



## On the interplay between academic achievement and educational identity: A longitudinal study



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### ABSTRACT

The present three-wave longitudinal study provides empirical evidence for the mechanisms of the bright and dark sides of identity development in the academic context. First, we investigated the patterns of stability and change in educational identity and academic achievement among adolescents. Second, we examined the reciprocal associations between identity processes (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) and academic achievement. The main results of the study highlighted that academic achievement predicts the manner in which adolescents deal with their identity issues in the academic context. Thus, high academic achievement leads to high levels of commitment (identity synthesis), while low academic achievement leads to high levels of reconsideration of commitment (identity confusion). This unidirectional pattern of effects applied equally to adolescent boys and girls, early-to-middle and middle-to-late adolescents, and to adolescents attending theoretical and vocational schools. Practical implications are discussed.

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### Introduction

In adolescence, the construction of a synthesized sense of identity becomes a prominent developmental task with important implications for personal and social adjustment (Erikson, 1968). One of the key questions of identity theory is where identity springs from. According to a number of theories, a positive self-view is dependent on positive feedback from the environment to the individual. For instance, the sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) proposes that a positive self-view springs from general positive social interactions with relevant others. Expanding the sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) to the identity domain, we assumed that educational identity might be driven by the academic achievement level, which is the feedback from the environment showing students how well their educational aspirations fit to their educational performance (Coe, 2002). In the school context, academic achievement represents the gauge of students' success or failure, which might foster or threaten adolescents' social acceptance (Bakker, Denessen, Bosman, Krijger, & Bouts, 2007) and implicitly strengthen or

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weaken their educational identity (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). However, a strong educational commitment may enhance students' motivation, which in turn might lead to improvements in academic achievement (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2012). In the present study we first analyzed the developmental patterns of educational identity and academic achievement operationalized in terms of grade point average (GPA). Second, we examined the directionality of effects between these two constructs: Does GPA drive relative changes in identity or is it the other way around?

### *Identity development*

Most of the research on identity development is rooted in Erikson's theory of identity (1968). As the first empirical attempt to investigate identity, Marcia's status model (1966) focused more on identity as an outcome that individuals should achieve by late adolescence, when identity conflicts are supposed to be solved and firm commitments assumed. Inconsistent results regarding longitudinal changes in identity statuses impelled researchers to a more granular analysis of identity development. Thus, recent approaches of identity focused on the processes underlying identity statuses (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, & Weigold, 2011).

Compared with the identity status model, which assumes that achieving a sense of identity in adolescence includes having strong commitments preceded by an intense exploration of various alternatives, the process model developed by Meeus and Crocetti (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) emphasizes that adolescent identity development implies maintaining or revising commitments that adolescents already possess when they enter this developmental period. Adolescents deal with their commitments through in-depth exploration and reconsideration (Meeus, 2011). Specifically, in-depth exploration is the process by which adolescents monitor and reflect on their current commitments, making them more aware of their choices. Reconsideration of commitment is the process by which adolescents compare their present commitments with other possible alternatives and try to change the present unsatisfactory commitments with new ones (Crocetti et al., 2008).

The associations between commitment and several positive psychosocial correlates support the idea that commitment is an indicator of positive identity development (i.e., identity synthesis; Meeus, 2011). In fact, commitment was found to be positively related to personal and social adjustment (Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti, Scrignaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012; Karaś, Ciecuch, Negru, & Crocetti, 2015; Klimstra, Luyckx, Germeijs, Meeus, & Goossens, 2012; Luyckx et al., 2006) and negatively related to emotional (e.g., depressive symptoms and anxiety, Crocetti et al., 2012; Luyckx et al., 2006; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje et al., 2012) and behavioral problems (e.g., externalizing problems, Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012).

In contrast, previous research has shown that reconsideration of commitment is indicative of an identity crisis (i.e., uncertainty, confusion), being positively related to depressive and anxiety symptoms, delinquency, poor parent–child relationships, and negatively associated with self-concept clarity, adaptive personality traits, and well-being (Crocetti et al., 2008, 2012; Karaś et al., 2015; Schwartz, Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012). Hence, despite the fact that it might serve positive long-term goals (i.e., through reconsideration, adolescents discard inadequate commitments and look for appropriate ones), reconsideration of commitment has negative short-term effects (Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2012).

While commitment and reconsideration of commitment have a clear positive and negative core respectively, in-depth exploration has a dual nature, being considered both an adaptive and a maladaptive process (Crocetti et al., 2008, 2012; Luyckx et al., 2006). Namely, in-depth exploration was found to be positively connected with adaptive psychosocial characteristics (i.e., positive personality traits, Crocetti et al., 2008; social responsibility and civic engagement, Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; academic adjustment and supportive parenting, Luyckx et al., 2006), but also with maladaptive psychosocial aspects (i.e., depressive symptoms, anxiety, problematic parent–child relationships, Crocetti et al., 2008).

### *Academic achievement*

In a period of rapid technological and economic changes, expanded educational preparation has become a necessity for adolescents. Hence, academic achievement became an important criterion for academic and socio-economic success (Kuncel, Credé, & Thomas, 2005; Poropat, 2009). So far, research on adolescent psychosocial functioning highlighted that academic achievement is an antecedent as well as a consequence of several emotional, behavioral, and social characteristics. For example, it was found that depressive problems led to poor academic achievement, which in turn enhanced depressive problems. These bidirectional associations were found only in girls (Verboom, Sijtsema, Verhulst, Penninx, & Ormel, 2014). However, prior cross-sectional results (Fröjd et al., 2008) pointed out that high academic achievement protected boys against severe depressive symptoms, the two variables being negatively related.

Previous studies also found that low-achieving students were more prone to anxiety and externalizing problems (i.e., aggression, antisocial and delinquent behavior) compared to high-achieving students. While underachieving girls were more vulnerable to anxiety problems (Pomerantz, Rydell Altermatt, & Saxon, 2002), underachieving boys were more vulnerable to externalizing problems (Hinshaw, 1992). Academic underachievement was also associated with peer rejection and discrimination, especially among underachieving girls (Bakker et al., 2007).

The grade point average (GPA) is one of the dominant operationalizations of academic achievement (Poropat, 2009). Despite the criticism about its use (e.g., grade inflation, Johnson, 2003; different grading criteria in different educational

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