Identity and intimacy during adolescence: Connections among identity styles, romantic attachment and identity commitment

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ABSTRACT

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Integration of adult attachment and psychosocial development theories suggests that adolescence is a time when capacities for romantic intimacy and identity formation are co-evolving. The current study addressed direct, indirect and moderated associations among identity and romantic attachment constructs with a diverse sample of 2178 middle adolescents. Identity styles were found to have unique and direct associations with identity commitment. Attachment anxiety showed only indirect associations and attachment avoidance had both direct and indirect associations with identity commitment. Tests of moderation revealed that gender, race and relationship status had no influence on the direct associations of identity styles or romantic attachment with identity commitment. Few differences in association strength among identity styles and romantic attachment emerged for gender or race. However, the differences found for relationship status suggested that relationship experiences adolescents bring to their exploration of identity and intimacy matter for how these two areas of development articulate.

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Although there are compelling theoretical arguments supporting the intersection of identity and intimacy during adolescence and early adulthood (Bosma & Gerlsma, 2003; Montgomery, 2005), relatively few efforts have examined these associations empirically. Identity is the process by which individuals define themselves as unique individuals (Erikson, 1963), whereas intimacy is the ability to give and receive care from another, while simultaneously maintaining one's sense of self (Cassidy, 2001; Montgomery, 2005). Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman, and Vaughn (2011) argue that identity development and the formation of intimate relationships may be parallel and mutually influencing processes beginning in adolescence. In the current study, we examined empirical linkages among identity and intimacy variables during the period of middle adolescence.

Adolescent identity formation

The seminal work of Erikson (1963, 1968, 1980) conceptualized identity formation as a process that becomes notably active in adolescence and continues into adulthood. It includes the consideration of alternatives for who one might become (identity exploration) and a process of making increasingly firmer decisions about who one is (identity commitment) (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Identity commitment is particularly important during adolescence given its positive associations with adjustment (Crocetti, Klimstra, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009; Kerpelman & White, 2006; Meeus, 1996).

Important to the process of identity exploration are adolescents' identity exploration styles. These styles may emphasize openness to diverse information and possibilities (informational style), guidance from respected others (normative style), or apathy or avoidance of engagement in the identity exploration process (diffuse/avoidant style) (Berzonsky, 1992). The informational style has been linked to many positive outcomes for adolescents; the diffuse/avoidant style has been associated primarily with maladaptive behaviors; and the normative style has been associated with both positive and negative indicators of adjustment (Adams et al., 2001; Pittman, Kerpelman, Lamke, & Sollie, 2009; Smits, Soenens, Vanteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2010; Soenens, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005). Because identity formation occurs, in part, within the context of relationships, parents and peers matter for this process (Johnson et al., 2007; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Smits, Soenens, Luyckx, Berzonsky, & Goossens, 2008). Furthermore, gender is linked to this process since males tend to use the diffuse/avoidant identity style more than females do (Berzonsky, 1992; Soenens et al., 2005) and females show greater levels of identity exploration and commitment than males do (Montgomery, 2005; Samoulis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001).

The developmental significance of romantic relationships during adolescence

While adolescents are engaged in identity formation processes, many also are entering into romantic-type relationships. During the last decade, there has been increasing attention paid to the unique and valuable contribution that adolescents' romantic relationships make to their development (Collins, 2003; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Meier & Allen, 2009; Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Cauffman, & Spieker, 2009; Welsh & Shulman, 2008).

Just as parent–adolescent relationships have been theorized to support adolescent identity formation (Adams, Dyk, & Bennion, 1990; Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997; Meeus & de Weid, 2007), adolescents' romantic relationships offer a context for youth to try out different identities as they explore various facets of themselves (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Within romantic relationships, adolescents experiment with different ways of being and behaving and discover new things about who they are as individuals separate from their family of origin. In these romantic relationships, interesting gender differences emerge. For example, males report greater discomfort with communication (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006), whereas females report higher levels of affective intensity, support, and caregiving (Schulman & Scharf, 2000), more time, closeness and commitment with friends (Johnson, 2004), and higher intimacy (Montgomery, 2005).

With intimacy defined as the capacity to receive care from and provide it to another person, while simultaneously maintaining one's autonomy (Cassidy, 2001; Montgomery, 2005), this capacity is clearly linked to attachment representations (Mayseless & Scharf, 2007). Bowlby (1969/1982) maintains that these representations emerge in infancy as a caregiver provides the "secure base" from which the infant can explore the broader world. The caregiver's responsiveness to the infant's signals provides the basis for the development of a specific attachment style. This attachment process later shapes an individual's beliefs and interactions regarding interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1990).

Hazan and Shaver (1987, 1990) extended Bowlby's work by studying attachment styles among adults within the context of romantic relationships, with the partner as the attachment figure. In adulthood, attachment representations have been conceptualized in terms of two dimensions, anxiety and avoidance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). Feeney (2002) asserts that attachment anxiety results from a fear of rejection or abandonment and represents the extent to which an individual worries that affection for a partner will not be returned, whereas attachment avoidance results from fear of one's own incompetence within a relational context and reflects discomfort with interpersonal closeness.

As adolescents gain experience in romantic relationships, their attachment representations are reshaped, ultimately affecting future relationships and life decisions in adulthood (Feeney & Van Vleet, 2010; Meier & Allen, 2009). Although adolescent relationships do not contain all features of adult attachments, the attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance offer a window on adolescents' views about intimacy within current or anticipated romantic partnerships and they could be expected to affect adolescents' engagements in this potentially important identity formation context.

Links between identity and intimacy during adolescence

Erikson (1968) theorized that intimacy followed identity formation, but subsequent theorizing and research have suggested that romantic intimacy begins developing prior to adulthood (Dyk & Adams, 1987) and identity work continues throughout adulthood (Kroger, 2007), indicating some confluence among these processes. Similar social processes are involved in the formation of both attachment and identity. Several studies note that parent–child relationships help determine adolescents' use of identity styles (Berzonsky, 2004; Berzonsky, Branje, & Meeus, 2007). Recently, Berzonsky, Dunkel, Soenens, and Papini (2011) reported that identity exploration styles begin forming in childhood experiences with parental responsiveness, regulation of behavior, and support for autonomy, as well as with adolescents' identification with their parents. These same dynamics are the foundation of child attachments to caregivers (Page & Bretherton, 2001) and may inform romantic attachment orientations seen in adolescence and adulthood. The attachment dimensions in romantic relationships depend in part on actual or expected experience in those types of relationships. Therefore, their emergence could be expected initially to be informed by relationships with parents and friends and later by experiences with dating partners.

Since the function of identity exploration is providing an experiential foundation for identity commitments, one would expect the identity styles to predict concurrent levels of identity commitment. However, when factoring in the concurrent