Self and Identity Formation as Embedded in the Social Context

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Young people do not develop their self and identity in a social vacuum, but in a continuous interactive process involving significant members of their social networks. In this article, we discuss various mechanisms through which interactions in different developmental contexts impact adolescent self and identity formation. Furthermore, we underline that this process is not unidirectional: in fact, the more adolescents achieve a clearer sense of who they are, the more they can exert an active influence in their contexts. In discussing this dynamic process, we will show evidence drawn from longitudinal studies with adolescents. Specifically, we will examine self and identity formation in the family, school, and civic contexts.

Key words: Self, Identity, Family, School, Civic

“No man is an island”
John Donne

Throughout the entire life span, individuals struggle to address core self and identity questions (Erikson, 1950), such as “Who am I?”, “Which is my place in the society?”, “In which (educational, work, religious, political, etc.) commitments do I want to invest?”. There are moments in which these questions become more urgent. This can be due to specific life events, which prompt individuals to question their own identity and rethink about themselves (Kroger & Green, 1996). For instance, this happens when individuals face important life transitions (e.g., the school-to-work transition, the transition to parenthood, the transition to retirement) or when they cope with unexpected events (e.g., the illness or the loss of an important person).

In addition to being triggered by specific transitions and life events, the self and identity questions become particularly relevant in two normative developmental periods: adolescence (Erikson, 1950, 1968) and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2004). In fact, in adolescence (10–18 years) young people experience multiple changes prompted by biological (the experience of puberty; cf. Susman & Dorn, 2009 for a review), cognitive (the acquisition of the formal-abstract reasoning; cf. Lehalle, 2006 for a review), and social (the starting of new interactions with peers and modifications in parent-adolescent relationships, cf. Laursen & Collins, 2009 and Brown & Larson, 2009 for reviews) development. Thus, adolescents are stimulated to reflect about what gives them a sense of continuity, which childhood identifications to maintain, and which to relinquish in favor of new choices. The self and identity work continues to be crucial also in emerging adulthood (19–29 years), when young people can explore different al-

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ternatives in multiple life domains (education, work, love, values, etc.) before making enduring adult choices.

Importantly, self and identity formation does not occur in a social vacuum. In contrast, self-definition is closely embedded in the social context. As emphasized more than one century ago by some of the fathers of psychology, like James (1890) and Cooley (1902), individuals find out who they are interacting with significant others. In this article, we discuss different mechanisms through which interaction with core youth developmental contexts impact self and identity formation. Furthermore, we underline that this process is not unidirectional: in fact, the more adolescents achieve a clearer sense of who they are, the more they can exert an active influence in their contexts. In discussing this dynamic process, we show evidence drawn from longitudinal studies with adolescents. Specifically, we examine self and identity formation in the family, school, and civic contexts.

**From You to Me: Intergenerational Transmission Processes in Families with Adolescents**

The first and most significant interactions start in the family context. The family represents the first micro-system in which individual development occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and has a strong impact on successive experiences with other proximal (e.g., the peer groups, the school contexts) and more distal systems. Thus, to understand self and identity formation is necessary to consider how it develops within the family system.

How parents can support their children and sustain their achievement of a stable identity? First, parents, by communicating who they are, can represent a model for their children and, thus, model their self and identity development by exposing their children to an example of identity certainty. In other words, the more parents have developed themselves a clear sense of identity, the more they can represent a positive model for their children. These considerations are rooted in the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) that emphasizes the centrality of the concept of modeling for understanding the socialization process. Therefore, parents can shape adolescents’ self and identity formation acting as modeling agents (Wiese & Freund, 2011). In fact, parents with self-beliefs that are well-defined might represent for adolescents in search for their identity a more attractive model than parents with less clear self-beliefs.

In line with these considerations, a first major mechanism through which parents can support self and identity formation in their children is represented by *intergenerational transmission processes*. This mechanism was investigated in a longitudinal study in which we sought to examine transmission of self-concept clarity in families with adolescents (Crocetti, Rubini, Branje, Koot, & Meeus, 2016). Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which beliefs about the self are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable over time (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996). A large corpus of evidence has highlighted that self-concept clarity provides a clear indication of self-certainty (cf. Crocetti & van Dijk, 2017, for a review). In fact, it is positively associated to enactment of meaningful identity choices, whereas it is negatively related to identity crises driven by reconsidering and discarding current commitments (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010; Morsünbül, Crocetti, Cok, & Meeus, 2014, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2011). Thus, self-concept clarity might indicate how well the process of developing an own identity is going (Schwartz, Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Meeus, 2012). This importance of self-concept clarity is further highlighted by its
strong connection with a host of indicators of well-being and adjustment (e.g., perception of meaning in life and affect balance, Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001) and its negative association with a cluster of problem behaviors (e.g., anxiety and depression, Schwartz et al., 2012; Smith, Wethington, & Zhan, 1996; Van Dijk, Branje, Keijsers, Hawk, Hale, & Meeus, 2014; body dissatisfaction, Vartanian & Dey, 2013; and eating disturbances, Perry, Silvera, Nei-lands, Rosenvinge, & Hanssen, 2008).

Given this centrality of self-concept clarity for individuals’ adjustment it is important to understand how parents can contribute to adolescents’ development of self-concept clarity. In a longitudinal study with 497 Dutch families including the father, the mother, and their adolescent child (i.e., the ongoing longitudinal RADAR-young project; Research on Adolescent Development and Relationships — younger cohort), we investigated transmission processes of self-concept clarity (Crocetti et al., 2016). More specifically, fathers, mothers, and adolescents reported their own self-concept clarity for six annual assessments, conducted when adolescents were 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 years old. Results of longitudinal analyses (Multivariate Latent Growth Curve Analyses and Cross-Lagged analyses) provided clear support of unidirectional transmission processes. As exemplified in Figure 1, self-concept clarity of fathers and mothers had over time positive effects on self-concept clarity of the adolescents, whereas adolescents’ self-concept clarity did not influence parents’ self-concept clarity. Importantly, the unidirectional influence of fathers’ and mothers’ self-concept clarity on adolescents’ self-concept clarity applied equally to adolescent boys and girls. Furthermore, the size of these effects was comparable for fathers and mothers. So, the pattern of influence in same-sex dyads (i.e., father-son, mother-daughter) was like the pattern of influence in opposite-sex dyads (i.e., father-daughter, mother-son). Overall, this evidence under-

Note. Schematization of results reported by Crocetti et al., 2016

Figure 1. Intergenerational transmission of self-concept clarity in families with adolescents
scores that when adolescent boys and girls can count on parents with high levels of self-certainty they are more likely to increase their self-concept clarity over the course of adolescence.

This is worth noting that this evidence of intergenerational transmission of self-concept clarity is consistent with intergenerational transmission processes occurring in other domains of adolescent development (cf. Meeus, 2016, for a review). For instance, transmissions of cultural orientations and attitudes (Meusen, 2014; Ter Bogt, Raaijmakers, & van Wel, 2005; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001) and conflict resolution styles (Van Doorn, Branje, & Meeus, 2007) are also unidirectional processes, from parents to adolescents, while the reverse paths, from adolescents to parents do not occur. Thus, longitudinal studies clearly document a parental dominance in intergenerational transmission processes. This dominance can be further understood considering the higher stability of self and personality reported by parents. This consideration is based on the principle that systems with a greater degree of stability are more likely to affect systems with a lower degree of stability (Asendorpf & Van Aken, 2003). Thus, adult parents, having a relatively more stable personality than adolescents (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), are more likely to influence them than the other way around. For instance, this has been proved for self-concept clarity: fathers’ and mothers’ self-concept clarity is more stable, or time-invariant, than adolescents’ self-concept clarity (Crocetti et al., 2016). So, the impact of parental self-concept clarity on adolescent self-concept clarity is an example of the impact that time-invariant processes have on more time-varying processes (Meeus, 2016). This means that the system that is more stable is more likely to influence the system that is less stable over time.

In sum, available longitudinal studies clearly show intergenerational transmission processes. Self-concept clarity, as well as attitudes, orientations, and conflict resolution styles (Meeus, 2016) are transmitted from parents to offspring. Thus, parents, by communicating who they are, work as modeling agents for their children and a have a consistent influence on their development.

**Posing the Basis for Reciprocal Processes:**  
**Quality of Family Relationships and Adolescent Identity Formation**

So far, we have discussed how parents can affect adolescent self and identity formation by communicating who they are and referring to intergenerational transmission processes. We can now ask to what extent the quality of parent-adolescent relationships influence children’s identity formation. Theoretically, a process of reciprocal influences has been hypothesized as further detailed below.

The family literature has mainly focused on theorizing how family relationships influence adolescent identity formation. In fact, several theories of parent-adolescent relationships share the principle that parents affect children’s identity formation but differ in their explanatory models. For instance, the separation-individuation theory (Blos, 1958, 1968) emphasizes that separation from parents is a precursor for adolescent identity formation. In contrast, the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) outlines that a secure bond with parents is necessary for exploring identity with confidence and making autonomous choices and decisions while having the opportunity to count on parents for support. Thus, these theories suggest, albeit referring to different mechanisms, that parent-adolescent relationships influence adolescent identity formation.

In addition to this, drawing from Erikson’s (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory, it can be argued that also adolescent identity formation might influence family relationships. Erikson (1968; p. 167)
stated that the "true engagement with others is the result and the test of firm self-definition". This suggests that when adolescents progressively become more certain about their own identity they are likely to improve the quality of their interactions with members of their social network, for instance by establishing more equal and mutual relationships. This is consistent with Erikson's assumption that the optimal resolution of the identity formation task is a precursor of intimate and caring (generative) interpersonal relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Thus, theoretically it is possible to hypothesize that adolescent identity can influence family relationships.

In a longitudinal study with families with adolescents involved in the RADAR project (Crocetti, Branje, Rubini, Koot, & Meeus, 2017), we tested these two competing hypotheses, to examine to what extent it is possible to document reciprocal associations between adolescent identity and family relationships. Specifically, we examined identity considering the three-factor identity model (Crocetti, 2017; Crocetti et al., 2008; Meeus, 2011). In this model, three pivotal identity processes are taken into account to parsimoniously explain identity dynamics. Commitment refers to enduring choices that individuals have made with regard to various developmental domains and to the self-confidence they derive from these choices. In-depth exploration represents the extent to which individuals think actively about the commitments they have enacted (e.g., reflecting on their choices, searching for additional information, talking with others about their commitments). Reconsideration of commitment refers to the comparison of present commitments with possible alternative commitments because the current ones are no longer satisfactory. Thus, by including commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment, this model sought to capture Erikson's (1968) dynamic of identity synthesis versus role confusion. Commitment and in-depth exploration, on the one hand, and reconsideration, on the other hand, are conceptualized as two opposing forces within this dynamic (Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijser, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). Whereas commitment and in-depth exploration imply attempts to develop and maintain a sense of self (i.e., identity coherence or synthesis), reconsideration represents questioning and rethinking this sense of self (identity confusion).

In this study, family relationships were assessed considering multiple indicators of the relationship quality reported directly by adolescents' fathers, mothers, and siblings. Specifically, we operationalized quality of family relationships considering levels of maternal, paternal, and sibling support, negative interaction (the intensity of conflict and antagonism, representing an indicator of interpersonal distance), and power (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). These dimensions tap into different aspects of family relationships and their assessment can help clarifying whether identity formation is intertwined with close and supportive (as emphasized in the attachment theory; Bowlby, 1988) or distancing (as underlined in the separation-individuation perspective; Blos, 1979) family relationships. Importantly, considering both parents and siblings we could test more comprehensively how both inter-generational (with parents) and intra-generational (with siblings) relationships influence adolescent identity.

Results highlighted an interesting pattern of associations consistent over the course of adolescence (from ages 14 to 18) that improve our understanding of the interplay of family relationships and identity formation (Crocetti et al., 2017). First, results of within-time correlations indicated that identity certainty was related to nurturing family relationships. Indeed, at the beginning of the study commitment was negatively related to paternal and maternal neg-
ative interaction, and positively related to sibling support; whereas reconsideration of commitment was negatively related to paternal, maternal, and sibling support. Furthermore, over the course of the study, commitment and in-depth exploration were associated with maternal and paternal negative interaction, respectively; reconsideration was positively linked to maternal and paternal negative interaction, and maternal power. Overall, this evidence is consistent with the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), suggesting that adolescent identity formation is positively correlated with warm and supporting family relationships.

Second, cross-lagged analyses pointed out that family relationships affected identity but also adolescent identity had significant (and even more) effects on family relationships over time (Crocetti et al., 2017). In fact, as schematized in Figure 2, mothers’ levels of support negatively predicted relative changes in adolescents’ reconsideration of commitment over the course of adolescence. This suggest that when adolescents receive less support from their mothers they question more their identity becoming more uncertain about their current commitments. On the other side, we found that adolescents’ commitment had a positive effect on the relationships with both the mother and the sibling, making the relationship with the mother more supportive and less conflictual and the relationship with the sibling more egalitarian. Adolescents’ in-depth exploration improved the relationship with all family members, leading to a more supportive and mutual relationship with the father, a more supportive and less conflictual relationship with the mother, and a more supportive relationship with the sibling. Finally, adolescents’ reconsideration of commitment worsened parent-child relationships, decreasing paternal support. Notably, associations between family relationships and identity were not moderated by adolescent gender, sibling gender similarity, and sibling age, suggesting that results applied equally to gender subgroups and were not affected by sibling characteristics.

Overall, this study suggests that when adolescents are involved in consolidating their sense of identity (commitment and in-depth exploration are at the basis of the identity-maintenance cycle that leads to a sense of identity synthesis; Crocetti, 2017), they improve also their relationships with their parents and siblings. In contrast, when adolescents are engaged in questioning and revising their identity they worsen their relationships with their parents.

This evidence is consistent with Erikson’s (1950, 1968) and Adams and Marshall’s (1996) conceptualizations, according to which identity development can be conceived as a process of person-context transactions. Thus, the mechanisms through which adolescents’ identity foster this improvement in family relationships can be further understood referring to Erikson’s notion that identity fulfills a self-regulatory function (Adams & Marshall, 1996) that poses the basis for intimacy and generativity. Furthermore, this improvement in family relationships prompted by adolescents’ identity can be understood as the way in which parents and siblings respond to the maturation processes of adolescents. In fact, when parents and siblings see the adolescents committed, active in thoughtful exploring their choices, and certain about themselves, they are likely to appreciate their maturation.

In brief, this study pointed to reciprocal effects between identity formation and family relationships in adolescence. Further studies conducted with adolescents (Schwartz, Mason, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2009) as well as with emerging adults (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007) further indicated bidirectional linkages between family relationships and youth identity. Thus, identity formation in young
Figure 2. Associations between identity processes and quality of family relationships

*Note.* Schematization of results reported by Crocetti et al., 2017
people is not unilaterally influenced by family relationships, rather it is a process of reciprocal influences in which adolescents and emerging adults play an active role.

How Good Am I? Academic Results as Feedbacks Reinforcing Adolescent Identity Formation

Until now, we have discussed the importance of parents and family relationships for adolescent self and identity formation. Another relevant micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) important for adolescents is represented by the school context. Adolescents spend a significant amount of time in school and, in this environment, they enact multiple exchanges with peers and adults that are important for their cognitive and social development (Elmore, 2009).

Notably, in the school context adolescents receive continuous feedbacks about their performance and they can compare their results with those of their peers. According to several theories, a positive self-view is dependent on positive feedbacks from the environment to the individual. For instance, the sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) suggests that a positive self-view originates from general positive social interactions with significant others. Applying this framework to identity formation in the academic context, Pop, Negru-Subtirica, Crocetti, Opre, and Meeus (2016) proposed that educational identity might be driven by academic results, which represent feedbacks from the environment indicating to students how well their educational aspirations fit their educational performance. In other words, in the school context, academic achievement represents the meter of students’ success or failure, which might foster or threaten adolescents’ social acceptance and implicitly strengthen or weaken their educational identity (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). At the same time, a strong educational commitment may enhance students’ motivation, which in turn might lead to improvements in academic achievement (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2012).

These hypotheses were tested in a longitudinal study with a large sample of adolescents (N=1,151 adolescents, \(M_{\text{age}}=16.45\)) participating in the research project Transylvania Adolescent Identity Development Study (TRAIDES; Negru-Subtirica, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015). Adolescents from theoretical and vocational schools participated in an intensive three-wave study aimed at unravelling associations between educational identity (studied with the three-factor model, thus considering educational commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment; Crocetti et al., 2008) and academic achievement (operationalized in terms of Grade Point Average, GPA) within one academic year (considering initial exams at the beginning of the two school semesters and final exams at the end of the second school semester).

Importantly, this study unveiled that the way students performed in school (i.e., their GPA) triggered the development of their educational identity (Pop et al., 2016). In fact, as schematized in Figure 3, cross-lagged analyses revealed that high levels of GPA led to high levels of commitment, while low levels of GPA led to high levels of reconsideration of commitment. Thus, the more adolescents experience academic success, the more competent students feel, and the more confidence they gain in their education. Instead, the more they face academic failure, the more students doubt their competence, and lose confidence in their education (Leary, 2005), especially when they make efforts to succeed and instead they fail. Overall, this pattern applied equally to participating adolescents, regardless of gender, age-group, and type of school.

In sum, this evidence suggests that youth iden-
tity can be reinforced or weakened by the continuous feedbacks that adolescents receive by their social contexts. More specifically, applying this general mechanism to the school contexts, we can observe that academic results strongly affect educational identity formation more than the other way around. Thus, being exposed to positive feedbacks foster achievement of a stable identity.

Roots and Benefits of Participation: Civic Engagement and Identity

In this article, we have seen how different contexts influence (and, in some cases, are influenced by) adolescent identity formation. So far, we reviewed longitudinal studies focusing on two relevant micro-contexts represented by family (Crocetti et al., 2016, 2017) and school (Pop et al., 2016) contexts. We can now expand our analysis in order to consider how adolescent identity is intertwined with participation in the civil society.

In several countries around the world, adolescents’ low rates of civic engagement are a matter of concern (e.g., Cicognani, Pirini, Keyes, Johanloo, Rostami, & Nosratabadi, 2008; Jahromi, Crocetti, & Buchanan, 2012) and a growing research is aimed at identifying which factors can promote civic engagement in young people (e.g., Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010). Theoretically, the way in which young people address identity issues is likely to be
related to their civic engagement. In fact, on the one hand, according to Erikson’s (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory, the extent to which individuals successfully resolve this task, achieving a coherent and clear sense of personal continuity and uniqueness, increases the likelihood of facing successfully subsequent developmental tasks. This theoretical background suggests that identity provides individuals with psychosocial resources important for becoming active members of the civil society. In fact, individuals who achieved a clear sense of their identity have enacted a set of ideological commitments that are likely to guide their involvement in the civic realm.

On the other hand, the literature on youth civic engagement (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Levine, 2009) suggests the importance of civic participation for adolescent development and provides theoretical arguments underlining that civic engagement can support identity formation. In fact, community participation can provide adolescents with (a) a sense of industry that entails feelings of self-efficacy derived from exercising one’s agency to engage in activities of societal relevance; (b) contexts for strengthening social relatedness, offering opportunities to interact both with adults and peers pursuing the same goals; and (c) opportunities to reflect on values and ideologies that can guide the performed activities (Yates & Youniss, 1996). In this respect, participating in civic activities creates opportunities for positive identity formation by providing youth with new roles, relations with adult models, career and networking opportunities, and skill building (e.g., Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Civic participation, therefore, can foster identity development, toward achievement of greater identity maturity.

We tested these hypotheses about linkages between identity and civic engagement in a two-wave longitudinal study (Crocetti, Garckija, Gabrielavičiūtė, Vosylis, & Žukauskienė, 2014) with a large sample of adolescents ($N=1,308; M_{age}=16.16$ years) involved in the research project “Mechanisms of promoting positive youth development in the context of socio-economical transformations (POSIDEV),” conducted in North-eastern Lithuania (Žukauskienė, Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, Kaniušonytė, & Crocetti, 2017). Specifically, in this study civic engagement was related to the social-cognitive strategies (identity styles; Berzonsky, 1989, 2011) that individuals adopt in processing, structuring, utilizing, and revising self-relevant information. In the identity style model, Berzonsky (1989) distinguished three identity styles: information-oriented, normative, and diffuse-avoidant. Adolescents with an information-oriented style are self-reflective, they actively seek out and evaluate self-relevant information, and they are likely to define themselves by means of personal attributes, like “my values,” “my goals,” and “my standards” (Berzonsky, 1989). Young people with a normative style tend to enact commitments in a more automatic fashion, adopting prescriptive behaviour and values from significant others and conforming to their expectations, without much exploration of identity alternatives. Furthermore, they mainly define themselves on the basis of collective self-attributes, such as “my family,” “my religion,” and “my ethnicity” (Berzonsky, 2004). Adolescents with a diffuse-avoidant style procrastinate and delay dealing with identity issues for as long as possible, they are not likely to explore identity alternatives or to enact meaningful commitments, and they have a propensity to emphasize contingent social aspects of their self-elements, like “my reputation,” “my popularity,” and “the impression I make on others” (Berzonsky, 2011). These different ways to approach the identity formation task were related to rates of civic engagement (i.e., participation in school self-government activities, volunteering activities, youth political organizations, and youth non-political organizations).
In line with the theoretical background (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1950; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1997), we found reciprocal associations between identity styles and civic engagement (Crocetti et al., 2014; see Figure 4) but identity was a stronger predictor of civic engagement (each identity style predicted changes in later levels of civic engagement) than the other way around (civic engagement predicted changes in subsequent levels of only one out of three identity styles).

More specifically, the information-oriented style was positively related to civic engagement cross-sectionally, but negatively related to it longitudinally. On the contrary, the normative style was unrelated to civic engagement cross-sectionally, while positively related to it longitudinally. These results seem to suggest that adolescents with a preference for an information-oriented style might have more psychological resources that support them in approaching civic engagement but their strong reliance on individual over collective aspects may prevent them from establishing a sense of connection and belongingness, which is an important component of civic participation (Yates & Youniss, 1996). In contrast, adolescents with a normative style might be more driven by external motivations when approaching civic participation (e.g., desire to make a good impression on others) but then they are more likely to appreciate their experience based on their tendency to form and maintain strong social bonds (e.g., Matheis & Adams, 2004). So, adolescents with informational and normative styles can approach civic engagement for different reasons and they can also differ in the motivations that lead them to continue to be involved. In addition to this, the diffuse-avoidant

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\text{Figure 4. Associations between identity styles and civic engagement}
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style was negatively related to changes in rates of civic engagement. Thus, adolescents who delay and postpone identity issues are also less prone to care and become committed in the civic sphere.

Consistent with the literature on social participation (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1997), we found that civic engagement also predicted changes in identity styles one year later. However, the significant effect of civic engagement was limited to the diffuse-avoidant style: higher levels of civic engagement lessened reliance on the diffuse-avoidant style.

Summing up, this evidence indicates that the way in which adolescents address identity issues and questions is also related to their chances of becoming active citizens. In fact, the more adolescents approach actively the identity task, the more they are likely to enlarge their social horizons and their social interests and commitments. In a positive loop, civic engagement stimulates identity work, reducing reliance on a passive diffuse-avoidant identity style. Thus, a positive alliance between the adolescents and their civic contexts has reciprocal beneficial effects, for the adolescent themselves and for the society at large.

Conclusions

We opened this article with a popular quote, “No man is an island”. The longitudinal studies reviewed in this paper confirmed that the continuous interactions that adolescents have within family, school, and civic contexts are an important motor for their self and identity formation. In fact, transmission processes, quality of interpersonal interactions, and social feedbacks received in a variety of contexts affect the ways in which young people develop their own self and identity. At the same time, adolescents are not passive recipients; in contrast, they are also likely to exert their impact in the social context. In fact, the more adolescents develop a clear sense of who they are, the more they achieve a set of psychosocial resources thanks to which they can play an active role. Thus, self and identity formation is embedded in the social context and an important venue for future research is to further unveil mechanisms underpinning these dynamic person-context transactions.

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