

*Learning, Selfhood, and Pragmatic Identity  
Theory: Towards a Practical and  
Comprehensive Framework of Identity  
Development in Education*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay we discuss a theory of identity development through the elaboration of American Pragmatists' conception of how individuals develop awareness of the self, others, and the environment. We then outline the potential contributions of Pragmatic Identity Theory as a practical conceptual framework and a method of analysis that can provide insights into identity formation, self-conceptions, and well-being for educators in day-to-day interactions. The literature on learning and identity can benefit from a more practical understanding of identity development, as identity development is relevant to how individuals form their values, beliefs, and behavioral dispositions. Based upon a gap in the current literature, this article explores four premises that educators can use to understand identity formation, and then argues for Pragmatic Identity Theory's potential contributions to research and practice as an analytical framework.

**Keywords:** Identity, learning, American Pragmatism, self, philosophy

**RESUMÉ:** Grâce à l'élaboration de la création américaine du pragmatisme, la théorie du sentiment identitaire est ici abordée ; c'est-à-dire la façon dont les individus prennent conscience d'eux-mêmes, prennent conscience des autres et prennent conscience du milieu environnant. Ensuite, les contributions éventuelles de la théorie pragmatique sur l'identité sont exposées dans les grandes lignes pour servir de contexte pratique au concept et à la méthode d'analyse, ce qui peut apporter des idées sur

la formation identitaire, sur la conception du soi et sur le bien-être des éducateurs dans les échanges quotidiens. Les travaux sur le rôle de l'apprentissage et sur l'identité, peuvent bénéficier d'une compréhension plus pratique sur l'approfondissement de l'identité puisqu'il est en rapport avec la manière dont les individus constituent leurs valeurs, leurs croyances et leurs aptitudes comportementales. Parce qu'il existe une lacune dans les travaux d'aujourd'hui, les éducateurs peuvent employer quatre postulats, présentés ici, pour comprendre la formation de l'identité. Ensuite, et pour servir de cadre analytique, on suggère fortement les contributions éventuelles de la théorie pragmatique sur l'identité pour la recherche et le travail.

Mots clés: identité, apprendre, pragmatisme, soi-même, philosophie

### *Introduction*

In this essay, we discuss American Pragmatists' philosophies about learning to advance a theory of identity formation that is specifically geared towards educational research. We argue that the ideas of William James (1890/2013), Charles Peirce (1966/1995), WEB Dubois (1903/2007), and John Dewey (1958/2000) on learning to become aware of the self have much to contribute to practical understandings of identities and identity development in educational spaces. In education, the identities of students, parents, teachers and principals are recognized as important areas of research for creating quality educational spaces (Palmer, 2010). However, the literature on teacher and student identity is still limited in terms of understanding how day-to-day interactions and self-reflection, in conjunction, influence identity.

In research literature, students' identities are generally considered to be ethnic/racial or cultural identities, while teacher identity literature looks at individualized self-conceptions (Van Meijl, 2006; Mclean, 1999; Palmer, 2010). More research is needed to understand identities and the roles they play in day-to-day interaction in educational spaces. This understanding can help practitioners and students better foster positive pedagogical relationships.

To address this gap in understanding, we synthesize and build upon the foundational work of American pragmatists to create a practical theory for everyday use. Most pedagogues and educational philosophers know of John Dewey's (1958) work and ideas on experience, learning, schooling, and society. However, his work is not regularly cited in terms of analyzing identity development as learning through experience and reflection because his most famous works are on educational practices. However, a significant portion of Dewey's work was about human flourishing, of which identity (as self-conception) plays a significant role.

What's more, his colleagues, Peirce, James, and Dubois, who worked in the same vein of philosophy, offer deep insights into understanding identity and its role in the human experience. We see incorporating their work in identity literature in education as an opportunity to better understand and analyze individuals and their interactions in educational spaces. We see this as particularly important because analysis of identity can inform relational dynamics between teachers and students, as well as students' sense of belonging and engagement in school, all of which are current issues in education (Carr-Chellman & Levitan, 2016).

In order to bring the ideas of Pragmatist philosophers into contemporary scholarship, we supplement arguments in American Pragmatist philosophy with current research on identity formation and multiculturalism (e.g., Stets & Serpe, 2013; Stets & Burke, 2014; Gay, 2003). Through this analysis, we develop a practical, easy to understand theoretical/interpretive approach supported by rigorous research to offer educators a way to better understand their students, as well as themselves. We have found the need for a practical theory and interpretive orientation about understanding identities in educational spaces. Educators need heuristics to better understand the various identities of their students in order to connect to their values and interests. This heuristic is what we begin to develop in this article.

The paper is organized into three sections. First, we briefly discuss general orientations to identity research as psychogenetic and sociogenetic, and how this dichotomy is problematic. We then discuss how American Pragmatists approach identity and self-concept in a different way than these general ideas, and how the Pragmatic approach can better integrate studies of identity into a holistic framework to provide greater insights into learning, self, and society.

Finally, we present four premises in Pragmatic Identity Theory to use in educational research and discuss their implications.

### *General Approaches to Identity Research*

The study of modern conceptions of identity began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with Freud and G.H. Mead (1934; 1925; 1913), though the study of the self has been investigated at least since the era of the pre-Socratics (Taylor, 1989). After the work of Mead and Freud, dozens of different conceptions of identity have appeared in scholarly literature in diverse academic fields such as psychology, literature, political science, gender studies, history, biology, anthropology, and sociology (e.g. Stets & Serpe, 2013; Palmer, 2010; Brenwell & Stokoe, 2006; McLean, 1999; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Zirkel & Johnson, 2016; Kornieko, et al., 2016; Olsen, 2008; Vargas, et al., 2016; Bottero, 2010; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Butler, 2011; Davies, 2006). The premises about identity formation can be divided into two broad, loosely defined paradigms. The first is the psychogenetic paradigm, which posits that identity formation is an internal form of personal development—identity develops from the inside out. An individual's identities are self-created and self-realized. This approach is influential in the psychological, biological, and political sciences (Bartlett 2005; Erikson, 1968,1980; Van Meijl, 2002).

The second paradigm is the sociogenetic perspective, which draws on the works of Vygotsky (1980; 2012), G.H. Mead (1913; 1925; 1934), and others in social psychology, sociology, and anthropology (e.g., Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Stets & Serpe 2013; Fiske, Gilbert & Lindzey, 2010; Turner & Reynolds, 2010). This approach posits that identity development is primarily socially and materially determined. The general argument is that identity is a socially constructed phenomenon and that identities are imposed upon individuals through social interactions that are then internalized. Thus, identity development occurs from the outside in. Each approach is valuable for understanding identity phenomena in their respective disciplines, but this dichotomy has left a gap in identity literature, neglecting the power dynamics between the internal and external worlds.

To be clear, most (but not all) sociogenetic and psychogenetic orientations include the individual or social (respectively) in their analysis. However, the “analytical primacy” (Holland & Lachicotte, 1995, p. 2-3) of each orientation misses the dynamic and shifting realities and power relationships of human experience as it relates to identity development.

In contrast to these two approaches, the Pragmatists William James (1890/2013), Charles Peirce (1966/1995) and the philosopher Charles Taylor (1989), argue that identity and self-concept are built through experience of both the internal and external worlds by implicit and explicit hypothesis formation and testing, and WEB Dubois (1903/2007) builds on these ideas to explain how context and power-dynamics influence identity development. Knowledge, self-awareness, and self-concept become improved through a process of reflection, though individuals never achieve an absolute knowledge of either their internal or external worlds. This orientation helps provide analytical insight into the shifting social and personal worlds within which people form and function in their identities. Pragmatic Identity Theory seeks to circumvent the assumption that there is a dichotomy between personal and social—the psychogenetic and the sociogenetic—in order to bridge the gap between these two philosophical orientations, and to bring these insights to bear in educational research.

### *American Pragmatism and Identity*

American Pragmatists’ fundamental insight is the experiential nature of awareness and cognition—that knowledge and identity are developed through interaction, and are contingent, relational, and in constant process (James, 2013). Insights into the experiential nature of knowledge first come from Charles Peirce, who is an often neglected, but seminal figure in Pragmatists’ thinking. Peirce’s (1869; 1995) text *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man* advances an integrated orientation for understanding identity and learning. Peirce argues that individuals’ cognitions are intimately connected with, and dependent upon, the external world and the internal process of biological growth for their development, instead of being radically separate and apart from the external world. He argues that living beings are necessarily integrated and situated within

the environment of the world. Therefore, the idea of radical separation of mind to world—as Descartes (1637; 1998) argues, and that skeptics in the philosophy of mind still currently grapple with (Greco, 2007)—is fundamentally mistaken. He also argues against Descartes' (1998) claim that individuals have an absolute insight into their internal states, contending that individuals are not able to be certain about either their internal experiences or the experience of their senses. Peirce claims, instead, that they can become more aware and knowledgeable of their internal life and the external world by interacting, questioning, and implicit hypothesis testing. Attaining more or deeper awareness is most often learned through experiencing unexpected error and the subsequent correction, which leads to learning through experience.

Peirce's epistemological orientation removes the dichotomy between knowledge created outside the skin and knowledge created inside the skin. Instead, it focuses on the fallible, but correctable and expanding nature of human awareness as the fundamental aspect of learning—self-awareness and the awareness of the external world comes from the same process of learning through comparison and reflection grounded in awareness of difference. This means that individuals “discover” internal drives and orientations, and have the capacity to “listen to” or ignore these internal drives, if they align or misalign with their environment. Equally, individuals are testing and learning from their environment both socially and physically, learning the behaviors that are expected, accepted, condoned, or condemned in certain circumstances. This learning paves the way for a negotiated interactional understanding of identity or self-making that is evolving and malleable.

William James views the development of self-awareness (or self-consciousness) differently than Peirce, though his conclusions do share similarities with Peirce's work. In the seminal book *Principles of Psychology* (1890/2013), James argues that self-consciousness and self-identity are intimately connected as they develop, but they are not equivalent. He argues that self-identity is in fact many mutable selves/identities, and that the development of self-consciousness is, in some sense, the creator of these many selves/identities. Self-consciousness, then, is understood to be an agential process. It is the river from which the tributaries of identity grow (Carr-Chellman & Levitan, 2016).

James (1890) views the process of becoming self-conscious as a process of reflection, and that “possessing self-consciousness or reflective knowledge of himself as a thinker” (p. 250), is a key element to a sense of “our own personal identity.” (p. 250). Like Peirce, James sees the creation of this self-consciousness as coming from a separation of the thinker from the thought.

According to James, there are at least three distinct but connected sources of identity.

- 1) The first originating source of identity is the self as a phenomenon, which is not an identity but the being-in-process from which identities arise—this self just *is* instead of being a certain *thing*.
- 2) This self-as-phenomena generates self-consciousness as an agential process. To create this self-consciousness, the individual self requires a kind of separation, dissociation, or reflective distance, between that which is thought and the thinker him/herself. The capacity to create distance is learned most readily when an individual becomes aware of error (1890, p. 250). So, like Peirce, James thinks that the awareness of error is a key and important step in the development of self-consciousness.
- 3) This error, whether it is a mistake in terms of touching a hot surface and hurting oneself or being told that they are wrong by trusted others, starts to develop the sense that there is a “someone,” thinking and feeling that is different from the thought or feeling. This someone has identities that are developed through interactions with others, the world, and one’s own cognitions.

### *Identity and Society*

According to James, the development of self-consciousness is a learning process; it is the capacity to reflect upon one’s thinking and, in turn, experience thinking as separated from a particular experience (1890, p. 250). It is a conscious process of objectifying one’s thoughts. This process entails discovering an instance of one’s thinking that is mistaken, which then allows the individual to make an inference of separation between the self and the experience of error. This allows an abstraction of self to occur. Discovering discontinuity between our thoughts (internal) and the world (external) generates an opportunity for reflection, which can then uncover a distinction between those thoughts and the

thinker of those thoughts who is also experiencing them, thereby creating an awareness of self.

Peirce and James discuss the phenomenological aspects of identity development regardless of any specific context. WEB Dubois offers insights into the social influence of identity development in the specific context of the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007). Instead of understanding identity and self-conception development as an agential process, Dubois discusses the experience of oppression when someone sees him, not as the Dubois he knows in himself, but as a stereotype. Dubois' true sense of self, or self-concept, is hidden behind a veil by the oppressive perceptions and actions of others. The imposition and oppressive perception from society means that individuals from marginalized communities or identities develop a double sight, an internal and external sense of reality. The double sense of reality that imposed by others effects one's self-conception and can cause it to be dis-integrated, painful, and unhealthy. The interactional nature of self-consciousness is essential to the full-throated picture of identity that Dubois presents.

Dubois contributes an essential understanding to the nature of power in identity formation. Instead of seeing identity as a fully agential process, he unveils the ways in which social influences can negatively impact healthy identity formation, and how that affects values and self-concepts. This insight, in conjunction with the insights of James and Peirce, allows for a nuanced theory of identity creation and development that undoes the dichotomy between internal (psychogenetic) and external (sociogenetic) formation, while still allowing for the flexibility of power-dynamics to influence the embodied, emotional, and cognitive constructs of identity.

Each of these thinkers see the starting point of the creation of the self as a process, and their theory of knowledge recognizes embodied change and growth, as well as the importance of relationships (Alexander, 2006). Identities are malleable and embedded in context. Consequently, identity development turns a corner away from rationalistic, one sided or bifurcated, and structurally determined models. Instead, a level of subjective agency rises to meet an ostensibly social shaping (and potentially oppressive) force of identity formation. Through experience and relationships, multiple and varied identities emerge.

### *Pragmatic Identity Theory*

Based on these insights, and in conjunction with the growing body of research on identity and multiculturalism, Pragmatic Identity Theory posits that identities are both personal and social constructs, which are held in complex relationships internally and intersubjectively (between individuals), as well as in complex relationships with the social and physical world. Pragmatic Identity Theory is conceptually based on the recognition that existence *is* relationship. To be is to relate to someone or something else. This emphasis on relationship is in the fiber of Pragmatism, finding fullest expression in the intersubjective nature of Dewey's notion of experience (1958). The implications of this observation are that individuals' interpretations and internalizations of their existence are founded on and formed through intersubjective relations—cognitively, emotionally, and materially (Carr-Chellman & Levitan, 2016).

In other words, identity formation is an experiential and relational process based on learning one's internal, perhaps biological impulses, as well as the feedback from the social and physical environment. So, distinct identities—such as one's religion—are best understood when those distinctions are conceptually integrated into the interactive whole of a dynamic and relational social and material world. In this way and in practical terms, Pragmatic Identity Theory moves the focus of identity formation towards a kind of self-making; a self can contain multiple and malleable identities, formed through the relationship between self and society in continuous process.

Based on the philosophical foundations of American Pragmatists' conception of self-formation, identity is best understood as a malleable, omnipresent, and semi-explicit aspect of experience. Identities are taken-on, learned from, and touch all aspects of human life. Identity, then, is an umbrella term that describes the conglomeration of self-concepts that are constructed, negotiated, and imposed. Identity also refers to those aspects of self that lie at the core of human motivation: the aspects of self that are “uncovered” through experience and reflection.

Pragmatic Identity Theory consists of 4 major premises:

**Premise 1:** Identity is constructed through reflection on, and negotiation with, three influences: a) self-concept, b) responsive semi-conscious embodied impulses, and c) societal meanings of identities—their collective understandings.

These three influences have different powers at different times; they are not hierarchical. Influence a) is how individuals come to see themselves, their self-concept (James, 2013). Self-concept is defined as meanings attached to the phenomenon of “self” (James, 2013; Stets & Trevettevik, 2014). The phenomenal “self” is defined as the individual’s awareness that “this” person, the self, is different in perceptual access than other aspects of the environment (Peirce, 1995; James, 2013). For example, a child learns that burning their hand hurts, while burning a stick does not hurt, thereby showing that they have different perceptual access to their hand as compared to the stick. Because they can feel the burning in their hand, their hand becomes part of the self in their awareness, creating a self-concept. Self-concept is learned over time, and is usually part of our explicit understandings. One’s self-concept and sense of self is fluid. It can be extended to one’s possessions, one’s prestige, or a family member, as perceptive access is a fluid ability. For example, if your child cuts herself, her physical pain might give you the sensation or feeling of pain once you realize that she hurts. That perceptive access is not necessarily immediate is assumed in this idea, but also has common reference points, such as how individuals who do not see a gruesome cut (for example on their head) report not feeling like the cut hurts very badly—until they see it.

Influence b) is the negotiation of responsive semi-conscious internal impulses. Internal impulses are those that affect emotions, perceptions, motivations, and intuitions. Scholars have also labeled this the adaptive unconscious (Wilson, 2004). However, the implication of being unconscious does not do justice to the human experience of semi-consciousness and the fluid nature of our awareness. Awareness without cognitive recognition does not necessarily mean that the individual is unconscious (for example, feeling a sudden chill and realizing someone is staring at you). Also, if consciousness is equivalent to awareness then we are marginally aware of many aspects of the environment (like the constant buzzing of a computer), but directly aware of only a few aspects of that environment, specifically that

which we many see as the significant aspects of our environment—such as the content on the computer screen. Yet, this awareness can shift rapidly depending upon how awareness is directed and then reflected upon.

For example, the underlying characteristics of people that make up the patterns of attraction for an individual, or their “type” of person, is often semi-conscious until reflected upon. One is not aware of “why” they are attracted to someone initially; they just feel the impulse of that attraction. This pattern also works for larger issues of same sex (or gender) or opposite sex (or gender) attraction. The attraction impulse “comes from” inside the person. Often it is an impulse that people choose to listen to or try to ignore. Research has shown that ignoring these impulses (based on societal pressure) affects wellbeing (Beals, Peplau & Gable, 2009). This kind of repression can be seen in Dubois’ notion of double-consciousness and plays a role in one’s ability to accommodate the usual vicissitudes of life (Rofé, 2008). Therefore, embodied impulses make those parts of the self and identity that one “discovers” from time to time. For example, when one gets the feeling that they are in a state of being that feels like “really me.”

Influence c) is how “society”—culture, significant others (parents, partners, friends), and strangers—sees the individual and imposes or negotiates their perceptions on the individual. Others’ perceptions, definitions, and evaluations affect identity construction from the time a person is born (Dubois, 2007; Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Kim, 2012). Under this understanding, identity is subjective and intersubjective, as well as being constructed and inherent depending upon context and the relative power of each of these influences.

It is more useful to be sensitive to multiple identities and the multiple facets and sources of each identity than to generalize about one specific identity writ large. For example, the identity of “Jewish” by itself is almost meaningless in studies of large sociological phenomenon. Other identities of an individual and the relationship between a person and their Jewish identity influences behaviors and values in vastly different ways. For example, a person’s physical appearance, or their family dynamic might influence the valuation of being Jewish, or how much they take on traditional Jewish values. The identity of Jewish is also going to be different in New York as compared to Kentucky because social understandings and stereotypes are different in each context.

To address this complication, Pragmatic Identity Theory understands identity as a constellation of identities (see Premise 2) that are flexible and context-dependent, in order to orient a researcher or practitioner to look at certain aspects of one's identity in relation to other aspects of self, as well as in relation to society or context, in order to map their own unique identities to better understand the impulses for certain behaviors and values.

**Premise 2:** An individual's identity can be “mapped” as a conglomeration or constellation of multiple identities. Each individual identity is understood as a point or node in the map. Each identity node has a distinct level of prevalence, salience, and longevity, and each node manifests in different contexts (Carr-Chellman & Levitan, 2016; Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identities also have three different types: role identity, group identity, and personal identity (McGall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 2002).

Each identity in a persons' identity constellation is integrated into the self through experience and hypothesis testing. Furthermore, each identity may change depending upon context. For example, a person might see herself as very calm and fair-minded at home and with friends, but also as aggressive and competitive at work. Each node or identity has different characteristics: salience, prevalence, and longevity. Salient identities have stronger feelings associated with them. Other scholars use the term “centrality,” to signify salience (e.g., Stets & Serpe, 2013). For example, one might feel very strongly about their ethnicity, or certain abilities, like athletics or writing, but feel less strongly about their job position or income.

Prevalent identities are those that are more likely to be present in any given situation. For example, based on the illustration above, the person is calm and fair at home and in social situations, so the “calm” identity is more prevalent than the “aggressive” identity, which may only appear in certain situations at work. However, how the person actually feels about their calm and aggressive identities, the salience of each identity, does not necessarily correlate to prevalence. This person may feel strongly about being aggressive as one of their identities, even if they are only aggressive for an hour or two a day. So, though the calm identity is prevalent, as it appears in more contexts than the aggressive identity, it is less salient. This distinction helps explain why some people

can be generous and caring in contexts of service or philanthropy, but cold or grudging to family members.

Longevity is the amount of time identities last. For example, some identities last a lifetime, such as having particular parents (Kripke, 1978). Yet other identities only last for a short time. Teenagers in particular take on many identities that do not last long. For example, a teen may take on an “artist” identity and paint every day for a week, as well as dress like a French student at the Sorbonne. But, in a month, that teen becomes a cheerleader.

Identities have three types: 1) Role identity, such as “parent”, “caregiver”, “sibling” (McGall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 2002); 2) Group identities, which are the groups with whom one identifies, such as Catholic, Protestant, Republican, Democrat, etc. (Burke & Stets, 2009); and 3) Personal identities, or the characteristics of the self in relation with or as distinct from others (Burke & Stets, 2009), such as athlete, caring, intellectual, witty, a smoker, a non-drinker, or any of the various personal or adjectival terms that designate a specific part of one’s self.

**Premise 3:** Emotions are deeply connected to identities (Stets & Trettevik, 2014; DuBois, 2007). The value individuals, and others, place, or do not place, on the identities that make up one’s identity constellation affects their overall well-being and individual sense of efficacy.

Self-concept, or feelings about one’s identities, plays a vital role in mental well-being, motivation, and willingness to change (Stets & Trettevik, 2014). Emotions are an inherent aspect of identity. Past literature has defined identity as a purely cognitive construct (Wilson, 2004). In contrast, we highlight the integrated centrality of emotions in identity. Emotions, which are deeply somatic and social, react to negative, positive, or neutral characterizations of identities. Emotions also react to the amount of attention that an individual’s sub-identities receive. For example, if an individual sees herself as intelligent, but no one notices or pays attention to her intelligence, then she is likely to become hurt, defensive, and/or potentially over-demonstrate her intelligence (Stets & Burke, 2014).

**Premise 4:** Identities have various levels of stability and malleability. Identity values are different than identities and can also be transformed.

Identity values and identity are connected but distinct. Identity values can be as important as the identity itself in terms of one's emotions and self-concept. For example, left-handedness, once considered a deviant characteristic, is now seen as an asset in activities like organized sports. The transformation from deviancy to asset in social values of left-handedness is a sign of fluidity, while being biologically left-handed is a fairly stable identity. Although biological left-handedness can change, it is difficult to do and harms the person trying to make the switch, so biological left-handedness as an identity is more stable. Both the valuation of being left-handed and left-handedness are important, and in relationship, yet they have different levels of power. The valuation of left-handedness affected the lives of left-handed children in social ways, while the biological characteristics of left-handedness also affects the lives of left-handed children, but in practical, physical ways.

For example, the more positive aspects of left-handedness were hidden when being left-handed was seen as deviant, but still had positive influences on the lives of some individuals. Now that the superstition of left-handedness has been removed, the biological influences are stronger than the social influences (Hardyck & Petrinvich, 1977)—though debate continues about the role of handedness in individual's lives.

These four premises taken together as an analytical framework for understanding identity can help uncover the many identities each person embodies or carries with them. This theoretical approach can also provide insight into the continual process of self-making and relational negotiation inherent in individuals' daily lives. The theory allows individuals to better uncover and understand how their identities may both facilitate strength and well-being, as well as create tensions or conflict in their personal and social environment.

### *Potential Contributions of Pragmatic Identity Theory*

There are three contributions that Pragmatic Identity Theory offers:

1) The premises are straightforward enough that this theory offers a practical way of getting to know others' identities without relying on stereotypes. For example, and in alignment with multicultural theory (e.g. Gay, 1995),

Pragmatic Identity Theory recognizes that each person has multiple identities with different levels of salience, prevalence, and longevity, implying that if teachers want to get to know their students, they benefit from recognizing that their students have a constellation of identities and that there is a good chance that each student has one identity that may also be part of the teacher's constellation of identities, such as "artist" or being a fan of the same sports team. Thinking about identities as multiple, context-dependent, embodied, and unique can help avoid stereotyping biases against students from cultural and ethnic minorities. If a teacher who understands Pragmatic Identity Theory recognizes that, for a visible minority student, their ethnic identity is one of many identities they carry (though likely a very salient one), they may begin to see the complexity of each student. That identities are learned through relationships, as is posited by Pragmatic Identity Theory, also implies that teachers have a duty to be considerate about how they build relationships with their students. Teachers' interactions can have a deep impact on students' identities, and therefore their well-being. Teachers who utilize this theory can then be more mindful about how they respond to different students' identities and recognize those identities that are most salient to be able to help students feel comfortable and safe in school. They can also help build a students' in-class identity through facilitating reflection and positive constructions of the students' identities in relationship with their other identities.

- 2) As an approach to interpreting research data, Pragmatic Identity Theory provides an interpretive lens to understanding identities through interviews. Interview data can be mapped for easy interpretation, while also providing rich qualitative information. However, more research is necessary on how to develop the methods and analytical frame that utilizes this research (e.g. Levitan, Mahfouz, & Schussler, 2018). A method to interpret information using Pragmatic Identity Theory can provide an avenue for helping interviewees become more self-aware through dialogue, as well as providing researchers with an interpretive framework to understand the identities and relationships that may influence how, for example, a new teacher will take to their induction process as they start to teach.
- 3) Pragmatic Identity Theory can also support teaching and teacher education research, and professional development

research (Olsen, 2008; Alsup, 2005; Tisdell, 2001; 2006). Scholars have examined the ways in which the subtle aspects of self come into the classroom or workplace and affect pedagogy, quality of teaching, and teacher burnout (Schussler, Bercaw, & Stooksberry, 2008; Palmer, 2010). Educational research has also developed a focus on teacher self-awareness and dispositions (Schussler, Stooksberry & Bercaw, 2010) as core components of quality teaching. Understanding a teacher's dispositions can allow for understanding patterns of action (Borko, Liston & Whitcombe, 2007). So, when teachers become self-aware of their dispositions as well as their values and biases, they can more effectively assess their influence on others (Borich, 1999), and change those patterns if they find them to not be efficacious. Pragmatic Identity Theory speaks to this work.

### *Conclusion*

Drawing on the philosophical foundations of American Pragmatism, and in alignment with multicultural theory, the core argument of Pragmatic Identity Theory is that identities are multiple, context dependent, and have complex relationships with each other, within the individual, and between individuals. Identities also have complex relationships with the social and physical world. Based on these observations, an individual's experience, interpretation, and internalization of her existence is founded on and formed through relationships that are emotional, cognitive and exist in physical space. Identity formation is a fundamentally relational process, so the contribution of this theoretical framework is that it allows for a nuanced understanding of self and society as a negotiated psychogenetic *and* sociogenetic process.

Although still preliminary, we think a synthesis of the Pragmatists' foundational epistemological insights with multicultural theory can offer a coherent framework to advance the understanding of identity to uncover patterns of stability and change in the learning process. Future work will begin to demonstrate the efficacy of this approach through analyzing narrative data, and how self-reflective storytelling can illuminate the interactions of identity with changes in learning.

The hope is that this essay presents ideas that spark discussion and debate about approaching identities as a

comprehensive and interactive part of the human experience. We think that this foundational, pragmatic insight offers possibilities for the future development of Pragmatic Identity Theory as an approach that is viable and useful for education scholars.

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