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van der Gaag, Mandy; Kunnen, Saskia; Pijl, Yvette

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What makes students commit? Experiences and identity development.

Mandy van der Gaag, Saskia Kunnen, Yvette Pijl

Introduction

Developing a sense of identity is an important task for adolescents (Erikson, 1968) and emerging adults (Arnett, 2001). Identity consist of 'commitments', strongly held beliefs or values (Marcia, 1966), in several domains of life (Bosma, 1992; Goossens, 2001). The domain of education and future occupation is especially relevant for emerging adults that have transitioned to higher education (Kunnen, 2009). During their first year, students explore and encounter experiences which are expected to influence their commitment (Marcia, 1980). However, how these experiences influence commitment, and thus what possible mechanisms for identity development exist on a micro-level, has hardly been researched (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), or how micro and macro timescales interact (Lichtwarck-Asschoff et al., 2008). In this study, a theoretical model was designed, that illustrates possible relations between macro-level commitment to identity beliefs, meso-level commitment to choices made and micro level experiences. A few of these relations were tested empirically.

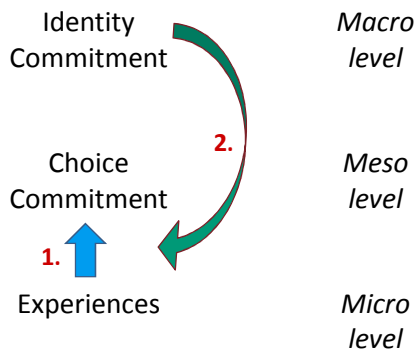
Method

This is a **longitudinal study**. We have followed 37 first year psychology students over a period of 30 weeks. Each week, they reported an important experience including accompanying emotions (micro level) and their current commitment towards their chosen education (meso level). We coded experiences as being a positive, negative, neutral or mixed experience and tested whether each of these types of experiences is followed by a change in commitment scores from one week to the next. We used identity interviews to asses the (macro level) identity commitment strength in the domain of education. Based on these scores we divided the students in two groups, weak vs strong identity commitment (macro level), and tested whether the groups differed in fluctuation of the commitment to the choice of education (meso level) over the 30 weeks.

Results



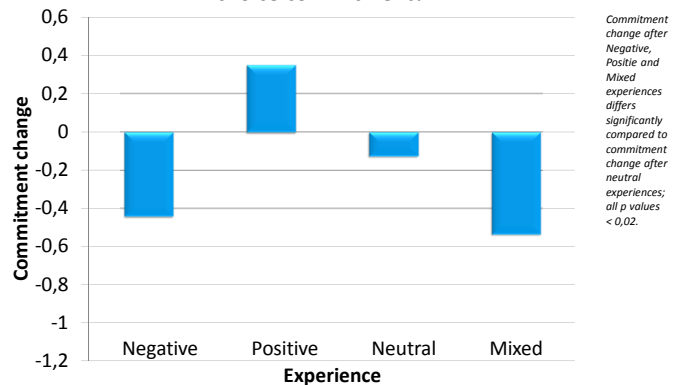
Theoretical Model



Discussion

It seems that experiences do play a role in commitment development in the domain of education. On average, negative and mixed experiences are followed by a decline in commitment, while positive experiences are followed by an increase in commitment. We also found that fluctuations in commitment towards the chosen education are bigger for student with weak identity commitments and smaller for students with strong identity commitments. This indicates that students with strong identity commitments might be less affected by experiences, while students with weak identity commitments may react more strongly to experiences.

1. Are certain experiences followed by changes in choice commitment?



2. Is this relation (1) the same for students with a weak vs strong identity commitment?

