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The relation between identity status and romantic attachment style in middle and late adolescence

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Abstract

This study examined the linkages between identity formation and romantic attachment in an ethnically diverse sample of high school ($n = 189$) and college students ($n = 324$). Individuals in the foreclosed identity status group had significantly lower relationship avoidance scores than the diffused identity status group, and the foreclosed group had significantly lower relationship anxiety scores than both the achieved identity and moratorium groups. Identity status and romantic attachment style were significantly related among the college sample, but not among the high school sample. Some ethnic differences in attachment style were noted. Developmental implications are discussed.

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Introduction

The conceptual link between attachment theory, rooted in the work of Bowlby (1982, 1988), and Erikson's psychosocial development theory can be seen in several of Erikson's stages (e.g. trust, generativity). One of the most salient links is between the concepts of identity and romantic attachment. This link is inferred in Erikson's writings on the stages of adolescence and young adulthood, when the crisis of identity is followed by the crisis of intimacy. "It is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy—which is really a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identities—is possible" (Erikson, 1968, p. 135). In other words, those who have not resolved their crisis of identity confusion are likely to either isolate and avoid intimacy altogether or else make futile, desperate and frantic attempts at intimacy, often with improbable or inappropriate partners. According to Erikson's theorizing identity is crucial for adult romantic attachment. Thus, the purpose of this study was to empirically examine the link between identity status and romantic attachment style by integrating the adult attachment constructs of Bartholomew (1990) with the identity constructs of Marcia (1966).

Identity status

Marcia (1966) has operationalized Erikson's concept of identity formation as involving two basic dimensions, exploration and commitment. *Exploration* is the process by which the individual actively searches for a resolution to the issues of choosing the goals, roles, and beliefs about the world that provide the individual's life with direction and purpose. *Commitment* represents the actual resolution of identity issues such as the selection of an occupation, relationship, group membership, religion, etc. Marcia's four identity statuses are: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.

The diffusion status (low in exploration and commitment) is characterized by individuals who are not committed to any particular goals, roles, or beliefs about the world and are not actively searching for ones either. The foreclosure status (low in exploration, but high in commitment) is descriptive of individuals who lack a period of exploration of alternatives but are nevertheless committed. Generally, these commitments represent those goals, roles, and beliefs about the world suggested by others, often parental figures, and are assumed without being questioned or examined, and therefore are attained more from a process of modelling rather than through self-reflection. The moratorium status (high in exploration, low in commitment) precedes identity achievement. The individuals in this status experience a "crisis" due to their active exploration of different options but have not yet chosen from the alternatives. Finally, those individuals who are able to move beyond the moratorium status and choose their goals, roles, and beliefs about the world are said to be in the achievement status (high in exploration and commitment).

Romantic attachment style

Bartholomew (1990) developed a four-category model of adult romantic attachment style based on two underlying continuums—relationship anxiety and relationship avoidance. The "secure" style is low in both anxiety and avoidance. The "preoccupied" style is high in anxiety and low in avoidance, presenting as overly dependant, jealous, clingy, and insecure. The "dismissing" style,

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