



## Identity development and forgiveness: Tests of basic relations and mediational pathways

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### ABSTRACT

Adaptive identity development leads to increases in personality traits that allow for social well-being. The current study tested this claim with respect to forgiveness, a dispositional tendency to forgive others. In a sample of university undergraduates ( $N = 214$ ), we examined the relations between forgiveness and two indicators of identity development: commitment and exploration. Forgiveness uniquely positively related with both identity variables, controlling for the other. Next, we tested mediational models to examine the mechanisms underlying these relationships. Our results suggest that, in part, the association between identity development and forgiveness is mediated by levels of agreeableness and neuroticism, as measured by the Big Five Inventory.

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## 1. Introduction

Theory (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Roberts & Caspi, 2003; Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008) and research (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Lounsbury, Levy, Leong, & Gibson, 2007) suggest that identity development can lead to broad changes in personality. Much of this empirical work, to date, has focused on how identity variables relate to the Big Five traits (although see Lounsbury et al. (2007) for relations with lower-order traits). The current study sought to extend this research to other traits by examining how identity development relates to dispositional forgiveness, defined as one's general tendency to forgive others (Roberts, 1995). Specifically, we tested the prediction that greater identity commitment and exploration should predict higher levels of forgiveness. We sampled emerging adults currently enrolled in college, given that this period is characterized by increased identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, heeding calls to examine the mediators and moderators of relations with forgiveness (e.g., Shepherd & Belicki, 2008), we test whether the link between identity development and forgiveness is mediated by agreeableness and neuroticism, viewed as the two superordinate traits most directly related to forgiveness.

## 2. Identity development and forgiveness

Recent theories have suggested that identity development should influence personality consistency and change (Roberts & Caspi, 2003; Roberts et al., 2008). That is, committing to an identity has been shown to engender greater personality consistency over time and situations. On the other hand, identity exploration likely leads to personality change. Moreover, it has been suggested that the maturation process, a concomitant to identity development, entails increases in certain traits that promote social integration and well-being, including conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability (Hogan & Roberts, 2004). Following this theoretical rationale, and some empirical work (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Lounsbury et al., 2007), it can be reasoned that identity and personality development influence one another.

Identity development generally involves two processes: commitment and exploration (Marcia, 1966, 1980). Adaptive identity development entails that these processes both occur, and do so in tandem. Less adaptive paths thus involve commitment prior to proper exploration of options, continued exploration without any commitment, or failing to take part in either process. Indeed, identity commitment is viewed as a benchmark of adaptive development during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1950), but primarily so only after appropriate exploration of one's options. Social cognitive research has suggested that some methods of exploration are more adaptive than others (e.g., Berzonsky, 1989, 1990). We discuss this research further below, but from this

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work, we suggest that “adaptive” exploration should involve thorough and unbiased processing of one’s identity options.

Research suggests that high levels of identity commitment and exploration should promote the development of those personality traits indicative of social well-being. Forgiveness is one such trait candidate, as it demonstrates consistent positive relations with both agreeableness and emotional stability (see Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005 for a review), two of the traits diagnostic of psychological maturity. Moreover, these traits have been linked to identity development. Indeed, individuals with a greater sense of identity tend to be higher on agreeableness (Lounsbury et al., 2007) and emotional stability (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993). Therefore, one would predict that adaptive identity development should predict greater forgiveness, at least partially by virtue of its positive effect on agreeableness and emotional stability.

Two theoretical frameworks provide rationale behind this predicted link between forgiveness and identity development. First, identity capital model suggests that when people commit to a sense of self, they accrue psychological and social “capital” that benefits them in their daily lives (Côte, 1996, 1997). Less tangible forms of capital can include better social perspective-taking, ability to explore commitments, and moral reasoning skills. Côte (1997) suggests that such attributes “give individuals the *wherewithal* to understand and negotiate the various social, occupational, and personal obstacles and opportunities commonly encountered throughout (late-modern) adult life” (p. 578). We suggest that greater forgiveness might constitute one type of capital, as forgiving others leads to better social relations (e.g., Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Hill & Allemand, 2010; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005; Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005), as well as perspective-taking and moral development (e.g., Brown, 2003; Coleman & Byrd, 2003; Wade & Worthington, 2003).

Second, research following identity status (e.g., Marcia, 1966, 1980) and the identity processing style framework (Berzonsky, 1989, 1990) demonstrates that adaptive identity development allows for better social interactions and well-being. Individuals classified in the achieved identity status (marked by levels of *both* commitment and exploration) have higher levels of intimacy (e.g., Kacerguis & Adams, 1980; Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973), are more willing to reveal themselves to others (Adams, Abraham, & Markstrom, 1987), and are less socially shy (Hamer & Bruch, 1994). With respect to the identity style framework, research suggests that the most adaptive method for identity exploration is through taking an “informational” approach (Berzonsky, 1989, 1990); informational individuals deliberately consider incoming information and do not filter out potentially negative reports. These individuals tend to score higher on measures of tolerance, intimacy, and life management than others (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005), and information-oriented students report better relations within their university (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006). Again, such positive social outcomes suggest a possible relation to forgiveness.

In summation, we believe that adaptive identity development should engender greater forgiveness, because this process leads individuals to develop those skills and traits allowing for better social well-being. In the current study, we first, examined the inter-correlations between forgiveness, identity commitment, and identity exploration. To assess *adaptive* identity exploration, we measured this variable with scores on a measure of information orientation. Second, we tested whether agreeableness and neuroticism mediated the links between the identity development variables and forgiveness. As noted above, we expected that at least part of the effect on forgiveness will result from the positive relations between identity development and these two Big Five traits.

In addition to testing these primary hypotheses, we include correlations with the other Big Five traits, as well as measures of two other identity processing styles: normative and diffuse. Having a normative style entails being primarily concerned with forming and identity that upholds societal standards and the expectations of significant others, while having a diffuse style generally involves delaying any identity commitments as long as possible (Berzonsky, 1989, 1990). As these are less active methods for identity exploration, one would not expect these scales to relate to forgiveness. We also would expect forgiveness to relate more strongly to agreeableness and neuroticism than the other Big Five traits, following past research (e.g., Mullet et al., 2005).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

Two hundred fourteen undergraduates (56% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.8$  years,  $SD = 1.10$ ) participated in an online survey for course credit at a Catholic university in the Midwestern United States. Most students were Caucasian (81%), and were in their first year at college (65%).

#### 3.2. Procedure

All participants took part in the survey through an online site. Participants were able to complete the survey at any time during the day, at any computer with internet access. All data was encrypted prior to transmission to ensure confidentiality.

#### 3.3. Measures

##### 3.3.1. Forgiveness

Forgiveness was assessed using the tendency to forgive scale (Brown, 2003). Participants rate their responses to the four-item measure on a seven-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater willingness to forgive. A sample item is “I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.78, similar to past studies (Brown, 2003; Hill & Allemand, 2010).

##### 3.3.2. Adaptive identity development

Two measures of adaptive identity achievement were taken from the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1992). Identity commitment was assessed with a 10-item scale; a sample item is “I know what I want to do with my future”. Identity exploration was assessed with an 11-item informational orientation scale; a sample item is “I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life”. Participants rate these items on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater commitment or informational processing. Cronbach’s alphas were 0.76 and 0.61 respectively. Although the information orientation alpha is somewhat low, past studies have reported similar values, between 0.65 and 0.69 (Adams et al., 2006; Berzonsky, 2008; Berzonsky & Luyckx, 2008; Luyckx et al., 2007).

##### 3.3.3. Other identity processing styles

Two other measures of identity processing styles were taken from the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1992); again, participants rated these items on a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater use of the processing style. Diffuse orientation was assessed with a 10-item scale; a sample item is “Many times by concerning myself with personal problems, they work themselves out”. Normative orientation was assessed with a nine-item

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