



Identity development during cultural transition: The role of social-cognitive identity processes



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ABSTRACT

Based on fundamental cognitive differences, [Berzonsky \(1989\)](#) proposed three different strategies of exploration behavior that underlie the process of identity development: informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant styles. The present study extends Berzonsky's theorizing to acculturation research and examines the social-cognitive processes underlying identity development of new immigrants ($N=218$). We investigate informational (analytical and exploratory), normative (heritage and host) and diffuse-avoidant identity styles as predictors of identity commitment and identity outcomes (self-esteem, self-concept clarity and ethno-cultural identity conflict). Two positive and two negative pathways to identity outcomes were identified, which were fully or partially mediated by identity commitment. Analytical informational style and normative orientation to the host society predicted stronger identity commitment, which, in turn, resulted in more positive identity outcomes. In contrast, diffuse-avoidant and exploratory informational styles exerted negative effects on identity outcomes via identity commitment. Furthermore, identity commitment buffered the negative impact of normative orientation to the country of origin on self-esteem. Taken together our findings indicate that identity commitment plays a central role in identity reconstruction of new immigrants.

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1. Introduction

Identity is strongly intertwined with socio-cultural factors, such as language, societal norms, history, and belief systems. Negotiating or living in-between two cultures/societies can be psychologically and socio-culturally challenging, and as a result immigrants frequently experience normative acculturation identity crises, including ethno-cultural identity conflict, which has a detrimental effect on the psychological ([Ward, Stuart, & Kus, 2011](#)) and socio-cultural ([Leong & Ward, 2000](#)) adjustment of acculturating individuals. In contrast, a coherent identity can successfully guide the behavior of immigrants in their everyday life and buffer the harmful effects of negative life events ([Schwartz, 2005](#); [Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006](#)). In a highly globalized world, where more than 200 million people are living as international migrants ([OECD, 2013](#)), continuously confronting and negotiating the demands of at least two different cultures, there is a growing need to understand how cultural transition affects the identity of immigrants and explore the factors that can potentially contribute to the development of a positive and coherent immigrant identity. So far however, research has mainly focused on differences in the structure of immigrants' identity, i.e., the relationship among various social-cultural identity aspects (e.g., blended vs. separated), but little is known about the mechanisms underlying identity development of adult immigrants during

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acculturation (Leong & Ward, 2000; Ward, 2008). In this paper, we argue that to gain a deeper insight in to the processes involved in finding a cultural home and creating a bicultural/multicultural identity over time, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of identity formation during cultural transition from the very early stages of acculturation.

Processes involved in acculturation have often been explained by using theories originating from other areas of psychology, such as the stress and coping framework to understand acculturative stress (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), social identity theory to investigate intergroup relations in cultural transition (Kosmitzki, 1996), or the theory of social cognition to elucidate cultural frame-switching (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). One approach that, we believe, deserves more attention in the acculturation literature is developmental theory. More specifically, we will argue that Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory of identity development provides a potential framework to understand the mechanisms involved in identity reconstruction during acculturation.

1.1. Psychosocial theory of identity development

Identity has been the focus of interest in almost all areas of psychology, and each field has conceptualized the construct somewhat differently depending on the scope of investigation. Before discussing how Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory of identity development can be applied to test identity processes in acculturating individuals, it is briefly described how identity has been conceptualized in the present research.

From a social-developmental point of view identity can be defined as a self-regulatory social-psychological construct that directs attention and influences information processes and behavior. Identity helps us understand who we are, creates meaning and commitments, forms coherence and harmony between goals, beliefs and values, and fosters a sense of personal control and the ability to recognize future possibilities (Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 433). At the same time it is deeply embedded in a social-cultural context, the change of which potentially shapes identity and encourages people to continuously reorganize their self-definitions. In the present research identity is defined as a framework for self-definition that incorporates both personal and social aspects of identity. In this study we do not focus on the structure of identity or the relationships among specific identity aspects, but rather investigate identity outcomes. In our terminology, identity outcomes refer to the perception and evaluation of identity. For example, we argue that an individual who has a clear and consistent sense of identity and how its components are inter-related will be characterized by a positive/balanced/achieved/consolidated identity.

According to Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory, the reconstruction of identity is facilitated by disequilibrium in identity that is often defined as an identity crisis. Identity crises are normative periods of identity development that occur when people actively examine and question identity issues, such as beliefs, aspirations and commitments to specific values. Marcia (1966) identified two factors – exploration behavior and commitments – that underpin identity development. He has argued that when people experience a normative crisis over identity, they not only actively explore their environments and the possible alternatives, but also must be willing to commit themselves to specific values in order to achieve identity development. More specifically, identity achievement is reached via active exploration that moves to strong and stable commitments. Although Marcia (1966) identified the underlying components of identity development and described achievement as a possible outcome in detail, his theory has been widely criticized, because it does not address the process of reconstruction, i.e., how and why individuals become identity achievers.

1.2. Identity styles: social-cognitive processes of identity development

The theory of identity styles developed by Berzonsky (1989) aims to explore how people deal with problems, make decisions and form commitments when they actively examine identity issues. It is a process-oriented approach to identity development that builds on the psychosocial theory of identity (Erikson, 1950, 1968) and addresses the critiques about Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm. Berzonsky (1989) has argued that when people undergo an identity crisis, differences can be observed in their social-cognitive processes; they solve problems and explore their environment in distinctive ways. Based on fundamental cognitive differences, Berzonsky (1989) proposed three different strategic styles of exploration behavior (i.e., the tasks involved in creating, maintaining or reconstructing one's identity) that underlie the process of identity development: informational style, normative style and diffuse-avoidant style. It has been shown that people have the cognitive ability to utilize all of these social-cognitive strategic styles (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005), so that self-reported individual differences derive from a dominant orientation to information processing and problem solving strategies rather than from developmental differences in social and cognitive capacity (Berzonsky, 2008).

Individuals who process on an informational basis are more effective in many social and cognitive areas (e.g. cognitive complexity, cognitive motivation, thinking style, decision making, coping). They are open to explore alternatives as well as to actively seek and evaluate self-relevant information. They are motivated by perceived discrepancies between their own and others' views (Berzonsky, 1989, 2008). People who score highly on a measure of informational style are also willing to engage in identity revision, and they are usually characterized by a well-differentiated and well-integrated identity structure that is anchored in personal self-esteem (Berzonsky, Macek, & Nurmi, 2003).

Normative individuals report a high level of self-control, intolerance for ambiguity, need for closure, and resistance to change (Duriez & Soenens, 2006). Their behavior is directed by social norms, order, traditions, obligations, and the enhancement of stability (Berzonsky, Cieciuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011). Perceived discrepancies between their own values and the

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