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Identity Formation in a Relational Context: A Person-Centered Analysis of Troubled Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the identity formation of troubled youth (8 female and 12 male adolescents, ages 14–17) in an after-school treatment program for problem behavior. To achieve this goal we (a) garnered information from 2 identity interviews given 6 to 8 weeks apart, (b) adopted a qualitative, person-centered analytical strategy to identify identity profiles, and (c) examined the identity profiles within a relational context, focusing on the developmentally salient domains of parents and peers. Analyses revealed 5 identity profiles similar to the identity statuses previously described by Marcia and others, but with unique phenomenological differences. Across the profiles, youth differed in their responses (in terms of exploration and commitment) to the “identity challenges” they encountered during this brief period. Likewise, the relational contexts of parental and peer support also varied across profiles.

Adolescence is, for most youth, a time of exploration in many domains. Adolescents’ gradual acceptance of broader social roles and their experimentation with new behaviors, attitudes, and ways of defining themselves brings new opportunities but also increased risks and vulnerabilities. Problem behavior is common dur-

ing adolescence (Jessor, 1998), the period when identity issues first come to the forefront for psychosocial resolution (Erikson, 1968). Each year, as a result of their explorations, some youth develop behavior problems that are severe enough to gain the attention of others and result in their placement in remedial, therapeutic, or corrective settings.

Adolescence is also a time of making commitments. Maturational changes in biological, psychological, and social domains converge to enhance the individual's capacity for self-direction. The questions of who one is and what one means to others become salient for most youth (Erikson, 1968). While facing these questions of "Who am I?", "What do I want to become?", and "Where do I fit in society?", young people are also faced with personal decisions about when, where, and how many risks they will take—and how they will change patterns that have become problematic toward a more positive identity, or cultivate instead a deviant or "negative" identity (Erikson, 1968).

Treatment settings present youth with imperatives to change their behaviors (e.g., Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002) and most settings have broader goals of fostering the comprehensive changes needed to counteract influences supporting problem behavior, including family functioning and peer networks. Such interventions implicitly or explicitly target *identity restructuring* (Kellogg, 1993; Stall & Biernacki, 1986), based on the assumption that the individual is capable of choosing how to respond to life circumstances that maintain problems and can, with support, change (Grimley, Prochaska, Velicer, Blais, & DiClemente, 1994). In posttreatment interviews, "successful" individuals often do identify transformations in identity, based on self-discoveries made in treatment, as an essential aspect of turning their life around (Baker, 2000). Conversely, identity may moderate the impact that treatment has on an individual. In one study, individuals with a diffuse/avoidant style had shorter lengths of continuous abstinence, fewer recovery-oriented behaviors, lower quality of recovery, and less recovery progress than those with an information style, suggesting an important relation between identity styles and recovery processes (White, Montgomery, Wampler, & Fischer, 2003).

Unfortunately, however, little is known about how troubled youth who are in a treatment context that presents them with "identity challenges" respond to these challenges. Further, little is known about how experiences in treatment and how self-change, "identity restructuring" goals that youth might establish there are linked to two developmentally important relational contexts in which adolescents define their identity: relationships with parents and relationships with peers. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the identity profiles of troubled youth being treated for problem behavior within a relational context. To achieve this goal we (a) adopted a qualitative, person-centered analytical strategy to identify identity profiles and (b) examined the identity profiles

within a relational context, focusing on parents and peers. The latter will be addressed first.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN FAMILY CONTEXTS

Several identity theorists have illuminated the psychosocial aspects of identity development by demonstrating how identity processes of commitment and exploration are influenced, in part, by relationships with parents (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Blasi & Glodis, 1995; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Côté & Levine, 1988; Grotevant, 1987). Their findings are consistent with family systems theory, which suggests that a healthy sense of individuation from parents and family is important for individual identity development. For example, parents who allow their adolescent children the opportunity to explore various social roles without undue resistance provide a sense of unconditional support for decision-making opportunities that encourages healthy identity formation (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). Researchers have found that both exploration and commitment were highest in families where members were able to express differences and resolve conflicts without losing a sense of cohesion, and boundaries were clear between parents and their adolescent children (Fullinwider Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996; Perosa & Perosa, 1993). Family cohesion (the strength of family bonds) has also been found to be positively associated with identity exploration among male participants and negatively related to diffusion among female participants (Jackson, Dunham, & Kidwell, 1990; Willemsen & Waterman, 1991). In contrast, enmeshment (extreme cohesion) between adolescents and their parents places an emotional strain on the adolescent and has a negative impact on their exploration of identity-relevant issues (Anderson & Fleming, 1986; Fullinwider-Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993).

Other characteristics of the family environment that have been found to be related to the formation of an identity during adolescence include parental attachment, parent-adolescent conflict, and parenting style. Several researchers have found that a secure attachment to one's parents is positively related to the identity achieved status, negatively related to the identity foreclosed and diffused statuses, and positively related to identity exploration and commitment when evaluated separately (Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001; Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994; Zimmermann & Becker Stoll, 2002). Furthermore, Taylor and Oskay (1995) found that families characterized by high conflict and authoritarian parenting were more likely to have adolescent children who were identity diffuse. On the other hand, a lack of family conflict has been found to be associated with identity foreclosure (Willemsen & Waterman, 1991). This is consistent with other evidence that suggests an appropriate balance of conflict within the family promotes identity explo-

ration among early adolescents when conflict is seen as an expression of individuation (Papini, Micka, & Barnett, 1989).

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND PEER CONTEXTS

The significance of the adolescent's peer group has been explored less often; however, evidence suggests it has an important role to play in identity development. Several studies have linked the quality of friendship relationships to identity development. Meeus and Dekovic (1995) found that perceptions of social support from friends were positively associated with both exploration and commitment in the relational domain, and with exploration in the school and occupational domains. On the other hand, Reiss and Younis (2004) found that adolescents whose scores on an identity-related measure decreased over time from average to low also reported greater conflict with peers. Similarly, Flum (1994) found that having a high dependency on peers, coupled with an asocial orientation and a lack of ability to withstand peer pressure, predicted a diffuse style of identity formation. A diffuse style was characterized by a lack of feeling of control over one's future and an overdependence on self and peers to the exclusion of parents in making future decisions. Although these youth may have felt accepted by their friends, their friends did not provide a facilitative environment for successful individuation from the family (Flum, 1994). This research demonstrates that peers, along with parents, provide an important relational context for identity development. However, overall, the focus of this type of research has been on the transactions between relational contexts and identity processes as important factors in healthy identity development (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997), but little attention has been given to how transactions between relational contexts and identity processes are important for troubled youth with compromised identity development.

ADVANTAGES OF A PERSON-CENTERED APPROACH

Although the identity status model has been well-researched (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993) and much is known about psychosocial and personality correlates of each status (achieved, foreclosed, moratorium, and dif-fused), critics argue the approach has several important limitations. Classifying individuals based on high versus low scores on two processes (exploration and commitment) obtained from interviews or questionnaires is useful for answering some questions, but not others. For example, issues of how to assign an overall status when a variety of identity-relevant domains are considered simultaneously continue to plague researchers, as do questions of context-related differences in mani-

festations of identity (Schwartz, 2001). Questions about consistency and change between statuses across time and “normal” fluctuations and sequencing of exploration and commitment across adolescence also remain (Grotevant, 1987, Meeus, 1996, Van Hoof, 1999). The “microprocesses” of how identity is maintained or changed remain unstudied (with a few exceptions; see Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kerpelman et al., 1997). Very little attention indeed has been devoted to the types of “negative” identities that youth may develop and how these are linked to youth’s relational contexts.

Person-centered analyses have recently been applied in developmental psychopathology research to examine the individual ontogeny and various pathways that an individual may take (e.g., Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). In this approach, attention is drawn to the individual as a “gestalt,” or whole person, dynamically interacting with the context in which he or she is embedded (Magnusson, 1998). The person-centered approach is more informative for detecting and describing the mechanisms and processes of development, emphasizing the transactional nature of development (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000), which can be further assessed using variable-oriented approaches (Horn, 2000). For example, a recent study by Reis and Youniss (2004) demonstrated the utility of examining identity profiles within a relational context by evaluating the ego identity of adolescents using the Identity subscale of the Eriksonian Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). Adolescents were evaluated at the end of their sophomore year and again at the end of their senior year of high school. Cluster analysis revealed four identity profiles: low-average (identity scores increased from low to above average), average-low (identity scores declined over time), high-high (identity scores remained high over time), and low-low (identity scores remained low over time). Comparisons between profiles on perceived quality of relationships with mothers and friends found consistent differences across profiles. Although communication and support from mothers increased over time for all profiles, the gains in communication were highest for the high-high and low-average profiles whereas support increased significantly for the low-low and low-average profiles. Communication and support from friends showed similar gains over time; however, conflict with friends decreased for all profiles except for the average-low profile where conflict with peers remained the same. These results illustrate how person-centered analyses inform our understanding of the unfolding of various identity pathways within a relational context.

In this case, we sought to distinguish distinct identity patterns or profiles that would (a) inform identity theorists about normal (and problematic) development and (b) inform practitioners who provide identity-related enrichment, prevention, remediation, or treatment so that interventions are more supportive and sensitive to particular types of individuals. However, adolescents in intervention settings are not all alike. Differing developmental trajectories characterize adolescents who engage in risky behavior that cannot be reduced to simple explanations or

overgeneralizations (Baumrind, 1987; Jessor, 1992). Thus, one goal of this study was to employ a person-centered analysis for analyzing qualitative data obtained across an 8-week period from youth in treatment for problem behaviors, to identify identity profiles that take into account patterns of exploration, commitment, change, and stability. The second goal of this study was to evaluate the identity profiles within a relational (parent and peer) context by examining specific relational themes that varied across the identity profiles of the troubled youth. To achieve these goals, identity profiles of commitment and exploration and the interpersonal processes with parents and peers were evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative information.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty adolescents (8 female, 12 male) ages 14–17 were participants in this study. Most (11) were non-Hispanic White, 4 were Hispanic, 2 were African American, and 3 reported multiracial heritage. Most ($n = 16$) reported living with parent(s) whereas 3 reported living with other relatives and one resided in the county youth detention center. All but one reported attending school, with most in either the 9th ($n = 5$), 10th ($n = 7$), or 11th ($n = 5$) grade. Mothers' education varied, with 25% ($n = 5$) having less than a high school education and 40% ($n = 8$) with some college. Fathers' education was similar with 5% ($n = 1$) with less than a high school education and 45% ($n = 9$) with some college.

Procedures

All participants were enrolled in an after-school community-based treatment program designed to reduce teens' problematic behavior. The intervention consisted of peer group support and psycho-educational activities, as well as individual psychotherapy. Although the adolescents were self-, family-, or court-referred to the program for a variety of problem behaviors, the most common was alcohol and illicit drug use. Although the intervention did not specifically target identity restructuring, however the context did encourage participants to re-examine identity commitments.

Adolescents were assessed at two points in time, approximately 6 to 8 weeks apart, near the beginning and end of their program involvement. Assessments consisted of interviews and an identity process questionnaire. Of the approximately 40 adolescents who provided complete information during their first week of program participation, only 20 were available to complete the second interview. Comparisons on demographic characteristics between the program completers and

noncompleters on the first interview showed that noncompleters were more likely to be male participants.

Instrument

Groningen Identity Development Scale (GIDS). The primary tool used to evaluate identity developmental processes was the GIDS (Bosma, 1992). The GIDS includes an identity interview coupled with an identity process questionnaire for each identity-relevant domain. The GIDS was designed to be administered in three steps:

1. Conduct an identity status interview across six domains.
2. Allow the interviewee to identify the greatest commitment in each domain.
3. Have the interviewee complete an identity process questionnaire for each domain.

Full administration of the GIDS takes about 2 to 3 hours to complete (Bosma, 1992). Given the population and assessment conditions for this study (which made a lengthy assessment problematic), the GIDS format was revised to be more brief. Pilot testing showed that approximately four domains could be explored in a 60- to 90-min interview: philosophy of life, relationships with parents, relationships with friends, and school/occupational attitudes and goals. Although both past and present exploration and the strength of commitments continued to be the foundation for questioning, the parent and peer domains were expanded to inquire about parent-child relationships and peer social support. Interviewers were trained by the first author.

Rather than increase participants' anxiety by introducing a tape recorder, a procedure was developed to summarize the content of the interview in each domain. Following each section of the interview, the interviewee was instructed to summarize the information on an index card. An outline was provided to help guide them in writing their summary and mirrored the questions asked in the interview. For example, after the interview in the parent domain, the participants were asked to answer the following questions:

1. Briefly describe your relationship with your parents. Who are you closest to and why?
2. Briefly describe relationships with other family members (if important).
3. Briefly describe how relationships have changed over time and what you've learned.
4. Briefly describe your level of commitment to your parents and family.
5. My strongest commitment is ...

To compensate for the potential loss of information, the interviewer also wrote down the main points of the discussion on an index card. Because the interviews in each domain were relatively brief (approximately 10–15 min), most of the information provided in the interview could be easily documented.

The GIDS questionnaire for each interview domain contained 32 items with two subscales: commitment (18 items) and exploration (14 items). The subscales evidenced good reliability across domains. Cronbach alphas ranged from .75 to .93 for commitment and .62 to .80 for exploration, which is equal to or better than other objective measures of identity (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995; Bennion & Adams, 1986; Berzonsky, 1989; Grotevant & Adams, 1984).

Analytical Strategy

Unlike traditional grounded theory approaches to qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the analytical strategy in this study was not strictly inductive. Analytical deduction was involved in the identification of important identity processes and the construction of the interview protocol designed to assess these processes (c.f., Bosma, 1992, Marcia, 1966). Analytical induction was used in the analysis of the interview data. Rather than assign individuals to an identity status, the qualitative analysis focused on the patterns and relationships between identity processes across domains over the two points in time, yielding an analyst-constructed typology (Patton, 2002). Because the primary source of information was responses based on a modified identity status interview, similarities in characteristics between the emerging profiles and the identity statuses were likely. The purpose of the analytical strategy, though, was to maintain the person-centered nature of the inquiry while identifying distinct identity profiles with the classification strategy. The qualitative analysis was conducted by the first author and proceeded in three steps:

Step 1. In Step 1 of the coding process, an initial pass through the data was made, beginning with the participants' responses, to identify conceptually meaningful information and develop preliminary themes that reflected the conceptual nature of the idea expressed in the narrative. Adopting a paragraph-by-paragraph coding strategy (Turner, 1981), each paragraph in the GIDS summaries was coded in relation to the following question, "What themes, ideas, patterns, or processes identify the conceptual substance of this paragraph?" All themes were coded at this phase. For example, the following summary of the parent domain was provided by a 17-year-old male participant:

At this point in my life I'm close to my parents as well as my brother. My relationship with my parents is good because of the fact that most of the time [they're] understanding due to their age and the way they were when they were my age, although

they've never had to deal with some of the things I've dealt with. My greatest commitment to my family is to be open and honest with them, as well as changing some of my ways because of the outcome of the way I do things now.

Upon coding, themes identified included: closeness to parents, parental understanding, honesty with parents, and commitment to change behaviors that distress parents.

Identity-related themes were more likely to be captured in the interviewer's report of the interview. For example, the following comments were recorded by the interviewer that focused on the general themes of exploration and commitment:

Exploration comments: “[He] feels [his] parents are somewhat strict and a little less understanding than other parents. [He] finds himself comparing his family with others.”

Commitment comments: “[He rated] the importance of relationships with parents at 10 ... [He] feels they have been good parents.”

Based on these comments, the exploratory behavior was coded as “comparisons with others,” whereas the statements of commitment reflected strong commitments to parents.

Step 2. The second step in the data coding process involved conceptualizing, clarifying, and sorting cases into meaningful constellations of identity-related processes over time. Because the primary objective of this stage of coding was to develop meaningful groupings of individuals with similar constellations of identity process themes, particularly patterns in identity exploration and commitment, the GIDS questionnaire scores were also included as relevant sources of information. For information from the GIDS questionnaire to be successfully integrated into qualitative data processing, a high–low graph reflecting domain scores by assessment time was created for each participant. This information, combined with the interview data, provided an analysis of the identity processes of commitment and exploration across domains and over the two points of assessment.

As initial codes were evaluated and re-evaluated in combination with the patterns that emerged in the high–low graphs, several classification strategies were attempted. Through a process of trial and error, clusters of individuals were devised by the first author, evaluated for conceptual clarity by the second and third authors, and reclassified and re-evaluated. Five profiles emerged as meaningfully different from one another. Three of the profiles demonstrated some stability in identity processes over time and across domains. Two of the profiles were characterized by changes over time. The five profiles identified in this step were used to evaluate differences in parent and peer themes in the next step.

Step 3. Step 3 coding was a focused exploration into the patterns of parent and peer themes that seemed to characterize each identity profile. The goal was to identify patterns and processes that proved meaningful in discriminating between profiles. The meaningful conceptual themes that emerged appeared to mirror previous empirical and theoretical work in the identity literature (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Josselson, 1992; Kroger, 1995). Rather than ignore this meaningful relationship, the literature was consulted and served to further clarify the emerging conceptualizations from the data. For example, Josselson's (1992) conceptualization of the dimensions of interpersonal relationships among adults provided insight into similar processes found among the participants in this study.

RESULTS

The results of the analyses are described in two steps. First, the qualitative themes that characterized each of the profiles are briefly summarized. After each profile description, the unique parent and peer themes that characterized each profile are reviewed.

Restructuring Profile

The Restructuring profile (3 male adolescents, 3 female adolescents) was characterized by an emphasis on self-exploration at the first assessment, followed by an emphasis on meaningful commitments at the second assessment. A crisis of exploration was sparked for these participants when their parents discovered that they were participating in delinquent activities, primarily substance use. Some experienced this crisis just prior to entering the program whereas others were experiencing the crisis during their first interview. For the group experiencing crisis, commitments were low and exploration was high (similar to a moratorium status). By the second interview, however, the youth were beginning to make important identity-related decisions that increased their sense of confidence and strengthened their identity-related commitments (similar to achieved status). This trajectory may have reflected one iteration of the MAMA cycle described by Stephen, Fraser, and Marcia (1992), where adolescents would fluctuate between moratorium–achievement–moratorium–achievement when their identity commitments were challenged. Similarly, these adolescents demonstrated that they were undergoing a process of change and moving toward a restructured identity.

For example, in the peer interviews, the descriptions of their interactions with the deviant peer group painted a picture colored by either a “loss of self” or a feeling of being used. As a result, most openly questioned their previous conceptualizations of their friendships and were actively re-evaluating themselves in the pro-

cess. The interviewer describes a conversation regarding the “loss of self” during the second interview with a 17-year-old female participant:

[She] says that before she was with the drug using crowd she was with a snobbish crowd. Felt like she couldn't be herself. Was cautious of how she appeared to them and others. [She] felt the drug using crowd was accepting and she could be real around them but they cut-off [the] relationship when she stopping using. Says she's learned that she has to be real and honest to herself and friendships are second.

This pattern of reflective exploration (of the effects of friendships on oneself) and commitment (to be self-validating and true to self first) was characteristic of the Restructuring youth.

Parent relationships. In the parent–child relational context, the Restructuring profile was characterized by themes of attachment and parent–child trust. In the parent domain, all responded that their relationship with at least one parent was close, trusting, reciprocal, and respectful. Interestingly, for three of the youth who were experiencing an identity crisis at the first interview, the secure relationship with one of their parents co-existed with a distant relationship with the other parent. These experiences were not characteristic of the responses by the second interview. For example, a 16-year-old female participant noted at her first interview that, “My dad is like a stranger to me in a way.” However, by the second interview she noted, “Me and my dad are getting closer. He seems to love me more and trust me a little more each day. Everything that has happened to me in the past has seemed to have been tucked away.” For this adolescent, the closeness to her mother remained stable over time, which appears to have buffered the difficulties with her father. Without her mother's support and guidance, the relationship with her father could have deteriorated into greater conflict and distress. That it did not is evidence of the supportive parent–child relationship characteristic of the Restructuring youth.

Interestingly, the growing trust in the parent–child relationship did not necessarily result in the granting of more autonomy. Generally, during the first interview, most reported that their parents were “strict,” which they saw as an understandable response to the discovery of their substance-using behavior. By the second interview, each reported a better relationship with parents who were still cautious about their commitments. For example, a 16-year-old male participant wrote: “I really saw my parents change ... I can joke around with my parents now and they won't take it seriously.” Again noting a positive (but conditional) change, a 16-year-old female participant wrote: “Everything that has happened to me in the past has seemed to have been tucked away. I know that the day I slip everything will come back on me, though.”

The tentativeness of parents' trust of their children seemed to fuel the frequent themes of trust for youth in this profile. Earning their parents' trust was most important. Few reported conflict with parents over their strivings for autonomy; rather, the striving for autonomy was suspended while these youth regained the connections with parents that were important to them.

Peer relationships. Another benefit of the secure parent-child relationship for youth with the Restructuring profile was the ability to manage the transitions between friendships. Five of the Restructuring adolescents reported that they were breaking off relations with deviant peers and were initiating or re-initiating relationships with nondeviant peers. Most expressed a motivation to change friendship groups due to their sadness for disappointing their parents with their disruptive behavior and noted the detrimental impact their former peers had on their educational and occupational goals. For example, one interviewer described the conversation with a 16-year-old male participant:

He used to feel that friends were people to get drunk and high with but when he started getting in trouble he starting thinking differently of friends. ... He can talk to his mom and dad about his friends.

Again, the open and secure parent-child relationship was instrumental in the re-evaluation of the meaning of friendship. The orientation toward parents, rather than peers, allowed many of the Restructuring adolescents to experiment with a nondeviant lifestyle without undue pressure from peers (cf. Flum, 1994). Another 16-year-old male participant summed up the predominant sentiment of the Restructuring youth when he said: "but he's just a friend, family comes first."

Overall, this profile is characterized by an adolescent who is struggling to regain his or her sense of identity after a parent's discovery of the deviant behavior. As a result of this discovery, meaningful self-examination in all domains was followed by commitments that reflected self-continuity. Likewise, the loss of trust from parents resulted in a desire to reinitiate the connections once held with parents even if it took sacrificing one's autonomy. Finally, self-examination of the meaning of deviant peer influences resulted in peer group changes, supported by parental connections that served to reinforce new, more conventional commitments.

Unexamined Commitments Profile

The Unexamined Commitments profile (2 male participants, 2 female participants) refers to a profile that is characterized by low to moderate levels of exploratory behavior coupled with stable and rigid commitments. Similar to the identity foreclosed status, the primary identity process theme was characterized by unre-

flective rigidity. Deviant commitments changed only when the influence of parents and counselors was brought to bear, not as a result of intrinsic (exploration-fueled) motivation. For example, a 15-year-old male participant, after the philosophy of life interview, wrote:

I feel that you should try to have as much fun as possible in life. To live your life to the fullest, but I have been thinking lately that I should change my ways of having fun.

Although his philosophy of life was always to have fun, “to make things fun even if they aren’t,” he reluctantly acknowledged that he may have to change his ways of having fun. This response lacked elements of self-examination and integration with other life domains that were common in the Restructuring profile.

Similarly, these youth tended to respond to adversity with defensiveness and to strengthen their existing commitments rather than sacrifice their sense of self-stability for identity exploration. For example, one of the Unexamined Commitments youth responded to philosophical challenges by changing her commitments to be more consistent with social expectations. During her first interview the interviewer recorded: “She says she has always felt that her philosophy was to always, ‘follow your heart’ ... [She] feels she is real committed to these beliefs and has never questioned them.” At the second interview, however, her commitments changed: “[My philosophy of life is] to listen to the people who care about me. Do what they think is best for me ... I used to listen to me and not other people but it didn’t get me very far.”

In this example, the challenge was from parents and counselors to “straighten up.” When she continued to participate in deviant activities, the pressure from parents and counselors increased. Although she was still strongly committed to what she saw as her philosophy of life, the new guiding value of “listen to people who care about me” replaced “follow your heart” because it was more consistent with the messages she was receiving from the adults in her life.

Parent relationships. The primary theme that emerged was functional relationships with parents. The youth in this profile reported that relationships with parents were close but “not too close.” This close but not too close relationship resulted in strong feelings toward parents but did not translate into an open parent–child relationship. Unexamined Committed youth seemed to recognize that their strong conventional commitments may not always match their behavior, so they were reluctant to open up to their parents, unless it had a personal payoff. The interviewer recorded this observation following the parent interview with a 15-year-old male participant:

“Conflict in [the] family mostly revolves around rules. [He] feels his parents should be more lenient. ... [He] recently made [the] decision to talk more openly to

[his] parents. [He] feels their relationship has improved but did not make them more lenient.”

Peer relationships. A similar pattern emerged in the discussion of friendships. Friends were described as trustworthy and committed and were an important source of support and companionship, second only to parents and family. However, given similar presenting problems as the restructuring profile of youth, the unexamined committed profile adolescents did not describe significant changes in their peer relationships. Their commitment to their peers was not challenged by the program goal of breaking ties with deviant peer groups. Neither did they question their peer group’s basic loyalties. This pattern shows that the Unexamined Committed youth did not subjectively associate their treatment/legal problems with identity-related issues in this domain. In fact, they did not report that their commitments to their parents, family, and friends were impacted by their treatment goals or legal obligations. Rather than perceiving their circumstances as a challenge to their self-identity, they were more likely to evaluate their troubles as a separate domain of responsibility.

Together, the Unexamined Commitments profile adolescent is one who recognizes the importance of commitments in her or his life. However, the commitments, in absence of self-exploration, result in tendencies toward rigidity. Commitments are changed only when coerced, or to conform with social expectations. In both cases, the decision-making process lacks reflection and insight. In family relationships, parents are close, but not too close. Some of the parent–child relationships suggest a functional quality, where relationships are maintained to achieve personal goals. On the other hand, friendships are described as supportive, but these youth lack a personal awareness that their friendships with deviant peers may interfere with their personal goals. As a result, the stability in commitments across domains and over time lacks the integration evident in the Restructuring profile. Across both times of assessment, commitments remained rigid, relationships remained functional, and goals remained unexamined.

Diffuse Profile

The third profile (2 male participants, 2 female participants), as the label suggests, is akin to Marcia’s identity diffuse status (Marcia, 1966). Each adolescent in this category expressed little exploration in any domain at either assessment and had few meaningful identity commitments.

Relationships with parents. For three youth, there was a lack of awareness of the need to explore, a state Archer and Waterman (1990) referred to as *precrisis*. For one of the adolescents, this lack of awareness of the need to explore appeared to be due to a focus on surviving a negative family situation. For example, the

16-year-old female participant described several important changes in her life during the interviews. She wrote the following comment about her relationships with parents: “My family is messed up. Every thing and everybody in my family is falling apart. Ever since my parents got divorced everything has been going wrong. I hate that.” Given these disruptions in her family life, and her discovery that she was pregnant, it is notable these events were not associated with significant changes in identity exploration or commitment. She reported a variety of coping responses but never expressed a desire to explore identity-relevant issues.

Relationships with peers. A fourth Diffuse profile adolescent reported a strong commitment to friends, expressed in the context of a strong desire to gain independence from her parents. This desire, however, was fueled by intense family conflict and a lack of bonding and support. The profile was similar to Archer and Waterman’s (1990) description of *alienated diffusion*. According to Archer and Waterman, alienated identity diffusion is characterized by anger that is “directed against others for either blocking the individual’s path toward meaningful identity commitments or failing to make available options worthy of providing a basis for commitment” (p. 103). For this 15-year-old female participant, the family was too wrapped up in conflict to assist and support successful individuation. As a result, an orientation toward peers occurred simultaneously with a sense of confusion, of “being in the middle” between parents and peers. She wrote: “Me and my dad don’t get along at all. We are always fighting from dusk ‘til dawn. [My best friend] is number 1 ... I can say anything and do anything and she’ll be cool with it ... I’m way committed to my friends. I love them.”

Interestingly, in the interview, she noted little interference from her parents in her relationships with friends. Although she stated that her parents disapproved of her relationship with her best friend, she expressed little concern about this to the interviewer. She stated that her friends provided the only source of social support, which contributed to her anger and ambivalence about her parents’ expectations for her to change her behavior.

In all, the precrisis Diffuse profile was characterized by a lack of awareness of the need to explore identity-related issues. Relationships with parents were stable but conflicted and friends were few. In contrast, the alienated Diffuse youth showed a striving for independence; however, the conflict and lack of support in relationships with parents resulted in a sense of alienation from them and a fierce commitment to and reliance on peers. As a result, identity exploration and commitment with other relevant domains appeared to be inhibited.

Self-Focused Rumination Profile

The patterns that emerged in the identity processes for the Self-Focused Rumination profile adolescents (1 female participant, 2 male participants) were character-

ized by self-focused exploration and unstable commitments across most identity domains. Because commitments were not stable over time, the Self-Focused Rumination profile adolescents did not share the sense of identity continuity as their exploring peers in the Restructuring profile. The confusion they experienced was not reflected as a sense of diffusion (i.e., disorganization), but rather, as anxiety and rumination about their identity. Their identity distress was linked to many unknowns about their future, which made some of their commitments tentative and easily changeable. Exploration was introspective, not unlike the Restructuring adolescents, but the rumination associated with the identity-related crises limited the scope of their introspectiveness. Because the present anxiety was consuming much of their attention, an orientation toward the future was absent. Without it, their self-exploration had a tendency to become overly self-conscious and/or self-critical, particularly in response to unmet expectations. This was expressed by a 14-year-old adolescent when she wrote: "I look at life and at myself as *bad* because I am always getting into trouble with friends and at school and stuff."

Parent relationships. The anxiety expressed by the youth in this profile revolved around their relationships with parents. The profile was characterized by an increasing identity orientation toward parents and family and a declining focus in the other domains. This is reflective of their idealization of parents and the emotional quality of their reunion fantasies. All of the Self-Focused Rumination profile adolescents were living with relatives, not parents, and the current, often conflicted, living arrangements seemed to provide an environment conducive to idealistic fantasies of family reunion. The interviewer recorded the following dilemma faced by a 14-year-old female participant: "Mom will be returning home from rehab in 2 weeks. ... [She] says she doesn't fear abandonment because mom appears committed to staying off drugs. ... She has hopes that [her] family will stay together this time although she fears that she may not be able to be the 'good child' for the hoped for 'good family.'" In this example, her reunion fantasies were tempered by a history of disappointment paired with anxiety and uncertainty about her future.

By the second interview, stronger commitments to parents were seen, but included commitments to help parents rather than to be supported by them. A 16-year-old male participant wrote: "Things started to get worse after the divorce because my mom would blame it on us (siblings) all the time. She would say that we drove our father into an alcoholic ... my greatest commitment is to not lose any contact with my dad and try to get him some help."

Peer relationships. For two of the adolescents, peer acceptance replaced the support they did not receive from their parents. They recognized that their most stable and supportive relationships were with peers because they were not sure they could trust their parents to always be there for them. For example, the

14-year-old female participant wrote: “Me and my best friend ... are always in trouble but every time we get into trouble we have even more friendship.” Each also recognized the difficulty in living up to the behavioral standards they perceived from their parents by continuing to remain friends with deviant peers. Part of the inner struggle involved reconciling these relationships in the context of their hopes for harmony within their families.

In sum, the Self-Focused Rumination profile was characterized by a crisis of individuation that involved unmet needs for support and a care-giving orientation toward parents and family, self-critical introspectiveness, and reliance on peers for acceptance.

Exaggerated Autonomy Profile

Similar themes characterized the three adolescents who were classified as Exaggerated Autonomy (3 male participants); however, their exploration was directed outward rather than inward. Each was experiencing a crisis that was connected to their relationships with parents. Relationships with parents were described as strained and conflicted. The interviewer recorded the following observation following the parent interview with a 16-year-old male participant: “Parents divorced 1 year ago. When they see each other (mother and son) they get along at first then begin to argue. Relationship with father is described as a ‘functional’ relationship. His father provides food, shelter and makes sure ‘he does his homework.’” Rather than sparking self-focused ruminating exploratory behavior, the disengagement sparked a concerted effort to become independent from parents. This goal seemed to drive the strong opinions and commitments expressed in all other interview domains. For example, another 16-year-old male participant commented at the second interview in the philosophy of life domain: “I am very committed [to] my values and beliefs. If someone else doesn’t like them then they can take their values and beliefs and shove them up their [butt].” As this comment shows, commitments were strong and unwavering—except in the interview regarding the parent domain.

Parent relationships. For most, the disengagement from parents had progressed to apathy toward them. Rather than maintaining their commitments to parents, each youth was seeking a sense of identity that was independent from the family. A 16-year-old male participant commented at the second interview:

I am closer to my mom because my dad does not talk or communicate with me very often. Our relationship has changed slowly. We used to fight a lot but not much anymore. I’ve learned not to talk or yell back at them. [I] do what [I’m] told and nothing else.

All of the youth in this profile reported previous attempts at re-engaging their relationship with their parents, but each expressed frustration or indifference when the attempts were not reciprocated. As a result, peers remained the most important source of acceptance.

Unlike the Self-Focused Rumination profile youth, the Exaggerated Autonomy profile adolescents expressed little anxiety about their relationships with parents. In fact, increasing self-centeredness permeated the interviews. The re-alignment of commitments away from parents and toward the other domains was accompanied by a reduction in meaningful exploration. Rather than becoming more reflective in the midst of crisis, these youth appeared to steel themselves with their commitments. On the other hand, like the Self-Focused Rumination youth, the Exaggerated Autonomy youth described idealized goals for the future that depended on their ability to achieve their idealized goals—rendering their commitments fragile. For example, one of the Exaggerated Autonomy profile adolescents recently returned home from boarding school where he was expelled for marijuana use. At the first interview, he was confused about his commitments; however, by the second interview, he had discovered that his parents had negotiated his return to boarding school and he quickly re-oriented his commitments:

(First interview) My relationship with my parents is poor. We argue and fight a lot.

(Second interview) I am very distant from my [parents] because I have been going to military school. I have not strong commitments to my family.

Realizing his disconnection from his parents, he quickly formed autonomous commitments in the other domains. However, he felt he could keep these commitments only as long as he remained at the boarding school and away from the family context.

Peer relationships. In the absence of support from parents, friendships were the most important interpersonal relationships. Although these friendships were defined by deviance, none of the Exaggerated Autonomy profile youth were willing to give up these important relationships. An autonomous adolescent noted: “My relationships with my friends is very good. ... They are very important to me. My parents don’t care and I don’t let my parents between me and my friends.” These adolescents valued their friendships as an important source of support and acceptance that allowed them to maintain autonomy from their parents.

In sum, the Exaggerated Autonomy profile was characterized by an orientation away from parents, a view of self as independently strong, increasing commitments in domains that would facilitate independence, and reliance on peers for support and acceptance. Individuation from parents had involved crises that resulted in an exaggeratedly autonomous identity.

The purpose of this study was to examine, within a relational context, the identity formation of troubled youth in treatment for problem behavior. To achieve this goal we (a) garnered information from two identity interviews given 6 to 8 weeks apart; (b) adopted a qualitative, person-centered analytical strategy to identify identity profiles; and (c) examined the identity profiles, based on variations in exploration and commitment, for their links with two developmentally important contexts in which adolescents define their identity: relationships with parents and peers.

The analyses suggested that youth in these circumstances (being actively presented with identity challenges) were engaged in identity processes of exploration and commitment in a variety of ways, as depicted by the profiles. The profiles offered glimpses of how identity processes were being transacted by similar youth and how each profile responded to the “identity challenges” they encountered. Likewise, these responses appeared to be linked in meaningful ways with aspects of their closest relationships.

Identity Formation and Troubled Youth

The population of interest in this study included troubled youth whose behavior had led to a crisis requiring their admission to a community-based intervention program. They were interviewed shortly after their arrival and again several weeks later, near the end of their participation. By virtue of these conditions, we know several things about the participants in this study. First, these youth had made decisions resulting in their being identified as having problem behaviors, and some had been cultivating a deviant or “negative” identity (Erikson, 1968). Second, these youth were, during the time they participated in the study, being presented with imperatives to change their behaviors and their current trajectory. Interventions such as the one in which they participated implicitly target *identity restructuring*—from a negative identity organized around deviancy to a positive identity organized around contribution and growth—based on the assumption that youth are capable of choosing how to respond to life problems and can, with support, change (Grimley et al., 1994). For most youth, making such changes also involves changes in peer associations and family relationships.

Past research suggests that the diffuse identity status (reflecting the absence of both exploration and commitment) is strongly associated with the types of problem behaviors most commonly addressed in intervention settings (i.e., substance use and delinquency; Jones & Hartmann, 1988; Jones, Hartmann, Grochowski, & Glider, 1989). However, we saw tremendous variation in the participants’ types and degrees of exploration and commitments, leading to the identification of five unique profiles. In addition, we found that the profiles that emerged from the quali-

tative data analysis bore resemblance to Marcia's (1966) identity statuses (unsurprising given that the GIDS interview was constructed to examine processes of exploration and commitment).

Specifically, youth with the "Restructuring" profile, in direct contrast with Diffuse youth, used the context of intervention for active identity restructuring and seemed to be headed toward an "achieved" identity status. Youth with an Exaggerated Autonomy profile also seemed to be striving to reach an "achieved" status, but with a forced self-reliance that would probably truncate opportunities for both exploration and commitment. Youth in the Unreflective Commitments profile resembled individuals in a "foreclosed" identity status (though their commitments might be less conventional), whereas youth in the Self-Focused Rumination profile resembled, in their anxiety and inability to decide on worthy commitments, individuals classified as being in an identity "moratorium."

The differences between the profiles we found and the previously established identity statuses may reflect variations or subtypes of statuses that are more commonly seen among distressed or troubled youth. In any case, this study illustrates how person-centered and qualitative approaches have much to offer in enriching our understanding of the phenomenology of individuals' lived experience of identity processes. However, in our view, they complement rather than subsume variable-level analyses in identity status research.

Links Between Peer Support and Identity Processes

Nearly all the youth in the study emphasized the importance of friendships and expressed strong commitments to their peers. Erikson (1968) noted that friends provide an important source of self-validation during times of uncertainty. Seeing all that is good (or bad) about the self reflected in the eyes of one's friends provides an objective source of validation of one's own subjective reality. This process has been described by other theorists as looking-glass-self (Cooley, 1922/1994), mirroring (Kohut, 1977), or eye-to-eye validation (Josselson, 1992). Although not a universal theme for the adolescents in this study, several Restructuring profile youth emphasized the need for self-validation as they transitioned from deviant friendships to nondeviant friendships. The desire to be "real" in friendships mirrored the need to see the self reflected in the eyes of friends. For the Restructuring youth, the introspective awareness of the true self, coupled with the desire to lead a deviancy-free lifestyle, was part of their desire to be "real"; they needed to be validated for the new person they believed they were becoming.

Another consistent theme was the reliance on friends as a source of social support. Erikson (1968) noted that friends serve an important role for peers who are in the process of individuating from parents and developing a sense of identity. The orientation toward peers that generally occurs during early adolescence is crucial

for the behavioral and cognitive autonomy that emerges throughout adolescence. However, an over-reliance on peers may interfere with familial relationships. At the same time, disruptive relationships with parents may orient youth toward peers. The effects of a peer orientation versus a parent orientation were most evident among the Exaggerated Autonomy and the Alienated Diffuse adolescents, who were both disengaged from parents. Encouraged to reduce their contact with deviant peers and initiate friendships with nondeviant peers, these youth found themselves with a difficult decision: sever ties with their only sources of social support or defy parents. Many chose to defy their parents.

For Restructuring youth, who were more oriented toward parents, transitions between friends were eased by the support provided by their parents and family. The orientation toward parents allowed them to experiment with a nondeviant lifestyle without undue pressure from peers. For the Unreflective Commitment youth, continued associations with deviant peers placed them at odds with the desires of their parents and the goals of the program. Rather than alter their commitments, they chose to maintain old friendships but convince their parents that they were not influenced by their friends. Other research indicates that this is a dubious strategy; deviant behavior among peers strongly predicts continued problem behaviors (Jessor, 1992).

Links Between Parental Support and Identity Processes

The quality of relationships with parents appeared to be linked in important ways to identity exploration processes. Meaningful and purposive exploration was associated with parental relationships perceived as emotionally supportive. This finding is consistent with a body of previous research (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Perosa et al., 1996). Several themes marked the nature of exploration as a primary process in identity formation: either the presence or absence of openness, resilience, and a future orientation. Exploration characterized by openness reflects an orientation toward seeking out, processing, and evaluating important identity information. For the Restructuring adolescents, past experiences were consolidated into current goals that included a new understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. Likewise, they were reflective about their own life experiences and allowed themselves to acknowledge their past mistakes without becoming defensive and/or rigid in their thinking. Flexibility was evident in a sense of resilience that characterized the essence of exploration among the adolescents in the Restructuring profile. Grotevant (1987) noted that effective exploration included a degree of flexibility when confronting new and challenging situations. Detaching from deviant peers and developing new associations with nondeviant peers was an important concern for many of the adolescents in the Restructuring profile. The success of these transitions rested in the secure relationship with parent(s) and a resilience characterized by

flexibility. Finally, exploratory behavior was characterized by the presence or absence of a future orientation. Marcia (1983) suggested that an important skill necessary for later identity achievement is the ability to translate one's introspective awareness into anticipated alternatives for the future. In this study, youth with a Self-Ruminating profile had an exploratory orientation, but were preoccupied with their current crises and more concerned with what they were to become today rather than tomorrow.

The identity profiles differed in the level of closeness and security provided by parents and/or peers. In the domain of parents and family, all of the adolescents reported a level of relatedness that ran along a continuum from closeness to alienation and disengagement. On one end were Restructuring youth whose descriptions of parents resembled descriptions of securely attached relationships. They described their relationships with parents as close, respectful, emotionally secure, and expressive—relationships that at a minimum provided an adequate “holding environment” (see Josselson, 1992) where the adolescents felt supported and secure. At best, the descriptors used by the adolescents in this study described relationships that were attached, via emotional security and belongingness, and provided them with emotional stability beyond those conditions provided in a “holding environment.”

On the other end of the continuum were the Exaggerated Autonomy and the Alienated Diffuse adolescents. For these youth, relationships with parents were described as highly conflicted and/or disengaged. It was not uncommon for the adolescents to become apathetic concerning their relationships with parents when the disengagement and/or conflict persisted. Each of the adolescents in these profiles were distancing themselves from their families, structuring their lives so their needs for support would be met elsewhere.

In the middle of the continuum were the relationships with parents for youth with the Unreflective Commitment profile. Their relationships with parents were also described as secure, but their level of closeness was tempered by the functional nature of the parent-child relationship. Statements of commitments to parents and family were often matter-of-fact and were accompanied by little insight or introspection. Although introspectiveness is not a prerequisite for attachments to parents, past research has found that parental overinvolvement is common among foreclosed youth (who resemble the Unreflective Commitment youth in this study; Anderson & Flemming, 1986; Fullinwider Bush & Jacobvitz, 1993). Enmeshment between adolescents and their parents places an emotional strain on the adolescent, which negatively impacts their level of exploration into identity-relevant issues and encourages premature identity commitments. Although there was not enough evidence to conclude that these dynamics characterized the Unreflective Commitment profile youth in this study, there may have been ways in which their relationships with parents discouraged identity exploration.

Also on the low end of the closeness-alienation continuum were the adolescents with the Self-Focused Rumination profile. These relationships were marked by distance but mediated by idealized fantasies of future closeness. Josselson (1992) described the function of idealization in relationships as the “process that draws us toward others in an effort to possess them or their qualities” (p. 127). For each of the youth with the Self-Focused Rumination profile, qualities of a parent were identified as important attributes for themselves. The desire to possess these idealized qualities was an attempt to grasp something that was outside themselves that appeared better than what they knew themselves to be. For these youth, idealizations set up unrealistic expectations for themselves and their parents. When they failed to meet their own expectations, these youth were overly self-critical and felt that they had let their parents down. When the parents did not live up to expectations, self-exploration again turned inward, as if these youth felt responsible for their parents’ failings. The idealized images of parents, based in part on reality but more on fantasy, oriented the adolescents toward their parents but blinded them to the realities and consequences of a disengaged relationship.

In general, the continuum of relatedness themes is reflective of the developmental process of individuation. Previous research has shown that a healthy sense of identity is fostered in a family that is able to be flexible and renegotiate the boundaries of the family system to support the individuality of the adolescent, yet provide a secure base from which to explore (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). The families of the Restructuring youth appeared to be the most successful at balancing these forces. The adolescents described their relationships with parents as close and secure with an openness to express their own individuality in the family. The Unreflective Commitment youth expressed similar family patterns yet lacked the emotional freedom for individuality. This pattern may be related to the lack of exploration common among the Unreflective Commitment youth as well as their functional nature of the parent–child relationship. The Exaggerated Autonomy and Alienated Diffuse youth lacked connectedness and their relationships with parents were defined by disengagement. Attempts to re-engage the relationship resulted in an identity-related crisis for the Exaggerated Autonomy adolescents and a sense of alienation for the Alienated Diffuse adolescent. For both groups, however, their level of individual autonomy was very high. Finally, the precrisis Diffuse youth reported closeness to parents but lacked a personal investment in their families. Their descriptions of their relationships with family members were vague and elusive, and may represent a less mature developmental status that predates the normative impetus toward individuation and self-definition.

In sum, the differences that emerged in parent relational processes between the profiles were consistent with previous research and with identity and family process theory. Further, they illustrated the importance of examining family relationships as an important identity component.

Conclusions and Implications

Although this was a preliminary study designed to investigate the relational context of identity formation, the results suggest that a person-centered strategy has the potential of expanding the evaluation of identity formation within a developmental and contextual framework: This kind of analysis can provide important insights into identity formation processes and the role of the relational context in identity-related decision making. The relations we observed suggest questions for future studies using variable-oriented approaches.

This study demonstrated that not all troubled youth are typified by traits associated with the Diffuse identity status (renown for its links with psychological problems). Youth who become troubled and/or seek help vary widely in their identity resources for making changes in their lives. As suggested by previous research, exploration and commitment appear to be the resources youth need to employ to restructure an identity that has become deviant or negative. However, youth differ in their ability to access these resources. This suggests that interventionists should offer identity challenges sensitively, and also provide enhanced support for exploring change when such support is absent from a youth's family context. It also suggests the potential importance of family interventions to bring closeness/distance dynamics into a balance that is more supportive of the adolescent's positive identity change.

This study did not offer the opportunity to compare the identity profiles of troubled youth with youth whose development was progressing without such a crisis. Therefore, we do not know whether the identity profiles we observed were unique to troubled youth, or are broadly present. The study design also did not permit an analysis of the specific impact that the intervention the youth were experiencing might have had on identity processes (i.e., no comparison group). Nevertheless, the person-centered and qualitative aspects of this study permitted a multidimensional, fine-grained look at identity formation of troubled youth across a brief period of time, based on the youths' own descriptions of the phenomenology of their identity-relevant experiences. In doing so, we drew attention to factors that can be qualitatively and quantitatively studied in future identity research with a variety of designs.

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