

## ПЕДАГОГІЧНА ТА ВІКОВА ПСИХОЛОГІЯ

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### THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN IDENTITY FORMATION DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD

*Identity formation is a central developmental task of emerging adulthood, traditionally conceptualized through cognitive and behavioural frameworks such as Erikson's psychosocial theory and Marcia's identity status paradigm. More recent process-oriented models describe identity as a dynamic cycle of exploration, commitment, and reconsideration. Although these approaches offer valuable insight into what emerging adults do as they construct identity, they give significantly less attention to the emotional mechanisms that support this process. Emotional intelligence, understood as the capacity to perceive, interpret, and regulate emotional experience, provides a promising framework for explaining how young adults navigate uncertainty, evaluate self-relevant information, and integrate emotional feedback into coherent self-understanding.*

*This paper argues that emotional intelligence is not merely an adjunct to cognitive exploration but a foundational mechanism that enables identity consolidation. By examining emotional awareness, emotional understanding, and emotion regulation, the paper proposes that emotional intelligence transforms immediate affective states into reflective insight, helping individuals tolerate ambiguity, refine commitments, and sustain a coherent sense of self. Emotional capacities also shape identity in relational contexts by guiding empathy, perspective-taking, and responsiveness to social feedback.*

*The aim of the paper is to articulate a comprehensive model in which emotional intelligence functions as a developmental mediator linking cognitive processes, interpersonal relationships, and emerging adult identity. By integrating emotional, developmental, and social perspectives, the article expands existing identity theory and highlights emotion as a central organizing force in the transition to adulthood.*

**Key words:** emerging adulthood, identity formation, emotional intelligence, emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships.

**Formulation of the problem.** Identity formation represents one of the most critical psychological challenges of emerging adulthood. Erik Erikson defined "identity versus role confusion" as the central psychosocial crisis of adolescence, yet subsequent theorists extended this process into early adulthood [4]. Jeffrey Arnett described this period as a prolonged stage of exploration in which individuals revisit and refine their self-concepts in light of new experiences and responsibilities [1]. During this transitional phase, young adults engage in exploration across academic, vocational, relational, and ideological domains as they strive to construct a stable and enduring sense of self.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** Although identity formation has been extensively

studied, much of the existing scholarship conceptualizes it primarily through cognitive and behavioural mechanisms. For example, James Marcia's [11] identity status paradigm focuses on processes of exploration and commitment; Kroger and Marcia [8] further elaborate how these cycles continue into early adulthood. Similarly, researchers such as Schwartz and Bardi [17], Luyckx, Schwartz, Berzonsky, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits and Goossens [3], and Meeus [14] examine identity as a dynamic interplay of choices, commitments, and reconsiderations. Furthermore, Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens and Duriez [10] demonstrated that satisfaction of basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – supports healthier identity develop-

ment, yet the emotional mechanisms enabling emerging adults to meet these needs remain underexplored. Together these perspectives illuminate the structural and cognitive processes of identity development, yet they give limited attention to the emotional mechanisms that shape how individuals interpret experiences, tolerate uncertainty and integrate self-relevant information.

In other words, although scholars offer rich accounts of what emerging adults do as they form identity – explore, commit, reconsider – they say comparatively little about how they manage the emotional complexity that accompanies these developmental tasks. The emotional processes underlying identity consolidation remain insufficiently articulated in the literature. This absence creates a conceptual gap: identity development cannot be fully understood without considering the affective competencies that support reflection, regulation, and self-understanding.

**Task statement.** Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine emotional intelligence as a key mechanism underlying identity formation during emerging adulthood. It explores how emotional competencies – particularly self-awareness, emotional understanding, and regulation – enable individuals to transform emotional experience into coherent and stable elements of self. By addressing this gap, the article seeks to expand existing developmental models by incorporating the emotional dimension that has been largely overlooked.

This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of identity development, one that integrates cognitive exploration with affective processing. With this foundation in place, we can now consider more closely how emotional intelligence functions as a developmental mediator in the transition to adulthood.

**Outline of the main material of the study.** Salovey and Mayer [16] originally defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to perceive, understand, and manage emotions to guide adaptive behaviour. Later theorists, including Goleman [6] as well as Petrides and Furnham [15], expanded this definition to include motivational and personality components. Emotional intelligence encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal domains: recognizing one's emotions and understanding others' emotions to sustain effective relationships [12].

In the context of emerging adulthood, these competencies are not optional – they are developmental necessities. Emotional self-awareness supports reflection on personal goals; emotional understanding helps interpret the affective consequences of choices;

and regulation maintains stability amid uncertainty. Together, these functions bridge experience and self-definition, allowing emotions to serve as informational cues rather than disruptive forces.

Affective processes provide the background against which identity decisions acquire meaning. While cognitive theories describe exploration and commitment as structurally organized processes, they often overlook the fact that emerging adults make such evaluations under conditions of emotional activation. Emotional intelligence offers a framework for understanding how affective signals are interpreted, calibrated, and transformed into self-relevant insight. Individuals with higher emotional awareness are better able to detect subtle shifts in internal states, allowing them to recognize when uncertainty, conflict, or ambivalence arises in the identity domain. Emotional understanding enables them to interpret these states rather than react impulsively, granting the reflective distance necessary for coherent decision-making.

Emotion regulation further supports identity work by allowing individuals to manage discomfort during exploration. Identity-related decisions are frequently accompanied by anxiety, doubt, and fear of failure; regulation skills mitigate these reactions, preventing avoidance or premature foreclosure. In this sense, emotion regulation functions as a stabilizing mechanism that protects the integrity of the exploratory process. Research in affective neuroscience demonstrates that maturation of the prefrontal cortex enhances regulatory capacity, enabling the integration of emotional and cognitive information. Emotional intelligence may therefore serve as a developmental conduit through which neurobiological maturation translates into psychological coherence.

Empirical research supports the mediating role of emotional intelligence in adaptive functioning. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence show greater psychological well-being, lower stress reactivity, and more coherent self-concepts [2; 9]. Conversely, deficits in emotional understanding are associated with impulsivity, identity diffusion, and emotional instability [17]. Thus, emotional intelligence does not simply buffer against distress – it actively structures the way individuals interpret and integrate experience into identity.

In turn, identity development involves transforming diverse experiences into a coherent self-narrative. McLean and Pratt [13] describe this process as “narrative identity,” where individuals construct a sense of continuity and meaning through autobiographical reflection. Emotional intelligence provides the tools for this reflective synthesis.

By accurately identifying emotions, emerging adults can discern patterns in their responses, recognize underlying values, and form consistent self-conceptions.

Self-awareness allows individuals to access the emotional meaning of experiences, while emotional understanding connects these experiences to broader life themes. Regulation ensures that emotional intensity does not fragment the emerging sense of self. This triadic process – awareness, understanding, and regulation – constitutes emotional integration, the mechanism through which transient emotional states become enduring insights. Through this integrative process emotionally intelligent reflection transforms emotion from a reactive signal into a constructive source of self-knowledge. For example, frustration during career exploration may reveal underlying values such as autonomy or creativity. Integrating this awareness into identity promotes direction and authenticity. Without emotional intelligence, however, affective experiences remain chaotic, hindering self-coherence.

Moreover, emotionally intelligent reflection enhances authenticity. Research indicates that individuals with higher emotional clarity experience greater self-acceptance and alignment between behaviour and values [7]. This alignment fosters a sense of authenticity – an essential marker of mature identity.

Furthermore, recent findings in neuroscience provide biological evidence for the interdependence of emotional regulation and identity formation. During emerging adulthood, the prefrontal cortex continues to mature, strengthening neural connections with the limbic system – the brain's emotional centre [5; 18]. This integration enhances executive control over affective impulses, supporting reflective judgment and emotional balance.

From a neurodevelopmental perspective, emotional intelligence reflects the brain's increasing capacity for coordination between cognitive and affective systems. As neural pathways supporting regulation and perspective-taking mature, individuals gain the ability to reinterpret emotional experiences and maintain continuity of self. Emotional intelligence, therefore, represents both a psychological construct and a neurobiological process underpinning identity development.

These neurological changes parallel Erikson's psychosocial model: the maturation of cognitive-emotional circuits enables the “identity versus role confusion” conflict to be resolved through reflection and synthesis rather than impulsive reaction. In this

sense, emotional intelligence can be seen as the neural substrate of identity coherence.

Identity is not formed in isolation; it is continuously shaped through interactions with significant others. Emotional intelligence is essential in these relational contexts because it governs how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to social feedback. Empathy and perspective-taking, as components of emotional intelligence, facilitate attunement to others' needs, expectations, and emotional reactions. These skills allow emerging adults to engage in relationships that provide validation and challenge – both of which are necessary for identity growth.

Emotionally intelligent individuals navigate interpersonal tensions more constructively, which supports a stable sense of self in social contexts. When faced with criticism or conflicting expectations, they are more capable of regulating emotional responses, maintaining dialogue, and integrating external perspectives without losing internal coherence. Such interactions provide opportunities for refining personal values, commitments, and relational roles. Conversely, limited emotional intelligence may hinder interpersonal functioning, producing misinterpretations, emotional reactivity, and instability in close relationships. These difficulties can reinforce identity diffusion or exacerbate ruminative exploration, as individuals struggle to integrate inconsistent social feedback.

Thus, emotional intelligence serves not only an intrapersonal function but also operates as an interpersonal resource that shapes how young adults position themselves within relational networks. It fosters the development of secure relational patterns, enhances communication within intimate and peer relationships, and supports the negotiation of autonomy and closeness – key developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. In this way, emotional intelligence contributes to the formation of a relationally grounded and emotionally coherent identity.

At the same time, identity formation also extends beyond intrapersonal processes, as it is shaped through relationships. Kroger and Marcia [8] emphasize that identity development involves balancing autonomy with relatedness. Emotional intelligence facilitates this balance by enhancing empathy and perspective-taking. Emotionally intelligent individuals can engage authentically with others while maintaining a stable sense of self.

Interpersonal emotional skills – such as empathy, active listening, and conflict regulation – enable emerging adults to form relationships that support

exploration rather than constrain it. Through emotionally attuned interactions, individuals receive feedback that refines self-understanding and reinforces authenticity. This relational attunement also protects against social isolation, a common challenge in early adulthood.

Cultural context further shapes this process. In collectivist societies, identity formation is often relationally embedded, and emotional intelligence plays a role in harmonizing personal and social identities. In more individualistic cultures, emotional self-awareness supports autonomy without severing social bonds. In both contexts, emotional intelligence acts as a balancing mechanism between individuality and connection.

Synthesizing these perspectives, emotional intelligence can be conceptualized as the mechanism linking affective experience to identity development.

A simplified model can be expressed as:

Emotional Perception → Emotional Understanding → Regulation → Integration → Identity Coherence

Through this sequence emotions evolve from fleeting reactions to structured elements of self-definition. The process is cyclical: as identity stabilizes, emotional intelligence deepens through reflective experience, creating a feedback loop between emotional and cognitive maturity.

This model highlights that identity formation is not solely about deciding “who I am” but about learning “how I feel and respond as who I am.” Emotional intelligence transforms identity from a static structure into a dynamic system of self-regulation and meaning-making.

**Conclusions.** Emerging adulthood represents a stage of profound psychological transformation, where identity must be continuously negotiated across changing social, professional, and emotional contexts. Emotional intelligence provides the adaptive capacities that make this negotiation possible. It transforms emotion from a disruptive force into a guiding mechanism for self-awareness, reflection, and integration.

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that emotional intelligence—through its components of awareness, understanding, and regulation—constitutes the foundation upon which coherent identity is built. Emotional competencies enable individuals to interpret emotional experience, extract meaning, and sustain stability amid uncertainty. In this sense, emotional intelligence serves as both the scaffolding and the outcome of successful identity development.

Future research should further explore this link by combining longitudinal and neuroscientific approaches to assess how emotional intelligence evolves alongside identity formation. Interventions that cultivate emotional awareness and regulation (through mindfulness, emotional coaching, or reflective journaling) may not only enhance well-being but also accelerate the consolidation of authentic identity.

Ultimately, identity formation during emerging adulthood is as much an emotional integration as it is a cognitive synthesis. To feel wisely, as much as to think clearly, is the hallmark of psychological maturity. Emotional intelligence thus stands as the invisible architecture of selfhood, guiding emerging adults toward authenticity, purpose, and emotional coherence.

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## Бігунов Д.О. ЕМОЦІЙНИЙ ІНТЕЛЕКТ ЯК МЕХАНІЗМ ФОРМУВАННЯ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ В ПЕРІОД РАНЬОЇ ДОРОСЛОСТІ

Формування ідентичності є центральним завданням розвитку в період ранньої дорослості. Традиційно цей процес описували через когнітивні та поведінкові моделі, зокрема психосоціальну теорію Еріксона та статуси ідентичності Марсії. Новіші процесуальні підходи розглядають ідентичність як динамічний цикл дослідження, зобов'язання та переосмислення. Хоча ці підходи окреслюють, що саме роблять молоді дорослі під час конструювання ідентичності, вони значно менше уваги приділяють емоційним механізмам, які забезпечують цей процес. Емоційний інтелект, що розуміється як здатність сприймати, інтерпретувати та регулювати емоційний досвід, пропонує перспективний теоретичний інструмент для пояснення того, як молоді люди додають невизначеність, оцінюють інформацію, важливу для «Я», та інтегрують емоційний зворотний зв'язок у цілісне самоусвідомлення.

У статті стверджується, що емоційний інтелект є не лише допоміжним компонентом когнітивного дослідження, а фундаментальним механізмом, який забезпечує консолідацію ідентичності. Зосереджуючись на емоційній обізнаності, розумінні емоцій та емоційній регуляції, стаття показує, що емоційний інтелект перетворює миттєві афективні стани на рефлексивне усвідомлення, допомагаючи людині витримувати невизначеність, уточнювати зобов'язання та підтримувати цілісне почуття власного «Я». Емоційні компетентності також впливають на формування ідентичності у міжособистісних взаємодіях, визначаючи емпатію, здатність до перспективного бачення та чутливість до соціального зворотного зв'язку.

Метою статті є представлення цілісної моделі, у якій емоційний інтелект виконує роль розвиткового медіатора, що поєднує когнітивні процеси, міжособисті стосунки та формування ідентичності в період ранньої дорослості. Інтегруючи емоційні, розвиткові та соціальні підходи, робота розширяє наявні теорії ідентичності та підкреслює емоцію як центральний організуючий чинник переходу до дорослого життя.

**Ключові слова:** рання дорослість, формування ідентичності, емоційний інтелект, емоційна регуляція, міжособистісні стосунки.

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