

Identities in Rupture: Practices, Enactment, Narration

by

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Declaration of AI Usage: Artificial intelligence assisted in three instances in the preparation of this paper. In one case, I asked about the ontology of social identity theory; AI returned gibberish. In a second case, I asked if a book – Laitin (1998) - utilized social identity theory in its theorising on identity formation; AI correctly reported that it did not. Finally, as the literature on intersectional feminism is new for me, I asked AI to generate references to this work, where the focus was specifically on identity formation.

Abstract: If identity – as theoretical construct or lived reality – was ever some stable and apolitical entity, those days are rapidly disappearing if not gone for good. Identity has been weaponized, with people experiencing it less as an act of deliberation or calculation, and more as a process of rupture to the routines and practices that shape ‘who they are.’ My article theorizes the implications of weaponization and rupture for identity, arguing that the ontology for how we think about it has outstripped our theorizing. We need to put identities into motion. The argument is developed in four parts.

First, I assess and critique social identity theory, as this is how much political science conceptualizes identity. This baseline theory not only often mis-predicts the content of the ‘other,’ its substantialist ontology and foundation in social psychology limit the ways in which it conceptualizes and accesses identity. Second, I introduce relationalism as ontology and its implications for how we think about theory.

Third, the bulk of the article then draws upon relational identity scholarship in sociology, critical border studies, everyday nationalism, feminist theory and visual ethnography. This allows me to develop a rich and diverse roster of social practices, enactments and narrations that capture the dynamics of identity formation in a world of flux and rupture.

Fourth, in the conclusion, I argue that the pluralism behind this roster - far from a weakness - is precisely the point. If political science takes its foot off the neo-positivist meta-theoretical accelerator, the result will be a broader and deeper conceptual space for creating new theory and data on identity formation. The discipline needs multiple gold standards for advancing the knowledge frontier.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to pry open disciplinary silos, in my case, for how political science thinks about and theorizes identity and, more, specifically, identity formation. Its focus is 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 – one might say, in a state of rupture; in disciplines outside political science, the focus is increasingly on identity formation through 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 / critical border

studies; everyday nationalism / intersectional feminist theory; 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 is precisely the point. It will give us 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 singular and thus 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, 2026).

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, SIT has theoretical and ontological weaknesses that limit its ability to capture identity formation in all its forms. Theoretically, it offers a 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 and 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 gaining increasing momentum over the past quarter century – has been a turn to relational ontologies, often referred to as relationalism (Checkel, 2025).

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.

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; Katzenstein, 2026; 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 post-Newtonian and 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; Katzenstein, 2026).

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; and Katzenstein, 2026). While some relationalists might disagree with the endpoint of causal or functional change (cite), 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 encompasses – epistemologically - critical realism, Bourdieusian 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 (see also Jackson and Nexon, 1999). 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, social psychology, 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 / critical border studies; everyday nationalism / intersectional feminism; 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 a broad set of processes – micro-macro, material-social, collective-individual, causal-functional, meaning-making – 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’ indicates 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 background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.’ Practices are ‘meaning making, identity-forming, and order-

³ This last statement may surprise those familiar with political science / social constructivist work on identity. While this research makes a nod toward relationalism, identities are still largely conceived in substantialist terms (Checkel, 2007; Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009).

⁴ There may be a role for post-structural approaches in this roster of identity-in-motion concepts; for some initial thoughts on their utility, see Sadiq (2023: 11).

producing activities’ (Adler, 2019: 109; see also Bourdieu, 1977; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018; Lechner and Frost, 2018).⁵

In lay terms, practices are ways of doing things. Meta-theoretically, it is a combination of Bourdieusian/continental social theory (Sherratt, 2005) and American pragmatism (Voparil, 2021) that creates an opening for a processual understanding of identity formation.

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 highlights a tension between ontology and theoretical 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 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); see also Lepeu (2025) and Both (2026). 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; footnote 3 above), 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 my 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, one can theorise a number of practices – of othering, of bordering, of re-humanising – that shape identities and political subjectivities (Both, 2025; Both, 2026; Samson, 2025; Samson, Forthcoming; see also Nicole-Berva, 2025a).

With practices now 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 ideal of observing practices up close and directly.

For the data analysis of the practices shaping identity, scholars have a choice, which is a function of meta-theoretical priors and the questions asked. 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 a researcher to explore 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; Riofrancos, 2021; 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, 2025a; Söderberg, 2025b; Söderberg, 2026; 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

literatures on everyday nationalism and intersectional feminism, which view identities being constructed from the bottom up through the enactment of daily routines, are key.⁶ The scholarship on everyday nationalism, which emerged in response to a 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, 2026; see also Favell, 2008).⁷ 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.

Intersectional feminism has a similar view of identity formation, with identities being enacted from the bottom up. However, it sees power relations (social and material) as being much more central to this process, with a subsequent focus on both repression (top-down) and resistance (bottom-up) as playing key roles (Kong, 2022; Muñoz-Puig, 2024). A similar argument – on the roles of repression and resistance in shaping relational identities – emerges from queer theory on civilian agency and political violence (Hagen, Ritholtz and Delatolla, 2024).⁸

In terms of methods, to ‘see’ individuals going about their daily lives, enacting their identities requires, for both everyday nationalism and intersectional feminist theory, a turn to

⁶ I thank Laurel Weldon, Simon Fraser University, for alerting me to intersectional feminism’s deeply relational view on identity formation.

⁷ 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.

⁸ I thank Sam Ritholtz, University of Oxford, and Carlotta Rudolph, European University Institute, for alerting me to these productive connections between feminist and queer theory.

immersive fieldwork, in particular, participant observation / ethnography and ethnographic/relational interviews (Draper, 1974; Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009; Muñoz-Puig, 2024). 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).

Specifically on everyday nationalism, a more critical observation is that its core theoretical argument is 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, 2026: 39-43). Again, 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.

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 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-Ibáñez, 2004; Edensor and Sumartojo, 2018).

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 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. An example is instructive here: Using photo elicitation to study identity formation in contemporary Hong Kong (Bogacki, 2026). The photographs of Bogacki's participants 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. Photo elicitation thus generated new and rich data on how individuals were negotiating/articulating/hiding their identities in an increasingly authoritarian Hong Kong (Bogacki, 2026: Chapters 4, 5, 6).

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 five reflections. First, in all the subsections above, identities are emergent; they are becoming. Practice scholars theorise practices as putting identities in motion. Students of everyday nationalism and intersectional feminist scholars operationalize in a very grounded 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.

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 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; Cremaschi, 2025), 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, when you are trying to access/measure identities in motion, high-quality field data will likely always trump big data.

Third, the three approaches sketched above are ‘neutral’ about the 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). This neutrality on the

content of identity is a progressive theoretical move, as too much earlier work focused only on ‘good’ identity (Checkel, 2007), or hard-wired an othering identity into its very foundation (social identity theory).

Fourth, the ethics of these relational, immersive theories of identity formation are challenging and, in some cases, may be unethical in application. On the former, I simply refer to the challenge – one there with all immersive field methods – that the ethics of a project and a researcher’s positionality will inevitably evolve and change over time. From this processual-ethical perspective (Kapiszewski and Wood, 2022), the ethics of a project only begin with Ethics Committee / IRB approval; the real challenge comes when those ethical principles confront the field.⁹

However, for some field sites and research participants, the theories and methods discussed above may be an ethical bridge too far. Consider an example: Using photo elicitation to understand better the dynamics of Indian identity construction since the 1948 partition. Starting from that partition to the present day, under the Hindu-nationalist government of Narendra Modi, identity discourse and practice has been repeatedly weaponised in India, resulting in continuing violence (and pogroms) well after the already-bloody events of 1948. In your research, you nonetheless plan to use photo elicitation, giving cameras to a group of middle-aged Indians (45-60 years old), and asking them to take photos of scenes/events/symbols/daily-practices that evoke their identity.

Giving the violence and othering that has defined Indian identity since 1948, recounting what those photos say may induce feelings of dread, anxiety, deep anger and general emotional turmoil for many of the research participants. This is getting dangerously close to the re-traumatisation that, ethically, we should never induce.¹⁰

⁹ Both (2026) and Söderberg (2026) are excellent examples of working immersively, while never forgetting to keep ethical practices front and center.

¹⁰ For this example – and details on the Indian identity landscape – I thank the faculty and students in the Department of International Relations, Ashoka University, New Delhi (April 2026).

The ethical lesson here is obvious, but nonetheless key: context is crucial. The relational-immersive approaches sketched here may be appealing on conceptual-theoretical grounds – getting us inside the motion-picture black box of identity formation. Yet, in some cases, how we gather the data to test and probe these approaches may violate our ethical principles. Recognising this violation and acting upon it – i.e., stopping or reconfiguring the field work – can only strengthen the ethical foundations of one’s research.¹¹

Fifth, I circle back to what, arguably, is the core of this essay: ontology. From the very start, I have sought - conceptually and ontologically – to put identities in motion. Consider again my choice of words and phrases: fluid, dynamics, rupture, emergent, and the like. Yet we all know and are told – from the first days of graduate school – that identities are ‘sticky’; they are ‘like a skin, not a sweater.’

How do I make sense of this ontological conundrum – this confusing puzzle about the reality of identity? I have two answers. First – and to be honest – I do not know. I had not even thought about this tension, until a question came from the audience in a [talk](#) that I gave in New Delhi earlier this year.

Second – and hopefully a more scholarly answer – I need to be clearer about my ontological target in the essay. It is how we conceptualize identity formation, not identity per se. There are indeed periods when identities are stable, in stasis, and not changing – sticky, in other words. However, I am interested in the periods of change, construction, and formation. The relational ontology and the theories based on it that I propose above target these ‘non-sticky’ moments.

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

¹¹ And doing so would place us – ethically - well ahead of our experimentalist colleagues. See footnote 12.

populate it. Yet, our theorising and theory building has not adjusted to this new, more processual view of the social world. As Hall argued nearly a quarter century ago for comparative politics (Hall, 2003), there is a problem when ontology and theory and method are mis-aligned – in my case, for contemporary research on identity.

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; Simmons and Rush Smith, Forthcoming). 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 particular, for theories of identity formation and how we study them in terms of methods. Yet, the disciplinary discussion has barely begun.

Indeed, we are 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.¹² Making an analogy to particle physics, Sil and Simmons (2025: 58) – in a brilliant turn of phrase – refer to this as the

¹² 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).

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 us to advance the knowledge frontier (Simmons and Rush Smith, 2026). 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. Substantialist, snapshot, causal stories about identity ain't the only (ontological) game in town.

VI. References

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