



Distinctiveness as a marker of identity formation



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ABSTRACT

Individual distinctiveness is theorized to characterize an adaptive identity, but its importance remained underexplored. In two studies, we investigated the nomological networks of two common conceptualizations of distinctiveness: general and comparative distinctiveness. We compared these to the network of identity formation's best-validated marker: commitment. Findings from two samples of young adults living in the Netherlands ($n = 320$) and in the US ($n = 246$) both revealed that general distinctiveness marked adaptive identity formation and greater psychosocial well-being. Moreover, general distinctiveness had unique predictive value over commitment strength. Comparative distinctiveness from important others uniquely indicated lowered social well-being. Our findings illustrate that careful attention should be paid to the conceptualization of distinctiveness, because distinctiveness is an important but complex concept.

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1. Introduction

Individuals are thought to have a need for distinctiveness from others (Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), which can be fulfilled through the construction of a clear personal identity (Vignoles, 2011). Therefore, a high level of distinctiveness is considered to be one of the features of an adaptive identity, alongside the experience of a high sense of continuity (Erikson, 1968; Pasupathi, 2014). A sense of continuity can be achieved by constructing strong commitments that provide certainty and direction in life (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006). However, whereas identity commitment has been thoroughly validated as a feature of adaptive identity development (for a review, see Meeus, 2011), distinctiveness' importance has remained more ambiguous.

Distinctiveness is a broad concept that can be constructed in multiple ways (Vignoles, Chrysoschoou, & Breakwell, 2000). For instance, distinctiveness can be derived from individuals' separateness, referring to the psychological distance from others (e.g., physical and symbolic boundaries and feelings of independence, privacy, and isolation). Furthermore, distinctiveness can be derived from individuals' social position (e.g., their relation-

ships, roles, or social status). Generally, however, the main source of distinctiveness is the experience of differences in personal characteristics (e.g., traits, abilities, and physical characteristics) between oneself and others (Becker et al., 2012). Therefore, the present research operationalized distinctiveness as the degree of perceived differences between oneself and others in personal characteristics. Yet, even when only focusing on this specific form of distinctiveness, conceptualizations differ across theories and studies (e.g., Kelly, 1955; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Moreover, although various theories state that experiencing distinctiveness is important for psychosocial well-being, it is such a complex construct that in certain forms it can also have drawbacks (Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). So far, different conceptualizations of distinctiveness have only been studied separately, whereas directly comparing these different conceptualizations may facilitate a better understanding of distinctiveness and its adaptiveness. Moreover, to clarify the role of distinctiveness in the broader process of identity formation, it should be studied alongside the best-validated marker of identity formation: identity commitment.

In the present research, we therefore investigated the nomological networks of two conceptualizations of distinctiveness: general and comparative distinctiveness. We examined the associations of these conceptualizations with young adults' psychosocial well-being and compared this to identity commitments' associations with psychosocial well-being.

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1.1. Development of distinctiveness

Individuals' experience of distinctiveness unfolds in the first decades of life (for an overview, see Harter, 2012). The awareness of the self, which can be seen as a rudimentary form of distinctiveness, emerges around 2 years of age, when children recognize themselves in a mirror. From middle childhood onwards, children start comparing themselves to others, mainly for personal competence assessments. During adolescence and young adulthood, these comparisons become more comprehensive. Consequently, young adults are generally able to compare themselves to others on many personal aspects. The adaptiveness of perceiving more distinctiveness may depend on its exact conceptualization.

1.2. Nomological network of general distinctiveness

One way of conceptualizing distinctiveness is by focusing on individuals' sense of general distinctiveness, referring to the degree to which individuals believe that they differ from others in general. According to uniqueness theory (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) this is a common dimension on which people define themselves.

Erikson (1968) described a clear identity as "superordinated to any single identification with individuals of the past: it includes all significant identifications, but it also alters them in order to make a unique and reasonably coherent whole of them" (p. 161). Thus, a personal identity consists of characteristics that differentiate an individual from others, making general distinctiveness a feature of an adaptive identity (Pasupathi, 2014; Pilarska, 2014). Without any sense of distinctiveness from others, a personal identity might be very difficult if not impossible to construe (Codol, 1981; Vignoles et al., 2000). Because of this necessity for self-definition, general distinctiveness can be regarded as a human need (Brewer, 1991; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980).

Empirical research supports these theoretical notions, as previous findings showed that the characteristics that are perceived by individuals themselves as most distinct are often also deemed as most self-defining (Becker et al., 2012; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Colledge, & Scabini, 2006). In addition, individuals who feel more generally distinct have been found to ruminate less about identity issues and have stronger identity commitments (Pilarska & Suchańska, 2015). Because identity formation is a key task for young people (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968), features that indicate adaptive identity formation such as higher levels of general distinctiveness, should also indicate broader psychological well-being. Previous studies indeed supported this idea, as general distinctiveness was associated with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Pilarska, 2014; Şimşek & Yalınçetin, 2010).

Experiencing general distinctiveness should also predict higher social well-being. Personal identities are constructed within interpersonal contexts (Erikson, 1968) and higher quality relationships may therefore facilitate identity formation. In turn, having a clear identity might be beneficial for the development of personal relationships (Erikson, 1968). For example, individuals with a distinct identity might experience less fear to lose themselves within interpersonal relationships. Consistent with these ideas, previous findings showed that general distinctiveness was associated with stronger feelings of relatedness to others (Şimşek & Yalınçetin, 2010) and higher friendship quality (Demir, Şimşek, & Procsal, 2013).

Within the nomological network of general distinctiveness, the concept of narcissism is likely also important. Highly narcissistic individuals perceive themselves in grandiose terms (Back et al., 2013). Grandiosity partly overlaps with general distinctiveness, as it refers to perceiving the self as distinct in a positive way. To maintain a grandiose self, individuals can use two strategies: narcissistic admiration and rivalry (Back et al., 2013). Narcissistic

admiration, which is largely adaptive (e.g., related to short-term romantic appeal; Wurst et al., 2017), refers to repeatedly trying to reinstate the grandiose self by pursuing others' admiration and feelings of distinctiveness. This strategy might thus be strongly related to general distinctiveness. Narcissistic rivalry refers to protecting the grandiose self, for example by devaluing others. This strategy is more maladaptive, as it is related to problems within close relationships (Back et al., 2013; Wurst et al., 2017). Possibly, narcissistic rivalry is also more common among individuals high on general distinctiveness. Because the strategies differ in adaptiveness, knowledge on their links with general distinctiveness provides insight in the adaptiveness of general distinctiveness.

1.3. Nomological network of comparative distinctiveness

A second way of conceptualizing distinctiveness is by focusing on individuals' comparative distinctiveness. Studies using this approach focus on the extent to which individuals' self-perceptions deviate from their perceptions of specific others in their social contexts (e.g., Feixas, Erazo-Cacedo, Harter, & Bach, 2008; Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, & Meeus, 2009). Based on this pattern of perceived similarities and differences, a comparative distinctiveness score can be calculated.

The pattern of perceived similarities and distinctions likely (at least partly) informs individuals' sense of general distinctiveness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Therefore, both conceptualizations are likely related to a certain extent. Yet, there are also crucial differences. One key difference is that comparative distinctiveness focuses on specific others, whereas for general distinctiveness the others are not specified. Often, in studies on comparative distinctiveness, the focus is on important others (De Bonis, De Boeck, Lida-Pulik, & Féline, 1995; Feixas et al., 2008; Selfhout et al., 2009). This might affect associations with psychosocial well-being. That is, theories indicate that high comparative distinctiveness from important others is maladaptive. Optimal distinctiveness theory states that individuals have to find a balance between their need for distinctiveness and need for social inclusion (i.e., need for similarity and deindividuation; Brewer, 1991). Too high comparative distinctiveness from important others may reflect a lack of social inclusion, leading to feelings of social distance and isolation (Brewer, 1991). Furthermore, hypotheses on similarity and attraction in dyadic relationships predict that relationship satisfaction is positively related to perceived similarity between the self and other (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Morry, 2005; Selfhout et al., 2009), because perceiving these similarities results in feelings of self-recognition and self-reassurance and in more pleasant interactions. Consistent with theories, previous research demonstrated that comparative distinctiveness was negatively linked to attraction in close dyadic relationships (Montoya et al., 2008; Morry, 2005; Selfhout et al., 2009).

In addition to social well-being, high comparative distinctiveness from important others might be related to more maladaptive identity formation and lowered psychological well-being. Lacking social inclusion and feelings of self-recognition might lead to discomfort with the self (Brewer, 1991; Morry, 2007). Therefore, young adults who perceive high comparative distinctiveness might feel more distressed regarding identity issues and search for ways to revise their identity. In addition, this discomfort with the self might result in a less positive view on the self and one's life. Previously, studies based on personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) indicated that comparative distinctiveness from important others was higher in samples with various mental disorders (e.g., major depressive disorder, dysthymia, schizophrenia, and borderline personality disorder; De Bonis et al., 1995; Feixas et al., 2008).

In sum, theories and empirical findings suggest that, although distinctiveness is thought to be one of the features of an adaptive identity, it can in certain forms also have downsides. Comparative

distinctiveness from important others is likely a feature of more maladaptive (identity) development.

1.4. Distinctiveness versus commitment

General distinctiveness thus likely characterizes adaptive identity formation, whereas comparative distinctiveness from important others might indicate maladaptive identity formation. To further clarify the importance of distinctiveness within the broader process of identity formation, we compared the nomological networks of both conceptualizations to the nomological network of identification with commitment. Identity commitment is currently the best-validated marker of identity formation, represented in various influential models of identity formation (Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2006; Marcia, 1966). These models state that individuals make choices in several identity-relevant domains (e.g., romantic relationships and career). By integrating these commitments within their identity, these provide a sense of continuity (Crocetti et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2006). Obtaining a sense of continuity is especially important for young people, as they are expected to become increasingly independent with age and can no longer fully rely on childhood identifications (i.e., convictions directly adopted from their parents; Erikson, 1968). The construct identification with commitment captures individuals' certainty about identity choices and the integration of these choices within their identity (Luyckx et al., 2006).

Many previous studies have shown that identification with commitment is related to other indicators of identity formation, and social and psychological well-being. Young adults who identify more strongly with their commitments were found to experience less distress and rumination regarding identity issues (Luyckx et al., 2008; Sica, Sestito, & Ragozini, 2014). Moreover, they feel more strongly related to others and less lonely (Cicognani, Klimstra, & Goossens, 2014; Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Duriez, 2009) and report higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Luyckx et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2011). Consequently, identification with commitment is considered a validated marker of adaptive identity formation.

Adaptive identity formation can thus likely be conceptualized as a cluster of related features, such as a sense of general distinctiveness as well as strong commitments (Pasupathi, 2014; Van Doeselaar, Becht, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2018). To examine the role and importance of distinctiveness in the broader identity construct, we compared the nomological network of the two conceptualizations of distinctiveness to that of identification with commitment. We expected that the direction of general distinctiveness' associations with psychosocial well-being would be similar to those of identification with commitment. Moreover, we expected that comparative distinctiveness and identification with commitment would be differently associated with psychosocial well-being. In addition to comparing the associations between both distinctiveness conceptualizations and identification with commitment, we were interested in the incremental value of distinctiveness and commitment in predicting indicators of well-being. Comparing the different concepts on this provides valuable insights in the importance and added value of the distinctiveness conceptualizations and commitment.

1.5. The present research

In the present research, we studied the importance of two conceptualizations of distinctiveness – general and comparative distinctiveness – for psychosocial well-being, and for identity formation in particular. Our aim was to investigate the nomological networks of both conceptualizations, and compare these to each other and to the nomological network of identification with

commitment. Nomological networks were compared by testing differences in hypothesized associations and by exploring the uniqueness of predictions.

Because both distinctiveness conceptualizations reflect different aspects of the same construct, we expected them to be positively related. Yet, we expected that their nomological networks would differ. General distinctiveness, likely a feature of an adaptive identity, was expected to be negatively related to indicators of maladaptive identity formation, and positively related to indicators of psychological well-being, social well-being, and narcissistic strategies. Comparative distinctiveness from important others was expected to be indicative of a lack of social inclusion. Thus, we expected it to be negatively associated with indicators of social well-being. Additionally, we expected it to be negatively associated with psychological well-being and positively associated with maladaptive identity formation.

Identification with commitment was expected to be positively associated with general distinctiveness, but negatively associated with comparative distinctiveness from important others. Moreover, the nomological network of identification with commitment was expected to consist of associations that were in the same direction as those of general distinctiveness, but opposite to those of comparative distinctiveness from important others.

We examined these hypotheses in two studies with slightly different emphases. This allowed us to test whether findings could be replicated across two countries: the Netherlands and the United States (US). Moreover, Study 2 built on Study 1 by extending comparative distinctiveness' conceptualization to disliked others, in addition to important others.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Psychology students of Tilburg University filled out an online survey in exchange for course credit. After reading information about the study, participants provided their consent and completed the survey. From those who finished the survey, 320 (81.8%) were included in the analyses. Excluded participants seemed to provide careless responses, as they replied wrongly to at least one of two attention check items (i.e., “Always reply to this item with true” and “Here you should always click on strongly disagree”; Meade & Craig, 2012). This high percentage of careless responses is not uncommon among university students participating in studies for course credit (e.g., Donnellan, Lucas, & Cesario, 2015). The selected sample consisted for 70.3% of females ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.11$ years, $SD = 1.89$, Range = 17–28 years). Of these students, 60.9% were living at home with family and 96.9% identified themselves as (partially) Dutch. The local institutional review board of Tilburg University approved of this study (protocol number EC-2017.03).

2.1.2. Measures

Some measures (Personal Sense of Uniqueness scale, Identity Distress Survey, and Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs) were not yet available in Dutch and were translated from English following a procedure of translation and back-translation. The structure of these translated measures was tested by examining the inter-item correlations and with the use of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015). Findings resembled those of the original validation studies and provided evidence for the Dutch measures being acceptable (i.e., positive inter-item correlations, overall sufficient factor loadings, and acceptable model fits). The Dutch measures, information on

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations Study 1.

Variable	Descriptives					Correlations				Difference between correlations			
	α	Min	Max	M	SD	1a.	1b.	2.	3.	1a.	1b.	2.	3.
1. Comparative distinctiveness													
a. Repertory grid		0.02	0.57	0.26	0.11								
b. Big Five		−0.86	0.45	−0.14	0.22	0.21 ^{***}							
2. General distinctiveness	0.68	2.00	5.00	3.45	0.55	−0.05	0.07						
3. Identification with commitment	0.84	1.20	5.00	3.34	0.70	−0.10	−0.02	0.21 ^{***}					
<i>Maladaptive identity formation</i>													
4. Identity issues distress	0.68	1.00	4.43	2.35	0.61	0.15 ^{**}	0.09	−0.08	−0.40 ^{***}	A	A	B	C
5. Global identity distress	0.74	1.00	5.00	2.73	0.92	0.07	0.07	−0.15 ^{**}	−0.28 ^{***}	A	A	B	B
6. Ruminative exploration	0.87	1.00	5.00	2.94	0.94	0.12 [*]	0.13 [*]	−0.08	−0.67 ^{***}	A	A	B	C
<i>Social well-being</i>													
7. Relatedness	0.65	1.67	5.00	3.64	0.65	−0.28 ^{***}	−0.17 ^{**}	0.15 ^{**}	0.19 ^{***}	A	A	B	B
8. Parent-related loneliness	0.92	1.00	4.00	1.62	0.61	0.23 ^{***}	0.07	−0.07	−0.12 ^{**}	A	B	B, C	C
9. Peer-related loneliness	0.90	1.00	3.92	1.84	0.61	0.19 ^{***}	0.13 [*]	−0.16 ^{**}	−0.33 ^{***}	A	A	B	C
<i>Psychological well-being</i>													
10. Self-esteem	0.90	1.10	4.00	2.88	0.54	−0.17 ^{**}	−0.08	0.38 ^{***}	0.46 ^{***}	A	A	B	B
11. Life satisfaction	0.77	1.40	7.00	4.55	1.15	−0.21 ^{***}	−0.08	0.13 [*]	0.34 ^{***}	A	A	B	C
<i>Narcissistic strategies</i>													
12. Narcissistic admiration	0.82	1.00	6.00	2.64	1.03	−0.04	0.02	0.46 ^{***}	0.23 ^{***}	A	A	B	C
13. Narcissistic rivalry	0.55	1.00	5.33	2.16	0.87	0.22 ^{***}	0.12 [*]	0.16 ^{**}	−0.13 [*]	A	A	A	B

Note. If letters differ between variables 1a to 3 in the columns of 'Difference between correlations', the correlations with the variable in that row differed significantly ($p < .05$).

* $p < .05$.
 ** $p < .01$.
 *** $p < .001$.

the translation procedure, inter-item correlations, and the results of the CFAs are available in the online [supplementary material](#). Coefficient alphas of all used measures are shown in [Table 1](#).

2.1.2.1. General distinctiveness. The Personal Sense of Uniqueness scale measured participants' sense of general distinctiveness (Şimşek & Yalınçetin, 2010). It contained 5 items (e.g., "I think that the characteristics that make me up are different from others"), mostly focused on differences between the self and others in personal characteristics. Items were answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The instruction stated that differences from others could be either positive, neutral, or negative. This instruction was added to increase the chance that participants would not only focus on positive differences and to decrease potential social desirability effects.

2.1.2.2. Comparative distinctiveness. Prior to completing the comparative distinctiveness measures, participants listed seven important others and indicated who these were: 25.0% were parents, 16.5% siblings, 8.3% other family members, 47.5% peers, and 2.8% others. Subsequently, they filled out two measures as input to compute comparative distinctiveness.

First, a modified version of Kelly (1955) repertory grid was used. For each important other and themselves, participants wrote down one characteristic that described this person. In addition, participants provided an opposite characteristic of each of these eight characteristics. The advantage of this measure is that participants themselves report the characteristics, which increases the chance that these are personally meaningful. Next, a matrix was presented with a column for each important other and the self and a row for each of the 16 self-generated characteristics (in a random order). Participants reported for each important other and the self whether every characteristic described this person or not (i.e., a dichotomous score). From these responses, we calculated the proportion of scores on which the self differed from the important others.

Second, participants rated themselves and the seven important others on the Big Five of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. The Ten-Item Personality Inventory-revised (TIPI-r; Denissen, Geenen, Selfhout, & van Aken, 2007) measured each dimension with a single bipolar rating scale. In our computations of comparative distinctiveness, we controlled for the influence of normativeness. Controlling for normativeness is important, because having a more normative profile increases both the chance of having a profile that is more similar to others and the chance of having higher psychosocial well-being (Furr, 2008). Therefore, we first computed distinctive profiles by sample mean-centering the Big Five traits of participants and of important others (Furr, 2008; Rogers, Wood, & Furr, 2018). A distinctive profile showed how a person deviated from the normative profile. Next, we computed q -correlations between the distinctive profiles of participants and their important others. These correlations reflect distinctive similarity, which "captures the degree to which two profiles are similar in the ways they diverge from the average profile" (Rogers et al., 2018, p. 126). However, as we were interested in the opposite of similarity, we multiplied participants' average q -correlation between the self and all important others by minus one, so that higher scores reflected higher comparative distinctiveness.

2.1.2.3. Identification with commitment. Identification with commitment was assessed with a subscale of the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS; Luyckx et al., 2008). This subscale consisted of 5 items (e.g., "I sense that the direction I want to take in my life will really suit me"). Items of the DIDS were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

2.1.2.4. Maladaptive identity formation. Rumination about identity choices was measured with the 5-item ruminative exploration subscale of the DIDS (e.g., "I keep looking for the direction I want to take in my life"). Recent identity distress was assessed with two subscales of the Identity Distress Survey (IDS; Berman,

Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004; Hernandez, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2006). The Identity Issues Distress subscale consisted of worries regarding seven identity issues (e.g., long-term goals, friendships). The 2-item Global Identity Distress subscale assessed the extent to which the issues as a whole had resulted in discomfort and interference with everyday functioning. Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very severely*).

2.1.2.5. Social well-being. Sense of relatedness to others was assessed with the 6-item relatedness subscale of the Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (BMPN; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). Items (e.g., “I felt close and connected with other people who are important to me”) were answered on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*no agreement*) to 5 (*much agreement*). Additionally, we measured peer- and parent-related loneliness with two subscales of the Loneliness and Aloneness Scale for Children and Adolescents (LACA; Marcoen, Goossens, & Caes, 1987). To make this measure suitable for university students, items were slightly adjusted (e.g., ‘university’ replaced ‘school’). Items referring to ‘home’ were excluded, because it could have been unclear for participants living independently to which home these items referred. Peer-related loneliness was assessed with 12 items (e.g., “I feel sad because I have no friends”) and parent-related loneliness with 10 items (e.g., “I feel left out by my parents”), all rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*often*) to 4 (*never*).

2.1.2.6. Psychological well-being. The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) assessed self-esteem. Items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”) were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). In addition, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) assessed life satisfaction. The 5 items (e.g., “I feel that I’m a person of worth”) were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.1.2.7. Narcissistic strategies. The use of narcissistic strategies was measured with the Brief Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013). It consisted of two 3-item subscales: narcissistic admiration (e.g., “I deserve to be seen as a great personality”) and narcissistic rivalry (e.g., “Most people are somehow losers”). Items were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 6 (*agree completely*). Coefficient alpha of rivalry was somewhat low ($\alpha = 0.55$), likely because of the low number of items, but all items on rivalry were positively associated ($r_s = 0.15\text{--}0.36$).

2.1.3. Strategy of analysis

The nomological networks of general distinctiveness, comparative distinctiveness, and identification with commitment were examined using Pearson correlations. Next, we tested whether dependent correlations with similar outcomes differed significantly between the conceptualizations of distinctiveness and identification with commitment (e.g., the correlation between general distinctiveness and self-esteem, and the correlation between identification with commitment and self-esteem; Lee & Preacher, 2013, September; Steiger, 1980). Lastly, the unique predictive value of the conceptualizations of distinctiveness and identification with commitment was examined with multiple regression analyses.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Descriptive analyses

Descriptive statistics of all study variables are shown in Table 1. The two measures of comparative distinctiveness were significantly positively correlated, but rather weakly, $r = 0.21$. The correlation was $r = 0.42$, $p < .001$ when the Big Five comparative

distinctiveness score was not corrected for normativeness, however. This suggests that the repertory grid comparative distinctiveness score was confounded with the normativeness of the characteristics. Although the two comparative distinctiveness measures were conceptually similar, they were thus empirically different. Therefore, we did not collapse them into one broad comparative distinctiveness construct, but included them separately in our correlational analyses. In describing our results, we focus only on the results that replicated across both measures. Because only the Big Five comparative distinctiveness measure was corrected for normativeness, this measure can be interpreted more straightforwardly than the repertory grid measure. Therefore, we only included the Big Five comparative distinctiveness measure in the multiple regression analyses reported in this manuscript. Results of the multiple regression analyses including the repertory grid comparative distinctiveness are available in Table S9 of the online supplementary material.

2.2.2. Correlations

Correlations between the variables of interest are shown in Table 1. Unexpectedly, neither measure of comparative distinctiveness was significantly associated with general distinctiveness. Identification with commitment was significantly positively associated with general distinctiveness, but not associated with comparative distinctiveness.

General distinctiveness was negatively associated with global identity distress, but not with identity issues distress or ruminative exploration. Furthermore, young adults who felt more generally distinct reported higher social well-being. They scored higher on relatedness and lower on peer-related loneliness. Yet, general distinctiveness was not linked with parent-related loneliness. Moreover, feeling generally distinct was linked with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction. Lastly, young adults who felt generally more distinct reported higher levels of both narcissistic strategies. Except for parent-related loneliness and narcissistic rivalry, all of the associations of general distinctiveness differed from the associations of comparative distinctiveness.

Comparative distinctiveness was most consistently associated with the indicators of social well-being. Young adults who scored higher on comparative distinctiveness from important others felt less related to others and more peer-related loneliness. Yet, comparative distinctiveness was not (consistently) associated with parent-related loneliness. Regarding the associations with the indicators of maladaptive identity formation, comparative distinctiveness was consistently positively associated with rumination about identity choices. However, it was not significantly associated with identity issues distress or global identity distress. Furthermore, comparative distinctiveness was not significantly associated with self-esteem or life satisfaction. Lastly, comparative distinctiveness was significantly and positively associated with narcissistic rivalry, but not with narcissistic admiration.

Associations with indicators of maladaptive identity formation, social well-being, and psychological well-being were similar for identification with commitment and general distinctiveness in terms of sign (positive or negative) and strength. If the associations differed in strength, identification with commitment was a stronger correlate than general distinctiveness. Furthermore, associations with the narcissistic strategies differed. Admiration was more strongly positively associated with general distinctiveness than with identification with commitment. Rivalry was positively associated with general distinctiveness, but negatively with identification with commitment. The associations of identification with commitment with the validation measures differed significantly from those for comparative distinctiveness, with both constructs showing associations in different directions.

2.2.3. Multiple regression analyses

With multiple regression analyses, we tested the incremental predictive value of general distinctiveness, comparative distinctiveness, and identification with commitment relative to each other. Standardized coefficients of these analyses are available in Table 2.

In a first set of models, each indicator of maladaptive identity formation, social well-being, psychological well-being, and the narcissistic strategies was predicted by two variables: general distinctiveness and comparative distinctiveness (i.e., based on the Big Five). The standardized coefficients resulting from these analyses were highly comparable with the corresponding Pearson correlations. Significantly correlated variables were also significant predictors in the multiple regression, and their standardized estimates changed at most with 0.01. Controlling for one conceptualization of distinctiveness had thus no substantial effect on the associations with the other conceptualization of distinctiveness.

In a second set of models, identification with commitment was added as a predictor.

In these models, general distinctiveness had incremental value over identification with commitment in predicting relatedness, self-esteem, and the narcissistic strategies. Yet, several of the associations of general distinctiveness that were significant in the previous models weakened, $|\Delta|\beta_s \leq 0.09$, and became non-significant after including identification with commitment. Specifically, general distinctiveness was no longer significantly related to global identity distress, peer-related loneliness, and life satisfaction.

Including identification with commitment as a predictor had no substantial effect on the significant associations of comparative distinctiveness. It did not substantially reduce the significant associations of comparative distinctiveness with ruminative explo-

ration, relatedness, peer-related loneliness, and narcissistic rivalry, $|\Delta|\beta_s \leq 0.02$.

When controlling for general and comparative distinctiveness, identification with commitment was still significantly related to all variables it was initially associated with. Only the association with parent-related loneliness became non-significant. In general, identification with commitment thus showed to have unique predictive value in the concurrent prediction of almost all indicators.

2.2.4. Summary and discussion of findings

The findings indicated that general and comparative distinctiveness were empirically different. The two conceptualizations were unrelated and had significantly different nomological networks. Higher general distinctiveness was linked with slightly less identity distress, higher social and psychological well-being, and the use of narcissistic strategies. In contrast, higher comparative distinctiveness primarily indicated slightly lowered social well-being, as well as somewhat less rumination about identity issues. General distinctiveness' nomological network showed to be quite similar to that of identification with commitment, yet general distinctiveness had some incremental predictive value over identification with commitment. The associations of comparative distinctiveness with social well-being were not explained by general distinctiveness or identification with commitment.

That comparative distinctiveness from important others and general distinctiveness were unrelated and had different nomological networks might have partly been caused by the focus on important versus general others. In Study 1, the conceptualization of comparative distinctiveness was limited to important others, in line with previous studies (De Bonis et al., 1995; Feixas et al., 2008; Selfhout et al., 2009). Changing this focus to others to whom one is

Table 2
Standardized coefficients of the multiple regression analyses Study 1 and 2.

Independent variables	Dependent variables											
	Identity issues distress				Global identity distress				Ruminative exploration			
	$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$	
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Comparative distinctiveness	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.02	0.08	-0.02	0.07	-0.04	0.13*	-0.04	0.11**	-0.07
General distinctiveness	-0.09	-0.14*	0.00	-0.06	-0.16**	-0.23***	-0.10	-0.10	-0.09	-0.23***	0.06	-0.01
Identification with commitment			-0.39***	-0.21**			-0.26***	-0.37***			-0.68***	-0.62***
	Relatedness				Parent-related loneliness				Peer-related loneliness			
	$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$	
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Comparative distinctiveness	-0.18**	-0.17**	-0.18**	-0.16**	0.07	0.13**	0.07	0.13*	0.14**	0.04	0.13*	0.04
General distinctiveness	0.16**	0.25***	0.13*	0.17**	-0.07	-0.21***	-0.05	-0.17**	-0.17**	-0.23***	-0.10	-0.18**
Identification with commitment			0.16**	0.22***			-0.10	-0.10			-0.31***	-0.14*
	Self-esteem				Life satisfaction							
	$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$					
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2				
Comparative distinctiveness	-0.11*	0.02	-0.09	0.04	-0.09	-0.07	-0.08	-0.05				
General distinctiveness	0.39***	0.43***	0.30***	0.27***	0.13*	0.23***	0.06	0.08				
Identification with commitment			0.40***	0.46***			0.33***	0.41***				
	Narcissistic admiration				Narcissistic rivalry							
	$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$		$\beta_{Model 1}$		$\beta_{Model 2}$					
	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2				
Comparative distinctiveness	-0.01	-0.11	0.00	-0.09	0.11*	-0.04	0.11*	-0.04				
General distinctiveness	0.46***	0.48***	0.43***	0.38***	0.16**	-0.04	0.19***	-0.02				
Identification with commitment			0.14*	0.31***			-0.17**	-0.05				

Note. Comparative distinctiveness = Comparative distinctiveness from important others, based on the Big Five; S1 = Study 1; S2 = Study 2.

* $p < .05$.
 ** $p < .01$.
 *** $p < .001$.

not closely related could provide insights in how general distinctiveness is constructed and change comparative distinctiveness' nomological network substantially. This was undertaken in Study 2.

3. Study 2

In Study 2, we examined whether we could replicate the pattern of findings found in Study 1's Dutch young adult sample within a young adult US sample. Prior to data collection, we pre-registered the plan for this study (<https://osf.io/md23k/>). In addition to replicating the findings in another country, Study 2 extended Study 1. Possibly, individuals mostly focus on distinctions between themselves and unrelated others as input for their general sense of distinctiveness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Based on optimal distinctiveness theory, it can be expected that perceiving similarities between the self and close others satisfies individuals' need for social inclusion, whereas perceiving differences between the self and unrelated others satisfies the need for distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). Accordingly, individuals perceive themselves in general as more similar to liked others and more distinct from disliked others (Davis, 2017; Weller & Watson, 2009). Consequently, we tested in Study 2 whether comparative distinctiveness from disliked others was positively related to general distinctiveness, and whether these two conceptualizations of distinctiveness had a similar nomological network.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

Data for Study 2 were collected via crowdsourcing platform Prolific (<https://prolific.ac/>). The sample consisted of college students aged 18 to 23 years, living in the US. After reading information about the study, participants provided their consent and completed the online survey. For 5.6% of the participants, the survey stopped halfway because they failed the attention check item (i.e., "Here you should always click on strongly disagree"; Meade & Craig, 2012). Completing the full survey was rewarded with £2.10 (i.e., \$2.84). Most participants (about 90%) finished within 30 min. Of the 250 participants, those who did not mention seven important others ($n = 2$) or four disliked others ($n = 2$) were excluded. The selected sample of 246 students consisted of 39.8% females, 58.1% males, and 2.0% reported to be non-binary. Their average age was 20.91 years ($SD = 1.63$, Range = 18–24 years). Of the participants 12.6% were freshmen, 30.5% sophomores, 24.0% juniors, 24.4% seniors, and 7.7% graduate students. Furthermore, 59.3% of the participants indicated that they lived with parent(s)/family, while 40.7% indicated living outside the parental home. Participants identified themselves mostly as fully or partially White/European American (65.9%), Asian or Asian American (21.5%), Latinx or Hispanic (9.3%), or Black, African American, or African (9.3%) descent. The local institutional review board of Tilburg University approved of this study (protocol number EC-2017.03a2).

3.1.2. Measures

Most measures were English language versions of those used in Study 1. An exception to this was that instead of the 6-item version we used the full 18-item version of the NARQ (Back et al., 2013). In addition, based on participant comments in Study 1, we stated for the LACA parent-related loneliness subscale (Marcoen et al., 1987) that participants could report, if necessary, on the one parent they had most contact with or a person that came closest to fulfilling the parental role. Moreover, we clarified that questions about home

referred to the parental home. Coefficient alphas of all measures are reported in Table 3.

Another difference with Study 1 was that in Study 2 we only focused on the Big Five for comparative distinctiveness and that we extended this measure. Like in Study 1, participants listed seven important others and reported who these others were: 14.6% were parents, 12.6% siblings, 4.9% other family members, 65.4% peers, and 2.4% others. Additionally, participants listed four disliked others. To help participants come up with individuals they disliked, four descriptions based on Kelly (1955) role titles were provided: a boy and a girl that participants did not like when they were in high school (or when they were about 16 years old), and a male and female whom they would dislike having as a companion on a trip. Across all listed disliked others, 57.2% were former classmates, 37.4% other peers, 4.2% family members, and 1.2% others. The procedure to compute comparative distinctiveness scores was equal to the procedure in Study 1. To control for normative profiles, we separately centered the Big Five traits of participants, important others, and disliked others prior to compute q -correlations (Rogers et al., 2018).

3.1.3. Strategy of analysis

First, we replicated the analyses we performed in Study 1. Second, we performed multiple regression analyses in which comparative distinctiveness from disliked others predicted the same dependent variables as those included in Study 1, together with one of the other conceptualizations of distinctiveness or with identification with commitment.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Descriptive analyses

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of all study variables. Individuals perceived themselves on average as more distinct from disliked others than from important others, $t(245) = 5.05$, $p < .001$.

3.2.2. Correlations

Correlations between all variables of interest are shown in Table 3 and resembled those found in Study 1. For general distinctiveness there were a few exceptions to this. Specifically, in Study 2, general distinctiveness was significantly associated with all maladaptive identity formation and social well-being indicators and not with only one out of three or two out of three indicators, respectively. Moreover, unlike in Study 1, there was no significant association with narcissistic rivalry. Similar to Study 1, almost all associations of general distinctiveness differed significantly from those of comparative distinctiveness from important others. Findings for comparative distinctiveness from important others also resembled Study 1's findings. However, this time, it was significantly positively associated with parent-related loneliness instead of peer-related loneliness, and not significantly associated with ruminative exploration or narcissistic rivalry.

All associations of general distinctiveness and identification commitment were in the same direction. Similar to Study 1, about half of these associations did not differ significantly in strength. Although identification with commitment was more strongly associated with two indicators of maladaptive identity formation and with the indicators of psychological well-being, its associations with the indicators of social well-being and with identity issues distress did not differ significantly from general distinctiveness. Like in Study 1, comparative distinctiveness from important others' associations with social well-being differed significantly from those of identification with commitment.

Unexpectedly, comparative distinctiveness from disliked others was not significantly associated with general distinctiveness. Moreover, it was not significantly associated with comparative dis-

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations Study 2.

Variable	Descriptives					Correlations				Difference between correlations			
	α	Min	Max	M	SD	1a.	1b.	2.	3.	1a.	1b.	2.	3.
1. Comparative distinctiveness													
a. Disliked others		−0.89	0.75	0.05	0.30								
b. Important others		−0.83	0.51	−0.07	0.24	0.06							
2. General distinctiveness	0.69	1.60	5.00	3.62	0.61	−0.05	0.04						
3. Identification with commitment	0.88	1.00	5.00	3.22	0.88	0.03	−0.04	0.35***					
<i>Maladaptive identity formation</i>													
4. Identity issues distress	0.68	1.00	5.00	2.29	0.65	0.01	0.02	−0.13*	−0.24***	A	A	A, B	B
5. Global identity distress	0.79	1.00	5.00	2.84	1.05	0.06	−0.03	−0.23***	−0.40***	A	A	B	C
6. Ruminative exploration	0.86	1.00	5.00	3.60	0.95	−0.03	−0.05	−0.23***	−0.62***	A	A	B	C
<i>Social well-being</i>													
7. Relatedness	0.57	1.33	5.00	3.25	0.66	0.07	−0.16*	0.24***	0.29***	A	B	A, C	C
8. Parent-related loneliness	0.93	1.00	4.00	2.08	0.72	0.00	0.13*	−0.20**	−0.17**	A, C	A	B	B, C
9. Peer-related loneliness	0.90	1.00	4.00	2.43	0.69	0.03	0.04	−0.23***	−0.20**	A	A	B	B
<i>Psychological well-being</i>													
10. Self-esteem	0.91	1.00	4.00	2.60	0.60	−0.07	0.03	0.43***	0.55***	A	A	B	C
11. Life satisfaction	0.88	1.00	6.80	3.73	1.47	−0.01	−0.07	0.23***	0.44**	A	A	B	C
<i>Narcissistic strategies^a</i>													
12. Narcissistic admiration	0.82	1.00	5.44	3.07	0.83	0.04	−0.09	0.48***	0.45***	A	A	B	B
13. Narcissistic rivalry	0.81	1.00	5.44	2.37	0.85	0.05	−0.04	−0.04	−0.06	A	A	A	A

Note. If letters differ between variables 1a to 3 in the columns of 'Difference between correlations', the correlations with the variable in that row differed significantly ($p < .05$).

^a Based on the brief NARQ (like used in Study 1) the correlations with comparative distinctiveness (disliked others), comparative distinctiveness (important others), general distinctiveness, and identification with commitment would be 0.07, -0.16^* , 0.35^{***} , and 0.36^{***} for admiration, and 0.04, -0.05 , -0.01 , and -0.03 for rivalry, respectively.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

distinctiveness from important others, identification with commitment, or any of the other study measures.

3.2.3. Multiple regression analyses

Standardized coefficients of the multiple regression analyses are available in Table 2.

Results of the analyses with comparative distinctiveness from important others and general distinctiveness as predictors showed that controlling for either distinctiveness conceptualization had no substantial effect on the associations of the other distinctiveness conceptualization. Significant associations remained significant and their standardized estimates changed at most with 0.01. This replicated the findings of Study 1.

When identification with commitment was added as predictor, general distinctiveness' associations with the maladaptive identity formation indicators and life satisfaction weakened, $|\Delta|\beta| \leq 0.22$, and became non-significant. However, like in Study 1, general distinctiveness still predicted relatedness, self-esteem, and narcissistic admiration. Moreover, general distinctiveness had incremental value in the prediction of peer- and parent-related loneliness. Resembling Study 1's findings, including identification with commitment as predictor did not substantially reduce the significant associations of comparative distinctiveness from important others with relatedness and parent-related loneliness, $\Delta\beta \leq 0.01$. When controlling for general and comparative distinctiveness, only one association of identification with commitment became non-significant. Like in Study 1, identification with commitment was no longer significantly related to parent-related loneliness.

Moreover, a series of multiple regression analyses showed that controlling for comparative distinctiveness from disliked others did not substantially change any of the standardized estimates for comparative distinctiveness from important others, general distinctiveness, and identification with commitment ($|\Delta| \leq 0.01$), as estimated in the correlations. For this reason, comparative distinctiveness from disliked others was not taken into account any further in the multiple regression analyses.

3.2.4. Summary of findings

Generally, findings of Study 2 replicated Study 1's pattern of findings.¹ Like in Study 1, general distinctiveness and comparative distinctiveness from important others were unrelated. General distinctiveness was consistently associated with less maladaptive identity formation, greater social and psychological well-being, and narcissistic admiration. About half of the time, these small to moderate associations were as strong as the associations of identification with commitment. Moreover, general distinctiveness had incremental value over identification with commitment in predicting social well-being, self-esteem, and narcissistic admiration. Like in Study 1, comparative distinctiveness from important others had modest but unique predictive value in predicting young adults' social well-being. Study 2's findings furthermore showed that comparative distinctiveness from disliked others was not associated with general distinctiveness or psychosocial well-being.

4. General discussion

In two studies, we showed that general and comparative distinctiveness are two very different sides of the same coin. The two conceptualizations of distinctiveness were unrelated and had significantly different nomological networks and unique predictive properties.² Higher general distinctiveness was associated with slightly more adaptive identity formation and higher social and psychological well-being. Moreover, although commitment strength appeared to be the strongest marker of adaptive identity formation, our findings also revealed that general distinctiveness had incremen-

¹ Findings of Study 1 and Study 2 were also meta-analytically aggregated (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). Results of the meta-analytic aggregation were largely identical to the findings in Study 1 and Study 2 separately, and are displayed in Tables S11 and S12 in the online supplementary material.

² Findings of analyses on curvilinear associations of distinctiveness with psychosocial well-being are discussed in the online supplementary material and displayed in Table S10 and Figs. S1–S7. These were added as exploratory analyses and were not included in our pre-registration of Study 2.

tal value in predicting young adults' concurrent adjustment. For comparative distinctiveness, it was crucial to take into account on which others this construct focused. Our findings did not show any predictive value for comparative distinctiveness from disliked others, but perceiving comparative distinctiveness from important others was a unique marker of slightly lowered social well-being.

4.1. Two conceptualizations of distinctiveness

That young adults' sense of general distinctiveness was unrelated to their comparative distinctiveness was unexpected, because perceived differences between the self and others have been thought to stimulate individuals' sense of general distinctiveness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Key differences between these two conceptualizations that could explain this incongruence are the focus on specific others and specific characteristics for comparative distinctiveness, whereas the constituting factors are more abstract for general distinctiveness.

Our findings do eliminate two potential explanations for the incongruence between general and comparative distinctiveness. First, Study 2 showed that comparative distinctiveness from important and disliked others were both unrelated to general distinctiveness. This suggests that the focus on specific versus general others might not be the primary cause for the incongruence. Second, in Study 1's comparative distinctiveness measure that was based on Kelly (1955) repertory grid, participants used their own personally relevant characteristics to describe themselves and others. Although for the comparative Big Five measures one could wonder whether these accurately capture the characteristics on which participants base their sense of general distinctiveness, this is less of a question for the repertory grid measure. Yet, even when focusing on personally relevant characteristics, comparative distinctiveness was unrelated to general distinctiveness. Thus, focusing on pre-specified characteristics for comparative distinctiveness does not seem to be causing the incongruence with general distinctiveness.

A remaining possible reason for incongruence between the two conceptualizations is the way that comparative distinctiveness characteristics are aggregated into one score. For instance, individuals might perceive themselves as extremely open and therefore very distinct, although the other four Big Five traits are highly similar to others. Because of this, it might be hard if not impossible to trace individuals' sense of general distinctiveness back to their perceptions of themselves and others using generalized measures. Future studies might tap into this by asking participants to rate the relative importance of the distinctiveness dimensions, and using these ratings as weights before computing an overall comparative distinctiveness index. Alternatively, qualitative measures might be useful to get insight into how participants translate perceived comparative distinctiveness into global impressions of general distinctiveness. For example, individuals scoring high and low on general distinctiveness might be asked to elaborate on differences and similarities with various categories of other individuals, in terms of various psychological dimensions.

4.1.1. General distinctiveness

Distinctiveness has been stated to be a feature of an adaptive identity (Erikson, 1968; Pasupathi, 2014). Our research confirmed this assertion, as young adults who felt more generally distinct experienced slightly less problems in identity formation and had stronger commitments, thereby replication previous findings obtained in a heterogeneous (in terms of education and backgrounds) sample of Polish young adults (Pilarska & Suchańska, 2015). Together, these findings indicate that general distinctiveness is a marker of more adaptive identity formation in young adulthood.

Because identity formation is a key developmental task in young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968), general distinctiveness was also expected to be an indicator of broader well-being among young adults. Our findings confirmed that young adults who felt more generally distinct experienced higher psychosocial well-being. They felt more related to others, less lonely, had higher self-esteem, and higher life satisfaction. This further suggests that feeling generally distinct is important for young adults in Western societies.

In addition, general distinctiveness' nomological network was expected to include the use of narcissistic strategies. Our findings showed that general distinctiveness was positively associated with narcissistic admiration. Yet, the association with rivalry was generally non-significant. Previous studies showed that the use of narcissistic admiration predicts more beneficial outcomes, whereas narcissistic rivalry is predictive of more maladaptive outcomes (Back et al., 2013; Wurst et al., 2017). Hence, these findings provide additional evidence that general distinctiveness is an adaptive conceptualization of distinctiveness.

4.1.2. Comparative distinctiveness

As expected, based on the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) and hypotheses on similarity and attraction (Morry, 2005), our findings showed consistently that young adults with high levels of comparative distinctiveness from important others experienced lowered social well-being. They felt less related to others and lonelier. These findings correspond with and extend previous findings that demonstrated negative associations between comparative distinctiveness and attraction in close dyadic relationships (Montoya et al., 2008; Morry, 2005; Selfhout et al., 2009).

Furthermore, we had expected that high comparative distinctiveness from important others would be related to discomfort with the self, and thus with maladaptive identity processes and lower psychological well-being. Our findings did not show much support for these hypotheses. High levels of comparative distinctiveness from important others were primarily indicative of lowered social well-being and this did not seem to spillover to other domains of adjustment. This latter finding does not seem to correspond with previous studies based on Kelly (1955) repertory grid technique, which found that comparative distinctiveness from primarily important others was higher in samples suffering from various psychological disorders (De Bonis et al., 1995; Feixas et al., 2008). Yet, our findings also showed that when comparative distinctiveness from important others was derived from self-formulated traits (i.e., based on the repertory grid), it more often resulted in significantly negative correlations with well-being than when it was based on the Big Five and controlled for normative profiles. Normativeness refers to the extent to which characteristics are common in the population, and is related to psychosocial well-being (Furr, 2008; Wood & Furr, 2016). In our first study, the link between repertory grid and Big Five comparative distinctiveness weakened substantially when the latter was corrected for normative profiles. Findings based on the repertory grid are thus likely confounded by normativeness of traits. Hence, although the personal relevance of self-formulated traits might partially drive the stronger associations between repertory grid measures of comparative distinctiveness and well-being, the main driver behind these associations likely is the normativeness of the traits.

Extending the conceptualization of comparative distinctiveness to disliked others showed that on average individuals perceived themselves as more distinct from disliked others compared to important others (see also Davis, 2017; Weller & Watson, 2009). Still, comparative distinctiveness from disliked others was not related to any indicator of social or psychological well-being, identity formation, or the narcissistic strategies. Like the absence of a link between comparative and general distinctiveness, this finding

suggests that the need for distinctiveness is fulfilled by a more abstract experience of differences from others.

The current findings confirm that distinctiveness is not a uniform concept. While it was a sign of positive adjustment to experience high levels of one conceptualization of distinctiveness, experiencing high levels of another conceptualization marked negative adjustment. These findings highlight the importance of being explicit about the precise conceptualization of distinctiveness in future studies.

4.2. Distinctiveness versus commitment

In addition to distinctiveness, an adaptive identity is thought to be characterized by strong identity commitments that provide young adults a sense of continuity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Pasupathi, 2014). To get more insight in the importance of distinctiveness for identity formation, we compared the nomological networks of both conceptualizations of distinctiveness with the network of identification with commitment. Our findings revealed that comparative distinctiveness' associations with young adults' psychosocial well-being were unique, whereas those of general distinctiveness and identification with commitment partly overlapped. This shows that comparative distinctiveness from important others has incremental value in signaling young adults' social well-being. Moreover, that general distinctiveness' predictions partly overlapped with those of a well-validated marker of identity formation further supports that general distinctiveness is part of a broader overall cluster of adaptive identity features.

Further comparisons showed that young adults' commitment was overall a stronger marker of an adaptive identity than general distinctiveness. Yet, our findings also showed that compared to commitment, general distinctiveness was in quite some cases an equally strong marker and for some aspects – social well-being and self-esteem – even had incremental predictive value. Our findings validate the strong focus on commitments in studies on identity formation (see Meeus, 2011; Van Doeselaar et al., 2018), but also indicate that an adaptive identity not only consists of strong commitments. So far, studies focusing on different adaptive identity features have been rare (see Van Doeselaar et al., 2018), and our findings show that researchers and practitioners should consider multiple relevant identity features.

4.3. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Important strengths of the present research were that we examined our hypotheses in two studies with adequate sample sizes to detect even small associations.³ Moreover, these studies focused on young adults from two different continents. The same pattern of findings was found across studies, demonstrating the robustness of our findings. Future studies could examine whether our findings can be generalized to samples from non-Western cultures. Experiencing differences between oneself and others has previously been found to be a more important source of distinctiveness in more individualistic cultures (Becker et al., 2012). Consequently, the nomological networks of general and comparative distinctiveness could be somewhat different in more collectivistic cultures.

Other strengths of our studies were the various measures that were included. Besides assessing individuals' distinctiveness with a self-report questionnaire, we also assessed distinctiveness more indirectly. Specifically, we asked participants to rate themselves and others on various characteristics and calculated the degree of

distinctiveness based on these ratings. Our results illustrated that this provides two different perspectives. Furthermore, comparative distinctiveness was measured in multiple ways, varying in the characteristics and the others that participants focused on. Additionally, our studies included multiple indicators of various constructs, all hypothesized to be related to distinctiveness. That associations were generally found across multiple indicators of a construct further confirms the robustness of these findings. Moreover, by including a broad range of constructs, our studies provide a good overview of the nomological networks of conceptualizations of distinctiveness.

Nevertheless, the present research also has limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, although we brought two key conceptualizations of distinctiveness together, more conceptualizations exist. Both conceptualizations of distinctiveness in the present research focused on perceived differences from others as this was previously shown to be the key source of distinctiveness (Becker et al., 2012). However, distinctiveness can also be achieved by focusing on one's sense of separateness from others or one's social position (Vignoles et al., 2000). Moreover, fundamental for individual distinctiveness in general is a basic awareness and recognition of the self (Codol, 1981; Vignoles et al., 2000). Generally, this awareness develops early in life (see Harter, 2012), but when detrimentally affected, a lack of this rudimentary form of distinctiveness is thought to result in psychotic symptoms (Kernberg & Caligor, 2005). Our findings on two conceptualizations of distinctiveness already showed that the unitary label of 'distinctiveness' masks the existence of separate concepts. To get a better understanding of distinctiveness, future studies might examine similarities and differences between the nomological networks of even more conceptualizations.

Second, our operationalizations of general and comparative distinctiveness both focused predominantly on individual differences in traits. An advantage of this approach was that it allowed us to control for profile normativeness when computing comparative distinctiveness based on the Big Five traits. Moreover, by using an operationalization of general distinctiveness that seems to also focus mostly on traits, our comparative and general distinctiveness measures became more comparable. Nevertheless, distinctiveness can also be based on other differences between individuals than traits. For instance, individuals could perceive differences in abilities and physical characteristics (Vignoles et al., 2000). Future research could examine if the current findings are replicable when broader operationalizations of individual differences are used.

Third, our findings are based on cross-sectional data and provide no empirical evidence for causality. Future longitudinal studies could investigate directionality and examine whether distinctiveness contributes to individuals' adjustment and/or vice versa.

Fourth, the present research was limited to young adulthood and findings might be different in other age groups. General distinctiveness has been suggested to form the foundation for identity formation (Pasupathi, 2014), which has been theorized to start in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents generally struggle to achieve a sense of autonomy and individuality (Koepeke & Denissen, 2012), which could strengthen their need for distinctiveness. Future studies should examine the nomological networks of distinctiveness at different periods across the life span.

5. Conclusion

The present findings demonstrate that distinctiveness is not a uniform construct. It can be conceptualized in multiple, unrelated, ways, which uniquely predict young adults' well-being. Perceiving many distinctions between the self and important others was

³ The sample of 320 participants in Study 1 provided sufficient power, 0.80, to detect correlations of 0.16 and stronger, and the sample of 246 participants in Study 2 to detect correlations of 0.18 and stronger ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

linked to lowered social well-being among young adults. Nevertheless, feeling generally more distinct was a feature of a more adaptive identity and was linked with greater psychosocial well-being. Paying careful attention to the precise conceptualization of distinctiveness is essential, because distinctiveness is an important but complex concept.

Open practices

A time-stamped preregistration of the hypotheses, sampling plan, and analysis plan for Study 2 is available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://osf.io/md23k/>). Study 1 was not preregistered. Data of Study 1 and Study 2 are also available on the OSF: <https://osf.io/b7qpu/>. Materials are available via the online [supplementary materials](#) or via the manuscripts on the construction of these measures.

Declarations of interest

None.

Author's contribution

Lotte van Doeselaar was responsible for conceiving and designing the studies, collecting the data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and writing the paper. Theo A. Klimstra, Jaap J.A. Denissen, and Wim Meeus actively assisted in designing the studies, analyzing and interpreting the data, and writing the paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2018.12.002>.

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