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Identity Status Differences among Italian Adolescents: Associations with Parent and Peer Attachment Relationships

Differenze di stati di identità in adolescenti italiani: Relazioni con le relazioni di fiducia di attaccamento ai genitori e ai pari

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ARTICLE INFO

Submitted: 03 November 2016

Accepted: 15 December 2016

DOI: 10.4458/8067-06

ABSTRACT

Based on identity status model, this cross-sectional study examined adolescents identity formation analyzing its association with parent and peer attachment. A sample of 1,480 adolescents from Italy completed self-report measures assessing ego identity status, and the perceived quality of parent and peer attachment. Adolescents who achieved an integrated identity status seemed to perceive a high quality of attachment both with parents and peers reporting main levels of trust and communication. On the contrary diffused and foreclosed adolescents reported more intensive feelings of distancing than the others groups, even if on the whole they did not differ significantly from youngsters in moratorium status. The implications of the findings, limitations and suggestions for future theoretical and empirical development of research in this field are discussed.

Keywords: identity status; parent attachment; peer attachment; adolescence; relationships.

RIASSUNTO

Basato sul modello degli stati dell'Io, il presente studio ha esaminato la formazione identitaria degli adolescenti analizzando la relazione con la fiducia nelle relazioni di attaccamento ai genitori e ai pari. Un campione di 1.480 adolescenti italiani ha completato misure autovalutative che indagano gli stati di identità dell'Io, la qualità percepita delle relazioni di attaccamento ai genitori e ai pari. Gli adolescenti classificati in uno stato di acquisizione dell'identità sembrano percepire una maggiore fiducia nelle relazioni di attaccamento ai genitori e ai pari, riportando maggiori livelli di fiducia e comunicazione. Invece gli adolescenti classificati in uno stato di blocco e diffusione riportano maggiori livelli di distanziamento rispetto agli altri gruppi, sebbene non differiscano in modo significativo dagli adolescenti classificati in uno stato di moratoria. Sono inoltre discusse le implicazioni, i limiti e i suggerimenti per lo sviluppo di future ricerche in questo ambito.

Parole chiave: stati dell'identità; attaccamento ai genitori; attaccamento ai pari; adolescenza; relazioni.

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RdP

Introduction

Erickson's (1968) theoretical conception of identity formation was elaborated and expanded by Marcia's identity status model which describes four qualitatively different statuses based on the amount of exploration and commitment that adolescent is experiencing or has experienced (Marcia, 1966, 1980; Meeus, van de Schoot, Kreijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). Identity *achieved* (A): adolescents have experienced a phase of exploring several alternatives before committing a specific identity defining domain. *Moratorium* (M): adolescents are in the process of active exploration, but they have not made significant commitments. *Foreclosed* (F): adolescents have made a commitment, but have not gone through a period of active exploration. *Diffused* (D): adolescents have neither explored among different alternatives nor have made a commitment regarding a specific domain.

In identity status research, attention has been focused how parent-adolescent relations and their quality influence the development of identity. Recent studies examining identity formation and attachment levels to parents stressed the influence of mother's attachment on identity achievement suggesting that secure attachment enable adolescents to face the challenges of interpersonal and intrapersonal exploration, which will lead to the development of a stable ego identity (Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2011; Laghi, Baiocco, D'Alessio, Gurrieri, & Mazza, 2008). A secure attachment to parents stimulates the development of identity (Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990), especially because it promotes the exploration of identity alternatives, a necessary condition for attaining the status identity achievement. By contrast, only few studies have examined the association between peer-adolescent relations and identity (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 1999; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002).

Although several studies have tried to empirically explore how youngsters in each identity status might demonstrate different quality of attachment in their relationships with significant others and have found strict associations between specific identity statuses and attachment (Arseth et al., 2011; Hoegh & Bourgeois, 2002), the strength of this relationship varied across studies probably because different attachment measures and conceptualizations of identity were used (Matos, Barbosa, de Almeida, & Costa, 1999). On one hand, it was found that personal and social identity, independent of adolescent gender, was significantly predicted by attachment to parents (Lapsley et al., 1990), especially to mothers (Benson, Harris, & Rogers, 1992), and was also directly and indirectly related to whole family security (Matos et al., 1999).

On the other hand, some studies (Arseth et al., 2011; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Marcia, 1993) concentrated on identity's dimensions instead on identity status and it was identified specific correlations between attachment and commitment and exploration separately measured. Specifically, as regards the connection between attachment and identity exploration, it was found that a secure adolescent attachment to parents promotes the development of identity by encouraging the exploration of identity alternatives. Pertaining to the dimension of commitment, some studies found that different adolescent attachment patterns could be associated with the ability to make commitments following identity exploration (identity achievement) and also with the ability to make commitments without exploration (foreclosure). So, it has resulted that during adolescence secure attachment patterns are linked with both commitment preceded by identity exploration and identity exploration itself. By contrast, commitment without identity exploration (foreclosure) has been associated with the combination of emotional attachment to parents and parental discouragement of exploration, independence strivings, and expression of differences (Arseth et al., 2011; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Marcia, 1988; 1993).

Moreover, during adolescence, attachment behavior is often directed toward non parental (non caretaking) figures, especially peers, who may be considered such on a situational or temporary basis. Particularly peers may become new sources of trust. In Weiss's view (1982), a particularly important aspect of adolescent peer attachment is the peer's ability to support and encourage the adolescent's assumption of growth-promoting challenges. As regards gender differences, Claes (1992) found that adolescent females and males had similar numbers of peer relationships, even if females indicated stronger attachment to peers. Several investigators have sought to better understand the characteristics of the adolescent – peer relationships, but only a limited number of them has focused attention on the connection between peer- attachment and the identity formation process or each

identity status. Generally, it was argued that adolescents need these relationships since information or support from a parent may no longer be so relevant and also to help them to establish their identity by comparing opinions and values with others (Lapsley et al., 1990). Helsen, Vollebergh and Meeus (1999) reported positive correlations between peer attachment and relational identity. This study also found positive correlations between parental attachment and school/work identity, and peer attachment and relational identity showing that it is useful to have domain-specific instead of overall identity measures. This situational hypothesis, was confirmed by Meeus and colleagues (2002) who demonstrated that school commitment, referring to the future, was significantly associated with parental attachment, while peer attachment was found to be related to relational commitment and exploration, issues that predominantly pertain to the present life situation of adolescents. Additionally, results showed that communication - one aspect of secure attachment - could be considered a predictor of the exploration of identity commitment both in parent-adolescent relationship and in peer-attachment.

The present study

Identity status and attachment are closely related constructs, although they come from different theoretical perspectives. The present study aims to investigate the relations between parent and peer attachment and each type of identity status following Marcia's developmental model. Attachment is conceptualized according to Bowlby's perspective as a unique emotional bond that enables adolescents to move away from the family and explore the world and to establish close relationships with significative figures other than parents. We therefore used an attachment measure which captures adolescents' perceptions of the quality of the attachment with both parents and peers evaluating behavioral and affective/cognitive dimensions of both actual adolescents' relationships. Postulated by attachment perspective, it was hypothesized that achieved adolescents and similarly moratorium ones would show a positive attachment organization characterized by trust and communication contrary to foreclosed and diffused youngsters.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 1,480 students (787 boys and 693 girls) attending high schools in Rome (Italy). The average age of the students was 17.45 (SD=0.49; range 17-19). The schools were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study (N=15). They were from urban (N=5), suburban (N=5) and more rural areas (N=5) within a small geographic radius, reflecting the full socio-economic spectrum of the region. Participation was preceded by an informed-consent procedure that required active consent from both students and parents. The questionnaires were administered in the classroom during a regular class period and took approximately 30 min. to complete. Instructions stated that the questionnaires were voluntary and that responses were anonymous and confidential. All students responded to the same questionnaire packet, with measures administered in counterbalanced order to each group of subjects.

Measures

Identity Status. The Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-Version 2 (EOM-EIS-II; Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989) was used to measure ego identity status. The EOM-EIS-II contains 64 items presented on a 6-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The instrument assesses the degree of identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure within four interpersonal domains (friendships, dating, gender roles, recreation) and four ideological domains (politics, religion, occupation, lifestyle). We assign identity statuses to participants with the standardization technique suggested by Adams, Bennion, and Huh (1989). The subjects with a score of one standard deviation above the mean of an identity status were classified with that status. When respondents scored one deviation above the mean on two (or more) identity statuses we assigned them to the lower of the two (or more) identity statuses. This procedure was based on a rank ordering of the statuses from most to least mature: achieved, moratorium, foreclosed and diffused. The Italian version of the instrument shows good reliability coefficients and a factorial structure

congruent with the operative definition of the construct (Laghi et al., 2008). In the present study, internal reliability of the EOMEIS-2 ranged from 0.76 to 0.84.

Attachment to Parents and Peer. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used to measure the quality of parent attachment in adolescence and the affective-cognitive dimension of attachment. The first scale measures the attachment to parents and consists of twenty-eight items on a Likert-type scale, on which each item has five possible responses (from “completely untrue” to “completely true”) and the latter measures the attachment to peers and consists of twenty-five items Likert-type scale. Both scales provide an indication of the level of security that is felt in the relationship with specific attachment figures (parents and peer). This level calculated using dimensions such as the quality of communication, and the extent of anger, alienation and/or hopelessness resulting from an unresponsive or inconsistently responsive attachment figure. The Alienation scale was recoded for both the scales. The IPPA has been used in a number of studies, and its reliability and validity in Italian context have been shown to be satisfactory (Pace, San Martini, & Zavattini, 2011). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha of the IPPA subscales ranged from 0.81 to 0.85 and 0.82 to 0.84 for Parent and Peer attachment, respectively.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0) was used to conduct bivariate and multivariate analyses relating to independent variables. The internal consistency of the overall scale and subscales were measured by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. Identity status differences were analysed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA).

Results

Identity Status and Attachment to Parents and Peer

Using the procedure previously explained the identity classifications were as follow: 461 adolescents (31.1 %) were classified as identity achieved, 493 adolescents (33.3 %) were classified as moratoriums, 248 adolescents (16.8 %) were classified as foreclosed, and 278 adolescents (18.8 %) were classified as diffused. Identity groups did not differ according to sex ($\chi^2(3)=2.36, p=.14$).

Concerning Parent attachment the MANOVA revealed a main effect for Identity Status (Wilks’s Lambda=0.95; $F(3,1476)=8.93; \eta^2=0.18; p<.001$). Post hoc test revealed that adolescents with foreclosed and diffused identities obtained higher scores than adolescents classified as moratorium on Alienation scale. Adolescents categorized as identity achieved obtained the lowest scores in the sample. Regarding Trust and Communication scales adolescents categorized as achieved obtained higher scores than others groups. For the total score, adolescent categorized as achieved and moratorium were not significantly different but obtained higher mean score than foreclosed and diffused adolescents.

Table 1. Mean score on the IPPA subscales for Identity status

	A		M		F		D		F _{3,1476}
	Achieved		Moratorium		Foreclosure		Diffusion		
Parent Attachment									
Alienation ^a	25.54	7.43	27.24	7.11	28.49	7.85	29.41	7.69	18.03*
Communication ^b	28.26	6.29	26.10	6.44	25.85	6.36	25.82	6.41	13.87*
Trust ^b	39.04	7.17	36.51	7.36	35.95	7.26	35.29	7.39	19.55*
Total score ^c	41.76	18.01	38.37	17.58	33.32	17.45	31.71	18.35	23.27*
Peer Attachment									
Alienation ^a	13.50	4.63	13.86	4.56	14.27	4.71	14.55	4.71	3.43*
Communication ^d	29.35	6.03	28.51	6.38	29.77	6.46	27.96	6.81	4.90*
Trust ^b	41.74	7.67	40.48	7.75	40.56	7.61	39.45	8.27	7.20*
Total score ^d	57.59	16.09	55.12	16.51	56.06	15.84	52.42	17.19	5.94*

Note. *p<.001; Duncan Test (p<.001): a= (F=D)>B>A; b= A> (M=F=D); c= (A=M)>(F=D); d= D<(A=M=F)

Concerning Peer attachment the MANOVA revealed main effect for Identity status (Wilks's Lambda=0.97; $F(3,1476)=4.61$; $\eta^2=0.10$; $p<.001$). Post hoc test revealed similar results for Alienation and Trust scales of parent attachment whereas there were differences for Communication and Total score: adolescents categorized as diffused obtained lower scores than others groups.

Discussion

A large body of studies suggests that the quality of adolescent's attachment to parents is a fundamental factor for a successful identity formation (Arseth et al., 2011; Bergh & Erling, 2005; Hoegh & Bourgeois, 2002; Kroger, 2000). Less evidence has been given to the relationship between peer attachment and the consolidation of identity and the contribution of peers in supporting and encouraging the adolescent's assumption of growth-promoting challenges.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between attachment to parents and peers as perceived by adolescents and their identity status.

As predicted, subjects who achieved an integrated identity similarly to adolescents in moratorium status seemed to perceive a high quality of attachment both with parents and peers reporting main levels of trust and communication. On the contrary diffused and foreclosed adolescents reported more intensive feelings of distancing and disaffection than the others groups, even if on the whole they did not differ significantly from youngsters in moratorium status.

Accordingly with the findings of earlier studies (Besser & Blatt, 2007; Sheehan & Nollen, 2002), a relationship of attachment to parents characterized by trust promotes the development of identity by enabling adolescents to face the challenges of interpersonal and intrapersonal exploration. Differently, a mistrust and disaffected parent-child emotional bond can lead adolescent to adopt values, plans and opinions from parents without much critical thought as in the case of foreclosed youngsters or it can bring adolescent to take an apathetic and disinterested attitudes typical of diffused ones.

Based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973), these concurrent associations might be interpreted as evidence for the facilitative effect that attachment can exert on adolescent's ego-identity, because attachment security is a basis for the exploration of new roles, attitudes, and relationships and the maintenance of a warm and supportive relationship with parents contribute to experience and expect personal continuity and sameness regardless of temporal and spatial change in life. Specifically, the feeling of being accepted and trusted by others as measured by the IPPA subscale of trust encourage adolescents to make commitments to a set of goals and beliefs after having evaluated the possible alternatives relying on parents respect of owns feelings and their understanding. This sense of certainty gives adolescents direction, purpose and meaning in life.

Furthermore, the high scores obtained by adolescents in identity achieved and moratorium status on the IPPA subscale of communication put in light the strength association between the adolescent perception of being considered as distinct individual with whom compare ideas and opinions and the ability to achieve a solid identity based on the outcome of a personal struggle. This link could be comprehended if we consider that the IPPA subscale measuring communication take into account the bidirectionality in openness in communication and, at the same time, the extent to which adolescent feels that the others help him to understand himself better (Meeus et al., 2002).

As regards peer attachment our results are in line with literature showing adolescents perceptions of the quality of their relationship with coetaneous to be similar to the relationship with parents. This findings confirmed how often processes within the family and the group of peers are closely related to one another and to aspects of referring to others: adolescents who perceive their relationships with their parents as positive may be most likely to establish trusting, intimate and reciprocal relationships with peers (Elicker et al., 1992; Kroger, 2000; Uppdegraff, Madden-Derdich, Ulloa Estrada, Sales, & Leonard, 2002). This finding is also consistent with the importance of peer as a secure basis to support and encourage the adolescent's assumption of growth-promoting challenges. It is important to underline that adolescents characterized as diffused differ significantly from the others groups in the perception of peer attachment reporting in general the lowest quality

of their emotional bond with peers and in particular the lowest scores on the IPPA communication subscale. In terms of interpersonal relationships, diffused adolescents tend to be isolated or stereotyped in their style of intimacy with others and so they are most likely to establish no close relationships or to focus them on very superficial issues (Bergh & Erling, 2005; Kroger, 2000; Meeus et al., 2002).

As suggested by several studies (Baumeister, 1999; Leary, Haupt, Strausser & Chokel, 1998) these findings generally confirmed that enhancement of self-worth and social validation foster the development of self and identity. On the contrary adolescents who perceived their relationships with parents and peers as characterized by affectively disaffection, mistrust and lack of communication showed an identity diffusion typically differentiated by lack of commitments, an avoidant information processing style and an incoherent life perspective (Berzonsky & Neimeyer, 1994).

The present results should be interpreted in light of several important limitations. First, the cross sectional design of the research did not permit to investigate directionality in the relationships we examined restricting the casual inferences that might be drawn from the results. To investigate the developmental processes such as those examined here, and to understand them correctly, we need longitudinal studies.

Secondly, the study relied only on self-report data from adolescents, including no information from the parents themselves, and may be subject to standard criticism with self-report bias. Although previous research suggests that adolescents' reports on how they perceive their relationships with parents is not inherently inferior to more objective measures, we are awareness that self-report instruments may have led to an overestimation or underestimation of some feelings or behaviors characterizing these relationships. These considerations call for a multi-informant replication of this study in which, in addition to the adolescents, parents should also be questioned and other methods of research used to confirm the pattern of findings.

Despite these limitations, the present study has important implications for future empirical investigation. Firstly this study has provided, in support of previous findings, valuable information regarding the strong association between parents and peer attachment and adolescent identity development. Furthermore, it raises several important substantive questions about the ways in which core identity dimensions and indices of psychosocial functioning which should be the object of thoughtful reflection and empirical research taking into account the potential mediating effects of others crucial dimensions of perceived parenting - such as behavioral or psychological control.

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