



Reconciling control and identity development: experiences of South African adolescents

Luzelle Naudé¹ · Elizabeth Cornelia van Damme¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore how a group of South African adolescents experience and react to being controlled during their process of finding a personal identity. Adolescents from the Eastern Cape province in South Africa (n = 120; 58.33% female) participated in focus group discussions regarding their experiences of how control shaped their sense of self. Participants understood identity as a continuous and fluid process of negotiation and adjustment shaped by significant others and embedded in social context. Participants articulated various experiences of control, mostly negative. Through thematic analysis, three pathways were constructed as distinct reactions to control: *Conforming and Submitting*, *Finding Freedom*, and *Internalising*. Each of these reactions contains a unique combination of exploration and commitment, with specific implications for identity development and achievement.

Keywords Experiences of control · Identity development · South african adolescents

Introduction

The transition from childhood into adulthood is a period during which adolescents strive to form a personal identity. In the pursuit to develop autonomy and independence, adolescents have to differentiate themselves in various life domains and contexts (Breger, 2017; Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011). This journey often entails exploring new alternatives, resisting expectations from others, and challenging existing boundaries (Lillevoll et al., 2013; Steeger & Gondoli, 2013). The aim of this study was to explore how a group of South African adolescents experience and react to being controlled during their process of finding a personal identity.

Identity development during adolescence

Although the achievement of a personal identity is a life-long process, adolescence is seen as a time during which

young people ponder on the question, ‘Who am I?’ (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz et al., 2011). Knowing oneself shapes perception, meaning-making, and motivation, and finding a unique sense of self directs behaviour, goals, beliefs, self-regulation, and choice. A personal identity also determines how challenges and threats are met and how opportunities are used (Breger, 2017; Bogaerts et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2013; Oyserman et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2011).

Identity develops through an iterative process of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1966). In Marcia’s (1966) original identity status model, exploration and commitment were combined in an orthogonal fashion to result in four distinct identity statuses: diffusion (a lack of systematic exploration and no commitment), moratorium (exploration without commitment), foreclosure (commitment without exploration), and achievement (exploration followed by commitment). More recently, Luyckx et al. (2006) extended this model by unpacking Marcia’s original two processes into the more nuanced processes of exploration-in-breadth (the search for different alternatives), exploration-in-depth (in-depth evaluation of one’s existing commitments), commitment making (choices about important identity-relevant issues), and identification with commitment (certainty about and internalisation of choice). In addition to this, ruminative exploration has also been considered. While exploration-in-depth and exploration-in-breadth are considered reflective

✉ Luzelle Naudé
naudel@ufs.ac.za

¹ Department of Psychology, Faculty of the Humanities, University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Bloemfontein 9301, South Africa

and adaptive, ruminative exploration is associated with maladaptive behaviour, distress, and less adaptive identities, such as a *troubled achievement identity status* (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Cadichon et al., 2022; Luyckx et al., 2008). Contemporary identity scholars agree that adolescents are active agents in their identity development, that there is heterogeneity in how they approach the process towards identity achievement and that there is more than one normative developmental pathways towards an achieved identity (Luyckx et al., 2008, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011).

Identity development in context

Identity development and self-definition are not isolated activities; they occur within the context of others (Adams et al., 2012; Cadichon et al., 2022; Erikson, 1968). An individual's identity is embodied in the perception of one's position and place, the roles assumed, and the sense of connection and belonging in various spheres of society (Oyserman et al., 2012; Pe'rez-Sales, 2010). Interactions with significant others, associations with social identity groups, and the values, norms, and beliefs of the environment are important contributors to identity (Adams et al., 2012; Froiland & Davison, 2014; Pellerone et al., 2015). A sense of self is usually the result of both differentiating and integrating various expectations, challenges, boundaries, or threats.

In attempting to gain acceptance, find a sense of belonging, and create a role in society, identity adjustments are made according to the expectations of the situation. Individuals who categorise themselves into groups tend to internalise group beliefs, values, and norms and will adjust their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviour to suit the group (Jewell & Brown, 2014; Oyserman et al., 2012; Jia et al., 2015). A strong need for acceptance can lead to commitments and attempts to attain group goals despite incompatibilities and without due exploration of alternatives (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Luyckx et al., 2007). A lack of self-discovery can be seen in commitments without proper exploration of roles and can be associated with a foreclosed or diffused identity status (Marcia, 1966).

The various contexts that shape adolescents' lives often change and transform as adolescents move towards maturity and adulthood. Within these changing contexts, adolescents experience crises, explore roles, and make commitments that lead to the formation of an identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). The groups into which adolescents categorise themselves are often heterogeneous, and the expectations, boundaries, restrictions, and opportunities of various contexts are diverse (Soenens et al., 2012). Managing these conflicting messages is an intricate balance between finding acceptance by submitting to expectations and gaining

independence by challenging norms and boundaries. How individuals manage to find this balance between self and social representation may, over time, lead to either coherence or incoherence in their sense of self (Adams et al., 2012; Breger, 2017; Birkeland et al., 2013; Cadichon et al., 2022; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Luyckx et al., 2013; Oyserman et al., 2012; Pellerone et al., 2015).

Control and its role during identity development

Control that is exerted by an individual's external world (not through a personal quality or goal) can be defined in various ways. It refers to the power to direct the behaviour, feelings, and thinking patterns of someone else towards approved ways (Soenens et al., 2012). It is also seen as the ability to restrict the behaviour, feelings, and thinking patterns of someone to fit a specific worldview (Soenens et al., 2005, 2007). Control can be exercised in many ways, with various psychosocial outcomes. Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2010) use the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) as a heuristic framework to explain the effect of control on an adolescent's psychological world—how control relates to the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness will determine its impact. Using parenting as an example, they distinguish between *promotion of independence vs. dependence* and *autonomysupportive vs. psychologically controlling* parenting. In another example, Soenens et al. (2010) explain how both dependency-orientated parental psychological control (based on issues of relatedness, separation, and parentchild distance) and achievement-orientated parental psychological control (based on issues of achievement, performance, and perfection) result in distinctive patterns of vulnerability in adolescents. Control practices that can be regarded as autonomysupportive practices, for example, those that facilitate perspectivetaking and allow choice, are seen as most beneficial for adolescents' psychosocial functioning (Assor et al., 2020).

As their locus of control becomes internalised, adolescents struggle with various forms of control while achieving a personal identity (Lillevoll et al., 2013). These individuals challenge boundaries as they try to find suitable roles and positions for themselves (Lillevoll et al., 2013; Steeger & Gondoli, 2013). Nonconformity and resistance to control become typical as the need for autonomy and independence increases, and this may lead to conflict (Kuhar & Reiter, 2013; Markova & Nikitskaya, 2017; Steeger & Gondoli, 2013).

The amount of control exhibited can direct adolescents' thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and identity development processes (Jia et al., 2015). Control that limits self-exploration can result in a foreclosed identity status (Marcia, 1966) because it constrains opportunities, suppresses

personality characteristics, and impedes identity development (Barber et al., 2012; Hoskins, 2014; Kunz & Grych, 2013). Diffused and incompatible identities can also be formed if external sources are too prescriptive (Pe'rez-Sales, 2010). Adolescents who react defiantly often display risk- and attention-seeking behaviours, which could become internalised into the identity (Halfond et al., 2013; Markova & Nikitskaya, 2017; Willoughby et al., 2013).

Adolescents thus play an active role in contexts of control. Much heterogeneity exists in how adolescents react to control during their socialisation process (Flamant et al., 2023). For example, Flamant et al. (2022) investigated how adolescents apply four distinctive coping strategies in reaction to overprotective parenting practices. These involved compulsive compliance (rigid obedience, giving up on own values and priorities), oppositional defiance (disrespect for authority and blunt resistance), negotiation (engagement in constructive dialogue aimed at finding consensus), and accommodation (cognitive restructuring and flexible adjustment of own goals and preferences relative to situational constraints). However, little is known about the interplay between adolescents' reactions to control and their identity development processes.

Method

This article emanates from a large, mixed-methods doctoral research study that investigated the role of control (psychological and behavioural) within various contexts (parental, peer, school, and community) on the identity formation of adolescents (see Van Damme, 2019; Van Damme & Naudé, 2022). The aim of this article is to provide a description and interpretation of the adolescents' subjective experiences of being controlled during their process of finding a personal identity. To gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents'

experiences in real-world contexts and their reactions, thoughts, and feelings in situations of control, a qualitative approach embedded in the overlapping epistemologies of interpretivism and constructivism was employed.

Ethical procedures and participant sampling

After ethical clearance and authorisation to conduct this study had been obtained from all host institutions (i.e., the Ethics Research Committee of the university [Ethical Clearance Number UFS-HSD2017/0234], the Eastern Cape Department of Education, and principals from the public secondary schools that participated), informed parental consent and participant assent were gained. Recruitment was conducted at schools with the assistance of teachers as community gatekeepers. Recruitment took place at schools where English is the medium of instruction, to ensure that participants felt comfortable to express themselves in English. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 120 participants of various gender and ethno-cultural groups who were (a) in the adolescent developmental stage between 13 years and 19 years of age; (b) proficient enough in English to articulate their experiences; and (c) able to provide both parental consent and personal assent. All participants who complied with these parameters had the opportunity to participate. In Table 1, a summary of the biographic characteristics of the sample is provided.

To ensure the fair, dignified, and respectful treatment of the participants, various ethical guidelines were followed. At the onset of the process, the aim of the study and the procedures (e.g., the voluntary nature, duration, and extent of participation; the prioritising of confidentiality; and the ground rules for focus groups) were discussed with the participants. Debriefing sessions were offered, and information regarding national help lines was provided.

Data collection

Data were collected through focus group discussions (Carey, 2016) in order to gain rich and deep insight into the participants' thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and ideas regarding their experiences of being controlled and their sense of self. The participants were organised into 17 focus groups of relatively equal sizes, with a maximum of 12 participants per group. The focus groups were compiled to be relatively homogeneous with regard to age and gender: early adolescent (13–15 years) females, early adolescent (13–15 years) males, middle adolescent (16–17 years) females, middle adolescent (16–17 years) males, late adolescent (18–19 years) females, and late adolescent (18–19 years) males. This was done to obtain nuanced data and to ensure, for example, that younger participants could speak freely and

Table 1 Biographic Characteristics of the Sample

Participant Information		N	%
Age (Years)	13	8	6.7
	14	22	18.3
	15	38	31.7
	16	26	21.7
	17	15	12.5
	18	9	7.5
	19	2	1.6
Gender	Female	70	58.3
	Male	50	41.7
Home Language	Afrikaans	19	14.3
	English	33	24.8
	Sesotho	4	3
	isiXhosa	73	54.9
	Setswana	1	0.7
	Swati	2	1.6
	isiZulu	1	0.7

voice their opinions honestly without fear of intimidation by older participants.

A collaborative and communicative environment was created during the focus group discussions to ensure that participants felt safe and comfortable when sharing their stories and experiences. Each focus group was scheduled for an hour, but the timeframe was adjusted according to the flow of the discussion, resulting in the focus groups being of varied lengths. The focus groups were facilitated by one researcher (doctoral psychology student). Openended questions were asked to direct the discussion towards topics related to identity and control. Interview questions were, for example: *What factors do you think can have an impact on identity development? What do you know about being controlled? How are people affected by being controlled? How does the experience of being controlled relate to who you are and who you choose to be?* Follow-up questions and prompts were used to ensure that the discussion was interactive and provided rich, new ideas and meaningful experiences. All the sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Fieldnotes were made after each session to assist with data analysis later. Rather than applying the more realist principles of saturation, the guidelines regarding information power from Braun and Clarke (2021a) were followed to ascertain whether the breadth, depth, and diversity of data would address the analytic goals and research purpose while considering pragmatic constraints.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Since the focus was on participants’ unique and contextually situated realities, a process of experiential thematic analysis was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This entailed moving through iterative cycles of familiarisation with the data by means of repeated active reading (including immersion in and critical engagement with the data). This was followed by the generation of units of meaning through working systematically through

the complete data set using open and active coding processes and balancing descriptive-interpretive, inductive-deductive and semantic-latent coding. This resulted in theme generation and theme refining and defining (i.e., organising recurring meaning units and central concepts into meaningful groups that capture salient/important details in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Saldaña, 2016).

Methodological integrity

Regarding the importance of methodological integrity and rigour, various aspects were considered to maintain fidelity to the subject matter (allegiance to the phenomenon under study) and utility in achieving the research goals (Levitt, 2017, 2018). Throughout the research process, there was a focus on alignment and conceptual coherence between research aim, philosophical positioning, and approaches to inquiry. Attention was paid to the procedures of data collection and management in order to provide data that could adequately address the research question (e.g., systematic methods of sampling, the use of a semistructured interview schedule, multiple focus groups, verbatim transcriptions). Furthermore, justification for the methodological choices was provided, and transparent reporting was done. Rigorous analytic procedures were applied to generate welldeveloped patterns of meaning, each underpinned by a central organising concept and summarised in a table of themes (Table 2). Findings were unpacked in narrative format with direct participant quotations (see the results section that follows) and discussed in relation to theory and context Braun and Clarke 2021c; Levitt, 2017, 2018).

Results

Conceptualising identity

Participants in this study articulated various opinions about how their identities developed over time and in association with others. They defined identity as “*being an individual,*

Table 2 Themes Developed Through the Process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Description of Central Organising Concept
Conceptualising Identity		Identity is experienced as a unique combination of a multitude of internal attributes that develop over time and are embedded in social context but determined by personal choice.
Experiencing Control		Various agents of control and control measures are prominent and mostly negatively perceived.
Pathways from Control to Identity	<i>Conforming and Submitting to Control</i>	Control is seen as an ‘invisible force’ or manipulative form with limited awareness, little power of choice, and reactions of dependency and willing submission, resulting in feelings of inner turmoil, compromised thinking, and a ‘false façade’ with a lack of coherence.
	<i>Finding Freedom from Control</i>	Control is met with a firmer stance, a resistance to power and personal choice, and the exploration of independence.
	<i>Internalising Control</i>	Views of control are embedded in personal reflection on the value of aspects of control and the power of choice and personal commitment.

being yourself” (Male, FG 17); *“It is basically understanding the differences between everyone else and acknowledging that this is you”* (Male, FG 15); *“the boundaries you have”* (Female, FG 1); *“how you see yourself”* (Female, FG 12); and *“knowing who and what you are”* (Male, FG 4). They declared that a multitude of internal attributes uniquely combine to form an identity: *“values”* (Female, FG 1); *“beliefs”* (Female, FG 1); *“skills”* (Female, FG 9); *“interests”* (Female, FG 9); *“strengths and weaknesses”* (Female, FG 9). They acknowledged that identity is not only rooted in culture and tradition, *“knowing your roots, where you come from”* (Male, FG 17), but also in personal history and upbringing, *“where you grew up, what happens around you, the people that you surround yourself with”* (Female, FG 14) and *“where I was raised, how I was raised”* (Male, FG 13). The important role of others was emphasised: *“your community, family, friends”* (Male, FG 2); *“the media”* (Female, FG 3); *“friends’ roles can influence you”* (Male, FG 11); and *“The things you do, what your friends are doing, that will make who I am today”* (Male, FG 13). The fact that identity is embedded in context was emphasised: *“Things that happen in your community, you are most likely to do the things that they do. You learn it from the things that they do and sometimes you participate”* (Female, FG 16); *“... creates or gives you a specific way to live your life, which can influence your character and who you are”* (Male, FG 17); and *“everything you see or hear, I think, influences you one way or another”* (Male, FG 17). Yet participants did not regard themselves as passive recipients of an identity but highlighted the importance of choice and using experience to make better choices: *“It’s your choices that define who you are”* (Male, FG 17); *“You know what is good or wrong for you personally. We have to go on experiencing it in order to know if it is wrong or if it is right for you”* (Female, FG 16); and *“You are trying to go through all of this that happens to be better in the future”* (Male, FG 13).

Experiencing control

Participants could easily relate to various agents of control in their lives. In addition to parents and peers who were most frequently mentioned, other control agents included *“the teacher”* (Female, FG 1); *“school”* (Male, FG 2); *“someone that is older than you”* (Female, FG 1); *“adults”* (Male, FG 6); *“the police”* (Male, FG 2); *“the church”* (Male, FG 2); *“political parties”* (Male, FG 2); and *“the government”* (Female, FG 3). When discussing power relations and authority, negative experiences were prominent: *“manipulation”* (Male, FG 6); *“being exploited”* (Male, FG 6); *“being bullied or pressured”* (Female, FG 10); *“they make decisions for you”* (Female, FG 7); and *“entrapment, oppression, seclusion, and privacy and I don’t know how to*

say it, but you are kept in a box” (Male, FG 17). With regard to parents, participants mentioned control measures such as *“she threatens”* (Male, FG 2), *“she tells me what to do”* (Male, FG 2); *“intimidating”* (Male, FG 5); *“they hit you”* (Male, FG 4); and *“doing chores”* (Male, FG 6). Participants felt controlled in their peer groups and stated the following: *“They will lie about you to the teachers and tease you”* (Female, FG 12); *“by saying bad things”* (Male, FG 5); and *“make fun of you”* (Female, FG 12).

Pathways from control to identity

In relating their reactions to experiencing control, three themes/pathways were identified: (1) *Conforming and Submitting to Control*; (2) *Finding Freedom*; and (3) *Internalising Control*.

Conforming and submitting to control

Most prominent in the discussions of the focus groups was evidence of conforming. Participants attributed this reaction to three underlying reasons: (1) unawareness and oblivion; (2) the perception of not having a choice; and (3) the need for acceptance.

Some participants were of the opinion that control can be exerted as an ‘invisible force’ of which one can be unaware:

I think people don’t know that they are being controlled or not ... everyone is, I believe, controlled, one way or another. There is something that puts you in order, whether it’s a rule or another person. You don’t really know when it happens ... but it keeps you straight or okay, and it’s been keeping you this way for a very long time. (Male, FG 17)

In addition, *“It is when someone is ... taking control of your mind or your ... social well-being and showing you what to do. Telling you what to do”* (Male, FG 6).

Closely related to this were participants’ perceptions that they are often forced into situations in which they do not have the power of choice: *“Someone claims you”* (Male, FG 2); *“Sometimes, you will have a different opinion to theirs and they will force you”* (Male, FG 5); and *“You don’t have a say in something”* (Male, FG 5). These manipulative forms of control can take many forms: *“by making you feel like what they are doing is right”* (Female, FG 16); *“They find your weak spots and they use it [sic.]”* (Female, FG 14); *“They will keep someone close and say things to make you feel insecure about yourself”* (Female, FG 3); and *“Someone I care about can control me and make me do things, things you care about or things you know that are going to affect you”* (Male, FG 17). Some participants asserted that they

often conform to expectations due to dependency: “*I accept that I am being controlled by my family and the school because I am not independent yet; I am not on my feet yet*” (Male, FG 15); and “*The community has a certain expectation for one in a community, so they might expect you to be what you are not*” (Male, FG 17).

Participants also admitted that they willingly submit to various forms of control with the aim of being accepted: “*... want to be someone else so that you could fit in and be liked*” (Female, FG 1); “*You don’t want to be left out and then everyone starts doing it. You follow them*” (Female, FG 9); “*You make bad decisions like drug abuse ... because you want to do what they do*” (Female, FG 1); and “*Friends make me do something that I don’t want to do; then they just keep pushing you and pushing and they won’t leave you*” (Male, FG 13). Avoiding negative labels were also frequently mentioned: “*It can control you when people criticise you*” (Male, FG 5); and “*Most people, if you do one thing, you will be perceived like that ... and it’s like they put a tag on you ... and people see that tag. And people see you as that kind of a person. It’s the only thing they see*” (Female, FG 14).

Whether these forms of submission are perceived as voluntary or not, the outcome is not experienced as conducive or productive. Emotional consequences included, “*makes me angry*” (Male, FG 4); “*sadness*” (Male, FG 5); “*hurt*” (Male, FG 5); “*you get anxiety*” (Male, FG 2); “*annoying*” (Female, FG 9); “*frustrating*” (Female, FG 9); “*tiring*” (Female, FG 9); “*breaks you down. Emotionally, it breaks you*” (Male, FG 6); and “*even become suicidal*” (Female, FG 10). Compromised thinking and behavioural patterns were mentioned: “*It changes the way you think*” (Male, FG 4); “*You can’t make your own decisions because you always doubt yourself*” (Female, FG 1); “*lose self-confidence*” (Female, FG 1); and “*You are not assertive*” (Female, FG 1). However, the most negative outcome that the participants identified with was the ‘false façade’ and living with pretence: “*view you as something that you are not*” (Female, FG 14); “*You are living in the ways the controlling person wants you to live*” (Female, FG 3); “*You won’t accept yourself and the way you are*” (Female, FG 1); “*becoming a different person just because of what people will make you do*” (Female, FG 1); “*You end up believing it and you end up doing it and it becomes you*” (Female, FG 16); and “*When you are doing what other people want you to do, how can you discover who you really are? Which is horrible. You basically become a copy of them*” (Female, FG 14).

From the above, it is clear that submission to control results in feelings of inner turmoil and a struggle to be true to the self: “*Like you lose yourself, like you lose who you are because you never actually discovered who you are*” (Female, FG 16); “*You start doing something you don’t want*

to do; you end up downgrading yourself and thinking less of yourself because I did this, and I really don’t want to do this” (Female, FG 14); and “*You are just adapting to all the things that other people are that you are not. And the consequences that you will have to deal with are, Who am I really? Like an identity crisis*” (Female, FG 14).

Finding freedom from control

Somewhat in contrast to the previous theme, some participants adopted a firmer stand in their reactions to experiencing control. They affirmed their own power and personal choice with the statement, “*[only] if you let them*” (Female, FG 16).

The following statements emphasised the importance of independence, especially as adolescents become older: “*You are your own person; you don’t have to listen to what people say*” (Female, FG 14); “*be able to say I’m not doing this*” (Female, FG 9); and “*Like maybe when I was five, you take it, but the older you get, the more you stand up for yourself*” (Female, FG 14). Related statements also portrayed some resistance to power: “*I’m gonna do what I want to do; you can’t just tell me what to do. You can’t just control me*” (Female, FG 14). Participants holding these views also valued the importance of exploration: “*getting to know themselves and their values*” (Female, FG 9). Participants admitted that ‘freeing oneself’ was “*not easy though*” (Female, FG). Methods to achieve freedom included, “*talking to someone you know, you trust*” (Female, FG 1), “*confronting the control*” (Female, FG 9), “*just say[ing] no*” (Female, FG 1) or leaving the situation.

Internalising control

Related to the previous pathway and much less prominent than the first theme were statements providing evidence of the internalisation of some aspects of control. In contrast to the previous two themes, these statements did not relate to either submitting or opposing power but rather to adopting a more mature view embedded in personal reflection and choice: “*thinking how the situation ... will affect you. And thinking if it is a good or bad thing*” (Male, FG 13). Participants holding this view reiterated the importance of awareness: “*You must first realise that you are being controlled*” (Female, FG 10). They could value the role of control in their lives and see the benefits: “*Being controlled can be positive ... like being controlled positively can like reduce chaos*” (Male, FG 17); “*... help you get you to your goals*” (Female, FG 8); and “*They guide you in a way that you ... you find a way ... to know what you had to do and what you didn’t have to do*” (Male, FG 11). This realisation provides the power of choice: “*saying no to peer pressure*” (Male, FG

4). What is clear, however, is the personal decision/commitment: “*It’s self-discipline*” (Male, FG 4).

Discussion

This study highlighted a group of South African adolescents’ experiences of control while in the process of exploring their identities. Participants experienced identity development as a continuous and fluid process of negotiation and adjustment that is shaped by significant others and embedded in social context. This confirms the views of identity theorists who regard identity development as a social and interactive process (Adams et al., 2012; Erikson, 1968; Oyserman et al., 2012; Pe’rez-Sales, 2010). Participants reiterated that their search for a synthesised sense of self is an ongoing process of identity exploration and commitment, as has also been explained by identity scholars (Bogaerts et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011). The fact that adolescence is a time when boundaries are challenged and autonomy is prioritised (Lillevoll et al., 2013; Steeger & Gondoli, 2013) was confirmed by the mostly negative experiences that participants related to the various agents of control. They preferred autonomy-supportive control practices that allowed for choice (Assor et al., 2020). In agreement with Flamant et al. (2023), Luyckx et al. (2013), and Schwartz et al. (2011), participants in this study regarded themselves as active agents and not passive recipients of an identity in contexts of control.

Three pathways of reacting to control were identified in this study, each of which contains varying forms of exploration and commitment, leading to different identity outcomes. The first and most prominent pathway was *Conforming and Submitting to Control*. When being confronted with various forms of control, the participants of this study mostly chose to conform. It seems that a strong need for acceptance and a sense of belonging outweighed their sense of perceived personal power to explore alternatives. This resulted in commitment to external expectations and group goals, leading to foreclosed or diffused identity statuses (Marcia, 1966). The prominence of this pathway might also be explained by contextual factors. The participants of this study reside in a resource-poor region of South Africa and face various economic challenges and socio-political changes. Cadichon et al. (2022) described how contextual factors such as unstable socio-political and economic conditions can limit identity development and result in a ‘troubled’ identities. Flamant et al. (2022) identified compulsive compliance as a particularly maladaptive coping strategy in contexts of control. Participants clearly articulated the negative consequences of the commitment to the values of others without proper exploration and self-discovery and expressed what

other researchers have referred to as identity incompatibility, incoherence, and rumination (Jia et al., 2015; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Luyckx et al., 2007, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2012; Pellerone et al., 2015; Pe’rez-Sales, 2010; Cadichon et al., 2022) also warned that this rumination about a vague future might result in a non-compliance with commitments.

Far less prominent than the reactions above was the second pathway, *Finding Freedom from Control*. This pathway resembled the resistance to control and nonconformity that one would typically associate with adolescents’ increased need for autonomy and independence (Kuhar & Reiter, 2013; Markova & Nikitskaya, 2017; Steeger & Gondoli, 2013). An overemphasis on resistance might be associated with oppositional defiance, a non-autonomous and maladaptive strategy that could be at the cost of personal values and preferences (Flamant et al., 2022). However, statements associated with this pathway also portrayed some aspects of deliberation relating to what is regarded as coherent/incoherent to the personal identity, followed by a stronger inclination towards exploring more suitable roles.

The third pathway, *Internalising Control*, highlighted some participants’ move towards an internal locus of control (Lillevoll et al., 2013) and the ability to explore both the positive and negative consequences of various alternatives before internalising the forms of control that will result in a sense of coherence and self-directed behaviour. This more adaptive and autonomous coping strategy allows adolescents the opportunity to stay true to the self (Flamant et al., 2022). This pathway aligns with the achieved identity status in which both exploration and commitment result in a unique sense of self that directs behaviour, goals, values, beliefs, self-regulation, and choice (Erikson, 1968; Bogaerts et al., 2019; Luyckx et al., 2013; Marcia, 1966; Oyserman et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2011; Assor et al., 2020) refer to this as *Reflective Authentic Inner Compass Facilitation*, which is embedded in authentic values, interests, and life-aspirations with autonomous commitment to futureorientated goals and decisions and is positively related to well-being.

Limitations of this study and recommendations for future research

Data collection for this study was done in English. Participants were from schools where English is the medium of instruction. They thus speak, read, and write in English on a daily basis. Still, for most participants (nearly 75% of the sample), English was not their home language. Participants might have found the expression of personal experiences in a language other than their mother tongue inhibiting. Future researchers can consider the judicious incorporation of multi-lingual co-researchers or translators.

The use of focus groups as method of data collection facilitated interaction and a lively co-construction of participants' realities. Although a respectful and save space for the expression of their experiences was provided, some participants could have felt less comfortable to share personal views. In future research, individual interviews might provide a more conducive environment, especially for participants who want to express experiences that deviates from the group norm.

The current research study provides an account of the experiences of a group of 120 adolescents from a region in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. The research thus presents a reflection of their reality in a specific contextual setting and at a particular point in time. Since identity unfolds in context, additional research incorporating diverse racial, ethnolinguistic, and socio-economic samples, will assist in drawing further conclusions on the intricate associations between identity and control. Future studies may consider including control agents (such as parents, peers, and other authority figures) in the research process — to provide an additional layer of understanding.

Conclusion and implications

This study emphasises the importance of considering reactions to control in order to gain a clearer and expanded understanding of adolescent identity development. The findings of this study affirm the importance of an iterative process, including both identity exploration and identity commitments towards the formation of an achieved and coherent identity. The challenges that adolescents experience in managing the intricate balance between finding acceptance by submitting to expectations and gaining independence by challenging norms and boundaries, especially in changing contexts with conflicting messages, are evident. The findings of this study highlight the importance of autonomy-supportive practices when interacting with adolescents. This knowledge can inform mentors and authority figures (such as parents, caregivers, teachers, school counsellors, and community mentors) of the value of allowing adolescents the space to be active agents in their own identity development.

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Data Availability The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of in-

terest.

Ethical approval All procedures performed in this study (involving human participants) were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

Informed consent Informed consent (parental consent and participant assent) was obtained from all the participants in the study.

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