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Micro-analysis of identity development

Mandy A.E. van der Gaag, MSc & Dr. E. Saskia Kunnen

Introduction

Very little is known about identity development on micro-level. Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, Frijns, van Lier & Meeus (2010) have shown that the dynamics of identity formation can occur on a timescale of days. However, the mechanisms behind micro-level identity development remain unknown. In this study we aim to provide insight in this by relating the experiences of emerging adults to their identity development. Based on Marcia's identity status paradigm (1966), we operationalize identity development as the development of commitments by means of exploration. We focus on identity development in the domain of education.

Can we see identity development on a timescale of weeks?

Is a change in commitment strength related to a certain kind of experience?

Method

In this pilot study, 12 first year psychology students were followed continuously over seven months. Every week they described an event that was important to them and the emotions that accompanied this event. They also reported their level of exploration and the strength of their commitment to their chosen education. The items used for this are inspired by the GIDS (Bosma, 1985) and measurements of daily identity dynamics by Klimstra et al. (2010).

Commitment items

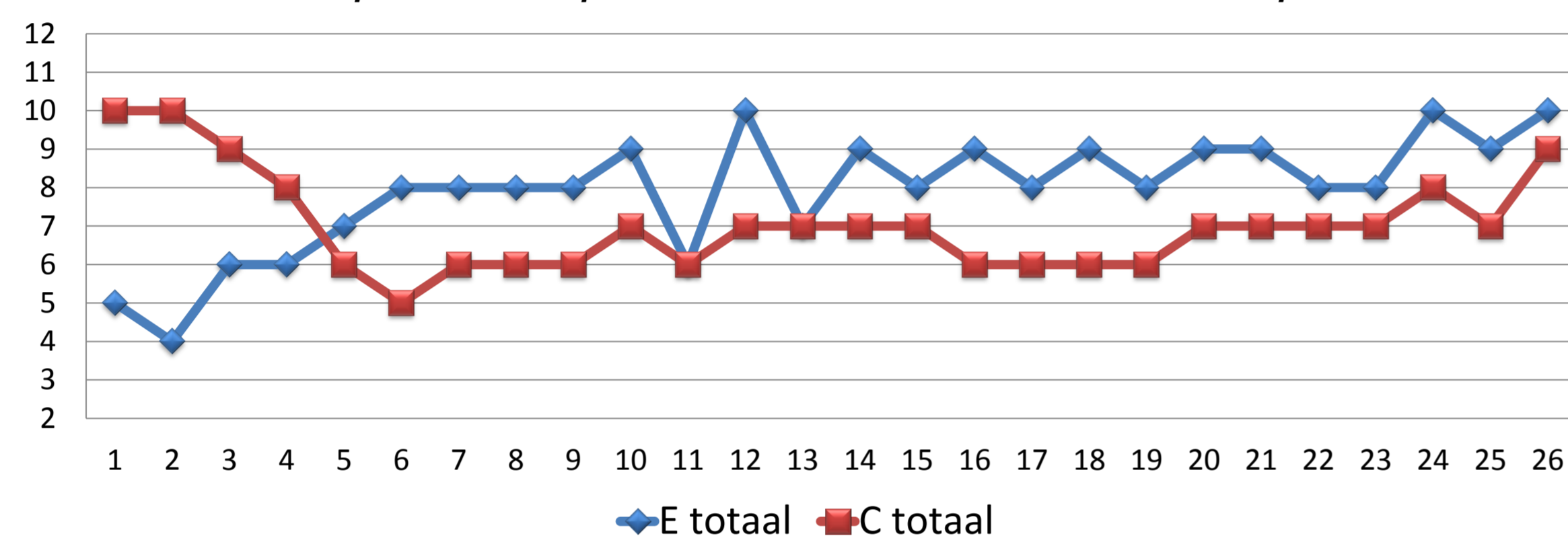
'Do you stand by your choice for this education?'
'Do you feel confident because of your education?'

Exploration items

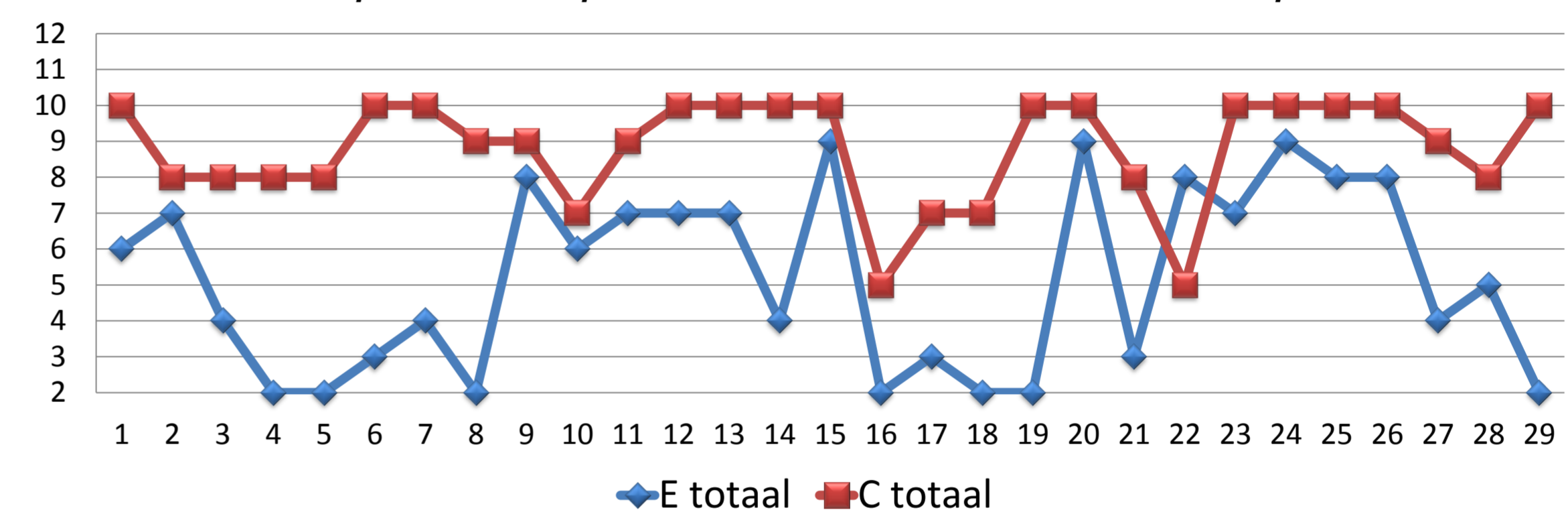
'Have you been asking yourself whether this education is right for you?'
'Do you try to learn as much as you can about (subjects within) your education?'

Preliminary results

Example 1: Exploration and Commitment p.15



Example 2: Exploration and Commitment p.16



As the individual graphs illustrate, **changes in exploration and commitment can be observed on a timescale of weeks**. The question that follows is 'what drives the changes?'. To answer this, we compared the commitment change after a positive experience to commitment change after a negative experience, we used resampling combined with Monte Carlo simulation techniques to analyse this.

Average Change in Commitment strength

| after Positive experience | | after Negative experience | | P-value |
|----------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| 0,29 | | -0,45 | | < 0,001 |
| ↙ | ↘ | ↙ | ↘ | |
| Education | Non-education | Education | Non-education | P-value interaction |
| 0,36 | 0,10 | -0,46 | -0,44 | 0,27 |

On average, we found that **after a negative experience, commitment strength declines and after a positive experience, commitment strength increases**. Out of ten participants, four show this pattern significantly even when only the individual data is analysed. The rest of the participants showed a similar pattern, but on individual level this was not significant. There was one individual who did not show any relation between his experiences and commitment strength change (graph Example 1).

We wondered whether the educational commitment development would be influenced differently by experiences in the domain of education (such as an exam) and experiences in different domains (e.g. relationship break-up). This interaction effect was not significant. We find it striking that **it does not seem to matter whether a negative experience is in the domain of education or not, it is followed by a decline in commitment either way**.

Discussion

This study gives unique first insights in the micro-level mechanisms of identity development within individuals. We found that *identity development is related to weekly experiences*. On average, negative experiences are followed by a decline in commitment and positive experiences by an increase in commitment, though individual differences have been found. Interestingly, after a *negative experience in a non-educational domain* (e.g. relations), the *educational commitment declines*. This may be because first year students experience many new things, whilst skills like focus and discipline are still developing. Therefore attention may be easily diverted to a negative experience in any domain. This may cause education to be less of a priority, which in turn may reduce educational commitment.

Contact

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