A Conceptual Review of Identity Integration Across Adulthood

Lauren L. Mitchell, Minneapolis VA Healthcare System & University of Minnesota

Jonathan M. Adler, Olin College of Engineering

Johanna Carlsson, University of Gothenburg

Py Liv Eriksson, University of Gothenburg

Moin Syed, University of Minnesota

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Abstract

Though Erikson recognized identity development as a lifelong project, most research on identity has focused on adolescents and emerging adults. Less is known about how the identity formed in adolescence is maintained and adapted across the adult lifespan. The purpose of the present paper is to provide a conceptual review and elaboration of Erikson's (1968) theory focused on *identity integration*, a construct that is particularly relevant to adult identity development. Identity integration describes the process of bringing together various aspects of one's self into a coherent whole, and the sense of self-continuity and wholeness that emerges as a result of these processes. Informed by the identity and lifespan development literatures, we present a conceptual framework that describes how identity integration is maintained across the adult lifespan, and how it is re-established when changing life circumstances present threats to an individual's identity. These maintenance and re-establishment processes help to support adults' well-being and adaptation to major life transitions and stressful events. This conceptual framework is intended to facilitate research on identity integration in adulthood, a time of life that has been less often studied in the identity literature, but that can involve identity dynamics that are just as critical as those in adolescence.

Key words: identity development; adulthood; identity integration; lifespan development

A Conceptual Review of Identity Integration Across Adulthood

Erikson's (1950; 1968) classic psychosocial development theory situates identity development as a key task for adolescence, but also emphasizes that identity development is a lifelong project that continues across the whole lifespan (Erikson, 1968; Whitbourne et al., 2002). A rich literature thoroughly documents identity development processes in adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2015; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013), but there is remarkably little work on identity development in adulthood, especially midlife and later life (Kroger, 2015). Instead, a number of disparate literatures address change and stability in identity across adulthood, including lifespan theories of development (e.g., Aldwin, 2011; Atchley, 1989; Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995), the narrative identity literature (e.g., Adler et al., 2015; Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Carlsson, Wängqvist, & Frisé, 2015; McAdams, 2006), and a multitude of literatures on specific life events and transitions that may trigger identity renegotiation (e.g., Adler, 2018; Benish-Weisman, 2009; Dunlop, Walker, Hanley, & Harake, 2017; Feldman & Beehr, 2011; Kim, Kiervik, Belyea, & Choi, 2011). Such bodies of work remain largely disconnected, despite dealing with similar themes of how the self adapts in the context of aging and lifespan growth. Furthermore, most Eriksonian research on adolescent identity development focuses closely on identity formation, including commitment and exploration processes (e.g., Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Marcia, 1966; Schwartz et al., 2013). Thus, while identity formation has been studied extensively, what happens *after* an initial identity has been formed is much less clearly conceptualized.

In this paper, we review and integrate the disparate literatures relevant to adult identity development, identifying common themes to explain how adults maintain a coherent, continuous identity beyond adolescence and emerging adulthood. We merge these perspectives into a conceptual framework that lays out how adults *maintain* an identity through everyday life, and *re-establish* an identity in the event of experiences that threaten one's existing sense of self. This framework connects with current dual-cycle models of adolescent identity formation (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2006), illustrating the "next steps" that adults take as they continue the work of identity development across the lifespan, and the complexity of these lifespan identity development processes.

At the core of our framework, we propose that *identity integration* is an especially relevant construct for understanding adult identity development. Identity integration involves bringing together disparate parts of one's self (e.g., one's memories of life experiences, social roles, capacities, motivations and commitments) into a coherent whole (Syed & McLean, 2016; van Hoof & Raaijmakers, 2003). Integration includes both the process of establishing and maintaining coherence, as well as the product that emerges: individuals with an integrated identity feel a sense of self-continuity across time and situations, and experience a consensus between the way they view themselves and the way they are viewed by others (Erikson, 1968). An integrated identity thus supports adults' ability to pursue life goals, build enduring relationships, maintain well-being, and facilitates adults' progress through later psychosocial stages focused on generativity and integrity.

We begin with a conceptual review that is organized into three sections. The first section synthesizes evidence beyond the mainstream identity literature to illustrate the importance of identity integration for adult development. In the sections that follow, we articulate the structure

of an integrated identity, and the specific mechanisms involved in maintaining integration over time. Our framework provides greater clarity and unifies diverse areas of research on identity integration, with the aim of encouraging systematic research on this foundational aspect of lifespan development.

Why is Identity Integration Important for Adults?

There are two main reasons why identity integration is an important aspect of adult development. First, identity integration is fundamental for healthy psychosocial functioning, and a lack of integration is detrimental for adults' well-being (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; Chandler et al., 2003; McAdams, 2001). Second, identity integration is a basic psychological construct that ties together many seemingly disparate literatures on specific events that occur during adulthood. Major life events can represent critical points when an integrated identity may be disrupted or challenged, as changing life conditions may no longer fit with existing identity commitments (Mitchell et al., 2020). Thus, identity integration has emerged as a salient, unifying theme across a range of literatures on normative and non-normative life events across adulthood.

Integration and Psychosocial Functioning in Adulthood

Erikson (1950; 1968) conceptualized identity integration as necessary for healthy adult functioning, and subsequent empirical work demonstrates how identity integration promotes adaptation and well-being. For example, integrating negative past experiences into one's life story appears to be beneficial for adults' well-being (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; Bauer & McAdams, 2004; King & Raspin, 2004; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006), and integration of multicultural identities into a coherent whole is positively related to mental health (e.g., Chen, Benet-Martínez, Wu, Lam, & Bond, 2012; Yampolsky, Amiot, & de la Sablonnière,

2016). Furthermore, identity integration may serve as a buffer for the biological impacts of chronic stress in adulthood (Mason et al., 2019).

In contrast, a lack of integration is related to poor mental health and psychosocial functioning. The connection between identity integration and clinical concerns has been demonstrated in research on borderline personality disorder (BPD; Adler et al., 2012; Wilkinson-Ryan & Westen, 2000; Westen, Betan, & Defife, 2011), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Brewin, 2011; Conway et al., 2004), and suicidality (Chandler et al., 2003; Sokol & Eisenheim, 2016). Often termed “identity disturbance,” some of the key defining features of BPD correspond to low levels of identity integration, including an unstable sense of self, and feelings of inner emptiness (Wilkinson-Ryan & Westen, 2000). Narrative perspectives on trauma suggest that PTSD symptoms such as intrusive memories reflect problems integrating a traumatic event into one's life story (Brewin, 2011; Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). Several treatment approaches for PTSD involve developing a coherent narrative of the traumatic event that can be woven into the client's broader autobiographical memory (e.g., Lely, Smid, Jongedijk, Knipscheer, & Kleber, 2019; Peri & Gofman, 2013; Resick & Schnicke, 1992). Furthermore, individuals who experience a low degree of temporal identity integration, or self-continuity, may be more likely to take harmful actions that would threaten the safety of their future self (Chandler et al., 2003; Sokol & Eisenheim, 2016). Taken together, this work illustrates how important identity integration is for adults' mental health.

Integration and Major Life Transitions in Adulthood

Identity integration also plays a critical role in adults' adaptation to expected and unexpected life changes and transitions. Berntsen and Rubin (2004) identify events that collectively define a "life script," or normative developmental sequence across adulthood in most

western cultures. Examples include marrying, becoming a parent, and retiring. Although such events are generally expected, they can nonetheless pose challenges for identity integration, as they can involve major changes in daily routines, relationships, and roles. For example, becoming a parent is often a desired event, but it is nonetheless a stressful transition that requires substantial adaptation (Cowan & Cowan, 1992) and can challenge new parents' sense of self (van Scheppingen et al., 2018). Integrating the parenting role into one's broader identity seems to contribute to greater confidence and satisfaction with parenting roles (Laney et al., 2015) and greater well-being (Dunlop, Walker, Hanley, & Harake, 2017). Identity integration is also salient during life transitions associated with aging, such as retirement (Feldman & Beehr, 2011), becoming a caregiver, (Eifert, Dudley, Eddy, Perko, & Adams, 2020), and bereavement (Walter, 2003). Despite often being a predictable part of one's life story, such events can nonetheless represent major changes in an individual's social and occupational roles, and require some reconfiguration of one's identity to adjust to new life conditions. Some work suggests that active identity adjustment efforts may promote psychological adaptation to such later-life transitions. For example, Amabile (2019) recently coined the term *identity bridging* to capture continuation of former roles and identities into postretirement life, whether by reactivating previously dormant facets of identity, or by adapting key aspects of one's career role to the retirement context. For bereaved spouses, making meaning of their partner's death and integrating the loss into their own life story appears to facilitate grieving and re-establishment of a new sense of self (Kim et al., 2011).

Issues of identity integration may be especially likely for experiences that are not part of the expected life script (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). For example, in some of his early clinical work, Erikson (1946) noted the importance of identity integration concerns among World War II

veterans. Such concerns remain relevant to modern-day military veterans as well. For instance, the transition back to civilian life after combat deployment can pose serious challenges to veterans' identities. After leaving the military, veterans may feel a loss of purpose in life, as civilian endeavors feel less fulfilling and meaningful (Mitchell et al., 2020; Smith & True, 2014). A sense of temporal discontinuity is not uncommon, with some veterans wishing to return to their past life, or struggling to imagine a viable future (Mitchell et al., 2020; Orazem et al., 2017).

Moving from one cultural context to another can also disrupt a sense of identity integration. For example, immigrating represents a major, non-normative life transition with multi-dimensional threats to identity integration (Syed, 2017). Immigrants have at least two cultural identity domains that they need to reconcile, or integrate: their culture of origin, and the culture of their new residence. A bicultural orientation, which integrates both cultures, is psychologically more adaptive than orienting towards only one culture or none at all (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013; Yoon et al., 2013).

Identity integration is also critical for individuals who acquire physical disabilities. Participating in the same activities that characterized the contours of one's daily life prior to becoming disabled may become more challenging or rendered impossible by the inflexibility of built environments and social institutions that marginalize particular kinds of bodies (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). The attainment of a positive disability identity has been found to be associated with high levels of psychological well-being (Chalk, Barlett, & Barlett, 2019; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017) and lowered levels of depression and anxiety (Bogart, 2015). Recent qualitative work suggests that integration may be the most important factor in identity development among people with acquired disabilities (Adler, 2018; Adler et al., 2019).

Identity integration emerges as a consistent theme across these seemingly disconnected literatures on major life events and transitions. There are many other experiences that may also trigger a need for identity integration, such as job loss, residential care placement, health events such as cancer diagnosis, heart attack, and so on. Most adults will contend with several experiences in their lifetime that may challenge their identities and bring issues of self-continuity and coherence to the forefront.

In the following sections, we present a conceptual framework that we hope will serve as a basis for systematic, cumulative research on identity integration. We highlight that identity integration is both an outcome and a process (Syed & McLean, 2016; Erikson, 1968). This dual conceptualization of the self and its functioning is rooted in James's (1892/1963) classic distinction between the "I" and "Me" aspects of the self. In his interpretation of James' I and Me, McAdams (1996) defines both a verb and a noun form of the self: the process of creating a self, which is carried out by the I, and the product that results from that activity, represented by the Me. Similarly, *identity integration* can be a verb, including processes such as drawing connections and resolving conflicts among different identity domains, and strengthening core elements of one's identity. *Identity integration* can also be a noun, capturing the sense of self-continuity and coherence resulting from these actions. In laying out our framework, we first address integration as an outcome, and then discuss integration as a process.

Identity Integration as an Outcome

Syed and McLean (2016) detail four dimensions of identity integration: contextual, temporal, ego, and person-society integration. Contextual integration describes coherence among identity domains, such as ethnic, gender, occupational, religious, and political identities. Temporal integration describes continuity over time, or connections between one's past, present,

and future selves. Ego integration reflects a global, generalized sense of coherence, perhaps best captured by a feeling of “wholeness” that cuts across both contextual and temporal dimensions. Ego integration emerges when an individual has insight into the ways that their identity domains have come together into a coherent whole over time. Thus, ego integration is most easily detected within integrative life stories, in which individuals reflect on intertwined trajectories of identity domains over time (see, e.g., Syed, 2010). Finally, person-society integration describes the degree to which individuals’ identities are aligned with their sociocultural context.

Notably, researchers have come to conceptualize integration as not so much about strict sameness as it is about continuity (Syed & McLean, 2016). For example, temporal integration does not mean remaining exactly the same over time. Instead, it is about seeing one’s development over time as part of a continuous trajectory, without major inexplicable changes. This subjectivity in the definition of integration reflects an underlying problem in the field of identity research: the distinction between stability and change is not often as cut-and-dried as it may seem (Adler, 2019). This nuanced conceptualization of integration is crucial for aligning the concept of integration with healthy development. Inflexibly applying the same identity across all situations, with a rigid approach to change, does not fit with the conceptualization of integration we present here.

There may also be multiple workable forms of integration, with varying degrees of self-continuity. For example, in his conceptualization of *identity configurations*, Schachter (2005) contrasts the traditional notion of integration with a looser, more flexible identity structure. This structure can contain conflicting identifications by not committing strongly to one or the other, but instead holding them lightly together. This configuration remains open to change, but provides sufficient stability that an individual can function effectively as an adult. In cultural

contexts that present greater conflict or instability (Schachter, 2005), or for individuals whose identities are highly intersectional (e.g., Adler, 2018), a loose and tentative structure may be most adaptive. Thus, there is no specific level of identity integration that is universally "adequate." Instead, adequate identity integration is subjectively defined, with an optimal level for each individual.

Moving forward, we encourage measurement approaches that align with the multidimensional structure of identity integration. Much of the existing research on identity integration has relied on qualitative analysis, often with ad hoc coding systems. Quantitative studies use a variety of measures, with varying operational definitions of integration. The development of measures that clearly map on to the contextual, temporal, ego, and person-society dimensions described here would facilitate systematic research on identity integration.

Identity Integration as a Process

Having described identity integration as an outcome, we now explain the processes involved in developing and maintaining identity integration over time. Here, we synthesize existing theory on identity development, alongside lifespan development models, into a holistic framework for identity integration dynamics in adulthood.

Existing Models of Adult Identity Dynamics

Perhaps the most ubiquitous model for identity development is Marcia's (1966) identity status model. However, Marcia's (1966) statuses were originally intended to reflect adolescent identity formation, and may not reflect all the important changes that occur in adulthood.

"MAMA" cycles (i.e., cycling between moratorium and achievement) have been proposed as a mechanism for adult identity revision, but the original data supporting this hypothesis only included college students (Stephen et al., 1992), and more recent investigations primarily

focused on youth (e.g., Kunnen et al., 2008). Indeed, there has been little research applying status measures to adult samples (Meeus, 2011; see Carlsson et al., 2015; Cramer, 2017; Eriksson, Wängqvist, Carlsson, & Frisé, 2020; and Fadjukoff et al., 2016, for a few exceptions). Though processes of exploration and commitment may be part of adult identity development, they may be less central than in adolescence.

Dual-cycle models of adolescent identity formation (Luyckx et al., 2006; Crocetti et al., 2008) are a more recent extension of Marcia's statuses. Although they focus on initial identity formation, and have generally not been applied to adults, some of the dynamics they describe are analogous to identity processes in adulthood. For example, these models introduce the idea that identity development processes include a recursive process of commitment formation, evaluation, and reconsideration that responds to changing situations and life experiences (Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006; see also Meeus, 2018).

Whitbourne's (1986; Whitbourne et al., 2002) Identity Process Theory (IPT) blends Eriksonian identity theory with Piaget's (1977) concepts of assimilation and accommodation. When individuals encounter identity-relevant information in their daily lives, such information is interpreted as consistent or discrepant with existing identity schema. If the information is consistent with one's current identity, no change is needed, and the information is *assimilated*. When new information conflicts with one's identity, an individual may change his or her identity to better fit with the discrepant information through *accommodation*. Striking a balance between these two processing styles is expected to yield a stable, resilient sense of self.

Within the narrative identity model, the life story functions as a platform for identity integration, bringing together one's past, present, and future selves into a coherent whole (McAdams, 2001). The act of telling life stories provides opportunities to weave experiences into

the fabric of one's identity (McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, 2006). The narrative construct of autobiographical reasoning is closely related to identity integration, reflecting the cognitive processes involved in integrating experiences into one's broader life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Autobiographical reasoning becomes more frequent and sophisticated with age (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006), and remains an important part of narrative identity development throughout adulthood (Lilgendahl, 2015).

Atchley's (1989) Continuity Theory resonates strongly with temporal integration. Continuity Theory posits that adults are motivated to preserve a sense of self-continuity through aging-related changes in later-life. Continuity Theory emphasizes that continuity is not simply a lack of change, but a subjective perception of self-sameness, leaving room for flexibility and growth. A sense of continuity allows individuals to function effectively in social roles, to pursue long-term goals, and to maintain self-esteem. Notably, Atchley (1989) specified that Continuity Theory was intended to explain continuity through normal aging processes, and thus may not apply to severe disruptions to self-continuity.

Lifespan development theories also provide a rich framework for understanding how adults' identities evolve over the lifespan. Such theories include the selection, optimization, and compensation model (SOC; Freund & Baltes, 1998), control theory (Heckhausen & Shulz, 1995), socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), and stress and coping models (e.g., Aldwin, 2011). Jointly, these theories conceptualize adults as agentic decision-makers, who select environments and adapt their identities with increasing skill over the lifespan. These processes allow adults to achieve their goals and maintain well-being through later-life.

The models presented here are generally not at odds with each other, but rather represent different perspectives on similar fundamental questions: how do adults maintain a healthy

identity, and how do they adapt their identities in the face of changing life circumstances? To facilitate research on these questions, we elaborate and synthesize these ideas into a conceptual framework that captures the dynamics of adult identity integration (see Figure 1).

At the core of our framework, we posit that the most important identity-related task for adults is keeping a continuous sense of identity integration. The framework illustrates how this task is achieved through recursive identity processes. These, include a) *maintenance processes*, or processes of regular, continuous upkeep, and b) *re-establishment processes*, or processes of repair, recovery, and revision that are engaged if identity integration is disrupted or lost. Across typical daily contexts, adults engage in processes of reflection, meaning-making, and make minor adjustments in identity content, with the outcome being a continuous sense of identity integration on a day-to-day basis. When identity is disrupted by changing life circumstances, adults engage in several possible identity re-establishment processes, such as exploring new possibilities, or interacting with significant others who encourage identity work. The outcome of such re-establishment processes is a restored sense of identity integration, and an adapted, revised identity that can function well in new life conditions. Just as dual-cycle models of adolescent identity (e.g., Luyckx et al., 2006; Crocetti et al., 2008) describe how an identity is formed and maintained, our framework describes how an identity is maintained and re-formulated iteratively throughout adulthood. Thus, the proposed framework may serve as an extension of the dual-cycle paradigm to the broader lifespan. In our subsequent discussion of these processes, we propose several mechanisms that may serve as mediators, explaining how life experiences, internal self-reflection, and sociocultural factors can influence identity integration across adulthood.

Mechanisms for Maintaining Identity Integration

Maintaining an integrated identity is not automatic, but involves continuous work. The active processes involved in maintaining an integrated identity have often been downplayed, as notions of adult identity development tend to focus on stability (Riegel, 1976). For example, labeling an individual as having an “achieved” identity status may hide subtle development, as identity is challenged, validated, and reconsidered in everyday life (Carlsson et al., 2015; Eriksson et al., 2020; Kunnen & Metz, 2015).

Several theoretical perspectives converge on the idea that gradual deepening of identity commitments is a key mechanism for maintaining identity integration. For example, the SOC model (P.B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 1998) describes how adults actively choose certain priorities to maintain through the course of aging, and make regular investments toward those goals. Brandstadter and Greve (1994) also identify self-confirmatory actions, or behaviors that enhance and strengthen existing self-concepts, as a key component of maintaining a positive sense of self through the aging process. Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989) and IPT (Whitbourne, 1986; Whitbourne et al., 2002) both describe processes in which adults assimilate new information to strengthen their existing core beliefs about themselves. These theoretical perspectives suggest that deepening commitments to central aspects of one's identity may contribute to maintaining a strong sense of integration over the adult lifespan.

Qualitative empirical work has revealed additional mechanisms to describe how identity integration is maintained. Within the Gothenburg Longitudinal study of Development (GoLD; Lamb et al., 1988), two studies of individuals with established commitment and stable identity status between ages 25 to 29 (Carlsson et al., 2015) and 29 to 33 (Eriksson et al., 2020) identified three active aspects of identity maintenance across these periods of adult life. The first aspect concerns how identity commitments are continuously developed to stay relevant across time.

Individuals in their late 20s gradually adjusted their identity commitments in relation to life changes, whereas more internally-driven involvement was at the forefront by the early 30s. The second aspect concerns story development, with continuous meaning-making of how life experiences relate to the self being most predominant in late 20s, whereas temporal and thematic integration of how one's identity commitments came about became apparent in early 30s. The third aspect concerns individual identity in relation to others and society at large. First this mainly involved increasing agency in making independent life decisions, but in the early 30s, integration of the identity in relation to others beyond personal aspirations became apparent. Beyond age 65, Kroger (2002) found that individuals engaged in maintenance processes including integrating the past with the present, finding meaning, and retaining important identity elements over time. Together, these studies detail mechanisms that contribute to maintaining identity integration across early and later adulthood.

An individual's overall sense of identity integration can remain intact even across major life changes. Internally-driven, volitional identity changes can unfold gradually in well-justified ways that may even enhance identity integration. For example, a person who feels increasingly discontent with their career might shift to a different area of work in pursuit of a stronger sense of meaning and fulfillment (Baumeister, 1994; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Such self-initiated identity changes often represent personal growth and exploration, and fit into the ongoing life story in ways that make sense and promote well-being (Bauer & McAdams, 2004). Thus, depending on how life transitions unfold, and how the individual interprets them, even major life changes may promote a stable or increasing level of identity integration (Atchley, 1989).

Identity maintenance processes may not be equally available to all. Those who live in more chronically stressful conditions and those who experience higher degrees of structural oppression may be presented with more challenges to the continuous work of identity integration (McLean et al., 2018). For example, cultural scripts for how a successful life story is told, such as the American master narrative of redemption (e.g., McAdams, 2006; McLean & Syed, 2015b), may be less available to individuals for whom the society simply presents fewer positive experiences. Furthermore, people with intersectional identities may face more challenges in integrating their experiences, depending on which axes of their identity are most frequently made salient.

Mechanisms for Re-establishing Identity Integration

What happens when life circumstances change, and regular maintenance processes are not enough to support a sense of identity integration? Erikson (1968) and others (Anthis, 2002; Marcia, 2002) have alluded to the possibility that disruptive life events can threaten identity integration. Furthermore, events such as divorce, bereavement, retirement, and onset of major health concerns can interfere with stability of an individual's self-concept (Light & Visser, 2013; Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Despite these challenges, it appears that most people encountering such events are able to re-establish an integrated identity afterward. All in all, we expect most individuals who were highly integrated before a disruptive event to become highly integrated again afterward (McAdams et al., 2006). In this section, we describe six mechanisms that help explain how individuals can re-establish an integrated identity following disruptive life events (see Figure 1).

Assimilation and Accommodation. The Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation form the foundation of IPT (Whitbourne et al., 2002), and also resonate with

other theories of lifespan adaptation to change. For example, Brandstadter and Greve (1994) suggest assimilative strategies such as manipulating the environment to minimize the effects of an event on one's goals. Such strategies circumvent the need for major change in one's sense of self, and thus control theory (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) asserts that assimilative strategies are primary and preferred. Assimilative approaches to re-establishing identity integration might involve reversing the disruptive event, or finding instrumental workarounds that minimize the effects on identity.

In contrast, accommodation involves adapting one's mindset to fit with new life circumstances, often by shifting goals and priorities, or adjusting one's self-concept (Brandstadter & Greve, 1994). For example, the SOC model (Freund & Baltes, 1998) emphasizes selecting important life goals to preserve in the face of change, and investing in those areas, while letting go of less important goals. Accommodative approaches to re-establishing identity integration include any response focused on adapting one's identity to fit with new circumstances (Whitbourne et al., 2002). For example, one might choose to let go of threatened aspects of one's identity, in favor of focusing attention elsewhere.

Autobiographical Reasoning. Processes of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), such as meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006), exploratory or differentiated processing (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Lodi-Smith et al., 2009; Pals, 2006), and self-event connections (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007), describe the cognitive processes involved in incorporating disruptive life events into one's life narrative. Autobiographical reasoning captures individuals' efforts to make sense out of their life experiences, and to understand how their identity has been shaped by life experiences. These processes can resolve discontinuities in

the life story by turning disruptive events into opportunities to learn about oneself, and creating a meaningful space for such events within the broader life story.

Master Narratives. Engaging with master narratives may also help individuals to re-establish a degree of identity integration following disruptive events (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015). Master narratives are cultural scripts that serve as templates for individual life stories. Individuals may resist master narratives, instead aligning with an alternative narrative that diverges from cultural norms (McLean et al., 2018). Master and alternative narratives thus provide elements of structure and content, useful narrative "ingredients," that can be incorporated into individual narratives of adjustment to disruptive life events.

Identity Exploration. Identity exploration is another mechanism that can contribute to rebuilding an integrated identity following disruptive life experiences (e.g., Marcia, 2002; Stephen et al., 1992). Identity exploration behaviors that are typically associated with adolescence, such as trying new hobbies, temporary work, and casual dating, may also represent steps toward re-establishing an integrated identity for adults whose have experienced job loss or divorce, for instance. However, the heightened responsibilities and obligations of adulthood, especially in midlife (Lachman et al., 2015), may limit opportunities for adults to explore extensively. Thus, compared to adolescence, adulthood may require new forms of exploration.

Identity Agents. Finally, adults may engage with identity agents in the process of re-establishing an integrated identity. Identity agents are individuals who take an active interest in promoting, shaping, and supporting another person's identity development (Schachter & Marshall, 2010; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). For adolescents, identity agents are often authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). For adults, identity agents may often be peers, including those who have previously experienced similar disruptive events.

Directions for Future Research

We have argued that identity integration, especially processes of maintaining and re-establishing integration, is the most important focus for research on adult identity development. The framework we have presented points to specific research questions that may form the basis of a robust, systematic study of adult identity integration.

One important future direction is investigating how culture shapes identity integration across adulthood. We expect that the need for identity integration in adulthood is universal; however, what integration looks like “on the ground” may vary across cultural contexts. Different cultures at different times in history may present unique challenges to identity integration, offer different tools for establishing and maintaining integration, and may encourage a tighter or looser sense of integration (Schachter, 2005). The task of identity integration is more difficult for marginalized groups, as histories of slavery and colonialism, and ongoing present-day structural oppression, damage the foundations of temporal and cultural identity integration (see Chandler et al., 2003; Syed & Fish, 2018, for detailed discussion). Erikson (1968) and others (e.g., Schachter, 2004) have also emphasized the role of historical context, suggesting that identity integration may be more challenging for recent birth cohorts, due to the complexity and constant change that characterize many modern societies.

How contextual factors interact with lifespan developmental trajectories to shape identity integration at different points across adulthood is not yet sufficiently understood. Future research might examine, for instance, how cultural factors such as stigma influence processes of re-establishing identity integration after disruptive life experiences, such as acquisition of disabilities or onset of chronic illness. The conceptual framework we have laid out is well-suited to studying cultural processes, because it emphasizes adaptation to changing circumstances,

rather than a universal developmental trajectory. We encourage future efforts to identify the specific cultural factors that contribute to variability, measuring factors at the cultural level, not just at the level of the individual (cf. Syed, Juang, & Svensson, 2018; Causadias, in press). Using such methods would better elucidate how identity integration depends on cultural context.

A second area for future research is the developmental implications of early-life identity processes for adult identity integration and mental health. In the context of Erikson's (1950; 1968) theory of psychosocial development, adolescence is seen as a sensitive period for identity development, with enduring effects throughout adulthood. However little empirical work tests this hypothesis (see Sneed et al., 2012, and Mitchell et al., 2021, for a few exceptions). Future research should investigate the downstream consequences of early-life identity processes on trajectories of psychosocial development and well-being across mid- and later-life. Accelerated longitudinal designs may be useful for investigating these effects, as they would allow examination of stability and change across adolescence and adulthood, without requiring multiple decades of data collection to cover the full lifespan.

A crucial issue for clinical applications is determining the most effective ways of managing threats to identity integration in adulthood. Whereas lifespan theories suggest that controlling the situation to minimize impacts on the self is preferable, such assimilative strategies are not always available (Brandstadter & Greve, 1994; Freund & Baltes, 1998; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). The narrative identity literature emphasizes that making meaning of major life changes can be beneficial; this strategy may represent a viable alternative (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2019). Further research on re-establishing identity integration may eventually inform effective interventions to support individuals undergoing major, identity-relevant life changes. Potential contexts where such interventions may be helpful include

bereavement, job loss, acquisition of disabilities, and driving cessation (cf. Liddle et al., 2014), though these represent only a few possibilities. Intervention development efforts may benefit from mixed-methods approaches that assess identity integration both quantitatively, to compare integration across treatment and control groups, as well as qualitatively, to investigate individuals' subjective experiences of identity integration.

Conclusion

We believe there is much to be gained in extending the study of identity development beyond emerging adulthood, and that identity integration is a central construct for this work. Identity integration is a theme that encompasses and unifies many important research avenues, while still providing clear direction about what aspects of identity are most critical to examine. We hope this framework will guide impactful research on identity development across the lifespan, and the importance of identity for adults' well-being.

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Figure 1. *Processes and Mechanisms of Identity Integration*