

Editorial

The Multifaceted Nature of Identity

Toward Integrative Perspectives on Processes, Pathways, and Contexts

Elisabetta Crocetti¹ and Katariina Salmela-Aro²

¹ Department of Psychology, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Italy

² Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

The identity questions are pervasive in the experience of every human being. They are specifically prominent in developmental periods, such as adolescence, in which individuals change substantially their body, achieve new cognitive abilities, and enlarge their social network (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Because of these multiple changes, young people urge to understand who they are, who they want to become, what makes them to be distinct from others, and what gives a sense of continuity despite the ongoing changes (Kroger, 2007). The same issues are highly relevant across other moments of the life span, especially when individuals face transitions that imply renegotiating their identity (e.g., the transition to parenthood, the transition from school to work, or the transition to retirement).

Given this centrality of identity in the human experience, it is clearly understandable why identity is one of the most studied constructs in the social sciences (Côté, 2006). As an evidence of this, a search in the bibliographic database Web of Science (in the Social Sciences Citation Index, SSCI) of the references with “identity” indexed in the title yields 37,941 results (data retrieved on May 30, 2018). More than one-third of them are from Psychology (26.44%) and Sociology (12.49%). If we focus on psychological articles (9,350 records), we can note all psychology areas are represented (e.g., experimental psychology, neurosciences, psychometrics, educational psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, applied psychology, and clinical psychology), with most references coming from social psychology (23.89%) and developmental psychology (14.69%) journals.

When a topic is so complex and investigated in different fields, as it is the case for identity, while on the one hand the high number of studies being conducted provides new

insights and increases the understanding of the topic, on the other hand it risks producing a fragmentation of the scientific knowledge. In fact, when more refined models are developed they can become very sophisticated and proceed on parallel tracks, with limited areas of intersections. As a result, the scientific knowledge of identity is highly specialized but fragmented (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011).

This special issue aims at advancing the identity literature by addressing this shortcoming. In fact, the common denominator of the six reviews that are presented is to propose integrative views, in which multiple components and facets of identity are considered. Thus, the purpose of each contribution is to set theoretical bridges between identity models and theories that are, so far, poorly connected.¹

Overview of the Special Issue

The first paper of Van Doeselaar, Becht, Klimstra, and Meeus (2018) focuses on three key components of identity: a sense of distinctiveness (seeing the self as unique and distinct from others), a sense of coherence (perceiving the self as similar across life domains), and a sense of continuity (perceiving the self as the same person over time). The distinction between these components dates back to Erikson’s psychosocial theory (1968), according to which identity formation is the core developmental task of adolescence and it entails finding a balance between the two opposite poles of identity synthesis and identity confusion. However, so far, these three components, although still central to current conceptualizations of identity (Pasupathi, 2014), have been

¹The idea for this special issue was conceived as part of the project Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnerships “Innovative curriculum for strong identities in diverse Europe (INSIDE)” (Project number: 2016-1-LT01-KA203-023220), although not all articles included in it are related to the project.

largely tackled in isolation, by different research fields. In their article, Van Doeselaar et al. (2018) first review the theoretical models of each component and the empirical evidence showing how identity distinctiveness, coherence, and continuity develop over time and how they are related to indicators of psychosocial functioning. Doing so, the authors conclude that identity continuity increases across adolescence and young adulthood, whereas developmental trajectories of distinctiveness and coherence are less understood, since extant studies on development of these components are mainly cross-sectional or based on small samples. Furthermore, they conclude that (a) moderate levels of identity distinctiveness are more adaptive than extreme (low or high) levels; (b) there is no convincing evidence yet for associations between identity coherence and psychosocial functioning; and (c) identity continuity is positively related to indicators of adjustment. After reviewing each component separately, the authors go a step forward, by proposing a developmental framework that integrates these components. By bringing together three key identity components, the authors discuss how they are developmentally related and their combined effects on psychosocial functioning.

The second paper of the special issue, authored by Meeus (2018), examines a key assumption of the identity status literature, namely the developmental continuum hypothesis (Waterman, 1982), which has been a topic of theoretical debate since the early eighties of the last century. According to this hypothesis, adolescents would show a developmental continuum, starting in identity diffusion and moving toward identity achievement through fore-closure and moratorium. By conducting an integrative review of the literature considering both studies based on the original Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm and on its recent extensions offered by the dual cycle process-oriented models (i.e., the three-factor model, Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; and the five-dimensional model, Luyckx et al., 2008), Meeus highlights five core issues, with the first three showing convergences between these two set of models, and the last two indicating key divergences.

First, Meeus (2018) shows that Marcia's model and the dual cycle models both provide consistent evidence of identity maturation, that is, identity development out of the diffusion status into the direction of the achievement status. Second, both set of models show that pathways with multiple transitions, from one status to another one, are not common. However, this evidence is based on studies with annual measurement waves, and, thus, this aspect needs to be analyzed more in-depth considering intensive designs able to detect identity changes occurring within years. Third, studies with both sets of models indicate that adolescents in (fore)closure have an adaptive profile in terms of well-being and adjustment. Fourth, the literature based on Marcia's model does not provide evidence of the developmental

continuum; whereas the recent process-oriented models suggest that at least two continuums can be identified, and they represent the cycles of identity formation and maintenance. Fifth, Marcia's model does not consider heterogeneity in identity status change, whereas the dual cycle models show that less than half of the adolescents in the status of achievement and closure changed identity whereas the clear majority in the statuses of diffusion, searching moratorium, and moratorium did. Overall, Meeus concludes that dual cycle models of identity development show identity maturation in adolescence and reveal two continuums, highlighting that identity development can be described as a process that moves from identity formation to identity maintenance.

The third paper of the special issue, authored by Crocetti, Prati, and Rubini (2018), focuses on the interplay of personal and social identity. The authors acknowledge that in the rich literature on identity, components of personal and social identity have been addressed separately and two distinct corpora of conceptualizations and evidence have been developed. First, the authors review theoretical advances in the fields of both personal and social identity. More specifically, they discuss how the personal identity literature rooted in Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory has been further developed in Marcia's identity status paradigm and in its recent extensions aimed at providing a more refined conceptualization of the process by which individuals form and revise their identity over time (Crocetti, 2018). Doing so, they emphasize the importance of commitment and exploration processes at the basis of identity formation and maintenance iterative cycles (see also Meeus, 2018 this issue). In a similar vein, the authors review the literature on social identity based on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory, highlighting the significance of fundamental identity processes (social categorization, social identification, and social comparison) all contributing to positive group distinctiveness. Furthermore, the authors review theoretical advances of the social identity theory that have witnessed a shift from a dichotomous approach (based on the ingroup-outgroup distinction) toward the analysis of social identity complexity and its implications for promoting social inclusion. After reviewing advances in personal and social identity research fields, Crocetti et al. (2018) take a further step, considering attempts to integrate these distinct identity facets and discussing communalities between personal and social identity processes (e.g., communalities between identity commitment and social identification). They conclude that the integration of personal and social identity is made by the self in a continuous attempt to adapt to the multiple demands of the social contexts in which individuals are embedded.

The fourth paper of the special issue, authored by Marttinen, Dietrich, and Salmela-Aro (2018) concentrates on the overlap of identity development, career development,

and goal developmental regulation theories addressing the question of how people intentionally engage during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, particularly regarding educational and career transitions. Utilizing an integrative perspective, Marttinen et al. (2018) explore the extent to which the types of intentional engagement described in theories represent different perspectives on the same developmental processes. More specifically, intentional engagement is defined as a meta-process that takes place during developmental transitions, including a sense of confidence and belief in one's own control over searching, selecting, and making decisions, a sense of responsibility for transition outcomes and confidence in the ability to overcome obstacles that delay the progression of the transition. Marttinen et al. argue that an integrative perspective allows explaining how different cognitions and behaviors, such as regarding generic and domain-specific identity formation and career goal pursuits, operate in conjunction and bring together different developmental pathways in young people. The authors conclude that cognitions and behaviors of intentional engagement are either adaptive or maladaptive and point to future research to investigate also the possible costs and maladaptive sides of intentional engagement during transitions using both variable- and person-oriented methods.

The last two papers of the special issue (Erentaitė et al., 2018; Schwartz, Meca, Cano, Lorenzo-Blanco, & Unger, 2018) review literature on identity in immigrant and ethnic minority groups focusing on the European and North American contexts, respectively. Thus, they offer complementary views on the implications for young people's identity of the increasing multiculturalism characterizing contemporary societies (on this topic see also the special issue edited by Motti-Stefanidi & Salmela-Aro, 2018).

More specifically, the review by Erentaitė et al. (2018) analyzes identity development among ethnic minority youth in the European context. The authors ask whether identity development in ethnic minority youth follows normative patterns identified in the studies with the mainstream youth or presents specific, unique patterns. The findings of their review reveal that identity development among ethnic minority youth in Europe can be characterized by (a) "intensified identity work," which implies that ethnic minority youth may be undergoing a more intensive identity crisis compared to their mainstream peers (e.g., Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011); (b) "diverging identity outcomes," which refers to the fact that identity processes can be more or less adaptive for the adjustment of ethnic minorities depending on the context, which is defined by multiple interdependent layers of relationships, cultural meanings, and national policies (e.g., Dimitrova, Chasiotis, & van de Vijver, 2016); and (c) "third way or hybrid identity" patterns, which refer to ethnic minority youth's ability to

creatively construct their identities by combining different elements across cultural, national, and ethnic boundaries (Belhadj Kouider, Koglin, & Petermann, 2014). The authors note that the current understanding of identity development among ethnic minority youth in Europe is limited by a lack of focus on normative aspects of identity development, such as identity processes and change, as well as developmentally relevant identity domains, including vocational, educational, and relational identity aspects.

The review by Schwartz et al. (2018) focuses on identity development among immigrant youth in the North American context. The authors apply a multilevel approach to examine identity among immigrant youth, considering society and group-level factors, as well as individual-level characteristics, which all contribute to shaping identity among immigrant youth. With regard to societal-level factors, perceived cultural difference between a host-national group and a given immigrant group, as well as a level of "threat" perceived by a host-national group with respect to a particular immigrant group are discussed among the main influences on identity processes among immigrants. A large perceived cultural difference, as well as perceived discrimination and rejection from the host-national group may facilitate the development of a shared identity, or ethnic identity, inside immigrant groups, and this, in turn, may buffer negative developmental outcomes for immigrant youth. On the other hand, perceived hostility toward immigrant groups in a given context may constrain identity options for immigrant youth, particularly, it may limit their national identity and bicultural identity options. In turn, this can also affect personal identity development among immigrant youth, since some identity options in different personal domains may be perceived as not available for immigrants. The authors emphasize that the interplay between societal and individual level identity processes must be considered when studying immigrant youth identity development, since the societal-level dynamic may both facilitate and constrain the individual-level identity processes.

On the one hand, these two reviews (Erentaitė et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018) offer specific insights into research on ethnic minority and immigrant youth conducted in two different contexts (Europe and the North America), on the other hand they highlight some common patterns. In particular, both reviews stress the importance of variations across and within national contexts, as well as across ethnic minority and immigrant groups, in understanding youth identity development. The findings from both regions show that development and implications of ethnic and cultural identity for broader psychosocial adjustment may vary substantially across ethnic minority groups and societal contexts. It is thus essential to compare the findings across national and ethnic contexts to understand how broad societal factors relate to individual identity development

among ethnic minority and immigrant youth. In addition, both reviews stress the importance of bringing the developmental change and age perspectives into the analysis of identity development among ethnic minority and immigrant youth. Finally, both reviews emphasize that ethnic minority and immigrant groups may employ creative ways and construct unique cultural labels and hybrid identities, aimed to distinguish a specific immigrant group from others and negotiate their position in a given societal context. This also asks for more sensitive and innovative ways to study identity development among ethnic minority and immigrant youth.

In conclusion, the six reviews presented in this special issue offer new insights into the multifaceted nature of identity, by advancing integrative perspectives on processes, pathways, and contexts. These contributions can inspire identity scholars and lead to more integrative research, in which some key theoretical hypotheses proposed by the review authors could be empirically tested across multiple groups and contexts. Hopefully, this “integrative” endeavor could become the priority of the agenda of identity scholars.

References

- Belhadj Kouider, E., Koglin, U., & Petermann, F. (2014). Emotional and behavioral problems in migrant children and adolescents in Europe: A systematic review. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 23, 373–391. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-013-0485-8>
- Côté, J. (2006). Identity studies: How close are we to developing a social science of identity? An appraisal of the field. *Identity*, 6, 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0601_2
- Crocetti, E. (2018). Identity dynamics in adolescence: Processes, antecedents, and consequences. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15, 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2017.1405578>
- Crocetti, E., Fermani, A., Pojaghi, B., & Meeus, W. (2011). Identity formation in adolescents from Italian, mixed, and migrant families. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 40, 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-010-9112-8>
- Crocetti, E., Prati, F., & Rubini, M. (2018). The interplay of personal and social identity. *European Psychologist*, 23, 300–310. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000336>
- Crocetti, E., Rubini, M., & Meeus, W. (2008). Capturing the dynamics of identity formation in various ethnic groups: Development and validation of a three-dimensional model. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31, 207–222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.09.002>
- Dimitrova, R., Chasiotis, A., & van de Vijver, F. J. R. (2016). Adjustment outcomes of immigrant children and youth in Europe. *European Psychologist*, 21, 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000246>
- Erentaitė, R., Lannegrand-Willems, L., Negru-Subtirica, O., Vosylis, R., Sondaitė, J., & Raižienė, S. (2018). Identity development in socially disadvantaged youth: Integrating hypotheses from studies on immigrant and other ethnic groups in Europe. *European Psychologist*, 23, 324–335. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000338>
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Kroger, J. (2007). *Identity development: Adolescence through adulthood* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lerner, R. M. & Steinberg, L. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Luyckx, K., Schwartz, S. J., Berzonsky, M. D., Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Smits, I., & Goossens, L. (2008). Capturing ruminative exploration: Extending the four-dimensional model of identity formation in late adolescence. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42, 58–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.04.004>
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 551–558. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281>
- Marttinen, E., Dietrich, J., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2018). Intentional engagement in the transition to adulthood: An integrative perspective on identity, career and goal developmental regulation. *European Psychologist*, 23, 311–323. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000337>
- Meeus, W. (2018). The identity status continuum revisited: A comparison of longitudinal findings with Marcia's model and dual cycle models. *European Psychologist*, 23, 289–299. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000339>
- Motti-Stefanidi, F., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2018). Editorial – Youth and migration: What promotes and what challenges their integration? *European Psychologist*, 23, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000315>
- Pasupathi, M. (2014). Identity development: Dialogue between normative and pathological developmental approaches. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 28, 113–120. <https://doi.org/10.1521/pedi.2014.28.1.113>
- Schwartz, S. J., Meca, A., Cano, M. A., Lorenzo-Blanco, E. I., & Unger, J. B. (2018). Identity development in immigrant youth: A multilevel contextual perspective. *European Psychologist*, 23, 336–349. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000335>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Van Doeselaar, L., Becht, A. I., Klimstra, T. A., & Meeus, W. (2018). A review and integration of three key components of identity development: Distinctiveness, coherence, and continuity. *European Psychologist*, 23, 278–288. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000334>
- Vignoles, V. L., Schwartz, S. J., & Luyckx, K. (2011). Introduction: Toward an integrative view of identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 1–27). New York, NY: Springer.
- Waterman, A. (1982). Identity development from adolescence to adulthood: An extension of theory and a review of research. *Developmental Psychology*, 18, 341–358. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.18.3.341>

Elisabetta Crocetti

Department of Psychology
Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna
Viale Berti Pichat 5
40126 Bologna (BO)
Italy
elisabetta.crocetti@unibo.it

Katariina Salmela-Aro

Educational Sciences
University of Helsinki
PO BOX 9
00014 Helsinki
Finland
katariina.salmela-aro@helsinki.fi



Elisabetta Crocetti (PhD) is a senior assistant professor at the Department of Psychology, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Italy. Her major research interests include identity formation in adolescence and emerging adulthood.



Katariina Salmela-Aro is Professor, Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland and Visiting Professor, Institute of Education, University College London, UK and School of Education, Michigan State University, USA. Her major interests include motivation, well-being, educational transitions, and related interventions.