



Short Communication

Identity boundaries: An empirical perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to empirically test a newly developed theory of identity boundaries (Lile, 2013). In its initial theoretical construction, it is proposed that these boundaries are systematically related to identity style due to their similar, process-oriented nature. This study deviates from the original conceptualization of identity boundaries by hypothesizing that those with an informational identity style would have higher degrees of self–other differentiation than those with a normative identity style rather than vice-versa. College students ($N = 496$, 69.4% female, 57.3% Caucasian) completed surveys of self–other differentiation and identity style. It was found that the informational identity style had the highest degrees of self–other differentiation, followed by the normative, and finally the diffuse-avoidant with significant differences occurring at all three levels, thus, supporting the hypotheses of the present study. Reasons for the deviation from Lile's theory are explored, implications of these findings are discussed, and new directions for this structural view of identity are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Erikson (1956) depicts identity development as a constructivist concept. As such, researchers in the field argue that components of one's identity are continuously added, modified, and discarded which may lead to shifts in one's sense of self over time (e.g., Kroger, 2003; Waterman, 1982). Identity, therefore, must have some regulatory element (van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2003). To pioneer this concept, Kroger (2003) proposed identity structure: a filter through which one coherently organizes life experiences. It is here that Kroger suggests the manipulation, reception, and retention of identity-relevant material occurs.

Only recently, however, has an organized framework of identity modulation been established (Lile, 2013). Borrowing from the ideas of Kroger (2003) and van Hoof and Raaijmakers (2003), the regulatory boundary explained by Lile is a “cognitive barrier” (p. 324) which controls the preservation of identity-relevant content, the ability to discriminate one's ideas from the ideas of others, and the management of incoming identity-relevant content from external social influences. The nature of the identity boundaries that Lile (2013) described is informed by Minuchin's (1974) theory of boundaries that exists between individuals in a family unit. Permeability characterizes the diffused identity boundary. Identity-related elements flow freely in

and out of this boundary leading to a highly contingent sense of self and little differentiation from others. The second identity boundary he described is a rigid identity boundary with a stalwart defense from outside identity-relevant information, high retention of preexisting identity content, and high distinction between the self and others. Finally, Lile described the clear identity boundary, which is hypothesized to be a midpoint on the flexible-rigid continuum. Those who have a clear identity boundary tend to be able to retain core constructs of their identity while at the same time being able to discard constructs that no longer fit into their overall self-schema; distinguish themselves from others while simultaneously recognizing congruency with others; and defend against outside opinions while concurrently considering, analyzing, and incorporating new items that fit into the existing schema.

Identity styles are socio-cognitive methods describing how individuals process incoming identity-relevant information. Berzonsky (1989) identified three identity styles: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. He suggests that while individuals are capable of using all three styles, people typically tend to use one strategy over the others. The informational identity style is characterized by eager identity exploration, critical thought and analysis, reflection after making preliminary commitments, and reconciliation in the face of dissonance. A normative identity style tends to be much more inflexible due to the tendency to vehemently defend beliefs from conflicting ideas or construe new information in such a way that it fits in with existing concepts. Those who use a normative style tend to uncritically adopt identity-relevant material from prominent individuals in their life (e.g., parents, peers, religious entities). Finally, those using a diffuse-avoidant identity style tend to procrastinate identity-relevant decisions until situational constraints

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demand a choice. If and when commitments are made, they are often capricious and contingent upon external factors such as situation, reward, or people (Berzonsky, 1992).

Given the descriptions of identity style proposed by Berzonsky (1989, 1992), Lile (2013) posits that clear boundaries (i.e., moderate levels of self–other differentiation) are related to the informational identity style, the rigid boundary (i.e., the highest degrees of self–other differentiation) is related to the normative identity style, and the diffused boundary (i.e., the lowest levels of self–other differentiation) is related to the diffuse-avoidant identity style. The goal of the present study is to empirically test Lile's theoretical conjectures on the links between identity boundaries and identity styles. In the present study, however, we suggest and test a slightly different pattern concerning these relationships. Contrary to Lile's idea that the normative style represents rigid boundaries, we see this identity style as representing discriminant boundary diffusion. Individuals with a normative identity style tend to unquestionably accept their values exclusively from respected figures, which can be seen as the quintessence of self–other fusion. This detail regarding where their identity-relevant information originates may be what distinguishes the normative identity style from the diffuse-avoidant. The informational identity style, on the other hand, is characterized by careful selection which may contribute to an identity that is very unique in nature given that it is likely comprised of information from a myriad of origins. An identity constructed using an informational identity style could truly be one-of-a-kind, making self–other differentiation easier for these individuals to achieve. Nevertheless, we agree with Lile that the diffuse-avoidant style will be characterized by the lowest levels of self–other differentiation because those with a diffuse-avoidant identity style tend to haphazardly conform to the immediate social environment. With the proposed argument, the present study hypothesizes that self–other differentiation will be significantly dependent upon identity style such that self–other differentiation will be highest among those primarily endorsing an informational identity style, followed by those mainly utilizing a normative identity style, and lowest in those chiefly employing a diffuse-avoidant identity style.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

University student participants ($N = 496$) were recruited online via a research system provided by the authors' institution. The sample largely consisted of female participants (69.4%) and ranged in age from 18 to 52 years ($M = 21.61$, $SD = 5.24$). The sample was ethnically composed of Caucasian (57.3%), Hispanic or Latino/a (18.1%), African American (11.9%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5.8%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.2%), and “mixed/other” (5.8%) participants.

Participants earned research credits which they may have used towards course or extra credit. Participants choosing not to participate in the research experience for extra credit were offered an alternative assignment of equal value.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. The identity style inventory (ISI-5; Berzonsky et al., 2013)

The ISI-5 is a 36-item measure using a Likert scale ranging from ‘Not at all like me’ (1) to ‘Very much like me’ (5) to assess the socio-cognitive

processes individuals use to make identity-related decisions. The scales used in this study were the informational (e.g., “I handle problems in my life by actively reflecting on them”), normative (e.g., “I automatically adopt and follow the values I was brought up with”), and the diffuse-avoidant (e.g., “Who I am changes from situation to situation”). In this study, adequate alpha coefficients were found for the informational (.80), normative (.78), and diffuse-avoidant (.80) subscales. Consistent with the method performed by Berzonsky (1992), for the purposes of comparison, individuals were assigned to one of the three identity style groups depending upon their highest identity style standardized Z-score.

2.2.2. The self–other differentiation scale (SODS; Oliver, Aries, & Batgos, 1989)

The SODS is an 11-item measure to reflect the degree to which individuals experience distinctiveness by assessing one's tendency to defer to others, identify with others' opinions/interests, and evaluate self-worth based on others' opinions. The items (e.g., “I find it hard to make a separate judgment in the face of a strong opinion expressed by a friend.”) are rated either ‘True’ (0) or ‘False’ (1). Oliver et al. (1989) reported sufficient internal reliability ($r = .76$). In this study, satisfactory reliability was also generated ($r = .82$).

3. Results

A table of descriptive statistics, delineating how self–other differentiation varied by identity style, can be found in Table 1. In order to control for potential confounding demographic variables (e.g., age on self–other differentiation; Levpušček, 2006), an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed. Self–other differentiation was entered as the dependent variable, identity style as the categorical independent variable, and demographic variables (i.e., age, academic year, ethnicity, and gender) were entered as covariates. The ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for identity style, $F(2, 459) = 11.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$ (see Fig. 1, standard error bars shown). Fisher's LSD post-hoc analyses suggested that individuals with an informational identity style had significantly higher scores than those with a diffuse-avoidant identity style ($p < .001$) and the normative identity style ($p = .005$) and those with a normative identity style had significantly higher self–other differentiation scores than those with a diffuse-avoidant identity style ($p = .046$).

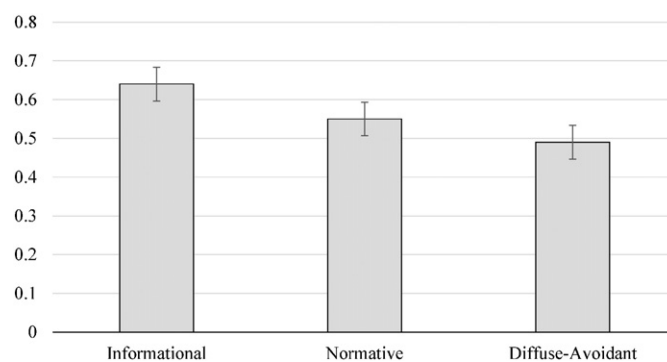


Fig. 1. Self–other differentiation by identity style.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of self–other differentiation by identity style.

Identity style	n	M (SD)	95% CI	S.E.	Skewness (S.E.)	Kurtosis (S.E.)
Informational	183	0.64 (0.28)	[.604, .684]	.020	−0.47 (0.18)	−0.68 (0.36)
Normative	131	0.55 (0.28)	[.503, .602]	.025	−0.15 (0.21)	−0.92 (0.42)
Diffuse-avoidant	166	0.49 (0.29)	[.441, .531]	.023	0.16 (0.19)	−0.90 (0.38)

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