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**“It is a New Chapter Now” – Making Identity-Defining
Commitments in Early Adulthood concerning Romantic
relationships**

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Abstract. The present study explored the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships. Using data from the Gothenburg Longitudinal study of Development, the sample consisted of nine participants who had developed from identity diffusion at age 29 (no commitments) into identity foreclosure at age 33 (commitments) in the romantic identity domain. Intra-individual changes in the participants’ identity narratives were investigated using a case-based thematic analysis. The findings suggest that the commitment-making process entail being influenced by life changes in new ways, increased levels of meaning-making and changes in identity content. The study highlight romantic relationships as an important context for identity development in early adulthood.

Establishing personal values, goals and beliefs concerning romantic relationships is important to most people, especially in early adulthood when many commit to a long-term romantic partner (Arnett, 2014; Schulman & Connolly, 2013). Erikson (1980) considered romantic relationships to be a key domain for identity development in early adulthood and the capacity to engage in intimate relationships a central developmental task of this phase. Based on Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development (1950), Marcia (1966) created the Identity Status Model and defined making *identity-defining commitments* as one of the core processes of identity development. Commitment is defined as “...the degree of personal investment the individual expressed in a course of action or belief.” (s. 33, Kroger & Marcia, 2011). In the romantic domain, this involves committing oneself to values, goals and beliefs about romantic relationships as well as acting in line with those commitments – in other words, deciding who one is as a relational being (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer & Orlofsky, 1993).

Although several researchers have put forward theoretical models trying to explain how commitments are formed and maintained (e.g. Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993, Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006), which will be presented below, little is known about what the commitment-making process entail for the individual and how this is expressed within age-relevant identity domains. Since commitments theoretically have been assumed to form during adolescence (Marcia et al., 1993), most of the previous studies have been conducted on this age group (e.g. van der Gaag, Albers, & Kunnen, 2017; Becht et al., 2017). Research shows that considerable identity development takes place in the adult years, including the formation of commitments (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Cramer, 2017; Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2016; Carlsson, Wängqvist & Frisé, 2015). There is therefore a need for examining the commitment-making process in early adulthood within the age-relevant identity domain of romantic relationships. The present study intends to meet this need. By examining intra-individual changes in identity narratives

of early adults, before and after they have made commitments in the romantic domain, the present study aims to explore the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships.

Identity Development and The Identity Status Model

Erikson (1968) defined identity as a sense of sameness over time and in different areas of life, as well as being recognized for this sameness by others. According to Erikson (1950; 1968; 1980), identity develops through integrating childhood identifications with the individual's own talents, interests and values into a coherent sense of self, that is in line with societal expectations and demands. Marcia (1966) elaborated on Erikson's theories on identity development and suggested commitment as one of two core processes underlying the development of an adult identity. Commitment refers to the level of personal investment the individual express in relation to their values, goals, beliefs and actions (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia, 1966). It involves making a choice about who one is and actively trying to implement that choice (Marcia et al., 1993). In this sense, commitments serve as an internal compass, guiding the individual's behavior in the present as well as shaping their expectations of the future (Marcia et al., 1993). An absence of, or vague commitments might therefore leave the individual feeling lost or isolated, without a sense of purpose or direction, as well as vulnerable to the opinions of others (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia et al., 1993).

In addition to commitment, Marcia (1966) defined *exploration* as a second core developmental process. Exploration involves reflecting on, trying out and choosing among meaningful alternatives (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Depending on the degree of exploration and commitment, individuals can be categorized as belonging to one out of four positions, called identity statuses (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia, 1966). Identity status can be measured globally or within specific identity-relevant domains, such as romantic relationships (Marcia et al., 1993). *Achieved identity* (A) refers to individuals who are perceived as having made identity-defining commitments after a period of exploration, while *moratorium* (M) is used to describe individuals who are currently in a period of exploration without having made any commitments yet (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993). *Foreclosed identity* (F) refers to individuals who seem to have made commitments without any prior exploration and the term *identity diffusion* (D) is used to describe individuals who are lacking both commitment and exploration (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993). From adolescence to adulthood the identity status development should in theory entail a progressive strengthening of the individual's sense of identity toward exploring different options and making identity-defining commitments (Waterman, 1982). Transitioning from identity diffusion to foreclosure is therefore a part of this progressive development and means that the individual has formed commitments that were previously absent or vague, and has formed them without a prior period of exploration. The present study aim to explore this process of making identity-defining commitments without exploration and therefore focuses on individuals who have transitioned from the identity diffusion status to the foreclosed identity status within the romantic domain.

Individuals categorized into the identity diffusion status have by definition not made identity-defining commitments and are not in a state of exploring alternatives in order to form commitments (Marcia, 1966; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). They may never

have engaged in exploration, or they may have had a period of exploration without being able or willing to commit to any views or actions (Waterman, 1982). Identity diffused individuals are in this sense lacking a coherent identity and therefore have little sense of what they want out of life or who they want to be in the future (Marcia et al., 1993). Carlsson, Wängqvist and Frisé (2016) found that remaining in identity diffusion over several years in early adulthood was associated with difficulties handling changing life conditions in an active and intentional way, creating new meaning and finding a direction in life. The participants in the study reported no severe signs of psychological distress (Carlson et al., 2016), however, identity diffusion may be a “latent weakness” (Erikson, 1968, p. 167), manifesting itself only when the individual is faced with expectations and responsibilities concerning adult life (Wängqvist & Frisé, 2011).

The foreclosed identity status describes individuals who have made identity-defining commitments without prior exploration of alternatives (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Marcia, 1966). Commitments made by foreclosures are therefore generally considered to reflect the values of the individual’s parents or other authority figures, making it an assigned rather than personally created identity (Waterman, 1982; Marcia et al., 1993). Kroger and Marcia (2011) describe foreclosures as seemingly strong and autonomous, especially if their values are considered mainstream and their life choices are supported by their social context. However, the lack of exploration and difficulty contemplating alternative values and ways of life leaves the foreclosed position vulnerable (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). When faced with information that challenges their belief system, the foreclosed individual might become defensive or rigid and failure to live up to expectations, both expressed and internalized, might result in feelings of shame and guilt (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). By examining changes in the identity narratives of individuals who have transitioned from identity diffusion (no commitments) to foreclosure (commitments) in the romantic domain, the present study may contribute with valuable insights into what this identity status development entail for the early adult.

Developing Identity-Defining Commitments

Erikson (1968) considered identity formation as the primary psychosocial task during adolescence; facing the task of becoming an adult with adult responsibilities, the individual must make commitments that provides a sense of continuity with his or her childhood self as well as being functional within his or her sociocultural context. Initial commitments are thought to be formed during early adolescence, often as a result of adopting values, goals and beliefs of one’s parents in an unreflective manner (Marcia et al., 1993). Commitments are then thought to be continuously evaluated, maintained or changed based on how satisfying they are for the individual and how well they work within their context (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx et al., 2006). According to Bosma and Kunnen’s model (2001), commitments towards views and actions that are approved by the individual’s social context and societal norms, as well as generating positive outcomes for the individual, are confirmed and strengthened. Conflicts between commitment and context are resolved through assimilation (changing the context or the interpretation of it to make it fit with the existing commitment), accommodation (adjusting the commitment to create a better fit between commitment and context) or withdrawal from the conflict. Bosma and Kunnen

(2001) connect individual differences in the extent individuals use these different strategies with the identity statuses, suggesting that identity diffusion is related to accommodating rapidly, whereas foreclosures persist to assimilate even when confronted with repeated conflicts between their commitments and the context.

The adult years have mainly been considered a time of implementing and experiencing the consequences of commitments made earlier in life, in some cases leading to a reappraisal of identity-defining commitments (or lack thereof) (Marcia et al., 1993). However, Erikson (1968; 1980) also emphasized identity development as a life-long process and empirical findings have showed that considerable identity change takes place in the adult years, including the formation of commitments (Kroger, Martinussen & Marcia, 2010; Cramer, 2017; Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Carlsson et al., 2015). Carlsson et al. (2016) found that several participants in their study remained in identity diffusion during early adulthood, not making any identity-defining commitments. Taken together, there is evidence that some individuals do not make commitments until later in life.

In the adult years, identification with parental figures is theoretically not considered to play a major role in forming commitments (Marcia et al., 1993). However, the individual might be influenced by identification with a partner, and differences in goals, values and beliefs between partners may spur a reappraisal of previously made commitments (Marcia et al., 1993). Identity status transitions in adulthood have been shown to be associated with internal factors such as readiness to change and internal conflict (Anthis & La Voie, 2006; Kunnen, 2006) and associated with external factors such as stressful life events (Anthis, 2002). However, these factors have mainly been associated with the reevaluation of current commitments and succeeding identity status change (for example from foreclosure to moratorium), not developing entirely new commitments in adulthood. To my knowledge, there are no previous studies examining the process of making identity-defining commitments within the romantic domain in adulthood.

Identity and Romantic relationships

Erikson (1980) considered romantic relationships to be a key domain for identity development in early adulthood and the capacity to engage in intimate relationships a central developmental task of this phase. Studies have shown that during this phase of their lives many people establish long-term romantic relationships (Arnett, 2014; Schulman & Connolly, 2013) and make identity-defining commitments in the romantic domain (Wängqvist, Carlsson, van der Lee & Frisé, 2016).

Romantic relationships offer an important context for identity development in multiple ways. For example, central questions to consider within the romantic domain is whether the individual wants to be in a long-term romantic relationship and what they want that relationship to look like (Arnett, 2014). When answering these questions the individual must also consider how different decisions concerning romantic relationship might affect their life in general and how their individual life plan might coordinate with a potential partner's (Schulman & Connolly, 2013). Further, by engaging in romantic relationships, the individual may learn what they like and dislike in a partner, helping them establish personal views on romantic relationships (Arnett, 2014). Moreover, by seeing themselves through the eyes of their partner, the individual may

also gain new perspectives on who they are (Arnett, 2014). At the same time, sustaining one's sense of self within an intimate relationship with a partner may prove a challenge, as well an opportunity, to further define and articulate who one is and what one wants (Montgomery, 2005).

Highlighting this interplay between romantic relationships and identity, Wängqvist et al. (2016) found that involvement in a long-term romantic relationship was more common among individuals in identity foreclosure and identity achievement, compared to identity diffusion or moratorium. Moreover, involvement in a romantic relationship that had lasted for four years or more was related to viewing relationships as more important and wanting to get married.

Aim

The present study aims to explore the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships. Intra-individual changes in identity narratives of early adults will therefore be investigated, before and after they have made commitments. The investigations are guided by the following research question: What inner and outer changes are evident in early adults' identity narratives concerning romantic relationships, before and after they have made identity-defining commitments in the romantic identity domain?

Method

The present study draws data from the ninth and tenth wave of the Gothenburg Longitudinal study of Development (GoLD) – an ongoing project at the University of Gothenburg's Department of Psychology since 1982. The ninth and tenth wave of data collections were reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg (Wave 9, dnr: 206-11; Wave 10, dnr: 263-15). For more information about the GoLD-project, see Carlsson et al. (2015; 2016) for wave nine and Kling, Wängqvist and Friséén (2018) and Gyberg and Friséén (2017) for wave ten.

Participants

The GoLD-project begun in 1982 with a community sample of 1- to 2-year-old children (Lamb et al., 1988). At the start of the project, the participants were recruited from waiting lists for public childcare in different areas of Gothenburg. The families came from a variety of backgrounds, and the sample was considered representative of families in Gothenburg (Broberg, 1989). This study draws data from the ninth and tenth wave of the GoLD-project when participants were 29 ($M = 29.3$ years, $SD = 0.6$) and 33 years old ($M = 33.3$ years, $SD = 0.5$), respectively. 124 individuals (86.1% of the original sample) participated at both data collections and romantic relationship identity status was assessed for all participants. The present study used a subsample consisting of participants who were categorized into the diffused identity status at age 29 (the ninth wave) and were at age 33 (the tenth wave) categorized as having developed into the

foreclosed identity status ($n = 9$; 3 women, 6 men) in the romantic relationship domain. Descriptive data from participants, each referred to by a pseudonym, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive data of each of the participants' family situation at ages 29 and 33

Pseudonym	Age 29		Age 33	
	Partner	Children	Partner	Children
Anna	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Johan	No	No	Yes	No
Sara	No	No	No	No
Daniel	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Maria	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Andreas	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fredrik	No	No	No	No
Mikael	Yes	No	Yes	Expecting
Erik	No	No	No	No

Instruments

Background interview. A structured background interview was used to gather demographic information about the participants at age 29 and 33. Questions relevant for the present study was: “Are you involved in a romantic relationship right now?” and “Do you have or are currently expecting to have children?”.

Identity Status Interview. The Ego Identity Status Interview developed by Marcia (1966) and Marcia et al. (1993) was performed at age 29 and 33. The interview was translated to Swedish and adapted to Swedish conditions for the eighth wave of GoLD, when participants were 25 years old (Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011). The interview format was semi-structured and a variation of probes was used. The identity domains explored at both age 29 and 33 were: occupation, romantic relationships, parenthood, and work/family priorities. In the present study, only the romantic relationship domain was used. Examples of questions concerning this domain were: “Is it important for you to have a long-term relationship?”, “What can one expect from one’s partner in a relationship?”, “Why do you think you want to/do not want to have a long-term relationship?”, “Would you like to get married?” and “What would marriage mean to you?” or, for those already married, “What does being married mean to you?”.

Procedure

At both age 29 and 33, most participants were interviewed at the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg. Participants who could not or did not want to come to the university were interviewed in other places such as their homes, workplaces or public libraries. Participants not able to meet face-to-face were interviewed over Skype or telephone. The interviews and subsequent assessments of identity status were performed by members of the GoLD research team. At age 29, the interviews were performed by three female doctoral students and two female master students in clinical psychology. At age 33, they were performed by two female doctoral students and three female post-doctoral researchers. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Based on the degree of exploration of alternatives and commitment to chosen directions expressed by participants' in the Identity Status Interview, the participants were assigned to one of four identity statuses for each domain as well as globally: achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, or diffusion. Assessments of identity status was performed by the interviewers following the guidelines outlined by Marcia et al. (1993). In the data collection at age 29 and 33, the interviewers were blind to the participants' previous identity status. In the present study, only the identity status from the romantic relationships domain was used. To ensure reliability in the romantic relationships domain, a random sample of interviews ($n = 20$) was re-coded by a second rater at both ages. The agreement for romantic relationship identity status assessment between first and second rater had a Cohen's kappa of .73 at age 29 (Wängqvist et al., 2016) and .81 at age 33 (Gyberg & Frisé, 2017).

Data analysis

To address the research question in this study, an analysis of changes in identity status interview narratives from the romantic domain between age 29 and 33 was performed in a series of steps (see Carlsson et al., 2015 & 2016 for similar method of data analysis).

First, to retain the characteristics of each individual's process of identity development within the romantic domain, the participants were treated as singular case studies (Yin, 2014). The interview transcripts from age 29 ($n = 9$) and 33 ($n = 9$) were read separately for each participant and the participants' interview narrative from age 29 was compared with their interview narrative from age 33. Changes in identity narratives were summarized for each participant separately, resulting in nine case summaries.

Next, the case summaries and interview transcripts were analyzed with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using an inductive approach. Manifest elements of change in participants' case summaries were given initial codes. These codes were discussed between the author and the two supervisors and initial themes were formed.

Thereafter, the interview transcripts from age 29 and 33 for each participant were coded based on the preliminary themes. Throughout the coding process the themes were reevaluated in relation to the data, resulting in the emergence of new themes as well as modifications on and the exclusion of initial themes.

Finally, the thematic structure was reevaluated in relation to the transcripts and the case summaries to ensure that it represented the data. All themes were named and

quotations from the participants were chosen to illustrate the content of the themes. Since the interviews were performed in Swedish, the quotations were translated to English. All participant names in the results section are pseudonyms.

Results

The thematic analysis of intra-individual changes in the participants' interview narratives before and after commitments resulted in six main themes and four subthemes. These themes and subthemes captured different aspects of what the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entailed for the participants. The first main theme, named *Life happens and you adjust - modifying views on relationships*, captured how changes in participants' lives relating to romantic relationships interacted with their views on romantic relationships. The second main theme, *Integrating the past, the present and the future*, concerned changes in the ways the participants spoke of the past, present and the future. The third main theme was named *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships* and captured the ways in which many of the participants had elaborated on their personal views on romantic relationships. The fourth main theme, *New ways of relating views on relationships to parents*, described changes in the ways participants spoke of their parents. The fifth main theme, *Valuing security and belonging*, concerned an increase in statements about valuing security and belonging as important aspects of romantic relationships whereas the sixth and final main theme, *Being less influenced by the moment*, concerned descriptions of participants being less influenced by changes in mood and circumstances regarding their views on romantic relationships. All the main themes and subthemes are presented below and illustrated with quotes from the participants (see Table 2 for overview). To emphasize the relationship between the results and the research question, themes from age 29 and age 33 will be referred to as *before commitments* and *after commitments*, respectively.

Table 2

Description of the six main themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Description
1. Life happens and you adjust - modifying views on relationships	1.1. "It changed the way I looked at it" – Reevaluating views on relationships in the light of new experiences	Changing views on relationships and valuing them as more important as a result of new experiences and changes in life conditions.

	1.2. Making sense of discrepancies between views on relationships and reality	Acknowledging and explaining discrepancies between views on relationships and life choices.
2. Integrating the past, the present and the future	2.1. Defining oneself in relation to the past	Speaking more and/or in greater detail of past experiences and their influence. Describing similarities and differences between past and current views.
	2.2. "A new chapter" – connecting the present with the future	Expecting views and behavior relating to romantic relationships to stay the same in the future. Expressing a clearer vision of the future.
3. Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships		Describing views on relationships in a more specific and personal way. Giving examples from everyday life.
4. New ways of relating views on relationships to parents		Talking more and in greater detail about one's parents. Comparing one's views and behavior with parents'. Emphasizing similarities.
5. Valuing security and belonging		Valuing security and belonging as important aspects of romantic relationships. Emphasizing the positive aspects of being in a relationship more.
6. Being less influenced by the moment		Views and actions concerning relationships are less influenced by changes in mood, situation and the opinion of others.

1. Life Happens and You Adjust - Modifying Views on Relationships

The first theme captured how life changes relating to romantic relationships (for example meeting a long-term romantic partner, getting more serious with a partner, having children) interacted with participants' views on romantic relationships in new ways after commitments compared to before. It included descriptions of how views were modified to coexist with one's current life situation in a way that made sense to the individual and to others. This theme was separated into two subthemes: *"It changed the way I looked at it"* – *Reevaluating views on relationships in the light of new experiences*, and *Making sense of discrepancies between views on relationships and reality*.

1.1. "It Changed the way I Looked at it" – Reevaluating Views on Relationships in the light of New Experiences. This subtheme described how some participants had changed their views on romantic relationships and had come to place greater value on romantic relationships as a result of new experiences and changes in life conditions that had taken place during the four years between the interviews. Some participants described how meeting their current partner and having a positive experience of being in a relationship had influenced them to value romantic relationships as more important compared to before commitments. Andreas expressed this in the following way when he talked about his romantic partner: "since we were so compatible, it changed the way I looked at it [being in a relationship]". Becoming a parent was also mentioned by some participants as an influential factor, motivating them to stay together with their partner for the sake of their children and valuing romantic relationships as more important than before commitments. This is exemplified by the following statement after commitments by Daniel, who had become a parent during the four years between interviews: "You look at people who get divorced and often that complicates things with the kids."

1.2. Making sense of Discrepancies between Views on Relationships and Reality. Some participants differentiated clearly between valuing romantic relationships as a norm or ideal, and valuing an actual relationship. This line of thinking was existent both before and after commitments, however, the way the participants made sense of this apparent discrepancy seemed to change between the two interview occasions. Before commitments, participants made little effort to explain discrepancies between their views on relationships and their actions. This is exemplified by the following quotes from Mikael, before commitments:

"...I want to say no but in fact I believe that I think it [a relationship] is quite important. /---/ it is just some strange idea that I have always had. But at the same time, I am in a relationship right now despite everything, so... So I guess it is quite important."

After commitments, the participants seemed to have clarified their views on relationships and how they fit in with the way they lived their lives. Some participants had elaborated on the circumstances under which a relationship was important and not. For example, one participant, Mikael, said:

"I do not see any reason not to be with her as long as we are in such a good place as we are right now. But I do not see any point in being in a

relationship that you do not enjoy /---/ I would rather be alone than be with someone that it is not working out with.”

2. Integrating the Past, the Present and the Future

The second theme concerned quantitative and qualitative changes in the ways the participants spoke of the past, present and the future. This theme was divided into two subthemes, one describing changes in how the participants spoke of the past, *Defining oneself in relation to the past*, and one describing changes in how they spoke of the future, *“A new chapter” – connecting the present with the future*.

2.1. Defining Oneself in relation to the Past. After commitments, most participants referred more often and/or in greater detail to experiences and ways of thinking in the past, related to romantic relationships. Many differentiated more clearly between the present and the past, describing the ways they had changed or stayed the same. Some acknowledged the past as an influential force, describing how past experiences had shaped their current views and actions concerning romantic relationships. When referring to the past, some emphasized continuity between previous and current views more after commitments compared to before commitments. For example, after commitments, Johan described how his views on romantic relationships had remained the same, even though he had been in several relationships and was in one at the time of the interview:

“But I have never felt when I was not in a relationship that I have lost any part of me, that it has been important to be in a relationship of that reason. It has not been a part of me. I have never defined myself as one part out of two - no I am me.”

Other participants described the ways in which their current views differed from previous ones. This is exemplified by the following statement after commitments by Sara, reflecting on how her views had changed and why she had come to value romantic relationships more:

“I have not done that [been in a relationship] a lot so I am pretty used to being alone. But I guess that it [a relationship] becomes more important the older you get. Now that you are not living at home anymore. /---/ I think it is a bit more important now than when I was younger”.

2.2. “A New Chapter” – Connecting the Present with the Future. Before commitments, many participants expected their views on romantic relationships to change in the future, as well as their actions concerning this domain. On the contrary, most of the participants expected their views to stay the same after commitments. There was a general shift among the participants from picturing oneself as different in the future towards connecting the present with the future, expressed by Anna as: “... it is a new chapter now, this is what it is going to be like from now on...”. This shift from being open to change towards expecting to stay the same is exemplified further by these two quotes from Mikael from before and after commitments, respectively:

“It is not very likely but it is not unlikely either [to change views on romantic relationship]. At the same time I feel that I am not a huge step away from coming to the conclusion that you do not need to be in a relationship at all.” (before commitments)

“No, I do not think I will [change views on romantic relationship]. But on the other hand, you might become more tolerant /---/ when others become dependent on you, for example if you have children and so on then you might be less inclined to just break it [the relationship] off, you know” (after commitments)

However, with regard to this subtheme, there was a difference between participants who were in a long-term committed relationship and those who were single. Both of the participants still expressing openness towards changing their views on relationships in the future after commitments were single, while all of the participants currently in a romantic relationship expected their views to mainly stay the same.

Before commitments, some participants believed that they would continue to be unsure about their views and actions concerning romantic relationships in the future, as they were at the time of the interview. For example, when asked about the probability of changing her views on romantic relationships in the future, Sara answered: “I think it is going to continue like this, that I do not know [if I want to be in a relationship], both yes and no”. After commitments, on the other hand, most of the participants expressed a clearer vision of what they wanted their future to look like and purveyed a stronger sense of direction and intention going forward, thus connecting their present with their future more.

3. Elaborating on the Personal Meaning of Romantic relationships

The third theme captured how many of the participants had elaborated on the personal meaning of being in a relationship and getting married. Before commitments, many struggled to answer questions about their views on relationships, giving vague, general and/or abstract descriptions. After commitments, many described their views on relationships in a more detailed, specific and personal way, relating their views on relationships to personal experiences and giving examples from their everyday life. This change could be seen in the following quotes by Anna, describing why she was unsure about getting married before and after commitments, respectively:

“It is not something that I think about right now but I do not know about the future, it might become an option” (before commitments)

“I guess I do not really see the need for it, I mean, I have never thought of it as a need of mine. It just does not feel necessary, I mean, we [her and romantic partner] know where we have each other without having to get married. It is just not something that we have to confirm to each other by getting married.” (after commitments)

For some participants, as in the example above, the change towards a more elaborate and personal view on relationships seemed to be associated with life changes taking place between interviews relating to romantic relationships (for example meeting

a long-term romantic partner, getting more serious with a partner, having children). At the second interview, these participants could relate their views on relationships and marriage to their current relationships in ways that were not possible earlier. However, this change was also noticeable among participants who appeared not to have experienced any life changes relating to romantic relationships between the two interview occasions. This is exemplified by Sara, single at both interviews, who before commitments had a hard time describing what it would mean to her to be in a relationship except it being a prerequisite for having children. After commitments, Sara described the meaning of being in a relationship in a more elaborate way and said for example:

“Well it means security, that you have someone who follows you through life, you know. Someone who follows you and you follow each other. Yes, it is about having someone who cares about you, someone close.”

4. New Ways of relating Views on Relationships to Parents

Theme four described changes in the ways participants related their views on relationships to their parents. After commitments, most participants talked in greater length and detail about their parents, their parents’ relationship, and/or their parents’ views on relationships, compared to before commitments. Some reflected upon possible reasons for their parents’ actions and beliefs. Many were more specific about the ways they believed their parents had influenced their views on romantic relationships, exemplified by this statement from Johan:

“I think I was almost 14 or something when they got divorced so during my whole childhood they were together. But at the same time, they were very much individuals which might also be the reason why they got divorced in the end. So I sort of have never felt that anyone close to me have demonstrated that it is important to have someone.”

There was also a general change concerning how participants defined themselves and their views on relationships as similar to or different from their parents’. Overall, participants seemed more aware both of potential differences and similarities after commitments, comparing views and life choices to a greater extent. Moreover, there was a tendency to emphasize similarities more after commitments than before commitments. Some participants were more explicit when describing parents as role models while others seemed to downplay or omit differences described before commitments.

However, two of the participants showed a different development, speaking less of their parents after commitments than before commitments. Before commitments, these two participants described aspects of their parents’ relationship that they would not like to incorporate into their own love lives. After commitments, they were hesitant towards comparing views and actions, saying that they did not know enough about their parents’ views or had not thought about it enough to make assumptions.

5. Valuing Security and Belonging

Theme five reflected an increase in statements about valuing security and belonging as important aspects of romantic relationships after commitments compared to before commitments. After commitments, more participants spoke of the positive aspects of being in a romantic relationship, emphasizing feelings of security and belonging, being able to share your life with someone and having someone to provide emotional support, as well as avoiding loneliness. For some participants who were currently in a romantic relationship, this was described as something they had come to value about having a partner. For some of the single participants, security and belonging was expressed as something that they increasingly longed for, strengthening their commitment towards being in a relationship. The following quotes by Sara and Erik after commitments are examples of how the participants spoke of valuing security and belonging as important aspects of being in a relationship:

“I think it is about a wish to ground myself somewhere, to build something /---/ to feel that I have some sort of foundation together with someone, maybe.” (Sara)

“I guess it is that you are not alone and that you actually have someone that you can get support from when you need it in a different way than an acquaintance or a friend.” (Erik)

6. Being Less Influenced by the Moment

The sixth and final theme concerned descriptions of participants being less influenced by changes in mood and circumstances regarding their views on relationships after commitments, compared to before commitments. Before commitments, some described that the value they placed on romantic relationships depended on meeting “the one” – a suitable partner that they would fall in love with. Some also expressed that their views on relationships and marriage depended on the views their prospective partner would hold, for example being open to getting married for the sake of their partner while not having a strong opinion of their own. Moreover, some expressed how their views on relationships varied depending on the current situation and mood they were in, described by Daniel, before commitments, in the following way:

“You think about it [wanting to be in a relationship] more when you are by yourself than when you are together with other people. Sometimes when you are together with other people you just want to get out of there but when you are by yourself you do not think that way.”

After commitments, the previously described variability and impressionability concerning participants’ views of relationships was less apparent. However, a few participants still expressed their views as dependent on their current or future relationship and how they felt about that relationship.

Before commitments, some described a passive approach towards dating and committing to a long-term romantic relationship. This pattern was noticeable among

single participants expressing a wish to be in a relationship while not actively pursuing one, expressed by Erik as “if it happens, it happens”. In a similar way, other participants described how they had ended up in relationships without making an active choice. This is exemplified by the following quote from Maria before commitments:

“My previous relationships mostly just happened. It is not like I have been looking for someone to be with. It just happened.”

After commitments, there were fewer descriptions of passively waiting for a partner or passively committing to one, purveying a stronger sense of agency and decisiveness in most participants’ descriptions of their views and actions relating to romantic relationships.

Discussion

This study explored the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships. By analyzing changes in the participants’ interview narratives from before commitments (identity diffusion status) and after commitments (foreclosed identity status), several themes were discovered. The results showed that the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entails both outer changes, for example having new experiences and changes in life-conditions, and inner changes, for example changes in views and ways of understanding them, as well as interactions between the two. The themes will mainly be discussed separately with the exception of the third main theme, *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships*, which will be discussed in relation to both the first and the second main themes.

Being Influenced by Life Changes in New Ways

The first main theme, *Life happens and you adjust - modifying views on relationships*, showed that life changes and new experiences seem to influence the commitment-making process in the romantic domain in early adulthood. Results from the subtheme “*It changed the way I looked at it*” – *Reevaluating views on relationships in the light of new experiences* showed that individuals who had made commitments reevaluated their views on romantic relationships and valued them as more important than before after having positive experiences in their actual relationships. These results are in line with what Bosma and Kunnen (2001) refers to as accommodation – changing one’s views when faced with confronting information. It could therefore be, as this study showed, that views of relationships as difficult and demanding change when the actual experience of being with one’s partner is perceived as something positive. As previously have been shown regarding commitment-making processes in other identity domains, positive emotional experiences are strongly related to subsequent changes in commitments (van der Gaag et al., 2017). The findings from the present study suggest that positive emotional experiences might have the same impact on commitment-making in the romantic domain and that gaining positive experiences might influence the individual to view a long-term romantic relationship as a realistic and appealing

identity alternative, which in turn facilitate the process of making an identity-defining commitment in the romantic domain.

Results from the second subtheme, *Making sense of discrepancies between views on relationships and reality*, showed how some individuals, after commitments, came to acknowledge and make sense of discrepancies between viewing relationships as not important while simultaneously engaging in a romantic relationship. These individuals seem to have solved the conflict between their views and their context by assimilation (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001); by stating that they are in a relationship because they value their partner but do not consider romantic relationships to be important in general, they manage to interpret their actions and life choices in a way that make them coherent with their views. Bosma and Kunnen (2001) have suggested that identity diffusion might be characterized by being overly accommodating, constantly changing one's commitments. The results from this subtheme highlighted another aspect of dealing with reality from a diffused position – not acknowledging discrepancies between one's views and actions, or, not solving apparent conflicts between them. As proposed by Montgomery (2005), navigating the needs of oneself and a romantic partner may spur the individual to further define and articulate who they are and what they want. Possibly, engaging in a romantic relationship might make it necessary for individuals without clear commitments in the romantic domain to, at some point, make identity-defining commitments in order to sustain their sense of self as well as their relationship over time. Or, using the vocabulary of Bosma and Kunnen (2001), changes in the context might make the conflict between views and actions more acute and hard to solve by withdrawal. For example, as this study showed, individuals who previously have not considered romantic relationships as important might change their views when becoming parents since they value staying together for the sake of their children.

The third main theme, *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships*, showed that views on relationships were described in a more detailed, specific and personal way after identity-defining commitments had been made in the romantic domain. Similar to the influence of life experiences on the changes described in the first main theme, *Life happens and you adjust - modifying views on relationships*, new experiences and changes in life-conditions in the romantic domain seemed to play a role in the change towards more elaborate views on romantic relationships as well, at least for some individuals. These individuals related their views on relationships and marriage to real-life experiences within their current relationship. As described by Arnett (2014), engaging in romantic relationships provides an opportunity to find out what one values and expects of a relationship. From this perspective, the elaboration of views on relationships displayed by the participants in the present study might be a result of learning what they want and need in an actual relationship.

In conclusion, the results from the first and third theme, *Life happens and you adjust - modifying views on relationships* and *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships*, suggest that the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entails an increased ability or willingness to acknowledge and solve conflicts between one's views and actions, either by accommodation or assimilation, and elaborating on one's views on romantic relationships. For many, these changes seem to be related to new experiences and changes in life-conditions in the romantic domain - such as meeting a partner, getting more serious with a partner or becoming a parent. These results are in line with previous findings from Anthis (2002) among others, showing that impactful life-events

may play a major role in identity development in adulthood.

The results from the present study also highlight that romantic relationships may provide an important context for identity development in early adulthood and that committing to a long-term romantic partner, which is common in early adulthood (Arnett, 2014; Schulman & Connolly, 2013), may spur the process of making identity-defining commitments. Future research should examine these potential associations between impactful life-events related to romantic relationships and the process of making identity-defining commitments in the romantic domain. Similar to the research design used by van der Gaag et al. (2017), gathering quantitative intra-individual data on a frequent basis could prove useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the interaction between life-events and the commitment-process.

Increased Levels of Meaning-Making

Based on the results from the second and third main theme, *Integrating the past, the present and the future* and *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships*, the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships seem to entail relating one's experiences, past as well as current, to one's views on relationships more often and in new and more complex ways.

Connecting experiences to one's sense of self may be understood in terms of what is referred to in narrative theories of identity development as *self-event relations* (Pasupathi, Mansour & Brubaker, 2007). Self-event relations can serve to maintain a sense of stability and continuity or explain how the individual has changed as a result of his or her experiences (Pasupathi et al., 2007). Through making self-event relations that explain how the individual came to be their current self and how inconsistencies and life changes fit in with their overall life story, the individual can cultivate a sense of sameness over time (Pasupathi et al., 2007). In the present study, examples of both stability-maintaining and change self-event relations were evident in several themes and especially in the subtheme *Defining oneself in relation to the past*. These results suggest that individuals make more self-event relations after they have made identity-defining commitments concerning romantic relationships, compared to before.

As the results from the subtheme *Defining oneself in relation to the past* showed, individuals who have not made identity-defining commitments may seem stuck in the moment, being unable or unwilling to reflect on their lives and how their pasts have influenced their current ways of thinking and living regarding romantic relationships. The results from the theme *Elaborating on the personal meaning of romantic relationships* also showed how some individuals, before commitments, seem to struggle with describing their views on romantic relationships in a personally meaningful way. These results indicate that early adults who have not made identity-defining commitments concerning romantic relationships are not engaging in a lot of *meaning-making* (e.g. McLean & Thorne, 2003). The concept of meaning making is commonly used in narrative theories of identity development and refers to how individuals create and maintain their sense of identity by reflecting upon their experiences, gaining insights from them and relating them to their present and future (e.g. McLean & Thorne, 2003). McLean and Pratt (2006) found that the even though the processes of exploration and meaning-making share some similarities, they are distinctive concepts, which

possibly interact with the process of commitment in different ways. Previous studies have found identity foreclosure to be related to low levels of meaning-making, compared to more mature identity statuses (McLean and Pratt, 2006; Carlsson et al., 2015). The results from the present study adds to our understanding of the associations between meaning-making and commitment by showing that the process of making identity-defining commitments without prior exploration in the romantic domain (i.e. developing from identity diffusion to foreclosure) seem to entail an increase in meaning-making for the individual.

Based on these result, it seems like there is an important connection between on the one hand making meaning out of past and current events and relating them to one's sense of self, and on the other hand making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships. However, the causal relationship between these identity processes need to be examined further in future research.

Parental Influences on Early Adults' Commitment-making

The results from the fourth main theme, *New ways of relating views on relationships to parents*, showed that for some individuals the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entails an increase in relating one's views on romantic relationships to the views and behavior of one's parents. The results from this theme also suggested that individuals who have made identity-defining commitments concerning romantic relationships emphasize similarities between their views and life choices and those of their parents more than before commitments. These results contrast with theoretical assumptions about identification with parental figures not playing a major part in the process of making commitments in adulthood (Marcia et al., 1993).

In a previous study, Crocetti et al. (2008) found commitment to be positively related to nurturing parent-adolescent relationships. The authors found that adolescents who identified strongly with their commitments reported more trust in their parents, especially in their fathers. The present study did not examine the quality of the relationship between the participating early adults and their parents. However, it is possible that changes in the parent-adult child relationship could influence the commitment-making process in some way. It is also possible that having identity-defining commitments, i.e. having defined and chosen an identity alternative, have enabled the individual to relate and compare their views to their parents' in ways that were not possible when commitments were vague or absent. The increase in relating views on relationships to one's parents could also be interpreted as an increase in meaning-making. Possibly, an increased ability or willingness to make meaning out of experiences of the relationship between one's parents (or parents relationship with other partners) may have enabled the individual to gain new insights on their own views on romantic relationships. These hypotheses need to be examined further. The association between parent-adult child relationship and/or experiences of parents' romantic relationships, and the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood would be an interesting avenue to explore in future research.

Changes in Identity Content

Research on identity have focused on *identity processes* (the mechanisms through which identity develops), as well as *identity content* (the specific views, experiences and domains important to a certain individual's identity) (Vignoles et al., 2011). In the present study, most of the themes described changes in the ways in which individuals understand and integrate their experiences and views into their identity - changes relating to identity processes (McLean & Syed, 2015). However, the theme *Valuing security and belonging* captured changes relating more directly to identity content (McLean & Syed, 2015). Based on the results of this theme, making identity-defining commitments in adulthood concerning romantic relationships is associated with valuing security and belonging as important aspects of romantic relationships and emphasizing the positive aspects of being in a relationship more, compared to before commitments. These results are in line with Erikson's (1980) original ideas about romantic relationships as a key domain for identity development in early adulthood and intimacy as a central identity issue of this phase.

Some of the changes relating to identity processes found in this study seemed to be influenced by the specific content of the individual's' views concerning romantic relationships. For example, the subtheme *Making sense of discrepancies between views on relationships and reality* described individuals involved in a relationship who did not view romantic relationships as important, and how they were more actively trying to make sense of this discrepancy after they had made identity-defining commitments. The same pattern of development was not found among individuals who viewed romantic relationships as important. Some of the themes also concerned participants' actual experiences relating to romantic relationships and how they seemed to influence changes in identity processes. For example, the theme "*A new chapter*" – *connecting the present with the future* showed how some of the single participants wishing to be in a relationship viewed it as likely that they would change in the future, compared to participants in a relationship who thought that they would stay the same.

In their study, Wängqvist et al. (2016) examined potential differences in views concerning romantic relationships between groups with different identity status, but found only small differences between groups. The authors encouraged further inquiries into how differences in identity content is related to differences in identity processes, beyond differences between the identity statuses. The results from the present study suggests that the views the individual has adopted concerning romantic relationships (e.g. viewing romantic relationships as important or not) influences the processes related to making identity-defining commitments concerning romantic relationships (e.g. an increased ability or willingness to acknowledge and solve conflicts between views and actions). Moreover, as described previously in the Discussion section, new experiences and changes in life-conditions related to romantic relationships seem to influence these interactions. However, as shown in the theme *Valuing security and belonging*, the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships also seem to entail a general change in identity content towards valuing security and belonging as important aspects of romantic relationships and value romantic relationships as more important than before.

The complex interactions between identity content, life situation and identity processes needs to be examined further in future research. Using a case-based research method, similar to the one used in Carlsson et al. (2015; 2016) and the present study, is

a valuable way of gaining in-depth knowledge on how these factors interact on an individual level.

The Foreclosed Identity Status as a Positive Identity Development

The results from the present study suggest that the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entail several positive changes related to identity development. For example, as previously described, individuals who have made commitments seem to solve conflicts between their views and their context in more adaptive ways, elaborate on their personal views on romantic relationships and engage in more meaning-making. The sixth main theme, *Being less influenced by the moment*, also showed that after they have made commitments, many individuals seem less dependent on variations in mood and circumstances as well as having a stronger sense of direction and agency. Taken together, these results purvey that the commitment-making process generally seem to entail a positive development towards a stronger sense of identity. This is an expected development, given that the transition from identity diffusion to foreclosure is theoretically and empirically considered a progressive status shift (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993). The results also seem to confirm the importance of making identity-defining commitments for maintaining a sense of sameness in adulthood, as described by Erikson (1968).

However, the results did not highlight the developmental limitations associated with the foreclosed identity status, such as adopting views in a non-reflective manner and making commitments prematurely (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993). It is possible that the research question, focusing on changes in participants' identity narratives from before and after commitments, emphasized the aspects of participants' identities that had developed while obscuring the aspects that had stayed the same. However, since there has been little research on identity development in early adulthood, it could also be that the developmental limitations associated with the foreclosed identity status in adolescence are less pronounced in early adulthood. Future research could examine these potential differences between making commitments in adolescence and in early adulthood.

The aim of this study was to examine what the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships entail. In order to study the process of commitment while excluding the process of exploration as a potential confounding variable, a decision was made to focus on individuals who had developed from identity diffusion to identity foreclosure. According to the identity status theory (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993), commitments made without prior exploration are considered as less mature and more fragile. Theoretically, making identity-defining commitments by developing from identity diffusion or moratorium to identity achievement should therefore result in more stable and personally meaningful commitments than developing from identity diffusion to identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966; Marcia et al., 1993). An interesting avenue for future research on commitments would be to explore these potential differences between commitments made with or without prior exploration. For example, it would be valuable to investigate to what extent the changes in identity processes and content found in this study are present

among individuals who have made commitments through other trajectories of identity status development.

Strengths and Limitations

A limitation of the identity status interview method used in this study is that it assesses identity status categorically. This might obscure the heterogeneity between individuals categorized as belonging to the same identity status. However, the case-based approach used in the present study is ideal for highlighting individual variation and might have counteracted this potential limitation of the identity status interview.

Given the lack of previous research, the present study had to employ an exploratory approach, analyzing the participants' identity narratives inductively. This has resulted in six main themes and four subthemes covering diverse aspects of the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships. As seen in the discussion section, these themes can be related to several concepts stemming from different schools of research on identity development. A deductive approach based on relevant theoretical assumptions might have resulted in more clear-cut results that could have been related to theory on identity development in a more consistent way. However, the case-based inductive method used in this study enabled all statements of the participants to be considered in the analysis. This has resulted in valuable, in depth insights into a previously unexplored research area.

The small number of participants in this study does however limit the generalizability of its findings and the research design limits possibilities for drawing conclusions about causality. The results of the study may therefore serve as a first step towards illuminating the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships through further research.

Conclusions

The present study explored the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships by examining changes in individuals' identity narratives from before and after they have made commitments in the romantic domain. This study adds to the existing knowledge by showing that the commitment-making process in early adulthood within the romantic domain seem to entail several changes related to identity processes and to identity content, as well as interactions between the two.

Based on the findings from this study, the process of making identity-defining commitments in early adulthood concerning romantic relationships, without prior exploration of alternatives, is associated with an increased ability or willingness to acknowledge and solve conflicts between one's views on romantic relationships and life choices in the romantic domain. Moreover, it seems to entail an increase in relating one's views on romantic relationships to past and current experiences as well as making more meaning out of them. The results also showed that the commitment-making process involves elaborating on one's views on romantic relationships as well as putting greater value on security and belonging as important aspect of being in a romantic

relationship than before commitments. The findings from the study also suggest that parental influences may play a part in adult commitment-making.

For many individuals, some of the previously described changes seem to be related to new experiences and changes in life-conditions in the romantic domain. These results highlight romantic relationships as an important context for identity development in early adulthood and that committing to a long-term romantic partner, which is common in early adulthood, may spur the process of making identity-defining commitments during this phase of life. The present study also show that, for many, developing from the identity diffusion status into the foreclosed identity status in the romantic domain, i.e. making identity-defining commitments without prior exploration, seem to entail a positive development towards a stronger sense of identity.

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