

Identities in Motion: Practices, Enactment, Narration

by

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Paper prepared for the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, 10-14 September 2025 (Vancouver, British Columbia). For the ideas presented here, many of which push the author outside his meta-theoretical and theoretical comfort zones, I thank Mariusz Bogacki, Maxine Both, Liv Moe and Zuzanna Samson - PhD researchers at the European University Institute (EUI) – and Dr. Ophelia Nicole-Berva, University of Geneva. For research assistance, I thank Madiha Sadiq, PhD researcher, EUI.

Declaration of AI Usage: AI assisted in two instances in the preparation of this paper, both of which utilized the AI embedded in Google Chrome's search function. In one case, I asked about the ontology of social identity theory; the AI returned gibberish (not even a hallucination). In a second case, I asked if a book published in 1998 utilized social identity theory in its theorising on identity formation; AI correctly reported that it did not. This book is referenced in Footnote 2.

Abstract: This paper explores the implications of the relational turn in ontology for how we theorize identity formation. It begins with a critique of social identity theory, an important school for thinking about identity; this theory is not so much wrong, although, it does often mis-predict the content of the ‘other.’ Rather, its substantialist ontology and foundation in social psychology limit the ways in which it conceptualizes and accesses identity. I next introduce relationalism and its implications for how we think about theory. The bulk of the paper then draws upon relational work on identity in sociology; everyday nationalism / critical border studies; and visual ethnography – to develop a roster of social practices, enactments and narrations that capture the dynamics of identity formation. In the conclusion, I argue that the meta-theoretical and conceptual pluralism behind this roster - far from a weakness - is precisely the point. If political science takes its foot off the meta-theoretical accelerator, the result will be a broader and deeper conceptual space for creating new theory and data on identity formation.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to bust open disciplinary silos, in my case, for how political science thinks about and theorizes identity and, more, specifically, identity formation. It is a paper devoted to meta-theory – how we conceptualize identity, its ontological status – and theory and method – the theoretical and methodological implications of different identity ontologies. We - as political scientists - have made a bet on a particular way of theorizing identity – social identity theory – without sufficient reflection on its ontology, which I argue is largely substantialist. This has consequences for how we theorize and measure/access identity formation.

Updating and drawing upon Peter Hall’s analysis of comparative politics (Hall, 2003), I argue there is a problem in contemporary research on identity, as ontology and theory and method are mis-aligned. We theorize identity as if it were a fixed thing we possess and we too often measure it with methods that provide a snapshot view of identity (positivist, one-shot semi-structured interviews, surveys, advanced quantitative techniques). Yet, in popular discourse, identities are fluid, emergent and changing, and in disciplines outside political science, the focus is increasingly on identity formation through dynamic processes of doing things (practices), enactment and narration. Put differently, our ontology of identity and identity formation should be processual and dynamic – a motion picture, as it were - while our current theory and methods are set up to theorise and capture snapshots.

I develop this argument in four steps, beginning with a critique of social identity theory. This school for thinking about identity is not so much wrong, although, it does often mis-predict the content of the ‘other.’ Rather, its substantialist ontology and foundation in social psychology limit the ways in which it conceptualizes and accesses identity. I next introduce relationalism and its implications for how we think about theory and method. The bulk of the paper then draws upon relational work on identity in sociology; everyday

nationalism / critical border studies; and visual ethnography - to develop a roster of social practices, enactments and narrations that capture the dynamics of identity formation.

In the conclusion, I argue that the meta-theoretical and conceptual pluralism behind this roster - far from a weakness - is precisely the point. The result will be a broader and deeper conceptual space for creating new theory and data on identity formation. The current gold standard in political science for advancing the knowledge frontier – experimental design plus causal identification – is thus not so much incorrect as incomplete. If we take our collective, disciplinary foot off the meta-theoretical accelerator, then new theory and methods, coupled to a richer and deeper understanding of identity and identity formation appear. This will give political scientists a ‘gold-plus standard’ for measuring and accessing identity in a world increasingly riven by identity politics (Checkel, 2025b).

II. Social Identity Theory and Identity: A World of Being and Snap Shots

For social psychologists and political scientists, there is a strong emphasis on the role of ‘groupness’ in generating identities. This has led to a long-running reliance on social identity theory (SIT) to explain identity formation; indeed, the theory’s focus on the social group makes it a natural fit. First developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s (Tajfel, 1982; Turner 1988), the theory has retained appeal because of its relatively simple story of identity formation. Individuals have a cognitive need for status and belonging, to belong to an in-group. Of course, belonging to such a group means you are comparing yourself to others, the out-group, with the latter typically viewed as inferior (Jackson and Hogg, 2010).

Empirically, the theory has been used to good effect over the years (Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008, for surveys), and is popular in contemporary causal-inference designs in political science. The latter may explore in-group/outgroup dynamics between refugees and

host communities (Hangartner, *et al*, 2019) or the key role of status – and threats to it – in shaping identity (De Juan, *et al*, 2024), for example.

Despite its continuing popularity, there are both theoretical and ontological weaknesses inherent to SIT that limit its ability to capture identity formation in all its forms. Theoretically, it offers an overly simplistic and reductionist vision of how individuals become who they are. On the former, context – institutions, discourses, material and social power – are ignored. Of course, parsimony in theory is generally preferred in contemporary political science, but if our goal is to capture the multiple dimensions of identity formation, such standards are self-defeating.

SIT's reductionism – to the level of agents – is a function of its basis in cognitive and social psychology. Some scholars applaud such methodological individualism, as it allows us to drill down and uncover the nuts and bolts behind social processes (Elster, 1982; 1989). But the agency in SIT is arguably too restrictive and limiting. In fact, individuals have little free will; they are the prisoners of psychological desires and needs for status and comparison, all hard-wired as it were. This is an agency where actors are constrained not by structures beyond their control, but by innate psychological desires. Whatever the case, the result is the same: A stripped-down understanding of identity formation, where social or embodied agency play no role (see also Marks and O'Mahoney, 2014: 68).

Lurking behind and, I would argue, explaining these theoretical limitations is SIT's substantialist ontology. Ontologies concern claims about the nature of being and existence (Epstein, 2024). By substantialist ontology, I mean one where “entities precede interaction, or that entities are already entities before they enter into social relations with other entities ... the basic ontological move is exactly the same - units come first, then, like billiard balls on a table, they are put into motion and their interactions are the patterns we observe in political life” (Jackson and Nexon, 1999: 293). Specifically for SIT, its substantialist view of the

social world requires that identity formation is a function and consequence of group membership; the individual and her identity are essentialized and precede interaction (Marks and O'Mahoney, 2014: 69). Identity is conceptualized as just there, in a world of being. So conceptualized, it is best measured with 'snapshot' methods – laboratory or field experiments, causal-inference designs, or surveys.¹

A better conceptualization/ontology for identity – one that captures its dynamism - is to view it as emergent, from social practices, enactments and narrations. The most suitable ontology for identity so conceived is a relational one, to which I now turn.²

III. Relational Ontologies and Theory: Coming into Being and Motion Pictures

Theories are conceptual tools for building arguments about the world around us; in most cases, they specify, suggest or imply how we can access and measure - methods – that same world. These theories need to match our conceptualization and ontology for that social world (see also Hall, 2003). Above, I argued that - for theories of identity formation in contemporary political science – ontology and theory are often misaligned. The substantialist ontology of social identity theory leads us to theorize in a static and essentialized manner that misses the fluidity and emergent nature of identity. We need process and dynamics, but they are not there.

The good news for political science is that developments in the philosophy of social science, specifically, in ontology, have created a meta-theoretical space for process-based conceptions of identity. The challenge, philosophically, has been to move these conceptions from static (being) to dynamic/processual (emergent, becoming). But how? The answer – one

¹ Tajfel's pioneering work on what would become SIT emerged from lab experiments.

² In this section, I focused on SIT and its substantialist ontology of identity formation. Of course, SIT is not the only culprit here. In his richly documented book on Russian identity formation, David Laitin (1998) employs game theory and rational choice models to reduce identity to an entity that exists prior to and changes little through interaction. His argument is thus also substantialist to the core.

gaining increasing momentum over the past quarter century – has been a turn to relational ontologies, often referred to as relationalism (Checkel, 2025a).

Within political science and drawing upon the work of Charles Tilly and ontological debates within sociology (Emirbayer, 1997), Jackson and Nexon (1999: 291-92) argue that ‘configurations of ties’ give rise to entities, and that these ties are not static, but ‘ongoing processes.’ The analytic focus is on recurrent sociocultural interaction, and not fixed entities (substantialism). It is but a small step from this ontological positioning – ‘processual relationalism’ they call it – to where a motion picture metaphor replaces the snapshots earlier discussed. Relationalism has by now made many inroads in political science, especially among practice theorists (Adler-Nissen, 2015), international-relations scholars (McCourt, 2016; Qin, 2018; Katzenstein, 2022; Kavalski, 2023; Call for Proposals, 2023), students of social network analysis (Selg, 2016) and some proponents of causal mechanisms (Tilly, 2001).

A more radical relationalism puts the social world into motion by building our understanding of it on a quantum-mechanical ontology. The argument here is that all our social-science thinking until now has been based on classical/Newtonian physics (substantialism). This has led us to theorize agents and structures as separate entities, to conceptualize cause as force acting at a distance, and to view process in a temporal sense. In a quantum-mechanical social world, agency is ineluctably relational and conceptualized as a wave function; cause is replaced by entanglement; and something can be here and on the other side of the universe at the same time (Wendt, 2015; Der Derian and Wendt, 2022; Erskine, Guzzini and Welch, 2022).

While Wendt models and understands the social world as quantum mechanical – you *are* a wave function – others adopt quantum mechanics as a metaphor to rethink core social-science concepts such as uncertainty and generalization (Katzenstein, 2022) or ethics

(Zanotti, 2022). For Katzenstein and collaborators, a turn to quantum mechanics allows us to capture ‘a process-oriented view of the world,’ where processes are ‘coordinated group[s] of changes in the complexion of reality, an organized family of occurrences that are systematically linked to one another either causally or functionally’ (Katzenstein, 2022: chapter 1, at pp.19-20; see also Rescher, 1996). While some might disagree with the endpoint – causal or functional change – this conceptualization of process perfectly captures its dynamic and temporal nature.

However viewed – in its moderate or radical versions – relationalism provides us with an ontological language that legitimates and makes possible a processual, motion-picture understanding of the social world. Meta-theoretically – and in its non-quantum-mechanical variants - it sets the stage for building theories that are epistemologically plural. We might thus theorize, as the cogs and wheels of identity formation: social practices; or bodily enactments; or narrations. To access such dynamics, we might use practice tracing; or following methods; or immersive fieldwork; or photo elicitation. This list of concepts and methods includes, epistemologically, critical realism, Bourdieu-ian interpretism, American pragmatism and ethnography. This pluralism is precisely the point.

On ontology and its relation to how we theorize identity formation, two final points are in order. First – and this is the good news - relationalism provides us an ontological language that makes identity not some state of the world, but an entity coming into being, as emergent, where motion pictures replace snapshots. For political science, this will require a turn to new theories – and disciplines – where theorizing identity as emergent is more commonplace.

Second – and this is the frustrating news – there is always some slippage when one goes from the level of meta-theory to that of theory. Thus, most theories of identity formation are some combination of different ontologies - substantialism and relationalism, in

my case. My more nuanced critique of social identity theory is therefore that it is constructed too much on a substantialist view of the social world. We need to look elsewhere – outside of SIT and indeed political science – if we are to theorise identity in a more relational manner.³

IV. Relationalism and Identity Formation

To get inside the motion-picture black box of identity formation, one can theorize such dynamics in three different ways: identities as emergent from social practices; as being enacted and lived; as being narrated. This roster is not exhaustive, but is salutary in pushing political science outside its disciplinary boundaries – to continental sociology, everyday nationalism / critical border studies; and to ethnography, respectively.⁴ My roster leads to the three sub-sections below, with each following a similar template: I first discuss how identity formation is theorized; then, in light of that theorization, how it is measured.

As my roster is about the dynamics and processes of identity formation, I should begin by defining the term. Identity formation denotes the broad set of processes – micro-macro, material-social, collective-individual – through which identities are formed. My understanding of identity construction is thus an integrative one, long favored by sociologists who study the topic (Cerulo, 1997).

Emergent Identities – I: Doing Things. ‘Doing things’ is a colloquial way of indicating one is in the realm of practice theory, and what it can tell us about identity formation. What, though, is practice theory? On my reading, it builds on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus by linking it to a theory of action, practice theorists define practices as ‘socially meaningful patterned actions that [...] simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify

³ This last statement may surprise those familiar with political science / IR / social constructivist work on identity. While this research makes a nod toward relationalism, identities are still largely conceived in substantialist terms (Jackson and Nexon, 1999).

⁴ There may be a role for post-structural approaches in this roster of identity-in-motion concepts; however, at this point, I am not sure and thus exclude them. For some initial thoughts on their utility, see Sadiq (2023: 11).

background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.’ Practices are ‘meaning making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities’ (Adler, 2019: 109; see also Bourdieu, 1977; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018; Lechner and Frost, 2018). In lay terms, they are ways of doing things. Meta-theoretically, it is a combination of continental social theory and American pragmatism that creates an opening for a processual understanding of identity formation.⁵

Practices become socially meaningful and make things happen when they are elevated to the group, to ‘communities of practice’ (Adler and Pouliot, 2011: 8). This translation from the individual to the collective occurs through diffusion processes and socialization. Adler (2019: 119), for example, views communities of practice as sites where their ‘members socialize one another and learn from each other by and through practice.’

The invocation of such processes by practice theorists needs further thought. These scholars argue that theorizing socialization is not necessary or possible, as this is out-of-bounds meta-theoretically – too substantialist and getting inside heads, as it were (Pouliot, 2010: 14-22). This is odd, and it highlights a tension between ontology and empirical operationalization in practice theory: An approach that is processual to the core fails to theorize key parts of the process through which practices become socially meaningful and shape identity.

I thus theorize this missing element by drawing upon work on social learning (Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008) and multi-directional / multi-arena socialization (Checkel 2017). Practices matter and shape identity when they become embedded within communities of practice; socialization theory allows us to deconstruct and map such dynamics.

⁵ Note that I wrote ‘On my reading’ Practice theorists disagree on many things – the need for a theory of action; the ability of non-immersive methods to access and see a practice; and the ontological primacy of practices, for example. Here, I favour the ‘Canadian variant’ developed by scholars such as Emanuel Adler (University of Toronto) and Vincent Pouliot (University of Montreal). On the disagreements among practice theorists, see Drieschova, Brueger and Hopf (2022); Hopf (2022); and Kratochwil (2022).

As earlier constructivist socialization studies have been criticized – correctly – as being substantialist (Jackson and Nexon, 1999; see also Epstein, 2012), I need to explain what I mean by multi-directional / multi-arena socialization and why it is sufficiently relational to put identities in motion. First and in contrast to earlier work (my own included), it draws upon insights not from institutional theory and sociology, but from anthropology to theorize socialization as much more dynamic. Second, socialization does not just occur top-down (earlier constructivist work), but from the bottom-up and horizontally as well. Third, it occurs in multiple arenas, often simultaneously (schools, families, social media, for example). Finally, social agents can resist and perhaps turn the tables on socializers. The interaction of these directions/arenas of socialization with an empowered social agency puts the focus much more on interactions than on particular agents (‘entities’). The result is a relational socialization theory that captures identities as emergent.

So far, perhaps so good. But something is missing in our theoretical account. Simply put, do certain kinds of practices have more influence on identity formation than others? All practice theorists have a favorite ‘go to’ example. In western societies, a handshake is imbued with meaning; it is a socially meaningful patterned action that simultaneously embodies, acts out, and possibly reifies background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world – it is a practice. However, it would be a bit of a stretch to conceptualize a handshake – qua social practice – as a driver of identity formation.

Here, practice theorists might do well to consider work in critical border studies. Building on this research, PhD students at EUI have theorised a number of practices – of othering, of bordering of re-humanising – that shape identities and political subjectivities (Both, 2025; Samson, 2025; see also Nicole-Berva, 2025a).

With practices now (mostly) theorized and their role in identity formation plausibly established, we need to consider how they will be observed. Specifically, what method(s) will

allow us to collect data on social practices and then map and analyse the process through which such practices move from the individual to the collective/group level, shaping identities along the way?

We can best do this by using ethnography / political ethnography (Gusterson, 1996; Gusterson, 2008; Schatz, 2009; Bueger, 2014), relational interviews (Fujii, 2010; Fujii, 2017) and document analysis (Cornut and de Zamaroczy, 2021) for the data collection. The first two are immersive field methods and come close to the practice theory ‘gold standard’ of observing practices up close and directly.

For the data analysis of these practices that shape identity, analysts can go in two directions, depending on their own meta-theoretical priors and the questions they are asking. If you wish to trace practices and tell a causal story, then one uses practice tracing (Pouliot, 2015; Pouliot, 2016: Appendix; Mantilla, 2023). This is a critical-realist approach to establishing what practices do, allowing the researcher how different practices layer and interact to shape and cause identity. It is a local, contextualized understanding of identity, but it is causal.

However, one could instead work more interpretively, where the researcher adopts a multi-sited design (Marcus, 1995; Both, Nicole-Berva, Saetre, 2025) and follows a particular practice shaping identity across different sites, exploring how its role changes. In terms of method, one employs following methods, originally developed in anthropology (Kunz, 2023; Söderberg, 2024; Söderberg, 2025; Nicole-Berva, 2025b).

Emergent Identities – II: Just Live Your Life. What do I mean with the subtitle above – ‘Just Live Your Life’? For theorizing identity formation, it means a resolute focus on the micro and the everyday. Here, the literature on everyday nationalism, which views identities being constructed from the bottom up through the enactment of daily routines – just living your life, to modify my subtitle. This scholarship, which emerged in response to the

top-down, elite, institutional focus in much of the state-building and nationalism literatures, is instead a bottom-up story of identity formation. What you do on a daily basis shapes who you are (Knott, 2015; Goode and Stroup, 2015; Skey and Antonsich, 2017; see also Knott, 2022).

Theoretically, the best of the work among these scholars does not ignore state-level or institutional factors. While keeping the focus on individuals – call them empowered social agents - students of everyday nationalism explore the interaction of these top-down factors with individuals going about their lives (Bogacki, 2025; see also Favell, 2008).⁶ One might say that identities are enacted; they are emergent and arise from individuals going about their daily lives, interacting with other individuals, state institutions and the like. For students of everyday nationalism, identity formation is thus highly relational.

In terms of methods, to ‘see’ individuals going about their daily lives, enacting their identities requires a turn to deeply immersive fieldwork, in particular, participant observation / ethnography. These identity-forming routines are detected and measured through micro studies and ethnographic exploration (Draper, 1974; Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009). Ethnographically, one looks for several indicators of identity: boundaries (what is inside and outside; their permeability); changes in and contestation over boundaries; and narratives expressing the implicit or explicit content of identity (Adams, 2009: 319).

A final, more critical point on everyday nationalism is that its core theoretical argument is actually quite undertheorized. What is driving identity formation at this everyday level? On my read, there is a good bit of overlap between symbolic interactionism and everyday nationalism in how they theorise identity formation. Both focus on the micro-level, analysing everyday interactions and the meanings attached to them. George Mead – and the many who followed him, argued that the self was not a pre-existing entity, but the product of social processes (Mead, 2015; see also Sadiq, 2023: 3; and Bogacki, 2025: 39-43). Again,

⁶ Favell’s brilliant book, which appeared well before the work of everyday nationalism scholars, embraces both their bottom-up theory of identity formation and commitment to immersive field methods.

this sounds very similar to what scholars of everyday nationalism argue. As Mead was a social-psychologist, one possible way to reconcile the two literatures is that symbolic interactionism provides the micro-foundations and mechanisms ('inside the head') for the identity enactments and routines that students of everyday nationalism observe ethnographically.⁷

Emergent Identities – III: Saying Things. My section subtitle again needs further specification: 'Saying Things' – but in response to what and about what?' If the answers are 'in response to photos' and 'about one's identity,' then we are using the method of photo elicitation to uncover dynamics of identity formation. With roots in visual ethnography and participatory research methods, photo elicitation is a new(er) technique for accessing identity. It has the potential – only now being realized - to generate exciting new data on identities and identity formation.

As method, photo elicitation collects data on identity in a way that minimizes the priming of research subjects while maximizing their agency. It varies on two key dimensions. First, some photo elicitation is critical and participatory, where researcher and research subject co-create meaning; a second type is where the researcher uses an interactive interview format with little or no prompting/priming (Fujii, 2017) to allow the research participant to narrate what a set of photos mean to her. Second, photo elicitation can be based on photos distributed by the researcher, or on photos chosen and taken by the research subject (Tinkler, 2014; Clark-Ibañez, 2004; Edensor and Sumartojo, 2018).⁸

My interest here is photo elicitation where the participants construct a narrative based on photos they have chosen. This allows them maximal agency / freedom to create their own meanings and, for me, stories about identity. Indeed, participant-generated photographs are

⁷ In future iterations, this section will address how insights from critical border studies can also enrich, sharpen and rectify the theoretical gaps in everyday nationalism.

⁸ I thank Mariusz Bogacki for alerting me to the last two citations and, more generally, for opening my eyes (bad pun) to the possibilities of using photo elicitation to generate new – for political science – data on identity formation.

especially valuable in allowing individuals to construct narratives on topics – like identity – that are not so easy to access/discuss in a more standard interview format (Tinkler, 2014: 179).

How, then, does photo elicitation on identity formation actually work? In the end, it is an interview – but one where the data comes from the research participant’s reconstruction and narrative of what her photos say about her identity. A PhD researcher at EUI, Mariusz Bogacki, has used photo elicitation extensively in his research on identity formation in contemporary Hong Kong. As Bogacki notes, his participants’ photographs revealed thoughts, behaviours, and attitudes with minimal prompting from him; he simply asked them to describe the photos, explain their content and justify the reason and importance of the photograph and what it depicted about their identity (Bogacki, 2025: 75-76).⁹

In sum, photo elicitation provides a bottom-up, relational perspective on identity formation. As participants construct narratives about their identity from photos, that identity in a very real sense is emergent and coming into being through their narrations. Of the three perspectives/approaches to identity formation introduced in this section, photo elicitation is arguably the most relational in its ontology.

Summary. To conclude this analysis, I offer three reflections. First, in all the subsections above, identities are emergent; to use an ontological language, they are becoming. Practice scholars theorise practices as putting identities in motion. Students of everyday nationalism operationalize in a very grounded – and atheoretical way – a relational view on identity formation. Proponents of photo elicitation argue that their method captures identities in motion in real time, as it were.

⁹ In his nearly complete thesis, Bogacki has used photo elicitation to very good effect – generating new and rich data on how individuals are negotiating/articulating/hiding their identities in an increasingly authoritarian Hong Kong (Bogacki, 2025: Chapters 4, 5, 6).

Second, despite these differences, the approaches and theorists share one thing in common: the use of immersive field methods to gather data on these identities (now) in motion. While field methods and political ethnography are enjoying a bit of a renaissance in political science (Kapiszewski, MacLean and Read, 2015; Procter and Spector, 2024), the headwinds in terms of method are daunting, given the growing emphasis on computational text analysis, machine learning and big data in our research and pedagogy. However, consistent with my pluralist message throughout this essay, this need not be viewed as an either/or choice. Moreover, sometimes – when you are trying to access/measure identities in motion? – high-quality field data may very well trump big data.

Third, the three approaches sketched above are ‘neutral’ about the form/content of these emergent identities. They theorize or imply nothing about this content, which means the result may be identities that many of us would view as normatively problematic. Thus, Polish border guards and some local communities in the far east of Poland may develop an inward-looking, exclusive understanding of their identity, partly as a result of the workings of social practices that dehumanize migrants and refugees (Samson, 2025). On my read, this neutrality on the content of identity is a progressive theoretical move, as too much earlier work, including my own (Checkel, 2007), focused only on ‘good’ identity.

V. Conclusion – Putting Identities in Motion

Political science is in the midst of an ontological revolution, from a substantialism it has long embraced to a dynamic, relational conception of the social world and the entities that populate it. This relational thinking is most advanced in IR – Section III. above - and a part of comparative politics (Simmons and Rush Smith, 2021; Sil and Simmons, 2025). That’s the good news. The bad news is an old story: As a discipline, we typically do not discuss meta-theory. This time, we need the conversation. If we take relationalism seriously, it has far-reaching implications for our theories in general and, in my case, for theories of identity

formation and how we study them in terms of methods. Yet, the disciplinary discussion has barely begun.

Indeed, we are perhaps heading in the other direction – strengthening our collective bet on substantialism. Over the past decade, political scientists have advanced a number of ideas for improving their research and strengthening the validity of their causal and process-based claims, including on identity: pre-registration / pre-analysis plans (McDermott, 2022); experimental designs (Dunning, 2015; Mahoney and Thelen, 2015: chapter 1); qualitative transparency (Jacobs and Buthe, 2021); developing a rigorous standard process tracing (Beach and Pederson, 2013, 2019; Bennett and Checkel, 2015); and, most recently, applying Bayesian logic to the causal claims we make in qualitative research (Fairfield and Charman, 2022).

For many, causal identification strategies integrated with experimental designs (Mize and Manago, 2022) and, for qualitative researchers, Bayesian process tracing (Book Symposium, 2023) are the gold standards for the discipline.¹⁰ Making an analogy to particle physics, Sil and Simmons (2025: 58) – in a brilliant turn of phrase – refer to this as the discipline’s ‘standard model.’ The problem, or rather the limitation, of such standards is they are premised on a snapshot view of the social world, where the goal is strengthened causal inference, with cause conceptualized in frequentist or Bayesian terms. The philosophical shadow of positivism looms large.

Yet, the foregoing discussion suggests that if we take seriously the philosophical, theoretical and methodological implications of putting the social world and identities into motion, then we need to revisit those proposals and standards, with a broadened set of philosophical priors. Instead of tinkering with design and method within a single (positivist) frame to generate new knowledge, employing multiple philosophical frames will better equip

¹⁰ While I do not address it here, the often controversial and non-reflexive ethics of experimental designs are another reason to question their gold-standard status (Desposato, 2020; Phillips, 2021; Kapiszewski and Wood, 2022).

us to advance the knowledge frontier. My three cuts at theorizing emergent identities in the previous section do precisely this: Meta-theoretical pluralism generates new theory on identities as emergent, and new data on identities in motion.

In my opening line, I characterized this paper as an exercise in silo-busting. This is always a good thing. Political science needs to take its foot off the meta-theoretical accelerator. The result will be a discipline with multiple standards that not only better reflect the diversity of our scholarship, but also multiply the ways in which we advance the knowledge frontier, thus creating a more plural and inclusive scientific community. Indeed, if pluralism could be ‘scaled up to the discipline of political science or the social sciences writ large, we will have greatly increased our chances of hitting upon a much wider array of useful insights about a much wider range of phenomena that constitute the social world’ – including on identity formation (Sil and Simmons, 2025: 60).

Building upon Sil and Simmons, this essay’s main take-away is that silo-busting and a plural meta-physics also matter at the levels of theory and method. Yes, we still need social identity theory and should continue to integrate it with causal inference experimental designs. But there is a lot more to identity formation than this substantialist and reductionist set up will get us. Most fundamentally, we need a new – for political science – relational ontology for theorizing identities in motion. Telling substantialist, snapshot, causal stories about identity ain’t the only (ontological) game in town.

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