Identity-Based Motivation: Using Identity to do More and Better

Abstract

People often have quite high aspirations for their health, wealth, and educational attainment but fail to start soon enough, persist long enough, and engage smartly enough to succeed. Identity-based motivation theory is a social psychological theory of motivation that provides a useful predictive framework to understand why that might be, how macro-level factors might matter, and what can be done about it. I present the theory and supporting experimental evidence from experiments and school-based intervention research showing that the predicted effects are obtained even in the rigors of real world complexity. Evidence suggests that identities are not fixed but dynamically constructed in context, that how people interpret their experiences of ease and difficulty is influenced by which identities are on the mind and what these identities seem to imply in the moment. The reverse is also true; people guided to particular interpretations of their experienced difficulty experience parallel shifts in identity content. Teachers can be trained to deliver a brief intervention to change each of these elements of identity-based motivation with resultant change in end-of-year school grades and risk of course failure.
class matters too, shifting chronic endorsement of difficulty mindsets by undermining people's everyday sense of power and control.

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