Introduction to the Dissertation

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IDENTITY AND LIFE’S BIG DECISIONS

When I was approaching high school graduation, just like my fellow near-graduates all over the Netherlands, I was faced with making a big life decision: to choose a very specific trajectory in higher education out of thousands of options (e.g., international business administration, sociology, applied mathematics, biotechnology, tourism, etc.). To me, having to make this decision felt exciting, but also scary and slightly unfair. I did not know what all the options were, nor what I liked, nor where I wanted my life to go in the future. So how was I to make such a big, life defining decision in a good way? This dilemma is the reality of many adolescents and emerging adults who are in the transition from high school to higher education. This dissertation is an attempt to understand how people make such career decisions, how they evaluate them after they are made, and how all of this is intertwined with fundamental micro-level processes of identity development.

Making a big life decision, such as choosing a career path, is intrinsically connected to a sense of identity (e.g., Raskin, 1985; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). Our identity encompasses notions on what defines us, on what we like and where we want our life to go in the future. If these notions are clear, they allow us to make fitting life choices (e.g., Rottinghaus & Van Esbroeck, 2011). But importantly, the choices we make also shape our identity. Identity researchers refer to the making of big life choices, such as deciding on a particular career path, as the formation of commitments. The commitments are considered to be the building blocks of identity (Marcia, 1966). The best commitments are generally thought to be preceded by a period of thorough exploration (e.g., Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Kracke, 2013) where multiple options are broadly investigated and a select few are investigated in more depth (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006).

Identity development continues throughout the life of an individual, it does not stop after a big life decision is made. Rather, after the choice is made and the commitment is formed (the commitment formation cycle), the chosen path is now further explored in-depth (the commitment evaluation cycle; Luyckx et al., 2006). This in-depth exploration may lead the individual to obtain new information on what the commitment truly entails and whether it is as fitting as she thought it was. This information may also lead the individual to doubt her choice – such doubt is called commitment reconsideration (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). As a consequence of such commitment explorations and reconsiderations, the individual may change her mind about the path she has chosen. Such a change of career path seems to
occur rather frequently in higher education: in Europe, 20% to 50% of students drop out of their chosen educational trajectory in the first year alone (Quinn, 2013).

Identity development is commonly understood as a long-term process spanning decades, years, or months at least, or in other words, it is understood on a macro-level timescale (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008). However, in recent years some researchers have started to turn their attention towards understanding identity development as it occurs in daily and weekly processes as well, or in other words, it is increasingly understood on a micro-level timescale (e.g., Klimstra et al., 2010). This exciting new direction of studying identity on a micro-level can give us new insights on how identity emerges from everyday life interactions, which has many theoretical and practical implications. But of course, as is always the case with new directions, many questions need to be answered, in particular fundamental questions on what the concept of identity is on this micro-level, what its building blocks are, and how these building blocks interact to both form and evaluate commitments.

In this thesis I aim to further fundamental theory on the processes and mechanisms of identity development on a micro-level. I aim to understand the processes of both commitment formation and commitment evaluation and demonstrate the practical relevance of such fundamental knowledge by applying these insights to understand two major career transitions that are part of these processes: choosing a specific career path and dropping out of higher education.

**THE PROCESS AND CONCEPT OF IDENTITY ON A MICRO-LEVEL**

Knowledge of identity processes on a micro-level can be important for both theory and practice. From a theoretical point of view, such knowledge fills a crucial gap: how identity comes to be through the actions and experiences of everyday life. From a practical point of view knowledge on micro-level processes may be more usable than knowledge on macro-level processes. Micro-level processes of identity development are closely related to actions and experiences in everyday life (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). As practitioners operate on a micro-level – i.e., they tend to work with the actions and experiences of an individual in the here and now – knowledge on micro-level developmental processes of individuals may just be the type of knowledge that will be informative for them.

What constitutes a micro- or macro-level process depends on the phenomenon in question. The process of identity development can span years, or even a lifetime.
Yet these macro-level processes spanning years must be rooted in smaller, everyday interactions with the context (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Such everyday interactions with the context can be considered a micro-level process of identity. In order to study this micro-level process, it is necessary to think about what type of identity constructs are relevant on a micro-level timescale. For those of you who are now really excited, thinking that in this thesis finally some clarity is forthcoming on the vague concept of identity – I must moderate your expectations. Although I feel I have made some important steps in conceptualizing identity and its process on a micro-level, these steps are but the beginning of a larger quest to understand the different aspects of identity on different levels of time. We are not near a complete theory, but I shall describe some of the beginning ideas and their basis below.

Identity is a notoriously ambiguous construct. Erik Erikson – commonly cited as the founder of theory on identity – has written several works (e.g., 1956; 1968) in which he attempted to clarify the concept of identity by describing it from different angles, but he avoided an explicit definition of identity. Lacking a definition of identity is of course not very convenient if one aims to study identity, thus identity researchers after Erikson have tried to distill a measurable operationalization of identity from his writings. Marcia (1966) was arguably most successful in this – his operationalization of identity still forms the basis of the main stream of identity research today. Marcia concluded that identity development is the process of forming occupational and ideological commitments at the time that the young individual is faced with adult tasks such as getting a job and becoming a citizen. He added that a period of exploration is essential for forming optimal commitments, and that both exploration and commitment can be present or absent, leading an individual to be in one of four possible identity statuses. This concrete definition of identity allowed the field of identity research to expand rapidly and various instruments were called into existence to measure exploration and commitment.

However, it turns out that the various instruments that were designed to measure identity diverge in what they measure precisely (e.g., Waterman, 2015). I reasoned that this divergence in identity measures is perhaps rooted in an implicit divergence in the ideas of researchers about what the constructs of exploration and commitment truly entail. When trying to pinpoint these possible differences in the conceptualization of identity, I noticed that researchers differ in what they consider to be the object of commitment and exploration.

Some researchers focus on the individuals’ commitment to and exploration of relatively abstract ideas that the individual has about herself in relation to her context (e.g., Bosma, 1985; Bosma, Kunnen, & Van der Gaag, 2012; Marcia, Waterman,
Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). These abstract ideas may entail convictions, norms and values in several domains of life (for instance, what the individual finds most important in friendships). Generating such ideas requires of the individual that she integrates many views on herself. After all, in any domain an individual may have various qualitatively different views. Moreover, her current views may differ from her past views, and from her views on where she wants to go in the future. Because of the high amount of elements and the large time-span that the individual integrates in one coherent view, it is perhaps suitable to name this aspect of identity the ‘macro-level’ of identity. This macro-level of identity contains not only the abstract views that the individual has on herself in different domains of life but also contains the strength of the commitment that the individual feels towards these views (i.e., the extent to which the individual is certain of these views, and how guiding these views are to the life of the individual) and how much she has explored these views (i.e., the extent to which the individual has investigated a view, thought about it, talked about it with friends etcetera).

Other researchers focus on a different aspect of identity. Several instruments designed to measure identity focus on the individuals’ commitment to and exploration of concrete contexts in the environment of the individual (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2008; Klimstra et al., 2010; Van der Gaag, De Ruiter, & Kunnen, 2016). Such concrete contexts may for example be a particular career path, or a particular friend. An individual can have views on how well suited this context is with her own interests and ambitions. Such a view on the fit of a context with the self can be generated relatively easily. For example, an individual who has but a single experience with another individual can already generate a view on how well this other individual is matched with her (although this may of course change over time). This feeling of fit, and how certain the individual is of this feeling, are important aspects to her overall feeling of commitment towards a certain context. Because this feeling of commitment to concrete contexts requires an integration of only a few elements over a small time-frame in order to form, it is perhaps suitable to call this the ‘micro-level’ of identity. This micro-level of identity contains not only the feeling of commitment towards a context, but also how much the individual has explored the context, alternative contexts, and her own interest and ambitions within this context.

It seems likely that the micro- and macro-levels of identity described in the previous two paragraphs are closely related, but conceptually it may hold some important advantages if we explicitly differentiate them. If we do, we can start to understand if and how these levels interact. We can for example start to unravel
how a lack of a clear and strong views on the self (i.e., lacking strong macro-level commitments) can affect the ability of an individual to choose a career path (i.e., form micro-level commitments; see for example chapter 5). Indeed, it seems likely that these two levels of identity continuously shape each other. A concrete commitment on the micro-level of identity, such as a strong commitment to a particular career path, shapes an abstract commitment on the macro-level of identity, such as the individuals’ view of herself as an ambitious individual. But this works both ways, the way the individual views herself also affects the micro-level commitments she forms and how she evaluates these commitments.

I touch on the topic of interaction between levels of identity in chapter 5, but for the largest part of this thesis (chapters 2, 3 and 4) I have chosen to focus particularly on the micro-level concept of identity, for two reasons. First, I expect that the micro-level of identity (exploration of and commitment to concrete options in the environment) is particularly relevant for studying micro-level processes of identity (identity processes spanning days and weeks). Concrete micro-level commitments to a specific educational trajectory or a particular friend are probably more easily affected by concrete day-to-day events than abstract ideas on the self are (i.e., macro-level identity). After all, this more abstract view on the self is here conceptualized as an integration of many views over a large time-span. If the individual dismisses this view she will need to redefine herself, an activity that is probably difficult, time consuming and accompanied by psychological turmoil. But this view can remain intact by doubting the fit of the context, which may also be unpleasant, but perhaps less threatening and time-consuming than doubting self-views that are so carefully constructed over the years. If we assume that individuals will tend to choose the less threatening, less time-consuming path, then it is plausible that they will sooner doubt the fit of a context, than doubt the view on the self. This is why I expect that the micro-level concept of identity will change more frequently on a week-to-week basis than the macro-level concept of identity, and will be the more interesting aspect of identity to study on this weekly time-scale.

The second reason to focus on the micro-level of identity is because the frequent evaluation of this construct – which is needed to investigate micro-level processes of identity – is much less intrusive than assessing the macro-level of identity. Having the feeling that a certain context or person does or does not fit, or whether you are sure about your choice for such a context or person, requires little reflection. This is evidenced by the relative simplicity of the instruments used to measure these types of concrete, micro-level commitments: multiple choice questionnaires that do not
even take a minute to complete (e.g., Klimstra et al., 2010). Contrastingly, integrating and generating abstractions from the many views that an individual may have on herself over a large time-span (i.e., macro-level identity) is time consuming and difficult. This difficulty is evidenced by the necessity of deploying interviews spanning several hours (e.g., Bosma, Kunnen, & Van der Gaag, 2012) in order to assess such self-views. This makes the assessment of an individual’s macro-level identity every week for a period of several months practically difficult, and such frequent and extensive reflections would have a high chance to significantly affect the identity development itself.

Throughout this dissertation I will touch on this conceptualization of identity as a micro- and macro-level construct several times, but I will note in advance that a lot of conceptual work still needs to be done in how to exactly distinguish such levels of identity, and how they may interact. This is indeed important work as it may unite two very different views on identity that have existed side-by-side while it has so far remained unclear how they are related to one another.

**THIS THESIS**

With this thesis, I aim to investigate processes and mechanisms of micro-level identity development in both cycles of identity development: commitment formation and commitment evaluation. To demonstrate the practical utility of such a fundamental understanding I connect the processes in these two cycles to two types of big career transitions that may result from each of these cycles: to choose a career path (particularly an educational trajectory) and to drop out of higher education.

I start this thesis by investigating the trajectories of micro-level commitment and exploration over a period of several months and study how such trajectories are related to the decision to drop out of higher education (chapter 2). I then try to uncover the mechanisms behind these trajectories by investigating how acts of micro-level exploration are related to changes in micro-level commitment within individuals (chapter 3). Next, I study what role there may be for emotional experiences in affecting the dynamics of commitment within individuals, and how this compares to the role of exploration (chapter 4). The final chapter combines these insights with theories of both developmental and cognitive psychology in one theoretical framework on the process of career choice. We use this framework to build a career choice simulation model that allows us to predict how micro-level processes of exploration and experiences shape the formation of career commit-
ments, and how individual differences may affect this process and the quality of the resulting career choice (chapter 5). Thus the chapters are so organized that they provide increasingly in-depth empirical and theoretical insight into the question: what are the basic processes and mechanisms of micro-level identity development and how are such processes related to big career transitions?

Throughout this thesis, I have placed the individual at the center. I aim to uncover mechanisms and processes within individuals, but at the same time I try to gain some insight in how individuals may differ in these processes. These aims do not automatically align well – they require some balancing. On the one hand, to uncover as much as possible of the intricacies of within-individual mechanisms and process, it may be best to perform an extensive case study on one individual or a few individuals. The obvious downside to this is that it is not clear whether the processes and mechanisms uncovered are true for other individuals (i.e., atomistic fallacy; Courgeau et al., 2016). On the other hand, large group studies that do have the capacity to generalize over many individuals often fall into the fallacy of translating group averages to processes within individuals (i.e., the ecological fallacy, Courgeau et al., 2016; or the ergodicity problem, Molenaar & Campbell, 2009; see also chapter 2). Moreover, the sheer amount of individuals in large group studies makes it tempting to only report on averages, and draw conclusions based solely on these averages while losing sight of the individuals and how they may deviate from the average. In all my chapters I have aimed to find a middle ground. I have placed the individual at the center of my analyses to preserve the richness of idiosyncratic development, while also looking at the group level to explore possible differences between individuals.
REFERENCES


