



The how and what of identity formation: Associations between identity styles and value orientations

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation evaluated the hypothesis that identity processing styles would be systematically associated with Schwartz's (1992) value orientations. Theoretically predicted relationships were found in a Polish sample ($N = 1078$). An informational identity style was positively associated with values emphasizing independence (openness rather than conservation) in a way that transcended selfish interest, whereas a normative identity style was positively associated with values such as security and tradition (conservation rather than openness). A diffuse-avoidant identity style was positively associated with values that highlighted self-interest such as hedonism and power. None of these relationships was moderated by age or gender. Findings are discussed in terms of the role that values may play in how individuals approach or avoid (re)constructing a sense of identity.

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1. Introduction

Identity formation is one of the major developmental challenges that adolescents and young adults must negotiate (Erikson, 1968). To effectively regulate and govern their lives, individuals need to develop a stable and meaningful identity structure, which enables them to maintain a sense of self-continuity over time and space and which provides a frame of reference for making decisions, problem-solving, and interpreting experience and self-relevant information. Most research on individuals' approach to the identity formation process has focused on *how* individuals explore and define their identity. For instance, Berzonsky's (1990) identity style model addresses stylistic differences in how individuals process identity relevant information and how they approach or evade the task of forming a sense of self-identity. Some individuals, for example, deliberately process and evaluate self-relevant information before forming commitments and defining themselves, whereas others automatically adopt and internalize the normative prescriptions of significant others. The question about *what* values people adopt as a basis for forming their identity has received relatively less attention. For example, do people with an open and deliberate approach to the identity exploration process adopt different values compared to those following normative prescriptions? In one of the

first attempts to fill this gap, the present investigation evaluates the hypothesis that identity styles will be systematically linked with different value orientations (i.e., personal beliefs about how individuals should act and behave). More specifically, we examined relationships between Berzonsky's (1990), Berzonsky's (in press) identity style model and Schwartz's (1992) value theory.

2. Identity processing styles

For more than 40 years most studies of identity formation were based on Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm, identifying four different identity types or outcomes: achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and diffusion. More recently, investigators have begun to focus on the process by which identity is formed rather than individual differences in identity outcomes (e.g., Berzonsky, 1988). In particular, Berzonsky (1990) proposed a process model of identity formation that focused on differences in the social-cognitive processes and strategies individuals use to engage or avoid the tasks of constructing, maintaining, and/or reconstructing a sense of identity: Three different social-cognitive identity processing styles are postulated within this model: Informational, normative, and diffuse-avoidant.

Individuals with an informational style deliberately search out, process, and evaluate self-relevant information before resolving identity conflicts and forming commitments. They are self-reflective, skeptical about their self-views, interested in

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learning new things about themselves, and willing to evaluate and modify their identity structure in light of dissonant feedback. Research indicates that an informational style is associated with self-insight, open-mindedness, problem-focused coping strategies, vigilant decision making, cognitive complexity, emotional autonomy, empathy, adaptive self-regulation, high commitment levels, and an achieved identity status (Berzonsky, *in press*). Individuals with high informational scores tend to define themselves in terms of personal attributes such as personal values, goals, and standards (Berzonsky, 1994; Berzonsky, Macek, & Nurmi, 2003; Lutwak, Ferrari, & Cheek, 1998).

Individuals with a normative style more automatically adopt and internalize the goals and standards of significant others and referent groups. A normative style is associated with high commitment levels, self-control, and a sense of purpose but also a need for structure and cognitive closure, authoritarianism, inflexibility, a foreclosed identity status and low tolerance for ambiguity (Duriez & Soenens, 2006; Soenens, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005). Individuals with high normative scores tend to define themselves in terms of collective self-attributes such as religion, family, and nationality (Berzonsky, 1994; Berzonsky et al., 2003; Lutwak et al., 1998).

Individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style procrastinate and attempt to defer facing identity conflicts and problems as long as possible. When they have to act or make choices, their behavior is driven primarily by immediate external demands and consequences. Such situational accommodations, however, tend to be short-term acts of compliance rather than long-term modifications in their sense of self-identity (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009). According to Berzonsky's model, diffuse-avoidance is more than a fragmented or confused self; it involves strategic attempts to evade or obscure potentially negative self-relevant feedback. A diffuse-avoidant style is associated with weak commitments, an external locus of control, impulsiveness, self-handicapping, and a diffusion identity status (Berzonsky, *in press*; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009). Individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style tend to define themselves in terms of social attributes such as reputation and popularity (Berzonsky, 1994; Berzonsky et al., 2003).

3. Value orientations and identity processing style

Schwartz (1992) defines a value as a transsituational goal varying in importance as a guiding principle in life, and developed a theory about the internal structure of the value domain. Ten different value types, each characterized by their own motivational goal, were identified: Stimulation (leading an exciting and daring life), Self-Direction (being independent, free, and curious), Universalism (being broadminded and displaying concern about social justice and the welfare of humankind), Benevolence (being helpful, responsible, and honest), Tradition (accepting customs and ideals, showing respect, commitment, and devotion), Conformity (upholding social norms, being self-disciplined, polite, and obedient), Security (valuing family and national security, order, and safety), Power (pursuing wealth, social status, and authority), Achievement (being ambitious, successful, and influential), and Hedonism (focusing on personal pleasure and gratification and self-indulgence).

Based on the compatibilities and conflicts between their respective motivational goals, Schwartz (1992) proposed that these personal values are organized in terms of two bipolar dimensions. One dimension, Self-enhancement versus Self-transcendence, opposes values emphasizing individual accomplishment and control (Achievement & Power) to values promoting the welfare and well-being of both close and distant others (Benevolence & Universalism). The second dimension, Openness to Change versus Conservation, opposes values referring to novelty and personal autonomy (Stimulation & Self-direction) to values leading to

stability, certainty, and social order (Tradition, Conformity, & Security). Hedonism does not play a distinctive role in this two-dimensional space because it is related to both Self-enhancement and Openness to Change (Schwartz, 1992). A review of research involving 97 samples from 44 countries by Schwartz (1994) revealed that the Openness (Self-direction + Achievement) – Conservation (Tradition + Security + Conformity) dimension emerged in 99% of the samples and Self-Enhancement (Achievement + Power) – Self-Transcendence (Universalism + Benevolence) was found in 97%.

Although both identity styles and value orientations involve cognitive processes and reflect characteristic ways of acting, value orientations are beliefs about how individuals *should behave*, whereas identity styles are strategic approaches to *how* individuals solve problems, resolve conflicts, and process and evaluate self-relevant information. That is to say, value orientations are guiding principles about *what* one should strive for, identity styles reflect *how* they go about attempting to accomplish those goals and desired end-states. The present investigation sought to examine relationships between identity styles and the higher-order value dimensions as well as the value scores that the dimensions comprise. This analytic strategy provides both a detailed and summarizing picture of the associations. In addition, the higher-order dimensions tend to be more reliable than the individual scales and allow for a more parsimonious description (Verkasalo, Lönnqvist, Lipsanen, & Kelkama, 2009).

Given that research indicates that individuals with an informational style are rational, self-reflective, empathic, and open to alternative ideas and values (see above), we hypothesized that an informational style would be related negatively to Self-enhancement (versus Self-transcendence) and positively to Openness to Change (versus Conservation). Research indicates that individuals with a normative style are self-disciplined, conscientious, and hold firm commitments and life goals but at the same time tend to adhere in a rigid, inflexible, and authoritarian fashion to traditional views, thereby stressing the importance of family, religion, community, and pride in their country (see above). Consequently, we hypothesized that a normative style would be negatively related to Openness to Change (versus Conservation). Finally, inasmuch as research demonstrates that individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style are self-centered, impulsive, present-oriented, externally controlled, and that they operate in a situation-specific fashion, defining themselves in terms of social considerations such as popularity, reactions of others, and reputation (see above), we expected a diffuse-avoidant style to be positively related to Hedonism.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were 1078 students and adults (51% females) from different areas of Poland. The sample was comprised of 234 middle adolescents attending secondary school (Mean age = 17.2, SD = 0.82), 506 late adolescents attending college or university (Mean age = 21, SD = 1.5), and 338 early adults who were employed (Mean age = 26.4, SD = 2.0). Participation was voluntary, no compensation for participating was provided, and anonymity was guaranteed. Student participants completed the measures within their classrooms. Early adults were contacted and recruited by trained psychology students who had volunteered to assist with the study. Student assistants distributed the measures to the adults, who completed them at home and returned them to the assistants the next day.

4.2. Measures and procedure

Identity styles were assessed with a Polish translation (Senejko, 2007) of the Identity Style Inventory (ISI-3; Berzonsky, *in press*).

On a 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*) Likert scale, participants rated the extent to which they considered 30 statements to be self-descriptive. The ISI comprises three continuous style scales: (1) an *Informational-Style* scale (11 items; e.g., “I have spent a great deal of time thinking seriously about what I should do with my life”; $\alpha = .64$); (2) a *Normative-Style* scale (nine items, e.g., “I prefer to deal with situations where I can rely on social norms and standards”; $\alpha = .62$); and (3) a *Diffuse-Avoidant-Style* scale (10 items; e.g., “I’m not really thinking about my future now; it’s still a long way off”; $\alpha = .73$).

Value orientations were measured with a Polish adaptation (Cieciuch & Zaleski, submitted for publication) of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2001), which contains 40 brief two-sentence descriptions of people. Participants were asked to rate on a 1 (*not at all like me*) to 6 (*very much like me*) Likert scale the extent to which the description in each statement applied to themselves. Cronbach alphas were .70 for Power, .72 for Achievement, .80 for Hedonism, .63 for Stimulation, .65 for Self-Direction, .75 for Universalism, .64 for Benevolence, .61 for Tradition, .58 for Conformity, and .59 for Security. To adjust for social desirability and systematic response sets, individual value scores were ipsatized by centering them on the mean of the value scales.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to evaluate the higher-order structure of the PVQ. Individual items were used as indicators of Schwartz’s (1992) 10 first-order latent factors, which were then used as indicators of the two higher-order latent factors (i.e., Self-enhancement versus Self-Transcendence and Openness versus Conservation). Because the position of Hedonism in Schwartz’s two-dimensional space is somewhat unclear, we estimated models with and without Hedonism. In the model with Hedonism, Power, Achievement, Benevolence, and Universalism were used as indicators of the Self-Enhancement versus Self-Transcendence dimension and Stimulation, Self-Direction, Tradition, Conformity, and Security were used as indicators of the Openness versus Conservation dimension. Hedonism was allowed to load on both second-order latent factors. A method factor to model acquiescence, with the unstandardized loading of each value fixed to 1, was included. Because of partial non-normality of a number of indicators, we used the asymptotic covariance matrix and inspected the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square (SBS – χ^2 : Satorra & Bentler, 1994). Following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to examine model fit.

Even though the model with Hedonism yielded an acceptable fit (SBS – $\chi^2(725) = 3778.44$; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .06), the loading of Hedonism on the Self-enhancement versus Self-Transcendence dimension was only .18 ($p < .01$). A model without Hedonism also had an acceptable fit (SBS – $\chi^2(616) = 3224.12$; SRMR = .07; RMSEA = .06) and all latent value factors had substantial loadings on the two second-order dimensions, ranging from .43 to .87 (mean loading = .63). Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC), a fit index used to compare non-nested models, indicated a better fit for the model without Hedonism (AIC = 3860.02) than the one with Hedonism (AIC = 4516.06). Consequently, Hedonism was not included in the calculation of the higher-order scores, which were calculated by summing the scores of the value scales that loaded on each bipolar dimension.

5. Results

Correlations between the identity style and the value variables are presented in Table 1. Because of the large sample size, an alpha level of .01 was used to minimize designating small effects as being significant. An informational style related positively to

Universalism and Benevolence and negatively to Power, Hedonism, and the Self-Enhancement – Self-Transcendence value dimension. A normative style related positively to Tradition, Conformity, and Security and negatively to Power, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction and both the Openness – Conservation and Self-Enhancement – Self-Transcendence dimensions. Diffuse-avoidance was related positively to Hedonism, Power, and Self-Enhancement – Self-Transcendence and negatively to Self-Direction, Universalism, and Benevolence. Ancillary partial correlation analyses controlling for sex and age, indicated that the magnitude of the correlations between the identity styles and the value priorities were generally unchanged (the largest difference in the magnitude of the bivariate and partial correlations was .03 and the significance level was virtually always the same).

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the summed scale scores on the bipolar value dimensions and identity styles (Table 2). Because Hedonism was not included in either of the two bipolar dimensions, it was also regressed on the styles to evaluate its hypothesized association with the diffuse-avoidant style. Sex coded as a dummy variable (Male = 1, Female = 2) and age were entered as control variables on step 1. The three identity styles were entered on Step 2. Sex \times Style and Age \times Style interaction terms were computed and entered on Step 3. The interactions did not account for significant variation in the values scores in any of the regression models and are not presented in Table 2.

Both the informational and normative styles accounted for significant variation in the Openness to Change versus Conservation dimension. As predicted, individuals with high normative scores endorsed values emphasizing Conservation, whereas individuals with high informational scores emphasized Openness to Change values. The informational style also significantly predicted the Self-enhancement versus Self-transcendence dimension. As hypothesized, individuals with high informational scores emphasized Self-transcendence values. All three styles uniquely predicted Hedonistic values. Whereas the association with diffuse-avoidance was positive, both the informational and normative styles were negatively associated with Hedonism.

6. Discussion

Although considerable research has focused either on *how* individuals explore options and alternatives in an effort to form a sense of identity or on *what* type of values people adopt, this is one of the first efforts to address the question about how style and values relate to each other. Historically, religious and other institutional traditions have served as the basis for defining good character, providing people with a standard to define their identity (Baumeister, 1987). As social and cultural conditions have rapidly changed and the legitimacy of institutional values has been questioned, the need to personally resolve identity crises and achieve an individualized sense of identity has come to be seen as a necessary prerequisite for adult development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966).

A substantial research literature indicates that individuals who process self-relevant information and approach identity conflicts and decisions in an informed, rational fashion are more effective on a number of social, personal, and cognitive dimensions than their counterparts who more automatically identify with the normative expectations of significant others or who characteristically procrastinate and strive to avoid making identity decisions (Berzonsky, *in press*). However, although an informational identity style is associated with skills and resources that would enable them to effectively accomplish the goals and aspirations they commit to (e.g., internal control, empathy, independence of judgment, resilience, autonomy, cognitive complexity, self-reflection, and

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients, and correlations among all variables in analyses.

Variables	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
1	Info	3.31	.52	.64														
2	Norm	3.36	.58	.62	.36**													
3	Diff	2.71	.66	.73	-.25**	-.13**												
4	CO	-.28	.77	.58	-.03	.23**	.03											
5	TR	-.54	.86	.61	-.01	.25**	.05	.41**										
6	BE	.45	.67	.64	.17**	.07	-.12**	-.01	.13**									
7	UN	.24	.65	.75	.22**	.09**	-.17**	.07	.16**	.32**								
8	SD	.50	.69	.65	.11**	-.17**	-.17**	-.42**	-.43**	-.07	-.13**							
9	ST	.13	.87	.63	-.07	-.21**	.07	-.42**	-.35**	-.16**	-.37**	.23**						
10	HE	.02	1.08	.80	-.25**	-.26**	.21**	-.40**	-.39**	-.20**	-.44**	.07	.41**					
11	AC	.09	.78	.72	-.06	-.07	.00	-.32**	-.47**	-.33**	-.46**	.15**	.18**	.18**				
12	PO	-.82	1.07	.70	-.20**	-.20**	.15**	-.28**	-.40**	-.47**	-.53**	.11**	.20**	.29**	.45**			
13	SC	-.06	.66	.59	.09**	.19**	-.05	.23**	.15**	-.15**	.11**	-.29**	-.42**	-.36**	-.23**	-.24**		
14	OP–CO	1.50	2.64	.71	.00	-.31**	-.03	-.73**	-.71**	-.07	-.25**	.67**	.73**	.49**	.40**	.37**	-.58**	
15	SE–ST	-1.42	2.43	.76	-.21**	-.16**	.14**	-.24**	-.41**	-.67**	-.74**	.15**	.29**	.36**	.74**	.86**	-.17**	.38**

Note: Info = Informational style; Norm = Normative style; Diff = Diffuse-avoidant style; CO = Conformity; TR = Tradition; BE = Benevolence; UN = Universalism; SD = Self-direction; ST = Stimulation; HE = Hedonism; AC = Achievement; PO = Power; SC = Security; OP–CO = Openness versus Conservation; SE–ST = Self-enhancement versus Self-transcendence. All value scales were centered.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression of Openness to Change versus Conservation and Self-Enhancement versus Self-Transcendence Value Dimensions and Hedonism on Identity Style.

Predictor variables	Openness to Change versus Conservation		Self-Enhancement versus Self-Transcendence		Hedonism	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Sex	.06	.04	.20**	.18**	.08	.04
Age	-.05	-.05	-.06	-.04	-.15**	-.11**
Informational style		.11**		-.16**		-.13**
Normative style		-.35**		-.07		-.18**
Diffuse-avoidant style		-.06		.07		.14**
ΔR^2	.00	.11**	.05**	.05**	.03**	.10**

** $p < .01$.

problem-focused coping; see Berzonsky, in press), these resources do not provide a basis for deciding what goals they should strive to achieve or what commitments they should form. The present results indicate that an informational style relates to values that emphasize independence and autonomy (being open to change rather than conservational) but in a way that transcends personal interest (self-transcendent rather than self-enhancing). This begs the question about why individuals with an informational style would deal with identity issues and guide their lives in terms of a universal perspective.

According to Erikson's (1968) life-span theory of psychosocial development, identity formation is prerequisite to the development of a sense of ego integrity later in adulthood. Ego integrity, according to Erikson, requires people to be self-directed and to take responsibility for their own actions and lives. Integrity also involves an understanding of the predicament that all human beings face and an appreciation of the diversity of ways in which human beings have found meaning in their lives (Erikson, 1968). Some have equated Eriksonian integrity with wisdom (e.g., Clayton, 1975): The application of reason and knowledge for the common good as indicated by values that transcend personal, social, or institutional interests (Sternberg, 2004).

Informed, rational information processing and decision making does not ensure that someone will be wise. But it seems reasonable to postulate that informed reasoning plays a role in wisdom. Research indicates that individuals with an informational identity style assume they play a role in constructing and interpreting information and that the credibility of their views and beliefs depends on the frame of reference they adopt. They also attempt to take into account different perspectives others may have and the alternative positions and views they may offer (Berzonsky, in

press). Consistent with our findings and this line of research, Beaumont (2009) found that two aspects of wisdom, self-actualization and self-transcendence, mediated the relationship between an informational style and meaning in life.

Also as predicted, a normative style was positively related to values emphasizing stability, tradition, obligation, order, and security (conservational rather than open to change). This is consistent with previous research that individuals with a normative identity style are strongly committed, conscientious, and self-disciplined but in a rigid, unwavering fashion, with a high need for structure, cognitive closure, and authoritarian control. Relatively automatic adherence to institutional values appears to be adaptive in that a normative style is associated with effective resources and characteristics including: self-regulation, firm life and career goals, positive peer relations and educational engagement (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005); positive self-worth and well-being (Phillips & Pittman, 2007); and emotional intelligence (Seaton & Beaumont, 2008). On the other hand, a normative style is associated with right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance, prejudice and homophobia (Duriez & Soenens, 2006; Duriez, Soenens, & Beyers, 2004). Within familiar, well-structured settings and groups, normative individuals appear to be relatively effective and well-adjusted. At the same time, the value they place on tradition and predictability and their resistance to change suggests that their racist and homophobic attitudes and right-wing authoritarian views (Duriez & Soenens, 2006) may stem from perceived threats to the institutions anchoring their lives.

In line with the view that diffuse-avoidance reflects a self-serving, present-oriented approach to identity issues (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009), individuals with high diffuse-avoidant scores endorsed hedonistic values that highlight personal gratification and

pleasure. A burgeoning body of literature indicates that individuals with a diffuse-avoidant style engage in self-serving problem behaviors such as conduct disorders, delinquency, illegal drug use, and alcohol abuse (see Berzonsky, in press; Berzonsky & Ferrari, 2009 for reviews).

Identity formation does not occur in the abstract, it always takes place in context. The present study was conducted in Poland, a country undergoing a transition from being a relatively closed, institutionalized society where values were dictated by authoritarian political and religious systems to a more open, secularized society where individuals are free to adopt more personalized values. Whether the same pattern of relationships would be found in other countries, especially ones with a long history of individual freedom, is a question that needs to be investigated.

Limitations of the present study include the moderate internal validity of some of the scales, which may have attenuated some of the relationships. Reliance on self-reports to measure both values and identity style is another concern: the observed associations may have been influenced by shared methods variance. Multiple informants would be one way to address this issue in future research. The present investigation was framed in terms of Berzonsky's (1993) model of identity that postulates that values influence how individuals engage the process of forming their identity and provide the standards against which those efforts are evaluated. Of course, identity formation is a dynamic, ongoing process in which the process of forming commitments may provide new information and feedback that, in turn, may lead to changes in value priorities. Because all the data in the present study were collected concurrently there was no empirical basis for drawing conclusions about the direction of the relationships. Longitudinal data would provide a basis for evaluating relationships between changes in identity styles and value orientations over time.

In conclusion, the present results indicate that *how* individuals deal with identity conflicts was related to the values that motivate and direct their lives. An informed, rational approach to identity issues was associated with values that highlight being independent and self-governing in a manner that transcends personal pleasure and self-indulgence. A normative, conforming approach to identity issues was associated with values that emphasized conformity and institutional commitment and responsibility. A procrastinating, avoidant approach to identity conflicts was associated with values that accentuate self-interest and personal pleasure. These findings and the cross-cultural generality of research on values (Schwartz, 1994) suggest that value orientations and the role they play in identity development may be a fruitful topic for identity researchers to investigate.

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