Identity in Adulthood—Stable or Flexible

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Abstract

The traditional approach to identity is focused on research of identity attainment in adolescence and early adulthood. Research of identity in adulthood is scarce, but outlines interesting perspectives. This article is focused on the specific features, typical for the transitional periods of identity reformulation throughout lifespan as adaptive response to the experienced contextual specificity. 703 Bulgarian volunteers in total, aged 18 - 60, were administered EOMEIS-2 in two different periods—2008 and 2018. The main objective of the study is three-fold: 1) to account changes in identity statuses distribution in the two time points—2008 and 2018; 2) to describe the most preferred identity status for adults in Bulgaria; and 3) to outline the most frequent statuses as ensuring the best adaptation of the person to the context. The general results reveal that there is no change in the distribution of the identity statuses. 82% of the adults prefer to postpone their stable commitments and reorganize their identity. Furthermore, this is not a result of inner choice but mainly adaptive response to the requirements of the context. Environment, perceived as unstable and preventing strong commitments, results in identity choices postponement as most adaptive person-context transaction.

Keywords

Psychosocial Identity, Identity Reorganization, Identity Crisis, Identity Statuses

1. Introduction

Here we present a comparison of identity in adulthood, measured in two time periods. The two projects were devoted to tracing the relation of psychosocial identity in adulthood with well-being and intimacy. The second project was designated to outline the relations of identity and coping. Both projects included mixed design with instruments and semi-structured interviews. In this way, I tried to include the specific effect of the social context. Identity status turned out

to promote happiness solely slightly, but stable identity to support effective coping strategies. What was common, in particular for the identity, was the high percent of Bulgarian adults who prefer to postpone their stable commitments. This provoked the interest to compare the data from the two studies, trying to search for explanation do people change, driven by age and psychosocial developmental tasks or the context has specific effect and pressure on them. What is specific for the situation in Bulgaria is that for a period of more than 30 years already the situation is perceived as unstable and not promoting identity choices.

2. Theoretical Background

People are constantly searching the answer to the question, "Who am I?" both on personal and collective level and form and change their identity over time (Vignoles, 2019). Erikson's concept of the sense of self-sameness and continuity in time underlies the identity theories and research. The classic theory describes psychosocial identity as wholeness and uniqueness of the person and connectedness to others and adolescence as the period for its attainment with polar solution, identity vs. diffusion (Erikson, 1968, 1876). Marcia (1966, 1980) suggests the four-status paradigm of identity, based on the combination of commitments and exploration dimensions. *Achieved identity* is attained after experiencing the identity crisis, when adolescent has thoroughly explored the possible alternatives and made personal commitments. *Moratorium* is the period of identity crisis. Adolescents in moratorium are actively involved in exploring the life alternatives and strive after attainment of self-definitions, without having strong commitments. *Foreclosed identity* means self-concepts and commitments of the significant others and the adolescents in this status have never questioned them. *Diffusion*, adolescents are neither exploring the alternatives, nor have commitments. The four identity statuses can be grouped into two categories according to the above polarities: into *committed* (foreclosed and achieved identity) and *uncommitted* (moratorium and diffusion) or according to the personal involvement in exploration, into *active* (achieved identity and moratorium) and *passive* statuses (diffusion and foreclosure). Adolescents in the more involved statuses have higher self-esteem, self-development and personal autonomy (Adams and Shea, 1979) and more adaptive defense mechanisms (Cramer, 1995). For the individual statuses moratoriums are confirmed to have the highest levels of anxiety and openness to new experience, while foreclosed adolescents are more authoritarian and follow normative approach in solving problems and decision-making. Diffusion is related to lower self-esteem (Marcia, 1966, 1967; Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1976; Tesch & Camerson, 1987, Berzonsky & Neimyer, 1994).

Main criticism to statuses paradigm concerns the underestimation of the broad social context and its implications on the course of identity achieving and maintaining. For more than two decades, the social context is considered not supporting the attainment of stable identity (Cote, 1997). Individuation relates

to the opportunities, which the culture provides people to find out their own ways to meet their personal needs and to define themselves (Cote & Schwartz, 2002). Especially reorganization of the society, the very dynamic changes and experienced need of making certain choices in a rather dynamic and complicated range of alternatives, prevent strong and long maintained commitments. Today all economic and especially social processes, migration flows and other pressures have even more impact on personal identifications.

Identity is conceptualized not as a static construct, but rather as developing in adulthood in response to adaptation to the changing life circumstances, biological, and psychological needs (Kroger, 2015). The mature identity is expected to be adaptive (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Marcia, 2002; Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Formation and changes of identity, especially in social aspect, are still is of research interest (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Openness to new experience in adulthood suggests flexibility of the identity (Whitbourne, 1976). Identity reformulation is possible if it had been achieved in adolescence (Marcia, 1988). In adulthood identity is strengthened, it is not achieved for the first time, but reconsidered, expanded and enriched in result of the new opportunities (Waterman, 1982). This, however, is not universally valid for all adults. An intriguing phenomenon in self-development studies is that in adulthood only a part of the adults have successfully resolved all the self-developmental tasks. More than a half remain to some degree not completely aware of themselves and have not stable self-definitions (Holt, 1980; McCrae & Costa, 1980; Redmore, 1983; Loevinger et al., 1985). A meta-analysis, comprising 124 identity studies reveal that only at 36 about half of the participants have stable commitments and achieved overall identity (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). In longitudinal study is confirmed the general identity development toward achievement from young to middle adulthood. Observed is foreclosure identity increase from age 27 to 36 and identity achievement increase between the ages of 36 and 42. Most of the achievers accounted are at age of 42 (Fadjukoff, 2007). This trend can be explained by the results that nevertheless at the age of 50 the most common status is achieved identity, the moratorium reappears both in ideological and interpersonal domains, evidencing the new explorations. Furthermore, analyzing the several age points of the study, it is outlined that no one of the subjects has remained in the same status, in no one of the life domains (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2016).

Concerning the identity trajectories a recent meta-analysis of research from 1996 through 2005 reveal that in general the mean proportion of progressive identity status changes accounts for 0.36, regressive 0.15, and 0.49 who remained stable (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). In adulthood the most common form of transitions in personal identity is the MAMA cycle (moratorium-achieved identity-moratorium-achieved identity) (Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992) and in later early adulthood the FAFA cycle (foreclosure-achievement - foreclosure-achievement) (Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2000). Furthermore, the identity transitions are not straight-lined, but can follow both progressive and re-

gressive paths (Fadjukoff, 2007). Kroger (2007) has outlined three regressive paths-disequilibrium-transition to moratorium; rigidification-transition to foreclosure and disorganization-transition to diffusion.

Meeus and Crocetti suggest a three-dimensional model in support of studying the identity formation trajectories. These trajectories are derived from splitting Marcia's moratorium in two parts and considering it most as a process, not as an outcome: commitment – stable choices, accompanied by self-confidence; in-depth exploration, which describes how people maintain their commitments, searching for information to validate their choices and reconsideration of commitments, which describes the search for new commitments (Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus et al., 2010). This position is common to the suggested in-depth and in breadth exploration (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Important for our position is the conclusion about the five identity statuses outlined by Crocetti et al. (2008). In addition to Marcia's four statuses, confirmed to a great extend, the added one is the *searching moratorium*. Adolescents in this status are found to have strong commitments, but continue to explore them intensively and are active also in considering and exploring alternative commitments. An interesting new research perspective is also that identity statuses can be considered identity development trajectories and that moratorium has two distinct forms: *classical moratorium* and *searching moratorium.* Searching moratorium relates to individuals, moving from strong and actively processed commitments to total lack of commitments and search for new ones in a manner, making them close to achievers. They have commitments are not indecisive, just need more time to consider alternatives in support of their present commitments (Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012). The *searching moratorium* status is replicated for the Japanese culture as well and is considered adaptive in adolescence, but not in emerging adulthood (Hatano, Sigumira, & Crocetti, 2016). Social and cultural dimensions are also reported to be related to identity issues. Representatives of higher social class are self-oriented and maintain higher well-being, while lower social class individuals are more oriented to others and responsive to the context and flexible (Boucher, 2020). Furthermore, self-continuity as a central part of identity is evidenced to depend not only on personal, but on cultural dimensions (Becker et al., 2018). Self-continuity ensures stability of identity, promotes positive mood, psychological health, and well-being (Sokol & Seper, 2019).

3. Current Study

3.1. Design

The main objective of the study is three-fold: 1) to account changes in identity statuses distribution in two time periods—2008 and 2018; 2) to describe the most preferred identity status for adults in Bulgaria; and 3) to outline the most frequent statuses as ensuring the possible adaptation of the person to the context. We measured identity with cross-section convenient sample design in

adulthood with 703 volunteers (42% men and 58% women), aged 20 - 60. The first sample is from 2008—303 volunteers and the second a decade later, from 2018—400 volunteers. Volunteers have been administered paper-and-pencil instruments. They have been recruited based on sex, age, education, and occupation as to include equal number of men/women, age groups distribution, different levels of education (high school, bachelors, masters), employed and unemployed, occupation in the fields of technical sciences and social sciences and people, assessing their income as lower/similar/higher than the average for the country.

	study 2008	study 2018
Men	35%	45%
Women	65%	55%
20 - 30	15%	20%
30 - 40	25%	25%
40 - 50	35%	28%
50 - 60	25%	27%
Social sciences	66%	53%
Technical sciences	34%	47%
High education	9%	7%
Bachelors	16%	15%
Masters	75%	78%
Assessing their income as lower than the average for the country	31%	39%
Assessing their income as the average for the country	47%	43%
Assessing their income as higher than the average for the country	22%	18%

3.2. Instrument

Volunteers have been administered EOMEIS-2 (Adams et al., 1989) adapted to measure the psychosocial identity statuses in adulthood. The instrument comprises 64 items, forming the variables identity statuses (achieved, foreclosed, moratorium, diffusion) of ideological, interpersonal and the overall identity. In this framework each subject is attributed to one of the 16 possible statuses the 4 pure statuses and 12 transitional statuses, depicting the transitional statuses in identity achievement: pure diffusion, pure foreclosure, pure moratorium, and pure achieving and the transitions: diffusion-foreclosure, diffusion-moratorium, diffusion-achievement, foreclosure-moratorium, foreclosure-achievement, moratorium-achievement, diffusion-foreclosure-moratorium, diffusion-foreclosure-achievement, diffusion-moratorium-achievement, foreclosure-moratorium-achievement, diffusion-foreclosure-moratorium-achievement and undifferentiated moratorium (low profile).

The items, used to measure the identity statuses in adolescence are adapted for the age groups of 20 - 30 and over 30 years. Formulation of the adapted items is confirmed by expert assessment. Reliability of the instrument is confirmed.

Cronbach's alpha is 0.72 - 0.74 for the individual items and 0.67 - 0.75 for the generated variables. The test-retest comprises 30 subjects and has correlation coefficients 0.68 - 0.83.

Semi-structured interviews had been made with 10 volunteers from each of the cross-sectional studies for each identity status (50 in total for identity achievers, foreclosures, moratoriums and undifferentiated moratoriums in 2008, replicated in 2018).

Data are analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25 with reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and analysis of variance.

4. Results

Below is presented the distribution of the studied subjects in five identity statuses because of the high percent of undifferentiated moratoriums. We would like to focus especially on this "low profile" as a special type of moratorium, which is typical both for Bulgarian adolescents and adults. What makes the difference to pure moratorium is that people are not active, but experience some kind of pressure to become active. Or in other words, they experience not intrinsic but extrinsic pressure to explore and prefer to postpone commitments. Figure 1 presents the distribution of statuses for the cross-sectional studies in 2008 and 2018. There is no significant difference between the two time periods, so the remaining results are summarized for the whole sample, revealing that the 10 years period had not led to significant change in identity preferences.

As it is illustrated, the lowest is the percent of identity foreclosures and achievers (adults following the standards of significant others and personal standards); followed by the pure moratoriums (the actively involved in roles exploration), diffusers (adults who are not willing to make commitments), and *more than half of all studied subjects are in undifferentiated moratoriums, i.e. they have lost the standards and values they had followed before and are in a*
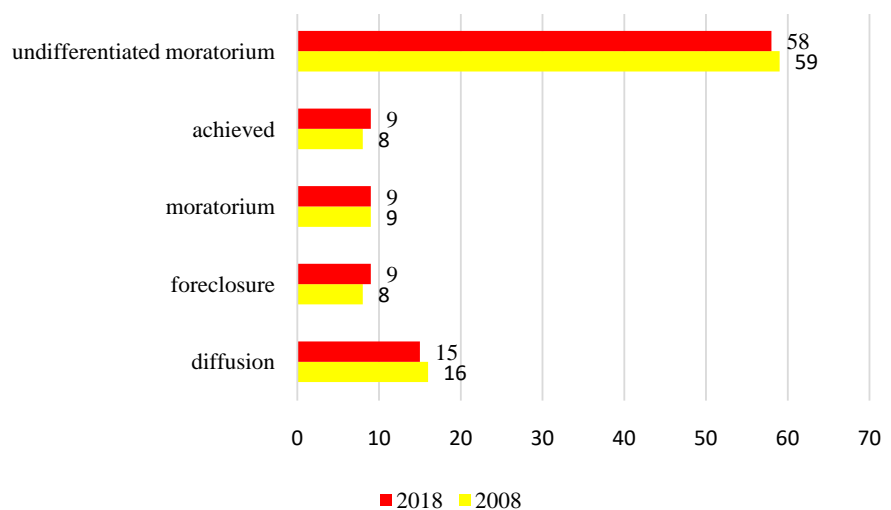
Figure 1. Percent distribution of the identity statuses for the whole samples from 2008 and 2018 (N = 703).

transitional period of pressure to reorganize their identity. If results are summarized, it turns out that committed (with foreclosed and achieved identity) are not more but 16% or less than one fifth of all studied subjects. 82% *of the studied Bulgarians have no personal commitments and choices.*

Table 1 outlines the general statistics for the integrated sample. The age significant differences are presented for the classic four statuses, whereas pure moratoriums and undifferentiated moratoriums are accounted as moratoriums (the low profile rule, Adams et al., 1989).

Table 2 presents only the significant age differences. Studied subjects are divided into 5 age groups: 1—below 25 years; 2—25 - 30 years; 3—31 - 40 years; 4—41 - 50 years; 5—over 51 years. This division aims at more correct differentiation of the possible differences, depicting the different age groups after applying the model of the homogenous age intervals, and their further grouping upon results processing.

Statistically significant age differences are outlined for the statuses foreclosed identity and moratorium in all three identities – ideological, interpersonal and overall identity. Age determined differences are supported for the *foreclosed identity in the ideological domain.* Subjects aged 25 - 30 years are higher in foreclosed identity in comparison to those over 30 years. *Interesting is the result that the group of the* 25 - 30 *aged is higher in foreclosed identity also in comparison to the group below* 25 *years.* For interpersonal identity the differences in foreclosed identity are as follows: subjects below 25 years are higher in foreclosed interpersonal identity in comparison to the group aged 31 - 40 and over 51

Table 1. Results for the integrated sample (N = 703).

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Ideological identity				
Diffusion	26.68	5.54	11	39
Foreclosed	31.44	6.16	13	45
Moratorium	28.78	6.56	14	43
Achieved	25.23	6.64	10	42
Interpersonal identity				
Diffusion	33.52	4.91	17	42
Foreclosed	32.95	6.44	14	47
Moratorium	27.39	7.01	12	42
Achieved	21.51	6.18	9	35
Psychosocial identity				
Overall diffusion	60.19	8.01	33	77
Overall foreclosed	64.39	11.15	29	92
Overall moratorium	56.18	12.38	26	84
Overall achieved	46.74	46.74	20	72

Table 2. Significant age differences (N = 703).

Variables	Mean	F-value	Significance	Age groups		Means difference	Significance
Ideological foreclosure							
1 (below 25 years)	31.07						
2 (25 - 30 years)	35.33			2	1	**4.264***	**0.011**
3 (31 - 40 years)	27.78	4.070	0.005		3	**7.556***	**0.001**
4 (41 - 50 years)	28.67				4	**6.667***	**0.005**
5 (over 51 years)	30.00				5	**5.333***	**0.022**
				1	2	−3.351	0.062
Ideological moratorium					3	−1.272	0.591
1 (below 25 years)	26.17				4	**−7.383***	**0.002**
2 (25 - 30 years)	29.52				5	**−5.828***	**0.016**
3 (31 - 40 years)	27.44	3.439	0.013	3	1	1.272	0.591
4 (41 - 50 years)	33.56				3	−2.079	0.400
5 (over 51 years)	32.00				4	**−6.111***	**0.039**
					5	−4.556	0.122
				1	2	1.263	0.468
Interpersonal foreclosure					3	**6.533***	**0.006**
1 (below 25 years)	35.31				4	4.310	0.065
2 (25 - 30 years)	34.05				5	**6.421***	**0.007**
3 (31 - 40 years)	28.78	3.607	0.010	2	1	−1.263	0.468
4 (41 - 50 years)	31.00				3	**5.270***	**0.032**
5 (over 51 years)	28.89				4	3.048	0.209
					5	**5.159***	**0.035**
Interpersonal moratorium							
1 (below 25 years)	24.00			1	2	**−4.238***	**0.026**
2 (25 - 30 years)	28.24				3	−4.000	0.112
3 (31 - 40 years)	28.00	3.913	0.006		4	**−7.222***	**0.005**
4 (41 - 50 years)	31.22				5	**−7.889***	**0.002**
5 (over 51 years)	31.89						
					2	−3.0016	0.317
Overall foreclosure				1	3	**9.8238***	**0.016**
1 (below 25 years)	66.38				4	6.7126	0.095
2 (25 - 30 years)	69.38				5	7.4904	0.063
3 (31 - 40 years)	56.56	3.854	0.007		1	3.0016	0.317
4 (41 - 50 years)	59.67			2	3	**12.8254***	**0.003**
5 (over 51 years)	58.89				4	**9.7142***	**0.022**
					5	**10.4920***	**0.014**
Overall moratorium							
1 (below 25 years)	50.17			1	2	**−7.589***	**0.023**
2 (25 - 30 years)	57.76				3	−5.272	0.229
3 (31 - 40 years)	55.44	4.433	0.003		4	**−14.6053***	**0.001**
4 (41 - 50 years)	64.78				5	**−13.7165***	**0.002**
5 (over 51 years)	63.89						

years. The group of the 25 - 30 aged subjects has more foreclosed interpersonal identity compared to the 31 - 40 old. The overall foreclosed identity is higher for the subjects below 30 years of age in comparison to those over 30 years. These differences are within the framework of the age determined identity achievement.

Much more interesting are the results, derived for the moratorium status.

Dynamic in moratorium reports it is higher proportionally to the age of the groups. For ideological identity subjects over 40 are more frequently in moratorium in comparison to the subjects below 25 years and those aged 31 - 40. For the interpersonal identity the groups aged 25 - 30 and over 41 years are more frequently in moratorium in comparison to subjects below 25. This distribution remains valid for the overall moratorium of identity. Only the group of subjects aged 31 - 40 have no differences in moratorium frequency in respect to the lower age groups. In view to the fact moratorium in this case is formed mainly from the undifferentiated moratorium, *the reasonable explanation is in the influence of the social context. The more mature persons of higher age in Bulgaria have lived in period both of stability and instability. Standards and norms, which have provided them sense of security, are not existing anymore and this provokes and imposes the need of reconsideration and review of their identity.*

5. Discussion

Identity is strongly related to the successful adaptation of the individual to the social context. The certain social environment sets the framework and/or limitations of the possible options and alternatives for personal commitments. Thus, the *identity statuses distribution depends on their adaptability to the particular social and cultural context. Undifferentiated moratorium is the process of* "*breaking with*" *the old norms and standards and the transition to active exploration of new ones.* The lack of new stable opportunities deprives individual from the ability to choose. This situation determines the strong domination of the undifferentiated moratorium among the studied subjects. Comparison of these results to data, obtained in states of stable economic development, suggests that in Bulgaria the lack of commitment and need of exploration is opposed to the foreclosed identity, reported in other studies (Fadjukoff, 2007). The percent of foreclosed identity is rather low in the Bulgarian sample.

In view to better illustration of the data, obtained for the studied group, an interview was conducted and its aim was to collect information about the contents of the identity. The common after summary of the results was the factor of instability of the social environment, perceived on individual level, as a constant reason person to search for and to find stability in the context. Self-construal, personal choices, and identity attainment, are facilitated by environment, experienced as reliable and supportive. The reason, shared by the studied subjects that explains why they feel insecure and deprive them from the chance to make stable commitments is the need constantly to reconsider the ways and means for self-expression and search for new forms of self-realization. "I begin everything in my life again and again from the beginning. Today I am not sure the situation tomorrow will be the same" is the most representative for all quotation of a volunteer from the study in 2008. This position is supported by the addition in interviews from 2018: "I live day by day, I have no long-term planning, for sure it is not possible. I don't believe in government. There is no security, no stability.

Thank to God that there are the family and friends, this makes me happy". *Insecurity and instability suggest two possible solutions constant search and exploration vs. complete resignation, i.e. they promote either moratorium or diffusion, but not the stable achieved identity. Concerning the foreclosed identity, the social context in Bulgaria makes it low adaptive. Undifferentiated moratorium in this case is frequent due to the breaking with the old, which is, however, imposed by the forced search for something new in a situation of insecurity.*

It is supported the expectation that nevertheless the age determined changes, identity is conditioned not only by the age. *Identity always remains within the framework of adaptation to the particular social context, in which person attains identity.* Adaptation to the social context in Bulgaria today is presented by the instable transitional status of undifferentiated moratorium. Furthermore, we have not accounted change for a period of ten years. This indicates that the situation and context in 2008 and in 2018 are perceived in the same manner. Bulgarians to much extent support their children, are devoted to them and expect children to realize their dreams (Stoyanov & Manolov, 2018). In our future work, we schedule to extend these results in the perspective of searching moratorium, suggested by Meeus et al. (2012) in view to fill our explanatory gap.

6. Conclusion and Implication of the Results

Identity achievement expands far beyond adolescence. Identity is achieved, reformulated and maintained throughout lifespan. In view to the specific situation in Bulgaria, accounted ten years ago, we have developed a consulting programme, promoting identity attainment. It can be applied on individual and group level in view to facilitate resolution of identity crises. The main point is differentiation of the life domains and use of those with more stable commitments (e.g. friendship) to support others. The programme is given the name *The three steps of identity*, which are followed during the sessions. The first one is *self-knowledge*. This means person to become aware of the personal goals, motives and impulses, what has central meaning in her life. The second step is *self-acceptance*, i.e. unconditional acceptance of the self, with all positive and negative parts. The third step is *self-expression* or behavior, consistent with the personal wills and goals. These three steps are the key to the harmony and integrated self-wholeness. Experiencing the sense of personal crisis, person vaguely feels that the previous commitments, goals, and values are no more appropriate and have to be substituted by new ones. The new ones, however, have to be found in the process of *questioning on cognitive level* (*self-knowledge*). *Afterwards change has to be emotionally accepted as to extend but not to confront to the old attitudes* (*self-acceptance*)*, finally comes the behavioral moment* (*self-expression*) *and ascertaining the enriched identity. Consolidation of these three steps ensures a sense of stability, internal coherence and continuity.*

The main limitation of the study is in its cross-sectional design and convenient samples. We hope to have the chance to extend the conclusions in future

and include measures of the individual identity domains. Furthermore, a cross-cultural comparison will enrich the results to a great extent.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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