Parental Psychological Control and Dimensions of Identity Formation in Emerging Adulthood

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Longitudinal data were used to evaluate whether parental psychological control would have a negative impact on identity formation. Perceived psychological control and 4 identity dimensions (i.e., commitment making, exploration in breadth, identification with commitment, and exploration in depth) were assessed 5 times in a college sample. Associations between psychological control and identity (i.e., negative associations with both commitment dimensions and a positive association with exploration in breadth) were stable across time. Further, the developmental pathways of these constructs appeared to be correlated: Increases in psychological control were associated with simultaneous decreases in both commitment dimensions. Finally, reciprocal effects were found: Psychological control inhibited progress in both commitment dimensions, whereas exploration in breadth led to increased psychological control. The authors have provided suggestions for helping emerging adults to approach the task of identity formation.

Keywords: identity, psychological control, parenting, commitment, exploration

An important developmental goal for late adolescents is to develop a personal identity (Erikson, 1968). Social-structural changes in many Western nations have resulted in the delaying of psychosocial maturity until the late teens and twenties—a period now called emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). The college environment provides somewhat unique opportunities for identity formation because that environment grants the time and opportunity for individuals to think and rethink their identity. As a result, much identity work is expected to occur during these years (Arnett, 2000).

Marcia's (1980) identity paradigm conceptualizes identity formation along two dimensions (i.e., exploration and commitment) and focuses primarily on the outcomes of identity formation, that is, on the person's making of commitments after exploring alternatives. In an effort to conceptualize identity formation in a more dynamic fashion, Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) used confirmatory factor analysis at the initial assessment period (Time 1) of the present longitudinal data set to distinguish among four identity dimensions rather than between two identity dimensions. They distinguished between *exploration in breadth* and *exploration in depth.* Exploration in

breadth refers to the extent to which individuals had considered different identity alternatives. Exploration in depth entails a more focused gathering of information relevant to the evaluation of commitments that are already in place. The in-depth exploration and reevaluation of one's commitments highlights identity formation as an ongoing process. Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers also distinguished between the possession of definite commitments and the extent of identification with those commitments (*commitment making* vs. *identification with commitment*).

Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) found that both commitment dimensions were associated with well-being. Exploration in breadth was associated with depressive symptoms, which suggests that exploration in breadth may signal an identity crisis (Marcia, 1980). Exploration in depth, however, was only marginally associated with adjustment. Therefore, an important aim of researchers in this field is to investigate factors that contribute to identity development, such as differences in family environment and parental behavior (Schwartz, 2005). In the present longitudinal study set in the college context, we attempted to do so by focusing on the impact of psychologically controlling parenting on identity formation.

Parental Psychological Control and Identity Formation

Through the use of intrusive techniques, psychologically controlling parents pressure children to comply with the parents' own personal standards and needs, irrespective of the children's needs and values. Psychological control inhibits experiences of autonomy in children and adolescents (Barber, 1996, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens,

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2005). Consequently, these adolescents are less in touch with their inner self and, hence, may experience difficulties in making a personal commitment. In addition, researchers recently found linkages between psychological control and fear of failure (Elliot & Thrash, 2004) and between psychological control and maladaptive perfectionism (Soenens et al., 2005). Emerging adults who perceive their parents as psychologically controlling tend to develop an anxious and indecisive orientation, which, in turn, is likely to hinder commitment making. Hence, we hypothesized that psychological control would consistently relate negatively to both commitment dimensions across time. Further, we used latent growth curve modeling (LGCM; Muthén & Muthén, 2002) to hypothesize that increases in psychological control might be accompanied by simultaneous decreases in both commitment dimensions.

In addition, the higher levels of anxiety and indecisiveness that result from psychologically controlling parenting might lead to a continuous search for alternative options or even to a ruminative process of exploring new identity alternatives (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985). Hence, a positive correlation was expected between psychological control and exploration in breadth. Exploration in depth, however, pertains to a more conscientious exploration of commitments that have already been established. Therefore, we hypothesized that psychological control and exploration in depth would be nonsignificantly or even negatively related across time. Further, increases in psychological control might be accompanied by simultaneous increases in exploration in breadth, whereas changes in psychological control would be relatively unrelated to changes in exploration in depth.

Finally, recent studies indicated that psychological control predicts adolescent functioning (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, & Maughan, 2005). Hence, we expected that cross-lagged analyses would show that psychological control predicts changes in dimensions of identity, such as decreases in both commitment dimensions. Further, we explored the possibility that identity formation predicts psychological control. Psychologically controlling parents might experience their emerging-adult children's lack of commitment or their broad search for identity alternatives as disappointing. This might lead the parents to increase their use of psychologically controlling techniques in an attempt to pressure their children to stop exploring too broadly or to make commitments.

Method

Participants

Five waves of longitudinal data, with 6 months between each data collection period (Times 1–5), were collected at a large university in Flanders, Belgium (cf. Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). All participants were Caucasian freshmen from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, which consists of a predominantly female student population. Our sample comprised 565 students, consisting of 482 women (85.3%) and 83 men (14.7%). Almost 65% of the students participated again at all four follow-up assessments. This longitudinal sample of 364 students consisted of 325 women (89.3%) and 39 men (10.7%). The

study mainly focuses on the first years of emerging adulthood: Mean age at Time 1 was 18 years 7 months ($SD = 7$ months).

Of the participants, 84% came from a family with both parents living together. A total of 13% of the participants had divorced parents. A total of 22% of the participants were commuters, and virtually all participants went home on weekends. University students in Belgium tend to rely on their parents for financial support. As an illustration, only 8% of the participants had a part-time job (ranging from 2 to 15 working hours per week) at the onset of the study.

To evaluate the effect of attrition, we used a multivariate analysis of variance on the five variables of interest (assessed at Time 1) to compare the participants who completed the five data assessment periods with those who dropped out. The combined dependent variables were affected by attrition, $F(5, 559) = 2.89$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and one univariate effect was significant. Participants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.42$) displayed a somewhat higher level of identification with commitment dimension than did dropouts ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.50$). Logistic regression analysis, $\chi^2(2, N = 565) = 20.53$, $p < .01$, indicated that retention was predicted by being female (odds ratio $= .49$, $p < .01$) and by being younger (odds ratio $= .67$, $p < .01$).

Measures

Dimensions of identity formation. Commitment making and exploration in breadth were assessed with the Dutch translation of the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995). Evidence was obtained for the reliability and validity of the two-factor structure in Belgian emerging adults. In addition, the Dutch version showed adequate convergent validity with continuous measures of identity styles and statuses (Luyckx, Goossens, Beyers, & Soenens, 2006). All identity items were answered on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale. Sample items include, "I have definitely decided on the occupation I want to pursue" (commitment making; 15 items) and "I have tried to learn about different occupational fields to find the best one for me" (exploration in breadth; 13 items).

Identification with commitment and exploration in depth were measured with the Dutch Utrecht–Groningen Identity Development Scale (Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002). Meeus (1996) provided evidence for the factorial structure of the Utrecht–Groningen Identity Development Scale and its invariance across various adolescent samples. Meeus et al. (2002) demonstrated the adequate reliability, concurrent validity, and construct validity of the instrument in different samples. Both identity dimensions were meaningfully related to, among other variables, ego strength and perspective taking skills. Sample items include, "My education gives me certainty in life" (identification with commitment; 16 items) and "I think a lot about my education" (exploration in depth; 10 items).

Psychological control. Psychological control was measured with the 8-item Psychological Control Scale—Youth Self-Report (Barber, 1996). Barber (1996) provided evidence for the validity and unidimensional factor structure of this scale. Cronbach's alphas of this scale were found to range between .72 and .86, demonstrating its reliability across samples. All items were answered on a 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies strongly*) Likert scale. A sample item is, "My parents are less friendly to me if I don't see things like they do." Participants rated psychological control for both parents together, making us unable to examine the relative or combined contribution of mothers and fathers to the prediction of adolescents' identity formation or to examine

whether the effects of psychological control on identity are stronger within same-sex dyads (cf. Barber, 2002).

Cronbach's alphas ranged from .72 to .80 (commitment making), .82 to .86 (identification with commitment), .74 to .77 (exploration in breadth), .62 to .71 (exploration in depth), and .82 to .86 (psychological control). Stability coefficients (i.e., the rank-order consistencies at intervals of 6, 12, 18, and 24 months; all at $p < .001$) ranged from .60 to .79 (commitment making), .40 to .67 (identification with commitment), .67 to .80 (exploration in breadth), .42 to .62 (exploration in depth), and .61 to .78 (psychological control).

Procedure

Permission to undertake this study was granted by the university's institutional review board. Participants signed a standard consent form before participating at Time 1. They were told that the study focused on identity development throughout adolescence, its predictors, and its consequences. All new freshmen students who enrolled at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in 2002 were asked to participate. Participation rate at Time 1 was 89%. Questionnaires were distributed in lecture halls or by mail. Three weeks after questionnaire administration, a new questionnaire was sent to those who had not yet returned the original questionnaire.

Results

Structural Stability of Within-Time Associations

At all five measurement periods, we calculated Pearson product-moment correlations between the identity dimensions and psychological control. More psychological control was associated with less commitment making (ranging from $-.27$ to $-.30$, $Mdn = -.27$, all $ps < .05$) and less identification with commitment (ranging from $-.10$ to $-.24$; $Mdn = -.20$, all $ps < .05$). Further, more psychological control was associated with more exploration in breadth (ranging from .19 to .27, $Mdn = .23$, all $ps < .05$). Psychological control was unrelated to exploration in depth (ranging from $-.07$ to .07, $Mdn = -.01$, all $ps > .05$). To formally evaluate the structural stability of these associations, we specified a single-indicator latent-variable model, with one latent variable associated with each scale score. First, we estimated paths among all latent variables and between each latent variable and its indicator, leading to a fully saturated model. Second, we reestimated the model after setting the correlations between identity and psychological control as equal at each measurement period. The

resulting model did not have a significantly worse fit to the data, $\chi^2(16, N = 364) = 19.03$, $p > .05$, compared with the unrestricted model. Thus, the associations between identity and psychological control were rather stable across time.

Common Developmental Pathways

LGCM was conducted with Mplus (Version 3.11; Muthén & Muthén, 2002). LGCM assesses within-individual change over time by estimating an intercept (i.e., average level) and a slope (i.e., rate of change) as latent growth factors. We used the observed variables measured at the five equidistant time points as indicators to represent these common factors. The intercept is a constant for any given individual, and hence its factor loadings are fixed at 1 for each measurement period. The factor loadings for the linear slope were fixed at 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. We fixed the first loading on the slope to 0 to determine the intercept as the initial level. Table 1 presents the parameter estimates of the multivariate LGCM, $\chi^2(260, N = 364) = 594.56$, $p < .001$, root-mean-square error of approximation $= .06$, comparative fit index $= .95$, standardized root-mean-square residual $= .04$. Commitment making, exploration in breadth, and exploration in depth increased linearly across time, whereas identification with commitment and psychological control remained largely stable. Slope parameter estimates were rather small. Multiplication of the average slope with the slope factor loading at Time 5 provides an estimate of average growth across the time span studied. Comparisons with the average initial levels indicate that participants are expected to realize between Times 1–5 an approximate 3.8%, 3.7%, and 3.4% increase in commitment making, exploration in breadth, and exploration in depth, respectively.

All variances associated with the slopes of identity and psychological control were significant. Therefore, correlations between these change parameters were calculated. Over time, increases in psychological control were associated with simultaneous decreases in commitment making ($r = -.47$, $p < .001$) and identification with commitment ($r = -.28$, $p < .01$). The correlations between the slopes of psychological control and both exploration in breadth ($r = .14$, $p > .05$) and exploration in depth ($r = .12$, $p > .05$) were nonsignificant.

Table 1
Parameter Estimates of Multivariate Linear Latent Growth Curve Modeling

Dimension	Mean intercept	Variance intercept	Mean slope	Variance slope
Commitment making	3.15*	0.13*	0.03*	.01*
Identification with commitment	3.50*	0.10*	−0.01	.01*
Exploration in breadth	3.25*	0.19*	0.03*	.01*
Exploration in depth	3.55*	0.10*	0.03*	.01*
Psychological control	1.91*	0.29*	0.01	.01*

Note. $N = 364$.
* $p < .001$.

Direction of Effects

Each identity variable at Time t ($t = 2, 3, 4, 5$) was regressed on that same identity variable at Time 1 and on psychological control at Time 1. This enabled us to capture the path leading from psychological control at Time 1 to the identity variable at Time t, when we controlled for the synchronic association between psychological control and identity at Time 1 and for stability in the identity variable. The same procedure was applied to investigate identity effects on psychological control (cf. Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998).

Four psychological control effects and three identity effects were significant (all $ps < .05$). The more psychological control emerging adults experienced at Time 1, the less strong their commitment making became at Time 4 and Time 5 ($\beta = -.10$ and $\beta = -.09$, respectively) and the less strong their identification with commitment became at Time 4 and Time 5 ($\beta = -.12$ and $\beta = -.12$, respectively). Conversely, the more exploration in breadth that emerging adults showed at Time 1, the more psychological control they experienced at Times 3, 4, and 5 ($\beta = .10$, $\beta = .09$, and $\beta = .11$, respectively). It should be noted that all cross-lagged coefficients were rather small.

Discussion

Diverse theoretical accounts suggest that intrusive, psychologically controlling parenting is detrimental to adolescents' and emerging adults' development of a stable and integrated personal identity (e.g., Barber, 2002). The present study is the first to fully explore the longitudinal relationships between psychological control and core dimensions of identity formation in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a period of unprecedented freedom to explore the different options available (Arnett, 2000). Such freedom to explore is exciting, and this period is a time of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty, and establishing a stable and viable identity becomes increasingly challenging in contemporary Western societies. General societal and cultural norms that once acted as a point of reference and guidance for individual development have been supplanted by a variety of life alternatives (Côté & Levine, 2002). Therefore, it is important that the microcontext of the emerging adult (such as the parents) provides some guidance on the road to an adult identity (Arnett, 2004). In line with this theorizing, when emerging adults perceived their parents as psychologically controlling, proactive identity formation was hindered in this study (cf. Barber, 2002).

The different longitudinal analyses indicated that the more participants perceived their parents as psychologically controlling, the more difficulties they experienced in establishing committed choices. Moreover, they were less likely to identify with the choices made or to feel certain about these choices. A representation of psychologically controlling parents seems to be associated with impairments in establishing identity commitments throughout the first 2 years in college. An interesting avenue for future research

would be to examine whether characteristics such as fear of failure or maladaptive perfectionism mediate the negative relation between psychological control and the formation of commitments (cf. Soenens et al., 2005). In addition, perceived psychological control was associated with a broad type of exploration but not with a more conscientious exploration in depth of already established commitments. Exploration in breadth seemed to predict increases in psychological control rather than the other way around. When parents are confronted with emerging adults who explore different alternatives in a rather broad fashion, the parents seem to increase their use of psychological control, probably in an attempt to pressure their children to make commitments. However, such controlling tactics seem to hinder rather than facilitate commitment making.

All measures were assessed through adolescent self-reports. In our previous work, we have demonstrated that the use of both parent and adolescent reports as indicators of the psychological control construct yields results that are highly similar to the use of adolescent self-reports only (Soenens et al., 2005). Adolescent self-report may be the most valid method to assess dimensions of parental treatment because of the subjective nature of this experience (Barber, 1996). Nonetheless, researchers are encouraged to replicate the current findings with parent-reported indices of psychological control. Further, the sample primarily consisted of female emerging adults from intact families, which calls for a replication among male emerging adults and emerging adults living in alternative types of family structures. We anticipate that, despite potential mean differences in identity formation and perceived psychological control, structural relationships will generally hold across gender and type of family structure.

In sum, the influence of the family continues to be very prominent during emerging adulthood, especially in college students (Arnett, 2004). Psychological and developmental problems experienced by college students may be related to ongoing relationships with their parents. Parental psychological control, which intrudes on the college student's search for autonomy, may impact how the college student feels about himself or herself and how he or she approaches the identity formation task (Barber, 2002). A more fragmented sense of identity or self can result from the student having parents who are not sensitive to or attuned to the needs of their adolescent children. The present findings indeed suggest that it is best for parents to avoid the use of intrusive and manipulative parenting strategies such as guilt induction and love withdrawal. Instead, parents may best view their emerging adult children as equals, showing respect for their children's inner wishes, standards, and needs if the parents want to stimulate the identity formation process in the college context (Arnett, 2004).

All of our participants were Caucasian college students from a Western country. Although parental psychological control has been demonstrated to influence child outcomes across different cultures (Barber, 2002), it remains to be investigated how parental psychological control relates to core identity issues in non-Western cultures or in non-White people living in Western cultures (a rapidly growing popu-

lation among adolescents and emerging adults). It is possible that the identity formation process operates differently in Whites than in non-Whites (Schwartz, 2005). Further, non-Whites have unique identity concerns, such as ethnic identity, that may be influenced by the family climate (cf. Swenson & Prelow, 2005).

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