

University of Groningen

Real-time Identity Processes

Kunnen, Saskia; Sugimura, Kazumi

Published in:
Identity

DOI:
[10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845](https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kunnen, S., & Sugimura, K. (2021). Real-time Identity Processes: Theories and Methods. *Identity*, 21(4), 271-274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



Identity

An International Journal of Theory and Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hidn20>

Real-time Identity Processes: Theories and Methods

E. Saskia Kunnen & Kazumi Sugimura

To cite this article: E. Saskia Kunnen & Kazumi Sugimura (2021) Real-time Identity Processes: Theories and Methods, *Identity*, 21:4, 271-274, DOI: [10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845](https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1985845>



Published online: 18 Oct 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 118



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Real-time Identity Processes: Theories and Methods

With great pleasure, we present the Special Issue “Real-time identity processes: Theory and methods.” The starting point for this special issue can be found in the conferences of the International Society for Research on Identity (ISRI) held in 2017 (Groningen, the Netherlands) and 2019 (Naples, Italy). In their contributions and discussions during these conferences, many identity researchers addressed the question: how can we understand identity development from the notion that all development is rooted, in some way, in everyday life? How does identity emerge from individuals’ daily experiences, thoughts, feelings, interactions, and behavior? As we described in our Call for papers, “real-time identity refers to ongoing efforts individuals make to construct, maintain, and revise their own identities. As identity is a product of person-context interactions, real-time identity inherently emerges out of interactions with both micro (e.g., family, peer, school, and workplace) and macro (e.g., social, cultural, political, and historical) contextual levels.”

We were excited to see how many high-quality submissions were submitted in response to the Call for papers. This informed us in the first place that the topic of real-time identity processes is highly relevant for many researchers at this moment, and secondly, that one special issue would not be enough to give a good representation of the work done so far. For that reason, we decided to split the special issue in two: in this issue, the first one, we focus on theoretical and methodological contributions, and in the second one on empirical applications.

Overview of the special issue

As editors of these special issues, we defined real-time identity in a general way. We repeatedly asked ourselves the question “What is real-time identity?,” when we had to decide whether submitted papers did indeed address real-time identity. We found the question difficult to answer and, in our decision-making, we thoughtfully considered the authors’ explanation about the real-time character of their papers. Indeed, the authors embraced several crucial, fruitful notions about “real-time identity” that are relevant to consider. In this respect, two articles in this issue (Klimstra & Schwab, 2021; De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021) take an overarching reflective perspective on real-time identity research in general.

Klimstra and Schwab (2021) present a review of quantitative studies on micro-level identities and elaborate on the methods used in these studies. Based on this overview, they discuss the merits and shortcomings of the presented studies. As a shortcoming in the existing quantitative studies, they observe a problem with the selection of concepts that are measured. Often, the studied concepts and the used items are directly based on the traditional developmental identity research that refers to thoughts and reflection. These concepts are not aligned with the time scale and with specific processes that take place in real-time. In addition, analyses often address between-persons relations between variables and, thus, miss within-person processes. Klimstra and Schwab propose to focus on real-time experiences and observations and on characteristics that are especially relevant at the real-time level, such as within-person dynamics, fluctuations, etcetera. They recommend combining quantitative and qualitative techniques since qualitative data (e.g., obtained from diaries) could supplement and help to clarify quantitative phenomena.

De Ruiter and Gmelin (2021) address similar issues and come partly to similar conclusions. The starting point in their paper does not consist of existing studies and methods but is of a theoretical and reflective nature. De Ruiter and Gmelin asked themselves the question “What is real about ‘real time’ anyway?” We, as editors, asked ourselves this same question when preparing the Call for papers. De Ruiter and Gmelin place the study of real-time identity development in the broader perspective of

studying identity development on all time scales. In their view, the starting point should not be the focus on different time scales but the study of processes. “We suggest that timescales are not temporal places in which certain identity features *exist*, but rather, the researcher may usefully *describe* any identity process (either its variability or its development/stability) at a specific timescale.” (De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021, p. 303). Here their analysis resembles that of Klimstra and Schwab, who also stress the relevance of studying processes that “belong” to specific time scales. The description of processes is thus central, making the process orientation key for this epistemological aim. In this light, they argue against the narrowing of real-time identity to the exclusive focus on action- and experience-features of identity. Conceptualizing different levels of processes should not be limited by the units of time but by time scale-specific mechanisms and types of emergence. Thus, they express the hope that their perspective will result in a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to the study of identity processes.

The papers of Klimstra and Schwab (2021) and De Ruiter and Gmelin (2021) tap the same general topics, and from their articles, we distilled three relevant issues we want to discuss here. First, the issue of time scale. Real-time identity mainly refers to short-term (or micro-level) identity phenomena, but it could be more than that. It refers to how identity appears in the short term and also how it shapes long-term development; moreover, real-time identity processes can be intertwined with reflecting on one’s own long-term identity process. Also, real-time processes can be studied repeatedly over longer time periods, with the aim of observing recurrent patterns and changes in patterns. This tells us that all time scales of identity development are intertwined. It is not possible and not necessary to study all time scales in one study, but it is crucial that researchers are aware of the broader context in terms of time scales.

Second, the conceptual issues. As Klimstra and Schwab (2021) point out, non-obtrusive, observable interactions or experiences may be the most convenient way to assess real-time identity. However, De Ruiter and Gmelin (2021) argue that also individuals’ reflections or thoughts take place in real-time and are part of identity development. Klimstra and Schwab point out that assessing reflections and thoughts during their occurrence is hard, maybe impossible because the assessment interferes with the process. Narratives (Hellinger & Schachter, 2021), diaries, and discussions between researcher and participant about real-time actions (Marshall et al., 2021) may help to assess thoughts and reflections in the form of “one’s reflections of experiences.”

Third, the issue of the methodological approach. Traditionally, identity is studied mostly with a between-person approach. However, in studies of real-time identity also within-person approaches are frequently used. As both Klimstra and Schwab (2021) and De Ruiter and Gmelin (2021) point out, studying processes requires a within-person approach. However, a challenge when using a within-person approach is the possibility to generalize, to draw conclusions that go beyond the individual that was studied. Researchers have to reflect on the necessity of the within-person approach and on the challenge to generalize their findings. In this regard, the contributions in this issue provide several examples of the way generalization can take place.

The three other papers in this issue (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021; Marshall et al., 2021; Schachter & Hellinger, 2021) describe methods, embedded in theory, for studying real-time development. This set of papers provide great examples of how the three issues we elaborated on above are intertwined with methods to study real-time identity. These methodological contributions refer to different types of data and designs, and together they form a good toolbox for researchers who are interested in studying real-time identity but do not know how.

Marshall et al. (2021) describe the Action-Project Method, a method that is rooted in the Contextual Action Theory (Young et al., 2002). Identity construction is conceptualized as a series of goal-directed actions over an extended period of time. Everyday interactions are seen as building blocks of goal-directed behaviors. Series of such actions over time construe identity through manifest actions, internal processes, and social meaning. Generally, videotaped conversations are used as the starting point. In different steps and in dialogue with the participants, insight is developed in the way in which the real-time actions, via short-term goals, contribute to the development of long-term identity. The real-time observations are not directly analyzed by the

researchers but given meaning in interactions with the participants. Processes are, thus, described in dialogue with the participants. These interactions are an excellent example of moving back- and forwards between time scales and of the use of both observational action measures, thoughts, and reflection. Marshall et al. apply a within-person analysis and generalize afterward by grouping different types of identity processes.

Gmelin and Kunnen (2021) describe how the identity content of real-time conversations can be analyzed by means of the Iterative Micro-Content Analysis (IMICA). They focus on analyzing the concrete mechanisms of real-time conversations. Their detailed, step-by-step description offers tools for researchers who want to study how identity claims change or remain the same within single interactions as well as across multiple interactions. An important characteristic of their approach is that change over time within conversations can be studied: The processes are being observed. IMICA is, per definition, focused on the content of conversations, thus, on observable interactions. The data resulting from this method can be analyzed in either a qualitative or a quantitative way. In the illustration, two time scales are presented: the real-time scale of the conversation and the somewhat longer time scale that covers repeated conversations. Repeated real-time measures using IMICA can be used to detect patterns, and changes in patterns, over time. To link these changes to long-term identity development, the authors suggest that the method could be combined with longer-term methods. The approach focuses on within-person processes, although also here, between-person analysis is possible by means of grouping types of processes.

Schachter and Hellinger (2021) present a narrative interview for capturing real-time identity development. They studied micro-changes in identity configurations as they appeared within the span of one qualitative, “big,” life-story style interview. They focused on micro-changes in the identity configurations and how they were reworked within and across the same interview setting. The dialogue with the interviewer stimulated reflections and possibly changes in reflections about oneself. The researchers looked for the possible triggers involved in instigating identity reflection, change, and elaboration. Their method is fundamentally qualitative in character. Although the setting is a life span interview, the focus is on a micro-level time scale: the processes are observed within the period of the interview itself. However, the context of the interview is highly relevant because the real-time thoughts and reflections are about the long-term development of the person itself. Importantly, there is a back and forwards movement; it is a real-time reflection about life span issues. Also in this study, the data consist of real-time interactions about (long-term) thoughts and reflections. The study used a within-person approach. Schachter and Hellinger embedded their study in the broader field of science by making a direct connection with theory. Their case study follows the tradition of theory exemplification (Robinson & McAdams, 2015), exemplifying what configurations – and the attempt to create them – “look like” in actual lives.

Closing remarks

After reading and rereading the five impressive papers in this issue, we felt that our initial definition of real-time identity needed refining and broadening. The three issues (i.e., the intertwining of time scales, the possibility and need to use a broad range of concepts, and the need to address within-person processes) that we distilled from the first two papers (Klimstra & Schwab, 2021; De Ruiter & Gmelin, 2021), and found to be highly relevant in the other three papers (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021; Marshall et al., 2021; Hellinger & Schachter, 2021) are issues that we need to address, take care of, and make explicit when studying real-time identity. This may provide researchers and readers a perspective to grasp what are the crucial, critical points for the study of real-time identity but also of macro-time identity development. We now define the study of real-time identity as referring to the process of ongoing efforts individuals make to construct, maintain, and revise their own identities by studying both short- and long-term time scales. We could study it in its back and forth movements between short- and long-term time scales, individuals’ abstract thoughts/reflection and concrete actions/experiences, in order to unpack mechanisms of identity development in time.


As editors, we especially want to stress the importance of de De Ruiter and Gmelin (2021) point that we need an inclusive and pluralistic domain of research. In this issue, as well as in the upcoming one about empirical applications, we see a huge diversity of approaches, ideas, and methods. The study into real-time identity development is still in its infancy; we need creative researchers who dare to explore identity processes using different approaches, trying new methods, and relating different time scales in nuanced ways. We hope that this issue may stimulate these researchers. It offers theoretical frameworks and specific tools to think about identity processes at different time scales and unveil real-time identity.

References

- De Ruiter, N. M. P., & Gmelin, J. H. (2021). What is real about “real time” anyway? A proposal for a pluralistic approach to studying identity processes across different timescales. *Identity*, 21(4), 289–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1969937>
- Gmelin, J. H., & Kunnen, E. S. (2021). Iterative micro-identity content analysis: Studying identity development within and across real-time interactions. *Identity*, 21(4), 324–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1973474>
- Hellinger, R., & Schachter, E. P. (2021). Tracking real-time changes in configurating identity elements in a life-story interview: An exploratory case study. *Identity*, 21(4), 341–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1977131>
- Klimstra, T. A., & Schwab, J. R. (2021). Time and identity: An evaluation of existing empirical research, conceptual challenges, and methodological opportunities. *Identity*, 21(4), 275–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1924722>
- Marshall, S. K., Botia, L. A., Chiang, M. M.-C., Domene, J. F., Noel, M., Pradhan, K., & Young, R. A. (2021). Using contextual action theory and action-project method to study real-time identity. *Identity*, 21(4), 309–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2021.1960166>
- Robinson, O. C., & McAdams, D. P. (2015). Four functional roles for case studies in emerging adulthood research. *Emerging Adulthood*, 3(6), 413–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696815592727>
- Young, R. A., Valach, L., & Collin, A. (2002). A contextual explanation in career. In D. Brown (Ed.), *Career choice and development* (4th ed., pp. 206–252). Jossey-Bass.

E. Saskia Kunnen

Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

 e.s.kunnen@rug.nl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7876-0750>

Kazumi Sugimura

Department of Psychology, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5668-6094>