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## Identity-based motivation: Implications for intervention

Daphna Oyserman and Mesmin Destin

The University of Michigan

### Abstract

Children want to succeed academically and attend college, but their actual attainment often lags behind; some groups (e.g., boys, low-income children) are particularly likely to experience this gap. Social structural factors matter, influencing this gap in part by affecting children's perceptions of what is possible for them and people like them in the future. Interventions that focus on this macro-micro interface can boost children's attainment. We articulate the processes underlying these effects using an integrative culturally sensitive framework entitled *identity-based motivation* (IBM, Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). The IBM model assumes that identities are dynamically constructed in context. People interpret situations and difficulties in ways that are congruent with currently active identities and prefer identity-congruent to identity-incongruent actions. When action feels identity-congruent, experienced difficulty highlights that the behavior is important and meaningful. When action feels identity-incongruent, the same difficulty suggests that the behavior is pointless and “not for people like me.”

### Keywords

Possible selves; school; adolescence; African American; Hispanic; achievement; health; depression; prevention; social identity; self-regulation

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Children want to do well in school and attend college, but their actual attainment often lags behind their aspirations. This aspiration-attainment gap is a problem both for the children themselves and for society at large and affects some groups (e.g., boys, low income children, African American and Latino children) more than others (e.g., Arbona, 2002). Macro-level as well as micro-level processes contribute to the emergence of this gap (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998). From a macro-level perspective, the aspiration-attainment gap is a function of social structural differences that are relatively impossible to change without large-scale, long term and financially intensive intervention directed at changing children's opportunity structures (e.g., Vera & Reese, 2000; Walsh, Galassi, Murphy, & Park-Taylor, 2002). However, as we will outline in this paper, a number of studies suggest that another approach is possible because social structural factors influence the aspiration-achievement gap, in part, through their influence on children's perceptions of what is possible for them and people like them in the future (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry & Bybee, 2002; Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002). Accordingly, interventions that focus on this macro-micro interface and emphasize the meaning children make of their possibilities can help children overcome the constraints imposed by social structural variables.

In the current paper we outline and test this possibility using as our theoretical model *identity-based motivation* (IBM, Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b), which conceptualizes the

underlying processes and guides the development of interventions that have been tested in experiments and randomized trials in urban public schools (in Detroit and its environs as well as Chicago) as well as rural areas in the United States and in international settings including France and Israel. The IBM model assumes that the self-concept is multifaceted, including many diverse and not well integrated identity-components whose content is dynamically constructed in context. People interpret situations in ways that are congruent with their currently active identities, prefer identity-congruent actions over identity-incongruent ones, and interpret any difficulties they encounter in light of identity-congruence. When action feels identity-congruent, experienced difficulty in engaging in relevant behaviors simply highlights that the behavior is important and meaningful. Conversely, when action feels identity-incongruent, the same difficulty suggests that engaging in these behaviors is pointless and “not for people like me.” As we will demonstrate, these perceptions have important downstream effects on engagement in school-focused judgments (e.g., planning to study), behaviors (including engagement with classroom activities and time spent on homework), and outcomes (including standardized test scores and grades in school).

IBM has three core postulates which can be termed *action-readiness*, *dynamic construction*, and *interpretation of difficulty*. Action-readiness refers to the prediction that identities cue readiness to act and to make sense of the world in terms of the norms, values, and behaviors relevant to the identity. However, which actions are relevant and what sense to make of situations depends on identity content, which itself is dynamically constructed. Dynamic construction refers to the prediction that which identities come to mind, what these identities are taken to mean, and therefore which behaviors are congruent with them are dynamically constructed in context (even though identities feel stable and separate from contexts). The third postulate, interpretation of difficulty, refers to the prediction that when a behavior feels identity-congruent, difficulties in engaging in the behavior will be interpreted as meaning that the behavior is important not impossible, and therefore effort is meaningful not pointless. Thus, interpretation of difficulty matters because it influences judgment, choice, and behavior.

Together these three postulates explain both how it is that identities feel stable but are instead malleable and dynamically created in context and why it is that school success needs to feel identity-congruent. People prefer identity-congruent to identity-incongruent behaviors and are more likely to use identity-congruent than identity-incongruent lenses to interpret their social and physical world. We will present relevant experimental and randomized clinical trial findings, outline implications of these findings for how we conceptualize interventions to improve the lives of at-risk children, and discuss implications for basic and applied research.

William James' (1890) first articulated a version of these postulates by arguing that the self includes content, motivation, and action tendencies, that social contexts matter for who one is in the moment, and that the self is malleable. In that sense, the identity-based motivation approach is rooted in the earliest psychological formulation of self-concept. The novel approach that the identity-based motivation model brings is two-fold. First, it focuses on predicting *when and how* aspects of the self-concept matter by operationalizing the three core postulates (action-readiness, dynamic construction, interpretation of difficulty) in a manner amenable to experimental manipulation. Second, it focuses on experimental methodology to test the efficacy of these postulates to predict behavioral outcomes in the moment and to form the basis for intervention influencing behaviors over time.

In the current paper, we demonstrate that the identity-based motivation (IBM) model provides an explanation for the gap between desired and attained outcomes, an explication

of why high risk contexts may enhance this gap, and a set of mechanisms through which children in high risk contexts can succeed. We base our demonstration on evidence from lab and field experiments and randomized clinical trials. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the IBM model provides the basis for what we term *small interventions with big effects*. We use this terminology to emphasize that subtle shifts in context can set in motion important changes in children's outcomes.

For clarity, this paper is organized in three sections. In the first section, we briefly outline what is meant by identity within and across cultures and which identities are likely to matter for engagement with school. In the second section, we articulate the IBM model. In the third section, we provide examples of the implications of the IBM model for procedural-readiness and action-readiness using relevant research from IBM-based lab studies and randomized clinical trials of the IBM-based intervention (called School-to-Jobs). We conclude with final comments on the relevance of the IBM model to interventions with diverse and multicultural populations, providing a bridge to other intervention and theoretical approaches.

### What is meant by identity?

Self-concept is a multidimensional cognitive structure made up of multiple potentially competing past, present, and future identities (for reviews, Abrams, 1994; Burke, 2003; Cross & Cross, 2007; King & Smith, 2004; Oyserman, 2001; Settles, 2004). Identities can be personal, including aspects of the self that make one unique, or social, including aspects of the self that are rooted in various group memberships. Even though identities are best thought of as elements of the self, self-concept and identity are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. However, in the current paper, we discuss *identity-based* motivation rather than *self-based* motivation for both empirical and theoretical reasons. First empirically, the literature typically examines the content and motivational consequences of specific social (e.g., “I’ll be a college student”, “I’ll be a better daughter”) and personal (e.g., “I’ll be successful”, “I’ll be smart”) past, current, and possible future *identities*, rather than the past, current or future *self* as a whole (therefore, we use the term possible identities rather than possible selves, the more commonly used term, for reviews, Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009). Second, from a theoretical perspective, using the term *identity* is advantageous because it links the identity-based model to a broader set of issues, as we articulate next.

First, using the term *identity* focuses attention on effects of socio-cultural context. Identity is the term Erikson (1968) used to describe adolescent *identity development*. He argued that children's identities reflect what seems possible for oneself in a particular historical, cultural, and sociological time period. Reconnecting with this term both facilitates connection to this earlier perspective and highlights that we are conceptualizing identities broadly, beyond a Western culture-bound focus on the self as an individual product to a broader cultural perspective of the self as a social process consisting of connections and relationships to important others (e.g., Oyserman & Markus, 1993). Second, using the term *identity* facilitates bridging psychological and sociological literatures and facilitates integration with modern goal theories. Psychological studies of current and possible selves mostly refer to particular identities rather than the self as a whole so that what a possible self is operationalized as is often more akin to what we are referring to as a possible identity (for a review, see Oyserman & James, in press). The sociological literatures based in identity and social identity theories emphasize social and personal identities as well as the influence of social contexts for identity content and function (for reviews Hogg & Smith, 2007; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Third, using the term *identity* facilitates focus on self-concept as a larger, multifaceted structure that includes past, current, and future identities (Howard, 2000; Neisser, 1988, 1997; Oyserman, 2001). Thinking of the self as composed of multiple, not-

well-integrated identities is critical to dynamic conceptualizations of the self that take into account the advances in social cognition research.

Two important consequences of the large size and minimal integration of self-concept in memory have been addressed in the literature (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Greenwald & Banaji, 1989; Markus & Wurf, 1987). First, only aspects of self-concept that are in working memory at any point in time are likely to influence feelings and actions; second, which aspects of self-concept are in working memory at any point in time is predicted by the situation. Important as these insights are, they do not fully address the dynamic nature of self-concept. As a consequence of the dynamic nature of self-concept, what a particular identity *means* and *which actions* are congruent with it are actively constructed by features of immediate contexts. Thus, when contexts make a particular current or possible identity salient, its content and the behaviors associated with it are likely to be shaped by what makes sense in the moment.

People come to know who they are and can become in interactions with others in their social contexts. Differing contexts highlight different *identities* or sets of traits and characteristics that are perceived as related. Which identity is salient in the moment influences both what one pays attention to and what one chooses to do.<sup>1</sup> Consider an 8<sup>th</sup> grader whose self-concept, sampled across multiple contexts, includes the following identities: “I am a girl whose parents are from Mexico. I used to want to play violin. I hate school. This coming year, I expect to get A’s and be really popular. I want to become a doctor. I am afraid I might end up poor, unemployed, or homeless.” Imagine that this 8<sup>th</sup> grader is in her math class and does not understand what the teacher is explaining. Depending on which identity constellation is salient, she is likely to have a different perspective on what to do and how to proceed.

When considered through the lens of the expected ‘all A’s’ identity, she may take notes and copy the problems from the board into her notebook so she can stay after class to show the teacher where she got lost or use these notes to try to figure things out on her own after school. When considered through another lens (e.g., the expected ‘popular’ identity), none of these options may come to mind. First, she may not really notice that she is lost because she is paying attention to other cues (like who is passing a note to whom). Second, even if she notices that nothing on the board makes sense, staying after class or working at home may simply not come to mind when the bell rings and there are chances to engage in ‘popular’ identity behaviors.

Each identity, being the kind of person who gets all A’s or is popular, involves a set of traits and characteristics which may feel congruent or incongruent with other identities. The traits and characteristics that make up an identity may be either individual or social group-based (Brewer, 1991). Thus, getting all A’s may be part of one’s social identity as a Mexican American girl or simply a personal identity. Moreover, contexts may cue current or possible future identities and the futures they refer to may be near (e.g., “this coming year I will get all A’s”) or far (e.g., “I will be a doctor when I grow up.”). These distinctions, between current and possible future identities and between personal (also termed individual) and social (also termed relational or collective) identities are useful. Research is beginning to provide evidence that possible future identities can influence current action when the possible future identity feels connected to the current self, whether the possible identity

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<sup>1</sup>Racial, ethnic, gender, and social class identities are often multiply constructed such that one’s racial identity is likely to refer to the interface of gender, social class, race, and ethnicity that define the specific constellation relevant to oneself. In the current paper we refer to racial-ethnic identity rather than to racial and ethnic identities separately for this reason. While we sometimes refer separately to racial-ethnic and gender identities, and these can be separately cued, we assume that what comes to mind is often a gendered, racial-ethnic identity tied to a particular time and place.

describes a near (Oyserman et al., 2004) or far (Nurra & Oyserman, 2010) future. The individual-collection distinction highlights the malleability of identity to shift from ways one is unique and different from others, connected to specific others, and a part of social groups (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Cross & Cross, 2007; Kashima & Hardie, 2000).

However, as detailed in the following sections, traits and characteristics can be simultaneously personal and social descriptions of who 'I' am. To continue with the prior example, the 'A' student identity could feel congruent or incongruent with being a girl, being Mexican American, or being a Mexican American girl. If these identities feel congruent, then when racial-ethnic identity is salient so are gender and school; conversely if these identities feel incongruent, then when one identity comes to mind, the others do not either because they are irrelevant or because being one means that the others cannot also be true.

### **Impact of gender, culture, and social structural factors on identity**

One of the insights from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) is that people are embedded in contexts which shape their choices. To specify which features of contexts matter, when they matter, and how they matter, it is necessary to move beyond the more static predictions coming from an ecological systems approach and consider identity, social identity (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Strauss & Cross, 2005), and cultural psychology theories (e.g., Fiske et al., 1998). For example, Brewer (1991) predicts that people will focus more on what makes them distinctive than what makes them similar to others when they are in in-group contexts and conversely, will focus more on what makes them similar to in-group members than what makes them distinctive when they are in contexts in which include in- and out-group members. Thus, what is important is the nature of the momentary, here- and-now, immediate situation. Meaning within immediate situations is assumed to draw both from what makes sense within the broader social context in which the situation occurs (e.g., school, the family, the neighborhood) and the cultural-historical epoch within which that social context is embedded (for articulation relevant to self and identity, see Oyserman & Packer, 1996).

Social identity theorists, in particular, have attempted to understand when a variety of social group memberships (e.g., being a man or a woman, Black or White) are a salient part of self-concept and when they are not. As articulated by racial-ethnic self-schema theory, social labels such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class are not necessarily elements of identity. People can be *aschematic* for race-ethnicity and other social group memberships (Oyserman, Kimmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh & Hart-Johnson, 2003). That is, although all people can be labeled in terms of memberships in social groups, not all social group memberships are included as identity elements. Moreover, when a social group is included as an identity element, the content of the identity depends on the traits and characteristics the person associates with the social group (Oyserman et al., 2003). Individuals vary in what that content is and this variation predicts outcomes over time (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Cross & Cross, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2003).

A number of scholars have considered how this works for school-focused motivation. If valuing and working hard in school is included in social identity content then when the identity is salient, so is focus on school. Conversely, if valuing and working hard in school are not included in social identity content, then when the identity is salient, school may not come to mind. This may be particularly problematic if a stereotype exists about whether people who belong to the social group on which the identity is based succeed in school. Stereotype threat theory predicts a decrement in performance when membership in such social groups is salient, and supporting evidence is found across a variety of social groups, including gender, social class, and race-ethnicity (for a review, Wheeler & Petty, 2001). The

identity-based motivation model predicts and finds an interaction effect – stereotypes are threatening only if the identity that comes to mind does not include a refutation of the stereotype (for school-focused content, see Oyserman et al., 2003, for health-focused content, see Oyserman, Fryberg & Yoder, 2007).

The working assumptions are first that social and personal identities come to mind when they are relevant in context, not otherwise, and second that identities that come to mind shift attention toward behaviors seen as identity-congruent in context. Consider, for example, an eight year old waiting at the bus stop. This third grader is both a boy and a good speller. The boys cluster together at the bus stop and separate themselves from the girls. In this situation, his identity as a boy, but not his identity as a good speller is relevant. But small changes in situation would influence which identities came to mind and therefore what behavior occurred. For example, if all poor spellers want homework help before school from the good spellers then poor spellers might cluster around good spellers, regardless of gender, so that one's identity as a speller, not as a boy, would be contextually relevant (if the only thing that mattered was spelling prowess). But, for example, if poor spellers only sought help within gender group, then both gender and spelling would be relevant identity cues. Social identity theory does not specify whether contexts are likely to make social (e.g. being a boy) or personal (e.g. being a good speller) identities salient; rather, it predicts that when an identity is salient in context, it will matter.

Coming from another angle, cultural psychologists have attempted to address the question of whether a social or a personal identity is likely to come to mind as a question of cross-societal difference. Cultural psychologists distinguish cultures in terms of whether they are individualistic or collectivistic, suggesting that there are cross-cultural differences in whether people tend to define themselves in terms of personal or social identities. Within this literature, when the self-concept is dominated by personal and individual-focused identities, it is termed *idiocentric* (Triandis, 1989) or *independent* (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and when the self-concept is dominated by social and relational-focused identities, it is termed *allocentric* (Triandis, 1989) or *interdependent* (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This simplification does not imply that individuals have only one way of making sense of who they are or that in some societies social identities are not part of self-concept. Rather, these models predict that societies are likely to differ in which social identities are chronically salient within the self concept. Specifically, in collectivistic societies, important social identities involve groups one is born into (e.g., race-ethnicity, tribe, or religion); whereas in individualistic societies, important social identities involve groups one can join or leave at will (e.g., professional or trade groups) (Fiske et al., 1998; Oyserman, 1993; Triandis, 1995). These cultural differences in societies are assumed to be based in the society's history. Individuals socialized within different societies are thus assumed to differ because of historical differences in how each society developed (Nisbett, 2003). In terms of identity, cultural psychologists predict that individualistic societies are more likely to focus members' attention on their personal identities while collectivistic societies are more likely to focus members' attention on their social identities.

Because these differences are assumed to be based in differences at the societal-level, cultural psychologists typically study differences in identity content by comparing groups, demonstrating, for example, a higher proportion of individual compared to social identities in working self-concept of European American college students compared to college students from other countries (for a review, Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). However, evidence from such between-group or between-society comparisons suffers from causal ambiguity because groups and societies differ on many characteristics, so it remains unclear whether observed differences are due to the posited cause or to one of its numerous natural confounds (for a review, Oyserman & Lee, 2007, 2008). Moreover, these

comparisons do not provide insight into the dynamic process by which identities change within individuals across time. Between-group difference observed at a single point in time could be due to differences in a culture as defined by its history and institutions, or due to other reasons which are not so distal or so fixed. In particular, more proximate factors in the immediate context may make some but not other identities salient at the moment of data collection.

In brief, although many of the theoretically posited between-society differences assumed to be stably based in individualism and collectivism can be found, between-society comparisons cannot illuminate the underlying process assumed to produce these differences (for meta-analytic reviews and a discussion of the methodological issues, see Oyserman, Coon, et al., 2002; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; Oyserman & Uskul, 2008). Experimental approaches which prime individualism and collectivism demonstrate that both personal and social identities are easily cued, both within the U.S. and in other countries. This implies that societies may differ in two ways. First, as posited by theories of individualism and collectivism (e.g., Triandis, 1989), societies are likely to differ in the propensity for any particular situation to cue a social identity, as compared to a personal identity. Second, as outlined in the section on situated cognition, societies may also differ in which particular personal or social identities are cued and what these identities mean in context.

### Which identities matter?

Numerous variables, from situational characteristics to experimental primes, can render an identity salient and increase its temporary relevance and influence. Any cued identity can matter when it comes to mind, but some identities are more likely to be cued across situations or within any given situation than others. Broader identities (e.g., identities based on race, ethnicity or gender) are more likely to be cued than narrower ones (e.g., identities based on specific situations such as being in the 'parent pick-up', 'walker', or 'bus rider' groups at school). Of course individuals differ in which identities are central and therefore more likely to be chronically salient, but beyond this individual variability what makes an identity broad or narrow is whether it is likely to be cued across a variety of contexts. Identities that are important but rarely cued in everyday contexts are less likely to influence behaviors than identities that are frequently cued in everyday contexts. Behaviors linked to broader identities are more likely to be engaged. Behaviors linked only to narrow identities are less likely to be engaged. When narrow identities (e.g. college-bound) are linked with broader identities (e.g., racial-ethnic, social class or gender identities), then contexts which cue one can also cue the other.

Gender and race-ethnicity are both broad social identities that are often psychologically salient (for a developmental argument as to why that is the case, see Bigler & Liben, 2006; for a social psychological perspective, see McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujita, 1978). Psychological salience may occur for a number of reasons. First race-ethnicity and gender are often experienced as essential and permanent ways of being, so anything connected to them is marked (for a gender example, see Prentice & Miller, 2006). Second, race-ethnicity and gender are often interpreted by others as having what is termed *psychological functionality*. In other words, people act on knowledge of race-ethnicity and gender as if knowing this information allowed for useful predictions about someone's likely behavior or characteristics. Because others respond as if these categories are psychologically functional, failing to take these social categories into account as part of identity impedes one's ability to predict other's response to oneself (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Of course, simply including a social category as a social identity does not mean it will influence behavior in a particular context. Social identities matter when they come to mind, not otherwise (Oyserman, et al., 2003).

It should be noted that even though it may seem that gender and race-ethnicity are more likely to be chronically salient for women and minorities, from an identity-based motivation perspective, dominant social identities such as being male and majority ('White') are just as likely to matter when they are cued. A cued identity can open or close choice options. Consider the situation of a middle-aged white man looking at himself in the mirror during his morning shave. He notices he is not looking as young as he used to, his hair is looking grey, and his eyes have dark circles. If he were a woman, he could put on make up and get his hair colored. As a man, these options might not come to mind, or even if they did, he might worry what others would think or say. The notion is that identities shape the options that come to mind, which choices make sense, and which feel awkward. When cued, non-dominant social identities (e.g., female, of color) may be more likely to limit choices and options that come to mind than dominant social identities (e.g., male, heterosexual), but as our preceding example highlights, these latter identities can also be choice-limiting.

## Identity-based motivation

The identity-based motivation model rests on the assumption that identities matter because they provide a basis for meaning-making and for action (Oyserman & Markus, 1998). This implies first that people are motivated to act in identity-congruent ways, and second, that when a behavior feels identity-congruent in context, it feels natural, and difficulty in engaging in the behavior is likely to be interpreted as meaning that it is important (e.g. "no pain, no gain") (Oyserman, 2007). Moreover, it also implies that the reverse is the case for behaviors that do not feel identity-congruent in context. These behaviors don't feel natural, and difficulty in engaging in them is likely to be interpreted as meaning that the behavior is not identity-syntonic (e.g. "taking notes is for nerds, not for normal kids like me") or lead to questioning the identity itself (e.g., "maybe I am not a math person").

As detailed in the following section, from an identity-based motivation perspective, both personal and social identities (whether formulated as current or possible future identities) matter not only because they focus attention on certain content – who one was, is, and may become - but also because in interaction with context, they evoke identity-congruent behavior and cognitive processes. Along with prior theories, the identity-based motivation model emphasizes the motivational force of identities. For example, it shares with social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981) theories the notion that people act to increase felt similarity to salient social identities, particularly when membership might feel threatened.<sup>2</sup> The identity-based motivation model also shares with cultural psychology (Triandis, 1989, 1995) the notion that differences in identity expression reflect differences in the relative salience of individual and collective identities, not differences in the existence of such identities. The identity-based motivation model moves beyond these prior models in a number of ways. The identity-based motivation model predicts that what an identity means, and therefore what is congruent with it, is dynamically constructed in the moment and can include both positive and self-undermining or even self-destructive behaviors. It also predicts that when behavior feels identity-congruent then the experience of difficulty in working on the behavior is likely to be interpreted as meaning that the behavior is an important part of the process, not an indication that the behavior is impossible or unnecessary.

In making this case, the identity-based motivation model links to modern motivation theories and utilizes a situated social cognition perspective (e.g., Schwarz, 2007, 2009; Smith & Semin, 2004, 2007). A situated perspective proposes that cognition and action are

<sup>2</sup>For examples focused on the social identity of being African American, see Cross, Smith & Payne, 2002; Strauss & Cross, 2005



not separate from contexts but rather are dynamically shaped by them. The identity-based motivation model integrates cognitive approaches with modern goal theories, which propose that once instantiated, goals can be situationally cued outside of conscious awareness and without systematic processing (for a review, Fischbach & Ferguson, 2007). On the one hand, thinking is flexibly focused on the demands of the current situation; on the other hand, thinking is framed by subtle situational cues as to what is relevant and what experiences mean.

By integrating these perspectives into a unified framework, the identity-based motivation model illuminates the social and cultural nature of identity, offering novel predictions about identity-based processes and their outcomes (Oyserman, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Particularly important is the notion that a salient identity can trigger mental processes that guide subsequent perception and action. Making an identity salient activates identity-consistent processes that can operate outside of awareness and, in effect, sabotage some self-goals while strengthening others (e.g., through disengaging from academic performance or from healthful lifestyles) (Oyserman, et al., 2007).

### **Identities and interpretation of meta-cognitive experience**

Engaging in identity-congruent behavior is often difficult, requiring persistence over time and forsaking of other potentially enjoyable choices. Consider the behaviors required to attain school-focused identities, such as class work, homework, and studying. The activities themselves may feel difficult. Difficulty may imply that the path to the identity is closed, meaning that the identity is unlikely to be attained or that it is an awkward fit with other important identities so should be abandoned. To judge what difficulty means, children must answer the implied questions, “*Why* is this so hard for me? Is this really the true me? Do we have school-focused identities?” Likewise, they must judge whether particular behavioral patterns (e.g. asking for help) are likely to work and if they contradict in-group identity (e.g. “Will asking the teacher for help actually help *me* succeed in school or is it only something that girls do or just a ‘white’ thing to do?”). If the path to an identity is blocked, no matter what one does, the identity will not be attained. If the behavior feels incongruent with other important identities, it may not come to mind in the first place.

Thus, feelings of ease and difficulty are not separate from identity, rather they are integral to identity and influence whether an identity is pursued or abandoned. This formulation of identity as including both content (what one thinks about when one thinks about one's self) and interpretation of accompanying meta-cognitive process (reflection on how thinking feels) first appeared in the writing of William James (1890). More recently, social cognition research has demonstrated the importance of considering both the content of thoughts and the meaning attributed to feelings of ease or difficulty associated with these thoughts (see Schwarz, 1998, 2002). Images of oneself having current and future identities are inextricably linked with feelings of ease or difficulty and what these feelings mean depends on the question one asks oneself in regards to the feeling. If the question is, “Is this important to me?”, then experienced difficulty may be interpreted as meaning that the answer is, “Yes, this is important to me. Otherwise, why am I working so hard?” Conversely, if the question is, “Is this the real me?”, then experienced difficulty may be interpreted as meaning that the answer is, “no”, since feelings of ease are commonly interpreted as truth and genuineness (other interpretations of felt difficulty are that if it is hard to think of or hard to do it is less likely to be true, Higgins, 1998; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Schwarz & Clore, 1996).

How the meta-cognitive experience of ease or difficulty when bringing to mind an identity is interpreted matters. First, it can provide the basis for inferring both whether a current or possible identity (e.g., an ‘A student’) is a part of the self and so worth pursuing or only falsely assumed to be a part of the self, but actually conflicting with other important

identities and so not worth pursuing. Second, it can provide feedback as to whether the gap between a current and a desired identity is manageable or unmanageable, open or blocked, and therefore whether the desired identity should be pursued or simply abandoned. Successful movement toward a school-focused identity requires ongoing behavior; it is not enough to complete one homework assignment or stay after class one day. If one's meta-cognitive experience is that working on the identity is difficult and if this difficulty is interpreted with a naïve theory that difficulty means it is not the real me, then difficulties associated with working toward the identity will undermine both effort and belief that the identity is truly part of the self.

Though the experience of meta-cognitive difficulty is generally interpreted as meaning 'not true for me,' a number of studies have documented that other interpretations are possible (Rothman & Schwarz, 1998). Sports stories abound with re-interpretation of the meaning of experienced difficulty (e.g. 'no pain, no gain') and the need to keep trying (e.g. 'you miss 100% of the shots you don't take'). Similarly, when attempting to attain a school-focused identity, the meta-cognitive experience of difficulty is generally interpreted as 'not the true me,' but could be re-interpreted to mean other things. Difficulty can be viewed as a normative part of the process (e.g. 'success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration'). Difficulty can also provide evidence of progress (e.g. 'the important things in life are the ones you really have to work for'). If difficulty and failures along the way are viewed as critical to eventual success, then difficulty is evidence of striving.

The common interpretation of difficulty as meaning low ability fits well with Americans' belief that intelligence and many other abilities are fixed rather than malleable (Dweck, 2002; Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 1995). In order for effort to matter, one must believe that ability is malleable and can be incrementally improved, rather than believe that it is a stable trait or entity (Hong et al., 1995; Dweck, 2002). Students holding incremental theories are more likely to persist over time (Butler, 2000, Study 1), as do students convinced to hold an incremental theory (Butler, 2000, Study 2). The identity-based motivation model provides a framework within which to understand entity and incremental formulations as naïve theories explaining what difficulty means. If effort matters (incremental theory of ability), then difficulty is likely to be interpreted as meaning that more effort is needed. However, if effort does not matter (an entity theory of ability) then difficulty is likely to be interpreted as meaning that ability is lacking so effort should be suspended.

Although race and gender have not been used to predict entity and incremental theories about ability, some race and gender differences have been found. For example, in one college sample, European American and female students were more likely to report entity beliefs about athletic abilities than African American and male college students (Li, Harrison, & Solmon, 2004). In a sample of second graders, boys and girls were asked to explain the misbehavior of same gender children. Boys commonly described boys' misbehavior in trait terms (e.g. "he is a bad boy"), whereas girls almost never used trait terms to describe the misbehavior of girls, relying instead on situational explanations (Heyman & Dweck, 1998). It is possible that in domains in which effort is expended and change has been observed, individuals are more likely to learn to appreciate incremental theories, whereas in domains stereotyped as identity-incongruent, they may be more at risk of accepting an entity theory with the implication that "we just can't behave differently."

### **Identity-based motivation is socially situated cognition**

The premise of an identity-based motivation perspective is that people use identities to prepare for action and to make sense of the world around them. That is, thinking (about identity) is for doing; an insight that can be dated back at least to William James (1890). More recent key formulations of this theme come from Smith and Semin's situated social

cognition model (2004, 2007), Fiske's (1992) thinking-is-for-doing formulation of the situatedness of social cognition, Schwarz's (2007, in press) situational sensitivity formulation of social judgment, and theories of racial and ethnic identity, including Strauss and Cross' (2005) descriptions of context sensitive identity enactments among African Americans. Though varied, each of these formulations highlights the constructive nature of cognition and underscores that individuals are sensitive to meaningful features of the environment and adjust thinking and doing to what is contextually relevant (Fiske, 1992).

In this way, the identity-based motivation model builds on the recurrent social psychological theme that cognition is situated and pragmatic. Situated and social perspectives call attention to the fact that contexts in which one thinks influence both what comes to mind and how one makes sense of what comes to mind. Thinking is contextualized by social and non-social features of contexts, including the pragmatics of the task at hand and one's physical experiences in the context (Smith & Semin, 2004).

Taken together, situated cognition approaches suggest a few basic premises: 1) thinking is situated; 2) the impact of contexts on thinking does not depend on conscious awareness of the context or its impact; and 3) people think in order to engage in adaptive action. Thinking is influenced by the context in which it occurs, including physical and social features of the external context as well as the experience of thinking itself. This means that thinking is not invariant and context-free; people think flexibly and are responsive to the immediate environment. The context sensitivity highlighted by situated approaches does not depend on conscious awareness of the impact of psychologically meaningful features of situations on cognition. Not only do situational effects not require explicit justification, but drawing attention to the potential influence of context can change the response (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Schwarz, in press).

To be sure, situated and social cognition approaches do not propose that all context effects on cognitive processes are necessarily mediated by self-concept or identity (e.g., Smith & Semin, 2004). However, a situated framework is critical to understanding identity-based motivation. The identity-based motivation model proposes that people are motivated to act in ways and make sense of the world using procedures congruent with their identities. Since identities are situated, which identities come to mind and what they mean in context is a function of both chronic and situational cues. Some situations are more likely to cue particular identities or constellations of identities than others. People's interpretation of cued identities (or identity constellations) depends on the pragmatic meaning of these identities in the particular context; action- and procedural-readiness will be cued but also shaped by the affordances of the context.

When situations cue an identity (e.g., African American), what the cued identity carries with it is not a fixed list of traits (e.g., hardworking, persistent). Rather, the cued identity carries with it a general readiness to act and make sense of the world in identity-congruent terms, including the norms, values, strategies and goals associated with that identity as well as the cognitive procedures relevant to it. What exactly this readiness looks like is dependent on what the cued identity comes to mean in the *particular context* in which it is cued. This does not imply that identities do not predict behaviors over time, but rather, that the predictive power of an identity depends on the stability of the contexts in which it is cued because differing contexts cue different aspects of an identity and differing intersections with other identities. The effect of an identity will be stable over time to the extent that individuals repeatedly encounter psychologically isomorphic situations because in each instance the situation will engender readiness to take the same actions (for a related discussion of the stability of attitudes, see Schwarz, 2007, for examples of behavior, see diary data, Strauss & Cross, 2005). Once a choice becomes identity-linked, it is automatized. If it feels identity-

syntonic, it feels right and does not require further reflection. On the other hand, if it feels non-syntonic to identity, it feels wrong and this feeling also does not invite further reflection.

The impact of subtle differences in context on which actions are cued by an identity is demonstrated by comparing the behavioral choices of eighth grade students given a chance to complete an extra credit assignment in two slightly different contexts (Destin & Oyserman, in press). Their contexts differed because unbeknownst to them, they were randomly assigned to either an education-dependent or an education-independent identity context. In the education-independent context, students learned how much money top entertainers and athletes make compared to the average person in their state. In the education-dependent context, students learned how much money on average people in their state earned after attaining various education levels. Students were then asked how much they would study that night; those in the education-dependent context said they would study more than those in the education-independent context. Even more impressive, eight times as many students went home and completed an extra credit assignment offered by an instructor. We conclude that while both the education-independent and the education-dependent contexts made possible adult identities salient, only in the education-dependent context did possible adult identities include school-focused behaviors. In this context, but not in the education-independent one, becoming an adult involved schoolwork. Therefore, these children were more likely to plan and engage in school-work.

Just as in the above example, in everyday life, identity-based motivation is common. It is cued when an identity is cued by psychologically meaningful features of everyday situations, like the features which tell the participant what the situation is about. Because thinking is for doing and is a dynamic product of the constraints and affordances of the immediate context, the particular identity cued in a particular context is a function of what is psychologically meaningful in context, what is chronically salient or central to the individual, and what the situational action-potentials are. Although identities feel stable, they are better conceptualized as dynamically created and recreated in each situation in which they are evoked. Because thinking is for doing and thinking is the emergent outcome of a dynamic process, contextual cues determine, at least in part, not only *whether* a particular identity will be cued but also *how* a cued identity will be interpreted and therefore which procedures, behaviors, choices and motivations are primed. Even though they emerge in a dynamic interaction with context, cued identities are consequential for subsequent meaning making, including which cognitive procedures are brought to bear (for a review of experimental evidence across national cultures, see Oyserman & Lee, 2007, 2008) and which actions are taken (for examples in elementary and middle schools, see Destin & Oyserman, in press; Nurra & Oyserman, 2010, for examples in college and beyond, see Cross, Smith & Payne, 2002; Strauss & Cross, 2005).

### **Contexts may not cue identity-based motivation toward school**

Most children desire school success and imagine that they will become college-bound (Mello, 2009; Trusty, 2000). Unfortunately, expectations are a better predictor of grades for socio-economically advantaged than for socio-economically disadvantaged children (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Alexander, Entwisle & Bedinger, 1994). Indeed, in our own research in low income urban schools, we find that almost all students (close to 90%) report expecting to attend college but only about half describe education-dependent adult possible identities (Destin & Oyserman, in press, Study 1).

An identity-based motivation perspective articulates how this gap occurs. Even though low-income and minority children desire becoming school successes and want to avoid becoming school failures, they are unlikely to focus sustained effort on school unless

contexts support these identities. First, self-relevant goals about school must come to mind in context. Second, these self-relevant goals must feel congruent with other important aspects of identity (e.g. racial-ethnic, gender, and social class relevant identities). Third, difficulties along the way must be interpreted as meaning that a school-focused future is important, not impossible, and that the path to attaining the self-relevant future goal is open, not closed (Oyserman et al., 2006).

For a number of reasons, these basic conditions for identity-based motivation to support school-focused effort are less likely to be met when children grow up in neighborhoods with high unemployment and poverty and limited exposure to adults like themselves who are college-graduates. Low income and minority children are more likely to live in high unemployment and high poverty neighborhoods (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). These neighborhoods also have a number of other problematic characteristics. First, they are likely to be segregated and segregation is associated both with limited exposure to adults who are college graduates (Adelman & Gocker, 2007; Krivo, Peterson, Rizzo, & Reynolds, 1998) and with lower endorsement of those aspects of racial-ethnic identity predictive of academic attainment (termed connectedness, awareness of racism, and embedded achievement, Oyserman & Yoon, 2009). Second, these contexts are likely to be “media saturated”, providing vivid models of education-independent adult identities such as sports and entertainment (Roberts, 2000). Given the lack of easily accessible models of people “like me” who have succeeded in school, youth's commitment to education may remain abstract and rarely cued as part of identity, thus seldom linked to everyday behaviors (for qualitative description, see Roderick, 2003; for quantitative analyses, see Oyserman, Johnson, & James, in press).

Moreover, in these contexts, racial-ethnic identities may also include information about academics that undermines children's belief in the identity-congruence of school-focused effort. Studies using a variety of methods converge in suggesting that students' perceptions of racial-ethnic groups contain predictions about their academic behaviors. Kao's (2000) ethnographic research suggests that high school students perceive Latinos as more likely to become manual laborers, Asians to do well in school, and African Americans to do poorly in school. Hudley and Graham (2001) show a similar pattern of results in a scenario-based experimental paradigm. Latino and African American students presented with a scenario about a target student who is failing in school were more likely to predict that the target was Latino or African American than white. These results are replicated when low income children are asked to infer the performance of a target student. When asked to predict academic performance of a target student, low income students infer worse performance from low (vs. middle) social class peers (Régner, Huguet, & Monteil, 2002; Weinger, 2000). However, as we document next, the consequences of salient racial-ethnic identity depend on what it means in context.

## Consequences of identity-based motivation

In this section, we present evidence for the powerful consequences of identity-based motivation on readiness to make sense and take action, what we term procedural-readiness and action-readiness. We demonstrate that procedures and behavior that feel identity-congruent will be chosen, whether or not they are the best or most effective procedures and behaviors and whether or not they would have been chosen had they not been contextually cued. We focus on how feelings of identity-fit matter and the things people do or avoid doing because of fit or mis-fit with important identities. As the following studies illustrate, one important variable triggering identity-based motivation is whether the situation brings an identity to mind. Situations can bring identities to mind in different ways, ranging from explicit priming to the identity's distinctiveness in a particular situation to concerns that the

identity may not be validated in the context. We begin first with procedural-readiness, demonstrating that cuing individual or collective mindsets matters for the cognitive procedures brought to mind in the moments. We then move to action-readiness, demonstrating effects on academic outcomes both in field experiments and in intervention research.

### **Identity-based motivation and procedural readiness**

In this section, the following proposition is considered: when a specific personal or social identity is cued in context, what is cued is not simply content but also a way of thinking, or a procedure. Having a relational or embedded sense of self cues generally relational and connected information-processing with a focus on patterns, connections, and relationships. Conversely, having an autonomous and separated sense of self cues a different information processing style. In this case separating and pulling procedures are cued and the focus is on figure, main point, and central aspects.

Two basic procedures are considered, ‘pulling apart and separating’ procedures and ‘connecting and relating’ procedures. The idea is that what comes to mind when an identity is cued is not simply content but also a general way of making sense of the world. Because personal identities focus attention on traits and characteristics separate from relationships, the procedure cued would be to ignore background and details and focus only on a main point. Because social identities focus attention on relationships, with traits and characteristics having meaning only within the context of relationships, the procedure cued would be to pay attention to background and details and focus on connection. This proposition builds on prior description of gender- racial-ethnic-, and culture-based differences in the propensity to define the self as a set of personal identities separated from contexts, relationships, and group memberships or as a set of social identities, embedded in contexts, relationships, and group memberships (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Triandis, 1989; Woike, 1994).

Everyone has both personal and social identities, but there is some evidence of chronic between-group differences in the propensity to focus on the personal or the social. Markus and Oyserman (1989) reviewed and synthesized the extant literature on gender differences in mathematical and spatial abilities. Men and women, they found, differed in how they navigated and made sense of three-dimensional space. Men were more likely to report mental imagery separated from their own perspective, seeing the world ‘as the crow flies’ rather than as they traversed it. These gender differences mapped onto differences in tasks that involved rotation of objects in three-dimensional space.

Markus and Oyserman (1989) proposed that basic differences in how the self is organized could predict these effects. Even though both men and women can have social identities based in gender, men and women may differ in the propensity to use social and relational information. Men were more likely to define the self as separated from, and women more likely to define the self as embedded in, contexts and relationships. These differences in content should also have implications for which cognitive procedures are accessible when the self was salient.

Whereas Markus and Oyserman's (1989) argument was based on a review of the gender literature on cognitive style, subsequent focus shifted to cross-national differences arguing for cultural differences in personal vs. social focus of self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). At the same time, cross-national differences in judgment and decision making were also emerging that seemed to parallel these differences in self-concept focus (for a review, see Oyserman, Coon, et al., 2002). Just as personal identities focus on the self as separate, European Americans seem to focus on the figure and ignore background in processing visual

information generally, while Chinese (Nisbett, 2003) and Japanese (Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura & Larsen, 2003) seem to focus on the relationship between figure and background, congruent with a social identity focus on the self as connected and related.

Clearly these results are provocative. However showing between-country or between-gender differences in average cognitive style does not yet clarify the process underlying these differences. Effects may be due to the postulated (fixed) cultural or gender differences, to other gender or culture-related factors, or to other differences entirely, including more malleable processes (see Oyserman & Lee, 2008, for a discussion). Thus, between-group comparisons cannot provide causal evidence about process. To demonstrate causal process, two steps are need. The first step is to demonstrate that subtle situational cues shift self-concept focus. The second step is to demonstrate that shift in self-concept focus results in shifts in the procedures that distinguish gender and other groups used in East-West comparisons.

An initial demonstration that average between-society differences in self-concept focus could be the result of situational cues was provided by Triandis and his colleagues (Triandis, 1989; Trafimow, Triandis & Goto, 1991). They demonstrated that they could reliably predict whether people would use more personal or social identities to describe themselves by shifting their in-the-moment focus on themselves as similar to or different from friends and family. They also showed that once a personal or social identity focus was cued in one situation, it was likely to be used again in another situation. They proposed that cross-national differences in self-concept focus were due to situational cues. In the past twenty years, this basic finding has been replicated using a variety of situational cues, showing that people in East and West describe themselves using more or fewer social identities, depending on which is cued in situation (for a review, Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Taken together, the evidence is clear that situational cues influence whether a social or personal identity is salient.

In a series of experiments, Oyserman, Sorensen, Reber and Chen (2009) demonstrated that the same kinds of situational cues that make salient social vs. personal identities also trigger the cognitive procedures that parallel cross-national differences in whether a focal target or integrated whole is first perceived. They showed that the performance of participants from a variety of racial-ethnic and national groups (including African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, Koreans, Hong Kong Chinese, and Norwegians) was systematically influenced by whether an individual or a collective mindset was cued. They primed mindset by having participants read a paragraph and to mark the pronouns in it. To prime an individual mindset, the pronouns were first person singular (I, me, my). To prime a collective mindset, the pronouns were first person plural (we, our, us). They found differences in basic perception tasks testing hearing, vision, and memory.

When primed with an individual mindset, participants were better at tasks that required focus on one piece of information while ignoring other pieces of information. When primed with a collective mindset, participants were better at tasks that required remembering how information connected and related. Those primed with collective mindset were better at incidental recall of details including details they had been explicitly told to ignore. For example, in one task, those primed with a collective-mindset were better able to recall information about the context in which a figure they were supposed to be paying attention to was embedded. Similarly, in another task, those primed with collective-mindset were better able to recall information about the placement of figures on a page. These effects are striking because in both tasks, instructions did not direct them to look at context and those primed with individual-mindset were more context-blind.

Most relevant to the current focus, performance on a task using Graduate Record Exam (GRE) items improved 10-15% after individual-mindset priming. These effects were found whether participants were African American, Asian American, or European American. Positive effects were particularly dramatic when comparing individual-mindset primed participants to collective mindset primed participants, with control group participants between the two primes. The experimental task used verbal GRE questions (e.g., synonyms and antonyms). Accuracy was facilitated by individual-mindset and undermined by collective-mindset because individual-mindset cued the task congruent procedure of pulling out the essential meaning and moving along rather than the task incongruent procedure of considering how all of the words might connect and meanings might be integrated. Mindset was equally malleable in all three groups. We interpret these results as suggesting that when individual-mindset is advertently or inadvertently cued in these kinds of test situations, performance should improve. Conversely, if collective-mindset is inadvertently cued in these kinds of test situations performance should suffer.

Note that the implication is not that a particular mindset is always better or worse, but rather that fit between task and mindset matters, and that a mindset, though easily cued, can have effects that can last over at least a test-taking event. For example, in another series of studies, Lee and colleagues (Lee, Oyserman, & Bond, in press) randomly assigned students to either individual- or collective-mindset conditions. Students were then given a difficult math test and told their results. Given feedback that they had done poorly, all students reported feeling badly, but only those who were primed with individual-mindset also disengaged from higher performing peers.

Taken together, these studies indicate that individual and collective mindsets are associated with and facilitate the application of different cognitive procedures. Individual mindset is associated with procedures that facilitate focus on an isolated stimulus and its unique attributes, pulling the stimulus apart from the field. In contrast, a collective mindset is associated with procedures that facilitate the identification of relationships, emphasizing the embeddedness of a stimulus in its field. Importantly, these mindsets can be easily cued by subtle situational influences and are equally influential among European American, African American and Asian American participants (as well as participants from other countries in the East and West).

These results are clearly not compatible with an argument that differences in cognitive procedures are based in extensive socialization in the intellectual traditions of a culture (Nisbett, 2003). Rather, they suggest that differences in the spontaneous application of cognitive procedures are better portrayed as efficient responses to culturally dominant tasks, consistent with theories of situated cognition (see Oyserman & Lee, 2007, Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009 for more detailed discussion). Of course these effects are not *necessarily* mediated by shift in focus from social to personal identity. Rather, an identity-based motivation model implies that when a social or personal identity is cued, these effects are also likely because identities carry with them procedural-readiness, readiness to make sense of the world using an individual or collective mindset. Whereas this section has focused on effects on cognitive procedures generally, in the next section, we consider how cued identities can influence academic behavior directly.

### **Identity-based motivation and action readiness: Experimental evidence**

Identities matter for academic outcomes (for examples based on the stereotype-threat model, see Steele, 1997). When a particular social identity is made salient, performance declines if the social group associated with the identity (e.g., women) is stereotyped as not performing well in the academic domain of interest (e.g., math) and improves if the social group associated with the identity (e.g., Asian) is positively stereotyped as doing well (Shih,



Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; for a review, Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Thus, in an elegant set of studies, Shih and her colleagues (1999) demonstrated each of these points. They showed the predicted negative effect of making gender salient before women completed the math task, interpreting this result as being due to the negative stereotype about women and math. They also showed that when another identity (Asian heritage) was made salient, performance rose when the data were collected in the U.S. (Americans positively stereotype Asians as math whizzes) but remained stable when the data were collected in Canada (Canadians do not have a stereotype about Asians as math whizzes).

Although an implication of a stereotype threat model is that these effects are independent of identity content, an identity-based motivation perspective focuses attention on the processes underlying these effects. For example, in some situations, identities feel safely supported and accepted by others (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 1995; Markus, Steele & Steele, 2001). In other situations, the legitimacy of one's claim to an identity may be questioned. Situations in which an identity is accepted cue identity-based motivation to attain identity-congruent goals. Situations in which identity is questioned cue identity-based motivation to demonstrate identity-fit.

One set of studies assessed students' feelings of social acceptance, obtained teacher ratings of their classroom behavior and school-reported end of term grades, comparing racial-ethnic minority students who self-reported that they did or did not 'look like' members of their racial-ethnic group (Oyserman, Brickman et al., 2006, Studies 1, 2). The classroom context does not afford many ways to engage in behaviors that are consistent with particular social identities. Therefore, we predicted that students whose racial-ethnic identities felt challenged because they did not 'look like' in-group members would be more likely to engage in academic stereotype-confirming behaviors. Results supported this prediction. Youth who did not look like in-group members were more likely to enact an in-group identity by engaging in stereotype-consistent academic behavior; they under-performed academically, misbehaved in class and chose non-school focused friendships. These results suggest that identity-based motivation can have negative effects when the options for identity-confirming action are limited to dysfunctional behaviors. When belongingness to an important group is threatened, people use the situationally available means to mark their identities even when this means poor performance and adverse personal outcomes.

However, an identity-based perspective does not suggest simply that people are prone to self-stereotype. Rather, it holds that identities influence behavior by providing information about group norms and expectations and by shaping a person's interpretation of social and contextual feedback (Oyserman, 2007). Hence, identity-based motivation can have both positive and negative impacts on behavior. Individuals may confirm or disconfirm negative or positive stereotypes depending on how identity is dynamically constructed in the moment.

For example, in one study, students completed a math task before or after being reminded of their racial or ethnic group membership (Oyserman, et al., 2003, Studies 1 and 2). Being reminded of group membership improved or undermined math performance depending on content of racial-ethnic identity. Performance improved for students with 'dual' identities who saw themselves as members of both their racial-ethnic in-group and broader society. In contrast, performance declined for students with 'in-group only' identities who saw themselves only as members of their racial-ethnic in-group and not of broader society, presumably because in this latter group, school success was assumed to be excluded from in-group identity.

The same pattern of effects was found in a separate sample of youth who were followed over the course of the school year. Content of racial-ethnic identity predicted grade point

average over time, presumably because the same content was repeatedly cued over the course of the school year. 'Dual' racial-ethnic identity content predicted improved performance over the course of the school year, compared to 'in-group only' content which predicted decline. Effects were stable, even controlling for prior report card scores (Oyserman et al., 2003, Study 3).

The same pattern of effects was found in a sample of youth followed for four years from ninth to twelfth grade. 'Dual' identities predicted improved performance compared to 'in-group only' identities, presumably because doing well in school was seen as an identity-relevant goal for the former but not the latter students (Oyserman, 2008). To directly test this effect, Oyserman, Gant and Ager (1995, Study 2) reminded students of their racial-ethnic identity either before or after taking a math test. When reminded of their racial-ethnic identity, African American students persisted more at math tasks if they believed that doing well in school was part of racial-ethnic identity.

Moreover, beyond content of racial-ethnic identity, action-readiness entails interpretation of meta-cognitive experience of difficulty. If the path to attaining school-focused future identities feels open, difficulty is more likely to be interpreted as meaning that the outcome is important, increasing effort. Conversely, if the path to attain these identities feels closed, then difficulty is more likely to be interpreted as meaning that the outcome is impossible and not identity congruent. To demonstrate this effect, we randomly assigned low-income African American and Latino middle school students to either receive information about need-based financial aid or information about the cost of college and then asked them about their plans for homework that night. We found that children primed to see the path as open (need-based financial aid) planned to spend more time on studying and homework than children primed to see the path as closed (cost of college) (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Results were replicated in two schools in two cities and were found controlling for current school grades.

We draw two conclusions from the results of these studies. First, salient identities matter and second, what these identities means is malleable and can be influenced by situational cues. A limitation of these studies is that they either demonstrate effects of identity over time (e.g., Oyserman, 2008) or demonstrate effects of contextual manipulation on what identity means (e.g., Destin & Oyserman, in press), but do not demonstrate the effectiveness of the contextual manipulation of what identity means over time. As summarized next, this limitation was addressed by translating the identity-based motivation model into school-based intervention and demonstrating real effects over time on grades, behavior, attendance, and other important outcomes (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

### **Identity-based motivation and action readiness: Evidence from a randomized clinical trial**

To demonstrate that the identity-based motivation model could be used to produce lasting positive change in school outcomes among children at risk of school problems, Oyserman and her colleagues developed and tested the School-to-Jobs intervention (STJ) to change children's possible identities with three primary goals: (1) making the future self feel connected to the current self so that current action to attain the future self is needed, (2) making actions needed to attain the future self feel congruent with important gender, race-ethnicity, and social class-relevant social identities, and finally (3) providing an interpretation of the experience of difficulty in working on school tasks as meaning that school-focused future identities were important, not impossible and that failures along the way are normative not diagnostic. The intervention involved structured activities that took place in small groups. As described next, each activity was linked to a core postulate of the identity-based motivation model (action-readiness, dynamic construction, and interpretation

of difficulty). Activities were ordered in a step-wise fashion, moving from the distal to the proximal future and from easy to harder tasks. Intervention was brief, lasting only 7 weeks, but effects were long-lasting, continuing over the two-year follow-up.

**Session-by-session synopsis of the intervention**—Session 1 focused on making possible identities salient and relevant to important social identities: Youth were partnered and each introduced the other in terms of the skills or ability the partner possessed to successfully complete the school year (e.g. ‘well-organized,’ ‘positive attitude’). This provided an initial example of congruence between school-focused possible identities and important social identities. Because all youth engaged in the task, the meta-message was ‘we all care about school.’

Session 2 focused on adult possible identities. Youth picked photographs that fit their adult ‘visions’. All participated. This participation itself was the first meta-message, that ‘everyone has possible identities. No social identity group is excluded.’ Most youth chose images of material success. Thus, the second meta-message was ‘we all want a good future.’

Session 3 focused on models. Students drew role models and negative forces; people or things that provide energy to work toward possible identities and those that are draining or nay-saying. The meta-message was that ‘everyone faces obstacles and difficulties, but this does not make the possible identities less part of the ‘true’ self.’

Session 4 focused on bringing the future nearer and making sense of the experience of difficulty. Students drew timelines into the future including forks in the road and obstacles. The meta-messages were first, that ‘the future starts now’ and second, that ‘everyone has difficulties. Failures and setbacks are a normal part of timelines and do not mean that possible identities are not part of the true self.’

Sessions 5-7 focused on strategies. In Session 5, students chose a possible identity and articulated specific strategies to attain this identity. This proved difficult for each student and the normative nature of difficulty was the meta-message. In Sessions 6 and 7 students worked on a poster board. In Session 6, students chose stickers describing next year negative feared and positive expected possible identities and put them on the left third of the poster board. Then they chose stickers describing their current strategies to work on these possible identities and put them in the middle third of the poster board. In Session 7 they completed the poster board, filling in the right third of the poster board with adult possible identities and linking these with lines to current strategies. The final board showed paths from near to far future identities via current strategies.

Sessions 8-10 focused on interpreting the experience of difficulty. Students worked in smaller groups on everyday problems, including social problems, academic problems, and the process of getting to high school graduation. The meta-theme was that all students care about these issues, that difficulties along the way are normative. This interpretation of difficulty implies that school-focused identities are important, not impossible. Session 11 cemented these new ‘meta-cognitive’ interpretations by having participants review and critique the sessions.

**Evaluation Procedure**—The efficacy of STJ was tested in two separate evaluations. First, as an after-school program (Oyserman et al., 2002) and then as an in-school program (Oyserman et al., 2006). In both cases, participating schools drew students from high poverty and high unemployment neighborhoods and enrolled predominantly African American and Latino children. In both cases evaluation compared treatment and control children and obtained data from multiple sources (self-report, teacher-report, school-

records). The after-school program involved randomization of children whose parents signed up for the program to participate or not. The in-school program involved randomization of the full cohort of eighth graders in three middle schools to participate in School-to-Jobs or school as usual. Data were collected prior to the intervention as a baseline in the beginning of the school year and post-intervention at multiple points in time (end of the eighth grade, fall and spring of the ninth grade) as children dispersed from the three middle schools to high schools across the city and beyond.

STJ began in the fall (mid-September) and ended seven weeks later, in mid-November prior to the completion of the first report card marking period. Control youth attended their regularly scheduled classes; intervention youth received the 11-session intervention twice weekly. The intervention was fully manualized. Fidelity to protocol was maintained via in vivo ratings by trained observers and weekly staff meetings (see Oyserman et al., 2006). Across the three schools, average attendance for the 11 sessions ranged from 80% to 90% by school, with only 36 youths assigned to STJ failing to attend at least half of the 11 sessions. In these 13.6% of intervention group cases, the youths were not attending school (often due to suspension or move to another school). Evaluation first determined that trainers and students had engaged in the manual-directed activities and that the predicted content had emerged in sessions. Having clarified that the planned process was followed, the impact of the intervention on children's grades, behavior in class, attendance, standardized test scores, self-report of depressive symptoms, and identity were assessed (Oyserman et al., 2006).

**Results**—To evaluate outcomes, control and intervention students were tracked through two academic years, the final year of middle school and the first year of high school. The STJ intervention had significant direct effects, increasing the number of school-focused possible identities students reported ( $d = .30$ ) and linking them with strategies ( $d = .32$ ). Effects for behavior were found both at the end of the school year and over time. For example, at two-year follow-up, significant effects on academic outcomes were found. Effects were found on all measures obtained -- time spent doing homework ( $d = .74$ ), change in in-class disruptiveness ( $d = -.78$ ), change in time spent doing homework ( $d = 1.04$ ), grades ( $d = .30$ ), change in grades ( $d = .35$ ), unexcused absences taken from school records ( $d = -.30$ ), in-class initiative taking ( $d = .33$ ), change in initiative taking ( $d = .43$ ) and disruptiveness ( $d = -.33$ ) by teacher report. The STJ intervention also reduced two-year follow-up risk of depression (youth reported) ( $d = -.26$ ). Importantly, effects on academic and behavioral outcomes were mediated by change in possible identities and increased linkage between possible identities and strategies to attain them.

**Summary**—Taken together, the School-to-Jobs intervention and accompanying research underscored a number of basic points. First, people are motivated to act in identity-congruent ways. Second, what an identity means in context is a dynamic function of the pragmatic options for action in a particular situation and how these options are imbued with identity-based meaning. Third, subtle shifts in contexts including shifts resulting from small interventions can have big effects on outcomes when they instantiate identity-behavior links. In this way, the identity-based motivation conceptualization does not imply a fixed or stable relationship between racial-ethnic identity and engagement or disengagement from school. Rather than propose that a salient but stigmatized racial or ethnic identity (e.g., African American) stably undermines (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 1997) or enhances (e.g., Lew, 2006) academic attainment, the IBM approach proposed that people are motivated to act in identity-congruent ways but that what determines if a racial or ethnic identity feels congruent (or incongruent) with school engagement is the meaning it takes on in context. The results of the IBM-based studies we summarized above suggest first that racial and ethnic identities are unlikely to predict improved academic attainment unless these identities explicitly link race-ethnicity to academics and second that content of racial and ethnic

identities are likely to change as context changes. The IBM-based prediction is children are motivated to engage in identity-congruent behavior and are highly sensitive to cues as to which behaviors are identity-congruent. In context, they may engage in school-focused behavior or not, depending on which behaviors feel identity-congruent.

## Implications of identity-based motivation for counseling psychology

In this paper, we outlined the identity-based motivation model, which assigns a central role to identity as it is dynamically constructed in context. Briefly, according to the identity-based motivation model, the self-concept includes a variety of social and personal identities (past, present and future-focused) that are not well integrated. Identities matter because they influence what actions people take (action-readiness) and how they make sense of the world (procedural-readiness). Although a particular identity feels important and stable in the moment, even seemingly important and stable identities are highly malleable and context sensitive. People are unlikely to be aware of either the situational influences on their identities or the important downstream consequences of this situational influence on which identities are salient or on what an identity means in the moment. Therefore they are likely to be unaware of the influence of situations on identity-cued thought and action processes. Given this lack of awareness, identity-based motivation processes can be beneficial (goal-supporting) or detrimental (goal-undermining), depending on how an identity is constructed in a specific context and the behavioral and procedural options available in that context. Therefore, it is not possible to understand the influence of an identity on cognition and behavior without taking situations into account.

In terms of the relationship between identity and school attainment, whether identity-based meaning-making and action readiness has positive or negative effects on school-focused behavior depends on which identities are cued and how experienced difficulty in working toward goals is interpreted. Given the high proportion of children who report expecting to go to college (e.g., Trusty, 2000), the identity-based motivation model takes as a start point that children want to succeed academically but that their academic attainment is likely to fall short of their academic aspiration for a number of reasons. First, engaging in effortful school-focused behavior is contingent on which identities are salient in context. Second, contextual cues also influence whether salient identities are linked to school-focused behavior in the moment. And lastly, contextual cues influence whether experienced difficulty is interpreted as meaning that the goal of school-success is important and so should be worked on or blocked and impossible to attain and so should be abandoned. Though highly contextualized, identities still can be harnessed to improve motivation.

The identity-based motivation perspective highlights the ability of small interventions to have large effects if interventions focus on changing which identities are salient, what salient identities mean, and how difficulty is interpreted. The School-to-Jobs intervention is an example of such an intervention (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002). The intervention operationalized three key propositions of identity-based motivation (action-readiness, dynamic construction, interpretation of difficulty). It helped students become more sensitive to contextual cues relevant to school-focused current and possible identities, see school-focused identities as congruent with other important identities (e.g. race-ethnicity, gender, social class), and interpret difficulty as importance. That is, the experience of difficulty in working on school outcomes was framed as meaning that the goal was important, not impossible for people like oneself. The intervention was tested twice and demonstrated to boost academic outcomes; moreover, these effects were mediated by change in children's future-focused identities and the perceived connection between these identities and other important identities (Oyserman et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2002).

For a number of reasons, the identity-based motivation model provides a uniquely fitting theoretical basis for counseling psychology. By focusing on harnessing motivation in the micro-macro interface, it leverages elements of theoretical perspectives currently used by counseling psychology. First, contemporary counseling psychology prioritizes person-in-context and developmental-contextual theoretical perspectives that emphasize the bidirectional interaction between a person and the environment to promote health, achievement, and career development (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1993; Gelso & Fassinger, 1990; Kenny, Waldo, Warter, & Barton, 2002; Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002; Vondracek & Profelli, 2002). The identity-based motivation model builds from a person and environment interaction model to show how subtle situational cues shape which identities come to mind and what they mean in the moment. The IBM model is congruent with other programs described in the counseling literature which have not been empirically evaluated for effects on academic outcomes (e.g., the Tools for Tomorrow program, see Solberg, Howard, Blustein & Close, 2002). As described earlier, the School-to-Jobs program based on the IBM model has been evaluated twice (as an after-school program and as an in-school program). In both cases, significant effects were found on academic outcomes as well as on the predicted mediating variables (school-focused future identities).

Second, congruent with counseling psychology's focus on lifespan development of the whole person and healthy personality (Kenny et al., 2002), the identity-based motivation model demonstrates how a large aspiration-attainment gap can develop over time simply because contexts subtly or implicitly cue some identities more than others or cue some identity-to-behavior links over others. Third, congruent with counseling psychology's emphasis on both risk and resilience factors (Kenny et al., 2002), the identity-based motivation model demonstrates how brief interventions that highlight structural barriers and personal strengths can produce positive consequences for youth development over time and in real-world settings for individuals varying in gender, racial-ethnic, social-class and cultural backgrounds. The identity-based motivation model is also useful for predicting when risky rather than healthy choices will be made in other domains such as health (Oyserman et al., 2007).

Third, the translation of identity-based motivation into the rigorously tested School-to-Jobs intervention provides support for curricula of several school-based counseling psychology interventions which have been evaluated only preliminarily. In each case, activities focus on the future self and self-goals as well as challenges and options (e.g., the Achieving Success Identity Pathway, Tools for Tomorrow, and Career Institute, see Howard & Solberg, 2006; Solberg et al., 2002; Rivera & Schaefer, 2008). Moreover, the identity-based motivation model highlights the interface of micro- and macro-structural issues and the potential for leveraging small interventions and situational cues. Thus the IBM- based intervention model complements larger school-change interventions which utilize systemic, full-service models to restructure in and out of school services, incorporate community partnerships, and develop individualized plans for youth to transform the student experience (e.g., Gardner Extended School Service and Teachers Supporting Students, see Kenny et al, 2002; Walsh & Galassi, 2002). Lastly, identity-based motivation interventions such as School-to-Jobs complement rather than conflict with policy-based and large scale interventions that attempt to combat structural inequality with a focus on economic asset-building (Grinstein-Weiss, Greeson, Yeo, Birdsong, Despard, Quercia, 2009), school reform, or teacher training.

The identity-based motivation model also highlights issues to be examined and problems to be avoided in implementation. For example, it uniquely highlights the need to provide an interpretation of difficulty as importance rather than as a cue to disengage. It also highlights the bi-directional relationship between identity and behavior. Thus, salient identities cue behavioral choices, but choices feel more meaningful if they feel identity-based. This means

both that people search among choices for the ones that feel more identity-based and also that changes in behavior are more likely to be lasting if they feel identity-based. An intervention that produces change in behavior, for example changing a child's in-class behavior by increasing on-task and decreasing off-task behaviors, is more likely to fade over time if these behaviors are not incorporated as identity-based. When these behaviors feel identity-based, then they will come to mind whenever the identity (being a boy, being Latino) comes to mind.

The identity-based motivation model also suggests that identity-congruent choices are more likely than identity-incongruent choices and that identity-congruence is separate from an analysis of other benefits or costs the behavior may have. People want to act like in-group members and do not want to act like out-group members (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007). However, what an identity means and which behaviors feel congruent with it is highly malleable. What feels like identity-congruent or identity-incongruent behavior in the moment is based in felt similarity between the choice and in-group 'me' identities vs. out-group 'not me' identities. Whether the behavior feels similar to in- or to out-group depends on subtle contextual cues. Counseling psychologists can work to modify context-based implicit messages that may dampen accessibility of possible identities or imply that difficulty is best interpreted to mean that the path to these identities is blocked so as to facilitate career development and health across racial-ethnic and cultural divides.

The identity-based motivation model clarifies that identity-congruent behaviors are preferred and that this preference is independent of any evaluative judgment about the value of the behavior. Once a behavior is identity-congruent, it becomes what 'we' do, separate from utilitarian concerns about whether it is a good or useful thing to do. Just as one's in-group may have negative attributes or make poor choices, but these choices and attributes are still in-group defining, choices can be congruent with one's personal identities, even if they are negatively evaluated.

Finally, it should be noted that the IBM model interfaces well with other theoretical perspectives such as Steele's (1997) stereotype threat model, Dweck's (2002) models of intelligence, and models of racial and ethnic identity other than our own (e.g., Cross's model, see Worrell, Vandiver, Schaefer, Cross, & Fhagen-Smith, 2006). The stereotype threat model predicts a main effect of making salient a stereotype about one's group, in contrast the IBM model predicts that this effect will be moderated by content of identity such that a threat effect should not be found if counter-stereotypic identity content is cued (for empirical support for this model see Oyserman et al., 2003). The models of intelligence framework predicts a main effect of believing that intelligence is malleable, but the IBM model predicts that the effect will be moderated by what interpretation children have of the difficulties they encounter in doing school work. Cross' racial-identity model began as a developmental model and was revised to focus on describing content of identity in terms of six internally consistent subscales (Assimilation, Miseducation, Self-Hatred, Anti-White, Afrocentricity, Multiculturalist Inclusive) that relate to experience in the social world in the sense that encounters with racism influence how one considers one's racial identity (see Worrell & Watson, 2008). Cross' model centralizes the influence of direct experience with racism. This is not incongruent with an IBM approach but the IBM model makes predictions about action-readiness, dynamic construction, and interpretation of difficulty which go beyond a particular description of identity content.

Clearly, future research testing specific predictions from each model is needed. Moreover, future research is needed to specifically test the extent that teachers, parents, and community members could benefit from identity-based motivational interventions aimed at increasing engagement in the kinds of behaviors likely to improve children's school outcomes. Brief

interventions that link relevant behaviors with identities as committed students, parents, and teachers and that provide an interpretation of difficulty as importance should increase the effectiveness of larger interventions (e.g., to support early parenting, improve teaching, or save for the future).

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