Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on International Law and Legal Policy
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

Decision-Making and Cognitive Processes Based on Identity and Identity Formation

Zhongrui Li

Psychology Department, University of Washington, Seattle, USA
zhongl9@uw.edu

Abstract. Identity is a dynamic psychological construct encompassing an individual's social roles, beliefs, values, self-conception, and social status. Although identity evolves over time through experiences and social interactions, individuals perceive it as relatively stable; this perception fosters a sense of continuity and influences social adaptation. By reviewing recent theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence regarding social identity and self-constructed identity, this article explores how identity shapes human cognition, moral judgment, and decision-making processes. Drawing on research into identity-driven motivation, occupational role identity, and moral decision-making, the article concludes that identity serves as a psychological framework through which individuals interpret situations, establish appropriate standards for judgment, and select behaviors consistent with their perceived roles and values. Further analysis reveals that identity not only guides initial decisions but also provides the impetus for individuals to rationalize and sustain subsequent actions. Overall, identity should not be viewed merely as a passive description of an individual's self-definition, but rather as an active cognitive and motivational framework that shapes how individuals perceive situations, evaluate alternatives, and regulate their behavior. Consequently, understanding these identity-based psychological processes offers valuable insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying human decision-making and social behavior.

Keywords: Social Identity, Identity Priming, Decision-making

1. Introduction

In modern society, individuals do not live as isolated entities; rather, they exist simultaneously within families, schools, workplaces, social groups, and various institutional and cultural environments. As the division of labor becomes increasingly specialized and social relationships grow more complex, people must assume different roles in different contexts, adjusting their behavior in accordance with relevant social norms, values, and behavioral expectations. For instance, a man might simultaneously be a university professor, a friend, a husband, a father, and a member of a school baseball club—roles that often entail distinct responsibilities and behavioral requirements. Therefore, understanding why individuals make different judgments and act differently in the same situation requires looking beyond objective circumstances or personal

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

interests; one must also examine how individuals perceive their "identity in the current situation" and how that perception shapes their interactions with society.

This article defines identity as a composite of characteristics, social statuses, beliefs, values, and self-perception. Elements that collectively shape how individuals understand themselves and interact with society. Identity encompasses both objective and subjective components. Some aspects are innate, such as biological sex, ethics, or specific health conditions, while others are conferred through categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and expectations, including occupation, social status, or identities formed in response to authority and social norms [1]. Furthermore, identity can be constructed through personal factors, such as beliefs, values, political leanings, interests, and one's own interpretation of personal traits. These personal factors are often shaped and improved through continuous interaction with social environments and other individuals.

Identity is not static but dynamic; it evolves and changes as individuals encounter new social environments, life experiences, and role transitions. Although identity undergoes objective change, individuals often subjectively perceive it as relatively stable. This sense of continuity helps maintain mental health and a sense of coherence, reduces cognitive conflict, and fosters effective social adaptation. It enables individuals to maintain a consistent self-concept even at the time they have gradual changes in beliefs, relationships, or social status, thereby enhancing their adaptability within social environments. For example, if a person tells a white lie to protect someone else facing unfair situation, they may still identify themselves as "honest person", because the act of lying can be interpreted as consistent with a broader moral self-concept for protect another from unfair treatment.

Beyond self-perception, identity entails associated responsibilities, expectations, and behavioral norms, which in turn influence an individual's behavioral motivations, judgments, and decisions. However, the extent of this influence depends on the degree to which an individual internalizes and identifies with a particular identity. People tend to assume the existence of a stable essence or core that predicts behavior. Much like the belief that one can predict tomorrow's preferences and desires based on today's; identity influences behavior, just as behavior reflects identity. Crucially, when an identity aligns with an individual's values, goals, or interests, it tends to guide behavior more effectively; conversely, if an identity is not fully embraced or conflicts with personal beliefs, its influence on behavior is comparatively weaker. In situations involving unethical orders, the presence or absence of social and situational factors is crucial to whether subjects resist such orders [2]. Among the various forms of identity, two are particularly influential in contemporary society: the first is "social identity," which stems from an individual's membership in social groups and the roles they play, encompassing aspects such as status, occupation, and familial roles. It can be said that as long as stable, socially constructed systems exist, people will possess a social identity. In contrast, the second form is "self-constructed identity," which reflects an individual's understanding and evaluation of their own essence.

2. Analysis

2.1. Social identity

Identity not only shapes how individuals perceive themselves but also influences their behavioral choices and decision-making processes by linking individual behavior to the moral implications associated with their identities. Embracing a specific identity entails accepting the associated responsibilities, obligations, and societal expectations. To maintain identity consistency, individuals often feel constrained to act in accordance with identity-based norms, especially when their identities' current role and obligations conflict with their personal preferences or self-interests.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

Consequently, in social life, identity identification and its impact on behavior serve as a significant mechanism for behavioral constraint. This constraining effect intensifies when the identity is derived from authoritative organizations, institutions, or individuals, such as the military, prominent media outlets, major corporations, or the ranks of the wealthy. Such identities exert a powerful influence on decision-making and behavior, leading individuals to act differently than they would outside that social role; at times, these actions may even breach personal moral boundaries or prioritize the lives of others over their own.

When people view others, social identity serves as a category used for social decision-making. It helps them evaluate others based on patterns learned and inferred within the social world. Such identities typically involve characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and political affiliation [3]. When people view themselves, social identities are typically accompanied by clear standards and behavioral norms. To fulfill the responsibilities of an identity and maintain consistency, individuals proactively adjust their behavior to align with that identity and meet the expectations of the society that confers such authority.

For instance, being a journalist is not merely a professional role involving news reporting; it entails a social responsibility to convey timely, accurate, and accessible information to the public, to oversee public power, and to protect the public from deception. Blanco-Herrero et al. examined the professional practices of Dutch journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that most viewed themselves as guardians of the public interest and disseminators of truthful information. This socially conferred identity as a "whistleblower" or "Watchdog for people" drove some journalists to persist in reporting the reality of the pandemic despite facing government pressure, public skepticism, and risks to personal safety. Even those who, under pressure from the situation, the government, and the public, were compelled to publish reports immediately without fully verifying their accuracy, later expressed self-criticism; they wished they had more rigorously fulfilled their role as overseers by scrutinizing government actions [4]. This demonstrates that when an individual identifies with a specific social identity, the responsibilities attached to that identity become a significant factor in decision-making; they can even compel the individual to accept personal loss in order to uphold the social values represented by that identity. When individuals are forced to act in ways that violate the responsibilities and obligations of their social identity, they experience moral distress. In extreme cases, the resulting regret over failing to fulfill their social duties may lead them to distancing themselves from their social identity and rights, as a form of self-imposed punishment for violate their social identity's role and norm.

In modern hybrid work environments, which combine in-person and remote work, social identity plays an increasingly important role. Psychological identification with the role of "company employee" and with the organization itself fosters a more open workplace culture and enhances employee autonomy. A study by Sagar et al. based on cross-sectional survey data from 412 hybrid workers across sectors such as IT, consulting, energy, manufacturing, financial services, and professional services, found that psychological ownership—a state wherein individuals feel an object belongs to "me" or "us" despite lacking legal ownership—is negatively correlated with resistance to change and acts as a mediator between communication transparency, autonomy, and resistance to change [5].

However, identity-related pressure does not always yield positive outcomes. When identity norms originate from a higher authority, individuals may set aside their own moral judgment in favor of obedience. Scholars offer various interpretations for this: it may be that once responsibility is assumed by higher-ups, individuals lose some awareness of the relationship between power and accountability; alternatively, the pressure exerted by superior authority may force individuals to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

prioritize self-preservation, leading them to obey orders and abandon moral judgment. Among experiments exploring such authority dynamics, the Stanford Prison Experiment stands out as the most famous—and the most ethically controversial case. It suggested that when individual placed in a role with unregulated power, especially a role with aggression and control behavior, they might become more likely to adopt their role/identity that conflict with their ordinary civic norms. However, a re-examination of the experiment by Haslam et al. revealed that the results did not stem simply from the "prison guard" identity or the associated social expectations and self-identification. Instead, the experimenters actively prompted and encouraged participants, driving them to exhibit increasingly harsh and even cruel behavior. In other words, the participants acted against their own moral standards not merely because they were playing the role of prison guards, but because they also internalized the behavioral expectations imposed by the authority figure, the experimenter. The experimenter effectively acted as a "third tier of authority" above the "guards," constantly pressuring them to comply for the sake of the experiment and to abandon their moral judgment [6]. As the authority figure repeatedly emphasized goals and role-based responsibilities, participants came to view obedience as a duty to be fulfilled; this eroded their moral constraints and led them to abandon moral judgment, even in the face of inhumane atrocities. This phenomenon illustrates that identity-related pressure exerted by a high-level authority figure possesses a far greater capacity to shape behavior than the pressure associated with ordinary social identities because it combines role expectations with institutional legitimacy, reward, punishment, and perceived responsibility transfer. On one hand, authority figures possess resources, the power to reward or punish, and sometimes even the power to take impose more serious consequences, may inclines individuals to comply with their demands, whether out of a desire for gain or a need for self-preservation. On the other hand, authority is generally perceived as possessing superior expertise and legitimacy, and as bearing some degree of responsibility for the individual's actions; consequently, individuals are more likely to internalize the demands of authority as part of their own role-based obligations. When behaviors advocated by societal or institutional authorities align with an individual's values. Such as those held by journalists dedicated to public accountability and their role pressure can reinforce motivation and support more responsible action.. However, when a conflict arises between the two, an individual may make decisions that violate their own moral boundaries in order to maintain their identity or to pursue benefits while avoiding harm.

2.2. Identity priming

A review of the literature reveals that individuals often do not make decisions based solely on objective information and situational assessments; instead, they are profoundly influenced by their own identities, making choices that align with those identities. Identity shapes not only how people understand social roles but also how they interpret situations, the standards by which they make value judgments, their behavioral norms, their sense of social responsibility, and their ultimate choices of action. A specific identity will be activated in a given context, whether by a trigger such as a remark referencing that identity or by something that engages the individual's perception of it. In these situation, individual tends to adopt thought patterns and behavioral strategies consistent with that identity, thereby exhibiting cognitive preferences and decision-making outcomes that differ from those observed in a non-identity-salient state. However, when individuals internalize an identity as part of their own behavioral norms, rather than relying on external triggers for activation, they typically engage in predictable, identity-based behavior.

Research by Jensen & Pedersen provides a empirical finding of how identity and its internalization influence decision-making. The study reveals that street-level bureaucrats, who must

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

navigate conflicting facets of their roles, may adopt different discretionary strategies depending on which aspect of their professional identity becomes most salient in a given situation. On one hand, they must manage their emotions and make impartial judgments grounded in state law; on the other, they are expected to provide responses that are personalized and fitted into current scenario for each individual case. The findings indicate that when bureaucrats identify primarily as "servants of the people," they tend to focus on public needs, adopt flexible and lenient approaches, and favor differentiated responses and showing a positive correlation with the likelihood of tailoring their actions to the specific behavior of the citizens they serve. Conversely, when they identify primarily as "agents of the law," they emphasize the strict enforcement of legal rules and procedures, remain less influenced by situational factors, and prefer to handle cases according to rigid legal standards and showing a negative correlation with the likelihood of differentiated responses. These findings suggest that role identity may play an active and important role in shaping individual behavior, rather than merely being associated with it. This demonstrates that identity and its internalization serve as a psychological framework, guiding individuals to apply different criteria for judgment in identical situations and ultimately shaping their behavioral decisions [7].

Beyond influencing decisions in professional domains, identity and its internalization can also alter people's moral judgments by activiting different standard about right or wrong for moral evaluating. In a study conducted within the Chinese cultural context Jin and Peng asked participants to imagine themselves in future social roles and subsequently placed them in moral dilemmas; they found that these imagined, anticipated identities activated distinct modes of moral reasoning in the present. When preparing for roles requiring "warmth", such as teachers or social workers, participants were more inclined toward deontological judgments; they prioritized adherence to moral principles and the welfare of others, accepting personal costs (such as a social worker sacrificing leisure time) to benefit others. For converse By contrast, when preparing for roles requiring "competence", such as corporate managers or financial analysts, participants were more likely to make utilitarian judgments, focusing on maximizing overall benefits; in doing so, they might overlook options otherwise deemed "unethical," such as a manager dismissing an inefficient employee despite the latter facing family hardships. These patterns held true across moral dilemmas involving varying degrees of hypothetical personal involvement and appeared to be influenced by the perception of others' expectations—which can be understood, to some extent, as how others define the identity of the person facing the dilemma. This research demonstrates that identity shapes not only behavioral choices but also the cognitive process of determining "what is right." In other words, the same moral dilemma can yield vastly different judgments depending on the underlying identity context [8].

While the two studies mentioned above focus respectively on law enforcement decision-making and moral judgment, In summary, both studies demonstrate that identity serves as a crucial cognitive cue that shapes an individual's way of thinking, such as standard criteria for judgment, assuming responsibility, and planning for future goals.. This perspective aligns with the core assumptions of Identity-Based Motivation Theory. Oyserman and Destin note that individuals interpret their surroundings and the difficulties or challenges they encountered based on their currently active identities. When a behavior aligns with one's current identity, people are more likely to perceive it as meaningful and remain committed to it, strengthens the willingness to invest effort and energy into an action; conversely, if there is a conflict between behavior and identity, people experience psychological resistance and causing a reduced willingness to participate.; conversely, when a behavior conflicts with that identity, psychological barriers arise, reducing the willingness to act. Thus, identity influences not only behavior itself but also how individuals interpret situations. For

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

instance, a student who identifies as an "ambitious learner" may interpret exam failure as a temporary obstacle in the learning process, whereas someone who believes they are "bad at studying" might interpret it as proof of a lack of ability, leading to vastly different subsequent choices [9].

In his 2017 article, Oyserman further noted that identity not only influences decision-making but also helps individuals rationalize actions they have already taken. When a behavior aligns with one's current identity, people tend to view their choices as natural and correct; even if the behavior itself seems somewhat irrational, individuals can mitigate cognitive dissonance by emphasizing the importance of their identity. For example, an individual who identifies as an "environmentalist" might purchase a more expensive eco-friendly product and view it as a reasonable expenditure consistent with their values, rather than merely a financial cost. This mechanism of identity-based rationalization means that identity not only drives behavior, guide initial choices, but also reinforces behavioral consistency and persistence, sustain them overtime [10].

3. Conclusion

This article examines how identity influences individual cognition and decision-making, focusing on the roles of social identity, self-constructed identity, and identity identification in shaping behavior. It posits that identity is not merely a static label describing an individual's social position or characteristics, but rather a dynamic psychological construct shaped by multiple factors and capable of guiding the development of behavioral norms. Identities evolve as environments and social roles shift; simultaneously, individuals maintain a sense of self-continuity and social adaptability by upholding a relatively stable perception of their identity. Therefore, understanding individual behavior and decision-making requires considering both the objective environment and the individual's subjective understanding of their own identity.

This article argues that identity influences an individual's decision-making and cognitive processes by shaping their behavioral norms, sense of responsibility, interpretation of situations, and value judgments. When a specific identity is activated in a given context or strongly internalized, individuals are more inclined to choose behaviors consistent with that identity and to interpret and evaluate issues using standards aligned with it. Therefore, understanding and predicting individual behavior requires greater attention to identity and the extent of its internalization, rather than relying solely on external circumstances, objective interests, or social norms.

At the individual level, reflecting on the various identities individuals hold and the values underlying them may help individuals recognize potential conflicts among these identities and avoid decisions made under identity-related pressure that contradict their core values or moral principles. For social organizations and institutions. For social organizations and institutions, establishing clear and reasonable behavioral norms while shaping members' identities is important, particularly without relying on excessive authoritative pressure that may lead individuals to prioritize organizational or identity-based requirements over independent moral judgment.

Another significance of this article lies in further illustrating that identity serves as a crucial bridge connecting the social environment with individual psychological processes. It not only explains why individuals exhibit different behaviors across various social roles but also helps researchers understand why people form differing perceptions, moral judgments, and decisions in identical situations. Identity-Based Motivation Theory further demonstrates that identity influences not only how individuals act but also how they interpret challenges in their environment and perceive the meaningfulness of their actions. When a behavior aligns with one's current identity, individuals are more likely to view it as meaningful and invest greater effort; conversely, when a

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.36971

behavior conflicts with that identity, psychological resistance may arise. Therefore, examining cognition and decision-making through the lens of identity contributes to establishing a more comprehensive explanatory framework for individual-society interactions.

However, this paper has certain limitations. First, the analysis relies primarily on existing theoretical and empirical studies; given the variations in research designs, samples, and contexts across these studies, the relationship between identity and behavior cannot be simply generalized as a universal and stable causal link. Second, identity is inherently dynamic and multifaceted; individuals may hold multiple identities simultaneously, with their relative importance shifting according to the situation. However, this paper lacks sufficient examples to specifically explain the mechanisms of competition, coordination, and transition among these identities. Furthermore, as this paper does not analyze studies involving long-term longitudinal surveys or experiments, its conclusions provide limited insight into long-term changes. Additionally, the influence of identity on behavior may be moderated by external factors such as an individual's cultural background and personal values, as well as societal authority structures and environmental conditions. Future research could employ more longitudinal and experimental studies to further examine the causal relationships among identity activation, identity internalization, and behavioral change, while also investigating how identity influences cognition and decision-making across diverse cultural and social contexts. Such research would help refine the understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying identity and enhance the practical utility of identity theory in explaining real-world social decision-making and behavior.

References

[1] Stets, J. E. (2005). Examining emotions in identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 68*(1), 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250506800104

[2] Caspar, E. A. (2021). A novel experimental approach to study disobedience to authority. *Scientific Reports, 11*(1), 22927. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-02334-8

[3] Smaldino, P. E. (2026). A functionalist account of social identity. In W. Wagner & C. Moya (Eds.), *Culture, identity, and essentialism: Anthropological and psychological approaches* (pp. 165–185). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-11918-6_8

[4] Blanco-Herrero, D., van der Meer, T. G. L. A., & van den Putte, B. (2025). Role adoption and decision making: How Dutch journalists dealt with misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journalism Practice, 0*(0), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2464925

[5] Sagar, S. S., Gaur, V., & Jain, A. K. (2026). Psychological ownership and resistance to change in hybrid work environments: An internalization-based explanation. *Administrative Sciences, 16*(6), 257. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci16060257

[6] Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2019). Rethinking the nature of cruelty: The role of identity leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment. *The American Psychologist, 74*(7), 809–822. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000443

[7] Jensen, D. C., & Pedersen, M. M. (2023). A cross-sectional study on the relationship between street-level bureaucrats' role identity and their discretionary decision-making practice toward citizen-clients. *Administration and Society, 55*(5), 868–891. https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997231157752

[8] Jin, W. Y., & Peng, M. (2021). The effects of social perception on moral judgment. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.557216

[9] Oyserman, D., & Destin, M. (2010). Identity-based motivation: Implications for intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist, 38*(7), 1001–1043. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000010374775

[10] Oyserman, D., Lewis Jr, N. A., Yan, V. X., Fisher, O., O'Donnell, S. C., & Horowitz, E. (2017). An identity-based motivation framework for self-regulation. *Psychological Inquiry, 28*(2–3), 139–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2017.1337406