TEEMU PAUHA

Social Identities and Dialogical Selves

A Theoretical Synthesis for the Psychology of Religion

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VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
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Identity is a key concept in practically all fields of the humanities and social sciences. However, different approaches diverge dramatically in their conceptualization of identity, which makes mutual dialogue and integration markedly challenging. In this article, I present two key approaches to identity—Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Dialogical Self Theory (DST)—and discuss the possibilities of combining them. While the two theories stem from different subfields of psychology, I argue that their key concepts can be meaningfully mapped onto one another. In particular, I argue that the I-positions and we-positions of DST can be understood as the personal and social identities of SIT, respectively. Combining DST and SIT terminology in this way helps to address the blind spots of both theories. What SIT adds to DST is a detailed outline of the causes and consequences of we-position activation. What DST adds to SIT, in turn, is a more elaborate conceptualization of intrapersonal identity work. While the integrated approach I propose here is useful for the study of identity in general, I argue that it is particularly beneficial for the psychology of religion. Unlike mainstream psychologists, psychologists of religion have been especially interested in investigating the identities of people long since dead. Biblical scholars in particular have employed SIT in their investigations. In this article, I suggest that a dialogical (or more broadly narrative) conceptualization of identity is more readily applicable to the textual sources used by biblical scholars than the more mainstream SIT approach.

When a friend of mine was planning her master's thesis in anthropology, the supervising professor gave her the following advice: "Write your thesis about anything, as long as it is not identity". I wrote my own master's thesis (Pauha 2010), and later a doctoral thesis (Pauha 2018), on identity and know now what the professor meant: studying identity is a sure way to end up in a thick conceptual mess. Despite identity being a popular concept in practically all fields of the humanities and social sciences, there is no common understanding of what it means (Pauha and Haimila 2024a). Some theorists perceive identity as a more or less fixed psychological structure, while others consider it to be a process that is never finished but constantly in flux. Likewise, theorists disagree on whether identity is an individual property or an interpersonal accomplishment—in other words, whether it resides inside a person or in the space between people.

Despite the multiplicity of ways in which the term "identity" appears in research, there are also certain commonalities among its various uses. In particular, identity is about the relationship between an individual and the community. Simply

put, a person's identity is their perceived and experienced status as part of a broader social context. In the terminology of positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990), identity concerns how a person is positioned by others and how they themselves negotiate and manage such positioning.

This is also what I consider to be the term's greatest promise: all disciplines that study human beings struggle with bridging the gulf between an individual and the broader community, and by conceptualizing the relationship between personal and social, identity offers tools for building such bridges. Consequently, the term identity has great potential in helping to integrate disciplines focusing on individuals (e.g. psychology) with those more focused on communities (e.g. sociology, anthropology).

In this paper, I discuss two different approaches to self and identity: Social Identity Theory (SIT; see, e.g. Tajfel and Turner 2004) and Dialogical Self Theory (DST; see e.g. Hermans et al. 1992). The aims of the paper are theoretical. What I attempt here is a theoretical integration in the sense put forward by Thornberry (1989, 52)—that is, an "act of combining two or more sets of logically interrelated propositions in order to provide a more comprehensive explanation of a particular phenomenon". By outlining the two theories, I wish to demonstrate their points of convergence as well as areas where the blind spots of one theory may be supplemented by insights from the other.

In addition to this theoretical integration being generally useful for scholars studying identity, I propose that it may have some benefits specific to researchers applying psychological approaches in the study of religion. While psychologists working in other fields have generally restricted their focus to investigating living people, scholars of religion have used psychological scholarship in the context of historical research as well (Pauha and Haimila 2024b).

In principle, both those investigating contemporary minds and those studying historical minds face similar challenges, in that none of them has direct access to the mental world of another person (Pauha and Haimila 2024b). The inaccessibility of another person's mind forces scholars studying it to make inferences from the observable behaviour of the person. As historical scholars cannot perform experiments with people who are long since dead, they need to rely on naturally occurring data, most typically texts written by or about the people they are studying. The problem with studying identity—or psychological phenomena more generally—through texts is that most such phenomena are verbal only to a very limited degree (Ormerod and Ball 2017, 572–3). Written reports can therefore tap into psychological processes only in a rather restricted manner.

In this paper, I suggest that dialogical self theory and other narrative approaches to identity offer ways to circumvent some of these challenges. As such, they may be of particular benefit for psychologically oriented scholars using historical data. If identity is, in essence, a story, psychologists do not need access to people's minds to study it; it is enough that they have access to stories they tell.

The structure of the article follows the three-part process of theoretical integration as outlined by Thornberry (1989, 54). In the next two sections, I introduce the basic

concepts and ideas of SIT and DST, respectively. After that, I discuss the divergences between the two theories. In my view, the divergences are not so much mutual contradictions as "gaps" in one theory that can be filled by importing ideas from the other theory. Accordingly, after discussing the divergences, I discuss the potential of a combined SIT/DST framework to provide a more comprehensive view of both intrapersonal and interpersonal identity processes. I conclude my paper by reflecting in more depth on the potential contribution of this theoretical integration to identity research in specific and to the psychology of religion more generally.

Before introducing the two theories, however, it is appropriate to make a few remarks about the relationship between their central concepts, namely "self" and "identity". Both terms are widely used in psychological scholarship but lack a generally agreed-upon definition. Most commonly, the self is distinguished from identity by its agentic component: while identity is generally understood as a representation that a person constructs of themselves, the self is perceived to include an executive part in addition to a representational one (see, for example, McAdams 2013; Shteynberg et al. 2022). Seen this way, the self can be understood as a broader concept, of which identity is a part (Owens et al. 2010, 478–79).

Of the two theories discussed in this article, SIT focuses very decidedly on a person's representation of themselves and how it affects their behaviour in interpersonal situations—that is, on identity. A person's own agency and intentionality in such situations—the self—in turn is given markedly less attention in SIT literature. DST, in contrast, discusses both the agentic and representational aspects of selfhood. As will be described in more detail below, DST posits a number of different "I-positions", each of which has the agentic capacity to participate in the narrating of the story about what kind of person one is. Accordingly, when discussing DST, I use the term "identity" to refer to the personal narrative that a person uses to represent themselves both to themselves and others. With the term "self", in turn, I refer to the totality of this narrative and the various I-positions that participate in crafting it.

Social identity theory

Having originated in social psychology, social identity theory focuses on how people derive part of their self-conception from group memberships and how this, in turn, influences their behaviour. The theory makes a general distinction between two components of an individual's self-conception (Turner et al. 1994, 454). According to the definition of Tajfel and Turner (2004, 283), social identity consists of "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he [*sic*] perceives himself as belonging". Personal identity, in turn, is a sense of one's distinct individuality and the characteristics that distinguish the self from everyone else (Turner et al. 1994, 454).

A key principle of SIT is that personal and social identities are differently active (or "salient") in different situations (Turner et al. 1994). In his early work, Tajfel proposed the interpersonal–intergroup continuum to describe this dynamic (Tajfel 1982, 13). Its basic idea is that, in certain situations, we perceive both ourselves and the people around us as distinct individuals,

while in other situations we perceive them as representatives of a group. A textbook example of the former is marriage and, of the latter, war. Marriage is commonly seen as a union between two individuals, and it would be downright odd to experience being first and foremost a group member, married to another group member (for example, a "Finn" to a "Swede"). In contrast, people typically do not engage in wars because of any personal animosity towards the soldiers on the other side, but because of being part of a (national or other) collective that is in conflict with an opposing collective.

Being two ends of a continuum, increased personal identity salience leads to social identity becoming less salient and vice versa. Social-identity theorists have identified a variety of factors that influence the relative salience of personal and social identities (Turner et al. 1994, 455; Tausch et al. 2009, 76). On one hand, certain social identities are more central to one's overall self-conception and therefore likely to become active in a variety of situations. On the other hand, there are situations that are likely to "trigger" a particular social identity to become active. For example, a feminist activist might be deeply attuned to perceive the fine gendered nuances of everyday interaction, which in turn is likely to make their gender identity easily activated. However, everyone is likely to become suddenly aware of their gender if bumping into a dressing room of a different gender by mistake.

In addition to personal and situational factors, the social composition of the situation may also influence social identity activation. The so-called metacontrast principle states that social identity activation tends to aim at maximizing intergroup difference while minimizing intragroup variation (Turner et al. 1994, 455; Tausch et al. 2009, 76). In other words, if the intergroup situation offers an easy way to divide the participants into two or more groups that are internally relatively homogeneous but distant from each other in terms of the topic at hand, this division is likely to become salient. Naturally, the intergroup difference and intragroup homogeneity need only be perceived and not actual, and metacontrast is therefore highly susceptible to commonly widespread stereotypes. For example, given how commonly Islam is associated with gender inequality in the European context, it is likely that religious identity will become salient in a discussion on women's rights, if some of its participants are women who wear the hijab while others are women who do not.

In addition to identifying factors influencing social identity salience, SIT also has much to say about its common consequences. The most commonly cited of such consequences is ingroup bias: when people identify with a group, they are likely to favour members of that group (the so-called "ingroup") over those of other groups ("the outgroups") (Tajfel 1982, 23; Tausch et al. 2009, 77). Ingroup bias occurs regardless of the social identity in question, and it has also been observed in experiments in which the participants know that they have been divided into groups on an arbitrary basis.

In addition to behavioural consequences, social identity activation also has consequences for how a person perceives himself or herself. Such consequences have been explored particularly in self-categorization theory (SCT) that John Turner,

among others, developed to supplement the classical social identity theory.[1] A key dynamic identified in SCT is that when a person identifies with a group, their self-conception conforms to their image of how the members of said group typically are (the so-called "prototype") (Turner et al. 1994, 455; Tausch et al. 2009, 76). In short, they begin to see themselves less as a distinct individual and more as "a typical member" of a group. This process is commonly known as depersonalization and is not to be confused with a psychiatric condition of the same name.

A further aspect worth noting about SIT is the motivational basis of identity work. According to classical SIT, people aim to maintain a positive view of themselves, and because the sense of self is partly based on group belonging, people want to belong to groups that hold a high status in society (Tajfel and Turner 2004, 283–84). However, the primacy of self-esteem needs has not gone without challenge in more recent social identity research. While not questioning the general importance of good self-esteem, researchers have noted that in addition to it, people also strive to experience continuity, belonging, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and meaning (Vignoles et al. 2006).

1 Sometimes, the term social identity theory is used in reference to both the original SIT and the various other theories that are based on it. At other times, the term is reserved only for the original SIT, and the term "social identity approach" is used as an umbrella term that includes the whole family of SIT-derived theories. In this article, I see no reason to demarcate the original SIT from related theories and, therefore, use social identity theory in the former sense.

In terms of the aims of this article, the key points of SIT include the following:

a. A person's self-conception includes several components, some of which pertain to their individual characteristics (personal identity), while others pertain to their membership in social categories (social identity).
b. The various identities are not equally salient at all times, but the way in which the person perceives themselves changes over time. In some situations, a given identity dominates the self-concept, while in other situations some other identity is central.
c. The relative salience of the various identities depends on personal, social, and situational factors.
d. People identify with groups that provide them with a sense of self-esteem, belonging, meaning, distinctiveness, continuity and efficacy.
e. Social identity activation has certain common behavioural and perceptual consequences, most notably ingroup bias and depersonalization.

Dialogical self theory

While social identity theory has been developed and applied primarily in the context of social psychology, the roots of dialogical self theory lie in personality psychology and especially in its narrative stream. A common feature of narrative theories of identity is the view that the psychological self is in some way narratively constituted. DST makes the more specific claim that identity is, in essence, a multivoiced narrative—a story, the telling of which involves several different narrators (Hermans 2001). An intuitive sense of this may be gained

by thinking of a group of people reminiscing about a shared experience; quite commonly, such experiences are remembered differently by the different people involved. Typically, people agree on some details but disagree on others—and even when not disagreeing, people differ in how much attention they pay to different things.

In DST, the different parts of the self that participate in the narration of a person's identity are called I-positions. Each I-position holds its own unique perspective onto the person's life, representing the person's various social roles ("I-as-a-psychologist") or their personal way of being in the world ("I-as-a-pessimist") (Hermans 2024).

Each I-position also holds its own values, motives and goals. While the various motives may be of numerous kinds, Hermans (1987, 13) suggests that they can be roughly divided into two general categories: S (or "self") motives are about increasing one's own personal autonomy and agency. Typical S motives include a lust for power, fame or money, but striving after knowledge, health and fitness can also be seen as examples of them. In turn, O (or "other") motives are about closeness and union with other people. Protecting one's children or maintaining family traditions exemplifies typical O motives.

A further classification that is central to DST is the distinction between internal and external positions (Hermans 2001). While the former are aspects of one's self that are experienced as such—as parts of one's own psyche—the latter are attributed to other people. External positions can be the internalized points of view of other people. For example, many people can imagine how their mother or father would comment on their life choices. Alternatively, external positions can include actually existing other people with whom one is in interaction (Hermans 2001, 253–4). Indeed, DST does not draw a clear line between the interpersonal and the intrapersonal realms—or the interpersonal and the intrapsychic dialogues—and therefore, other people are as much a part of one's identity dialogue as are the various facets of one's own psyche. Relatedly, a special class of positions is the we-positions (Hermans 2001, 261–63). A we-position embodies the (imagined) point of view of a whole group of people. For example, one can reflect on their living world from the perspective of what "we Christians" would think of it.

Sometimes, the perspectives of the various I-positions are easily reconciled, while at other times they clash with each other. For example, given the general Islamic ban on alcohol, combining the I-positions "I-as-a-bartender" and "I-as-a-Muslim" may be more challenging than, say, combining the I-positions "I-as-a-Muslim" and "I-as-an-imam". That is not to say that it is impossible, but it may require more identity work and negotiation within the I-position constellation.

In case a conflict between two I-positions is particularly damaging to the self constellation as a whole, a third position may be required to remedy it (Hermans 2014, 153). A third position acknowledges the interests of the conflicting positions and seeks a compromise that is satisfying to both of them. For example, if a person enjoys working as a bartender but feels that it is too much at odds with their Muslim identity, they might seek a job as a barista, thus retaining key features of their former

profession while not having to engage in the serving of alcohol.

In addition to the third position, scholars have identified a variety of other special I-positions, each of which has its own distinctive role in a position repertoire. Metaposition, for example, provides a higher-order view of one's dialogical self and thus provides a point of view from which to reflect on it (Hermans 2014). In my study on young Shia Muslims in Finland, for example, God served as such a metaposition to several of my interlocutors (Pauha 2025). The young Shia could imagine how their various life choices, and even their thoughts, would appear from God's perspective, and by doing so they could gain a "bird's eye view" into their life and self as a whole.

While a metaposition provides a higher-order vantage point from which to reflect on one's self, a promoter position is more goal-oriented and seeks to effect change in the self-system (Hermans 2014, 145). Again, God serves as an example: adopting God's perspective did not provide the young Shia Muslims in my study an indifferent and detached view of their lives but a morally loaded one (Pauha 2025). Imagining what God would think of oneself involved attributing praise and blame to one's actions. This, in turn, provided the young Muslims with guidance on how to relate to their various I-positions—what voices to listen to more attentively and what to ignore.

For the purposes of this paper, the key ideas of DST can be summarized as follows:

a. Identity is a narrative that is told by a multitude of narrators, or "I-positions". The I-positions may embody the perspective of one's social roles (e.g. "I-as-a-Christian"), one's individual characteristics (e.g. "I-as-a-loner"), another individual (actual or imagined; e.g. "my mother", "my Lord Jesus"), or a group of people (e.g. "we Christians").
b. Each of the positions has its own perspective on the individual's living world, as well as its own goals and motives. The motives can be roughly divided into self- and other-oriented motives (or S and O motives for short).
c. In addition to participating in the collaborative narration of one's identity, certain I-positions also have a special role to play in the dialogical self. Positions with such distinct roles include metapositions, promoter positions and third positions.

A combined framework

Because they stem from two quite different academic contexts, SIT and DST have so far been developed largely independently of each other (but see Hermans and Dimaggio 2007). In this paper, however, I argue that the key concepts of both theories can be meaningfully mapped onto each other, thus broadening the scope and applicability of the theories.

Integration of different theories is certainly nothing new in the field of psychology (for an example on identity, see Seaman et al. 2017). However, apart from the many works discussing the integration of therapeutic approaches (see, for example, Bateman and Holmes 2002), there is relatively little psychological scholarship on *how* such integration should be done in practice. Criminologists, in contrast, have been much more active in discussing the different forms and methods of theoretical

integration (see, for example, Bernard and Snipes 1996). In particular, while being generally critical of integrated theories, Hirschi (1979, 35–36; see also Bernard and Snipes 1996, 308) acknowledges the potential benefit of what he calls side-by-side integration. In side-by-side integration, no theory is subsumed under another. Instead, each theory is granted its own group of applicable cases, thus broadening the overall applicability of the integrated theory over that of any of the individual theories. What I attempt in this paper is a Hirschian side-by-side integration. I argue that SIT, as such, has blind spots that are addressed in DST, and vice versa. In particular, SIT is useful in explaining the social determinants and consequences of identity activation, while DST addresses the intrapersonal identity negotiations in more detail. Together, the two theories can account for a broad range of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that affect identity dynamics.

As the concept of identity is used in a number of disciplines and with a number of meanings, the first step in any integration of identity theories is unpacking the underlying conceptualizations of identity and examining their commensurability. It may well be that the theories use the same concept to refer to different things. If this is the case, one needs to carefully assess which, if any, parts of the theories remain applicable if the definition of identity changes.

In SIT literature, the psychological constitution of the self is described relatively little. However, the implicit—and sometimes explicit (Reimer et al. 2011)—assumption is that identities are mental representations. That is, identity is a personal view about who one is as a person. The identities are generated by self-schemata stored in long-term memory (Cinnirella 1998, 132; Griffiths 2015, 120). A key concept in cognitive psychology, a schema refers to a mental structure or heuristic that organizes the processing of experiences, perceptions and knowledge. As the name suggests, self-schemata organize the processing of information pertaining to the self. Such information may include parts of the self-concept (personal and social identities), but it may also be about things that are external to the self yet still somehow relevant to it (e.g. perceived in- and outgroups). Individuals may have several different self-schemata that are associated with their different social identities, and the schemata vary in activation depending on the salience of the social identities corresponding to them.

Like SIT, DST conceptualizes identity as a representation, but DST is more precise regarding its specific constitution, conceptualizing identity as a multi-voiced narrative. However, similarly to how the personal and social identities postulated by SIT move into consciousness and then out of it, the various I-positions in one's position repertoire switch between actively participating in the narration of the identity and being silent.

The question that arises is whether I-positions should be seen as distinct components of an individual mind or rather as metaphors for how the mind processes identity-related information. Based on a series of innovative experiments that they designed to address this question, Stemplewska-Żakowicz, Zalewski, Suszek and Kobylińska (2012, 265) conclude that "I-positions are relatively autonomic modules of the cognitive system, which consist of script-like structures combining

personal and socially shared knowledge. These structures are activated in certain conditions (automatically or intentionally) and henceforth—until the next I-position is activated—determine the range of processable information and the specific rules of this processing".

What is thus common to both DST and SIT is that they conceptualize the self as consisting of several parts that may become differently active in different situations. According to SIT, the self-concept includes a personal and social part—or a personal and social identity—each of which may be more or less salient depending on situational and personal factors. According to DST, the self consists of several distinct I-positions, the relative dominance of which fluctuates over time. A dialogical self resembles a human conversation in that the I-positions may agree, shout over, argue with or silence each other. Both SIT and DST conceptualize identity as being generated by cognitive frameworks that organize information processing. While the aforementioned definitions vary in the terms used for such heuristics ("schemata" in the context of SIT and "scripts" in the context of DST), they refer essentially to the same thing. In cognitive psychology literature, scripts are commonly understood as "temporally structured schemas" (Ranta 2021, 11), which makes the term a natural choice for narratively oriented theory such as DST.

It is thus possible to argue that SIT and DST share an understanding of identity as a constantly revised representation that is generated by variably active schemata. However, as Thornberry (1989, 53) has emphasized, a proper theoretical integration is not achieved with the demonstration of conceptual overlap. As the building blocks of theories are not concepts but propositions, a full theoretical integration should involve also the frameworks in which the concepts are embedded. In line with the side-by-side approach to integration outlined above, I argue that SIT and DST have their distinct spheres of application and can, therefore, be used to address each other's blind spots.

Having its roots in social psychology, SIT concentrates on the inter-personal causes and consequences of social identity activation, while paying relatively little attention to the intrapersonal complexities of identity work. To be fair, SIT is not completely oblivious to the fact that individuals may, in certain situations, feel pressure to revise their social identity constellation. In particular, Tajfel and Turner (2004, 286–87) outlined different strategies that individuals may adopt when they feel that one of their social identities is devalued in the broader society. In such situations, an individual may seek to move from a devalued group into a more prestigious one (social mobility), redefine the terms of intergroup comparison (social creativity) or attempt to raise the status of their group in the social hierarchy (social competition). Importantly, however, these strategies are adopted in response to social rather than intraindividual pressures. Accordingly, their use aims at increasing the social prestige (and consequently the self-esteem) enjoyed by the individual, rather than at relieving internal identity tensions and conflicts.

Moreover, research within the SIT tradition often focuses on one identity at a time and overlooks the intricate ways in which the various identities interact (but see works on social identity complexity; Roccas and Brewer 2002). A typical SIT study might

investigate, for example, the interpersonal effects of national identity activation; however, as is emphasized in studies on identity intersectionality, identities do not exist in isolation but only as parts of an intertwined identity constellation (see, for example, Shields 2008). The national identities of a Finnish-Somali Muslim woman and a White Finnish Christian man, for example, are likely to be quite different. Singling out national (or any other) identity from the constellation is fundamentally artificial and runs the risk of distorting it.

In turn, DST, with its roots in personality psychology, discusses in depth the internal dynamics of the identity constellation and how the relationships between the different parts of one's self are negotiated. Dialogical self theorists have identified, for example, a number of special I-positions (e.g. metaposition, third position), each of which has its distinct role in the intrapersonal identity work. However, while unpacking in depth the identity processes within an individual mind, DST is rather sketchy in regard to the interpersonal and group dynamics. DST literature commonly acknowledges the importance of the social, and even conceptualizes the boundary between intrapsychic and interpersonal realms as fuzzy rather than fixed. Despite, and perhaps because of, holding the intrapsychic and interpersonal to be in essence comparable, if not similar, dimensions of identity work, DST easily overlooks the unique influence that other people have on us. By conceptualizing both the different facets of a person and the other people around that person as positions within the self, DST runs the risk of turning significant others from flesh-and-blood human beings into mere representations. However, as anyone who has lost a parent knows, it is fundamentally different to imagine discussing with one's mother and really discuss with her.

My conviction is that the respective strengths of SIT and DST can be used to address each other's blind spots. The core of my proposal lies in conceptualizing the social identities of SIT as the we-positions of DST, and the internal I-positions of DST as parts of the personal identity of SIT. The equating of we-positions with social identities and I-positions with personal identities may already be intuitively obvious on the basis of the previous discussion. However, I will elaborate on it with some definitions from previous literature (see also Hermans 2001, 263).

In a book in which he elaborates on his theory of we-positions, Hubert Hermans (2022, 1–2) defines them as follows: "As extensions of I-positions, we-positions refer to the experience of being participants at different levels of inclusiveness: I as a participant of social groups, as a participant of humanity, and as a participant of nature and the earth", This definition comes markedly close to John Turner's extension of SIT, the social categorization theory. Instead of the interpersonal–intergroup continuum proposed by Tajfel, Turner (with Katherine J. Reynolds, 2012) writes about "levels of self-categorization where people can define or categorize themselves at different levels of abstraction; for example, at the interpersonal level (where self is defined as a unique individual relative to others available for comparison), at the intergroup level (where self is defined as being a group member in contrast to a relevant outgroup) and at the superordinate level (where self is defined as a human being in contrast to other

lifeforms)", Both definitions emphasize how one's perception of oneself, and the consequent patterns of thinking and behaviour, may vary in inclusivity. Sometimes a person acts and thinks primarily as a distinct individual, at other times as a group member, and at still other times as a human being among all other humans.

What DST adds to SIT is a detailed unpacking of the diversity of potential self-positionings and the ways in which they relate to each other. While especially the conceptualization of personal identity is generally vague in the context of SIT, and often done in a very all-encompassing manner (e.g. as including all "idiosyncratic personal attributes"; Reynolds 2015, 314), DST provides more nuance. From the DST perspective, such "idiosyncratic personal attributes" are not active all at once, but are clustered around a variety of different I-positions and may—depending on the respective centrality of the I-positions—play a more or less central role in identity work. Furthermore, because they are attached to potentially conflicting I-positions, our personal attributes do not need to be in harmony; some parts of the self may well conflict with other parts. DST can offer SIT the terminology it lacks for conceptualizing such intrapersonal dynamics. Third position, metaposition and promoter position are just some examples of potentially useful terms.

Moreover, DST can be used to conceptualize intersectionality in identity work in an elaborate manner. In a previous article, my colleague and I investigated the ways in which mixed martial arts (MMA) professional John Waterman wove together his athletic and religious identities in his autobiography (Pauha and Ronkainen 2021). On the basis of previous research, we had assumed that being a professing Christian might be in some tension with earning one's living as a cage fighter. However, what our analysis revealed was that, while Waterman's autobiography indeed displayed a marked conflict, it was not between religion and MMA *per se*. Instead, the conflict was between two distinctive narrative voices—those of "John the Fighter" and "John the Paterfamilias"—both of which had their own individual relationship with both sports and religion. In this view, identity intersectionality is not merely about combining different identity categories within a person. Instead, these categories intersect within the individual's multiple I-positions. Because people hold multiple I-positions, they often shift between different ways of expressing or inhabiting their intersecting identities.

What SIT adds to DST, in turn, is a detailed outlining of the conditions and consequences of we-position activation. In fact, I am prone to perceive the very activation of a we-position within a dialogical self essentially as depersonalization—that is, as the conforming of self-perception to a group prototype. According to SIT, depersonalization occurs when a social identity becomes salient due to situational factors such as metacontrast. In addition to depersonalization, the activation of a social identity (or a we-position) also has other common perceptual and behavioural effects, the most important of which is ingroup bias.

Concluding thoughts for the psychology of religion

While I consider the theoretical integration that I am proposing to be generally

useful in personality and social psychology, I think that it has special benefit for the psychological study of religion. Unlike psychologists more generally, psychologists of religion have always been interested in studying people who have long since died (Pauha and Haimila 2024b). After all, the history of religions includes a number of personalities and events that are psychologically exceptional and out of the ordinary. Paul's call to follow Christ, the visions of St Hildegard of Bingen and the Jonestown massacre practically call for a psychological explanation.

The challenge in studying past people is, of course, the lack of suitable data (Pauha and Haimila 2024b). As dead people are not available for interviews or surveys, a psychologist studying them has no choice but to investigate what is known about their activities, typically through written sources. Such documents, however, are typically very sketchy with regard to psychological processes such as identity work. When people describe such processes, it is typically in a language that is relatively distant from academic discourse and difficult to translate into psychological terminology. Furthermore, even if they had the right terminology, people could not provide exact descriptions of the workings of their minds, simply because much of it happens outside of conscious awareness (Ormerod and Ball 2017, 572–73). Identity processes such as depersonalization and ingroup bias, in particular, affect the majority of people, but people very seldom are aware of them.

While my own studies have predominantly concerned contemporary identities, I am familiar with the use of identity theories to study the Bible. Therefore, I use examples drawn from biblical studies to illustrate the more general benefit that my approach has for psychological scholarship using historical data.

Biblical scholars have an impressive track record in applying social identity approaches to the study of biblical texts and their cultural contexts (see, for example, Esler 1998; Jokiranta 2012; Baker 2012; Hakola 2015; Nikki 2018). While these approaches have undoubtedly gleaned important insights into the biblical world, I argue that there are other approaches in psychology that might be more easily applicable to the study of textual sources. From the perspective of social identity theory and other social cognitive approaches, biblical and other historical texts are (semiotically speaking) in an indexical relationship with human psychology; they are the end product of largely unconscious and nonverbal information processes. Studying human psychology via textual sources is, thus, like seeing a finished car and trying to figure out what kind of machine produced it. It can be done, but the results are almost always hypothetical and tentative—only one possible alternative among many.

Conscious of the limitations of their methods, biblical scholars have been wary of making arguments about the actual identities of biblical authors or personae (see Luomanen 2021). Rather than treating the texts as descriptive, they have more typically approached them as prescriptive: the texts seek to socialize their audiences into certain kinds of identifications (see, for example, Kujanpää 2022). However, this way of applying SIT markedly reduces its explanatory power. SIT as such does not discuss how people adopt social identities but primarily what happens when

the identities that people hold become situationally salient. Therefore, much of SIT is not really applicable in a study focusing on social identity transmission. Depersonalization, ingroup bias, metacontrast principle, etc. are definitely relevant when discussing intergroup interaction, but the relevance is less clear in the context of socialization into identity.

Narrative psychologies such as Dialogical Self Theory offer a more direct entry into identity processes. From a narrative perspective, stories such as those found in the Bible are not mere reflections of more fundamental identity processes; instead, the telling of stories is the process through which identities are constructed.

To illustrate the application of SIT and DST perspectives to the study of ancient texts, I would like to quote from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (9:19–23):

> For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God's law but am within Christ's law) so that I might gain those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it. (1 Cor 9:19–23 NRSVue)

Nina Nikki (2018, 176) has interpreted the passage in light of Social Identity Theory as reflecting the context-dependency of social categorization; because different identities are active in different situations, Paul may alternate between identifying as a Jew and as a non-Jew. This is, of course, a possible interpretation, but it remains fundamentally hypothetical because the passage is Paul's *ex post facto* description of his identifications in different contexts, and we cannot really assume Paul to be able to accurately describe (or even to be aware of) the cognitive processes that occurred in his mind in these situations.

In contrast, from a DST perspective we could interpret the passage as identity work in action. What Paul is doing here is not merely reminiscing on his identifications in different situations, but actively trying to negotiate between his different (and contrasting) I-positions. The tensions between Paul-as-a-law-abiding-Jew, Paul-as-a-Christ-believing-non-Jew, etc., find here at least a temporary resolution as they are subjected to a single dominant I-position, Paul-in-Christ (see Nikki 2018, 176).

While both SIT and DST accounts of 1 Corinthians 9 avoid the problematic yet common tendency to portray Paul's identity as singular and fixed (e.g. exclusively Christian or exclusively Jewish; see Nikki 2023), DST offers additional advantages for psychologically oriented scholars investigating historical data. Unlike SIT, DST does not approach textual sources such as the Pauline letters as subjective recollections of past interpersonal and intergroup encounters. Instead, it conceptualizes literary activity such as letter writing as identity work *in situ*. Therefore, the fallibility of human memory and the potential

unreliability of the author are not as big a challenge for DST as they are for SIT. Moreover, by not conceptualizing identities as mental representations but as stories, DST does not attempt to peek inside a person's mind. Instead, it is enough that there is access to stories told by them. Therefore, the inaccessibility of cognitive processes to consciousness does not pose as major a challenge to DST as it does to SIT.

While texts written in the first person, such as the Pauline letters, provide the most direct entry into narrative identity work, they are not the only kinds of texts that can be used to investigate it. As DST emphasizes, identity dialogue involves voices not attributed to the self; therefore, a text written about other people may also reveal facets of its author's identity negotiations. Similar to how a person may construct their identity by engaging in a dialogue with an imagined voice of their mother, they may also do so by staging an imagined dialogue between literary personae, such as Jesus and his apostles.

Even heavily redacted texts involving multiple authors and redactors can be conceptualized within a DST framework. According to DST, the dynamics of the self emerge from the dialogical relations between the positions within it. The positions argue with each other, shout over each other, silence each other, but also encourage and agree with each other. This is essentially what a redactor does when working with materials authored by others—they emphasize certain passages while downplaying or even deleting others. By combining and editing the works of their predecessors, a redactor engages in identity dialogue with them. To put it bluntly, Jesus and the apostles functioned as positions in the dialogical self for the Gospel writers, just as the earlier authors of the Book of Jeremiah did for its later Deuteronomist redactors.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that, while arguing for the benefits of DST in historical research, I am not suggesting that biblical scholars and other scholars interested in applying psychology to historical data abandon SIT altogether. Instead, the suggestion I am making in this article is that such scholars supplement SIT with DST or other narrative approaches. While DST and SIT stem from rather different psychological traditions, I argue that the two can be meaningfully combined, thus fixing the gaps in both theories. ■

Dr **Teemu Pauha** is a psychologist and scholar of religion focusing on the social psychology of religious identity and interreligious relations, especially in the context of Islam in Europe. He is a university lecturer in Islamic theology at the University of Helsinki and has published research on topics such as mosque conflicts, apostasy from Islam, the interreligious attitudes of atheists, Qur'an burning and religion in martial arts. Pauha has edited (in Finnish) collections of articles on Islam in Finland as well as on the psychology of religion. He is also the author of the book *Finnish Shia Youth and the Qur'an: Cultural Psychological Perspectives on Lived Religion* (Springer, 2025). Since 2014, Pauha has authored or co-authored the Finnish section of the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* (Brill). He is the editor-in-chief of *Studia Theologica—Nordic Journal of Theology*. Currently, Pauha is investigating the sense of safety in religious spaces, with a particular focus on LGBTIQ+ Muslims.

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