



## Understanding identity integration: Theoretical, methodological, and applied issues



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### ABSTRACT

*Identity integration* is one of the foundational theoretical concepts in Erikson's (1968) theory of lifespan development. However, the topic is understudied relative to its theoretical and practical importance. The extant research is limited in quantity and scope, and there is considerable heterogeneity in how identity integration is conceptualized and measured. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to 1) provide a conceptual discussion of different forms of identity integration 2) highlight the different methodological approaches represented in the literature, and 3) detail the implications of integration for psychological functioning. In particular, we provide a conceptual and methodological discussion of four forms of integration: two that are widely recognized, *contextual integration* and *temporal integration*, and two that have received less attention, *ego integration* and *person-society integration*. We see this paper as filling a need in the literature for those interested in how complex identity processes are related to psychological functioning.

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The fundamental question of identity, *who am I?*, is one that is asked in myriad ways across many academic disciplines (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011), and nearly goes back to the beginning of modern empirical psychology itself (James, 1890). Within this broad question, scholars interested in developmental issues are concerned with a more circumscribed question: *how did I become who I am?* This developmental perspective on identity was principally championed by Erik Erikson (1950, 1968), whose psychosocial theory of identity development continues to be highly influential (Kroger & Marcia, 2011; McLean & Syed, in preparation, 2015b; Meeus, 2011).

One of the foundational theoretical concepts in Erikson's (1968) theory of lifespan development is *identity integration* (van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2003). Erikson's writings covered a great deal of territory, and he seldom provided precise definitions of constructs (Côté & Levine, 1988; Waterman, 2015), but identity integration generally corresponds to "a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity" (1968, p. 19) that is often considered a hallmark of healthy identity development (Waterman, 2015). The empirical research on integration has demonstrated its importance for multiple aspects of psychological functioning, from suicide (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, Hallett, & Marcia, 2003), to immigrant adjustment (Benish-Weisman, 2009), and educational persistence (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). However, the extant research is limited in quantity and scope, and there is considerable heterogeneity in how identity integration is conceptualized and measured. Moreover, the topic is understudied relative to its theoretical and practical importance.

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Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to 1) provide a conceptual discussion of different forms of identity integration 2) highlight the different methodological approaches represented in the literature, and 3) detail the implications of integration for psychological functioning. We see this paper as filling a need in the literature for those interested in how complex identity processes are related to adjustment. Indeed, there is currently great interest among identity development researchers in processes associated with multiple identities, and therefore the time is ripe for a dedicated discussion on how to align theory, research, and practice on the topic.

### Conceptual foundations: what is identity integration?

Erikson's theory is particularly useful for thinking about and organizing the complexity of the construct of identity integration, as it articulates multiple layers at which integration can manifest. Our read of Erikson, as well as the current literature on identity, points to four broad forms of identity integration. A common definition of a healthy identity, from an Eriksonian perspective, is a sense of integration across context and time. There are, however, two other forms of integration that are in need of theoretical and empirical attention, especially in developmental terms: integration of both time *and* context and integration of self and society.

It is important to highlight the irony of specifying four distinct forms of identity integration, as the concept of integration is fundamentally concerned with pulling together complex aspects of the self into a coherent whole. Indeed, identity development necessarily involves simultaneously coordinating the four forms of integration in order to lead a healthy, productive life. As with most psychological phenomena, such complex processes must be delineated and simplified to facilitate theoretical and empirical development, even if the separation itself is artificial (Van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2002). Moreover, the different forms have been represented as distinct in the literature, with researchers zeroing in on one form at the expense of others. Thus, drawing distinctions among these forms of integration is important for clarifying the existing literature, to help avoid conflating the different forms, and to motivate research on how each of the forms of integration develop and relate to other important developmental tasks.

Germane to the current special issue, clarifying these forms of integration is critical for understanding healthy psychological functioning. From an Eriksonian perspective, without successful integration, individuals experience a lack of personal continuity and persistence, which can result in severe issues with psychological functioning. Indeed, the concept of identity integration grew out of Erikson's clinical observations, particularly his work with veterans following World War II, as he was working to conceptualize the mechanisms that could explain severe deficits in psychological functioning. Contemporary studies have shown that breakdowns in identity integration are associated with incoherent and fractured identities, which are linked to severe psychological problems (Chandler et al., 2003). Thus, bringing greater empirical attention to identity integration will help to realign identity research with research on disruptive psychological functioning, while at the same time broadening the field of identity development, which has tended to focus on relatively healthy populations.

Although research relevant to identity integration can be found across a wide variety of approaches, situating it within an Eriksonian framework is a useful way to organize the existing literature. Moreover, using this organizational framework helps to highlight a) that some forms of identity integration, particularly contextual and temporal, have received much more empirical attention than others, and b) there is a wide array of methodological approaches within similar forms of integration.

**Table 1**  
Forms of identity integration with examples.

	Definition	Example
Contextual	Integration of multiple identity domains	Cause I want to be a doctor in California, and most of the people in California, especially L.A., are minorities, and most minorities are Latinos right now. So I decided if I minor in Latin American and Latino Studies; I'm a Latina, but we all have different stories, and therefore I'll be able to better understand my patients and that way help them when they come to me with problems. (Syed, 2010)
Temporal	Coordination of past, present, and future	My mom works part time, so on those days ... she did not work, we would spend time together, often doing arts and craft projects. This brought out my creative streak, and to this day I spend a lot of time on art projects ... One night my boyfriend and I were discussing our hopes and dreams for the future, and we started talking about what we want to do after college, when we want to be married and have kids, etc. I told him this story to explain why I would love to have a part-time job when we have kids, so that my children will hopefully have such fond memories of spending time with me. (McLean, 2005)
Ego	Coordination of domains over time	It seems to me that I have become much more able to make sense out of my life. I am happier than I ever remember being. I have begun to be able to put together many once vague ideas about how one should live one's life and why—and be able to relate almost everything I do to that emerging "philosophy." Not only am I able to direct actions that I would be taking anyway, i.e. being a housewife, raising children, potting, etc., but this emerging philosophy has also gradually pushed me into new directions. ... I feel much more sure of my thoughts, feelings, my judgments, and my decisions. (Pals, 1999)
Person-society	Alignment of self and society	In Grade 9 I consented to a clandestine rendezvous with a male classmate at the supper hour back at the school locker room. It was one of the few times in my teens when I had sexual contact. The feel of another male body was exciting. However, my cultured guilt took over for several years before I was truly able to sort my true feelings out. Back then, there were very few people to talk to in a small town ... (Weststrate & McLean, 2010)

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