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# Navigating the Self in Diverse Work Contexts

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# Navigating the Self in Diverse Work Contexts

## **Abstract**

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## **Keywords**

identity, positive identity, identity construction, identity work, image management, positive organizational scholarship, social identity

## **Disciplines**

Management Sciences and Quantitative Methods

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## **Navigating the Self in Diverse Work Contexts**

Laura Morgan Roberts and Stephanie J. Creary

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Navigating the self is critical for working in a diverse world, in which different identities interact in social space. This chapter presents five theoretical perspectives on how individuals navigate the self in diverse organizational contexts—social identity, critical identity, (role) identity, narrative-as-identity, and identity work. We review these five prominent theoretical perspectives on identity processes in diverse contexts to explicate various ways in which individuals actively participate in the co-construction of their identities in diverse contexts. As a next step in research, identity, diversity, and relationship scholars are encouraged to inquire into the generativity of proposed tactics for navigating the self in order to identify pathways for cultivating more positive identities in diverse work settings. The examination of positive relational identities is considered a promising path for further inquiry in this domain.

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### **Introduction**

Navigating the self is germane to working in a diverse world. Navigating the self refers to the identity construction and negotiation processes that unfold as people interpret and act on their differences. Navigating the self involves proactive identity construction that helps fulfill the need for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (Rothman, 1997, p. 7). Diversity within a work setting shapes how people view themselves—as insiders, outsiders, powerful, powerless, conformists, or deviants, to name a few identities. Personal, interpersonal, and intergroup dynamics influence how people

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interpret and act on their differences in diverse work settings. This chapter presents an array of tactics, and the underlying motives that prompt tactic use, when an individual navigates his or her self in a diverse work setting.

As Booysen (2007, p. 6) writes, “tension and conflict between diverse social identity groups are major disruptive factors in nearly every country of the world.” Societal power disparities between identity groups, manifested at the personal and interpersonal levels, often, but not inevitably, hinder the effective functioning of culturally diverse teams. Biases and ego defensive routines can deepen misunderstanding, heighten animosity, and undermine trust between people from different cultural groups in work settings. Some approaches to navigating the self exacerbate identity conflicts in an attempt to preserve an individual’s sense of worth and esteem. However, as people interpret and act on differences in constructive ways, they open possibilities for differences to become sources of creativity and resilience. It is therefore important to identify which tactics for navigating the self constitute generative (p. 74) pathways for cultivating more positive identities in diverse work settings and building stronger relationships across dimensions of difference.

Despite its practical significance, the topic of navigating the self has not been featured as a coherent body of research or conceptual field within diversity scholarship. Much of the diversity scholarship and practical advice privileges a managerial perspective by linking diversity to processes and outcomes of managerial interest such as satisfaction and performance, and advising managers of the top-down actions they can take to improve the climate and outcomes of diverse work contexts (Pringle, Konrad, & Prasad, 2006). In contrast to this view, navigating the self represents a bottom-up, agentic view of individuals who proactively engage in motivated—and at times strategic—acts of identification with groups, roles, scripts, traits, narratives, and personae that may serve to create a more inclusive work environment, satisfying work experience, and/or productive work outcomes.

The phrase “navigating the self” implies some degree of personal agency in shaping and sustaining one’s own identity as one confronts the complexities and possibilities that emerge in diverse organizations. In contrast, diversity scholarship that places greater emphasis on structural inequality often diminishes the visibility (and perhaps the possibility) of individual empowerment. Structural determinism poses considerable constraints for navigating the self capably within diverse contexts. In fact, some scholars have construed such acts of positive identity construction as manipulative (e.g., higher-status people defining themselves in self-enhancing ways that reinforce the existing power structure) or exploitative (e.g., marginalized group members who take on positive identities of “team members” or “citizens” that placate or pacify their concerns for equality) (Learmonth & Humphries, 2011). Yet, understanding the motives and tactics for navigating the self can help to disarm individual biases and dismantle structural inequalities.

This chapter aims to synthesize the research on navigating the self in diversity scholarship. To do so, we will review five prominent theoretical perspectives on identity processes in diverse work settings to explicate various ways in which individuals actively participate in the co-construction of their identities. We articulate the core assumptions that underlie each theoretical perspective as we present different viewpoints on why and how an individual navigates him or her self in a diverse work setting.

### **Five theoretical perspectives on navigating the self in diverse work settings**

In this chapter, we review five theoretical perspectives on identity that highlight different ways in which people navigate their self-identities in diverse work organizations: the social identity perspective, the (role) identity perspective, the critical identity perspective, the narrative-as-identity perspective, and the identity work perspective. Each perspective puts forth a different view of the essence of identity and how it is shaped. For the sake of explicating various motives, tactics, and outcomes, we review each perspective as a separate theoretical tradition. However, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive; some studies of navigating the self draw upon multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the motive behind using certain tactics, the influence of a particular context, or the outcomes resulting from a given approach to navigating the self. In the sections that follow, we review the core assumptions of each theoretical tradition and discuss the featured processes for navigating the self in diverse work contexts. Table 5.1 summarizes each perspective's definition of identity, as well as the general approach to, motives for, and commonly featured tactics associated with navigating the self in diverse work settings.

#### **Social identity theory**

First, we review social identity theorists' core assumptions about identity. Social identity theoretical approaches include both social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987), which are distinct but related approaches to understanding how social groups and categories shape one's sense of self, and are often referred to interchangeably. Here, we use the umbrella term "social identity theoretical approaches" to encompass both. The social identity theoretical approaches examine how people understand and position themselves and others in terms of social group categories.

Social identity theorists establish that people segment, classify, and order the social environment and their place in it based on categories (Turner, 1987). Through self-categorization into multiple groups, including race/ethnicity, gender, age cohort, and organizational groups, people identify similarities and differences between themselves

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and others. The existence of a social identity constitutes both a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social group or category (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the feelings associated with that membership. A social category is represented in the self-concept as a social (p. 75) (p. 76) identity that both describes and prescribes how one should think, feel, and behave as a member of that social group (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As members of a social group, individuals share some degree of emotional involvement in and degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it with other group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

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Table 5.1 Navigating the Self in Diverse Work Contexts: Five Theoretical Perspectives					
	<b>Social Identity Perspective</b>	<b>(Role) Identity Perspective</b>	<b>Critical Identity Perspective</b>	<b>Narrative-as-Identity Perspective</b>	<b>Identity Work Perspective</b>
Definition of identity	Knowledge that one belongs to a social group or category and feelings associated with that membership	Self-meaning attached to multiple roles an individual performs and the meanings of an individual's behavior	Multiple, shifting, competing, temporary, context-sensitive, and evolving manifestations of the self that are shaped by socioeconomic, institutional, cultural, and historical boundaries between identity groups	An emergent, interpretive process of becoming that is captured by an individual's storied self-understandings	Reflects how an individual develops a self-understanding that is coherent, distinct, and positively valued within the context of complex, ambiguous, and contradictory experiences
General approach to navigating the self in diverse work contexts	Responding to identity threats through group memberships and identification	Reducing identity conflict and increasing complementarity	Challenging the status and power relations that are embedded in identities	Constructing stories of interaction with one's social world to define who one	Proactively constructing a socially validated identity that reflects aspects

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		between different role identities		is for oneself and for others	one deems most central to one's sense of self
Motive(s)	Self-enhancement, belongingness and differentiation	Alignment	Emancipation	Sense making	Self-verification
Specific tactics	Making favorable, self-enhancing comparisons between groups through social mobility, social creativity, social competition, and superordinate categorization	Intrapersonal identity integration and segmentation	Mobilizing organizational discourses to resist regulation	Creating multiple self-narratives that explain critical processes in identity and career development, stories of resilience, or cultural scripts that appeal to different audiences	Identity negotiation processes and agentic identity performance that allow individuals to claim and others to grant desired identities



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Organizational scholars have applied and extended social identity theories to explain diversity dynamics in organizations. Williams and O'Reilly (1998) provide an extensive review of how social identity theory has been applied to understand diversity dynamics. One of the popular areas of diversity research that applies social identity theory is that of bias. Categorization processes often lead to bias; for example, leadership categorization theory (Lord & Maher, 1991) explains how leadership prototypes (i.e., views of the standard example or typical leader) affect leadership perceptions for diverse groups. The leadership prototype is both gendered and raced; it is applied most consistently to male leaders (e.g., Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989) and White leaders (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008), and thus results in biased evaluations of female and non-White leaders.

Many scholars also emphasize how interactions with people who are different, such as those belonging to different social identity groups, can be difficult or even hostile in work organizations. For example, persons who are overweight experience a host of negative employment outcomes, including perceptions that they are lazy and incompetent, lack self-control and discipline, and are therefore responsible for their weight. They are less likely to be hired, earn less money, and are evaluated more harshly in performance reviews (see Bell & McLaughlin, 2006, for a review). People who are seen with (or are in close physical proximity to) obese people are also evaluated less favorably (Hebl & Mannix, 2003). Recruiters may have a conscious or unconscious bias against hiring obese people because they do not want to be associated with obese people (Bell & McLaughlin, 2006). Unattractive workers are likely to suffer similar job-related outcomes (see Bell & McLaughlin, 2006, for a review).

Another popular area of social identity research that relates to workplace diversity is based on the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971). According to this paradigm, people prefer and have an easier time interacting with similar others, such as those who belong to the same social identity groups. As a result, they may have less diverse networks. For example, Ibarra's studies of diversity and social networks support that White employees tend to have less racially diverse social networks than do minorities (Ibarra, 1993, 1995).

Social identity research also explains how demographic representation influences identification processes. Studies of work team dynamics and organizational demography support that heterogeneity (i.e., whether and on how many visible dimensions team members differ from one another) may lead to a lack of attachment and increased conflict in workgroups (e.g., Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002). At the same time, research shows that heterogeneity can increase attachment for typically underrepresented groups. For example, Ely's (1994) study of female attorneys compared those in sex-integrated versus male-dominated firms. Ely found that women in sex-integrated firms were more likely to experience common gender as a positive basis for identification with other women than those in male-dominated firms. All of these studies

hold in common the assumptions that social context shapes group identification, and that group identification influences social behavior.

**Social identity theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work settings.** According to social identity theorists, group memberships fulfill the needs for self-enhancement, belongingness, and differentiation. Self-enhancement or positivity strivings involve the need to be viewed favorably by the self and others (see Baumeister, 1999, for a review). Group memberships provide a basis for self-enhancement, as people identify themselves with favorably regarded groups. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 101), group identifications are “relational and comparative: they define the individual as similar to or different from, as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than members of other groups.” People also make favorable, self-enhancing comparisons between in-groups and out-groups to increase the positivity of their self-regard. Group memberships also provide opportunities for optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991); people fulfill their needs for belongingness and differentiation simultaneously as they define themselves as similar to their in-group, yet distinct in positive ways from members of other groups. Members make favorable comparisons between their in-group and a relevant out-group to sustain their perception that the in-group is positively distinct from the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Diversity can create a challenging context for constructing or sustaining a positive sense of self. Stereotypes and power imbalances between groups (p. 77) at the societal level pose threats to people’s social identity, primarily the threat of being misjudged or mistreated due to social identity group membership, or of being rejected from a valued social identity group altogether (for a review, see Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Social identity threats are likely to occur in diverse work settings, during which both in-group and out-group members are more likely to challenge the positive distinctiveness of other social identity groups and question the legitimacy of social identity group membership. Members of socially devalued groups (i.e., groups that are generally characterized within society as possessing unfavorable defining characteristics, and are often stigmatized by negative stereotypes and low relative status in social hierarchies) face an unusual predicament in constructing positive identities; rather than belong to a positively distinct group, they belong to a group that may distinguish them on the basis of negative attributes.

With respect to navigating the self, social identity theorists have devoted most of their attention to how members of socially devalued groups respond to social identity threat. Research in this domain (not specific to diversity in the workplace) has uncovered three primary responses to social identity threat—social mobility, social creativity (which includes superordinate categorization), and social competition. Theorists argue, in accordance with Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) early propositions and a host of empirical studies, that members of devalued groups will adopt one of the following tactics, based upon their beliefs about whether group boundaries are permeable and differences are legitimate.

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The first is social mobility. If members believe they can exit the lower-status group, they will navigate the self by employing social mobility tactics in an attempt to join a higher-status group. Even if they cannot physically exit their own group, members of socially devalued groups might attempt to affiliate with a highly regarded group by portraying themselves as prototypical members of that group—demonstrating that they possess the defining characteristics of the valued group (rather than the devalued group) so that they will be viewed as legitimate members. For example, certain people attempt to suppress their invisible devalued identities (e.g., sexual orientation, physical illness) while in the workplace so they will be perceived as members of higher-status groups (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, 2008).

The second is social creativity. If they believe group boundaries are impermeable but the status-oriented differences between groups are legitimate, members of devalued groups will “navigate the self” through the use of cognitive tactics. They will reevaluate their in-group using a set of criteria that will reestablish positive distinctiveness. For example, individuals whose occupations involve dirty work (Hughes, 1951) use cognitive tactics to negotiate and secure social affirmation for their identities (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Specifically, these individuals may transform the meaning of their marginalized work and tainted identities by devaluing negative attributions and revaluing positive ones to make the occupation more attractive to insiders and outsiders (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

A related social creativity tactic for navigating the self is superordinate categorization, which involves categorizing oneself at a higher, meta-group level (e.g., Gadget employees, rather than Gadget engineers and Gadget accountants) to achieve intergroup cooperation (see Allison & Herlocker, 1994). Superordinate categorization may benefit organizations. Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, and Neale (1998) argued that promoting a collectivistic organizational culture may encourage demographically diverse members to categorize one another as having the organization’s interests in common, and may therefore lead to increased creativity and productivity. However, superordinate categorization may also suppress important differences and undermine one’s sense of distinctiveness, especially for minority-group members in majority contexts. Majority-racial-group members tend to prefer to downplay subgroup distinctiveness and expect minorities to adopt majority-group culture. On the other hand, minorities may prefer to integrate rather than assimilate, by respecting subgroup differences and preserving minority cultures within an overarching group (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). As a corollary, Whites also may prefer to discuss intergroup commonalities, whereas minorities may prefer to talk about intergroup distinctions and power differences (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007). Thus, the preference for superordinate categorization may depend on whether one belongs to a majority or minority group within an organizational context.

The third tactic is social competition. Social identity theorists posit that if members believe boundaries are impermeable and differences are illegitimate, but their lower status is unstable, they will engage in social competition against the out-group. Competitive behaviors are often associated with conflict and hostility because they involve power (p. 78) contests between lower-status and higher-status groups. Advocacy

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groups within organizations in the broader community use social competition to challenge group status differences, and corollary differences in access to resources and positional power. Members of such advocacy groups navigate the self by proactively challenging negative views about their social identities and fighting for equal status. They navigate the self by pushing for a social, rather than personal, redefinition of their identity group and status. For example, Creed and Scully (2000) described how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) employees' disclosure of sexual orientation mobilized social change. This examination of grass roots mobilizing demonstrates how an individual's approach toward navigating the self also has implications for collective action.

### **(Role) identity theory**

Next, we review (role) identity theorists' core assumptions about identity. (Role) identity theory proposes that the self-concept is socially constructed, based on the identities attached to the multiple roles that individuals occupy in society (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). A multifaceted self, constructed of multiple roles, mediates the relationship between social structure and individual behavior (Hogg et al., 1995). The origins of (Role) identity theory lie in two different yet strongly related strands of identity research (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The first strand, rooted in traditional symbolic interactionism, claims that (a) social structures affect the self and (b) the structure of the self influences social behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000; see also Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). In this regard, (role) identity theory reflects Mead's (1934) assertion that "society shapes self shapes social behavior" (quoted by Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). Sluss and Ashforth (2007) expound upon this core premise in their work on relational identities in the workplace; they describe how individuals derive a sense of self from their various role-based interpersonal relationships and how relational identities shape patterns of interaction.

The second strand of (role) identity theory focuses on the internal dynamics of self-processes that affect social behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000; see also Burke, 1991; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Burke & Stets, 1999). (Role) identities are thought of as "self-meanings" that are attached to the multiple roles an individual performs and the meanings of an individual's behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000). For example, Burke and Reitzes (1981) found that college students' self-views of academic responsibility (a dimension of the student identity) were a strong predictor of college plans, suggesting that individuals will align their behaviors with their sense of self when both factors share meaning. Both strands of (role) identity theory share the belief that external social structures and the structure of the self are inextricably linked (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

**(Role) identity theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work settings.** Given that the self is multifaceted and that individuals have as many identities as they have social roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000), it is important for individuals to align their actions and sense of self with the expectations of a given role. (Role) identity theory

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focuses on the need to manage the diversity among the multiple roles (and corresponding expectations) that an individual holds. The focus here is on diversity within a person, rather than the differences between in-group and out-group members (as featured in social identity theory). This approach to navigating the self is important for reducing or preventing the internal identity conflicts that may arise when multiple identities are not mutually reinforcing (Stryker, 2000). The motives for navigating the self relate to reducing conflict and increasing complementarity between different role identities, in order to create a more positive identity structure.

(Role) identity theory calls attention to the conflicting social expectations that many role incumbents face. According to (role) identity theory, identities are organized in a salience hierarchy, such that an identity that is higher in the salience hierarchy is more likely to be invoked across a variety of situations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The salience of an identity reflects commitment to the role relationships associated with that identity because an individual is more likely to behave in accordance with an identity that is higher in the salience hierarchy than one that is lower (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Given the multitude of role expectations, (role) identity theorists purport that role prioritization may be important for increasing clarity of relational identities and commitment to varied role expectations (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008).

Role congruity research also explains why people would be motivated to fit into behavioral expectations for certain roles, given the negative social consequences of role violation. For example, many studies have documented how female leaders are disadvantaged by societal beliefs that agentic traits, typically ascribed to the prototypical leader role, are incongruous with the communal traits that are ascribed to the female gender role (p. 79) (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992; Heilman, 2001; Rosette & Tost, 2010). Female leaders who exhibit agentic behaviors are often perceived less favorably, due to role incongruity (i.e., a violation of the communal gender role expectations) (Eagly et al., 1992; Rudman & Glick, 1999; 2001). Much of this role congruity research focuses on how others perceive and evaluate those who fit prototypes for gender and leadership, but doesn't examine how people navigate the self (i.e., proactively engage in identity construction) to respond to or avert these perceptions. For example, Rosette and Tost (2010) report that women leaders at senior levels, who demonstrate success in masculine positions (and get the credit for the success), may be evaluated favorably in ratings of agentic and communal traits. Rosette and Tost's (2010) conclusion is based on an experimental condition, and not an examination of how women leaders attempt to navigate themselves in various situations. However, this research does establish a strong motivational basis for mitigating tensions within one's own role identity composition.

Navigating the self, according to the (role) identity theoretical perspective, may be motivated by the need to align one's identity structure with preferences (via prioritization) and the need to reconcile competing expectations or role demands (i.e., role incongruity). The following section will address the latter set of tactics for navigating

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the self. Beyond prioritization, people also navigate the self in ways that will establish desirable relationships between their own role identities.

Diversity researchers have used (role) identity theory to explain how people navigate identity conflicts by cognitively structuring the multiple facets of their identities in ways that promote complementarity. Navigating the self may involve choices to “disidentify” (e.g., deny or discard a lower-status identity for a higher-status identity), segment (e.g., create boundaries between identities while remaining committed to each), or integrate multiple identities (e.g., merge the identities so that they are no longer viewed as separate) (Caza & Wilson, 2009; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). Bell’s (1990) study of Black professional women who managed the tensions of living between two cultural worlds (Black and White) revealed that the women developed various identity structures, ranging from segmentation to biculturalism. These identity structures permeated beyond the women’s cognitive sense of self to shape their social environment, as they “create[d] dynamic, fluid life structures that shape[d] the patterns of their social interactions, relationships, and mobility, both within and between the two cultural contexts” (p. 462).

**Segmentation** and **integration** are both viable strategies for mitigating identity conflict (see Ashforth et al., 2008, for a review). Individuals who use segmentation tactics tend to present themselves as “partial selves” when in the company of nonsimilar others. For example, female scientists who struggle with having identities as both a woman and a scientist in a male-dominated work environment (Settles, 2004) may choose to compartmentalize (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Roccas & Brewer, 2002) their identities, or activate only their scientist work identity while at work to prevent their gender identity from interfering with the performance of their scientist identity (Settles, 2004).

While compartmentalization may reduce the impact of stress in various life domains, it may also inhibit a person’s ability to draw upon the psychological, social, and cognitive resources that accompany various role identities across domains. Dutton and colleagues (2010) conclude from their literature review that in low-stress situations, integration tactics may be most potent for enhancing the degree of complementarity that an individual experiences between his or her multiple identities. For example, Harrington and Hall (2007) propose that individuals who experience conflict between work and nonwork role identities can integrate and find balance between these identities by establishing “protean” careers. Protean careers are self-directed career models in which individuals define their own views of success versus those in which models of success are defined by organizations (Harrington & Hall, 2007). Protean careers demonstrate values of freedom and growth versus advancement, high versus low mobility, psychological success versus success based on position, level, and salary, and pride, work satisfaction, and professional commitment over organizational commitment (Harrington & Hall, 2007). Hall and Mirvis (1995) also argue that these new career forms are critical for continuous learning and development among older workers in diverse organizations. As another example, Reybold and Alamia (2008) found that female faculty members developed a

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more integrated identity that encompassed both their identities as teachers and researchers, after experimenting with a compartmentalized professional identity structure and finding the two identities to be more synergistic than segmented. Identity integration allowed these faculty members to feel a greater sense of “academic flow” (p. 119). (p. 80)

Segmentation and integration are cognitive tactics for structuring one’s own identity to manage role conflict. Another tactic for navigating the self, **defining behavioral scripts**, helps to address role ambiguity. An experimental study on navigating the self in workplace interracial interactions examined how role identity shifts can help reduce anxiety. Avery, Richeson, Hebl, and Ambady (2009) provided White participants with well-defined and loosely defined social scripts for interacting with a Black stranger in a simulated work situation. The well-defined scripts provided norms that dictated expected interpersonal behavior (e.g., interview or applicant vs. conversation partner) and thus helped to attenuate the anxiety that Whites typically experience during cross-race interactions. These scripts helped the White participants to develop their role identities in relation to their Black counterpart, and thus increased the likelihood of smooth cross-race interactions. However, the authors also reported that Black participants’ discomfort during the interracial interactions was not affected by the scripted or unscripted encounter. Thus, it is important to continue exploring the impact of various tactics for navigating the self on diverse groups.

### Critical identity theory

**Critical identity theorists’ core assumptions about identity.** Critical identity theorists treat identities as multiple, shifting, competing, temporary, context-sensitive, and evolving manifestations of subjective meanings and experiences in the social world (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Critical identity theory is largely concerned with issues of power that constrain individuals’ abilities to freely construct and negotiate identities in work organizations. It challenges social identity theorists’ assertion that individuals freely undertake processes of self-categorization and identification. Rather, critical identity theory purports that socioeconomic, institutional, cultural, and historical boundaries between identity groups in society are reflected in organizational boundaries; lower-status groups occupy lower-level positions and identity groups are formally segregated from one another (Konrad, 2003). Identity research from this perspective often locates the root causes of stigmatization and discrimination in intergroup interaction patterns that activate social categorization processes (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). Scholars in this tradition devote less attention to individual differences in personality and behavioral style. They view identities as more than just a collection of personality traits or individualized differences; they are informed by institutional, political, and societal structures (Warner, 2008). They also emphasize how context, social meanings, power disparities, and historical intergroup conflict affect current diversity dynamics in work organizations. In contrast to social identity researchers, critical identity

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researchers rarely examine how threat and conflict emerge from difference in and of itself. Rather, in this tradition, difference is always contextualized in power relations.

Research on the gendering of organizations, meaning the persistent structuring of organizations along gender lines, also fits within a critical perspective. This research focuses on macro- rather than micro-levels of analyses, but does lend insight into the masculine orientation of abstract conceptions of “ideal workers” (Acker, 1990). Although the ideal worker does not exist, organization structures and job descriptions reinforce these unrealistic expectations that workers have full-time availability, mobility, high qualifications, and strong work orientation, and that outside-of-work responsibilities are secondary to the organization’s requirements (Benschop, 2006). These expectations are associated with heterosexual men whose spouses assume complete responsibility for household affairs, thus freeing them to be fully available for the organization’s needs and well suited to the masculine culture of the organization. This research is grounded in the conception of gender as an ongoing process rather than a category. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) foundational work in this domain examined the dynamics of “doing gender.” Doing gender involves verbal and symbolic acts that reproduce the symbolic order of gender and often reinforce systems of dominance and oppression. For example, many men constantly negotiate and reconstruct masculine selves in workplace interactions by drawing upon organizational resources, discourses, and practices, and engaging in competition with other men to display dominance and validate identity (Hearn & Collinson, 2006). These discussions of gender frame the context in which people attempt to construct and negotiate their identities. Yet, within critical identity theory, the emphasis is on how societal discourse, activism, and scholarship can change rigid social structures. The question of individual agency in shaping one’s own identity or shaping social structures is contested heavily (Benschop, 2006).

Critical identity theorists also posit that intersections of race, class, and gender, in particular, influence the formation of personal and social identities (p. 81) (Cole, 2009; Holvino, 2010). *Intersectionality* refers to the meaning and consequences of belonging to multiple social categories (Cole, 2009). It acknowledges that identity is not the summation of the multiple social groups to which a person belongs (Warner, 2008). Rather, identity is composed of the qualitatively different meanings and experiences that arise from the interaction of the multiple social group memberships that cannot be explained by examining each identity alone (Warner, 2008). Intersectionality also acknowledges the status and power relations that are embedded in identities. In this respect, intersecting identities create both opportunity and oppression because they can signal advantage, disadvantage, or both at the same time, depending on the salience of a particular identity in a particular social context (Collins, 1990). For example, research has found that being heterosexual was a privilege for heterosexual Latino men, but being a person of color was associated with relative subordination (Hurtado & Sinha, 2008). Scully and Blake-Beard’s (2006) review of research on class in organizational diversity research also emphasizes that class is “inextricably linked to other social identities in the lived experiences of employees” (p. 433). Scott’s (2011) dissertation on intersectionality among African-American female senior executives on Wall Street describes how various



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identity experiences, including class background, country of origin (immigrant families), region of socialization (North vs. South), skin tone, religion (Catholic, Protestant), and maternal and paternal relationships (role identities), together shaped the value systems and career choices of these women. As these women described the construction of their professional identities, they emphasized the simultaneous influence of these intersecting aspects of their lives. However, Scott's (2011) research and Scully and Notably, Blake-Beard's (2006) discussion of class emphasize the role of individual agency in constructing identities. This agentic perspective is not as salient in many other writings on intersectionality and the matrix of oppression.

**Critical identity theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work settings.** According to critical identity theorists, emancipation is a primary motive for navigating the self. These theorists describe processes by which organizations regulate individual identities, and thus compromise one's freedom to self-define. They argue against the pursuit of managerial interest at the expense of liberty, autonomy, and justice for lower-class workers. The primary argument that critical theorists present is the following. Identities in organizations are regulated by organizational elites such that "ways of seeing, being, and doing are imposed" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 16). Although the organization is not necessarily the most influential institution in identity construction, identity regulation is a significant method of organizational control that is accomplished through discourse and social practices. Organizations regulate individuals' identities through active identity work practices such as induction, training, and promotion (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Managers may also engage in socialization practices (e.g., training and education) that encourage employees to identify with the organization but also facilitate social domination (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). In another case, managers may regulate employees' identities through appeals to self-image, feelings, values and identifications (Alvesson et al., 2008; see also Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993) during the feedback process (Alvesson et al., 2008). In this case, organizations "seduce subordinates into calibrating their senses of self with a restricted catalogue of corporate-approved identities bearing strong imprints of managerial power" (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 16). Other mechanisms for regulating identities within work organizations including defining a person directly (e.g., as a middle manager); defining a person by defining others (e.g., having a killer instinct); providing a specific vocabulary of motives (e.g., working in groups, having a sense of community); explicating morals and values (e.g., being a team player); constructing knowledge and skills (e.g., managers as "strategists"); group categorization and affiliation (e.g., a member of the corporate family); social positioning (e.g., informal rankings); establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game (e.g., defining what a "team player" is); and defining the conditions in which an organization operates (e.g., globalization) (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

According to critical identity theoretical approaches, people have a limited range of options for navigating the self in diverse work contexts, in which their status is

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structurally imposed and reified through systems of dominance. In the face of such constraining conditions, critical identity theorists propose that individuals resist identity regulation to achieve a more desired self-view.

**Discourse** plays an important role in processes of identity formation, maintenance, and transformation, and is therefore a central element of navigating the self and resisting dominance (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Individuals attend to and (p. 82) mobilize organizational discourses and engage other discourses to self-identify as separate and independent entities and to repair their sense of identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Prasad and Prasad (2000) suggest that **resistance** helps individuals to affirm their own identities as autonomous individuals by taking discursive ownership over resistance (i.e., labeling certain acts as forms of resistance) and by interpreting their own actions as resistance. For example, LGBT employees who are being open and self-affirming are said to engage in acts of resistance against systems of heterosexist oppression (Creed, 2006). Acts of resistance may help individuals construct ethical narratives about themselves that serve as a “strategic resource for identity work” (Kornberger & Brown, 2007, p. 497). Meyerson and Scully (1995) and Meyerson (2001) introduce the construct of a “tempered radical”—a person who carefully leads change as an outsider within his or her own organization (i.e., someone who differs from the mainstream culture of the organization). Tempered radicals use their own ambivalent identification with the organization as a platform for resisting the dominant culture and promoting more inclusiveness, sometimes subtly and other times directly.

David Thomas’ studies of minority executives also highlight the role of race-related discourse in shaping power dynamics and career outcomes between majority supervisors and minority subordinates. For example, Thomas (1993) reported that the highest-quality cross-race supervisory relationships were those in which managers and subordinates had similar views on the relevance of race-related discourse. If both parties wished to directly confront (i.e., talk about) race or both parties wished to avoid race-related conversations, relationships were of a higher quality than if one party wished to discuss race but the other did not. Thomas and Gabarro’s (1999) comparative study of successful and plateaued White and non-White executives also demonstrated the impact of race-related discourse: non-White executives who advanced to the most senior levels talked directly about race and race-related challenges with mentors early in their career.

### Narrative-as-identity

Narrative-as-identity theorists’ core assumptions about identity are as follows. The narrative-as-identity approach views identity as an emergent, interpretive process rather than as a static structure. Social identity, role identity, and critical identity theories account for the situational influences on changing identities, yet their discussions of diversity and navigating the self tend to construe identity as a state of being. The narrative-as-identity approach, in contrast, features identity as a process of

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becoming and captures people's storied self-understandings as situated in the temporal arc of past (who they have been), present (who they are), and future (who they are becoming).

Narrative-as-identity scholarship refers to "the stories people construct and tell about themselves to define who they are for themselves and for others" (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, p. 4). According to this perspective, an identity is composed of an individual's narratives or stories of interaction with his or her social world. Identity narratives contain key themes that situate one's existence within a plot of unfolding events. These narratives provide people with a sense of order and continuity in the midst of potentially disconnected or even conflicting life episodes. Narrating the self is an integrative mechanism for identity construction that provides a sense of unity and purpose (Erikson, 1959) and brings coherence to life (McAdams, 1985; 1997). Narrative-as-identity theorists caution against equating "integrating" with "simplifying" identity. Some theorists emphasize that integrative narratives are not simplistic; they contain many voices in dialogue with each other (Gergen, 1991). This "conversation among narrators" or "war of historians" (Raggat, 2006) accounts for the opposition that is inherent within selfhood (Gregg, 2006). Regardless of the degree of contradiction within one's life story, self-narration facilitates the construction of a coherent sense of self across time and circumstance by enabling individuals to simultaneously accommodate change and consistency (Ashforth et al., 2008).

**Narrative-as-identity theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work settings.** Sense making is a primary motive for navigating the self in diverse work settings. Sense-making activities involve inquiring and interpreting one's embeddedness within a social context, and help people to derive meaning from challenging situations and to (re)construct a positive sense of self even through disappointment and unexpected changes (Ashforth et al., 2008). As people consider the differences between their own past, present, and future selves, they craft narratives to make sense of these internal changes. This sense-making mechanism promotes resilience and the imaginative pursuit of future possibilities, even in light of disappointment. (p. 83)

Narrative-as-identity scholarship unearths the process by which individuals craft stories of growth via sense-making activities. For example, growth is a central theme in the derivation of redemptive meaning from negative life stories (McAdams, 2006) and in reflection and sense making about traumatic events (Maitlis, 2009). Maitlis' (2009) research reveals how musicians who have suffered career-altering injuries compose self-narratives that enable them to make sense of who they are as professionals and humans after the injury. Narratives of hope also reflect anticipation of future growth (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009).

Identity narratives also help people to deepen others' understandings of their (often unorthodox) career trajectories, thereby meeting their needs for self-verification (Swann, 1983). For example, during career transitions, self-narratives enable a person to bridge gaps between old and new roles and identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). A coherent

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self-narrative allows an individual to explain career and identity transitions through stories that depict one's career trajectory as a series of purposive events. To appeal to different audiences, an individual may create multiple self-narratives such that each individual self-narrative becomes part of a larger and more varied narrative repertoire (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Narrative identity theorists have not typically focused on issues of diversity *per se*; the contribution of this approach stems more from the narrative methodology itself and what it reveals about the career experiences of racioethnic minority groups. Scholars who use narrative methodologies for data collection assume that storytelling and life histories explain critical processes in identity and career development. As people share their narrative about their career trajectory, they inform researchers of the critical events and people that have shaped who they have become. Researchers do not often write about this process of self-narrating among minority professionals, but they do rely on the data gathered from narratives to explain career experiences. In this sense, navigating the self (in research interviews) lends insight into people's agentic approaches toward navigating their careers.

The emphasis on proactivity and resilience is similar to a focus on protean careers (Hall & Mirvis, 1995) and narratives of growth (Maitlis, 2009). Although typical career profiles have been based on the experiences of dominant groups, narrative analyses of minorities uncover the unique, contextualized ways in which they define themselves as professionals. Studies of career and identity development for minorities often extend beyond the immediate work context and socialization processes in organizations; these studies of diversity and identity reflect a holistic, life history examination of the multiple factors that shape a person's sense of becoming a professional. Many of these studies are also concerned with highlighting the challenges, personal characteristics (i.e., resilience, fortitude), and social support networks that account for the "success" (i.e., leadership promotions) of minority professionals. In this sense, navigating the self refers to the process of reconciling societal pressures, job assignments, family expectations, and personal choices over a long period of time. For example, Bell and Nkomo's (2001) in-depth analysis of the life experiences of Black and White professional women revealed how factors such as maternal and paternal relationships influenced career orientations and trajectories. Thomas and Gabarro's (1999) study of minority executives captured personal histories and career biographies and then illuminated patterns in the development of minority executives who reached the top echelons of corporate America.

Studies that use narrative analyses often explain how diverse professionals have become who they are, but offer less insight into how these professionals define themselves as works in progress who are still immersed in a growth process of becoming. As such, this view of narrative-as-identity remains relatively uncharted yet fruitful terrain for uncovering alternative pathways (via self-narrating) for navigating the self in diverse work settings.

### Identity work

Last, we review identity work theorists' core assumptions about identity. The phrase "identity work" is often attributed to Snow and Anderson (1987), who defined it as "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (p. 1348). In many respects, the notion of "identity work" may be viewed as synonymous with navigating the self. Like the other four perspectives that lend insight into navigating the self, the identity work approach posits that the self emerges from the dynamism of interaction with one's social world. As such, scholars who study identity work will likely place their work under one or more of the banners of social identity, role identity, critical identity, or narrative-as-identity research traditions. Yet identity work research also captures the tension and dynamism involved with (p. 84) navigating the self in ways that the other four perspectives minimize. Therefore, we set these identity work studies apart from the other four identity theory traditions, given that the identity work tradition portrays individuals as proactive agents in constructing socially validated identities that reflect aspects they deem most central to their sense of self.

The empirical research on identity work provides intentional and detailed accounts of how individuals deal with their complex, ambiguous, and contradictory experiences at work by constructing an understanding of self that is coherent, distinct, and positively valued. Both cognitive and behavioral tactics that individuals use to navigate the self in diverse work settings are revealed. Cognitive approaches to identity work include shifting dimensions of comparison to evaluate one's own social identity more favorably (social identity theory) and making sense of past experiences to describe oneself in more positive ways (narrative-as-identity theory). In contrast, behavioral techniques focus on active and relational sense-making processes that help individuals construct and sustain more positive identities. This focus on self-authoring is similar to the orientation of narrative-as-identity scholarship. The emphasis on human agency and malleability in identity construction contrasts with other theorists' views that identities (and power differences) are structurally imposed and resistant to change (e.g., some critical theorists).

In this section, we will focus on distinct behavioral identity work tactics that are not explicitly addressed by the other four identity perspectives. We point to two prominent behavioral identity work approaches to navigating the self in diverse work contexts: **identity performance** and **identity negotiation**. Identity performance research details an actor's deliberate attempts to navigate his or her social context via self-expression and impression management. Research on identity negotiation establishes the iterative, interactive nature of identity construction in diverse work contexts.

**Identity work theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work settings.** In the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the identity work perspective includes a broad body of research on the interpersonal nature of identity construction (Stryker, 1980). The anchor in symbolic interactionism is similar to the (role) identity

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theorists' emphasis on social roles and expectations and their influence on a person's sense of self. Identity work encompasses a range of agentic tactics that people employ to proactively shape the meaning or significance of their identity in a given context. Identity work research draws heavily upon self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), which argues that people desire to be seen by others in ways that are consistent with how they see themselves. Self-verification is beneficial for epistemologic and pragmatic reasons: it helps people to have a sense of who they are (as reflected to them by others), and how they should interact (according to their place in the social world). The pragmatic benefits of self-verification are similar to those presented by role identity theorists; others' perceptions and expectations help to create a script for social behavior. Identity work research takes these presumed motives as the backdrop for the rich accounts of various tactics people will employ to help others develop a more accurate, complex, and appreciative understanding of their own identities.

Like social identity theory, identity work research also illustrates the ways in which people respond to discrepancies or threats to their identities, such as those prompted by stereotyping, stigmatization, or legitimacy challenges (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ibarra, 1999). In the following section, we will describe the identity work tactics that people use to address these identity threats. Recent scholarship on positive identity also raises the possibility that "identity work...is inspired by an entity's desire to grow and evolve rather than a need to maintain social status or self-worth in the face of threat" (Roberts, Dutton, & Bednar, 2009, p. 510; see also Kreiner & Sheep, 2009). Yet the research on navigating the self in diverse work contexts has focused primarily on dealing with identity threat and its challenges to the self-verification motive.

Research reviews of identity performance help to build coherence and allow for comparisons and generalizations across population-specific studies. In their fervor to present an in-depth account of identity performance for a particular group within a particular context, scholars typically do not cite the broad range of tactics that have emerged from studies in different contexts or according to different theoretical traditions.

Identity performance involves proactively shaping others' perceptions of one's social group memberships and identification (Roberts & Roberts, 2007). Identity performance encompasses a range of disclosures and enactments. One medium for identity performance expression is through appearance, or surface-level display cues. Surface-level display cues signify group affiliations and associated ideologies, through physical appearance (p. 85) (e.g., hair, makeup, clothing, jewelry) and symbolic gestures that emphasize certain cultural orientations (displaying photos or cultural artifacts, engaging in public cultural rituals). Identity performance also involves disclosing feelings about group membership and involvement in social identity group activities. Such disclosures communicate how important certain identities are to one's self-concept and daily living (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009).

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Display cues and disclosures also shape perceptions of competence and fit in a diverse organization (Bell, 1990; Clair et al., 2005; Roberts & Roberts, 2007).

As stated previously, much of the identity work research associates agentic identity performance with identity threat. In addition to symbolic interaction and self-verification, impression management and social identity theories have helped to provide a theoretical foundation for the identity performance tactics that people use in response to threats. Social identity theory has focused primarily on cognitive tactics for strengthening or weakening group identification, rather than individual self-presentation. The impression management frame helps to explain why navigating the self can be a particularly challenging task in diverse work contexts (Roberts, 2005). In diverse work contexts, people with marginalized social identities (e.g., women; gays or lesbians; or members of minority racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups) and people with privileged identities (e.g., men; heterosexuals; those in majority racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups) experience social identity threats that interfere with their desire for self-verification and positive professional image construction. In the section that follows, we focus on two types of social identity threats—devaluation threats and legitimacy threats—and explain how they obstruct professional image construction, and thus prompt different identity work tactics to repair one’s image in the eyes of others.

**Devaluation threats** are “situations, events or encounters that people interpret as signaling social identity-based negative evaluations of them” (Ely & Roberts, 2008, p. 181) and that often lead people to worry that negative stereotypes will be applied to them. Some members of marginalized groups may experience chronic devaluation threat if they are tokens (Kanter, 1977) or are underrepresented in senior positions (Ely, 1994; 1995), or if the dominant culture is at odds with their identity group’s interests (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). **Legitimacy threats** are triggered by signals that people are failing to live up to the positive expectations or idealized images of their social identity group and thus are not considered to be fully legitimate members of that group (Ely & Roberts, 2008). Members of privileged groups are more likely to experience legitimacy threats than devaluation threats, but both groups can experience both types of threat. For example, many men seek to demonstrate their ability to embody masculinity in its idealized and stereotypical forms by showing strength, authority, and autonomy, and feel threatened when they do not receive affirmation of their masculine status (Barrett, 1996; Connell, 1995; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993). Navigating the self is particularly challenging in diverse contexts because of the likelihood that responding to a social identity threat may trigger yet another social identity threat for the other party. Moreover, members often monitor each other’s actions to assess loyalty to the group or authenticity of identity (Anderson, 1999; Branscombe et al., 1999), thus complicating one’s ability to mitigate devaluation and legitimacy threats.

Four of the most common strategies for “navigating the self” when responding to devaluation and legitimacy threats are distancing, dispelling, living up to idealized images, and feigning indifference (Ely & Roberts, 2008). Common strategies for responding to devaluation threats are distancing oneself personally from one’s social

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identity group and its stereotypes and dispelling negative stereotypes about the group more generally. Distancing involves disassociating from one's social identity group and is the behavioral counterpart of social identity theory's social mobility strategy (Roberts, 2005; Tajfel, 1978). Marginalized group members use distancing to suppress their marginalized identity in hopes that they will avoid social rejection, harassment, or loss of social status. Members of privileged groups also use distancing tactics to reduce the likelihood that others will view them according to negative stereotypes.

In contrast, the strategy of dispelling negative stereotypes is driven by attempts to restore the group's positive distinctiveness while maintaining one's own affiliation with the group. People using this strategy may also educate others about the inaccuracies of group stereotypes, attempt to enlighten out-group members about cultural differences, or even hold themselves up as a positive exemplar who does not embody the stereotypes; play into group stereotypes to accrue social benefits; or even take the role of group representative, holding themselves to a standard of perfection in order to demonstrate the group's capabilities (Roberts, 2005; (p. 86) Roberts, Settles, & Jellison, 2008). In accordance with this line of research, Bergsicker, Shelton, and Richeson (2010) conducted six studies of impression management goals in interracial interactions. They found that Whites and non-Whites diverge in their impression management goals: Whites seek to be liked and be seen as moral, to dispel negative stereotypes that they are biased, whereas minorities seek to be respected, to dispel negative stereotypes of incompetence. These divergent goals led Whites to engage in more ingratiation impression management behaviors during cross-race interactions than self-promotion, whereas Blacks and Latinos used more self-promotion during cross-race interactions (Bergsicker et al., 2010).

Legitimacy threats prompt people to prove that they are able to live up to idealized images of their group. Common reactions to legitimacy threats involve demonstrating that one can live up to the culture's idealized images of one's social identity groups. For example, male medical residents may take unnecessary risks, avoid asking for help, and cover up their mistakes in order to be seen as heroic and invulnerable (Kellogg, 2005).

The intensity of coping with devaluation and legitimacy threats leads some people to adopt a fourth strategy, feigning indifference, to portray the image of one who is unconcerned with others' perceptions (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). People who feign indifference often adopt a detached, even antisocial stance in order to appear autonomous and independent, to signal that they are unwilling to invest their time or effort into making a good impression on others. Another way to create the image of indifference is to intentionally defy group norms by expressing one's willful deviance from the dominant culture (e.g., deviating in physical appearance or expressing controversial opinions). Ironically, the goal of feigning indifference is to shield oneself from the pain of rejection or devaluation that may result from failure to respond effectively to social identity threats (Ely & Roberts, 2008).



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Beyond these four tactics for responding to social identity threat, a fifth identity work tactic of managing visibility is also pertinent for navigating the self in diverse work contexts. Members of marginalized groups often struggle with gaining the appropriate amount of attention from colleagues at opportune moments (Blake-Beard & Roberts, 2004). Marginalized group members, even those in senior leadership positions, believe that their contributions are often obscured and rendered invisible but their shortcomings are spotlighted and become hypervisible (Kanter, 1977). A case study of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reveals the process of strategically managing one's own visibility to promote social change (Roberts, Roberts, O'Neill, & Blake-Beard, 2008).

Another important insight from agentic identity performance research relates to how people navigate the disclosure process of invisible identities. People who belong to stigmatized or marginalized invisible identity groups (e.g., sexual orientation, disabilities, religion) must carefully consider whether and how to disclose their identity group membership during social interactions (Clair et al., 2005; Creed & Scully, 2000; Ragins, 2008). Creed (2006) writes the following about "passing," or the nondisclosure of sexual identity at work: "passing requires complex stratagems, making the management of others' knowledge of one's sexual identity almost a career in itself (Woods, 1994). The emotional, psychological and spiritual costs are great, making nondisclosure a source of stress in itself, with various work and life consequences (DiPlacido, 1998)" (p. 378). Stone-Romero, Stone, and Lukaszewski (2006) review a range of disclosure options for people with disabilities in work organizations, including passing as "normal," overperforming, and acknowledging the disability. Given the implications for bias and discrimination, identity disclosure choices vary from person to person and from situation to situation.

Identity performance research typically focuses on the actor rather than the perceiver; it emphasizes how people experience identity threats, and how they attempt to cope with, mitigate, or prevent such threats from recurring. The tactics that we reviewed in the previous section have been illustrated throughout various empirical studies of marginalization and stereotyping in organizations and professions: distancing, dispelling, living up to idealized images, feigning indifference, managing visibility of strengths and shortcomings, and disclosure decisions about invisible identities. However, the identity performance research is one-sided in its emphasis on the actor, to the exclusion of the perceiver. It focuses on strategies and intentions but offers less insight with respect to impact and unfolding processes of mutual influence on identities. The bridge between identity performance and identity construction is through identity negotiation processes. This area of identity work research has focused more on work-related identities and individual characteristics rather than diversity and cultural identities. However, it does help to map (p. 87) out a process by which identities are co-constructed through acts of **identity claiming and granting**.

Bartel and Dutton (2001) provide a useful framing of these identity negotiation techniques in their description of the claiming-granting processes by which identities are socially constructed. The claiming-granting perspective offers a dynamic account of the

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identity work that unfolds during interpersonal encounters. It emphasizes the interdependence of an actor and audience when constructing positive identities within a social context. Claiming occurs when individuals perform acts they believe embody their self-view. Granting occurs when others within the social environment engage in comparison processes that allow them to affirm or disaffirm the identity an individual desires.

Achieving social validation of identities is especially important in diverse work groups (Milton, 2009). Researchers on interpersonal congruence and identity confirmation, who have assessed the extent to which group members understand and validate one another's identities, have found that these measures of social validation are correlated with creativity and cooperation in diverse work groups. For example, Polzer, Milton, and Swann (2002) found that diversity enhances creative task performance in groups with high interpersonal congruence levels, but it undermines performance in groups with low levels. Interpersonal congruence also explains differences between diverse groups with higher versus lower levels of social integration, group identification, and relationship conflict (Polzer et al., 2002). Navigating the self through claiming and granting during the first 10 minutes of group interactions determined whether group members elicited self-verifying appraisals and predicted group outcomes four months later (Polzer et al., 2002). In another study, Milton and Westphal (2005) found that identity confirmation has a positive impact on cooperation in racially diverse groups, and therefore mediates the impact of race-based diversity on performance. Thus, the identity performance research helps to illustrate motives and tactics, whereas the identity negotiation research provides more data on the positive outcomes of self-verification.

### Future inquiry and next steps

In this chapter, we have sought to expand and enrich understanding of the various ways in which people navigate the self by situating tactics within broader, theoretical frameworks of identity management. Within these frameworks, we have articulated the often taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions of various traditions or scholarly communities, and their unique implications for navigating the self in diverse contexts. We also provided a forum for comparison across theories and identity groups. Our theoretically inclusive review can serve as a platform for future research on patterns, processes, and outcomes related to the various approaches toward navigating the self.

Reviewing theoretical approaches to navigating the self in diverse work contexts unearths a host of tactics that individuals employ to construct, restore, and sustain a positive sense of self. These cognitive and behavioral tactics provide individuals with a myriad of options for how they might achieve self-validation and self-enhancement, even among diverse colleagues who may apply stereotypes and trigger social identity threats. Each of these theoretical approaches offers important insights for navigating interpersonal interactions in diverse organizations, which can be developed to further scholarship and practice in this domain. Social identity theorists call attention to intergroup dynamics, critical theorists examine the role of discursive resistance, role identity theorists study the effects of segmented versus integrated identity structures, narrative theorists reveal sense-making processes that yield coherence, and identity work theorists investigate behavioral practices of claiming and influencing the significance and meaning of identities in diverse work contexts.

Although this review treats each perspective separately to unearth key themes with optimal precision, many studies of “navigating the self” draw upon more than one theoretical tradition. For example, social identity theory helps to explain why people use certain tactics for navigating the self and not others. White employees’ racial identity attitudes explain why some react more positively than others to interracial situations at work (Block, Roberson, & Neuger, 1995). The strength of female scientists’ and Black medical students’ identification with their gender, race, and chosen professions is significantly correlated with their agentic identity performance tactics. Those who identify more strongly with gender and race are more likely to use dispelling tactics and less likely to use distancing tactics (Roberts et al., 2008). Thus, these approaches should not be viewed as exclusive or competing frameworks; rather, they represent bodies of research that overlap in common interests and expand our explanatory power.

We have not presented an exhaustive review of acts that may be encompassed under the rubric of “navigating the self” in this chapter. The myriad of (p. 88) assumptions regarding identity creates a vast field of possibilities for navigating the self: intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Yet this vast array of possibilities poses theoretical and empirical challenges for scholars and practitioners who seek to understand how people effectively navigate the often rocky,

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uncertain, awkward, and yet promising terrain of interpersonal interactions in diverse organizations. Many studies of navigating the self limit their theoretical references to a narrow field of identity scholarship; rarely do identity scholars engage in dialogue that crosses disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. As a result, many of the commonly held practices for navigating the self are underexamined but contrasting assumptions based on disciplinary fields are overstated. Our goal for this chapter was to shed light upon these assumptions, highlight the theoretical and empirical contributions of various traditions, and present a more balanced and theoretically inclusive account of the field's current knowledge base on navigating the self in diverse work contexts. This review also helps to reveal possibilities for future research on navigating the self, both within and across identity theoretical traditions. In the following section, we pose several questions that may guide future research on navigating the self.

**Which self is being navigated? Understanding complex identities.** We anchored our discussion in identity theory based on the assertion that an identity is a core element (although not the entire composite) of the self-system. Although the self-system encompasses a broad range of emotions, motivations, schemas, scripts, and self-construals, identity refers to self-definition. Common themes emerge from the five theoretical perspectives (p. 89) on identity:

- Identities are a set of self-imposed and externally imposed meanings that situate an entity within a social world through the construction of defining characteristics and relationships with other entities.
- Identities are multifaceted, with meanings that evolve from group categories and memberships (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987), social roles (Burke & Stets, 1999; Hogg et al., 1995; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), self-narratives (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009; Gergen, 1991; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maitlis, 2009; McAdams, 2006; Raggat, 2006), reflected appraisals and interpersonal encounters (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), social structures (Alvesson et al., 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2001; Cole, 2009; Holvino, 2010; Konrad, 2003; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Warner, 2008), individuating traits and characteristics (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987), and values (Hitlin, 2003).
- Identities evoke a set of cognitions, feelings, and behaviors that are associated with these defining characteristics and relationships. The study of identity reveals the meaning and significance of such self-relevant constructions for individuals and organizations.

Yet there is a gap in theorizing on how individuals develop a shared understanding of one another as people who possess multiple identities (Roberts & Creary, 2011). Future research might examine which tactics for navigating the self enable people to construct more complex rather than simplified identities. For example, how does the use of segmentation tactics like disidentification (Steele, 1997) and compartmentalization

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(Roccas & Brewer, 2002) help people to navigate themselves in increasingly complex work environments that call forth the activation of multiple identities simultaneously (e.g., physician-administrator, working mother, social network “friend” and employer)? How do integration tactics like dual identification (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), superordinate categorization (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neele, 1998; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), and “hyphenation” (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) help people to navigate multiple identities? Although the role identity research is referenced most often in studies of managing competing demands, other traditions can also provide useful insight into this process. Critical identity theory’s emphasis on intersectionality may be helpful, narrative identity’s emphasis on sense making and coherence may lend insight, and identity work’s thick descriptions of identity performance and claiming and granting may help to shed light on this topic. By drawing from these varied perspectives, we might learn how to foster a shared understanding that individuals belong to multiple groups and possess multiple roles, all of which are significant and related to one another. We might also be able to test how mutual understanding of multiple identities improves the value of interpersonal relationships in diverse organizations.

**What are the implications of various tactics of navigating the self for actors, observers, and intergroup relations?** The five theoretical perspectives present different possibilities and concerns associated with navigating the self, including status hierarchies, psychological well-being, and performance.

Some tactics for navigating the self are more likely than others to reinforce **status hierarchies** of dominance and submission, privilege and marginalization. For example, social identity theory’s social mobility tactics reinforce status hierarchies of dominance. By exiting a lower-status group to join a higher-status group, members of devalued groups legitimize the notion that one social group is “better than” another. In this respect, claiming an identity (e.g., a “powerful leader”) may have positive cognitive and emotional outcomes for the individual (e.g., increasing one’s self-esteem) but negative outcomes for others (e.g., disempowerment, oppression) (Roberts & Creary, 2011). Further, social creativity tactics transform the meaning of one’s social identity group but may not change the relative ranking of social groups on the dimension of comparison. On the other hand, certain tactics are more likely to increase the status of marginalized groups in diverse work settings. According to critical identity theorists, discursive resistance of identity regulation can increase consciousness of inequality and emphasize affirmation of workers’ identities as autonomous beings. Future research might examine the broader impact of navigating the self on the status hierarchies that exist within organizations and societies.

Research on navigating the self can also help to explain how diversity influences **psychological well-being**. Some tactics for navigating the self may enhance psychological well-being, whereas others may undermine it. For example, identity prioritization enhances predictability in a complex social world, but simplifying one’s sense of self may have negative psychological consequences. Role identity theorists have concluded that segmentation tactics can limit identity spillover of affect, attitude, and

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behavior from one domain to another and reduce identity conflict (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002), but identity performance research shows that identity suppression can induce identity conflict (Roberts, 2005). Prominent agentic identity performance tactics—distancing, dispelling, living up to idealized images, and feigning indifference—can interfere with learning and performance, lead to poor self-regulation, increase tension and stress, and undermine autonomy and relationships (Ely & Roberts, 2008). The desire to validate one's own self-worth can lead one to assign blame and become preoccupied with oneself, missing the opportunity to learn from others and to improve oneself and one's outcomes (Ely & Meyerson, 2006). The defensive, ego-protective nature of certain tactics for navigating the self can enable people to construct more positive self-views in the short term but may undermine social interactions in diverse organizations in the long term (Crocker & Park, 2004). On the other hand, stories of resilience, identified in narrative-as-identity research, may be helpful in facilitating individual growth and enhancing feelings of competence (Maitlis, 2009); these narratives may be particularly important for marginalized or minority groups who seek to uncover the multitude of ways in which they define themselves as professionals.

Tactics for navigating the self may also influence **performance** on work-related tasks. Research on stereotype threat, which draws from social identity theory and identity performance research, describes how people respond to fears of being seen and judged according to negative stereotypes about their group. Stereotype threat often raises concerns that one's performance on a particular task will inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype about one's lack of ability (Roberson & Kulik, 2007; Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002). Under stereotype threat, one also fears that one's poor performance will reflect negatively on the stereotyped group. These concerns can increase one's level of anxiety (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998), and the desire to disprove stereotypes can lead people to invest too much time in independent task pursuit rather than seeking help (Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Coping with identity threat may undermine individual and team performance because people lose focus on the task at hand while mitigating concerns of stereotyping (Baumeister, 1999; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Steele, 1997). Ironically, this distraction often leads people to confirm the very stereotypes they had hoped to dispel (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, when women or African-Americans fear that their math test performance will confirm a negative stereotype of incompetence, they are less able to focus on the test itself and more likely to perform poorly than when they are less concerned about social identity threats (for review of relevant study results, see Steele et al., 2002). Roberson and colleagues have examined stereotype threat in the workplace. Roberson, Deitch, Brief, and Block (2003) report that Black managers who experience stereotype threat spend more time monitoring their performance through peer comparisons and are more likely to discount performance feedback they receive from the organization. These tactics for navigating the self in the face of stereotype threat may help Black managers (p. 90) protect a positive identity but may also undermine longer-term performance and relationship building.

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A meta-analysis of the various tactics and related outcomes, at multiple levels of analysis, would be helpful to develop a theoretically inclusive understanding of when and how to navigate oneself in diverse work contexts, based on one's goals, the audience, and the nature of intergroup relations. Motive might be a moderating factor in determining whether a tactic for navigating the self leads to more positive or negative intergroup, psychological, and performance outcomes. Researchers might assess various motives for navigating the self, such as: advancing one's career, gaining power, restoring one's dignity, or maintaining the right to self-author (particularly when labeled or categorized by others in disempowering or inhumane ways). An intense focus on navigating the self may also help to explain how people manage multiple interests, realities, and paradoxes in organizational life as they balance their own complex needs for inclusion, recognition, advancement, and competence.

**How does cultural diversity influence positive identity construction and navigating the self?** Recent identity scholarship has sought to deepen our understanding of positive identities at work (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). Yet cultural diversity has remained peripheral to the discussions of cultivating positive "work" identities such as functional role, department, or organizational membership. Cultural diversity refers to differences among people in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, or other dimensions of social identity that are marked by a history of intergroup prejudice, discrimination, or oppression (Ely & Roberts, 2008). Even in contexts that are diverse along these dimensions, race, gender, and class diversity are often invisible contextual features of the positive identity studies. The relative lack of attention to cultural diversity may be due to its associations with bias, discrimination, stigma, threat, and conflict in organizations—all of which seem to contradict an interest in cultivating positive identities and positive organizational scholarship more broadly (Roberts, 2006). A theoretical gap exists in identity scholarship regarding how people cultivate more positive work-related identities in culturally diverse contexts, because the dominant research on diversity and navigating the self features a limited set of tactics for coping with identity threat. The question of positive identity construction reaches beyond identity threat and invites a broader range of tactics for constructing, sustaining, and restoring positive identities. The review presented in this chapter supports that cultural diversity research has much to offer in terms of charting new pathways for cultivating positive identities at work.

As Dutton and colleagues (2010) noted, "the way in which individuals go about constructing a positive identity may vary depending on the culture in which they are embedded." The cultural influences of race, gender, and class likely shape each person's interpretation of proposed mechanisms for positive identity construction. According to the *virtue* perspective in Dutton and colleagues' (2010) typology, an identity is positive when it is infused with the qualities associated with people of good character, such as "master virtues" (Park & Peterson, 2003) like wisdom, integrity, courage, justice, transcendence, redemption, and resilience. Gendered constructions of virtue may

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influence the process of positive identity construction for male and female professionals; bravery, as a virtue, is often associated with traditionally male professions (e.g., firefighters), whereas compassion, as a virtue, is often associated with traditionally female professions (e.g., nursing).

The *evaluative* perspective on positive identity focuses on the regard in which individuals hold their personal identity (i.e., as an individual), relational identity (i.e., as a member of a relationship), and social identity (i.e., as a member of a social group). According to this perspective, an identity is positive when it is regarded favorably by the individual who holds it and/or by referent others who regard the identity favorably. Psychological research on self-evaluations shows that African-Americans who based their contingencies of self-worth on others' approval, physical appearance, being good at school, or outdoing others in competition suffered greater self-esteem losses than did their White American counterparts (Crocker & Park, 2003). Basing self-esteem on love and support from one's family, on God's love, or on being a virtuous, moral person was a more stable and generative path toward increasing positive evaluations for people of all backgrounds, but for African-Americans in particular (Crocker & Park, 2003). These differences may influence positive identity construction processes in diverse organizations. Yet research on self-esteem among White men shows that believing in affirmative action quotas (whether or not they actually exist) protects White men's self-evaluations from threatening performance feedback (e.g., being told they performed poorly on an intelligence test) by boosting their sense of self-competence (p. 91) (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). Thus, the diversity implications of positive identity construction are substantial.

The *developmental* perspective on positive identity focuses on changes in identity over time and assumes that identity is capable of progress and adaptation. The developmental perspective asserts that an identity is positive when it progresses toward a higher-order stage of development (for an example, see Hall's [2002] description of progress through distinct career stages). The developmental perspective also asserts that an identity is positive when the individual defines himself or herself in a way that generates fit between the content of the identity and internal or external standards (e.g., adapting to new roles at work, see Ibarra, 1999; resisting stigmatization and oppression, see Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010, and Meyerson & Scully, 1995). As referenced in this chapter, career research suggests that White men and women may follow different trajectories for assimilation and maturity in career development than do non-White men and women (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999). Further, cultural scripts and social discourses associated with group memberships dictate the parameters of interpersonal and intergroup relations and serve as "contextual resources" that individuals draw upon to construct narrative identities (Alvesson et al., 2008).

The *structural* perspective focuses on the ways in which the self-concept is organized. Research fitting this perspective asserts that an individual's identity structure is more positive when the multiple facets of the identity are in balanced and/or complementary relationship with one another, rather than in tension or conflict with one another (see



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Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Identity work research shows that in the face of complicated dynamics, marginalized individuals are proactive agents who employ nuanced tactics for constructing positive identity structures in diverse work contexts (e.g., Meyerson & Scully, 1995). We encourage more explicit research that bridges cultural diversity with positive identity construction through the examination of tactics for navigating the self.

**How do people navigate the self to create positive relational identities?** The theoretical exploration of varied approaches toward navigating the self also promotes the discovery of generative pathways for building high-quality relationships in diverse organizations. Our research review suggests that these generative pathways for building high-quality relationships in diverse organizations might begin with enriching understanding of how individuals from varied cultural backgrounds navigate their selves in ways that construct more positive identities in diverse work contexts. Rather than focus merely on the individual's sense of self, however, we propose that identity scholars reconceptualize the core elements of generative positive identity that serve both individual and social aims. That is, we propose that scholars shift identity paradigms in diversity research away from a focus on individual or collective identities to a focus on positive relational identities, and a focus on how people navigate these relational selves.

Building on the work of Sluss and Ashforth (2007), we define positive relational identities as self-views that reflect the ability to derive positive value from and enhance interaction patterns within interpersonal relationships. A positive relational identity can strengthen the individual's ability to cultivate social resources (Dutton et al., 2010), but also strengthens the quality of the tie between two or more people from culturally diverse backgrounds. The distinction between a positive individual identity and positive relational identity is as follows. A positive individual identity emphasizes whether one considers oneself to be virtuous, held in high esteem (by the self and others), growing and adapting in positive ways, and coherent or whole. A positive relational identity would involve building a more positive sense of self along these dimensions *for each party in the relationship*, and thus reduces the likelihood that one's own positive identity construction—and corollary tactics for navigating the self—will occur at the expense of the other (i.e., elevating one's own sense of self by diminishing another person or group). To shift to a focus on positive relational identities, scholars would need to consider the tactics for navigating the self that promote shared growth, enhancement, and empowerment, as individuals within a relationship come to view themselves *and each other* as more virtuous, worthy, evolving, adapting, balanced, and coherent. The focus on positive relational identities provides a counterpoint to the more egocentric tactics, often supported by social identity and identity performance theories, that involve elevating one's own identity by degrading another's, rather than mutual gain.

Further, an emphasis on positive relational identities may also raise questions regarding “positive” qualities that define the relationship itself and the identification processes of relating to one another as relational partners. The virtue perspective on [\(p. 92\)](#) positive relational identity in diverse organizations might emphasize principles of relating to

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others with dignity, humility, and respect. Navigating the self might involve claiming and granting such relational principles. However, research should examine whether certain relational identities (i.e., “helper,” “caregiver,” or “servant”) reinforce a dynamic of powerlessness and dependence on the party who has more access to resources. These relational identities are often associated with virtuous behavior, but the impact of such “virtuous” identity construction in diverse contexts should be examined closely.

The evaluative perspective on positive relational identities might involve tactics for navigating the self that reinforce mutual regard, affirmation, and love. The developmental perspective on constructing positive relational identities might illuminate the growth trajectory of a relationship in which trust, transparency, and intimacy increase over time, despite differences. Tactics for navigating the self might involve sense making that supports such views of mutual worth. And the structural perspective on constructing positive relational identities could characterize the elements of a relationship in which differences remain salient and complexity is validated. Navigating the self might involve prompting complex categorizations that encourage group identifications based on optimal distinctiveness within a collective, not just within an individual.

Recent research on positive relationships at work may help to further this line of inquiry on navigating the self (e.g., Davidson & James, 2007; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Geiger, 2010; Milton, 2009). We propose building upon these initial discussions to fully address the power dynamics between parties. A deeper understanding of dominance, submission, oppression, victimization, voice, silencing, and differential access to resources is critical in developing this scholarly approach toward positive relational identity construction in diverse work contexts. This scholarly approach would also require drawing upon various insights from social identity, critical identity, (role) identity, narrative identity, and identity work approaches; a single theoretical approach is unlikely to generate the new insights that are needed to navigate the self and engage diversity in this increasingly complicated social world. We hope that these intellectual endeavors will not only illuminate the interplay between navigating the self, positive identity, diversity, and relationships in organizations, but will also serve as the conceptual landscape for developing more generative encounters with difference in work contexts.

### Concluding thoughts

We encourage scholars to continue to engage in cross-disciplinary, theoretically inclusive dialogue on navigating the self in diverse work contexts. We focused our review on five prominent theoretical perspectives on positive identity construction, but there are certainly other theories that are relevant but were not part of the scope of this chapter. For example, status characteristics theory presents a resource-based view of social structure that explains how people who are systematically denied access to resources necessary for effectiveness are then viewed as inferior performers. In short, access to resources shapes societal consensus on the value of groups, which then influences social interactions. Diversity scholars have drawn upon status characteristics theory to explain social interactions and identities within diverse work contexts. Thus, it may be useful in identifying additional ways that people navigate the self.

We also believe that debates on agency and structure in navigating the self are useful for challenging assumptions and deepening understanding of the complex interplay of person and context in self-definition. Overly individualistic accounts of the self and identity construction diminish the importance of context and limit the ability to envision the long-term impact of self-strategies on individuals. Yet overly deterministic accounts of structural constraints diminish the role of personal agency in making sense of and defining a meaningful existence in a diverse work context.

Finally, we draw from critical theorists who view themselves as primary agents of identity change by raising consciousness and holding attention on structural inequalities and dominance. This view serves as a reminder that our scholarship itself can create possibilities or constraints on how people navigate themselves to construct positive identities in diverse work contexts. For example, Shapiro, Ingols, O'Neill, and Blake-Beard (2009) take ownership of their agency as diversity scholars in their article "Making sense of women as career self-agents," which recasts the discourse on women's careers from "opting out" of the conventional, gendered, work-is-primary model to a more empowered narrative of women as "free agents" and "agent[s] of their own career." We encourage diversity and identity scholars to recognize the work of various theoretical traditions in their efforts to explain how, why, and to what end people navigate the self in diverse work contexts. (p. 93)

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