Cognitive Processes and Identity Formation: The Mediating Role of Identity Processing Style

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ABSTRACT
Identity formation is conceptualized in terms of a social-cognitive model that postulates stylistic differences in how people negotiate or manage to evade the challenge of constructing, maintaining, and/or reconstructing their sense of identity. Some people adopt an informed, reflective orientation to identity conflicts and questions; others take a more automatic, normative approach; whereas others procrastinate and delay identity decisions until situational demands and consequences dictate how they react. The role that general rational and automatic cognitive processes and identity processing styles play in identity formation is considered. Research that has evaluated the theoretical hypothesis according to which the linkage between rational and automatic reasoning processes and measures of identity formation is mediated by identity processing style is reviewed. The findings indicated that rational and automatic cognitive processes generally did account for significant variance on measures of identity formation including strength of commitment, types of self-attributes within which one’s identity was grounded, and identity status. However, the findings further revealed that identity processing styles at least in part mediated most of the relationships between cognitive processes and identity formation. In all of the analyses, identity processing styles explained a greater amount of the unique variation in measures of identity formation than the cognitive variables.

Key words: identity processing style, identity achievement, commitment, rational processing, intuitive processing.

INTRODUCTION
Identity formation serves as the linchpin in Erik Erikson’s (1968) lifespan theory of psychosocial personality development. A coherent and stable sense of identity provides a frame of reference for interpreting experience and self-relevant information and for making decisions and solving personal problems. Identity also provides a basis for maintaining a sense of self-unity over time and space. Despite the inevitable flux of random events and fleeting changes people experience in the course of their daily lives, an integrated identity structure enables them to construe their lives as being unified and meaningful (Berzonsky, in press). Although Erikson (1964) approached identity from a psychoanalytic perspective, he and others (e.g., Inhelder, Piaget, 1958; Marcia, 1980) have hypothesized that cognitive processes play an important role in identity formation. However, studies designed to demonstrate a relationship between formal operational reasoning and identity formation have produced mixed findings (see Berzonsky, Barclay, 1981; but compare, e.g., Boyes, Chandler, 1992). My research program has focused on stylistic differences in the social-cognitive strategies individuals use to construct, maintain and/or reconstruct a sense of identity (Berzonsky, 2004, 2008a). This social-cogni-
tive model highlights three identity processing styles: informational, diffuse-avoidant, and normative. These styles are reported preferences in the social-cognitive processes and strategies individuals use to engage or attempt to avoid the challenge of constructing and maintaining a coherent sense of identity (Berzonsky, in press).

The present article provides a review of research on the role that identity processing styles and cognitive processes play in identity formation. First, I provide a brief overview of the three processing styles and a review of research on linkages between identity processing styles and other identity and cognitive processes. The major purpose of the article is to review research that evaluated the theoretical hypothesis (Berzonsky, in press) that relationships between rational and automatic cognitive processes and measures of identity formation are at least partially mediated identity processing styles.

IDENTITY PROCESSING STYLES

Individuals with an informational identity processing style intentionally seek out, process, and evaluate self-relevant information. They are self-reflective, skeptical about self-views, open to new information, and willing to examine and revise aspects of their identity when faced with dissonant feedback (Berzonsky, 1990, 2004). This mentally effortful approach to identity formation should result in a stable, coherent, well-differentiated and integrated identity structure (see Berzonsky, 1989a).

Not all individuals deal with potentially self-diagnostic information in an open, effortful manner. People who possess a normative identity processing style more automatically internalize and conform to the expectations and values held for them by significant others and referent groups. Their primary concern to protect and conserve their existing identity structure; they have a low tolerance for ambiguity and a high need to maintain structure (Berzonsky, 2004; Soenens, Duriez, Goossens, 2005). This relatively automatic, or mindless (Langer, 1989) processing style is associated with a rigidly organized, change-resistant identity structures (Berzonsky, 1989a).

A diffuse-avoidant identity processing style is typified by chronic procrastination and defensive avoidance: Diffuse-avoiders are reluctant to confront and actively engage personal problems, identity conflicts. Of course, problems and decisional situations cannot always be avoided indefinitely. When diffuse-avoiders delay too long their behavior is dictated primarily by situational demands and consequences. Such situation-specific adjustments, however, tend to be relatively transient acts of verbal compliance or behavioral compliance rather than stable, long-term revisions in their identity structure. This identity style is associated with a fragmented, inconsistent, even empty identity structure continually needing to be validated and replenished by approval, praise, and acceptance from others, pleasurable experiences, consumer goods, and the like (see Berzonsky, Ferrari, 2009).

RESEARCH ON IDENTITY PROCESSING STYLES

Identity Style Inventory

Identity styles are operationally defined by a self-report Identity Style Inventory (ISI: Berzonsky, 1989b, 1992). The Inventory has been found to have adequate psychometric properties (see Berzonsky, 1992, 2004). Internal reliabilities of the scales generally range from 60. to 80., although translated versions, especially of the normative scale, have in some cases been lower (see Berzonsky, in press). The ISI or translated versions have been used in more than 15 different cultural contexts or countries including Poland (Senejko, 2007), India (Srivastava, 1993), the Czech Republic (Macek, Osecká, 1996), Slovakia (Sramova, Fichnova, 2008), Finland (Numri, Berzonsky, Tammi, Kinney, 1997), Greece (Vleioras, Bosma, 2005), Hungary (Sallay, 2002), Canada (Adams, Berzonsky, Keating, 2006), South Africa(Seabl, 2009), Italy(Crocetti, Rubini, Berzonsky, Meeus, 2009), Germany (Krettenauer,
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Identity Status

For more than 40 years the identity status model formulated by James Marcia (1966) has served as the standard for research on identity formation. Relationships between identity styles and identity status, therefore, provide a basis for establishing the convergent validity of the Identity Style Inventory. Relationships between identity style and status are perhaps the most consistently replicated findings in the identity status literature: at least nine different studies have been published. Consistent with expectations based on my social-cognitive model (Berzonsky, 1990, in press), the findings indicate that self-exploring achievement and moratorium identity statuses are positively associated with an informational processing style; foreclosure is linked to the normative identity style; and identity diffusion is correlated with the diffuse-avoidant style (Adams, Berzonsky, Keating, 2006; Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines, Berman, 2001; Berzonsky, 1989b, 1990; Berzonsky, Kuk, 2000; Berzonsky, Neimeyer, 1994; Krettenauer, 2005; Schwartz, Montgomery, 2002; Schwartz, Mullins, Waterman, Dunham, 2000; and Streitmatter, 1993).

Self-Definitional Bases

Identity processing styles should also be differentially associated with the types of self-elements youth encode and rely on to define their sense of identity. Results from several research investigations are consistent with predictions based on my social-cognitive model (Berzonsky, 1990, in press). Individuals with high informational scores emphasize personal self-elements – e.g., my values, my goals, and my standards; those with high normative scores highlight collective self-attributes – e.g., my family, my religion, and my nationality; and diffuse-avoidance is associated with social self-elements such as popularity, my reputation and impressions made on others (Berzonsky, 1994, 2005; Berzonsky, Macek, Nurmi, 2003; Dollinger, Dollinger, Centeno, 2005).

Cognitive Processes and Strategies

A number of studies have investigated the cognitive strategies used by individuals with different identity styles. While youth with both informational and normative styles have been found to be conscientious, purposive, and reasonably effective in their lives, they differ in openness to new experiences and the extent to which they process and evaluate complex information. An informational processing style is positively associated with openness to ideas and values (Berzonsky, 1990; Berzonsky, Sullivan, 1992; Dollinger, 1995; Duriez, Soenens, Beyers, 2004; Duriez, Soenens, 2006) and rational/analytical thinking (Berzonsky, 1990, Berzonsky, Ferrari, 1996; Berzonsky, Sullivan, 1992). An informational identity style is also positively associated with automatic reasoning as indexed by the Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, Heier (1996) Faith in Intuition measure of automatic processing (Berzonsky, 2004, 2008a), which supports the supposition that both automatic and deliberative reasoning contribute to identity formation (Berzonsky, 2004; Epstein et al., 1996). A normative identity style is associated with automatic processing as measured by both intuitive reasoning (Berzonsky, 2008a, 2008b) and need for cognitive closure (Webster, Kruglanski, 1996), which assesses cognitive rigidity with a low tolerance for uncertainty (Berzonsky, 2007; Crocetti et al., 2009; Soenens et al., 2005). Diffuse-avoidance has been found to be associated with maladaptive cognitive and