

**Predictors of Identity Exploration among Adolescents: Relationships with
Parents and Close Friends as Mediated by Identity Processing Style**

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ABSTRACT

Erikson described the key task in adolescence as identity formation (1960). Since then the question of identity formation in adolescence has been studied in various ways (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2015). Initially, much of identity formation research dealt with Marcia's identity status paradigm, which proposes four identity statuses (1966, 1980, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 2002). Over the past ten years, research has sought to identify factors which predict and mediate two aspects of identity formation: *exploration*—when the adolescent explores alternative identities and their own identity conflict, and *commitment*—when the adolescent chooses an identity through that conflict (Schwartz et al, 2015).

This study examines a multi-dimensional model explaining the process of adolescent identity exploration and identity commitment. Researchers (Côté & Levine, 2014; Crocetti, 2017; Grotevant, 1987; Kerpelman, Pittman & Lamke, 1997; Marcia, 1993) have examined models explaining the contribution of the social context to identity formation processes. These models (e.g., Grotevant, 1987) stress the contribution of social contexts in different spheres, such as family, parents, friends, and school. However, these models address the social context as a unit without examining the individual contribution to the identity processes of significant figures in these spheres. Nor do these studies examine the contribution of peer relations to identity formation although peers are significant figures in the adolescent's life (Brauer & De Coster, 2015). The research literature shows that a best friend or close friends can provide "a secure base" for the adolescent (Crowell & Waters, 1994; Pittman, Keiley, Kerpelman & Vaughn, 2010). These models also rarely address the mediating variables between the social context and exploration process.

The study's theoretical rationale is based on Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which stresses parental attachment figures as providing "a secure base" for exploration and commitment processes. As noted, both these processes are aspects of identity formation. The present study examines how parental attachment variables explain the identity formation measures.

Furthermore, following the definition of exploration as a problem-solving process (e.g., Berzonsky, 1989, 1990, 1992; Cohen-Malayev, 2008 (Hebrew); Grotevant, 1987; Schwartz, 2001), the study examines how the adolescent's particular style of decision making and problem solving relating to identity formation, serves to mediate the relation between attachment to parents and best friends, and identity formation. This examination follows the rationale that secure attachment leads the adolescent to develop a more

informative style of identity processing. On the other hand, over-dependence on parents leads adolescents to develop a more normative style of identity processing.

The study's **goal** was to evaluate the contribution of a **multi-dimensional model**—including measures of attachment relations with parents and best friend and measures of separation and individuation—to explaining the variance in key measures of identity exploration and commitment. These key measures are: exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, ruminative exploration, commitment and identification with commitment (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, Soenens, Vansteenkist, Smits, & Goossens, 2008). Another goal was to examine the contribution of the mediating variable—identity processing style—to explain the link between the characteristics of the relationship with parents and best friend and identity exploration and commitment.

The study's two main hypotheses were:

- A. The first hypothesis assumed that the attachment and processes of separation and individuation variables would contribute to the measures of identity formation and the identity processing style.
- B. The second hypothesis was that the identity processing style would mediate the relationship between the measures of attachment and processes of separation and individuation and the measures of identity formation.

The study examined these hypotheses among 385 adolescents in eleventh and twelfth grades, aged 15-19 ($M=16.9$). Participants were: 196 boys (51%) and 188 girls (49%) in 12 different schools. Eleven schools were six-year schools and one was a four-year school. Eight schools had an academic orientation while four were comprehensive schools. Five were in central Israel, 4 were in the Jerusalem region, 2 were in northern Israel, and 1 was in the south. All schools were Jewish, with: 56% of students in state general schools and 44% in state religious schools.

The study administered 7 questionnaires: (1) a demographic questionnaire; (2) the Hebrew form (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000) of the **Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR) questionnaire** (Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998) to examine attachment avoidance and anxiety; (3) the Hebrew form (Granot & Maysless, 2001) of the **Attachment Security Scale (ASS)** (Kerns, Klepac & Cole, 1996) which examines patterns of attachment to the father and to the mother; (4) the Hebrew form (Aviad, 2001) of the **Psychological**

Separation Inventory (PSI) (Hoffman, 1984) which examines separation and individuation processes; (5) the translated version of the **Inventory of Peer Attachment (IPA)** which examines attachment to a friend; (6) the Hebrew form of the **Identity Style Inventory (ISI3)** (Berzonsky, 1992) which examines identity processing styles, and (7) the translated form of the **Dimensions of Identity Development Scale1 (DIDS)** (Luyckx et al., 2008) which examines the different measures of exploration and commitment.

Statistical tools in the analysis included analysis of variance, structural equation modeling (SEM), and correlations. Results indicated that the theoretical model presented fit the observed data: $\chi^2=1769$, $df = 1087$, $p < .001$, $CFI = .94$, $TLI = .93$, $SRMR = .05$, $RMSEA = .04$, 90% $CI [.04, .04]$.

Further analyses show the contribution of four variables to adolescent exploration and commitment processes:

1. Measures of attachment to father and mother (ASS).
2. Measures of anxiety and attachment avoidance (ECR).
3. Measures of conflictual and functional dependence on the father and conflictual dependence on the mother (PSI).
4. Measures of identity processing style (ISI3).

These findings confirmed the proposed model and showed that attachment, separation, and individuation contributed directly to identity formation and to the mediation of identity processing styles. Results also show that identity processing styles mediate between measures of attachment, separation, and individuation and measures of exploration and commitment.

Following is a summary of key findings:

- A. **Attachment to father**—One main finding was that attachment to the father contributed negatively to the measure of ruminative exploration. This shows that although attachment to the father did not directly contribute to exploration it was in fact an exploration regulating factor.
- B. **Identity processing style as a mediator between attachment to the mother and identity formation processes**—Another important finding relates to understanding the function of identity processing style in mediating the relationship between attachment to the mother and identity formation processes. This is based on the

distinction in the literature between the characteristics of childhood exploration and adolescent exploration (Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2009). This finding can broaden our understanding of the difference between a “secure base” in childhood and a “secure base” in adolescence. This result was demonstrated for the mother and not the father. It suggests that the attachment relationship with the father and the attachment relationship with the mother during adolescence have different roles as discussed in the literature (Guglhör-Rudan, Thönnissen & Walper, 2008) and as described in the Discussion.

Identity Formation—Findings also indicate that secure attachment with the mother contributed to a normative identity processing style marked by a low level of exploration and a high level of acceptance. This contrasts with the hypothesis regarding the contribution of attachment to parents to identity processing which assumed that secure attachment contributes to forming an informative identity processing style.

- C. **Anxiety and attachment avoidance**—As hypothesized, anxiety attachment decreases exploration and attachment avoidance delays exploration. The centrality of the general attachment measures (anxiety and avoidance) in the model may underline changes in attachment relations in adolescence as discussed in the literature (Pittman et al, 2010) where the adolescent becomes less dependent on earlier attachment figures and develops broader integrative attachment patterns. These patterns contribute significantly to the various identity formation measures.
- D. **Identity processing style as a mediating factor**—Another important finding supporting the research hypotheses relates to **identity processing style**, which was found to mediate between general attachment, attachment to parents, measures of separation and individuation, and measures of identity formation. It appears that characteristics of the relationship with parents contribute to the identity processing style which the adolescent forms and this style significantly impacts on the identity formation measures.
- E. **Differentiation between exploration measures**—The findings strengthen and sharpen our knowledge about the different exploration measures (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits, Goossens, 2008a). They thus support the idea that exploration in breadth, namely exploring different identity options, means leaving a familiar identity and moving towards the discovery of new identity worlds, which requires a relatively high degree of confidence. On the other hand, exploration in depth, which further confirms the chosen identity, is believed

to cause less anxiety and discomfort. The findings also highlight the need to characterize the ruminative exploration measure, involving recurring exploration and inability or indifference to making a commitment, as a distinct and important measure. These findings suggest that not only do the relationship with parents and the measures of attachment in general drive the exploration process, they also regulate the fear and anxiety which this process arouses which could cause ruminative exploration.

These research findings can contribute theoretically and practically. Theoretically, they contribute to the study of attachment by increasing our understanding of attachment relations and of separation and individuation as risk factors in adolescent identity formation. Furthermore, they broaden and deepen our knowledge regarding the contribution of attachment relations and separation and individuation processes as factors of acceleration or delay in adolescent identity formation. The findings may also enable development of interventions for parents of adolescents and improve our ability to shape adolescents' identity processing styles to enhance their identity formation

