



Qualitative and quantitative aspects of commitment development in psychology students

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Abstract

We investigated the development of study- and work-related commitments in 28 psychology students during their bachelor years. Based on seven measurements of exploration and commitments (over a period of three-and-a-half years) we found the theoretically expected information-oriented, normative and diffuse trajectories. In addition, the longitudinal data allowed us to distinguish between a stable and a fluctuating information-oriented trajectory. We also found a stable moratorium and a regression trajectory. Clear, qualitative differences were found between the commitments in the different types of trajectories. Commitments in the information-oriented trajectories show more differentiation, development and change than those in the normative or diffuse trajectories. The fluctuating trajectory showed more doubt and negative emotions than the gradual and normative trajectories. The commitments in the normative trajectories were characterized by high levels of satisfaction and well-being, and by low levels of differentiation and development. The moratorium trajectories showed the highest levels of doubt and negative emotions, and the diffuse trajectories were average in this respect.

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Introduction

This study concerns the development of professional commitments in psychology students. Exploration and commitment formation are seen as the major aspects of identity development. By exploration we mean that individuals are seriously considering different possibilities before committing themselves to what really matters to them. Commitments in the occupational domain refer to studying and work. Commitments in this domain are at least partly shaped by the context. Because commitments refer to a relation between the individual and the context, contextual changes may demand new commitments, and thus trigger transitions in identity. During the whole lifespan many transitions, especially in the formalized domain of studying and work, are initiated by contextual change in the form of normative societal demands (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Nurmi, 2001).

Especially in adolescence and emerging adulthood, people are confronted with both individual changes and new environmental demands that force them to make decisions concerning their future occupational life (Arnett, 2000). On the one hand, their position is characterized by the fact that nowadays it takes a long while before young people have to fulfill all adult roles (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). On the other hand, in the Dutch university system the opportunities to freewheel, or to change majors, are limited. It is important to make the right choices, because there is little opportunity for correction and change. Moreover, university students – especially those who choose an abstract subject such as psychology – often choose their major on the basis of relatively little and general information. When – as teacher and mentor – we ask students about their choice for psychology, most students can be no more specific than that they think it is an interesting topic, or that they want to learn to help or to understand people. Thus, their (new) commitments seem often general and vague. To be prepared for professional life, during their time at university they have to develop more specific commitments, as to what they want in their professional lives. In this process, conflicts in the subject–context relation may occur. Students struggle with the necessity to balance time for studying and time for other activities, they may be confronted with failure, and some students realize they have chosen the wrong subject (Kunnen, submitted for publication). When all things considered we may expect that a lot of identity work needs to be done during the university years. The initial commitments, often vague and chosen under time pressure, should be tested and elaborated. Moreover, during the years at university problems may occur that require adjustment of their commitments. Because students differ in their initial commitments, in the problems they encounter and in the way they cope with them, we may expect that their pathways of commitment development will differ too. Luyckx, Goossens, and Soenens (2006) showed that especially students who had strong initial commitments and who failed in their freshman's year became engaged in a lot of identity re-evaluation.

In the past decade, knowledge about pathways in identity development has increased rapidly. However, empirical knowledge about individual pathways is still scarce. Most empirical knowledge is based on changes in groups (Waterman, 1993) or on analysis with two or three measurement points (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005). An exception is the eight-wave study of Luyckx et al. (2006) and Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (in press). In addition, most research focuses on the strength of commitments and exploration, but not on the quality of the commitments. Qualitative aspects such as complexity and rigidity are important indications of

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