Identity, perception of parent-adolescent relation and adjustment in a group of university students

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Abstract

The parent-adolescent relations play an important role in developing identity process (Berzonsky, Branje, & Meeus, 2007; Meeus, Iedema, & Engels, 2005). This study investigates the role that identity plays in mediating relationships between parenting and social adjustment in a group of 112 college students. They completed: Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, Bush-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995), Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Turpin, & Brown, 1979) and Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Results show associations between parental support and relational adjustment, between identity status and relational adjustment. Therefore, the identity commitment represents an important variable for emotional and social adjustment in adolescence.

1. Introduction

Marcia (1989) defines the identity as a dynamic and not static structure whose formation depends on two key components: exploration of alternatives in relation to the objectives, beliefs and convictions; identity commitment with which adolescents make decisions on the relevant issues (Pellerone, 2013a).

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The exploration is often a sign of a crisis or the presence of doubts about important choices for their lives, which act as obstacles to the simultaneous formation of the commitment of identity (Lucky, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Wang, 2009).

Analyzing the two dimensions of identity, Marcia identifies four states that correspond to as many modes of relating to the events: a) Achievement (high level of exploration and commitment), b) Moratorium (good exploration commitment but not yet started), c) Foreclosure (commitment without-free exploration), d) Diffusion (low level of exploration and commitment).

From the Marcia’s model, literature has investigated the relationship between identity and personality variables such as, social adaptation and relationships with parental figures, and found that: adolescents in the state of Achievement manifest a positive personality profile, with a few psycho-social problems and a good relationship with parents; adolescents in the state of Foreclosure have good communication with their parents, are not very outgoing, but available and open to changes. The subjects in the Moratorium, characterized by anxiety and tension for choices, show an adversarial relationship with parents; finally teenagers in state Diffusion explicit few psycho-social problems and establish an ambivalent relationship with their parents (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents in a Foreclosure state and diffusion show a tendency to somatization and depression, and hostile behavior; adolescents in state of Achievement manifest a reduced level of anxiety, and they are more independent than those in Moratorium.

The interaction between socio-contextual and family factors seems crucial in determining behaviors, cognitive styles, personality characteristics, ways of relating that the individual in the process of identity formation feels as his own (Pellerone & Micciche, 2014b).

Psychological theorists (eg Blos, 1967; Erikson, 1968) have suggested that in this period adolescents are about to change their relationships with parents and the creation of their own identity. The teenagers begin to perceive themselves as active agent, responsible for their successes or failures, and to evaluate choices as a result of stand-alone processing. In this phase, the parental support has a fundamental role in the processes of autonomy identity; in particular, a secure attachment relationship with parents allows the adolescent to experience the emotional proximity, internalize the rules and parental values, acquire the “indicators” in which the young can see in the formulation of their choices (Pellerone & Micciche, 2014).

The family is, therefore, an important laboratory for decision-making adolescent: a good family communication allows adolescents to discuss options with parents decision and act on the basis of advice received (Pellerone, 2013b); when communication is problematic, adolescents have less chance to meet with their parents and accept the advice and suggestions received (Craparo, Gori, Mazzola, Petruccelli, Pellerone & Rotondo, 2014).

As the adolescent grows and develops an adequate commitment decreases the instrumental and emotional support offered by the family. The latter is perceived as less important for the emotional adjustment of the young people, who feel that their ability to adapt can be attributed to their skills, and the peer group, and not to support that the family provides (Pellerone, 2014).

Meeus and colleagues (Meeus, Keijser, & Branje, 2010) in this regard, shows how the social groups adolescents belong to may provide an important resource for the development of identity: the group provides the necessary emotional support that can improve the degree of commitment in the choices that you take; it becomes a resource for the quality and quantity of exploration in the choices that the adolescent monitors (identification processes).

In fact, while the family influences the level of commitment and exploration that the adolescent manifests in schools; the peer group influences the development of identity that the teenager will manifest in the relational domain.

2. Objectives and research hypothesis

This study investigates the role that development of identity plays in mediating the relationship between parenting and socio-relational adjustment in a group of adolescents. In particular it is assumed that:

- according to the literature (Wyttenbach, 2008) the parenting tie with the mother is positively related to socio-relational adaptation;
- the identity status is correlated with the socio-relational adjustment, as confirmed by literature (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005);
older teens exhibit an identity commitment and a greater social adjustment, than younger ones (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005);

confirming literature, excessive parental control is predictive of a relational style avoidant in adolescence (Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, & Papini, 2011), and a high level of emotional support is predictive of an adaptive capacity (Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984).

The group consists of 112 Italian university students enrolled in the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, aged between 18 and 24 years (M=19.60, SD=1.06), including 18 women and 94 men; respect to the variable age group was divided into: a group of 64 subjects aged between 18 and 19 years; a group of 48 subjects between 20 and 24 years.

The instruments administered to full group are: Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, Bush - Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995), in order to investigate the identity development according to Marcia’s model; Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Turpin, & Brown, 1979) to detect the processes of parenting; Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which explores the socio-relational adjustment, according to Bowlby's attachment theory.

In particular, Ego Identity Process Questionnaire consists of 32 items that explore the dimension of identity exploration and commitment. The level of exploration is measured through the analysis of four ideological areas: occupation, religion, politics and values; the level of commitment is investigated through four interpersonal areas: family, friendships, gender roles, and the ability to enter into sentimental relationship.

Parental Bonding Instrument is a questionnaire filled in two parts (one on the mother and the father), which measures the perception of parenting received during childhood; the instrument consists of 25 items and analyzes two domains: the handling (heat) and over-protectiveness (excessive control).

Relationship Questionnaire is a self-report instrument, which proposes to subject some self-descriptions, each of which summarizes the relevant aspects of a specific attachment style (Agostoni, 2007): a) pattern of secure attachment (positive model of self, positive model of other); b) worried (negative model of self, positive of the other); c) fearful (negative model of self and negative model of the other); d) detached / devaluing (positive model of oneself and negative model of the other).

3. Data analysis

The Pearson’s correlation is used to assess the relation between the binding of parenting and the socio-relational adaptation and between the development of identity and the socio-relational adaptability.

The Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is done to verify the influence of age on the identity status and the socio-relational adaptation.

In order to explore the predictive variables of the use of a secure relational style in adolescents, Analyses of Hierarchical Regression for Separate Blocks is used.

4. Preliminary analysis

Some preliminary analysis were conducted in order to investigate the sub-dimensions of the development of identity (ideological and interpersonal areas), the type of parenting and the influence of the independent variables (gender and age) on the development of identity and on parenting.

Pearson's correlation analysis shows the presence of a relationship between the ideological and interpersonal dimensions, in particular:

- the importance given to the work is positively correlated with the value of friendship (r = 0.20; p < 0.05), romantic relationships (r = 0.25; p < 0.05) and the affirmation of gender identity (r = 0.31; p < 0.01);
- the importance given to politics correlates with the value of the family (r = 0.29; p < 0.01);
- the values in general correlate positively with the importance given to romantic relationships (r = 0.22; p < 0.05).

Compared to the status of identity, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) shows how the gender and the age influence the development of identity; in particular gender affects the importance that adolescents attach to
values (F = 4.90; p < 0.05) and family (F = 6.03; p < 0.05) and even more to romantic relationships (F = 12.33; p < 0.01); insisted the age appears to influence the importance attached to job (F = 3.64; p < 0.01) and friendship (F = 4.08; p < 0.01). The analysis of mean scores shows how males attach more importance to the values (Males: M = 14.22, SD = 0.50; Female: M = 12.40, SD = 0.38) and romantic relationships (Males: M = 16.00, SD = 0.72; Female: M = 12.7, SD = 0.46) than girls who attach more importance to the family (Males: M = 12.89, SD = 0.60; Female: M = 14.58, SD = 0.45). Moreover, it appears that older adolescents consider it essential both work and friendship, than the smaller ones on element that confirms a greater development of identity in the first than in the second ones.

The same analysis of variance shows that the level of identity commitment is influenced by the interaction between gender and age (F = 4.48; p < 0.01): the Post hoc Tukey shows how the older girls (24 years) get the highest average score in the level of commitment of identity.

Compared to parenting, the Multivariate Analysis of Variance shows how age influences the perception of mother (F = 4.06; p < 0.01) and father control (F = 3.70; p < 0.01); while the gender affects the perception of the parental care (F = 7.88; p <0.01). In particular, the analysis of average scores shows how with increasing age adolescents perceive more control by their parents. Also, are the girls who perceive to a greater extent the paternal nurturance than boys (Female: M = 24.91, SD = 1.05; Males: M = 18.61, SD = 1.42).

5. Results

The first objective is to verify the presence of a correlation between binding of parenting and socio-relational adjustment in a group of Sicilian adolescents freshmen university. Pearson’s correlation analysis shows the presence of a positive relation between the level of maternal control and worried style (r = 0.21; p < 0.05), and negative between the maternal heat (nurturance) and detached style (r = - 0.28, p < 0.01). According to international literature (Wytenbach, 2008), it appears, therefore, confirmed the first research hypothesis.

The second objective is to investigate the relationship between the development of identity and socio-relational adaptation. Pearson’s correlation analysis shows that the level of exploration correlates positively with the secure style (r = 0.26, p < 0.01), the level of identity commitment with the worried style (r = 0. 20; p < 0.05). Therefore the second research hypothesis appears also confirmed.

The third objective is to measure the influence of age on identity status and socio-relational adjustment, assuming that older adolescents exhibit a commitment and an relational adaptation greater, than younger people, as confirmed by the literature (Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005). The Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) shows how the age appears to influence both the level of exploration (F = 2.57; p < 0.05) and that the use of a worried style (F = 2.50; p <0.05); the analysis of average scores and the Tukey post hoc show how the older adolescents have higher scores in the level of exploration and use of a worried style. It appears, therefore, partially confirmed the third research hypothesis.

A subsequent object is to measure the predictive variables to the use of a relational secure style in adolescents: the Multiple Regression Analysis for blocks (first block: the development of identity; second block: level of parental care and control) shows how the emphasis on values such as religion, friendship and romantic relationships are predictors of a secure style (48.4 % of variance explained); to this is added the perception of a low parental control (55.8 % of total variance explained).

The same data analysis aimed to investigate the predictors of a devaluing style show as: the importance attached to the friendship and the low level of paternal care are predictors of a relational detached style (23% of variance explained). In support of the international literature (Soenens, Berzonsky, Dunkel, & Papini, 2011), it appears confirmed the latest research hypothesis.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study investigates the roles that the development of identity plays in mediating the relationship between parenting and socio-relational adaptation in a group of university teenagers.

According to the first hypothesis of research, data analyses show the presence of a positive relation between the level of maternal control and worried relational style, and a negative correlation between the level of maternal
warmth and detached or devaluing style. Thus, excessive control by the mother leads the adolescent to establish relationships, characterized by a of negative self representation and a positive model of the others; as well as the absence or reduced maternal nurturance determines a relational mode detached or devaluing, characterized by a positive self representation and a negative model of the others, which leads the adolescent to establish little intimate and superficial relations with the other.

It appears confirmed the second research hypothesis, since there is a correlation between the level of exploration and the use of a secure relational style; this confirms the literature data, according to which adolescents in the state of Achievement, or those who have already started a process of exploration and commitment of the possible choices of identity, have good socio - relational adaptability skills (Pellerone, 2013a). Interestingly, the commitment of identity correlates with the worried style, this could be explained by the fact that adolescents in the state of Moratorium (with high level of exploration, but low level of commitment) are characterized by increased anxiety and tension due to an identity choice not realized yet; it would lead the subject to have little self-esteem and trust in other friends and peers who have already taken important decisions for their future (Johnson & Nozick, 2011).

It appears partially confirmed the third research hypothesis, because the analysis of the data show that older adolescents present a greater development of identity and in particular a high level of exploration, but are characterized by worried relational style.

Finally, confirming the literature and partially confirming the hypothesis of research: the perception of low paternal care, together with the importance that the adolescent attributes to friendship are predictors of a detached style, characterized by good faith in ourself, but not in the other; also a low level of parental control along with the importance to values such as friendship, religion and romantic relationships are predictors of a secure style.

So, as teens get older, and approximate to adulthood, their identity commitments increase, and the degree to which these commitments develop becomes increasingly important for the socio-relational adaptability skill.

References


Meeus, W, Iedema, J., MaassenEngels, R. (2005). Separation and tension due to an identity choice not realized yet; it would lead the subject to have little self-esteem and trust in other friends and peers who have already taken important decisions for their future. (Johnson & Nozick, 2011).


