

## THE ROLE OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION MAKING PROCESS ON ADULT ATTACHMENT: A CROSS-NATIONAL STUDY IN SICILIAN AND ANDALUSIAN ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Literature shows that attachment styles are shaped by the first relationships children establish with their environment and that they continue during adolescence and have an influence on individual's identity development, and interpersonal relationships. Research has examined the role of identity and decision-making processes on adult attachment style.

**Method:** The participants were 162 students, aged between 18 and 36 ( $20.98 \pm 2.70$ ), coming from two countries, Sicily (Italy) and Andalusia (Spain), characterized by a different socio-cultural system and family context. The participants were assigned to complete the following questionnaires: the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ), the General Decision Making Style (GDMS) and the Experience in Close Relationship (ECR).

**Results:** Findings suggest that there are differences between Italy and Spain in adult attachment, identity development and decision-making process.

**Conclusions:** The results are in line with literature that underscored the notion that the Italian family is characterized by a high degree of emotional bonding and excessive support from both parents.

**Key words:** adolescence, attachment, identity, decision making, relationship

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**Declaration of interest:** none

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### Introduction

Attachment behavior is defined as a motivational system projected to regulate the proximity with the attachment figure (Williams and Riskind 2004). The principal determinants of attachment behavior development are the experiences with attachment figures in infancy, childhood and adolescence. Attachment theory hypothesizes that there is continuity in the relationship between caregivers and children as well as in the children's future relationships in adulthood, through the constitution of internal working models - IWM- (Bowlby 1973), whose functions are to lead the individuals to interpret the information from the outside world, and to guide their behavior in new situations (Craparo et al. 2014a, Giannini et al. 2011, Pellerone et al. 2016a, Pellerone et al. 2016b, Santisi et al. 2014).

Extensive literature on adult attachment indicates that people who differ in how they describe their attachment style (Feeney et al. 2008, Kidd et al. 2011), and in the quality of their working models, also differ in their global perceptions of interpersonal experiences and in their perceptions of themselves and others (Main and Goldwyn 1985; Main et al. 2003; Pellerone et al. 2016c, 2017; Pietromonaco and Barrett 1997).

Adult attachment styles can be categorized in the same way that Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) categorized children's attachment styles; they are based on the two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance (Main and Goldwyn 1985, Main et al. 2003): in particular, anxiety leads individuals to fear rejection and abandonment within intimate relationships, and avoidance determines discomfort with intimacy and the tendency to seek independence.

Similarly, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) show that attachment styles belonging to the anxiety and avoidance dimensions can be classified into four types:

- a) *secure*: characterized by a positive view of the self and others; it is typical of those individuals who are expressive, comfortable with closeness and able to depend on others; they can explore and develop new attitudes, roles and relationships (Zimmerman and Becker-Stoll 2002, Iacolino et al. 2016);
- b) *preoccupied or anxious/ambivalent*: with a negative view of the self and a positive view of others, characterized by being comfortable with closeness and fairly confident in the availability of others, but very worried about being abandoned (Mikulincer 1995);
- c) *fearful*: show a negative view of both self and others;

it is typical of those persons who have mixed feelings about close relationships: on the one hand, they desire to have emotionally close relationships, and, on the other hand, they tend to feel uncomfortable with emotional closeness;

- d) *dismissive*: characterized by a positive view of the self and a negative view of others, in which the desire for independence often appears as an attempt to avoid attachment altogether. They view themselves as self-sufficient and invulnerable to feelings associated with being closely attached to others.

From this point of view an attachment style can be considered as an important factor that shapes an individual's thoughts, feelings and behavior, above all when the individual has to make important life choices (Ceyhan 2006, Feeney et al. 2008). In fact, literature has amply demonstrated that parental responsiveness is a significant factor in determining the source of adolescence decision-making assistance; for example, Blustein and colleagues (1995) presented a theoretical research in which they explain why the experience of security provided by secure attachment relationships facilitates exploration of the self and environment, and progress through career decision making and commitment processes.

Conversely, insecure attachment leads to the inhibition of exploration and growth-oriented behaviors and, consequently reduces career decision-making self-efficacy and increases fear of commitment (Wolfe and Betz 2004, Ramaci et al. 2016). Similarly, Agheli and colleagues (2013) show that individuals with an avoidant style have significantly less emotional intelligence (Craparo et al. 2014) and they are not able to decide in many situations coherently, in comparison to individuals with a secure style. Unaware of their emotions, they are not able to deal with problems and make appropriate decisions, and in many situations they cannot make a logical decision (Specchiale et al. 2013).

Attachment styles are shaped by the first relationships children establish with their environment and they persist during adolescence and have an influence on identity development, decision making processes (Braunstein-Bercovitz 2013) and interpersonal relationships during adulthood (Hamilton 2000).

Alongside the traditional approach which emphasizes the study of the relationship between attachment and decision-making processes during adolescence, a smaller part of the literature explores the relationship between identity development, adult attachment and the ability to make important choices (Downing and Nauta 2010, Guerra and Braungart-Rieker 1999).

Marcia (1989) defines the concept of identity status as the style through which one faces identity problems, delineating two key components: a) the exploration of alternatives in relation to objectives, beliefs, and convictions; b) and the commitment with which individuals make choices on material issues (Fermani et al 2008, Pellerone 2015); so that, by jointly analyzing the two dimensions, four identity statuses are identified:

- a) *achievement*, characterized by a high level of exploration of the possible alternatives, followed by a high level of commitment in the choices;
- b) *moratorium* status characterized by tension and reflection on the different solutions, although a choice has not yet been made;
- c) *foreclosure*, distinguished by uncritical adhesion to the infantile identificatory models, without experimenting with alternative ones;

- d) *diffusion*, characterized by effect superficial experimentations, without reflections and therefore not aiming at a future commitment (Crocetti et al. 2008).

Over the years, Marcia's model has been integrated, organizing the four identity statuses along a healthy versus unhealthy continuum, distinguishing the following (Pellerone et al. 2015):

- a) *achievement* status, typical of those individuals who manifest positive self-image, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility and independence; they are self-directed and highly adaptive;
- b) *moratorium*, characterized by greater uncertainty, fears for the future, limited flexibility, and reduced cooperation; they are sensitive or anxiety-ridden, highly ethical or self-righteous, flexible or vacillating;
- c) *foreclosure*, typical of those individuals who manifest conventionality, rigidity, low self-esteem, lack of autonomy, and relationships with conflict; foreclosure individuals may be seen either as steadfast or rigid, committed or dogmatic, cooperative or conforming;
- d) *diffusion*, typical of those who show greater flexibility and cognitive complexity but poor self-respect, and have relationships which are not very satisfactory. Individuals with identity diffusions may be considered either carefree or careless.

As identity development involves the exploration process, and adult attachment style is the result of an exploration which people experience on themselves and on others (using the internal working models), adult attachment style is expected to correlate with identity development.

In fact, literature shows that identity development involves exploration, which is promoted by secure attachments and inhibited by insecure attachments, such as the avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles. In particular, research on college students showed that: secure attachments appeared to facilitate identity development and prevent identity diffusion, by promoting an identity commitment and encouraging the exploration of identity alternatives (Samuolis et al. 2001). So, adolescent attachment to parents and peers mediates personal and social identity by providing the adolescent with a base from which to develop identity (Meeus et al. 2005). In line with Marcia's model, Kennedy (1999) reported that secure individuals manifested a higher identity development than fearful (anxious) individuals; they also seemed to have lower moratorium scores than preoccupied (anxious and avoidant) individuals, and lower identity diffusion than fearful and preoccupied individuals.

Likewise, Zimmermann and Becker-Stoll (2002) showed that: attachment security was related to identity achievement in adolescence; dismissing (avoidant) attachment was related to identity diffusion; preoccupied (anxious) attachment was marginally related to identity diffusion.

While most adolescents are engaged in identity formation processes, many are also entering into romantic relationships. Their attachment representations are reshaped, influencing their future relationships and life decisions in adulthood (Feeney and Van Vleet 2010, Meier and Allen 2009).

Although adolescent relationships do not contain all of the characteristics of adult attachments, the attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance operate as a sort of magnifying lens that allows us to investigate the adolescents' intimacy within current or

anticipated romantic relationships, and they could affect adolescents' engagements in this potentially important context for identity development.

Recently, Berzonsky et al. (2011) have reported that identity exploration styles are structured from childhood experiences through parental response capacity, regulation of behavior, and support for independence, as well as through adolescents' identification with their parents. These same dynamics are the foundation of child attachments to caregivers and may inform romantic attachment paths manifested in adolescence and adulthood.

The attachment dimensions in romantic relationships depend in part on actual or expected experience in those types of relationships. Therefore, their emergence could be expected initially to be informed by relationships with parents and friends and, later, by experiences with dating partners. In particular, Seiffge-Krenke et al. (2001) found in a longitudinal study that formation of a separate identity at age 17 predicted less relationship obsession, sexual attraction, love at first sight and fear of closeness at age 20. Similarly, in another longitudinal study, Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) found direct links between identity development in middle adolescence and intimacy in early adulthood (Craparo 2014, 2014b; Craparo et al. 2013).

Few researches have tested models involving associations between identity, decision-making and the attachment dimensions of avoidance and anxiety, nor have the collective associations with identity commitment been examined. Such an examination is important because of the information it could provide about the emergence and active intersection of identity formation and romantic relationships, and of their influence within the decision-making process during adulthood.

Furthermore, although the identity statuses imply how exploration and commitment may be associated with each other and how they may relate with other constructs (such as romantic attachment and decision-making processes) in order to directly test these associations, indicators of identity exploration and commitment need to be measured separately, as they are in the current study, so as not to confound the two processes.

Based on this background, the aim of the present study is to verify the role of identity and decision-making processes on the adult attachment style in a population of Italian and Spanish undergraduates.

## Objectives and hypothesis

The present study explores the role of identity development and decision making process on the adult attachment style, to identify possible similarities and differences between two samples of the Mediterranean area, Sicily (Italy) and Andalusia (Spain). Both Italy and Spain have two clearly differentiated major regions: a northern region, where nuclear, conjugal, or restricted family structures are more frequent; and a southern region, where extended, parental, or enlarged families are predominant (Borsa and Nunes 2011, Miller 1987). In this sense, as historiographical and anthropological research has suggested, Italy, Spain and Greece are different from other European areas in that they share some social and cultural features that are less marked, or not present, in other European countries (Micheli 2012):

*Hypothesis 1:* due to the specificity of the Italian culture in structuring mutual relations - in which emotional closeness and loyalty are demanded - the

development of the personal individuation will be hampered by a sort of foreclosing family system, only in the Italian adolescents.

*Hypothesis 2:* the group of participants with a low-profile status will sometimes tend to use a dependent decisional style (characterized by the continual search for others' advice and opinions before facing a choice) and sometimes use an avoiding style (typical of those people who make continual attempts at doing things in order to avoid ever taking a decision about what to do); and adolescents with high-profile status will tend to use a rational style (characterized by an in depth search for information and a systematic evaluation of alternatives).

*Hypothesis 3:* lower level of anxiety and avoidance will be associated with a more functional decision-making style, such as actively taking steps to solve the problem, and not retreating into avoidance in both groups (Italian and Spanish students).

*Hypothesis 4:* identity development, and in general the degree to which an individual is able to explore life, will influence the level of anxiety and avoidance within adult attachment.

*Hypothesis 5:* the predictive variables to the secure adult attachment will be: age, level of identity development and the use of functional decision making style.

## Materials and methods

We used a cross-sectional, ex post facto, retrospective, two groups, one measurement research design (Montero and León 2007).

### Participants

A total of 82 Sicilian students, of which 10 boys (12%) and 72 girls (88%), who attended a College in the south of Italy (Enna) and 80 Andalusian students, of which 24 boys (30%) and 56 girls (70%) who attended a College in the south of Spain (Jaen) completed self-report questionnaires.

As regards the age variable, the Italian students were stratified into: a group of 49 adolescents (59.8%) aged between 18 and 20 ( $19.78 \pm 0.47$ ) and a group of 33 young adults (40.2%) aged from 21 to 36 ( $23.39 \pm 3.00$ ). The Spanish students were stratified into: a group of 48 adolescents (60%) aged between 18 and 20 ( $18.96 \pm 0.82$ ) and a group of 32 young adults (40%) aged from 21 to 35 ( $23.40 \pm 2.51$ ).

To ensure ethical standards, we sent informed consent forms to the students' parents and/or legal guardians. After receiving signed consent from the parents, we then visited the students who had been authorized to take part in the study and asked them to sign a consent form.

Before administering the questionnaire to the students, we informed them that participation was anonymous and voluntary and explained the objective of the study. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was 30 minutes. Convenience sampling was performed owing to accessibility.

Participants completed all self-report measures consecutively. They also provided information on their age, gender, and ethnicity prior to completing questionnaires.

Researchers collected data during the Erasmus teaching program, conducted between 2015 and 2016. In particular, data were collected in two separate periods of time (data from Italy were collected first, then the Spanish data).

The research procedures described in this article were performed in compliance with: the American Psychological Association, the Italian Psychological Association ethical guidelines for research and the ethical guidelines of the Spanish Psychological Society, and in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, the statement of ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects.

The research was approved by the IRB, Internal Review Board, of Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at the “Kore” University of Enna.

**Instruments**

The instruments used were the following: ad hoc questionnaire designed to detect biographical data (gender, age, country, institution); the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire, the General Decision Making Style, and the Experience in Close Relationship.

The *32-Item Ego Identity Process Questionnaire* (EIPQ; Balistreri et al. 1995) investigates identity status development according to Marcia’s model through the dimensions of exploration and commitment. The exploration level is measured through the analysis of four ideological domains (occupation, religion, politics, and values), and the commitment level is investigated through four interpersonal domains (family, friendships, gender roles, and sentimental relationships). The assessment is made a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Balistreri and colleagues (1995) reported the estimates of internal validity of the tool: 0.80 for the results that indicate commitment and 0.86 for the scores that indicate exploration; the scores that indicate reliability are 0.90 for commitment and 0.76 for exploration; the internal consistency is 0.72 and 0.71 for commitment and exploration, respectively.

The *General Decision Making Style* (GDMS-R; Scott and Bruce 1995): constructed for detecting individual decisional style, is a questionnaire consisting of 25 items grouped into five subscales corresponding to five decisional styles: rational (in depth search for information and systematic evaluation of alternatives), intuitive (confidence in one’s own intuitions and feelings), dependent (search for advice and opinions from people that are considered competent), avoidant (attempt to avoid decision making), and spontaneous (making the choice in the shortest possible time). The assessment is made on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The Italian version shows that Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients vary from a minimum of alpha 0.68 for the rational scale to a maximum of 0.83 for the avoidant scale and 0.75 for spontaneous scale.

The *Experience in Close Relationship* (ECR; Brennan et al. 1998): used to evaluate the construct

of adult attachment. Participants rate each of the 36 item self- report about connection using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). It groups people into four different categories on the basis of scores along two scales. The ECR is designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety (i.e., the extent to which people are insecure vs. secure about the availability and responsiveness of romantic partners) and attachment-related avoidance (i.e., the extent to which people are uncomfortable being close to others vs. secure depending on others). From the intersection of anxiety and avoidance scores t four types of attachment are identified: *secure* (low avoidance and anxiety), *worried* (low avoidance and high anxiety), *detached* (high avoidance, low anxiety) and *fearful* (high avoidance and anxiety). The difference between secure and not secure attachment was based on the cut-off 3.46 for anxiety and 2.93 for avoidance (Santa-Maria et al. 2007). Brennan and colleagues (1998) reported that the ECR had a high level of internal consistency in a sample of undergraduates, with coefficient alphas of .91 and .94 for the Anxiety and Avoidance subscales, respectively. Results from Italian studies of undergraduates (Picardi et al. 2000) also indicated a high level of internal consistency for the Anxiety subscale ( $\alpha= 0.90$ ) and the Avoidance subscale ( $\alpha=0.88$ ).

**Data analysis**

In reference to preliminary data the following analyses were performed: T-Test for independent groups was conducted in order to compare the scores obtained with the administration of the instruments to Italian and Spanish subjects; the Levene Test to measure the null hypothesis equal variances; multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to verify the influence of sex, age on identity, decisional style and relationships style.

In order to verify the first hypothesis, T-Test for independent groups was conducted; to assess the second and the third hypotheses two Pearson correlation analyses were conducted; to measure the fourth hypothesis a Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used; an analysis of hierarchical regression for separate blocks was used to verify the last research hypothesis.

The level of significance was 0.05. All analyses were conducted with SPSS software (v 23.0).

**Results**

In reference to the identity development, T-Test shows that there are significant differences in all measurements (**table 1**). Spanish students manifest higher mean scores than Italian ones in the following

**Table 1.** T Test for independent group in reference to identity development (Sicily versus Andalusia)

Measures	Italy	Spain	Levene’s Test		Student’s Test		
	M ± SD	M ± SD	F	P-value	t	df	P
Occupation	4.10± 0.83	11.78 ± 1.48	27.46	<.001	-41.00	123.42	<.001
Religion	52.50 ± 7.88	13.19 ± 2.05	26.33	<.001	43.20	92.17	<.001
Politics	49.48 ± 7.20	12.56 ± 1.83	34.59	<.001	44.49	91.73	<.001
Value	3.16 ± 0.97	12.18 ± 2.16	30.85	<.001	-34.23	109.07	<.001
Family	3.09 ± 1.08	13.8 ± 2.25	42.47	<.001	-38.71	113.10	<.001
Friendship	4.02 ± 1.91	13.75 ± 1.97	.33	.57	-31.88	159.51	<.001
Gender roles	3.72 ± 2.62	12.54 ± 2.35	2.83	.09	-22.53	158.87	<.001
Sent. relationships	12.34 ± 1.98	14.13 ± 2.51	2.20	.14	-5.03	149.90	<.001

dimensions: occupation, value, family, friendships, gender roles and sentimental relationships.

In reference to decision-making and adult attachment styles (**table 2**) the analysis shows that the Spanish students manifest higher mean scores in rational, dependent and intuitive styles; regarding the

To assess the first research hypothesis, the T-Test for independent group was carried out, comparing the level of identity development in two groups of students (Spanish versus Italian). Confirming the hypothesis, the results show that the two groups differ in the level of exploration ( $F_{(1,160)} = 45.27; p < .001$ ) and commitment

**Table 2.** T Test for independent group in reference to decision making and adult attachment styles (Sicily versus Andalusia)

Measures	Italy	Spain	Levene's Test		Student's Test		
	M ± SD	M ± SD	F	P-value	t	df	P
Rational Style	13.43± 2.32	17.92 ± 2.86	4.25	.041	-10.94	.160	<.001
Dependent Style	11.04 ± 2.32	18.06 ± 3.73	12.01	.001	-14.39	.160	<.001
Avoidant Style	13,23 ± 1.82	13.00 ± 4.27	43.55	.000	.450	.160	.653
Intuitive Style	13.81 ± 2.42	17.38 ± 3.22	6.94	.009	-7.99	.160	<.001
Spontaneous Style	14.02 ± 2.66	11.70 ± 3.64	5.05	.026	4.64	.160	<.001
Avoidance	23.18 ± 4.36	16.26 ± 4.66	1.38	.242	9.75	.160	<.000
Anxiety	14.15 ± 4.63	20.38 ± 6.18	11.61	.001	-7.25	.160	<.000

adult attachment, Italian students present a lower level of anxiety but a higher level of avoidance than Spanish ones.

With regards to identity, results of 2 (gender: male and female) x 2 (age: 18-20 young, and 21-36 adults) analysis of variance showed that there are no effects of interaction. Only gender shows significant differences ( $F = 3.76; p = .050$ ) as regards identity commitment; the analysis of mean scores underlines that males show a greater commitment than females (Male:  $M = 10.74$ ; Female:  $M = 9.12$ ).

As regards decisional style, analysis showed that there are some effects of interaction ( $p < .01$ ) and, in particular the rational ( $p < .001$ ) and the intuitive style ( $p < .01$ ). The analysis shows that with increasing age, the rational style decreases in males (Age I:  $M = 18.47$ ; Age II:  $M = 14.84$ ) and increases in females (Age I:  $M = 14.85$ ; Age II:  $M = 15.88$ ). Some trends were identified as regards the intuitive style: in the transition from the first to the second age-group, the score decreases in men (Age I:  $M = 17.42$ ; Age II:  $M = 14.76$ ) and it grows in women (Age I:  $M = 14.96$ ; Age II:  $M = 15.94$ ).

In reference to adult attachment style, analysis showed the effect of interaction age x gender ( $p < .01$ ) on the cluster anxiety ( $p < .01$ ). The multivariate test of between-subjects effects shows significant effect as regard the level of anxiety ( $p = .006 F = 3.65$ ), which decreases in males (Age I:  $M = 21.62$ ; Age II:  $M = 15.67$ ), but increases in females (Age I:  $M = 16.38$ ; Age II:  $M = 17.09$ ).

( $F_{(1,160)} = 1.26; p < .001$ ): the Italian subjects present average scores significantly lower in exploration (Group A:  $23.69 ± 9.50$ ; Group B:  $12.43 ± 1.01$ ) but higher in commitment (Group A:  $5.52 ± 1.78$ ; Group B:  $13.57 ± 1.34$ ).

To value the second hypothesis, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted (**table 3**). In reference to the adolescent group, it shows that the level of identity exploration: correlates positively with rational and spontaneous decision-making styles, but negatively with dependent and intuitive styles. Furthermore, commitment correlates positively with rational and intuitive styles, but negatively with dependent and spontaneous styles.

In the young adults group, the same analysis shows that: exploration correlates positively with rational style, but negatively with dependent and intuitive styles; identity commitment correlates positively with rational, dependent and intuitive styles, but negatively with avoidant style (**table 4**). This data partially confirms the research hypothesis.

To test the third hypothesis a correlation analysis was conducted between the scores of adult attachment (anxiety and avoidance) and the scores that students report on decision-making styles (rational, dependent, avoidant, intuitive and spontaneous). In reference to the Sicilian students, results show that the cluster of ECR – Avoidance – in close relationship correlates negatively with rational style ( $r = -.310; p < .001$ ). In the Andalusian group, anxiety correlates positively with dependent

**Table 3.** Correlation between dimensions of identity and decision making styles in adolescents

Measures	Rational	Dependent	Avoidant	Intuitive	Spontaneous
1. Exploration	.323**	-.468**	-.124	-.393**	.216*
2. Commitment	.654**	-.738**	.133	.507**	-.415**

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

**Table 4.** Correlation between dimensions of identity and decision making styles in young adults

Measures	Rational	Dependent	Avoidant	Intuitive	Spontaneous
1. Exploration	.452**	-.582**	.123	-.380**	.043
2. Commitment	.596**	.684**	-.326**	.554**	-.222

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$

( $r=.296$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and avoidant styles ( $r=.281$ ;  $p<.001$ ); the cluster of ECR – Avoidance – in close relationship correlates positively with avoidant ( $r=.248$ ;  $p<.05$ ), and spontaneous styles ( $r=.249$ ;  $p<.05$ ). The hypothesis is, therefore, confirmed.

A subsequent ANOVA shows the main effect of identity (Wilk’s lambda = 0.45;  $p<.001$ ) on ECR scales. The analysis shows the influence of identity on both the level of anxiety ( $F=15.30$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and avoidance ( $F=27.98$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

In particular, Tukey’s post hoc shows that: the highest scores in cluster Avoidance are achieved by students with foreclosure status (table 5), and Cluster Anxiety by students with moratorium status (table 6). The research hypothesis and international literature are therefore, confirmed.

In order to explore the predictive variables of secure adult attachment, an analysis of hierarchical regression for separate blocks was used: (a) gender, age and country in the 1<sup>st</sup> block; (b) the level of identity development in the 2<sup>nd</sup> block; (c) the decision making style in the 3<sup>rd</sup> block. Each block of independent variables is evaluated in terms of what they add to the explanation of the variability of the dependent variable at the time of their entry, evaluating the weight of all predictors.

The analyses show that the type of country and the avoidant decisional style are predictive variables of the level of anxiety (table 7).

**Table 5.** Tukey’s post hoc for the level of avoidance

IDENTITY	N	AVOIDANCE
		1
Foreclosure	78	16.37
Achievement	2	17.45
Diffusion	5	22.32
Moratorium	77	23.10
Sign.		.079

**Table 6.** Tukey’s post hoc for the level of anxiety

IDENTITY	N	ANXIETY
		1
Moratorium	77	14.27
Diffusion	5	14.80
Foreclosure	78	20.22
Achievement	2	20.95
Sign.		.197

**Table 7.** Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the level of anxiety in all group

Model	Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	SE	B	T	P-value
1	Age	.253	.239	.883	-.052	-.754	.452
	Gender			1.085	-.068	-.958	.339
	Country			.885	.481	6.814	<.001***
2	Age	.297	.245	.929	-.048	-.656	.513
	Gender			1.111	-.065	-.900	.369
	Country			5.219	.771	1.852	.066
	Occupation			.378	.199	.819	.414
	Religion			.138	.507	1.131	.260
	Politics			.150	-.279	-.608	.544
	Value			.286	-.082	-.373	.710
	Family			.274	-.338	-1.362	.175
	Friendship			.245	-.059	-.286	.775
	Gender roles			.187	.246	1.619	.108
	Sentim. relationships			.206	-.062	-.777	.438
	2			Age	.337	.263	.924
Gender		1.128	-.085	-1.158			.249
Country		5.248	.737	1.760			.081
Occupation		.388	.072	.291			.771
Religion		.137	.613	1.369			.173
Politisc		.151	-.426	-.924			.357
Value		.293	-.100	-.444			.658
Family		.278	-.262	-1.043			.299
Friendship		.245	-.067	-.329			.743
Gender roles		.188	.229	1.506			.134
Sent. relationships		.208	-.058	-.724			.470
Rational Style		.183	.077	.769			.443
Dependent Style		.153	.111	.973			.332
Avoidant Style		.142	.141	1.899			.050*
Intuitive Style		.159	-.093	-1.090			.277
Spontaneous Style	.146	.009	.119	.906			

Note:  $\beta$ = beta standardized coefficients; \*\*\*  $p<.001$ ; \*  $p<.05$ .

**Table 8.** Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the level of avoidance in all group

Model	Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	SE	B	T	P-value
1	Age	.376	.364	.727	.082	1.297	.197
	Gender			.893	.007	.103	.918
	Country			.729	-.607	-9.396	<.001***
2	Age	.457	.417	.117	.117	1.839	.068
	Gender			.040	.040	.630	.529
	Country			-.475	-.475	-1.297	.197
	Occupation			.107	.107	.501	.617
	Religion			.296	.296	.752	.453
	Politics			-.045	-.045	-.111	.912
	Value			-.311	-.311	-1.613	.109
	Family			.147	.147	.675	.501
	Friendship			-.186	-.186	-1.030	.305
	Gender roles			.467	.467	3.499	.001***
	Sent. relationships			-.184	-.184	-2.626	.010**
2	Age	.535	.483	.105	.105	1.745	.083
	Gender			.004	.004	.062	.950
	Country			-.386	-.386	-1.101	.273
	Occupation			.260	.260	1.246	.215
	Religion			.215	.215	.572	.568
	Politics			.171	.171	.444	.658
	Value			-.232	-.232	-1.233	.220
	Family			.293	.293	1.395	.165
	Friendship			-.143	-.143	-.833	.406
	Gender roles			.424	.424	3.333	.001***
	Sent.. relationships			-.135	-.135	-1.999	.048*
	Rational Style			-.162	-.162	-1.916	.047*
	Dependent Style			-.303	-.303	-3.164	.002**
	Avoidant Style			.203	.203	3.275	.001***
	Intuitive Style			.016	.016	.219	.827
Spontaneous Style			.043	.043	.651	.516	

Note: β= beta standardized coefficients; \*\*\* p <.001; \*\* p <.01; \* p <.05.

In contrast, the predictors of the level of avoidance in adult attachment are the following dimensions (**table 8**): the type of country, to attribute great importance to the dimension of gender roles, and low importance to the sentimental relationships, and the tendency to use avoidant style, and not to use rational and dependent styles.

## Discussion

This study explored the role of identity development and decision making style on adult attachment styles among teenagers and young adults in Italy (Sicily) and Spain (Andalusia).

The first goal is to recognize if the development of personal identity can be hampered by a sort of exclusion from the system of the family in Italian students. In this respect it was found that Italian subjects present lower identity exploration than Spanish ones, who manifest higher levels of identity commitment. These results are in line with other studies (Manzi et al. 2006) that underscored the notion that the Italian family is characterized by a high degree of emotional bonding and excessive support from both parents, yet also by restrictions and by relations of enmeshment; this also lends support to other observations regarding the presence and maintenance of adolescents' requirements and restrictions (Lanz and Tagliabue 2007). Moreover, the literature underlines that foreclosure status may be

more common in collective cultures, but it probably is a healthier and more adaptive identity status in a stable pre-modern cultural context (Sheng 2014).

In reference to the second aim, as was raised initially, the data suggests that in adolescent groups, a good level of identity exploration and commitment led the subjects to make rational choices, which were characterized by a complete and exhaustive search for information and possible consequences, although high-profile identity prevents them from making dependent choices, characterized by the continual search for others' advice and opinions before facing a choice.

This differs with the findings for young adults, in which identity exploration leads them to use a rational style, but prevents them from making dependent and intuitive choices; moreover, commitment leads the young adults to use rational, dependent or intuitive styles, but prevents them from making avoidant choice. This difference is also consistent with the transitional developmental property of Moratorium and Diffusion statuses, out of which many adolescents move but into which few adolescents drift.

The third goal is to value if a low level of anxiety and avoidance is associated with a more functional decision-making style in both groups. In this respect, it was found that in reference to the Italian students, the cluster of ECR – Avoidance – in close relationships correlates negatively with rational style. This data confirms the recent literature which underlines the

effect of adult attachment on decision-making styles (Brown and Reuben 2012, Halama and Pitel 2016).

In the Spanish group, anxiety correlates positively with dependent and avoidant styles; and the cluster of ECR – Avoidance – in close relationships correlates positively with avoidant and spontaneous decisional styles. So, according to the literature, anxious subjects, doubting their worth and lovability, tend to seek validation and reassurance from others by meeting certain standards of worth and value (Park et al. 2004).

Confirming the fourth research hypothesis, students with foreclosure status seem to manifest a high level of avoidance, and students with moratorium status seem to present a high level of anxiety.

According to the literature, individuals who are more anxious about their self-worth may be more likely to be stressed into finding out more about the self and, consequently, are more explorative (Craparo et al. 2014, Magnano et al. 2014, Magnano et al. 2016). So anxious subjects were more likely to be explorative, but found it harder to make commitment (more in Moratorium, less in Foreclosure), compared to individuals with other attachment styles (Sheng 2014). In conclusion, predictive models suggest that the level of anxiety increases when it is in the repertoire which includes the avoidant style and, above all in subjects belonging to Italian culture and family contexts.

Otherwise, the prediction model avoidance trend shows that the tendency to avoid choices, and the reduced use of rational or dependent decision-making style, the elevated importance that students attribute to gender roles but the reduced importance to sentimental relationships, and above all the belonging to Italian culture are predictive variables to the cluster of ECR – Avoidance – in close relationships.

This finding could be explained by the fact that in Sicilian culture, roles within the family are greatly emphasized, and individuals have a strong need to meet social expectations. This idea of the importance, very common among Southern Italians, of making a good impression (*Fare bella figura*) when interacting with other people, is very much a matter of showing integrity and of leading people to have respect for them; when they are not able to adopt to social pressure - that is, when they make a “bad impression”- they therefore feel shame. So exposure to perfectionism and to an authoritarian parenting style may bring the individual to the perception of rigorous expectations, self-esteem linked to success, and fear of disappointing others and high level of anxiety and avoidance in close relationships (Pellerone et al. 2016b).

These findings suggest that there are differences between Italy and Spain in adult attachment, identity development and decision-making processes. In fact, considering the importance of adult attachment styles and how they impact relations on the world stage, it seems indeed significant to discover that the cultural context of belonging and the ways in which one faces a choice may be more influential than identity development in determining outcomes related to levels of anxiety and avoidance manifested in close relationships.

## Conclusion

Generally, the present study provides support for the research hypotheses, although some limitations need to be better addressed by future research, such as the absence of a sampling method, which prevents the presence of a representative sample, the generalization

of the results, and the external validity.

Furthermore, results should be interpreted with caution due to the participants involved, in particular because of the presence of a greater number of women than men in both groups of the sample, which makes generalizations difficult.

Another limit is represented by the absence of a longitudinal-type study design, which would be more suitable for research involving adolescents and their identity development; future research should strive to conduct longitudinal studies examining the developmental trajectories of adolescents’ perceptions of parenting and family functioning across diverse cultures.

Furthermore, the use of a cross-sectional design is not sufficient for establishing a causal relationship. In this sense, future research should conduct studies in other cultural contexts, not belonging to Mediterranean regions, in order to compare cultural patterns of different families (patterns that have been present for years in the theoretical models of the social sciences, but for which the empirical evidence is still extremely scarce) with the object of enriching the database and facilitating the identification of further variables that contribute to generating positive outcomes.

Moreover, the identity development, the decision making process and the adult attachment type were measured through the use of self-report, which implies a risk of misleading information or social desirability (Stone et al. 1999), and it may also introduce some measurement biases across different cultures and age groups.

However the construction of research in different culture contexts represents one of the strengths of this research, which tries to replicate and interpret the data in other socio-cultural environments.

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