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Moralized Identities in and Around Organizations: An Identity Work Perspective

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ABSTRACT In this article, we examine the literature on moralized identities – the range of identities that people construct for themselves that are underpinned by issues of morality. We problematize traditional theorizing by drawing on the identity work perspective to provide an explanatory framework that diverts attention away from a focus on what single, stable, unified, and rarely fully contextualized moralized identities *do* to theorize how multiple, fluid, context-specific, moralized identities embedded in relations of power *develop*. Our framework outlines a dynamic conceptualization of moralized identities which disrupts the assumption of moral coherence by theorizing moralized identities as plural, dynamic, relational, and networked. Building on our framework, we provide an agenda for future moralized identities research.

Keywords: identity, identity work, identity work perspective, moral identity, moralized identity

INTRODUCTION

Inspired particularly by Aquino and Reed's (2002) social-psychological approach and Jackall's (1988) sociological work, the literature on moralized identities – all forms of identity people construct in relation to morality – has flourished in recent decades (e.g., Burton and Vu, 2021; Gill, 2023; Hardy et al., 2020; Huhtala et al., 2021; Stein, 2021; Turunen and Lundgren-Henriksson, 2025; Vadera and Pathki, 2021). As the corpus of largely empirical moral identity scholarship continues to grow, the need to advance and refine our theoretical understanding of how distinct moralized identities are constructed has become urgent. Increasingly, extant theory struggles to account for people's lived experiences and efforts to construct moralized identities at work, especially those in extreme environments (Havel, 1991; Levi, 1988a, 1988b). Appreciation of how such

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identities are formed, maintained, repaired, entangled, blended, switched between, overwritten, and deleted is required to deepen insight on why people do the 'right thing', and why they do not.

Two somewhat heterogeneous streams of research and theorizing on moralized identities dominate the organization and management studies literature, one based in social psychology the other more sociological in orientation. Social psychologists drawing on social cognitive theory and to a lesser extent social identity theory (SIT), define a moral identity as a 'self-conception organized around a set of moral traits' (Aquino and Reed, 2002, p. 1424), and typically employ experimental and survey studies to investigate how, in what circumstances, and with what consequences single, moral identities can be activated and deactivated (Aquino et al., 2009; Blasi, 1993; Detert et al., 2008; Shao et al., 2008). Sociological approaches implicate a broader set of conceptions of moral identities (Jackall, 1988; MacIntyre, 1981, 2007; Stets and Carter, 2006; Weaver, 2006), some of which recognize that moralization describes 'increases in the degree to which moral relevance is attached to issues, actions, or entities' (Rhee et al., 2019, p. 6), allowing nuanced understanding of distinctive moralized identities.

Despite burgeoning interest in moralized identities, given their significance in work organizations, both social psychological and sociology scholars 'have neglected an analysis of the self as a moral entity' (Stets and Carter, 2011, p. 192) and, in some important respects, '…how individuals make sense of themselves as ethical subjects is a [still] yet to be explored domain' (Poldner et al., 2019, p. 151). Moreover, many existing studies are problematic because they adopt simplistic, often binary views of people, as either moral or immoral. Such accounts do not explain adequately how moralized identities are worked on – to some extent – mindfully by workers, how different moralized identities may be harboured by an individual and how they relate to each other, flux over time, sometimes lack coherence, and are shaped by a range of contextual factors (Aquino et al., 2009; Gellerman, 1986; Sachdeva et al., 2009; Shao et al., 2008). Addressing these weaknesses is important to expand and enrich understanding of processes of moralized identities construction which are currently largely unacknowledged, resulting in blind spots in contemporary theorizing.

We draw on an identity work perspective (IWP) to develop a theoretical framework that explains how moralized identities are worked on in and around organizations (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Beech, 2008; Brown, 2022; Caza et al., 2018; Gill, 2015; Kourti et al., 2018; Phelan and Hunt, 1998; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, 1996; Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Using our framework, we theorize how individuals continuously (re)construct a range of moralized identities that are relational, bound together, not always fully integrated, fluid and which may be prioritized or suppressed depending on situational demands and relational contexts. One element of our framework highlights that people use varied identity work pathways, including cognitive mechanisms, narratives and dramaturgical performances, to work on and *coordinate* their multiple moralized identities.[1] Another element considers how the availability of identity resources conditions which moralized identities individuals can claim. A further element draws attention to the salience and availability of other identities beyond moralized types – particularly role and social identities – that shape the ways individuals construct and negotiate moralized identities. A final element of our

framework positions workplace moralized identities within relations of power, which most existing studies have largely ignored. Collectively, these related elements provide a dynamic account of how moralized identities continuously are worked on by locally embedded, self-reflective actors.

Through our framework and associated contributions, we aim to initiate novel conversations (Healey et al., 2023) about how moralized identities are constructed and change. Guided by our framework, we outline an associated agenda for future research.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING MORALIZED IDENTITIES

In this section, we draw on the IWP to problematize (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020) much of the extant literature's largely acontextual treatment of moralized identities and assumptions that they are single, stable, and unified. Our approach is aligned instead with those contemporary accounts, such as Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) that emphasize moralized reasoning and behaviours are pluralistic and pragmatic (Graham et al., 2013). It is motivated also by biographical, autobiographical and scholarly accounts of how people grapple with the practical difficulties associated with the (re)construction of moralized identities – such as the need to deal with moral injuries (Litz et al., 2009), moral distress (Ulrich and Grady, 2018), and moral trauma (Tick, 2012), the scope for moral self-deception (Ciulla et al., 2007) and moral weakness (Havel, 1989), and how even mundane organizing can erode managers' moral integrity (Jackall, 1988), which conventional scholarship on moralized identities struggles to explain.

Since emerging as an approach to identities research and theorizing, the IWP has attracted considerable attention and its kitbag of tools, concepts, constructs, and frameworks for analysis continues to grow seemingly exponentially (Alvesson, 2010; Beech, 2011; Bernardi et al., 2019; Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018; Jean et al., 2024; Kourti et al., 2018; Phelan and Hunt, 1998; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Although what constitutes 'identity work' is to an extent contested, there is consensus that scholarship associated with it centres on an understanding of identities as 'the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves' (Brown, 2015, p. 23). Such meanings are 'worked on' – in processes of addition, adaptation, overwriting, ignoring, and deletion – by people, both in soliloquy (Athens, 1994) and social interaction (Goffman, 1959), within relations of power (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2009). Identity work scholarship draws on and draws together established approaches to the study of identity such as those focused on Role Theory, Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory, narratology, dramaturgy, symbolism, and psychodynamics to focus on the situated practices by which identities are fabricated (Brown, 2022). The identity work 'perspective' – a 'set of ideas with explanatory possibilities' (Weick, 1995, p. ix) – serves in our project 'as the basis for systematic reflection' (Weick, 2017, p. 13).

Although identity work scholarship is increasingly prominent, relatively few identity work studies focus squarely on moralized identities (e.g., Gill, 2023; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Taylor et al., 2018), and what we do know about moralized identity work

has not yet been subject to detailed critical scrutiny. While there is a substantial literature on moralized, particularly conventionally moral identities, this attends more to what moralized identities do, that is, to their importance in moral reasoning and action (Aquino et al., 2011; Aquino and Reed, 2002; Reed et al., 2007, 2016; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007), than how they are 'worked on,' that is, formed, revised, interrelate, and coordinated by situated actors. Hence there is a need for integrative theorizing that explains how moralized identities are continuously fabricated works-in-progress, that are multiple, often intersecting, generally networked, and embedded in relations of power by reflexive actors (Giddens, 1991). Our theorizing chimes with a wealth of studies that show moral attitudes and feelings regarding what is 'right' are in general malleable, contextual, and highly responsive to educational programs (Gill, 2023; Ong et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2011).

We introduce and explain a framework – see Figure 1 – that theorizes how moralized identities are constructed in terms of five elements: (i) types of moralized identities (i.e., supererogatory, moral, amoral, and immoral[2]) (ii) the processes of constructing and coordinating moralized identities along different pathways; (iii) resources for moralized identities; (iv) the salience of multiple identities; and (v) contextual considerations relating to discourse, power, and politics. The 'boxes' which contain each element are intended to connect to one another to signify that elements are closely linked and should be viewed as interconnected. These elements represent core concepts that help explain processes of moralized identity construction and serve as the 'basic units for a theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 420). Given the importance of conceptual clarity to our project (Suddaby, 2010), Table I provides a summary of definitions and distinctions between each element of the framework with examples.

Moralized Identities (Types): Compatible, Conflicting, and Synergistic

While extant literature has overwhelmingly focused on conventionally 'moral' identities, individuals enact multiple moralized identities. As reflected at the core of our framework, each moralized identity type should be regarded as closely connected rather than as independent and, not, therefore, singular identities worked on in isolation. Moreover, each of the other elements of our framework can interact to affect this network of moralized identities. We begin by briefly sketching four main types of moralized identities that we identified through our review of extant literature: supererogatory; moral; amoral; and immoral. Our review process and each type are summarized in Table II and detailed further in Appendix 1 (available online).

Supererogatory identities. Supererogatory identities are those associated with 'good' actions and intentions that, within a social system, exceed what is normatively morally required. A diverse set of related studies – for example, those on egalitarianism, organizational citizenship behaviour, prosocial behaviour, and altruism – represent some people in organizations as working on identities as selfless to the extent that they abandon or postpone '…personal interests, privileges, or welfare' (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1998, p. 479). Complementary studies show how workers construct identities 'as morally outstanding individuals' (Wegerer, 2018, p. 111) and as 'morally

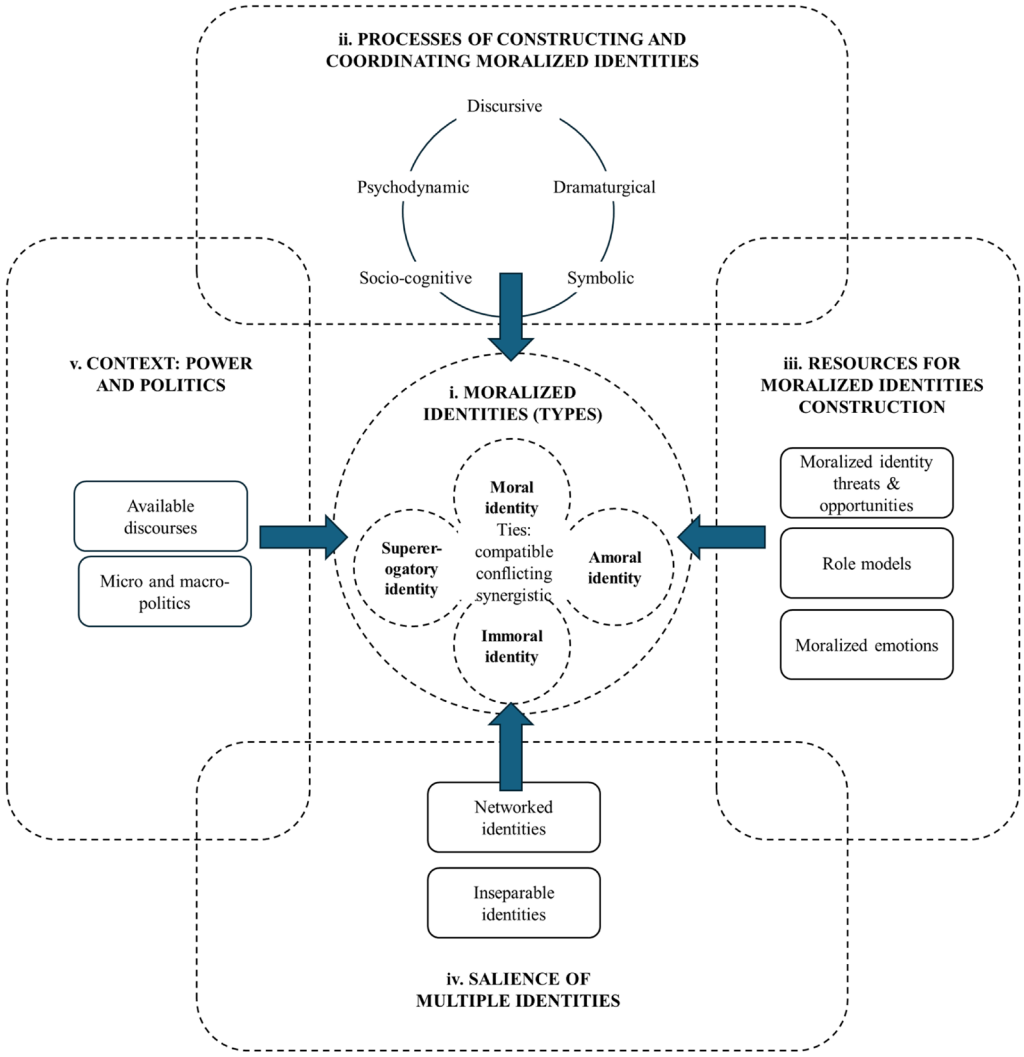

Figure 1. Theorizing the construction of moralized identities

superior' or 'heroic' workers (Deeb-Sossa, 2007, p. 751, 768). Scholarship has focused principally on supererogatory identities in relation to four major sets of activities: self-sacrifice, conscience-objecting, philanthropy, and leader activism (see Online Appendix).

Moral identities. Most often the default position of organizational scholars has been that people in organizations work on conventionally 'moral' identities that align with societal conceptions of what is 'right' or 'good' (Baker and Roberts, 2011; Gill, 2023; Jackall, 1988; Knights and Willmott, 1999; MacIntyre, 2007; Roberts, 2003; Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013; Wicks and Freeman, 1998).[3] Empirical studies attribute moral identities to various categories of people in organizations including middle managers (Bird and Waters, 1987; Rouleau, 2005; Taylor et al., 2018; Watson, 1994) leaders (Huhtala et al., 2021; Skubinn and Herzog, 2016),

Table I. Definitions and distinctions between the elements in our framework for understanding moralized identity construction

Element and sub-elements	*Definition*	*Distinction from other elements*	*Illustrative examples*
Types of moralized identities Supererogatory Moral Amoral Immoral	The broad categories of self that people adopt in relation to morality: going 'above and beyond' (supererogatory), conventionally moral (moral), ignoring moral concerns (amoral), and rejecting conventional morality (immoral)	Who: Focuses on categorizing the types of moralized selves people adopt, that is, they specify the content (type) of moralized identity	A whistleblower risking their livelihood (supererogatory); a lawyer committed to conventional notions of justice (moral); a bureaucrat blindly just following rules' (amoral); a corrupt official (immoral)
Processes of construction and coordination Discursive Dramaturgical Symbolic Socio-Cognitive Psychodynamic	The means by which individuals construct, negotiate, adapt, reconcile, and delete moralized identities across contexts	How: Emphasizes the mechanisms and practices through which moralized identities are made and managed	A doctor who articulates claims they act in patients' interests (discursive); a manager who acts 'tough' at work (dramaturgical); a police uniform signalling authority (symbolic); a group member who stereotypes out-group others (socio-cognitive); an actor who rationalizes conflicting roles (psychodynamic)
Resources for moralized identities Threats Opportunities Role models Moral emotions	The social, emotional, and situational inputs that individuals draw upon to sustain, resist, or reshape moralized identities	What: Inputs that sustain or challenge moralized identity work	A whistleblower who doubles-down when threatened with dismissal (threat); someone who agrees to help another in order to provide a resource for their claim to be a good person (opportunity); a junior lawyer guided by a justice-oriented mentor (role model); a manager who experiences guilt over their inaction (emotion)

(Continues)

Table I. (Continued)

Element and sub-elements	*Definition*	*Distinction from other elements*	*Illustrative examples*
Salience of multiple identities Integration Segmentation Inseparability	The ways in which moralized identities intersect with other identities, shaping their prominence, and compatibility in different contexts	Why: Focuses on the motivation for and coherence/co-existence between different moralized identities	A working parent who blends caregiving and managerial identities (integration); a member of Greenpeace who keeps their activist and professional lives separate (segmentation); a soldier-medic who is unable to disentangle their roles (inseparability)
Context: power and politics Available discourses Micro and macro politics	The structural, institutional, and cultural settings that shape which moralized identities are available, legitimate, or marginalized, etc.	When: Situates other elements within societal, structural and institutional conditions, showing how discourses and hierarchies enable or constrain moralized identities	A hospital setting that valorizes a discourse of staff self-sacrifice while marginalizing activism; an NGO that manipulates employees to regard themselves as moral agents of change despite resource pressures and personal costs to them

and professionals such as medics (Pratt et al., 2006) bankers (Whittle and Mueller, 2012), and academics (Alvesson and Gjerde, 2020; Fitzmaurice, 2013). One prominent stream of research employs Aquino and Reed's (2002) instrument for measuring moral identities to conduct experimental work on how these are configured and their implications for ethical action (Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Jennings et al., 2015; Winterich et al., 2013).[4] What counts as a 'moral' identity is heterogeneous and scholars have focused on four broad subtypes: phronetic, authentic, called, and virtuous (see Online Appendix).[5]

Amoral identities. Amoral identities are attributed to those actors in organizations who, in an age of moral relativism, may be 'able to engage in moral debate' but 'restrict themselves to the realms in which rational agreement is possible' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 30). The idea that bureaucracy encourages individual amorality connects with other critiques that it leads also to depersonalization and the stripping of actors' humanity (Hoggett, 2006). Considerable debate centers on whether amoral identities are, as MacIntyre (1981, 2007) maintains, commonplace or, as Randels (1995, p. 206) contends constructed by a limited number of middle and lower-level managers who 'are mere policy implementers'. Mangham (1995) argues that managers mostly construe themselves as morally neutral and that they tend to separate their personal moralities

Table II. A typology of moralities and identities: types and subtypes

Identity type	*Subtypes*	*Definitions*	*Illustrative sources*
Supererogatory	Self-sacrificial	People who construct selfless identities to the extent that they abandon or postpone their personal interests, privileges, or welfare and incur risks and costs	Choi and Mai-Dalton (1998); Conger and Kanungo (1987); Gill (2023); Grint (2010)
	Conscience-Objector	People, such as 'principled dissenters' and 'whistleblowers' who are constructing themselves as exposers of wrongdoing often at considerable personal cost	Bird and Waters (1987); Kenny et al. (2020); Stein (2021)
	Philanthropic	People constructing their selves as pursuing not-for-profit social objectives through the active investment of substantial economic, cultural, social, and/or symbolic resources	Carnegie (2006 [1889]); Harvey et al. (2011); Maclean and Harvey (2020)
	Leader-Activist	Formal and informal leaders constructing their selves as inspiring and mobilizing others to take a moral stance regarding organizational and/or social issues	Hambrick and Wowak (2021); Soergel (2016); Solinger et al. (2020)
Moral	Phronetic	People constructing identities featuring the practical wisdom to make the best possible decisions often in challenging circumstances	Aristotle (1985); Bardon et al. (2017); Clarke et al. (2009)
	Authentic	People defining themselves as being 'true' to their 'essential' selves and act in accord with these self-expectations	Heidegger (1962); Trilling (1972); Hochschild (1983)
	Called	People constructing themselves as 'called' and who develop specific identities associated with a distinctive set of moral attributes and prerogatives	Bunderson and Thompson (2009); Bloom et al. (2020); Kreiner et al. (2006)
	Virtuous	People constructing selves as cultivating 'virtuous' dispositions that are rooted in a community, and enable the achievement of certain (good) ends	Aristotle (1985); MacIntyre (1981); Weaver (2006)
Amoral	Intentionally Amoral	People intentionally constructing themselves as concerned solely to promote the best interests of their organization	Fineman (1996); Donald and Goldsby (2004); Roberts (1984)
	Casually Amoral	People constructing themselves as over-casual, careless, or inattentive to moral issues in organizations	Carroll (1987); Jackall (1988); Drumwright and Murphy (2004)
	Morally Mute	People constructing themselves as intentionally unwilling to engage with moral issues in organizations or to define themselves as moral beings	Bird and Waters (1989); Kreps and Monin (2011); Jackall (1988)

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

Identity type	*Subtypes*	*Definitions*	*Illustrative sources*
Immoral	Self-Deceptively Hypocritical	People unconsciously enacting identities that others regard as immoral and which if brought to consciousness they would deny or disown	Batson et al. (1999); Caldwell (2009); Goffman (1959)
	Stigmatized	People represented by others as constructing themselves as morally tainted or discredited by virtue of some action, mark, or attribute	Ashforth and Kreiner (1999); Goffman (1963); Slay and Smith (2011)
	Authoritarian	People constructing themselves as self-interested, exploitative, domineering, controlling, and vengeful, with a forcing style of conflict resolution and directive style	Adorno et al. (1950); Ashforth (1994); De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008)
	Intentionally Hypocritical	People constructing themselves as seeking to characterize themselves as moral but whose actions do not confirm their public statements regarding their selves	Brunsson (1993); Trevino et al. (2000); Effron et al. (2018)

from their professional roles. Nash (1995), however, avers that few actual managers are steadfastly amoral, and that managers frequently '…display a variety of intellectual biases and moral scruples' (p. 228). This position is supported by Moore (2008b, p. 490–1) who insists that '…it is impossible for them [managers] to compartmentalize their lives to such an extent that within bureaucratic organisations their own agency disappears entirely'. Three broad representations of amoral identities in organizations have attracted particular attention: the intentionally amoral, the unwittingly amoral, and the morally mute (see Online Appendix).

Immoral identities. A substantial literature concerns certain categories of individuals whose identities and actions are grossly antithetical to prevailing cultural norms of acceptability. A substantial body of experimental social psychology research has explored those deemed to have 'low moral identity' (Eissa and Lester, 2022; Joosten et al., 2014; Noval and Hernandez, 2019; Vadera and Pathki, 2021), and how people morally disengage to justify to themselves the rightness of reprehensible conduct (Bandura et al., 1996). Although individuals often seek to protect their positive views of their moral self, 'people's rosy picture of their moral identity do weaken after engaging in immoral actions' (Xu et al., 2019, p. 1351). Erikson (1968) discussed how some individuals come to identify with 'evil prototypes', that is, those with stereotypical identities regarded as undesirable or dangerous. Stets and Carter (2011, p. 193) point out that there may be situations in which 'individuals are unable to control self-perceptions to keep them at the level of their internal identity standard despite whether the meanings are moral or immoral', and that 'individuals may have an immoral identity' (p. 201). The idea that people develop immoral identities is also consistent with evidence that many people do not have positive views of their work selves (e.g., Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011) and can struggle to develop positive

identities (e.g., Adler et al., 2015).[6] Four specific immoral identity types have attracted particular attention: the self-deceptively hypocritical, the intentionally hypocritical, the morally stigmatized, and the authoritarian (see Online Appendix).

Ties: Compatible, conflicting, or synergistic. Current preoccupations with single moralized identity types is problematic because they focus on these identities as stand-alone and static, overlooking the complexity inherent in individuals' constructions of self. Conventional social psychology which insists that the dissonance people experience from threats to moral integrity is closed down (Aronson, 1999; Festinger, 1957) rather than (at least in some instances) embraced and used proactively and creatively (Frandsen et al., 2025) has led to studies that conceal as much as they reveal. To usefully complicate these conceptions, we place the four broad distinctive types of moralized identities at the core of our framework to emphasize that they are multiple, exist in relation to one another, and bound together. For example, enacting a supererogatory identity as an activist or whistleblower (Stein, 2021) implies constructing the self as 'not conventionally moral' and 'not amoral'. Likewise, to claim an 'immoral' identity requires an individual to work on and potentially reject a 'moral' identity (Stets and McCaffree, 2019).

The ties between moralized identities may be compatible, conflicting, or synergistic (Bataille and Vough, 2022). As Bataille and Vough (2022, p. 95–6) explain, compatible identities describe identities existing or occurring together 'without problems or conflict', conflict describes 'a tension between two or more identities', while synergistic identities are mutually enhancing. In each of the remaining four elements of our framework, we theorize how different factors can affect the salience of and ties between multiple moralized identities and thus how individuals coordinate them. We also further clarify these ties by concluding with an illustrative example of the framework.

Processes of Constructing and Coordinating Moralized Identities

A second aspect of our theorizing is that individuals frequently work in varied ways to construct and coordinate (i.e., bring into a subjectively satisfactory relationship[7]) their dynamic network of moralized identities. For example, moralized identities and the ties between these identities evolve continuously in response to quotidian micro-adjustments in people's tasks, interactions, and work environments. A variety of studies have explained how individuals seek to maintain a moral or righteous self (Greenwald, 1980; Wakeman et al., 2019), through for instance differing degrees of moral disengagement (Moore, 2008a). Rather than dealing with how moralized identities are made, however, analyses often concentrate on how some elements of work context such as corporate culture and organizational structures, policies, and systems might be altered to influence moral decision making and action (Charan et al., 2002; Sims and Brinkman, 2002). When moralized identity change is highlighted it is often to focus on how employees can be persuaded or coerced to conform to local and/or societal ethical norms, and sometimes merely to prescribe that 'managers must come to appreciate the key elements in making moral judgments' (Carroll, 1987, p. 7).

In this subsection, we theorize the processes through which moralized identities are constructed by actors and how these multiple moralized identities and their ties are negotiated through five identity work pathways.

Identity work pathways. These address specifically the question of how moralized identities are composed through multiple interleaved mechanisms associated with distinctive trajectories (Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018): discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, and psychodynamic. Discourse such as narrative, dialogue, and other situated practices of language use (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Ybema et al., 2009) are means by which actors (re)construct themselves (linguistically) as moralized entities. Dramaturgy and the embodied social actions and emotional displays that constitute it in social settings are performative means that 'announce and enact' (Creed and Scully, 2000, p. 391) people's moralized identities (Anteby, 2008; Courpasson and Monties, 2017; Goffman, 1959). The adoption, display, and manipulation of object symbols, that is, tangible, often highly visible and malleable 'things' that are suffused with meaning (Casey, 1995; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), ranging from personal possessions to body art, are a further set of instruments individuals deploy to define themselves morally. Socio-cognitive mechanisms such as prototyping and stereotyping (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and self-sensemaking practices (Weick, 1995) are particularly used to position people in relation to social groups and those entities definitions of what it is to be supererogatory, moral, amoral, and immoral. Psychodynamics, for example in the form of ego defences such as splitting, fantasy, and projection (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014; Freud, 1936; Petriglieri and Stein, 2012) are apparatuses by which organizational actors' fashion moralized identities below their level of awareness and are an important reminder that they are only partially intentional productions.

While in the extant moralized identities literature there is an emphasis on cognition (e.g., Aquino and Reed, 2002), in our framework we highlight that individuals also employ a range of non-cognitive means in moralized identities construction. For instance, individuals may employ discursive pathways to tell themselves stories to account for or reconcile apparent moral contradictions. This allows individuals to create ties between, for example, their moral and immoral identities and other work identities: such as 'I fly for work but live sustainably otherwise' (Gill, 2021) or 'I am a soldier but value saving lives as a medic' (Ashforth et al., 2024). Or they may reframe the relationships between identities along a dramaturgical pathway, through behavioural performances (e.g., a manager may strictly enforce organizational rules to demonstrate their commitment to the principle of equality of treatment for their staff). Symbolic identity work such as tattoos and choice of attire are also important in processes of moralized identities construction and coordination: tattoos may be kept secret or displayed to others to construct morally neutral or challenging versions of the self for different audiences at different times (Irwin, 2001). Formal business, business-casual, and casual clothing can be adopted by actors to construct more (or less) morally trustworthy identities (Sotak et al., 2024). The psychodynamic pathway demonstrates how, for example, fantasies can provide a way for people to construct the identities they desire, no matter that they may also be unrealistic or harbour

contradictions (see Driver, 2009, 2015). Not only can distinct moralized identities be constructed in multiple ways but as different identity work pathways may operate concurrently, they can simultaneously reinforce or undermine existing ties.

Resources for Moralized Identities

This element of our framework examines some of the materials – cognitive, psychodynamic, discursive, and other symbolic resources – with which individuals continuously construct and coordinate their moralized identities. This is important because there is an assumption in many studies that individuals' moralized identities are pre-constructed prior to arriving in work settings and are largely unvarying. Much conventional moralized identity research is premised on the notion that moral development occurs during childhood and adolescence (Damon, 1984): early socialization, it is contended, especially the influence of parents and religion, shapes moralized identities, which is when 'an individual's definition of self begins to integrate with morality' (Shao et al., 2008, p. 515). IWP scholarship, however, contends that identities continue to develop throughout the life course (Giddens, 1991; Gill, 2023; Watson, 2008) and shows how occupations and job roles can be key sources of identity construction (Brown, 2022; Caza et al., 2018). Our theorizing draws attention to the connections between specific resources and the identity work pathways for moralized identities construction, which include identity threats and opportunities, role models, and moral emotions.

Moralized identity threats and opportunities. A trigger to construct (and/or coordinate) moralized identities in the workplace is the appraisal of a related threat or opportunity. Identity work scholars have examined how identity threats – 'experiences appraised as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity' (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644) – can trigger processes of identity work. Brown and Coupland (2015) showed how 'threats' can serve as resources which professionals draw on to articulate preferred versions of their selves. This is also the case for moralized identity threats, such as work colleagues claims that an individual is unjustifiably immoral. Brown et al. (2021), for instance, show how business school deans faced with assaults on their preferred moralized identities as 'good people' used them to fashion narrative identities claiming they were managers with integrity who were 'honest' and 'authentic' (see also Bataille and Vough, 2022). Schabram and Maitlis (2017) analyse how the experience of working in animal shelters, while challenging, can provide opportunities for personal moral development. Whether conceptualized as identity threat or opportunity, such experiences constitute valuable resources with which individuals can work proactively or reactively on their selves (Watson, 2008; Winkler, 2018; Xie and Peltokorpi, 2024) and on the ties between their moralized identities if they appraise the threat or opportunity as possessing a moral component.

Role models. Moralizing resources also include other people, for example in the form of role models (Gibson, 2003, 2004; Goffman, 1959), and there is growing research analysing how individuals construct identities based in part on these constructs

(Gibson, 2003, 2004; Ibarra, 1999; Selznick, 1957). The notion 'role model' combines the idea of 'role', and its associations with behaviours and social positions (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Sarbin, 1943), and 'modelling', which implicates identification and learning (Bandura, 1977; Erikson, 1985). Role models are mostly regarded as people with whom an individual identifies, who inspire them, and from whom they learn through emulation (Bandura, 1977; Ibarra, 1999). They are not just local leaders and mentors but, potentially, a vast range of figures drawn from the global stage, from history, and fictional sources (Gibson, 2003, 2004). Role models are an important resource to encourage moralized thought and action and to edify, thereby supporting the development of moralized identities (Gill, 2023). Importantly, though, role models need not necessarily be conventionally 'moral'. Negative role models can be people whom individuals revile but may learn from through contrast or avoidance (Gibson, 2003, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2002). Whether moral or immoral, exemplars can encourage reflection on moralized identities and thus can prompt identity work through the pathways we have outlined. For example, Creed et al. (2010) showed how by connecting with openly gay ministers who served as role models, other ministers were able to challenge their belief that being religious was moral while being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) was immoral.

Moralized emotions. Moralized emotions such as guilt, pride, remorse, and shame are 'emotional responses to behaviours that either conform to or violate a moral standard' (Lefebvre and Krettenauer, 2019, p. 446) and play a complex role in shaping moralized identities along each of the identity work pathways. Narrative identity scholarship suggests that moralized emotions are useful resources that people deploy in their self-narratives to construct themselves as specific kinds of person (e.g., as someone with moral courage, driven by a sense of duty, or seeking redemption) (McAdams, 1993; Mitra et al., 2024). For instance, Page-Jones and Brown's (2025) analysis of veterinarians shows how their talk about feelings of pride and guilt were implicated in their constructions of desired selves as morally good and feared selves as morally tainted. From a dramaturgical perspective, moralized emotions can be theorized as performances of the self that represent actors as adopting a moralized stance (e.g., angry, disgusted, etc.) toward an important ethical issue (Goffman, 1959). When combined with appropriate altruistic action, and personal suffering, the display of moral emotions (e.g., expressions of outrage at others' immoral actions) can bolster an individual's reputation (Cormack, 2002). Moralized emotions thus exist in a reciprocal relationship with identities, both as resources for their construction and as outcomes of identity work. For example, guilt is a resource for identity work (Frandsen et al., 2025; Gill, 2023) and a likely outcome when someone fails to act according to their preferred self-conceptions and/or take responsibility for their failure (Tangney et al., 2007).

Salience of Multiple Identities

An individual's moralized identities also relate to their other identities. This is an important but sometimes overlooked consideration; while researchers have long acknowledged

that individuals possess multiple (e.g., personal, social, and role) identities that become more (or less) salient in different contexts (Aquino et al., 2009; Aquino and Reed, 2002), scant attention has been paid to the relationships between these non-moralized identities and moralized identities. Limited concern with broader networks of identities reflects the common use of experimental and survey-based methods to measure the degree to which a moralized identity is central to an individual's sense of self and the relationship of this centrality to other outcomes, such as prosocial behaviours (e.g., Aquino et al., 2011). A focus on a single moralized identity as an explanatory variable, as opposed to one of many identities that constitute the self, risks a narrow understanding of the identity network that pervades and supports, moralized identities. We explore the significance of multiple identities for moralized identity formation, focusing on two key concepts: networked identities and the inseparability of identities.

Networked identities. Identity work scholarship has focused on the relationships between identities to theorize how making changes to one identity modifies the relationships among them (Bataille and Vough, 2022; Somers, 1994). Much of this research builds on Ramarajan's (2014) use of a network metaphor to explain the connections between an individual's multiple identities to draw attention to inter-identity work, that is, how an actor alters the relationships between them. This metaphor depicts an individual's 'identity set' as a network of nodes that represent specific identities. For instance, nodes could refer to gender, occupation, or perhaps different moralized identities, and a gender or occupational identity may be connected to a moralized identity to varying degrees. Studies suggest that individuals manage their multiple identities along a continuum from fully integrated to wholly segmented (Rothbard et al., 2005). Integration involves 'merging the identities together so they are no longer viewed as separate' (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 274), such that the divisions between identities become blurred. Segmentation 'involves erecting cognitive or behavioural barriers between identities' (Bataille and Vough, 2022, p. 104). Applying this continuum metaphor to moralized identities, there likely will be considerable interpersonal differences: while some individuals will erect sharp boundaries (segment) at least some of their multiple moralized identities (moral-immoral, for example) others will adopt a strategy of integration and move seamlessly between them. Moralized identity chameleons (integrators) engage more easily with the patching identity work required to move between moralized identities while strong segmenters struggle to flex their moralized identities to fit contingencies of circumstance.

Inseparable identities. Beyond being connected within a network, some identities may be so closely bound (e.g., a nurse-manager, musician-teacher) that they can be inseparable in certain contexts (Stets and Burke, 2000). This is important because, for example, an individual's role identity as a nurse might be strongly associated with their conventionally moral identity and their role identity as a manager may be more closely associated with their amoral identity. As the nurse-manager moves between roles different moralized identities may come to the fore, with the potential for intrapsychic conflicts to emerge and practical problems regarding how to act consistently becoming troublesome.

Further, our theorizing posits that changes to one identity can also affect other identities, and this has two other implications for theorizing the development of moralized identities. First, when a moralized identity is salient, there are likely to be spillover effects that can be positive or negative. For example, when work and family identities enrich one another, individuals may seek to create synergies to enhance ties because of the positive spillover effects onto another identity (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). As such, a moralized identity is likely to be accompanied by various forms of inter-identity work. Second, multiple identities may be invoked simultaneously in certain contexts (Bataille and Vough, 2022). Ashforth et al. (2024), for example, analyse how certain job roles such as being a soldier-medic or undercover police officer require the combination of distinct identities that act as 'foils' to each other. This is akin to the notion of co-activated identities found in mainstream socio-cognitive research, which has theorized how they may become routinized, such that individuals require limited cognitive processing to activate both simultaneously (Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009). That is, some moralized identities are readily accessible but not easily distinguishable or separable and likely require management through strategies of avoidance, favouritism, and different forms of compromise (Ashforth et al., 2024).

Context: Discourse, Power, and Politics

Our theorizing draws attention to discourses, power, and politics in regulating the availability of resources and the salience of other identities that shape the construction and coordination of moralized identities. Studies of moralized identities generally recognize that what is regarded as 'right or "wrong" depends on contingencies such as the audience and setting (Graham et al., 2009, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Leavitt et al., 2016; Roulet, 2019; Vaccaro, 2012). For example, while rule-following is generally encouraged in organizations there are some circumstances in which rule-breakers are favoured (Gill, 2026; Wakeman et al., 2025). However, scholarship has more rarely accounted for the political context in which moralized identities are constituted or the relations of power in which they are enmeshed. Not only quantitative social-psychological research (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Stets and Carter, 2011), but also many qualitative studies are similarly disinterested in notions of power and overlook the micro-political games in which embedded actors construct their moralized identities (e.g., Detert et al., 2008; Skubinn and Herzog, 2016). Even critical management studies, with its specific interest in power, it has been argued, 'has failed to substantively engage with ethics as it relates to individual subjects' (McMurray et al., 2011, p. 542; Wray-Bliss, 2009). We consider how power suffuses the development of moralized identities under two broad headings: available discourses and micro and macro politics.

Available discourses. Discourses can be understood as structured collections of meaningful texts (Parker, 1992) that produce knowledge, define subjects, and establish relationships of power and truth (Foucault, 1977). By 'meaningful texts' we refer to 'any kind of symbolic expression requiring a physical medium and permitting of permanent storage' (Taylor and Van Every, 1993, p. 109) including written documents, Web sites,

artwork, spoken words, symbols, and other artefacts (Fairclough, 1995). Discourses, then, are the constitutive linguistic-symbolic context through which not just definitions of reality but the organizations and the social world in which people construct their identities are constituted (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The discourses that construct a particular organization instantiate sets of conventions that rule in and rule out ways of thinking, acting, and being, providing a matrix of opportunities for and constraints on identity work. That is, an institution 'provides them [members] with a frame for action, without which they could not act, but it thereby constrains them to act within that frame' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 38). Discourses themselves are dynamic and the relations between their multiple elements' fluid, reciprocal, and co-constitutive such that the resources for moralized identities construction they make available also shape them.

Organizations and professions as 'identity workspaces' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) are regimes of power that enforce the (re)production of certain kinds of institutionally prescribed moralized identities (Bitektine et al., 2020; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) mechanisms for 'identity regulation' suggest how individuals' moralized identities may be imposed upon by their employers and professions through managerially and occupationally inspired discourses. This is important because not all actors have equal power to define what is morally acceptable. Senior leaders, institutional authorities, and dominant groups promulgate moralized narratives that exert control, overwriting, and marginalizing alternatives. For instance, Beu and Buckley (2004) showed how charismatic leaders can create an environment where their subordinates commit crimes of obedience by invoking a transcendent mission that overrides the claimed moral standards of their employees. In such circumstances, managers can then downplay their own complicity in harmful decisions by adopting an amoral identity, such that they are just 'following orders'. The availability of certain discourses in an organization can, therefore, make certain moralized identities and notions of morality more salient and thus provide valuable resources for individuals to draw on.

Nonetheless, we do not suggest that managerially inspired discourses are totalizing. Other research highlights how people have substantial latitude to create moralized identities of their choosing (Bauman, 2000; Baumeister, 1986; Gergen, 1991). As Fillion (2004, p. 122) notes, in organizations, identities are formed 'within and against the constraints of the particular regimes of truth [they] inhabit', and researchers mostly recognize the limits that available discourses impose on people while attributing sufficient agency to them to pick and choose between options and to combine them in novel ways to create preferred versions of their selves (Mumby, 1987; Trethewey, 1999). Thus, a discourse shapes but does not dictate what identities individuals may construct or sustain. Moralized identities are on this reading best regarded as 'crafted' or 'bricolaged' in processes of identity work that are to some extent intentional and calculated though also sometimes at the edge of awareness, and always situated and contextual (Callero, 2003; Jenkins, 1996; Kunda, 1992).

Micro and macro-politics. Moralized identities are important not just for purposes of self-meaning but also in both micro (interpersonal) and macro (organization-level) political games. As McMurray et al. (2011) note: 'the ethical subject is always a political subject' (p. 541) and 'politics is how ethics become actualized in practice' (p. 546). At a micro-level,

research shows how in displaying and enacting identities people are concerned with building political credibility and influence others' decision making (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1989; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). There is also evidence that organizational leaders seek to present themselves as authentically ethical to garner the support of followers, and to encourage positive organizational identification and citizenship behaviours (Brown and Mitchell, 2010).

At the macro-level, identity work can be a significant form of 'institutional work' (Creed et al., 2010; Lok, 2010) and is one means by which organizational legitimacy is maintained and potentially challenged (Brown and Toyoki, 2013). Studies of effective leader activism (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Solinger et al., 2020) and conscience objectors (Beardshaw, 1981; Bird and Waters, 1987; Kenny et al., 2020; Stein, 2021) are strongly suggestive that in working on their moralized identities people may have profound institutional effects. One potential means by which individuals' identity work can be translated into broader social movements within organizations and industries is by aligning with, adapting, and blending frames for action which they then personally enact and that motivate others to action (Benford and Snow, 2000). Moralized identities can, therefore, be a means to alter the policies and strategies of work organizations and the institutional logics which underpin them (Lok, 2010).

Our articulation and application of an IWP to develop a critical framework that problematizes existing studies of moralized identities is a 'first step' towards a scholarly discourse that does more than identify and investigate the behavioural and decision-making implications of distinct moral types. Our framework confronts the ever-increasing complexity of the moralized identities of people in and around organizations. Workers' face demands to be temporally flexible and spatially mobile (Sennett, 1998); some have become digital nomads (Ahuja et al., 2020), and many feel the desire or are obliged to create online identities (Barros et al., 2023). In a world of contested moralities where the notion of what it is to be a 'good' person is often hotly contested, satisfactory moralized identities are both more important to individuals but also more elusive and always the focus of ongoing work.

The Relationships Between Elements of the Framework

An important feature of our framework is that each element is connected and can inform, or be informed by, the others: multiple moralized identities are dynamic and constructed in relation to both other people and contexts with whom/which they are negotiated and often disputed (Pratt et al., 2024; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007; Somers, 1994). As Coupland and Brown (2012, p. 1) point out, 'relationality is a vital element of identity formation: for example, an account of the self as a team worker requires mention of other team members, while versions of the self as a follower implicate leaders' (see also DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Individuals' moralized identities connect to a vast range of their other identities, including those which are social (e.g., mother, professor, choir member), possible (Markus and Nurius, 1986), lingering (Wittman, 2019), or alternate (Obodaru, 2012). Important here is that identities relate not just to other people but also to external phenomena (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007) and events, such as workplace transitions and processes of change (Caza et al., 2018). Moralized identities should, therefore, be understood as being fabricated in relation

to a plethora of intra-personal (e.g., thoughts, feelings) and external (e.g., environmental, symbolic) sensations, things, and occurrences.

This notion of relationality highlights that the five elements are not linear stages or isolated categories but mutually shaping dynamics within a web of identity work processes. The types of moralized identities cannot be understood apart from the processes that coordinate them, since the ties between, say, moral, and amoral selves are forged through, for example discursive and/or performative negotiations. These processes are energized by resources such as threats, role models, and emotions, which act as relational bridges that can either intensify conflict between identities (e.g., guilt heightening tension between moral and immoral selves) or create synergy (e.g., pride aligning moral and supererogatory role identities). The salience of multiple identities means that changes in one domain reverberate relationally across the network – a professional role, for instance, can amplify, attenuate, or mute certain moralized identities depending on context. For example, tattoos can be a form of symbolic work (element ii) but may also be tied to role models at work who display (or attempt to hide) such aesthetics of one's identity (element iii). These activities are embedded in relations of power and political processes, which shape not only which identities are available but also how their ties are negotiated, making relationality the thread that binds the framework together. Moreover, these identities can 'act back' on their context (Lok, 2010). As such, building a richer understanding of the development of moralized identities requires attention not just to each element of our framework but also to their interactions.

An Illustrative Example of the Framework

A useful way to illustrate the framework is through the example of a hypothetical mid-career hospital-based doctor who is also an active climate campaigner. First, the doctor must navigate multiple types of moralized identities: as a supererogatory activist who goes beyond their clinical duties to advocate for systemic change, a moral professional committed to patient care, sometimes an amoral bureaucrat when following hospital rules, and as an immoral actor sensitive to accusations by colleagues that they are compromising their professionalism by 'wasting' time on their activist pursuits rather than focusing on patients. Second, their moralized identities are shaped through processes of construction and coordination: in public they employ discourse to present themselves as both physician and activist; in the hospital they perform a dramaturgical balancing act, embodying authority (as a doctor making medical decisions) in clinical settings while showing vulnerability (to personalized attacks from others who disapprove of these activities) when campaigning; privately they manage tensions psychodynamically, reassuring themselves through processes of denial, fantasy, and rationalization that their medical decisions align with their broader moral purpose.

Third, the doctor relies in their continuing identity work on multiple resources: the threat of being labelled disruptive by hospital leaders may, over time, prompt them to reaffirm their activist stance, to moderate it, or perhaps even abandon it; the opportunity of joining a professional climate coalition likely strengthens their resolve; role models such as senior physicians who speak out on climate matters provide legitimizing

precedents; and moral emotions like pride in advocacy or guilt when they feel complicit in energy-intensive medical practices fuel their ongoing identity work. Fourth, their moralized identities intertwine with their other multiple identities: as a parent they integrate care for their children with their climate activism, presenting as consistent with a moral duty of stewardship, while at work they sometimes segment their activist and medical roles to maintain credibility. Finally, their identity work is embedded in context, relations of power, and micro-politics: dominant hospital discourses valorize tireless patient care but marginalize political engagement, forcing them to bricolage a moralized self that challenges these norms and create alliances to shift institutional priorities. Thus, their moralized identities are multiple, dynamic, and politically situated, continually constructed and negotiated across contexts. For 'real world' personal accounts of the practical difficulties of formulating moralized identities see, for example, Ellsberg (2003), Havel (1991), and Levi (1988a, 1988b).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Moralized Identities: Multiple and Relational

Our first contribution lies in theorizing individuals, in their identity work, as manoeuvring among a range of moralized identity types – supererogatory, moral, amoral. Rather than individuals possessing a unified sense of moralized selfhood (e.g., Shao et al., 2008; Stets and Carter, 2011), each of these identities is freighted with its own distinct normative expectations. We place these ongoing coordination activities at the core of our theorizing to shift scholarly attention from what a moralized identity does to how multiple moralized identities are constructed. Drawing on the IWP, we have proposed a framework for analysing moralized identities which foregrounds their multiplicity, interdependence, and relationality. While the IWP has extensively explored how individuals work continuously on their identities (e.g., Brown, 2015, 2017; Caza et al., 2018), few studies focus on moralized identities and those which do (e.g., Gill, 2023; Kornberger and Brown, 2007) have not explored how individuals navigate multiple distinct moralized identities.

Our perspective challenges dominant models of the moralized self as integrated and internally consistent (Blasi, 1984; Shao et al., 2008). This is important because, as Hannah et al. (2020, p. 727) observe, despite numerous accounts of people's moralized identity inconsistency and fragmentation (e.g., Améry, 1985; Havel, 1989; Jackall, 1988; Levi, 1988a, 1988b) among scholars 'moral identity has been consistently operationalized as a unitary construct' (see also Jennings et al., 2015). Our framework repositions moralized identities as themselves sites for identity work, and thus disrupts the assumption of moral coherence, proposing instead a model of moralized identity complexity and fluidity. Building on the work of Bataille and Vough (2022), we have drawn attention to the different 'ties' between identities: conflicting, synergistic, and compatible. Moralized identities are not anchored in a single, integrated value system, but draw on diverse multi-level discourses and are shaped by heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting moral logics. Individuals, in their identity work, may shift between these or blend them to adopt distinct moral stances in various

domains at different times. For instance, an individual may act as an amoral market actor at work while striving for their preferred fusion of supererogatory morality in community or family life. Relaxing the requirement for identity consistency licences research that is sensitive to the often dislocated and sometimes contradictory nature of employee identities and the consequences of these for individual and collective behaviour.

The Dynamism and Fluidity of Moralized Identities

A second theoretical contribution of this article is to theorize *how* individuals navigate across multiple, intertwined moralized identities. In contrast to literature which treats moralized identity as a singular, integrated foundation for selfhood (e.g., Aquino and Reed, 2002; Stets and Carter, 2006), we have argued that individuals continuously (re)construct a range of moralized identities, each of which may be prioritized or suppressed depending on situational demands and relational contexts. People use manifold pathways, such as narratives, the use of object symbols, and dramaturgical performances, to work on and coordinate their multiple moralized identities, and to account for and 'fix' apparent identity inconsistencies. People construct moralized identities not by adhering to a single moralized sense of self but by navigating between multiple moral discourses. This notion of pathways has theoretical implications for identity work scholarship by emphasizing discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-psychological, and psychodynamic negotiations across moralized identities. In this way, we extend existing models by showing that identity work is not only in pursuit of coherence (Blasi, 1993; Boegershausen et al., 2015) but also managing moralized identity dissonance. We therefore reposition any moralized identity not as a fixed internal compass, but as an in-progress construct that individuals must actively coordinate.

Our framework also highlights how the availability and distribution of identity resources – such as role models and moral threats – condition which moralized identities individuals can claim. Moralized identity work does not occur in vacuo; it is moulded by the symbolic and material resources that make certain moralized selves 'constructable' and legitimate (Creed et al., 2010). For instance, the presence of role models who embody supererogatory or activist moralized identities may enable individuals to construct similarly aspirational selves (Gill, 2023). Conversely, the perception of moral threat, such as reputational risk or organizational wrongdoing, may provoke the uptake of conventionally moral or even oppositional immoral identities as a form of defence or resistance against peril (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020). In this way, claiming a particular moralized identity is both an internal process of alignment, and a response to the affordances and constraints of one's environment. This shifts the focus from moralized identity as a stable trait to a resource-dependent, contextually mediated accomplishment. Building on Ahuja et al. (2019), Killian and Johnson (2006) and Larson and Pearson (2012) among other studies, our theorizing enriches identity work literature by accounting more fully for how moralized self-construction is negotiated with reference to available resources.

The framework draws attention to the salience and availability of other identities beyond moralized types – particularly role and social identities – which shape the ways

individuals construct and negotiate moralized identities. While a moralized identity is often conceptualized as a core or guiding self-aspect (e.g., Aquino and Reed, 2002), our argument is that it is frequently co-constituted in relation to the dynamics of other identities that are situationally or structurally salient. For example, an individual's enactment of a moralized identity as a 'good' professional (Pratt et al., 2006) may be shaped by the expectations associated with their professional role (Fournier, 1999). Leavitt et al. (2016) for instance, showed how distinct moral obligations are embedded in different occupational identities. Similarly, an individual's capacity to adopt a supererogatory identity that is encouraged by their employing organization's practices may be constrained by how they have negotiated their identity within societal (e.g., racial, gender, and class) discourses. The availability of role or social identities influence which moralized identities a person feels are advisable, reasonable, possible, or safe to claim (or ignore). That is, moralized identity work is not insulated from work on other identities but is deeply entangled with it (and them). By foregrounding this entanglement, we move beyond models that isolate moralized identities as a discrete domain and instead position them as a situated negotiation shaped by the intersectional salience of other self-categories.

A final element of the framework germane to the development and dynamism of moralized identities is our consideration of them as framed within relations of power (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Bardon et al., 2017; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Power influences whose moral claims are acknowledged, ignored, or dismissed (Madsen, 1984). The navigation of moralized identities involves discursive struggles over the definition of what counts as 'moral' (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). An individual employee may invoke a conventionally moral identity when opposing a policy, but their moral claim may be dismissed as naïve, emotional, or mutinous if it challenges dominant norms. A frontline worker might feel pressure to suppress a supererogatory identity to avoid being seen as self-righteous or insubordinate. These dynamics reveal how power works through moralization itself – assigning a moralized valence – (e.g., shameful, honourable, virtuous) to identity performances (Creed et al., 2010; Creed and Scully, 2000). The theoretical implication of this aspect of our framework is that moralized identity work is a site of disciplinary power, whereby people are governed through moralized discourses and their expectations, rewards, and sanctions.

Our framework helps explain the fluidity of moralized identities. Individuals engage in moral reflexivity – an ongoing evaluative process that involves questioning who we are in the world and how we can act in responsible and ethical ways (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015) – and this reflexivity affects how we understand the self. Reflexivity is not simply about aligning actions with values; it involves managing tensions between competing moralized logics (e.g., being a loyal employee vs. a whistleblower). Rather than striving for consistency, individuals may switch between moralized identities, adapting to shifting expectations across social domains. This theorizing leads to a view of the self as morally plural and situationally adaptive. We contribute to moralized identity work scholarship by illuminating the centrality of moral reflexivity in contemporary identity construction (Giddens, 1991; MacIntyre, 1981, 2007). Individuals evaluate, prioritize, and justify their commitments to various moralized identities, often in situations of normative ambiguity and moral contestation (e.g., Améry, 1985; Havel, 1989; Jackall, 1988; Levi, 1988a, 1988b). This moves identity work scholarship beyond preoccupations with

role alignment or status preservation and toward a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate tensions between shifting regularizing standards, and situational demands.

Future Research Directions

In this section, we seek to initiate new conversational directions (Healey et al., 2023) for moralized identities scholarship.

What motivates moralized identities construction and coordination? Our framework theorizes how diverse moralized identities are constructed along multiple pathways and in relation to different resources and identities. However, we know little about why individuals choose to construct these identities, or the specifics of how such work is accomplished. Importantly, we need better to understand what motivates processes of moralized identities construction. To date, considerable identity work scholarship has concerned how motivations, such as those for self-esteem, continuity, uniqueness, meaningfulness, competence, and acceptance lead to the construction of positive, adaptive, fit-for-purpose identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 2010; Florian et al., 2019; Vignoles, 2011; Weller et al., 2023). These efforts can serve as the basis for systematic research on moralized identities.

Research might usefully focus on which motivations for identity work are more or less important to individuals in their construction of moralized identities. Are different motivations correlated with distinctive moralized identities? For example, it seems plausible that conventionally moral identities are more motivated by needs for community acceptance than some forms of supererogatory identities (such as conscience objectors) and immoral identities (e.g., hypocritical), both of which may be met with revulsion by peer groups. Those working intentionally on amoral identities might be more strongly driven by the desire for competence and thus focus narrowly on work tasks rather than engage with issues of morality, than are those concerned to construct conventionally moral identities. Studies of moral disengagement show that people participate in what they would 'normally' regard as misconduct by, for example, portraying such actions as being in the service of moral objectives, using euphemistic language that sanitizes their behaviour, comparing their acts with still more egregious ones, displacing responsibility for them onto others or the constraints of circumstance, ignoring or distorting the consequences of their actions, and devaluing or dehumanizing their victims (Bandura et al., 1996). These findings are suggestive that the motivations, patterns of reasoning and behaviours that underpin work on immoral identities are likely many and diverse, and how they interact moment-by-moment in different contexts a rich vein for further studies.

While it is likely that those working on what they construe as supererogatory and moral identities will regard them as 'positive' and 'authentic', whether this is also true for those working on amoral and immoral identities is less clear. Perhaps those working on different types of immoral identity find it harder than others to construct positive and authentic identities: for instance, it may be that those who work on intentionally hypocritical identities are less easily able to deal with their inconsistency and so to consider themselves

authentic than those working on authoritarian identities and who enjoy being domineering and controlling (Rook et al., 2024). How people engineer moralized identities in opposition to the moralized identities of others raises a host of fascinating questions. For example, do those who self-define as conventionally moral do so by differentiating themselves not just from those they regard as amoral and immoral but also from those considered supererogatory?

What resources support moralized identities construction? We have outlined several important resources in the development of moralized identities but at least two sets of future studies are needed to analyse how those in organizations draw on specific resources to develop them. First, following McAdams (2006), researchers might analyse how workers employ cultural motifs – such as meritocracy, upward mobility, and personal emancipation – to tell 'redemptive' self-stories, of how they have transitioned from immoral (or less moral) to moral (or increasingly conventionally moral) identities. Research might also focus on the identity work by which people account for their slippage from identities they self-define as 'moral' to those they recognize to be 'immoral' and the drivers that underpin this: some may take inspiration from role models, others might position themselves as knowingly and pragmatically adjusting to corporate dictates. Second, aligned with dramaturgical and postmodern conceptions of identities, research is needed that examines how in social settings managers undertake identity work that allows them to transition quickly between different moralized identities in-the-moment, for example in ways they know to be immoral (e.g., as hypocritical or authoritarian), but which, perhaps, help them to get work done (Jackall, 1988). What identity work 'patches and fixes' do people employ to make these quick transitions (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008)?

How do moralized identities and other identities interact? A central predicate of the IWP is that people have multiple identities and that there is potential for them to conflict when/if individuals come to perceive incompatibilities between them (Ashforth et al., 2024). In our theorizing, we have emphasized that moralized and other identities exist in a network. More research is needed, however, that considers the potential clashes between an actor's moralized identities and their other (e.g., personal, role, social, alternate, aspirational, and lingering) identities (Gecas, 1994; Gill, 2023; Obodaru, 2012; Wittman, 2019). This is important because it seems probable that in those contexts where individuals feel required to switch frequently between different moralized identities to fulfil their work goals, this could result in negative outcomes such as detriments to their well-being, job satisfaction, performance, self-esteem, and intention to turnover (Hodges and Park, 2013; Vough et al., 2024).

In working life, managers will perhaps be confronted by former subordinates they have exploited and clients they have wronged that make past immoral identities salient and which may conflict with current conceptions of themselves as conventionally moral. What identity work is then enacted that allows managers to operate effectively? Prior research and theorizing (Vough et al., 2024) suggest that actors will experience intense conflict when two identities are made salient simultaneously that differ starkly in terms of their content and implications for behaviour. Whether this is the case with moralized

identities (e.g., supererogatory-immoral) is, though, yet to be fully explored. What little evidence we have leads us to propose that managers are generally highly adept in managing conflicts between different moralized identities and may often regard themselves as both 'moral' (in certain respects) and 'immoral' (in others) with apparent ease (Brown et al., 2021; Jackall, 1988).

Although scholarship on identity conflict is disparate and has often been disconnected, recently Vough et al. (2024) have provided an integrated model which usefully theorizes conflict as a form of threat that involves individuals in three sets of appraisal processes: an initial evaluation of the potential for harm, subsequent exploration of means to mitigate damage, and efforts to reappraise a conflict and imbue it with positive meaning. How these processes of evaluation, exploration, and reappraisal manifest in relation to specifically moralized identities conflicts would be an intriguing program of work.

How do people respond to attempts to regulate their moralized identities? One prominent strand of identity work theorizing concerns how normative control is exercised through identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), yet how control over individuals' moralized identities is enforced is yet to be fully explored. Research is required that investigates how organizations, professions, and occupational groups attempt to manipulate employees' moralized identities and to shape them through for instance objective setting, mentoring, training, codes of practice, disciplinary norms, and formal systems of appraisal, and quasi-informally enforced through buddy systems, peer pressure, and the threat of social sanction (Bardon et al., 2017; Page-Jones and Brown, 2025; Pratt et al., Forthcoming).

Complementarily, there is a need for research that examines how people do not merely kowtow but creatively appropriate, combine, resist, subvert, deform, and ignore corporate practices and discourses that target their moralized identities (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2014; Kunda, 1992; Thomas and Davies, 2005). In addition to corporate settings, research is also needed on the opportunities and constraints placed on people to cultivate moralized identities in, for example, total institutions, where identity work is subject to extreme forces such as prisons (Toyoki and Brown, 2014) and secure psychiatric hospitals (Harrison, 2000) and other highly concertive organizations such as the military (Jenkings et al., 2011) and religious cults (Kanter, 1972). An extensive range of fundamental research questions remain unanswered: how do moralized identities intersect with social identities such as those linked to race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality, which intersectional theorists regard as mutually constructing systems of power (Collins, 2015)? How do individuals seek to evade or manage the attempts by managers to control their moralized identities by identifying and occupying 'unmanaged spaces' (Gabriel, 2002) in organizations beyond the surveillance of seniors? What might be the unintended consequences of successful corporate attempts to regulate individuals moralized identities?

Relatedly, the denial of moralized identities is potentially fecund territory for research (Albuja et al., 2019; Cheryan and Monin, 2005). Future studies of how people respond to the denial of their moralized identities might consider whether people use different defensive identity work strategies depending on who is doing the denying

(subordinates, work colleagues, superiors, customers, etc.) (Petriglieri, 2011). Research could also investigate more nuanced instances where, for example, a person's moralized identity is partially challenged (e.g., 'I know you are usually a moral person, but, in this case, you are being immoral'). Further, it is possible that people will respond differently to denials of their moralized identities depending on the importance of the issue at stake: contests over moralized identities in relation to relatively trivial issues may elicit little more than a curt rebuff, while the denial of someone's moralized identity where an important point of principle is at stake are likely to prompt more thoroughgoing identity work. In addition, context is likely an important shaper of the reparative identity work engaged in by those denied a preferred moralized identity: for example, it may be that the denial of a moralized identity by one individual in a closed interaction with no audience prompts a different kind of identity work response to a challenge that is made by several individuals, or which is witnessed by others (Goffman, 1959). Additional research might examine how those who have recently been subject to moralized identity denial learn from this experience and whether (or not) they develop more effective identity work strategies for dealing with it in future (Bandura, 1977).

How can an IWP on moralized identities inform moral theory? Applied to moralized identities, the IWP offers a counterweight to the contemporary field of moral psychology (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977) which often insists there is a monistic, unified moral developmental trajectory along which people develop. Our theorizing connects rather with Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) (Graham et al., 2013) and its suggestion that we 'recognize the inherent pluralism of moral functioning' (Graham et al., 2013, p. 58), that moral reasoning is as much intuitive as it is considered, is done to satisfy the self and for socially strategic purposes, and functionally adaptive. The framework we have elaborated shares MFT's concern to emphasize plurality in moral matters in relation to identity construction and emphasizes how in fabricating the self-in-the-moment actors broker competing moral principles – such as care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation – through the pathways we have identified.

An IWP on moralized identities offers MFT an apparatus by which it may be extended and refined. MFT has been developed principally by social psychologists, and the IWP can be a vehicle for encouraging a broader range of scholars – including sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians – to investigate how patterns of reasoning underpinning moral pluralism operate through the construction of moralized identities. A frequent criticism of MFT is that it tends to ignore relationality (Rai and Fiske, 2011). The IWP (and our framework in particular) offers one means by which the importance of interpersonal relations in moral reasoning may be investigated by attending to how moralized identities are co-constructed. Another set of criticisms of MFT is that it focuses on how moral judgments form rather than how these are put into practice (Narvaez, 2010). By making moralized identities construction its focus, MFT scholars might usefully capture a more extensive range of morally relevant behaviours. In short, 'MFT is a theory in motion, a theory to be expanded, constricted, refined, and built

upon' (Graham et al., 2013, p. 118), and our theorizing provides a potentially generative way forward for it.

Limitations of the Framework

Our framework for understanding moralized identities construction developed from the literature associated with the IWP is, we recognize, one way of seeing, and as Burke (1965 [1935], p. 49) points out 'every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing'. At least three sets of important criticisms might be levelled against our theorizing. First, while advocating that researchers account adequately for the simultaneity of multiple identity work processes by which moralized identities are constructed, our framework, especially as articulated in Figure 1, is open to the charge that it deals with these individually and in piecemeal fashion. Second, in describing the diverse processes by which moralized identities are fashioned, we have relied on existing studies of identities and identity work and have made only modest progress in terms of identifying novel mechanisms coupled specifically with moralized identities. Third, although the passage of time is implied in our conceptualization of moralized identities formation, issues of temporality are, arguably, underplayed in our framework, and indeed Figure 1 lacks an explicit temporal dimension. Rather than contest these and other such critiques, we embrace them. We offer our framework as a starting not an end point for discussion and invite scholars to read it with an appreciation of the impossibility of a single model illustrating every possible mechanism, process, nuance, and concomitance. As we hope our theorizing has clarified, moralized identities and the processes of their construction are not easily tractable phenomena, and the scope for further research and refinement of our ideas is considerable.

CONCLUSION

Aligned with Shotter's (1993, p. 118) observation that 'The basic practical-moral problem in life is not what *to do* but what *to be*', our theorizing suggests the need for increased attention to the importance of moralized identities in the study of organizing and managing. In this respect, our project dovetails with others who have argued that '…organization studies needs to be fundamentally reshaped…to provide room for ethics' (Wicks and Freeman, 1998, p. 123; Clegg et al., 2007). Morality is not merely the 'background of action' (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 148) but integral to people's selves. To highlight this, we employed the IWP to develop a critical framework for studying moralized identities, show the limitations inherent in existing studies, and outline an agenda for future moralized identities research that is sensitive to how they are multiple, fluid, relational, networked, and contextually embedded in relations of power. Research from this perspective is best placed to understand and appreciate moralized identities in ways that generatively match 'the lived world of organizational actors' (Johnson et al., 2003, p. 15).

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NOTES

[1] By 'coordinate' we refer to the processes involved in bringing the different elements of an identity or multiple identities into a (generally sufficiently) subjectively satisfactory relationship.
[2] We recognize that these are broad category types and that many further fine distinctions may be made. For example, someone may be conventionally moral and a utilitarian, Kantian, or subscriber to virtue ethics etc. or some combination of these.
[3] A distinctive stream of research and theorizing which implies organizational actors are, or have the capacity to be, moral beings draws on Foucault (Clegg et al., 2007; Foucault, 1984; Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006).
[4] Other instruments for measuring 'moral' identity have been devised (e.g., Sosik et al., 2014) but these have as yet not attracted widespread attention.
[5] Often, as Edwards et al. (2019) point out, empirical description morphs into moral prescription (Trevino et al., 2003). The leadership literature, for example, is replete with normative narratives that identify leadership's 'moral dimension' (Gardner, 1993) and its 'moral foundations' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 181). Normative identity prescriptions are (either explicitly or tacitly) incorporated into a variety of leadership theories such as servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011) and authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005).
[6] The protagonist who recognizes they are 'immoral' is a well-established literary trope. Consider, for example, Shakespeare's Macbeth or the character Edmund in King Lear.
[7] Such relationships are themselves dynamic.

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