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An Identity-Based Motivation Framework for Self-Regulation

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Will you be going to that networking lunch? Will you be tempted by a donut at 4 p.m.? Will you be doing homework at 9 p.m.? If, like many people, your responses are based on your gut sense of who you are—shy or outgoing, a treat lover or a dieter, studious or a procrastinator—you made three assumptions about identity: that motivation and behavior are identity based, that identities are chronically on the mind, and that identities are stable. These assumptions fit everyday experience. First, people do assume that everyone has a stable essence or core that predicts their behavior, that who people *are* matters for what they do and that what they do reflects who they are (Arkes & Kajdasz, 2011; James, 1890; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). Second, people know a lot about themselves; this is why linking anything to the self increases recall and processing depth (Sui & Humphreys, 2015). Third, people assume that their identities are always on their mind, that they can predict tomorrow's tastes and desires from those of today (Gilbert, Gill, & Wilson, 2002; Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013). If identities have worth and value, then people should make sense of their experiences through the lens of these identities. If identities are stable and chronically on the mind, then no matter the setting, meaning-making will be stable and people should be able to use their identities to control and regulate themselves. Many conceptual models are based on these assumptions too (e.g., Baumeister, 1998; Berkman, Livingston, & Kahn, this issue; Brewer, 1991; Brown, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1987, 1989; Oyserman, 2007). But just because these assumptions are common and useful does not mean that they are correct. Identity-based motivation theory predicts that identity stability is a useful illusion but that identity accessibility and content are flexibly attuned to contextual constraints and affordances. This flexibility is a design feature, not a flaw.

As reviewed in greater detail elsewhere (Oyserman et al., 2012), what is stable is not the content or structure of the self or the accessibility of a particular self content or structure, but rather the motivation to use the self to make meaning. Far from being a limitation to overcome, this dynamic construction of self-concepts and identities is necessary: To paraphrase William James (1890), thinking (about the self) is for doing. People use their self-concepts and identities in service of making sense of the world and their choices within the world. Identities orient and focus attention on some features of the immediate context and

render other features of the immediate context irrelevant or meaningless (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Identity-based motivation provides a new way to consider self-regulation by focusing on how immediate contexts influence identity and meaning-making. That is, immediate context shapes which identities are on the mind and also what on-the-mind-identities imply for meaning-making, goals, aspirations, values, and desires.

Defining Self, Self-Concept, and Identity

So far we have referred to identities, self-concepts, and self-regulation but did not distinguish or define these terms. We do so now, following Oyserman et al. (2012; based on Oyserman, 2009a), defining self, self-concept, and identity as nested constructs. As outlined next, identities are nested within self-concepts and both are nested in the self, the seat of self-regulatory capacity.

Self and Self-Regulation

The *self* is the capacity of an “I” to reflect on an object “me” and to be aware of this reflection (“I am thinking about me”). The “me” aspect of the self is temporal (past, present, and future). It contains self-concepts and identities. The “me” aspect of the self (identities and self-concepts) is often assumed to exist in memory regardless of people's current situation or chronic social position. What comes to mind at any moment is a working subset of these memory structures. Regulating what one attends to, how one thinks, feels, and acts is an important task of the self. Ability to self-regulate differs—across people, developmental phases, and situations (for longer discussion, see Oyserman, 2007). Ineffective self-regulation increases likelihood of premature goal-disengagement and battered feelings of worth and competence (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Schwinghammer, Stapel, & Blanton, 2006). Cultures and worldviews may differ in how much they promote self-regulation as a means of fitting in or sticking out (Moojiman et al., in press).

Self-Concepts

Self-concepts are cognitive structures that organize content (identities) and provide a lens with which to interpret

experience and make meaning (Markus & Cross, 1990; Oyserman et al., 2012). A number of self-concept types have been documented empirically (for details, see Oyserman et al., 2012). One type involves perspective: People are capable of taking a first-person immersed perspective or a third-person distal perspective on the self. An emerging body of research documents that first- and third-person perspectives on the self are available in memory, though not necessarily chronically accessible (for reviews, see Kross & Ayduk, 2017; Oyserman et al., 2012). Another type involves agency-communion: People are capable of taking an agentic independent view or a connected interdependent view of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus & Oyserman, 1989). Independent and interdependent self-concepts are available in memory, though not necessarily chronically accessible: Accessibility carries with it identities and mental procedures (for reviews, see Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Identities

Identities can be personal or social. Personal identities are traits and characteristics (e.g., “smart”). Social identities are social relationships (e.g., “friendly”), social roles (e.g., “mother”), and social group memberships (e.g., “American”). Social identities contain relevant content—what it means to be friendly, a mother, an American. Identities, whether personal or social, can be positive or negative in valence and are temporal (past, present, future). Although typically assessed as a list of attributes, identities are embodied. For example, an identity as “smart” is not just a semantic list or set of episodic memories; it includes a sense of what “smart” looks like, sounds like, moves like, and so on (Oyserman et al., 2012; see also Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Identities are nested within self-concepts, which means that accessible self-concept influences which identities are accessible and what these identities imply. Take, for example, an identity as “smart.” When an independent self-concept is accessible, so are personal traits and characteristics of “smart” (e.g., solving problems quickly, being focused on one’s own achievements) and mental procedures of separating, using rules, and focusing on the big picture (e.g., for a review, see Yan & Oyserman, *in press*). In contrast, when an interdependent self-concept is accessible, so are social relations, roles, and group memberships, so “smart” might entail being a helpful colleague who can mentor others and mental procedures of connecting, gist-based, and focusing on context (e.g., for a review, see Yan & Oyserman, *in press*).

Identity-Based Motivation

Now we define identity-based motivation theory, detail each component with examples of empirical support, and highlight implications for self-regulation.

A Situated Approach

There is some evidence to support the view of the self as a stable memory structure; however, this evidence is more limited than might be assumed because it comes primarily from correlational studies that examine agreement with close-ended

statements about the self over time (for a review, see Oyserman et al., 2012). Moreover, a stable memory structure understanding of the self contrasts with a recurrent social psychological theme that cognition is situated and pragmatic rather than context-free and invariant (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Schwarz, 2010). That is, the contexts in which one thinks influence both what comes to mind and how one makes sense of what comes to mind. Situated models have three basic premises that are foundational to identity-based motivation theory. First, thinking is flexible. People think in order to engage in adaptive action. Second, thinking is situated. People’s thinking is responsive to the external (physical and social) and internal (experience of thinking) features of their immediate context. Third, the impact of contexts on thinking does not depend on conscious awareness of its impact. Indeed, drawing attention to the potential influence of context can change how people respond to it.

Identity-based motivation theory takes this situated approach and proposes that what constitutes the “me” aspect of the self is not stable but created in moment-to-moment situations. People’s dynamically constructed identities—“me” as “male,” “smart,” “student”—fit the constraints and affordances of their current situation. People are motivated to act and make sense of the world using the identities on their minds—identities have value and people regulate themselves in light of their identities. At the same time, which identities come to mind and what these identities imply for action and meaning-making are dynamically constructed in context. People’s interpretation of the identities on their mind and hence their self-regulatory focus depends on the pragmatic meaning of these identities in the particular context. From an identity-based motivation formulation, what is stable is not recalled content (identities) or recalled structures (self-concepts), but rather the motivation to use identities and self-concepts to make meaning. Memory is used, but the “me” is constructed, not stable. People’s dynamically constructed identities fit the constraints and affordances of their current situation. That identities are dynamically constructed is not necessarily obvious or easily extracted from daily experience; people have extensive autobiographical memories so almost anything can feel like a continuation of a stable self. Panel 1 of our Figure depicts this situated and dynamic nature of identity.

A Social Psychological Approach

Identity-based motivation theory is a social psychological theory of human motivation and goal-pursuit. It explains when and in which situations people’s identities or self-concepts motivate them to take action toward their goals (Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b, 2015). Identity-based motivation theory starts with the assumption that identities have value—people prefer to act and make sense of situations in identity-congruent ways—ways consistent with how “I” and “we” (people “like me”) think and act. The implication is that people are motivated to regulate their behavior, to work toward desired and away from undesired future identities, and to act in ways that fit who they are now and want to become. Although identities have value in that people prefer to act (action-readiness) and make meaning (procedural-readiness) in line with their identities, which identities come to mind and what these identities

imply for action and meaning-making is not fixed and depends on features of the immediate situation (dynamic construction).

The premise of an identity-based motivation perspective is that people use identities to prepare for action and to make sense of the world around them: Thinking (about identities) is for doing. People assume that their identities are stable and, hence, that their goals and behaviors are stable across situations. Indeed identities and self-concepts have behavioral consequences, yet as we show, neither meaning-making nor action are fixed scripts recalled from memory (for a more detailed description and literature review, see Oyserman et al., 2012). Although memory is involved and identities are often on the mind, the content of the self is not stable.

From an identity-based motivation perspective, the thing of interest is not that people can change how they regard themselves after putting in sustained and conscious effort. Rather, it is that small shifts in context can have surprisingly large effects,

changing how people regard themselves, how they interpret their experiences, and the actions that they take, whether they are aware of these changes or not. Identity-based motivation has three components, termed dynamic construction, action readiness, and procedural readiness. Each component is an associative knowledge network, each linked to others. Consequently, features of situations that cue one knowledge network will likely cue the other knowledge networks via spreading activation (Oyserman & Fisher, *in press*; Oyserman et al., 2012). This means that the identity-to-action link is bidirectional: Situational affordances and constraints that influence what people do should also influence how they see themselves (e.g., Bem, 1972). We graphically represent this process in Figure 1. For ease, we highlight each component as a panel, separating dynamic construction (Panel 1), procedural-readiness (interpretation of experienced ease and difficulty, Panel 2), and action-readiness (Panel 3). Panel 1 also illustrates spreading

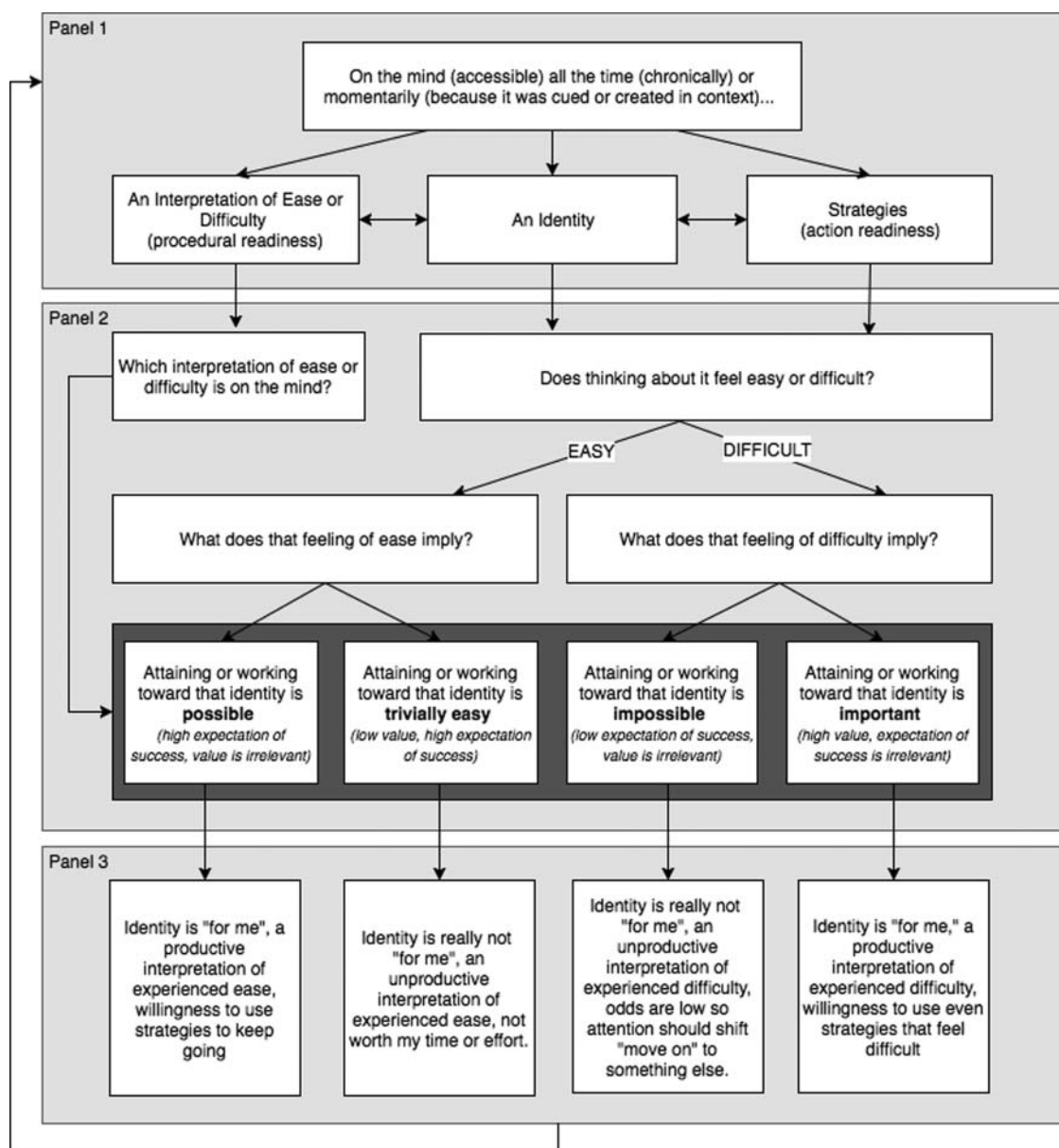


Figure 1. Identity-based motivation process model: How identities influence self-regulation.

activation across components. The bidirectional flow between identities, interpretation of experience, and action is depicted in Panel 1 of [Figure 1](#) with bidirectional arrows. Panels 2 and 3 also show the cascading process of influence. For ease, we show an arrow going back up from the bottom to top panels rather than detail the full recursive process.

Dynamic Construction

Although people experience themselves as having stable identities, how people think about themselves depends on the affordances and constraints of the immediate context. Which identities come to mind and what these identities seem to imply for action and meaning-making are constructed in the moment rather than simply being drawn from memory. The same holds for self-concepts. This “dynamic construction” is a virtue not a flaw: Identities and self-concepts are flexibly attuned to features of the immediate situation rather than being fixed in memory. Having said what dynamic construction entails, it is helpful to also note what it does not entail: Dynamic construction does not mean that people do not remember anything about themselves; they do. People have an enormous stock of self-related memories—wherever you were and whatever you did, *you* were there (Fivush, 2010). The same is true for prospection; imagining who one might become involves memory, and people repeatedly mentally simulate who they might be in the future either in general or in specific settings (Szpunar, Spreng, & Schacter, 2014). Given all of these ways in which identities and self-concepts can be on the mind, people are likely to experience a sense of ease and fluency with whatever content or structure is dynamically cued in context (Oyserman et al., 2012). This sense of fluency may lead people to experience themselves as having stable, chronically accessible identities. Whatever is on the mind feels fluent, and this fluency may be mistaken for “always there.”

Evidence

The first proposition is that which identities come to mind is influenced by immediate context. This idea is also referred to as “working” or “on-line” self-concept (see Markus & Wurf, 1987). The evidence for this proposition is quite robust. For example, whether British students think about themselves as students or as British is easily shifted by contextual cues, and this has consequences for their health behavior (Tarrant & Butler, 2011; for a broader review, see Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b; Oyserman et al., 2012).

The second proposition, which is that the content of accessible identities is dynamically constructed, is unique to identity-based motivation theory. Evidence for this proposition is emerging. Consider the following experiment which shows that small features of the situation shift the content and implications of an accessible male or female identity. Elmore and Oyserman (2012) asked eighth-grade students to describe what they expected to be like next year and what they were concerned they might be like next year. All booklets they were given to write in looked the same on the outside. On the first page of each booklet was a graph showing actual Census data. The feature that changed was the graph details: Students saw only one

of four graphs. Two of the graphs showed a gender difference: One showed that men have higher earnings than women (the “men succeed” condition); another showed that women graduate at higher rates than men (the “women succeed” condition). The other two graphs did not mention gender. Seeing that men have higher earnings (the “men succeed” condition) implied that school engagement was congruent with being a boy: It was a “for me” behavior for boys. This was not implied by the other three graphs. Seeing that women graduate high school at higher rates than men (the “women succeed” condition) implied that school engagement was congruent with being a girl: It was a “for me” behavior for girls. This was not implied by the other three graphs. Indeed, children imagined more school-focused future identities if success was presented as characteristic of their own gender (boys in the “men succeed” condition and girls in the “women succeed” condition).

Evidence for dynamic construction is not limited to the content of social identities such as gender; it has also been found for personal identities including “networker” and “retiree.” Consider a networking identity. In a series of studies, Raj, Fast, and Fisher (2017) first showed that people with “networker” identities were more likely to prioritize strengthening and expanding their professional networks than people who did not report this identity. Then they showed that networking identities could be dynamically constructed. Participants were randomized into two groups (identity-congruent, identity-incongruent). In the identity-congruent group, participants were asked to give examples of how networking is consistent with “who you are.” In the identity-incongruent group, they were asked to give examples of how networking is inconsistent with “who you are.” Participants led to consider networking as identity-congruent subsequently reported a stronger networking identity and greater intention to network.

Rather than cue identity with a written prompt, Lewis and Oyserman (2015) tested the effect of small shifts in situation on adults’ “retiree” identity. In their experiments, participants were randomized to consider retirement. Some participants were asked to consider their retirement in 30 years in the future. Other participants were asked to consider retirement in 10,950 days in the future (equivalent to 30 years). The experiment was tried again, this time comparing 40 years and 14,600 days. They were then asked how connected this retiree identity felt to their current identity. When days rather than years were the context, participants reported that their retiree identity felt more connected to their current identity and more congruent with their current identity. Hershfield et al. (2011) also focused on retiree identity. They used an embodied prompt to create a particular future retiree identity. Participants were shown an avatar—an image of themselves based on their current appearance—and then asked how they would allocate \$1,000, with one option to invest the money in a retirement account and the other options focused on the present. There were two versions of the avatar. One version had the participant’s current appearance, and the other version was the participant’s current appearance digitally aged to be 70 years old. This small shift in context changed participants’ allocations. Participants in the aged avatar condition seemed to experience their retiree identity as temporally proximal; compared to the other group of participants, they invested more in retirement savings.

Implications for Self-Regulation

These and other experiments demonstrate that people are sensitive to what their immediate contexts imply for their identities; even subtle changes in the immediate context can have pronounced effects on identity content. This dynamic construction does not imply that identities are never stable in content over time but rather that what seems to be stability is the result of repeatedly experiencing contexts that feel the same (are psychologically isomorphic) over time. If contexts feel the same, the same identities and identity content are likely to be repeatedly instantiated. One way in which place in social structure (e.g., income, social class, gender, race, ethnicity) can matter is by creating psychologically isomorphic contexts over time (for summaries, see Fisher, O'Donnell, & Oyserman, *in press*; Oyserman & Fisher, *in press*; Oyserman & Lewis, 2017; Oyserman, Smith, & Elmore, 2014). From a dynamic construction perspective, self-regulation success is more likely if across time, contexts feel the same; then the same identities come to mind and what they imply (norms, values, goals) are consistent. This is less likely to occur the more contexts feel different.

Procedural Readiness

Procedural readiness is the idea is that people make sense of their experiences through the lens of the identities that are currently on their mind. We have already described one form of procedural readiness: readiness to use the mental procedures evoked by accessible self-concept (e.g., distal vs. immersed, independent vs. interdependent). Here, we focus on another form of procedural readiness: readiness to use experiences of ease and difficulty to infer something about identity, and vice versa. Panels 1 and 2 of Figure 1 focus on the cascading process from immediate context to identity and interpretation of experienced ease and difficulty.

From an identity-based motivation perspective, both experienced ease and experienced difficulty can bolster self-regulatory effort. Specifically, experienced ease can imply possibility, high odds of success—"This is for me, I am (or can become) good at this." Experienced difficulty can imply value and importance separate from the odds—"No pain, no gain, this is really important for me." If an accessible identity feels congruent with the task at hand (it is a "me" thing to do), people are more likely to interpret their experiences of ease as implying that task success is possible and to interpret their experiences of difficulty as implying task importance.

However, experienced ease and experienced difficulty can also be demotivating, undermining self-regulatory effort. Experienced ease can imply low value, even triviality—"I should not waste my time on this, it is beneath me." In contrast, experienced difficulty can imply that one's odds of success are low, potentially impossibly low—"I cannot do this, this is not for me" (for a review, see Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). People are more likely to interpret their experiences of ease as implying that success is trivial and their experiences of difficulty as implying that success is unlikely if they feel uncertain about whether an accessible identity is congruent with the task at hand, thus decreasing motivation and effort.

Evidence

The prediction that which interpretation of difficulty is identity-congruent is dynamically constructed in context was tested by Oyserman, Destin, and Novin (2015). They showed that immediate contexts affect how strongly students' endorsed difficulty as a signal of importance. In their experiments, students read about the university setting, either as success-likely (a place where students attain) or failure-likely (a place where attainments often fall short of dreams). Then students wrote about their possible future identities over the college years, either their desired future identities or their undesired future identities. After perceptions of the immediate context were subtly manipulated in these ways, students rated their agreement or disagreement with the idea that experienced difficulty signals importance. When the way students were thinking about college matched the way they were thinking about their identities (i.e., success-likely setting and desired future identity, failure-likely setting and undesired future identity), students were more likely to interpret difficulty as importance.

Whereas the prior study focused on the effect of identity on interpretation of experienced difficulty, the effect of interpretation of experienced difficulty on identity has also been documented. For example, Smith and Oyserman (2015) tested the influence of accessible interpretation of experienced difficulty on confidence in identities and willingness to act in identity-congruent ways. They randomly assigned students to two groups. One group of students read a statement about difficulty as a sign of importance, and they were asked how often they interpreted difficulty as importance. The other group of students read a statement about difficulty as a sign of impossibility, and they were asked how often they interpreted difficulty as impossibility. Smith and Oyserman (2015) then looked at effects of interpretation of experienced difficulty on identity (Experiment 1) and behavior (Experiment 2). Students led to consider difficulty as a sign of importance rated academics as more central to their identity (Experiment 1) and spent more time on a difficult academic task (Experiment 2) than students led to consider difficulty as a sign of impossibility. This effect on identity was replicated with community college students (Aelenei, Lewis, & Oyserman, 2017), and the effect on behavior was replicated with middle school students (Elmore, Oyserman, Smith, & Novin, 2016). Effects are not limited to the academic domain; in the health domain, dieters led to consider difficulty-as-importance reported feeling less tempted to overeat and, in fact, ate less in a taste test (Lewis & Earl, *in press*).

These experiments focused on effects of immediate context, showing causal process by randomly assigning people to experience subtly different immediate contexts. However, the immediate context is not necessarily experienced as changing. Rather, the immediate context may be experienced as psychologically isomorphic to the one before it and the one after it. If so, then the same interpretations of experienced ease and difficulty are likely to come to mind repeatedly. Repeated interpretation of ease as possibility and of difficulty as importance should bolster self-regulation. In contrast, repeated interpretation of ease as triviality and of difficulty as impossibility should undermine self-regulation. Empirically, adults with low incomes are more likely to endorse a difficulty-as-impossibility

perspective than adults with higher incomes (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017); effects of education (Aelenei et al., 2017) and income on difficulty-as-importance are less consistent (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017).

Not all evidence comes from experimental manipulation. For example, Yan and Oyserman (2017) examined the relationship between self-reported interpretation of difficulty and teachers' and students' beliefs about learning, building on the literature on effective self-regulated learning (e.g., Bjork, Dunlosky, & Kornell, 2013). They found that teachers and students who endorsed difficulty-as-impossibility also endorsed a suboptimal set of beliefs about learning (e.g., that learners should reread material as a way of studying instead of self-testing). Moreover, the more students endorsed difficulty-as-importance, the more they reported using effective self-regulated learning strategies (e.g., self-testing, self-explanation) in preparation for a midterm exam.

It is important to note that interpretations of experienced ease and difficulty are distinct from other measures of motivation, showing convergent and discriminant validity (for a detailed description, see Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). Thus, ease-as-possibility and difficulty-as-importance scores have low-level positive correlations with other measures of motivation, including growth mind-set (Dweck, 2000), grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006), locus of control (Rotter, 1966), and others (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). Ease-as-triviality and difficulty-as-impossibility show negative associations with these measures. The correlations between these other measures of motivation and interpretations of ease and difficulty are no higher, and are often lower, than the correlations among measures of motivation generally (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). The four interpretation of ease and difficulty measures are not redundant with other measures of motivation, and they yield four distinct factors, suggesting that people have each available as an interpretive framework.

Implications for Self-Regulation

People have access to multiple interpretations of their experienced ease and difficulty. Which interpretation they use in the moment is determined by features of the immediate context, including which identities are on the mind (Oyserman et al., 2015). Accessible interpretations of experienced ease and difficulty have implications for identity and self-regulation (Aelenei et al., 2017; Elmore et al., 2016; Smith & Oyserman, 2015). However, interpretations of ease and difficulty are not opposite sides of the same coin—that difficulty means importance in a particular moment does not imply anything about impossibility. It also yields no information about whether ease implies triviality or possibility (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). Each interpretation predicts performance separately (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017). What's more, these interpretations of ease and difficulty are distinct from existing constructs found to matter for self-regulation (Fisher & Oyserman, 2017), such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) and grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

People are likely to continue to draw on the same interpretation of experienced ease and difficulty if contexts feel the same across time—then the same identities are likely to come to mind and are likely to imply the same values, norms, and goals.

However, because people hold multiple interpretations of what ease and difficulty mean and these interpretations are distinct, repeatedly using one interpretation does not mean that other interpretations are undermined. If a person is routinely reinforced for interpreting difficulty as importance, that will not make them invulnerable to cues that difficulty means impossibility. Similarly, if a person is routinely reinforced for interpreting ease as possibility, that will not make them invulnerable to cues that ease means triviality.

Action Readiness

People prefer to act in ways that fit (are congruent) with what their accessible identities imply, and the reverse, identities are inferred from action. This propensity to act in ways that feel identity congruent in the moment is termed “action readiness” and is depicted in Panel 1 of Figure 1 as “strategies.” Like dynamic construction, this component of identity-based motivation is situated and dynamic and does not require explicit, systematic, or conscious articulation. That is, features of the immediate context influence which identities are likely to be salient and what these identities imply for action; strategies are flexibly attuned to affordances and constraints in the immediate context. A large body of research provides evidence for these predicted processes; some examples of these experiments are summarized next. Some studies focus on current identities and others on future possible identities, some focus on social identities and others on personal identities.

Evidence

Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) compared a salient “job seeker” identity in two contexts and showed that the behaviors linked to job seeker identity differed by context. One group of women responded to a job advertisement and came to an actual interview in which a male interviewer asked questions such as, “Do you think it is important for women to wear bras to work?” and “Do you have a boyfriend?” The interview was captured on videotape. Another group of women read about a job interview in which a male interviewer asked these inappropriate questions, and they were asked how they would respond. What job seeker identity cued differed depending on context. Outside of the interview context, women's job seeker identity implied readiness to take assertive action, including leaving the interview. Within the interview context, however, women did not leave the interview; the video captured them smiling and answering even inappropriate questions. Being in the interview context cued their socially appropriate job-seeking female identity, and they acted to appease authority and not appear rude in order to get the job.

Elmore and Oyserman (2012), in the study described in the Dynamic Construction section, also found that the identity content constructed in immediate context influenced behavior. In their study, after seeing graphs that implied that “women succeed” or “men succeed” or graphs that did not show gender, students reported different future identities and acted in line with these contextually created identities. For example, boys, who otherwise tried to solve fewer math problems, stepped up their efforts when the immediate context subtly implied that

“men succeed” compared to no information or that “women succeed.”

Differences in what accessible identities imply for action were also found by Landau, Keefer, Oyserman, and Smith (2014). In these experiments, college students were asked to imagine and write about their future possible academic identities. Experiments differed in what happened next. Participants were asked to make a choice (e.g., take or not take information about a study skills workshop), to do something (e.g., mental math), to make a prediction (e.g., how much they would study), or their subsequent performance was assessed (e.g., quiz grades). The immediate context in which academic identities were elicited differed only in background image. Sometimes the background image on which academic identities were written was of a path; other times the background image was of boxes or houses. Students were more likely to self-regulate—act in service of their academic future identities, when the immediate context subtly implied connection (e.g., image of a path) than when it subtly implied disconnection (e.g., separate boxes or houses). They took the study skills information, they did more mental math, they said they would study more, and they got better grades.

Instead of college students and academic future identities, Lewis and Oyserman (2015) asked adults to consider their future self as a retiree in subtly different contexts that might lead adults to see their future identities as relevant or irrelevant to their current choices and hence self-regulate more or less. Half were asked to consider their retirement as occurring in 30 years. The other half were asked to consider their retirement as occurring in 10,950 days. Then, all were asked how connected they felt to their “retiree” future identity, and their willingness to wait for larger rewards (save for the future) was assessed using a measure of temporal discounting. Adults randomized to the years condition reported feeling less connected to their retiree self. Adults who felt less connected to their retiree self were less willing to invest in their futures, choosing immediate over delayed rewards.

Considering the future in days rather than years is not the only way to create a sense that future and current identities are connected. Bartels and Urminsky (2011) had participants read a paragraph. Half of the participants read a paragraph explaining that the characteristics that form the core of a person’s identity stay stable over time (identity is stable); the other half read a paragraph explaining that the characteristics that form the core of a person’s identity change dramatically over time (identity changes). People seemed willing to believe whatever they read, and the version of identity that they created in the moment mattered. If they created an “identity is stable” mental image, they were more willing to wait for larger rewards (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; for a similar paradigm, see Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012).

Implications for Self-Regulation

As each of these experiments shows, people are sensitive to contextual cues as to which identities are relevant, what these identities imply, and hence how they should act. This sensitivity means that what people aspire to can differ across settings. Hence, what counts as self-regulatory success and failure might

need to be reconsidered. Indeed, an identity-based motivation approach suggests that some self-regulation failures are really failures to predict in one setting which goals will seem identity-relevant in another. For example, in Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001), the women in the interview were not failing to act in the assertive way that women outside the interview thought they would; instead they were trying to get a job. Similarly, seeing a box or a house, rather than a path, reduced the sense that “future student me” is relevant, so people studied less and got worse grades (Landau et al., 2014). Thinking in years (Lewis & Oyserman, 2015) or thinking about identity as changing (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011) both reduced the sense that “retiree me” is relevant so people were less willing to save for the future.

At the same time, an identity-based motivation approach does not mean that people never invest in future goals; they do if it feels identity relevant, whether because the context includes a path (Landau et al., 2014), the future feels near (days away; Lewis & Oyserman, 2015), or something reminds oneself that “I will always be me” (Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Hershfield et al., 2012). From an identity-based motivation perspective, self-regulatory successes and failures are contextually scaffolded: When contexts feel the same (are experienced as psychologically isomorphic), what identities imply for action will be stable as well, increasing the likelihood of self-regulatory success. In contrast, if over time contexts feel different rather than the same, then strategies are likely to differ as well, which may undermine self-regulation.

Summary

Identity-based motivation theory is a social psychological theory of motivation and goal pursuit (self-regulation). It differs from other theories of self-regulation by highlighting three components: dynamic construction of identity, interpretation of experience, and action-readiness. These three components work in tandem as associative knowledge networks. By focusing on dynamic construction, identity-based motivation theory provides a nuanced set of testable predictions about how personal and social identities shape self-regulation and are shaped by features of the immediate context. By highlighting the macro–micro interface between the personal and the social-structural, identity-based motivation helps to explain how macro-level features of the context including culture, poverty, and stigma influence successful self-regulation and goal pursuit (Fisher, O’Donnell, & Oyserman, *in press*; Lewis & Oyserman, 2016; Oyserman & Fisher, *in press*; Oyserman & Lewis, 2017; Oyserman et al., 2014; Yan & Oyserman, *in press*).

Although people experience their identities as mattering, stable, and always on the mind, people actually have multiple identities, and what these identities imply is not invariant but flexibly attuned to features of the immediate situation. This flexible attunement, called dynamic construction, is a strength, not a design flaw. It means that people can flexibly engage with their worlds, focusing on the meaningful and shifting attention away from the trivial. It means that memory is the servant rather than the master of identity.

At the same time, not all contexts are equal. If contexts imply that ease means triviality and difficulty means impossibility, then people will feel less confident in accessible identities

and pursue tasks at hand with less rigor. The good news is that dynamic construction also implies that people can change. Indeed, identity-based motivation theory has been applied to school-based intervention, yielding successful improvements in school grades via improvements in self-regulation (Horowitz, Sorensen, Yoder, & Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). Beyond education, identity-based motivation theory provides a distinct way to understand aspiration-attainment gaps, gaps between what people aspire to and what they actually attain over time. Some theories reframe these gaps as reflections of poor character, lack of impulse control, or insufficient valuation of the goal. Others reframe these gaps as reflections of the power of social structures. In contrast, identity-based motivation theory highlights both how contexts matter and what can be done about it.

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