

THAT'S HOW PEOPLE GROW UP

Identity Formation in Emerging Adulthood

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Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs Universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 26 april, 2013, kl 10.00, sal F1, Psykologiska Institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg

Fakultetsopponent: Dr. Moin Syed, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, United States

The thesis is based on a summary of the following papers:

- I. Frisé, A., & Wängqvist, M. (2011). Emerging adults in Sweden: Identity formation in the light of love, work and family. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 26*, 200–221. . doi: 10.1177/0743558410376829
- II. Wängqvist, M., & Frisé, A. (2011). Identity and psychological distress in emerging adulthood in Sweden: Is it always distressing not to know who to be and what to do? *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research, 11*, 93–113. doi: 10.1080/15283488.2011.560803
- III. Wängqvist, M., & Frisé, A. (in press). Swedish 18-year-olds' identity formation: Associations with feelings about appearance and internalization of body ideals. *Journal of Adolescence*. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.02.002



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Abstract

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The overall aim of this thesis was to study emerging adults' identity formation and its relationship to other aspects of their psychosocial development and living situations. The three studies of this thesis examined how young people dealt with identity issues and how this was related to other aspects of their development, living situation, and larger socio-cultural context. The focus of **study I** was on how identity issues concerning love, work, and family were handled, and how identity formation was related to occupational contexts and to involvement in a romantic relationship. The study is based on interviews with 136 people aged 25 years (68 women and 68 men). Fewer than half of the emerging adults had made identity-defining commitments after first having explored various alternatives (i.e., identity achievement). However, it was less common for people to explore issues of parenthood and romantic relationships than it was to explore occupational choices and work/family priorities. The results indicated that people with achieved identities were more likely to be in a long-term romantic relationship than those who had neither explored identity issues nor made any identity-defining commitments (i.e., identity diffusion). Additionally, the participants in the identity diffusion group were less likely to be enrolled in university education, whereas this was common in the identity achievement group. More women than men were coded as identity achieved, whereas more men than women were coded as identity diffused. The results indicated that people's positions in the identity formation process may vary depending on identity issues, social context, and gender. In **Study II**, the aim was to explore the relationship between identity formation, psychological symptoms, and identity distress. The study group was the same as in Study I. Individuals involved in a process of active exploration (i.e., moratorium) experienced more distress from psychological symptoms and identity issues than did those who were not exploring their identities. A mediational model indicated that the identity exploration that signify emerging adulthood can be accompanied by psychological symptoms, but that this association may be mediated by the experience of distress over identity issues. The results indicated that vulnerability and distress may accompany normative development in emerging adulthood. The study demonstrated that it may not always be distressing not to deal with identity issues, as the participants in the identity diffusion group had levels of distress as low as those of participants with established commitments. In **Study III**, identity formation and its associations with body-esteem and body ideal internalization were investigated. A total of 714 people aged 18 years (394 women and 320 men) participated in the study. For women more exploration of interpersonal identity issues and stronger interpersonal identity commitments were related to more positive views of what others thought about their appearance. However, more interpersonal identity exploration was also related to more internalization of body ideals. For men, stronger interpersonal identity commitments were related to a more positive view about their appearance in general. Moreover, women explored identity issues more, had lower body-esteem, and internalized body ideals more than did men. Study III demonstrated that identity formation with regard to interpersonal identity issues was related to the 18-year-olds' feelings about appearance and internalization of body ideals. In sum, this thesis demonstrated that identity formation was related to the social contexts of love and work, that the uncertainty about identity issues might be associated with psychological distress, and that identity formation and certain aspects of body image appear to be related.

Key Words: Identity formation, Occupation, Romantic relationships, Psychological distress; Body image, Gender issues, Emerging adulthood