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Personal Goals and Identity of Czech University Students

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Lucia Kvasková¹ , Jan Širůček¹, Stanislav Ježek¹, Lucie Hrubá^{1,2}, Lenka Lacinová¹, and Petr Macek¹

Abstract

This study aimed to examine personal goal setting and identity processes in Czech university students. A total of 1,347 Czech emerging adults completed the questionnaires on goal setting, identity commitment, and identity exploration in various life domains (romantic relationship, education, and work). First, our study showed that in our sample, goals related to education were the most prominent. Second, higher identity commitment or exploration in one domain predicted setting the goal in the same domain, supporting the notion of the interrelatedness of identity formation and goal pursuit. Additionally, those who set work-related goals reported fewer goals associated with romantic partnership, marriage, and family, suggesting individual differences in goal preferences. Our study adds to the knowledge of European emerging adults' identity processes and goal selection processes. Furthermore, our findings stress the holistic approach when investigating personal goals.

Keywords

personal goals, identity classes, emerging adults, work, romantic partner, parents

The concept of personal goals has a long history in psychology. It has been conceptualized in various ways in the literature, for example, such as personal projects (Little, 1983), life tasks (Cantor et al., 1987), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), or developmental goals and projects (Heckhausen, 1999). Despite the different terminologies, all these constructs refer to personal goals, which are based on individuals' motives (Stuchlikova & Mazehoova, 2014). They can also be conceived of as future-oriented representations of what individuals strive to achieve in various life domains (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Karniol & Ross, 1996). As such, they simultaneously reflect the personality of an individual and the features of his or her culturally defined life contexts (Cantor et al., 1991; Little, 1983). According to the life span theory, individuals of different ages experience different development environments based on their age (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Nurmi, 1991; Salmela-Aro, 2009). Moreover, they typically select and adjust their personal goals according to the developmental tasks and transitions of their age group (e.g., Havighurst, 1948; Heckhausen et al., 2010; Salmela-Aro, 2009).

In emerging adulthood, individuals face more transitions than they do at any other stage of life (Arnett, 2014). These include transitioning from education to work, starting a career, initiating an intimate relationship, and starting a family (Arnett, 2014). Indeed, worldwide studies have shown that young people in the third decade of their lives are formulating and simultaneously

committing to the personal goals related to career and romantic relationships (e.g., Bangerter et al., 2001; Dietrich et al., 2013; Lietz et al., 2016; Martinen & Salmela-Aro, 2012; Turner et al., 2014).

The study described here recruited Czech emerging adults whose lifestyles do not differ substantially from the lives of their peers in other Western and Central European countries (Arnett, 2006; Macek et al., 2007). In the domain of school and career, easily recognizable tendencies define emerging adulthood. At ages 18–24, about 60% of Czechs are still in some form of formal studies (Česky statistický úřad [ČSÚ], 2014), and each year, the number of college students increases. In this context, the average age of first marriage, and the first childbirth, increased in the last decades. The average age of individuals' first marriage is now 28 years for women and 31 years for men (ČSÚ, 2014). However, at ages 20–24, 21% of young Czechs live in a partnership; at ages 25–29, this is 52% (Kohoutová & Nývlt, 2014). Considering the similarities in

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developmental tasks and transitions between Czech emerging adults and their peers from other European and American countries, we presume that the most prominent personal goals are related to education and romantic partnership in Czech emerging adults.

Some studies have tried to determine whether love or work is more important for young people (e.g., Salmela-Aro et al., 2007; Seiffge-Krenke & Luyckx, 2013). Thus, our first research question was, Do Czech emerging adults prioritize goals related to education or goals related to romantic relationships?

Identity formation is closely related to goal pursuit. Following the identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1993), we consider identity as a developmental process of commitment formation following exploration while we refer to the identity commitment, like personal goals, as the person's values in different domains of life (Kunnen et al., 2008). Since emerging adults find themselves in changing contexts, they continuously reflect on their chosen goals, and their commitment to specific goals can change (Luyckx et al., 2008). As such, the process of constructing personal goals and plans to realize them can also be seen as a mean of identity construction (Marttinen et al., 2016). Thus, during the transitions, the formulation of and the commitment to realistic goals can be indicators of successful adaptation during the life span development (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). For example, emerging adults who are highly committed to love and work scored highest on psychosocial and health correlates such as life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and work stress, among others (Luyckx et al., 2014).

However, individuals differ in goal hierarchies and the strength of their commitment and exploration in various life domains (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2014; Marttinen et al., 2016; Ranta et al., 2014). More concretely, emerging adults can identify with one life domain (work, education, or romantic relationship) or multiple life domains simultaneously (Kunnen et al., 2008; Ranta et al., 2014). For example, in the study of Ranta et al. (2014), different goal profiles have been recognized concerning emerging adults' goal hierarchies (career and romantic relationship). Similarly, Luyckx et al. (2014) examined emerging adults' identity configurations across two domains—love and work. They found that whereas some configurations were characterized by firm commitments in one or both domains, other configurations consisted of individuals scoring low on commitment and high on exploration and rumination (Luyckx et al., 2014). These findings support the notion that goals setting and identity formation are closely related and that individuals differ in their focus on one or more life domains (Luyckx et al., 2008; Marttinen et al., 2016).

Hence, our second research question was: To what extent are identity commitments and exploration in a particular life domain (work, education, and romantic relationship) related to emerging adults' personal goals either within or outside of that life domain?

Additionally, our third research question was: Is setting the personal goals in one life domain related to setting the personal goal in another life domain?

Method

Participants and Procedure

We utilized the data from a 5-year longitudinal panel study Pathways into adulthood conducted in the Czech Republic during the 2012–2016 period. The primary purpose of this project was to examine how emerging adults develop autonomy and identity associated with their relationships, education, and work (for more information on data collection and sample, see Umemura, Lacinová, & Macek, 2015). The data on different relevant topics were collected at three time points over 1 year. In this study, we analyzed the cross-sectional data collected over four periods (March 2013, July 2013, December 2013, and March 2014). All questionnaires were administered online. For the study, only university students born between 1987 and 1995 were selected from the total sample. This study included 1,347 young people with the mean age of 21.49 years ($SD = 1.32$). This sample was overrepresented by females (77.1%).

Measures

Strength and content of the exploration and commitments. We used a Czech version of the Groningen Identity Development Scale (Konečná et al., 2010) to assess the strength and content of the exploration and commitment. This scale was originally developed by Bosma (1985) and later adapted to Czech by Konečná et al. (2010). The modified scale comprises 11 items, with 7 items measuring commitment and 4 items measuring exploration. The strength of commitment was measured by items such as, “Does this... (commitment)... give you the feeling that you know what to do with your life?” The exploration level was measured by item, “Do you talk with others about... (exploration)?” Emerging adults' exploration and commitment were assessed in the following domains: current studies, current work, romantic relationships, and relationships with parents. The responses were measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree/never*) to 4 (*completely agree/often*). The commitment scales had α scores between .75 and .90 across domains. The exploration scales had α scores between .60 and .70 across domains.

Personal Goals

The participants were asked to list up to three current personal goals in response to the following instruction based on a revised version of Little's idiographic Personal Project Analysis inventory (Little et al., 2007; Salmela-Aro, 2001):

People have many kinds of issues and goals they think about, hope for, and try to accomplish. Consider the personal projects you have in your life at the moment. These projects may be related to any life domain, such as education, work, family, or self-related issues.

Two independent assessors categorized the goals to match identity domains. Those categories included education (e.g., “get accepted to dream university,” “successfully finishing the studies”); work (“to find a job” and “change the job”); and

Table 1. Distribution of Czech University Students Across Goal Categories.

Goal Categories	%	N
Education	81.6	1,099
Work	50.8	684
Romantic relationship, marriage, and parenthood	49.4	665

Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Setting Goal Related to Romantic Partnership, Marriage, and Parenthood Based on Commitment and Exploration in Domains of Romantic Partnership, Study, and Work.

Variables	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
E-RR	0.13	0.18	0.55	1	.46	1.14	0.81	1.61
C-RR	0.58	0.25	5.41	1	.02	1.79	1.10	2.94
E-S	-0.28	0.24	1.30	1	.25	0.76	0.47	1.22
C-S	0.39	0.21	3.27	1	.07	1.47	0.97	2.25
E-W	0.05	0.21	0.07	1	.80	1.06	0.69	1.61
C-W	0.10	0.16	0.38	1	.54	1.10	0.81	1.50
Constant	-3.07	1.20	6.54	1	.01	0.05		

Note. E = exploration; C = commitment; RR = romantic relationship; S = current study; W = current work; P = parents; df = degrees of freedom; CI = confidence interval.

romantic relationship, marriage, and parenthood (“to find a romantic partner,” “to improve romantic relationship,” “get married,” and “have children”). The κ was between .74 and .82. The content of each goal category was coded on a dichotomous scale for further analyses: 0 = no goals mentioned in this category and 1 = at least one goal mentioned in this category.

Results

Do Czech Emerging Adults Prioritize Goals Related to Education or Goals Related to Romantic Relationships?

Table 1 depicts the distribution in goal categories. The most prominent goal category was education, mentioned by 81.6% of emerging adults. The goals related to work and to the romantic relationship, marriage, and parenthood were mentioned by approximately half of the respondents.

To What Extent Are Identity Commitments and Exploration in a Particular Life Domain (Work, Education, and Romantic Relationship) Related to Emerging Adults’ Personal Goals Either Within or Outside of That Life Domain?

Binominal logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of commitment and exploration in domains of work, study, and romantic relationship, marriage, and parenthood on the likelihood that participants’ set goals related to each

Table 3. Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Setting Goal Related to Work Based on Commitment and Exploration in Domains of Romantic Partnership, Study, and Work.

Variables	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
E-RR	0.16	0.18	0.86	1	.35	1.18	0.83	1.67
C-RR	0.050	0.25	0.04	1	.84	1.05	0.65	1.71
E-S	-0.40	0.24	2.73	1	.10	0.67	0.42	1.078
C-S	0.51	0.22	5.57	1	.02	1.66	1.10	2.54
E-W	0.25	0.21	1.37	1	.24	1.29	0.84	1.96
C-W	0.01	0.16	0.10	1	.93	1.01	0.75	1.38
Constant	-1.62	1.18	1.83	1	.17	0.20		

Note. E = exploration; C = commitment; RR = romantic relationship; S = current study; W = current work; P = parents; df = degrees of freedom; CI = confidence interval.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting the Likelihood of Setting Educational Goals Based on Commitment and Exploration in Domains of the Romantic Partnership, Study, and Work.

Variables	B	SE	Wald	df	p	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio	
							Lower	Upper
E-RR	-0.41	0.26	2.51	1	.11	0.66	0.40	1.10
C-RR	.17	0.36	0.22	1	.64	1.18	0.59	2.37
E-S	.66	0.33	3.98	1	.04	1.93	1.01	3.69
C-S	.52	0.29	3.35	1	.07	1.69	0.96	2.96
E-W	-.65	0.32	4.28	1	.04	0.52	0.28	0.97
C-W	.18	0.22	0.67	1	.41	1.20	0.78	1.85
Constant	.03	1.62	0.00	1	.99	1.03		

Note. E = exploration; C = commitment; RR = romantic relationship; S = current study; W = current work; P = parents; df = degrees of freedom; CI = confidence interval.

of these domains. Our results showed that a higher commitment to romantic partnership is associated with an increased likelihood of setting a goal related to a romantic relationship, marriage, and family (see Table 2). Additionally, a higher educational commitment was related to an increased likelihood of setting a work goal (see Table 3). Further, logistic regression revealed that those who scored higher on work and study exploration are more likely to formulate educational goals (see Table 4).

Is Setting the Personal Goals in One Life Domain Related to Setting the Personal Goal in Another Life Domain?

Additionally, we tested how setting the goal in one life domain relates to setting the goal in another life domain. Those who set the goal related to work were significantly less likely to set goals related to romantic partnership, marriage, and family, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,347) = 28.901, p < .001$ (see Table 5). More concretely, those who set the goal related to work mentioned the

Table 5. Crosstabulation of Setting a Goal Related to Work and Setting a Goal Related to Romantic Partnership, Marriage, and Parenthood.

Goal Related to Work	Goal Related to Romantic Partnership, Marriage, and Parenthood	
	No	Yes
No	385 (5.4)	273 (−5.4)
Yes	297 (−5.4)	387 (5.4)

Note. Adjusted residuals appear in parentheses below observed frequencies.

goals related to romantic partnership, marriage, and family less often (adjusted residuals = −5.4). However, those who set goals related to work were no more or less likely to set the goal related to education, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,347) = 2.816, p = .093$. Additionally, those who set the goal related to education did not differ in setting the goal related to romantic partnership, marriage, and parenthood, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,347) = 0.041, p = .840$.

Discussion

Our study aimed to investigate the formulation of personal goals and identity processes in Czech university students. First, our results showed that goals related to education were the most prominent, suggesting that young people emphasize educational goals more than they do goals related to romantic partnership and starting a family (e.g., Salmela-Aro et al., 2007). However, considering the average age of our sample (22 years) and the average age when Czech people enter the first marriage (28 years for women and 31 years for men), our results are in line with the notion that individuals' personal goals depend on developmental tasks of their age-group in the particular cultural environment (Cantor et al., 1991; Heckhausen et al., 2010; Salmela-Aro, 2009).

Second, we proposed that identity formation is closely related to goal pursuit (Luyckx et al., 2008; Marttinen et al., 2016). Our results indeed showed the interrelatedness of identity commitment or identity exploration in a particular domain with personal goal setting in a corresponding domain. More concretely, a higher commitment to the romantic partnership was associated with an increased likelihood of setting a goal related to romantic partnership, marriage, and family. On the other hand, emerging adults who scored higher on educational commitment were more likely to set work goals. Additionally, setting educational goals was connected to a more in-depth exploration of study and work domains. These findings support the notion that emerging adulthood is a period of career preparation during which young people often combine school and work. It is known that university students usually have part-time jobs to support themselves financially, even though these jobs are not directly relevant to their future career plans (Arnett, 2014). In such a case, evaluating the fit of current work may lead young people to strive for an educational goal that would enable them to work in a more suitable job.

Finally, individuals differ in goal hierarchies and identity profiles (e.g., Marttinen et al., 2016; Ranta et al., 2014). In our study, those who set the goal related to work were less likely to mention goals connected with romantic partnership, marriage, and family. Following other studies (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002; Ranta et al., 2014), we suggest that goal preference depends upon current life situation (e.g., romantic partnership status and satisfaction). For example, those who focus on a career may not be in a satisfying relationship. Unfortunately, one study limitation was that our data did not allow us to consider the current life situation of the participants in such details.

Our findings showed that Czech emerging adults set educational goals related primarily to their current developmental transition. By showing that higher commitment or exploration in one domain predicted setting the goal in the same domain, our study demonstrated that goal pursuit and identity formation are indeed related. Additionally, our results suggest that individuals differ in goal hierarchies and the strength of their commitment to and exploration of various life domains, as some focus more on partnership and some on a career. However, our findings need further investigation with a more representative sample.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Open Practices

Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered.

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