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Identity in university students: The role of parental and romantic attachment[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

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In this study with 236 Portuguese university students, we examined two competing models for understanding identity. In the first model, the direct independent effects of parental and romantic attachment on identity were tested. The second model examined the mediating role of romantic attachment representations in the link between parental attachment and identity. The participants completed measures of parental and romantic attachment at the beginning of the freshman year (Wave 1), and a measure of identity development 18 months later (Wave 2). Structural equation modeling for the independent model indicated that identity is exclusively predicted by romantic attachment at this life stage, and not by parental attachment. Regarding the second model, our mediational hypothesis was supported, since the association between parental attachment and identity was totally mediated by romantic attachment representations. Both models presented adequate indices of adjustment, and provided a complementary understanding of the differential role that romantic relations play in contributing to explaining identity development.

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The influence of attachment on psychosocial development has been both theoretically and empirically supported. Research has pointed out that secure parental attachment promotes adaptive psychological functioning (Leondari & Kiosseoglou, 2000; Lopez & Brennan, 2000) and encourages the development of identity (Årseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2009; Kennedy, 1999; Marcia, 1983; Quintana & Lapsley, 1987). Parental attachment also affects competence in romantic relationships. Adolescents who are more securely attached have closer and more durable relationships with their dating partners (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Mayseless & Scharf, 2007). Using an alternative, yet complementary approach, researchers began examining peer relationships in late adolescence, more recently focusing on romantic relationships, exploring the influence of this relational context on identity development (Vogensen, 2003).

Although the value of these studies and reviews is unquestionable, the assessment of clear links between the nature of the parent-adolescent relationship and the development of identity remains difficult to examine (Meeus & Minet, 2007). This is likely due to the complexity of this developmental task and its consequent assessment and measurement. Moreover, the emergence of new relational contexts during this life phase might influence both parental attachment relationships and identity development, factors that must be considered. The role of romantic relationships in the development of adolescents has recently appeared and merits further examination (Collins, 2003; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). There is a lack of

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research on whether identity is related to romantic attachment (Berman, Weems, Rodriguez, & Zamora, 2006), despite the recognition that the attachment system functions on the formation of new bonds in young adults (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Therefore, studies that consider the role played by both parental and romantic attachment in the prediction of identity in late adolescence might contribute to a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the articulation of both relational contexts in the lives of late adolescents. Driven by the potential of both parental and romantic attachment relationships in promoting psychosocial growth, namely identity, we designed and tested two competing models. We first inspected the direct influence of both attachment contexts (parental and romantic) on identity. We anticipated that romantic attachment representations might operate as stronger predictors of this dimension, considering the significance of romantic relationships during this period of life. In a second model, we present a mediational hypothesis in which we anticipated that romantic attachment representations might function as a mediating mechanism whereby parental bonds are involved in identity development. In the following sections, we discuss the links between parental attachment and identity in late adolescence and summarize findings from available empirical studies. We then provide a conceptual and empirical review of romantic attachment in late adolescence and its influence on the developmental outcome under study.

Parental attachment, romantic relations and identity in late adolescence

Identity formation is a dynamic and life-long process, characterized by continuous changes in individuals' amount of exploration and the strength of their commitments (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1983). This process takes place while the parent-adolescent relationship is also undergoing major changes. As adolescents become more capable of self-sufficiently dealing with life's challenges, parents may learn to recognize and adjust to their children's near-adult maturity and encourage their development either implicitly or explicitly. The changes that occur on both sides allow parents and adolescents to move toward a relationship that is less hierarchical and more egalitarian (Matos, 2006). Nevertheless, these relationships continue to be crucial contexts for psychosocial development. In general, affective support and connectedness with parents seems to provide an optimal environment for the encouragement of identity formation (Noom, Dekovicá & Meeus, 1999). Previous research supports the developmental advantage of a secure attachment representation. Secure attachment to parents encourages identity development (Meeus, Oosterwegel & Vollebergh, 2002; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001; Zimmermann, 2002), whereas less secure parental attachment appears to be related with identity diffusion (Matos, Barbosa, Almeida, & Costa, 1999). Additionally, it was found that parental attachment is predictive of social skills, which affect competence in romantic relationships (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001). In a similar study, acceptance and encouragement of independence in the parental relationship contributed to better social competence, which in turn promoted higher capacity for intimacy in romantic relationships (Scharf & Mayseless, 2001). Young adults who retrospectively reported close and autonomous relationships with their parents also reported closer, more intimate and more secure relationships with their romantic partner (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Furman & Simon, 1999; Kobak & Sceery, 1988). More recent studies reveal that attachment organization in infancy was found to be predictive of the emotional quality of romantic relationships in early adulthood (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). There is also evidence that the quality of observed interaction patterns in the family (e.g., warmth and sensitivity) seems to be positively related to attachment security and similar behaviors between romantic partners (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Wideman & Larsen-Rife, 2008). Taken together, these studies bring to light the implication of parental attachment on identity development and on the creation and development of romantic relationships. However, in a meta-analysis review, Meeus and Minet (2007) questioned the nature of the association between parent-adolescent relationships and identity development. More specifically, in terms of parental attachment, the authors found that few studies revealed direct links. This may be due to the reorganization of the parent-adolescent relationship that occurs at this life stage and to the diverse environmental characteristics involved, namely the importance of peers and the romantic partner. It is plausible to consider that parental attachment may influence identity development through these other relational contexts.

Romantic attachment and identity development in late adolescence

During their adolescent years, youth gradually abandon idealized representations of their parents and become increasingly involved in intimate relationships with their peers. These relationships ultimately become primary sources of social support by the time these adolescents enter young adulthood (Overbeek, Engels, Meeus, & Volleberg, 2003; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Furman and Shaffer (2003) argue that romantic relationships play an important role in the development of identity, in the development of close relationships with peers and on the level of transformations in family relationships. Romantic partners influence identity formation in a variety of ways, including by providing encouragement and direction and by serving as role models (Vogensen, 2003). The partner's actions, non-verbal signs and verbal expressions provide a rich source from which to infer and adjust one's self-view (Hinde, Finkenauer, & Auhagenc, 2001). More recently, it was discovered that the developmental demand for establishing a separate identity is an important contributor to young adults' romantic relationships across most stages of adolescence (Collins et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a common assumption that optimal close relationships are characterized by a balance between self and others (Kegan, 1982; Seiffge-Krenke, Shulman, & Klessinger, 2001). Taking an opposite approach, Berman et al. (2006) found that identity status was significantly related to romantic attachment style. However, these researchers pointed out the complex nature of the associations between identity and romantic attachment, mentioning that identity statuses do not dictate romantic attachment styles.

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