition to higher education or to the job market has not been examined.

From a different angle, Social-Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent & Brown, 2006; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) suggested that identity development is not only associated to the broad, complex judgements that individuals make about their subjective experiences of basic need-satisfaction, but it is also determined from *task-specific* self-efficacy beliefs related to the perceived competence to accomplish career-related goals and choices (Bandura, 1977). In support of this view research based on SCCT supported Career Decision-making Self-efficacy (CDSE; Betz, 2001) as an important predictor of high commitment-making (e.g., Ezeofor & Lent, 2014; Ford & Smith, 2007; Guay, 2005; Lent, 2004; Lent & Brown, 2006), work and educational well-being Ezeofor & Lent, 2014; Lent, 2004) during critical career transitions (e.g., Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007; Lent, Paixão, Silva, & Leitão, 2010; Luyckx et al., 2009). Importantly, research has not examined together the role of need satisfaction, need frustration and CDMSE to predict identity development and adjustment during critical career transitions.

2. Present research and hypotheses

Building on SDT and SCCT research, the primary aim of this study was to test an integrated model of the antecedents of identity development and experiences of well/ill-being for students involved in the transition to higher education/job market. More specifically, we examine how broad appraisals of psychological needs (need satisfaction; need frustration) and career-specific self-efficacy beliefs (CDSE) predict changes in key dimensions of identity development (exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, ruminative exploration and commitment-making) and psychosocial adjustment (well-being, ill-being) over time. Five hypotheses were formulated for this study.

Hypothesis 1. Symmetrical effects of psychological needs and CDSME.

Experiences of need satisfaction and CDMSE at T1 positively predict exploration in breadth, exploration in depth and well-being at T2 (**Hypothesis 1a**) whereas need frustration at T1 positively predicts ruminative exploration and ill-being at T2 (**Hypothesis 1b**; Lent et al., 1994; Luyckx et al., 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Hypothesis 2. Crossover effects of psychological needs and CDSME.

Feelings of basic need satisfaction and CDSE at T1 negatively predict ruminative exploration and ill-being at T2 (**Hypothesis 2a**) whereas perceptions of need frustration at T1 negatively predict exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, commitment-making and well-being at T2 (**Hypothesis 2b**). The crossover effects are expected to be lower-sized than the symmetrical effects (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Hypothesis 3. Symmetrical effects of identity and well-being.

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