Exploring the social identity threat response framework

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore what individuals perceive as social identity threats, the sources of the threat, individuals' responses, and the consequences of the threat.
Design/methodology/approach – Narratives from 224 individuals were collected. A sample of 84 narratives were analyzed in depth using a qualitative content analysis approach.
Findings – Initial support for identity threat response theory was found. Three new distinct threat responses – constructive action, ignore, and seek assistance – were uncovered. Additionally, harm/loss appraisals were found to be perceived and reacted to similarly to Petriglieri-defined identity threats.
Originality/value – This study contributes to identity scholarship by shedding further light on the "theoretical black box" associated with identity threat. Such insight is necessary in further enhancing our understanding of the impact that identity threat has at the individual and organizational level.

Keywords Incivility, Social identity, Identity threat, Identity threat responses
Paper type Research paper

People often confront situations that could threaten their social identities.

Considering that identity threats can result in performance decrements (Steele and Aronson, 1995), antisocial behavior (Aquino and Douglas, 2003), and even in-group denigration (Lewis, 2003), identity threats have long been of interest to scholars. Researchers, however, have been most focussed on a limited set of antecedents and outcomes of identity threats. As such, we have little understanding of how individuals actually respond to identity threats and the outcomes of their threat responses. From a practical perspective, the paucity of concern about the actual responses to identity threats may be due to the fact that organizational scholars tend to focus on outcomes of managerial concern such as satisfaction and performance. Although these outcomes are important, we contend that examining the actual identity threat responses (ITR) and outcomes is paramount because they have important implications for both theory and practice. For example, there is scant evidence on the effectiveness of different types of ITR. This is a critical omission in the literature as scholars are unable to offer evidence-based guidance on the efficacy of ITR.

ITR theory (Petriglieri, 2011) is a good first step to fill this gap, yet as we will highlight later, it is incomplete in capturing the full range of appraisals, identity responses, and the threat response outcomes. The present study offers a qualitative content analysis of individuals' narrative descriptions of identity threat episodes in order to explore and expand ITR theory related to responses and outcomes. Further, we

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contribute to the literature by providing a typology of threats people experience and by advancing an argument that challenges Petriglieri's contention that harm/loss appraisals are not *true* identity threats.

Theoretical development and propositions

Until recently, the explanations for how people responded to identity threats were scattered across numerous literatures and focussed on organizational outcomes. Research in various disciplines suggest that individuals who perceive threats are likely to react defensively in order to reaffirm their social identity, restore justice, or deter future threats (Aquino and Douglas, 2003). Defensive strategies may manifest in overtly aggressive forms such as negative stereotyping and discrimination (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000), conflict or resistance (Jehn, 1995), criticism of one's abilities, and public humiliation (Aquino and Douglas, 2003), or less obvious forms such as physical or psychological withdrawal (Foldy *et al.*, 2009) decreased commitment (Purdie-Vaughns *et al.*, 2008), and in-group solidarity (Geddes and Konrad, 2003). With ITR, Petriglieri (2011) offered a framework that synthesized these literatures and provided a coherent explanation of the appraisal process and how people respond to identity threats and the likely consequences of those threats.

ITR predicts that when individuals experience an identity threat, they will respond by engaging in either or both of the two broad ITR categories. The first category includes the identity-protection responses – derogation, concealment, and positive distinctiveness. Individuals can enact one or several ITRs simultaneously (Petriglieri, 2011). An individual engages in derogation by criticizing or denouncing the attacker to mitigate the identity threat and discredit the attacker (Sykes and Matza, 1957). A concealment threat response occurs when one tries to tone down or hide the threatened identity hoping that the reduced salience of the identity will persuade the attacker to stop the identity threatening behavior (Roberts, 2005). The most proactive of the identity-protection responses, positive distinctiveness, is when an individual attempts to change the attacker's opinion of the threatened identity by arguing the virtues of the identity (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002). Engaging in derogation and concealment threat responses are theorized to maintain the identity threat because they do not alter the threatened identity or the attacker's view of the identity whereas the other threat responses are theorized to eliminate the identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011).

The second category includes the identity-restructuring responses – identity exit, meaning change, and importance change. This set of responses seeks to change an aspect of the threatened identity in an effort to foil the identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011). Identity exit, the most challenging threat response to undertake, requires an individual to discard completely one's affiliation with the threatened identity. Using a meaning change threat response, threatened individuals cognitively shift their perception of what the identity means to them whereas when an importance change threat response is used, individuals cognitively shift how important the identity is to them (Petriglieri, 2011). To eliminate the threat, individuals engaging in these identity-restructuring responses must alter their identities and what they mean to them in fundamentally dramatic ways (Petriglieri, 2011). Because of the nature of some identities and how important identity is to people (Dutton *et al.*, 2010; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), identity-restructuring threat responses are likely to be employed less often than identity-protection responses. This leads us to our first propositions:

P1a. Identity-protection threat responses will be invoked more often than identity-restructuring threat responses.

P1b. Individuals who engage in derogation and concealment will maintain the identity threat whereas individuals who engage in the other threat responses will eliminate the identity threat.

Petriglieri (2011) distinguishes between harm/loss appraisals and identity threats. She states that harm/loss appraisals occur when individuals perceive a comment or situation to be offensive to one or more of their identities, but the perpetrator of the comment or situation does not have legitimate authority over the individual and cannot affect the individual's occupational outcomes (e.g. hiring, salary, promotions, work assignments, etc.). In contrast, *true* identity threats take place when individuals with legitimate authority (e.g. managers) are the initiators of threats. This is a true identity threat because a person with legitimate authority can affect the individual's occupational outcomes, and as a result, there is either a present or future harm to the identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Thus, Petriglieri argues that, "a harm/loss appraisal alone, however, is not sufficient to threaten identity" (p. 645).

While it is reasonable to predict a disparaging remark from a stranger might be appraised as less harmful than one coming from a boss, it also seems plausible that individuals can perceive identity threats from individuals without legitimate authority. Research suggests individuals have a strong desire to belong and be accepted within their social groups (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and coworkers can have an enormous influence over group norms, alliances, behaviors, and well-being (Glomb and Liao, 2003; Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Coworkers' influence can affect peers' behaviors at work and that influence can subsequently affect their occupational outcomes (positively or negatively). For example, employees often feel pressured to engage in citizenship behaviors even when they do not want to when their workgroup expects it and normalizes the behavior (Bolino *et al.*, 2010).

Additionally, research on stereotype threat suggests that the fear of confirming stereotypes and the statements people make can have an impact on others' performance even if the threat was not actively evoked (Carr and Steele, 2009, 2010; Goff *et al.*, 2008). Stereotype threat theory suggests that when the negative stereotypes of a social identity group are evoked, affected group members may suffer performance decrements that are aligned with the negative stereotypes that might not have occurred had the negative stereotypes not been evoked (Carr and Steele, 2009, 2010; Davies *et al.*, 2005). Research on stereotype threat suggests that statements of acquaintances and strangers, and the preoccupations they may create, can lead some people to perceive identity threats and can affect individual behavior. Therefore, we propose the following:

P2. An individual will respond to identity threats by engaging in identity-protection or identity-restructuring threat responses whether or not the source of the threat is an authority figure.

Identities can be ascribed or achieved. Ascribed identities are those in which people have at birth or are prescribed socially such as race/ethnicity or sex/gender whereas achieved identities are those people adopt or earn such as professional identities or voluntary roles. As expected, ascribed identities are less malleable than achieved identities (Petriglieri, 2011), which generally increases the salience of the identity to others and the importance of the identity to individuals (Crocker and Major, 1989). Likewise, the history of stereotypes, social dominance, and status is generally more entrenched in society and experienced by individuals with ascribed identities than achieved identities (Devine, 1989; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001). As a result, it is likely that

ascribed identities may be perceived to be more important to individuals and threatened more often than achieved identities. This leads us to our propositions:

P3a. Individuals will rank ascribed identities higher than achieved identities.

P3b. Individuals will report more identity threat occurrences of ascribed identities than achieved identities.

Methodology

We collected stories about identity threats from participants and analyzed them, following what Mayring (2000) calls a qualitative content analysis approach, which is a blend of two research traditions: positivist and interpretive (Gephart, 2004). Data were gathered from upper class business students at a large southeastern university and from working professionals who attended a November conference of The PhD Project™ (see www.phdproject.org for more information). Using these two groups, we were able to collect a purposive sample (Maxwell, 1996; Miles and Huberman, 1994) of 224 narratives from the same number of participants of many different races/ethnicities, ages, professional backgrounds, and life experiences. The researchers obtained e-mail addresses of business students from professors' class lists and of working professionals from The PhD Project™ staff. An e-mail with a Qualtrics survey link was sent to individuals inviting them to participate in the research project. At the survey site, participants ranked their five most important social identities and rated how important they were on a two-item survey with a five-point Likert scale. Responses were scaled such that high values represented greater social identity importance. The Cronbach's α was 0.81 (see appendix).

Participants were then asked to provide descriptions of their social identity threat experiences. We provided four text-entry boxes with no word limits to encourage narrative descriptions of episodes that would be useful for developing theory. Specifically, we asked participants to recount: a situation where they felt their social identity was threatened; how they responded to the threat; the consequences of their threat response; and how the situation could have been rewritten to make their identity safe. Asking participants to type answers to open-ended questions in order to construct identity response narratives gave them a greater degree of confidentiality and anonymity than face-to-face interviews, as well as allowed us to collect a greater number of response narratives to overcome key informant bias (Maxwell, 1996). Traditional, qualitative interviews (King, 1994) were ruled out because of the sensitive nature of identity threats; we believe that the use of Qualtrics allowed our participants to report more freely and accurately their identity threat experiences without being influenced by the researchers' race, sex, or other extraneous factors that may prompt more socially desirable responses. Finally, participants answered questions about their demographics.

Data analysis

Each case for analysis represented an episode (Miles and Huberman, 1994) of social identity threat in narrative form. Analysis of the cases occurred in four steps. First, we identified usable narratives for further analysis. Second, we engaged in an iterative process of examining narratives and refining theory to develop the theoretical categories to be used in coding. Third, we trained two raters to code the narratives to test theoretical variables. Finally, to answer our propositions, we explored patterns in the coded narratives. As a preliminary step, the four researchers identified the usable narratives for analysis, applying definitions from social identity theory (Tajfel and

Turner, 1979) and ITR (Petriglieri, 2011). Our initial data came from 224 participants: 86 students and 138 The PhD Project™ participants. We eliminated cases with missing data, those that did not provide sufficient information in the narrative, and those that did not describe a legitimate social identity threat. After eliminating unusable responses, our final sample for analysis consisted of 134 identity narratives from 134 participants. The number of narratives eliminated is a result of the trade-off made by eliciting stories via an anonymous survey rather than in face-to-face interviews where probing might have improved the proportion of usable narratives (King, 1994).

Qualitative content analysis commences with inductive development of categories (Mayring, 2000). We began by randomly selecting 25 narratives for each of the four authors and an additional 25 cases for two authors so that there was overlap. In other words, each author analyzed 50 cases, with 25 having overlap with at least one other author. We met periodically to discuss our interpretations. We discussed each narrative and reached consensus on how to code accurately going forward. Although our initial coding sheet included what Miles and Huberman (1994) call a "start-list" of Petriglieri's (2011) identity response categories, the iterative nature of the process led us to develop additional categories to describe other themes or constructs such as consequences of the threat response, identity safety agency and whether there was a positive outcome from the threat situation. When disagreement became rare, we finalized a coding sheet with definitions and examples. All codes were applied at the level of a narrative describing an episode of a social identity threat. In other words, narratives were analyzed holistically.

To test the codes developed during the inductive phase of analysis, we chose a sample of 84 narratives, which came from 41 students and 43 The PhD Project™ attendees in an effort to achieve maximum variation sampling (Maxwell, 1996). The majority of participants were female (64 percent), a member of a racial minority (55.9 percent), between the ages of 19 and 25 (52.4 percent), geographically located in the southern region of the country (55.9 percent), had traveled outside of their geographic location ten or more times (53.6 percent), and had earned a master's degree (33.3 percent). Only 23 participants answered the job tenure question, where the minimum years of employment was two and the maximum was 25 (Mean = 11.39 years). Sample industries and job titles for participants were health care, government contracting, consulting, banking, senior associate, survey research analyst, and executive. Sample student majors were accounting, business management, and marketing.

Two categories required no additional analysis; we simply noted the identities threatened and the sources of threat as described by participants. However, two raters were trained by two of the authors to code threat response tactics and outcomes. The training session, which lasted approximately three hours, consisted of the authors briefing the raters on the overall purpose of the study, discussing the coding sheet, and reviewing three narratives together. The two raters were given a week to complete the coding sheet and were instructed to work independently.

Following content analysis guidelines (Krippendorff, 2011), we report both percent agreement and Krippendorff's α for a stratified sample of cases to assess the reliability of the coded categories in 2 through 5. With a single exception, all αs were well above 0.40, the minimum level accepted for coding nominal variables during theory development (Artstein and Poesio, 2008; Fleiss, 1981; King, 1994).

Findings

P1a posits that individuals will respond to identity threats by using identity-protection responses more often than identity-restructuring responses. Of the 84 identity threat

Threat response category	Threat response tactic	Frequency	Threat source		Threat response outcome	
			Harm/loss appraisal	Identity threat	Threat maintained	Threat eliminated
Identity Protection (Petriglieri, 2011)	Derogation	7	5	2	1	6
	Concealment	8	5	3	6	2
	Positive distinctiveness	10	9	1	5	5
Identity protection (proposed)	Constructive action	24	16	8	6	18
	Ignore	14	12	2	12	2
	Seek assistance	5	4	1	3	2
Identity restructuring	Identity exit	2	1	1	2	0
	Importance change	1	1	0	0	1
Uncategorized		13	10	3	8	5

Table I.
Frequency of threat response tactics in narratives

Variable	Sample narrative	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's α
Derogration	I looked at the agent, said I was born in California and I'm handing you my passport. I then said "who do you think you are talking to me like that. I need to speak to your manager immediately." I filed a complaint	92	0.63
Concealment	I felt the need to try to identity with them, so I suppressed comments about my religious identity to get through the weekend. I avoided questions about religion, and tried to be in the drivers seat of every conversation	92	0.63
Positive-distinctinve-ness	At a social gathering (coworkers birthday dinner) there was a very surprised look when I informed everyone where I was from and as if that particular place was looked down upon. I explained to everyone the identity which is still commonly associated with the location is not accurate and the times of the past have changed	96	0.78

Table II.
Identity-protection response variables coded in narratives

narratives we analyzed, surprisingly, only 33.3 percent of the threat responses ($n = 28$) were classified as either identity-protection or identity-restructuring as theorized by Petriglieri (2011; refer to Tables I-III for sample narratives). Nonetheless, our results support Petriglieri's threat response model that these two categories of threat responses are indeed possible reactions that people employ when faced with identity threats. Additionally, we found support for our proposition that individuals will use identity-protection responses ($n = 25$; 89 percent) more often than identity-restructuring responses ($n = 3$; 11 percent). Interestingly, the remaining 66.7 percent ($n = 56$), did not fit the ITR framework. Our data revealed three additional, distinct threat responses, that individuals use to respond to identity threats, which we labeled as constructive action, ignore, and seek assistance (see Table IV for sample narratives).

Variable	Sample narrative	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's α
Identity exit	My response to this situation was initially to avoid being alone at celebrations then I began avoiding events all together. Ultimately, I chose not to participate in cultural events until my mid-20s. Still, today I struggle with racial and cultural identity and a sense of belonging in native and non-native communities	96	0.65
Importance change	I am very light-skinned and have Caucasian and native American ancestors; however, I am African-American and identify with this race. However, growing up at school, other students would question what race I was. I just told them that I was African-American; however, I began to dissociate myself with the African-American race. I am African-American; however, race became unimportant in defining who I am	96	0.65

Table III. Identity-restructuring response variables coded in narratives

Variable	Sample narrative	Percent agreement	Krippendorff's α
Constructive action	I coped with the issue by having my boss outline my responsibilities while striving to prove I was deserved the next promotion	92	0.79
Ignore	I ignored the individuals and focussed on interacting with other attendees until I left	92	0.76
Seek assistance	I made reports with the organization's Human Resource	96	0.65

Table IV. Newly identified identity threat response variables coded in narratives

The first new threat response that we identified differed in a nuanced, but important, way from a positive distinctiveness response. A person engaging in positive distinctiveness "actively" tries to educate the threat initiator of the benefits of the threatened identity in order to change the threat initiator's views of the identity, which eliminates the identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011; Roberts *et al.*, 2008). However, in most cases, people chose to take constructive action to overcome the identity threat. Constructive action is when an individual attempts to overcome an identity threat by engaging in what he or she perceives to be productive behavior, but does not address the threatened identity directly. For example, one participant wrote "I felt that my identity as a Black woman is threatened on my job by the way training and promotions are handled. Just looking at the facts, it seems that White employees receive more promotions and training opportunities than their counterparts of other races." She explained that the way she coped with the threat was "to do the best I could everyday and hope that I could work the system. Unfortunately, I found that my good work was not going to change anything at that particular job. My ultimate solution was to look for another job that offered greater potential for growth." This participant's response does not fit any of Petriglieri's threat responses. Instead of raising the issue of the social identity threat, she tried to overcome the identity threat by working harder. When her hard work was not rewarded, she chose to quit. We counted 24 cases that followed a constructive action response in order to deal

with identity threats. Therefore, we propose that constructive action is an additional ITR that people can choose to engage in to combat identity threats.

The second additional threat response that we observed from the data were an ignore threat response. For example, one participant stated he "overheard a group of non-minority colleagues using humor that was lightly interspersed with offensive, racially based epithets." The participant felt powerless to act as he stated, "Working as one of the few minorities in the company, there was nothing much I could do. Unfortunately, I, more or less, saw it as a 'lose-lose' proposition." The participant stated that he did not stay with the company much longer than that, but expressed guilt as he stated, "[I] view[ed] it as a 'lost' teaching opportunity." We found 14 cases where participants perceived that ignoring the identity threat was the most appropriate response they could engage in at that particular time. Therefore, we propose that ignore is a new and distinct ITR.

The third ITR that emerged from our narratives was to seek assistance in responding to the identity threat. In some cases, this response was chosen because the participant did not know exactly who initiated the identity threat. For example, one participant stated, "During my freshman year in undergrad, there was racial slurs and offensive language posted on my dorm room door. There was also a doll with a noose place[d] on my bed. I reported [it] to the R.A. but decided to transfer to a different school." In other cases, the victim could have confronted the initiator of the threat but chose to bypass the threat initiator and seek assistance from an authority figure. In our data set, we found five cases where participants used a seek assistance ITR. Therefore, we propose that seek assistance is a new, distinct ITR. Although we identified three additional threat response tactics that individuals use to cope with the identity threat, there were 13 narratives that were not coded into any of the response tactics due to insufficient information. Per our conceptualization, our three new ITR would also be classified as identity-protections threat responses.

Based on ITR, *P1b* posited that individuals who engage in derogation and concealment will maintain the identity threat whereas individuals who engage in all other threat responses will eliminate the threat. Our data did not support this proposition. Although we identified narratives that supported the relationships between the specific ITR tactics and threat maintenance or elimination posited by Petriglieri (2011), there were also many for which our narratives suggest the opposite effect. For example, one participant relied on concealment to cope with an identity threat stating, "I felt the need to try to identify with them, so I suppressed comments about my religious identity to get through the weekend. I avoided questions about religion, and tried to be in the driver's seat of every conversation." This participant's use of the concealment tactic resulted in the elimination of the threat: "The weekend went smoothly after that. I did not have to worry about feeling uncomfortable around any of them." Additional examples of conflicting outcomes associated with the same tactic are provided in Table V. We found that identity threats were roughly as likely to be maintained ($n = 43$) as eliminated in our narratives ($n = 41$) see Table I and Table V for sample narratives). Furthermore, our findings suggest that most ITR tactics (with the exception of importance change and meaning change) are associated with both maintenance and elimination of identity threats (see Table I). That is, the type of threat response tactic an individual uses to mitigate the identity threat does not seem to determine the outcome. This is also true for the three additional ITR tactics that our data

Variable	*Percent agreement*	*Krippendorff's α*
Threat maintained	92	0.81
Threat eliminated	92	0.81
Threat response tactic	*Threat maintained*	*Threat eliminated*
Derogation	"It continues to happen"	"Received an apology"
Concealment	"The consequences of my response were an increased sense of alienation. A sense of loss and sadness. I felt like something was missing"	"The weekend went smoothly after that. I did not have to worry about feeling uncomfortable around any of them"
Positive distinctiveness	"I wanted to deactivate by my Senior year, but let them talk me out of it. Today, I keep in contact with maybe 2/70 women"	"Everyone was very receptive of the response and seemed surprised to hear the South has been making changes for the better"
Identity exit	"The consequences of my response was an increased sense of alienation. A sense of loss and sadness. I felt like something was missing"	"I found new mentors, gain acceptance into NYU (though I turned them down) and was invited to attend the 2011 PhD Project Conference"
Importance change	"I've had varying levels of success. Some people reciprocate and have even said, (at a later time) 'when we were growing up' and include me in their generation. Others prefer to hold on to the age difference, I believe as a justification to fuel their passive-aggressive tendencies"	na
Constructive action	"Him yelling and saying that I have no choice in the matter"	"I was able to prove my worth and was given the opportunity of promotion when the time came"
Ignore	"Unsure […] I didn't remain at the company for much longer after that, but perhaps could view it as a "lost" teaching opportunity"	"There were no consequences for me. If anything, I think the realization that my peer and I were silent brought on the awareness in the management group that the conversation should not continue"
Seek assistance	"I had to wait a few months to be considered for another promotion which I did receive"	"Radio programming other than soft music was banned in the workplace"

Table V.
Threat maintained/ eliminated coded in narratives by threat response tactics

uncovered. Within our sample narratives, however, we found derogation and constructive action to mostly result in the threat being eliminated, while ignore usually resulted in the threat being maintained. Taken together, our findings suggest that ITR and their outcomes are highly individualized phenomena that are strongly influenced by context-specific factors (Johns, 2006) for which we could discern no pattern.

P2 posits that individuals will respond to identity threats using an identity protection or identity-restructuring response regardless of whether or not the source of the threat is an authority figure. That is, individuals will respond to harm/loss appraisals and Petriglieri-defined identity threats with the same ITR. In contrast to what Petriglieri (2011) predicts, our participants perceived a harm/loss appraisal as an identity threat. In fact, a greater number of harm/loss appraisals than Petriglieri-defined identity threats were found in our narratives (see Table I).

Although these threats were not perpetrated by an authority figure, participants still experienced a threat to their social identity. In fact, our narrative data uncovered that all ITR tactics (with the exception of meaning change) were used to respond to both harm/loss appraisals and identity threats. These results suggest that whether initiators have formal authority or not, individuals perceive and respond to harm/loss appraisals with ITR.

We examined the narratives further in an effort to uncover the source of these threats. We identified six unique categories that describe the origin/source of the identity threats. The majority originated from coworkers/colleagues ($n = 21$). Interestingly, several narratives indicated that the perpetrators of identity threats were family, friends, and acquaintances ($n = 9$). Eight narratives indicated school peers as the source of the threat. A number of narratives pointed to a group or organization as the source of the threat ($n = 7$). We identified two threats that can be classified as originating from the material world (Media $n = 1$; Unemployment $n = 1$).

These findings suggest that people perceive and respond to identity threats from various sources and not just from people who have some formal authority over them. This point is further elucidated by the fact that 19 identity narratives indicated that the source of the threat was a stranger or unspecified/unknown person. We conclude that individuals can experience social identity threats when the perpetrator has or does not have legitimate authority over the person.

Over half ($n = 52$) of the identity threats were potentially reoccurring threats, whereas 32 were single occasion threats. *P3a* posits that individuals will rank ascribed identities higher than achieved identities and *P3b* posits that people will experience more identity threats toward ascribed identities than achieved identities. Supporting *P3b*, most of the identity threat narratives involved an ascribed identity (e.g. race, sex, etc.; $n = 71$), whereas only 13 identity threat narratives were directed toward an achieved (e.g. professional identity). Additionally, supporting *P3a*, ascribed identities were listed more often than those achieved. The top five social identities that participants reported were: race ($n = 77$), gender ($n = 75$), religion ($n = 73$), age ($n = 73$), and sexual orientation ($n = 38$), respectively. Surprisingly, only 36.9 percent ($n = 31$) of the narratives provided by our participants dealt with the social identity that the participant indicated as being most important to him/her. When considering the top three most important identities reported, this figure increases to 60.7 percent ($n = 51$). However, nearly 16 percent of the narratives in our sample did not deal with any of the top five social identities that participants indicated as being important to them. This is an intriguing finding because it suggests that, although people have an overall understanding of the hierarchy of what their various social identities mean to them, threats to their "less important" identities still affect them and are remembered by them (i.e. are salient identity threats).

Discussion, limitations, and directions for future research

Our findings suggest that individuals do not recall threats only to what they consider to be their most important identities. Participants' narratives reveal that a perceived threat to any identity, regardless of the degree or ranking of importance to an individual, seems to be salient. Moreover, in contrast to what Petriglieri (2011) argued, participants perceived a harm/loss appraisal as an identity threat. In fact, we found a greater number of harm/loss appraisals

than Petriglieri-defined identity threats in our sample. Not surprisingly, the top five identity categories listed by participants as being most important were ascribed identities. Our findings also revealed that individuals indeed use a threat response tactic when faced with a social identity threat. Our sample narratives confirmed that individuals turn to both identity-protection and identity-restructuring threat response tactics. Further, the full range of ITR tactics (with the exception of meaning change) were used by participants when experiencing either harm/loss appraisals or identity threats. Importantly, our data uncovered three additional distinct threat response tactics: constructive action, ignore, and seek assistance. Contrary to what ITR predicts, we did not find that the type of threat response tactic determined whether the threat was maintained or eliminated. The range of threat responses (with the exception of importance change and meaning change) resulted in both outcomes.

Like all studies, ours has some limitations. First, we acknowledge that our use of an online survey rather than the traditional face-to-face interview prohibited us from probing participants further in cases where the information was unclear or the story was incomplete. Although we believe that our approach afforded them a greater degree of confidentiality and anonymity, encouraging more open and honest responses and minimizing informant bias, we recognize the significant trade-off in terms of the lower number of usable narratives. Future research should explore identity threats using multiple methods to determine if there are additional threat responses beyond those we have uncovered.

Second, we were unable to account for all individual and contextual variables that may influence the perception of, response to, and outcome of a social identity threat. The present study was intended as a preliminary test of ITR. Further examination of the link between the type of identity threat and the threat response tactic used is necessary. Moreover, future research should examine whether individual or contextual differences influence whether an individual perceives an identity threat, the type of threat response tactic used, and what would subsequently make the individual regain identity safety. Researchers also should investigate the link between threat response tactics and additional outcomes.

Lastly, we relied on a purposive sample and recognize that our findings may not be generalizable to all workplace settings. Despite having a diverse sample that included college students, we find it interesting that many wrote about a situation at their place of employment. Future research should replicate this study in different contexts and cultures to establish whether the findings differ from those in this study.

Conclusion

It is well established that identity threats in the workplace result in negative individual and organizational outcomes (Cortina *et al.*, 2013; Griffin and Lopez, 2005). Although it is impossible for organizations to create and nurture an environment that is free of all social identity threats, cultivating a workplace environment that welcomes, supports, and values employees' social identities to avoid or curb identity threat should be of great importance to organizational leaders (Davies *et al.*, 2005; Markus *et al.*, 2002). Our findings offer additional insight into what individuals perceive as threats, the sources of the threat, individuals' responses, and the consequences faced. Such insight is necessary in further enhancing our understanding of the impact that identity threat has at the individual and organizational level.

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Appendix. Survey questions

Social identity ranking

People tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, race, sexual orientation, age cohort, etc. We refer to these classifications as our social identities.

Please rank order from (1) most important to (5) less important, 5 of your social identities.

Social identity threat narratives

1. Tell us about a time when you felt your social identity was threatened (either at work, school, social gathering, etc.).
2. What was your response to the identity threatening situation (i.e., How did you attempt to cope with it?)
3. What were the consequences of your response?
4. If you could rewrite this event in a way that is supportive of your identity, what would have had to happen?

Identity importance

Using a 5-point scale (1 = very important to 5 = unimportant), how important is the identity that you wrote about in scenario 1 to you?

Using a 5-point scale (1 = very significant and 5 = very insignificant), how significant is the identity that you wrote about in scenario 1 to you?

Demographics

Please select your gender:
- Male
- Female

Please select your age range:
- 19-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 66 or older

Please select the highest level of education you have attained:
- High School Diploma or Equivalent
- Associate Degree or some College courses
- Bachelor Degree
- Master Degree
- Doctorate Degree

Please select your race:
- White, non-Hispanic
- Black or African American
- Asian
- Hispanic
- Other (please specify)

What region of the country were you raised in?
- South
- Northeast
- Midwest
- West
- US Territory
- I was not born in The United States (what country were you born in _____?)

How many times throughout your life have you traveled outside the region of the country you were raised in?
- Never
- 1-3 times
- 4-6 times
- 7-9 times
- 10 times or more

Which of the following best describes your current occupation?
- Student
- Employee
- Other (please specify)

What year are you currently in?
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate Student

What is your major?

What industry do you currently work in?
- Manufacturing
- Education
- Government (non-Education)
- Construction
- Retail
- Transportation
- Services
- Other (please specify)

Which of the following best describes your current position?
- Executive/Administrator
- Director
- Manager
- Supervisor
- Other

How many years have you been in the workforce?

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