Review

Adolescent identity development in context
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Abstract
One of the key developmental tasks in adolescence is to develop a coherent identity. Studies have increasingly begun to go beyond the study of mean level identity change and examine the underlying mechanisms of identity development at the intraindividual, microlevel, that is, at the level where development is taking place: within the person, in here and now experiences and relationships. Identity development during adolescence is characterized by both systematic maturation and substantial stability. Life events and transitions, as well as accumulating real-time experiences, might play a role in identity development. Optimal development of identity is embedded in high-quality family relationships and friendships in which constructive narrative processes take place.

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Developing a coherent sense of identity is a key developmental task in adolescence and young adulthood [1]. Adolescents begin to explore their identity and increasingly develop a subjective feeling of self-sameness and continuity over contexts and time. The last couple of years, the focus has shifted from understanding mean level change and associations at the group level to understanding the within-person mechanisms underlying identity development in the context of adolescents' daily lives [2]. Identity is enacted at the microlevel in daily experiences and relational contexts with parents and peers, in which adolescents receive feedback on their self-perceptions. Adolescents might particularly change their identity in periods with transitions or salient life events that require them to reconsider who they are and which direction they want to take in their lives. Understanding identity change thus requires assessment of within-person mechanism microprocesses of identity and a focus on transitional periods.

Processes of identity development
Adolescents are thought to experience an identity crisis before developing a clear and stable identity [1]. This idea is reflected in the dual-cycle identity model, which focuses on development of the identity processes of exploration and commitment along two interrelated cycles [3]. In the identity formation cycle, adolescents question their identity, explore identity alternatives, and form identity commitments. In the identity maintenance cycle, they further strengthen chosen commitments in a dynamic between identity commitment and in-depth exploration of current commitments. Based on these processes, adolescents are thought to develop identity synthesis, or the extent to which they perceive themselves consistently and feel sure of themselves. In line with the dual-cycle model, commitment making tends to be negatively associated with exploration in breadth, exploration in depth tends to be positively associated with identification with commitments, and reconsideration tends to be negatively associated with identification with commitments [4].

Longitudinal studies on identity statuses and the underlying identity processes of commitment, exploration, and reconsideration with assessments every year or every few years show that there is considerable stability in identity across adolescence and young adulthood, but when there is developmental change, this change is mostly in the direction of stronger identity commitments [5−7]. Identity synthesis shows a comparable pattern of moderate increase [8−10]. However, identity distress developed curvilinearly from age 14 to 30 years, with a peak in distress occurring in emerging adulthood [11]. Overall, these findings show that identity matures slowly but systematically during adolescence and young adulthood.

Moreover, identity development is thought to result in increasing integration across identity domains, such as

educational and interpersonal identity, and changes in commitment and exploration processes in these domains become more strongly intertwined into late adolescence [12]. However, global identity processes could only partly explain domain-specific identity processes in young adulthood [13], and thus also in young adulthood, it remains important to distinguish between different identity domains.

Identity development at individual level
Studies using interindividual analyses have shown that adolescents who experience more uncertainty about the self than other adolescents, characterized by lower commitments that might be combined with high levels of exploration, typically tend to remain more uncertain than their peers across adolescence [14]. Although one might conclude from these relatively stable interindividual differences in adolescent identity that an identity crisis is not necessary for developing a coherent identity, these findings do not rule out that individual adolescents go through periods of uncertainty before establishing a more mature identity, irrespective of their level of identity certainty relative to peers. Research has increasingly focused on these intraindividual processes of identity development to capture how identity reorganizations occur within individual adolescents.

At the within-person level, in years when adolescents reported higher-than-usual reconsideration, they also reported lower-than-usual commitments in the educational and interpersonal domain [15], and when adolescents reported lower educational commitments in a particular year, they reported higher-than-usual reconsideration in the subsequent year. Relatedly, when adolescents scored higher than usual on identity synthesis, they reported higher-than-usual proactive exploration processes one year later [16]. For interpersonal identity, however, higher reconsideration in a particular year was followed by stronger commitments the next year [15]. These within-person findings suggest that reconsideration goes hand in hand with weaker commitments and that reaching a degree of identity synthesis is a prerequisite for proactive identity exploration. The overtime within-person effect of reconsideration on commitment suggests that reconsideration might be a prerequisite to find new commitments and supports the idea that identity commitments result from identity uncertainty.

Identity processes in daily live
Although these within-person findings are important, identity is thought to emerge from the accumulation of real-time interactions of adolescents in their daily context [17]. In recent years, researchers have therefore started to pay increasing attention to within-person microlevel processes, focusing on day-to-day changes in identity rather than on change across longer intervals [2]. On average, when female students reported more-than-usual daily commitment in the educational domain, they reported less-than-usual exploration of fit and reconsideration and more-than-usual exploration of self at the within-person level [18]. But 50–60% of individuals showed a negative daily correlation between exploration and commitment, whereas a minority showed a positive or negligible relation. It is thus important for future research to examine which factors can explain the large heterogeneity in within-person microlevel identity processes. Knowledge of these microlevel processes of identity has been used to develop interventions for youth who struggle with identity development [19].

Development of identity in relation to life events and daily experiences
Adolescents and young adults develop a sense of self during a phase of life that involves many role changes. Most studies examined dual-cycle processes of identity while ignoring contextual demands, yet these salient transitions, such as entering tertiary education, initiating intimate relationships, and joining the workforce, may increase the salience of identity processes and go hand in hand with identity changes [17]. Individuals need to integrate these important experiences into their identity as important points of continuity or change. Heterogeneity in the development of educational commitment and reconsideration across the transition to tertiary education indeed revealed that a sizable minority showed either more or less adaptive patterns after the transition, which were meaningfully associated with sociodemographic, academic, individual, and relational characteristics [20]. Thus, transitioning into new roles may foster — or present challenges to — the development of the self, and research on identity should take into account these contextual factors.

Incidental stressful life events, such as an illness or a relational breakup, can also serve as turning points in the development of identity [21]. Such events can induce feelings of discontinuity and force adolescents to reconsider their identity, reflected in weaker commitments and more exploration and reconsideration, and an overall sense of identity diffusion [22, 23]. However, two recent studies did not find strong evidence for longitudinal associations between stressful life events and identity processes. Concrete life events were not significantly related to within-person changes in identity commitments, exploration, and reconsideration [24]. Also, stressful life events were not significantly longitudinally related to interpersonal commitments and bidirectionally negatively related to career commitments in one of two samples only [25]. Future research should examine whether the role of life events in identity formation depends on how adolescents perceive and cope with these events and integrate them into their identity.

Rather than major life events, positive and negative daily emotional experiences tend to be related to increases in microlevel educational commitment [26]. Also, among students doing a clinical internship, real-time fulfillment versus frustration of the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy was related to stronger and weaker commitments, respectively [27]. Future research needs to address how these accumulating daily experiences affect identity development. In line with the assimilation—accommodation perspective [17], a single negative experience might result in assimilation, or a change in the interpretation of the experience to keep the commitment intact. When negative experiences accumulate, individuals may need to accommodate, resulting in a decrease in commitment.

Within-person associations of identity and psychosocial adjustment

Underlining the importance of identity in adolescents' lives, adolescents with higher identity synthesis have consistently been found to report higher levels of psychosocial adjustment. Identity uncertainty is related to a broad range of psychosocial problems, such as internalizing problems [5,7,28,25], loneliness [29], externalizing problems [5,28,30], and substance use [31]. In addition, more adaptive identity processes predict positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction and self-esteem [32], civic beliefs [33], and academic engagement [34,32], and achievement [35], and can buffer the associations of discrimination [36] and peer delinquency [30] with adjustment problems. A clearer identity might help adolescents to differentiate themselves from others as a separate, autonomous person and respect their own boundaries. In sum, adolescents with a more coherent and clear identity tend to do better in many areas of life. Interventions targeting adolescents' identity show promising effects on adolescents' identity and adjustment [37,38].

Research has also started to explore the within-person associations between identity and psychosocial adjustment, to examine whether change in identity triggers change in adjustment at individual level. A within-person increase in identity uncertainty predicted a within-person increase in depressive symptoms one year later but not vice versa, suggesting a role of identity uncertainty in the development of depressive symptoms over time [39]. Also, increasing delinquency predicted weaker identity commitments and more identity reconsideration, and an increase of in-depth exploration predicted a decrease in delinquency one year later [40]. These findings show identity uncertainty and psychosocial problems reciprocally affect each other. Future research should however also take into account the content of adolescents' identity, as identity struggles might result in feelings of despair and ways of coping

that make youth develop a negative identity in which they identify with roles opposed to societal expectations [41].

Identity and relationships

Identity concerns not only the experience of self-sameness and continuity of the self but also the extent to which this experience corresponds with the sameness and continuity of one's meaning to significant others, such as family members and friends. In interactions with others, adolescents receive self-relevant feedback [42] which they can use to strengthen or adjust their identity commitments. Supportive and responsive relationships with family members and friends also form a secure base from which adolescents can confidently explore identity options.

Several recent studies provided evidence for the role of family and peer relationships in development of identity. A higher degree of identity consolidation, commitment, or exploration in-depth have been associated with a higher perceived family climate [43], more family cohesion [44], higher parental trust and lower emotional separation [45], and more support from parents and siblings [46], whereas more conflict in family relationships is related to lower commitments and more ruminative exploration [46,44]. Support from friends was related to relational and educational identity [24], and higher autonomy support from friends reduces adolescents' problematic educational reconsideration [47]. Also, adolescents' identification with their classmates and with their group of friends predicted stronger interpersonal identity commitment and exploration, as well as lower reconsideration [12]. These findings suggest that when adolescents are comfortable and at ease with their family members and friends and in their larger peer groups, they have a basis from which they can explore their identity.

Adolescents also narrate about their life events and experiences with family and friends, which helps them make sense of their experiences and form a more coherent identity. Having a high-quality friendship has been associated with making redemption sequences and self-event connections in one's identity narrative [48]. A qualitative study showed three overarching microlevel patterns during real-time interactions with peers that advanced exploration [49]. These findings are important as they tap into more concrete commitment making and exploration processes. As the quite global identity processes that are typically assessed might be unconscious [50] and might not always optimally reflect the mechanisms of identity formation [4], it is important to grasp these meaningful real-time experiences and microlevel behaviors adolescents engage in that contribute to identity formation [51].

As adolescents develop a clearer sense of identity, they are also better able to engage in positive interactions with others. Adaptive educational identity processes foster autonomy supportive interactions [47], and a study examining within-person associations [52] indicated that although relationship quality with parents — and not with friends — affected subsequent self-concept clarity, self-concept clarity affected subsequent relationship quality with both parents and friends. In sum, adolescents who experience closeness and acceptance in relationships with parents and friends tend to experience less difficulties in developing a clear identity.

Conclusions

Identity development does not take place within a vacuum, but in the context of real-time interactions with important others such as parents and peers [53]. Theory suggests that life transitions and life events might trigger identity change, whereas emerging evidence suggests that accumulating real-time experiences and relational contexts in which identity emerges are the driving mechanisms of intraindividual identity development. Development of identity is fostered by high levels of closeness and relatedness to parents, and a more mature identity helps adolescents establish high-quality friendships in which constructive narrative processes take place. Certainty about oneself is closely related to better functioning in multiple domains. Within-person developmental processes in identity suggest that identity uncertainty might result in feelings of despair and less adaptive ways of coping. Future research should link real-time concrete identity processes during specific transitional periods to long-term intraindividual identity formation processes to increase our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of identity formation.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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*   of special interest
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