Identity Motives

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Abstract

In this chapter, I review the literature on motivated identity construction, drawing together insights and evidence from diverse theoretical perspectives, and I propose the foundations of an integrative model. Evidence suggests that people are motivated not only to see themselves in a positive light (the self-esteem motive), but also to believe that their identities are continuous over time despite significant life changes (the continuity motive), that they are distinguished from other people (the distinctiveness motive), that their lives are meaningful (the meaning motive), that they are competent and capable of influencing their environments (the efficacy motive), and that they are included and accepted within their social contexts (the belonging motive). Each of these motives has a theoretical basis for universality, but different cultures may develop different ways of satisfying them, so that the same underlying motives may have very different consequences in different cultural contexts. People are not necessarily aware of their identity motives, and there is often little or no correlation between people’s self-reported motives and the results of more implicit measures. Paying attention to the multiplicity of identity motives will potentially enrich applications of identity theories in virtually any domain.

Since identity first became a topic for social scientific enquiry around the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g., Cooley, 1902; James, 1892), a significant focus of theory and research has been to look at the ways in which individuals and groups actively construct and maintain their images of themselves (e.g., Bernstein, 2005; Cerulo, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, Chapter 14, this volume; Spears, Chapter 9, this volume). People utilize a huge variety of strategies to claim or defend particular aspects of their identities: they take credit for their successes and avoid blame for their failures,
buy consumer goods that symbolize their desired identities, participate in risky health behaviors that they expect will make them more acceptable to others, choose relationship partners who see them as they see themselves, aggress against those who have evaluated them negatively, treat members of their own groups more favorably than members of other groups, and participate in wars or even acts of genocide (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Braun & Wicklund, 1989; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994; Swann, 1987).

However, theories are often surprisingly vague or inconsistent about what exactly it is that people are trying to construct, maintain, or defend when they do all these things. In other words, what are the key properties of a satisfactory identity? Some theories assume that identity processes are largely guided by the need to develop, maintain, and enhance a sense of self-esteem (see Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume; Heppner & Kernis, Chapter 15, this volume). However, it is increasingly argued that self-esteem is not the whole story. Other psychological motives or needs may also shape how we see ourselves, affecting our thoughts, feelings, and actions (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Aharpour & Brown, 2002; Breakwell, 1987; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980; S.E. Taylor, Neter & Wayment, 1995). Unfortunately, the literature on these motives is very fragmented: a bewildering variety of motivational constructs have been proposed by theorists focusing on different aspects of identity and working in different applied domains, with little attempt to integrate these ideas or to test them against each other. In this chapter, I draw together evidence from a number of these perspectives and I propose the foundations of an integrative model of motivated identity construction. In particular, I review theoretical arguments and evidence suggesting that people are motivated to construct identities characterized by feelings of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, meaning, efficacy, and belonging.

Identity as a Personal and Social Construction

The concept of identity may be defined in many ways (see Vignoles, Schwartz, & Layckx, Chapter 1, this volume). Here, I use the term to refer to all aspects of the image of oneself—as represented in cognition, emotion, and discourse. In the following paragraphs I will unpack several implications of this definition of identity.

First, the contents of identity can be very broad, extending far beyond the physical limits of the person. As proposed by James (1892), “In its widest possible sense, […] a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account” (p. 177). Research has corroborated this view, showing that people often treat as “part of themselves” not only significant others—partners, family members, and close friends, as well as members of their social groups and categories—but also material possessions, places, and even the brands they use (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Tropp & Wright, 2001; Dittmar, Chapter 31, this volume).

Second, according to this definition, identity is not an “objective truth” to be discovered (cf. Waterman, Chapter 16, this volume); it is an idea—or rather a set of ideas—that people construct and reconstruct actively throughout the life span, involving a complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and communication processes, within particular local contexts as well as a wider historical and cultural context (see Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, Chapter 8, this volume; Berzonsky, Chapter 3, this volume; Burkitt, Chapter 12, this volume; Serpe & Stryker, Chapter 10, this volume; Smith, Chapter 11, this volume). Thus, aspects of identity are not fixed or predetermined: there is always the potential for change, and it is always possible that things could have been different. But this is not to say that the meanings
that people give to themselves are somehow arbitrary or unimportant, nor that they are necessarily unstable.

Opponents of a constructionist perspective sometimes portray this as meaning that people start their lives with a blank slate for an identity, with the implication that the contents of the resulting identity would therefore be mainly arbitrary or even accidental. Of course, in a purely cognitive sense, the “blank slate” theory seems likely to be true—as far as we can tell, nobody is born with a pre-formed self-concept. Yet, many of the building blocks for constructing identity are present at birth—not just the genetic dispositions of the individual, but a huge amount of social and cultural resources provided by parents, friends, relatives, and the wider social and historical context. Indeed, the social processes of constructing an identity begin long before birth, as parents, friends, and relatives begin choosing names, imagining what the child will be like, and so on—drawing on locally and culturally available representations of the typical characteristics of a person of this gender, family, class, ethnicity, and nationality. Thus, even to the extent that the private self-concept is drawn on a blank slate, every individual starts with a particular set of chalks to draw with, and these are very far from random.

Nor does a constructionist perspective mean that the contents of identity are trivial or unimportant. On the contrary, people go to all sorts of lengths to maintain and defend the identities they have constructed, so that the potential for change and variation is often not very apparent. To defend particular aspects of their identities, people willingly get involved in all sorts of highly concrete and consequential actions, including risking or sacrificing their own lives, as well as taking the lives of others (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1996; Leary et al., 1994; Schwartz, Dunkel, & Waterman, 2009). Thus, identities themselves may be constructed rather than “real,” but the psychological processes and social actions by which people construct, maintain, and defend them are absolutely real, as are their consequences.

The Concept and Measurement of Identity Motives

If people are constantly striving to construct, maintain, and defend a satisfactory sense of identity, and if these strivings have such major consequences—sometimes even a matter of life and death—then it seems crucial to understand which forms of identity are more “satisfactory” and which are less so. Is the preference for one construction of identity over another based purely on the idiosyncrasies of particular individual or cultural worldviews, or is it possible to identify a more general set of principles that make some forms of identity preferable over others?

Theorists have proposed that identity construction is guided by various general principles, which seem to have motivational or need-like properties (e.g., Breakwell, 1986; Brewer, 1991; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Hogg, 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Although the terminology used differs across perspectives, I will refer to these principles here as identity motives. Identity motives are defined as tendencies toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the processes of identity definition and enactment (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). Unlike physiological needs such as hunger, identity motives are not necessarily biologically hardwired—they might equally have originated as cultural adaptations to pervasive human concerns about social organization and/or the meaning of existence. Still, identity motives are expected to function similarly to physiological needs, in at least three ways:

1. that motive satisfaction will typically have positive implications, whereas frustration will typically have negative implications for psychological well-being;
2. that people will typically desire and strive for forms of identity that satisfy these motives, whereas they will typically dislike and try to avoid those that frustrate them; and
3. that temporary or chronic situations that elicit frustration of these motives will typically lead to intensified strivings to satisfy them.
Identity Motives and Basic Human Needs

Some theorists have argued that identity processes evolved to serve more general or basic human needs, including personal survival (e.g., Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000), avoiding uncertainty (e.g., Hogg, 2007), suppressing fears about mortality (e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004), and maintaining social relationships (e.g., Leary, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2003). Without disagreeing with any of these arguments, it seems important to note that the concept of identity motives here is not simply equated with basic needs. In particular, none of the needs described above is exclusively relevant to identity processes: identity is just one of many domains of psychological functioning that may be influenced by basic needs, and—at least in some of these perspectives—identity dynamics are not seen as a main motivating influence on behavior. In contrast, the concept of identity motives entails that identity dynamics have a direct, causal role in motivating behavior. Whereas basic needs push for certain ways of acting, which may have some consequent impact on identity and well-being, identity motives push for certain ways of seeing oneself, which may thus necessitate engaging in certain actions.

Nevertheless, in principle, the constructs of basic needs and identity motives are not mutually exclusive—in fact, the two constructs are complementary. At a simple level, it is easy to imagine that people are driven by basic needs as well as by identity motives. However, more crucially, as I will discuss below, each of the identity motives reviewed in this chapter is likely to have come into being because it has some adaptive function in satisfying one or more basic needs. For example, having a sense of positive self-esteem may be beneficial in suppressing fears about mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), and having a distinctive and meaningful sense of identity may be especially important for reducing uncertainty (Hogg, 2007).

Detecting the Operation of Identity Motives

Notably, it is likely that people often will be unaware of their identity motives, for several reasons. Many identity maintenance strategies involve biased thinking or forms of self-deception (see Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume), and so these strategies may only be successful in protecting a desired self-image to the extent that people remain unaware of the motives underlying them: if I were aware that I am only attributing my exam failure to bad luck rather than poor preparation in order to protect my self-esteem, then it would be harder to believe in such an attribution and thus my self-esteem would not be protected. Moreover, even without engaging in self-deception, people may be unaware of their identity motives simply because they operate at a higher level of abstraction than the level at which people focus their everyday concerns (see Carver & Scheier, 1982): my underlying motive to feel competent might be personally instantiated in a set of more specific and concrete goals—getting a new paper accepted for publication, improving my teaching ratings, or throwing a good birthday party for my son—and I am likely to focus my attention more on these specific, personalized goals than on the relatively abstract, generic motives which underlie them. Furthermore, to the extent that most people, most of the time, are relatively adept at satisfying these motives automatically and without the need for reflection, identity motives may quite rarely come into conscious awareness—generally functioning “below-radar” except in situations when they are frustrated. Thus, even if identity motives are not necessarily inaccessible to consciousness, people often may be unaware of them.

This raises an important issue for empirical research into identity motives, as it suggests that we cannot take people’s self-reports of their identity motives at face value. Someone who claims not to be concerned about self-esteem may be saying this to protect their self-esteem, and someone who claims to enjoy being unique and different from others may be saying this to conform with the norms of an individualist
culture (e.g., Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002; Salvatore & Prentice, 2011). Nevertheless, the presence of identity motives can be inferred from their predictable effects on identity processes and structures, which reflect the three characteristic functions of identity motives listed earlier.

A first line of evidence comes from studies investigating the relationship between motive satisfaction and subjective well-being. This relationship can be explored on a number of levels. For example, studies into individual differences show that people with higher self-esteem tend to report greater life-satisfaction and positive emotions (reviewed by Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Moreover, the same relationship can also be observed when looking at fluctuation over time within individuals: on days when an individual’s self-esteem is higher, her/his subjective well-being is also typically higher (see Heppner & Kernis, Chapter 15, this volume).

A second line of evidence involves the documentation of directional biases in how people process information about themselves and others. People often selectively attribute their successes to internal factors and their failures to external factors (Zuckerman, 1979). Moreover, across a wide variety of evaluative dimensions, a majority of people believe they are “better than average,” which would be a mathematical impossibility (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), and when they learn about these motivational biases most people believe that they personally are “less biased than average” (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Thus, the self-system has been likened to a totalitarian political regime, fabricating and revising personal history (Greenwald, 1980). Perhaps more benignly, people also tend to see as most important and self-defining—and enact most to others—those parts of their identities that best satisfy their identity motives, whereas they tend to marginalize those parts of their identities that frustrate their identity motives (Vignoles et al., 2006).

A third line of evidence comes from studies into the effects of threatening or affirming aspects of the self-concept. Threats to individual and group identities have been shown to result in a variety of responses, including changes in attributions, group identification, self-stereotyping, social attitudes, prejudice, and even violence (Baumeister et al., 1996; Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Pickett, Bonner, & Coleman, 2002). However, many of these outcomes are avoidable if people are given the opportunity to cope with the threat by affirming or enhancing other aspects of the self-image (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

### Key Theoretical Approaches

Claims about the motivational underpinnings of identity processes have evolved more or less independently within separate bodies of existing literature. I provide a brief outline of three areas of research that have been especially influential, as well as a fourth perspective that is less well-known.

### Self-Evaluation Motives

One body of research has focused on the cognitive processes by which people evaluate themselves, in response to positive and negative information (reviewed by Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume). Research has suggested the existence of up to four distinct motives influencing self-evaluation. Focusing on social comparison processes, S. E. Taylor and colleagues (1995) argued that self-evaluation is guided at different times by motives for self-enhancement (aiming for positive current self-views), self-assessment (aiming for accurate self-views), self-verification (aiming for stable or consistent self-views), and self-improvement (aiming for growth, or for positive future self-views). Nevertheless, several influential attempts have been made to reduce this list to a smaller number: for example, Gregg et al. (Chapter 14, this volume) argue for just two overarching motives, self-enhancement and self-assessment, while Sedikides and Strube (1997) proposed that all four motives directly or indirectly serve the motive for self-esteem—and thus self-enhancement is
the single dominant motive for self-evaluation processes.

Without going into the details of all the findings and arguments, it seems that self-enhancement gives way to accurate self-assessment only rarely, except in situations where there is some perceived possibility of self-improvement (e.g., Dauenheimer, Stahlberg, Spreeman, & Sedikides, 2002; J. D. Green, Pinter, & Sedikides, 2005; S. E. Taylor et al., 1995); thus, self-assessment arguably might be viewed as a “first stage” in the self-improvement process, rather than as a separate motive in its own right. However, self-improvement serves a common purpose with self-enhancement—namely increasing the positivity of self-views, whether now or in the future—in fact, one can imagine that I might enhance my self-esteem in the present by thinking that I will improve myself in the future, even if I will never actually take the behavioral steps needed to make the improvement happen! Thus, both self-assessment and self-improvement arguably can be viewed as indirect routes to self-enhancement (Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

A more significant challenge to the proposed supremacy of self-enhancement seems to come from the self-verification motive, as this can lead those with low existing self-esteem to pay more attention, or give more credence, to negative than to positive information when they evaluate themselves (e.g., Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). Thus, it seems that people will sometimes sacrifice potential gains in self-esteem in the interest of maintaining self-consistency (but see Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume). Even so, to the extent that most people most of the time tend to see themselves moderately positively—at least in Western cultures—this motive will more often lead to the verification of positive than of negative self-views.

Thus, it seems likely that the most prevalent motivational influence on self-evaluation processes is the motive for self-esteem. Yet, perhaps this is not especially surprising, given that the focus of the self-evaluation literature is on processes of self-evaluation, and not on identity construction more generally. Indeed, studies focusing on a wider range of identity processes and outcomes provide evidence that appears to support a wider range of identity motives.

Social Identity Motives

Another body of literature focuses on group identities and intergroup relations (reviewed by Spears, Chapter 9, this volume). Although motivation was not a primary concern of the original theorists, social identity theory makes an explicit assumption that “individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). Abrams and Hogg (1988) famously argued that social identity theory contained an implicit “self-esteem hypothesis” involving two corollaries: (1) that “successful intergroup discrimination will enhance social identity, and hence self-esteem” and (2) that “low or threatened self-esteem will promote intergroup discrimination because of the ‘need’ for positive self-esteem” (p. 320; but see Turner & Onorato, 1999). However, research has yielded inconsistent results, partly owing to confusion about the measurement of specific aspects of self-esteem (Rubin & Hewstone, 1998).

Subsequent theorists have proposed various motivational extensions of social identity theory. One line of thinking is that group identity processes are often directed toward creating meaningful identities (e.g., Hogg, 2007; B. Simon, 2004; Spears, Jetten, Scheepers, & Cihangir, 2009). Spears et al. (2009) present a series of studies focusing on the process of creating a new group: participants typically discriminated against members of another group only when the identity of their own group was portrayed as meaningless, suggesting that they were seeking to differentiate their group from the other group in order to construct meaningful group identities. Along similar lines, uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007) proposes that many aspects of group processes and intergroup relations are driven by a need to reduce subjective uncertainty—which can be satisfied by constructing a meaningful identity. Supporting this theory, people typically show heightened
in-group identification and intergroup discrimination under conditions where meanings of the self-concept and the social context are unclear (e.g., Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Mullin & Hogg, 1999). In particular, uncertainty motivates identification with those groups that provide a clearly defined meaning to the identities of their members (e.g., Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner & Moffitt, 2007; see also Schwartz et al., 2009).

Another line of thinking is that social identity processes are driven mainly by an interplay of motives for distinctiveness and for belonging (Brewer, 1991; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). Although these motives are often seen as acting in opposition, one way of resolving this is through group membership. Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT: Brewer, 1991) proposes that the belonging need can be met through inclusion in groups, and the distinctiveness need through differentiating one’s group from other groups. Pickett, Silver, and Brewer (2002) found that participants increased identification with smaller (i.e., more distinctive) groups when their sense of distinctiveness had been threatened, and with larger (i.e., more inclusive) groups when their sense of belonging had been threatened. Moreover, people defend the boundaries of their groups—by discriminating both against members of other groups and against deviant members of their own groups—especially when group distinctiveness is threatened (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997) or when their own inclusion in the group is not assured (Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001).

Thus, based on the research to date, it seems plausible that social identity processes may serve a number of motives—for self-esteem, for meaning, for distinctiveness, and for belonging. Crucially, evidence suggests that both uncertainty reduction and optimal distinctiveness strivings occur independently of—or even at the expense of—self-esteem: in some circumstances, people will sacrifice self-esteem in order to achieve an identity that is distinctive or meaningful (Brewer, Manzi, & Shaw, 1993; Hogg & Svensson, 2006, as cited by Hogg, 2007; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Nevertheless, the interplay of these four motives as they influence social identity processes in different contexts remains to be investigated in greater depth.

Self-Determination Theory and “Basic Needs”

An increasingly influential perspective in personality psychology is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although originally conceived as a theory of behavior, not a theory of self, this perspective has been extended to make predictions about identity processes (Ryan & Deci, 2003; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume). The theory proposes three “basic needs,” understood to be common to all humans: people need to feel that their actions are not coerced (the need for autonomy), that they are capable (the need for competence), and that they are connected to others (the need for relatedness). Satisfaction of these needs has been shown to predict individual differences in well-being, as well as within-person variation in well-being over time (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Behaviors or activities that fulfill these needs are typically experienced as especially rewarding or satisfying, and thus people feel especially motivated to continue them (e.g., Patrick, Knee, Canavello, & Lonsbary, 2007).

Over time, it seems likely that such patterns of repeated and rewarding behavior will come to be “internalized” and integrated into an individual’s sense of self. Thus, basic needs are theorized to have an indirect influence on identity formation. However, research into the internalization process has tended to focus on people’s thoughts and feelings about their behaviors, rather than focusing on identity per se (reviewed by Ryan & Deci, 2003; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume). Thus, self-determination researchers have yet to provide empirical evidence to support fully their theoretical account of the influence of basic needs on identity formation. Moreover, the theory seems most relevant to those aspects of identity that are closely linked to the performance of particular behaviors—that is, role identities, such as relationships and occupations.
It is less clear whether similar predictions could be derived regarding other kinds of identity content that are not based on behavior, such as body image or nationality.

Only one study, to my knowledge, has directly tested the relation between the three basic needs and processes of identity formation. Luyckx, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, and Duriez (2009) found that individual differences in “total need satisfaction” (a composite measure of feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness) predicted subsequent engagement in several processes of identity formation—especially the process of “identification with commitment” (see Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, Chapter 4, this volume). In further analyses, where satisfaction of each of the three needs was measured separately, feelings of competence and relatedness, but not autonomy, contributed uniquely to predicting identification with commitment (Koen Luyckx, personal communication, January, 2010). This shows that need satisfaction can facilitate identity construction, but the study does not test whether the three basic needs guide identity construction in the manner of identity motives—in the sense that people would be more likely to explore and commit to those forms of identity that promise or provide greater need satisfaction.

I should reiterate that the concept of basic needs underlying self-determination theory differs from the construct of identity motives. Ryan and Deci (2003) portray identity mainly as an outcome of the process of need satisfaction, but not as a desirable end in itself. Although they acknowledge that people sometimes strive to maintain or enhance their identities, they view this as a maladaptive response to the frustration of one or more basic needs. In contrast, theories of identity motives view identity maintenance and enhancement as universal and largely inevitable processes. Admittedly, people’s strategies for maintaining their identities can sometimes have negative repercussions for themselves and for those around them—as noted at the beginning of this chapter—but they can also be beneficial. For example, enhancing self-esteem can give a person the confidence and optimism to overcome obstacles and achieve his or her goals (S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988). Thus, rather than try to avoid such identity-driven processes, perhaps positive outcomes can be sought more effectively by trying to channel people toward satisfying their identity motives in adaptive ways, rather than in damaging ways.

**Identity Process Theory**

My own perspective on identity motives owes an especially significant debt to identity process theory, which was originally developed by Breakwell (1986, 1993) as a theoretical framework for her research into identity threat and coping. According to this theory, identity—which encompasses both personal and social aspects—is the dynamic outcome of cognitive processes occurring over time within particular (and changing) social, cultural, and historical contexts. Crucially, the operation of these processes is understood to be guided by identity principles, which refer to the motivational basis of identity. Like most identity theories, identity process theory includes a self-esteem principle, but it does not suggest that identity processes are motivated solely to achieve self-esteem. In her original formulation of the theory, Breakwell (1986) listed three principles, self-esteem, distinctiveness, and continuity; subsequently an efficacy principle was added (Breakwell, 1993).

According to Breakwell (1986), an identity threat exists when the identity processes are unable to comply with the identity principles—in other words, in any situation where feelings of self-esteem, distinctiveness, continuity, and/or efficacy are undermined or are in some way insecure. Situations of threat are understood to lead to the adoption of coping strategies, defined as anything that the individual does in order to respond to an identity threat. Strategies may be on one of three levels: intra-psychic strategies, involving revising the identity structure; interpersonal coping strategies, involving changing one’s relationships with others; and intergroup coping strategies, involving group-level behavior. The
latter include the strategies of social mobility, social competition, and social creativity theorized within social identity theory as responses to the threat posed by membership in disadvantaged groups (see Spears, Chapter 9, this volume). Applications of the theory have addressed an extremely wide range of types of identity threat, including conflicts among religious, ethnic, and sexual identities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), the forced relocation of a mining community (Speller, Lyons & Twigger-Ross, 2002), and the political changes associated with European integration (Breakwell, 1996).

Situations of identity threat provide a useful context for studying the processes shaping identity, because they offer empirical access to identity change (Deaux, 1993), but the theory implies that identity principles operate at all times, not only under conditions of threat. Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell (2002) tested this claim in a study of identity among parish priests. Specifically, we used identity motives to predict the organization of multiple aspects of identity into subjective identity structures. Supporting a self-esteem model, the priests perceived those identity aspects with which they associated the greatest sense of self-esteem as especially central to their identities. However, we then added ratings of distinctiveness, continuity, and efficacy as further predictors of perceived centrality. Supporting identity process theory, this model was a statistically significant improvement over the self-esteem model, and all four motives contributed significantly and uniquely to the prediction of subjective identity structures.

Theoretically, the processes shaping identity are understood to be universal, biologically grounded, and content-free, but Breakwell (1987) has described the principles guiding these processes as “reifications of what society regards as acceptable endstates for identity” (p. 107), rather than essential or universal principles. Thus, she has emphasized that the principles listed above may not be relevant in every culture or historical epoch, nor is it likely that they form an exhaustive list of principles operating within our own culture. This definition of identity principles as societal values internalized by the individual has encouraged several researchers to propose additional identity principles that they see as especially relevant to the populations and research questions they are studying. For example, in their studies of identity among sexual minorities, Markowe (1996) has argued for two further principles, a “need for authenticity and integrity” and a “need for affiliation,” and Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) have suggested adding a “coherence” principle to the theory (see also Vignoles et al., 2002).

Arguably, this flexibility of the theory is a strength, but it also poses problems for both its parsimony and coherence. When applying the theory to a new cultural setting, it is theoretically conceivable that a completely different set of identity principles may apply. Moreover, by proposing that identity principles are dependent on “social value,” the logic of claiming that identity processes are guided by more than just self-esteem concerns is arguably undermined. Given that people’s self-esteem is often thought to be based on the extent to which they believe they are living up to what is valued within their immediate social and wider cultural context (e.g., Leary, 2005; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), continuity, distinctiveness, and efficacy could be reduced theoretically to the status of “facets” of self-esteem, in the context of a society where these qualities happen to be valued.

**Toward an Integrated Model of Identity Motives**

Over the past few years, I have been developing an integrated theoretical model of motivational influences on identity construction, maintenance, and defense. The model extends identity process theory by including motivational constructs derived from other perspectives, but it departs from identity process theory in providing a different account of the nature, origins, and cultural variability of identity motives. The theory is currently a “work in progress,” but I refer to it here as motivated identity construction theory.
Motivated identity construction theory starts from the premise that identity is both a personal and a social construction, as outlined at the start of this chapter. Following Reicher (2000), I consider identity as the outcome of complementary processes of identity definition and identity enactment. People do not just define their identities on a private, cognitive level, they also enact them for both real and imagined audiences, and this social process of claiming a certain kind of identity—and having one’s claims recognized or not—is a central part of identity construction (see also Bem, 1972; Marková, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2003; Swann, 1987; Licata, Sanchez-Mazas, & Green, Chapter 38, this volume; Serpe & Stryker, Chapter 10, this volume). These processes occur within a particular intersection of local and wider contexts, and the prevailing ways of thinking and talking within these contexts make certain identity categories available or desirable, and others less so. Nevertheless, people may challenge the range of identity categories available or question the meanings given to them (e.g., Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995).

Although the content of identity is drawn largely from the social environment, I argue that any form of identity must satisfy certain requirements in order to be adaptive or useful. These requirements take on a motivational character, guiding the processes of identity construction and maintenance and influencing psychological well-being. Specifically, the theory predicts that people in all societies will be motivated not only to see themselves in a positive light (the self-esteem motive), but also to believe that their identities are continuous over time despite significant life changes (the continuity motive), that they are distinguished from other people (the distinctiveness motive), that their lives are meaningful (the meaning motive), that they are competent and capable of influencing their environments (the efficacy motive), and that they are included and accepted by others (the belonging motive). All six motives are predicted to be universal; however, different societies may evolve different ways of satisfying each motive, leading to considerable cross-cultural variation in the outcomes of identity processes.

Crucially, this common set of identity motives is also understood to apply across different levels and domains of identity. Thus, there is no need to create separate identity theories, or posit different sets of identity motives, in order to theorize about individual, relational, or group identity processes, to understand people’s identification with possessions or places, or to study the role of identity in such diverse domains as education, family processes, consumer behavior, societal cohesion, or international relations.

### The Self-Esteem Motive

As an illustration, consider the motive for self-esteem. This motive is involved in an enormous range of theories and empirical findings (for reviews, see Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume; Heppner & Kernis, Chapter 15, this volume). As discussed earlier, people show a wide range of cognitive biases that maintain and enhance self-esteem, and these biases are typically intensified in situations when self-esteem is undermined or insecure. People typically desire possible future identities that promise greater self-esteem, whereas they fear those that promise lower self-esteem (Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008), and they perceive as especially self-defining those aspects of their current identities that provide greater self-esteem (Vignoles et al., 2006). Moreover, a person’s level of self-esteem appears to have a long-term causal influence on psychological well-being and psychosocial adaptation (e.g., Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

Self-esteem strivings have also been implicated theoretically in intergroup relations (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; but see Spears, Chapter 9, this volume). Various theorists have argued for the importance of distinguishing between personal self-esteem—one’s self-worth as an individual—and collective self-esteem—the perceived worth of one’s group—when looking at intergroup relations (e.g., Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). However, perhaps surprisingly, it turns out that personal self-esteem is a stronger predictor than collective self-esteem of
bias against other groups (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000), and threats to individual self-worth lead to increased discrimination against members of other groups (Fein & Spencer, 1997). Hence, it seems appropriate to view personal and social identity processes as influenced by a common motive for self-esteem, rather than by separate “individual-level” and “group-level” motives.

Theoretically, there are reasons to view this motive as universally adaptive, helping people to avoid anxiety and to persevere despite setbacks (Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2000; see Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume). However, cross-cultural researchers have questioned its generality, noting that many of the classic research findings of self-esteem maintenance and enhancement processes are not replicated when Western studies are transposed to non-Western cultures (Heine, Lehmann, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Subsequent research has suggested a more nuanced view. It now seems that people in non-Western cultural contexts do strive for positive self-regard, but that they may use different strategies (Heine et al., 2001; Muramoto, 2003) and emphasize different value dimensions (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2003) in doing so. Indeed, members of collectivist cultures may derive positive self-regard by portraying themselves in a modest light: ironically, this suggests that acts of self-criticism may actually protect rather than undermine self-esteem (Kurman, 2003). Thus, seemingly very different cognitions and behaviors may be manifestations of the same underlying motive as it plays out in different cultural contexts.

Recently, Vignoles et al. (2011) examined the bases of self-esteem among late adolescents across 19 nations. In more individualistic nations, participants derived self-esteem to a greater extent from those aspects of identity that provided greater feelings of autonomy (or control over one’s own life), whereas in more collectivist nations, they derived self-esteem to a greater extent from aspects of identity that related more to doing one’s duty. In other words, participants derived self-esteem from those aspects of their identity that were most consistent with cultural value priorities. Interestingly, these effects were found while controlling statistically for the effects of individuals’ personal value priorities. Thus, it seems that the bases of self-esteem are defined collectively, reflecting what is valued normatively within a cultural group, rather than being constructed individually based on one’s personal values.

Motivational Bases of Identity Definition

Although the motive for self-esteem seems well supported by theoretical arguments and by empirical research, motivated identity construction theory proposes that it is not the only motivational influence on identity processes, nor is it necessarily the most important one. Arguably, more fundamental to identity processes than the need for esteem, although perhaps less visible under normal circumstances, are the identity motives for continuity, distinctiveness, and subjective meaning, each of which plays a crucial role in processes of identity definition. Two further motives, for efficacy and belonging, are theorized to play an especially strong role in processes of identity enactment, and I will discuss these further on.

Continuity: The continuity motive refers to the need to feel a sense of connection between one’s past, present, and future identities. The sense of temporal–spatial continuity is an extremely important facet of identity (Apter, 1983; Codol, 1981; Côté, 2009; James, 1892). Indeed, Erikson (1968) defined identity itself as “a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity” (p. 19). Philosophers see the establishment of continuity over time as a defining property of the identities of objects and people (e.g., C. Taylor, 1989; Wiggins, 2001). More pragmatically, if people were not perceived as connected in any way to their past and future selves, they could not be held accountable for their past actions, nor could they form future goals—to the obvious detriment of both individual functioning and social coordination (Chandler et al., 2003). Thus, continuity of identity is adaptive for individuals and for social groupings.
Yet, in the identities of persons and of groups, continuity is not a “given”—it has to be established against a backdrop of constant change. Individuals experience both physical and psychological changes throughout their lives. All human social groupings are also in an endless state of change and flux: members enter and leave, through birth, death, and social mobility; and histories of many groups are characterized by recurring debates and changes in the boundaries and meanings of group identity. Thus, continuity cannot be equated with “stability.” Continuity is not the absence of change, but that there is some conceptual thread connecting past, present, and future time-slices of identity, despite the occurrence of change (Breakwell, 1987).

Empirical evidence suggests that the need for continuity does indeed function as an identity motive. People typically perceive as especially central and self-defining those parts of their identities with which they associate a greater sense of self-continuity (Vignoles et al., 2006) and they desire possible future selves that promise to maintain self-continuity, whereas they fear those that threaten to undermine it (Vignoles et al., 2008). People pay more attention to information that is consistent with their existing self-conceptions, recall it better, and interpret it as more reliable (Shrauger, 1975), and they often seek to occupy and to create social contexts that provide self-confirming feedback (Swann, 1987). Conversely, the lack of subjective continuity has been associated with various indicators of psychological distress, including negative affect (Rosenberg, 1986), feelings of dissociation (Lampinen, Ödegard, & Leding, 2004) and even suicide (Chandler et al., 2003), as well as attempts to increase personal consistency (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001).

Like self-esteem, a sense of continuity can be constructed in various ways. Chandler and colleagues (2003) have explored the strategies used by adolescents to assert their continuity over time, when confronted with the fact that they have changed. They concluded that these strategies become increasingly sophisticated with age, but they also distinguished between two broad approaches to constructing continuity, termed essentialist and narrative. The essentialist approach is based on the belief in some stable and enduring, essential “core” of identity; thus, continuity is maintained by denying or trivializing change (see Swann, 1987). In the narrative approach, the sense of continuity is based on establishing a coherent storyline in order to connect together different parts of one’s life; in this way, even major changes can be accommodated into a coherent story using narrative devices such as “turning points” (see McAdams, Chapter 5, this volume), or through social procedures such as “rites of passage” (van Gennep, 1908/1977).

Although not traditionally considered within the social identity literature, evidence is starting to emerge for the importance of perceiving continuity in one’s group identities. Forms of group identity continuity predict both group identification (e.g., Sani et al., 2007; Sani, Herrera, & Bowe, 2009) and individual well-being (e.g., Haslam et al., 2008; Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008). Like individual continuity, group continuity appears to have at least two dimensions—one focused on stability over time (maintaining the group’s values and heritage), and the other focused on narrative linkage (connectedness of events in the group’s history; Sani et al., 2007).

Both essentialist and narrative continuity warrants can be viewed as attempts to use logic or reason to justify the existence of a continuing identity despite change. Yet, when they are not explicitly challenged to do so, people may not need to resort to reasoned argument in order to maintain a sense of self-continuity. Vignoles, Sani, and Easterbrook (2010) propose that subjective continuity may be maintained by any process that allows an individual to feel connected or “in touch” with their past and future selves. For example, Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, and Arndt (2010) studied the role of nostalgia as a potential source of continuity maintenance. In one study, they showed that priming nostalgic thoughts leads to an increased sense of self-continuity. Moreover, people appear to use nostalgia as a mechanism for reconnecting with their past selves when feelings of self-continuity are insufficient or under threat: in two further studies, they showed that experimentally priming a
sense of discontinuity leads to increased nostalgic thoughts, and that individuals who have experienced more continuity-disrupting life-events tend to report more nostalgic thoughts.

Some evidence suggests that continuity seeking is moderated by culture. Compared to Westerners, members of East Asian cultures are less likely to show consistency across situations in their self-descriptions (e.g., Cousins, 1989; see Smith, Chapter 11, this volume). Tafarodi, Lo, Yamaguchi, Lee, and Katsura (2004) found that East Asian participants placed less subjective importance on a continuous “inner self” than did Canadians. Does this mean that the continuity motive could be limited to those cultural environments where the concept of an essential, inner self is emphasized and valued? In contrast with this position, the theoretical arguments above suggest that self-continuity should be adaptive in any cultural environment.

Cross-cultural evidence is currently limited, but it seems that members of different cultural groups may construct self-continuity in different ways, but not necessarily to a different extent. English and Chen (2007) studied cross-situational consistency in self-descriptions among Americans of European and Asian descent. Compared to European Americans, Asian Americans showed significantly more variation across relational contexts, yet within each context, they showed a similar level of stability over time. Thus, the lower cross-situational consistency found among East Asians in previous studies may simply reflect a greater attention to context, rather than a lower need for temporal self-continuity in this population. Chandler and colleagues (2003) reported differences in continuity warranting strategies between indigenous Canadian adolescents and Canadian adolescents of European descent. European Canadians were more likely to use essentialist approaches to justify their continuity over time, whereas indigenous Canadians were more likely to use narrativist approaches. Further research is needed to examine the range of continuity maintenance strategies that may be used across a wider range of cultures, as well as the cultural beliefs and values that may moderate their use.

**Distinctiveness:** The distinctiveness motive pushes people to see themselves as distinguished in some way from others (Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000; for a recent review, see Vignoles, 2009). Many authors have portrayed distinctiveness as a defining property of identity (e.g., Apter, 1983; Codol, 1981; James, 1892). Semiotologists teach that the meaning of any concept lies in what distinguishes it from other, related concepts (Saussure, undated, as cited in Culler, 1976). Thus, what it means to someone to be a British person, or a musician, or a Muslim depends in large measure on what they see as distinguishing Britishness from other nationalities, musicians from non-musicians, or Islam from other religions (Vignoles et al., 2000). Beyond its necessity for meaning-making, distinctiveness may also carry survival benefits (for a discussion, see Burris & Rempel, 2004). Moreover, there are likely practical benefits to any social grouping of having an effective way to distinguish among individuals within the group: this creates the possibility for social coordination, whereby group members can play complementary roles toward a common goal, rather than just imitating the behavior of other group members.

These arguments suggest that the motive for distinctiveness will be universal, not for any biological reason, but in the sense that distinctiveness-seeking will be a necessary feature of the human condition. To the extent that human beings are meaning-making and socially organized animals, every society must find a way of distinguishing its members from each other, and individuals must strive to maintain their distinctiveness in order to have a meaningful sense of who they are and to function effectively in society.

Studies have catalogued numerous ways in which people construct and maintain a sense of individual distinctiveness. People typically remember information better if it distinguishes the self from others (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Rogier, 1997), are most likely to mention their more distinctive attributes when asked to describe themselves (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976), and consider their more distinctive attributes as especially self-defining (Turnbull, Miller, &
When feelings of distinctiveness are threatened or undermined, people report more negative emotions (Fromkin, 1972), are faster to recognize uniqueness-related words as self-descriptive (Markus & Kunda, 1986), evaluate scarce and novel experiences more positively (Fromkin, 1970), distance themselves physically from others (Snyder & Endelman, 1979), and increase their identification with smaller groups (Pickett, Silver, et al., 2002). Developmental studies suggest that the distinction between self and others arises very early in life (Stern, 1985). Adolescents in highly “enmeshed” families—where differentiation between family members is impeded—are especially prone to a variety of psychological and social problems (Barber & Buehler, 1996), and the loss of distinctiveness in some forms of psychosis may be experienced as a “loss of self” (Apter, 1983).

People also use various strategies to preserve the distinctiveness of their group identities. Especially, when group distinctiveness is under threat, they perceive their group in stereotypical terms (van Rijswijk, Haslam, & Ellemers, 2006), and they discriminate against members of the group who deviate from group norms (Marques & Páez, 1994), against perceived impostors who transgress the group’s boundary (Jetten, Summerville, Hornsey, & Mewse, 2005), and against members of other groups (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Ojala & Nesdaile, 2004). Conversely, affirming the differences between groups can lead to reduced prejudice (Zárate & Garza, 2002). Spears, Jetten, and Scheepers (2002) have argued that individual and group differentiation are separate motives. However, “trade-offs” between interpersonal and intergroup distinctiveness suggest that these are alternative means of satisfying a single motive. People describe their groups as more diverse, and themselves as less stereotypical of their groups, when the group is larger—thus enhancing individual distinctiveness when less group distinctiveness is available (Brewer, 1993; Brewer & Weber, 1994). Threats to group distinctiveness can lead those who identify less with a group to differentiate themselves as individuals (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). Conversely, threats to individual distinctiveness can lead to increased identification with distinctive groups and tightening of group boundaries (Pickett, Silver, et al., 2002).

Some theorists have suggested that distinctiveness-seeking is a recent historical development tied to the rise of individualistic values in Western nations (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980), and that the motive for distinctiveness may be weaker or absent among people living in collectivist cultures (Triandis, 1995). Yet, there is little direct evidence for either claim (for a recent review, see Vignoles, 2009). In contrast, Vignoles et al. (2000) proposed that the motive for distinctiveness is universal, but that distinctiveness may be constructed in different ways according to cultural beliefs, values, and norms: namely through difference, separateness, or social position. Western psychologists usually understand distinctiveness in terms of difference—distinctiveness in qualities such as abilities, opinions, personality, and appearance. In contrast, social position refers to distinctiveness in one’s place within social relationships, including kinship ties, friendships, roles, and social status. Separateness refers to distinctiveness in terms of distance from others, encompassing physical and symbolic boundaries, and feelings of privacy, independence, and isolation.

Vignoles (2009) proposed that all three sources will be detectable within most or all cultural systems, but that difference and separateness will be emphasized and valued more in individualistic contexts, whereas social position will be emphasized and valued more in collectivist contexts. Recent results from our study of late adolescents in 19 nations support these predictions (Becker et al., 2010). In multilevel analyses, the distinctiveness motive was at least as strong in collectivist nations as in individualist nations. However, distinctiveness was associated more strongly with difference and separateness in more individualist nations and more strongly with social position in more collectivist nations. These effects were found while controlling for individuals’ own individualism–collectivism. Thus, as with
positive self-regard, it seems that the emphasis on different sources of distinctiveness is a collective—and thus genuinely cultural—process, rather than an individual one.

Subjective meaning: Although continuity and distinctiveness may give an identity “meaning” in a technical, semantic sense of the term, having these properties does not ensure that the identity will be experienced as subjectively meaningful. The meaning motive refers to the need to find significance or purpose in one’s existence (Baumeister, 1991). Many theorists have portrayed the search for meaning as an essential feature of human nature, proposing that the sense that one’s existence is meaningful is a core component of psychological well-being (Bartlett, 1932; Frankl, 1962; for recent reviews, see Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Steger, 2009; van den Bos, 2009; Waterman, Chapter 16, this volume). Heine et al. (2006) argue that meaning-making has adaptive benefits for humans, allowing actions to take on significance beyond their immediate physical context.

Seeing oneself as a meaningful part of a meaningful world may be especially important when people are faced with traumatic or unpredictable events. Achieving a sense of coherence and purpose, rather than seeing the events of one’s life as random and arbitrary, seems essential if one is to avoid descending into paralyzing feelings of anxiety or hopelessness. Hence, it is no surprise that the search for meaning appears to play a crucial role in coping with traumatic and unpredictable events, such as military combat (Harmand, Ashlock, & Miller, 1993), terminal illness (S. E. Taylor, 1983), and bereavement (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999). Moreover, as reviewed earlier, people seek to identify with groups that have very clearly defined meanings, especially under conditions of subjective uncertainty (see Hogg, 2007).

Research has shown that the perceived presence of meaning in one’s life is associated with various indices of psychological well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009)—although some findings question whether it is perceived meaning that causes well-being or vice versa (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). When people’s perceptions of meaning are undermined—for example by pointing out inconsistencies in their lives—they seek to re-affirm meaning, even in unrelated domains (e.g., McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor et al., 2001; Proulx & Heine, 2006).

Heine et al. (2006) point out that people often cope in quite similar ways with various threatening situations, including self-esteem threats, feelings of uncertainty, interpersonal rejection, and mortality salience, and they suggest that all of these can be explained, at least in part, by a common underlying need to construct and maintain a sense of meaning. Moreover, they argue that the construction of meaning logically precedes these other constructs: for example, one cannot evaluate oneself (necessary for self-esteem) if one does not have a meaning system providing value dimensions for this purpose (see Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Nevertheless, Heine and colleagues stop short of arguing that all of these processes are fully reducible to meaning maintenance: “although a desire to maintain meaning cuts across all of these psychological processes there is more to each of these processes than just a motivation for meaning” (2006, p. 102). Consistent with this, my own research into identity motives (described later) suggests that the meaning motive has a strong and pervasive influence on identity definition, but it does not subsume the influence of other motives.

The meaning motive has received very little direct cross-cultural attention. In the only study of which I am aware, Steger et al. (2008) found that the presence of meaning in life was associated with happiness to a similar degree in the USA and in Japan; American participants also reported feeling less happy if they were searching for meaning in their lives, whereas this effect was not found among the Japanese participants. Thus, in keeping with their greater cultural focus on self-improvement (see Heine et al., 2001), Japanese participants’ well-being was not undermined by wanting their lives to be more meaningful than was currently the case.
More generally, it seems likely that the meaning motive will follow a similar pattern to those reviewed earlier: it is hard to imagine a society in which people did not value or strive for a sense of meaning, but it is clear from numerous cross-cultural studies that people in different cultures construct different kinds of meaning for themselves and for the world they live in (Heine et al., 2006). However, it also seems plausible to imagine that some societies may be better adapted than others to fulfill meaning needs. In particular, one might predict that the meaning motive will be aroused especially in societies with looser social structures and norms, where individuals are expected to find their own meanings, compared to those with more rigid social structures and more prescriptive social norms (Côté & Levine, 2002).

**Motivational Bases of Identity Enactment**

Feelings of continuity, distinctiveness, and meaning may help individuals to define themselves as objects of awareness, but two further motives may be more relevant to the enactment of identities in the world: people need to see themselves as capable of acting on their world (the motive for efficacy) and as recognized and accepted by others (the motive for belonging). Both of these motives have been described elsewhere as “basic human needs” (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet, I argue that they can also be conceptualized as identity motives: that people strive to see themselves in these ways, and that these images of oneself, and not just one’s actual levels of competence and social acceptance, have important implications for well-being and for behavior.¹

**Efficacy:** The motive for efficacy pushes for feelings of competence and control. Experiences of efficacy have been theorized as another defining feature of identity—to have a sense of self is to experience oneself not just as an “object” but also as a “subject” or “actor,” capable of influencing one’s environment (Apter, 1983; Codol, 1981). There are obvious adaptive benefits of being competent and in control in any given situation. However, there may also be important benefits of seeing oneself in this way. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) proposes that beliefs about one’s capability of producing a desired outcome can enhance actual performance, because people with higher self-efficacy beliefs tend to set higher goals for themselves, try harder, and persist more when faced with setbacks. Thus, it is better to be an optimist than a realist.

Experiences of influencing one’s surroundings are thought to be an early and important precursor of the sense of self in infancy (Stern, 1985). Feelings of competence and control are strong predictors of subjective well-being (Reis et al., 2000), satisfaction with life-events (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001), and security in relationships (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman & Deci, 2000). In contrast, feelings of helplessness or lack of efficacy have been associated with depression, anorexia, and even cases of sudden, unexplained death (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Baumeister, 1991; Seligman, 1975). Self-efficacy beliefs have been associated with reductions in risky behavior among adolescents, as well as better physical health and increased life span (Bandura, 1997; Caprara, Regalia, & Bandura, 2002; Rodin & Langer, 1977).

The studies cited above provide evidence for the adaptive benefits of self-efficacy, showing that existing feelings of self-efficacy can enhance motivation for a range of behaviors. However, self-efficacy theorists have typically paid less attention to the idea that people are motivated to maintain or enhance feelings of self-efficacy, or to defend such feelings when they are undermined or threatened. One exception is a recent paper by Sheldon and Gunz (2009). Extending self-determination theory, they proposed that the three basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness would function as motives: that people would increase their efforts to satisfy each need in circumstances when that need was frustrated. In a set of three studies, using cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal methods, they found that people reported a heightened desire for competence when feelings of competence were low, and when feelings of either
competence or autonomy had been undermined experimentally.

Further evidence that people regulate their feeling of self-efficacy might be inferred from studies in the self-evaluation literature. Measures and manipulations of perceived competence are frequently used to operationalize theoretical predictions about self-esteem. Studies have shown that people often create illusions of competence and control—overestimating their control over events, treating situations of chance as situations of skill, or underestimating the time it will take them to accomplish desired goals (e.g., Langer, 1975; S. E. Taylor & Brown, 1988). Moreover, one of the most common ways of manipulating self-esteem threat in experimental studies is to engineer failure experiences or give participants negative feedback about their competence using bogus tests of ability or intelligence (reviewed by Leary, Terry, Allen, & Tate, 2009). Typically, it is assumed that this will threaten self-esteem, since competence is an important basis for self-esteem (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Yet, self-liking and self-competence do not always go together (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), and people vary in the extent to which their self-esteem is contingent on qualities such as intelligence (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008). Hence, it is often unclear whether the defensive reactions found in these studies should be interpreted as striving to maintain positive self-evaluation or to maintain feelings of efficacy.

Theoretically, the benefits of feeling competent are likely to generalize across cultures. However, there may be differences in what forms of competence are most salient or valued in different cultural contexts. Markus and Kitayama (2003) distinguished between “disjoint” and “conjoint” forms of agency. They suggested that the former, where agency is seen as located within the individual, may be more prevalent in individualistic cultures, whereas the latter, where agency is seen as arising from the combined and coordinated efforts of multiple individuals, may be more prevalent in collectivist cultures. These differences in the construction of agency were illustrated when comparing American and Japanese media portrayals of athletic performance, and when American and Japanese students were asked to select information they would wish to see in a media report (Markus, Uchida, Omoregie, Townsend, & Kitayama, 2006).

Belonging: Finally, the belonging motive refers to the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to others, or social acceptance, both in interpersonal relationships and within groups. Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the need to belong as a “fundamental human motivation” (p. 497), whose sphere of influence—like that of efficacy—is not restricted to identity processes (see also Deci & Ryan, 2000). Nevertheless, the belonging motive is a core construct in several theories of identity motivation (Brewer, 1991; Leary, 2005; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Indeed, Ryan and Deci (2003) proposed that “the principal function of identity formation is fostering the experience of secure belongingness or relatedness” (p. 254).

The evolutionary benefits of social inclusion are obvious. Human beings have evolved as a social species, and are very poorly adapted for survival alone; thus, we exist in a state of “obligatory interdependence” in which the motive for belonging plays an essential and adaptive role (Brewer & Caporael, 2006a, 2006b). Consistent with this, people who are excluded socially typically show a desire for “social reconnection” and initiate strategies toward forming new relationships, although they do not necessarily seek to repair relationships with the people who have excluded them (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Sheldon & Gunz, 2009).

When direct social contact is unavailable, people also maintain feelings of belonging through various indirect strategies. Thus, feelings of loneliness or rejection typically lead to a variety of coping strategies, including increased sensitivity and heightened memory for social events (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Pickett & Gardner, 2005), increased identification with larger/inclusive groups (Knowles & Gardner, 2008; Pickett, Silver, et al., 2002), self-stereotyping (Pickett, Bonner, et al., 2002), overestimating consensus for one’s beliefs (L. Simon et al., 1997), talking or singing to oneself
(Jonason, Webster, & Lindsey, 2008), and using the television for company (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009).

The need for belonging is also closely linked to self-esteem dynamics. Sociometer theory (Leary, 2005) proposes that the self-esteem system evolved as a mechanism to help people avoid social rejection. Specifically, it is argued that changes in self-esteem track (or “monitor”) changes in one’s relational value. Thus, a drop in self-esteem signals that one may be at risk of rejection, providing an impetus to make oneself more acceptable to others—and thus the risk of rejection is averted. Leary has reviewed a wealth of research evidence showing that belonging concerns are pervasively reflected in dimensions and processes of self-esteem. Moreover, a recent longitudinal study has shown that self-esteem is predicted prospectively by others’ liking, but that the reverse is not true (Srivastava & Beer, 2005).

Leary, Schreindorfer, and Haupt (1995) reinterpreted many supposed effects of low self-esteem, including depression, substance abuse, delinquency, and eating disorders, as reactions to real or imagined rejection by others; and Leary et al. (2009) have noted that many of the threat manipulations used in studies of self-esteem maintenance involve presenting negative feedback to participants in a socially visible manner—thus, self-esteem threat is confounded with the threat of relational devaluation, and results may be open to reinterpretation as showing belonging maintenance. Yet, even if the dynamics of belonging are often experienced psychologically in terms of self-esteem, threats to belonging cannot be compensated by affirming other dimensions of self-esteem, indicating that belonging is a motive in its own right (Knowles, Lucas, Molden, Gardner, & Dean, 2010).

The relationship between motives for belonging and for distinctiveness is especially interesting. Theorists have often viewed these two motives as fundamentally conflicting. Uniqueness theory (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) proposes that people prefer to be moderately, but not extremely, different from others, because the need for uniqueness (which relates to distinctiveness) is balanced by a desire for similarity (which relates to belonging). Similarly, optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) proposes that group identity processes are driven by a need for differentiation and a need for inclusion, understood to act in opposition to each other: “optimal distinctiveness” occurs at a point of equilibrium between the two needs, which will normally be a state of moderate distinctiveness. Thus, both theories claim that humans are in an inevitable state of motivational conflict between these two needs (for similar arguments, see Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001).

However, both theories rely on particular constructions of the two motives that lead to their opposition. Uniqueness theory understands distinctiveness as difference, which is opposed with similarity. Optimal distinctiveness theory understands distinctiveness in terms of group size: the larger the group, the more inclusion; the smaller the group, the more differentiation. But once the two motives are conceptualized more fully, a different picture emerges. Some constructions of distinctiveness and belonging are logically opposed—difference with similarity, separation with closeness, exclusiveness with inclusiveness of groups—but this is by no means inevitable. Distinctiveness in terms of social position actually relies on being embedded within a network of relationships (Vignoles, 2009); acceptance by others can make one feel that one’s differences are recognized (R. J. Green & Werner, 1996). Hornsey and Jetten (2004) review numerous ways in which people use group memberships to satisfy both motives simultaneously.

It is more or less impossible to imagine a culture where people would not have a need for belonging. Triandis (1995) has suggested that the need for belonging may be stronger in collectivist than in individualist cultures; yet, virtually all of the research evidence reviewed above comes from the individualistic cultures of North America and Western Europe, showing that the belonging need is pervasively present in individualist cultures. Indeed, an alternative possibility is that the belonging need might be more strongly aroused in individualist nations, considering that less stable patterns of social relationships may
result in a greater chance of motive frustration (Lo, Helwig, Chen, Ohashi, & Cheng, 2009).

It seems likely that the belonging motive—like others—will have different implications according to the forms of relationship that are most prevalent and most valued in different cultural contexts (Fiske, 2004). For example, Brewer and Yuki (2007) discuss the different meanings of social groups in Western and Eastern cultures. Groups in North America often take the form of social categories, with identification, loyalty, and trust based on perceived similarity to other group members and fit with the category prototype; in contrast, groups in Japan more commonly take the form of social networks, with identification, loyalty, and trust based on perceptions and knowledge of the relational structure, interconnections, and differences among group members (Yuki, 2003; Yuki, Maddux, Brewer, & Takemura, 2005).

**Empirical Evidence for Multiple Motives**

**Motivational Influences on Identity Definition, Enactment, and Affect**

Although the theory and evidence seem compelling for each of these motives on its own, relatively few studies have looked at the effects of more than one motive in combination. Yet, it seems important to know whether each of them really contributes uniquely to the dynamics of identity construction, or whether a shorter list of motives might be more parsimonious (Gregg et al., Chapter 14, this volume). Studying motives together also brings several other questions to the fore: Are some motives stronger than others? Are some motives particularly relevant to specific identity domains or processes? How often do these motives conflict with each other, and how do people respond when different motives make contradictory demands on identity construction?

A few studies have used experimental methods to pit two or more identity motives against each other. For example, Swann and colleagues (1987) tested participants’ reactions to positive and negative feedback as a function of their pre-existing self-views. Participants were happiest when they received positive feedback—irrespective of their pre-existing self-views—supporting the influence of the motive for self-enhancement (i.e., positive self-regard) on affective reactions. However, cognitive reactions were very different: participants found the feedback trustworthy and informative to the extent that it confirmed their prior self-views—even if the feedback was negative. Thus, it seemed that participants were prepared to sacrifice a potential gain in self-esteem in the interests of maintaining self-continuity. Similarly, Brewer et al. (1993) presented results suggesting that people will sacrifice self-esteem to protect their distinctiveness: when feelings of distinctiveness were undermined, participants reduced their identification with a group that was positively valued but not distinctive.

These studies provide evidence for the independent influence of multiple motives on identity processes. If continuity or distinctiveness were only important as a means to self-esteem, then participants would not be willing to sacrifice self-esteem in the service of these motives. However, studies such as these tend to require rather specific and artificial situations, in order to pit the relevant motives against each other. Moreover, it is hard to imagine an experimental design that could successfully separate the influences of more than two or three motives.

Hence, Vignoles and colleagues have developed a new approach to measuring identity motives, by looking at their effects on the outcomes of identity definition and enactment processes (Vignoles et al., 2002, 2006). Our methodology assumes that different aspects of identity (e.g., “father,” “social scientist,” “poor at sport”) vary in their perceived centrality and importance (i.e., identity definition), and in the extent to which they are presented to others in social interactions (i.e., identity enactment). Those identity aspects that satisfy identity motives tend to be perceived as especially central and self-defining, and are more likely to be emphasized in self-presentation, whereas those that frustrate
identity motives are more likely to be perceived as marginal and kept hidden from others.

Numerous studies now provide converging evidence for the role of four motives in shaping identity definition. Vignoles and colleagues (2006) explored the influence of multiple motives on identity definition in four studies, finding that research participants rated as most central and self-defining those aspects of their current identities that best satisfied motives for self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, and meaning. Each of these four motives made a significant and substantial unique contribution to predicting subjective identity structures, after accounting for the influence of the other motives in the model—thus, none of these four motives is reducible to any of the others. Recently, we have replicated these findings in a study of late adolescents from 19 nations spanning Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, and the Middle East (Vignoles, Becker et al., 2010). Results are consistent across individual, relational, and group levels of identity (Vignoles et al., 2006, Study 2), as well as domains of the “extended self”: people identify with possessions and with places to the extent that they satisfy the same four identity motives (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Vignoles et al., 2010).

Feelings of belonging and efficacy were also related to the perceived centrality of identity aspects in these studies, but effects tended to be smaller and did not always reach statistical significance. Longitudinal analyses suggested that feelings of both efficacy and belonging, as well as meaning, had an indirect impact on this dimension of identity definition, through their contribution to feelings of self-esteem (Vignoles et al., 2006, Study 4). The indirect effect of belonging provides some support for Leary’s (2005) proposal that the self-esteem system monitors and helps people to regulate their relational value—belonging concerns might be the underlying cause, but self-esteem has the more proximal influence on identity construction. However, the fact that self-esteem was predicted also by feelings of efficacy and of meaning indicates that the self-esteem system is not exclusively tuned to monitor relational value.

In several studies, we have also examined motivational predictors of identity enactment, reflecting the behavioral and self-presentational side of identity construction (Vignoles, Becker et al., 2010; Vignoles et al., 2006, Study 4). In longitudinal analyses, identity enactment shows a bidirectional relationship with identity definition: that is, people report showing to others especially those parts of their identities that they perceive as most self-defining, but they also come to perceive as most self-defining especially those parts of their identities that they show to others (see Swann, 1987). But motivational predictors of identity enactment differ from the predictors of identity definition: people report showing to others especially those aspects of their identities that satisfy motives for self-esteem and belonging. Efficacy was a significant predictor in our original study (Vignoles et al., 2006, Study 4), although the role of this motive has been less well supported subsequently (Vignoles, Becker et al., 2010).

We have also looked at the influence of these motives on affective dimensions of identity, predicting people’s happiness about existing aspects of their identity, as well as their desired and feared possible future identities (see Oyserman & James, Chapter 6, this volume). People are happiest with those aspects of their identities, as well as with material possessions, that satisfy three motives: for self-esteem, efficacy, and meaning (Vignoles, Becker et al., 2010; Vignoles, Dittmar et al., 2010; Vignoles et al., 2006). People typically desire those possible identities that promise feelings of self-esteem, efficacy, meaning, and continuity, whereas they fear those that promise frustration of the same four motives (Vignoles et al., 2008). As before, the motive for belonging typically showed indirect effects through self-esteem in these studies.

Thus, it seems that each of the six identity motives theorized above influences the processes by which identity is constructed and maintained, but different combinations of motives have a stronger impact on different identity processes. In particular, motives for continuity, distinctiveness, and meaning are especially relevant to identity definition, whereas motives for belonging and
efficacy are mainly relevant to identity enactment. Only self-esteem appears consistently relevant to both identity definition and enactment processes. As discussed earlier, several theorists have argued on philosophical grounds that both continuity and distinctiveness are necessary preconditions for a meaningful sense of identity; from a humanistic perspective, it is unsurprising that identity definition should be guided also by a search for subjective meaning, and not just fulfilling these “technical” criteria. In contrast, both efficacy and belonging are more clearly relevant to a person’s relationship with the external world: efficacy refers to a person’s capacity to act on the world, and belonging refers to their having a place within the world. Thus, it makes sense that these motives are of greater relevance to identity enactment.

**Individual Differences in Motive Strength**

We have also extended our methodological approach to look at individual differences in motive strength. Because people are not necessarily aware of their identity motives, measuring such individual differences has been problematic in the past. This is illustrated by the problems encountered in attempts to operationalize the “self-esteem hypothesis” to predict individual differences in intergroup discrimination. Abrams and Hogg (1988) proposed that individuals with lower pre-existing self-esteem would be likely to show intergroup discrimination, on the assumption that their need for self-esteem would be more frustrated. In contrast, Stangor and Thompson (2002) made the equally plausible prediction that individuals with higher self-esteem would show greater in-group favoritism, on the grounds that people with higher self-esteem are typically more adept at using self-enhancement strategies. Thus, level of self-esteem clearly is not sufficient to measure the strength of the motive for self-esteem.

As discussed earlier, nor is it viable simply to ask people how strongly they desire a sense of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, and so on. Explicit measures of “need strength” may provide information about people’s subjective values, but they do not necessarily reveal anything about their underlying motives; to measure the latter, a more subtle form of measurement may be more useful. Vignoles and Moncaster (2007) adapted the methodology described earlier to create implicit measures of individual differences in the strengths of identity motives. To illustrate, consider the finding mentioned above that people generally perceive as especially self-defining those aspects of their identities that provided a sense of self-esteem. If this pattern in the data is interpreted as evidence for a self-esteem motive, then it should follow that the pattern will be stronger among those with a higher need for self-esteem, and weaker among those with a lower need for self-esteem. Thus, correlations between motive satisfaction and identity definition (or enactment) ratings of multiple identity aspects can be calculated for each individual, and used as an implicit measure of individual differences in strength of any given identity motive.

Initial findings show that these implicit measures are unrelated to explicit measures of people’s beliefs about their identity motives, such as “need for uniqueness” or “need to belong” scales (e.g., Eriksson, Becker, & Vignoles, in press). Nevertheless, the implicit measures predict various outcomes. Vignoles and Deas (2002) found that people with a stronger continuity motive were less willing to consider cosmetic surgery. Thorpe (2003) found that people with a stronger belonging motive scored higher on a measure of socially desirable responding, and Kelly (2004) found that people showed a stronger belonging motive after being asked to recall experiences of ostracism—expected to arouse this motive. Petavratzi (2004) found that people with a stronger distinctiveness motive tended to prefer more distinctive relationship partners. Vignoles and Moncaster (2007) found that the strength of both distinctiveness and belonging motives predicted national in-group favoritism, but only among those who were more highly identified with their nation. Thus, these implicit measures are not measuring people’s beliefs about their motives, but they have some predictive utility.
Although still in its infancy, research into implicit measures of motive strength seems to be an important avenue for future development.

**Applications of an Integrated Model**

Clearly, a single, integrated model of motivated identity construction processes, relevant to multiple domains of identity and identity-seeking behavior, represents a gain in theoretical parsimony; but there are also significant potential practical benefits of this approach. In particular, a more comprehensive understanding of identity motives provides a more complete theoretical toolkit to help understand identity-related processes in the real world and thus potentially to design more effective strategies for intervention. Although the main focus of my own work in this area has been theoretical, I will give two examples to illustrate the potential benefits of this model for understanding and for intervention.

The first example involves national identity and attitudes toward immigration. Recent studies have shown that people who hold essentialist concepts of nationhood (where national identity is based on ethnicity/ancestry) are more likely to hold negative and prejudiced views of immigrants (see Licata et al., Chapter 38, this volume). However, the motivational basis of this relationship has remained unclear. Motivational theories of intergroup relations have focused largely on motives for self-esteem, meaning, distinctiveness, and belonging, but Naidoo, Pehrson, and Vignoles (2010) hypothesized that the link between national essentialism and prejudice against immigrants might be explained better by the continuity motive—on the basis that immigration undermines the continuity of national identity when it is defined in terms of ancestry. Consistent with this, in a study of British adults, we found that the essentialism–prejudice link was moderated by individual differences in the strength of the continuity motive: among those with a weaker identity motive for self-continuity, the link was absent. Thus, we were able to improve our understanding of this intergroup phenomenon by relating it to a motive that had not previously been considered in the intergroup relations literature.

A second illustration is an intervention study conducted by May and Vignoles (2010) in which we aimed to enhance intentions to donate blood among young people. Based on Vignoles and colleagues’ (2008) findings about the motivational bases of desired and feared possible future identities, we created an information leaflet portraying to participants a possible identity as a blood donor, that would provide feelings of self-esteem, efficacy, continuity, and meaning. We measured proximal (“next week”) and distal (“in the near future”) intentions to donate blood, as well as motivational properties of the possible future self as blood donor, which clustered onto two dimensions: (1) potential esteem and efficacy and (2) potential continuity and meaning. Our leaflet did not affect distal intentions, which were generally high in any case, and were predicted by potential esteem and efficacy. However, our leaflet did increase proximal intentions to donate blood, even compared to a leaflet currently used by the British blood donation service; and this effect was accounted for by a change in beliefs about the possible feelings of continuity and meaning to be derived from blood donation. These results suggest that an attempt to boost intentions based only on the promise of increased self-esteem would not have been successful. Thus, taking account of multiple identity motives enhanced our intervention.

Beyond these two illustrations, I suggest that a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of identity motives has the capacity to enhance applied research and interventions in any domain where identity processes are important: spanning areas as diverse as health promotion, family processes, consumer behavior, civic participation, and terrorism. In each of these areas, motivated identity construction theory can help to illuminate the kinds of identity categories that people will seek to occupy, the kinds of events that will threaten people’s sense of identity, as well as the kinds of actions they might undertake in order to construct, maintain, or defend a satisfactory sense of identity.
To conclude, evidence supports the existence of at least six identity motives—for self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, meaning, efficacy, and belonging. All six motives have a theoretical basis for universality, but different cultures may develop different ways of satisfying each one, so that the same underlying motives may have very different consequences in different cultural contexts. Undoubtedly, future research will refine this model, and it is possible that additional motives may be found, or that finer distinctions may be drawn within the existing motives. Yet, it is clear already that multiple motives are involved in identity processes: people do not only seek self-esteem when they construct, maintain, and defend their identities. Paying attention to the multiplicity of identity motives can help us better to predict and understand identity-related outcomes, and ultimately to change them for the better.

**Note**

1. Readers familiar with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) may be surprised at the omission of autonomy from the list of identity motives reviewed here. It is important to reiterate that self-determination theorists understand autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic human needs, and there is no reason to assume that there will be a one-to-one correspondence between basic needs and identity motives. The question is whether or not the autonomy need would lead people to strive for certain ways of seeing themselves. Theoretical definitions of autonomy vary widely, but if autonomy is understood in terms of psychological freedom—or the absence of coercion—then one possible version of an “autonomy motive” would lead to an emphasis on achieved identities (such as life-choices), as opposed to ascribed ones (such as one’s gender or nationality). Yet, even in the case of ascribed identities, people have considerable freedom in how they define these identities, and in the extent to which they identify with them, and people often experience their ascribed identities as highly central and motivating. Moreover, in the domain of cultural values, Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan (2003) have emphasized that it is how people relate to their values that determines the level of autonomy, not the content of the values themselves: thus, if values are fully internalized, there is no contradiction in the idea that one might autonomously endorse values that restrict one’s objective freedom. Translating this into the domain of identity, it seems that the autonomy need might play a role in the processes by which people form an identity, but it does not prescribe the features of the identity that they will form, and hence it seems questionable whether it fits the current definition of an identity motive.

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