HANDBOOK OF

MUSICAL IDENTITIES
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Adolescence is a time of major change and development. At a biological level, hormonal and physiological changes cause a marked difference in physical appearance, while rapid cognitive development provides adolescents with the capacity to think about their worlds in increasingly sophisticated ways. Such changes mean that adolescents are constantly dealing with new ways of interacting with their social environments. An important part of the latter process is the formation of a personal sense of identity—defining one’s sense of self in terms of values, strengths, abilities, and goals, and negotiating a place for that self in the social environment. It is well-documented that music plays an important part of this identity formation process (see other chapters in this volume), particularly during adolescence (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003; Hargreaves, Macdonald, & Miell, 2012; McPherson, Davidson, & Faulkner, 2012). Less well understood are the processes by which music and music learning become a part of adolescents’ identities. How do individuals who persevere with music learning address the immense personal challenges it poses, mature into independent learners, and incorporate strategies for dealing with these challenges into their personal identity? How does all of this unfold in their lives as they think about and plan their musical futures?

Another concern is for those adolescents who exit their formal musical engagement, and for whom being an actively engaged musician does not become a centrally important way of defining their identity. These adolescents still have a musical identity in the sense that they have ideas and values about their musical abilities, and about musical abilities in general. This can even extend to holding highly developed opinions on the nature of their own and others’ musical abilities, such as whether musicians are born or made. These identities are important because they come to play a role in the way people think about music. For example, when asked about music learning, most adults respond
that they wish they had successfully learned to play a musical instrument (Davis, 1994; Nexus Research, 2007). They may not pursue music activities, even though they may be quite capable, and their self-exclusion from music can have negative effects on their sense of self (Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Knight, 2011). At the same time, they may believe that a quality music education is worthwhile only for the few that are gifted, and this may influence their support for music education for their own children or for music education in schools. Given the health and well-being benefits of music engagement (MacDonald, Kreutz, & Mitchell, 2012), it is important for researchers to understand what needs to be achieved to maximize the proportion of the population that is able to enjoy the benefits of music through active participation, as well as those who choose not to develop specialized skills in music performance.

In this chapter we draw on the Eriksonian view of identity formation as one of the critical tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Specifically, we look at the most prominent line of research emerging from this view, Marcia’s (1980) implementation of Erikson’s work, along with recent expansions, to frame our discussions. We begin with a theoretical overview of the Erikson–Marcia model of identity formation and its relationships with self-determination theory, and then draw on our research with highly engaged adolescent musicians to describe the processes through which musical identity is consolidated during adolescence, and to understand the significance of music learning to the self.

**12.1 Adolescent identity development**

**12.1.1 The Erikson–Marcia perspective on identity development**

Erikson (1968) contended that one of the major tasks for adolescents is to reflect on their place within their social networks (peers, family, society), including the ways that others in their social networks view them, and to plan for a future to look forward to. It is also a time through which adolescents must, from a huge range of possible ways to continue their adult lives, select from an ever-narrower range of personal, occupational, and social paths. Erikson's theory generated decades of empirical work, the most fruitful line of which was based on the way Marcia (1980) operationalized his process of identity formation. Marcia used two activities, conceptualized as dimensions, which form several possibilities or statuses for the process of adolescent identity formation: Exploration refers to the degree to which adolescents have considered or tried various different kinds of identity related pursuits, while commitment defines the degree to which adolescents have made decisions regarding a personal identity that they will pursue in the future.

The degree to which these two activities are undertaken can be depicted in a $2 \times 2$ matrix, shown in Fig. 12.1, which represents four different possible outcomes. The first, characterized by the absence of either exploration or commitment, represents identity
Identity development, typical of most children upon entering adolescence. Identity diffusion is an incomplete or incoherent sense of identity, in which the person has not consciously tried various identities, reflected on the way they are perceived by others, learned from those perceptions, or selected possible social roles to actively pursue. The second outcome is moratorium, where the person has explored various roles, activities, images, and behaviors, but not yet made firm commitments to any of these. Erikson posed this as an important part of adolescence, and evidence supports that this stage, possible only in societies that have the economic affordances to allow such a period of experimentation, results in adults who have explored a fuller range of potential commitments and thereby maximize their potential. The third outcome is foreclosure, where the person has prematurely committed to an identity without fully exploring and experimenting with the range of possible identities or activities. Finally, identity achievement occurs when the person has fully explored and experimented with a range of personal and social identities, and arrived at a conscious and coherent identity that dictates a path for their future.

More recently, these dimensions have been extended to include qualitatively different types of exploration and commitment (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008). Exploration was relabeled exploration in breadth, to refer to the search for different alternatives in relation to goals and values, while exploration in depth refers to talking with others and judging how well the exploration fits with personal goals, and ruminative exploration refers to indecisiveness and flawed decision making. Commitment was also elaborated, with the dimension relabeled commitment making to refer to identity choices having been made, and the dimension identification with commitment added to refer to the degree to which adolescents identify with and feel certain about those choices.

Within this conception, adolescence involves a process of continually exploring various identities, and making decisions and commitments to those in which one identifies. In music learning, this could involve an identity as broad as being a person who plays a musical instrument or a person who is knowledgeable about music. More specifically, it could include being a classical musician or someone who has a profession, but plays music recreationally. A healthy process of identity seeking would involve adolescents exploring these various identities and reflecting on whether they align with their personal interests and values, eventually making a decision on an identity that they feel is aligned with their sense of self. There are also possible maladaptive outcomes. For example, an adolescent committing to playing a musical instrument for some time without
considering whether it is really in his or her interests or long-term goals, or someone who commits to music learning as a long-term goal but does not understand the importance of the extensive practice that is necessary to achieve that goal.

In our work with children learning to play musical instruments, we uncovered the importance of identity processes before children even began formal learning on their instruments (Evans & McPherson, 2015). The children in our sample of 157 were asked, before they had begun formal instruction, how long do you think you will continue to play your instrument? Those who articulated a longer-term view (e.g., until I’m an adult, for the rest of my life) continued their active involvement in music activities for longer, on average, than those who articulated a short-term view (e.g., until the end of this year, until I’m in high school). This relationship only held up if they undertook commensurate amounts of practice (the relationship was not evident by examining practice alone). We interpret this result to suggest that it is important for children to have a sense of their future selves, and within that context, their music learning and practice would be more likely to be perceived as an active identity exploration process.

What are the drivers of healthy identity formation processes? Our next step is to consider what facilitates exploration in depth and identification with commitment, rather than only the shallower exploration in breadth, ruminative exploration, or poorly considered commitment making. Self-determination theory offers some explanation of how these forms of identity pursuit might lead to better alignment with the self.

### 12.1.2 Self-determination theory and identity development

Self-determination theory (SDT), which emanates from over 30 years of research led by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, is based on the assumption that humans are inherently oriented towards growth and well-being, and that people thrive most when origins of their behavior are perceived as emanating from and regulated by the self, rather than the external social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Regulation is internalized through the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence is the need for mastery and effectiveness in one’s actions (White, 1959; Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002), relatedness is the need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in one’s social environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and autonomy is the need to feel as though one’s actions are self-endorsed and volitional (deCharms, 1968; Reeve, 2002).

Activities that are undertaken for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment derived from them are said to be intrinsically motivated. In SDT terms, children’s play is the prototype of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsically motivated activities are experienced as volitional and are undertaken for the joy of having an effect on one’s environment, thus they are closely linked to the needs for competence and autonomy. The need for relatedness is also critically important, because not only do significant others (e.g., parents, peers, teachers) provide the necessary tools in the social environment
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(such as instruments, lessons, a structured household in which music practice can take place), but they also provide encouragement, coaching, and involvement. If this is achieved with care and warmth, then positive outcomes are much more likely to ensue (Grolnick, 2009; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Thus, an adolescent undertaking self-determined behaviors is naturally encouraged to pursue and explore multiple commitments and identity paths. The more that the psychological needs are fulfilled within activities, the more likely those activities are to be assimilated to the self (La Guardia, 2009; Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Duriez, 2009).

Of course, not all behaviors can be intrinsically motivated. Many activities are not inherently intrinsically motivating, such as practicing scales, and not every music lesson can resemble the characteristics of “play” exemplified by the intrinsic motivation construct. In SDT, these extrinsically motivated activities can still be relatively self-determined, because the extrinsic–intrinsic distinction is less important than whether the activity or goal is perceived as emanating from or endorsed by the self, versus being initiated or regulated by others. SDT distinguishes four types of extrinsic motivation (see Fig. 12.2)—those that are relatively external to the self (external and introjected regulation) and more autonomous, self-determined behaviors (identified and integrated regulation).

Thus, when a young adolescent’s practice behavior is regulated by his or her parents using punishments or rewards, or simply by the feeling that he or she “ought” to practice, the regulation will not encourage the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs, and the adolescent is unlikely to come to identify with the activity as an important part of his or her identity (Faulkner, Davidson, & McPherson, 2010; Evans, McPherson, & Davidson, 2013). On the other hand, an adolescent’s identity is more likely to be aligned with the self if

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**Fig. 12.2** Self-determination theory’s organismic integration theory (adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2000).

their parents help to regulate the practice behavior in an autonomy-supportive way and provide structure around the activity. With such support, the adolescent is more likely to understand the value of music practice and other music activities in helping to improve his or her abilities, and thereby achieve personal goals.

12.1.3 Summary

Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development and its interpretation by Marcia (1980) proposes that adolescence is a time in which individuals’ transition from a diffuse patchwork of possible identities, to a process of exploring different identities and committing to some, the successful product of which is identity achievement. Self-determination theory explains why. Adolescents will value those identity explorations that are fulfilling of basic psychological needs. The more adolescents experience fulfillment of the basic psychological needs within their identity explorations, the more likely they will become to commit to them, value them, and regard them as being an integral part of their sense of self.

12.2 Adolescent musical identity processes

What do the various exploration and commitment processes look like? In this section, we draw on interviews with adolescent music students to describe various manifestations of commitment and exploration as they discussed their career intentions, the role of music in their lives, and the degree to which they valued their music learning. The students, who were all aged between 15 and 18, were part of a sample of 30 students who we interviewed in and around a large city in the United States. Teachers and our colleagues helped to identify all of the students based on their exceptional music performance abilities and because they were all regarded as being highly involved in music. The classical musicians we studied, for example, were engaging in many hours of practice every week and were likely to be on track to compete for positions in outstanding University music schools. Given the level of their performance skills, some would be candidates for eventual employment as professional musicians in major orchestras. Likewise, some of the popular musicians were performing at functions such as weddings, recording jingles for radio stations, entering regional ensemble competitions, and devoting enormous resources and time to rehearsing, composing, listening, and experiencing music with similarly minded peers.

These students were part of a project examining the role of school and non-school music activities in constructing meaning in people's lives. For this chapter, however, we chose several of our participants because in our conversations with these adolescents about the meanings that they derive from their music participation, illustrations naturally emerged of the identity formation processes described in the previous section. We
found that these students had strong ideas about the role of music in their lives, beliefs about their musical abilities, and strong connections with social environments. In this section, we discuss examples of several of the possible combinations of identity processes described earlier in this chapter. (Identifying features and some details of the participants involved have been changed.)

12.2.1 Judy: exploration in depth of strengths versus passions

Our first student, Judy, was at a stage in her life where she was exploring several possible identities. As a junior in high school (aged 16), she was at a time where she could freely explore various identity pursuits without having to commit, but also faced choices (e.g., for elective subjects in high school) that would have consequences for pursuing different career paths. In our conversation, she was weighing music, in which she was highly involved and passionate, with the goal of being a pharmacist. Judy made a distinction between strength or ability in an area, and passion. When asked about her strengths, she responded:

Judy: Well, my strengths kind of lie in the maths and sciences, I guess. My voice teacher tells me that I try too hard to be like a student in choir, like a student more than a musician. So I’ll either try too hard or want to be perfect all the time. I love musical theatre, and I love choir, but I just don’t know if I have necessarily the strengths to major in music or to pursue it professionally. I’ve got the passion. The passion is there. But it’s probably more the ability isn’t very strong.

Researcher: In an ideal world, what would you do? What would your heart tell you to do?

Judy: Music education.

Judy appears to have discovered a fact about musical ability development that researchers have uncovered in recent decades. Although she may have exceptional ability, it is the values, resources and orientations to the activity that lead to the self-regulatory abilities required to initiate and sustain longer-term commitment. Judy seemed aware, during her exploration of these various possible selves, that balancing ability with interest was important, as she did not want one to outweigh the other in her decision making:

I guess I’m trying to be, like, the realistic, like, “where do I see myself?” I want to start a family and have that flexible schedule, and then I just, with … I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to let my passion take over. You know, that kind of thing. So I guess it’s just … again, I’m probably going to change because I toil over it all the time. Like, why am I not going into music when I love it so much?

Judy had not yet made a commitment, but as a junior in high school, it would be expected that she should explore various kinds of identity pursuits, thus it is appropriate
for her to be in identity moratorium. Judy is reflecting on the various influences in her
life, and considering her future self. In the above excerpt, she is weighing two factors—
the perception of the need to be “mature” and balance things that she believes she wants
for her future— such as starting a family—and whether that conflicts with her selecting
a musical future for herself. She feels free to discuss the various options as future possi-
bles without any anxiety about extrinsic motivators, such as money or image. This
thinking illustrates exploration in depth, exploring activities, considering their align-
ment with the sense of self, and reflecting on their benefits of the identity pursuit.

This autonomous exploration may have been facilitated by her own parents, who
she suggested encouraged her to “do whatever I want—It’s hard enough to wake up in
the morning, let alone do something you don’t want to do.” Her extended family was a
source of information, helping her to weigh her options as she talked to them about the
kind of work involved. It appeared that Judy’s family fulfilled the background need for
relatedness for her to make her own autonomous decision about her future.

In Judy we therefore clearly see identity formation at work. In her thorough explora-
tion of a potential musical identity, she is well aware of aligning her intrinsic interests
with the activities she chooses to do (autonomy), has a well-developed sense of her abil-
ity (competence), along with a backdrop of family and peer support (relatedness).

12.2.2 Margaret: ruminative exploration
and an uncertain future identity

Margaret was one of most exceptionally talented performers of our sample at the time
of the interview, yet we believe she displayed ruminative exploration. This kind of explo-
ratio is maladaptive because while it involves exploring various identities, it is char-
acterized by a lack of reflection about how those identities might fit into the current
and future sense of self, and thus produces anxiety, indecisiveness, and uncertainty
(Luyckx et al., 2008). Although Margaret had reached an extraordinary level of ability,
she showed considerable anxiety and indecisiveness about the role of music in her life
and in her future self.

First, there is no doubt that at 17 years of age, Margaret possessed a high level of intrin-
sic interest in music:

Music motivates me. It consoles me and excites me. It’s an intangible means of
improving my life; it gives my life more glory than it often deserves … It’s important
to me because I enjoy it so much. I love the challenge. My entire weekends are eaten
up by music. The kids I meet in the youth orchestra are amazing people. I love that
companionship. To experience music with others is divine! It’s the most special thing
I have.

While Margaret demonstrated a significant level of involvement—devoting entire
weekends to individual and various ensemble rehearsals—she admits to only beginning
to seriously focus on music and to systematically practice from the age of 15. Prior to that, she had owned her instrument since she was 9 years old and had taken lessons, but completed only minimal levels of practice. While this response should be interpreted carefully—she must have practiced extensively for at least a few years in order to have made it to the standard she was at when we interviewed her—it appears that music as an identity pursuit may only have been undertaken seriously in the most recent year or two. At the time of the interview, she practiced approximately 24 hours per week, and frequently “rushes home from school” to unpack her instrument and practice. Margaret’s lack of conscious exploration was evidenced in her talk about auditioning for and eventually becoming principal in a prominent youth orchestra and her major decisions about music in recent years:

I auditioned for the orchestra, I think, three times. I don’t really count the first one because I was 14, and I didn’t actually know what I was auditioning for. My teacher told me that I had to go and play, and I was like, “okay.” And it was awful. But I think sophomore year was really a transition year for me. Actually sophomore year, I actually tried to come to [the music academy] in the middle of the year, which was not a bad idea, but I really didn’t know anything about it.

This process and others reflect a lack of conscious decision-making, perhaps leading to some of the anxiety she had about her choice of career. Margaret’s auditions for the orchestra and for the music academy did not appear to have the volition and initiative of truly autonomous, self-determined motivation. Her process of selecting a university or deciding on her future was also characterized by procrastinated decision-making, portrayed to us with considerable negative affect, anxiety, and a sense of being overwhelmed:

I’m not really good at making decisions. Ideally, I would double major and pursue two degrees. At some point, there would be some epiphany, and I would say, “oh, I got it. This is what I’m going to do.” The end. Now, Margaret lives happily ever after. Even if I go to university and pursue two degrees, I’m thinking that at some point in time there’d be some kind of light bulb that will say, “this is what I want.” And I will scratch the other one and go for it. But I have no idea. I want to do something interesting, whether it is music or otherwise. I wanted to be something that is new and interesting every day, and that is, it is not a static position. For a while, I wanted to be an architect, and then I wanted to be a journalist, and then I wanted to be a doctor, and then I realized that I would have to do math so I gave up on the doctor idea. I have no idea what I want. I think the problem is that I have no plan A. Without a plan A, there cannot be a plan B. And for a while, I wanted to be a book editor. I don’t know. Now, I just tell people that I want to be a mermaid and get it over with.

When asked if she had consulted her parents for advice, there is no evidence of the reflection characterized by healthy exploration. Unlike others in our study, she had not sought information from her parents or teachers and considered the relative weight of that advice based on how much she trusts them and what she wanted for her future
self. Rather, her parents—her mother in particular—seemed to influence her in a
different way:

I guess that I have been so busy I haven’t asked them what they think. My mom is
supportive but worried. I think she just wants me to be happy. She likes security. She’s
worried that I won’t have a secure position, or my life will be sort of all over the place.
She hates that. I’d love to play in a great orchestra. But there is an opening once every
seven years, and thousands of people are trying for that one shot. You have to move
somewhere. My mom made me promise that I won’t leave this city. She left her par-

This quotation shows the considerable pressure placed on Margaret to abide by a
promise she had made to her mother not to leave the city in which she was raised. In
some cases, pressure of this kind may be indicative of a damaging parenting practice
known as conditional regard, whereby parents apply unnecessary pressure, or withhold
affection and autonomy support, in order to elicit certain behaviors from their children
(Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). In this case, it is possible that Margaret’s promise to her
mother may act to apply undue pressure and is distracting from her ability to sensibly
weigh her various exploratory identity pursuits and assimilate them into a future self
that she feels comfortable with and is able to look forward to.

Margaret therefore provides an illustrative contrast with Judy. Both cases show a
highly developed level of musical ability. Judy shows considered identity exploration,
while talk of Margaret’s possible future selves invokes considerable anxiety. Margaret
appears indecisive about how to weigh various factors in her identity pursuits, anxious
about the need to make a commitment, and unable to narrow the numerous possible
future selves she has considered. She enjoys the solace of practicing and spends con-
siderable amounts of time on it, but rather than being a means to achieving her identity
commitments, it may simply be an activity that distracts her from making the difficult
vocational decisions that she faces.

12.2.3 Derek: exploration in breadth
and foreclosed commitment

Derek came from an affluent family with a father who was able to pick up any sort of
instrument, and who possessed a strong interest in the music of his youth, such as the
Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan, which he remembers hearing in various
family contexts from when he was very young.

As a 5-year-old, his parents “tricked” him into learning the violin—an instrument
that “nobody else I liked played”—and then compelled him to stick with this instrument
for another 9 years. His first violin teacher left the area after 1 year, so he transferred to
a Suzuki teacher who he reports as “awful,” in part because there were no opportunities
to select pieces he wanted to play, with a curriculum that involved a set order of pieces, which he either did not like or did not know. The lack of autonomy contrasted dramatically with his guitar playing which commenced around the age of 12:

I hated taking [violin] lessons so much that I refused to let my parents put me in [guitar] lessons because I thought it would be a lot worse for me … When I started learning guitar I went online and found like three chords and just learned how to play them and practiced them for hours. I think I must have spent a good seven months just playing three chords. I got really good at those three chords! I found something I was really passionate about and finally I could play things that I loved. I started writing music immediately.

“I want the right way to be my way” were typical comments that displayed a strong sense of autonomy that had resulted from having taught himself to play the guitar and compose his own music. Unlike his sense of competence on the violin, where he reported being always behind the other students, Derek was in three rock bands for which he was writing most of the music, and had multiple mastery experiences leading to a strong sense of competence as a musician. One of the most important of these experiences occurred when his band won a local music festival competition performing one of his songs:

It was so nice when we won the competition. The next day we played again and I just remember looking out there. The entire front two rows were singing along to a song I wrote. I must have smiled for like a week and a half after that.

At the time of the interview, Derek, unlike the other members of the bands in which he played, had committed himself to becoming a professional rock musician. When he first spoke to his parents about this “they were horrified. They thought that I was losing valuable time,” referring to the need to study and do well at school, but for Derek, music was:

… the truest expression of my soul. The expression of my own feelings and stuff. Even if I don't make it and I'm stone-broke somewhere it will be OK. If I don't give it my all, it will haunt me for the rest of my life. That's what I need to do. It's not like I want to be a musician. I need to be a musician.

This quest for reaching his dreams, however, involved some direction from his parents, who wanted him to at least get a College education. Because of their influence to “get a degree” before following his dreams, Derek was intent on applying to a particular university with a prominent music school. While we had a sense that Derek was passionately involved in his guitar playing and songwriting, we sensed that when the conversation shifted to discussing what would happen in the coming years, Derek had not deeply considered a precise image of what kind of musician he would want to be as an adult, and had only vague ideas about what steps were necessary in the coming years to
achieve his goals. Strangely, the sketchy plans he had developed actually excluded any kind of further formal music learning:

I'm not applying to the music program, but I want to get into the university. I think I might study environment studies there or something else. And then I plan on hopefully moving to the city, just getting a cheap job somewhere, somewhere close to the city … lowest apartment I can, just trying to make it for a couple of years. I mean, I know it's very unrealistic, but that's what I want to do with my life, you know? I want to go toward it … I guess I have a pathological fear of being taught music, so I guess I try to avoid going to a place where they're going to show me how to do it. I don't know why. I just hate it so much. I don't ever want to be told how to do it, you know. The way I learned guitar was just by watching people.

The decision to throw himself head-first into attempting to succeed as a rock musician raises the question of how realistic this might be for any similar 16-year-old adolescent. This was something of which Derek was very aware, even though he had been participating in the choir and musicals at school, and was heavily involved in drama as ways of developing his voice and his confidence to perform as a musician:

Well, I think … the biggest thing that I'm worried about is just getting music out there with the competition that's out there today. I mean like, I know to say, "Oh, I'm going to be a musician" is a ridiculous claim in today's society. I don't expect most people to believe me when I say that. I don't have any, like, it took me a lot to believe it myself when I said, you know, I used to be like, "Oh, I'll just be a musician when I grow up." Like, now, it's become something serious.

Our impressions of Derek led us to conclude that while he may be exploring his musical identity, it is exploration in breadth. In other words, he may be enjoying the activity and be intrinsically motivated by it, but there is a lack of active reflection and information-seeking from others about exactly what this identity pursuit might mean in the future. He had committed to a musical future, but unlike others in our study, could not articulate a specific set of characteristics of his future musical self, and crucially, did not have an understanding of the requirements and costs of the path that might lead to his goal. Some of his comments were explicit in stating that his motivation to succeed drew from the control he experienced in being pressured to learn the violin as a child. Therefore, we suggest that Derek had made a foreclosed commitment to his future musical self.

12.2.4 Brian: resolved identity and commitment with identification

Brian was in his final year of high school, and an accomplished pianist and clarinetist in both jazz and classical traditions. In responding to questions about his career, Brian's responses resemble that of identity achievement. He had not only experienced
a number of different activities and identity pursuits, but had committed to ideas about the nature of his education in the future and where it might lead him. When asked about his future beyond his final year in high school, Brian responded by describing not only the kinds of University majors and careers he wanted to choose, but the role and value of his interests:

I’ll be going to [an ivy-league university]. Right now, I’m considering music and philosophy as a double major. They don’t actually have pre-law, so I would just have to go to law school. I read somewhere that music is the second most accepted major into law school. It’s all about getting a good liberal arts education. I think the really top musicians—there’s a certain creativity—and I think that overall they probably have good minds and they tend to think a little more abstractly and be very—obviously—hard workers. It’s more of the qualities that will really carry them through, and I think that probably, in a sense, would help me to get into some more competitive Colleges.

In this excerpt, Brian appeared to be bringing his strongly identified musical identity into the service of his long-term goals. When we asked him about why he had decided on law, his response further clarified this, and he articulates the ways in which all three of these interests come together in the service of his future self:

I started to read more about philosophy, and I really like debating and talking about that stuff. Law has always been something that interests me. The little bit that we did studying the constitution, things like that, has interested me. I like to debate, and I think a lot of that works with philosophy. I think really the only purely philosophical thing that I could do is to teach philosophy, and I wasn’t exactly sure that I wanted to do that, but law is pretty close. In 10 or 20 years, if I go into law, I hope I would be working in a firm, working my way up. I would still be playing piano, even if it was something just for fun. I would always be playing the piano.

Brian had already thought about how he was going to live a life that was fulfilling of his need for achievement, where the work itself was aligned with his personal interests, and which would enable him to continue pursuing the identity he was most passionate about. He had considered not only his interests—his various identity explorations—but also the role those explorations and identities would play in his future self. Sometimes, rejecting an identity is just as powerful as selecting one as a commitment for the future. During our conversations, Brian clearly rejected two identities—teacher and musician:

If you want to be a performer, it's tough to find work some times. I talked to my band teacher who is really active in the job community here, things like that. His wife is an oboist in [a prominent city orchestra]. They tell me things, and it sounds like a really, really tough life, making it in these bigger orchestras and landing gigs and record deals. It's hard, and so I guess if you don't want to teach, then it's kind of a tough life. I'm not exactly sure if I'd want to teach at this point.
However, when we drilled down, he revealed that he would reconsider music teacher identity as a commitment if he found that, down the track, he no longer enjoyed law school. This is particularly important, because it means that not only had Brian made plans for his future, but that he had also made plans to actively and continually re-evaluate his commitments in relation to his sense of self. When asked about whether, if he found that university level law and philosophy did not satisfy his sense of self, and whether he would then consider switching to music, he responded, “Oh sure. If I was still in college, I would definitely feel comfortable switching.”

Brian is an example of someone who explored various identity pursuits throughout high school—jazz music, classical music, debating, philosophy—and reflected deeply on how much he enjoyed each of these and their value in his life. He had also not only made a firm commitment, but the commitment had been informed by imagining his future self, and considering the specific roles of his various identity pursuits. Debating and philosophy explorations led him to select law as a career ambition and he knows he will always have music, at least as a leisure activity that gives meaning and value to his life. If he does change his mind at university, his decision will be well-backed by years of reflection and understanding about various identity pursuits that have given him the skills to examine the merits of his various options and make an informed decision.

### 12.2.5 Summary

The point we are making with these illustrative case studies is not that it is necessarily important for adolescents to have firm ideas about their futures, and what they will do when they finish school and enter young adulthood. Rather, the ongoing dynamic processes involving exploration and commitment are part of healthy identity formations that should involve conscious reflections about the self and the future self. It is not simply enough to form the commitments by trying out different activities and identities before settling on one of them. Functional identity formations appeared to be supported by competence, relatedness, and particularly autonomy, and two of our illustrations, Margaret and Derek, showed the particularly negative effects of experiencing parental pressure and control in childhood.

In Fig. 12.3, we summarize our four examples of adolescents who started from a point of identity diffusion. Derek appears to have foreclosed on his identity, making an ambitious commitment without extensive exploration. In contrast, Judy, Margaret, and John explored their identities. Judy was still in a process of exploration and contemplating making a commitment as she approached the final years of high school. Margaret was ruminating anxiously on her exploration and, despite being in her final year of schooling, was indecisive about her commitment. Brian had thoroughly explored his musical identities and committed to his future self.

Healthy and adaptive identity formation involves consciously and continuously gathering information and reflecting on whether one’s commitments are aligned with and fulfilling one’s sense of self. In our illustrative examples throughout this section, we have
shown that these more healthy forms of identity pursuit and formation seem to occur in environments where the basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are fulfilled.

### 12.3 Transitioning into Adulthood

After the period of moratorium, where adolescents are, to varying extents, free to explore various identities without having to commit to them, young adulthood demands selection and commitment to a specific identity. The identity formation process is not final, and it is entirely healthy for people to continually reflect on various identity explorations and commit to them. Crucial decisions regarding tertiary education and entering the workforce, however, need to be made, which require significant identity commitments in order to be successful.

#### 12.3.1 Investment and commitment versus exiting musical involvement

There has always been a strand in music education research, which has attempted to understand why students “drop out” of active music learning activities (such as studio music lessons or elective music at school). Researchers have viewed this as a problem and attempted to investigate it by focussing on the reasons for ceasing instruction (Hallam, 1998; McEwan, 2012) or by examining socio-economic indicators (Klinedinst, 1991; Corenblum & Marshall, 1998). The negative view of “dropping out” of music learning reflects the anxiety teachers often express about retaining student numbers in elective programs, or the need to maintain full instrumentation in a school ensemble. Too often, such discussions view students’ choices to cease their musical participation as
negative or inappropriate, rather than considering it in the context of the child’s overall psychological well-being.

In this section, we describe the process of “dropping out” in terms of identity formation processes. Our preference is to articulate a view of ceasing music instruction, or “exiting” music involvement that frames selecting or rejecting an identity as a musician more positively. We also describe why people who exit from music learning maintain a kind of musical identity into the future, and why this is important for music educators.

In the context of this chapter, dropping out of music activities represents the rejection of a kind of musical identity, such that a person might actively explore and reflect on his or her identity, for example, as a clarinet player, but decide that it is not an activity that aligns with a sense of self, and reject it in favor of an alternative identity pursuit. A music teacher evaluating his or her program should be interested in whether the music learning environment was supportive of the student developing a positive musical identity—that is, whether the environment was supportive of the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We believe this to be a helpful way to frame discussions with students around why they are considering ceasing their music learning. Indeed, our research has noted that students continuing in music learning when their psychological needs are being thwarted may experience negative effects on their overall wellbeing (Evans et al., 2013). There will always, of course, be students, no matter how supportive their learning environment is, who decide not to dedicate significant proportions of their lives to the extensive practice necessary to develop in an ongoing way as a musician, just as there will always be students who choose not to dedicate significant proportions of their lives to studying history, mathematics, or any other particular pursuit offered in schools or the community.

Teachers should be concerned about students who exit formal music learning not because specialized music learning is for everyone, but because even those who leave formal music learning continue to have a musical identity in that they have beliefs, tastes, preferences, and attitudes about music and music education (McPherson et al., 2012). If learners depart music education because of negative experiences of psychological needs thwarting, they should be a concern for teachers and researchers. These students are likely to develop negative beliefs about the nature of music and the benefits of music learning. Evans (2009), for example, found evidence to suggest that beliefs and values about music learning in young adulthood related strongly to the experience of psychological needs fulfilment in early music experiences, not later ones. This suggests that disaffected students—those who experienced thwarting of their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy in their early music learning—may be less able to appreciate and enjoy the emotional, affective, and well-being benefits that music confers. They are probably also less likely to support music education in schools, and are less likely to dedicate the personal and economic resources to providing a quality music education to their own children.

Identity formation processes therefore have implications for educators. For all students, music learning environments should fulfil the basic psychological needs of
conclusion, relatedness, and autonomy. With these experiences, those who continue to choose formal music learning as a key identity pursuit will be able to make healthy and balanced decisions about the development of their careers. Many students will inevitably depart formal music learning as an identity pursuit. For these students, their experiences should have led to the formation of positive beliefs about the nature of music learning and the relationship between practice and achievement, and some experience of the well-being and psychological health benefits that music learning confers.

### 12.4 Conclusions

Adolescence is a stage of life in which people undergo processes related to attaining autonomy and independence from parents, as well as negotiating a place and role in a complex social environment. Crucial to these processes is the formation of a personal identity: a detailed response to the question, “Who am I?” For all adolescents, music is an integral part of this identity formation process. For some, active music-making may not play a core part of their eventual adult identity, but these individuals will still hold values and beliefs about music. Others may commit to a life of specialized musical expertise. All adolescents should be provided the opportunity to actively explore and reflect on the role of music in their lives, and commit to a musical identity that is fulfilling, aligned to their sense of self, and that allows them to enjoy the health and well-being benefits that music confers to everybody. The key to fruitful and enjoyable musical identity pursuits lies in the degree to which their experiences are fulfilling of the basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

### References


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