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Jayson O. Seaman
University of New Hampshire, Durham, jayson.seaman@unh.edu

Erin H. Sharp
University of New Hampshire, Durham, erin.sharp@unh.edu

Andrew D. Coppens
University of New Hampshire, Durham, andrew.coppens@unh.edu

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A Dialectical Approach to Theoretical Integration in Developmental-Contextual Identity Research

Jayson Seaman
University of New Hampshire
Department of Kinesiology
New Hampshire Hall
124 Main Street
Durham, NH 03824
jayson.seaman@unh.edu

Erin Hiley Sharp
University of New Hampshire
Department of Human Development & Family Studies
Pettee Hall, Room 202
55 College Road
Durham, NH 03824
erin.sharp@unh.edu

Andrew D. Coppens
University of New Hampshire
Department of Education
Morrill Hall
Durham, NH 03824
andrew.coppens@unh.edu

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For Consideration in the Special Issue: Identity Development Process and Content: Toward an Integrated and Contextualized Science of Identity

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Abstract

Future advances in identity research will depend on integration across major theoretical traditions. Developmental-contextualism has established essential criteria to guide this effort, including specifying the *context* of identity development, its *timing* over the life course, and its *content*. This article assesses four major traditions of identity research – identity status, eudaimonic identity, sociocultural theory, and narrative identity – in light of these criteria, and describes the contribution of each tradition to the broader enterprise of developmental-contextual research. This article proposes *dialectical integration* of the four traditions, for the purpose of generating new questions when the tensions and contradictions among theoretical traditions are acknowledged. We provide examples from existing literature of the kinds of research that could address these questions and consider ways of addressing the validity issues involved in developmental-contextual identity research.

Keywords: Developmental-contextualism; Eudaimonic; Identity formation; Identity status; Narrative; Sociocultural theory

A Dialectical Approach to Theoretical Integration in Developmental-Contextual Identity Research

The rise of developmental-contextualism as a governing paradigm for identity studies has led to calls for more integration across theoretical traditions. Authors describing this task (e.g., Syed & McLean, 2015) have noted the difficulty of synthesizing fundamentally different conceptions and units of analysis from fields such as human development, sociology, anthropology, and history (see e.g., Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Côté, 2006; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luykx, 2011). Insights provided by these perspectives are essential to imagining more robust models of identity, but their incorporation also poses the challenge of addressing how multiple levels of the social ecology interacting across different scales of time "constitute basic developmental processes" (Schachter, 2005, p. 376.; see also Goossens & Phinney, 1996). Developmental-contextualism also raises the question of what principles and criteria ought to be used to integrate divergent perspectives without identity research becoming a Tower of Babel (Côté, 2006, p. 6). Given the complex demands entailed by a developmental-contextual orientation, a key task ahead is to develop guidelines not only for conducting individual studies, but also for coordinating a plurality of perspectives concerning self-understanding.

Efforts to address the need for such guidance have taken several forms. Some authors have reasserted the cultural and historical dimensions of Erikson's writing, which were eclipsed as the identity status model rose to prominence (Côté & Levine, 1988; see e.g., Hammack, 2008; McAdams & Zapata-Gietl, 2015). Others have sought to strengthen claims about context by refining models devised within singular traditions of identity research (e.g., Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Byers, 2006) or by elaborating specific points of intersection between different traditions (e.g., McLean, Syed, & Shucard, 2016; Syed &

Azmitia, 2008; Waterman, 1982). These strategies will remain productive even as developmental-contextualism suggests the improbability of attaining a single, comprehensive model dominated by any one theoretical tradition. As Vignoles et al. (2011) argue, approaches are now needed that draw on “the strengths of … contrasting theoretical and methodological approaches without losing sight of [their] unique contributions” (p. 12) – an especially challenging prospect when one tradition’s unique contributions conflict with others in fundamental ways.

This article proposes a means of working productively with tensions that arise when prominent but contrasting research traditions are leveraged to inform developmental-contextual studies of identity. Instead of viewing these tensions as evidence of the field’s “confusion” (Vignoles et al., 2011, p. 7), we see contradiction as a fundamental and unavoidable characteristic of the entire enterprise, traceable to Erikson’s root contention that identity is “a process ‘located’ *in the core of the individual* and also *in the core of his communal culture*” (1968, p. 22, emphasis in original; see further discussion in Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Schachter, 2005). Our argument is that the science of identity now requires ways to harness these contradictions, while also respecting core concerns represented by specific theories. To this end, this article: (1) proposes a *dialectic* approach to integration that encourages cross-fertilization among prominent yet often contrasting traditions; (2) raises questions that arise from tensions generated by cross-fertilization; and (3) provides examples illustrating how these tensions might be addressed empirically in future studies.

We begin by introducing four prominent research traditions sharing an Eriksonian lineage – *identity status, eudaimonic identity, sociocultural theory,* and *narrative identity.* These focal traditions were selected because they view identity as a psychosocial phenomenon, in contrast to

sociological or philosophical perspectives (see Côté, 2006; Schachter, 2005). Additionally, the research landscape is presently dominated by the status and narrative traditions (McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2014), but the eudaimonic and sociocultural traditions offer considerations that are important to retain in future work. Each also maintains fidelity to Erikson's original formulation, in which identity involves a social dimension, positioning the individual in a social structure; a personal dimension, or concrete lived experience; and an ego dimension, reflecting a subjective sense of continuity (Côté, 1996).

We then summarize the core meta-criteria of *context, timing,* and *content,* which must be addressed for research to be considered sufficiently "developmental" and "contextual." Each of the focal traditions provide specific kinds of leverage on unresolved issues related to these meta-criteria; sociocultural theory demands a more expansive treatment of *context,* narrative identity demonstrates the importance of systematically examining *timing*, and the eudaimonic and identity status traditions challenge researchers to retain strong notions of *content* – even though, we argue, no one tradition has established a definitive basis for this last criteria. The second half of the article introduces the idea of a *dialectic* approach to integration and examines how intersections and tensions between different traditions can be exploited to generate new questions and insights. In the final section, we outline several validity concerns involved in theoretical integration and propose greater ecological validity as an important goal for future research.

Overview of Prominent Research Traditions

Identity status theory. Identity status theory (Marcia, 1966) first translated Erikson's psychoanalytic discussion of identity into a measurable model, and it continues to dominate the empirical literature as well as proposals for theoretical expansion (e.g., Kunnen & Metz, 2015; Meeus, 2011; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). It specifies four distinct

identity statuses – *diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium,* and *achievement* – based on the relative presence or absence of *exploration*, the degree to which individuals consider alternative goals, values, and beliefs, and *commitment,* the degree to which individuals resolve important identity-relevant conflicts in different domains (e.g., occupation, relationships). Identity status is generally assigned separately within distinct domains.

Recent expansions of Marcia's identity status model introduce a wider range of processes involved in exploration and commitment (Luyckx et al., 2006; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010). Luyckx and colleagues (2006) describe individuals cycling iteratively through *exploration in breadth*, *initial commitment*, *exploration in depth*, and *evaluation of commitment* before reaching full commitment. *Evaluation of commitment* accounts for a sense of "fit" between one's commitment and the knowledge obtained through exploration (e.g., "I sense that the career I want to pursue in life will really suit me," Luyckx, Seiffge-Krenke, Schwartz, Crocetti, & Klimstra, 2014). More recently *ruminative exploration* was added, suggesting a less productive process of continually questioning commitments (Crocetti, Luychk, Scrignaro, & Sica, 2011). Likewise, Meeus et al. (2010) highlight *reconsideration* of new commitments involved in *in-depth exploration*. These extensions acknowledge the need to account for greater complexity in the processes of identity formation within and across domains in the basic status model.

Eudaimonic identity theory. Following Erikson's (1968) argument that the significance of identity is defined partly by its quality, eudaimonic identity emphasizes the daimon, or "true self," in which humans have innate, core interests, skills, and talents that must be *discovered* through exploration (Waterman, 2011). Here identity is conceptualized not as a particular status, domain, or degree of commitment, but as identification of a core set of interests, abilities, and

potentials that influence one's choices (Waterman, 1982; 2011). Waterman developed this theory after finding that many research subjects coded as identity achieved in the status model still seemed unable to articulate a meaningful connection to their identity commitments (personal communication, October, 2001).

Eudaimonic identity theory describes identity formation as following a stepwise progression: (a) explore a range of activities, broadly defined, in order to *discover* one's core or innate interests, abilities, and potentials; (b) recognize a subjectively satisfying activity as a form of *personal expressiveness* – characterized by a "constellation of subjective experiences that includes feelings of rightness and centeredness in one's actions, strengths of purpose, meaningfulness, intrinsic motivation, fulfillment, authenticity, and identity, as in 'this is who I really am'" (Waterman & Schwartz, 2013, p. 104); (c) identify the core interests, skills, and talents discovered to be responsible for the experience of personal expressiveness; (d) develop those core interests, skills and talents through continued activity; (e) seek further opportunities to enact this identity (Waterman, 2011). Researchers studying eudaimonic identity emphasize the cultivation of self-understanding through the choice of life activities. Accordingly, activities figure prominently as contexts in research designs (e.g., Coatsworth & Sharp, 2013).

Sociocultural tradition. Over the past 30 years, sociocultural theory has led to breakthroughs in understanding cognitive development and learning (Roth & Lee, 2007), with implications for studying identity. Sociocultural theory views psychosocial development as occurring through changing participation in social and institutional practices (Rogoff, 2003). Because of this wider scope and corresponding emphasis on social interaction, the traditional sociocultural unit of analysis is *culturally organized activity* rather than individual choices or "internal" mental processes (Matusov, 1998). Nonetheless, subjective experience figures

prominently in sociocultural research, because socially coordinated, goal-directed action is core to sociocultural explanations for human conduct, including the achievement of self-understanding (see Stetsenko, 2005).

The sociocultural tradition also shares Erikson's concern for cultural-historical dimensions of identity, particularly the view that cultural activities act as an organizing force for individual development in all domains including identity formation (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Vygotsky, 1981). For example, activities such as schooling contain historically formed models for personhood that circulate as resources for identity formation – what Erikson (1968) described as role images (p. 211) – which are actively taken up in the practice of being a student to shape self-understanding in ways that compound across long-range developmental trajectories involving multiple domains (Eckert's (1989) *Jocks and Burnouts* provides an example; see also Packer & Greco-Brooks, 1999). Thus, from a sociocultural perspective, learning always entails "the organization of social futures" (O'Connor & Allen, 2010). Sociocultural researchers approach identity processes *as* transformations of participation and *in terms of* the affordances of historically evolved cultural activities.

Narrative identity tradition. Narrative identity is fast becoming a leading conceptual and methodological approach (Adler et al., in press; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2015). In this framework, identity develops through the adoption and use of narrative forms such as "life narratives, curricula vitae, written biographies and autobiographies, and also more partial biographical accounts" (Habermas, 2007, p. 1). Such ways of presenting one's life come to constitute self-understanding and shape future purpose and direction through repeated instances of mental reflection, textual production, and storytelling. Ego identity is therefore both revealed and shaped by the formation of a personal *life story* that achieves unity and coherence over time

(Baerger & McAdams, 1999; McLean et al., 2014). Moreover, it is through constructing personal biographies in terms of culturally circulating narrative forms that the self becomes socially recognizable (Fivush et al., 2011). In short, we become who we are through the stories we tell about ourselves (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

Narrative identity research has emphasized several essential elements. First is the achievement of *autobiographical reasoning* in adolescence, or the cognitive capacity to integrate previously episodic memories into a more coherent plot form characterized by direction and purpose (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Köber, Schmiedek, & Habermas, 2015). Second is the cultural concept of *biography,* which provides parameters for organizing and telling personal narratives (Habermas, 2007; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Third is *coherence,* which makes the self comprehensible by linking events in temporal and thematic order and integrating otherwise disparate identity elements (Köber et al., 2015). Finally, because narratives are cultural by nature, they are also *ideological*, serving as a crucial link between individual identity, history, and communal norms (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Wortham, 2005). Narrative research emphasizes the mutual constitution of psychology and culture, and it covers the life span by seeking antecedents in childrearing and psychological correlates into adulthood.

Core Meta-Criteria for Developmental-Contextual Studies of Identity

Taken independently, the above traditions vary in the extent to which they contribute to understanding identity in developmental-contextual terms. But how can their contributions be more systematically evaluated and compared? Foundations of the ecological and life span sciences have established three essential criteria for developmental-contextual research (see Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2007; Lerner & Castellino, 2002). These criteria are: (a) identify how environmental conditions afford and constrain individual-level processes

(*developmental context*); (b) outline sequential changes across the lifespan and explain connections between earlier and later developmental achievements (*developmental timing*); and (c) describe what it is that develops or changes over time (*content*). These meta-criteria can be used to evaluate what each tradition contributes to developmental-contextual research, illuminate tensions that exist across traditions, and establish guidelines for integration in subsequent conceptual and empirical studies.

Criterion: Developmental context. Developmental context pertains to the interaction of social, cultural, and historical conditions over different scales of time to shape human development (e.g., Featherman & Lerner, 1985). Bronfenbrenner's (1995) bioecological systems model is one example, in which individual development occurs through complex intersections between characteristics of the individual and features of the environment that change across historical and ontogenetic time. According to this perspective, psychological and environmental processes are reciprocally related – from biological maturation, to proximal processes involving parents and peers, to the organization of specific institutional settings like school and work, to historically formed macro-level factors like socioeconomic conditions and racial group relations. Developmental-contextualism thus requires showing how different system-levels interact as contexts in specific instances, relative to particular domains or developmental tasks of interest.

The ***sociocultural*** tradition places the greatest pressure on identity researchers to develop stronger notions of context. Sociocultural perspectives depart from viewing context as a "surround" that "influences" identity development – wherein personal and social identity formation processes are understood as separate, or perhaps interacting (e.g., Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011; see Cole, 1996 for a discussion). Instead, sociocultural researchers understand context as a process involving culturally mediated actions that are both the material for and product of

individual identities. Sociocultural theorists maintain that placing context in the center of any analysis of psychological functioning

> overcame the split between the Cartesian individual and the untouchable societal structure. The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce [cultural] artifacts. (Engeström, 2009, p. 134)

This methodological approach captures identity as simultaneously personal and social, pushing researchers to account for context via holistic, relational units of analysis rather than by aggregating separable components. Long-standing sociocultural critiques of "internalization" (e.g., Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993) establish a more demanding threshold for conceptualizing context than what is accomplished by aligning individual and societal "boxes" (McLean & Syed, 2016). Thus, sociocultural conceptions of context press researchers to explain how the histories, activities, and values of specific communities become tools for individual self-understanding, and conversely, how cultural continuity and change are achieved through the reproduction and transformation of specific models of identity (see e.g., Hammack, 2008; Wortham, 2005).

An emphasis on *activities* as primary contexts for identity work is an aspect of sociocultural theory shared by the ***eudaimonic identity*** tradition (e.g., Coatsworth & Sharp, 2013). Eudaimonic identity theory focuses on person-activity fit as an essential part of individual identity processes (Waterman, 2015), especially subjective responses to conditions in the immediate environment. Sociocultural researchers are likewise concerned with face-to-face interactions, but their interest lies more in understanding how the affordances provided within activities vary culturally, including comparing how wider patterns of activity organization "lead" individual development over the life course (e.g., school beginning around age six in culturally

Western communities. See Beach, 1995). Eudaimonic identity theory devotes much greater attention to the formation of individual subjectivity, yet in terms of *context,* both traditions emphasize activity and participation as indispensable resources for identity formation.

The sociocultural emphasis on the cultural dimensions of context is also shared with ***narrative identity***. Context has been approached in three related ways in the narrative tradition: the relation of a story's grammatical structure to its expressive function (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Gee, 2006), interactional environments in which stories are told, and cultural variation in the availability and use of different narrative forms and genres. Socialization into autobiographical narrative begins in early childhood as parents interact with their children (Fivush et al., 2011; Wang, 2013) and continues into adulthood as narratives are reconstructed (McAdams, 2006). Cultural variability in narrative identity has not been widely studied, but existing reviews have indicated cross-cultural differences in the extent of narrative elaboration and the use of different genres in such interactions (Fivush et al.). Researchers have also started to recognize *master narratives*, ranging from conceptions of the life course, to stories describing the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, to accounts of maternal love, as crucial mechanisms linking culture and self-understanding (see Arnett, 2016; Hammack, 2008; Kerrick & Henry, 2017). We further discuss master narratives later in the article.

Identity status theory contains few explicit propositions about the role of context in identity processes (Côté & Levine, 1988; McLean et al., 2016), mostly treating context as variables that interact with individual-level characteristics (e.g., Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). For example, studies on global parenting dimensions have suggested that placement in more advanced identity statuses is associated with warm, supportive, and less controlling parents (Luyckx, Soenens, Vasteenkiste, Goossens, & Berzonsky, 2007; Meeus, 2011). Such examples

are rare, however, and the lack of broad knowledge even about demographic differences in identity status placement and the salience of different domains indicates that *context* is relatively underdeveloped in the status tradition.

The pressure sociocultural theory places on other traditions can be leveraged to facilitate new empirical questions about developmental context and identity. For example, status researchers could investigate how specific cultural practices and institutions communicate the salience of different identity dimensions (i.e., individual, relational, and collective) and domains (e.g., education, career, family roles). Eudaimonic identity theory could be expanded by examining the types of exploratory activities and experiences that are emphasized within different cultural communities or social settings, or how young peoples' impressions about "what kind of people" participate in different kinds of activities shape their own possibilities for identification (e.g., King & Church, 2013). Narrative researchers informed by sociocultural notions of context have already begun to examine how children across cultures learn to represent themselves autobiographically within family interactions (Wang, 2013); this type of research will deepen understanding of the relationship between identity and context in the future.

Criterion: Developmental timing. Questions of developmental timing and identity are threefold: First, when does identity emerge as a primary focus within the lifespan? Second, what biological, psychological, and cultural factors shape the sequence of qualitative changes across the lifespan? And third, what are the critical precursors and future impacts of specific identity achievements? Identity researchers tend to place a special emphasis on adolescence, attributing to Erikson the view that "tentative crystallization of identity occurs during childhood; during adolescence, however, a new form of identity emerges in which these identifications of childhood are sifted, subordinated, and altered in order to produce a new identity configuration"

(Kroger et al., 2010, p. 683).

The ***identity status*** and ***eudaimonic*** traditions have approached developmental timing by offering hypotheses about identity construction chiefly during adolescence and early adulthood. The status literature maintains that: (1) identity exploration takes place in earnest during adolescence and early adulthood; (2) individuals move from less developmentally advanced statuses (i.e., diffusion and foreclosure) to more advanced statuses (i.e., moratorium and achievement) from adolescence to early adulthood; (3) identity commitments are typically consolidated by early adulthood; and (4) individuals will progress through the identity statuses in a predictable sequence from diffusion, to foreclosure, to moratorium, to achievement (Archer & Waterman, 1994; Marcia, 1993; Waterman, 2004). Similarly, the eudaimonic identity tradition imagines expressive identity beginning in childhood with introductions to different activities and experiences, to adolescent discovery of core elements, to adulthood when an individual enacts identity through ongoing life choices.

Empirical studies supporting the progression from childhood to adulthood proposed by status and eudaimonic identity researchers are limited, however (Côté, 2006; Kroger et al., 2010; Meeus, 2011). Studies on status changes generally show that the number of college-going young adults classified as identity achieved increases over time, while the number in identity diffusion status decreases, yet many respondents failed to reach achievement even by their senior year of college. Findings also suggest less stability in the sequence of identity status change over time than might be expected; some participants categorized as identity achieved at one time later shifted to a less advanced identity status (Côté & Levine, 1988). Other work suggests greater stability of commitment across adolescence (e.g., Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013) than in young adulthood. Empirical evidence thus provides some support for identity

status progression over time, but less for the hypothesis that individuals move predictably through statuses from adolescence into early adulthood (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 1988; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). The extent to which the status model is suited to addressing fundamental issues related to timing is therefore uncertain (Meeus, 2011).

The ***sociocultural*** and ***narrative*** traditions regard identity as a process evolving over the life course rather than emerging and solidifying in adolescence. Sociocultural researchers view identity work at different developmental periods along the life course being driven by the normative organization of social activities in given cultural communities (Elkonin, 1972; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Arnett, 2016). In this view, identity formation as an activity becomes a leading psychological task during particular age periods *because of* culturally normative expectations rooted in social, historical, and economic patterns. In this manner, understanding how culturally prominent activities – broadly, in Western communities: play, school, and work (Elkonin, 1972) – lead psychological development provides insights into the convergence of ontogenetic and historical timescales, which is a main topic of sociocultural interest.

The sociocultural perspective illustrates how a stronger conception of context also entails a revised view of developmental timing. For example, although researchers in the sociocultural tradition also tend to view adolescence as a particularly generative period (Polivanova, 2006), the overwhelming focus on adolescence in identity studies can also be understood as an expression of the histories, values, and organizational practices most familiar to researchers and study participants (Matusov & Smith, 2012). The assumption that identity formation is a prolonged process of increasing self-reflexive awareness is recast as deriving from particular practices within cultural communities that value Western, middle-class ideologies of finding

oneself and "choosing" an identity (see Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015). Other communities in which the arc of development is drawn by engagement in different practices likely hold other possibilities for identity along distinct timing trajectories.

Narrative perspectives also emphasize the mutual constitution of individuals and culture by examining the origins and changes in autobiographical storytelling across the life span. The trajectory of socialization into narrative self-understanding has been systematically investigated, giving important purchase on changes happening over the life course and correlates with other psychological functions. For instance, researchers have investigated early parent-child interaction to understand developmental antecedents of narrative identity, particularly how different types and degrees of family storytelling scaffold key narrative attributes such as coherence and other dimensions of autobiographical storytelling (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Fivush & Merrill, 2016; Wang, 2013). Similar to the status tradition, adolescence is viewed as a particularly significant time when several formative conditions converge and maturation occurs in relevant domains: (a) societal pressure to articulate a life purpose and direction increases (see Baumeister, 1987 for a historical analysis of this point); (b) opportunities to refine one's life story increase as social contacts widen and conversational contexts expand; and (c) cognitive maturity confers the ability to connect events causally and thematically and to "represent the self in more abstract ways and to deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of life experiences" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 236). These conditions usher a qualitative change from remembering isolated events to ascribing causal and temporal coherence to life events and discerning their implications for an imagined future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001). The capacity for autobiographical reasoning therefore corresponds with acquisition of the cultural concept of biography in adolescence, enabling an integrated and coherent identity

articulable in the form of a life story that continues to evolve into adulthood (Köber et al., 2015).

Tensions among the strengths of the four traditions in the area of *timing* – particularly in light of sociocultural conceptions of *context* – encourage a reformulation of basic questions about when identity formation occurs or is most salient in development: When in development do children begin to encounter settings that communicate the need for one to “explore” and “commit” to various life choices? In what cultural communities are these opportunities experienced as demands for one to take up “having an identity” as a problem of self-definition? How does the chronological organization and means of children's engagement in identity-relevant activities vary across home, school, social media, and peer settings? And importantly, *what* is developing over the course of these interactions?

Criterion: Content. The goal of identity formation is generally understood as having a clear and cohesive answer to the question “who am I?” Developmental-contextualism requires researchers to specify *what* develops and *what* constitutes the accomplishment of identity as a developmental task. Given its constitutive role in identity as both a popular and scientific concept, content has received remarkably little research attention (Syed & McLean, 2015). We see two likely reasons for the limited empirical treatment to date: (1) it is assumed to be a property of identity *per se*, particularly as a domain status, and (2) there is currently no agreement about how to study it. Consequently, different traditions seem more or less likely to see content as a problem requiring further conceptual or empirical definition.

Eudaimonic identity is notable in its emphasis on what an identity should include. Waterman was not the first to propose the elements of identity content (see Erikson, 1968; Grotevant, 1987; Marcia, 1993), however, eudaimonic identity theory is unique in defining identity as a self-definition *constituted* by awareness of one’s core interests, skills, and talents.

Eudaimonists also differentiate a successful identity from a less successful identity, in terms of associations with wellbeing, as a matter of content. Eudaimonic identity theory therefore also introduces *quality* as a concern related to *content*; a high quality identity is one that emerges from recognition and integration of one's true, core self (i.e., daimon) – labeled an *expressive* identity, while a lower quality identity is one that meets expectations of the external environment but is not reflective of one's core self – labeled an *instrumental* identity (Schwartz, Mullis, Waterman, & Dunham, 2000). This evaluation of identity content has been supported by some empirical evidence linking expressive identity with indicators of wellbeing (Coatsworth & Sharp, 2013; Waterman et al., 2015), however questions remain regarding differences between this construal of content and other notions such as self-concept (see Baumeister, 1999).

The ***narrative tradition*** increasingly prioritizes identity content, treating it in terms of *types of events* in a life story, the story's *focal domain* or domains, and the *master narratives* that help to give the story structure and meaning (e.g., McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean et al., 2016). First, because narrative identity is represented by autobiography, content is necessarily constituted at least in part by the *types of events* contained within a life story such as turning points, significant life events, and other scenes that demonstrate agency, redemption, communion, exploration, or resolution (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Second is the subject of a story, or its *focal domain*. For instance, McLean et al. (2016) identified several prominent domains in college students' autobiographical memories and also found some domains to integrate others. For example, memories involving *family* were tightly linked to *religion, sex roles,* and *values*. In this view, content is defined as the subjective salience of specific identity status domains, communicated as a property of one's autobiography. Finally, the relationship among these elements is often expressed within culturally circulating *master narratives*, which

provide coherent, culturally-rooted archetypes reflecting moral messages about “how we are supposed to behave and how we are supposed to feel” (McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 327). As such, individual life stories are therefore also constituted by master narratives (or oppositional alternatives to them – see McLean & Syed, 2016). The recognition of master narratives suggests that *ideology* may be an important but infrequently considered element of content (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Hammack, 2008), whether as a constitutive feature of it or a template according to which specific, other contents are organized – what McLean and Syed (2016) call a master narrative’s *structure.*

Within the ***identity status tradition***, identity is achieved when an individual reports making a firm and unwavering commitment within a specific domain, after a period of struggling among alternatives (Marcia, 1966). In this way of construing identity achievement, *domains* are regarded as the individual’s identity content, for example identifying as a member of a religious affinity group (e.g., Armato & Marsiglio, 2002). Indeed, identity status research commonly uses the terms identity *domain* and identity *content* interchangeably – for example describing content as work, relationships, or ideology (e.g., Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011; McLean et al., 2014). However, a critical question status researchers face is whether classification as identity achieved in a domain offers sufficient information about the content of identity (Carlsson, Wängqvist & Frisén, 2015).

Research on identity status content is equivocal on this point. A concept of identity that accounts for the relative salience of some domains over others, even when several would be classified “achieved,” seems necessary for defining content in the status tradition (e.g., Frisén & Wängqvist, 2011; McLean et al., 2014). Such an account should explain shifts in identity as different domains are prioritized across the lifespan (e.g., when jobs change or families grow) or

even across activities of daily life that are experienced as conflicting. Archer (1989), for instance, refers to identity content areas such as vocation and family roles, but argues that *identity* is what defines decisions and choices about investment among these content areas. Similarly, Frisén and Wängqvist (2011) conceptualize identity content as the salience of domains, but their discussion of an example from their interview data suggests that a subjective sense of identity emerges from relations, sometimes in tension, across domains. They write: "Her answers indicated that she had thought about issues concerning priorities between work and family, and her reasoning seemed to be based on her knowledge about herself and what she valued in life" (p. 210). Such explanations beg the question; identity content may be better understood as the "knowledge about herself and what she valued in life," which is expressed in terms of status domains, but is not reducible to them. Researchers attuned to these problems have therefore argued that methods from other traditions are necessary for specifying content in the identity statuses (McLean et al., 2014; McLean et al., 2016).

The ***sociocultural tradition*** has not sufficiently dealt with questions about identity content, because individual differences or subjective experiences with social structures tend to be a marginal concern relative to identifying wider cultural patterns (McLean & Syed, 2016). Researchers working in sociocultural traditions, however, emphasize that all psychological development – even what others consider maladaptive – occurs in relation to cultural practices and traditions. Accordingly, content would not be conceived as something achieved "within" a person, but instead it would be studied as an ongoing process of ideological alignment with collective social values expressed in and through routine ways of speaking and forms of conduct. As individuals transform their participation in cultural activities, the identity entailments of that participation become salient in individuals' and others' understanding of them, which are

expressed in further interaction (see Roth, 2007). Outside of participation in social practices, including modes of self-understanding that circulate culturally, identity would literally be inconceivable, as it is devoid of content.

In sum, there is presently little agreement on what constitutes identity content. Eudaimonic identity theory conceives of it as self-awareness of one's unique interests, skills, and talents, particularly as they are affirmed in one's activity choices. In identity status theory, content is typically defined as domains (e.g., religion, occupation), a conception that is also used occasionally in narrative research (see McLean et al., 2014). The utility of the domains in narrative research is questionable, however, as other constructs could arguably also constitute content, such as event types (e.g., turning points) and story forms (e.g., redemption narratives). The increasing recognition of master narratives also complicates efforts to define content from the point of view of the subject, since they entail a much stronger ideological presence in one's self-definition than is often recognized. Master narratives do, however, provide possible purchase on how personally salient content is also constituted by culture; this also might provide ways to understand relationships between subjectivity and content from a sociocultural perspective, which presently lacks ways of handling such insights.

Comparing how these focal traditions handle content can generate empirical questions whose answers may generate a basis for shared understanding. Recent explorations of master narratives (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2016) provides a promising example. Questions stemming from this work could focus on whether master narratives can be considered content *per se,* whether they organize more discrete contents – for example, religion, nationality, and relationships (Hammack, 2008) – according to wider historical and cultural bases, or whether they might serve either function in different instances. Answers might vary depending on

whether master narratives are seen as *biographical,* as when they provide normative models of the life course (Arnett, 2016), or *plot-driven*, functioning as people signify identification with particular characters in a story they are participating in conversationally (Wortham, 2003); these might carry different implications for identity content. Answering such questions will likely require more granular methods than what has been typical in much of the research to date. Nonetheless, rigorous studies of timing and context will be of limited value without clearer articulations of *what* is developing across different levels of analysis and scales of time.

Inseparability of Context, Timing, and Content in Developmental-Contextual Identity

Our discussion thus far has pointed to generative aspects of each theoretical tradition with respect to *context, timing,* and *content* of identity, revealing areas of compatibility and also differences in the way core criteria are conceived. The sociocultural tradition carries strong implications for *context*; the narrative tradition stresses *timing,* in terms of studying the antecedents, emergence, and correlates of personally salient modes of self-understanding; and the identity status, eudaimonic, and narrative traditions emphasize *content* as essential to understanding identity, even though a cohesive, basic definition has yet to emerge. The primary point we wish to take from the preceding discussion is that (a) *context, timing,* and *content* can be separated for analytical purposes but should be treated as indissoluble elements of identity, and (b) each tradition – while making a limited contribution to developmental-contextualism as a whole – places important kinds of pressure on how identity should be approached in future research. What follows is a discussion of how to capitalize on these tensions.

A dialectic approach to integration

Dialectics is typically used in the developmental literature to characterize the relationship between individual and social planes of analysis (Baltes et al., 2007; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000;

Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Dialectic research on identity sees tensions that arise between these planes as potentially prompting qualitative changes in either or both planes, as in the case of misalignment between one's self-understanding and an ascribed social role. For example, many Black students in urban schools struggle to maintain connections to their peer groups while also trying to demonstrate academic interests to teachers, who are often unreceptive (see Roth, 2007). Dialectic analysis is meant to be generative; according to Reigel (1976), it "not only searches for answers but also for questions" (p. 689) by considering at least two elements in a way that focuses on discordances, conflicts, and asynchronies instead of seeking compatibility. Contradictions, in a dialectical framework, are the engine of change and therefore ought to be the focus of research.

In this final section, we apply dialectic principles to the project of integrating across theoretical traditions in order to examine specific tensions that could generate new questions, units of analysis, and analytic strategies. We describe three approaches to dialectic integration and discuss corresponding validity concerns that arise in a developmental-contextual environment. These are: (1) to "hold constant" a set of assumptions from one tradition in order to address a specific problem; (2) to strategically cross-fertilize specific attributes of two or more traditions based on a larger problem of interest; and (3) to develop new conceptions that provide analytic purchase on *context, timing,* and *content* as indissoluble parts of a whole that captures identity processes in the concrete ground of lived experience. Each of these approaches also introduces validity concerns specific to developmental-contextualism as a governing paradigm.

Holding assumptions constant and "as if" validity. There is value in working within one tradition to address specific problems related to one or more of the meta-criteria, *as seen through* the assumptions of that tradition. For example, consider a study of identity content

among youth growing up in rural communities as they participate in extracurricular activities, taken from the point of view of the eudaimonic identity tradition. Within this tradition, experiences of personal expressiveness are presumed to indicate discovery of one's core identity – one's innate abilities, interests, and potentials as they come to be realized in different activities. To understand the problem of eudaimonic identity formation among youth living in rural communities, researchers could foreground the subjective experiences individuals report in various out of school activities, such as 4-H, youth sports, paid work, and so on, in order to assess correspondence between setting-level features – the presence of adult mentors, use of new skills, a shared sense of purpose – and subjective characteristics tied to greater personal expressiveness (e.g., Coatsworth & Sharp, 2013). As an investigation of *content*, such projects would be useful for understanding how different activities draw out different types or degrees of personal understanding or the process by which identity discovery occurs in different activities for different participants (see Nasir & Cooks, 2009 for an example from the sociocultural tradition). Questions about the *context* and *timing* of expressive identity could be also incorporated by comparing youth experiences in rural, urban, and suburban communities and by examining how early exposure to activities shape later preferences, experiences, responses, and outcomes.

In traditions with apparent gaps in knowledge of *context, timing,* or *content,* it will be advantageous to hold constant a set of assumptions in order to enhance the leverage that tradition provides on a given dimension of identity – for example, seeing how certain extracurricular activities afford particular forms of self-understanding as informing *content*. The danger in exclusively taking this approach, however, lies in proceeding *as if* identity is reducible to, or is sufficiently explained by, the concepts used in the study. This "as if" threat resembles the

imposed etic problem (Berry, 1969): the possibility that what are presumed to be fundamental identity dimensions are actually artifacts of culturally and historically specific beliefs about identity, reified first as methodological decisions and then as an empirical discovery. (See Packer & Goicoechea (2000) for a description of the *as if* condition related to learning theory.)

Identity status theory, for instance, is marked by this tendency, particularly overemphasizing individual agency (McLean & Syed, 2016); by itself, such a degree of agency can be accepted only conditionally, *as if* individuals approach identity as a context-independent matter of exploring then selecting from long-range commitments, like choosing from a menu or trying on a suit. Seen as an *as if* validity issue, it is possible that exploration and commitment constitute identity development insofar as they have become dominant categories for understanding, if not *experiencing*, it, much in the way Erikson (1968) described “identity crisis” in the 1960s (pp. 26-29). Put another way, exploring and committing to an identity might now be a culturally situated master narrative, rather than reflecting a universally given process of identity formation. Therefore, when holding a set of assumptions from one research tradition constant, it will be important in future studies to explicitly acknowledge that one is illuminating a dimension of identity through the affordances of a particular research tradition while deliberately suspending other conceptions, in order to enable specific insights into *context, timing,* or *content.*

Targeted cross-fertilization to achieve incremental validity. Examples already exist of researchers gaining leverage on a particular identity problem by incorporating attributes from two of the traditions discussed here. McLean et al. (2016), for example, investigated identity content by combining the narrative identity attributes of *event types* and *personal relevance* with the status attributes of *ideological* and *interpersonal contents* and *exploration* and *commitment.* They found that narratives enabled respondents to make personal meaning of events within

different identity domains (family, religion, values) in a manner suggestive of exploration, but some domains “spilled” into others in their descriptions of significant events, making it difficult to assess the degree of commitment in different domains. Our purpose here is not to appraise their findings, but rather to note an example of research that strategically cross-fertilizes from two traditions in an effort to generate insights into a poorly defined aspect of identity: *content.*

The above study reflects what may be called *targeted cross-fertilization,* where key concepts from one tradition are incorporated with those from another to achieve a deeper explanation of *context, timing,* or *content* than what is possible from one tradition alone. Returning to our example of youth activity involvement in rural communities, a greater understanding of how different activities facilitate personal expressiveness – a central feature of eudaimonic identity – could be enhanced by investigating relations between event types included in stories about activities discussed as meaningful, and typical measures of personal expressiveness. It is plausible that the degree to which youth experience activities as personally expressive might depend on the extent to which “self-defining memories” (Thorne, McLean, & Lawence, 2004) involving the activities become incorporated into stories about the self. In other words, personal expressiveness may be mediated by the use and appropriation of particular types of narratives, and certain activities either correspond to event types that some people find especially meaningful or facilitate rehearsals of culturally significant narrative forms that signal personal expressiveness. In this example, core concepts from eudaimonic and narrative identity theories could be leveraged to address abiding questions about *content, context,* and the relationship between them, during a key developmental period.

This example of cross-fertilization would satisfy Adler et al.’s (2016) call for research “weighing in on the ways in which narrative identity adds to the study of individual differences,”

particularly "as cross-sectional indicators and longitudinal indicators of well-being" (p. 169). This effort, Adler et al. argue, is important for establishing the "incremental validity" of narrative identity, wherein concepts are used to uniquely explain variance unaccounted for by traditional indicators. We want to uproot this concept from its statistical origins, however, and argue for a similar notion with respect to targeted cross-fertilization: Specific concerns, sensibilities, and concepts from one tradition could – as in the preceding examples – be joined with those from another tradition to enhance understanding of a particular identity dimension. But even incrementally valid research can limit understanding of *context, timing,* and *content* to the assumptions of the focal traditions, largely independent of one another.

A deeper approach to cross-fertilization, and a step beyond incremental validity, would involve seeking questions about identity that arise out of specific points of tension between different traditions. Along the axes of *timing* and *context*, viewed from a sociocultural perspective, Arnett (2016) observes that a cultural community's master narratives likely provide ideological guidance regarding when in the life course certain activities should be available to individuals as affordances for identity development. This insight provides specific methodological leverage to address questions regarding cultural differences in identity *content,* for example. Without this kind of sensibility, one can study links between eudaimonic and narrative identity as youth participate in extracurricular activities as discussed above, while implicitly holding constant the twin assumptions that narrative self-construction occurs chiefly through autobiography and it is in adolescence that the cognitive processes necessary for identity work emerge. Often accompanying the assumption of a cognitive threshold necessary for identity work is a companion methodological assumption regarding when in the life course researchers should focus on understanding identity development. These presuppositions could constrain the

search for evidence on how activities come to constitute identity, providing some new insights but largely reaffirming existing assumptions.

What would remain unaddressed in this approach is the possibility that narrative self-construction occurs earlier, among young children, and more often through storytelling genres and practices that deviate from autobiography but are nonetheless identity-constituting. The search for narrative identity's "emergence" logically leads researchers to approach identity work occurring at earlier ages 'as if' it would appear similar to, or as a simpler form of, what is believed to happen in adolescence, and seeks occasions likely for these to be found. Studies on maternal reminiscing in childhood and later narrative identity (e.g., Fivush et al., 2011) draw these connections. In contrast, Nicolopoulou (2008) presents research focusing "primarily on fictional stories, as opposed to narratives of personal experience" (p. 300), and argues that young children's narratives aren't merely primordial forms of a later, more fully developed autobiography, but are sense- and identity-making genres not sufficiently understood in terms of forms common at older ages, i.e., autobiography. Children's acts of storytelling are an identity-constituting activity *per se* during a developmental period in which imaginary play is a leading activity of development in many communities (see Karpov, 2005) but is only occasionally organized around lone protagonists or first-person narration. To the extent that narrative identity continues to be defined as constituted by autobiography, then, even researchers deliberately engaged in cross-fertilization could deem children's narrative work with fictional stories to be of minimal importance relative to the later development of identity (see also Georgakopolou, 2014). Nicolopoulou's research therefore opens up compelling questions about the relationships between the *timing* of narrative self-construction in different developmental periods, *contexts* where identity-constituting practices occur, and possible *content* if it is not represented

autobiographically. This methodological turn can be understood as *dialectically* cross-fertilizing between sociocultural and narrative traditions in a way that modifies core assumptions and, by doing so, surpasses a minimum threshold of incremental validity.

Striving for ecological validity: The inseparability of context, timing, and content in developmental-contextual identity research

Deliberately holding constant one set of assumptions and strategically cross-fertilizing among contrasting traditions can be regarded as efforts to build toward more ecologically valid concepts and descriptions of identity processes. But each of these prior strategies rely on what may be called an *analytic disassembly* of identity phenomena as experienced in everyday life – that is, the separation of *context, timing,* and *content* so they can be studied by incorporating concepts from one or more discrete theoretical traditions. This move is useful, we have argued, for contributing incrementally to developmental-contextual understandings of identity; the more researchers work across traditions, the less likely the field is to be bound by "as if" concerns. Still, a key consideration for future research is to develop greater *ecological validity*, defined as "the degree to which the circumstances created by the researcher's procedures [including their theories] match those of the everyday world of the subjects" (Briggs, 1986, p. 24; see also Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1997). Striving for greater ecological validity will establish more robust understanding of identity at the individual level, with respect to particular cultural communities, operating within given historical epochs, in relation to everyday lived experiences. We see this as central to Erikson's challenge to study "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and also *in the core of his communal culture*" (1968, p. 22) – that is, to study a process occurring across different ecological levels and timescales simultaneously, experienced and revealed in everyday

settings and practices. More significant advances in developmental-contextual identity research will need to make ecological validity a central tenet.

We see four kinds of efforts important to moving beyond analytic disassembly and the incremental approach it entails, toward more ecologically valid developmental-contextual identity research. First, resolving the dialectic tensions created by analyses conducted across research traditions will require more holistic units of analysis for identity research. Striving for ecological validity presses researchers to develop concepts that "avoid an analytical separation of behavior and context which is not matched by the experiences of people engaged in such activities" (Blommaert & DeFina, 2016, p. 6). One example of ecologically valid conceptions of identity using a more holistic unit of analysis can be found in the work of Chicana feminist scholars writing on the concrete experiences of Mexican American youth (Hurtado, 2003). Concepts such as *mestiza consciousness* permit traction on intersecting dimensions of culture and history that are simultaneously experienced as oppressive and leveraged as resources for identity work at the individual level (Anzaldúa, 1987/2012). In this work, connections to family and community among several Latina women were identity constituting, both as experiences of class- and poverty-based marginalization and, importantly, in agentic responses taken up in ways that reflected family commitment and political consciousness (Hurtado, 2003). In this research, analytic insight was gained by conceiving of identity *in terms of* the lived experiences of particular social and cultural communities.

Ecologically valid research on identity will therefore also emphasize analytic approaches that hew close to the ground of lived experience. It will examine how “the concrete actions of the individual in a concrete social world” yield “interactive changes in common activities and everyday situations” (Reigel, 1976, pp. 690-691) rather than striving to refine existing, abstract

categories (see also Lerner & Castellino, 2002). For example, one could imagine coding for identity content during an observational study of adolescents engaged in discussions with their parents about various decisions like selecting elective courses, choosing extracurricular activities, or considering various college majors. Viewed ecologically, resolving the dialectic tensions deriving from differences across theoretical traditions is valuable only insofar as it better illuminates the contradictions and paradoxes that drive identity processes in people's everyday experience (see also Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016).

Third, ecologically valid research will demonstrate greater sensitivity to how scientific concepts and the research process itself shape the phenomenon under investigation, admitting one's concepts and methods as a legitimate, if not necessary, object of inquiry throughout the research process. The use of life story interviews in narrative identity research provides a case in point (McAdams, 2008; Wengraf, 2001). Instances where people are required to produce "big stories" like life histories about themselves are relatively rare occurrences in daily life (Dunlop & Walker, 2013). Telling a big story, Bamberg (2006) argues, "requires particular kinds of institutional settings to bring them off, and … the use of highly specific rhetorical techniques" (p. 71). Far more often, people share *small stories* – brief episodes involving other people, often involving reported or invented speech, organized chronologically around an immediate point rather than presenting a linear march through time (Georgakopolou, 2014). As a validity concern, several dangers lie in continuing to favor big stories. They "tend to present deceptively coherent, settled, thought-out lives and selves" (Georgakopolou, 2014, p. 10), meaning that the core identity attributes of stability and continuity may not be latent properties of personal narratives but instead are artifacts of the interview method/event itself. Moreover, subjects versed in telling big stories about themselves undoubtedly produce more coherent ("better") ones than people

practicing the genre for the first time. Variability might therefore say less about individual differences and more about the extent to which informants have experience with institutional settings that afford opportunities to rehearse life stories along canonical lines (cf. Briggs, 1986).

The big stories/small stories distinction points to the importance of accounting for the concepts and methods used in the analysis of identity – for example, the situational dynamics of the interview as a factor in the production of a life story (Pasupathi, 2015). One thing people accomplish in an interview is an interview, in which they can be expected to generate accounts of their lives along canonical lines, working in the same manner as, for instance, a college essay or therapy. And, Wortham (2003) argues that even in interviews, what people are *doing* may relate only loosely to what they are *saying;* Briggs (1986), for instance, tells of his experience conducting fieldwork in a Mexican community. After multiple attempts to conduct an ethnographic interview with his host family, he finally succeeded in getting the father to respond. It was only later when he realized that what he imagined as an interview, the man had used as an opportunity to further apprentice Briggs to the local economy. Together they had accomplished an interview, but also more, and it was the “more” that afforded greater insights into the man’s identity as a community elder.

Other concepts and units of analysis give purchase on ecological levels and timescales in a way that could contribute to ecologically valid research and speak more meaningfully to identity context, timing, and content. Blommaert and DeFina (2016) offer another example. They propose a methodological system based on the concept of *chronotope* (literally timespace) to discover how “socially shared, and differential, complexes of value [are] attributed to specific forms of identity” (p. 5). Timespaces – the family dinner, a social media platform, a night at the bar with friends, a performance evaluation at work – involve expectations that configure a

definable range of possible social roles. Chronotopes, Blommaert and DeFina argue, are normative: “If specific forms of cultural practice mark specific periods of life, all such periods must have their own forms of cultural practices” (p. 8). They are also fractal: “even within narrower timespans we can see nonrandom co-occurrences of timespace configurations and forms of cultural practice and identity enactment” (p. 9). Identity formation through activity involvement among youth living in rural communities, for example, would be seen as arranging resources for self-construction, including ways of telling about one’s future prospects, along contours that are predictably arranged but not historically intransient, as factory closures precipitate dramatic shifts in the local opportunities available to discover oneself in terms that have future viability (see Kenway & Kraack, 2004).

Identity work *per se* may occur as normatively expectable chronotopes are synchronized or violated. Moreover, chronotopic arrangement can be expected to differ cross-culturally or even within a seemingly homogenous environment:

> …while [university] students share almost identical experiences and develop particular, and similar, identities during their days at the university, the meanings and effects of these shared experiences will differ according to the more fundamental social and cultural identity profiles they ‘brought along’ to university life. (Blommaert & DeFina, p. 4)

The idea of *identity chronotopes* may provide a holistic unit of analysis that provides an opening for research on how identity processes – say, of exploration or discovery – are organized according to historical ideologies, and become tied to outcomes that differ according to macrosocial factors such as socioeconomic changes. For example, how do adults in rural communities dissuade youth from involvement in activities tied to dying forms of industry and start emphasizing others, such as postsecondary education, which often involves leaving and

never coming back to one's hometown? Embedded in this question is the recognition that identity processes necessarily have time/space dimensions that can only be understood through historical and empirical analysis linking together individual and community changes occurring over different scales of time. But even research using concepts such as *chronotope* can benefit by being explicit about how specific studies explain broader issues related to the *context, timing,* and *content* of identity.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that tensions between theoretical traditions with contrasting assumptions can be harnessed to generate new research questions about identity – especially related to the *context* that shapes its formation, the *timing* of its development, and its *content*. Côté (1996) aptly expressed the challenge ahead for identity researchers as they work to address these core developmental-contextual criteria. They need "to carefully distinguish among the dimensions of identity within a theory that stipulates how macrosocial contexts vary and change and how these varied and changing macrocontexts can affect interactional and subjective-psychological aspects of identity" (p. 150. See also Lerner and Castellino, 2002, p. 127). Côté's challenge is not merely a methodological problem, but also an ontological one; it requires an accounting of changes at three different scales of time: event, or real time; ontogenetic, or developmental time; and sociogenetic, or historical time (see Kunnen & Metz, 2015). This is the challenge of achieving greater ecological validity. The need also extends to identity's spatial dimensions involving settings such as school, family, community organizations, diasporic boundaries, and so on, which configure social relations and material practices in ways that both afford and constrain identity opportunities, the specifics of which are explicable only through detailed empirical work.

Identity researchers working in a developmental-contextual paradigm face new challenges as they attempt to address abiding questions about timing, context, and especially content, given its current lack of conceptual clarity. Research designs will become more complicated, and publication outlets will need to accommodate a wider range of data collection strategies and reporting styles. As Duncan, Magnusen, and Ludwig (2004) state, however, "…developmental scientists should not be simplifying their theories for the sake of empirical tractability" (p. 59). Future research can benefit by embracing the contradictions that arise in the "dialectical space" that emerges when different research traditions are recruited to serve the developmental-contextual project.

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