Identity-Based Motivation

DAPHNA OYSERMAN

Abstract

People believe that they know who they are and that who they are matters for what they do. These core beliefs seem so inherent to conceptualizations of what it means to have a self as to require no empirical support. After all, what is the point of a concept of self if there is no stable thing to have a concept about, and who would care if that concept was stable if it was not useful in making it through the day? Yet the evidence for action-relevance and stability are surprisingly sparse. This entry outlines identity-based motivation theory which takes a new look at these assumptions and makes three core predictions termed *dynamic construction*, *action-readiness*, and *interpretation of difficulty*. That is, rather than being stable, which identities come to mind and what they mean are dynamically constructed in context. People interpret situations and difficulties in ways that are congruent with currently active identities and prefer identity-congruent to identity-incongruent actions. When action feels identity-congruent, experienced difficulty highlights that the behavior is important and meaningful. When action feels identity-incongruent, the same difficulty suggests that the behavior is pointless and "not for people like me."

INTRODUCTION

People believe that they know who they are (the self is stable) and that who they are matters for what they do. These core beliefs seem so inherent to conceptualizations of what it means to have a self as to require no empirical support. After all, what is the point of a concept of self if there is no stable thing to have a concept about, and who would care if that concept was stable if it was not useful in making it through the day? On the one hand, it seems utterly reasonable to assert that people do know themselves. One of the earliest forms of self is a memory trace of what one looks like (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979) and memory itself seems to implicate the self—wherever one is, one is always there, so the self is at least indirectly always part of memory. People have a lot of experience with themselves and a huge store of autobiographical memories (Fivush, 2011). On the other hand, these core beliefs about how the self functions do require further investigation precisely

because they are so much at the core of psychological theorizing. Considered in a different light, being able to recall examples of oneself behaving in ways that fit current self-descriptions may equally be evidence of the malleability of self—one can come up with supporting evidence for almost any possible identity or self-description. Indeed, the empirical evidence for either the belief that the self is stable or that it predicts behavior is surprisingly scarce (for a review, Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

Identity-based motivation (IBM) theory focuses on this seeming contradiction between the experienced reasonableness of a relatively strong identity-to-behavior link and the paucity of empirical evidence for such a link. To do so, IBM builds on modern theories of social, situated and grounded cognition, which start with the premise that thinking is influenced by the context in which it occurs (e.g., Smith & Collins, 2010). People include accessible information as part of their representation of constructs unless they have reason to exclude it as irrelevant or to use it as a comparison standard (Bless & Schwarz, 2010). Synthesizing across research, a situated approach can be delineated as follows (Bless & Schwarz, 2010; Fiske, 1992; Schwarz, Bless, Wänke, & Winkielman, 2003; Wyer & Srull, 1989). First, people are sensitive to their immediate environment. Second, "thinking is for doing," people process information about their environment as it pertains to possibilities for action in the moment. Third, people do not use all of what they know at any moment in time. Instead, they use that subset of all their knowledge which is accessible in the moment. Features of the environment influence what comes to mind—what knowledge is accessible. But the influence of the environment does not stop with accessibility of knowledge. People use implicit demands of the immediate situation to make sense of what comes to mind. Integrating these three features of situated reasoning, people act in ways that make sense in light of the interface between what comes to mind and what that seems to mean in context.

IBM theory builds on these insights to consider how features of the environment influence what comes to mind when people consider who they are (the self) and the interplay of what comes to mind and features of the environment on the influence of accessible features of the self on motivation. IBM theory predicts that identity-to-behavior links are difficult to discern because which identities come to mind and what they mean are both dynamically constructed in context, accessible identities only influence behavior if action makes sense in the moment, and people often (mis)construe difficulty working toward a possible identity as implying that it is not really possible for them. Fortunately, by articulating these three foci, termed *dynamic construction*, *action-readiness*, and *interpretation of difficulty*, IBM also focuses attention on the likely circumstances in which ("when") and the processes

by which ("how") identities do matter for behavior (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b).

Consider an identity as a "cool" person. Whether being cool comes to mind, what it means to be cool and what actions are connected with coolness depend on what is constrained and afforded in a particular situation. "Cool" could be a personal trait or a social trait that is linked to group membership (athletes, programmers, the popular crowd, all could be "cool" depending on context). Associated "cool" behaviors could be asocial and health-risky (e.g., drinking alcohol or abusing substances, having unprotected sex, smoking cigarettes, not caring about schoolwork), pro-social and health-oriented (e.g., volunteering, developing shareware, particular kinds of exercise or eating habits) or anything in between (e.g., using a particular brand of computer or no technology at all). What happens if cool actions feel difficult? Does that mean that one is not really cool and should give up trying to be?

IBM theory predicts that contexts cue both a particular identity and what that identity implies in this situation. Because "thinking is for doing," identities that come to mind make a difference, influencing judgment, choice, and behavior only if they are experienced as relevant to the current situation. Because people believe that identity-congruent behavior will feel right (easy to do), yet taking action is often difficult, requiring both focused attention and inhibition of the impulse to do something else, interpretation of experienced difficulty matters. If an action feels identity-congruent, then experienced difficulty in engaging in it will reinforce the identity-congruent interpretation, so that difficulty will be interpreted as meaning that the action is important and meaningful. Conversely, if an action feels identity-incongruent, then experienced difficulty in engaging in it will reinforce the identity-incongruence interpretation, so that difficulty will be interpreted as meaning that the action is pointless and "not for me" (or if the incongruence is with a social identity, "not for people like me").

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Because the identity to behavior link is so foundational, early research focused on describing content of self-concept with the assumption that knowing how people described themselves would provide a strong prediction of behavior (e.g., for conceptual models, Baumeister, 1998; Brewer, 1991; Brown, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1987, 1989; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012). Models differ somewhat in the extent that they explicitly articulate an underlying goal of having a sense of self and what that goal is described as being. Core self-goals include feeling good (self-enhancement), feeling competent (self-improvement), having control (self-regulation), and making predictions (self-knowledge).

No matter the particulars, conceptual models of self and identity uniformly predict an effect on behavior: Selves and identities are predicted to influence what people are motivated to do, how they think and make sense of themselves and others, the actions they take, their feelings and ability to control or regulate themselves. Models differ in the extent that they focus on alternative influences including the consequences for behavior of social norms and social contexts, with sociological and cultural theories of self and identity putting more emphasis on the self as part of social structure (Markus, & Oyserman, 1989; Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010; Tajfel, 1981).

Although initially self and identity were treated as if there was a single structure or coherently organized set of structures, the cognitive revolution in psychology transformed understanding of self and identity. Current formulations highlight the multiplicity of images, memories, experiences, and sensory inputs into an online or working identity (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Klein & Gangi, 2010). Although not always explicitly stated, the common assumption is that situations bring to mind from memory some, but not other aspects of all that could be self-defining. Behavior is predicted by those "online" or "working" identities.

Self and identity research was also highly influenced by social psychological formulations of the importance of situations in understanding behavior (for a review, Oyserman, 2001). Self and identity researchers have long believed that the self is both a product of situations and a shaper of behavior in situations (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Evidence that the self is a social product is not hard to come by. A large body of research demonstrates that situations influence which identities come to mind. Much of this research comes from cultural, social identity and self-categorization theorists who posit and show that whether people think of themselves in terms of personal or social identities importantly depends on contextual cues (Abrams, 1999; Brewer, 1991; Hogg, 2003, 2006; Oyserman *et al.*, 2012). These research traditions also demonstrate that people led to see themselves in terms of their social identities respond differently than people led to see themselves in terms of their personal identities, providing evidence that the self is a shaper of behavior in situation. Evidence for working self-concept, the notion that context influences how people describe themselves also seems plentiful. For example, just reading a paragraph and circling first person singular versus plural pronouns has small but significant effects on the relative proportion of personal traits and characteristics compared to social roles, relationships, and social group identities, including gender, race-ethnicity, and social class identities used to describe oneself (for a meta-analytic review, see Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

A number of gaps remain to be addressed because research has not yet demonstrated empirically how online identities are created in the moment, when identities influence behavior, and how online experiences of difficulty and ease influence which identities come to mind and whether behavior is pursued. It is not clear to what extent identities and their content are drawn from memory and to what extent identities and identity content are dynamically created in context as would be predicted by IBM theory. While the assumption of being drawn from long-term memory implies that identities are relatively fixed, this assumption has not been tested. Moreover, modern theorizing about how thinking works—that it is grounded in situations, embodied (influenced by bodily feedback), and pragmatic, implies that online or working identities are dynamically created in context (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). This prediction also requires empirical evidence.

CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

Applying a situated cognition perspective to the specific demands of understanding how self-concept works, IBM theory makes the following specific predictions. First, of the many social and personal identities a person could have, the ones that will matter are those that come to mind in context and are experienced as relevant to the situation at hand. Second, accessible identities that do not seem relevant to the action possibilities available in the situation will not yield behavior (even if an outside observer could discern possibilities for action). Third, interpretation of experienced difficulty influences which identities come to mind in the first place. There are two ways in which experienced difficulty can matter. First, people can experience difficulty while imagining a future possible identity. Second, people can experience difficulty while engaging in tasks or behaviors relevant to the identity. If experienced difficulty is interpreted as implying impossibility, then the relevant identity is unlikely to be accessible. If experienced difficulty is interpreted as implying importance, then the relevant identity is likely to be on one's mind. Illustrative examples of research on dynamic construction, action-readiness, and interpretation of difficulty are provided next. As the IBM model is relatively new, much of this research comes from Oyserman and her students.

Dynamic Construction

To test the prediction that identities are dynamically constructed in context, Elmore and Oyserman (2012) randomly assigned middle school students to interpret one of four graphs. The graphs either showed (accurate) census

information about earnings in their state, or about high school graduation rates in their state. For half of students, graphs broke down information by gender. Thus, boys and girls either saw that men succeed (they earn more) or that women succeed (they graduate high school more), or got information without a gender comparison. As predicted, the effect of the information depended on whether it implied that people like oneself succeed. Boys in the men succeed condition generated more academic and career-oriented possible identities and were more engaged in school than boys in the other condition, implying that what being a boy meant for academics depended on contextual cues.

A number of studies also demonstrate that how an identity is understood depends on context. For example, British students were more likely to plan for a healthy reduction of alcohol and salt intake when their British identity rather than their student identity was accessible at the moment of judgment (Tarrant & Butler, 2011). They were also more willing to plan for healthy lifestyle choices if asked to think of themselves as British in the context of a comparison to Americans (seen as less healthy) than in the context of a comparison to Japanese (seen as more healthy) (Tarrant & Butler, 2011).

ACTION-READINESS

To test the prediction that accessible identities cue readiness to act in identity-congruent ways, researchers assigned middle school students to either read about the cost of college or about financial aid for college. After reading about financial aid, students planned to study more, were more likely to turn in an extra-credit assignment and predicted that they would get better grades in school (presumably because they expected to work hard in school) (Destin & Oyserman, 2009, 2010). These studies showed that action-readiness cued action in situations in which action seems relevant or necessary. Other studies have shown that accessible identity does not influence action if none seems currently relevant or necessary, for example when action seems relevant later, or current behavioral options are irrelevant to accessible identity (for a review, Oyserman, 2015).

INTERPRETATION OF DIFFICULTY

IBM theory predicts that identity-to-behavior links are difficult to discern because people (mis)interpret difficulties they encounter as implying that currently active identities are impossible to attain so action is irrelevant. To test this prediction, researchers randomized participants to experience difficulty or not and then asked them about the effectiveness of healthy life-style habits for them. Participants misinterpreted difficulty as

implying that healthy lifestyle habits, while generally effective, were not identity-congruent for them and so would be unlikely to work (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). In another set of studies, middle school students were asked to consider their difficulties in school and randomly assigned to either be provided with an interpretation of their difficulties or not (for a review, Oyserman, 2013, 2015). Students provided an interpretation of difficulty as meaning that schoolwork was important to them generated more school-focused possible selves than other students. They also worked harder at school tasks, writing a better quality essay and scoring better on a difficult cognitive task. The same occurs for college students guided to recall a time that they interpreted experienced difficulty with schoolwork as meaning that it was important to succeed then led to believe that they had this interpretation more frequently than others (Smith & Oyserman, in press). These students reported stronger academic identities, spent more time and hence scored better on a test of fluid intelligence than students guided to recall a time that experienced difficulty with schoolwork meant it was impossible to succeed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Assumptions about what the self is and how self and identities matter are implicated in a broad range of social science theories and in public policies, including policies related to education, savings and asset accrual, health, crime and delinquency. IBM theory highlights the importance of contextual cues in shaping how difficulty is interpreted, which identities come to mind, and whether these identities have action implications. It has been used to improve academic outcomes among low income children (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). Implications for counseling intervention, academic attainment and health gaps have all been articulated and the model is being used to predict how to best formulate savings and assets policies for low income families (Elliott & Kim, 2013; Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Oyserman, Smith & Elmore, 2014). A promise of this research is that IBM can be used with real world populations, can provide specific predictions, and can be used to leverage behavior change. The core challenge is in translating specific predictions into robust interventions, taking seriously that the same attribute can be motivating or demotivating depending on meaning and interpretation of difficulty in context.

Research to date has focused on the interface between particular social (gender, race, social class) and personal (academic success, healthy) identities for particular outcomes (academic success, healthy lifestyle). Other interfaces are also possible. Future research focusing on other identities, other ways

in which tensions between the action-demands of identities are resolved, other outcome measures, and other socio-cultural contexts is needed to expand generalizability and test for limiting conditions and moderators of effects.

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Daphna Oyserman joined the University of Southern California January 2014 as a Dean's Professor of Psychology, Professor of Education and Professor of Communication. She also codirects the USC Dornsife Center for Mind and Society. Her research examines how small changes in context can shift mindsets, and so the perceived meaning of behaviors and situations, with large downstream effects on important and consequential outcomes, including health and academic performance. Her theoretical and experimental work conceptualizes the underlying processes, which she then translates into real-world interventions. One line of work focuses on cultural differences in affect, behavior, and cognition—how people feel, act, and think about themselves and the world around them. A related second line of work focuses on racial, ethnic, and social class gaps in school achievement and health. Throughout, she examines how apparently "fixed" differences between groups may in fact mask highly malleable situated processes that can be profoundly influenced through small interventions that shift mindset. Select publications are available at her personal webpage http://dornsife.usc.edu/daphna-oyserman

Dr. Oyserman received a PhD in psychology and social work from the University of Michigan (1987) and served on the faculty of The Hebrew University, Jerusalem before returning to the University of Michigan, where she last held appointments as the Edwin J. Thomas Collegiate Professor of Social Work, Professor of Psychology, and Research Professor in the Institute for Social Research. She is the recipient of W. T. Grant Faculty Scholar Award, the Humboldt Scientific Contribution Prize of the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, Society for Personality and Social Psychology, and Society for Experimental Social Psychology.

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