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Finding Balance between the Needs for Conformity and Individuality: An Exploration of Identity

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Finding Balance between the Needs for Conformity and Individuality: An Exploration of Identity

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Abstract

Just as society has changed a lot within the past 100 years, the concept of identity has also evolved significantly. A big factor in the evolution of identity has been the realization that social and group phenomena influence all conceptualizations of identity. In this review, I explore identity through the lens of Optimal Distinctiveness theory (ODT), which proposes that humans have two opposing social motives (distinctiveness and inclusiveness) that position them amidst an internal battle over identity.

I start by defining identity and the self, including the distinction between the two. Next, I explore identity formation and different types of identity (personal, social, collective, and organizational). After that, I analyze the central identity motives of belonging and self-expression. Finally, I discuss theoretical approaches to the central question of this paper: when thinking about identity, what is the optimal balance between conformity and individuality?

By reviewing the existing literature, I have found that the optimal balance between distinctiveness and inclusiveness is none other than a balancing act. While identity can loosely be thought of as how a person defines themself both as an individual and in relation to others, it is evidently a very complex concept; there are multiple different types of identity, each of which involve balancing the need to fit in with the need to be unique. In order to reach optimal distinctiveness, it is vital for individuals to regularly engage in social interactions, reflect on their identity motives, and recognize the importance of both individuality and conformity.

Intro

Who am I? Who do I want to become? Who are we (collectively)? What roles do I play in different parts of my life? What groups do I belong to? These questions may arise at many points during the life span, but we most frequently think about self-concept and identity during adolescence, from 13-17 years old, and emerging adulthood, from 18-25 years old (Whitbourne, Sneed, and Sayer, 2009). Traditionally, adolescence has been labeled as the time during which people experience identity development (Erikson, 1968b). However, more recent research has highlighted a new developmental period, emerging adulthood, during which identity development is particularly relevant (Arnett, 2000). Regardless of when identity develops, it appears to continue changing throughout an individual's lifetime. The self is an extremely complex concept with multiple parts. One part of an individual, the 'me', may want to conform to society, while another part, the 'I', may long for individuality. I will further explain the different roles of the 'I' and the 'me' in the section titled 'Basis of the Self'. On top of that, there are many different types of identities, some of which may conflict with each other. This includes, but is not limited to, personal identity, social identity, collective identity, and organizational identity. It is this battle between the 'I' and the 'me', along with the conflicting agendas of a person's various identities, which leads to the central question of this paper: When thinking about identity, what is the optimal balance between conformity and individuality?

Background

As mentioned, identity development was originally thought to occur during adolescence. Two of the most prominent figures in fields of identity and the self, who were also proponents of the belief that identity development occurs during adolescence, are George Mead and Erik Erikson. In 1934, Mead conceptualized the self and the 'I-Me' dialectic. According to Mead (1934), the self is not something humans are born with, but rather it is something that develops over time, especially during adolescence. In 1963, Erikson proposed his theory on the stages of psychosocial development. 'Identity versus role confusion', which is the fifth stage of the model, was associated with adolescence.

During Mead and Erikson's lifetime (the early to mid 20th century), young people were expected to enter the workforce, get married, and have children shortly after graduating high school. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median age at first marriage was about 20 to 21 years old for women and 22.5 to 24 years old for men during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; moreover, less than 25 percent of the U.S. population had completed high school and only about 5 percent had graduated from a four-year university. However, sweeping demographic shifts have taken place over the last half century that have changed the late teens and early twenties from a brief transitional period to prolonged period of exploration and possibility (Arnett, 2000).

During the 2010s, the median age at first marriage has risen to 26 to 27.5 years old for women and 28 to 29.5 years old for men. Additionally, for the first time in U.S. history, 90 percent of American adults have finished high school and more than 33 percent have a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau). These changes over the past fifty years have altered the nature of human development, especially in the late teens and early twenties.

Jeffrey Arnett (2000) coined the concept ‘emerging adulthood’ (EA) to describe this new developmental period that has emerged for modern-day 18 to 25 year olds. “Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (Arnett, 2000).

In light of these societal changes, Jeffrey Arnett (2000) proposed identity development occurs during EA rather than during adolescence. He further asserts that emerging adulthood is characterized by five features or ages (identity exploration, self-focus, possibility, instability, and feeling in-between). During the age of identity exploration, individuals work to figure out who they are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, what their personal beliefs and values are, and how they fit into society. This is very similar to Erikson’s adolescent identity development, but it occurs at a later point in life (during EA).

Since the task of developing a sense of self and identity has been pushed back to a later developmental period, identity has become increasingly important to emerging adults (EAs). It could be argued that identity has also become more challenging to navigate because EAs today are exposed to more people and societal influences than ever before. Given that emerging adulthood is a time of instability, EAs may experience additional threats to their existing identities (Arnett, 2000). This, in turn, means that it is particularly important for people to learn how to balance the need to conform and the need to be unique. Similarly, emerging adulthood is a time of many possibilities. Social-psychological and sociological perspectives both hold that individuals simultaneously have multiple identities and that these various identities come together to define who a person is (Schwartz et al., 2012). EAs are especially likely to assume new identities, and it is vital that they learn how to integrate their different identities so that they feel a unified sense of self.

Going back to the questions posed at the beginning of the paper (Who am I? Who do I want to become? Who are we (collectively)? What roles do I play in different parts of my life? What groups do I belong to?), we can use the term ‘identity’, in a variety of ways, when searching for answers (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). In other words, identity can be thought of as how a person defines himself/herself both as an individual and in relation to other people and the world. Given the complexity of the concept, it makes sense that there are multiple different types of identity. In this review, I will focus on personal identity, social identity, collective identity, and organizational identity. This is not an exhaustive list of types of identities, rather these types of identity seem to be the most relevant to my review and the most thoroughly discussed in existing literature. I will not be reviewing things such as narrative identity, relational identity, cultural identity, or political identity.

But before examining different types of identity, I discuss what identity and the self are. Next, I delve into identity formation. After exploring the conceptualization of different identities, I analyze identity motives. Finally, I review Optimal Distinctiveness theory, which attempts to answer the central question of this review: when thinking about identity, what is the optimal balance between conformity and individuality? By the end of this review, I hope you will have a better understanding of why successful identities involve a balance between conformity and differentiation and what the optimal level of distinctiveness is.

Self vs. Identity

While the concepts of ‘identity’ and the ‘self’ are similar, they are not identical. Nevertheless, they are often ill-defined and used interchangeably in both psychological and sociological literature. Psychologists often look at identity from the angle afforded by notions of personal and ego identity, rather than social identity. Sociologists tend to look at identity from the angle afforded by notions of social and personal identity, rather than ego identity. “Thus, although looking at the same field, psychologists and sociologists generally do so from opposite positions,” which ultimately leads them to different definitions of identity (Côte & Levine, 2002). Further, many people use these terms in everyday life as if ‘identity’ and the ‘self’ were one and the same. According to Côte and Levine (2002), “it is the failure to adopt clear definitions for the constructs of identity and self that exacerbates the difficulty in coordinating the research orientations of psychology and sociology”. Regardless of how they are defined or used, both self and identity are important parts of how we see ourselves.

For purposes of this paper, the ‘self’ refers to a person’s internalized behavioral repertoires; this is distinct from the ‘self-concept’, which refers to a person’s subjective experience of such behavior. When these experiences are reflected upon, they form the foundation of identities. Moreover, identity can be understood as “the sum of second-order reflections on what can be called the first-order reflective experience of self-concept” (Cote & Levine, 2002). While there is a clear distinction between the self and self and identity, it is still important to consider the self when thinking about identity. Accordingly, I will give a brief overview on the basis of the self, in addition to an overview of the basis of identity. After that, the rest of this review will focus solely on identity.

Basis of the Self

One of the most well-known figures in the field of identity is George Mead. Mead's concept of self is based in the idea of reflexivity, which in this situation is organized by the "I-Me" dialectic. The self is "that which is an object to itself," and like other objects, the self is the product of an interaction between our human selves and our environment (Mead, 1934). Interestingly, the self is something that is unique to humans, so it is not present in other species. Humans have the ability to respond reflexively to themselves, and it is this capacity for reflexivity that enables the self.

According to Mead, the self serves as an instrument of both social control and self-control. "The self is the vehicle through which social control is internalized and becomes self-control" (Stets & Serpe, 2016). In other words, the self is a product of the interaction between a human and its environment, and we are made aware of ourselves when we are required to understand and cooperate with others. "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (Mead, 1934). Humans are able to respond to social cues with conformity or nonconformity because of the reflexive self, which arises from our constant interactions with society. Although humans and other species have evolved from the same origins, humans are unique because they have a sense of self. According to Mead (1934), man's behavior is such in his social group that he is able to become an object to himself, a fact which constitutes him a more advanced product of evolutionary development than are the lower animals". The self is both a subject and an object, so it is something which we can be conscious of. Thus, "being human means being conscious of having a self and the nature of the self is central to what it means to be human (Lewis, 1990).

In his book *Mind, Society, and Self* (1934), Mead discusses the social foundations of the self. The idea of identity as a relational construct is encapsulated by Mead's (1934) proposition that identity (and the self) arises amidst the process of social experience, and it continues to develop within an individual as a result of his/her relationship to this process and to other people within the process. Mead argued that identity should be viewed as a social process with two distinct phases; this is where Mead made the distinction between 'I' and 'me'.

According to Mead (1934), "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of others". The 'I' is associated with spontaneity, creativity, and unpredictability. Interestingly, the 'I' is something that an individual is unaware of because it is not directly given in our experiences. In other words, the action of the 'I' is not known until after it is already happening. Conversely, "the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself/herself assumes" (Mead, 1934). The 'me' is associated with consistency and predictability, and it is something which an individual is aware of. When a person internalizes and organizes the attitudes of others, they become conscious of themself in relation to others. This individual is aware of how others will perceive and respond to his/her words and actions.

Thus, the 'me' serves as an instrument of social control. Language plays an essential role in the 'me' because it allows humans to put themselves in others' shoes. This process of role-taking, in which we assume others' points of view and anticipate their responses to us, helps each of us to construct the self (Stets & Serpe, 2016). These anticipated responses, along with our internalized social roles, constitute the organized 'me'. Mead proposed that "the 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I’” (Mead, 1934). The ‘I’ can choose to either conform to or deviate from the internalized expectations that are manifested in the ‘me’.

Thus, the ‘I’ serves as an instrument of self-control, yet it is guided by the ‘me’. The self exists as an internal conversation between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, and this ultimately shapes not only an individual’s behavior but also social processes. According to Mead (1934), “when the response of the other becomes an essential part in the experience or conduct of the individual; when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behavior—then the individual appears in his own experience as a self”. As a product of social processes, the self is based on a balance between conformity and individuality.

Basis of Identity

Sigmund Freud was one of the first psychological theorists to address the fundamental question of self-definition. Freud believed that an individual's identity was the result of parental introjections during an individual's early childhood (Freud & Strachey, 1961). Introjection can be defined as the process by which an individual unconsciously internalizes the attitudes and beliefs of other people. According to Freud (1989), "one's sense of self was derived from parental introjects during the genesis of the superego, at the end of the Oedipal conflict. Furthermore, not only did Freud believe that these introjects formed the foundation of one's self-definition during childhood, but he also held that these parental identifications were not significantly revised or updated during adolescence or adulthood". In other words, Freud proposed that an individual's sense of self was relatively stable over time and largely outside of their conscious control.

Despite the fact the Freud wrote extensively on identity, his viewpoint was very narrow. Freud's psychoanalytic theory of development was limited to childhood and it focused solely on psychosexual drives. The first psychodynamic writings to move identity formation beyond childhood identifications and parental introjects were those of Erik Erikson (1950), who is famous for his theory on psychosocial development. Central to Erikson's theory is the concept of identity. Erikson believed that it is the presence of self-selected identity elements that separates children from adolescents from adults (Schwartz et al., 2012). "Erikson considered identity to be psychosocial in nature, formed by the intersection of individual biological and psychological capacities in combination with the opportunities and supports offered by one's social context" (Kroger, 2006). According to Erikson (1950), an individual develops his or her identity through a sequence of eight stages that define the life cycle: (1) trust versus mistrust; (2) autonomy versus shame and doubt; (3) initiative versus guilt; (4) industry versus inferiority; (5) identity versus role confusion; (6) intimacy versus isolation; (7) generativity versus stagnation; and (8) ego integrity versus despair. Psychosocial development, thus, depends on an individual's ability to successfully navigate these fundamental psychosocial tensions throughout their lifetime.

According to Erikson (1974), identity is best represented by a single bipolar dimension ranging from identity formation to identity confusion. Identity formation represents a reworking of past and present identifications into a larger set of self-defined ideals. Identity confusion is an inability to rework such identifications into a larger set of self-defined ideals. Erickson also acknowledged that identity is a multidimensional concept that is broken into three levels: ego identity, personal identity, and social identity. These three levels correspond to different degrees of embeddedness in the self and context. Ego identity is an individual's consciousness of their own self. Personal identity, which lies at the intersection of the self and context, is the set of goals, values, and beliefs that one shows to the world (Erikson, 1974). At the contextual level, social identity is a sense of inner solidarity with the ideals of a group to which one belongs. If an individual is able to successfully balance these various dimensions of identity and navigate the psychosocial tensions inherent in development, they will reach identity achievement. However, Erikson (1963, 1968b) stressed that identity is never resolved once and for all, but rather remains open to modifications and alterations throughout adult life.

Identity Formation

Identity formation, or individuation, can be thought of as the development of an individual's distinct personality throughout different stages of life. The formation of an identity is what defines individuals to themselves and others. Given that both uniqueness and affiliation play important parts in a person's identity, the process of identity formation can create conflict within an individual. There are two main theories on identity formation: Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and James Marcia's identity status theory.

According to Erikson, human development occurs in a series of stages, each of which is marked by a specific psychosocial crisis. These crises can be thought of as critical decisions that lead an individual either forwards or backwards in life (Ryckman, 2008). Erikson proposed an eight-stage model of ego development, where progression to the next stage depends on resolving the crisis at the previous stage. For purposes of this paper, we will focus on "Identity vs. Role Confusion" (Stage 5) because it is most relevant to identity. In the words of Erikson (1968a), identity is a multifaceted concept that consists of who we are, who we do want to become, and who we do not want to become; these things are integrated by the ego. Role confusion is a state in which a person cannot decide on their proper life roles, and it is associated with shame and doubt regarding who a person is and who they are going to become (Ryckman, 2008). If a person is stuck in role confusion for too long, they may have an identity crisis. An identity crisis is a developmental turning point in which a person who is faced with basic life choices fails to act constructively. For example, someone having an identity crisis may not be able to make proper decisions and commitments regarding friendships, romantic relationships, personal values, education, or a career. This can lead to a negative identity, a commitment to values and roles that are unacceptable to society. Negative identity may prevent a person from developing shared identities with others. (Erikson, 1968b). However, identity crises are not inherently bad. In fact, Erikson argued that an identity crisis of some form, even a minor one, is a universal aspect of development as part of the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is only prolonged, severe identity crises that are problematic. Conversely, if a person successfully navigates through an identity crisis, they reach identity achievement; this is when individuals have undergone a period of crisis and, as a result, have developed firm commitments concerning their life goals. A person who has reached identity achievement has extensively considered various goals and values, accepting some and rejecting others, and understands who they are as a unique person. They will feel a sense of fidelity, or "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems" (Erikson, 1964). Upon resolving the "Identity versus Role Confusion" conflict, a person will also be able to move onto the next stage in Erikson's model. However, reaching identity achievement is not a one time thing, rather it must continually be worked towards as an individual's identity changes over time.

Like any other theory, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development has had its fair share of criticism. Sorell and Montgomery (2001) asked whether the historical and sociocultural context in which Erikson's theory was constructed weakens its contemporary usefulness. Additionally, Côte and Levine (2002) asserted that the lack of definitional clarity regarding the concept of "identity" raises the question of whether or not we should turn our attention to Erikson's original writings about identity formation for assistance. Nevertheless, it was found that "the concept of identity that Erikson's theory introduced to social science, and particularly to human developmentalists, is rich and beautiful and useful to our continuing quest for understanding human lives. Likewise, the conceptualization of identity development as a life-long psychosocial process—perhaps better, a biopsychosocial process—is very much in step with contemporary thinking in many disciplines" (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001). After reviewing the literature, Côte and Levine (2002) concluded that although Erikson did not provide any clear direction regarding how to empirically research his ideas, he is arguably still the most influential figure in the study of identity formation. "Erikson's theory is particularly useful because it allows us to address, in one analysis, the psychological, social, cultural, and historical factors that shape adolescence and the formation of adult identity" (Côte & Levine, 2002). Besides that, Erikson's work is cited as a theoretical foundation for much subsequent research on identity, including Marcia's identity status theory, which I discuss next (Côte & Levine, 1988).

Building on Erikson's work, James Marcia (1964) argues that the identity stage and its resolution can be understood at two interrelated levels. First, Marcia identified four distinct positions, or identity statuses, implicit in Erikson's theory on identity development. These four identity statuses (identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement) are used to describe and pinpoint the progression of an adolescent's identity formation process. Each identity status corresponds to certain levels of two criteria: exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to a time during which a person is actively learning about and choosing between meaningful alternatives. Commitment refers to the degree of personal investment someone makes in a particular belief or course of action (Marcia, 1966). Identity diffusion is when a person is not currently exploring identity options, nor are they firmly committed to an identity. This identity status is characterized by procrastination, disorganized thoughts, and avoidance. Someone in identity diffusion lack a coherent sense of identity and have little sense of the future. Foreclosure is when a person has made a commitment to an identity without fully exploring their options. This occurs if someone accepts social/cultural beliefs as their own, rather than figuring out their own values. For example, a person may adopt their parents' beliefs and attempt to live up to certain expectations. Moratorium is when a person is actively exploring identity options but has not made any commitments (Marcia, 1966). This identity status can be characterized by temporary paralysis as a result of conflicting options or by a state of excitement where all things seem possible. Identity achievement is when a person has fully explored their identity options and subsequently made a commitment. This occurs once someone firmly commits to their own beliefs, values, or goals (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017). Identity achievement is closely related to Marcia's second belief that the "Identity vs. Role Confusion" stage is resolved when an individual constructs a strong ego identity (Côte & Levine, 1988). Identity can be viewed as "a self-structure-an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history. The better developed this structure [ego identity] is, the more aware individuals appear to be of their own uniqueness and similarity to others and of their own strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world" (Marcia, 1976). Clearly, identity achievement is the most desirable identity status for a person to attain given that it is here that "identity is experienced as a core that gives meaning and significance to one's world" (Marcia et al., 1980).

The Conceptualization of Different Types of Identity

In line with the psychosocial theories of identity discussed above, I will continue to examine different types of identity from the psychosocial perspective. There are many different types of identity because it is such a complex construct and multiple different perspectives have been taken on it by experts from a variety of fields (psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.). Nevertheless, I will focus on Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity theory (SIT).

According to SIT, people tend to classify themselves into a variety of social categories, which are defined by prototypical characteristics of the category members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social categorization serves two functions: first, it cognitively organizes the social environment and provides an individual with a systematic way of defining others, and second it allows an individual to define himself/herself within the social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Moreover, SIT originally distinguished between only two types of identity: personal identity and social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Personal identity was thought of as the self defined in terms of unique personal attributes and close relationships with family and friends. Social identity was thought of as the self defined in terms of attributes shared with members of that belong to the same social category as oneself (Hogg, Abrams, and Brewer, 2017, pg. 571). The theory associated group phenomena with social identity but not personal identity. However, subsequent research has suggested that group phenomena are actually relevant to personal identity. According to Hogg (2006), "although personal identity has little to do with group processes, group life often frames the development of personal identities". Furthermore, multiple researchers have proposed that the original dichotomy between social and personal identity is too narrow.

In 1996, Brewer and Gardner distinguished between three types of identity. Their conception of the individual self, which is based on personal attributes that differentiate the self from others, aligned with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) original definition of personal identity. However, Brewer and Gardner (1996) divided Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity into two parts: the relational self and the collective self. They proposed that the relational self is based on an individual person's significant role relationships, while the collective self is based on group membership and the division between 'us' and 'them'. There are two main differences between the relational self and the collective self. First, although both interpersonal and collective identities are social extensions of the self, the relational self involves "social connections that are personalized bonds of attachment" whereas the collective self involves "impersonal bonds derived from common identification with some symbolic group or social category" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Second, the relational self and collective self each have different levels of inclusiveness. Relational identity is based on specific role relationships (i.e. student -- professor, child -- parent, employee -- boss), while collective identity is experienced in terms of membership in a general social group (i.e. students, professors, children, parents, employees, bosses).

Then in 2007, this taxonomy of three types of identity was expanded into four types: person-based social identity, relational social identity, group-based social identity, and collective identity. Person-based social identity reflects the 'internalization of group properties by individual group members' (Brewer & Chen, 2007). Relational social identity corresponds to Brewer and Gardner's (1996) definition of relational identity; group-based social identity corresponds to Turner and Tajfel's (1979) original definition of social identity. Collective identity reflects a "collective self construal that is also manifested in social action aimed at promoting the group's identity" (Brewer & Chen, 2007). The main reason why Brewer and Chen (2007) extended the taxonomy of identity was to account for cross-cultural differences in how an individual thinks about and defines themself; specifically, the processes associated with self-conception were found to differ in collectivist versus individualistic countries.

Personal Identity

Personal identity consists of the individuated self, specifically, the characteristics that differentiate a person from other people (Brewer, 1991). Such idiosyncratic characteristics may include physical attributes, psychological traits, intellectual abilities, and personality traits (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Personal identity also refers to one's goals, values, and beliefs (Schwartz, 2001). According to Schwartz et al. (2012), the majority of developmentally based personal identity research has relied on Erikson's (1950, 1968b) theory of identity, and on Marcia's (1966, 1980) empirical operationalization of Erikson's concepts. As stated, Erikson proposed that development unfolds through a predetermined set of stages, with the fifth stage being explicitly focused on identity. Marcia (1966) expanded on Erikson's work by operationalizing his concepts in a way that permitted empirical investigation. Numerous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have provided support for Marcia's four identity statuses (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). But like Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the Marcia's identity status model has also been heavily criticized (Schwartz, 2001, 2005). First, although identity achievement is similar to Erikson's concept of identity synthesis, and although diffusion is similar to identity confusion (Côte & Schwartz, 2002), it is unclear how foreclosure and moratorium fit into Erikson's theorizing. Second, the casting of exploration as the process underlying identity development (Grotevant, 1987), and of commitment as an outcome of that process (Marcia, 1988), appeared to carry the assumption that identity was somehow "finalized" during adolescence or emerging adulthood, which contrasts with what Erikson proposed.

However, recent advances in the literature on personal identity have addressed these original criticisms (Schwartz et al., 2012). Theorists have proposed new identity processes and subdivided exploration and commitment into narrower dimensions. Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) split exploration and commitment into two processes each. Exploration was subdivided into 'exploration in breadth' (the same as Marcia's original dimension) and 'exploration in depth' (careful consideration of commitments that have already been made). Commitment was split into 'commitment making' (Marcia's original dimension) and 'identification with commitment' (integration of commitments into an individual's sense of self). Luyckx et al. (2006) demonstrated that these four processes were empirically distinguishable and that they continually change at different rates over time.

Social Identity

Social identities are categorizations of the self into social groups that entail a shift away from perception of oneself as a unique individual. A social group is “more than two people who share the same social identity. They identify and evaluate themselves in the same way and have the same definition of who they are, what attributes they have, and how they relate to and differ from people who are not in their group” (Hogg, 2006). Given that people often belong to multiple different social units, they simultaneously have numerous social identities. If the majority of a person’s social identities share many attributes, the person is said to have a simple social identity. Conversely, a person has a complex social identity if the majority of their social identities are discrete or conflict with one another (Hogg, Abrams, and Brewer, 2017, pg. 571). In 1979, Tajfel and Turner developed Social Identity theory. At the core of this theory is Tajfel’s definition of social identity as “an individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972). Social groups, whether large demographic categories or small project teams, provide their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are and how the in-group differs from out-groups. In other words, people who choose to belong to a certain social unit have the same definition of who they are, what attributes they have, and how they relate to others who are not part of the chosen social group (Hogg, 2006).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that individuals strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity, so they will seek to highlight positive aspects of the in-group to which they belongs and also find negative aspects of out-groups in order to boost their own self-image. In other words, members of the in-group (us) enhance the status of the in-group and discriminate against members of out-groups (them) to increase their own self-image. When social identity is not up to par, individuals will “strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Because social identities are chosen, they can also be activated and/or deactivated at different times. The pressure on individuals to belong to positively distinct groups leads social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other. When dividing the word into ‘us’ versus ‘them’, there are three stages involved in evaluating others as part of the in-group or out-group: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.

Social categorization serves as the foundation for social identity processes because when we are talking about social groups, we are talking about categories of people (Turner et al., 1987). Thus, people represent categories as prototypes, “fuzzy sets of attributes (perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors) that are related to one another in a meaningful way and that simultaneously capture similarities within the group and differences between the group and other groups” (Hogg, 2006). Social categorization transforms how we see people because rather than viewing an individual as unique, we see them through the lens of the social group’s prototype. In other words, social categorization depersonalizes both in-group and out-group members. Unsurprisingly, in-group attributes are usually perceived as positive, while out-group attributes are often perceived as negative. Social identification occurs when an individual adopts the identity of the social group they have categorized themself as belonging to. In other words, individuals “internalize their group membership as an aspect of their self concept” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Once an individual has categorized various social groups and identified with one or more of those groups, they tend to compare the groups to which they belong to other groups that they do not belong to. Social comparison involves making positive and negative value judgments about certain social groups. Rather than comparing themselves with every out-group, in-groups will only compare themselves to relevant out-groups. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), “similarity, proximity, and situational salience are among the variables that determine out-group comparability.” Ultimately, individuals divide the world into ‘us’ versus ‘them’ via social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in aiming for superiority over others (out-groups).

Collective Identity

Collective identities reflect the self defined in terms of being part of a collective that engages in social actions aimed at promoting the group's identity as a whole. What distinguishes collective identity from social identity or relationship identity is that collective identities do not require personal relationships between group members (Brewer & Gardner, 1997). With collective identity, there is not a strong sense of attachment to other group members, yet there is still a distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Although there is not much research on the difference between relational and collective identities, one important exception is Hogg's (1992, 1993) work on the distinction between interpersonal liking and social identity as sources of attraction to others. Research on liking at the interpersonal level suggests that attraction is strongly correlated with perceived similarity between two people. Specifically, liking is a function of perceived similarity in personality traits, preferences, values, and beliefs. In other words, interpersonal attraction depends on how well two people's personal identities match. Conversely, research on attraction at the collective level suggests that simply knowing about a shared group identity is enough to foster liking for other individuals. 'In-group' members tend to be better liked than people who are not in the group; this holds even when a person knows nothing about another person's personality, preferences, values, or beliefs.

In order to clarify the distinction between attraction at the interpersonal and collective levels, Hogg uses the terms 'personal attraction' and 'social attraction'. Personal attraction is based on liking the personal identity of another individual and perceiving similarity between their personality, preferences, values, and/or beliefs and ours. In contrast, social attraction is based on liking in-group members more so than out-group members (Brewer & Gardner, 1997). As a result of this distinction between personal and social attraction, it is possible for a person to exhibit a preference for an in-group member who they do not like on a personal level. This occurs when people team-members who do not like each other personally are able to successfully work together on a project. In this instance, social attraction has more influence than personal attraction. Similarly, it is possible for a person to discriminate against an out-group member whose personal identity they do like.

Organizational Identity

The term 'organizational identity' (OI) was originally coined by Albert and Whetten in 1985. Organizational identity can be thought of as an internal set of beliefs regarding the identity of a firm. In conceptualizing OI, Albert and Whetten built on the idea of identity as a relational construct formed via interaction with others. They proposed that "organizational identity is formed by a process of ordered inter-organizational comparisons and reflections upon them over time" (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Similar to Mead's "I-Me" dialectic, Albert and Whetten's (1985) conceptualization of OI is based on relations between 'us' and 'them'. While Albert and Whetten (1985) "did not make explicit how the organizational equivalents of Mead's 'I' and 'me' were involved in organizational identity," subsequent research has generalized aspects of Mead's definition of individual identity to organizational phenomena (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Hatch and Schultz (2002) build off of Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) definition of organizational image to conceptualize the organizational equivalent of 'me'. They define 'organizational image' as "the set of views on the organization held by those who act as the organization's 'others'. By analogy, the organizational 'me' results when organizational members assume the images that the organization's 'others' (e.g. its external stakeholders) form of the organization" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). This is something which the organizational members are aware of, but not in control of because the images held by an organization's 'others' are defined not by what an organization's members believe, but by what the outsiders perceive. Conversely, the organizational 'I' must be something which the organizational members are unaware of, by virtue of the application of Mead's theory. Hatch and Schultz (2002) propose that 'organizational culture' is analogous to the 'I' in

Mead's "I-Me" dialectic. They define organizational culture as "the tacit organizational understandings (e.g. assumptions, beliefs, and values) that contextualize efforts to make meaning, including internal self-definition" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Hatch and Schultz believe that organizational culture corresponds well with the 'I' because it tends to operate beneath organizational members' awareness, is connected to deeper level values, and responds to external attitudes.

Evidently, organizational image and organizational culture constitute important aspects of organizational identity. Hatch and Schultz (2002) claim that, "Reasoning by analogy from Mead's theory, our position is that if organizational culture is to organizational identity what the 'I' is to individual identity, it follows that, just as individuals form their identities in relation to both internal and external definitions of self, organizations form theirs in relation to culture and image". They further develop the Organizational Identity Dynamics Model (OIDM), which explains the interrelated processes between organizational image and organizational culture by which both internal and external self-definitions construct OI.

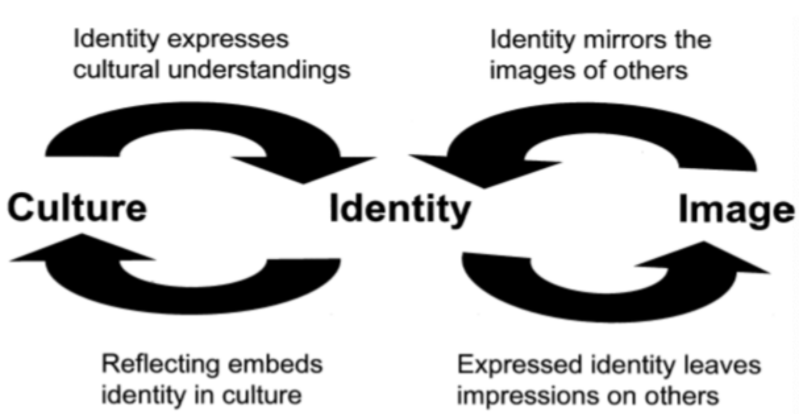

Figure 1. The Organizational Identity Dynamics Model. Adapted from "The dynamics of organizational identity," by M.J. Hatch & M. Schultz, (2002), *Human Relations, 55*(8), 991.

Similar to how Mead proposed that identity is based on a continuous conversation between the 'I' and the 'me', OI can be thought of as an ongoing exchange between organizational culture and organizational image. According to Hatch and Schultz's Organizational Identity Dynamics Model, there are four processes linking OI, organizational culture, and organizational image: mirroring, reflecting, expressing, and impressing.

Mirroring is the process by which OI is mirrored in images of others. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) examined mirroring and OI as part of a case study on the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Their findings suggest that "if organizational members see themselves more or less positively than they believe that others see them, they will be motivated by the discrepancy to change either their image or their identity" (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). After organizational images are mirrored, they will be evaluated against existing organizational self-definitions that are embedded in the organization's culture.

Related to mirroring is reflecting, which is the process by which OI is embedded in cultural understandings. OI is either reinforced or encouraged to change via the process of reflecting on identity in relation to cultural values and assumptions held by members of the organization. According to Hatch and Schultz (2002), reflecting on OI causes it to become further engrained in the organizational culture because this requires the organization's members to think deeply about their assumptions and values with reference to their organization's culture; this process activates cultural values, which then become associated with the OI. Going back to the idea of reflexivity, when organizational members understand and describe themselves as an organization, they are able to respond reflexively to the organization. Here, Mead's concept of the reflexive self is organized by an "Us-Them" dialectic. The self, then, is the product of an interaction between the organization and its environment. Reflection “allows culture to imbue identity artifacts with meaning”, and so OI tends to reflect cultural values more closely (Dewey, 1934).

Expressing is the process by which culture makes itself known through identity claims. When an organization reflects on its identity and then communicates how it has incorporated those reflections into its OI, cultural understanding is carried into the process of identity expression. These identity claims allow organizational members to refer to themselves as an organization when speaking to both inside and outside of the organization. Practices of expression (e.g. branding and advertising) that make use of an organization’s sense of cultural self help an organization to “construct OI through culturally contextualized self-expression” (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Cultural expression has the power to draw stakeholders to an organization by virtue of establishing a shared identity. The connection that stakeholders and organizational members feel to the organizational cultures grounds the organizational ‘I’ in a socially constructed sense of belonging (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Put another way, expressions of organizational culture can make meaningful impressions on outsiders.

Impressing is the process by which expressions of identity influence others. Regardless of whether these impressions are projected intentionally (e.g. via official marketing and press conferences) or unintentionally (e.g. via the words and everyday actions of organizational members), they play an important role in shaping OI and organizational image. Organizations may strategically attempt to make certain impressions on outsiders in order to align OI (internal beliefs) with their organizational image (external beliefs); this is also known as impression management (which I do not focus on in this paper). In addition to attempting to impress a certain identity on outsiders, an organization may also have to deal with images projected onto it by outside sources (e.g. the media or competitors). “Thus, organizational efforts to impress others are tempered by the impressions those others take from outside sources... and the influences of others will be counted or discounted by the organization when it chooses self-identifying responses to their images in the mirroring and reflecting processes that relate organizational image back to organizational culture” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

According to the OIDM, organizational identity results from the four processes (discussed above) that continuously cycle within and between organizational culture and organizational image. In 1994, Jenkins proposed that “‘it is in the meeting of internal and external definitions of an organizational self that identity . . . is created”. Consistent with Jenkin’s assertion, the OIDM helps clarify the dynamic processes involved in the intersection of internal and external definitions of OI, which ultimately explain how OI is constructed and modified over time. In the words of Hatch and Schultz (2002), identity is the result of “conversation between organizational (cultural) self-expressions and mirrored stakeholder images, recognizing, however, that whatever is claimed by members or other stakeholders about an organizational identity will soon be taken up by processes of impressing and reflecting which feed back into further mirroring and expressing processes”.

Identity Motives

Identity motives are needs that push individuals towards or away from specific identity states (Vignoles, 2011). Existing research on identity motives is relatively fragmented, which makes sense given the complexity of self-concept. Identity motives can be divided into those that are central to identity construction and those that are still relevant but more on the periphery (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Central identity motives include belonging, self-expression, self-enhancement, self-coherence, and optimal distinctiveness. In this paper, I focus on belonging and self-expression. There are also peripheral identity motives such as self-efficacy, meaningfulness, and control, but I will not discuss those in this review (Vignoles, 2011).

Belonging refers to the need to feel connected to and accepted by others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The belongingness hypothesis states that humans have a pervasive drive to establish and maintain a certain number of meaningful, supportive interpersonal relationships. Meeting this need fully requires frequent positive interactions with the same people. The need for belonging has been highlighted in numerous prominent theories, but not all theorists agree on the details of belongingness. Freud asserted that humans are motivated by their sex drive to engage in interpersonal contact (Freud, 1930). He also believed that belongingness needs were connected to a desire for strong family relationships. Maslow proposed that 'love and belonging' is the third out of five needs in his hierarchy of needs; thus, our physiological and safety needs must be satisfied before we can fully attend to our belongingness and love needs, which must be met before the need for self-esteem (Maslow, 1943). While both of these well-known theorists acknowledged that humans strive to be a part of relationships, they did not fully understand the significance of belonging and their assertions were made with little empirical evidence. Bowlby was likely the first person to rigorously test the human need of belonging. He is most well-known for his attachment theory, which proposes that an individual's early relationships with their caregivers set the foundation for how they will view and interact with people in close relationships throughout life. Bowlby recognized that the need for belonging is an attempt to recapture the close relationship that we had (or wanted to have) with our parents when we were infants.

The most influential perspective on the need for belonging is Baumeister and Leary's (1995) hypothesis. They posit that belonging is one of the most important needs that humans have because belonging is essential for survival. Evolutionarily, humans who had a strong desire to belong were at an advantage because they were more likely to successfully reproduce and ensure that their offspring survived. When facing enemies/predators, disease, or other difficulties, people who were part of a group were more likely to survive. Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim that satisfying the need for belonging requires two aspects of relationships to be met: first, humans need to have positive interactions with others, and second, these interactions must take place in within the context of stable, enduring relationships. Baumeister and Leary demonstrated the importance of belonging by showing how it affects human cognition.

Additionally, Linville and Jones (1980) showed that people tend to process information about in-group versus out-group members differently. Specifically, information about out-group members is thought about in "extreme, black-and-white, simplistic, polarized ways," whereas similar information about members of a group to which a person belongs is "processed in a more complex fashion." Besides that, Ostrom, Carpenter, Sedikides, and Li (1993) provided evidence that information about out-group members “tends to be stored and organized on the basis of attribute categories (such as traits, preferences, and duties), whereas in-group information is processed on the basis of person categories.” Thus, social bonds create a pattern in cognitive processing that gives priority to organizing information on the basis of the person with whom one has an existing connection. Moreover, several studies illustrate how cognitive processes may blur the boundary between the self and close others. For example, Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Melson (1991) found that subjects had a harder time making me-not-me judgments about traits on which they differed from their spouse than on traits they shared with their spouse. This suggests a cognitive merging of the self with certain close others, thus highlighting the importance of belonging and intimate interpersonal relationships. When considering all of the above mentioned studies, it becomes clear that belonging is a power factor in shaping human cognition. It not only affects how we think about ourselves but also how we think about others.

Self-expression, which entails living authentically, can be thought of as the unobstructed operation of one’s true self in one’s everyday life (Kernis, 2003). Authentic living involves aligning our internal values and experiences with our external expressions. According to Gecas (1991), the need for authenticity drives individuals to strive for congruence between their personal values and their behavior. Closely related to authenticity is uniqueness. Uniqueness theory posits that “the emotional and behavioral outcomes of interpersonal similarity depend on the magnitude of self-perceived similarity relative to the person(s) with whom we are comparing ourselves” (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Specifically, there is a curvilinear relationship between emotional reactions as a function of degree of similarity relative to another person, so an individual will have the most positive emotional reaction when there is a moderate amount of similarity and a negative emotional reaction when there is very low or very high perceived similarity.

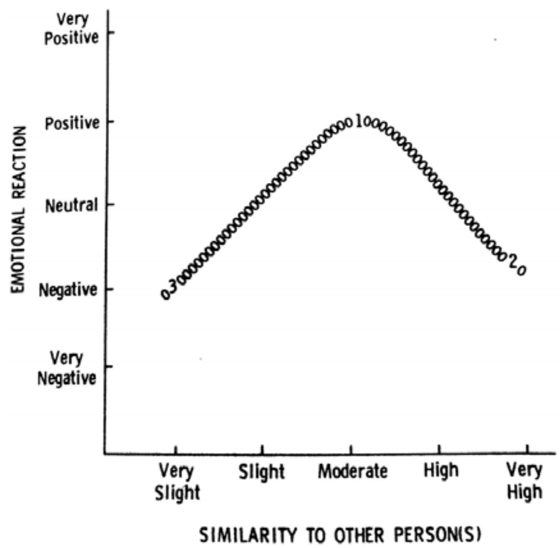

Figure 2. Hypothesized Emotional Reactions to Another Person as a Function of Similarity Relative to that Person. Adapted from *Uniqueness: The human pursuit of difference,* by C.R. Snyder & H.L. Fromkin, (1980), 35.

When an individual perceives a moderate amount of similarity relative to another person, he/she will exhibit no change in behavior. When an individual perceives a very low amount of similarity, he/she may attempt to change his/her behavior in order to enhance the similarity. Conversely, when an individual perceived a very high amount of similarity, he/she may attempt to change his/her behavior in order to lessen the similarity. In support of uniqueness theory, Byrne, Barry, & Nelson (1963) conducted a study in which they manipulated perceived similarity with a hypothetical person and then asked subjects to report how similar they are to this hypothetical other. Uniqueness theory would predict that an individual who is told that he/she is highly similar to another person should distort this information and report less perceived similarity. An individual who is told that he/she is only slightly similar to another person would distort this information and report more perceived similarity. A person told they are moderately similar to another person should not distort the perceived similarity. Byrne, Barry, and Nelson (1963) randomly assigned subjects to one of three groups: Group 1 (told that they are 20% similar to another person), Group 2 (told that they are 50% similar to another person), and Group 3 (told that they are 80% similar to another person). As predicted by uniqueness theory, it was found that Group 1 increased their reported perceived similarity, Group 2 reported little distortion in perceived similarity, and Group 3 decreased their reported similarity.

Multiple subsequent studies have obtained similar results (Snyder & Batson, 1974; Ganster, McCuddy, & Fromkin, 1977). The study by Ganster, McCuddy, and Fromkin investigate one of the three factors hypothesized to be associated with overall level of similarity. The three factors are proportion of similarity on comparison attributes, number of comparison attributes, and number of comparison others; this study manipulates the number of comparison attributes by having participants complete a questionnaire that contained either 15 or 30 questions regarding their attitude towards something. After each question, they were given one of two types of feedback: Feedback 1 (that their response was similar to 33% of other participants) or Feedback 2 (that their response was similar to 80% of other participants). The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Scale (1967) was used to measure participants' change in self-esteem from before and after receiving the feedback. Results showed that self-esteem increased for participants who took the 15-item questionnaire and were told that their response was similar to 80% of other participants as compared to 33% similarity. Conversely, self-esteem decreased for participants who took the 30-item questionnaire and were told that their response was similar to 80% of other participants as compared to 33% similarity. "As similarity on 15 items increased from 33% to 80%, it may be reasoned that the person experiences a change from slight to moderate similarity...As similarity on 30 items increases from 33% to 80%, it may be reasoned that the person probably experiences a change from moderate similarity to high similarity" (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). These findings support what uniqueness theory predicts: Slight similarity is hypothesized to occur when there is 10-50% similarity on 1-15 comparison attributes. Moderate similarity is hypothesized to occur when there is 60-100% similarity on 1-15 comparison attributes. High similarity is hypothesized to occur when there is 80-100% similarity on 30-50 comparison attributes.

		Factors that contribute to overall level of similarity		
		Proportion of similarity on comparison attributes	Number of comparison attributes	Number of comparison others
Overall level of similarity as conceptualized in uniqueness theory	**Very high**	**95–100%**	50 or more (including attitudes, personality and physical characteristics, etc.)	2–10,000
	High	**80–100%**	30–50 (may include more than just attitudes)	1
	Moderate	**60–100%**	1–15	1
	Slight	**10–50%**	1–15	1
	Very slight	**0–5%**	1–15	1

Table 1. Hypothesized Factors Associated with Overall Levels of Similarity as Conceptualized in Uniqueness Theory. Adapted from *Uniqueness: The human pursuit of difference,* by C.R. Snyder & H.L. Fromkin, (1980), 23.

Overall, the results from the study by Ganster, McCuddy, and Fromkin suggest that people purposefully strive to avoid a high or low sense of similarity relative to others, and that this is tied to self-esteem.

Evidently, belong and self-expression are both important identity motives. Nevertheless, they are conflicting motives. Therefore, we need to determine how to optimally balance the need for belonging with the need for self-expression.

Theoretical Approaches

Traditionally, social psychological theories of the self and identity focused on the individuated self-concept, while they failed to account for the impact of group membership and social interactions on the concept of self. However, more recent research has investigated the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships with others. According to Brewer (1991), achieving an extended sense of self is a fundamental human motivation. Individuals seek to define themselves in terms of their immersion in relationships with others and with larger collectives. There are multiple theories proposing that we are born with a 'need to belong' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

According to Brewer (1991), social identity theory has different interpretations in different parts of the world. "Americans tend to think of social identities as aspects of individual self-concept -- part of internal structure and differentiation. But the European conceptualization is one involving extension of the self beyond the level of the individual". Brewer claims that the American conceptualization of social identity does not adequately consider the importance of group membership to the concept of self. She proposes that the self-concept is expandable and contractable across different levels of social identity, using a diagram of concentric circles to illustrate the relationship between personal identity and social identity. The concentric circles represent definitions of the self at different levels of inclusiveness.

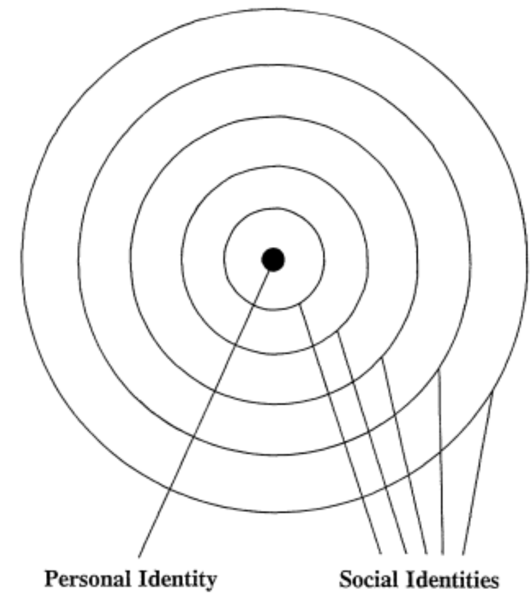

Figure 3. Personal and Social Identities. Adapted from "The social self: On being the same and different at the same time," by M.B. Brewer, (1991), *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 17*(5), 476.

At the center of the circles, personal identity concerns the characteristics that differentiate an individual from others within a given social context. As we move outwards, the different levels of social identity represent various frames of reference we use for differentiation and social comparison. The first level of social identity involves an individual's categorization of himself/herself into a social unit with which he/she most closely relates. An individual will think about the things he/she has in common with other members of this social unit, and he/she will start to view themself as an exemplar of that social unit. Instead of differentiating between 'me' and everyone else, an individual will differentiate between 'us' and other social units. The outer circles of the diagram represent levels of social identification with broader and broader social units. As a person identifies with broader social identities, the basis for self-evaluation changes, leading to transformations in self-concept.

As an example, I will talk about my identity within the college student domain. At the level of personal identity, I am a Claremont McKenna College student studying psychology and economics. My immediate frame of reference is my closest friends. For this conceptualization of myself, I think about what characteristics, experiences, and accomplishments distinguish me from my friends. Because my closest friends are the people who I spend the most time with, there may be a proximity effect that shapes my conception of my personal identity. The next frame of reference includes the students who I have classes with or who are in the same clubs that I am in. For this conceptualization of myself, I think about what characteristics, experiences, and accomplishments distinguish me from the other who are in classes and/or clubs with me.

The first level of my social identity is me as a member of the psychology and economics majors at CMC. In defining myself, I think about what I have in common with other psychology and economics majors at CMC and what differentiates us from other majors offered at CMC. At this level of self-definition, my identity and self-esteem are tied to the reputation and outcomes of the entire group of psychology and economics majors at CMC. The next level of social identity is me as a student at Claremont McKenna College. For this conceptualization of myself, I think about what I have in common with other CMC students and what distinguishes us from students at other liberal arts colleges. My final level of social identification is me as a student at a liberal arts college. In defining myself, I think about the similarities between myself and other students at liberal arts colleges and about how we differ from students at other types of colleges. As the context used for self-evaluation changes, so does my self-concept. Regardless of how much my self-concept expands or contracts across different levels of social identity, I still think about how I am similar to and different from others; the only thing that shifts is my frame of reference.

Considering the fact that there are many different levels of a given social identity, and that a person can have a plethora of different social identities, we must think about how an individual selects a certain social identity. Brewer (1991) proposes that social identity "derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)". Our need for assimilation is satisfied by our being part of in-groups, while our need for uniqueness is satisfied via inter-group comparisons. When considering the balance between the needs for differentiation and assimilation, there are three theories: Optimal Distinctiveness theory, Different Audiences theory, and Two-Stage Valuation theory. I am focusing my review on Optimal Distinctiveness because that's where most of the literature relevant to my review can be found.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

According to Zuckerman (2016), identity reflects the confluence of two seemingly contradictory tendencies: to conform to the practices that others have adopted and to differentiate oneself from others. But how and why must this challenge be met? Existing research has advanced three theories (Optimal Distinctiveness theory, Different Audiences theory, and Two-Stage Valuation theory) in response to these questions. Of the three theories, Optimal Distinctiveness theory is “perhaps the most influential approach” (Brewer, 1991; Chan, Berger, & van Boven, 2012). Since Optimal Distinctiveness theory (ODT) is also most relevant to my review, I focus on it, rather than summarizing all three theories.

Optimal distinctiveness theory posits that “social identity is driven by two opposing social motives - the need for inclusion and the need for differentiation” (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004). In other words, humans have competing internal needs: assimilation and differentiation. Further, the equilibrium point between assimilation and differentiation occurs where the need for conformity and the need for individuality are equally strong; this occurs when an individual is in a moderately sized group of similar others (Zuckerman, 2016). ODT “derived from a general perspective on the evolution of human sociality that recognizes that humans are adapted for group living and that the structural requirements for group cohesion and coordination have shaped social motivational systems at the individual level” (Brewer, 2011). An individual’s sense of self is maximized in the context of shared in-group membership and clear distinctions between the in-group and out-groups.

The basic tenets of the Optimal Distinctiveness model are as follows (Brewer, 1991):

1. Social identification will be strongest for social groups or categories at that level of inclusiveness which resolves the conflict between needs for differentiation of the self and assimilation with others.
2. Optimal distinctiveness is independent of the evaluative implications of group membership, although, other things being equal, individuals will prefer positive group identities to negative identities.
3. Distinctiveness of a given social identity is context specific. It depends on the frame of reference within which possible social identities are defined at a particular time, which can range from people at a specific social gathering to the entire human race.
4. The optimal level of category distinctiveness or inclusiveness is a function of the relative strength (steepness) of the opposing drives for assimilation and differentiation. For any individual, the relative strength of the two needs is determined by cultural norms, individual socialization, and personal experiences.

Within a given social context, an individual can be categorized along a dimension of social distinctiveness-inclusiveness that ranges from complete uniqueness to complete assimilation. Each point along the distinctiveness-inclusiveness spectrum corresponds to the need for assimilation and the need for uniqueness being a certain strength. These "needs for assimilation and differentiation are represented as opposing forces," as depicted in Figure 4 on the next page (Brewer, 1991).

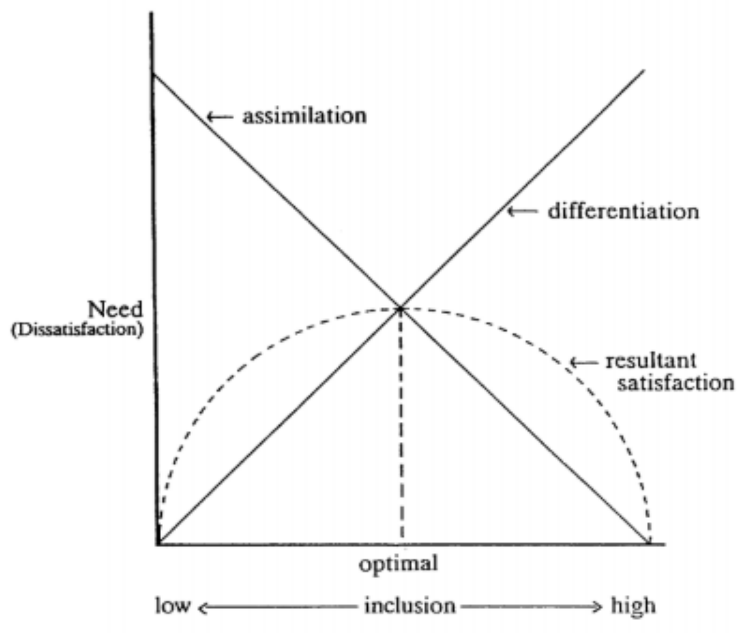

Figure 4. The Optimal Distinctiveness Model. Adapted from "The social self: On being the same and different at the same time," by M.B. Brewer, (1991), *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 17*(5), 477.

As one's self-concept becomes more and more unique, the internally-driven need for assimilation becomes stronger and stronger. Conversely, as one's self-concept becomes more and more depersonalized, the internally-driven need for distinctiveness becomes stronger and stronger. At either end of the spectrum, a person's self-concept is threatened. Complete uniqueness leaves a person vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, while complete assimilation leaves a person with no basis for social comparison. Hence, optimal distinctiveness is the result of distinctiveness and inclusiveness needs being equal in magnitude.

According to Brewer (1991), the primary implication of this model is that certain amounts of distinctiveness, when offset by equal amounts of inclusiveness, are paramount to every type of identity. If we return to Figure 3, we can think about the concentric circles in light of Optimal Distinctiveness theory. ODT implies that "there is one level of social identity that is dominant, as the primary self-concept within a domain" (Brewer, 1991). This social identity is selected and activated to the extent that it balances the needs for inclusion and differentiation within a given social context. Furthermore, personal identity often does not provide optimal distinctiveness. A majority of the time, "the prepotent self will be a collective identity at some intermediate level of inclusiveness, one that provides both shared identity with an in-group and differentiation from distinct out-groups" (Brewer, 1991). Put another way, optimal social identities involve shared distinctiveness.

Before moving onto the final section of this review, I would like to clarify three principles that are essential to understanding ODT. First, optimal distinctiveness is context specific. According to Brewer (2011), "context affects both the activation of motives or needs and the relative distinctiveness of specific social categories." Second, optimal distinctiveness is a dynamic equilibrium. This is because "inclusion and differentiation motives are also subject to temporal influences" (Brewer, 2011). Third, identity motives vary by person, culture, and environment. The strength of the needs for distinctiveness or inclusiveness may be different when comparing one person to another. Besides that, some people may be more or less sensitive to changes in levels of these needs. All together, the three principles discussed above help illustrate that there is not one universal answer to the central question of this paper.

Concluding Remarks

As society continues to change exceedingly, the concept of identity will also continue to evolve. Early psychosocial theories of identity, such as Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity theory, only distinguished between two types of identity (personal and social). At the end of the 20th century, identity was expanded to include three different types; then in the 21st century, the taxonomy of three types of identity was expanded into four types. Furthermore, identity development was originally believed to occur during adolescence, but now it is widely accepted that identity development predominantly occurs during emerging adulthood and continues throughout the life span (Arnett, 2000). Over time, researchers also have come to realize that social and group phenomena influence all conceptualizations of identity; this is implied in Brewer's (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness theory.

According to ODT, humans have two opposing social motives (distinctiveness and inclusiveness) that situate them within the midst of an internal battle over identity. The need for assimilation and the need for differentiation, which can be compared to the 'I' and the 'me' aspects of the self, both shape how a person thinks about their identity. Optimal distinctiveness can be thought of as the point of equilibrium in Brewer's (1991) model, and this occurs when an individual feels the need to conform to society and the need to be unique equally. We can look to Optimal Distinctiveness theory for guidance on balancing different types of identity. Optimal identities, whether they are personal, social, collective, or organizational, are those that satisfy the need for inclusion within the in-group and simultaneously serve the need for differentiation through distinctions between the in-group and out-groups (Brewer, 2011).

Ultimately, identity is a complex concept. Humans will always strive to answer the following questions: Who am I? Who do I want to become? Who are we (collectively)? What roles do I play in different parts of my life? What groups do I belong to? Fortunately, “the complexity of the modern world does provide us with multiple ways to meet identity needs, with multiple identities that are optimal in different contexts” (Brewer, 2011). When thinking about balancing the need for inclusiveness with the need for distinctiveness, while simultaneously navigating multiple types of identity, it is imperative for us to understand that optimal distinctiveness is multi-faceted and situational. The optimal balance between conformity and individuality is none other than a balancing act.

Practical Implications

As we go about our daily lives, we should keep in mind our opposing needs for conformity and individuality. Specifically, we should be cognizant of not letting our self-concept become too individualistic or too depersonalized because we do not want to be at either end of the distinctiveness-inclusiveness spectrum in Brewer's (1991) model. Equilibrium, or optimal distinctiveness, is better than either complete uniqueness or complete assimilation.

Besides that, it is important for individuals to regularly spend time in social groups and build a variety of relationships. This will help them to recognize how they are both similar to and different from others that are members of the in-group or out-groups. According to Mead (1934), identity and the self are a product of the interaction between humans and the environment; we are made aware of ourselves when we are required to understand and cooperate with others. Therefore, it is vital that we immerse ourselves in social environments so that the 'I' and the 'me' aspects of our identities can fully develop.

Finally, individuals should try to recognize their central identity motives and think about how these motives drive identity formation. This is particularly relevant considering that recent research has suggested not only that identity development predominantly occurs during emerging adulthood (rather than during adolescence), but also that a person's identities continue to change throughout the life span. Reflecting on their identity motives will help individuals to better understand how to balance the conflicting agendas of their various identities and determine the optimal balance between conformity and individuality in a given setting.

Future Directions

Given the importance and complexity of the concept of identity, there are ample avenues for future research. With regards to Optimal Distinctiveness theory, one question that remains to be answered is: how can individuals prevent themselves from forming a self-concept that is either too individualistic or too depersonalized? Answering this question would help guide people towards optimal identities. Aside from that, another question that needs to be investigated regarding the Optimal Distinctiveness model is: are there specific contexts in which optimal distinctiveness occurs more towards one end of the distinctiveness-inclusiveness spectrum, rather than at the midpoint? It may be that marginally more distinctiveness or marginally more inclusiveness is optimal for some types of identities in particular situations. Finally, considering the fact that identities continue to change throughout one's lifetime, could the equilibrium point of optimal distinctiveness also vary across the life span?

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