Personal and social aspects of professional identity. An extension of Marcia's identity status model applied to a sample of university students

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The study proposed an extension of Marcia's identity status model based on validation of the Professional Identity Status Questionnaire (PISQ-5d), a scale able to measure both intra-individual and intergroup processes connected with the development of a professional identity in university students. The aims were to prove the construct validity of the PISQ-5d, to determine the appropriate number of identity statuses, and to assess the concurrent validity of the identity statuses considering both job-related and academic factors. In this study, 477 university students completed a questionnaire with the PISQ-5d scale; 220 also completed the measures of work values; and 168 completed the measures of student self-esteem and self-efficacy, academic motivation, and grades. Results confirmed the expected five-dimensional structure of the PISQ-5d and the scale's effectiveness at differentiating five types of identity status. Relationship between professional identity status and job-related and academic factors showed that the students with achievement or foreclosure identities had higher scores on measures of academic self-esteem and intrinsic work value and had lower scores for intention to leave university. Implications in terms of considering the PISQ-5d scale a useful tool for the evaluation of professional identity construction processes in university students will be discussed.
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1. Introduction

In industrialized countries, the construction of the worker identity is among the most central aspects of the transition from adolescence to adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2004; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). This is particularly true among university students as they invest a lot of effort into exploring alternative professional identities and have to make a commitment to their career choice (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Skorikov, 2007; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010). Nevertheless, there are few instruments for investigating professional identity construction processes (see Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011), especially in university students. In addition, drawing on revisions to Marcia's (1966) identity status model (e.g., Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goosens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005), most recent studies have focused on intra-individual processes relevant to the development of professional identity (exploration and commitment), neglecting the social dynamics of professional identity development (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

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Professional identity is a type of identity that includes personal as well as social dimensions, and this study is one of the first studies to provide evidence of the combination between intra-individual and intergroup processes connected with the development of a professional identity. Its aim was to extend Marcia's identity status model through the validation of an instrument—the five-dimensional Professional Identity Status Questionnaire (PISQ-5d)—which assesses both intra-individual and intergroup processes involved in the development of professional identity in university students. Alongside construct and content validation, the study also aimed at validating the concurrent validity of the PISQ-5d by analyzing the associations between professional identity construction processes and factors relating both to academic work and to future employment.

1.1. Contemporary models of identity status

The identity status model (Marcia, 1966) is one of the most influent theoretical models that deals with the processes of identity construction in various domains. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted on a sample of 20 late-adolescent men, Marcia expanded Erikson's (1968) ideas on identity formation in different areas through two behavioral indicators: *exploration*, referring to the active questioning and weighing of various identity alternatives before making decisions about the values, beliefs, and goals that one will pursue; *commitment*, which consists of making a relatively firm choice in an identity domain considered important and engaging in significant activities oriented toward the implementation of that choice. From the combination (i.e., high and low) of exploration and commitment, Marcia classified individuals into four statuses: *Achievement* (have made a commitment after a period of exploration), *Foreclosure* (have made a strong commitment without having explored alternatives), *Moratorium* (have not made a commitment but still actively exploring possible alternatives), and *Diffusion* (have not made a commitment and lack of exploration).

In recent decades, several contributions highlighted the limitations of the original model (cf. Schwartz, 2001), and scholars have proposed adjustments and expansions (cf. Meeus, 2011 for reviews) that have also had implications for the development of measures of vocational identity (e.g., Porfeli et al., 2011). Among these contributions, Crocetti and Meeus (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010; Crocetti et al., 2008) proposed a dual cycle model of identity formation designed to measure multiple identity domains grouped as ideological (e.g., educational identity) and relational. The aim of this model was to capture the dynamic process by which identity is formed and revised over time through three processes: commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. *Commitment* refers to the choices made in the central domains of the identity and to the self-confidence that individuals derive from these choices. *In-depth exploration* represents the extent to which individuals reflect on their current commitments while searching for new information. These two processes are related to the cycle of *identity formation and maintenance*: Individuals explore their commitments in depth and decide whether these fit well with their overall talents and capacities. *Reconsideration of commitment* refers to the comparison of present commitments with alternative commitments because the current ones are no longer satisfactory. Reconsideration of commitment therefore enacts the *identity revision cycle*: If one's current commitments are not satisfying, or do not provide a good fit, individuals might reconsider choices in favor of other commitments.

In studies conducted with early and middle adolescent samples (Crocetti et al., 2008, 2010), university students (Crocetti, Sica, Schwartz, Serafini, & Meeus, 2013) and adult employees (Crocetti, Avanzi, Hawk, Fraccaroli, & Meeus, 2014), researchers have found that these three processes contributed to the identification of people as achieved (high on commitment and in-depth exploration but low on reconsideration of commitment), foreclosed (moderately high on commitment and low on in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment), and diffused (low on all the three processes). Commitment, in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment also led to a refinement of the definition of the moratorium status, dividing it into moratorium and searching moratorium statuses. The *Moratorium* status consists of individuals who scored low on commitment, medium on in-depth exploration, and high on reconsideration of commitment. The *Searching moratorium* status encompasses people with high scores on commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment: It characterizes individuals who vacillate between the moratorium and achievement statuses that Stephen, Fraser, and Marcia (1992) have outlined. While individuals in the moratorium statuses evaluate alternatives in order to find satisfying identity-related commitments, those in the searching moratorium status seek to revise commitments that have already been enacted, starting from the secure base provided by their current commitments (Crocetti, Palmonari, & Pojaghi, 2011).

1.2. Professional identity: a combination of both intra-individual and intergroup processes

Studies on professional identity construction processes based on Marcia's (1966) identity status model and on the recent revisions to this model (Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2005) have analyzed identity processes at an *intra-individual* level. The latter considered identity statuses as results of motivational and cognitive processes that individuals put in place to meet their talent and their abilities. However, professional identity is a type of "collective identity" (Ashmore et al., 2004), and so it is also related to the *intergroup* processes of categorization, group identification, and social comparison (Tajfel, 1981). Professional identity describes both one's awareness of being a worker doing a specific job and one's identification with the groups and social categories to which one belongs by virtue of one's job. Studies have consistently shown that job satisfaction and performance were highest in workers who identify strongly with their workgroup and/or a larger organization (e.g., Van Dick & Haslam, 2012). In their recent analysis of connections between the personal and social facets of professional identity, Crocetti et al. (2014) also found significant associations between four types of identity status and the way in which employees identified with an organizational and/or work group. However, Crocetti and colleagues measured identification profiles and identity statuses as independent even if associated variables; in fact, the authors did not considered identification profiles as processes of professional identity construction or revision.