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Career Choice in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

In our Career-Guidance-Project, initially meant for adolescents, we were confronted with emerging adults with career choice problems. Our intervention protocol did not work well for these older clients. To get more insight in the differences between both groups and the needs of the emerging adult clients we compared psychological, identity and coping characteristics of adolescents and emerging adults with career choice problems. We found that both groups show above average psychological problems and inadequate coping strategies, but that for the emerging adults these problems appeared more serious. The adolescents but not the emerging adults scored below average in variables that were directly related to exploration and chosing skills. In a case-study of an emerging adult we illustrate the type career choice guidance that was in our project representative for this group.

Introduction

In this paper, we will address career choice problems in adolescence and emerging adulthood from the perspective of identity development. This paper is written on the basis of the authors' experiences in an intervention project for young people who experience problems in their career choice and their experience as identity development researchers. In this Career Guidance Project we developed a protocol for the guidance of adolescents who experienced career choice problems. However, an increasing number of clients in this project were not adolescents, but emerging adults. We noticed that the protocol we developed for adolescents did not work very well with these older clients, and that both age groups seem to have different kinds of problems. We will address the question whether adolescents with career choice problems differ from emerging adults with career choice problems, and whether the guidance should differ between both groups.

First, we will discuss the theory on identity development in adolescents and emerging adults, with a focus on the differences between these groups. Next, we will discuss the career choice protocol we used for adolescents from the perspective of identity development. Finally we will discuss our findings concerning the differences in type of problems between the two age groups, and to illustrate the typical problems of emerging adults we will present a representative case-study of an emerging adult in our project.

Identity and Identity Development

Research into identity development was focused first and foremost on the identity status models of Marcia (1966). Marcia has conceptualized identity as a "self-structure - an internal self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (1980, p. 159). In his research Marcia focuses on the behavioral level, i.c. the process of exploration and committing oneself. Based on exploration and commitment, four identity statuses have been distinguished: Identity Achievement (commitments are achieved after a period of exploration of meaningful alternatives), Moratorium (the person is actively engaged in a process of exploration),

Foreclosure (commitments were chosen without the exploration of alternatives), and Diffusion (the person has no commitments). The statuses are "modes of dealing with the identity issue characteristic of late adolescents" (Marcia, 1980, p. 161). Various authors have remarked, however, that this process neither begins nor ends with the years of adolescence (Kroger & Haslett, 1991; Marcia, 1993). Over time, new explorations may occur, giving rise to other, more fitting commitments.

In the days when Erikson formulated his theory about identity, the majority of young people we now call "emerging adults" had already found jobs and started making adult commitments such as marriage and a family. Matters of identity usually sorted themselves out during the years of adolescence (ages 12-18). With the changes in society, with its greater emphasis on individualism, all this has ceased to be a matter of course (Arnett, 2007). Societal changes have resulted in an 'extended' transition to adulthood (Côté, 2000). Decisions concerning the future and hence questions of identity are postponed, whereas young people are supposed to be able to make their own choices. Thus Arnett (2000) was led to introduce a new development stage: 'emerging adulthood', starting from the age of eighteen and lasting up to the age of 25. There is no question yet of the commitments and responsibilities that adults take upon themselves, whereas the experimentation stage, started during adolescence, continues and intensifies. According to Arnett (2000), it is not during adolescence that most explorations for the sake of attaining a stable sense of identity are made, but during emerging adulthood. Research shows that attainment of a stable sense of identity is seldom reached during adolescence and that identity development continues afterwards. These developments suggest that identity development in the form of a career choice may often be postponed, as compared to some decades ago.

Identity Development and the Career Choice Process: the protocol

The way in which adolescents decide on the first step in their career choice, namely their courses of study, has been researched in detail by Germeijs and Verschueren (2006). Our protocol for

adolescents is based on their research. Starting from various theoretical models of the decision-making process and from taxonomies of career choosing problems, they have conceptualized the process of choosing among adolescents as a decision-making process with a number of tasks.

First, young persons *have to be aware* of the necessity of making a choice, then they *have to be motivated* to make a decision (task: orientation on choice). In our protocol we focus on the awareness and motivation especially in the intake. We check whether it was the adolescent's own choice to enroll. If not, the intake was focused on exploration of the choice situation and the adolescents' feelings about that. For enrollment in the guidance, awareness and some motivation were prerequisite.

Then there is the third task of *self exploration*, consisting in collecting information about themselves and a broad exploration of their context. This means the young person is asked to collect information on the various alternatives that may be chosen. The first sessions in the protocol focus on this task. By means of specific home-assignments the participants were asked to study websites of different universities or colleges, to list the studies that were described there, and to make a list of studies that attracted them and studies that they did not like at all. During the sessions, we discussed their lists, and stimulate them to become more specific, to compare studies and formulate differences etcetera. In the same way, they had to make lists of their own broad job preferences such as, is it important for you to work with people, to help people, to build something).

When from this breadth orientation a number of possible courses of study have been chosen, the next assignment follows: *in-depth orientation*. This task was the focus of the second part of the protocol. The assignments in this part concern searching for more information on the remaining courses. The participant was stimulated to contact the university, to talk to other students, to study the list of topics in the different courses, etc.

From here the last tasks follow, which Germeijs and Verschueren call *'decisional status' and 'commitment'*. Decisional status is the stage in which a certain course of study is chosen,

commitment expresses the strength with which the young person feels committed to the choice of a certain course of study. In the protocol we planned a final session, several weeks after the decision was made. The participants were asked in the mean time to talk about their choice with others, and to think it over. In what was planned to be the last session we discussed whether they felt certain and confident about their choices. If not, we went back to earlier steps in the protocol, and explored what made them hesitate etc.

In the course of the project it has become clear that the protocol was very successful for adolescents, but not for emerging adults. If we consider the protocol from the perspective of identity theory, the protocol "teaches" adolescents the different skills that are needed in the different phases of commitment development. First, they are taught how to explore and collect information, both internal and external, both in breadth and in depth, next they are guided in organizing their information, in formulating criteria about what is important for them, and finally, to choose and to commit themselves. The emerging adults in the project seemed to have no difficulties with these skills from the beginning. They performed the tasks easily, but did not gain anything by doing them. Obviously, in this group other intervention techniques are needed. But which? A literature search learned that from the early eighties onwards, many interventions were developed that aim at furthering identity development (Archer, 1994; Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002; Kurtines, Silverman, Schwarz & Montgomery, 2000; Marcia 1989). Research shows that such intervention should include both strategies aimed at problem solving skills and making choices (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002), and also emotionally oriented elements (Schwarz, Kurtines and Montgomery, 2005) However, no research into the effect of interventions aimed at specific identity processes has been done as yet, so that no guidelines are available for specific student counseling (Ferrer-Wreder, Montgomery & Lorente, 2003).

To learn more about the characteristics of both groups and their different needs, we investigated whether the two groups in our Career Guidance Project differ from each other and from their norm groups with regard to identity measures (identity style, level of exploration and

commitment strength) problem solving (coping) and psychological problems. Secondly, to learn more about the type of problems and about potentially effective intervention strategies in emerging adulthood we present a case study: we analyzed the phases and processes gone through by Maria, a 23-year-old student who was successfully guided when she had career choice problems.

Differences between Adolescents and Emerging Adults in Psychological Problems, Coping Styles and Identity

Method

Participants. The subjects were 31 adolescents (mean age 17.5) and 46 emerging adults (mean age 22.5) who assigned for the career choice guidance. The majority of subjects in both groups was in a higher level type of education. A subject was assigned to the group "adolescents" if he or she was in secondary school, and as "emerging adult" if the subject has finished secondary school. In the Dutch educational system, secondary school takes four to six years and is followed by either a specific vocational education, or by a university study.

*Instruments. B*efore the guidance started we administered the following questionnaires. The UCL (Schreurs, Van de Willige, Tellegen & Brosschot, 1988) is a Dutch instrument that assesses coping styles. The seven subscales are: active problem solving, palliative reaction pattern, avoidance, seeking social support, passive reaction pattern, expressing emotions, and soothing thoughts. The clients younger than 18 used the adolescent version, the others the adult version. To develop a norm score for the whole group we selected for each subject the appropriate reference age group (normal population), and averaged the norm scores for all subjects. The "Klachtenlijst" is the Dutch version of the Symptom Check List SCL-90 (Arrindell & Ettema, 1986), a standard checklist for a broad range of psychological problems. The 90 items result in scores for anxiety, agoraphobia, depression, sleeping problems, insufficiency of thinking and acting, suspiciousness, interpersonal sensitivity, hostility, and psycho neuroticism (total score).

The information processing styles were assessed by a Dutch translation of the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1989). As reference group we used the scores of 358 first year psychology students, main age between 18 and 22 (Kunnen, 2005).

In addition, an identity interview (GIDS) was administered (Bosma, 1985). In this semi-structured interview, the contents and the strength of commitments, and the level of exploration were assessed in six domains: View of life, Parents, Friendship, Studying/Work/Leisure time, Personal characteristics and Intimate relation. A seventh domain consists of the overall principle that the participant sees in all domains. The interview takes about 20 minutes per domain. The questions in the interview aim to stimulate the interviewee to explore and clarify what he or she perceives as important in this domain. Following that interview the interviewee is asked to write down what really matters to him or her concerning the domain in question. A questionnaire is then applied that assesses the strength of this commitment, and the amount of exploration in the domain. The seven questionnaires give two scores each, one for exploration, and one for commitment. The commitment score reflects the strength with which a person feels committed to the commitment on the card; exploration refers to the extent to which a person is engaged in collecting information, in order to explore the existing commitments, or to arrive at new commitments in the domain in question.

To compare the test scores of both groups with the general population, we compared each group with the average score of the appropriate norm group (one sample t-test). To compare both groups with each other we applied the t-test for independent samples.

Results

Compared to the norm group, both adolescents and emerging adults showed above average scores for most indications of psychological problems (table 1). The emerging adults but not the adolescents scored significantly above average on anxiety. Although the differences between both groups were not significant, the scores of the emerging adults were higher for all scales.

Table 1 here

Both adolescents and emerging adults scored above average on passive and avoiding coping styles (table 2). The emerging adults scored above average on all other styles, too: palliative reactions, seeking social support, expressing emotions, and soothing thoughts, and below average on active coping. In general, the emerging adults show more and more significant differences from the norm.

Table 2 here

With regard to identity style, the adolescents scored (marginally significant) lower on information oriented style than average (table 3). The emerging adults did not differ significantly from average or from the adolescents. Both groups scored below average on the commitment scale.

Table 3

Both adolescents and emerging adults scored below average on exploration as measured in the GIDS (table 4). For the adolescents this was significant in all domains, for the emerging adults in four out of seventh domains. In all domains, the scores of the adolescents were lower than those of the emerging adults. This difference was significant in the domain of studies-work-leisure. The adolescents had below average strength of commitment scores in the domains of philosophy of life, personal characteristics and the general principle. The emerging adults scored below average on the domain of studies-work-leisure and the general principle. The commitment strength of both groups differed significantly only in the domain of philosophy of life.

 Table 4

Conclusion

Both groups score above average on the psychological problems agoraphobia, depression, insufficience and hostility as measured with the SCL-90. Only emerging adults score above average on anxiety. Although non-significant, the emerging adults' scores are systematically higher than those of the adolescents.

Both groups score above average on avoidant and passive coping; styles that are often interpreted as inadequate. In addition, the emerging adults score below average on active coping,

and above average on palliative and emotional coping and on social support. Interesting is that the coping scores for the emerging adults do not differ from the adolescents. The norm scores however, are different for both groups, and as can be seen in table 2, the coping scores of the emerging adults resemble the average scores for a much younger age.

As expected, the adolescents score lower than the emerging adults on GIDS exploration and information oriented identity style, that are both related to the process of exploring and making choices. The differences in exploration are not all significant, but they are systematic: they hold for all domains. These lower scores may explain the career choice problems in adolescents and the success of the protocol that focuses on the development of exploration.

Overall, both groups show non-optimal patterns of coping and higher levels of psychological problems as compared to the population in general. This may mean that troublesome youth is more prone to develop career choice problems. It may also mean however, that career choice problems trigger psychological problems and inadequate coping patterns.

For adolescents, the low levels of exploration and information oriented identity style may explain their career choice problems, and the success of the guidance program, because the guidance program focuses on learning skills that resemble exploration and an information oriented style of solving a career problem.

The emerging adults' exploration and information oriented identity style scores suggest that most of them do have the skills needed for making a choice. The higher levels of psychological problems and the atypical and probably less functional pattern of coping styles in the group of emerging adults suggests that this group may have more encompassing problems than adolescents with career choice problems. To shed more light on the characteristics of emerging adults with career choice problems, we will describe a representative case study in more detail.

Guidance in Emerging Adults: A Case Study

Method

In this case study, we describe the guidance process of one typical emerging adult client in the

Project. Data are collected over a five-month period, the time it took to guide her through the

decision-making process. The data comprises of the questionnaires described above, session

reports, completed assignments and a pre- and a post-treatment GIDS assessment. The GIDS

outcomes of both assessments were compared in a descriptive way. Two independent raters

scored whether the contents of the GIDS commitments had changed, and described eventual

changes.

The Guidance

Our subject, Maria, has almost completed her studies of Dutch language and she enrolled in the

Career Guidance Project because she doubted whether she wants to look for a job or take up

another university course. The intake in the protocol consisted of three sessions, including

administration of the tests, a general intake interview, and the first GIDS interview. Table 5

shows for each domain the content of the commitments and the exploration and commitment

scores.

Table 5 here

> Maria's paramount problem was that she had almost finished her studies in Dutch language and literature and
>
> could not decide whether to take a job or continue studying. Maria seemed to have the skills needed to make
>
> choices: she reports that she makes decisions in a rational manner, weighing all alternatives against each other,
>
> choosing the one that seems best in the end. This was confirmed by the test results. She scored above average
>
> on active coping and on information oriented identity style.
>
> The GIDS results (table 5) show that Maria, as compared to students of the same age, had very weak
>
> commitments in the domains of life philosophy, friendship, personal characteristics and general principle. In
>
> the domains of friendship, personal characteristics and general principle the exploration scores were high:
>
> Maria was engaged in active exploration in these domains but had not developed any commitments yet. The
>
> commitment in the domain personal characteristics expressed satisfaction with herself, but also uncertainty.
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> In the domain of intimate relationship her commitment was very strong, and the levels of exploration low,

which indicates that in this domain Maria felt very certain. She told that she lived together with her boyfriend, and felt supported by him. The domain philosophy of life showed low levels of exploration and commitment strength, suggesting that this domain did not play an important role at that moment. In the last session of the intake phase we discussed the test and GIDS results with Maria. During the intake it emerged that Maria continually compared herself with others, mainly with her female friends. She felt that this comparing has a negative influence on her capability to choose. She accounted for the widely diverging scores in the domains of Friendship and of Intimate relationship by the fact that with her boyfriend she could be herself completely, a feeling she did not have among her female friends. When asked if she could see a link between her tendency to compare and her inability to choose, she said that she now realized the adverse effect of this comparing on making decisions. To stimulate Maria to reflect on the session she got as "homework" the assignment to write a letter in which she reflects on what was discussed.

This homework was the starting point of the guiding process. The guidance process comprised of nine sessions. In the first sessions, the protocol was followed in the same way as with adolescents. In the first phase we focused on self exploration. The client was stimulated by different kinds of tasks (such as writing letters) to explore her own interests, wishes and skills. We aimed to increase the client's awareness of herself. As can be seen below, this worked well for Maria.

Writing the letter mentioned above triggered insight and consciousness in different themes. The first theme concerned Maria's own impediments: *" I see it now. I still feel insecure". "I've got wiser now and more confident, but today I've found out I still let my insecurities get in the way". "Today the penny has started to drop: I compare myself too much with them".* She reflected on a number of situations from the past week, and this improved her insight into her insecurity, in the inhibiting effect of her comparison behavior and her inability to choose. The second theme in the letter concerned her wish to stop comparing herself with others. However, she did not know how to achieve this: *"It would really be great if I could get this comparing out of my system". "If only I were a bit more confident". "…trying to be content with myself and my choices … If only I could bring myself to stick to them with conviction. That's what I'm going to try".* The third theme was insecurity/little self-confidence. Maria realized that she is not sure of what she wants: *"I haven't quite sorted that out yet, but …, I thought I was sure I didn't want to start on a job yet. That's how I felt at the time. So maybe that means something. But then I do rather tend to change my mind".* Again, Maria could formulate the pros and cons of studying and a job and analyze the situation for herself. She did need any help with the practical exploration in this process. However, this did not lead to a choice.

These two sessions coincided with a traineeship, the final part of her studies in Dutch language. Her traineeship experiences made her decide against taking a job. Thus, the main problem shifted to the question: what university course should she choose. She already had some ideas about possible candidates. Some of these were rational choices, subjects that would complement her present studies in an excellent way, others were emotional ones, subjects that attracted her, but have no bearing on her present studies at all. We gave Maria the assignment to collect more information on the various courses of study.

With this assignment, we shifted the focus from exploration of the self to exploration of the context. This is in line with the protocol: the client was stimulated by different tasks (such as writing letters, gathering information) to explore the contextual possibilities, such as the available schools and studies. For adolescents, the focus is on acquiring the skills of collecting and organizing information. Maria however, had these skills. Her information oriented identity style score was in the 7th decile, her active coping score between 7th and 8th decile, and four out of seven exploration scores were above average (see table 5). As can be seen below, the process of collecting information confronted her with her inability to decide, and it created confusion and chaos.

Based on the collected information, Maria weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the various studies, and made on rational grounds the choice for the study of General Linguistics. However, she kept doubts, mainly because she observed that she changed her mind so often. To give her more time, the interval between sessions six and seven was prolonged by a week. In session seven she declared she felt like being back to square one. She had found out that the duration of General Linguistics was four years instead of three, which was a great disappointment. Maria still thought the study of General Linguistics was worth considering, but she now saw more disadvantages. The first disadvantage was that she felt that she should have taken up this subject earlier, instead of doing Dutch language and literature. The second disadvantage concerned the duration of the course: she was afraid of being fed up with studying after two years. At this point we discussed that she seemed to contradict herself, because in an earlier session she had said that she wanted to continue studying. It became clear that there were no external objections against her choice: friends and relatives supported her in this choice and there were no financial obstacles, but she seemed to search for arguments counting against choosing this subject. To get clear what was going on, we gave Maria as homework the assignment to write a letter about what keeps her back. This letter showed Maria no longer has

a clue about what to choose. *"… I really don't know anymore … But I can't find it in my mind."* It also showed she is searching for certainty. She wrote that she would rather have attended a lower educational level secondary school, because in that case she would not have had so many options for choice. Thirdly, the letter showed a negative strategy of choosing, in which other persons' opinions were the key factor. For every option Maria summed up the disadvantages, which turned out to be based on the opinions of others. The last theme in the letter was the loss of self-confidence: *"What the heck, I've stopped taking myself seriously long ago. I come up with a different subject every week and it really drives me nuts. Nobody's taking me seriously anymore, so why should I myself?"*

In the previous sessions, we left the protocol. Instead of teaching and guiding the practical skills needed for exploration and choosing we turned our attention to what kept Maria from applying the skills in order to come to a choice. We used the same techniques (counseling and assignments) to explore what was at stake for Maria. It turned out that it was the making of a choice that was most difficult.

In the following sessions we started to talk about the negative strategy of choosing mentioned in the letter. Maria told that in fact she could never make up her mind. Even in answer to the question "what would you like to eat?" she didn't know what she wanted, not because she didn't have an opinion, but because an abundance of choices overwhelmed her. The negative elimination strategy helped her to lead her to the least negative option. In order to change her focus on the negative side, the assignment for the next session was writing a letter about things she likes, things that make her happy. The letter was to show Maria using a positive approach and putting herself in the centre. Maria started this letter with: *"This is going to be a positive letter, so I start with a positive Hi!"* At the start Maria was rather skeptic in her letter and clearly found it a hard task: *"… Only later on we're going to have a look at what I can do and what my possibilities are. So let's just do a little daydreaming. Seems easy, is rather hard though."* Initially she wrote about *"something with people"* and gradually made this more specific. It appeared that Maria knew quite well what she wanted and what she liked. Striking too is that, whereas in previous letters and during previous sessions she considered other people's opinions important, she sticked to her own mind in this letter. In the next session Maria declared that eventually she quite enjoyed writing the letter. We discussed all the positive points that Maria mentions in the letter, while attempts were made to find university courses/professions to go with them. Maria mentioned psychology and education, which she mentioned before, at the start of the guidance sessions. She remarked that these keep coming to her mind. At the end of this phase, Maria's decided that she would either choose psychology or education. She felt she would not need any guidance for the choice between these two.

Instead of focusing on the techniques and results of gathering information, we focused on psychological processes that held Maria back from finding and choosing for what she really wanted. The assignments helped her to get insight in her inadequate strategies, to overcome them, and to make a choice. The final phase in Maria's guidance coincides with the final phase in the protocol: the 'decisional status' and 'commitment'. A gap of several weeks has been left between the sessions to give the client sufficient opportunity to let her decision sink in and to start feeling more committed to it.

> Maria has gone into the details of courses, psychology and education. *"If you want to find out whether it's any good or not, you'll have to experience it".* She was going to enroll for a course of psychology. She decided to keep her decision to herself till the course starts, in order to safeguard herself from the influence of others. She felt clear in her own mind as to what she wants, but she wanted to leave it some time to mature. The opinions of others might bring back her doubts again.

After the last session of the guidance we made an appointment for the final evaluation and the second appliance of the GIDS. We also asked Maria to write a letter in which she reflects on the guidance and gives her view of it.

> Shortly before the evaluation session, Maria had enrolled herself in an introductory course in psychology. She felt satisfied with her decision to take up psychology and was happy with it. When asked what made her to make this choice, she said that what has been important was firstly a growing understanding of her self during the guidance sessions, secondly having learned to approach things positively. When looking back Maria told that for a long time she thought she would never find a way out, owing to her despair and self-doubt. During the guidance sessions in which she was to ponder things making her happy and touching her, it was as if a switch was touched. To Maria this switch meant being able to choose psychology. *"Yet, in spite of my choice being emotional, practical matters have also played a role".* This quotation shows that both aspects, affective as well as rational ones, have been involved in her choice. In her final letter, she told about her realization of her comparison behavior, and that she still found this hard to cope with. As she put it: …*"In spite of my becoming aware of comparing myself to others …, very difficult to account for my decision towards friends and family. I don't explain myself, because I no longer want to, but I do feel the urge".*

Changes in Commitments during the Guidance

Comparison of the GIDS results before and after the guidance showed that in every domain the commitment contents have changed (table 6).

Table 6 here

In the domain of View of Life the commitment content did not change much. During the pre-measurement Maria tries to enjoy the little things in life, during post-measurement she realizes so even more and actually succeeds in it. There seems to be a change from trying to doing. The increase in commitment score suggests that she feels more committed in this domain. With regard to her parents Maria's commitment with them has become more one of equals. The strength of commitment score has decreased. In the domain of Friendship, the commitment scores became even lower and the exploration scores higher than before. The ideas she had before the guidance have vanished. Maria no longer knows what she understands by friendship. She seems to be eagerly looking for new commitments in this domain. The commitment in the Studying/Work/Leisure time domain sounds more dedicated and specific than before. The exploration level has decreased. A commitment seems to have developed. The second commitment in the Personal Characteristics domain may be described as more specific and more self-aware than before. The lack of self-confidence as described during the first measurement is still there, the commitment is still weak and the exploration high. Little change has occurred in the domain of Intimate Relations. The commitment remains very strong, with below average exploration. In the second commitment she added her new realization that he compares her relationship with that of others. The General Principle commitment in the pre-measurement refers to others as source of strength and of security. In the second assessment, the source of strength seems to be internal, and Maria is more specific about what is uncertain.

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

In this study we aimed to get more insight in characteristics of adolescents and emerging adults with regard to career choice problems and the kind of career choice guidance they need. In the

first study we found similarities, but also some interesting differences between both groups. For adolescents, the their low levels of exploration and information oriented identity style may explain their career choice problems, and the success of the guidance program, because the guidance program focuses on learning skills that resemble exploration and an information oriented style of solving a career problem.

The emerging adults' results suggest that most of them do have the skills needed for making a choice but that they may have other problems and need other types of guidance. In this second part we therefore described a typical guidance process with an emerging adult. Also Maria did have the skills needed for exploring and comparing alternatives. Her career choice problems seemed to be rooted in feelings of insecurity, and a dysfunctional urge to compare herself to her friends. As the commitments in the pre-measurement GIDS results showed, this insecurity did not only play a role in the Studying/Work/Leisure time domain, but in other domains as well. The tasks in the protocol that aimed to train exploration skills did not work for Maria: she already had those skills. For her, it was the very comparison made with the various other domains that triggered the increase of her awareness in other domains and a re-formulation of the commitments' content. Also the changes in Maria's case are not limited to the domain of studying. In general, her post-guidance commitments express more awareness and are more specific than the initial ones.

If the results in this study can be confirmed in other studies, this means that emerging adults in general need other types of career guidance than in adolescents. Of course, the data presented in our first study concern averages. We also saw some adolescents who showed high levels of exploration and an information oriented coping style, and who needed a type of guidance that was comparable to Maria. However, if Maria's case is in some way representative for a larger group of emerging adults, this may mean that for emerging adults it would be more important to include other domains in the guiding process as well and to focus on more general

psychological functioning. With adolescents our guidance was usually limited to one single domain: study-work-leisure and to specific skills.

An important question is whether the process described is idiosyncratic to this particular emerging adult, or whether it has a more general validity. As regards Maria's specific problems with about making choices and comparing herself with others, it is not likely to be generalizable. However, Maria's situation resembles the description of Shulman, Feldman, Blatt, Cohen and Mahler (2005) that "transitions are no longer successively manageable sequences and passages, but are now characterized by fluctuations, discontinuities and reversals, and uncertainties." As emerging adulthood grows more and more prominent as a stage of life, the attendant problems will occur with increasing frequency. Although further research will have to prove in how far the present findings can be generalized, the present research provides new insights into the kind of problems that may occur, thus making the first move towards the development of intervention methods specifically designed for this stage of life.

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Tabel 1. Mean Scores for Adolescents and Emerging Adults on the SCL-90, Compared with Norm group.

	Mean Norm group	Mean Adolescents	Mean Emerging adults
Anxiety	12.5	13.2	14.6 *
Agoraphobia	7.0	7.9 *	8.7 *
Depression	20.8	24.5 *	25.5 ***
Somatizing	16.5	16.2	16.2
Insufficience	11.1	13.8 **	15.8 ***
Mistrust	24.2	25.3	26.0
Hostility	6.0	7.2 ***	7.7 ***
Sleeping problems	3.7	4.6	4.8 **

Difference with mean is significant: * at p<0.05, ** at p < 0.01, *** at p < 0.001

Tabel 2. Mean Coping Style Scores for Adolescents and Emerging Adults, Compared with Norm group.

Coping style	Mean Norm group Adolescents	Mean adolescents	Mean Norm group Emerging Adults	Mean Emerging Adults
Active	17.3	17.3	21.6	17.8 ***
Palliative	18.2	18.8	14.4	18.2 ***
Social support	15.4	15.4	12.1	16.3 ***
Avoiding	13.1	16.5 **	14.0	17.0 ***
Passive	10.9	13.0 **	10.1	14.0 ***
Emotional	6.0	.2	5.6	6.7 ***
Soothing thoughts	12.2	11.8	11	12.4 **

Difference with mean is significant: * at $p<0.05$, ** at $p < 0.01$, *** at $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Mean Identity Style Scores for Adolescents and Emerging Adults, Compared with Norm Group.

	Mean Norm group	Mean Adolescents	Mean Emerging Adults
Information-oriented	38	35.4 *	38.4
Diffuse	26	28.5	26.0
Normative	27	26.2	26.5

Difference with mean is significant: * at p<0.1, ** at p < 0.05, *** at p < 0.01

Tabel 4. Mean Exploration and Commitment Scores in the different Domains for Adolescents and Emerging

Adults, Compared with Norm group.

	Exploration Mean Adolescents	Exploration Mean Emerging Adults	Commitment Mean Adolescents	Commitment Mean Emerging Adults
Philosophy of life	30 ***	39 *	34 ***	49
Parents	31 ***	41 *	48	45
Friends	33 ***	37 **	49	45
Study-work-leisure	39 *	52	43	42
Personal characteristics	41 *	44	37 **	43
Intimate relations	31 ***	40 *	52	52
General Principle	38 *	45	39 *	42 *

Because the scores are percentiles the norm is 50.

Difference with mean is significant: * at p<0.05, ** at p < 0.01, *** at p < 0.001

Table 5. Maria's Pre-Guidance GIDS Results: Commitment Contents and Scores (decile scores in parentheses).

	Commitment	Exploration
Commitment contents for each domain		
view of life:	21(3)	8(1)
"I have an open and positive attitude in life. I acknowledge other people and their opinions and am		
curious to know them. I try to enjoy the little things in life (and the big ones) and not to think		
ahead too much, but to live by the day."		
Parents:	28(7)	12(7)
"Good relationship: I can fall back on my parents; we respect one another".		
Friendship:	13(1)	16(9)
"Friends are for laughing with and they should always be available to each other for any problem".		
Studying-work-leisure time:	29(7)	18(8)
"Studying and work are important (arrow) main subject. Leisure time is also quite important;		
needn't only mean doing nothing".		
Personal characteristics:	13(1)	21(9)
"Still insecure about my looks and what impression I make on other people. Apart from that, as to		
character: reasonably content".		
Intimate relationship:	35(10)	11(3)
"an intimate relationship creates happiness and a sense of security. It means being yourself,		
counterbalancing your partner and having fun together".		
Metaprinciple:	17(2)	16(8)
"Open-minded in life: I like being with others (friends, parents, boyfriend), though with feelings of		
uncertainty towards them. On the other hand they may actually give you strength and make you		
happy".		

Table 6. Maria's Post-Guidance GIDS results: Commitment Contents and Scores (decile scores in parentheses).

Commitment Content for each domain	Commitment	Exploration
View of life	25 (5)	7 (1)
"I really view life more positively and feel I am my own girl now, and I realize it's more fun to live by the day and enjoy the little things."		
Parents	20 (3)	11 (7)
"I can always call on my parents. And the funny thing is: I don't necessarily need them and our relationship is getting more on an equal level (they can call on me more often now)."		
Friendship	4 (1)	24 (10)
"To me the notion of friendship is difficult to grasp. When exactly do you call someone a friend and when are you a friend yourself. I might be satisfied with my friends and with myself as a friend, but that's not how I see things just now."		
Studying-work-leisure time	28 (7)	11 (2)
"I appreciate studying in general. I like learning things and will keep doing so during my next course of studies and my work afterwards. Still, I don't want to start a job. I'm going a hundred percent for my studies and the leisure time that comes with it."		
Personal characteristics	16 (1)	19 (8)
"I shall always remain slightly insecure(especially about looks) and compare myself with others. I'll always be a perfectionist and keep planning ahead. But knowing your weak points gives you a chance to handle them better and temper them and it enables you to cope with criticism better".		
Intimate relationship	32 (10)	11 (3)
"I am rally happy about the relationship with my friend. I can be myself, feel well and strengthened. The only thing I want to keep alert to is getting bourgeois. I compare my relationship with that of people around me".		
Metaprinciple	24 (4)	13 (6)
"I have grown more confident and independent. I know what I want, what I can do and what my weak points are. It helps me viewing life positively and be myself. Only in the domain of friendship I haven't quite worked things out yet".		