

The Only Constant is Change: Reconciling Agentic and Communal Tensions from a Dynamic Identity Perspective

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ABSTRACT. We propose a narrative conceptual framework for understanding identity as a dynamic system sustained by two ongoing negotiations between agentic (self-focused) and communal (other-focused) motives. Traditional models were often grounded in stability, consistency, and moral coherence and tended to underplay the adaptive complexity of modern identity. In a world where individuals continuously shift between social, professional, and digital selves, coherence emerges not from sameness but from the capacity to integrate contradiction. Existing classical and contemporary frameworks either privileged continuity or pathologised inconsistency, failing to recognise how personal fluidity could be a source of growth rather than conflict. Drawing on socio-developmental, cognitive, and motivational research, we argue that apparent tensions within self-motivations (e.g., self-interest and care for others) are not indicators of dysfunction but hallmarks of a resilient, flexible identity. Arguments are presented for an integrative model reframing identity coherence as a process of agentic–communal negotiation, in which stability emerged as a property of adaptation across different contexts. By acknowledging both the prosocial bias in existing research and the functional role of self-contradictions, this perspective offers new avenues for conceptualising identity health, measurement, and resilience in a dynamic social world.

Keywords: self-concept, identity, self-awareness, self-coherence, agentic, communal, authenticity

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INTRODUCTION

The ever-present question “*Who am I?*”, although a deeply personal inquiry, can nowadays feel deceptively simple and overused. Yet, each time we address it, it can land differently, as the answer is not universal or easily defined by listing characteristics of one’s subjective experience. It is more like a moving target that shifts with each moment of reflection, failure, or reinvention when people revise themselves through memory, contradiction, or whatever new version of “true self” they can comfortably live with.

McAdams (2013) calls this process narrative identity, or the ongoing story through which individuals make sense of who they are. However, even this story can be split, or it can hold conflicting chapters. Seemingly contradictory traits (such as kindness and cruelty, or even confidence and insecurity) often coexist or alternate in quick succession, calling into question the notion of a fixed, unified self. As Stern (1930) insightfully put it, “*Apparently...(some people) can abruptly become a fully different person because so many human forms are present and ready in the depths of (their) existence*” (as cited in Renner & Laux, 2000, pp. 53–54). This suggests that the search for identity may not result in a singular, stable entity, but rather a constellation of potential selves that emerge in response to varying internal and external contexts.

What matters now is not being aware of the existence of multiple selves, as this idea is not new to identity research (e.g., possible selves; Markus & Nurius, 1986; self-complexity; Linville, 1987; dialogical selfhood; Hermans & Kempen, 1993, see *Table 1*), but rather how people can successfully manage them. When identity is stretched across cultures, social media statuses, professional and social roles, the tension between stability and flexibility is not just theoretical, but immediate, and sometimes resource-draining. When people must navigate between being the dutiful (adult) child in one context, a parent striving to stay current with gentle parenting practices, a competitive employee, a “woke” friend online, and a law-abiding citizen who self-regulates efficiently to keep the peace in their neighbourhood, coherence becomes less about consistency and more about negotiating personal and (possibly opposing) relational motivations in real time. As a result, models of identity may overstate stability or underestimate the complexity of navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting motives and roles. What is missing is a framework that explicitly considers the tension between more agentic (self-serving, self-focused) and communal (prosocial, other-focused) goals (Bakan, 1966) as central to maintaining a coherent self.

In other words, coherence is not just about holding a consistent narrative or stable traits (Cooper et al., 2018). It emerges from the ongoing negotiation between self-focused and other-focused goals, between personal ambition and

obligation or responsibility, between independence and connection. This agentic–communal tension may not be a flaw or a source of fragmentation, but the very backbone of a resilient, adaptable identity. Also, within this negotiation, authenticity (the feeling of acting in alignment with one’s genuine priorities and values) emerges as we “*experience the self as a fluid process rather than (..) static*” (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p.294).

This conceptual framework examines how psychological models and empirical data account for (or fail to account for) this dynamic coherence. By examining existing models, highlighting biases in the literature, and exploring possible emerging theories of adaptive identity, this work seeks to illuminate how stability could be understood differently from sameness, and more as adaptive integration of both (or multiple) social and personal drives.

EXISTING VIEWS OF IDENTITY STABILITY

Various theories have offered competing answers to the question posed at the beginning (“*Who am I?*”), but approached the problem in different ways. A need for greater conceptual clarity in self-concept theories has been noted in the literature, and a streamlined framework spanning multiple psychological domains has recently been proposed as a response to this integrative necessity (Hards et al., 2024; also see Manzi et al., 2022). We set out our paper by also drafting a comparative overview of key theories related to the manifestations of identity function and dysfunction (*Table 1* summarises these existing theories; for a *contemporary developmental focus* on identity theories, please see Karaś et al. (2018)). This synthesis clarifies how different scholars (from developmental, social, cognitive, narrative, and even clinical domains) have approached identity flexibility, stability, and fragmentation (a subjective feeling of distress caused by incoherence in one’s self), offering a deeper understanding of the factors that shape identity and how it changes over time.

Psychology has long attempted to chart the terrain of *the self*, often treating it as a static entity. Classical frameworks, such as Erikson’s (1956) psychosocial stages and Marcia’s (1986) identity statuses (as discussed in Berzonsky et al., 1999), typically conceptualise identity in terms of achievement or crisis, stability or failure (see *Table 1* for an overview). The classical view points towards a *relatively stable* and structured configuration of commitments and explorations that emerge through typical development. Within this tradition, identity is often understood as the achievement of a coherent and enduring sense of self, reflected in the consolidation of consistent roles, values, and life directions over time (Berzonsky et al., 1999).

Although this developmental perspective is widely acknowledged, it is implicitly treated as a marker of identity resolution and psychological maturity. Building on this, most developmental research has increasingly focused on the concept of identity commitment (or the degree to which individuals internalise choices about their values, goals, and roles). Research in this area consistently demonstrates that stronger, more stable commitments are associated with higher levels of well-being. For example, a cross-national study (Karaś et al., 2014) showed that different facets of well-being (subjective, psychological, and social well-being) are consistently linked to higher identity commitment, greater in-depth exploration (actively reflecting on and understanding personal choices), and lower reconsideration of commitment (less frequent questioning or comparison of alternative paths) in both educational and job identity domains. Implicitly, these classic developmental models, although insightful and aligned with the traditional view of identity as stable and coherent, assume that the self can and should remain relatively consistent over time. In contrast, more recent dynamic perspectives extend this view by emphasising identity as an ongoing process of integration and reorganisation rather than a fixed endpoint.

In trying to understand how these developmental views materialise beyond adolescence, a recent conceptual framework on identity integration (Mitchell et al., 2021) emphasises that maintaining a coherent sense of self is an ongoing process, requiring adaptation and reestablishment of identity in response to life changes, highlighting that coherence can coexist with change throughout adulthood. Thus, coherence may not look the same for everyone. For some individuals, both in the developmental years and beyond (Fadjukoff et al., 2016), maintaining a sense of coherence may paradoxically require change, adaptation, or even becoming someone entirely different over time.

This raises the question of how coherence is maintained when identity change is foundational. Drawing on narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2013), coherence in such cases is not defined by stability of identity content, but by the continuity of a self-narrative that integrates change into a temporally meaningful life story. This fluidity allows for growth and the possibility of identity transformation without losing the core stability of the self. Even when an individual's identity changes substantially, coherence can be preserved insofar as the change is experienced as part of a personal developmental trajectory rather than as fragmentation or rupture. Accordingly, the referential criteria for coherence are not fixed traits or roles, but can be narrowed down to: (1) narrative integration (McAdams, 2013), (2) perceived continuity of self-authorship over change (Adler et al., 2016), and (3) relative stability of higher-order values or guiding principles (Vecchione et al., 2016). These elements allow individuals to interpret even profound identity change as self-continuous rather than discontinuous.

Self-reflection (i.e., self-awareness) alone is therefore not sufficient to ensure coherence, as comfortable self-integration (narrative and value structure that preserves psychological continuity over time; McAdams & McLean, 2013) is required.

Even if there seems to be a common understanding of the nature of a dynamic self, the way we understand stability and change as main processes remains debated. As mentioned, traditional identity models (as discussed in Berzonsky et al., 1999), although they provide solid foundational frameworks, do not fully account for the complexities of identity and self-fragmentation in adulthood. Moreover, the concept of multiple identities was already echoed in more other classic theories such as Markus and Nurius's (1986) Theory of Possible Selves, Hermans and Kempen's (1993) Dialogical Self Theory, Linville's (1987) Self-Complexity Theory and Stern's (1923) Unitas Multiplex (as cited in Renner & Laux, 2000; but see *Table 1* for more examples), which also explore the adaptive nature of identity flexibility, focusing on how self-concept shifts in response to internal conflicts or external pressures. However, these models also do not clearly differentiate between healthy flexibility and a disruptive fragmentation of the self.

Other contemporary theories try to answer this by emphasising the engagement with future possible selves (hypothetical images of who we might become, see *Table 1* for more details), as another mechanism that explains identity development (e.g., Carroll's (2018) Expanded Self-as-Theory model builds on Epstein's (1973) original framework). Unlike actual selves (who we currently are), possible selves are speculative and thus more susceptible to failure (e.g., "My future self might not get that scholarship"). However, their failure does not necessarily destabilise core identity structures. This is because self-revision (updating our self-beliefs) functions less as replacement and more as refinement (i.e., reshaping existing self-concepts to align more closely with feedback from the environment).

In response to setbacks, individuals often preserve their core identity by attributing inconsistencies to external factors rather than internal deficiencies (Carroll et al., 2015). This aligns with the idea that identity change mirrors scientific reasoning: failed predictions are integrated or dismissed without disrupting global self-coherence. This is usually achieved by using two overarching strategies: teleological strategies, which aim to preserve self-worth (e.g., avoiding situations that could invalidate or challenge someone's self-view), and epistemic strategies, which prioritise learning and self-growth (e.g., seeking constructive feedback to improve performance; Carroll, 2018). When individuals successfully realise a possible self by perceiving an alignment between their outcomes and their desired identity, they experience increased self-trust and identity coherence (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Also, theories of clinical instruments, while offering insights into the dysfunctional nature of self-instability, do not provide specific mechanisms or delimitations among different types of identity. For example, the Identity Consolidation Inventory (ICI; Samuel & Akhtar, 2009) was designed to assess the stability of an individual's sense of identity, with high instability being associated with distress and depression (Samuel & Akhtar, 2009). Also, the Identity Distress Survey (IDS; Berman et al., 2004) gauges the extent of emotional distress a person experiences due to unresolved identity-related concerns, such as those found in individuals with borderline personality disorder (Fuchs, 2007). An emerging trend is thus to focus on the disruptive nature of self-instability and connect it to unusual circumstances, such as trauma (Martin & Shkreli, 2019), or to clinical conditions (Bogaerts et al., 2021).

A more in-depth model that encompasses both functional and dysfunctional aspects of self-flexibility is Kaufman's Self-Concept and Identity Measure (SCIM; Kaufman, 2015) and Theoretical Model, categorising identity structures as **consolidated** (*stable and coherent*), **disturbed** (*conflicted and fragmented*), and **a lack of identity** (diffuse and undefined). Each category reflects varying degrees of identity integration and stability versus fragmentation. A consolidated identity is characterised by a stable self-concept, marked by self-awareness, consistent values, and a positive sense of self-worth over time. Disturbed identity, by contrast, manifests perceived temporal instability and a self-perception primarily shaped by external validation. Individuals with disturbed identities struggle with internal consistency, often adapting their values and behaviours to meet external expectations (Kaufman, 2015). Lastly, a lack of identity represents an extreme form of identity fragmentation, in which individuals possess a solely interdependent self with unclear priorities, leading to profound confusion, emptiness, and difficulty in forming a perceived coherent self (Bogaerts et al., 2021). While Kaufman's model effectively maps identity dysfunction and stability, it still offers little insight into how coherence is actively maintained across multiple, sometimes conflicting contexts and, thus, selves. Moreover, the model does not explicitly consider the possibility of having multiple selves and still adhering to a consolidated identity. This can provoke a deeper inquiry (that we try to address in the next section of this conceptual framework): *Do inherent contradictions within the self really challenge the stability of identity, OR do they actually highlight its adaptability within a functional and evolving self-framework?*

We will now try to shape an answer to our question above by examining the relationship between identity contradictions, stability, and adaptability.

Table 1. *Identity Theories: Implications for Functional and Dysfunctional Identities**

Key Theory**	Functional Identity	Dysfunctional Identity	Key author(s)
Looking-Glass Self (<i>Social Theory</i>)	People may shift their self-views across different social contexts, reinforcing the idea that identity is adaptive rather than fixed.	If people rely too heavily on external validation, they may develop a fragmented sense of self and experience confusion about who they are.	Cooley (1902), as seen in Yeung & Martin (2003)
Unitas Multiplex - Conception of the person (<i>Developmental Theory</i>)	The self is unified in its underlying purpose and constantly evolving, and does not necessarily lead to fragmentation. Instead, it offers a framework where multiple identities ("Unitas Multiplex" or <i>Multiple Unity</i>) can coexist harmoniously. When these identities are linked by a deeper sense of purpose and a story binds them together, they become integrated. This is different from Gergen's (1991) more fragmented perspective.	N/a	Stern (1923) as seen in Renner & Laux (2000)
Self-presentation (<i>Social Theory</i>)	Self-presentation is adaptive and shaped by context and strategic performance. It could be seen as a strategic tool , but it can also allow individuals to experiment with different versions (e.g. roles) of themselves and discover new ways of being	However, people may struggle to reconcile the different aspects of themselves across roles and contexts when self-presenting. This can lead to feelings of internal conflict or identity dissonance. Identity can become fragmented when it is overly performative and completely disconnected from the authentic self.	Goffman (1959)
Psychosocial Development Theory (<i>Developmental, Social Theory</i>)	People go through multiple identity statuses and roles, which shows how adaptive identity development can be. They progress, have setbacks, identity conflicts, and redefine themselves over time.	People who utilise avoidant or normative processing styles are more likely to experience identity confusion (or diffusion), as these styles make it harder for them to explore themselves. These approaches can mess with one's sense of self by making them ignore key personal decisions, leaving them feeling incomplete.	Erikson (1968) & Marcia (1966); as seen in Berzonsky et al (1999)

Key Theory**	Functional Identity	Dysfunctional Identity	Key author(s)
Attachment Theory (<i>Developmental Theory</i>)	Attachment theory has implications for identity formation: a secure attachment lets people explore themselves in relationships with others and adds new experiences to their self-concept, helping them learn more about different parts of themselves.	People with avoidant or anxious attachment may define who they are by how others see them, which makes their sense of self very unstable and dependent.	Bowlby (1969)
Self-Schema Theory (<i>Cognitive, Clinical Theory</i>)	Self-schemas represent evaluations, descriptions, and capabilities about the self that evolve and adapt over time. If someone's self-concept includes the possibility of growth or change, they are more likely to accept novel or even contradictory aspects of themselves.	Fragmentation can occur when contradictory self-schemas emerge (without the understanding of growth or change). Maladaptive self-schemas can lead to a fragmented identity (e.g., " <i>I am not worthy</i> "), in which individuals struggle to incorporate new self-relevant elements, resulting in confusion and distress .	Beck, (1967) & Markus (1977)
Expanded Self-as-Theory Model (<i>Cognitive, Developmental Theory</i>)	Functional identity is shaped by a reciprocal dynamic between one's core self and possible selves. People can regularly revise and expand who they are by integrating new aspirations and self-concepts across different contexts.	Dysfunctional identity in this model could be reflected by a breakdown in that reciprocal process. When individuals fail to connect or revise their core self with new possible selves, they experience confusion, stagnation, or a fractured sense of identity.	Epstein (1973), as seen in Carroll (2018)
Theory of Possible Selves (<i>Cognitive, Developmental Theory</i>)	The concept of multiple alternative selves in this theory shows how flexible identity can be, since people can change their roles and goals depending on the situation. This can help people grow and act in ways that help them reach their goals more efficiently.	Yet when possible selves are in conflict or competition, it can lead to an internal conflict that does not resolve, and the self-concept might become fragmented. This can cause identity uncertainty, instability, and trouble creating a clear sense of self over time.	Markus & Nurius (1986)

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Key Theory**	Functional Identity	Dysfunctional Identity	Key author(s)
Self-Discrepancy Theory <i>(Cognitive, Social Theory)</i>	If individuals can adapt and reconcile their different self-representations over time (between the ideal, ought and actual self), this suggests that their identity can evolve to resolve inconsistencies.	Self-discrepancy (between the ideal, ought, and actual self) can often be experienced as internal conflict, characterised by a lack of integration between different aspects of the self. This can be a hallmark of identity confusion, leading to emotional distress, guilt, shame, and disappointment.	Higgins (1987)
Self-Complexity Theory <i>(Cognitive, Developmental Theory)</i>	This theory incorporates and balances multiple identities, enabling individuals to transition between different aspects of themselves without losing their sense of coherence. This can also help prevent the feeling of being stuck in one rigid self-concept , or help people move on and adapt more effectively when one role or self-concept is affected or lost. This can contribute to a more adaptive, flexible identity.	Low self-complexity (having very few roles) may contribute to identity fragmentation. If individuals see themselves as limited to a few roles or aspects of themselves, an adverse event related to one of those roles (e.g., a breakup affecting their romantic identity) could significantly disrupt their overall sense of self.	Linville (1987)
The Saturated Self <i>(Social Theory)</i>	N/a	People today are always connected to the internet and social media, which means they are constantly exposed to other perspectives, values, and commitments. This, in turn, makes the unified sense of self unstable and creates fractured identities. This can lead to anxiety, indecision, and internal conflict. People with this “multiphrenic” condition may feel like they have several different “selves,” each with its own social identity, job, etc.	Gergen (1991), as seen in Renner & Laux (2000)

Key Theory**	Functional Identity	Dysfunctional Identity	Key author(s)
The Dialogical Self (<i>Cognitive, Social Theory</i>)	Identity is dynamic, shaped by multiple internal “voices” that interact like an ongoing dialogue. The self adapts based on social, cultural, and personal contexts, supporting the idea that identity is not fixed but constantly evolving.	Different roles, voices, and perspectives can also create tension, especially when external expectations (e.g., cultural, societal) conflict with internal desires or personal history. This “fragmentation” may manifest as a lack of coherence in one’s identity, and can lead to confusion, insecurity, or distress.	Hermans & Kempen (1993), as seen in Hermans (2003).
Self and Identity Theory (<i>Social, Cognitive Theory</i>)	Identities can emerge from social roles (Identity Theory) or group membership (Social Identity Theory). Thus, this framework shows that the self is not fixed but adaptable across social contexts.	When role-based identities (e.g., being a student, parent, or worker) and group-based identities (e.g., ethnic, political, or gender identity) clash, individuals may experience disturbances in identity integration (a role conflict).	Stets & Burke (2000)
Social Cognitive Theory (<i>Social, Cognitive Theory</i>)	Self-concept is dynamic, and it evolves through experience and social comparison. Self-beliefs about capabilities change with new learning experiences.	Difficulty in self-regulation or self-efficacy (which might be a sign of identity disruption) can make your self-concept change, which makes it harder to keep your sense of identity stable	Bandura (2001)
Self-Determination Theory (<i>Social, Cognitive Theory</i>)	Intrinsic motivation affects how well you can explore different identities. People are more likely to explore themselves when they feel free and supported, which makes their identity more flexible and adaptable.	People may feel alienated, confused about who they are, or have internal conflicts if their requirements for autonomy, competence, or relatedness are not addressed. This can lead to identity problems.	Deci & Ryan (2002)
Diachronic vs. Synchronic Perspectives (<i>Philosophical, Cognitive Theory</i>)	Episodic selfhood does not necessarily mean fragmentation: some people naturally experience themselves as episodic, meaning they do not construct a continuous self-story but still accept that they are the same person. Those people do not necessarily experience identity fragmentation. They do not view their lives through a narrative lens.	A deficit in the diachronic self (the perception of a coherent, continuous self across time), especially for individuals with a need for a cohesive life narrative, such as rapid, frequent changes in values or goals, may also weaken the synchronic self (the sense of “who they are” in the moment). This can create general distress and internal conflict.	Strawson (2004) & Dorahy et al (2020), & McAdams (2021)

Key Theory**	Functional Identity	Dysfunctional Identity	Key author(s)
Narrative Identity Theory (<i>Social, Cognitive, Developmental Theory</i>)	From this perspective, people can reshape their stories, reinterpret past experiences, and incorporate new facets of their identity. Rather than being static, identity evolves through ongoing experiences, cultural influences, and self-reflection.	Trauma, significant life changes, or deeply conflicting self-perceptions can disrupt personal narratives, leading to identity confusion. When individuals struggle to maintain a coherent life story, narrative identity can become fragmented.	McAdams & McLean (2013)

*Note**Reviewing these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the existing conceptualisations of adaptive identity (i.e., consolidated and fluid) and dysfunctional fragmentation (i.e., disturbed) in the literature.

*Note***Theories are presented in chronological order

Disclaimer: This table may not be exhaustive. Other perspectives in the literature may exist that were not included here, and new theories or refinements of existing ones may emerge over time.

HOW IDENTITY NAVIGATES CONTRADICTION

To explore this, we first consider how identity negotiates the tension between continuity and change, drawing on theoretical approaches by Sinnott's (2017) cognitive flexibility account, Wheeler's (2017) narrative integration perspective, and Strawson's (2004) critique of narrativity. We then turn to empirical evidence that supports our line of inquiry.

Sinnott (2017) invites us to consider a surprising question: "(...) *how can I create and hold a unified concept of my self and my identity and at the same time (...) hold a concept of my self and my identity as growing, evolving, and changing?*" (p. 19). When we recall our past (e.g., remembering who we were at the age of twenty-two), those memories shift in light of new experiences, a phenomenon she terms "reentry shock" (Sinnott, 2017, p. 20). Rather than fragmenting our identity, this process allows us to weave fresh insights into our life story, maintaining a stable core even as details evolve. Moving forward and drawing on complexity and chaos theories, Sinnott (2017) argues that our self is like a self-regulating system: memory, emotion, and thought interact in a non-linear fashion to balance continuity with change (pp. 21-23). She also highlights "postformal" thinking (i.e., the ability to hold multiple, even conflicting self-views at once), similar to the Theory of Possible Selves, or even the concept of future possible selves (Carroll, 2018; Markus & Nurius, 1986, see Table 1 for more details), as the very tool we use to navigate apparent contradictions. Only when this flexible machinery breaks down, as in certain neurological conditions, do inconsistencies become pathological (Sinnott, 2017).

Specifically, at a cognitive level, executive control and working memory processes allow individuals to maintain and coordinate competing self-views simultaneously, while autobiographical memory supports their integration into a continuous self-narrative (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). At a broader neurocognitive level, emergent work shows that self-continuity is also supported by semantic self-representation networks, including the default mode network (DMN), which contributes to the integration of self-related information across time (Menon, 2023). Therefore, difficulties in integrating contradictions may arise when these systems are disrupted. For example, in clinical conditions such as borderline personality disorder (Fossati et al., 2012; Fuchs, 2007) and trauma-related disorders (Martin & Shkreli, 2019; Láng, 2015), there are studied associations with impairments in affect regulation and autobiographical integration, which can lead to such unstable self-representations rather than coherent ones.

On the other hand, there is also evidence in narrative strategies observed in morally complex contexts. For example, Kruse and Skilbrei (2024) show that individuals who have committed sexual offences may construct either “adaptation” narratives, which maintain coherence through distancing from aspects of the offending self, or “transformation” narratives, which integrate these aspects into a revised self-concept oriented toward change and moral development. These strategies illustrate different ways in which contradictory self-aspects can be either compartmentalised or integrated.

Taken together, these findings suggest that identity flexibility depends on the capacity of cognitive, affective, and narrative systems to integrate multiple self-representations into a higher-order coherent structure. When these integrative processes are compromised, flexibility may instead result in fragmentation.

Also, even if Sinnott does not explicitly state this, we can see how her words relate to navigating multiple roles and to the constant need to balance self-focused and other-focused goals. Agency and communion goals represent two complementary motivational dimensions: agency emphasises personal goals and self-interest, while communion emphasises social connection and prosocial concerns (Abele & Wojciszke, 2018; Bakan, 1966). Although subsequent work has refined measurement approaches (e.g., Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012), they are still commonly conceptualised as contrasting forces. This tension between being “selfish” and “prosocial” has never been addressed in classical identity models, yet these forces shape how self-related concepts are experienced (e.g., self-esteem and self-concept studies; Chen et al., 2018; Abele & Hauke, 2018). For example, a parent who works long hours and pushes hard to be the best at their job has a strong drive for success and pride (agentic drive). At home, the same person is caring, patient, and focused on keeping everyone close and safe (communal drive).

However, those goals can clash, as the parents' want to provide sometimes turns into being absent or neglectful, and what started as love begins to look like selfishness. Understanding how identity navigates contradictions, therefore, requires attention not only to temporal stability but also to the interplay between agentic and communal orientations (contextual stability: both internal and external).

The ability to flexibly pursue both self-focused and relationship-focused drives may underlie a resilient, coherent self in contemporary life. Sinnott's (2017) work confirms that what appears to be self-contradictions can actually signal a robust, evolving, and "fluid" self, adapting to new contexts without losing core coherence.

Wheeler's (2017) view also mirrors seminal autobiographical and narrative approaches (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Oyserman et al., 2012) that help us understand how internal contradictions do not necessarily destabilise identity but can enhance the self's adaptability over time. Drawing on both psychological and sociological evidence, Wheeler (2017) argues that although identity is generally viewed as stable (especially after adolescence), it remains amenable to change throughout adulthood via narrative processes. Identity is built upon self-knowledge and autobiographical storytelling, as individuals integrate moral developments into a coherent narrative - "(...) maybe identity is not what we know, but what we stand for", thus signalling the importance of authentic (agentic & communal) values and goals (Wheeler, 2017, p. 7). One way to view this is that narrative integration enables identity to remain both flexible and continuous, accommodating contradictions without compromising coherence.

By contrast, Strawson's (2004) famous manifesto "*Against narrativity*" challenges the presumption that having a life story is a universal feature of human self-experience. He distinguishes "*Diachronic*" selves, in which individuals perceive their lives as a unified story, from "*Episodic*" selves, which do not rely on temporal continuity to maintain psychological well-being. Similar to McAdams' (2021) analysis of a U.S. president (the so-called "*Episodic man*"), Strawson (2004) notes that the drive of these Episodic individuals to force narrative coherence can actually misrepresent their lived experiences and may even prove counterproductive. From this perspective, internal contradictions require no narrative reconciliation and are accepted as natural aspects of a moment-to-moment self, and not self-instability.

Usually, these disruptions in self-continuity and identity integration are seen as central features of clinical disorders. Clinical literature has consistently shown that self-instability is associated with heightened psychological distress, particularly in conditions such as borderline personality disorder, mood disorders,

substance abuse, eating disorders, schizophrenia, depression, suicidality, and trauma-related presentations (Fossati et al., 2012; Berman et al., 2004; Bogaerts et al., 2021; Rose & Bond, 2008; Verschueren et al., 2017; Láng, 2015). Within these frameworks, instability is typically understood as contributing to affective dysregulation and perceived as a sense of self-incoherence. However, more recent perspectives suggest that the relationship between identity variability and distress is not inherently linear.

Specifically, identity change may be adaptive when it occurs within a structurally integrated system that allows for flexibility without fragmentation (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Evidence from Buchanan and Bardi (2015) supports the presence of this potentially adaptive mechanism. For example, across four studies, both agentic and communal behaviours were associated with psychological well-being. This well-being was not predicted by the degree of alignment between behaviour and consciously endorsed personal values. Interestingly, subjective experiences of “rightness” in one’s actions (i.e., state authenticity) emerged as a more consistent predictor of well-being than dispositional value–behavior congruence (i.e., trait authenticity). Similarly, occupational research indicates that job satisfaction is more strongly related to self-perceived person–job fit than to objectively assessed fit (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011).

As mentioned in the beginning, this idea of a self-identity that is both highly fluid and self-experienced as coherent is not entirely new. It closely relates to Flexible Identity Theory (Rachmad, 2017, as seen in Rachmad, 2024), a culturally sensitive theory that emerged in response to rapid globalisation, digitisation, and increased social mobility. This view also sees identity as constantly shaped by social interactions and individual experiences rather than as fixed. Thus, having a flexible identity helps people navigate changing situations with ease and adjust their social roles to meet contextual demands. This idea is somewhat similar to Kaufman’s (2015) SCIM consolidated identity type, which incorporates characteristics such as authenticity and a strong internal compass, yet may constrain flexibility in how the self is understood. Nevertheless, Flexible Identity Theory (Rachmad, 2024) also does not explicitly distinguish between dysfunctional and functional adaptation.

We thus reiterate that a possible answer to this conundrum might involve accepting the existence of another identity type in a revised or new version of Kaufman’s (2015) SCIM framework (i.e., **a fluid identity**). A fluid identity is conceptualised as maintaining self-concept coherence even as individuals must flexibly (or strategically) adapt their self to meet contextual (self)demands (see also Fleeson & Wilt, 2010) and may function as a protective factor when integrated with stable higher-order structures, without implying

pathology. Empirical data could also support the existence of such an identity, research showing that high openness to experience is a strong predictor of identity flexibility, defined as the tendency to explore and change identity commitments in work/family contexts (Whitbourne, 1986). In this sense, flexibility may serve a regulatory function, reducing distress when it enables adaptive reorganisation rather than destabilising fragmentation.

However, an important question remains: do these approaches actually capture identity flexibility as an adaptive feature within a functional and evolving self-framework? One way to address this is to examine how identity organisation translates into everyday dynamics. One approach focuses on the dimensions of agency (self-focused, achievement-oriented) and communion (other-focused, relational), as identity-related processes that shape self-esteem regulation (a self-related concept; Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2025). While agentic narratives were associated with lower instability in daily self-esteem, communion actually did not predict it as strongly. This can represent a direct link between agentic/communal motives and identity-related concepts (Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2025). However, it does not explicitly examine identity flexibility/stability across multiple roles or contexts, nor does it examine behaviour (self-serving vs prosocial) directly.

Other studies (Becht et al., 2021) tracked individuals aged 13 to 24 and examined day-to-day identity processes and their influence on longer-term identity stability. Results suggest that identity is both flexible at shorter timescales and builds stable structure at longer timescales, as low daily commitment levels and high identity reconsideration were associated with a greater likelihood of maintaining weak identity commitments in emerging adulthood. This shows that identity flexibility and stability are not opposites and can coexist. If an individual leans towards a flexible identity, it gives them room to shift roles/goals more easily. If they lean towards stability, they anchor in specific identity commitments. The main gap in this study is that it does not map how those identity processes link to how flexible/ fluid identity might shift goal orientation (towards more self vs. other-oriented goals).

Another adolescent study (Klimstra et al., 2010) confirms this, showing that identity formation involves both stability and change: commitments remained relatively stable, while exploration and reconsideration changed over time. In this study, identity processes were assessed using the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti et al. 2008), where commitment refers to the degree of certainty and satisfaction with current identity choices, in-depth exploration reflects active reflection on and evaluation of those existing commitments, and reconsideration of commitment

looks at the extent to which individuals question current commitments in light of alternative options. This developmental approach allows for the separation of identity stability (commitment) from processes of identity change (exploration and reconsideration), thereby enabling a more in-depth analysis of how adolescents can maintain continuity while simultaneously engaging in developmental revision of identity content. Thus, so far, research shows that identity formation in adolescence and young adulthood seems to be guided by progressive changes in how individuals handle commitments, rather than by changes in commitments themselves, and less is known about how this flexibility can manifest once identity has reached adulthood.

Another non-WEIRD (i.e., non- Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) study (Chui et al., 2015) looked at how identity status (e.g., achieved identity, moratorium, diffusion) can moderate the link between values (individualistic and future orientation values) and prosocial behaviour. The main results indicated that the effect of future orientation on prosocial engagement was stronger for those in “searching moratorium” and “carefree diffusion” identity statuses (less stable commitments) than for those in “achievement” or “foreclosure” identity statuses (more stable commitments). In this case, a less stable identity status (i.e., more flexibility or lower commitment) actually enabled prosocial engagement. This interesting twist could help us understand how a fluid identity can also lead to prosocial, not just self-serving, behaviours. However, this research still does not explicitly capture the self-serving (agentic) vs prosocial (communal) tension, nor does it map behaviour across different contexts.

Last, but not least, one cross-cultural study found that people of higher socioeconomic status see themselves as more agentic and slightly less communal (Boileau, 2024). This can be seen as a link between social self-concept (a part of identity that explains social self-perception) and an agentic vs communal orientation. Nevertheless, it does not tie identity flexibility/stability to self-serving vs prosocial behaviour across contexts.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that coherence is not merely a product of narrative integration or temporal stability, but also of how individuals negotiate the pull of competing goals, both agentic and communal. This can pose important questions, such as: *How exactly does identity flexibility/fragmentation or stability relate to agentic (self-serving) vs communal (prosocial) goals?* Also, *to what extent do current identity models and measures reflect a bias toward prosocial, communal goals, thereby potentially influencing our understanding of identity coherence and the role of self-focused, agentic goals?* This will be addressed in the next section.

COHERENCE OF AGENTIC & COMMUNAL GOALS

So far, we know that identity flexibility/stability research primarily delves into developmental and social contexts of identity formation (adolescence, early adulthood) rather than directly linking it to self-serving vs. prosocial motives. We see research on agentic vs communal motives, but not necessarily tied to how one's identity shifts or stabilises over time. No studies seem to model identity fluidity/stability and agentic vs communal behavioural motives together (e.g., how a flexible identity may enable shifting between self-serving/communal goals, or how a stable identity anchors towards one or the other).

We now examine emerging empirical work that, while not explicitly integrating identity flexibility/stability with agentic and communal motives, offers partial insight into how these domains may intersect. For example, one study that looked at adolescents (Findley-Van Nostrand et al., 2018) examined agentic (status) and communal (closeness) goals in relation to self-reported altruistic, reactive, and proactive prosocial behaviours (Study 1). Results showed that different forms of prosocial behaviour link differently to agentic vs communal goals: proactive behaviour (instrumental, self-benefit) is tied to agentic goals, and altruistic behaviour is tied to communal goals. Another study (Luyckx et al., 2017) examined how identity exploration and commitment relate to goal types (intrinsic goals, conceptualised as communal and more prosocial/meaningful, and extrinsic goals, similar to agentic or more self-serving/material goals). Results showed stronger identity commitment and a greater tendency to pursue intrinsic (versus extrinsic) goals. Also, exploration was associated with some shifts in goal orientation. If we connect this to our inquiry, as it ties identity processes (flexibility/stability) to goal type (which aligns with self-serving vs. prosocial). It shows that when identity commitments are clearer/stable, people lean more toward intrinsic/prosocial goals.

Yet, this research does not clearly map how agentic vs communal motives (or, in this case, extrinsic and intrinsic motives) could be influenced by one's identity flexibility and vice versa, how a flexibility in one's identity can enable self-serving vs prosocial switching. If someone's identity is highly flexible (the person often shifts roles, values, and commitments), they may be better able to switch between agentic and communal motives depending on context. That can be adaptive, but it can also be slippery if personal values (and thus, authenticity) have a low importance, or the person has a low awareness of such matters. On the other hand, if someone's identity is stable (clear commitments, consistent roles), they might lean more consistently towards either communal or agentic motives, depending on their core values and the way their identity is anchored. Unfortunately, almost no literature attempts to

link identity flexibility/stability to agentic vs. communal behaviour/motives within a single model.

Furthermore, much of the identity literature has implicitly favoured communal approaches, emphasising coherence through moral growth, empathy, and social integration, while downplaying the role of agency in self-continuity. Classic studies on autobiographical memory showed that people selectively reconstruct past events to highlight moral improvement and distance themselves from earlier failings (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011). This “prospection bias” paints the present self in a positive light, reinforcing communal values like benevolence. Furthermore, when individuals believe they are being observed, they tend to adopt more communal behaviours in order to manage their reputations (Cañigueral & Hamilton, 2019). This underlying “audience effect” could suggest that identity-research paradigms, when conducted in the presence of experimenters or confederates, may unintentionally prime prosocial goals and thus overrepresent prosocial aspects of the self.

Reputation management research (e.g., Cage, 2015) also demonstrates that concern about how one is perceived activates communal motives, which, in turn, can shape responses on identity measures, offering another perspective on the phenomenon of social desirability. Consequently, traits and behaviours linked to agency, such as competition or self-enhancement, and those associated with the dark traits, may be underdetected when social desirability pressures favour prosocial displays (Bulbuc & Visu-Petra, 2024). Identity researchers could consider incorporating anonymous, private, or even competitive contexts, as well as implicit and ecological methods, to counteract this prosocial bias and more accurately capture both communal and agentic aspects of the self.

Another argument is presented by Amiot et al. (2017), who suggest that integrating relevant self-aspects is far from neutral. In three experiments, individuals who had a high acceptability of pro-discrimination norms (e.g., harmful, non-communal behaviours) reported significantly greater compartmentalisation and intra-individual conflict than those who adhered to pro-merit norms (social standards prioritising fairness; Amiot et al., 2017). This suggests that communal, morally laudable actions are more readily integrated into a coherent identity. In contrast, harmful or non-communal actions are often isolated from one’s overall self-view, triggering dissonance (Ryan & Deci, 2003).

Together, these perspectives could again highlight a prosocial bias in identity research: studies conducted in socially-oriented contexts may overestimate the stability and coherence of communal values while underrepresenting agentic or morally ambiguous behaviours. Future research should also examine how both communal and agentic goals (i.e., those that conflict with group norms) influence self-concept stability and psychological well-being.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that clear definitions of prosocial behaviour in research are frequently lacking. According to Pfattheicher et al. (2022), only 74% of studies actually define and operationalise what is considered “prosocial.” Some researchers adopt a consequentialist view or even a utilitarian view (labelling any action that benefits others as prosocial). By contrast, “intentionalist perspectives” argue that what matters most is the actor’s motive to help, even if the outcome is harmful (Pfattheicher et al., 2022).

Although much of the identity literature emphasises communal aims (such as moral growth, empathy, and social integration), this emphasis may overstate the coherence of the self. Agentic goals, including competition, self-enhancement, and morally ambiguous pursuits, are often underexamined, creating a blind spot in understanding how individuals maintain continuity in the face of conflicting motives. Put differently, what appears as a stable, coherent identity in the research may partly reflect a bias toward prosociality in measurement and study design. Attending to both agentic and communal goals is therefore essential for capturing the full range of identity flexibility and the ways coherence emerges in real life.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Towards an integrative model: Identity coherence through agentic–communal negotiation

Together, these accounts suggest that adult identity might even inhabit a spectrum that ranges from richly narrated (“diachronic”) stability to non-narrative synchronicity, where stability and change coexist through either the power of meaning-making through story or the acceptance of disjunction (OR, even a complete lack of awareness and concern for such discontinuities).

Agentic and communal goals interact dynamically, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes pulling the self in opposing directions. The present theoretical paper sought to critically examine these tensions and highlight the limitations within existing conceptualisations of identity, while outlining a possible direction for the inclusion of a “fluid identity” within a revised or expanded version of a framework (E.g., Kaufman’s (2015) SCIM framework). However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as noted in Table 1 (see *Disclaimer* at the bottom of the table), the overview provided is by any means not exhaustive. The selection of theories reflects those most relevant to the present discussion. Thus, other perspectives within the literature may offer complementary or competing accounts that were not included. Moreover,

theoretical developments in this area remain ongoing, and future work may refine, challenge, or even expand the perspective outlined here. Second, the proposal advanced in this paper is conceptual in nature and does not constitute a fully specified theoretical model at this stage. Accordingly, it requires further elaboration and more importantly, empirical validation. While prior, tentative findings (e.g., associations between identity exploration and commitment and intrinsic goals/prosocial or extrinsic goals/ material goals; Luyckx et al., 2017) offer preliminary support, the integration suggested here remains hypothetical. Finally, the interpretative nature of this analysis introduces an element of subjectivity in how theoretical tensions and convergences are identified, which the authors are aware should be considered when evaluating the scope and implications of the present contribution.

Nonetheless, rather than treating existing contradictions within one's identity system as dysfunction, they can be understood as the very mechanism by which identity stays responsive and relevant across contexts. This perspective raises numerous open questions for research. *How do different social, cultural, or digital environments shift the balance between agentic and communal aims? What processes allow some individuals to tolerate, or even thrive, amid apparent contradictions?* We know that people with higher self-transcendence values (e.g. benevolence) tend to choose more cooperative outcomes (versus self-maximising values, such as power; Heilman & Kusev, 2020; Daniel et al., 2015), as self-transcendence values are positively associated with helping behaviour, whereas self-enhancement values are negatively associated with helping others. We also know that authenticity can act as a resource under stress (Nartova-Bochaver, 2023). People who report higher authenticity cope better, so when identity, values, and behaviour align, people are less likely to feel fragmented or self-dysregulated. However, recent theoretical developments on “dark authenticity” (the perspective that highlights authenticity as an agentic, self-focused form when internal self-concepts are organised around Machiavellian, narcissistic, or psychopathic tendencies) suggest that alignment does not always imply prosocial expression (Bulbuc & Visu-Petra, 2024). For example, individuals high on dark personality traits may experience a sense of authenticity precisely when pursuing self-serving or norm-violating goals, as these behaviours reflect what they perceive as their “true self.” Such cases illustrate how a coherent identity may still motivate antisocial or strategically manipulative behaviours. What we do not know is whether identity coherence can be measured dynamically, capturing emergent stability rather than static traits or categorical types. Moreover, future studies should examine whether identity flexibility increases the risk of self-serving shifts when the person lacks value alignment.

An additional avenue worth considering is how identity fusion intersects with these processes. Identity fusion describes a visceral sense of oneness between the personal and social self (Swann et al., 2012). Although often studied in relation to groups, fusion can also occur with romantic partners, siblings, leaders, animals, brands, or even deeply held values (Hamid et al., 2019). Bringing fusion into dialogue with identity fluidity raises the possibility that some individuals with unstable or fragmented identities may be more likely to “anchor” themselves through intense fusion experiences. Conversely, people with a highly consolidated identity (Kaufman et al., 2015) might become overly rigid and poorly adapted to changing situations, suggesting that too much stability can actually be dysfunctional. In this way, fusion might function as a stabilising force for unclear self-concepts, providing a sense of external continuity when a person’s internal sense of self is shaky, or vice versa. Future studies could further explore this possibility.

Last but not least, recent studies are showing that helping stems partly from feeling valued/seen (agentic motivation; Lin et al., 2025), as gratitude mediates the relationship between perceived social support and prosocial behaviour, alongside a sense of personal gain. Moreover, recent work in the leadership organisational field (Bunjak et al., 2024) conceptualises authenticity as a dynamic process, adaptable across different identity levels (personal, relational, collective), with self-identity shifting contextually in line with the dominant identity level. This can make us wonder: *Which type of identity tends to lead to more self-serving behaviour vs more prosocial behaviour?* And, more importantly, *how do people negotiate internal conflicts without collapsing into distress or fragmentation?* Addressing these questions may reveal new mechanisms of self-maintenance and psychological resilience.

One possible answer lies in a set of integration skills that allow individuals to tolerate, rather than eliminate, internal conflict. From a classical perspective, identity coherence has traditionally been associated with the formation and maintenance of stable commitments (as discussed in Berzonsky et al., 1999), as well as the internalisation of social expectations (e.g., the Looking-Glass Self; Cooley, 1902, *see Table 1* for more details), implying that consistency is achieved through consolidation and social interaction. However, more contemporary perspectives also remind us that coherence may be influenced by our ability to coordinate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, self-representations across contexts (Linville, 1987; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Markus & Nurius, 1986, as mentioned in *Table 1*), all of which emphasise the multiplicity of the self.

Empirically grounded work highlights the role of narrative integration processes (McAdams & McLean, 2013), emotion regulation (Fossati et al., 2012), and executive control (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) in supporting the

coordination of competing self-representations and the incorporation of conflicting experiences into a coherent life story. These mechanisms may enable individuals to maintain continuity while accommodating (internal) conflict (between self vs. others' needs).

At the same time, other factors may also contribute to this, although they are less directly linked. For example, the presence of higher-order values or guiding principles (Vecchione et al., 2016) may provide a stable reference point for interpreting contradictions over the years, and individual differences in the need for coherence or levels of self-awareness may influence how strongly such conflicts are experienced or resolved. Vecchione et al. (2016) show that changes in value importance tend to preserve the overall coherence of the value system. When a given value becomes more important, compatible values tend to become more important as well, while conflicting values tend to become less important. For instance, if someone begins to value conformity more strongly, they may also place greater importance on tradition and social expectations, while reducing the importance of self-direction in situations where independent choices could conflict with group norms (Vecchione et al., 2016).

We also argue that, in some cases, lower levels of self-awareness may also reduce the perceived need to integrate inconsistencies, thereby limiting experienced distress, albeit potentially at the cost of deeper (challenging) integration in the long run.

For research, a model incorporating fluid identity encourages study designs that account for context, multiple goals, and contradictions, moving beyond prosocial bias. In clinical practice, this could suggest reframing internal conflict: rather than pathologising dissonance, clinicians could view it as a natural feature of an adaptive reframing process. In everyday life, this new model can offer validation of fluid and adaptable identity, where juggling multiple, sometimes opposing roles is not a flaw but a sign of resilience and pragmatism.

CONCLUSIONS

We have integrated various pieces of the identity puzzle: identity stability and flexibility research, and agentic/communal social-orientation research. However, we do not yet have strong, integrated work that examines how the “tension” between self-serving/prosocial motives may interact with identity flexibility. Fluid identity (i.e., perceived coherence of self while shifting between social roles, responsibilities and personal needs) influences how someone shifts between self-serving and prosocial motives and could be a valid research lead, but it has some implications.

First, a fluid identity can mean a person is able to shift between roles, motives, and possibly even moral stances depending on context. Someone leaning more self-serving could mean that fluidity can turn into a tool for survival or manipulation as they adapt to protect themselves or to get what they need (which might be a valid experience for individuals with dark personality traits; Bulbuc & Visu-Petra, 2024). If an individual is more prosocial, that same fluidity could help them connect with others and cooperate more easily.

Second, future research must address the unresolved question of which “self” takes precedence when agentic and communal motives collide. Identity coherence may be less about sameness, but about sustaining continuity through change, and adapting to a fast-moving society and technological age.

In conclusion, fluid identity could serve as a lens for seeing how people navigate contradiction, preserving a (narrative or not) thread of coherence in the very act of comfortably holding multiple selves together. This perspective integrates identity stability, flexibility, and goal-based tensions into a unified but open-ended theoretical lens for future research.

Conflicts of Interest

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