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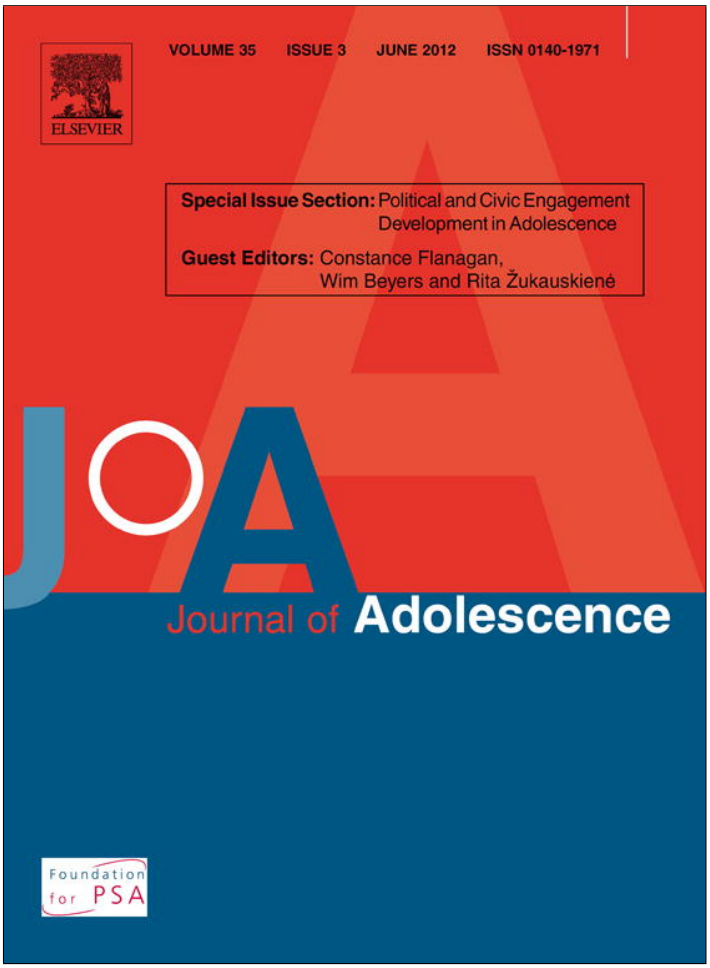

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Identity and civic engagement in adolescence

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to examine the links between identity (statuses and processes) and adolescent civic engagement (volunteer and political participation). Participants were 392 Italian high school students (42% males) aged 14–20 years (M_{age} = 16.23 years; SD_{age} = 1.53) who completed a self-report questionnaire. First, using a person-centered approach, we found that achieved adolescents were more involved in volunteer activities, reported higher civic efficacy, and stronger aspirations to contribute to their communities than their diffused counterparts. Second, by means of a variable-centered approach, we demonstrated that the link between identity processes (i.e., commitment and in-depth exploration) and past and future volunteer and political participation was mediated by social responsibility. Implications of the findings for current understanding of the link between adolescent identity formation and civic engagement are discussed and suggestions for future research are outlined.
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Introduction

During adolescence, individuals face the task of developing a firm personal identity and figuring out their place in society (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Facing this identity task is vital to becoming responsible adults and active citizens (Havighurst, 1952). In this paper we examine the link between identity (statuses and processes) and civic engagement (volunteer and political participation) among Italian adolescents. Studying this topic is urgent in light of recent trends suggesting that Italian youth, even more than their peers living in other Western countries, are increasingly disengaged from society, especially from politics (Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Jahromi, Crocetti, & Buchanan, in press).

Though much civic engagement literature suggests the theoretical importance of civic identity (e.g., Flanagan, 2003a; Yates & Youniss, 1996, 1999), there are few empirical studies testing the relations between identity and civic engagement (though some have examined the related constructs of political identity; e.g., Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007). One recent empirical study on the topic suggests that identity and civic engagement seem to reinforce each other time, creating a virtuous cycle in which identity promotes civic engagement and engagement fosters identity (Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen, & Lawford, 2010). Further research is necessary to understand this phenomenon. In this paper, we sought to contribute to research on identity and youth civic engagement by examining how civic engagement, both community-oriented and political, relates to the process of identity formation and what role the attitude of social responsibility might play.

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Adolescent identity formation

Erikson's lifespan theory of psychosocial development (1950, 1968) was a pioneering contribution to the field of identity studies. According to this theory, identity formation is the core developmental task of adolescence. Adolescents may move toward two poles, represented by *identity achievement* and *identity confusion*. Individuals who approach actively the identity formation task are likely to achieve firm commitments by integrating relevant earlier identifications to form a unique and personal identification. On the contrary, young people who have not chosen their own commitments are in a condition of identity confusion: they move from one identification to another without being able to find their own identity commitments.

The most important empirical elaboration of Erikson's (1950, 1968) views on identity formation was Marcia's (1966) identity status paradigm. Based on his clinical work, Marcia proposed that the two poles distinguished by Erikson (i.e., identity achievement vs. identity confusion) could be incorporated into a broader model, based on the dimensions of exploration and commitment. *Exploration* refers to the active questioning and weighing of various identity alternatives before making decisions about the values, beliefs, and goals that one will pursue. *Commitment* involves making a relatively firm choice about an identity domain and engaging in significant activities geared toward the implementation of that choice.

Crossing exploration and commitment yields four identity statuses (Marcia, 1966). In the *achievement* status, individuals have made a commitment in a specific identity domain following a period of active exploration; in the *foreclosure* status, adolescents have geared to a commitment with little or no prior exploration; in the *moratorium* status, adolescents are actively exploring various alternatives and have not yet made a commitment; finally, in the *diffusion* status adolescents have not engaged in a proactive process of exploration of different alternatives, nor have they made a commitment in a specific identity domain.

In the last decades various expansions of Marcia's model have been proposed (cf. Schwartz, 2001). In particular, Meeus, Crocetti et al. (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010), building upon previous works by Meeus (1996; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999), have expanded the identity status paradigm by proposing a three-factor identity model, focusing on the interplay of *commitment* which refers to firm choices that adolescents have enacted with regard to various developmental domains and the self-confidence they derive from these choices; *in-depth exploration* which represents the extent to which adolescents reflect on their current commitments, looking for new information about them and talking with other people about their commitments; and *reconsideration of commitment* which refers to the comparison of present commitments with possible alternative commitments when one's existing commitments are no longer satisfactory. This conceptualization of reconsideration of commitment is, in some respect, similar to Marcia's (1966) original definition of exploration, as it encompasses the search and evaluation of possible new commitments. On the other hand, it differs from exploration in that it taps into adolescents' present attempts to change current commitments because they are no longer satisfied with their prior choices. Therefore, reconsideration is undertaken within the context of one's present commitments, rather from a lack of commitment as originally hypothesized by Marcia.

In fact, this three-factor model, in contrast to Marcia's (1966) conceptualization, assumes that individuals enter adolescence with a set of commitments in ideological and interpersonal identity domains (Meeus, 2011; Meeus et al., 2010). For instance, in domains such as educational and relational identity, individuals approach adolescence with some commitments (usually internalized from parents or other authority figures) and can decide whether to maintain or to revise them. Thus, this model is based on the interplay of a dual cycle process (cf. Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006): adolescents can then explore their commitments in depth and decide whether they provide a good fit with one's overall goals and potentials (the identity development and maintenance cycle); if one's current commitments are not satisfying or do not provide a good fit, they may be reconsidered in favor of other more appealing commitments (the identity revision cycle).

From the combination of these identity processes it is possible to distinguish specific identity statuses (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2011; Meeus et al., 2010), that resemble and expand on Marcia's (1966) conceptualization. Specifically, adolescents in the *achievement* status report high commitments, they explore them deeply and, being satisfied by their choices, they do not reconsider them in favor of other options. Individuals in the *early closure* status are characterized by moderate commitments, neither truly explored nor reconsidered. Youth in the *moratorium* status exhibit low commitments, associated with medium in-depth exploration, and very high reconsideration of commitment, because they are striving to look for more satisfying alternatives that could fit their aspirations and needs. Finally, adolescents in the *diffusion* status display low commitment, in-depth exploration, and also reconsideration of commitment, thus they do not care about their lack of fulfilling commitments.

A growing body of literature has documented that both identity processes and identity statuses are differently related to various correlates, such as personality dimensions, internalizing problem behaviors, and family relationships (for recent reviews see Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Meeus, 2011). However, up to now, there are few studies about the relationships between identity and civic engagement.

Youth civic engagement: volunteer and political involvement

The term "civic engagement" refers to a broad construct that includes civic skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and goals. There are numerous definitions for this term (see Adler & Goggin, 2005 for a discussion) and there is debate about what activitites are "civic". Youth civic engagement is defined in this paper as including both community-oriented and political participation and goals. Understanding youth civic engagement is increasingly on the research agenda in many fields such as

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psychology, political science, and sociology. Of interest to democratic societies is the question: How do youth develop a sense of themselves as community members and citizens?

Empirical research has advanced the understanding of youth civic engagement. For example, by describing volunteer and political activities that youth often participate in– such as tutoring, campaigning, and participating in social organizations at school– and by suggesting that such activities influence the formation of beliefs about one's responsibilities and aspirations toward community (e.g., Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Such research focuses on the importance of early socialization processes in contexts of families, schools, and peer groups as well as on opportunities for civic involvement during adolescence (Flanagan, 2003b; Youniss & Levine, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Mazer, 2001). There seems to be a developmental cycle during adolescence in which attitudes such as civic efficacy (the belief that one can impact their community) and social responsibility (a sense of duty to others) both lead to and result from participation in community service and political activities (Flanagan, 2003a; Pancer et al., 2007; Schmidt et al. 2007).

Youth civic engagement is Italy is low by most indicators, although there is evidence for coupled trends of increasing volunteerism with decreasing political engagement (Marta & Pozzi, 2007; Marta & Scabini, 2003). Youth have been involved in various social movements and protests in recent decades (Morlino et al., 2000); however, political participation within the government structure is minimal and youth political attitudes are characterized by a generalized distrust of politicians and government (Cartocci, 2002). However, youth who participate in community-oriented and political activities report positive beliefs about the importance of such civic participation (Jahromi et al., in press).

Possible links between identity and civic engagement

Much civic engagement research alludes to the importance of identity in the process of civic development. Identity is a useful theoretical construct to understand how individuals integrate social experiences into beliefs, values, and goals for one's future. For example, in Yates and Youniss's (1999) book on civic identity, the editors and chapter authors draw upon important aspects of identity such as experiences, commitments, beliefs, and goals. However, civic identity is employed as an overarching idea and a definition is not provided, nor is a model for understanding identity specified or tested empirically. In fact, until recently, there have been few empirical investigations disentangling the links between identity and various forms of civic engagement. However, hypotheses about the link between these phenomena can be derived from literature documenting relations between identity on the one hand and prosocial, moral, and civic behavior on the other hand.

A growing literature has showed that identity plays a key role in explaining moral motivations, the basis of prosocial behaviors (cf. Hardy, 2006; Hardy & Carlo, 2005, 2011a,b). For instance, in a study conducted with a small sample of North-American university students, Hardy and Kisling (2006) showed that scores on identity achievement were positively correlated with prosocial behaviors (e.g., community service, altruism), whereas scores on diffused identity were negatively linked to such prosocial behaviors. These findings were further supported by longitudinal data highlighting reciprocal relationships between identity achievement and diffusion on the one hand and community involvement on the other hand (Hardy et al., 2010). Recently, Busch and Hofer (2011) found that identity achievement scores were positively associated with prosocial tendencies in German and in Cameroonian adolescents. Padilla-Walker, Barry, Carroll, Hadsen, and Nelson (2008) compared prosocial tendencies of emerging adults classified in the various identity statuses and reported that diffused university students reported lower prosocial tendencies than did their counterparts in any other identity status. Therefore, mature identity status seems to be related to prosocial behaviors, but the nature of the relation between identity processes and prosocial behaviors, and civic engagement specifically, is not yet understood.

In one study that is most directly relevant to the topic of this paper, Pancer et al. (2007) tested relations between identity development and youth civic involvement. The authors surveyed adolescents in their last years of secondary school about their civic participation and, using a cluster analytic approach, were able to distinguish four groups of adolescents: Activists (who had high levels of involvement in a wide range of political and community activities); Helpers (who were involved in helping individuals from their communities but not in political activities); Responders (who responded to but did not initiate helping or political activities); and Uninvolved adolescents. Comparisons revealed several differences among the groups in terms of parent and peer interactions, identity development, and adjustment. In particular, the Activists and Helpers reported higher scores on identity achievement and lower scores on identity diffusion than the Responders and Uninvolved adolescents. Furthermore, the Activists and Helpers expressed higher social responsibility attitudes (i.e., a sense that individuals have a duty to help others) than the Responders, who, in turn, had higher social responsibility attitudes than the Uninvolved youth. This provides evidence that youth who are active in civic activities tend to have more developed identities and more positive social attitudes. However the nature of identity statuses and processes as related to both past experiences with and future intentions for both community-oriented and political dimensions of civic engagement remains an open question.

Study aims and hypotheses

Following from the literature reviewed, the purpose of this study was to explore empirical associations between identity and aspects of civic engagement among Italian youth. To reach this aim we employed a recent three-factor model (Crocetti et al., 2008b; Meeus et al., 2010) to investigate how past and future volunteer and political activity relate to identity statuses and processes. Following recent suggestions from identity literature (e.g., Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011; Goossens & Luyckx 2007), we integrated a person-centered approach with a variable-centered approach (von Eye and Bogat, 2006) to

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study the relations between identity and civic engagement. Each approach offers a unique way to analyze this topic and, therefore, their integration allows a comprehensive understanding of how identity and civic engagement relate among Italian youth.

Specifically, adopting a person-centered approach allowed us to uncover how youth classified in various identity statuses (achievement, early closure, moratorium, and diffusion) derived using Meeus, Crocetti et al.'s three-factor model (Crocetti et al., 2008a; Meeus et al., 2010) differ on facets of civic engagement. The statuses were specified from configurations of identity processes (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment). In line with previous studies (Busch & Hofer, 2011; Hardy & Kisling, 2006; Hardy et al., 2010; Pancer et al., 2007) we expected that adolescents with a more mature identity (i.e., those who are classified in the achievement status) would report higher involvement than their peers with a less mature identity (i.e., those who are in a condition of identity diffusion).

Furthermore, by means of a variable-centered approach, we examined relations among identity processes (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) and past and future civic engagement. Specifically, our aim was to test a model explaining how identity is related to civic engagement among Italian youth. Because high commitment and extensive exploration are the building blocks of an achieved identity, which is associated with moral reasoning (cf. Jespersen, Kroger, & Martinussen, 2009) and prosocial behaviors (Hardy & Kisling, 2006), we expected significant correlations between both commitment and exploration, on the one hand, and civic engagement on the other. No clear hypotheses were made for the third aspect of identity, reconsideration of commitment.

We also hypothesized that social responsibility, an attitude that expresses a sense that individuals have a duty to help others, would mediate the relationship between identity processes and civic engagement (the hypothesized model is schematized in Fig. 1). This hypothesis is based on previous work by Pancer et al. (2007), showing that individuals involved in political and volunteer activities reported higher social responsibility than their uninvolved peers. Thus, different levels of social responsibility could be at the basis of different rates of involvement. Specifically, we expected that identity processes indicating engagement in the formation of a firm identity (i.e., commitment and exploration) would be positively related to civic involvement through the mediation of social responsibility.

Method

Participants

Participants were 392 Italian adolescents (42% boys and 58% girls) between the ages of 14 and 20 (M_{age} = 16.23; SD_{age} = 1.53), who were attending academically rigorous high schools, located in Central Eastern Italy, that prepare students for university education (i.e., classical or scientific lyceums).[1]

Prior to initiating the study, we obtained permission from the school principals to administer questionnaires during class time. Parents were provided with written information about the research and were asked for their consent for the adolescent to participate. After we received parental permission, students were informed about the study and asked whether they wished to participate. All the students present in class the day of the administration participated in the study and completed the questionnaire packet.

Measures

Identity

Identity commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment were measured using the *Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale* (U-MICS; Crocetti et al., 2008b; Italian version validated by Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010). The U-MICS consists of 26 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*). Thirteen items index the target processes in one ideological domain (education) and 13 items index the target processes in one interpersonal domain (friendship). Sample items include: "My education/best friend gives me certainty in life" (commitment; 10 items), "I think a lot about my education/best friend" (in-depth exploration; 10 items), and "I often think it would be better to try to find a different education/best friend" (reconsideration of commitment; 6 items). For each of the identity dimensions, we summed responses across the two domains (Crocetti et al., 2008b, 2010). Cronbach's alphas were .80 for commitment, .70 for in-depth exploration, and .69 for reconsideration of commitment.

Volunteer engagement

Past volunteering was assessed with one item asking how often participants had done volunteer work in their community over the past nine months (1 = *never*, 2 = *1 to 3 times*, 3 = *4 or more times*). Intentions for future volunteering were measured with two statements adapted from previous work (Reinders & Youniss, 2006) assessing the likelihood of volunteering in the future ("How likely is it that you will volunteer in the upcoming summer?" and "…after graduating from high school?"; 1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *definitely will*). Cronbach's alpha was .78.

[1] The Italian high school system includes three different educational tracks: lyceums (i.e., schools that prepare students for university studies), technical schools (i.e., schools that prepare students for doing specific occupations, such as accountant, surveyor, etc.), and vocational schools (i.e., schools that prepare students for doing specific skilled jobs, such as electrician).

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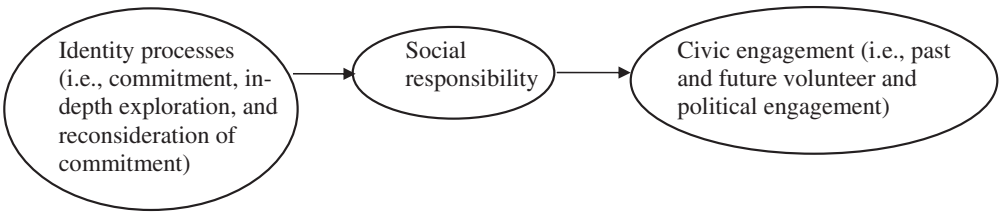

Fig. 1. Schematization of the hypothesized model.

Political engagement

Past political involvement was measured with one item asking how often over the last nine months participants had "joined or participated in a political party, club, or organization?" (1 = *never*, 2 = *1 to 3 times*, 3 = *4 or more times*). To measure intentions for future political involvement, participants rated the likelihood of boycotting a product, demonstrating for a cause, and working on a political campaign after graduating high school (1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *definitely will*; Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003). Cronbach's alpha was .67.

Civic efficacy

This was assessed using three ad hoc items with a response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) to measure the extent to which youth felt they could have an impact on their community: "I can change my world for the better by getting involved in my community", "I can make my community a better place by helping others in need," and "There are things I can do to make the world a better place". Cronbach Alpha was .67.

Aspirations to contribute to community

These were measured by assessing the importance (using a response format ranging from 1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *very important*) of Kasser and Ryan's (1993) seven community-feeling items (e.g., "To help people in need" and "To work for the betterment of society") to the participants when thinking about their "life and future". Cronbach Alpha was .79.

Social responsibility

Participants rated ten items from Pancer's Youth Social Responsibility Scale-Short Form (see Pancer et al., 2007 for the Youth Social Responsibility Scale, short form attained from personal correspondence) assessing general feelings of responsibility in addressing social needs (e.g., "Everybody should volunteer some time for the good of their community", "Young people have an important role to play in making the world a better place"). Participants reported their answers on a five point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach Alpha was .74.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 provides all mean values. A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the presence of gender and age differences on the study variables. Significant main effects of both gender (Wilks' $\lambda = .79$; $F(10, 379) = 10.13$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$) and age (Wilks' $\lambda = .91$; $F(10, 379) = 3.56$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$) were found, whereas the gender by age interaction was not significant (Wilks' $\lambda = .98$; $F(10, 379) = 0.80$; $p = .63$, $\eta^2 = .02$).

Table 1 presents all follow-up univariate analyses. Specifically, gender differences were found on seven out of ten study variables. Girls scored higher than boys on commitment, in-depth exploration, past and future volunteer participation, and social responsibility. On the other hand, boys scored higher than girls on past and future political involvement. Age differences were found only on two out of ten study variables: younger adolescents reported higher commitment and lower social responsibility than older adolescents.

A person-centered approach: identity statuses and civic engagement

First, by means of cluster analysis, we classified adolescents into identity statuses. Specifically, we standardized the scores for the identity processes (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) and, following Gore's (2000) two-stage approach, we conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method and based on squared Euclidian distances. We compared cluster solutions with two, three, four, five, and six clusters on the basis of three criteria: theoretical meaningfulness of each cluster, parsimony, and explanatory power (i.e., the cluster solution had to explain approximately 45-50% of the variance in each of the identity dimensions). On the basis of these criteria, a four-cluster solution was retained as the most acceptable. Indeed, solutions with fewer numbers of clusters failed to extract theoretically meaningful identity statuses and explained little variance (falling under the threshold of 45% of variance explained in each

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics and gender and age differences

Variable	Gender differences					Age differences			
	Total ($N = 392$)	Boys ($n = 166$)	Girls ($n = 226$)	F (1, 391)	η^2	14-16 years ($n = 222$)	17-20 years ($n = 170$)	F (1, 391)	η^2
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			M (SD)	M (SD)		
Identity									
Commitment	3.38 (0.54)	3.30 (0.57)	3.45 (0.50)	7.77**	.02	3.49 (0.51)	3.25 (0.55)	19.74***	.05
In-depth exploration	3.22 (0.49)	3.10 (0.51)	3.31 (0.46)	18.81***	.05	3.23 (0.48)	3.21 (0.51)	0.25	.00
Reconsideration of commitment	2.46 (0.63)	2.50 (0.64)	2.43 (0.62)	1.64	.00	2.44 (0.63)	2.48 (0.62)	0.87	.00
Civic engagement									
Past volunteer participation	0.58 (1.04)	0.42 (0.87)	0.71 (1.14)	7.22**	.02	0.55 (1.02)	0.63 (1.08)	0.71	.00
Future volunteer participation	2.34 (0.96)	2.12 (0.92)	2.50 (0.96)	15.14***	.04	2.37 (0.95)	2.29 (0.97)	0.61	.00
Past political participation	0.37 (0.85)	0.47 (0.97)	0.31 (0.75)	4.13*	.01	0.35 (0.83)	0.41 (0.88)	0.82	.00
Future political participation	2.30 (0.88)	2.53 (0.94)	2.13 (0.79)	22.42***	.06	2.29 (0.89)	2.32 (0.86)	0.27	.00
Civic efficacy	3.54 (0.71)	3.47 (0.78)	3.59 (0.64)	2.99	.01	3.52 (0.71)	3.57 (0.70)	0.39	.00
Aspiration for community contribution	3.57 (0.61)	3.53 (0.68)	3.59 (0.56)	1.12	.00	3.53 (0.61)	3.61 (0.61)	1.45	.00
Social responsibility	4.01 (0.50)	3.88 (0.50)	4.10 (0.47)	19.85***	.05	3.96 (0.50)	4.07 (0.49)	5.16*	.01

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; η^2 = eta squared.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

identity dimension); whereas solutions with a higher number of clusters violated the principle of parsimony, because they included clusters that represented only slight variations of previous clusters and did not extract any new clusters that could be matched to a specific identity status as proposed by Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx et al. (2008). In the second step, initial cluster centers obtained from the hierarchical cluster analysis were used as non-random starting points in iterative *k*-means clustering. The z-scores of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment for the final four clusters are shown in Fig. 2. As can be seen, the first cluster ($n = 82$; 20.9% of the sample) consisted of adolescents scoring high on commitment and in-depth exploration, but low on reconsideration of commitment. The second cluster ($n = 152$; 38.8% of the sample) was comprised primarily of individuals with moderately high scores on commitment, low scores on in-depth exploration, and low scores on reconsideration of commitment. The third cluster ($n = 86$; 21.9% of the sample) was composed of individuals who scored low on commitment, moderate on in-depth exploration, and high on reconsideration of commitment. The fourth cluster ($n = 72$; 18.4% of the sample) consisted of individuals scoring low on all three dimensions. Thus, we found, in sequence, clusters representing achievement, early closure, moratorium, and diffusion statuses. This four-cluster solution explained 61%, 45%, and 51% of the variance in commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment, respectively.

A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) on measures of civic engagement with identity statuses as the independent variable and gender and age as covariates was conducted. After controlling for gender and age, findings indicated a main effect of identity statuses (Wilks' Lambda = .86, F (21, 1092) = 2.89, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$) on the combined dependent variables. Results of the follow-up univariate analyses are shown in Table 2. Tukey post hoc comparisons highlighted that achieved adolescents scored the highest on past and future volunteer engagement, on civic efficacy, and also on aspiration for community contribution, whereas their diffused peers scored the lowest, with adolescents in the moratorium and early closure statuses reporting intermediate scores. On the contrary, post hoc comparison on past and future political engagement

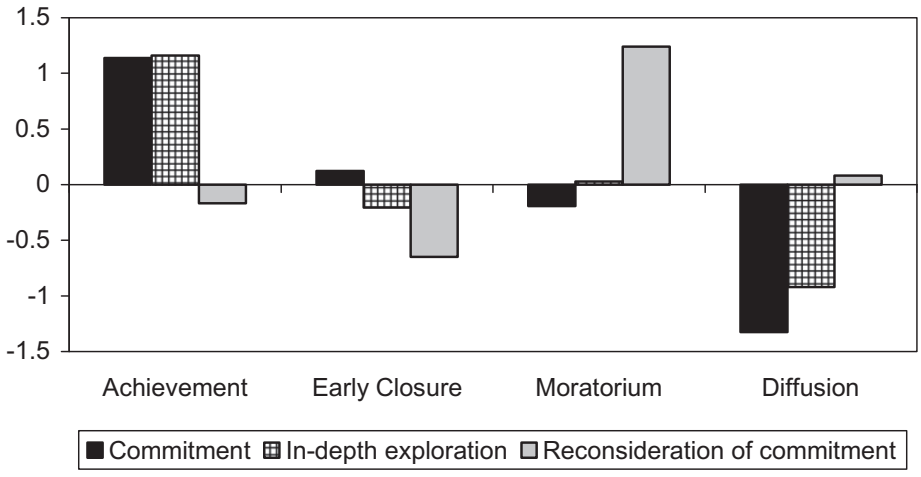

Fig. 2. Z-scores for commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment for the four identity statuses.

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did not reveal any significant difference among identity statuses. Finally, achieved adolescents scored higher on social responsibility than their counterparts in any other identity status. Eta squared values indicated that effect sizes were low, ranging from .02 to .08.

A variable-centered approach: identity processes and civic engagement

As a second step, we examined links between identity and civic engagement by means of a variable-centered approach. Correlations among study variables, reported in Table 3, revealed that civic engagement dimensions were mainly related to commitment and in-depth exploration.

Thus, we estimated a model that could explain how identity processes are related to civic engagement. Specifically, we tested a model in which identity processes (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment) predicted past and future volunteer and political involvement through the mediation of social responsibility. The model also estimated correlations among predictors (i.e., identity processes) and among outcomes (i.e., past and future volunteer and political engagement). In order to adjust for measurement error, structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent variables (Bollen, 1989) was performed using AMOS 5 (Arbuckle, 2003) program. SEM requires multiple indicators for each latent construct. For latent variables characterized by more than five indicators (i.e., commitment, in-depth exploration, reconsideration of commitment, and social responsibility), instead of using separate items as indicators, we created three parcels of items for each construct and used these parcels as indicators of the latent variables (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994); while for latent variables characterized by less than five indicators (i.e., past and future volunteer and political involvement), we used single items as indicators of the latent variables. Gender and age dummy coded were also included in the model.

The model fit was examined in the overall sample relying on various indices (Kline, 2005): the ratio of the chi-square statistic to the degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) should be less than 3; the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should exceed .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999) with values higher than .90 considered to be acceptable (Bentler, 1990); and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) should be less than .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Findings revealed that the fit of the model was found to be excellent ($\chi^2 = 344.71$, df = 164; χ^2/df = 2.10; GFI = .93; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .05). Significant paths are reported in Fig. 3. As can be seen, identity commitment and, to a stronger extent, identity exploration were positively related to social responsibility that, in turn, predicted both past and future intentions of volunteer and political engagement. Additionally, gender was significantly associated with commitment and in-depth exploration, social responsibility, past and future political engagement; age was significantly related to commitment, social responsibility, and future volunteer involvement.

Standardized indirect effects on the dependent variables ranged from .02 to .05 for commitment, from .03 to .10 for in-depth exploration, and from −.01 to .00 for reconsideration of commitment. By calculating bootstrap estimates of indirect effects together with bootstrapping bias-corrected confidence intervals we found that a standardized indirect (mediated) effect of both commitment and in-depth exploration on all the dependant variables (i.e., past and future volunteer and political engagement) was statistically significant at $p < .05$, confirming the hypothesized mediation effect.

Identity processes (together with gender and age) explained 17% of the variance in social responsibility. The mediator, again in conjunction with gender and age, explained little variance in past political engagement (3%) and past volunteer engagement (7%), while it explained higher portion of variance in future political engagement (20%), and even more in future intentions of volunteering (30%).

Discussion

In this contribution we have shed some light on the associations between identity statuses and processes and civic engagement among Italian high school students. Findings suggest meaningful links between identity and community volunteer activities and moderate associations between identity and political participation.

Table 2
Means of civic engagement dimensions by identity statuses.

	Identity statuses					
	Achievement	Early closure	Moratorium	Diffusion	$F(3, 391)$	η^2
Past volunteer engagement	0.90[a]	0.59[ab]	0.49[b]	0.33[b]	3.74*	.03
Past political engagement	0.44[a]	0.28[a]	0.52[a]	0.32[a]	2.29	.02
Future volunteer engagement	2.63[a]	2.32[ab]	2.35[ab]	2.01[b]	3.90**	.03
Future political engagement	2.39[a]	2.18[a]	2.49[a]	2.34[a]	4.13**	.03
Civic efficacy	3.82[a]	3.52[b]	3.59[ab]	3.22[c]	10.24***	.07
Aspiration for community contribution	3.84[a]	3.56[b]	3.54[b]	3.31[c]	11.84***	.08
Social responsibility	4.21[a]	4.01[b]	4.01[b]	3.76[b]	10.33***	.07

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. A mean is significantly different ($p < .05$) from another mean at Tukey post hoc test if they have different superscripts. For past volunteer and political engagement the scale ranged from 0 to 3; all the other measures ranged from 1 to 5.

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Table 3
Correlations among study variables.

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Commitment	.40***	−.17***	.10*	.02	.15**	.04	.23***	.22***	.23***
2. In-depth exploration	1	.03	.09	.01	.20***	.15**	.16**	.24***	.30***
3. Reconsideration of commitment		1	−.08	.13**	−.01	.15**	.06	−.02	−.04
4. Past volunteer engagement			1	.37***	.29***	.11*	.27***	.25***	.21***
5. Past political engagement				1	.08	.34***	.23***	.27***	.10
6. Future volunteer engagement					1	.33***	.39***	.37***	.41***
7. Future political engagement						1	.31***	.34***	.23***
8. Civic efficacy							1	.58***	.57***
9. Aspiration for community contribution								1	.64***
10. Social responsibility									1

Note. $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

Identity statuses

Using a person-centered approach, we examined differences among adolescents classified in various identity statuses. In line with Marcia's (1966) conceptualization and works conducted with a recent three-factor model (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Meeus et al., 2010) that expands on Marcia's contribution, we have investigated differences among adolescents characterized by the identity statuses of achievement, early closure, moratorium, and diffusion. In this study a variant of the moratorium status, searching moratorium (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx et al., 2008), was not empirically found. Searching moratorium is a transitional status (Meeus et al., 2010), characterized by the attempt to revise current commitments in favor of most appealing choices. The fact that this status, identified in previous studies conducted with both Dutch (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx et al., 2008) as well as Italian (Crocetti et al., in press) adolescents, did not emerge in this contribution might be attributable to the peculiar characteristics of the examined sample. In fact, while in previous investigations identity statuses were examined in large samples including adolescents from a wider age span (early and middle adolescents), from various educational tracks (lyceum, technical schools, and vocational schools), and also from mixed and migrant families, in the present contribution we have considered a more homogeneous group, consisting exclusively of middle adolescents attending classical and scientific lyceums. These pupils are attending rigorous high schools in preparation for university. Such students come from families with higher educational attainment compared to students in both technical and vocational schools, and it is less probable in these lyceums to find adolescents from migrant families (Dei, 2007). The specific characteristics of our sample could explain why we did not find a searching moratorium group. Thus, this transitional status might also be less likely to occur in some adolescent group than in others. This hypothesis is in line with results presented by Crocetti et al.

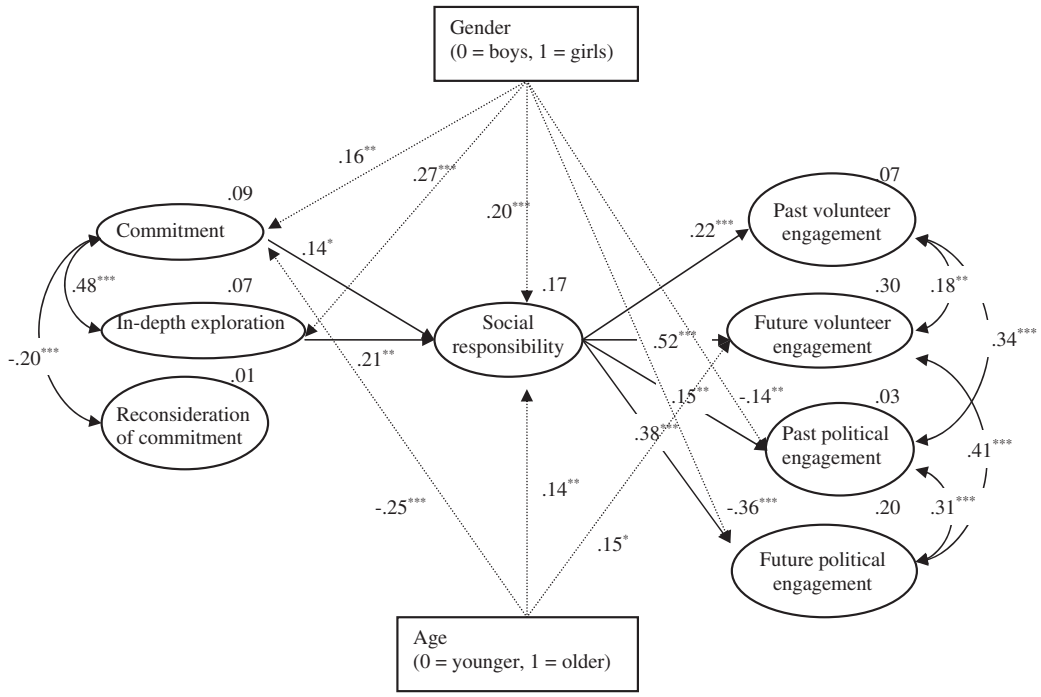

Fig. 3. Standardized solution of the model tested in the overall sample. Note. For convenience of presentation only significant links among latent variables are reported. Significant effects of gender and age are also reported. $N = 392$. $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

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(2011) showing that the searching moratorium condition was more typical among migrant adolescents (especially among those migrated to Italy from Asian countries) than among their counterparts from Italian and mixed families. Overall, these findings suggest the importance of studying identity paths in specific adolescent groups, who might face peculiar situations. In particular, results of the present study underline the importance of taking into account differences related to the specific educational track adolescents are attending.

Identity and civic engagement

Youth civic engagement literature suggests the importance of civic participation to development during adolescence and provides theoretical reason to believe that civic engagement both stems from and enables identity development. Most research focuses on the latter part: how participating in civic activities provides opportunities for positive identity formation through providing youth with new roles, relations with adult models, career and networking opportunities, and skill building (e.g., Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). However, recent studies of identity and civic engagement find a bidirectional relation between these constructs (Hardy et al., 2010, Pancer et al., 2007).

This contribution, in line with identity theory (Erikson, 1968), focussed on how identity can explain differences in levels of civic engagement. We found that identity processes relates to civic engagement via social responsibility, the attitude that it is important to care for one's community. Youth with achieved identities, or those who are exploring their identity in depth, are more likely to endorse the attitude of social responsibility and to be civically engaged. Main findings pointed out that the relation between identity and civic engagement was stronger for community-oriented than for political forms of civic engagement. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, we cannot assume any direction of causal links, as we discuss further when considering the limitations of this study. Future research should build on these findings by exploring bidirectional relations between identity and civic engagement over time.

Identity and community volunteer activities

Using a person-centered approach we found that achieved adolescents were more involved in volunteer activities, reported higher civic efficacy, and had stronger aspirations to contribute to their communities than their diffused counterparts, while adolescents in the early closure and moratorium statuses displayed intermediate scores. This pattern of findings is in line with available evidence showing that diffused university students report lower prosocial tendencies than their counterparts in any other identity status (Padilla-Walker et al., 2008). Additionally, our findings are consistent with results obtained using identity status scores, instead of classification into identity statuses, by showing that scores on identity achievement were positively correlated with prosocial behaviors and tendencies, whereas scores on diffuse identity were negatively linked to such outcomes (Busch & Hofer, 2011; Hardy & Kisling, 2006; Hardy et al., 2010).

Taken together, these findings support Erikson's (1950, 1968) psychosocial theory suggesting that the formation of a stable identity may facilitate the desire to contribute to society through community-oriented engagement. In line with this consideration, achieved adolescents also reported higher levels of social responsibility than their peers in any other identity status. These results are consistent with findings from a recent meta-analysis (Jespersen et al., 2009; cf. Kroger & Marcia, 2011) showing that achieved youth reported higher levels of moral reasoning than their non-achieved counterparts.

To further explore this phenomenon, using a variable-centered approach, we tested a model in which links among identity processes and volunteer participation were mediated by social responsibility, controlling for gender and age. Results suggest that identity commitment and in-depth exploration of identity choices are positively related to social responsibility which, in turn, is positively associated with past and, to a stronger extent, future volunteer engagement. This suggests that the attitude of social responsibility is a potential mechanism by which higher order identity processes are related to community-oriented civic engagement.

One finding deserves special attention. Model testing revealed that the identity process of in-depth exploration, more than identity commitment, related to civic engagement (through the mediation of social responsibility). Thus, the active reflection on current commitments seems to be the key identity process that might promote civic engagement, perhaps through the formation of attitudes such as social responsibility. This might be especially true for the age group studied here, including adolescents who are in a stage of developing where identity exploration is common. It is worthwhile to remember that available studies have highlighted that in-depth exploration can be a double-edge sword, associated with curiosity but also with confusion and distress (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2008; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, & Rodriguez, 2009). Findings from the present study suggest a bright side of in-depth exploration. In-depth exploration has been shown to be related to openness to experience (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008); perhaps youth who are actively exploring and reflecting on identity relevant choices might be open to civic experiences. Given that these data are cross-sectional and that civic engagement and identity likely affect each other in reciprocal ways (e.g., Hardy et al., 2010), it is important to consider that active involvement in civic activities might be a mechanism facilitating in-depth identity exploration. For example, perhaps active civic involvement leads one to reflect on one's own social identity.

A closer look at the results point out that the model explained more variance in intentions for future volunteering than in past volunteer engagement. This finding is not surprising, as the literature on attitude-behavior links has widely demonstrated (cf. Ajzen, 2002; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) to predict intentions of doing something is easier than to predict overt behaviors that might be influenced by a large array of factors. In this respect, during a debriefing after data collection,

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participants provided further insights useful to clarify these differences in the explained variance (7% for past and 30% for future volunteer involvement, respectively). First, all participants were attending rigorous schools preparing them for university study. Thus, several adolescents spent most of their after-school time doing homework and reported to have little spare time that could be devoted to other activities, including volunteer activities. It is worthwhile to note that, whereas in North America, participation in volunteer activities can build stronger college applications (e.g., Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002), this is not the case in Italy, where volunteer involvement is not evaluated when youth apply to college. Second, some high school students, even though willing to volunteer, might be discouraged by external constraints. For instance some of them live in small villages where they might be presented with few opportunities for volunteering. Furthermore, considering that only few of them had obtained a driver license (which can be obtained after age 18 in Italy), they have limited chances to move independently to bigger cities. Indeed, it is well documented that youth who face few opportunities for civic engagement are less likely to be civically engaged (e.g., Youniss & Levine, 2009).

Identity and political engagement

Evidence presented here suggests that identity statuses and processes were related to volunteer involvement, whereas a different picture emerged for political engagement. In fact, different identity statuses did not relate differently to past and future political engagement. Furthermore, when we tested the model, we found that social responsibility explained less variance in both past and future political engagement. Additionally, relations between volunteer and political involvement were moderate.

Various issues should be taken account when interpreting these results. First, the higher amount of variance explained in intentions for future political involvement, compared to past political involvement, is a reasonable result, convergent with the attitude-behavior literature briefly refereed above (cf. Ajzen, 2002; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Furthermore, the fact that we explained less variance in political than in volunteer participation might be partially due to lower levels of variation in political engagement, as suggested by standard deviations reported in Table 1 for past and future civic involvement. Moreover, the low level of explained variance for past political participation suggests that other variables, rather than those examined in this study, might predict the choice to be politically involved. For instance, values endorsed by significant others, such as the parents, might play a crucial role (e.g., Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001).

Our findings suggest that adolescents with a mature identity might find volunteer involvement to be a suitable context for expressing their will to be active in their communities, whereas the same cannot be said for political involvement. This situation can be explained by related phenomena. On the one hand, in Italy, young people are increasingly disengaged from politics, are often disgusted by it, and have low trust in politicians and in the government (e.g., de Luca, 2007; Cartocci, 2002). On the other hand, Italian political parties have failed to provide young people with meaningful possibilities to be actively involved in political issues, exacerbating a feeling of general distrust (e.g., Livi Bacci, 2008).

Therefore, adolescents may easily find volunteer activities to be a context in which they "can make the difference", while it is more difficult for them to find such a context within political groups. Indeed, youth who are active in political groups have been defined as "whiteflies" to emphasize how scarce they are (Recchi, 1997). Furthermore, adolescents who are politically involved are negatively evaluated by their peers who are not involved. Indeed, politically involved adolescents are often perceived by other adolescents as fanatic or easily manipulated by older politicians (Graziani, 2004). Whereas community-oriented engagement provides a viable means for youth with mature identities to contribute to community, political activities may not. Briefly, these results suggest that in Italy the distance between political institutions and young citizenships is so pronounced that changes are needed in order to overcome this problem.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The evidence presented in this study is useful toward uncovering the links between identity and adolescent engagement. However, this study should also be considered in light of some limitations. The main limitation concerns the cross-sectional design which does not allow for the test of causal links. Based on the identity literature, we hypothesized that identity is a precursor of civic engagement, but it could also be the other way around: adolescents could start to be civically engaged because they are pushed to do it by their parents or peers and this experience might plausibly stimulate identity maturation. Most likely, there is a reciprocal relationship between identity and civic engagement: identity promotes civic participation which stimulates achievement of an even more firm identity. Therefore, future longitudinal studies are needed to disentangle these links.

In this study, measures of civic engagement were adequately reliable but for past volunteer and political participation, we used a single item measure. We have partly accounted for this limitation by running full SEM analyses with measurement error taken into account. However, future studies should extend our knowledge on the links between identity and civic involvement by adopting measures of civic engagement with more robust psychometric properties that can tap different forms of volunteer and both conventional and unconventional political engagement.

Some characteristics of the sample reduce the generalizability of the findings. In fact, as noted above, our sample was comprised exclusively of adolescents attending classical and scientific lyceums. Future studies are needed to disentangle links between identity and civic engagement in more heterogonous adolescent groups, involving students who are enrolled in

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lower educational tracks, adolescents from ethnic minority groups, and even adolescents that have left the school system prematurely.

Finally, in this study we tested whether social responsibility mediated the relationship between identity and civic engagement. However, other mediators could be involved in this process. For instance, identity might promote *social well-being*, the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society (Keyes, 1998), which, in turn, could increase willingness to be actively involved in the local community and in political contexts. Of course, future studies are needed to test the role of other potential mediators; this would provide valuable knowledge than might be implemented in interventions aimed at promoting youth participation.

Conclusion

This study, integrating a person-centered and a variable-centered approach, sought to disentangle associations between identity (statuses and processes) and civic engagement (in the form of both volunteer and political participation). Though the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously given the limitations, findings imply that the links between identity, especially between exploring and reflecting on one's identity, social responsibility, and civic engagement are worth further exploration. Understanding these links has implications for promoting civic engagement, even political forms of engagement which are especially low among Italian youth. Specifically, findings of the current study point out that a key ingredient of an intervention to increase civic engagement might attend to identity development and promote in-depth exploration characterized by reflective thinking and mindfulness.

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