

Toward an Integrative Theory of Self-Identity and Identity Stressors and Traumas and Their Mental Health Dynamics

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Abstract

Self-identity is a flexible and linear/non-linear dynamic system that consists of various identities and hierarchical sub-modules and operating processes and develops (grows or declines) through dealing with stressors and traumas (IST). ISTs may threaten the existence, the maintenance or development of one of the persons' identities. Different IST types include personal identity, physical identity, role identity, and social identity stressors/traumas and constitute a multi-level hierarchy. A value processing system, related self-evaluation, and core developmental assets are identity-impeded operational processes in each identity. The salience of one identity may be activated by IST and became the situational (or the default) lens that biases the person's appraisal and coping response. The most traumatizing ISTs are those that threaten identities' existence, triggering existential anxieties. The macro dynamics of accumulation, proliferation and the interaction between pre-identity, identity, and post-identity traumas determine their mental health impact, rather than a triggering trauma.

Keywords

Identity Traumas, Existential Annihilation Anxiety, Developmental Assets, Value Processing System (VPS), Development-Based Trauma Framework (DBTF)

1. Introduction

Self-identity, the executive self, develops within the context of adversities. Advancing our understanding of self and identity in the context of life stressors and traumas is important to develop the field. Authors want to state from the begin-

ning that they consider traumatic events as one type of stressors that are acute and are an intricate part of the general theory of stressors. When we talk about stressors, we mean all kinds of acute (traumatic), chronic and non-chronic stressors. Further, we think that clinical science should focus on the impact and the total macro dynamics of stressors that include the accumulation and proliferation of traumatic, chronic and non-chronic stressors, their dynamical interactions and their impact and not only on a single acute (traumatic) stressors which are, mostly the dominant focus of the single trauma-focused PTSD literature. We will discuss in detail the current perspective of Self- and identity stressors and the need for new perspective and propose an integrative framework that details identity traumas and their micro and macro dynamics.

There are growing interest and momentum and emerging body of literature around, stress, identity, and trauma. However, their diverse empirical findings and conceptual paradigms are fragmented which challenge their conceptual clarity. The conceptual and empirical integration that combine and refine the various models is vital to moving the field forward. The goal of the current paper is to propose a unifying and coherent interdisciplinary framework that may enhance the conceptual precision and absorbs/integrates the diverse theories and the rich empirical findings on identity, stressors, and traumas and their mental health dynamics. This project can provide clarity while also generating new testable ideas. We will briefly describe the current perspective on identity and identity stressors and traumas, and then propose a refined and integrative conceptual framework for the mechanisms of interaction between identity and identity/stressors and their linear and non-linear micro and macro dynamics.

2. The Current Perspective on Self-Identity and Identity Stressors and Traumas and the Need for a New Framework on Identity Stressors and Traumas

Current status of our knowledge in this field reflected significant progress on understanding identity/stressor/trauma dynamics. Individuals develop their identities, starting in early adolescence (e.g., [Blos, 1962](#); [Kroger, 2007](#)). Adolescence marks the crucial individuation revolution that sets the child on the developmental path and the emergence of a unique interdependent person into adulthood. Self-identity as a flexible and dynamic agentic system develops (positively or negatively) by dealing with internal, environmental and social stressors and traumas. There is evidence that the activation of self-identity is context specific and varies across situations and with the exposure to the developing context of stressors and traumas (e.g., [Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2017](#); [Guala & Filippin, 2017](#)). Identity stressors and traumas are the context of and pre-requisite to identity development and constitute the other term of the identity development equation. The response of the emerging identity to the challenging or threatening internal and external stressors and traumas determines the trajectory of identity development and its behavioral outcomes. Stressors can challenge or nurture one aspect of self-identity, stimulating or inhibiting its development. For

example, rape can challenge and inhibit the personal identity autonomous growth, while nurturing family environment can nurture personal identity autonomy and interdependence.

At adolescence, individuals start acquiring increased self-awareness, meta-processing, meta-cognitive and self-regulatory capacities. They develop self-definitions expressed in independent and interdependent self-schemas and related self-evaluative, event, and other-evaluative and cognitive and emotional processing capacities. Through this process, they acquire internal and external developmental assets. Developed self-evaluation capacities that help them explore their limits and potentials and cope with adversities. They selectively attune themselves to significant events that have relevance and importance to their developing self-definitions, self-schemas, self-evaluations, assets and existential concerns (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Markus, 1977; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Oyserman, 2009).

Current status of our knowledge in this field fails/or poorly identify the differential effects of the various stressor types on different identities of the individual and the dynamics of their interactions. Further, the conceptual frameworks and empirical results that attempted to explore these interactional dynamics differed and are fragmented. Attempting the integration of a myriad of competing and overlapping theoretical models and related empirical research, in stress, trauma and identity fields, constitutes a formidable and challenging epistemological project. However, such an attempt may contribute to advance a transdisciplinary lens that organizes our knowledge and thinking on self, identity, and stress. We will use and further refine the emerging paradigm of development-based trauma framework (DBTF) to help tackle this integrative task.

3. An Integrative Framework on Identity and Identity Traumas

Constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the self-identity components are related to the existence, maintenance and development of the individual's executive self with its emerging meta-cognitive and self-control capacities (see **Figure 1**). Agency seems to arise from both self-controlled and stimulus-controlled processes (e.g., Wang, Damen, & Aarts, 2017). With the emerging agency, complex systems of identity emerge. An executive self-identity functions as the organizing and regulating executive agent that manages the self's dynamic hierarchy of identities (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2010). It manages the development of agentic executive processing. Personal (and interpersonal) identity involves independent self-schemas which are central to the emotional and cognitive processing of interpersonal stressors and traumas. On another hand, social identity theory (SIT) (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggested that identification with groups of belonging and interdependent self-schemas is central to emotional and cognitive processing especially in response to intergroup and collective (social) identity stressors. SIT proposes that group-based appraisal yields group-based emotions, and behavior (e.g., Mackie & Smith, 2002). Self-identity

is an information agent that process information about the world (e.g., [Baumeister, Maranges, & Vohs, 2018](#)). Identities, personal or collective, as such, are pre-cognitive, pre-affective self-schemas and meta-representations that function to process and regulate perceptions, conducting appraisals/reappraisals, emotions and behavior (cf., e.g., [Elmore & Oyserman, 2012](#); [Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007](#); [Randel, 2002](#); [Reed, 2004](#); [Oyserman et al., 2015](#)). Further, identity implicates yearning for authenticity and the need to self-actualize, self-fulfill, and affirm the activated social or personal identity, promoting their goals and life projects.

Development-based trauma framework (DBTF) ([Kira, 2001](#), [Kira, 2010](#); [Kira et al., 2008](#), [Kira et al., 2013](#); [Kira et al. 2011](#), [Kira et al., 2014](#); [Shuwiekh, Kira, & Ashby, 2017](#)) maps some of the linear and non-linear micro and macro dynamics behind the etiology of identity traumas negative or positive impact (see [Figure 1](#), see also [Appendix](#) for terminology definitions). Human beings are self-aware dynamic systems that continually monitor internal and external processes through feedback and feedforward loops. They demonstrate nonlinear shifts from one state to another upon a threshold of external and/or internal pressures/stressors (e.g., [Benight, Shoji & Delahanty, 2017](#); [Guastello, & Liebovitch, 2009](#); [Kaplan & Garner, 2017](#); [Kunnen, 2012](#)). Current static models of identity cannot capture the nonlinear dynamic processes such as shifts in self-regulation and shifts in identity salience from identity to another within its complex hierarchical matrix of salient and dormant identities. Research on identity dynamics can benefit from a more dynamic hybrid linear and non-linear systems approach that is focused on the dynamic process of self-adaptation to extreme stressors across time. The dynamic hybrid approach opens the door to significant methodological advances in using the non-linear analytical methods.

DBTF expanded and integrated identity, existential and annihilation anxieties (EAA), and stress and trauma theories into a cohesive framework of identity trauma dynamics. Identity trauma framework (e.g., [Kira, 2010](#)) serves as a meta-theoretical heuristic that may orient future research on identity-related stressors. It is based on the separation/individuation and the development of autonomy and interdependence theories (e.g., [Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 2000](#)). It builds on [Erikson's \(1968\)](#) work on identity, [Marcia's](#) model of identity development (e.g., [Marcia, 1980](#)), and the model of identity processing styles (e.g., [Berzonsky, 2008](#)). Identity stressors/traumas are internal or external events or situations that threaten or challenge the existence, maintenance or development of one or more of the persons' salient identities, and/or its related assumptions, self-evaluations, and existing functional assets (compare: [Oyserman, 2009a, 2009b, 2015](#); [Fisher & Oyserman, 2017](#)). People usually react to stressors in ways that are congruent with their activated identities, related accessible self-schemas, and embedded valuations and related developmental assets. DBTF proposes three main stressor/trauma types that include pre-identity traumas, (e.g., attachment disruption), different identity stressor/trauma types that may be experienced with the emergence of the individuation process, and post-identity

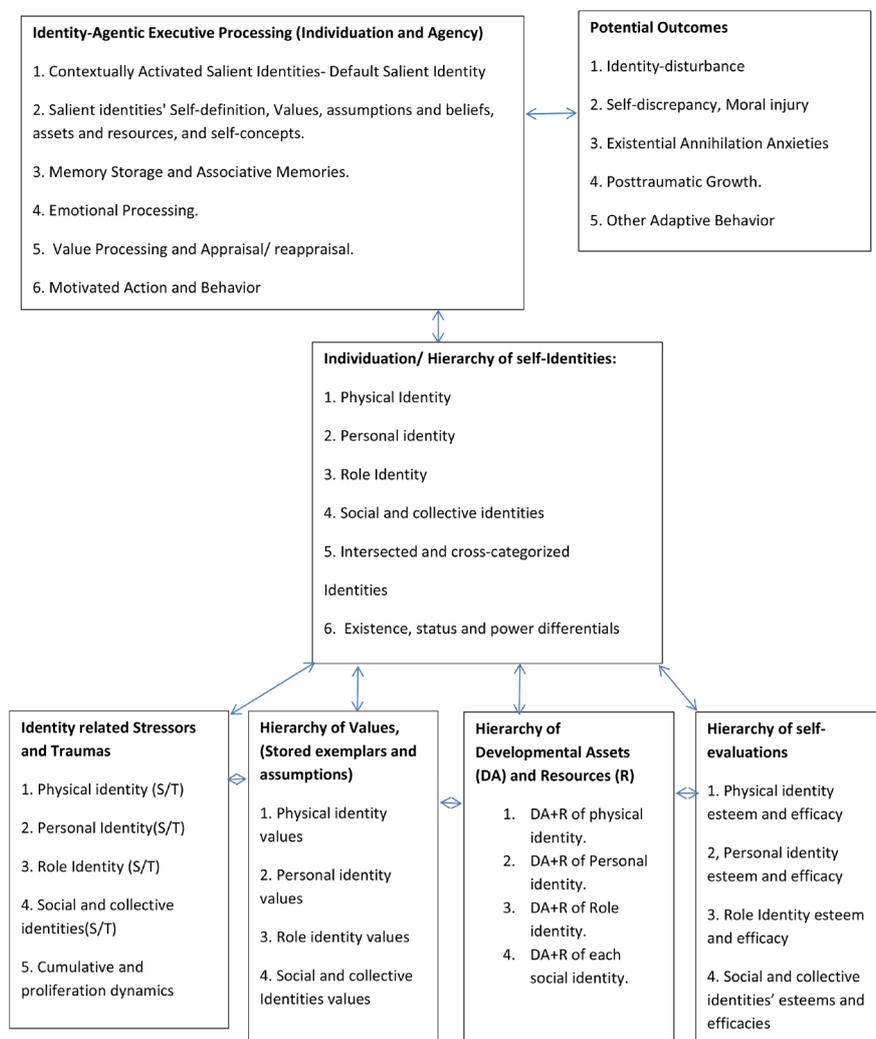


Figure 1. The conceptual model of identity linear and non-linear system micro dynamics. Note: S/T = Stressors/Traumas; DA + R = Developmental assets and Resources.

stressor/trauma of interdependence that reflects the wiring of the individual's complex personal and social connectome. Post-identity trauma types include secondary and tertiary stressor-trauma types. While secondary traumatization is the interpersonal transmission of stressor/trauma between connected persons, tertiary traumatization is the inter-generation transmission, intergroup transmission, and historical traumas. Both types of secondary and tertiary stressors/traumas are related to the interdependence dynamics achieved through the individual's development. Identity stressors/traumas include personal identity stressor/trauma (PIT) (events that violate/threaten the person's agency, autonomy, and free will, e.g., sexual and physical abuse). Identity stressor/trauma, also, include role identities traumas (RIT) which are those that especially challenge his/her self-actualization enterprises (e.g., failed business, fired from a job, forced out of school), or self-fulfillment venture (e.g., perceived failed generativity, and reproductive traumas, e.g., Jaffe & Diamond, 2011). Role identity stressor/trauma can target at least two types of roles: social roles, for example, motherhood or fa-

therhood with several responsibilities that achieve self-fulfillments, and educational and occupational roles that achieve self-actualization. They, also, include physical identity or survival stressor/trauma (PIST) (events that violate/threaten the person's physical existence, e.g., life-threatening event). The individual's physical identity and the link between identity development and threats to the body (Daniels & Gillen, 2015), and to the body-esteem had attracted little attention in identity literature (Nelson, Kling, Wängqvist, Frisé, & Syed, 2018). Further, identity stressor/trauma include a myriad of other social (or collective) identity stressor/trauma (CIST) (e.g., different discriminations such as ethnic, racial, and gender discriminations, different social-structure violence (e.g. poverty and relative deprivation), and intergroup conflicts (e.g., torture) (Kira, 2010, Kira et al., 2018). Most of such types of social or collective identity stressor/trauma are perpetrated by micro and macro systems and groups or their representative members, compared to other trauma types that are perpetrated primarily by individuals (Kira, 2017; Kira et al., 2014; Kira, Shuwiekh et al., 2018). Further, most of them are chronic and continuous (Kira et al., 2013). Finally, the advent of globalization, associated with the communication revolution and the spread of smartphones, led to the increased cyber-socialization. New types of virtual and actual personal and social (collective) identities are emerging (c.f., e.g., Clemmitt, 2006; Olivier, 2011), with new various cyber stressors/traumas (e.g., identity theft). Cultural and dual identities emerged with the widespread of internal migration, immigration, and asylum-seeking. Different cultural exposures yielded different social loyalties and identities and added up to the mix of the person's identity hierarchy and related stressors and traumas. For example, gaining refugee status, or naturalization is in itself an acquisition of a new social identity.

Identity trauma integrative framework differs from other approaches by theorizing identity system as a dynamic linear/non-linear system that manages at least three microdynamics and other three macro dynamics. First microdynamics is the processes of activation/inhibition of the salience of different identities upon exposure to different identity stressors and traumas. Second, are the dynamics of activation or inhibitions of varying event appraisals/reappraisals, self-appraisals/reappraisals processes, and the selective mobilization of core developmental assets related to the activated (or default) identity. The third is the activation of existential anxieties due to actual or perceived threats to the existence, maintenance or development of one or more of the person's identities. Finally, the theory goes beyond single trauma paradigm and its microdynamics to the macro dynamics of traumatization, such as cumulative trauma and trauma proliferation dynamics and the interaction between identity, pre- and post-identity traumas in the mechanisms leading to post-trauma identity development. In the following sections, we will discuss each of these main dynamics.

3.1. Micro Dynamics

a) *The dynamic activation/inhibition of the salience of different identities upon exposure to different identity stressors and traumas:*

Different identities belong to the same person's agentic self (or self-identity). They intersect in a dynamic hierarchical structure, with some identities more salient and others more dormant, depending on the activating events or the importance the individual assigns to each by default. The salient identities by default or by activating events are chronically accessible, being the focused lens of appraising and responding to the relevant stressors.

Identity trauma theory proposes that what constitutes the "me" aspect of the self is not constant but differently activated and constructed on a moment-to-moment basis. There is extensive evidence that the identity heuristics are context specific and may be triggered by environmental stressors (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002). The different external or internal stressors and traumas, and the contextual constraints and affordances differently activate the salience of one identity or the other (and its related self-schemas, beliefs, values, and internal and external developmental assets and resources). The Agentic self's different identities are organized within a multi-level dynamic hierarchy with its structured gradients according to the salience/dormancy and the current situational relevance. Identity-centrality (identity salience), identity-uncertainty, subgroup, and superordinate group identities describe some of the identity characteristics within the hierarchy. The proportional relevance and importance of an identity to a person's executive self, as well as the type and severity of threats to an identity by an activating stressor, contribute to its salience. Threats to identity range in their severity, with the most severe being the existential threats. The linear/non-linear dynamic system approach to identity assumes that the self-system manages the hierarchy of identities and may switch across time in a discontinuous manner with threshold shifts from one identity to another under exposure to different types of stressors. The self-system contextually activates the relevant identities to be more salient, more accessible in regulating perceptions, appraisal/reappraisal, emotion, and behavior. It utilizes the values/goals and assumptions related to the salient (activated) identities to appraise/reappraise the emerging event/s. In post-event processing, she/he may reappraise and modify its initial appraisal, or suppress to ensure adequate control (Gross & Thompson, 2007). It consults memories in the memory storage related or associated with the event/stressor. It processes different individual or collective negative or positive emotions triggered by the event/stressors. Also, it may initiate a motivated action and behavior in response to the stressor or the situation. The salient identity relevant self-schemas, related beliefs, values, and developmental assets are more accessible than other relatively dormant identities, directing appraisal, emotion, and behavior.

The activated identity can be a personal, physical, role, or one of the social or group identities, depending on the activating identity stressor/trauma. Each identity trauma type (physical, personal, role and group types) may elicit different dynamics that may cause different mental and physical health processes and outcomes. The salient (activated) identity became, with its linked content and

processes, the current lens, and the agent in responding to such events or cues (c.f., Stryker, 1968). The higher the commitment (identity salience/centrality) to the activated identity, the higher is its potential salience as lens and agent for action. Related self-schemas and their associated contents and processes are accessible in memory, though not necessarily chronically accessible (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus & Oyserman, 1989; Oyserman & Lee, 2008; for reviews, Oyserman, 2017). The person may acquire a salient default identity in the cases of no severe stressor or traumas, or due to the chronic occurrences of specific types of traumas. Chronic personal identity traumas chronically activate personal identity and perpetually prime independent self-schemas that are related to autonomy, personal agency, and personal (or psychic) identity, leading to more individualism. On the other hand, collective identity when became chronically salient due to chronic collective identity traumas, perpetually activate the interdependent self-schemas that are related to the person's social identities, potentially leading to collectivism (c.f., e.g., Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). A default identity (independent or interdependent) may be chronically accessible to process ongoing events and stressors. The salient default identity should be empirically explored for each individual and group. A default identity can change with the type of actual or perceived contextual and chronic identity threats. Further, a dynamic switch in the salience of identity can be triggered by internal dynamics. For example, experiencing a failure to effectively deal with a particular personal identity trauma, may cause a switch in saliency to other personal identity (c.f., e.g., Murray, Lamarche, Gomillion, Seery, & Kondrak, 2017), or to a collective identity (e.g., religion) making it more salient, or vice versa.

Further, coactivation of two or more identities occurs when a reaction to an event or situation is influenced by the meanings and roles associated with two (or more) identities simultaneously (e.g., Robin, Baumann, & Kotik, 2018). Cognitively, an individual may experience the coactivated identities as compatible or in conflict. When two or more identity is coactivated, each activated identity is at risk of being set aside (or "identicide"); (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Some evidence suggests that identities at the individual level are more central than identities at relational or collective levels *in individualistic societies* (Sedikides, Gaertner, & O'Mara, 2011). However, there is also evidence that collective mortality (death of one's in-group) has a greater impact than personal mortality (personal death), (especially) in collective cultures (Kashima, Halloran, Yuki, & Kashima, 2004). The individual may also experience the coactivated identities as compatible, where information and meaning derived from each identity is mutually enhancing and enriching (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). An example of the coactivation dynamics is the coactivation of personal and physical identity traumas (e.g., sexual and physical abuse, or threats to kill) when committed in the context of political, intergroup violence. Torture, hate crimes, or discrimination can coactivate both personal and social or collective identity traumas. In this case of double-barrel trauma, personal and social identities intersect in potentially more severe traumatization dynamics.

b) *The dynamics of activation or inhibitions of an event appraisal/reappraisal, self-appraisal/reappraisal processes, and the selective mobilization of core developmental assets connected to the activated identity.*

Self-identity is not only an information processing agent; it is a value and meaning-making processing agent (c.f., Baumeister & Landau, 2018). Value processing (meaning-making) is one of the leading dynamics that are instrumental in coping with threats to identity. Each identity, in the identity hierarchy, has a unique (or shared) value processing (evaluating) system (VPS) that has a distinct structure, function, and processing capacity. VPS contains the pre-cognitive system of identity-relevant schemas, assumptions, beliefs, values, moral norms, implicit and idiosyncratic theories, narratives and a set of heuristics that constitute the identity structural contents and processes. There is empirical evidence that group identity, for example, triggers social norms and heuristics that prescribe specific behaviors and social roles (e.g., Bacharach, 2006).

Each identity's VPS contributes to evaluating the relevance and importance of an event to the activated identity (Kira, 1987; Shuwiekh, Kira, & Ashby, 2017). Such process of appraisal and meaning-making are significant to health, well-being and individual development (e.g., Hooker, Masters & Park, 2017, Park & Baumeister, 2017). However, meaning-making is only an initial step of coping with the threat. There is empirical evidence that different identities may change the preferences in the decision-making process (e.g., Guala & Filippin, 2017). Evidence suggests that individuals may also try to benefit from the experience, and or restore threatened needs or to pursue substitutes when needs or 'developmental assets' are challenged (e.g., Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998).

The person's different identities possess different value processing systems (VPSs) and core developmental assets (DAs) that may be identity type-specific. The meaning of an event means its implications to the salient identity (or identities). The event's meaning implicates its relevance and consequentiality to the person's activated identity (c.f., Baumeister & Landau, 2018). The potential meaning of an event is determined by its potential impact on the identity existence, related current functional assets, and future valued goals, and life project. Also, the meaning-making of self-identity or self-evaluation is another important process.

Further, a self-evaluation system (self-esteem and efficacy or the perceived value and significance of self-identity) is an intricate part of the VPS. Self-evaluation is the totality of one's different self-concepts and self-schematizations (c.f., Horowitz, 2012). Developing self-awareness and self-reflective skills trigger the self-evaluation process in the various domains of functioning. Self-evaluation and resulted self-concept delineated the person's perception of his/her advantages and disadvantages and limitations and strengths confronting specific or general challenges to a specific identity/ies. However, inflated or deflated self-concept (self-evaluation) can happen and may negatively impact the identity

function. Hierarchy of self-concepts (core self-evaluations related to each identity) includes physical identity esteem and efficacy, personal identity esteem and efficacy, role identity esteem and efficacy, and social and collective identities esteem and efficacies. Conceptual and empirical research favors domain-specific self-esteem (self-concept) than an overall level of self-esteem (e.g., Schwinger, Schöne, & Otterpohl, 2017). Research suggests a nonlinear relationship between self-esteem and behavioral health (e.g., Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Kira, Shuwiekh & Bujold-Bugeaud, 2016; Kira, Shuwiekh, Kucharska, & Bujold-Bugeaud, 2018). Inflated self-esteem can lead to risk-taking behavior and externalizing behavior, while deflated self-esteem can lead to depression and internalizing behavior.

Further, the significance of a person's life is the search for a role or calling that is meaningful for the whole person or the default or salient identity. Life is rather meaningful when the person achieved or worked and sacrificed enough to reach goals sought by his/her salient identities. Goals related to personal, role/status, and social (collective) identities are all involved in the meaning-making process. The social identity goals play an integral role in scaffolding personal meaning (Baumeister & Landau, 2018). Existential meaning involves purpose, value, mattering, continuity, and coherence of the activated identity (e.g., Baumeister & Landau, 2018), and establishing the significance and the authenticity of an identity (Chen, 2018).

One of the important trajectories of the negative impact of identity stressors may occur when relevant identity stressors violate the activated identity-related assumptions, self-definition, values, beliefs, idiosyncratic and implicit theories, and moral norms threatening identity authenticity. As the term is typically used, authenticity refers to the degree to which a particular behavior is congruent with a person's attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, and other dispositions (e.g., Chen, 2018). Different ISTs can shake the particular identity-related value processing system's (VPS) equilibrium, shattering its assumptions (c.f., Janoff-Bulman, 2010), values, and implicit theories, causing disturbances in self-organization and systemic dynamical chaos. Such chaos can perturb the appraisal and emotion regulation processes, as well as motivated behavior. Such chaos can recalibrate a person's response to be out of his/her values and moral norms' range. Identity disturbance refers to a severe form of identity pathology. Despite clear relevance to psychological distress, existing explanatory models of identity pathology are scant and poorly integrated with modern clinical science (Kaufman & Crowell, 2018). Identity disturbances and related pathologies may include self-discrepancies, moral injuries, and related emotional and behavioral disturbances (e.g., Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Litz et al., 2009; Strauman & Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy (the discrepancy between authentic self-identity and perceived identity in this case), and moral injury were found to be associated with neuroticism, maladaptive coping, and negative affect as well as higher level indicators of psychological maladjustment and disorder (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006, for a comprehensive review). It was found to be associated with neg-

ative posttraumatic growth (Shuwiekh et al., 2017). The crisis of meaning found to predict suicidality in youth independently of depression and other potential risk factors (Schnell, Gerstner, & Krampe, 2018).

Each identity (and the agentic person) strives to retain, protect, and build competencies, assets, and resources that they can utilize to increase their self-efficacy (and self and environment control) dealing with challenges. The potential or actual loss of these valued assets, resources and power are one of the significant identity threats (c.f., Hobfoll, 1989).

Core developmental assets (DAs) include two kinds: internal DA and external DA (extension resources). Internal DAs include (but not limited to) will to live, exist, survive, succeed, and thrive (WTELS). WTELS is one of the individual's emerging and primal developmental assets (Kira, Lewandowski et al., 2014; Schopenhauer, 1992). WTELS is the master motivator, and at the center stage in the science of motivation, that is still missing in current theories of motivation. New research of WTELS in adolescents, found evidence that "WTELS" is the source for coping and is strongly related to resiliency and posttraumatic growth. It was associated with a decrease in depression, PTSD, and comorbid complex mental health syndromes, as well as with improved physical health (Kira, Alawneh, Aboumediene, Lewandowski, & Laddis, 2014; Carmel, 2011).

Further, internal DAs include self- and environment-control which comprise personal autonomy and feeling and having executive control (i.e., personal identity). They, also, include a secure attachment (or alternatively different types of attachment styles), the status of the person's roles fulfillment and achievements, and his/her personal and collective self-concepts (i.e., self-efficacy and self-esteem). They include the developed/ developing values, moral norms, and belief systems. Additionally, self-reflective, empathy, mentalizing, and self-monitoring, self-transcendence, and differentiation (detachment) capacities are among the potential internal assets. Internal DAs, also, include belonging, and interdependence capacities as well as social competence and psychosocial maturity. Interdependence capacities may include seeking, providing and receiving social and material support. Further, internal DAs include the person's genetics, predispositions, and able body's functioning organs that were developed across the lifespan, together with the person's brain, related neurological and physiological systems as well as associated cognitive and emotional processing and decision-making capacities (Kira, Lewandowski, Chiodo, & Ibrahim, 2014). They may also include developed socio-economic-status, education, and positive attitudes and dispositions and futuristic orientation, (c.f., e.g., Pashak, Handal, & Scales, 2018; Scales & Leffert, 2004; Scales et al., 2016). On the other hand, extension resources (external assets) may include available social support, family structure, material and environmental resources, and social systems interventions (for a review of different resource theories see Hobfoll, 2002).

Developmental assets are fluid as they emerge, grow and, or decline with challenges and across the natural course of lifespan and development (c.f., Baltes, 1987). Internal developmental assets facilitate the development and use of

external and situational assets. Developmental assets are, as such, prerequisites to optimal external resources utilization. The interplay between genetics, stressors, trauma types, its cumulative and proliferation dynamics, and resulted epigenetics unfolds over time to produce varieties and patterns of an individual's developmental assets and/or limitations. Individual's resiliency, distress tolerance and ability to cope with adversities are determined, in large part, by the status of his/her developmental assets. We propose a new approach and definition of resiliency that is measurable, which is the sum of the whole person's DAs, with different levels, portfolios, and poly-strengths of resiliency pertaining to each distinct identity. We can measure the overall resiliency and specific resiliencies for each identity, by sampling aspects of well-defined DAs for each. Empirical research would determine the relative contribution of each DA to an identity's resilience (c.f., e.g., Hamby, Grych, & Banyard, 2018).

Further, there is an ongoing process of revising the contents of core selves (identities) and possible selves (developing identities) over the lifespan (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Self-revision for different identities involves the ongoing adjustment of current self-representations of each identity to enhance their correspondence with feedback from the environment (Carroll, Agler, & Newhart, 2015; Carroll, 2018), or to take advantage of lessons learned from different identities' stressors/ traumas exposure. Also, revisions in possible-self pursuits precipitate later revisions in core selves. Possible selves are more likely to succeed when derived from self-schemas that accurately represent one's actual "developmental" "competencies (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989).

To sum up, self-concepts, related valuation constructs (value processing system), and developmental assets are nested within identities and hierarchical links. Salient identities determine which self-concept and related valuation of essential assets, and strategies are accessible. Personal, physical, and different social (e.g., group identities) have different (or shared/overlapped) related valued assets, goals, and self-concepts. At the same time, which identities come to be activated by the event (e.g., external or internal stressor or trauma) will trigger related assumptions, self-concept (self-esteem and efficacy), mobilizes assets and resource and enact the behavioral activation or inhibition process. **Figure 1** summarizes the model of trauma microdynamics.

c) The dynamics of existential anxieties activation

Each identity has a unique or intersected existential strives and will-to-exist-live and survive. Identity traumas may threaten the sheer agentic autonomy or the mere existence of the salient (activated) identity. Existential threats are the most severe threats encountered by an identity. What makes an event traumatic is primarily determined by its potential or perceived existential threats to one or more of the person's salient identities. Concerns about the existence, maintenance and continuous emergence of one or more of the individual's own identities, starting in early adolescence, can escalate upon exposure to real or perceived existential threats. Traumatization, according to this framework, is a potential threat to and a challenge to an identity existence, to its assumptions or

value processing system (VPS) and self-concepts and/or to its developmental assets, resources, and executive capacities. The potentially most significant mechanism of traumatization is the rise of existential annihilation anxiety (EAA). There is empirical evidence that the higher the salience of identity the higher is the EAA that may erupt upon CISTs exposure (Kira, Shuwiekh, Rice, Al Ibraheem, & Aljakoub, 2017). Because of the importance of the dynamics of EAA, we will discuss its dynamics and consequences in detail.

Existential annihilation anxieties (EAA), which is almost ignored in current clinical science, significantly contribute to mediating the effects of identity traumas on different mental health disorders. There is initial empirical evidence that supports this hypothesis (Kira, Shuwiekh, Rice, Al Ibraheem, & Aljakoub, 2017; Kira et al., 2012; Kira, Templin, Lewandowski, & Shuwiekh, 2018; Kira, Shuwiekh, Kucharska, & Al-Huwailah, 2019). Different existential threats may target different identities. Existential Psychic annihilation anxiety, fear of psychic destruction, and psychic annihilation may erupt upon exposure to personal identity traumas, such as rape, sexual abuse, and trafficking that threatens the person's autonomy and independence (e.g., Allen, Hurvich, & Mcguire, 2017; Schiek-Gamble & Hurvich, 2015; Hurvich, 2004). Similar existential anxieties may erupt upon exposure to events that threaten the person's established roles and self-actualization life achievements and goals. Also, existential fear of physical death may erupt upon exposure to the life-threatening or terminal events. Events that represent threats of physical destruction (e.g., combat, natural disaster) mostly represent the current dominant focus of trauma psychiatry and PTSD literature, as presented in Criterion A in PTSD (DSM IV, modified in DSM V, to include sexual abuse and secondary traumas in first responders). Further, collective (social) existential annihilation anxieties (CEAA) may erupt upon exposure to serious threats to one's group/s. CEAA, which is relatively an overlooked dynamics, emerges when one of the relevant social groups that the person closely identifies with is threatened, demeaned or assigned comparatively inferior status and power by other strong competitor or dominant groups. Hate crimes, slavery, Holocaust, genocides, and colonization are examples. Collective existential anxieties may trigger embitterment feelings in reaction to injustice, vilification, or humiliation (e.g., Linden & Rotter, 2018).

Mortality salience theory (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1992) proposes that self-esteem serves as a buffering function for existential anxieties related to mortality salience. However, the intersection of different EAA from different existential threats goes beyond mortality salience. Proposing that self-esteem is a sufficient or the only potential buffer against mortality salience, let alone such different intersected existential anxieties is too simplistic and have an individualistic bias as it focuses only on the individual's physical mortality. We argue that self-esteem buffer hypothesis is questionable on several conceptual and empirical grounds. First self-esteem is part of the more general model of self-evaluation (self-beliefs or self-concepts, self-trust). Self-efficacy can be a functionally more powerful buffer (e.g., Bandura, 1982; Bandura, 1988). The concept of anxiety buffer is

more complex and may include several components that empirically prove to contribute to the alleviation, blocking or buffering such existential anxieties (e.g., Hoelterhoff & Chung, 2017). Self-esteem alone is one component of a cluster of anxiety buffer. First, we broaden the concept of existential anxiety to include personal, physical, role/status, and collective existential anxieties. The buffering cluster includes self-concept (self-evaluation that comprises self-efficacy and self-esteem, and self-trust), as well as the identities' value processing system (VPS), core assumptions, and core developmental assets that include will-to exist-live-survive leading a meaningful life (c.f., e.g., Hooker, Masters, & Park, 2018). Such cluster functions to buffer identity-related existential annihilation anxieties at different levels of mortality (e.g., the inevitability of individual's death), and extinction salience (the inevitability of the group's demise across history). (Kira, 2002; Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010). The functioning of existential anxiety-buffer of mortality salience may be disrupted or threatened in the case of physical identity threats (e.g., Abdollahi, Pyszczynski, Maxfield, & Luszczynska, 2011). Extinction salience existential anxiety-buffer functioning may break up upon exposure to such events like genocide and the Holocaust (e.g., Kira, 2002). Similar mechanisms are at work in the case of threats to personal or role identities. While the concepts of collective trauma and collective EAA were ignored for long in clinical and mainstream psychology, yet, political psychology started to recognize the importance of the concept in the Holocaust, genocides, and intergroup conflict studies (e.g., Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, Leidner, & Saguy, 2016; Kira, 2002; Kira et al., 2012; Kira, Alawneh, Aboumediene, Lewandowski, & Laddis, 2014; Kira et al., 2018; Shrira, 2015; Yair, 2014; Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010). Existential anxiety about an identity loss can have more severe mental health consequences than PTSD, increasing comorbidities and complex syndromes.

Mortality and extinction saliences and other identity-related EAA can intersect, amplifying each other and creating reigning negative dynamics. However, extinction salience of the group can be more powerful and overrule mortality salience. There is empirical evidence that collective mortality (death of one's in-group) has a more significant impact than personal mortality (personal death), (especially) in collectivist cultures (Kashima, Halloran, Yuki, & Kashima, 2004). Individual may sacrifice his/her physical self for the perceived survival of the group. We propose that Lone wolf phenomena (in terrorism research) may be explained, at least in part, by the primacy of group extinction salience, as a powerful motivator for such highly group-identified extremists.

A myriad of empirical studies that span across the trauma field, substantiated the adverse mental health effects of various violated personal identities (e.g., sexual abuse, child abuse, and neglect, rape). Also, on different violated physical identities (e.g., life-threatening events), and on role identities. Empirical studies have focused on various violated collective identities including racial identity ethnic identity, Native American identity (e.g., Omidy, 2012), and gender identity (e.g., Kira et al., 2015; Kira, Shuwiekh, & Bujold-Bugeaud, 2017), and found

that social identities violations are linked to adverse mental health outcomes. The results of meta-analyses (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009) have also supported significant positive associations between identity violations and internalizing and externalizing disorders, general distress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, substance abuse, anger, psychosis, as well as negative associations with happiness, life satisfaction, and mastery. A growing literature is addressing the effects of virtual and cyberidentity traumas (e.g., Wright, 2015). A comprehensive review is beyond our scope.

3.2. Macro Dynamics: Cumulative Stressors/Traumas, Stressors, and Traumas Proliferation and pre- and Post-Identity Traumas Interaction with Identity Stressors and Traumas

Research and conceptual work in stressors and traumas macro dynamics is still in its inception. The current research identified at least three major dynamics: the cumulative intersected identity stressors and traumas, the proliferation of different identity (and non-identity) stressors and trauma and the interaction dynamics between pre-identity, identity, and post-identity traumas.

a) *Cumulative Stressors/Traumas dynamics*

The cumulative effects of each of the different identity trauma types and their intersection in a total cumulative impact have been studied. There is convincing evidence of the cumulative negative effects of some personal identity trauma (i.e., child poly-victimization) on mental and physical health (e.g., Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007). Further, there is recent evidence of the cumulative negative effects of collective identity trauma on mental health (). There is convincing replicated evidence of the serious negative effects of cumulative stressors (that include pre-identity, identity, and post-identity traumas) (e.g., Awad, Kia-Keating, & Amer, 2019; Cloitre et al., 2009; Kira et al., 2008, Kira, Fawzi & Fawzi, 2013; Kira, Omidy & Ashby, 2014, Kira, Lewandowski, Somers, Yoon, & Chiodo, 2012; Martin, Cromer, DePrince, & Freyd, 2013; Kira, 2004). The cumulative effects involve, in addition to the linear dose-response model generally observed in single trauma impact, a non-linear threshold model of causality. The accumulation of stressors' impact reaches a threshold where the last stressor/trauma becomes the "straw that broke the camel's back" breaching the threshold of distress tolerance. This non-linear threshold model presumes that individuals have different breaking points. Even for people with higher distress tolerance, enough cumulative dynamics can cause the person to "break". These nonlinear shifts from one state to another can happen upon exposure to external and internal pressures/stressors (e.g., Benight, Shoji & Delahanty, 2017; Kira & Wroble, 2016; Zeeman, 1976) and the most recent stressor (or chain of stressors) can falsely appear as the direct cause of the disorder. Armev and Crowther (2008), comparing a linear versus a non-linear model of aversive self-awareness, dissociation, and non-suicidal self-injury, found that the non-linear model evidenced a better fit to the data, accounting for 6 times the variance (66%) than the linear model (9% - 10%). The non-linear models of the relationship between

cumulative trauma and PTSD explained over three times the variance explained by the linear model indicating a threshold cumulative dynamic.

b) *Stressors/Traumas Proliferation Dynamics:*

Proliferation means that an event/s may predict other subsequent events in a chain-reaction manner over a period of time or over life-span. Studies on stressor and trauma proliferation (Kira et al., 2018; Kira, Lewandowski, Chiodo, & Laddis, 2016) identified two trauma proliferation pathways: Pre-identity traumas (e.g., attachment traumas) pathway, and the collective (social) identity stressors and traumas (CIST) pathway. Each independently predicted (directly and through mediators) personal identity trauma (PIT), role identity trauma, and physical identity or survival trauma (PIST) and secondary trauma (SIT). The pattern of proliferation was configurally invariant across different cultural groups and strictly or strongly invariant across genders.

c) *Identity Stressors Interaction Dynamics:*

The interaction between pre-identity, identity, and post-identity trauma, which represent the total traumatization dynamics, is still very lacking focus in current research. The interaction means identifying the predictive, mediating and moderating identity stressors/traumas that impact mental health. In a recent study (Kira et al., 2018), collective identity stressors/traumas (CIST) found to predict directly and indirectly (through mediators) existential annihilation anxieties (EAA), PTSD, and cumulative trauma-related disorders (CTD). It is surprising that oppression and discriminations that start with the emergence of a person's identity early in adolescence and continue with him/her the rest of the lifespan are overlooked in the PTSD literature (e.g., Holmes, Facemire, & Da-Fonseca, 2016; Reisner et al., 2016). Physical/survival stressors/traumas (PIST) and personal identity traumas (PIT) were significant mediators of CIST's effects on PTSD and CTD. Physical identity or survival trauma was a significant mediator of CIST effects on EAA. Serial mediation analysis indicated several potential significant trajectories of the effects of CIST on PTSD and CTD via physical identity or survival trauma (PIST) or personal identity trauma or both, and via PIST on EAA. Pre-identity traumas (attachment traumas (ATT) moderated the mediated effects of CIST on PTSD and CTD via personal identity trauma (PIT). Secondary traumas (SIT) moderated CIST mediated effects on PTSD via PIT and PIST, and on EAA via PIST. Further, recent studies found that pre-identity traumas (i.e., attachment traumas), and post-identity trauma (e.g., secondary traumas) moderate the effects of CIST on mental health (Kira et al., 2018). Future research needs to develop a new focus on these global interaction dynamics between different stressor/trauma types across life-span.

4. Conclusion

The growing body of fragmented conceptual models and empirical findings on identity and identity stressors and traumas begs for a bold conceptual and empirical integration to advance the field. We described a unifying dynamic linear

and non-linear system's approach to identity, its structure, and dynamics. The proposed dynamic system model integrated several paradigms and empirical findings on stress, trauma, and identity, applying, as a starting point, the individuation revolution that a person leads in her/his developmental path to adulthood. Current work refined the development-based identity theory that conceptually integrated identity stressors and traumas. We examined identity stressor/trauma paradigm identifying the different types of identity traumas and the four main dynamic non-linear processes that manage the interaction between different identities and identity, pre-identity (e.g., attachment disruption) and post-identity (secondary and tertiary) stressors/traumas. The overarching goal was to provide a coherent and critical integration of the diverse theoretical models and empirical findings on identity and identity stressors and traumas that may help guide future empirical research. More attempts for conceptual and empirical refinement and integration are needed to advance our understanding of the dynamics of identity development.

Future research may explore the differential impact of different identity trauma types to provide a robust understanding of their micro and macro dynamics of each. Further, identity traumas intersect and dynamically interact with each other and with other pre-identity traumas (e.g., attachment traumas), and post-identity secondary (e.g., indirect and vicarious traumas) and *tertiary traumas* (e.g., historical and cross-generation transmitted traumas). The cumulative and macro dynamics of different stressors and intersected or proliferated traumas are a missing valid approach to studying their overall impact than only studying an isolated single identity trauma (e.g., Cloitre et al., 2009; Kira et al., 2008, Kira et al., 2018). This is especially true for those who were multiply traumatized (e.g., Stein, Wilmot, & Solomon, 2016).

Current model has practical and theoretical significance in identifying the different types of identity traumas and the four main dynamic non-linear processes that manage the interaction between different identities and self-identity, pre-identity (e.g., attachment disruption) and post-identity (secondary and tertiary) stressors/traumas. This is the first attempt to integrate the theories and empirical research in the field of identity and provide an innovative framework for different identity pre and post-identity traumas. However, current attempt is limited with the scope and framework we developed within a vast field of theories and empirical research in the fast developing field of self-identity. Future studies can focus on further development of the integrative work and its components and empirically test its premises.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix: Basic Terminology and Definitions of the Constructs and Dynamics of Developmental Stressors/Traumas Framework

Cumulative Stressors (cross-sectional) = Chronic Stressors + Acute Stressors (traumas) + life ordinary stressors (positive, negative or neutral)

Cross-sectional and sequential (longitudinal) Stressors trajectories

Physiological Stressors <> Psychological Stressors <> Social Stressors:

- **Chronic** Physiological Stressors <> Chronic Psychological Stressors <> Chronic Social Stressors > Cumulative Chronic Stress Load.
- **Acute (i.e., Traumatic)** Physiological Stressors <> Acute Psychological Stressors <> Acute Social Stressors > cumulative Acute (traumatic) Stress Load.
- **Total Cumulative Stressors Load** = *Chronic Stressors Load* + *Acute (traumatic) Stressors Load*

Types of Development related Stressors:

Pre-identity stressors = Prenatal physiological stressors + birthing Stressors (e.g., Complicated birth) physiological and psychological stressors + Attachment disruption and attachment styles (Psychological stressors) + 0 - 3 child abuse and neglect (physiological and psychological stressors).

Identity Stressors = *Physical identity* Stressors (physiological and psychological stressors) + *Personal identity (Psychic)* Stressors (primarily psychological stressors) + *Role identity* Stressors (self-actualization and self-fulfillment) (psychological and social stressors) + *Social identity stressors* (social and psychological stressors).

Social Identity Stressors = group identity stressors (e.g., genocide, holocaust, discriminations, oppression) + social structure status (violence) stressors (poverty-cast systems, slavery)

Post-identity (interdependence) stressors = Secondary Stressors (cross-persons transmitted stressors) + Tertiary Stressors (cross-generations transmitted and historical stressors)

Stressors Basic Micro dynamics = The dynamic activation/inhibition of the salience of different identities and default identity > The dynamics of activation or inhibitions of varying events appraisals and the selective mobilization of core developmental assets by the salient identity > The dynamics of activation of existential anxieties in response to potential or perceived severe threats to the existence, maintenance or development of one or more of the person's identities.

Stressors Basic Macro dynamics

Pre-identity Stressors Load + *Identity Stressors Load* + *Post-identity Stressors Load* > **Stressors Macro dynamics**

Stressors Macro dynamics = Stressors cumulative dynamics + Stressors proliferation dynamics + Stressors interaction dynamics (mediation – moderation).