

The sociomaterial force theory of identity

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Abstract

Foundational theories in social psychology tend to focus on the individual's phenomenological experience, and to conceive of the environment and the individual as discrete entities. To overcome the ontological and epistemological limitations of such perspectives, we propose a theory rooted in culturally oriented existential philosophy. This *sociomaterial force theory of identity* emphasizes the reciprocal, historically contingent relationship between broad social and material forces on one hand, and processes of social and individual identity on the other. To concretize the framework, we compare it to current theories (social identity theory and social representations theory) and apply it to a qualitative case study of differences in how religious group members narrate the suffering brought on by natural disaster. We propose the theory can contribute to a more historical, dynamic, and truly interdisciplinary psychology, and would be especially useful for integrating multilevel data on the experience of a particular social group at a specified historical period.

Keywords

ecological psychology, existentialism, identity, religion, suffering

Of the many functions of narrative in phenomenological experience, arguably the most important is sense-making in the face of suffering. Indeed, the human capacity to narratively integrate experiences of extreme suffering into one's sense of identity is apparently a strong testament to our resilience (Crossley, 2000). However, personal and social identity—especially as they are narratively reconfigured under threat—are shaped significantly by culture and social structure, as well as by environmental and material forces and events. In order to theorize how social and environmental forces influence the

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phenomenological experience and narration of suffering, and how the latter in turn relates to the construction of identity, we present a *sociomaterial force theory of identity*.

The subject matter of the sociomaterial force theory is the relation of individual identity to broader social and material forces. There are two primary tendencies in the treatment of this theme by much of psychology that the theory aims to overcome. The first is a methodological individualism that leads to relatively static and ahistorical analyses of broader social forces. For instance, social identity is often conceptualized as a matter of individual cognition (e.g., salience of an identity), rather than as a semistable state in an unfolding historical sequence (e.g., the imposed identity of noncitizen status in a recently established sovereign nation). The second tendency is an idealism or social constructionism that leads to the exclusion of material forces. For instance, the construct of “citizenship” might be studied primarily as a social representation—that is, as a category constructed through discourse and symbols, such as papers or passports—rather than as an embodied status contingent on both human-imposed (e.g., fences) and other-than-human (e.g., rivers) ecological features.

The sociomaterial force theory is derived from culturally oriented existential philosophy, specifically Nietzschean poststructuralism and the late materialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. These philosophies were developed specifically to address such problems of individualistic reductionism and exclusion of the material, which plague not only psychology but social science more broadly (DeLanda, 2006; Nail, 2019). After presenting the theory in detail, we will apply and exemplify it in a qualitative case study of cultural differences in the narration of natural disaster. Before presenting our theory, however, it will first be useful to address the assumptions of some other prominent social psychological theories on the same general subject.

Ontological and epistemological issues in social psychology

We will compare our theory to two well-established frameworks for understanding how social processes influence individual (identity) processes: *social identity theory* (SIT) and *social representations theory* (SRT). These prior theories are complex and we cannot possibly do them full justice for reasons of space; accordingly, we assume some prior knowledge of the theories and have relied as much as possible on key sources explicitly devoted to metatheoretical issues.

Theories should be understood as operating within particular scientific–philosophical *worldviews* (Altman & Rogoff, 1987), a backdrop of assumptions and values. Rather than focus on what the following discussion might say about the validity of a particular theory, we would rather the reader attend to the specified differences in ontological and epistemological orientation. Our discussion is not intended to show prior theories to be somehow deficient, but rather to clarify how the aims and assumptions of the sociomaterial force theory differ, and why these points of divergence are important for analyzing the individual–social relation. We also hope to argue that while each theory has clear strengths, each also exemplifies at least one of the gaps that we have contended are widespread in psychology.

Social identity theory: Interactional worldview and microreductionism

The SIT approach, which includes SIT proper and self-categorization theory, emphasizes the importance of social identities and motives in everyday psychological phenomena (Hornsey, 2008). SIT argues that people strive to enhance the comparative superiority of their ingroups in order to maintain their own self-esteem, and that this general motive is affected by a variety of factors such as power and impermeability differentials between groups. An additional insight is that the extent to which people are motivated by their social identities depends on the relative salience of the relevant category in a situation.

SIT is representative of what Altman and Rogoff (1987) identified as the dominant worldview of empirical social psychology (particularly as practiced in the United States), namely the *interactional* worldview, in which the “psychological qualities of person and social or physical environment [are] treated as separate underlying entities,” and theories “seek laws of relations between variables and parts of [the social] system” (p. 12). Indeed, Turner and Oakes (2010) explicitly claim an interactionist metatheory for SIT, proposing that “Mind and society, individual and group, are mutual preconditions, simultaneous emergent properties (i.e., higher order, distinctive, irreducible) of each other” (p. 228), and that the purpose of SIT is to specify “the precise mechanisms of social-psychological interaction and emergence” (p. 237). Essentially, the theory advocates the use of experimental methods to identify mechanistic “laws” that universalistically govern how social identities influence individual experience and behavior. In principle, one can combine the universalistic theory with concrete information about a given society and social group to explain particular individual–social relations at a given time and place.

Ultimately SIT offers a *microreductionist* account of the individual–social relation, which is typical of psychology (DeLanda, 2006; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). The primary ontological move of SIT is to conceptualize sociality in terms of the individual’s voluntaristic, mental experience (conscious or otherwise) of an identity category, downplaying the material instantiation of social identity in concrete historical processes, habitual behaviors, and social relationships (for similar assessments, see Brown & Lunt, 2002; Greenwood, 2014). The microreductionism of the theory is well summarized by Turner and Oakes (2010):

Individuals are more than we had ever supposed, parts which can (psychologically) contain the whole. . . . Depersonalization is the process whereby people cease to be unique individuals and become *subjectively* the exemplars or representatives of society or some part of it – the living, self-aware embodiments of the historical, cultural, and political-ideological forces and movements which formed them. (p. 237)

Social representations theory: Organismic worldview and macroreductionism

SRT aims to study “the process of the origin, change and elaboration of the iconic portrayal of things in the discourse of social groups” (Wagner & Hayes, 2005, p. 123). The theory has pronounced tendencies toward social constructionism and a methodological

focus on communication and discourse. SRT studies examine how individuals belonging to a particular social group are able to discuss and functionally navigate a particular concept, event, or object—be it a scientific theory or a global pandemic—by light of commonly shared and socially negotiated assumptions. In the process, SRT identifies mechanisms whereby social information is typically psychologically assimilated (e.g., anchoring and objectification effects; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). SRT researchers use a variety of data sources, ranging from interviews and focus groups to mass media (Batel & Castro, 2018).

The epistemological worldview of SRT is best classified as *organismic* (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). This view emphasizes, “Holistic entities composed of separate person and environment components, elements or parts whose relations and interactions yield qualities of the whole that are ‘more than the sum of the parts’” and strives to identify “principles and laws of [the] whole system” (Altman & Rogoff, 1987, p. 13). The key aspect of an organismic worldview is that units of analysis are unities or totalities that cannot be separated into parts, because individual parts are constituted by their reciprocal interaction with other parts in the whole. Hence, Marková (2003) identifies the “dialogical triad” as part of the “ontology of humanity” (pp. 90–93), and as

the dynamic unit of the theory of social knowledge. The *Ego-Alter-Object* is a triad within which the components are internally related. . . . If the components are internally related the unit can function only as an organic whole that cannot be decomposed into its parts. (p. 153)

In other words, the individual (*Ego*) never conceptualizes the material world (*Object*) directly, but their experience is always mediated by social representations (*Alter*). A related aspect of organismic worldviews is they tend to epistemologically exclude external influences operating outside of the posited holistic unit. So, for instance, Marková (2003) argues that majority–minority relations between groups cannot be defined on the basis of forces external to the dialogical triad: “However dominant one group could be with respect to another group, if the two groups do not define themselves in terms of dominance and submission, vis-à-vis that characteristic, they do not form the majority/minority” (p. 169).

Proponents of SRT have explicitly identified the theory as *macroreductionist*: “One can conceive the theory of social representations as an attempt to transpose or translate social-structural facts as a ‘macro-reduction’ into forms of thinking in order to make possible top-down explanations from the social to the individual” (Wagner & Hayes, 2005, p. 124). In principle, the “dialogicality” of SRT acknowledges the fact that social representations emerge partly from dialogues between individuals, thus reflecting individual experience and agency (Lopes & Gaskell, 2015; Marková, 2003). In practice, however, SRT emphasizes the ways in which individual thought is constrained and formulated by discourse and media, positing that individuals are primarily imprinted on by external information through basic processes of assimilation and accommodation. By focusing on the expressed, or potentially expressible, symbolic discourse of individuals, the theory largely excludes the agency and randomness of the material world from analysis (Wagner & Hayes, 2005).

Limitations of prior ontologies

This necessarily brief discussion hopefully brings into relief some of the aims and assumptions common to many available theories of the individual–social relation. We believe they have certain limitations in terms of the range of phenomena they can explain and the nature of some of their explanations. Many of these limitations stem from a foundational epistemological decision to demarcate psychology in terms of its “proper” data or subject matter. In the historical development of social psychological theories such as SIT and SRT, the proper subject matter has been the individual’s phenomenological experience (Wegner & Gilbert, 2000). The decision to demarcate social psychology as the science of self-report, text, or language brings up a number of issues that the theories subsequently devote significant energy to either resolving or exaggerating as a core aspect. In particular, this methodological tendency raises two sets of problems for theory: theorizing part–whole relations, and conceptualizing dynamics and agency.

In terms of theorizing part–whole relations, one limitation of prior theories is that they tend to conceptualize individuals and society as ontologically different and therefore requiring either conceptual reconciliation and bridging within a discipline, or separate study by different disciplines. Related to this ontological divide, prior theories also tend to insist that individual experience of the material world is always “mediated” (e.g., by perception or culture) rather than direct, preconscious, and immediate (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015). As can be seen in the foregoing discussion, psychologists often address these part–whole issues through a form of either micro- or macroreduction.

Regarding dynamics and agency, prior theories tend to situate individual subjectivity as the dynamic center of agency operating against an inert material background. On one hand, for microreductionist theories like SIT, this is associated with underrecognition of the historical, concrete processes that construct and maintain social entities (such as identities) and methodological reification of such entities as situationally determined states (Giddens, 1979). On the other hand, for macroreductionist theories like SRT, this is associated with a lack of attention to the agentic sources of power behind material and social events, and an overemphasis on how material objects are socially constructed once they already appear, *in medias res*, in the milieu of a social group.

A brief example may illustrate how these limitations might affect analysis of a particular social problem. Recent work has had much success applying SIT (Jetten et al., 2012) and SRT (Eicher & Bangerter, 2015) to the issues of health and well-being. One would imagine, then, that these theories could contribute much to the understanding of a particular issue where social factors, identity, and health combine. One such representative issue is the legacy of uranium mining on lands historically and currently belonging to the Navajo Nation of the southwestern United States, which has been associated with disproportionate rates of radiation-related diseases among people living in these areas (Voyles, 2015). Indeed, compared to a psychological model focused exclusively on individual-level attitudes and behaviors, these theories *would* contribute much; for example, by pointing out that these individuals’ experience of radiation-related disease is shaped by their social identification as Navajo or otherwise, and that their responses to radiation are shaped by a multifaceted social representation of this phenomenon. But these observations would appear to be only the *starting point* for analysis of this sociomaterial and

temporally unfolding problem. What is required is a theory that can grapple with questions such as: Why were these mines built, and by whom? Whom did they benefit? Why were they built on Navajo land, why was this societally possible, and why did so many Navajo individuals work in them? How can we understand the physiological effects of uranium tailings, particularly when they contaminate water or are used in home construction? What are the competing narratives of land use and attachment constructed by Navajo activists and the U.S. government that have led to contestation of what should be done about the waste from these mines (Voyles, 2015)?

We contend that theories such as SIT and SRT (and many others in social psychology) are limited in their ability to answer questions like these. Specifically, they are limited by an overemphasis on individual phenomenology and assumed laws of relation, and an underemphasis on material context and temporal change. For these reasons, such theories fail to fully consider the ways in which humans *arise from* and *shape* their material worlds, which constantly refract back and *shape them* in return (Shweder, 1995).

To more thoroughly theorize this relationship, we propose a theory embedded in what Altman and Rogoff (1987) call a *transactional* worldview, in which “Holistic entities [are] composed of ‘aspects,’ not separate parts or elements” and “temporal qualities are intrinsic features of wholes” (p. 13). In other words, for example, a social group is, in an important sense, only a transient collection of individuals, because if these individuals change their behavior over time, the group will dissolve; and similarly, a community is only a collection of groups, and so on. Transactional theories “Focus on event[s]” and endeavor to “describe and understand patterning and form of events” (Altman & Rogoff, 1987, p. 13). Thus, sociomaterial force theory is primarily intended to facilitate the analysis of *concrete events* in their historical complexity and future implications, in order to improve social conditions (rather than to generate testable hypotheses or guide experiments, although the theory can in principle also do this).

The ontology and epistemology of sociomaterial force theory

The sociomaterial force theory of identity draws on an *ontology of motion and force* (Nail, 2015, 2019) and a *critical–historical epistemology* (Sullivan, 2020). The theory’s antecedents in philosophy are Sartre’s (1960/2004) dialectical nominalism (see Baugh, 2015) and the processual philosophy of Nietzsche and Deleuze (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze, 1983). Sartre stressed how the dialectical interaction between individuals and their environments ratcheted up into the interplay of inertial social structures that in turn further shaped the material world. Similarly, Nietzsche presented society as an interplay of forces competing for power. His theorizing influenced the poststructuralists, among whom Deleuze developed an account of society as a collection of *assemblages* (see Nail, 2017).

An “assemblage” is any socially influenced and influencing entity—for example, an individual can be considered an assemblage (of genes, organs, ideas, actions, etc.). We primarily use the term to refer to groups, collectives, and ensembles of multiple individuals. This single term can designate entities at several levels of the social that might typically be distinguished by terms like “social group,” “community,” “culture,” or “society.”

Of course, it is important to distinguish between these different levels for certain purposes. What is essential about the concept of assemblage, however, is that these various social “entities” are only “entities” in a metaphorical sense; they are not intact, static, and unchanging, but rather fluid, dynamic, and precarious. At the same time, larger social assemblages maintain a degree of ontological autonomy because they exert novel power over their constituent elements (e.g., a group compels certain behaviors from its members; DeLanda, 2006). In this way, society should be analyzed as a collection of variously sized assemblages interacting along various vectors of force.

Sartre’s particular version of motion-focused ontology assumes that (a) human activity stems from, reacts against, and shapes the nonhuman material world, and the latter refracts back even as it is altered, shaping and constraining future human activity; and (b) the individual human organism is an irreducible site of material power, whose activity must be analyzed to understand the constitution of larger social units. In general, much of human activity must be understood as an attempt to constrain, stabilize, and redirect the flowing force and flux of material power; this is as true of a large corporation constructing dams to harness energy as it is of a developing child constructing a personal narrative to make sense of and direct their bodily changes. A transactional worldview and an ontology of motion acknowledges the thoroughly intertwined nature of material and social processes, and retains focus on the individual’s psychological construction of their material environment while acknowledging how the individual is thoroughly shaped by historical, material, and social forces. In short, the theory does not deny the importance of phenomenological experience or self-report/textual data. But neither does it isolate these as a closed world of analysis, because it takes seriously the view that human consciousness, itself part of the material world, continually transacts with the rest of matter outside it.

Sociomaterial force theory of identity

Schematically, the theory proposes that microlevel processes of *social identification* and *phenomenological experience* arise from, and feed back into, the interaction of broader macrolevel *material* and *social forces*. A diagrammatic sketch of the key variables and processes at each of these levels of analysis is presented in Figure 1. It is important to note that these processes are not monolithic or unidirectional in *any* direction. The theory conceives construction of the material world, of cultural groups and social identities, and of individual experiences as fluid, interlocking, and open processes. Processes on the left and right sides of the diagram reinforce those immediately below or above them. However, shifts frequently occur horizontally as well, often as a result of forces interacting across the vertical levels.

It is similarly important to recognize that levels of force are nested within each other. In other words, the effects of the most macrolevel on the most microlevel forces are not *necessarily* mediated via the intervening levels (although this is often the case). For example, while the theory facilitates analysis of major material events—such as natural disasters—which eventually affect a large number of individuals, this does not imply that individuals are not affected by more “micro” material events in their immediate

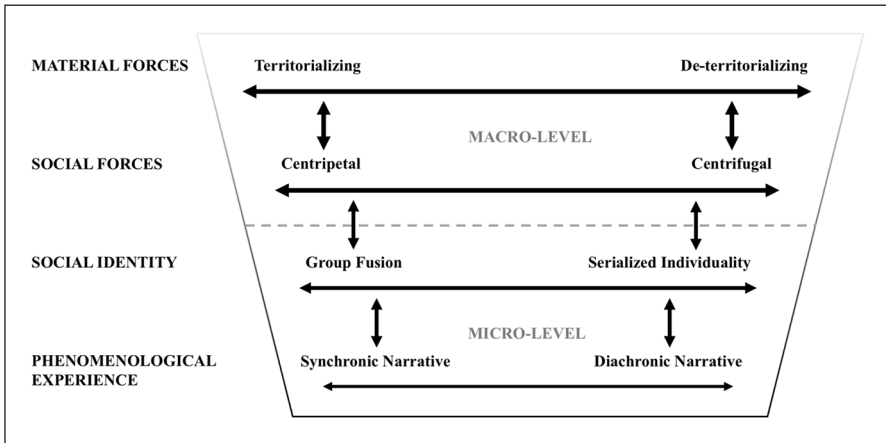


Figure 1. Key variables in the sociomaterial force theory of identity.

environment. Further, “macro” material events often have “micro” material consequences—for example, a hurricane may damage a water-treatment facility, eventually leading to the contamination of a family by the water in their home. Moving in the other direction, actions undertaken in the individual’s realm of immediate phenomenological experience may have direct “macro” material effects, as when an individual in the thrall of a political narrative bombs a major government building.

Material and social forces

As an attempt to more rigorously delineate, and conceptually interrelate, the ways that material events affect individual lives, we articulate two different types of macrolevel forces: “material” and “social” forces. By *material force*, we indicate events and processes that are typically referred to as “environmental” or “biological.” *Social forces*, by contrast, are human-engendered events and processes drawing toward or stemming from historically and geographically distributed centers of power (Nail, 2015). We must remain attentive to the reciprocal interaction and cumulative effects of material as well as social forces. For instance, material forces are often the effects of social forces, as when natural disasters increase in frequency due to anthropogenic climate change. Although distinguishing between these forms of force is analytically important, in reality they often represent two different blurred meanings, instantiations, or aspects of the same force.

Material events have either *territorializing* or *de-territorializing* effects on human groups and their local environments (Nail, 2017). We define *territorializing* effects and processes as acting to “stabilize the identity of a (social, material) assemblage, by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 12). Nonanthropogenic material events can be territorializing, as when the growth of a dense forest separates two populations of people that might otherwise more readily have come in contact. But human intervention on the world

has also been profoundly territorializing in its effects; there is arguably no more territorializing technology than that of a church, temple, or simple house. Conversely, *de-territorializing* effects and processes destabilize the identity of a (social, material) assemblage, by increasing its degree of heterogeneity or blurring its boundaries (DeLanda, 2006). Again, these effects can arise “naturally,” as when a drought decimates a landscape previously characterized by seasonal continuity; but they are often the downstream consequences of human intervention, as when transportation and communication technologies open lines of mutual influence between previously separated environments.

There are two dominant vectors of social force, *centripetal* and *centrifugal*. As an initial exposition of these concepts, consider how they are used in Roger Barker’s (1968) theory of underpopulated behavior settings. Centripetal social forces are exercised in an underpopulated or rural community because the setting cannot afford to lose any individual inhabitants without a major impact on its functioning. In a small, rural school, there will be more personalized attempts to reform a deviant student, rather than expel them, because there would be nowhere else in the community for the student to go. On the other hand, adequately or overpopulated settings exercise centrifugal force—they can separate out, and expel, certain individuals in order to maintain or even increase the setting’s functionality. In a big, urban school, there will be fewer reform attempts and more incentive to expel the deviant student, because they can be easily replaced by another student waiting to transfer, and the student can be deferred to a number of other institutions.

This is a very simple example dealing with a relatively small-scale assemblage, but similar vectors of force can be observed at all levels of assemblage throughout history. Centripetal social force is defined by Nail (2015) as possessing a

dominant motion inward – toward the creation of stable social centers on the earth’s centerless surface . . . [it] does not emerge from the center; it emerges from a decentered periphery. It is the kinetic conditions for a social center . . . [and] *collectively* brings the outside in. (pp. 39–43)

For example, humans build monuments in the centers of settlements, and fences around those settlements, in order to draw individuals into a sense of participation in a transcendent, distinctive identity. Centripetal forces do not only gather organisms and materials inward; they also exclude those that cannot be made productive or that are coded as foreign, leaving them outside the contained circle of community. Thus, social conflicts on the local or intergroup level are often a primary centripetal force, reifying group boundaries and increasing a sense of interdependence (Clastres, 2010). These centripetal social forces often have territorializing material effects in turn. A fence aids in the sustainment of an agricultural or horticultural environment in which residents become invested; a conflict creates sanctuary zones outside of which group members feel insecure.

By contrast, centrifugal social force involves processes of “ruling the territorial periphery from the center . . . [and expanding] the curved movements of territorial control into a completely enclosed circle, bringing all its stock into a shared resonance

around a central axis, and radiating outward” (Nail, 2015, p. 49), thus “bringing the inside and the outside into a hierarchical resonance around a center” (Nail, 2015, p. 52). This form of social force first arose with urbanization, and ultimately became the primary operative force of empires and nation-states. The fundamental logic of centrifugal force is to separate out peripheral social units, territories, and actors so that they can be more tightly controlled in their orbit around a power center (“divide and conquer”). For example, ancient empires emerged as powerful city centers and expanded their reach via technology and military force, entering into hierarchical relationship with “peripheral” settlements; the latter were permitted to operate as before, but surplus value extracted from them was now returned to enhance the power of the dominant city. This form of force reaches its most far-reaching potential in capitalist social organization, which works to maintain “serial and elastic motion” by enhancing “the capacity for a network of junctions to return to its normal shape after contraction or expansion” (Nail, 2015, p. 81), via “force that quickly redistributes people to fill a deficit or displace an excess” (Nail, 2015, p. 214). Capitalism operates by utilizing universal technologies, axioms, and symbols (e.g., money, shipping routes, wire transfers, stock markets) to separate out elements (e.g., labor, capital, source, production, consumption) and recombine them in hierarchical chains of relationship.

Centrifugal social force interacts in reciprocal combination with material force. De-territorialization permits more rapid and efficient exercise of centrifugal force, which in turn leads to further de-territorializing impact. The earth has been extensively de-territorialized through imperialist, colonialist, and capitalist efforts to plug disparate environments and time “zones” into a global grid of scientifically organized production (Schmitt et al., 2021). To highlight another momentous example, the Internet arose first from centrifugal efforts to control defense and technology research by organizing separated computer stations around a hierarchical center, efforts which have had an inestimable de-territorializing effect via the novel capacity to extend human activity across massive distances and spans of time. While these de-territorializing technologies arose in the exercise of historical centrifugal force (e.g., colonialism, military development), they now in turn facilitate ever more precise enactment and reach of this type of force. For example, under modern governments, the maintenance and enforcement of a serialized and surveilled personal identity reflects the complex working of centrifugal social force (Marx, 2016). Governmental regulation of most of the earth’s territory, combined with digital technology for recording and relaying identifying information, allows governments to separate out individuals from the mass of “society,” tracking, curtailing, or redirecting their movements at the whim of centralized power.

In this way, centrifugal social forces expel individuals not from a bounded community (as in the case of centripetal social force), but from sociality in general, the right to political representation and to existence as such. This occurs either through outright de-politicization and denial of citizenship (to enslaved peoples, migrants, colonized peoples, ethnic/religious minorities, and people convicted of crimes), or through disenfranchisement by debt and austerity measures. Peripheral elements that cannot contribute to the profit and power of the center are refused any form of recognition and can be expelled (detained, deported).

Social identities: Serialized individuality and group fusion

Moving from the macro level of material and social forces down to the individual phenomenological level requires the crucial intervening step of determining how individuals identify with amorphous social collectives. In the sociomaterial force theory, this will require a conceptualization of social identity divergent from that of the SIT tradition, which fails to distinguish between very different modes of identifying with (and being in) the social. The experience of psychologically fusing with a collective, for example, is not on the same quantitative continuum with viewing the self as an atomistic entity; rather, it is a qualitative shift into a new phenomenological mode of experience, catalyzed and sustained by sociomaterial forces and patterns of narrative interpretation that run deeper and wider than individual-level cognitions and motivations.

Sartre (1960/2004) analyzed social identity construction in reaction to broader sociomaterial forces. He describes the mode of social being and identity in contemporary capitalism as *serialized individuality*. This is a social situation in which a group of individuals are related to each other as infinitely exchangeable elements, organized around their common orientation to an object; as when a group of individuals are all applying for the same job, or all waiting to board the same bus. In relation to the collective object (the résumé-processing or ticket-dispensing algorithm), these individuals are simply entities assigned a code in a queue. Ratcheting the process of serialization up to the broadest levels of social assemblage (e.g., governments and the international market), these individuals are all eminently replaceable numbers (serial IDs) and functional placeholders (as laborers, consumers, citizens) in a series. The resulting social identity of serialized individuality is a sense of competitive individualism: most people in the environment are perceived as strangers, either obstacles or resources in relation to the goal of attaining or appeasing the collective object. If one wants a seat on the bus, then others at the bus stop only impinge on one's experience as obstacles in attaining one of the limited seats. Such experiences are emblematic of the lateral, indirect relations that exist between individuals under centrifugal social force, which unites individuals in their common separation, making them mobile, precarious, and incapable of solidary acts of resistance; in short, serialized.

And yet routinely in history, social movements have risen up from the mass of serialized individuals to resist the centrifugal force of power centers. How is this possible? Sartre argues that a change in the constitution of an assemblage of individuals can only be engendered by its members recognizing an imminent threat of destruction against all of them. Such an extreme threat engenders a shift to a social identity state Sartre labeled *group fusion*. This concept can, at least for research purposes, be considered essentially isomorphic with that labeled "identity fusion" by Gómez et al. (2020) and Swann et al. (2012). The two concepts especially overlap insofar as Sartre argues that (a) group fusion involves a heightened sense of one's self as *related to* individual others in the group, rather than a dissolution of personal identity in an abstract collective identification; (b) fusion is primarily caused by the recognition or experience of a common threat; and (c) fusion involves a motivational willingness to sacrifice the self to preserve others in the group. The threat of a group's imminent destruction evokes an experience among group members of "common fate as a totality" (Sartre, 1960/2004, p. 353), and, as a result, "Against the common danger, freedom frees itself from alienation and affirms

itself as common efficacy” (Sartre, 1960/2004, p. 402). Thus, the shared experience of imminent threat causes a shift in social identity toward group fusion. Such threats can come in the form of de-territorializing material force, as when a hurricane decimates a local cityscape; or in the form of centrifugal social force, as when police or military are employed to forcibly disperse protestors. Sudden recognition of common fate resulting from an acceleration of threat is the basis of group fusion, which leads to a psychological (perceptual, emotional) weakening of the borders between self and Other. In a fused group, each member not only sees their own potential destruction in the danger posed to every Other, but also their potential salvation in the continued resistance of every Other: there is now strength in numbers, in collective action.

Sartre suggests fusion is a very tentative state of social identification, which is constantly under threat by de-territorializing and centrifugal forces. Fused groups struggle to enact centripetal forces that will sustain the identification of their members against a variety of counter-forces that lead toward dispersion, such as waning extremity of threat, internal divisions, mobility and absence in interpersonal interactions, and competing bids for allegiance from broader institutions. Sartre describes the reactive centripetal forces aimed at sustaining group fusion as various forms of “pledge,” namely symbolic or legal elements that commit individuals to the group over time. These can include cultural beliefs that increase a sense of territorial and eternal interdependence among group members, such as religious ideology.

Phenomenological experience: Diachronic and synchronic narratives

Identity is continually (re)constructed through narrative, and this is especially true when the self is confronted by experiences of threat and suffering. Humans are characterized by their resistance of the determinative aspects of material force: while identities arise from a perpetual matrix of territorializing and de-territorializing forces, individuals attempt to actively fix the flux of these forces at certain points. During and after threatening experiences in particular, the individual can adopt one of two primary narrative orientations, or modes of defensively restoring meaning to the situation of existential threat. We refer to these contrasting patterns as *synchronic* and *diachronic* narratives. These patterns connote different ways of narrating the self in relation to time and space, to political and collective life, and to the limit situations of suffering and mortality.

In distinguishing between these patterns, Sartre (1972/1993) invokes Saussure, who explicated these categories with an analogy to chess. When one narrates events synchronically, one focuses on what and where the chess pieces are at a given point in the game (during a single move), revealing the spatial and hierarchical relationships between them. Thus the macrocosm of society at a given moment in history is narratively incarnated in the present microcosm of relations between forces in a local environment. However, diachronic narration is a narrowing of focus to the sequential unfolding of the game across time, isolating the part played by each piece, their past moves and future fate. Thus the forward progress of social history is narratively incarnated in the “micro-temporalization” of the forward movement of an individual life.

Synchronic and diachronic narratives are primarily distinguishable in terms of the orientation the narrator adopts toward experiences of suffering and threat. In a synchronic

narrative—which focuses on vertical power relations at a given moment in time—suffering is experienced as an “outer limit” that demarcates the boundaries of one’s group (Sartre, 1985/2006); in other words, suffering is *collectivizing*. One construes suffering or threat in such a way that one feels more strongly oriented toward the group or social identity. In a diachronic narrative—which focuses on the unfolding of events over time and in relation to a broader history—suffering is experienced as an “inner limit” to the development of the individual lifespan (Heidegger, 1962); in other words, suffering is *individuating*. One construes threatening events as obstacles, or even potential opportunities for transformation and growth, in the idiosyncratic trajectory of the self.

Going beyond these general distinctions between synchronic and diachronic narratives of suffering, each type can manifest in different varieties. Synchronic narratives can be analytically contrasted in terms of the different ways they represent *space*: as either sacred or revolutionary (Castells, 1983; Lefebvre, 1992). In narratives oriented toward sacred space, two different planes or areas of reality are symbolically contrasted—the sacred and the profane—and the narrator seeks to interrelate these two planes, or to defend the sacred against the incursion of profane space. For example, religious narratives may discern a divine presence in the darkest hour of material suffering; or a nationalist narrative may portray immigrants as infringing upon the border. In narratives oriented toward revolutionary space, by contrast, narrators from historically oppressed groups seek to reclaim and transform spaces that have been corrupted or colonized by external forces. For example, when people of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Ontario initiated a year-long blockade to protest and prevent the commercial extraction of lumber from their ancestral land, this centripetal social action was spurred by a synchronic narrative centered on the symbolic meaning of the forest for their way of life and prior betrayals of the Canadian government (Willow, 2019).

Diachronic narratives can be distinguished in terms of their primary *temporal* orientation, representing time either in a linear and progressive or in a fragmented way (Brockmeier, 2000). In linear diachronic narratives, time is progressively and positively experienced as forward movement, and barriers of suffering and threat are changes in trajectory that represent new opportunities for growth and redemption (McAdams, 2001). For example, in a sample of recovered alcoholics in Finland, a common narrative theme was one of personal growth, whereby narrators recovered once they recognized alcoholism was a compensatory response to inhibitions they had previously placed on themselves (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999). However, in fragmented diachronic narratives, the individual becomes trapped in endless, ascetic cycles of boredom and novelty, productivity and leisure, such that the future begins to feel like an eternal recurrence of the same. For example, patients in and out of an opiate addiction treatment center in Baltimore narrated their lives as a series of rotations between the pursuit of temporary highs on the outside and the habitual routine of life on the inside (Meyers, 2013).

Empirical case study: Narrative orientations toward natural disaster

As a provisional demonstration of the utility of this theory, we will overview a study on the narrative orientations of members of different cultural groups toward the threat and

suffering imposed by natural disaster. Specifically, we will revisit data from a case that the first author explored in some detail a decade ago (Sullivan, 2016), namely, the experience of the destruction caused by tornadoes by minority religious groups in Kansas. The data from this study (systematically examined here for the first time) are hypothetical accounts of disaster experience elicited from these groups in an experimental context. Thus, the present analysis will primarily document the presence of synchronic and diachronic narrative orientations in two groups. However, the theory suggests that these individual-level narrative orientations arise in interaction with broader sociomaterial forces and social identities. Therefore, before examining the narrative data, we will overview the cultural contexts from which they derive.

Traditionalist Mennonite and “secular” experiences of natural disaster

In an earlier study, the first author (Sullivan, 2016) performed a comparative analysis examining how one religious and cultural subgroup—a congregation of traditionalist Mennonites¹—experienced the devastating Greensburg tornado of 2007, which decimated an entire small town in Kansas. The analysis centered on how this subgroup’s experience differed from that of “secular” or mainstream religious majority individuals living in the town of Greensburg. The current discussion is supplemented by data from Baker and Baker (2016), a study that summarizes the impact of the tornado on majority Greensburg residents.

The Greensburg tornado was a literally de-territorializing material event, in that it destroyed 95% of structures in the town. However, even the de-territorializing force of the event manifested differently in different cultural groups. The traditionalist Mennonites—whose homes are primarily located outside of the town proper—did not experience the destruction of their church, which lay outside the path of the storm. Because it was the only church left standing after the destruction, this was a very significant initial experience for the Mennonites of resistant territorialization. The beacon of their community had survived, and it facilitated practical gatherings of the community for months to come.

Most importantly, the de-territorializing impact of the storm interacted with the various social forces enacted in response. For majority residents in the United States who are not affiliated with a particular cultural subgroup or network, recovery from a natural disaster exemplifies the working of centrifugal force. Resources and expertise emanate outward from state and federal centers; “peripheralized” residents are reliant on national organizations (e.g., the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency), as well as outside donations, experts, and contractors, to rebuild their properties and communities. This was especially true in Greensburg, because a vision immediately took shape, inspired by the Kansas governor and then later adopted by President Obama himself, to reconstruct Greensburg as a “green,” energy-efficient town that would become a symbol of sustainable redevelopment. Thus, the reterritorialization of the community was dictated by the agenda of an external power center, to which many residents did not assent. By contrast, the traditionalist Mennonite community was able to enact a variety of centripetal forces, emanating both from the community itself and from the broader institutional structures of its denomination, which maintain a significant degree of communal,

cultural, and economic independence from globalized society. Many members of the community were skilled in, or earned their living from, carpentry and other trades, which gave them the requisite knowledge to rebuild their homes. Unlike majority Greensburg residents, who had to wait months or years to bring outside contractors in to their small town, the Mennonites began performing this restorative labor on their own almost immediately. Beyond this, the Mennonites practice their own intra-denominational form of insurance, meaning they were not dependent on extracommunal aid sources for funding. Members of congregations throughout Kansas and Oklahoma also flocked to Greensburg in the days after the storm, providing ample emotional and material support.

To offset sudden disasters, peripheralized communities—and, ultimately, their serialized individual members—within capitalist nation-states are dependent on a long chain of power structures and distributed funds over which they exert little local efficacy. By contrast, the traditionalist Mennonite community examined here maintains its external borders through various mechanisms of centripetal force.² Relatively independent congregations are related to each other in a tight, egalitarian network; and when a given site is threatened, it can become a temporary central node, which draws the broader community's resources in toward itself. These divergent vectors of social force ultimately determined the differential de-territorializing impact of the tornado. Three years after the storm, the “mainstream” population of Greensburg had been reduced by half, and had only recovered to about 60% seven years later. Families that could not afford to rebuild, or that could not accept the externally imposed eco-conscious vision, simply emigrated. By contrast, the traditionalist Mennonite congregation was reduced by only about 3% as a result of the storm, and those who lost homes were living in rebuilt properties—often in the same style and on the same location—within 2 years. It could therefore be reasonably said that the Mennonite congregation—in stark contrast to the surrounding community—did not ultimately experience the tornado as a de-territorializing event.

Importantly, the contrasting social forces enacted by and impacted upon these two cultural groups in Greensburg are partly the product of their members' social identities. The traditionalist Mennonites maintain social practices that draw strict external borders around their community, orienting individuals—especially in times of threat—toward the phenomenological state of group fusion. This state manifests not only as a sense of egalitarian oneness and interdependence with other church “brethren,” but also as a common orientation toward religious transcendence. The traditionalist Mennonites believe that God is with them in every instance of suffering, and that their earthly sufferings are trials that recapitulate, and allow them to participate in, the sufferings of Jesus' and God's vision for them. By contrast, the social identity of serialized individuality entails a very different experience of suffering for those in the United States outside such subgroup enclaves, even if they belong to mainstream religious denominations. Even if catastrophes such as environmental disasters bring people together in the short term, unless they are able to form a defensive fused group in response, over time, majority citizens of a modern nation-state typically relapse into seriality. This was the case in Greensburg, where, in the years after the storm, majority residents began to experience competition for scarce rebuilding resources, division over the future of the town, and visible inequalities in differential capacities for resilience. These different social identities are reflected

in the narrative orientations toward disaster displayed by the traditionalist Mennonites and members of other, more liberal denominations.

Contrasting narrative orientations in simulated disaster accounts

In order to examine the kinds of narratives produced by traditionalist Mennonites and members of other denominations in response to natural disaster, the first author conducted a quasiexperimental simulation study to elicit qualitative data. Specifically, a sample of the traditionalist Mennonite group was recruited, and compared to a sample of Unitarian Universalists. The latter were chosen for the study because, although they are technically a minority religious group (and hence comparable to the Mennonites), Unitarian Universalism represents the opposite cultural extreme of liberal, urbanized, and relatively “secular” religiosity (see Sullivan, 2016, for a detailed discussion of this denomination). Thus, while the traditionalist Mennonites experience a social identity of group fusion and the impact of centripetal social forces, the Unitarian Universalists are more likely to experience serialized individuality and the impact of centrifugal social forces.

The samples consisted of 24 Mennonites ($M_{Age} = 50$ years, 9 women) and 19 Unitarian Universalists ($M_{Age} = 63$ years, 12 women). Each came from a single congregation of the respective denominations located in Kansas. For the Mennonites, the study was administered at a meeting in their church building. For the Unitarian Universalists, the study was announced at a service, and completed by participants either immediately after the service or at home. The data for this study were collected as part of a larger survey; details of the other measures and findings are provided in Sullivan (2016).

Participants responded to a prompt to imagine the possibility of a tornado causing devastation in their town/city and to write about how this event would affect them and those around them. It is important to note that the Mennonite congregation recruited for this study was *not* the congregation that experienced the Greensburg tornado. To facilitate more controlled comparisons of enculturated narrative orientations, the study was conducted purely as a simulation of disaster experience (rather than an account of *in vivo* disaster experience). Nevertheless, two factors attest to the external validity of the data. First, many of the participants from both the Mennonite and the Unitarian congregations mentioned that they had previously experienced tornadoes (and/or other natural disasters) and that they drew on these experiences in formulating their accounts. Second, the themes that appeared in the accounts were very similar to the culturally specific themes observed by the first author in narratives from the Greensburg community (Sullivan, 2016). This suggests that the simulation narratives approximate the orientations employed by individuals from divergent religious backgrounds in the actual experience of natural disaster.

The narrative accounts were coded for themes relating to the sociomaterial force theory of identity. We were particularly attentive to evident differential tendencies in the narratives elicited from the two groups. No attempt was made to quantitatively reduce the data, to treat them as adjudicating hypotheses, or to use them for intensive theory construction. Instead, the codes were used to enrich the theory, and to demonstrate its integrative potential, by examining how the abstract processes it specifies manifest in a

particular concrete instance (Layder, 1998; Morrow & Brown, 1994). Based on recommendations from O'Connor and Joffe (2020), an iterative process with two independent coders was used to ensure reliability. The first author—who was familiar with the data—developed a coding scheme of 10 codes and coded each narrative. Then, a second independent coder who was unfamiliar with the data and blind to which group participants belonged also coded each narrative using the same scheme. After an initial round of coding, definitions of each code were discussed and refined before a second round of independent coding. After the second round of coding, Cohen's Kappa values ranged from .63 to 1.00 across the 10 codes, with an average of .83, indicating strong intercoder agreement (McHugh, 2012). Remaining disagreements were discussed and consensus achieved.

Common themes across the narratives. In order to avoid overreification of cultural types, it should be stressed that certain themes recurred throughout the majority of the elicited narratives and did not substantively differentiate the orientations of the two groups. These are themes that are generally common in firsthand narrative accounts of natural disaster experience. They were (a) *intense affective experience*—awe and fear at the simulated destruction, gratitude for survival; (b) *paramount concern for others*—believing that loss of loved ones would be the greatest source of initial fear, and of subsequent emotional devastation if it were to occur; and (c) *postdisaster utopia*—imagining that people in one's community will come together in solidarity after the disaster. The Mennonites were more likely to be explicit that their “church brethren” would help them in the aftermath, whereas Unitarians tended to mention family or a more abstract, unspecified “community.” But in general, these three themes characterize most narratives in the sample, regardless of the narrator's cultural milieu.

Themes in the traditionalist Mennonite narratives. Two distinct themes characterize many of the traditionalist Mennonite narratives, attesting to their synchronic narrative orientation. The first of these is *transcendence*, which means that in moments of suffering, such as a natural disaster, the Mennonites feel connected to a transcendent plane and a sacred space-time. For example, one participant wrote that “God would be very near at that time.” There is a willingness to offer oneself and one's life-course into God's hands: “I would honestly seek God's will for my future plans”; “Difficulties make us realize that Heaven is our goal.” This sense of trust that material events unfold according to Divine will—that there is an immaterial sphere, in which the Mennonites participate, that transcends the material plane of suffering—sometimes manifests as an *inner calm*, even in the midst of chaos: “I feel there would be down in my heart a calm because of my faith in God”; “The Lord would also be my constant rock.”

Such statements, which preserve the integrity of sacred as opposed to profane space, are mirrored by others that constitute the second distinctive theme in Mennonite narratives, that of *nonattachment* to worldly possessions. This theme accomplishes the degradation of the profane world. Antimaterialist statements about nonattachment are obviously adaptive in the wake of destruction, and it would be incorrect to say such statements are absent in non-Mennonite narratives. However, they form a central trope in these accounts. As one Mennonite respondent wrote, “I would also realize that earthly

possessions mean so very little—they can all be gone in a moment . . . and only God’s peace in my heart really matters.”

Themes in Unitarian Universalist narratives. A stylistic difference that stands out almost immediately upon comparing the Unitarian to the traditionalist Mennonite narratives is that the former more commonly adopt a *sequential narrative style*. The Mennonite accounts tend not to depict forward movement in time, focusing instead on the overall imagined impact of the event, the individual’s emotional response, the resultant community solidarity, and the importance of God’s unfolding will. In other words, for the Mennonites, the tornado itself is an event, but their simulated accounts do not depict a sequence of personal occurrences that will be initiated in response to this event. However, Unitarians are more likely to describe a diachronic sequence of projected reactions: first awe and shock; then checking in with family; then seeking help from, or giving to, the community; and finally, coming to terms with the event and interpreting it in the future. For instance, one Unitarian response began, “I would spring into action,” and took the form of a numbered list of actions the participant would take to mitigate the impact. In multiple instances, Unitarian participants imagined making sense of the event by prospectively incorporating it into their broader autobiography: “My pattern in the past has been to do what needs doing and only long afterward cry or otherwise react, and I imagine that pattern would hold in such an event.” This relative tendency toward a sequential narrative style exemplifies how the Unitarians produce more diachronic narratives, less likely to be reflections on hierarchical relations of power and value (sacred/profane) and more likely to be short autobiographies.

Two other distinctive themes reinforce the diachronic orientation of the Unitarian participants. The first, which contrasts sharply with the Mennonite emphasis on *nonattachment*, is the theme of *significant possessions*. Multiple Unitarian respondents mentioned that personally significant possessions and property would be a major loss. “[I would be] sorry to have lost mementoes of my and my daughter’s babyhood as well as things that belonged to my mom”; “It would be hard to lose all your belongings and important documents”; “I would be very upset to lose photos and archival papers that my daughter and I are organizing and preparing to save.” It is clear that the Unitarians emphasize these losses because the possessions make significant contributions to personal identity, both in the literal sense of legal–financial identification (documents) and in the autobiographical sense (mementoes, archives). Another distinctive theme is that, whereas the Mennonites were likely to mention an *inner calm* deriving from God’s protection as a reserve of strength, the Unitarians were more likely to mention an *inner strength* stemming from their own resilient self. Unitarian narratives repeatedly emphasize the need to take decisive action in the face of calamity: “It would be a horrific experience, however, moving forward and not sitting idle (and complaining) would be the only option.” A sense of *inner strength* gives individuals the resolve to “move forward”: “[I] would find that place within me that will persist, always taking the next step, that will not quit.”

Concluding this brief qualitative analysis, we can observe that, for the traditionalist Mennonites, the suffering induced by the tornado is collectivizing—it is an opportunity to participate in and merge with symbolic notions of sacred space, a temporary

reenactment of an eternal legacy of redemption. Such a narrative orientation facilitates a transition to group fusion in the face of threat, because it directs the individual toward the shared fate experienced by all those who interpret the suffering through the same set of codes. The suffering induced by environmental disaster is thus highly significant for the Mennonites, in that it reaffirms their social identity and reorients them toward their belief in transcendence. Furthermore, the Mennonites expect to receive aid from their social network and are perhaps therefore more willing to passively accept the externality of the tornado and reflect on its significance.

Alternatively, the Unitarian Universalist narratives tend to be more linearly diachronic and individuating. Suffering is not meaningful in and of itself, but only once it occupies a position as a limit to be overcome in an unfolding self-narrative. Rather than reinforcing collective identities, suffering for the Unitarians presents an opportunity to reconstruct the self in the wake of chaos—just as the city of Greensburg was de-territorialized and reconstructed by the centrifugal force of the eco-conscious narrative. Such a diachronic narrative is adaptive within a social identity context of serialized individuality. If help from others cannot be guaranteed or waited for, the outcome of the event for the self may be importantly contingent on the self's ability to rapidly construct a progressive, action-oriented narrative.

The prospect of a sociomaterial force theory

While the present application is fairly limited, this case study offers insight into how the sociomaterial force theory might be employed to analyze processes of culture and identity construction in the context of a threatening event. The theory might prove especially useful for qualitative, ethnographic, or multimethod research attempting to understand how these processes play out in a bounded historical, geographical, and material context. In such research, it is essential to link deep analysis of the perspectives of affected individuals to a broad understanding of the social and material forces affecting them. Detailed historical, archival, ecological, and geographical data need to be integrated with participant observation and self-report to achieve a complete view of such events and their impact. The theory (as outlined in Figure 1) offers a relatively straightforward path for performing multilevel conceptual analysis when such a mass of data is available.

Truly multilevel analyses are difficult to achieve in psychology for a number of reasons. As discussed, methodological limits often encourage researchers to reify their constructs as representing bounded and *causa sui* entities, whether they be the individual agent (“microreductionism”) or the cultural structure (“macroreductionism”). To overcome these limitations, a transactional approach is required that allows theorists to treat each level—ranging from broad sociomaterial forces to individual phenomenology—as independent and characterized by its own tendencies and development, but also as mutually interpenetrative, interactive, and reinforcing. Such an approach would facilitate theoretical engagement with multilevel data, accumulated with a variety of methods appropriate to each level. Conceptualizing social and material forces as uniting and refracting at the fulcrum of the existing individual, the sociomaterial force theory of identity is a promising step in this direction.

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Notes

1. The term “traditionalist Mennonite” is used in this article to refer to a relatively small denomination of Anabaptists (ca. 25,000 individuals), primarily located in the United States, called the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (also known as “Holdemans”). For purposes of the current discussion, what is most significant is that this group enacts various forms of centripetal social force and strives for a social identity of group fusion. More details regarding the concrete history and practices of this group are available in Jantz (2020) and Sullivan (2016).
2. For example, marrying and doing business within the faith; maintaining agrarian lifestyles; resisting “worldly” practices, media, and technology; socializing children in faith-run schools; and shunning apostates (see Sullivan, 2016).

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