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Parental and peer support, identity development and psychological well-being in adolescence

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ABSTRACT   Two studies are presented, on parental and peer support and identity development, respectively. The aims of these studies were (a) to report on age-related changes in parental and peer support and identity development, and (b) to predict psychological well-being by parental and peer support and identity. Study 1 shows parental support to decrease as adolescents grow older, while peer support increases. In general peer support catches up with parental support, but doesn't take over. Compared to peer support, parental support is the better predictor of psychological well-being, but only in early and middle adolescence. So, as regards parental support a separation effect was found. Study 2 shows identity to develop progressively with age, and also the relation between identity status and psychological well-being was found to become stronger with age. Taken together, these findings support the notion of the second separation-individuation in adolescence.

Key words: Identity, Parents, Peers.

Introduction

Adolescence is the period of the second separation-individuation process (Blos, 1967). It is the second, because the first separation-individuation takes place in early childhood (ages 1-2). During the first separation-in-dividuation process the child discovers that s/he is "other" than the primary caretaker and that the primary caretaker is not always simply at his or her disposal. The second separation-individuation involves a much more radical disengagement. Young people achieve their definitive autonomy with regard to their parents. They become independent and learn gradually to make their own decisions about life. So, the second separation-individuation process entails two related processes: disengagement from parents and identity development.

Parents and peers

The process of disengagement from parents entails restructuring the network of the young people's significant others. At the start of adolescence parents occupy the central position in the personal network of young people. Gradually friends and later a partner become increasingly important in this network, and take the place of the parents as the most important reference persons. Apart from the fact that the

importance of reference persons in the personal network of young people changes, the nature of the relationship with their parents also alters. During the separation-individuation process they begin to interact increasingly with peers. Since young people have no formal power over each other, interaction among peers is based on the principle of symmetry and equality (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). During the course of adolescence young people are therefore learning to get along with each other on the basis of equality. This learning process also has an effect on the relationship with the parents. Equality gradually becomes a more important principle in the interaction between young people and their parents, replacing the dominance of the parents (see also Besevegis & Giannitsas, 1996).

The separation-individuation process can be investigated as either a continuous or a discontinuous process. The continuity approach assumes that there is a connection between the respective influences of parents and peers upon young people. In the discontinuity approach it is assumed that there is conflict between the influences of parents and peers.

The discontinuity approach is mainly to be found in studies within youth sociology into the so-called *parent-peer conflict*. The original assumption in these studies was that the influences of parents and peers are by definition conflictual. This "conflict hypothesis" (De Wit & Van der Veer 1984, p.127) was later moderated and replaced by the "situational hypothesis" (Brittain, 1968). The situational hypothesis proposes that parents and peers both have a strong influence on young people, but in different situations. The (perceived) influence of peers is strongest in leisure time, while that of parents is strongest in the area of school and career. The influence of the mother and peers is strongest in the area of relationships. Research conducted in the Netherlands has also found this situation-specific distribution of the influence of parents and peers (Meeus, 1989).

Researchers working with the situational hypothesis have in general reached no conclusions about the connection between the influences of parents and peers, and that is remarkable. As early as 1969, Kandel and Lesser found that the influence of parents and the influence of peers showed a slight positive correlation. On issues relating to school, friends and parents appeared to give advice along the same lines.

In keeping with these results, a new theoretical perspective on the second separation-individuation process was formulated almost twenty years later by Grotevant and Cooper (1985, 1986). They suggest that young people who have a good bond with their parents also will develop positive relationships with their peers. We call this assumption the hypothesis of connected parental and peer support.

Identity development

Developing an identity is a key task in adolescence. Marcia's identity status paradigm (1966) constitutes one of the most well-known approaches to the study of identity development. Although it cannot qualify as a theory of identity development (Meeus, 1996; Van Hoof, 1999; Waterman, 1982), review studies have found support for the fundamental developmental hypothesis of the identity status paradigm (Meeus, 1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). In most identity status studies progressive shifts in identity status are found, i.e., transitions from identity diffusion into the direction of identity achievement.

An analysis of a series of studies on the relation between identity status and indicators of psychological well-being (Adams, Ryan, Hoffman, Dobson, & Nielsen, 1984; Côté & Levine, 1983; Craig-Bray, Adams, & Dobson, 1988; Kapfhammer, Neumeier, & Scherer, 1993; Marcia, 1967; Marcia & Friedman, 1970; Orlofsky, 1978; Oshman & Manosevitz, 1974; Rotheram-Borus, 1989; Rothman, 1984;

Schenkel & Marcia, 1972; Sterling & Van Horn, 1989) by Meeus (1996) showed that there are systematic differences in psychological well-being among the identity statuses. Moratoriums have the lowest level of psychological well-being, followed by diffusions, while both high commitment statuses, achievement and foreclosure, show the highest level of psychological well-being.

Identity develops progressively with age, and this could be interpreted as a certain pressure on adolescents to achieve a mature identity status. As adolescents become older, they must have a correspondingly more strongly developed identity. If this hypothesis is correct, then there should be a greater difference in late adolescence in psychological well-being among the identity statuses than in early adolescence.

Research questions

We will present results of two related studies on the separation-individuation process. In the first study we will concentrate on the separation from parents in connection to the influence of peers and address these questions:

1. Does the influence of parents and peers as perceived by adolescents change through time? Does the influence of parents become smaller as adolescents grow older, while the influence of peers becomes bigger?

2. Does the causal influence of parents and peers on psychological well-being change with age? Are causal parental and peer influence positively related? Are the data in favour of the hypothesis of connected parental and peer support?

In the second study we will focus on identity development and address these questions:

1. Does identity develop progressively? Is there a decrease of identity diffusion as adolescents grow older and an increase of achieving commitment?

2. What kind of relationship is there between identity and psychological well-being? In view of the results of our analysis of the studies on identity status and psychological well-being we expect the level of psychological well-being to be lowest in the status moratorium, followed by diffusion and highest in the statuses with a high level of commitment.

3. Is there an age by identity status interaction with regard to psychological well-being? Are the differences in well-being among the various identity statuses greater for the older adolescents than for the younger ones?

Method

Participants

Study 1. Data for this study were collected as part of a broader longitudinal project "Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development (USAD) 1991-1997" (Meeus & 't Hart, 1993). A national sample of Dutch adolescents aged 12 to 24 was drawn from an existing panel of 10,000 households. The respondents were interviewed in their homes. They were also asked to fill out an extensive questionnaire in the presence of the interviewer. They were then given another questionnaire to fill out on their own and send back to the research organization. In total 2900 young people returned this second questionnaire. The questionnaires on parental and peer support and psychological well-being were fully completed by 2815 young people. Four age groups were represented: early adolescence (between 12 and 14, $n = 522$), middle adolescence (between 15 and 17, $n = 749$), late adolescence (between 18 and 20, $n = 658$) and post adolescence (between 21 and 24, $n = 886$).

Study 2. The same sample was used as in Study 1. The questionnaire on relational identity and psychological well-being was fully completed by 2557 young people. Four age groups were represented: early adolescence (between 12 and 14, $n = 543$), middle

adolescence (between 15 and 17, n = 774), late adolescence (between 18 and 20, n = 648) and post adolescence (between 21 and 24, n = 592).

Measures

Parental and friends' support (Study 1) were assessed by use of the "role-relational approach" (Fischer, 1982; Meeus, 1989). The participants indicated on 10-point scales to which extent they feel supported by a standard set of persons: father, mother, siblings, intimate friend (best friend or partner), friends, classmates and colleagues. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of social support they receive in the domain of personal relationships. In Study 1 the data of parental support (support from father and mother) and friends' support (support from best friend and other friends) are presented.

Identity (Study 2). Relational identity was assessed with the Utrecht-Groningen Identity Development Scale (U-GIDS) (Meeus, 1996) by items in the domain of relationships. The U-GIDS uses six 5-point Likert items (response categories ranging from 1 = completely untrue to 5 = completely true) for the measurement of commitment, and five for the measurement of exploration.

The scale for commitment measures the extent to which the young people feel committed to, and derive self-confidence, a positive self-image and confidence in the future from relationships. Examples of commitment items are: "My best friend/partner gives me security in life" and "I'm sure my best friend/partner was the best choice for me". The scale for exploration measures the extent to which the young people are actively engaged in exploring relationships. Examples of exploration items are: "I often think about my best friend/partner (school/work)" and "I try to find out a lot about my best friend/partner (school/work)". Cronbach's alphas of the scales for relational commitment and exploration were .89 and .82, respectively.

In presenting our findings we will refer to identity statuses. The U-GIDS scales for commitment and exploration were dichotomized into high and low, with the sample mean at time 1 as the cut-off point, to produce the four identity statuses: *diffusion, closure, moratorium* and *achieving commitment*. Since these statuses are different from Marcia's statuses we give a short description. A low degree of commitment combined with a low degree of exploration can be described as the identity status diffusion (D). This represents a diffuse identity because the commitment is not strong, and neither is it the focus of attention. The identity status closure (C) refers to a high degree of commitment, to which little attention is given and which is, as it were, self-evident. This therefore concerns a strong, but self-evident identity, which leaves no room for doubt. The word closure indicates the closed character of this identity status. The identity status moratorium (M) is the mirror image of closure: the combination of low commitment and a high degree of exploration. The great salience of this low commitment may indicate the threatened loss of the concrete content of the commitment (such as a job or ideology) or an attempt by the adolescent to make this commitment stronger. Of the four identity statuses, moratorium refers most to identity crisis. It represents a psychologically far-reaching reconsideration of a commitment that can have crisis-like features. The identity status achieving commitment (AC) combines a strong commitment with a high degree of exploration. This concerns a strong commitment to which the adolescent gives a lot of attention, and which is therefore of great psychological significance.

An important difference is that our statuses characterize a moment, whereas those of Marcia describe a period. This is clearest when we contrast Marcia's statuses foreclosure and achievement with closure and achieving commitment, the comparable statuses in our model. Foreclosure refers to a strong commitment that has not been preceded by a great deal of reflection or doubt, while achievement refers to a

strong commitment that has been preceded by careful reflection. The statuses closure and achieving commitment in our model do not claim to say anything about the past, but rather describe the exploration/salience of the present commitment.

Psychological well-being (Studies 1 and 2). The Cantril ladder (Cantril, 1965) was used to assess psychological well-being. The respondents were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale how they generally feel (1 = very bad to 10 = very well). This measure has been used in numerous surveys since the early sixties and its validity has been amply demonstrated (see for a review Veenhoven, 1984).

Results

Study 1

ANOVAs showed that parental support decreases and friends' support increases with age, Fs (3, 2812) = 16.58 and 24.48, respectively, ps < .001. *Post hoc* Scheffé tests showed this pattern for relational parental support: age group 12-14 > age groups 15-17, 18-20 and 21-24; for relational peer support this pattern was found: age group 12-14 < age groups 15-17 and 18-20 < age group 21-24. So relational parental support decreases from early to middle adolescence and then becomes stable, while relational peer support increases from early to middle adolescence and then again from late to post-adolescence. Figure 1 shows the age-related changes of parental and peer support.

To answer our second question a regression analysis was run with psychological well-being as dependent and parental and friends' support as independent variables. In the first step age and gender were entered as control variables, in the second step parental and friends' support, and subsequently the two-way interactions between age, gender, parental and friends' support. A positive relation between parental support and psychological well-being was found
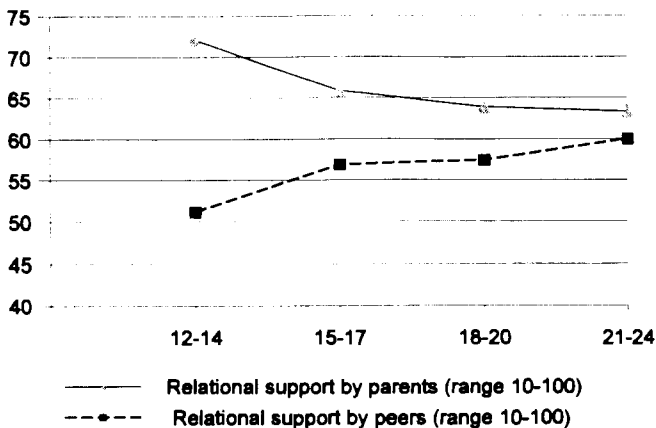

Figure 1
Age trends in relational parental and peer support.

and no significant association between friends' support and psychological well-being, *B's* were .16 and .03, respectively, *ps* < .001 and > .05. Three interactions were found to be significant: Parental x Friends' support, Parental support x Age and Parental support x Gender; *B's* were .06, .07 and .16, respectively, *ps* < .01, and .001. While the interaction between parental and friends' support was difficult to interpret, the interaction Parental support x Age was not: a stronger association was found between parental support and psychological well-being in early and middle adolescence compared to late and post-adolescence; the interaction Parental support x Gender showed girls to receive more support than boys.

Study 2

In the first analysis we examined age and gender differences in identity. Clear gender differences were found: males are more strongly represented in diffusion (18.8 versus 12.3%) and females slightly more in closure (8.8 to 6.6%) and moratorium (9.2 to 6.6%) and very much more in achieving commitment (24.8 to 12.9%), $x^2(3, N = 2557) = 123.59, p < .001$. Age effects are given in Table 1.

The table shows that there is a linear decrease in the number of diffusions with age (from 46% of the 12 to 14-year olds to 17% of the 21 to 24-year olds), the number of closures remains relatively stable (from 11% of the 12 to 14-year olds to 13% of the 21 to 24-year olds), the number of moratoriums decreases (from 21% of the 12 to 14-year olds to 14% of the 21 to 24-year olds), and the number of achieving commitments increases sharply (from 22% of the 12 to 14-year olds to 56% of the 21 to 24-year olds). So, clear progressive developmental trends in identity were found, $x^2(9, N = 2557) = 223.20, p < .001$.

A second step in the analysis concerned the relationship between identity and psychological well-being. A three-way analysis of variance was completed on psychological well-being with the U-GIDS identity status classification, gender and age as the independent variables. Significant main effects were found for all three of the independent variables. Females are less happy than males, $F(1, 2529) = 7.26, p < .01$. As young people become older they feel less happy, $F(3, 2529) = 16.62, p < .001$. The value for the main effect of identity status on psychological well-being was $F(3, 2529) = 13.63, p < .001$. To determine the differences among the statuses *post hoc* analyses were carried out with the Scheffé test; the results are given in the bottom row of Table 2.

For the total sample moratoriums have a lower level of general well-being than closures and achieving commitments, and diffusions have a lower level than achieving commitments. This

Table 1
Percentage of respondents in the different identity statuses by age (*n* = 2557)

Identity status	Age groups				
	12 - 14 (*n* = 543)	15 - 17 (*n* = 774)	18 - 20 (*n* = 648)	21 - 24 (*n* = 592)	Total (*N* = 2557)
Diffusion	46	31	30	17	31
Closure	11	22	14	13	15
Moratorium	21	16	13	14	16
Achieving commitment	22	31	43	56	38
Total	21	30	25	23	100

Table 2
Identity status and psychological well-being.
Mean comparisons and standard deviations for the different age groups and total sample[a]

Age groups	Diffusion		Closure		Moratorium		Achieving commitment	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
12 - 14 (n = 543)[b]	8.32$_a$	1.29	8.29$_a$	1.61	8.16$_a$	1.35	8.41$_a$	1.32
15 - 17 (n = 774)[c]	7.76$_a$	1.30	8.21$_b$	1.25	7.97$_{ab}$	1.43	8.18$_b$	1.30
18 - 20 (n = 648)[d]	7.87$_a$	1.18	7.82$_a$	1.49	7.58$_a$	1.24	8.08$_b$	1.16
21 - 24 (n = 592)[e]	7.72$_{ab}$	1.25	8.04$_b$	1.23	7.20$_a$	1.57	8.07$_b$	1.25
Total (n = 2557)[f]	7.96$_{ab}$	1.28	8.10$_{bc}$	1.36	7.79$_a$	1.44	8.14$_c$	1.25

Note: [a] Simple effects were assessed with the Scheffé test. Means sharing a common subscript across columns are not significantly different from each other, while means with a different subscript are significantly different at the .01 or better.
[b] $F(3, 539) = .73$, *ns*; [c] $F(3, 770) = 5.84$, $p < .001$; [d] $F(3, 644) = 4.02$, $p < .01$; [e] $F(3, 588) = 10.78$, $p < .001$; [f] $p < .001$, see text.

pattern of results supports our hypothesis: there is no difference in psychological well-being between the high commitment statuses, moratoriums are the least happy and diffusions occupy a position between moratoriums and the high commitment statuses.
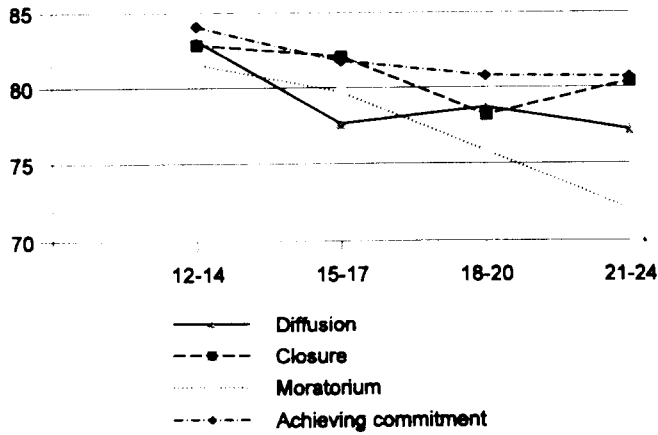
Apart from these three main effects the three-way analysis of variance also showed an interaction effect of age and identity status on psychological well-being: as adolescents become older the influence of identity status on psychological well-being is greater, $F(9, 2529) = 2.42$, $p < .01$. In order to clarify this interaction effect the differences among the statuses were analyzed with the Scheffé test for each age group. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that for the 12 to 14-year olds there are no differences in psychological well-being among the 4 statuses; for the 21 to 24-year olds the moratoriums are the least happy, the high commitment statuses are the happiest and the diffusions occupy a position between the moratoriums and the high commitment statuses. In the two intermediate age groups we see the development of the between status differences: for the 15 to 17-year olds the diffusions are the least happy and the high commitment statuses are the happiest, with the moratoriums in an intermediate position. For the 18 to 20-year olds only the achieving commitments are distinct from the other statuses: they are happier. Figure 2 visualizes the observed age trends.

The results show an age-related pressure to develop identity. Young people have to develop an identity and this implies that only at a higher age does failure in this respect become translated into a lower level of general well-being. The results show that a strong commitment only leads to more happiness at a higher age. Only then does the status moratorium begin to take on the character of an identity crisis and become associated with feelings of unhappiness. For diffusion the situation is the opposite of that for the high commitment statuses: in the lowest age group this is the status with a modal level of well-being; only in the higher age groups does this status lose its functionality.

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85 ┄┄┄
80 ─────
75 ┄┄┄
70 ┄┄┄
      12-14      15-17      18-20      21-24
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─────── Diffusion

── ● ── Closure

·········· ······· Moratorium

──·◆·── Achieving commitment

Figure 2

Age, identity status and psychological well-being[1]

Note: 1. Range of psychological well-being: 10-100

General discussion

Taken together our studies offer a clear answer to the questions we posed at the end of the Introduction.

The level of social support offered by parents and peers as perceived by adolescents changes through time. Parental support decreases as adolescents grow older, while peer support increases. In early adolescence parental support is much stronger than peer support, while in middle adolescence peer support becomes as important. So, in general peer support catches up with parental support, but doesn't take over.

Parental and peer support are positively related. A zero-order correlation of .16 between these variables was found. Also, parental and peer support have positive zero-order correlations of .20 and .12 with psychological well-being. In a regression model with both variables, however, parental support contributed significantly in predicting psychological well-being, while peer support did not.

This finding is qualified by a significant interaction of parental support and age in predicting psychological well-being. This interaction shows that the influence of parental support is limited to early and middle adolescence. This pattern of findings does not lend support to the the hypothesis of connected parental and peer support. In early and middle adolescence parental support has impact on psychological well being and in late and post-adolescence it doesn't. Peer support does not add significantly to that.

Our findings do show a clear separation effect, since with increasing age the impact of parental support diminishes. Added to that the relation between identity status and psychological well-being was found to become stronger with age. Since identity can be taken as a central aspect of individuation, these findings show that being individuated goes together with psycho-social adjustment, especially in late adolescence. In the course of adolescent development parents become less important, while identity gains in importance in becoming adjusted. In a nutshell this is precisely what the separation-individuation hypothesis would predict!

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