

# Perceived career parental support and identity development: a study on adolescents

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*Abstract.* Identity development is a lifelong process that goes through a particularly important phase in adolescence; during this period young people are engaged in the identity development process and are committed to making important choices for their future. Parents can act as a support in making sure that these choices are made in line with their own interests and identity, thus contributing to the general development of identity. In this study, we wanted to analyze how career support from parents is related to the development of identity and if it could be a mediator between commitment and exploration in depth. The sample consists of 250 students aged between 12 and 17 years ( $M = 14.02$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) and the measures used are: Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) and Parental career-related behaviors questionnaire (PCB). Research findings with implications for practice will be discussed.

*Keywords:* identity development, parental support, career, professional development, career-related support

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## **Introduction**

Erikson (1963, 1968) developed the life cycle theory, in which he argues that the typical developmental task of the adolescent is that related to the construction of identity. The author who made possible to translate this theory into measurable constructs was Marcia (1980). In his model, Marcia (1980) argues that identity formation occurs according to a process that includes exploration and commitment. The combination of these two dimensions can result in four types of identity: identity achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity diffusion.

In recent years, several proposed models have tried to provide important contributions in the field of identity and one of these is that of Luyckx and colleagues (2008). This model takes into consideration the following aspects that underlie the identity formation process: exploration in breadth, commitment making, exploration in depth, identification with commitment and, ruminative exploration. The latter aspect is considered a risk factor for identity development (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008).

Some research (Constantine, Wallace & Kindaichi, 2005; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010) has shown the importance of the supporting role of parents in identity development; for this reason, many authors have begun to study both constructs (Benson, Harris & Rogers, 1992; Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990).

In this study, we focused on the perceived support of parents in career choices, to understand if it can contribute to the general identity development process. Indeed, parental career support could contribute to the development of identity in the context of career choices, which represents one of the main areas of identity development (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel e Geisinger, 1995); for this reason, it can also contribute to the formation of the latter.

In this article, first, we proceed to present a theoretical introduction to the contents and research that we intended to test and we also present our formulated hypotheses; second, we explain the methodology and results of our research; in the end, we will offer several implications for practice.

## **Identity development**

Identity development is a lifelong process that is faced through several developmental stages and overcoming specific evolutionary tasks (Erikson, 1968, 1982); it is a complex and multifaceted process (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006).

According to Erikson's model of stage development, identity is constructed through eight fixed "psychosocial stages", in which individuals experience and identify themselves in multiple roles. This is particularly true for the adolescent phase, in which the primary psychosocial task is the formation of identity and the developmental conflict is "identity achievement vs role confusion" (Erikson, 1968). In other words, psychological, cognitive, emotional and social changes that occur during adolescence, determine a complex path that oscillates between ego identity development and identity diffusion processes (Erikson, 1956, 1963), to arrive at an original synthesis between the different parts of the experienced self.

Trying to operationalize the Eriksonian model for empirical research, Marcia (1966, 1989) elaborate a commitment-formation cycle represented by two important processes that are involved in the identity formation task: exploration and commitment. The first process refers to the evaluation of identity alternatives before deciding on an important life choice, as an expression of a problem-solving behavior (Grotevant, 1987) aimed at the research of a more complete sense of self (Schwartz & Dunham, 2000); instead, commitment refers to the act of making a choice, basing on a particular set of ideas, values, beliefs, and goals (Kuther, 2018) and actively engage for the realization of the choice. From the combination of these processes, four states of identity arise (Marcia, 1966): achievement, foreclosure, moratorium, diffusion. On the one hand, achievement and foreclosure are both characterized by the presence of identity commitments but differ in the degree to which the person has explored before implementing the commitment (Schwartz et al., 2011). On the other hand, moratorium and diffusion are both characterized by the relative absence of commitment but differ as regards the engagement in a systematic exploration of identity (Schwartz et al., 2011).

These model have, over many decades, inspired over 1,000 theoretical and research studies that have tried to extend it, examining identity status antecedents, behavioral consequences, connected personality characteristics, patterns of interpersonal relations and developmental forms of identity over time (Schwartz, 2001; Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Kroger, 2017).

Deepening Marcia model (1966, 1993), Luyckx and associates (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008) have proposed a contextual identity model that includes five dimensions connected to identity formation and identity evaluation: (a) exploration in breadth, (b) exploration in depth, (c) ruminative exploration, (d) commitment making and (e) identification with commitment.

The exploration in breadth corresponds to the concept of exploration

identified by Marcia (1966, 1993): «the degree to which adolescents seek different alternatives to their goals, values and, beliefs before making commitments» (Luyckx et al., 2008, p. 59). A person who explores in breadth, thinks actively about different directions that might take in life and about different goals that might pursue. Exploration in breadth is facilitated by an “adaptive” perfectionism (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2008) and linked to what Trapnell and Campbell (1999) define a reflective and adaptive type of private self-attentiveness.

The size of commitment making also corresponds to what Marcia elaborated (1966, 1993) and refers to the «degree to which teenagers made choices on important identity issues» (Luyckx et al., 2008, p.59). This enactment of strong choices in different identity domains could be a result of exploration in breadth. A high score on commitment is found in people who reach their goals (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Identification with commitment is the degree of security and certainty experienced about one’s existing commitments and to how well these commitments fit with one’s interests and values (Bosma, 1985). When someone feels certain about his choices (Luyckx et al., 2008), frequently experience a personal expressiveness (Waterman, 1990) that is the degree to which a person’s sense of identity corresponds to his unique potentials. Identification with commitment is substantially related to various indicators of psychosocial adjustment (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al., 2008).

The exploration in depth is the dimension that allows the continuous evaluation of commitments to ascertain they resemble the individual's internal standards (Luyckx et al., 2008). Although exploration in breadth and exploration in depth are both characterized by being information-oriented and having an open outlook on life (Berzonsky, 2011), the substantial difference is that the second one is similar to a reconsideration of commitment (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008). Accordingly, the person evaluates current commitments through introspective mechanisms, gathering information, and talking with others (Meeus, 1996). This continuous evaluation of identity commitments is influenced and influences the formation of identity in a strong way (Grotevant, 1987).

The ruminative exploration represents a consequence of confusion and lack of social supports. It is a result of a prolonged dysfunctional exploration in breadth that culminates in being stuck in procrastination. It is also positively related to the “pathological type of diffusion” (Marcia, 1989), to maladaptive perfectionism, depressive and anxiety symptoms and to lower self-esteem

(Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009; Becht et al., 2019); instead, it results negatively related to commitment making and identification with commitment (Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, et al., 2008; Luyckx, K., Soenens, B., Goossens, L., Beckx, K., & Wouters S., 2008). It seems that maladaptive perfectionism lets people continue to focus on unrealistic identity standards (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), strengthen a kind of self-rumination that interferes with the development of an integrated set of identity commitments to future plans (Ward, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003).

An example may be useful to clarify this process (Luycky et al., 2011): an individual that wants to enroll in college may explore various possibilities for academic majors through reading online information and talking with parents, teachers, and peers (exploration in breadth). After that, he or she might choose one specific college (commitment making). The choice does not imply that the identity process is finished and maybe he or she might continue to gather information to evaluate the choice made (exploration in depth).

The main domains in which identity development takes place are vocation-career-occupation, values, politics, religion, intimate relationships, friendship, sexual roles, family (Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger, 1995). Among these, vocation takes and leading role in adolescence identity formation; Skorikov and Vondracek (1998) have shown that ideological, religious, lifestyle, and political identity domains were related, but lagged behind the development of vocational and professional identity. In fact, some researchers have shown that there are significant correlations between professional commitment and identity (Blustein, Devenis & Kidney, 1989; Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999).

### **Parental support in identity development**

Parental support is linked to positive outcomes in adolescence, yet the influence of parental involvement on identity development during adolescence has not been clearly established (Sartor & Youniss, 2002).

Identity development does not only take place within an "intrapersonal glass bell" but is strongly influenced by the interpersonal contexts in which the adolescent relates (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Identity is actively modeled through the comparison of one's characteristics, abilities, and opinions with those of others (Festinger, 1954). These considerations are supported also by the identity control model of Kerpelman et al. (1997, 2001), an extension of Grotevant's (1987) model, that views identity development as a series of recurrent feedback loops aimed at minimizing the discrepancy

between self-perception and feedbacks (i.e. acceptance or rejection) received from others. Similarly, to the concept of exploration in depth (Luyckx et al., 2008), she conceptualized exploration as a way to obtain feedbacks - both intrapersonal and interpersonal - on current identity configurations to evaluate the choices one has made. The most strongly valued interpersonal feedbacks are those originates from significant others, such as peers, romantic partners, and parents (Kerpelman et al., 1997; Schwartz, 2001).

There are three parental behaviors connected to career choice (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009): career-related support, appearing when parents help their children make their own choices, neither interfering nor neglecting, providing instrumental support and guidance when needed; interference behavior, when parents excessively control their children's career actions, forcing them to make decisions that seem better to them but with which their children disagree; and parental lack of engagement, which could be due to a lack of interest in their children's career choices or lacking economic resources or having little time to devote to their children, for example, because they have a full-time job or because they are single parents. High parents' lack of engagement is associated with decision-making difficulties (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Dietrich & Salmela-Aro, 2013) and parents who interfere with adolescence career choices can hinder identity development. According to Luyckx, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, and Berzonsky (2007) and Beyers and Goossens (2008), emerging adults who perceived their parents as intrusively controlling appeared to experience difficulties in establishing clear and committed identity choices.

Parents can have a positive influence in identity development (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995); this applies both to career support for parents (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Berrios-Allison, 2005) and general support from parents (Constantine, Wallace, & Kindaichi, 2005; Leal-Muniz & Constantine, 2005; Lucas, 1997). In fact, both are associated with the identity commitment (Sartor & Youniss, 2002). For this reason, we have included among our hypotheses that career parental support can positively correlate with the positive dimensions of identity development and negatively with rumination (see Hypothesis 1).

Commitment and exploration are considered to be the primary means by which adolescents move towards identity development and preparation for future roles (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997). Support, especially that comes by family, is positively related to exploration activities (Hirschi, Niles, & Akos, 2011; Howard, Ferrari, Nota, Solberg, & Soresi, 2009; Nota et al., 2007). Dietrich & Kracke (2009) demonstrated that perceived parental support predicts exploratory behavior; this research is mainly based on the career field.

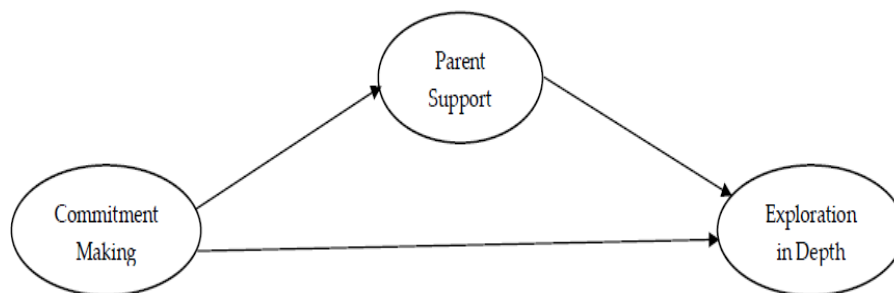
However, professional identity plays a very important role in the development of general identity (Skorikov & Vondracek, 1998). The autonomy encouraged by parents is positively related to exploration in depth (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). Moreover, parental support has been positively linked to both commitment processes and exploration in depth (Redmayne, 2017). This is the reason why parental support is a variable that plays a key role in our study (see Hypothesis 1).

Moving from these, we have hypothesized that career support from parents can be correlated and significantly predict exploration behaviors that influence the formation of general identity, with particular reference to exploration in depth (see Hypothesis 2).

Noting that a study of Beyers and Goossens (2008) has demonstrated a dynamic bond between perceived parental support and identity formation and, in particular, that perceived parenting predicted the explorative phases of identity formation (i.e., exploration in breadth and commitment making), while evaluative phases of identity formation (i.e., exploration in depth and commitment identification) predicted more supportive parenting, we set out to investigate if parental support can have a mediating effect between commitment making on exploration in depth (see Hypothesis 3).

Our research hypotheses are summarized below, and Figure 1 shows the hypothesized model, in which parental support is defined as perceived parental support.

Figure1. *Hypothesized Model*



H1: parental support correlates positively with commitment making, exploration in breadth, identification with commitment and exploration in depth; instead, it correlates negatively with ruminative exploration.

H2: commitment making, and parental support predict exploration in

depth.

H3: parental support has a mediating effect on the direct effect of commitment making on exploration in depth.

### **Method: Participants, Measure, Procedure and Results**

The study was developed through the structuring of a survey for middle school and high school students and managed to obtain a sample of 250 students aged between 12 and 17 years ( $M = 14.02$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) and subdivided in 106 males and 144 females.

For this study we used the measures described below.

Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS, Luyckx et al., 2008; ed. it. Crocetti, Luyckx, Scignaro, & Sica, 2011); it is a scale used to measure the dimensions foreseen by Luyckx's model (Luyckx et al., 2008). The scale is made up of 25 items that evaluate: exploration in breadth (simple item is "Think about the direction I want to take in my life"), exploration in depth (simple item is "Think about the future plans I have made"), ruminative exploration (simple item is "Keep looking for the direction I want to take in my life"), commitment making (simple item is "Decided on the direction I want to follow in life") and identification with commitment (simple item is "Plans for the future offer me a sense of security"). The subject is presented with statements and is asked to express what each of them describes his current situation, responding on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = No, the sentence does not describe my current situation at 5 = Yes, the sentence perfectly describes my current situation). In the validation study the values of Cronbach's alpha were between .79 and .86 for all dimensions. In the present study the values of Cronbach's alpha were .85 for exploration in breadth, .67 for exploration in depth, .76 for ruminative exploration, .90 for commitment making and .86 for identification with commitment. All Cronbach's Alpha values were acceptable, as indicated by the literature (Taber, 2018; Di Nuovo, 2014).

Parental career-related behaviors questionnaire (PCB, Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; ed. it. Marcionetti & Rossier, 2016); the measure consists of 15 items assessing three specific parental behaviors in career choices: support, interference, and lack of engagement. In this research, we used only 5 items to evaluate the support (simple item is "My parents talk to me about my vocational interests and abilities"). The participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). In the validation study the values of Cronbach's alpha were .80 and .84 for boys and girls. In the present study the values of Cronbach's alpha were .79.



The study was conducted in two middle schools and two high schools located in Sicily (Italy). Students received an invitation from the school to participate in the research, voluntarily basis. A letter was sent to parents informing them of this research and asking to sign the consent for their child's participation and for data processing. All parents gave their consent to participate. The administration was conducted by a psychologist (part of the research team) during school hours, after deciding with the teachers and the school manager. During the administration only the psychologist was present. Participants were explained how to complete the research protocol and anonymity of the compilation was guaranteed. The research protocol included a section where gender and age were required.

The data were analyzed with the SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Science), the SmartPLS (Partial Least Squares) software and the Amos 22 software.

Regarding our first hypothesis (H1), the results (Table 1) show that it is partially confirmed because the dimensions positively correlated with each other in most cases. Specifically, parental support correlated with commitment making ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ), exploration in breadth ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ), identification with commitment ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ) and exploration in depth ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ) except ruminative exploration which did not correlate.

Table.1. *Descriptive and correlations between the variables.*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Commitment Making	16.1	5.54	1						
Exploration in Breadth	18.3	4.93	-.13**	1					
Ruminative Exploration	15.7	4.95	.38**	.49*	1				
Identification with Commitment	18.1	4.52	.77**	-.01	-.43**	1			
Exploration in Depth	17.7	4.10	.52**	.11	-.04	.48*	1		
Parental Support	18.5	4.33	.21**	.15*	.12	.15*	.34*	1	
Age	14.7	1.77	-.12	.23*	.15*	.02	.02	.05	1

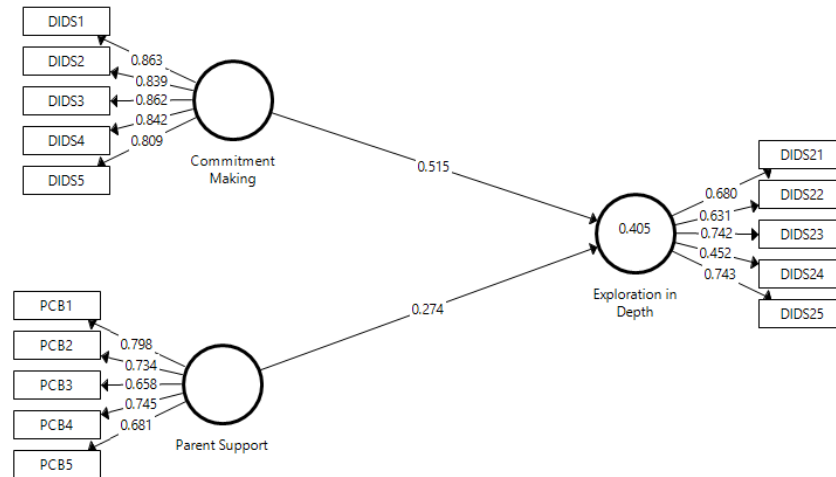
Note. M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively.  
\* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ .

Consequently, considering these correlations, it was decided to verify the potential predictive effects of the variables highly correlated with exploration

in depth.

In order to verify our second hypothesis (H2) related to this potential predictive effect, we used SmartPLS to apply the partial least squares approach to our data (Figure 2).

Figure.2. Path Diagram



In Table 2 it was noticeable that exploration in depth was successfully predicted by parental support ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ) and commitment making ( $\beta = .51, p < .001$ ) which explained 41% of the variance ( $R^2 = .405$ ).

Table.2. Regression Results.

	Exploration in Depth			
	$\beta$	S.E.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Commitment Making	.515	.001	12.399	***
Parent Support	.274	.008	4.690	***
R <sup>2</sup>			.405	

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

It has been hypothesized that parental support could mediate the effect of students' commitment making on exploration in depth (H3). We tested the mediation hypothesis (Figure 2) verifying the significance of the indirect effects, through the bootstrapping method on AMOS 22. In the Table 3 we

reported the results of the mediations showing the standardized  $\beta$  which indicates the intensity of the effect. In addition, we showed the Confidence Intervals (C.I.) 95% which expresses the significance of the effect with a 5% of probability of error (C.I. > 0 are significant).

Table.3. *Effect of Commitment Making on Exploration in Depth through Parent Support (standardized  $\beta$ ).*

Paths	Indirect effect		Direct effect		Total effect	
	$\beta$	C.I. 95%	$\beta$	C.I. 95%	$\beta$	C.I. 95%
Commitment Making – Parent Support – Exploration in Depth	.04	.01 - .07	.35	.27 - .42	.39	.07 - .26

The results showed that the total effect of commitment making on exploration in depth ( $\beta = .39$ , C.I. = .07 - .26) was significant as well as its direct effect on it ( $\beta = .35$ , C.I. = .27 - .42); furthermore, the indirect effect of commitment making on exploration in depth (I. E. = .04; C.I. = .01 - .07) was significant and partially mediated by parent support, showing how the parental support plays a fundamental part in strengthening children's intentions in order to make them more satisfied with the projects they have formulated.

## Discussion

The aim of the present research was to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the parent-child relationship and how parental support in the specific field of career can influence identity development.

Previous studies have shown that commitment and exploration are fundamental for identity development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007) and that parental support promotes the development of a healthy and defined identity in adolescents (Constantine, Wallace & Kindaichi, 2005; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010).

Our study added to these discoveries how the relationship with parents, when experienced as supportive by their children, has a positive impact on identity, contributing to the formation of the latter; in our study we investigated, in particular, the role of parenting career support and the results, as we will discuss below, have implications for the involvement of parents in career counseling paths.

More specifically, the contribution of our results to the theoretical models described regards the following statements: (1) parental career support

correlates with commitment making, exploration in breadth, identification with commitment and exploration in depth (H1). These findings are in line with other studies that have shown that parental support is positively related to positive developmental outcomes (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). We had speculated a negative correlation between parental support and rumination, but this hypothesis has not been confirmed. The absence of a negative correlation could be explained by the fact that in some cases parental support may cause more confusion in adolescents trying to achieve levels of maladaptive perfectionism (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009; Becht et al., 2019) that prevent them from establishing an adequate commitment to their future plans (Ward, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Another explanation could be that the tendency to rumination is better conceptualized as stable personality traits (Just and Alloy 1997; Knowles et al. 2005) linked to genetic influences (Pont, Rhee, Corley, Hewitt., & Friedman, 2019), and that is little affected by contextual influences as parental support; certainly, further studies would be needed to explore these hypothesis; (2) commitment making and parental support predict exploration in depth (H2) and (3) parental support has a mediating effect on the direct effect of commitment making on exploration in depth (H3). These latter findings are also in line with other studies that have shown how parental support predicts exploration in depth (Pesigan, Luyckx & Alampay, 2014), therefore parental career support can have a positive influence on identity development.

Although to be read with some limitations, such as the sample size and the absence of multiple measures for each variable, the results confirmed the importance of the role parents career-related support in their children's identity development.

#### *Implication for future research.*

The implications for future research could be manifold. First of all, moving also from a recent study of Romm, Barry, Kotchick, DiDonato and Barnett (2019), who demonstrate that identity commitment is predicted differently from paternal or maternal behavior, future researches could examine separately maternal and paternal influences on the dimensions of identity development, and in particular on commitment making and exploration in depth.

Secondly, it would be interesting to investigate the hypothesis that the congruence between the commitments made and the person's potentials and wishes (high identification with commitment) may decrease the need for re-

evaluation of the choices enacted, resulting in a low need for extensive exploration in depth (Lucky et al., 2011) and, therefore, whether parental support in childhood is able to predict commitment making and exploration in depth more than parental support in adolescence.

Last but not least, following the Alliman-Brissett et al. (2004) hypothesis of four dimensions of parental support for career (career-related modeling, verbal encouragement, instrumental assistance, emotional support), it would be interesting to understand how different types of parental support can influence the dimensions of identity development expressed by Luyckx et al (2005, 2006, 2011).

#### *Implications for counseling and career counseling.*

The results of the current study generate several implications, that can drive both parents and career counselors to reflect on the importance of the involvement of parents in issues concerning the development of their children's identity.

The first implication is linked to our first hypothesis (H1): considering that parental support correlates with commitment making, exploration in breadth, identification with commitment and exploration in depth, and therefore that parental support can influence career development of adolescent, parents should be aware of the importance of their role in their children's identity development. In this context, in order to support the identity development of their children, it is essential that parents remember that parental support is effective when it allows the development of autonomy (Koestner, 2020), placing in the middle between excessive absence and excessive presence and thus promoting adolescents' searching for self-evaluated and self-defined answers (Beyers & Goossens, 2008); in other words, supporting children does not mean nor decide the path they will have to travel, nor let them feel lost in front of an infinite number of roads, but rather to provide them a compass for orientation and choose their own way independently. Supporting children in their identity development means "to be present when an explicit or implicit need emerges", without "interference" nor much less "lack of interest" (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009). In this way, parents can guide their children to discover, use and fully exploit their resources.

The second implication regards our second and third hypothesis (H2 - H3): commitment making and parental support predict exploration in depth and, in particular, parental support has a mediating effect on the direct effect of commitment making on exploration in depth. Therefore, as parental support plays a fundamental part in strengthening children's intentions in order to

make them more satisfied with the projects they have formulated, we need to consider ways to encourage parental support, in addition to working with adolescence alone. Institutional programs seeking to foster adolescence career development should focus on the inclusion of parents in programs, in order to promote the continuous evaluation of identity commitments.

In conclusion, parents should be involved in career counseling programs through parental training actions, in order to contribute to the co-construction of their children's future.

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