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Identity Formation in Adolescence:  
The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments

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**Abstract**

The biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur in adolescence stimulate young people to think about themselves, reflect on the kind of people they want to become, and find their place in society. Traditionally, these changes have been explained by Erikson's theory and Marcia's identity status model, but process-oriented models of identity provide new insights. In particular, dual-cycle models, such as the three-factor identity model, focus on the dynamic process by which young people iteratively form and maintain their identity over time. This iterative process is captured by the interplay of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment, as well as by distinct identity statuses. Furthermore, the extent to which adolescents find a stable identity is intertwined strongly with their psychosocial functioning and well-being.

*Keywords:* Identity formation; dual cycle; psychosocial functioning.

## Identity Formation in Adolescence: The Dynamic of Forming and Consolidating Identity Commitments

Forming a clear and stable sense of personal identity is a core developmental task that individuals need to address along their entire life span, especially in transitional periods in which their sense of stability and certainty might be undermined (1, 2). In this respect, adolescence is the life span period in which the multiple biological, cognitive, and social changes that occur stimulate young people to rethink about themselves, to reflect on the kind of person they want to become, and to find their own place in the society. A priority for identity research is to unravel the process by which individuals address the identity formation task. In this article, we will review conceptualizations rooted in Erikson's (1) psychosocial theory and Marcia's (3) identity status paradigm, with a specific focus on recent extensions represented by process-oriented models (4), such as the three-factor identity model (5). Doing so, we will underline that identity development can be conceived as an iterative process, in which commitments can be formed and revised over time.

### **Identity Roots: Erikson's Psychosocial Theory and Marcia's Identity Status Paradigm**

In Erikson's (1) psychosocial theory, the life course is conceptualized as a sequence of stages, with each of them characterized by a core developmental task. In adolescence, the conflict between *identity versus identity confusion* represents the main task. Adolescents can resolve adequately this task, combining and integrating relevant earlier identifications in a unique and personal way, or fail in doing this, and thus remain in a status of confusion, in which they have not chosen their own commitments, and they do not hold meaningful identifications that could provide them with a sense of direction.

Erikson's seminal work (1, 2) represents a reference point for several identity conceptualizations (6). In this context, Marcia's (3) identity status paradigm is probably the most well-known elaboration of Erikson's views on identity formation. Marcia proposed that, in addition to the two poles proposed by Erikson (i.e., identity versus identity confusion), other statuses should

be considered. Specifically, these statuses could be differentiated by considering two dimensions: *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; and *commitment*, which implies making identity choices and engaging in significant activities geared toward the implementation of these choices. Four identity statuses can be obtained based on the presence or absence of exploration and commitment (3): in the *achievement* status, adolescents have made a commitment after a period of active exploration; in the *foreclosure* status, adolescents have made a commitment with no prior exploration; in the *moratorium* status, adolescents are still in the process of exploring various alternatives and have not yet made a commitment; and, in the *diffusion* status, adolescents have not engaged in a proactive process of exploration of different alternatives, nor have they made a commitment. Thus, Marcia (3) conceptualized identity statuses as a combination of commitment and exploration aimed at representing an individual's style of coping with the identity crisis described by Erikson.

Consistent with this view, the identity status paradigm has been largely applied to study inter-individual differences among youth classified into the various identity statuses. Consistent evidence highlighted that young people in achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and diffusion statuses could be differentiated in terms of personality characteristics and psychosocial problems (for a review see, 7). However, the identity status paradigm has been also criticized for not being fully able to capture the process by which people can question and change their identity (e.g., 8, 9). Indeed, especially in post-modern societies, identity is not achieved once forever, but it is, as Erikson (2) suggested, a life-long task.

Thus, building upon Erikson's insights, several models and conceptualizations (e.g., identity styles, 10; narrative identity, 11, 12; identity control theory, 13; dynamic systems perspective, 14) have been proposed to further unveil identity processes and dynamics (for extensive reviews see: 15, 16). In this article, we will focus specifically on the three-factor model (5) that, similarly to the

five-dimensional model (17), underpins that identity formation can be considered as a dual-cycle process.

### **The Three-Factor Identity Model**

Starting from the Eighties, the awareness about the importance of studying the process of identity formation increased. In this context, Bosma (8) and Meeus (18) reflected on the meaning of commitment and exploration and underlined the importance of (a) studying their intensity, rather than their presence or absence, as originally done in the identity status paradigm; and (b) considering different functions they might play. Thus, they differentiated between commitment making and identification with commitment (8) and between past exploration, needed to find new commitments, and present exploration, necessary to validate existing commitments (18). These contributions represented the starting point for the development of the dual-cycle models: the three-factor model (5) and the five-dimensional model (17). In this article, we will consider in detail the three-factor model and we will discuss similarities and differences with the five-dimensional model.

#### **Commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment as pivotal identity processes**

The *three-factor identity model* was proposed as a parsimonious model aimed at capturing the dynamic process by which people form and revise their identity over time (5). In this model, three pivotal identity processes are taken into account: *commitment* refers to enduring choices that individuals have made with regard to various developmental domains and to the self-confidence they derive from these choices; *in-depth exploration* represents the extent to which individuals think actively about the commitments they have enacted (e.g., reflecting on their choices, searching for additional information, talking with others about their commitments); and *reconsideration of commitment* refers to the comparison of present commitments with possible alternative commitments because the current ones are no longer satisfactory.

In this model, it is assumed that individuals enter adolescence with a set of commitments that are of at least minimal strength in ideological and interpersonal identity domains (19).

Adolescents can then evaluate and question their preliminary commitments, based on childhood identifications (20). As displayed in Figure 1, this dynamic can be captured by two cycles (4). In fact, the interplay between commitment and reconsideration of commitment is at the basis of the *identity formation cycle* (cycle 1), in which adolescents can compare their present commitments with more appealing alternatives and start to revise their commitments when they are perceived as no longer satisfactory. The interplay between commitment and in-depth exploration is at the basis of the *identity maintenance cycle* (cycle 2), in which adolescents can validate their current commitments, reflecting on their meaning, investing in maintaining them, and make sure that they provide a good fit with their overall talents and potentials. When in-depth exploration leads, in contrast, to a sense of uncertainty as young people start to doubt and mull over their current commitments, it is possible to go back to the identity formation cycle (4).

Thus, by including commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration, this model sought to capture Erikson's (2) dynamic of identity synthesis versus identity confusion. Commitment and in-depth exploration, on the one hand, and reconsideration, on the other hand, are conceptualized as two opposing forces within this dynamic. Whereas commitment and in-depth exploration imply attempts to develop and maintain a sense of self (i.e., identity coherence or synthesis), reconsideration represents questioning and rethinking this sense of self (identity confusion). In fact, although in the long-term reconsideration is important for finding more satisfying commitments, when it occurs it leads to a temporary crisis, related to the loss of current routines and certainties.

### **Links between identity processes and psychosocial functioning**

In line with the different roles they play, each identity process has distinct associations with adolescent psychosocial functioning. Specifically, *commitment* is positively related to resilient personality characteristics, such as extraversion and emotional stability (5, 21, 22); it is linked to high self-concept clarity and self-esteem (5, 23); it is positively related to nurturing family relationships (20); and it is strongly associated with multiple indicators of mental health and

adjustment, such as low levels of internalizing symptoms and externalizing problem behaviors (24, 25), high levels of positive well-being (26) and life satisfaction (23), and high academic achievement (27). Thus, commitment is intertwined with psychosocial resources and healthy adjustment.

*In-depth exploration* has a double-faceted character. It is positively associated with agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience (21, 22, 28), active social-cognitive strategies to evaluate self-relevant information (29), warm family relationships (20), and social responsibility (30). However, it is also negatively related to emotional stability and is positively related to internalizing symptoms (5, 28). Thus, in-depth exploration is a sort of double-edge sword, associated with curiosity but also with some distress.

Finally, *reconsideration of commitment* is negatively associated with self-concept clarity and self-esteem (23, 28), and with personality traits such as agreeableness and extraversion (5, 21); it is linked to poor family relationships (20); positively associated with both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (24, 25), and low academic achievement (27). Therefore, reconsideration of commitment appears to be intertwined with disequilibrium and maladjustment, assuming the character of an identity crisis.

### **From Three Processes to Five Identity Statuses**

The three-factor model can be applied to classify individuals into different identity statuses, based on specific combinations of high or low levels of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment (31). Importantly, five statuses (achievement, early closure, moratorium, searching moratorium, and diffusion) have been identified by empirically-based methods of classifications (e.g., cluster analysis, 31; Latent Class Analysis, 19; Latent Class Growth Analysis, 32) and they have been validated and replicated in a variety of Western and non-Western cultural contexts (e.g., Italy: 33; Netherlands: 31; Japan: 21; Turkey: 34), across ethnic majority and minority adolescents (35), and in youth with specific problem behaviors, such as juvenile delinquents and clinically referred youth (36). On the one hand, these identity statuses recall

Marcia's (3) original statuses; on the other hand, they differ from them, being defined by the extent to which identity processes are more or less intense (rather than present or absent), and identifying two different forms of moratorium (a positive and a negative one).

More specifically, as schematized in Table 1, the *achievement* status consists of individuals scoring high on commitment and in-depth exploration but low on reconsideration of commitment (31). This status is associated with the healthiest psychosocial profile. In fact, adolescents in this status score high on personality characteristics such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience; they can count on supportive interpersonal relationships; they display high social responsibility, civic efficacy and engagement; and they exhibit high levels of life satisfaction and low internalizing and externalizing symptoms (21, 30, 31, 34).

The *early closure* status includes individuals with moderately high scores on commitment and low scores on both in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. On the one hand, these adolescents are like their peers in the achievement status: in fact, they display similar levels of adjustment and positive interpersonal relationships (21, 31, 34). On the other hand, they differ on their personality profile (scoring lower on most Big Five traits but not on emotional stability) and on their likelihood of being civically engaged (30, 31). Thus, adolescents in the early closure status are well-adjusted but less proactive than adolescents in the achievement status.

The negative and the positive facets of Marcia's (3) moratorium status are captured by the (classic) moratorium and searching moratorium statuses, respectively. The *moratorium* status consists of individuals exhibiting low commitment, low or moderate in-depth exploration, and high reconsideration of commitment; whereas the *searching moratorium* status is represented by individuals high on commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. The moratorium status is more stressful than the searching moratorium one, as clearly indicated by evidence showing that adolescents in moratorium report more internalizing and externalizing problems and less life satisfaction than adolescents in searching moratorium (31, 34). This is because, although in both statuses adolescents are in the process of looking for more satisfying

commitments, those in searching moratorium can start this search from a more secure basis represented by their current commitments, to which they are highly identified, whereas those in moratorium are moving from a more unsatisfactory condition.

Finally, the *diffusion* status comprises individuals displaying low commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. Adolescents in this status report a poor personality profile, moderate-to-low levels of adjustment, low levels of civic efficacy and low aspirations to contribute to their communities (21, 30, 31, 34). Thus, adolescents in the diffusion status show some passivity in their identity approach.

In terms of longitudinal developmental pathways, Meeus et al. (19) found that 63% of adolescents stayed in the same status across a four-year period, whereas 37% changed statuses. Additionally, findings revealed very clearly identity maturation: over time, prevalence of diffusion decreased and prevalence of achievement increased. Among the adolescents changing identity status, the majority (about 80%) made only one transition in a four-year period. Overall, this evidence shows systematic identity maturation across the period of adolescence and suggests that the identity formation task is not concluded by the end of adolescence; rather, it continues to be a life-long process highly relevant in following developmental periods of emerging adulthood and adulthood.

### **Comparison with the five-dimensional model**

The three-factor model (5) is conceptually related to the five-dimensional model (17). In fact, both models share their conceptual bases, rooted in Erikson's and Marcia's contributions and in the extensions proposed by Bosma (8) and Meeus (18). Drawing from this common theoretical background, these two models focus on both the development and the evaluation of one's personal identity (identity formation and identity maintenance cycles), and, therefore, they are both considered as dual-cycle models (4). Thus, it is worth further discussing similarities and differences between them.

First, a main difference between the two models is their degree of parsimoniousness. In fact, in the three-factor model the two cycles are based on the interplay of three processes (commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment), as further discussed in prior sections; whereas in the five-dimensional model five processes are considered. More specifically, in the five-dimensional model, the identity formation cycle is based on the interplay between commitment making and exploration in breadth and the identity maintenance cycle is based on the interplay of identification with commitment and in-depth exploration (37). In addition, a further form of maladaptive exploration (i.e., ruminative exploration) is included in the five-dimensional model. Thus, the two models differ on the extent to which they offer parsimonious ways of capturing identity dynamics.

Second, while the two models define similarly the identity maintenance cycle, the operationalization of the identity formation cycle is different. In fact, in the three-factor model it is assumed that individuals do not enter adolescence as a *tabula rasa*, rather they start to form their identity re-questioning their preliminary commitments (thus, identity formation is meant at finding new commitments that could replace the current ones); whereas in the five-dimensional model, more similarly to Marcia's original idea, exploration-in-breadth of different alternatives starts from a lack of commitment. Thus, the two models differ in their conceptualization of the initial commitment formation.

Third, both models have shed new light on meaningful distinctions within identity statuses, clarifying some inconsistencies of the identity literature. In fact, combining multiple identity processes and using empirically based methods of classification (in contrast to a-priori methods largely employed in applications of the identity status paradigm; for a discussion see 38) it has been possible not only to individuate identity statuses that recall those originally described by Marcia (3), but also to further differentiate between specific types of moratorium and diffusion. More specifically, studies with the three-factor model highlighted a distinction between two different forms of moratorium (classical moratorium and searching moratorium; 31), as discussed in the

previous sections. On the other hand, research based on the five-dimensional model differentiated between two forms of diffusion (i.e., diffused diffusion and carefree diffusion; 17), which shows different profiles in terms of maladjustment and distress. Thus, both models highlighted distinctions within identity statuses, but while the three-factor model pointing to different forms of moratorium, the five-dimensional model uncovered distinct forms of diffusion.

Fourth, the two models differ on the operationalization of identity processes. In this regard, the identity processes encompassed in the three-factor model can be measured with the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; 5, 39), which measures commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment in multiple identity domains that are relevant for individuals' *present* experience. These domains can be grouped into two classes referring to ideological (e.g., educational identity, vocational identity, religious identity) and interpersonal domains. Then, researchers can focus on specific domains (e.g., 33) or average responses across domains to obtain an index of overall identity processes. On the other hand, the identity processes included in the five-dimensional model can be measured by means of the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS; 17), which assesses commitment making, identification with commitment, in-depth exploration, exploration-in-breadth, and ruminative exploration in related to general *future* plans. Thus, the DIDS focuses on a unique identity domain, which is based on extent to which individuals explore future-related goals and commit themselves to future plans. Thus, although both the U-MICS and the DIDS are very flexible (the U-MICS items could be adapted to measure future plans and the DIDS could be applied to multiple identity domains relevant in the present experience, e.g., 40), so far most of studies conducted with the U-MICS and the DIDS differed on the number and content of identity domains taken into account. In sum, the three-factor model and the five-dimensional model offer similar identity conceptualizations but, at the same time, they are characterized by theoretical and methodological differences.

## **Conclusions**

Identity formation is a core developmental task across the entire life span that becomes particularly urgent in adolescence. In this article, we have discussed how recent extensions of Marcia's identity status paradigm have shed new light in the dynamic process by which adolescents can form (cycle 1) and maintain (cycle 2) their identity commitments. Importantly, the extent to which adolescents are successful in consolidating a stable sense of identity is strongly intertwined with their psychosocial functioning and well-being.

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Table 1

*From Three Identity Processes to Five Identity Statuses*

<i>From identity processes...</i>	<i>...to identity statuses</i>				
	<i>Achievement</i>	<i>Early closure</i>	<i>Moratorium</i>	<i>Searching moratorium</i>	<i>Diffusion</i>
<i>Commitment</i>	High	Moderate or High	Low	High	Low
<i>In-depth exploration</i>	High	Low	Low or moderate	High	Low
<i>Reconsideration of commitment</i>	Low	Low	High	High	Low

Figure 1. The three-factor model: Schematization of the dual cycle

