Identity behind the Iron Curtain: Recent advances in identity research in changing contexts

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ABSTRACT

The present article introduces the special issue on identity in the former Soviet bloc countries. We begin by discussing identity as a developmental task, as well as the social-contextual forces that direct and constrain the ways in which individual people construct their identities. We then articulate some specific challenges inherent in identity development within contexts characterized by social change – primarily the fact that the available identity alternatives, and the ways in which individuals are expected to go about choosing from among these alternatives, are likely changing rapidly. We frame Erikson's original work as having been grounded in times of rapid social change in the post-World War II United States, and describe the direct relevance of Erikson's work for the study of more contemporary instances of sociopolitical change. We then introduce and summarize the articles included in the special issue.

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The cultural/historical, ideological, political and economic frameworks in which a society exists, has existed, and has the potential to exist in the future create boundaries that guide and constrain the choices available to individual people (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). In some societies, the available life paths are clearly assigned (or the range of choices is small), whereas in others they are much less clear and characterized by a higher degree of flexibility. For example, within some authoritarian regimes, career and family roles – such as the professions from which one can choose and the size of the family that one can create – are dictated by the state (e.g., Cheng & Berman, 2012). At the other extreme, democratic systems, although also guided by economic, political and ideological forces, place few explicit limitations on individual freedoms and choices and provide little guidance – leaving people largely on their own to find their way (Côté & Levine, 2002, 2015).
Many parts of the world are changing politically, economically, and culturally. Transitions from autocratic to democratic rule or vice versa, changes in the role of religion within the cultural fabric of a society, and economic booms or collapses can drastically change the opportunity structure for people residing within that society (e.g., Hellerstein & Merrill, 2011). When the macro-level forces underlying a cultural context change rapidly, such as during a change in the system of government (e.g., a military coup or other forms of overthrowing), the “rules of engagement” (i.e., ways of interacting with other people or with social institutions) may be in flux and may create confusion for individual people who are making life choices within that cultural context. Contemporary examples might include the Arab Spring overthrowing of dictatorial regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, the seizure of power in Venezuela by the Chávez/Maduro government, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s crackdown on dissent in Turkey.

Because these examples are quite recent, it is difficult to assess their effects on individual people’s life choices and outcomes. However, it may be instructive to study transitions that occurred a generation ago, so that we can examine their effects on young people who have grown up after the transition occurred. Such work has been done regarding the end of apartheid in South Africa (e.g., Norris et al., 2007) and the end of the Cold War (Youniss et al., 2002). Much of this work has compared, either explicitly or implicitly, the last generation that grew up under the old system (e.g., parents) and the first generation growing up under the new system (e.g., adolescents or emerging adults; e.g., Macek, Bejček, & Vaničková, 2007; Macek, Jezek, & Vazsonyi, 2013). The fall of the Soviet Union, and the sudden granting of freedom to the former satellite republics that had been under Soviet control for more than half a century, provided an unprecedented opportunity to study the effects of social change on both societal and individual outcomes.

A key construct during times of social change is identity. Erikson (1950, 1968) spoke of identity as an interplay between the person and her/his social environment. That is, the person develops a sense of self based on repeated transactions with family, friends, schools, places of employment, and other social structures. When these social institutions change, how does that affect the ways in which individual people set goals, make life choices, and select value systems?

What is identity?

The term “identity” carries a number of different meanings, such as life goals and plans, social roles, and one’s overall life story (see Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013; Syed & McLean, 2016). It can be taken as the amalgamation of choices and activities in various life domains and across the various life contexts (e.g., family, peers, school/work, romantic partners) in which one operates (Farrelly et al., 2017). For example, one may conceive of oneself as outgoing and spontaneous with peers but quiet and submissive with one’s
romantic partner. Moreover, not all identity processes and domains (or the contexts in which they operate) work at the same time scales. For instance, career planning may be thought of as occurring over a span of months or years, whereas friend relationships and activities may be thought of in terms of days or weeks (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma, & Kunnen, 2008).

More or less, identity represents the answer to the questions “who am I?” or “who are we?” It operates at multiple levels, including individual, relational, and collective (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Identity refers to how individual people view themselves, how individual people view their nation and/or region, and how the nation or region is defined through societal-level discourse (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). During times of major social change, such as the fall of the Soviet Union, all of these levels may be fundamentally changed (Mole, 2012). That is, individual people may experience a different range or array of choices than were previously available to them; people may be charged with coming to terms with a new national identity (e.g., Georgian, Lithianian, Romanian) that had previously been suppressed or prohibited (Tuminez, 2003); and countries that were not allowed to have a national identity are suddenly charged with creating one. Essentially, individual people and the nations where they reside are both creating an identity – perhaps leading to a sense of confusion or instability at both levels (Kuzio, 2008; Macek et al., 2007, 2013). Specifically, macro level forces direct individual identities, and individual identities in turn affect national identity.

Developmentally speaking, identity issues are most prominent in adolescence and emerging adulthood – that is, the teens and the early to mid 20s (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Erikson, 1968). In most societies, young people must make choices regarding who they will be, what kinds of relationships they will have, and what values they will hold. Young people often face these choices beginning in adolescence, when formal operational thought, counterfactual logic, and awareness of possibilities emerge (Krettenauer, 2005) – and continuing through the 20s, when young people settle into enduring career and relationship arrangements (Arnett, 2007; Erikson, 1950; Schwartz, 2016). As a result, adolescents and emerging adults are likely to be most affected by major societal-level changes such as the fall of communism in the former Iron Curtain (Soviet bloc) countries.

Erikson (1950, 1968) was the first psychological theorist to address the task of identity development. Writing in the 1950s and 1960s, he described the choices facing young people growing up in the United States after World War II. Adolescents and young adults (the term “emerging adult” was not introduced until 2000) were growing up in a postwar environment that was entirely unlike the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression that preceded the war. The task of developing a sense of identity was normative and would be encountered by the vast majority of young people, but within a context that was itself changing, developing an identity would be especially challenging. Young people were
growing up in an environment that was quite different from that in which their parents were raised, thus creating a generation gap that made it difficult for parents to guide and relate to their children. In essence, Erikson was describing a sociocultural environment that involved a great deal of social change – thereby underscoring the relevance of his writing for contemporary contexts and times of rapid social transformation.

Identity development is not simply an academic exercise – rather, the construction of a sense of self is predictive of a number of important psychosocial and health outcomes (see Schwartz et al., 2013, for a review). For example, young people with a more coherent sense of identity tend to score higher on indices of well-being and flourishing, to be less likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety, and to avoid substance abuse and other health-compromising behaviors. Identity is also critical in stabilizing the person during times of acute cultural change, such as following international migration (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). For these reasons, it is essential to examine the role of identity among young people residing in former Soviet countries.

The current special issue

The current special issue highlights several former Iron Curtain countries – the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, Kosovo, Slovenia, and Albania. Identity research is very new to this part of the world. The majority of identity research – and psychological research in general – has been conducted in North America, Oceania, and Western Europe (Arnett, 2008; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). As a consequence, the majority of what we know about identity processes comes from studies conducted in a handful of wealthy, technologically oriented countries. Although a handful of articles have been published on identity development in former Iron Curtain countries (e.g., Crocetti, Erentaitė, & Žukauskienė, 2014; Karaś, Cieciuch, Negru, & Crocetti, 2015; Pop, Negru-Subtirica, Crocetti, Opre, & Meeus, 2016), there has yet to be a single journal issue that brings together a collection of empirical articles from identity research in these countries.

This special issue represents the next step in the evolution of identity research. Developmentally oriented identity research began in North America, where Erikson and later Marcia (1966, 1980) – who operationalized Erikson’s writings for empirical research – were working. Western European identity research began in the 1980s and early 1990s, largely in the Netherlands (Bosma & Gerrits, 1985; Meeus, 1993). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, identity research expanded to other European countries, primarily Belgium (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006) and Italy (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008). Much more recently, identity research has begun to emerge in the former Iron Curtain countries, as reviewed earlier. Eastern Europe therefore represents a
“next frontier” for developmentally oriented identity research – and the current special issue is designed to present a collection of this work and to help move it forward.

This special issue consists of seven articles focusing on identity processes in former Iron Curtain countries. Crocetti provides a review and update on the definition and components of identity, using a three-dimensional model (consisting of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitments) that builds on and extends Marcia’s (1966) original work. Indeed, Crocetti’s model is utilized by two of the other articles in this issue, and this model has helped us to understand change and stability in identity processes over time and across contexts (Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010).

Skhirtladze, Javakhishvili, Schwartz, and Luyckx examine links between identity styles – characteristic ways of handling identity-relevant information and making life choices – and perceived parenting among a sample of Georgian emerging adults. They found that more autonomy-supportive types of parenting were associated with an information-oriented identity style, where the person gathers information and sorts through it as part of the process of making life choices, whereas parental psychological control (i.e., valuing the child only if s/he behaves according to the parent’s wishes) is linked with a diffuse-avoidant style, where the person procrastinates and avoids making a decision for as long as possible. Findings for the normative style – where the person follows rules and seeks out authority figures – were weaker, perhaps because the Georgian cultural context is fairly normative and collectivistic in general.

Žukauskienė, Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, Kaniušonytė, and Crocetti examined developmental changes in identity styles across four years within a sample of Lithuanian adolescents. They found strong gender differences in the trajectories of identity style processes across time: for boys, use of the informational and normative styles decreased over time, and the identity styles were less stable over time than they were for girls. This was one of the first studies to examine longitudinal changes in identity styles, as well as gender differences in these longitudinal patterns.

Dimitrova, Buzea, Uka, Zahaj, Tausova, and Crocetti examined links between identity processes and life satisfaction in majority and minority (Roma) ethnic groups across five Eastern European countries – Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, the Czech Republic, and Kosovo. The study was based on Crocetti et al.’s (2008) three-process model of identity development, which consists of commitment (making identity-related choices), in-depth exploration (evaluating the choices one has already made), and reconsideration of commitments (discarding or suspending one’s current choices because they are no longer functional). Dimitrova et al. found a complex set of interactions between nation and majority/minority ethnic group in the links between identity processes and life satisfaction. For example, commitment was more strongly associated with life satisfaction for majority than minority adolescents in Romania, but the
opposite pattern emerged in Albania. Commitment was not significantly associated with life satisfaction for either majority or minority groups in Kosovo or the Czech Republic. So an intricate set of location specific cultural processes is likely at play.

Negru-Subtirica, Pop, and Crocetti examined associations between educational and occupational identity choices and expectations within a sample of Romanian adolescents. This question is important in general, because the transition between school and work has become increasingly difficult in many countries (Côté & Levine, 2015). The question is especially important in countries such as Romania, where jobs are scarce and where educational pursuits often do not translate into work opportunities.

Lepshokova, Lebedeva, and van de Vijver studied a sample of ethnic Russians residing in the North Caucasus (a former Soviet republic) and examined the extent to which these ethnic Russians would perceive themselves as outsiders in a largely non-Russian country. These authors utilized the construct of identity incompatibility – feeling as though one’s ethnic and national group memberships are mutually exclusive. They posited this construct as mediating the link between perceptions of discrimination and a separated acculturation approach, where the person retains their ethnic identification and does not identify with the larger nation or region in which they reside. Findings supported this hypothesized mediating sequence, suggesting that feeling rejected by the majority ethnic group may lead one to perceive a sense of incompatibility between one’s ethnicity and membership in the larger national group. In turn, such perceived incompatibility may prompt an approach where the person retreats into her/his ethnic group and avoids interactions with the majority group. Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey (1999) have referred to this phenomenon as the rejection-identification effect.

Lam and Katona adopted a social identity approach to examining national and supranational identity among Hungarian youth. They asked adolescents to report their extent of identification as Hungarian and as European (along with other descriptors such as age and socioeconomic status) in contrast to identification with “outgroups” such as Romanians, Russians, and Americans. Not surprisingly, Hungarian identity was most strongly endorsed by all participants, but higher-SES adolescents also identified strongly as European. These results affirm the importance of national identity (see Pehrson & Green, 2010, for a review), but they also suggest a transition in Hungarian national consciousness from former Iron Curtain country to member of the European community.

**Discussion**

These articles, using a variety of identity-related constructs and a variety of research designs, may help to increase the momentum of identity research in
the former Iron Curtain countries. These studies highlight several important points, three of which are discussed here. First, and perhaps most importantly, the former Soviet bloc countries are quite different from one another. Dimitrova et al. demonstrated this empirically by comparing the association between identity processes and life satisfaction across five countries. Although identity commitments and life satisfaction have been shown to be strongly and positively related in U.S. samples (Schwartz et al., 2011), this association is clearly not universal, and Dimitrova et al.’s findings call for further work to identify the specific cultural processes that determine the strength of the links between identity processes and well-being.

Second, because identity is so closely tied to economic opportunities (Côté & Levine, 2015), young people’s ability to actualize the identity choices they make is, at least to some extent, dependent on the availability of jobs (both entry-level jobs and higher-level careers) within the national context where young people live. Without opportunities to put one’s choices into action, the identity development process becomes largely an exercise in frustration (Destin & Oyserman, 2010). An important research direction in resource-poor countries and regions, then, involves identifying the coping mechanisms that may help to preserve one’s motivation when one’s initial choices are blocked or otherwise unavailable. One such mechanism may be loss-based selection, where the person “chooses again” when her/his original choice is not realized (Gestsdóttir, Bowers, von Eye, Napolitano, & Lerner, 2010).

Third, although some Soviet influences remain in some former Iron Curtain countries, in other countries these influences are still present to a lesser extent. For example, the Czech Republic has become modernized to the extent where it can be considered a largely Western country (e.g., Danis, Liu, & Vacek, 2011), Georgia has experienced a much greater struggle to modernize (Pelkmans, 2006). As outlined by Lam and Katona, the situation in Hungary appears to depend on socioeconomic status, with higher-SES individuals gravitating more toward a European identity. Much of the struggle to modernize in Eastern Europe has been economically based, which suggests a need to investigate determinants of the divergent economic realities among the various former Soviet bloc nations. Indeed, the extent to which the former Iron Curtain nations are still in a state of cultural transition, more than 25 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, may be an important negative predictor of the extent to which individual young people are able to actualize their identity choices.

In sum, the articles in this special issue have helped to further the development of identity research in the former Iron Curtain countries. Clearly, more work is needed to compare and contrast the form and function of identity development across these countries and to identify the sources of differences that emerge. Identity interventions, which have only begun to emerge in the West, may be particularly necessary in contexts that are in transition and where contextual stability is largely absent. These interventions may need to target
the societal level as well as targeting individual people – strengthening young people’s ability to make effective choices is likely to be helpful only to the extent that the social and cultural environments are able to support these choices and put them into action. Of course, the structure and components of these interventions have yet to be determined.

It is our hope that identity research in the former Soviet bloc will eventually “catch up” to the literature amassed in North America and Western Europe. The sophisticated research designs and analytic models used in the present articles are quite encouraging. These, and other, signs point to a research community that is coming of age.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


