

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I

Introduction

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Social psychological debates about identity

Rusi Jaspal

We live in an ever-changing social world, which constantly calls forth changes to our identities and actions. Advances in science, technology and medicine, political upheaval and economic development are just some examples of social change that can impact upon how we live our lives, how we view ourselves and each other and how we communicate. Social change can result in the salience and visibility of particular social categories, changes in the assimilation, accommodation and evaluation of these categories and new patterns of action. Similarly, individual psychological change – getting a new job, being diagnosed with a life-changing illness, growing old – can dramatically affect our sense of self, potentially forcing us to rethink who we are, our relationships with others and how we ought to behave in particular contexts. What social change and psychological change have in common is their power to affect radically our identities and actions.

This volume is about identity, change and action. The contributors to this volume address this tripartite relationship in diverse and complex social psychological contexts. The chapters endeavor to explore the antecedents of changes in identity and action, and their developmental trajectory. It is easy to see why the important task of examining the tripartite relationship between identity, change and action has generally been neglected by social psychologists. Core debates in the field have focused on questions about the “correct” unit of analysis (psychological or sociological); competition between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms; and epistemology. These divides have, to a large extent, impeded theoretical integration. Identity Process Theory (IPT) sits within this matrix of debate because of its integrative focus on the intrapsychic, interpersonal and intergroup levels, its methodological diversity and epistemological eclecticism. The theory constitutes a valuable explanatory tool for addressing pressing social psychological problems of the twenty-first century and aspires to acquire predictive power as it is refined and developed in empirical work. We decided to edit this volume

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

amid a growing body of diverse empirical research based on the theory since the early 1980s. It has been used by social psychologists in particular but has broader appeal in the social sciences and among practitioners. Thus, Identity Process Theory has an important role to play in shaping the social psychology of identity, change and action.

As evidenced by the chapters in this volume, Identity Process Theory research has addressed a wide range of pressing real-world issues – national identity, post-conflict societies, sexual behavior, risk, place and environment and prejudice. Furthermore, unlike many Western social psychological theories, Identity Process Theory has been used as a heuristic tool in diverse geographical and cultural settings – the UK, Spain, Canada, India, Israel and others. Yet, the diversity that characterizes the theory can also make it difficult to delineate conceptually. This volume provides a summary of the development of Identity Process Theory and contextualizes the theory in the social psychology of identity, change and action.

Identity Process Theory

Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1993, 2001; Vignoles *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b) proposes that the structure of self-identity should be conceptualized in terms of its content and value/affect dimensions and that this structure is regulated by two universal processes, namely *assimilation–accommodation* and *evaluation*. The assimilation–accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. coming out as gay) and the adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure (e.g. self-definition as gay and downplaying one’s religion). The evaluation process confers meaning and value on the contents of identity (e.g. viewing one’s sexual identity as a positive thing but one’s religious identity negatively).

Breakwell (1986, 1992, 2001) originally identified four identity principles which guide these universal processes: (1) continuity across time and situation (*continuity*); (2) uniqueness or distinctiveness from others (*distinctiveness*); (3) feeling confident and in control of one’s life (*self-efficacy*); and (4) feelings of personal worth (*self-esteem*). There has been some debate about the number of identity principles – some Identity Process Theory researchers have suggested additional principles although they have not met with universal approval (Breakwell, this volume; Vignoles, 2011). For instance, Vignoles *et al.* (2002a) proposed two additional identity “motives,” namely *belonging*, which refers to the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people and *meaning*, which refers to the need to find significance and purpose in one’s life.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

More recently, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) proposed the psychological coherence principle, which refers to the motivation to establish feelings of compatibility between (interconnected) identities.

A core prediction of Identity Process Theory is that if the universal processes cannot comply with the motivational principles of identity, for whatever reason, identity is threatened and the individual will engage in strategies for coping with the threat. A coping strategy is defined as “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 78). Coping strategies can function at three levels: intrapsychic (e.g. denial, re-conceptualization), interpersonal (e.g. isolation), or intergroup (e.g. social mobilization). Some forms of threat may induce coping at multiple levels in order to optimize identity processes (Jaspal and Sitaridou, 2013).

Identity Process Theory provides a holistic model of (1) the structure of identity, namely its content and value dimensions and the centrality and salience of identity components; (2) the interaction of social and psychological factors in the production of identity content; (3) the interrelations between identity and action. A key assumption of the theory is that, in order to understand the processes that drive identity construction, it is necessary to examine how individuals react when identity is threatened (Breakwell, 2010).

According to the theory, identity is the product of social and psychological processes. Breakwell (1986, 2001, 2004, 2010) has repeatedly acknowledged the role of social representations in determining the content of identity and the value of its components. Social representations determine how individuals assimilate, accommodate and evaluate identity components, what is threatening for identity and how individuals subsequently cope with threat. In formally allying Identity Process Theory with Social Representations Theory, Breakwell (1993, 2001, this volume) sought to provide greater insight into the *social* contexts in which individual identities are constructed and the social resources (images, notions, language) employed by individuals in constructing their identities. Crucially, the theory recognizes that individuals have agency in the construction and management of identity. In interaction with relevant social contexts, individuals construct systems of meaning for making sense of their lives, experiences and identities. To this extent, IPT can be described as a *social constructivist* model of identity processes (see von Glasersfeld, 1982).

Debates in the social psychology of identity

In order to understand the contribution of Identity Process Theory to the social psychology of identity, it is necessary to contextualize the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

theory historically. In many respects, the theory was ahead of its time – ambitiously seeking to articulate the intersections between the intrapsychic, interpersonal and societal levels of analysis and to provide a holistic framework within which identity, change and action could be collectively examined. With the exception of Tajfel’s (1978, 1982) Social Identity Theory, social psychology seemed to have become more concerned with piecemeal theorizing, than with presenting integrative, holistic theoretical frameworks incorporating multiple layers of analysis. When Breakwell (1983, 1986, 1988) first began to articulate what subsequently became known as Identity Process Theory, there were already a number of social psychological models of identity. Yet, none seemed able to explain the micro- and macro-processes underlying the construction of identity, that is, the total identity of the individual. While it is necessary to be explicitly selective in discussing social psychological approaches to identity, some dominant approaches can be identified. In thinking about how these approaches relate to one another, a number of “divides” surface: US versus European; psychological social psychology versus sociological social psychology; realism versus social constructionism; qualitative versus quantitative.

Psychological social psychology

In general, US social psychological approaches to identity have consistently focused upon the individual level of cognition, viewing the individual as the primary unit of analysis. These approaches are positioned in what is often referred to as “psychological social psychology.” Within this paradigm, Hazel Markus (1977) developed the concept of the “self-schema,” which she described as a cognitive representation of the self used to organize information regarding the self and to guide the cognitive processing of self-relevant information. The concept of self-schema provided a purely cognitive account of selfhood, suggesting that cognitive abilities such as memory drove the construction of identity. Quite unlike Identity Process Theory, the self-schema model did not view selfhood as an agentive process on the part of the individual (as a social being) but rather as a process driven and constrained primarily by cognitive functioning.

The development of Identity Process Theory coincided with the publication of Markus and Nurius’ (1986) paper “Possible Selves” in the *American Psychologist*. Prima facie, this concept seemed to begin to address the social dimension of selfhood. However, the primary concern lay in integrating cognitive (i.e. self-schemas) and emotional (i.e. fear) elements of the self by examining individuals’ perceptions of (1) what

they might become, (2) what they would like to become and (3) what they were afraid of becoming in the future. Crucially, these “possible selves” were regarded as noteworthy since they could motivate particular patterns of action. In their articulation of the concept of “possible selves,” Markus and Nurius were now drawing attention to the agency of the current identity of the individual in shaping future identities. Moreover, the concept of possible selves initiated a debate on the link between identity and action (Oyserman and Markus, 1990; Riff, 1991). Yet, this line of research seemed to underestimate the importance of examining the social dimension of selfhood – that is, how social structure, the ideological milieu and, most importantly, social change could actively shape and constrain cognitive functioning in relation to the self. Moreover, the concept of possible selves did not fully articulate the social circumstances in which particular “selves” might be desired, resisted or adopted. Conversely, these were all concerns that underlay the development of Identity Process Theory and researchers who subsequently integrated the Possible Selves Concept and Identity Process Theory sought to address this very question (Vignoles *et al.*, 2008; see also Breakwell, 1986).

Identity Process Theory was clearly influenced by Bandura’s (1977) Self-Efficacy Model. Bandura (1995, p. 2) defined self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations.” While dominant social psychological theories tended to view self-efficacy as a component of self-esteem, Bandura argued that they should be considered as two distinct facets of the self. Breakwell (1986) initially drew on Bandura’s ideas concerning self-efficacy in describing self-protection at the intrapsychic level; that is, how individuals cope with threats to identity. More specifically, it was argued that “the individual may engage in the exercise of self-efficacy” in order to regain appropriate levels of the identity principles (Breakwell, 1986, p. 102). Although Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Model suggested that self-efficacy was central to cognition, affect and behavior, its role in relation to identity construction remained under-explored. On the basis of extensive research into identity among young adults (Breakwell *et al.*, 1989; Fife-Schaw and Breakwell, 1990, 1991), self-efficacy was later incorporated into Identity Process Theory as a fourth principle of identity (Breakwell, 1992). This established greater linkage between identity and action partly by showing how the processes of identity could function to provide the individual with feelings of control and competence.

Identity Process Theory and the Self-Efficacy Model overlap in some of their core assumptions. Bandura was one of the first social psychologists

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

to stress that one's sense of self-efficacy was dependent on one's *perceived* success in a given situation, rather than on one's actual success. Crucially, self-efficacy beliefs were dependent upon both social *and* psychological factors. Bandura stressed that self-efficacy should by no means be viewed as a personality trait but rather as "a differentiated set of self-beliefs linked to distinct realms of functioning" (Bandura, 2006, p. 307). Therefore, in his writings, Bandura consistently called for context-specific research that examined the specific situations and contexts in which self-efficacy beliefs might acquire salience. This ethos was echoed in Identity Process Theory. Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory was concerned primarily with human agency in self-regulation – indeed, he argued that "[a]mong the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives" (Bandura, 1993, p. 118). Similarly, the self-agency of the individual in constructing and regulating identity has always been a core assumption in Identity Process Theory.

Sociological social psychology

The 1980s also marked significant developments in the more sociologically oriented branch of social psychology. Drawing extensively on the Symbolic Interactionist Framework, Sheldon Stryker (1980; Stryker and Serpe, 1982, 1994) developed Identity Theory within this paradigm. The theory essentially argued that identities arose from role positions, that an individual could have many roles/identities, that these were arranged hierarchically in the self-concept and that they differed in salience. Unlike the mainstream approaches in US psychological social psychology, a key tenet of Stryker's Identity Theory was that social structure did indeed play an important role in dictating one's level of commitment to particular roles and, consequently, in rendering salient or latent particular identities in the self-concept. This partly laid the foundations for theory and research on the concept of "multiple identities," which was to become a buzzword in the social psychology of identity (Howard, 2000; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Furthermore, partly as a consequence of this debate, the *structure* of identity, which accommodated these identities, needed to be adequately theorized. In articulating the "black-box" of identity, Identity Process Theory was concerned partly with explaining the structure of identity – the value and content dimensions. Moreover, the model theorized the content of identity – its multiple elements, interactions between these elements and their relative salience and centrality (Breakwell, 1986).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Identity Theory and Identity Process Theory diverged in some of their assumptions regarding the social antecedents of identity development. While Identity Theory referred to “interactional possibilities,” viewing symbolic interaction as the primary means of understanding identity development (Stryker and Burke, 2000), Identity Process Theory drew upon Moscovici’s (1988, 2000) Social Representations Theory. The synthesis of these theories served to elucidate the *reciprocal* interrelations between the social and the individual – how social representations affected identity processes and how identity processes in turn shaped social representational processes. Indeed, Breakwell (this volume) argues that “individual identities are developed in the context of an abundance of social representations.”

Since the mid 1970s, British social psychological theory and research on identity had come to be dominated by the Social Identity Approach, consisting initially of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978, 1981) and subsequently of Self-Categorization Theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Both theories have of course been elaborately discussed elsewhere (Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Reicher *et al.*, 2010). However, it is worth remembering and reiterating that Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory was concerned primarily with explaining intergroup relations and therefore focused on that part of “an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Tajfel never attempted to address individual identity in Social Identity Theory (Breakwell, this volume). Conversely, Identity Process Theory was designed to examine the “blackbox” of the total identity of the individual, that is, “the social, cognitive, conative and oretic processes that comprised identity” (Breakwell, 2010, p. 2). Although Identity Process Theory was, to some extent, inspired by the Social Identity Approach which argued that individuals sought self-esteem from their group memberships (Breakwell, 1978, 1979), it set out to explain and predict a distinct set of psychological phenomena.

Following Tajfel’s death in 1982, John Turner and his colleagues (1987) developed Self-Categorization Theory, which was intended to complement, rather than replace or merge with, Social Identity Theory. Self-Categorization Theory set out to elaborate on Social Identity Theory, partly by addressing issues pertinent to individual identity, in addition to the intergroup level of human interdependence. The theory explicitly acknowledged the various levels of self-categorization: individual, group and superordinate/human. It proposed that these distinct levels of self-categorization could all shape intergroup behavior – thus, the focus of the theory remained on the intergroup level of analysis. Conversely,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02270-6 - Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change

Edited by Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

Identity Process Theory deliberately abandoned the distinction between personal and social identity, because “seen across the biography, social identity is seen to become personal identity: the dichotomy is purely a temporal artefact” (Breakwell, 2001, p. 277). In Identity Process Theory, identity elements include traits, experiences and group memberships, all of which comprise the hierarchical structure of identity. This is not to suggest that Identity Process Theory cannot be used to shed light on intergroup issues – in fact, the theory has been used for this very purpose (Breakwell, 2004; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2012; Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011; Lyons, 1996; Oren and Bar-Tal, this volume). Despite the duality of both the Social Identity Approach and Identity Process Theory, both seeking to address the individual and social levels of analysis, their assumptions and foci are distinct – the models set out to explain quite different social psychological phenomena (Pehrson and Reicher, this volume).

Epistemological debates in identity research

Coping with Threatened Identities was published in an era of emerging debates around epistemology. Growing dissatisfaction with positivist, empiricist and laboratory-based approaches to social psychology led some social psychologists to advocate an alternative epistemological approach, namely social constructionism. Kenneth Gergen was possibly the most important intellectual leader in this movement. Gergen’s ground-breaking article “Social Psychology as History” appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 1973. The article argued that, like all knowledge, psychological knowledge was culturally and historically specific and that psychological explanations therefore needed to incorporate the social, historical political and economic aspects of everyday life. In short, social constructionism problematized the “taken-for-grantedness” of social psychological knowledge (Gergen, 2001). Gergen was one of a growing number of social psychologists who were concerned about the potential ideological and oppressive uses of social psychology and who believed that the discipline was implicitly promoting the agenda and values of dominant and powerful groups in society to the disadvantage of marginalized groups. In the UK context, Harré and Secord (1972) voiced similar concerns and emphasized the agency of individuals as “conscious social actors” rather than as passive subjects. Like Gergen, they viewed language as a social resource for constructing particular versions of the world, events and other phenomena and, thus, as central to understanding human agency.