# Identity work in organizations and occupations: Definitions, theories, and pathways forward

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## Abstract:

Understanding how, why, and when individuals create particular self-meanings has preoccupied scholars for decades, leading to an explosion of research on identity work. We conducted a wide-ranging review of this literature with the aim of presenting an overarching framework that comprehensively summarizes and integrates the vast amount of recent research in this domain. Drawing on our analysis of the empirical literature, we present an enhanced conceptual understanding of identity work. We then summarize the four dominant theoretical approaches researchers have used to explain how, when, and why individuals engage in identity work. This side-by-side comparison of these theoretical perspectives allows us to parse out the unique contribution of each theoretical lens and highlights how these theories can be integrated into a holistic view of an inherently multifaceted concept. Lastly, we critically analyze the state of the field and lay a detailed roadmap for future researchers to draw from to expand our current understanding of how individuals work on their identities in occupations and organizations.

## Article:

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Identities are individuals' subjective interpretations of who they are, based on their socio-demographic characteristics, roles, personal attributes, and group memberships (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gecas, 1982). Alongside self-esteem, individuals' multiple identities make up the content of their self-concepts (Gecas, 1982). As a "root" organizational construct (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 13), identity "can be linked to nearly everything: from mergers, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship

and emotions to politics, participation and project teams" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 5). Work identities, in particular, are self-meanings tied to participation in work-related activities, such as organizational, occupational, and role identities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Prior examinations of the extant identity literature have indicated that individuals' self-understandings are multidimensional and dynamic rather than simple and static (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Brown, 2015; Horton, Bayerl, & Jacobs, 2014). This insight reflects the movement toward understanding the processes underlying identity, in addition to the traditional focus on identity strength (e.g., identification). The result is a dramatic surge in studies focused on *identity work*, or the range of activities individuals engage in for "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" their self-meanings (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626) in the context of their occupations and organizations.

The swell in scholarly interest in identity work is warranted in the age of protean, boundaryless, digitized, and often plural careers, where many employees need to create new work identities or revise existing work identities several times in their careers (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017; Ibarra, 1999). Thus, workers today must be agentic in crafting who they are and what they do at work (Arthur & Rousseau, 2001; Hall, 2004). Yet, although recent investigations have yielded important and relevant insights about identity work, this knowledge has emerged in piecemeal fashion, often bounded by distinct theoretical approaches and assumptions. For instance, authors' decision to use a particular theoretical lens, such as social identity theory, identity theory, critical theory, or narrative theory to explain identity work often leads their insights to mainly influence others also subscribing to the same approach. The time is ripe for a higher level conceptual, theoretical, and empirical integration. As such, our objective here is to bring together the currently fragmented identity work research by looking across theoretical, terminological, and disciplinary boundaries.

Ultimately, we hope that this review will serve as a jumping-off point for scholars beginning their foray into the area, as well as a resource for veteran identity work scholars interested in moving their research in new directions. To achieve this goal, we begin by providing an expanded definition of identity work that specifies both identity work modes and identity types, thereby providing important nuance to existing definitions. We then articulate the unique contributions and complementarities of the different theoretical lenses adopted by identity work scholars. Weaving together various theoretical perspectives around the core questions of when, how, and why of identity work provides a more thorough understanding of the identity work tapestry than any one theory could provide by itself. In addition, we summarize what we currently know about the individual, interpersonal, and organizational implications of identity work. This analysis sets the stage for our final contribution: a critical analysis of the current state of the field and the identification of theoretical and methodological opportunities for future research. Our overarching goal of providing scholars with a holistic picture of the identity work literature sets this review apart from others, which focused primarily on a subset of the literature (e.g., organizational identification work: Brown, 2017; professional identity work: Lepisto, Crosina, & Pratt, 2015; emotions in identity work: Winkler, 2016). By synthesizing identity work insights from various theoretical perspectives, we hope to shift the larger identity conversation from focusing on identity debates (e.g., Brown, 2015) toward understanding complementarities and points of synergy.

**2 METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS**

2.1 Identifying articles for inclusion

We began by performing database searches on Google Scholar, EBSCO, and Thomson Reuters Web of Science (Social Science) using the term "identity work" in the context of work and organizations. As we read the resulting papers, we noticed that scholars largely relied on the identity work definitions given by Snow and Anderson (1987)[1], Alvesson and Willmott (2002), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), and Watson (2008). In the second stage of our search, we used Web of Science to identify articles that have cited these four foundational articles. This reverse citation search resulted in papers that used the term identity work as well as those that used related terms such as identity construction (e.g., Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Pratt, 2012; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), identity play (e.g., Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), and identity jujitsu (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009). When terms emerged to describe identity work-related activities, we compared them with the dominant definitions of identity work. Those provided by Snow and Anderson (1987), Alvesson and Willmott (2002), and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) consistently emphasized the types of activities that identity work involves, including creating, presenting, sustaining, forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising identities. This shared, broad conceptualization of identity work allows many other constructs to be subsumed within it. For example, Pratt's (2012, p. 28) definition of identity construction concerns "how identities come to be formed." As such, it fits squarely within the "forming" aspect of identity work; [see Brown (2015) and Pratt (2012) for a deeper discussion of distinctions between terminologies]. In Supporting Information, we list the definitions for the identity work-related terms that fall under the broad umbrella of identity work, as commonly defined.

We then looked within the articles identified in the first two steps for references to additional sources. We combined all of the search results into a comprehensive list and then read each article, book, or book chapter to assess whether it met the following three criteria. First, the item needed to directly focus on how individuals modify their identities in some way (e.g., forming, repairing, and actively maintaining). For instance, although Alvesson and Willmott (2002) has been cited by 414 organizational articles, we only included 120 of those articles that directly explored identity processes. Second, we selected research focused on identity work at the individual level. Although there are studies of how organizational, team, and brand identities are constructed or modified, these studies were not included in our review. However, we did include studies that examined cross-level implications of individual-level identity work. Third and finally, articles had to be in or about work and/or organizational contexts. This filtering procedure resulted in the inclusion of 261 empirical and theoretical contributions in our analysis, 211 (80.8%) of which were published in the last decade (after 2007).

We adopted a three-stage coding process to uncover the central themes in the identity work literature. First, two of the researchers went through each article and did a fine-grained coding of the basic components of the identity work process—identifying antecedents, outcomes,

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[1] Although the term "identity work" had been used by sociologists previously (e.g., Strauss, Fagerhaugh, Suczek, and Wiener (1982) used it to discuss how hospital staff help patients deal with the implications of trauma or illness to their personal identity), most management scholars attribute the term to Snow and Anderson (1987)

mechanisms, and boundary conditions. Second, we then abstracted up to categorize the codes identified in the first step (similar to the creation of second-order themes commonly used in qualitative research: Van Maanen, 1979). This process led us to identify different modes, types of identities worked upon, and outcomes of identity work. For each of these categories, we kept a spreadsheet with specific examples from the text from each paper. Finally, having noted the diversity in theoretical approaches taken to study identity work in the previous two stages, we then went back to each article and identified the theoretical lens (es) and assumptions used in it. The results of this analysis became the organizing framework for this review.

## 2.2 Expanded definition of identity work

While identity work scholars have drawn heavily on the four foundational definitions stated above, they have also expanded upon them in important ways (see Supporting Information for both sets of definitions). Three of these expansions are widely agreed upon, perhaps even taken for granted assumptions. First, scholars suggest that identity work is usefully viewed as an ongoing process (Davies & Thomas, 2008; Lucas, 2011), involving "continuing experiments" (Brown & Toyoki, 2013, p. 876) and "constant reconstruction" (Fachin & Davel, 2015, p. 371). Second, however, scholars have also suggested that certain triggers such as role transitions (e.g., Ibarra, 1999), tensions between different identities (e.g., Koerner, 2014), and challenging work environments (e.g., Cowen & Hodgson, 2015; Petriglieri, 2015) can initiate more intense identity work. Third, identity work occurs at the intersection of the person and the external environment, meaning that although individuals may have some agency in the identities they choose (Frandsen, 2015), these choices are also interpersonally negotiated (Lucas, 2011) and constrained by social context (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Marlow & McAdam, 2015).

In addition to these accepted expansions, our review also suggests several divergences across conceptualizations of identity work. In particular, we identified differences in the modes through which identity work occurs and in the types of identities worked upon. In the below section, we review the literature with respect to these two dimensions in order to highlight the diversity underlying this construct. We conclude this section by proposing an updated identity work definition including these two elements.

### 2.2.1 Identity work modes

While there is some consensus about the projected aims of identity work (i.e., constructing, revising, and rejecting identities), identity work definitions often use the rather vague and underspecified term "activities" to describe identity work practices. This conceptual vagueness has led identity work to be described variously as a "mental activity" (Alvesson et al., 2008), fundamentally "performance based" (Beech, 2008), predominately "linguistic" (Driver, 2015), "narrative" (Alvesson et al., 2008; Driver, 2015), or "communicative" (Lucas, 2011). It has also led to the proliferation of discrete identity work tactics, which, although rich and diverse, also make the literature "inchoate" and fragmented (Brown, 2015, p. 24). Our analysis of the various identity work activities in the literature suggests that they can be parsimoniously grouped under four modes representing where these activities occur: cognitive (in thoughts), discursive (in talk),

physical (in symbols), and behavioral (in actions)[2] [see Brown (2017) for a related discussion of how scholars have approached organizational identification work and Lepisto et al. (2015) for types of professional identity work]. We use the term "mode" as it designates "a particular form, variety, or manner" (The American Heritage Dictionary) of people's identity work activities. But it does not articulate underlying processes of identity work (which we address more in a later section). Below, we describe these modes and provide additional examples in Table 1. Although we present these modes as distinct, they can work in tandem such that one instance of identity work can involve multiple modes.

**Table 1.** Identity work modes

| Mode | Paper | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Cognitive | Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) | Authors describe how people involved in "dirty jobs" use cognitive tactics such as ***cognitively reframing the meaning*** attached to their stigmatized occupation, ***recalibrating the internal standards*** used to assess the dirty attribute of their work, ***cognitively shifting their attention*** to the more nonstigmatized attributes of their job, and doing ***selective social comparisons*** to make sense of their occupational identity |
| | Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) | They describe the cognitive techniques used by priests in managing the demands placed on them by their personal and occupational identities such as ***cognitively separating their role and identity through the use of a metaphor of a mask*** (e.g., putting it on or taking it off). Alternately, their participants also mentioned ***cognitive merging of their role and identity*** not treating "self" and "priesthood" as at all separate from one another. A tactic to manage multiple identities that was uncovered was the ***imposition of a cognitive hierarchy*** or pecking order onto various identities. |
| | Petriglieri and Stein (2012) | These authors explain the concept of ***projected identification***, where people project the unwanted aspects of an identity onto others so that it appears as if these others possess those unwanted characteristics and not the individual him/herself. This enables the individual to then enact that identity, which may be suitable for their role. |
| | Essers et al. (2013) | The authors explain how migrant female business owners invoke ***selective cognitive processing*** to keep their autonomy. They do this by selectively filtering and attending to the suggestions given to them by others based on whether those suggestions were favorable to their goal of maintaining autonomy or not. |
| | Berger et al. (2017) | This paper shows how Moroccan Muslim employees in Netherlands cognitively reconcile the conflict between their religious and professional identities by ***cognitively repositioning some of their organization's practices***, such as social events that include alcohol that may be contrary to their religious beliefs, as gatherings that have benefits beyond the consumption of alcohol. |
| Discursive | Kuhn (2006, p. 1341) | Kuhn notes that "***concepts, expressions, or other linguistic devices*** that, when deployed in talk, present explanations for past and/or future activity that guide interactants' interpretation of experience while molding individual and collective action. Discursive resources are drawn from social practice, render activity sensible for participants, and contribute to ongoing system structuration (Fairclough 1992; Kuhn and Nelson 2002)." |
| | Gagnon (2008) | Various discursive tactics used by people in constructing their identities have been described. For instance, ***using program jargon and speaking like an insider***, justifying the program and its aims, ***expressing gratitude and pride*** in being selected, ***repeating program philosophies*** without question or irony were some tactics to show one's affiliation with the program. Others who were building a self-identity more cynical of the program were said to do so ***using irony and humor*** by poking fun at the decreed activities and procedures for group work. |

[2] We considered including "relational " and "temporal" as additional modalities of identity work. However, we determined that these were both cross-cutting elements of these four identity work modes. All of these modes operate at the individual level; however, there is often also a relational component as well. Further, because time and process are integral components of identity work, each individual mode also has temporal characteristics as well. We address both relational and temporal issues more in later sections of this review

| Mode | Paper | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| | DeRue & Ashford (2010, p. 632) | Authors describe the verbal tactics used in claiming and granting of leader and follower identities: "Direct verbal acts aimed at claiming a leader identity might include a person *making statements that he or she is a leader or statements consistent with being leader-like*, while direct verbal granting acts might include *referring to another person as a leader*. Similar direct verbal acts can also be used to claim a follower identity, such as *stating that you are simply following the direction of another person* or that you expect to follow the lead of others in a particular situation." |
| | Frandsen (2015) | The author describes how employees adopted and expressed their cynicism through the *use of humor, irony, skepticism, apathy, and exaggeration* that was directed at resisting the identity regulation efforts of the management that prevented the employees from fully servicing the customer |
| | Costas and Kärreman (2016) | These authors found that consultants in elite consultancies *used language to portray a "bored" identity* toward their work. They *expressed themselves in wordings referring to themselves as frustrated and devastated and described their work as being dry, dull, monotonous, and repetitive*. "Boredom," "being bored," and "doing boring things" were the expressions used by them to view their work. |
| Physical | Alvesson (2001) | The author stresses how employees in knowledge intensive firms *focus on physical appearance*—to give a strong impression of being tightly disciplined and accountant like. Virtues such as *appearing clean, proper, impersonal, objective, standardized, predictable, and reliable* are, presumably, communicated. |
| | Humphreys & Brown (2002a, p. 941) | In this study on how dress is used in identity work, the authors note that "*Headscarves (together with beards, moustaches, jewelry, and other items of attire)* have been deployed as 'a symbolic challenge' (Mirza and Reay, 2000, p. 524), the intent of which has been to generate 'oppositional meanings' (Mueller, 1992), and more instrumentally 'new "types" of professional intellectuals', whose role it is to 'carry cognitive praxis of the movement on into the larger society' (Eyerman and Jamieson, 1991, p. 166)." |
| | Elsbach (2009) | The author notes how designers in the toy car industry are able to signal and affirm their creative identities as "independent" and "idealistic" by *developing "signature styles."* One designer even mentioned that he attempted to include a representation of his face in his cars. |
| | Boudreau et al. (2014) | Highlight a number of ways in which librarians *enact physical identity work activities to signal their identity*. For instance, librarians made their identity salient by improving the *signage* in the library by implementing better *flyers, banners, and name-tags* that were made more prominent and pasted in locations where they could grab attention such as in elevators and bathrooms. They also *used social media to highlight their presence* in an increasingly digitized library by creating a Facebook page. Additionally, they also restored some of the symbolic status of the book by *installing a rolling cart with books* that had been selected as "good reads." |
| | Courpasson and Monties (2017) | These authors examine how police officers *use their body for identity work* by focusing on attributes such as fitness, cleanliness, toughness and intimidation. Officers create a link between their bodies and their identities and hence *develop specific bodily practices* through which they convey the need for strong, fit, and healthy bodies. |
| Behavioral | Ashforth et al. (**2007**) | In their study on employees and managers engaged in dirty work, these authors found that *behavioral tactics such as blaming, condemning condemners and distancing from clients/roles* that highlighted the dirty aspects of their jobs were used by employees to manage their occupational identities |
| | Scott et al. (2009) | In their actor-focused model of justice, these authors theorize that managers may enact *behaviors that adhere to or violate the norms of organizational justice* to create and maintain a desired identity in the workplace (e.g., Managers may enact behaviors that align with norms of justice to promote the identity of being a good and fair boss. Alternately, they can also enact behaviors that violate norms of justice to promote an identity of being a tough boss) |
| | Koerner (2014) | In her work exploring workplace courage as a form of identity work, the author suggests that *courageous acts such as voicing one's opinion, reporting misconduct, disobedience, circumvention, and resigning in protest* can contribute to the crafting of an individual's identity |

| Mode | Paper | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| | Cowen and Hodgson (2015) | They document the ***behaviors that project managers enact to strengthen their identities*** as project managers such as avoiding overload of work and deflecting non-project manager responsibilities to others, as well as "window dressing" their performance in front of auditors. |
| | Berger et al. (2017) | They found that Muslim women in a firm in Netherlands ***worked hard and achieved all their targets to signal that they were hard working professionals*** and to justify them taking a day off on the festivals of Islam, which were not national holidays in their organization. |

Note: Emphasis added.

## *Cognitive*

Cognitive identity work is comprised of the mental efforts to subjectively construe, interpret, understand, and evaluate an identity (Killian & Johnson, 2006). It highlights the self-reflective nature of identity work, involving self-questioning, reflexive sense making and self-change (Beech, MacIntosh, & McInnes, 2008; Fletcher & Watson, 2007). For example, MacIntosh and Beech (2011) found that strategists often construct their identity through an internal dialogue with their fantasies. Cognitive identity work may also involve making sense of multiple identities by building a cognitive understanding of one's network of identities (Ramarajan, 2014), developing meaning around being multiple things (Caza et al., 2017), finding ways to switch between identities (Essers, Doorewaard, & Benschop, 2013), addressing tensions arising from identity paradoxes (Carollo & Guerci, 2017), and creating identity hierarchies (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Cognitive identity work is not limited to only controlled, rational conscious processes (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2017; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Rather, individuals may also engage in unconscious cognition wherein individuals struggle with "unconscious desire and underlying lack" (Driver, 2017, p. 630). Driver (in press), for instance, highlighted how employees may develop "imaginary selves" as they grapple with negative workplace experiences such as low pay or high levels of stress.

## *Discursive*

Because identity work is "intimately connected with discourse" (Carroll & Levy, 2010, p. 84), people often use narratives, stories, dialogues, and conversations as a conduit for identity work. Discursive identity work, or identity talk (Snow & Anderson, 1987), is comprised of what is verbalized and how it is verbalized. In this regard, tone of voice, word choice (Allen, 2005), language skills (Alvesson, 2001; Einwohner, 2006), specific "insider" jargon (Gagnon, 2008), and expressions (Kuhn, 2006) each play a vital role in shaping identities at work. For instance, Carroll and Levy (2010) showed how the adjectives chosen to describe management (e.g., "boring," "mundane," and "not challenging") set the identity of a manager apart from that of a leader. In addition, scholars have also shown how humor, bantering, metaphors, and even lies can be used to reinforce desired identities (Alvesson, 1998; Carollo & Guerci, 2017; Huber & Brown, 2017; Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). Such communications are influenced by contextual discourses such as cultural scripts, occupational narratives, management discourses, and everyday rhetoric such as shop floor and office talk (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009; Smith, Meyskens, & Wilson, 2014; Ybema et al., 2009). Thus, people are both the producers and the products of discourse (Lawless, Sambrook, & Stewart, 2012).

## *Physical*

Individuals also work on their identities physically, by using either themselves (e.g., using one's own body: Courpasson & Monties, 2017) or materials and objects in their physical environments (e.g., office decor: Elsbach, 2004; artifacts: Elsbach, 2009; dress: Humphreys & Brown, 2002a; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) to align others' impressions with a desired self-meaning. For instance, in his studies of an advertising agency, Alvesson (1994, 1998) found that looking young and fit, being well dressed, wearing different clothes on different days, and managing one's overall appearance were some of the means of crafting an identity as a serious advertising professional (see also Brown & Coupland, 2015; Courpasson & Monties, 2017). Essers and Benschop (2009) noted how some Muslim women entrepreneurs used headscarves to highlight their Muslim identity, whereas others postponed their use. In terms of symbolic objects and artifacts, Anteby (2008) found that craftsmen associated their identity with the skilled prototypes of products they produced as opposed to mass-produced goods, whereas Shortt (2012) revealed that hairdressers arranged photos in order to construct identityscapes that told their identity stories. Thus, there is ample evidence that individuals construct and project their identities visually through material means.

## *Behavioral*

Finally, behavioral identity work consists of the actions that people enact to build, revise, and maintain their identities (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). This dramaturgical mode of identity work shapes identity-related interactions with others in ways that reinforce or change self-meaning and in turn changes the way others view the person (e.g., Goffman, 1959). For instance, Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al. (2006) found that when struggling to achieve a sense of balance, priests often segregated their personal and occupational identities by adopting ephemeral roles, taking vacations, or engaging in spiritual actions such as meditation, prayer, scripture, and worship services. Muhr (2012) observed that international employees use locations that she terms as "non-places" to reconnect with their core identities by performing routine activities such as standing in line at the supermarket, checking in at the hotel, eating a Continental/American breakfast, and performing the security and passport checks at the airport. Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, and Samuel (1998) noted how employees mimic the actions and behaviors of their mentors and even their mentor's mentor to craft their own identities (see also Alvesson, 2001; Ibarra, 1999). Thus, identity work can take several, quite varied forms.

### 2.2.2 Types of identities worked upon in organizations

Apart from identity work modes, our review suggests there also are meaningfully distinguishable types of identities people work upon in organizations. Not only do people have multiple identities but they also have varying types of identities that can differentially influence how, when, and why identity work occurs. Consistent with previous typologies of identities (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Thoits & Virshup, 1997), our analysis revealed three major categories of identities people work upon in occupations and organizations: collective, role, and personal identities.

### Collective identities

Individuals often define themselves as part of a collective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, individuals may construct work-related self-meaning around the organizations in which they work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). How individuals create meaning around their ties to their organization is complicated and characterized by dueling desires to be part of something larger than themselves and to be distinct from others (Brewer, 1991). For instance, Frandsen (2015) demonstrated that call center employees often simultaneously embrace and distance themselves from their organization and their roles within that organization. Similarly, Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, and Scully (2010) found that devout members of the Catholic Church engaged in "split identification" in which they identified with the teachings of the Church but disidentified with the Church as an organization. Thus, although organizations are important targets of identity for individuals, identity work around organizations is not always straightforward.

Individuals also target occupational or professional identities in their identity work, focusing on what it means to be a member of a particular occupational category. Empirical research on identity work has explored a variety of occupational identities ranging from knowledge work occupations such as scientists (e.g., Jain, George, & Maltarich, 2009), investment bankers (e.g., Alvesson & Robertson, 2016), medical professionals (e.g., Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017), engineers (e.g., Jorgenson, 2002), architects (e.g., Vough, 2012), lawyers (e.g., Brown & Lewis, 2011), management consultants (e.g., Costas & Kärreman, 2016), academics (e.g., Knights & Clarke, 2014), and accountants (e.g., Gendron & Spira, 2010) to less prestigious occupations such as construction workers (e.g., Styhre, 2012), correctional officers (e.g., Tracy, 2004), exotic dancers (e.g., Grandy & Mavin, 2012), chefs (e.g., Fine, 1996), and miners (e.g., Wicks, 2002). Individuals in both stigmatized occupations (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007) and well-respected occupations (e.g., Gill, 2015; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Morales & Lambert, 2013; Vough, Cardador, Bednar, Dane, & Pratt, 2013) engage in identity work to deal with identity-based insecurities, anxieties, and misconceptions. For instance, Alvesson (2001, p. 863) suggested that in "knowledge work," a competent work identity is difficult to construct due to the "slipperiness" of the concept of knowledge. Relatedly, Brown and Lewis (2011) demonstrated that knowledge workers often struggle with issues of autonomy. Thus, people across the occupational spectrum tend to engage in identity work to build and revise their collective identities.

### Role identities

Roles, understood as the positions we take on in relation to others, play a key part in defining who we are (e.g., Stryker, 1987), especially in the context of work (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). A vital aspect of role-based self-meanings are one's relational identities, or one's self understanding in relation to others (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Much of the research on role-based identity work in workplaces has focused on roles such as managers, leaders, and entrepreneurs, explaining how people create meaning and legitimacy in these roles. In particular, research has explored how leaders and managers position themselves relative to discourses about these roles (e.g., Clarke et al., 2009; Cuganesan, 2017; Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017; Sims, 2008). Scholars have also focused on how entrepreneurs craft and express

their roles in their companies (e.g., Lewis, 2013; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Lewis (2015), for example, showed how over time, an informant shifted her view of the entrepreneurial role from a focus on nuts and bolts to a more strategic, long-term perspective.

Research has also examined individuals' attempts to be understood as a "professional" when enacting a variety of work roles. Professionalism refers to presenting oneself and conducting oneself in ways that help reinforce one's claims to specialized knowledge or expertise (Grey, 1998) and meet normative expectations (Roberts, 2005). As such, identity work around being a "professional" focuses primarily on the activities individuals use to create and express a sense of being competent when enacting a specific work role. For instance, Roberts (2005) suggested that those deviating from the image of an "ideal professional" associated with being White, masculine, heterosexual, and well educated may face distinct struggles with constructing a professional image that others accept as legitimate. This assertion is supported in studies of African-American journalists (Slay & Smith, 2011), gay men in the UK's National Health Services (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009), and female engineers (Jorgenson, 2002). In an interesting twist, although acting "professional" is typically exalted as positive and desired, Alvesson and Robertson (2016) found that investment bankers used the term "professionalism" to refer to an impassive and detached stance relative to colleagues and clients, noting that individuals may forego respect, autonomy, and integrity, in the name of professionalism.

### *Personal identities*

Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin (2010) note that an individual's personal identity is the most elementary type of identity that "denotes a unique individual with self-descriptions drawn from one's own biography and singular constellation of experiences" (p. 479). Personal identities can be derived from idiosyncratic personal attributes or qualities. For instance, in her study of toy designers, Elsbach (2009) found that designers created recognizable "signature styles" to confirm and express their own creative identities. Individuals also utilize their self-defining traits in the construction or repair of identity narratives. In their investigation of how individuals bring prior work experience with them as they move into new organizations, Beyer and Hannah (2002) provide evidence of individuals creating their own unifying themes that link their past and current experiences, such as "matchmaker" or "strategic thinker." In another study, Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) found that employees used identity work to repair their threatened "good worker" identity in the wake of bullying.

Demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and ethnicity) are a second source of personal self-meaning that individuals work on in organizations. Although demographic identities stem from memberships in broader collectives, in the work context, they can be individuating, prompting identity work. These personal, nonwork identities are a source of obstacles as well as opportunities for identity work (e.g., Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Ford, 2006). LaPointe (2013), for example, suggested that masculine narratives of career-change constrained the identity work of female Finnish business students considering a career change. In addition to examinations of women's identity work around gender in organizations (e.g., Essers & Benschop, 2007; Lewis, 2013; Pini, 2005), scholars have also focused on issues related to men's identity work. Alvesson (1998) described how male advertisers, struggling with their masculine identity in a line of work becoming more "feminized," reinforced the gendered division of labor to restore

feelings of masculinity. In contrast, Ely and Meyerson (2010) found male offshore oil platform workers did not ascribe to stereotypical masculine behaviors, instead embraced more feminine identity characteristics by acknowledging limitations, mistakes, and engaging with emotions.

Some research emphasizes cultural or ethnic identity work in organization. For instance, in a study of Moroccan and Turkish female Muslim entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, Essers and Benschop (2009) found that informants had to negotiate multiple conflicting demands coming from their religion, culture, and work. Similarly, Liu (2017) articulated how Chinese Australian professionals played into their ethno-cultural identities by presenting themselves as exotic commodities, which helped them gain recognition with their White colleagues. There is less research on identity work concerning other social categories at work such as sexual identity. However, as Creed, DeJordy, and Lok (2010) illustrate in their work on LGBT priests who become agents of institutional change and Compton (2016) demonstrated in the context of employees managing their sexual identities in relation to organizational policies, this is an important line of research for future research.

Synthesizing our review of the modes of identity work and the types of identities worked upon with current definitions of identity work, we present an updated definition of identity work:

> Identity work in occupations and organizations consists of the *cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities* that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting *collective, role, and personal self-meanings* within the boundaries of their social contexts.

Including modes and types of identity work depicts the diversity within the current identity work literature and provides an opportunity for future research to transcend these divergences.

## 3 THE HOW, WHEN, AND WHY OF IDENTITY WORK

Just as you see different colors and shapes depending on the angle at which you look at a crystal, scholars see different things when studying the construct of identity work, based upon the theoretical angle they adopt to examine it. However, seeing different things does not mean that the crystal (or the construct) is fractured or in tension. Rather, it suggests that it is multifaceted and complex and perhaps best understood when viewed from multiple angles. In this section, we look across four theoretical approaches commonly used to explain identity work (social identity theory, identity theory, critical theory, and narrative theory[3]) to illustrate the added value of each approach and to set the groundwork for further integrations across approaches. As detailed below and summarized in Table 2, we articulate what each of these theories predicts about *how*, *when*, *and why* identity work occurs. Importantly, we only provide a brief, high-level overview of the

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[3] Although we treat these theories independently in order to parse out their unique added value to our understanding of identity work, in reality, they are overlapping. Thus, we acknowledge that the boundaries between them are blurred and that authors sometimes use several of these theories concurrently. Additionally, there is heterogeneity across identity work papers regarding how each theory is used, and therefore, the empirical examples we provide may not represent the views of other papers using the same theoretical perspective. Although we note several of these variations, we focus primarily on the core elements of the theories in terms of their original conceptualizations and the dominant uses of them over time. Finally, not every theory that we review will be considered a theory by all readers, and therefore, the term "theory" may not equally apply, but we use it for the sake of parsimony.

basic elements of each theoretical perspective to save room for an in-depth articulation of their stance on identity work. More detailed examinations of these theories in relation to the general concept of identity have been performed expertly elsewhere (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Brown, 2017; Held, 1980; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Stets & Burke, 2000). Although these are the dominant theoretical perspectives used in the articles reviewed, they are not a comprehensive list of all perspectives used to understand identity work. We explore additional theoretical approaches, such as psychodynamics and intersectionality, in a later section.

**Table 2.** Dominant identity work theoretical perspectives

| Theory and representative articles | What types of identities are worked on? | How do people engage in identity work? | When do people engage in identity work? | What motivates people to engage in identity work? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Social identity theory**<br>Foundational: Tajfel and Turner (1979)<br>- Alvesson (2000)<br>- Ashforth and Kreiner (1999)<br>- Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014)<br>- Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) | Collective identities | - Position themselves relative to ingroups and outgroups<br>- Change how they define groups in which they are members | - When collective meanings are changed or challenged<br>- When ingroup/outgroup distinctions become salient | - Self-enhancement<br>- Distinctiveness<br>- Belongingness |
| **Critical theory**<br>Foundational: Foucault (1980)<br>- Alvesson & Willmott (2002)<br>- Brown & Lewis (2011)<br>- Boussebaa and Brown (2017)<br>- Covaleski et al. (1998) | Collective identities | - Resist and/or engage with attempts at control from dominant institutional discourses | - Ongoing, in response to discursive attempts to shape identities | - Maintaining continuity and individuality |
| **Identity theory**<br>Foundational: Stryker and Serpe (1982)<br>- DeRue and Ashford (2010)<br>- Jain et al. (2009)<br>- Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016)<br>- Knapp et al. (2013) | Role identities | - Change self to align with role<br>- Change role expectations<br>- Change self or others' perceptions of roles | - New roles<br>- Self vs. other expectations<br>- Multiple roles | - Self-verification |
| **Narrative Theory**<br>Foundational: Bruner (1991)<br>- Beech and Johnson (2005)<br>- Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010)<br>- Watson (2009)<br>- Wright et al. (2012) | Personal identities | - Creating and updating stories that draw on personal histories and available discourses | - Ongoing but heightened during transitions/change<br>- Ambiguous or unexpected events | - Coherence and plausibility |

As shown in Table 2, each of these theories is used to explain identity work largely in relation to one of the three types of identities (collective, role, and personal) described above. Both social identity theory and critical theory focus on collective level identities. Social identity theory emphasizes when and how individuals will define themselves as part of a collective (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1978), whereas critical theory's focus is on the strong role played by collectives in regulating and controlling individuals' identities (Foucault, 1980). In both cases, the collective in question is typically the organization, whereas less frequently occupations or subgroups are also considered. Identity theory, in contrast, is more concerned with self and social perceptions and experiences of role identities (Stryker, 1987; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Finally, although narrative theory has been used at multiple levels of analysis, it is often aimed at

explaining how people make sense of their experiences by constructing stories (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Watson, 2009). As such, narrative approaches shed light on the historical, personal story of the individual that is told internally and through interactions with others (Beech, 2008; Brown, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus, one key reason why these various theories have inconsistent, yet complementary, stances on how, when, and why identity work occurs is because they often focus on different types of identities.

3.1 How do individuals engage in identity work?

A central question for identity work scholars is as follows: How do individuals engage in identity work? In other words, what are the processes underlying identity work? Numerous identity work tactics/activities have proliferated in recent years, making our understanding of them unwieldy. For example, among others, adapting, negotiating, avoiding, rejecting and resisting (Berger, Essers, & Himi, 2017), teflonic maneuvering (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016), nostalgia, reproduction, validation, and combination (Bardon, Josserand, & Villesèche, 2015), legitimacy affirming and legitimacy contesting (Brown & Toyoki, 2013), and experimentation, reflection, and recognition (Beech, 2011) have been identified as identity work tactics in the last 6 years. However, it is difficult, based on the current state of the literature, to assess how each of these tactics relate to each other. Here, we draw on different theoretical perspectives to articulate what it is individuals actually do when engaging in identity work. In so doing, we identify a few broad categories of identity work tactics that will be useful for scholars attempting to situate their findings within the existing literature. Although the identity work modes described in the earlier section are the types of raw materials that individuals draw upon (thoughts, talk, actions, symbols) when engaging in identity work, the tactic categories described here explain how individuals engage those raw materials when enacting identity work. As such, individuals may use multiple different modes to perform identity work in any of these categories of tactics. For instance, individuals who create and update their personal stories may do so via changing their cognitions, engaging in discourse about their new stories, changing their physical representations of self, or behaving in line with the newly adopted story.

*Social identity theory* (SIT)[4] suggests two basic ways that identity work occurs. First, individuals engage in identity work as they change the degree to which they associate themselves with a collective. Thus, individuals may either attach or distance themselves relative to a collective (e.g., increasing/decreasing identification; Ashforth & Mael, 1989), doing what Brown (2017) calls identification work. Pratt (2000) suggests this process occurs through affinity or emulation. In the case of affinity, people recognize compatibilities between themselves and the organization and even choose organizations seen to be similar to themselves. In the case of emulation, individuals incorporate characteristics of the organization into their self-understandings. In both cases, identity work determines individuals' level of attachment to collectives. For instance, Petriglieri (2015) found that even though BP executives' identification with BP were destabilized in the wake of the Gulf of Mexico rig explosion, those who were able to actively work on the response to the explosion could reidentify with BP. Intergroup comparisons and prototypes are a key element of this identity work process. Lucas (2011), for instance, illustrated how miners compared themselves with low- and high-status outgroups to find greater dignity in their work.

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[4] In our discussion of SIT, we include both SIT and SCT as they share assumptions and are typically discussed together (for a discussion of the relationship between the two, see Hogg & Terry, 2000).

In terms of prototypes, the construction managers in Löwstedt and Räisänen's (2014) study strongly associated themselves with the prototypical craftsman: "there was a common representation of 'who we are', and of 'what we do' reproduced in the dominant narrative, which simultaneously reinforced the identification of a salient ingroup" (p. 1097).

In addition to adjusting the degree to which they see themselves as members of a collective, individuals also engage in identity work by changing the meanings that they associate with a group. This form of identity work is perhaps most clear in the research on so-called dirty-work occupations (Hughes, 1951), which examines how individuals relate to and overcome the taint associated with the work that they perform (e.g., Grandy & Mavin, 2012; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006), potentially with help from their managers (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2017). In this vein, Ashforth and colleagues (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) proposed that individuals working in occupations characterized by physical, social, or moral taint will engage in tactics such as recalibrating, reframing, and refocusing occupational ideologies, alongside other approaches. However, individuals do not engage in this form of identity work only around stigmatized identities. Kyratsis, Atun, Phillips, Tracey, and George (2017) identified three forms of identity work (authenticating, reframing, and cultural repositioning) that established medical professionals used to change their professional identities in the wake of a tumultuous professional logic shift. Thus, from a SIT perspective, identity work occurs through changing one's association with a collective or changing the meanings one associates with that collective.

From a *critical theory* (CT) perspective, identity work involves engagement with dominant discourses, often in a contested fashion (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown & Lewis, 2011; Clarke et al., 2009; Covaleski et al., 1998). CT differs from SIT by emphasizing the role that institutions play in shaping how individuals engage in identity work (e.g., Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Organizations create and perpetuate dominant narratives to influence how individuals define themselves, with hopes that such identities will constrain behaviors in organizationally beneficial ways. This often prompts power struggles in the form of identity work. For example, Thornborrow and Brown (2009) explored how the preferred self-conceptions of paratroopers were controlled by their regiment. They found that paratroopers aspired to a specific image of their occupation centered on professionalism, elitism, and machismo-ism, but this image was elusive and a source of anxiety. As such, identity regulation is viewed as a form of hegemonic organizational control.

Although individuals are influenced by hegemonic discourses (Gagnon, 2008; Gill, 2015; Tracy, 2004), through identity work, they can also question, co-opt, or reject these discourses in favor of other valued identities (Doolin, 2002; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b), although they often do so in subtle, covert ways (see Collinson, 2003). Interestingly, several articles indicate that control attempts are not all or nothing. Individuals often end up both being controlled and resisting (e.g., Anteby, 2008). For example, Westwood and Johnston (2012) revealed that employees often use humor to reject organizational attempts at identity regulation, while still maintaining the status quo (see also Huber & Brown, 2017). Further, the existence of multiple competing discourses makes control attempts penetrable (e.g., Humphreys & Brown, 2002b). Clarke et al. (2009) found that aerospace managers negotiated between discourses of emotional detachment versus engagement, professionalism versus unprofessionalism, and concerns for

business and for people. Thus, identity work from a CT perspective is centered on understanding how people respond to issues of identity control in organizations, including those stemming from powerful entities that attempt to regulate one's identity as well as those arising from organizational members who become complicit in supporting existing discourses.

*Identity theory* (IT) makes differing predictions regarding the process of identity work, in part because it is focused on role-identities, as opposed to collective identities. IT, based on the symbolic interactionist framework and the work of Stryker and Serpe (1982), suggests that identity is strongly rooted in roles, which are interpersonally negotiated. As such, how we see ourselves depends upon the roles we hold and the expectations associated with those roles (Katz & Kahn, 1966; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Role identities provide the self with a meaning that encompasses relational role-expectations such as sales associate-customer (e.g., Thoits, 1995). Accordingly, from an IT perspective, individuals engage in identity work by taking steps to define themselves by a new role or to change a role partner's perceptions of who they are and what should be expected of them in a role relationship. For instance, although she did not take an explicitly "IT" lens, Ibarra's (1999) work on provisional selves explains how individuals draw on their own and others' perceptions about a role when adapting to a new role. In addition, the research on leader and manager identity stresses the importance of relational identity work when individuals attempt to position themselves as leaders in relation to followers (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Ely et al., 2011; Epitropaki et al., 2017). In their theory piece on claiming and granting leader identities, DeRue and Ashford (2010) provided a useful illustration of the different ways that identity work may occur for both leaders and followers. Individuals must claim their roles and what defines them, but they also must be granted those roles by others.

Scholars use IT to explain identity work at the nexus of multiple work roles. Jain et al. (2009) demonstrated how academics who become involved with commercialization activity navigated the blurred lines between their once clear role as an academic and the new role of an entrepreneur to create a hybrid role identity of an academic entrepreneur (see also Karhunen, Olimpieva, & Hytti, 2017). Further, Caza et al. (2017) found that to manage their authenticity when juggling multiple work roles, plural careerists sequentially segmented and then aggregated work roles on both a cognitive and interpersonal level. Finally, Grimes (2017) found that entrepreneurs challenged by feedback strategically identified and de-identified with the various work roles they held during their creative revision process. Thus, from an IT perspective, roles are conduits for identity work that occurs as people shift their own and others' perceptions of their roles, sometimes simultaneously.

Finally, *narrative identity theories* (NIT[5]) suggest that identity work is an act of storytelling in which we incorporate experiences into our ongoing story of self to make sense of who we are (Linde, 2001). From this perspective, people understand themselves through stories that connect who they once were to who they are now and who they may become (Ibarra &

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[5] What we classify under NIT is a group of loosely related papers that use narratives as a theoretical and methodological tool. Within this group, a subset draw upon sensemaking that has been considered by some researchers to be a theory of its own (e.g., Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). However, in our analysis, which focuses on parsing out theoretical assumptions related to identity work specifically, we classify sensemaking as a form of NIT due to shared assumptions and occasionally highlight its unique contributions

Barbulescu, 2010). Beech et al. (2012, p. 41) note that narrative identity work involves an on-going process of "writing one's autobiography" in which others play character roles. Identity narratives, thus, are the result of an interplay between internal factors and external influences and are constantly "in-progress," as multiple versions of reality tend to exist in tension (e.g., Boje, 1991; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pick, Symons, & Teo, 2017).

Such narratives are constructed within existing discourses that constrain what we consider to be a good story (Watson, 2009). Wright, Nyberg, and Grant (2012) showed how sustainability managers and consultants negotiated varying and often conflicting discourses around sustainability, efficiency, profitability, and professionalism to narrate themselves as green change agents, rational managers, and committed activists (see also Carollo & Guerci, 2017). Further, people may also incorporate specific work experiences into their ongoing narratives. For example, Vough, Bataille, Noh, and Lee (2015) illustrated how managers engage in identity maintaining, protecting, or restructuring as they narrated the ending of their careers. People may also work to narrate their nonwork identities in the workplace (e.g., Essers & Benschop, 2007; Jorgenson, 2002; LaPointe, 2013). Jorgenson (2002), for instance, described how female engineers used narration to resolve contradictions between their gender and professional identities.

3.2 When does identity work occur?

The different theoretical perspectives have implications for not only how identity work occurs but also when it is proposed to occur. Although each of the theories suggest that identity work will intensify in the face of threats, tensions, or conflict relevant to the identity, the nature of those circumstances differs across theories. Below, we outline the situations that each theory predicts will initiate or heighten identity work.

As per *SIT*, identity work is likely to occur when the meaning of a collective is threatened or changed and when ingroup/outgroup distinctions become salient. First, identity work is particularly likely when the meanings of collective membership are threatened, such as when employees of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey grappled with their connection to the organization based on its stance on (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Here, both one's own perceptions of the organization (organizational identity) and one's perceptions of how others view the organization (organizational image) can initiate identity work when threatened. Second, when the meaning of a collective changes, such as institutional logic shifts in the medical profession (e.g., Kyratsis et al., 2017; Reay et al., 2017), people are also likely to engage in identity work. Third, identity work also occurs when ingroup/outgroup distinctions become salient. Koveshnikov, Vaara, and Ehrnrooth (2016) showed how cultural stereotypes played out in two Finnish multinational corporations operating in Russia. Both the Russians and the Finns created stereotypes of the other and engaged in "stereotypical identity talk" to construct boundaries and power relations as well as "reactive talk" to protect themselves from these threats.

*CT's* focus on hegemonic discourses that institutions use to control individuals suggests that identity work occurs when individuals feel compelled to negotiate between attempts at identity regulation and their need for agency. Thus, identity work is an ongoing process involving

varying levels of compliance with or resistance to discourses in the context of power inequities (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Anteby, 2008; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017). Covaleski et al. (1998) found that in Big Six public accounting firms, accountants relied on discourses of public autonomy to resist pressures toward conformity. Organizations may also effectively shut down opportunities for identity work. Karreman and Alvesson's (2001) study of a Swedish newspaper showed how pressures in a meeting to create and maintain a cohesive shared identity around the newspaper prevented time for critical reflection and alternative meanings. Perhaps more than the other theories, critical theory focuses less on triggers and more on the ongoing power struggle between individuals and institutions.

Identity work, from the perspective of *IT*, is expected to occur when there are conflicts or misunderstandings around roles (Stets & Serpe, 2013). According to Stryker and Burke (2000), one's social positions are validated through "role performances that accord more closely with the meanings and expectations attached to that identity" (p. 289). Tensions around roles can occur when a role is new, when others do not see us as we see ourselves in a role, or when multiple roles conflict with one another. For instance, both Ibarra (1999) and Pratt et al. (2006) showed that role transitions become ripe moments for identity work because people are learning to enact expected role behaviors and building a sense of self in these new roles. Simultaneously, individuals often must also reconcile differences between new and old roles (Jain et al., 2009). Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016) demonstrated how meanings of roles and the attached identities are negotiated over time in a team. Specifically, although no roles were initially assigned, the team members constructed their roles as intrapraneurs, then cultural translators, then internal salespeople. Each of these negotiations contributed in different ways to the team seeing themselves as experts and outsiders. With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that identity work may be particularly salient in the early stages of becoming an entrepreneur (e.g., Drori, Honig, & Sheaffer, 2009; Karhunen et al., 2017). Finally, because individuals hold multiple roles simultaneously (Stryker, 1987), individuals may experience tension between valued role identities. Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg (2012) found during the liminal period of pregnancy, expecting mothers engaged in identity work to address conflicts between professional and nonwork identities. In sum, there are a host of tensions around roles that can initiate identity work.

From a *NIT* perspective, identity narratives are neither static nor are they ever completed, as multiple versions of reality "are constantly being reconstructed, refined, embellished, imagined and re-imagined by different actors in different settings, as stories are narrated and re-narrated" (Beech et al., 2012, p. 41). However, narrative identity work is likely to be more pronounced as individuals go through work transitions and change. Such events cause disjunctures in the ongoing identity narrative that requires work to integrate back into the narrative (e.g., Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015). In particular, Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) predicted that narrative identity work will be particularly prevalent when individuals experience role transitions that are large departures from their previous work, do not reflect institutionalized career trajectories, and are perceived as socially undesirable. Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) found that frequent boundary spanners engaged in identity work around their moves between positions, projects, and other major career choices, resulting in either integrated or multi-identity narratives. In their study of management coaches, Moore and Koning (2016) explored how their informants engaged in identity work to manage the uncertainty involved in this new role identity.

In addition to work transitions, individuals also construct narratives to make sense of ambiguous or unexpected events (e.g., Boudreau, Serrano, & Larson, 2014; Weick, 1995). When ambiguous events occur, previously constructed understandings and the selves that go along with them are called into question. When sense has been broken, it requires reconstruction (Pratt, 2000). In a clear depiction of this process, Koerner (2014) described how the recognition of incompatibilities between different types of identity (e.g., personal and collective) led to sensemaking via courage stories that preserve, repair, strengthen, or create identities. Vough and Caza (2017) theorized that individuals experiencing unexpected denied promotions can construct growth narratives that help them build resilient identities. Thus, narrative theories are helpful for understanding identity work in the context of transitions or unexpected events.

3.3 Why does identity work occur?

Perhaps the area of widest divergence across theories concerns what motivates people to engage in identity work. Although it has been recognized that there are various motivations underlying the self (e.g., Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Lepisto et al., 2015; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006), different theories emphasize a subset of these motivations. Here, we explore the dominant motives attributed to identity work in each of these traditions.

Although *SIT* scholars have referred to several motives for identity work, the most common ones are self-enhancement, distinctiveness, and belongingness. People strive to see themselves in a positive light. As such, individuals seek to self-enhance by associating with prestigious collectives (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Wicks (2002) found that, through their interactions with others at home and at work, coal miners could construct positive occupational identities, despite the taint associated with the occupation. Relatedly, people also engage in identity work to feel distinct from others. In fact, striving for positive distinctiveness may even be, at times, an impetus for lying at work (e.g., Leavitt & Sluss, 2015). This need for distinctiveness can be coupled with a need for belonging with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as individuals seek an optimal balance between being part of a group and also retaining their own unique defining characteristics (Brewer, 1991). For example, priests find themselves having to negotiate the balance between their need for a unique personal identity and their need for inclusion in their occupation (Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al., 2006), and entrepreneurs seek to be connected to, yet distinctive from, their local entrepreneurship communities (Grimes, 2017).

Although motives are not often an explicit focus of *CT* scholars' research, this framework does suggest that people may instinctively engage in identity work in order to maintain their individuality, self-expression, and sense of continuity. Alvesson and Willmott (2002), for example, suggest that the objective of identity work is continuity in a sense of self: "Managing continuity … against a shifting discursive framework … is the basis for identity work". Organizational attempts at identity regulation may disrupt people's ongoing identity construction process, resulting in insecurities (Collinson, 2003; Gagnon, 2008) and anxiety (Gill, 2015; Kuhn, 2006; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Accordingly, people often react to this sense of identity imposition reflexively by engaging in identity work in order to negotiate and resist organizational identity control and to protect their own sense of agency and individuality. For example, Doolin (2002) documented how clinicians, defined by professional autonomy, resisted

attempts by management to bring in more accountability when they thought it hurt their sense of professional control.

*IT*, in contrast, highlights the need for self-verification: individuals' need for others to see them as they see themselves (Swann, 2012). Because individuals' understandings of their roles are shaped by how others see them in these roles (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), they engage in identity work to align their own and others' role perceptions (Swann & Hill, 1982). For example, Wilson and Deaney (2010) used self-verification to explain why a teacher engaged in identity work by leaving her role as she felt others' perception of her in that role was inconsistent with how she wanted to be seen. Scott, Colquitt, and Paddock (2009) have noted how managers either adhere to or violate norms of interpersonal and informational justice to project an identity of being a good or a strict boss, respectively. Thus, the IT perspective posits enactment of roles in expected or desired ways as the key motive for identity work.

Finally, the core motive for identity work from an *NIT* perspective is coherence. As individuals integrate new experiences into the story of their lives, they want these stories to make sense and tie together past, present, and future (Shortt, 2012). To be perceived as coherent, both the structure and the content of the story must align with the teller and listener's understanding of how the world works and of typical human behavior (McAdams, 2006). From this perspective, humans are driven to see themselves as remaining the same, at least in part, as time passes. Narratives can create this desired sense of stability even amidst change. For instance, Fachin and Davel (2015) found that filmmaker, Denys Arcand, sought coherence as he transitioned from a political documentary maker to a box-office director. Coherence can also motivate individuals to create a sense of compatibility between various discourses. In one of several pieces on how managers navigate sustainability issues, Phillips (2013) illustrated how two "ecoprenuers" negotiated discourses related to enterprise and environment into a coherent identity narrative. However, their positioning did change as they oriented themselves in relation to different sets of others. Importantly, plausibility, not accuracy is the core motivation for crafting an identity narrative (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Coherence does not imply "truth" but rather the ability to create a story that integrates one's observations and holds up to scrutiny (Weick et al., 2005). For instance, in their study of former members of Arthur Andersen, Gendron and Spira (2010) found that members engaged in identity work to create a "distinct representation or conceptualization of what 'truly' happened within AA," but this culminated in four different "true representations" (p. 295).

## 4 WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF IDENTITY WORK?

After identity work occurs, then what? Although there is a great deal of research documenting when and how individuals engage in identity work, there is less work that focuses explicitly on the resultant outcomes. Here, we review the various outcomes that have been suggested, highlighting the complex, cross-level implications of identity work in organizations.

4.1 Identity implications: Resolved tensions, threats, or conflicts and strengthened identity

Given that identity work is primarily concerned with the creation, revision, and maintenance of identities, it is not surprising that the preponderance of scholarship has focused on its identity-

based implications. Perhaps the most common outcome of identity work is the resolution of some sort of identity tension or threat for the individual. These tensions often stem from identities in conflict (e.g., Carrim & Nkomo, 2016; Croft et al., 2015; Lewis, 2013). For instance, Berger et al. (2017) documented how identity work helped Muslim employees reconcile their professional and religious identities, whereas Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al. (2006) showed the boundary work priests engage in to protect personal and professional identities from infringing on one another. Role reconciliation may occur over time as well, as individuals who transition from one role to the next also need to align who they once were with who they are now (e.g., Beyer & Hannah, 2002). Identity work can also help individuals reduce perceived identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011). Those engaged in stigmatized work, for instance, can use identity work to distance themselves from the stigma or ease the threat of stigma by reevaluating their work (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Morales & Lambert, 2013; Toyoki & Brown, 2014), although such attempts are not always successful (Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2012). Or identity work may assist individuals in navigating between competing discourses, resulting in reconciliation or integration (e.g., Hodgson & Paton, 2016). Finally, individuals may be able to reconcile misalignments between their identities and the work they do via identity work (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Pratt et al., 2006).

Another identity-related benefit of identity work is the formation or strengthening of an identity. As individuals engage in identity work, they can internalize the identity more strongly and, in the case of social identities, feel stronger attachments to the collective (e.g., Brown, 2017; Cerulo, 1997; Mallett & Wapshott, 2012). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggested that the identity work of dirty workers enhances their occupational identification. Bardon et al. (2015) showed that corporate alumni's engagement in identity work helped them maintain their identification with their previous organization and provided them with a sense of who they are in their subsequent organizations. Alvesson (2000) also noted how identity work among knowledge workers boosted their identification with and loyalty toward the organization.

While the aim of identity work is often to reduce tension, to strengthen one's identity, or to form a new identity, empirical research indicates there is no guarantee that identity work will successfully address these issues, and sometimes it even creates new issues (e.g., Beech et al., 2012). Beech (2011) cautioned that despite efforts at identity work, ambiguity may persist and leave individuals in a liminal state. Clarke et al. (2009), for instance, found that managers integrated antagonistic discourses into their self-conceptions without settling on clear and coherent identities. In addition, Carrim and Nkomo (2016) described an intractable identity conflict wherein Indian women working in a Western culture will never be one of the "boys," regardless of the identity work they undertake. Further, Davies and Thomas (2008) found that despite efforts to change, masculinity remained a strong foundation for policing identities. Other studies suggest that in contrast to increased identification, identity work may lead to a weakened (Gendron & Spira, 2010), ambivalent (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), split (Gutierrez et al., 2010), schizo, or neutral (Humphreys & Brown, 2002b) identification with the collective. Further still, sometimes identity work ends in damaged identities (Cowen & Hodgson, 2015), or even a sense of self-alienation (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Thus, identity work does not always culminate in positive identity states, and in fact, recent work is beginning to question whether identity work is even always aimed at creating coherent, validated identities. For instance, Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, and Ybema (2016) found that rather than employing identity work to

achieve self-affirmation, indie musicians used three forms of self-questioning identity work for self-disruption.

## 4.2 Personal implications beyond identity outcomes

Identity work also has implications for several indicators of employee well-being and success at work. Maclean, Harvey, Gordon, and Shaw (2015) documented how entrepreneurs' use of a journey metaphor while crafting their identity narratives led them to embrace the new identity of a philanthropist, which in turn heightened personal fulfillment. Bowles (2012) showed how the identity work of women leaders after their authority claims were rejected led to either a reorientation in their long-term strategy or altered job aspirations (for similar findings in the context of expatriation, see Kohonen, 2008). Lewis (2013) showed how some female entrepreneurs experienced authenticity when they could adopt a feminized entrepreneurial identity. Cable, Gino, and Staats (2013) tied the experience of authenticity from expressing personal identities to increased job satisfaction and engagement. There is also growing acknowledgement that emotions play a large part in both the process and outcomes of identity work (e.g., Creed et al., 2010; Hay, 2014; Koerner, 2014; Winkler, 2016).

Identity work can often be a double-edged sword, resulting in both positive and negative personal outcomes. For instance, Croft et al. (2015) found that although identity work resolved some conflict at the individual level, nurse managers experienced emotional distress about the perceived loss of their professional identity. Similarly, Gill (2015) found that identity work by management consultants resulted in a trade-off between higher commitment and significant anxiety about their status. In one of the more elaborated explorations of identity work and personal outcomes, Kira and Balkin (2014) suggested a curvilinear relationship between work-identity alignment and well-being, such that there is a positive relationship between alignment and thriving, but only up to a point. Once individuals' identities and work become completely aligned, they found that individuals experience withering due to overidentification. In sum, identity work can have both positive as well as negative personal implications that go beyond its impact on identity.

## 4.3 Relational implications

The identity work one person does also has consequences for others in the work context. For instance, Koerner (2014) found that courage-based identity work can positively influence the identity of an observer. However, because identity work often privileges one's own desires, it can also have unintended downstream consequences for one's relationships with others. Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2016) found that as people pursued meaningful "expert" identities, their credibility was harmed and they were seen as outsiders. Similarly, in Beech et al.'s (2012) study of operas, as informant "Angus" attempted to disidentify from a draconian identity, he became seen by others as more and more intolerant. Thus, one person's identity work can have residual impact on those around him or her and on their relationship.

The relational implications of identity work also extend beyond specific interpersonal relationships to influence entire social groups. Doing (2004) described how the ongoing identity work around what it meant to be a lab operator influenced the interpersonal relationships

between operators and scientists as well as the culture within the lab. Similarly, Smith et al. (2014) found that relational identity work between the entrepreneurial leader of a social venture and the members of a strategic alliance firm led to identity changes for both the firms. In particular, identity work often involves the creation or dissolution of boundaries between groups, potentially even influencing power structures. Koveshnikov et al. (2016) demonstrated that in addition to distinguishing themselves from one another (creating boundaries), Finnish and Russian managers also engaged in "self-reflexive identity talk" that dissolved boundaries. Further, the Muslim female entrepreneurs in Essers and Benschop's (2007) study felt pressured to choose between being perceived as appropriate in the business context versus appropriate in their cultural communities. To address this, they stretched the boundaries of their religious and cultural identities to allow for entrepreneurial agency, shifting the power dynamics for these women within their larger community. Finally, Ybema, Vroemisse, and van Marrewijk (2012) found that identity work united groups leading to the construction and maintenance of partnerships across cultural boundaries.

4.4 Organizational implications (and beyond)

People's identity work has implications for the organizations and institutions they are embedded within. For instance, several authors have highlighted how, in the process of creating their own identities, employees also shape the identity of the organization. Brown and Toyoki (2013) depict how prisoners' identity work shaped both how they saw themselves as well as the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy of the Helsinki Prison. Similarly, although Humphreys and Brown (2002b) focused on how organizational narratives shape individual identities, they also illustrated how organizational identity claims evolved alongside organizational identification. From a cultural perspective, Leung, Zietsma, and Peredo (2014) showed how Japanese middle-class housewives changed the meaning of their roles at a broader, more institutional level through internal identity work. Thus, aligned with structuration arguments of Giddens (1984), while we create ourselves, we also create the structures in which our selves exist.

Individual identity work can serve as an act of resistance that disrupts organizational structures and discourses. Berger et al. (2017) found that the identity work undertaken by Muslim employees often challenged the White organizational structures and status hierarchy they were embedded within. Lok (2010) demonstrated that everyday identity work allows individuals and collectives to resist the identity and practical implications of new institutional logics. Several other papers have shown that identity work can influence strategy, in particular. MacIntosh and Beech (2011) suggested that fantasy plays an important role in the identity work that management teams engage in as they develop organizational strategy. Löwstedt and Räisänen (2014) found that when construction managers defined themselves on the basis of the collective identity of "construction workers," they were not open to ideas presented by consultants, potentially leading to negative strategy implications. Finally, Beech and Johnson (2005) proposed that identity dynamics can have a disruptive influence on strategic change.

Identity work may also influence employee performance and, as a consequence, organizational performance. Frandsen (2015) showed that call center employees' identity work resulted in cynical distancing that protected them from the harmful effects of a negative image while

enabling continual efficiencies and customer focus. Elsbach (2009) showed how individuals were able to negotiate between identity expression and allowable performance via the creation of signature styles for their toy cars. Finally, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) documented that if identity work failed and employees were unable to identify with their organizations, they displayed negative performance and, ultimately, were dismissed. However, although these studies suggest that identity work drives performance, it may be that identity work and performance are reciprocally related in that individuals may be more motivated to create positive identifications when their performance is high (Styhre, 2012).

Identity work also has been linked to safety behaviors in organizations. Wicks (2002) described how the identity development process led to risky and dangerous behaviors in a coal-mining context. Although the miners talked of the dangers in the mine, they also "almost basked in the danger by portraying themselves as 'real men' by going where few men would dare to go" (p. 324). Thus, these men came to see the essence of manhood as danger, ironically, putting them in harm's way. In a study on correctional officers, Lemmergaard and Muhr (2012) found that officers engaged in professional indifference that shielded them from the taint of the work but did not mean they ignored the dangers they faced. Ely and Meyerson (2010) found that the "undoing" of gender in offshore oil platforms enabled employees to remain focused on safety and avoid unnecessary risks.

Ultimately, as identity work is frequently not only cognitive but also discursive, physical, and behavioral, engaging in it has ripples that impact relationships with others and institutions more broadly. Overall, the research we summarized points to the need to look for beneficial and harmful outcomes of identity work, as well as when and how they co-occur.

## 5 MOVING FORWARD: CRITIQUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the previous sections, we have reviewed how our understanding of identity work has progressed. In the remainder of this article, we offer a critique that uncover the major avenues through which identity work research can be productively developed. We propose that empirical and conceptual misalignments and lack of methodological diversity has limited the depth and breadth of what we currently know about identity work. In this section, we articulate these limitations and point out relevant theoretical and methodological avenues to address them.

### 5.1 Empirical and conceptual misalignments

Several assumptions about identity work are not always represented in empirical investigations such as (a) individuals have multiple, interdependent identities, (b) identity work relates to past, present, and future identities, (c) identity work is relational, and (d) identity work is both conscious and unconscious. Below, we explore each of these points, supplying ideas on how to more explicitly include them in future research.

#### 5.1.1 Multiple identities

Although it has been acknowledged that people have multiple identities (James, 1890; Linville, 1987; Mead, 1934), much of organizational research focuses on identities in isolation

(e.g., Caza et al., 2017; Creary, Caza, & Roberts, 2015; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Doing so may be problematic because identities are interconnected such that a change in one has implications for the entire self-system (Ramarajan, 2014). In fact, we see utility in expanding our perspective from "identity work," which implies isolation focus on isolated identities, to "self-work," which acknowledges the interconnectivities between multiple identities within the self.

One way in which identity work researchers can address multiple identities is through adoption of an intersectionality lens. Arising from the feminist tradition, intersectionality focuses on the management of "the complexity of multiple dimensions" by examining relationships between and across identities (Atewologun, Sealy, & Vinnicombe, 2016, p. 224). Taken into the work context, this approach examines how combinations of individual's racial, gender, sexual, and other identities provide advantages or disadvantages at work. Carrim and Nkomo (2016) utilized intersectionality framing to explain how South African women negotiated their managerial identities in the political, historical, and cultural context in which they worked. Atewologun et al. (2016, p. 239) also used intersectionality theory as a lens in their illustration of how British Black, Asian, and mixed identity senior managers claimed their identities in ways that led to both privileged and disadvantaged status, resulting in "ongoing restriction and expansion of 'what it means to be a senior minority ethnic woman or man' in subordinate, superior and client encounters." Thus, we see great promise in an intersectionality approach that explicitly acknowledges the interdependence of ones' multiple identities.

We also suggest scholars should take a closer look at the juncture between discrete identities (e.g., gender and culture) and more generalized work identities. As currently conceptualized (e.g., Dutton et al., 2010), work identities consist of an individuals' unique set of identities at work. Yet exactly how specific work-based role, collective, or personal identities are integrated into an overall work-based self-concept and what contextual characteristics impact this process has not been thoroughly explored. Walsh and Gordon (2008) suggested that organizational and occupational identities are integrated into an overall work identity on the basis of the opportunities they provide for distinctiveness and self-enhancement. Riach and Loretto (2009) explored how older individuals without paid employment constructed their work identities relative to their age and disabilities. However, there is still room to explore how different types of identities interact to influence more general work identities.

*5.1.2 Temporal models*

There is also room for integration across temporal elements of identity. In our ongoing identity narratives, both past and potential future identities shape current self-meanings (Strahan & Wilson, 2006). Thus, identity work includes the identities we have held in the past as well as those we would like or anticipate holding in the future. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) suggest that who one anticipates becoming tomorrow shapes how one sees oneself today and the actions one takes today. Indeed, the future work selves that we envision for ourselves influence how we engage in career-related proactive behavior in the present (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). Despite these inroads, there is room for more fine-grained analyses of how anticipated or hoped for future selves affect current self-understandings as well as longitudinal studies of when and how future selves are incorporated into the self-concept.

Additionally, the field would benefit from greater exploration of how current or past identities set the stage for future identity work. Obodaru (2012) suggested that people often have alternative selves—or ideas about the person one could have been had circumstances been different—that influence affect, cognition, and motivation. Another emergent stream of research involves viewing identity work as creating identity resources (and sometimes constraints) that shape how individuals respond to future identity tensions. For instance, in a 5-year longitudinal study, Caza et al. (2017) found that the identity work around what it means to be authentic in their work led plural careerists to develop identity resources, which, in turn, propelled them to augment their perceptions of what it means to be authentic. Similarly, Vough and Caza (2017) suggested that as individuals tell growth-based stories about being denied a promotion, they develop resilient identities that help them face future identity threats.

### 5.1.3 Interpersonal dynamics

Scholars often assume that identity work is relational, in that collective, role and, personal identities are constructed with others over time. Several papers have theorized about the negotiated aspects of identity management (e.g., Creary et al., 2015; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009), but only few have examined this issue empirically. Although identity work occurs via interaction with others, in what ways might it matter who people engage in identity work with? Pasupathi (2003) suggested that the personality traits, goals, knowledge, behavior, and age of a listener shape a speakers' memory of personal experiences. Thus, future research should focus on the role specific others play in identity work, perhaps highlighting variables such as relative status, type of support given (e.g., affective and instrumental), and nature of relationship (e.g., inside work and outside work).

Similarly, it would be fruitful for future work to interview dyadic pairs to examine how identities are co-constructed and revised. Petriglieri and Obodaru's (in press) investigation of how dual-career couples' identities co-evolve is a good example of the usefulness of a more relationally dynamic perspective. Building on this, researchers could interview pre-revenue start-up entrepreneurs and their spouses to understand how they both construct their identities relative to the new company. Or, in the instance of an individual who gets promoted within her group, scholars could investigate how the group members simultaneously negotiate their revised role relationships by gathering data from both the new manager and the subordinates. This approach would add much needed understanding of the ongoing identity interplay between actors.

### 5.1.4 Unconscious processes

Despite the acknowledgement that identity work is not always a conscious process (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), the methods and theories used to address identity work tend to favor observable indicators of identity work. However, there is an emerging stream of research that looks at identity work from a psychodynamic lens, pointing out how ego defenses such as fantasy, denial, and rationalization can be used to minimize anxieties, resolve conflicts, and maintain self-esteem. Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to identity work suggests that the core of identity is often what is repressed and excluded rather than brought to the fore (Driver, 2015, 2017). Petriglieri and Stein (2012) showed how leaders in the Gucci family deal with unwanted versions of their selves through processes of projective identification—the

"splitting off" of undesirable understandings of who they are and projecting them onto others. As work expands in this area, scholars should look for intersections between it and other, more conscious frameworks. This may require drawing on perspectives that foreground such processes, as these authors have done, as well as using methods aimed at understanding unconscious processing, such as the combination of psychoanalytic, cognitive, and neurophysiological techniques advocated by Shevrin, Bond, Brakel, Hertel, and Williams (1996).

5.2 Methodological myopia

A second issue concerning the current study of identity work is the lack of methodological diversity. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the identity work literature is the almost complete dominance of qualitative studies. With very few exceptions, all of the writings we found in this domain were theoretical or qualitative. Although this inductive dominance has led to a rich understanding of what identity work is, it has also resulted in a proliferation of constructs, a lack of theory testing, and an impoverished understanding of the role of individual differences. Further, although research on identity work has been performed in a wide variety of contexts, there is still ample room to investigate how contextual factors influence identity work. In the interest of providing a more balanced understanding, we invite researchers to also explore quantitative approaches to identity work.

There are several plausible reasons for the predominance of theoretical and qualitative approaches. First, by definition, identity is highly idiosyncratic. As such, each person has a unique set of identities that differentiate them from others. Because qualitative research privileges the lived experiences of people, most identity-work researchers have relied on it for studying the nuances of idiosyncratic identity processes. Second, identity work is a dynamic concept that may be difficult to fully capture via quantitative measures. Third, research on identity work only began in earnest around the turn of the century, with several foundational pieces published in 2002 and 2003. Thus, up to this point, because there was little known about it, identity work could be considered a nascent theory, which typically lends itself to inductive theory development where "rich, detailed, and evocative data are needed to shed light on the phenomenon" (Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1162).

However, given the vast amount of research that has been reviewed here, we believe that research on identity work has matured into an intermediate, or perhaps even a mature concept. As such, the time has come to begin to look for a more balanced approach to studying identity work—encompassing both inductive and deductive empirical insights—for both theory building and theory testing (Fine & Elsbach, 2000). When a field of study stays in the theory building stage for too long, it can give rise to what Block (1995) refers to as the jangle fallacy wherein there is a proliferation of similar concepts masquerading under different names. This contributes to conceptual ambiguity and confusion that stymies the further growth of the field. As noted above, there is already evidence of this confusion in the proliferation of new identity work tactics without relying on earlier descriptions, which inhibits comparisons across contexts. An overreliance on qualitative investigations of intermediate theory can also lead to a lost opportunity for statistical support for its main tenants (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), possibly making researchers weary of the field. Incorporating some deductive theory testing studies via quantitative methodologies could defuse this issue.

Quantitative approaches may also help with the terminological issues we have noted since the development of quantitative scales, though often imperfect, allows for conceptual consistency— at least among those using a given scale. Although the "what" aspect of identity work will remain idiosyncratic, the "how" and "to what end" of identity work is ripe for measurement using more quantitative means. Thus, an important first step toward deductive tests of identity work, its antecedents, and its impact will be the development of validated measures of identity work tactics. For instance, scholars could develop scales for each of the central identity work goals (forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising identities). Additionally, our enhanced definition of identity work that includes the different modes of identity work can also act as a solid foundation for developing a comprehensive scale that contains items pertaining to each mode of identity work. In the following sections, we discuss specific advantages of diversifying the methodological toolkit of identity work research.

### 5.2.1 Individual differences and outcomes

Quantitative and mixed-method investigations open the door for new questions around the role of individual differences in identity work. Gender has frequently been used as a differentiator for identity work (e.g., Alvesson, 1998; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; LaPointe, 2013; Pini, 2005). However, there are surely several other individual differences that also drive identity work processes. Self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1991) and self-esteem (e.g., Leary, 2012) may be two examples. Those who are confident in who they are and feel like they can effectively make changes may be those who are more proactive in their identity work efforts, such as resisting control attempts or discarding others' perceptions. By assessing such individual differences and investigating their relationship with various identity work propensities and behaviors via field surveys (Button, 2001; Jones et al., 2016), researchers can get a better understanding of who gravitates toward which types of identity work. Doing so would address questions such as the following: Why do some individuals challenge identity regulation attempts while others accept them? Why do some stigmatized workers recalibrate their work while others reframe? Why might one individual be concerned about meeting her own role standards while another is concerned about meeting others' role standards?

Diversifying methodologies used to investigate identity work will also help us better understand the outcomes of identity work and their underlying mechanisms. In our review, we found that identity work outcomes were often secondary, relegated to the discussion section. Accordingly, investigations focused directly on understanding implications of identity work and the timing of these outcomes will be critical. Shifting focus toward outcomes may mean relying on quantitative measures that can best measure outcomes of interest and possibly even experimental approaches that make salient certain types of identities (Cable et al., 2013) allowing researchers to induce particular forms of identity work. That being said, because identity issues are complex and characterized by competing tensions (e.g., Caza et al., 2017; Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012), such approaches will need to take into consideration the various trade-offs identity work entails.

### 5.2.2 Role of context

Currently, we lack a clear understanding of contextual influences because most studies focus on identity work in very particular contexts, leading to a form of sampling myopia. Due to the predominantly qualitative approach, extant studies typically give rich contextual descriptions and background information about where identity work is occurring. However, there have been few attempts to look across contexts and contrast the variables that are shaping the identity work process. Although scholars using CT, for instance, have effectively captured organizational and institutional attempts to regulate individual identity (e.g., Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter, 2010; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), it is less clear if these regulation attempts differ across organizations or professions in terms of their nature or effectiveness. To address such questions, scholars will need to design comparative case studies or large-scale surveys in which multiple workplaces, subgroups countries, or industries are analyzed and compared. Pratt et al.'s (2006) study of identity work across medical specialties and Karhunen et al.'s (2017) study of the identity work of science-based entrepreneurs in Finland and Russia took such a comparative approach. We encourage more research in this vein in the future.

An underexplored contextual influence on employee's identity work is that of collectives such as teams, departments, and units that constitute the proximal context (for some exceptions, see Reay et al. (2017); Schnurr (2009); Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996)). Because employees tend to identify more strongly with proximal than distal targets (e.g., Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Knippenberg & Schie, 2000; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005) and may even identify with these targets for different reasons (Vough, 2012), it will be important for future research to investigate more deeply how these proximal collectives shape employees' identity work efforts.

Currently, there are at least 200 empirical examples of individuals performing identity work upon their collective, role, or personal identities at work. However, the large majority of these studies have involved individuals working in North America and Europe. As such, we know much less about the identity work that goes on in work organizations in Africa, South America, and Asia. Perhaps identity work scholars have unearthed universal processes and understandings about identity, but it is equally likely that there are different impetuses for identity work, unique identity work processes, and perhaps even varying consequences of such processes across cultures. Research from these regions is needed to fully understand the various identity issues that individuals face across the globe and how they address them.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Over the last 10 years, research on identity work has exploded. Scholars have been both driven to understand identity because it is fundamental to who we are as humans (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015) and challenged by the "slipperiness" of the concept (Alvesson, 2001). In this review, we looked across theoretical, terminological, and disciplinary boundaries to take stock of what we have learned about identity work processes and build a roadmap to help guide future studies. We brought important nuances of identity work to the fore (e.g., modes and types) and compared theories side-by-side to demonstrate their complementarities and provided a fuller picture of the variety of main ways that individuals engage in identity work, when they do so and why they do so. Altogether, this review provides a richer toolkit for future identity work researchers to draw from. Amidst the demands on workers to take ownership of their own careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) and the changing nature of the

economy (e.g., to a "gig" economy, Davis, 2016), there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of identity dynamics at work.

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