

WHO I AM? THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE IDENTITY FORMATION PROCESS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Project *Transición a la Aduldez en España* (<http://grupos.us.es/transaduldez/>)

This research has been funded by the Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, the Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional (RTI2018-097405-B-I00); and the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (EDU2013-45687-R).



INTRODUCTION

Identity is a complex construct that has been defined by Erikson and Marcia as a psychological process characterized by the development of a set of traits that distinguishes the individual and differentiates him from other individuals or groups, defining who he/she is in our society. It is one of the most significant achievements in the life development and, furthermore, a key prelude to adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966).

Erikson postulated that the **identity development process (IDP)** ...

... Begins in **adolescence** and extends into the adulthood

... it is “built” in the **interaction with others**, as it is a definition of the *self* based on a **social construction**

... And is also influenced by **personal circumstances**

The **Dual Cycle Model** (DCM), an extension of the paradigm of Erickson and Marcia developed by Luyckx et al. (2005), defines the formation of identity and the *self* as a **continuous** and **gradual** process that includes, among other processes, the **commitments making** and the **identification**, or not, with them; **explore** the environment and available options and evaluate these options in depth.

Although this model consists of 5 fundamental dimensions (**Commitment Making, Identification with Commitment, Exploration in Breadth, Exploration in Depth and Ruminative Exploration**), the present work focuses on the first two, which are the dimensions of **commitment**, since they are considered the ones that allow the consolidation of identity.

Due to the several **socio-economic** changes that have occurred in the industrialized societies of the 21st century, youth take longer to acquire **adult roles** and **stable commitments**. For this reason, the IDP is a key process and the cornerstone in the so-called **emerging adulthood**, a stage that includes young people between 18 and 29 years of age (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz and Montgomery, 2002).

The characteristics of emerging adulthood are:

- a) Stage of **exploration** and **consolidation of identity**.
- b) Stage marked by high **instability** in all vital areas.
- c) The person is more **self-focused** than in other stages.
- d) There is a general feeling of **not being an adult nor an adolescent**; instead, there is a feeling of being in the middle of both stages.
- e) Stage of several **open doors** and **possibilities**.

Due to the strong **psychosocial** and **cultural** component of the IDP (Coté, 1966), two key variables of this process have been studied in recent decades: **perceived social support** and **gender**.

Both influence the way in which youths make **commitments** and **identify** and integrate them as part of who they are.

Positive and **solid** social relationships can act as a **support** and a **source of security** throughout the changes and events that occur during the various stages of life development, which, in turn, results in the identity development of each person (Para, 2008).

That is why the different **sources of social support** play a prominent role in the development of identity (Para, 2008).

Family support is present from birth, and the way in which family resources, values, beliefs and learning experiences influence the resolution of early crises conditions the life development of later years (Para, 2008; Bosma and Kunnen, 2001).

In the adolescence and emerging adulthood stages, **family support** is still necessary even if it is shared with other sources of support such as friends or a romantic partner. The quality of **family interactions** and, therefore, the presence, insufficiency or absence of support, influences the exploration and **consolidation of identity** during those years (Para, 2008; Meeus et al., 2002).

Support from friends or peers complements family support from the first two years of life and becomes more relevant as the person reaches adolescence and emerging adulthood.

In fact, its influence is greater when the family nucleus does not provide **stable** and **functional support**, being the **primary source** of support those youths that do not have quality family support (Para, 2008).

While **family support** provide, or not, a secure basis for development and world exploration, **peers** offer new resources and different points of view that complement and enrich this development process.

Although the role of **family and friends support** in the IDP has been extensively studied, the role of the **partner support** in the IDP, on the other hand, has been little studied.

During adolescence and emerging adulthood, youths establish their **first romantic relationships** and, in some cases, their **marriage**. When couples live together or "expand" the family, the support of partner comes to the fore and becomes the primary source of support, for better or for worse.

This could make **partner support** an important source of identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Like the **friends**, the couple offers new experiences and points of view that may coincide, or not, with the own values of the person. And, like the **family**, the couple offers a stable and secure base, or not, from which to continue the daily development. Therefore, it is of special relevance to study its impact on the development of identity.

Another relevant variable in the development of identity is **gender**. There are authors who point out that there are differences in the IDP between boys and girls. Studies based on the DCM are **scarce** and their **results inconsistent**; in some of them, **girls** obtain higher scores in **commitment making** (Crocetti et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2012; Luyckx et al., 2008; Merrill et al., 2016; Morsunbul et al., 2014), while in others (Bogaerts et al., 2019) they find that **boys** have the highest score in **commitment making** and **identification with commitment**.

MAIN AIMS

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of the identity development process in a sample of emerging adults. The relationship between perceived social support (family, friends and partner), the formation of commitments and the identification with said commitments was analyzed, all from a gender perspective.

METHOD

SAMPLE

In this study there was 1502 participants (60.1% girls and 39.9% boys) from two Spanish universities, Universidad del País Vasco (UPV / EHU) and Universidad de Sevilla (US), with ages between 18 and 29 years ($M = 20.32$, $DT = 2.13$), of the five branches of knowledge: (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Health Sciences, Social and Legal Sciences, and Engineering and Architecture).

METHOD

MEASURES

- ❖ The ***Identity Development Scale*** (Luyckx et al., 2008) has 25 items with a Likert-type response scale. The instrument is divided into five subscales of which only two have been used for the study: *Commitment Making* (CM; $\alpha = .93$), and *Identification with commitment* (IC; $\alpha = .92$).
- ❖ The ***Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support*** (Zimet et al., 1988) has 12 items, with a Likert-type response scale that are divided into three subscales: *Friends support* ($\alpha = .93$), *Family support* ($\alpha = .92$) and *Partner Support* ($\alpha = .87$).

METHOD

PROCEDURE

The IDS was administered during colleague classes to US and UPV students between 18 and 29 years old. The questionnaire was administered in paper and pencil format.

A favorable report was obtained from the *Comité de Ética de la Investigación Biomédica de Andalucía*.

Descriptive tests, one-way ANOVAs, correlational analysis (Pearson's r) and regression analysis with SPSS v26 were performed to analyze the data.

RESULTS

TABLE 1

Descriptive statistics and ANOVA of the two dimensions of commitment in boys and girls.

	Commitment Making			Identification with Commitment		
	M (DT)	F (gl)	d Cohen	M (DT)	F (gl)	d Cohen
Boys	3.75 (.87)	0.78 (1, 1491)	0.045	3.72 (.86)	3.93* (1, 1490)	0.105
Girls	3.71 (.89)			3.63 (.86)		

*p<.05

TABLE 2

Descriptive statistics and ANOVA of the three types of support in boys and girls.

	Rango	Family Support			Friends Support			Partner Support		
		M (DT)	F (gl)	d Cohen	M (DT)	F (gl)	d Cohen	M (DT)	F (gl)	d Cohen
Boys	1-7	6.06 (1.26)	5.649*	0.125	5.90 (1.13)	15.957***	0.211	6.40 (1.09)	5.734*	0.178
Girls		6.21 (1.15)	(1, 1493)		6.14 (1.15)	(1, 1493)		6.56 (0.79)	(1, 801)	

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

RESULTS

TABLE 3

Correlation between Commitment Making, Identification with Commitment and the three types of perceived social support.

	Family Support	Friends Support	Partner Support
Commitment Making	.181**	.105**	.194**
Identification with Commitment	.190**	.125**	.172**

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

TABLA 4

Comparison by gender of the correlation between the two dimensions of identity and the three types of perceived social support.

	Boys			Girls	Girls		
	Family Support	Friends Support	Partner Support		Family Support	Friends Support	Partner Support
Commitment Making	.243**	.154**	.330**		.140**	.078*	.114**
Identification with Commitment	.257**	.196**	.243**		.148**	.089**	.134**

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001. In all the correlations, except for the formation of commitment * peer support and identification with commitment * partner support, significant differences were obtained between them (p <.05 Fisher's Z).

RESULTS

TABLA 5

Regression models for predicting commitment making and identification based on gender and the three types of support.

	Commitment Making				Identification with Commitment			
	Coefficient (B)	t	ΔF	R ²	Coefficient (B)	t	ΔF	R ²
Paso 1								
Family Support	.025	1.00			.10***	3.65		
Friends Support	.086	3.23**	14.95	0.05	.05*	2.40	16.41	0.06
Partner Support	.148	4.41***			.12**	3.50		
Paso 2								
Family Support*Gender	.02	.59			.03	.80		
Friends Support*Gender	-.02	-.51	0.664	0.002	-.01	-.22	0.356	0.001
Partner Support*Gender	.01	.19			-.01	-.37		

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

CONCLUSIONS

There are slight differences by gender in the IDP for boys and girls. **Boys** have a greater **identification with commitment**. No differences were found in commitment making.

Instead, **girls** have perceived **more support** from family, partner and friends / peers. These results coincide with the previous literature. As summarized in Barbee et al. (1993), **girls** have a greater tendency to seek and receive support, and they also have higher levels of perceived social support.

Those differences...

They show that **gender** is related to divergences in **identity development** and **perceived social support**. The cause of these differences is not clear, but ...

... can reflect the impact that different gender roles, stereotypes and life experiences, as well as different social and cultural expectations, have on boys and girls from birth to adolescence and adulthood.

CONCLUSIONS

Without distinguishing by gender, there is a **positive relationship** between the commitment making and identification with the three types of support.

These results, which coincide with the findings of the literature, confirm that **the sources of perceived support, both family and peers, stimulate the development of identity when they are positive** (Para, 2008). These data also shed light on the influence of partner support, which is the support that has been least studied in research in the last decade.

When the data is analyzed by gender, however, it is found that the **influence of support is not the same for boys and girls**. Identity correlations with support reflect **stronger associations in boys**, meaning that support has a greater impact on identity development in them.

CONCLUSIONS

BOYS



GIRLS

The type of support that most stimulates the commitment making is the **support of the partner**, followed by the family member and, lastly, the support of friends.

On the other hand, **family support** has a greater influence on identification, followed by partner support.

The type of support that most stimulates the commitment making and identification is the **family support**, followed by partner support.

The **support of friends**, on the other hand, has a very weak positive relationship with both processes.

CONCLUSIONS

COMMITMENT MAKING

The type of support that most favors the formation of commitments is the **support of the partner**, followed by the family member.

The influence of support in this process of commitment making is **greater in boys than girls**.

IDENTIFICATION WITH COMMITMENT

The type of support that most favors identification with commitment is the **support from the partner**, followed by support from family and friends.

The influence of support on identification is **greater in boys than girls**.

CONCLUSIONS

Boys perceive less social support than girls do, **but this has a greater impact on their identity development** compared to girls.

Partner and family social support are the two types that carry the most weight in identification with commitment in emerging adults.

The **social support of friends** is the one that has less weight in both identity processes during emerging adulthood.

CONCLUSIONS

Need to...

... Develop lines of research that shed light on **the causes or mechanisms** that originate these **gender differences** and that determine **the role of each type of support** in emerging adulthood.

... Develop a **longitudinal research** that allow observing **how the three types of support influence the identity development of boys and girls over time**, analyzing whether there are variations in the impact of each one throughout emerging adulthood.

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