PATHWAYS FOR POSITIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT WORK: FOUR TYPES OF POSITIVE IDENTITY AND THE BUILDING OF SOCIAL RESOURCES

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In this paper we organize research on work-related identities into a four-perspective typology that captures different ways identities can be "positive." Each perspective on positive identity—virtue, evaluative, developmental, and structural—highlights a different source of positivity and opens new avenues for theorizing about identity construction. We use these four perspectives to develop propositions about how different forms of positive work-related identity construction can strengthen employees through building social resources.

Work is a pervasive life domain and a salient source of meaning and self-definition for most individuals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Carlsen, 2008; Gini, 1998; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Individuals form, transform, and modify how they define themselves and others in the context of work-based situations and activities (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). As Butler remarked, "Every man's [or woman's] work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of him [or her]self" (1998: 70). For example, chefs describe their roles using rhetorical narratives—like artist, business person, or professional—that imbue their self-definitions with worth (Fine, 1996); knowledge engineers narrate their identities in ways that infuse their identities with a sense of doing adventurous and important work (Carlsen, 2006); and hospital cleaners pick and choose from their interactions with nurses, doctors, and patients to construct self-definitions that foster a sense of value and meaning in doing cleaning work (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

These studies, as well as others focused on work-related identities (i.e., occupational identity, professional identity, organizational identity, etc.), assume that individuals wish to construct positive identities in their work domain (Gecas, 1982; Turner, 1982). While this core assumption from psychology has remained consistent in organizational research, the word "positive" has been defined and applied to identities and identity construction processes in a variety of ways (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). As a result, one purpose of this paper is to answer the question, "What makes a work-related identity positive?" To answer this we use the current identity literature in organizational studies and other disciplines to develop four distinct theoretical perspectives that capture the positive aspects of work-related identities and identity construction processes.

We use our typology of positive identity perspectives to answer a second question: "How do these four perspectives on positive identity reveal new insights into how employees gain strength through defining themselves in particular ways?" By applying core ideas from conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), we show how the four different perspectives on positive work-related identity uncover different pathways through which identity construction can build social resources for individuals. By social resources we mean the number, diversity, and quality of relationships that an individual has at work. As do social network theorists (e.g., Baker, 2000; Burt, 2000) and developmental process researchers (e.g., Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ragins & Kram, 2007), we assume that employees who have more social resources acquire other resources (e.g., information, access, trust) that strengthen them to endure stress and hardship and/or to take on new and more demanding challenges. Together, the typology of positive identity perspectives and the propositions linking positive identity construction to social resources open up new questions and offer new insights for scholars interested in identity, social relationships, and positive organizational scholarship.

STARTING ASSUMPTIONS

Our quest to deepen understanding about positive identity construction at work builds on several core assumptions about work-related identity. First, we define "identity" as the meanings that individuals attach to themselves (Gecas, 1982). These meanings might be represented as self-schemas that capture features or attributes that individuals associate with themselves (Markus, 1977), or they might be represented in a narrative form (McAdams, 1993), as individuals story who they are in interaction with others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) and over time (Carlsen, 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Further, we acknowledge that people's identities are multiple (Cooley, 1902), multifaceted (Gergen, 1991), and dynamic (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), making identity a complex and changing representation of self-knowledge (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994) and self-understanding that is associated with a broad range of self-relevant feelings and attitudes (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). The modifier

"work-related" is important because it focuses this paper on the aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work (i.e., a job) or membership in work-related groups, organizations, occupations, or professions. Thus, when we talk about work-related identities, we are interested in the way that individuals construe themselves in their work domain. This conception is intentionally broad to encompass the variety of activities, tasks, roles, groups, and memberships that individuals can use to compose a work-related self.

WHY FOCUS ON POSITIVE WORK-RELATED IDENTITIES?

Work as a life domain is important for self-construction. Most people will spend large portions of their adult lives at work. As Gini put it, "As adults there is nothing that more preoccupies our lives. From the approximate ages of 21 to 70—we will spend our lives working. We will not sleep as much, spend time with our families as much, eat as much or recreate and rest as much as we work" (1998: 707). In addition, research assumes that identities are created in relationships with others (Gecas, 1982; Gergen, 1994), and the large number of work-based friendships (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002) and daily work interactions (Dutton & Ragins, 2007) make work a central domain for the construction of the self. As a result, organizational researchers have begun to examine how individuals construct identities that are positive in a variety of ways (e.g., Roberts & Dutton, 2009). Four observations motivate our focus on developing theory about positive work-related identities.

First, researchers have conducted a variety of studies to understand how employees create and maintain a positive self-definition (i.e., a self-definition that is favorable or valuable in some way), but little consensus exists about what constitutes a positive work-related identity. For example, research on stigmatized occupations and work roles (e.g., Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006) demonstrates how workers overcome physical, moral, or social taints to create a positively evaluated sense of self at work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Researchers have also demonstrated the ways that individuals claim a positive identity at work when their membership is ambiguous (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001) or contested (e.g., Alvesson, 1998). Further, research on

occupational and career development (e.g., Ibarra, 1999), diversity (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Roberts, 2005; Thomas & Gabarro, 1999), and growth at work (e.g., Carlsen, 2008; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009; Maitlis, 2009; Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005) demonstrates how individuals construct a positive work-related identity as they develop in a career, occupation, profession, or organization. While in all of this research scholars are interested in explaining the processes and antecedents leading to a positive work-related identity, the definitions and assumptions underlying this construct are highly variable. Thus, one reason to focus on positive work-related identities is to create a more nuanced and systematic understanding of what can be conceptualized as positive about a work-related identity.

Second, positive work-related identities are theoretical mechanisms in both micro and macro organizational theories. That is, positive work-related identities are an important "cog" in the theoretical set of "wheels," providing explanations for relationships between variables (Davis & Marquis, 2005; Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998). For example, researchers at the micro level have explained individual adjustment to organizations (e.g., Pratt, 2000) as a process that is motivated by the desire to construct an identity that is privately and/or publicly evaluated as worthwhile or significant in some way. At the other end of the micro-macro spectrum, certain macro theories use positive work-related identity construction as a core mechanism driving institutional change. For example, in their study of a social movement within the field of French gastronomy, Rao, Monin, and Durand (2003) found that the social construction of a positive work-related identity was an important causal force in accounting for the movement of culinary chefs away from classical cuisine toward nouvelle cuisine. Thus, a better understanding of positive work-related identities should enable researchers to articulate more accurate theoretical mechanisms that will help explain both micro and macro phenomena.

Third, researchers have paid significant attention to how individuals construct a positive identity in response to negative identity threats at work, but they have given far less attention to positive identity construction more generally. The focus on stained or stigmatized roles (Boyce, Ryan, Imus, & Morgeson, 2007), occupations

(Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006), and organizations (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Hudson, 2008), as well as episodes of identity threat (Breakwell, 1986; Caza & Bagozzi, 2009), creates important but incomplete understandings of the processes and outcomes related to positive identity construction in organizational research. Because negative states and processes tend to command more attention in psychological processes (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), the relative emphasis on negative over positive work-related identity processes is understandable. However, if individuals, dyads, and collectives need a disproportionate experience of positive over negative states to experience individual or collective flourishing (e.g., Fredrickson & Losada, 2005), then extending our understanding of positive identity construction beyond responses to negative identity threat may be particularly important.

Fourth, there is ample evidence in a variety of organizational studies that different kinds of positive identities are linked with favorable outcomes. For example, positive work-related identities can provide individuals with an enhanced capacity to deal with adversity and stress (Caza & Bagozzi, 2009; Hobfoll, 1989), facilitate individuals' access to different knowledge domains, foster creativity (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008), provide a vehicle for learning from different cultural experiences to enhance work processes (Ely & Thomas, 2001), and promote adaptation to new work settings (Beyer & Hannah, 2002). Positive identities also motivate individuals to take actions that promote positive outcomes in organizations. For example, when hospital cleaners took on the identity of healer or care provider as part of their work identity, they were motivated to provide interpersonal helping to patients, visitors, nurses, and doctors. These identity-consistent behaviors contributed to personal satisfaction and enjoyment on the job, and they provided a sense of meaningfulness at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). As a result, it is both theoretically and practically important to further specify the sources of positivity in work-related identities.

These four observations motivate our investigation of the different ways that work-related identities can be positive. In response, we offer a typology of positive identity construction that highlights the multifaceted ways in which work-related identities can be positive. These per-

spectives also invite deeper exploration of how different forms of identity construction can strengthen employees, focusing particularly on how different kinds of positive identities facilitate or motivate the building of social resources. Through this exploration we generate a set of propositions that create the foundation for a model of social strengthening via positive identity construction. Our propositions lay the groundwork for new research questions on work-related identity construction and uncover practical insights about the cultivation of positive work-related identities.

FOUR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POSITIVE WORK-RELATED IDENTITY

A review of the identity literature reveals a myriad of ways that researchers have conceptualized the positivity of work-related identities. In some studies the conceptualization of the construct positive identity has been very explicit, while in most the conceptualization has been more implicit. We have organized these conceptualizations into a four-part typology. All four perspectives on positive identity assume that identity construction processes involve individuals' taking on and/or modifying some aspect of an identity, or self-definition. Further, the four perspectives have their foundations in a range of identity theories, including social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), structural identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), and optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Each approach illuminates different sources of positivity in work-related identities and reveals a spectrum of opportunities for constructing a positive identity in work-related contexts. Below we detail each theoretical perspective, elaborate on its core assumptions, and illustrate the approach's use in organizational research (see Table 1).

The Virtue Perspective

The virtue perspective posits that a work-related identity is positive when the identity content is infused with virtuous qualities or character strengths that correspond to the qualities that distinguish people of good character and that are defined as inherently good. As its label implies, the virtue perspective has a rich history in virtue ethics (e.g., Aristotle, 1984;

MacIntyre, 1981). Researchers who exemplify this perspective have usually focused on the construction of identities with certain "master virtues" (Park & Peterson, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), such as wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Researchers have identified a classification system for the set of twenty-four character strengths that represent evidence of the master virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These master virtues have been identified and discussed by philosophers and religious leaders as morally good qualities that distinguish people of good character (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Religious and scholarly thought together suggests that these virtues are important in explaining the survival of the species (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and in helping individuals construct a well-lived life (Weaver, 2006). The universal significance of these virtues within and/or across societies over time is evidence of their inherent goodness and positivity. Thus, when individuals construct work-related identities that have the strengths, characteristics, or qualities that are instantiations of these master virtues, those particular identities are considered positive.

Within organizational studies there has been sporadic interest in individuals or collectives whose identities are infused with particular virtues, and some virtues seem to have drawn more attention than others (e.g., Weaver, 2006; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). In addition, within organizational studies there is less emphasis on the universal significance of virtues and more focus on how certain virtues are important in specific organizational contexts. For example, researchers have examined how individuals who act courageously contribute to principled organizational dissent (Graham, 1986) and the prevention or correction of ethical transgressions (e.g., whistle-blowing; Miceli & Near, 1985). When people at work see someone act with bravery in what appear to be dangerous but important circumstances, they often infer that the person is courageous (Worline, Wrzesniewski, & Rafaeli, 2002). However, these approaches have not considered whether individuals who act this way or are viewed this way by others actually define themselves in courageous terms. It would be logical to assume that employees in work organizations could act in ways that lead them to believe that their self-definition includes quali-

TABLE 1
Comparing Four Perspectives on Positive Work-Related Identity

Bases for Comparison	Virtue	Evaluative	Developmental		Structural	
			Progressive	Adaptive	Balanced	Complementary
Basis for positivity of identity	Virtuous identity content	Favorable regard for identity content	Change in identity content toward a more developed or ideal identity	Change in identity content toward a better fit with internal or external standards	Balance in identity content between inclusion and differentiation	Building linkages or connections between the various facets of the self
Core assertions	Certain virtues and character strengths are inherently good. When individuals construct an identity that contains master virtues and/or character strengths, the identity is positive.	Individuals derive self-esteem from subjective evaluations of their identity characteristics and identity groups. Identities that are favorably regarded by the self or by others are positive.	Individuals naturally progress toward the "ideal" self through stages over time and/or through changes that indicate growth.	Individuals create possible selves and select those that align with internal and external standards.	The structure or organization of identity content minimizes tension between human needs for inclusion and differentiation by balancing personal identity with social identity.	Multiple identities are viewed as compatible with one another, in that the possession of one identity (e.g., role, cultural background) can facilitate the execution of expectations related to the other identity (e.g., task performance, engagement).
Illustrative studies or approaches	Aquino & Reed (2002)	Fine (1996), Roberts (2005)	Super (1957), Hall (2002), Carlsen (2006)	Ibarra (1999), Pratt (2000)	Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep (2006)	Ely & Thomas (2001), Rothbard (2001)
Core proposition	A work-related identity becomes more positive when it is imbued with virtuous attributes.	A work-related identity becomes more positive when individuals regard the identity more favorably.	A work-related identity becomes more positive as its content changes in the direction of an ideal or more developed identity.	A work-related identity becomes more positive as it develops a better fit with internal and/or external standards.	A work-related identity becomes more positive by balancing collective identity and personal identity.	A work-related identity becomes more positive as multiple identities are viewed as complementary.

ties associated with courage (e.g., bravery, valor).

Beyond courage, other virtue-laden identities that have been studied by organization researchers include integrity (Prottas, 2008), compassion (as a form of humanity; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000), humility (as a form of temperance; Delbecq, 2008; Owens, 2009), and wisdom (Kessler & Bailey, 2007). Leadership scholars have also focused on leaders who are endowed with character strengths and virtues (e.g., Manz, Manz, Marx, & Neck, 2001). For example, in their article about transcendent leadership, Crossan and Mazutis (2008) recommend that leaders focus on developing character strengths like wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. In addition, researchers interested in authentic leadership study the development of leaders who are optimistic, confident, hopeful, resilient, and of high moral character (e.g., Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Michie & Gooty, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). While there has been significant recent attention paid to organizational and individual virtuousness (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Manz, Cameron, Manz, & Marx, 2008), there has been far less attention paid to virtues as a focus of work-related identities.

One notable exception has been research using a construct called "moral identity." Researchers doing this work are typically interested in identity and its implications for moral action (e.g., Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007; Weaver, 2006). A moral identity is a self-schema that contains a set of moral traits or characteristics (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). Researchers studying moral identity argue that people meaningfully vary in the degree to which their moral identity is internalized or rooted deeply in the self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Traits such as being caring, compassionate, honest, kind, hardworking, and generous are typically associated with the prototype of a moral person, and people who have a stronger moral identity tend to characterize themselves as having these traits.

In sum, the virtue perspective on positive work-related identities claims that the positivity of the identity is in the virtuous content of self-definitions. If the identity contains qualities that are associated with universal virtues or strengths like courage, compassion, or integrity, the identity is considered positive. Some re-

search on individual virtues and character strengths asserts that these identities represent stable self-constructions (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004), whereas other research theorizes that this kind of self-construction is more fluid and based on how individuals narrate or define themselves in interactions with others (Sparrowe, 2005).

The Evaluative Perspective

While the virtue perspective focuses on identity content, the evaluative perspective focuses on the regard that people associate with their work-related identities. In general, people like to feel good about themselves (Baumeister, 1999; Gecas, 1982) and are motivated to claim identity characteristics and/or groups that favorably distinguish them from others (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Lynn & Snyder, 2005). As a result, the evaluative perspective captures subjective feelings of self-regard as an individual at work (i.e., personal identity), as a member of work relationships (i.e., relational identity), and as a member of work-based social identity groups (i.e., social identity). It assumes that identities serve an important purpose for enhancing and/or maintaining a sense of self-worth (Gecas, 1982). Based on these premises, the evaluative perspective asserts that an identity is positive when it is regarded favorably.

People often make positive evaluations of their personal identity at work—that is, the work-relevant traits, characteristics, and competencies that differentiate them as an individual. This type of positive regard is captured in research on global self-esteem and generalized self-efficacy, in which people with positive identities evaluate their personal characteristics favorably (e.g., seeing themselves as competent, capable, accepted, and valued by others; see Rosenberg, 1979, and Stets & Burke, 2003). For example, Judge and colleagues' theory of core self-evaluations examines positive self-regard as the evaluations that people make about themselves and their worthiness, competence, and capability (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002).

Individuals also make positive evaluations of their collective identities. For example, collective self-esteem research examines how positively an individual feels about the social cate-

gories and groups to which he or she belongs (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). As a form of collective self-esteem, organizational researchers capture members' evaluations of occupational and organizational identity groups (e.g., Pratt, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Research on organization-based self-esteem examines "the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant and worthy as an organizational member" (Pierce & Gardner, 2004: 601; see also Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989). For example, cooks' identities become more positive when they construct and evaluate the meaning of their membership in the occupational group of chefs as desirable and valuable (Fine, 1996).

A third stream of identity research examines the tactics that individuals use to restore or maintain positive self-evaluations when they face conditions of identity devaluation. For example, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) found that business school affiliates used cognitive reframing tactics in response to *Business Week* rankings that threatened members' perceptions of valued core identity attributes. Similarly, studies of people who perform "dirty work" (work that is considered to involve physical, social, or moral taint) reveal the use of strategies that deny or devalue the negative attributes that others associate with such occupations (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, and Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006), allowing individuals to maintain a sense of positive self-regard for an otherwise maligned identity. Managers in such stigmatized occupations also confront negative public perceptions by extolling the value of the work (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). Another line of research explains how and why professionals who belong to negatively stereotyped social identity groups may attempt to restore positive regard by downplaying the salience of the devalued group membership (e.g., avoid stereotypical behavior) or attempting to educate and advocate on behalf of their social identity group in work contexts (Chattopadhyay, Tluchowska, & George, 2004; Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Roberts, 2005).

Taken together, the research deploying an evaluative lens on positive identity highlights how individuals evaluate the content and meaning of their work-related identities. This perspective highlights the ongoing dynamic appraisal that is part of the identity construction process. This perspective also highlights the ongoing work involved in evaluating identity content when taking into account one's own assessments and others' assessments, suggesting that positive identity construction can be an effortful process. The evaluative lens captures how the sense of worth or regard applied to one's self-definition (by the self or others) can imbue an identity with positivity.

The Developmental Perspective

While the previous two approaches focus on identity content and its evaluation, the developmental perspective focuses on the change in an identity or self-definition *over time*. Implicit in this perspective is the assumption that the identity is dynamic and capable of progress and adaptation. We separate our description of the developmental perspective into two approaches: the progressive approach and the adaptive approach.

Progressive identity development. We call the first approach to positive identity development the progressive approach. According to this lens on identity, the positivity of an identity is evidenced in its progression toward a higher-order stage of development. Several influential theorists have sought to explain physical, physiological, and psychological development in individuals over time. Levinson (1986), for example, viewed the "life course" as a cycle composed of "qualitatively different stages," which he called "seasons." Although he asserted that each person passes through the same general stages, a person's experience in each developmental stage is unique. Each stage is associated with a set of developmental tasks designed to build the self, and each stage is separated by a period of transition that corresponds to the changing of the self. Over time, attitudes and behaviors are brought into alignment with the structure of the self, ever progressing toward the life dream or the ideal view of what the person hopes to become. Erikson (1968), Kohlberg (1969, 1984), and Kegan (1982) also developed theories of development corresponding to different life stages.

A similar line of thinking has been applied explicitly and implicitly in organizational research on work-related identities. For example, in the career development literature, theorists have examined work-related identity development as an identity passes through age-related

stages. Hall (2002) has suggested that most leaders progress through distinct career stages that can be viewed as passages from one role to another and one identity to another. For example, a leading engineer might progress through the distinct career stages of high school student, college student, company trainee, engineer, and then manager. As individuals pass through these stages, they pass through three phases of development: establishment, advancement, and maintenance (Hall & Nougaim, 1968). In the establishment stage (usually year 1) the employee "does not have a strong identity relevant to the particular organization and [he or she] is struggling to define more clearly his [or her] environment and his [or her] relationship to it" (Hall & Nougaim, 1968: 26–27). In the advancement stage individuals become most concerned with moving up in the organization, and they eventually reach a stage of maintenance where their desires for further advancement level off and they experience a development plateau (see Hall, 2002, for a review). Super's (1957) model of career development also suggests that within each particular career stage employees progress through a cycle of trial, establishment, maintenance, and decline.

Implicit in these theories is the assumption that as an employee progresses through a career stage, his or her identity changes and develops. When individuals enter a new stage, their identity tends to be malleable and impressionable. However, over time they gain experience that solidifies their self-concept as an employee, professional, and/or organizational member. Accordingly, career development is equivalent to identity development (Hall, 2002). In this process elements of old identities are discarded, new elements are added, and the employee progresses toward the career dream or the ideal view of what he or she hopes to achieve in his or her career. In these stage models of development, the key mechanisms driving development are experience and time.

The progressive approach is also evident in research examining how individual growth leads to changes in identity content over time. While researchers don't normally talk about stages, they assume that individuals progress from one construction of self toward another that is typically construed as improvement, growth, or progress in some way. For example, Maitlis (2009) studied how people reconstruct their professional identities after encountering career-related trauma in ways that represent growth. Other researchers have studied how everyday narratives of growth at work are actually episodes where employees narrate plots of positive self-change (Sonenshein, Dutton, Grant, Spreitzer, & Sutcliffe, 2009). Carlsen (2006) depicts how individuals alter self-constructions at work in ways that enable seeing themselves as progressing in their overall life narrative. All three examples affirm the malleability of identity construction and the importance that individuals construe the content of an identity change in a way that indicates progress or growth toward some ideal. This pattern of identity change is central to the progressive approach to identity development and illustrates an important way that a work-related identity can be positive.

Adaptive identity development. Researchers have also used a more adaptive approach to explain the development of work-related identities over time. At a general level the adaptive approach suggests that individuals systematically alter the content of the identity to achieve a more appropriate fit with a set of internal or external standards. According to this view, some event, such as leader "crucibles" (Bennis, 2002) or role transitions (Ibarra, 1999), helps individuals see the need for identity change and encourages the creation of new identities or "possible selves" (Yost, Strube, & Bailey, 1992). According to Ibarra, "Once our possible selves are in play, what ensues can be likened to a fierce Darwinian competition taking place within ourselves. . . . The time comes to reduce variety, to discard some possibilities, and to select among them, a new favorite" (2003: 61). Accordingly, individuals select possible selves that are consistent with both internal and external standards as they interact with the environment.

Ibarra's (1999) model of "provisional selves" is an example of positive identity construction from an adaptive perspective. Ibarra proposed that professionals adapt to new roles by experimenting with provisional selves as they develop toward ideal possible selves. According to her model, professionals identify role models as sources of provisional identities, experiment with these provisional identities, and evaluate these provisional selves based on both internal and external standards. Thus, role transitions present professionals with an opportunity to change their identity, and they winnow provi-

sional selves to achieve an appropriate fit with internal and external perceptions and standards.

Other organizational researchers have also applied an adaptive view to studies of identity development. For example, in studying organizational newcomers, Pratt (2000) proposed a model explaining the process by which individuals come to identify with their organization. His model of identity adaptation asserts that individuals first undergo a period of sensebreaking when they experience discontent with their current sense of self in relation to their ideal self. Because of this identity discrepancy, the individuals are motivated to construct a new identity that incorporates their new organizational membership. However, the extent to which the individuals will ultimately identify with the organization depends on the relationships surrounding the individuals. Thus, transitioning into an organization provides newcomers with an opportunity to establish a new identity that is consistent with both internal and external standards.

In each of these studies, a change in the context or situation encourages the creation of new identity content or possible selves. Individuals then choose which identity content or possible selves survive based on a variety of different standards. Whereas the progressive approach to identity development focuses mainly on the natural progression that occurs as individuals pass through career stages, the adaptive approach focuses more on agentic adaptation to changing internal and external standards that are made relevant in specific situations or environments. From this perspective, an individual develops by constructing, experimenting with, discarding, and adapting current identities to achieve a sense of authenticity, coherence, meaning, distinctiveness, assimilation, maturity, or any combination of such attributes. When there is a greater fit between the identity content and internal or external standards, then a work-related identity is considered more positive.

The Structural Perspective

The structure of an identity, or the way an individual's identity content or self-concept is organized (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003: 116), constitutes another means through which individuals can construct a positive identity. Given the multifaceted nature of identity, an individual's identity structure is more posi-

tive when the multiple facets of the identity are in a balanced and/or complementary relationship with one another. Multiple identities can foster a "sense of meaningful, guided existence" created through the "reciprocal role relations" (Thoits, 1983: 176) that sustain the identities making up the self in groups (see also Linville, 1985, 1987). Yet potential conflicts between the various facets of identity must be resolved in order to generate important psychological and performance outcomes (Campbell et al., 2003; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Rothbard, 2001). Accordingly, the structural perspective on positive identity calls attention to the different ways that individuals attempt to organize and structure their multifaceted identity content to reduce identity conflict. Two primary processes are featured in the literature on positive identity structures: optimal balance and complementarity.

Balanced identity structure. Some research suggests that the positivity of a person's identity lies in the relationship between personal identities and social identities. According to this approach, the personal identity is that part of an identity that is composed of the "characteristics of the self that . . . [set] one apart from all others" (Ashmore et al., 2004: 82). In contrast, the social identity is a self-categorization into inclusive social groups or units requiring "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987: 50). These two types of identities create structural "torsion" or tensions that require individuals to balance inherent desires for inclusion and belonging against the desire for uniqueness and differentiation (Branscombe et al., 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Individuals who have identity structures that achieve a balance between assimilation and differentiation are said to be optimally distinct (Brewer, 1991), and this state of optimal balance is portrayed as positive because it allows the individual to fulfill competing identity needs (Kreiner & Sheep, 2009).

Brewer (1991) asserted that people choose to identify with social identity groups that will enhance their optimal distinctiveness by clearly and favorably differentiating them from members of other groups. Organizational research supports the prevalence of this desire for optimal balance among various professionals, in-

cluding filmmakers (Alvarez, Mazza, Pedersen, & Svejenova, 2005), entrepreneurs (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009), and priests (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006).

One illustration of the structural relationship between personal and social identities can be found in the work of Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006), documenting how Episcopal priests structure their identities to achieve optimal balance in a profession that produces significant identity torsion between personal and social identities. Specifically, priests are drawn to identify strongly with their vocation and to enact the responsibilities associated with the profession, but they also need to protect their personal identity from being overpowered by their vocation. Using qualitative data, these researchers demonstrate how identities can be restructured to balance these seemingly paradoxical demands for inclusion and distinctiveness. According to their model of optimal balance, individuals facing identity demands toward the collective will respond with differentiation tactics, placing greater emphasis on their personal identities. In contrast, individuals facing identity demands toward individuation will respond with integration tactics, placing greater emphasis on their social identities. Thus, individuals are in a constant process of working to structure their identities to achieve optimal balance. Achieving greater balance between collective and personal identities implies that a work-related identity is more positive.

Complementary identity structure. A second stream of research on identity structure focuses on the perceived complementarity between different social or role identities as an indicator of positivity. Studies that examine complementarity highlight how competing demands and values that are associated with various facets of identity can generate internal tension or identity conflict (see also Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004; Settles, 2004: 487). People who experience this dissonance within their identity structures employ a variety of coping strategies to reduce the conflict (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), providing evidence that they are motivated to increase complementarity between identities. Coping strategies range from disidentification (e.g., denying or discarding a lower-status identity and embracing a higher-status identity) to segmentation (e.g., creating firm boundaries between identity

domains but remaining committed to both identities) to integration (e.g., merging the identities together so they are no longer viewed as separate). It is important to reduce identity conflict because when the pressures of one identity interfere with the performance of another identity, this can threaten one's sense of self (Thoits, 1991), overtax cognitive resources (Fried, Ben-David, Tiegs, Avital, & Yeverechyahu, 1998), lead to role overload (Biddle, 1986), undermine coping (Cooke & Rousseau, 1984), and promote inconsistent action or inaction (Merton, 1957). Although individuals may choose to segment their identities, much of the recent organizational literature has illustrated the benefits of increasing complementarity through building linkages or connections among the various facets of the self, without allowing one facet of identity to subsume or overtake another. Thus, as individuals structure their identities in ways that are complementary, the identity structure becomes more positive.

Research on complementary identity structures is illustrated by work-family studies showing how individuals cope with identity conflict emerging from the attempt to meet family and work obligations (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). For example, Rothbard and Ramarajan (2009) have noted that complementary identity structures allow individuals to successfully navigate potential conflicts that may emerge when their nonwork identities become activated at work. Similarly, diversity scholars have studied the identity conflicts that arise when cultural minority workers are discouraged from sharing their unique cultural backgrounds, expressing cultural values that differ from the organization's, or drawing on cultural experience and insight to inform the organization's strategy, work processes, or climate (Bell, 1990; Cox, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Thomas, 1993). For example, Ely and Thomas (2001) revealed that groups whose minority members activate their cultural and professional identities at work may be more successful at contributing valuable ideas and learning from differences than groups whose members segment or suppress aspects of their cultural background while at work. In addition, research on cultural diversity suggests that it is psychologically healthy for people to view their cultural and professional identities as compatible rather than oppositional (Bell, 1990; Bell & Nkomo, 2001). And, finally, Cheng et al. (2008) found that identity integration (i.e., the degree to

which individuals reconcile different social identities) allows individuals to access different knowledge structures and enhances individual creativity.

Taken together, this research suggests that more complementarity among multiple identity facets is a more optimal identity structure. Complementarity indicates that an identity structure contains both complexity and compatibility; individuals distinguish among different facets of their identities (i.e., the identity structure is complex; Linville, 1985) but also generate linkages among those facets. This allows individuals to activate various identities in a given context (i.e., the identity structure is also compatible; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; George & Chattopadhyay, 2005; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). A greater degree of complementarity between identities is a positive psychological condition that enables people to make connections and derive meaning from the disparate elements of their lives (Caza & Wilson, 2009; Ibarra & Barbulescu, in press; McAdams, 1993; Sanchez-Burks & Lee, 2009) while producing a more coherent sense of self that promotes well-being (Downie et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Thus, the positivity of a work-related identity is greater as individuals organize their identities in ways that emphasize more complementarity (rather than conflict).

These four perspectives on positive identity illuminate four different pathways through which individuals cultivate self-definitions that are positive in some way. The four perspectives capture a broad range of theoretical assumptions regarding sources of positivity for identity construction (e.g., virtues, evaluations, development, and structure) and increase the precision with which scholars can examine the nature, antecedents, and consequences of positive identities. In the next section of the paper, we illustrate one potential consequence of positive identity construction—employee strengthening—by demonstrating how the four perspectives on positive identity illuminate different mechanisms for building social resources.

PUTTING THE FOUR PERSPECTIVES TO WORK: POSITIVE WORK-RELATED IDENTITIES AND EMPLOYEE STRENGTHENING

The value of the four-part typology is revealed by using each perspective to build illustrative propositions about how positive identities strengthen employees at work. As defined in the introduction, we view employee strengthening as a process of increasing individuals' capacity to endure stress and hardship and/or increasing their capacity to take on new demands and challenges. Central to the process of employee strengthening is the building or creating of resources. Consistent with conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002), we assume that individuals strive to "retain, protect and build" (Hobfall, 1989: 516) key social and psychological job-relevant resources and that these resources help to strengthen individuals by enhancing their functioning and well-being at work.

Resources are defined broadly as "entities valued in their own right" or "entities that act as a means to obtain centrally valued ends" (Hobfoll, 2002: 307). In particular, we are interested in how different forms of positive work-related identities increase or build social resources. Social resources include the number, breadth, diversity, and quality of relationships employees have at work. Social resources are the valuable assets that inhere in the structure, content, and quality of the connections individuals have with others at work. Accordingly, social resources can be thought of as a subset of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) or relational wealth (Leana & Rousseau, 2000). While in many perspectives on social resources sociologists view these resources as a property of the relationship between two individuals, some psychologists view these social resources as personal assets that are part of a reserve that helps individuals cope and adapt (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001). We assume that individuals at work have some discretion over how and with whom they form connections. This personal discretion makes the building of social resources particularly sensitive to how employees think about and define themselves (identity construction). One could imagine that identity construction would have less impact on the building of other less discretionary, more fixed resources, such as ascribed status or immutable individual-level characteristics.

Building social resources is particularly important for strengthening individuals in organizational contexts, because having additional, broader, more diverse, or higher-quality relationships with others is associated with desir-

able outcomes, such as better physical and psychological health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2001), greater job involvement (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), more creativity (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009), and better coordination and performance in interdependent work (Gittell, 2003). Creating and sustaining social resources is also critical to core processes that promote individual functioning at work, such as employee socialization (Ashforth, Saks, & Lee, 1998), proactivity (Grant & Ashford, 2008), adaptation (Tsui & Ashford, 1994), learning through participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and thriving at work (Carmeli & Spreitzer, in press; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005).

We see how social resources strengthen employees at work in a variety of research studies, including the importance of social support and mentoring at work (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ragins & Kram, 2007), the impact of individuals' networks for career progress (Burt, 1992), the power of psychological safety (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Creed & Scully, 2000; Edmondson, 1999) and attachments at work (Kahn, 2007), and links between respectful connections and mindful organizing (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007; Weick & Roberts, 1993). These studies suggest a variety of ways that social resources strengthen individuals at work, increasing their capacity to deal with adversity and/or increasing their capacity to take advantage of opportunities. Next, we present several claims that invite researchers to consider positive identity construction as a mechanism that may help to build and sustain the social resources that are critical to employee and organizational functioning.

We present a series of illustrative propositions connecting the content and structure of employees' work-related identities to their social resources at work. These propositions assume that identity construction is relational: changes in an individual's self-definition affect social resources, in part, through how an audience or partner responds to the identity construction efforts. In the propositions below we assume that the partner or audience to an individual's identity work efforts is receptive to the identity claims of the focal individual. The propositions vary in the degree to which they assume that an increase in social resources is contingent on a partner's reactions. As noted
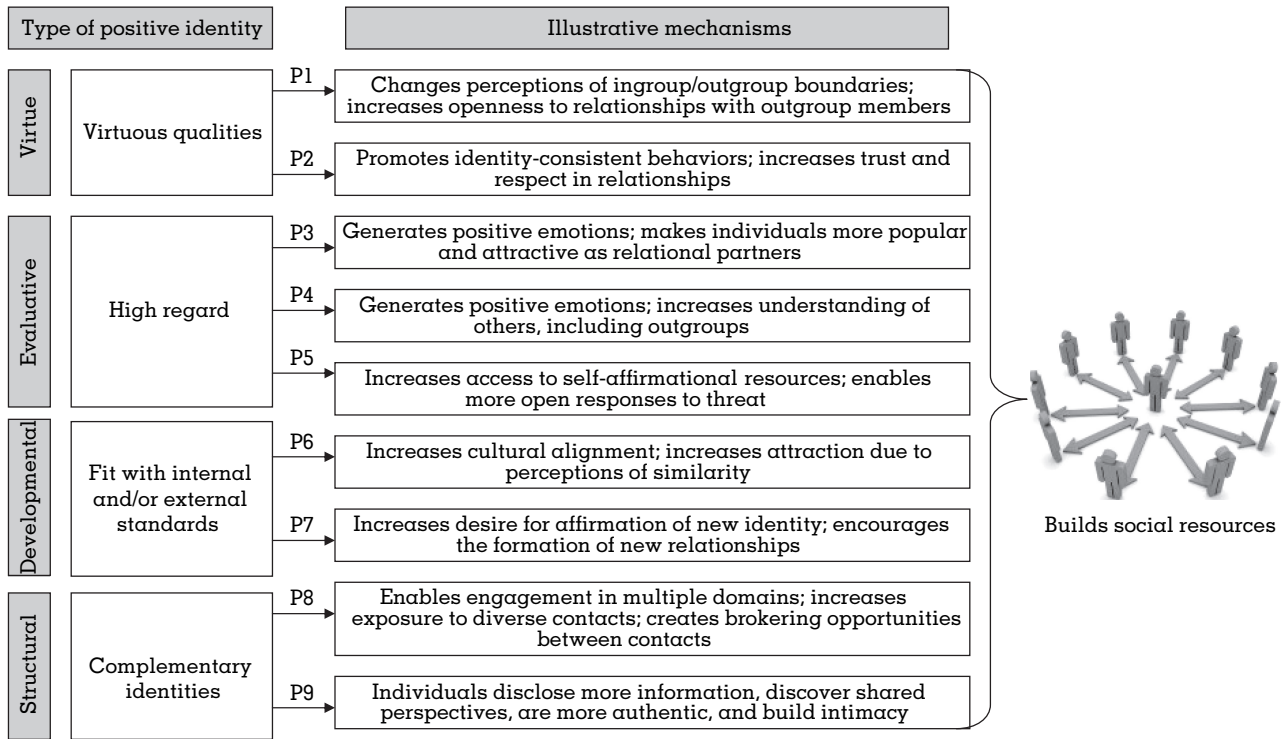
later, future research will need to consider more fully the relational dynamics that undergird this process of strengthening through social resources. The propositions are summarized in Figure 1.

Virtue Perspective and Social Resources

Links between an individual's virtuous identity and social resources can be seen by focusing on research studying particular kinds of virtuous identities—that is, a moral identity and a compassionate or caring identity. This research uncovers two paths that link this form of positive identity construction and the building of social resources.

First, a more virtuous work-related identity can alter individuals' preferences for building connections to others, facilitating the cultivation of social resources. Prior research suggests that virtuous identity content can shape an individual's perception of ingroup and outgroup boundaries. For example, research on individuals' moral identity suggests that having virtuous attributes that are central to one's self-schema is associated with a breakdown of the normal ingroup-outgroup preferences. More specifically, Reed and Aquino (2003: 1271) demonstrated in a series of four experiments that when a moral identity becomes more salient, people expand their "circle of moral regard," suggesting that one effect of having a more central moral identity is that it minimizes ingroup-outgroup distinctions and increases sympathy toward outgroups. As a result, one might expect that individuals who define themselves with attributes consistent with a moral identity (e.g., more caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, hardworking, honest, and kind) will be more open to interacting with members of outgroups in their work organizations. In work organizations members of outgroups might include people who are in other units or departments, as well as people who are at different organizational levels. In addition, individuals who have a highly self-important moral identity are more likely to care about the wellbeing and suffering of others, including outgroup members (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008), making them more conscious of the harm they cause other people (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). This openness to interactions with members of outgroups and concern for their

FIGURE 1
Positive Identity Perspectives and the Building of Social Resources

Type of positive identity			Illustrative mechanisms
Virtue	Virtuous qualities	P1	Changes perceptions of ingroup/outgroup boundaries; increases openness to relationships with outgroup members
		P2	Promotes identity-consistent behaviors; increases trust and respect in relationships
Evaluative	High regard	P3	Generates positive emotions; makes individuals more popular and attractive as relational partners
		P4	Generates positive emotions; increases understanding of others, including outgroups
		P5	Increases access to self-affirmational resources; enables more open responses to threat
Developmental	Fit with internal and/or external standards	P6	Increases cultural alignment; increases attraction due to perceptions of similarity
		P7	Increases desire for affirmation of new identity; encourages the formation of new relationships
Structural	Complementary identities	P8	Enables engagement in multiple domains; increases exposure to diverse contacts; creates brokering opportunities between contacts
		P9	Individuals disclose more information, discover shared perspectives, are more authentic, and build intimacy

Builds social resources

welfare facilitates building relationships with outgroup members, leading to our first proposition.

> *Proposition 1: The more an individual's work identity is imbued with virtuous qualities (that are part of a moral identity), the greater the number of relationships the individual will form with members of outgroups in the work organization.*

Second, constructing one's identity with particular types of virtuous attributes (e.g., caring and compassionate) can lead to actions that further foster the building of social resources. In particular, individuals who define themselves as caring or compassionate (often called a "prosocial identity"; Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008) are likely to build higher-quality relationships with others at work because this form of virtuous identity is associated with identity-consistent behaviors of helping and acting benevolently toward others. Research on compassionate work units (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Worline et al., 2009) suggests that

people in these units who take on a compassionate identity frequently engage in spontaneous acts of helping and giving to others. Research on giving and generosity at work suggests that employees who give more earn more trust and respect from their colleagues (Flynn, 2003). Because trust and respect are marker characteristics of high-quality connections at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), having an identity that is defined by compassion may lead to higher-quality relationships with others (Baker & Dutton, 2007).

> *Proposition 2: The more an individual's work identity is imbued with compassion or caring, the higher the quality of relationships the individual will form with others at work.*

Evaluative Perspective and Social Resources

From the evaluative perspective, positive self-regard is an important component of positive identity. Since positive regard is related to the affective component of identity, it is likely that

an individual whose identity is imbued with high esteem and high self-worth will experience more positive emotions (e.g., pride or contentment). Research on positive emotions indicates that people who experience pleasant affective states such as pride and contentment are better equipped to build social resources. First, an individual's experience of positive emotion at work makes the person more attractive to others (i.e., coworkers or customers; Fredrickson, 2000). In support of this, research shows that people with more positive self-regard are more popular (i.e., regarded as one with whom others wish to form relationships) and receive more help from colleagues at work (Scott & Judge, 2009). People with more positive self-regard are also more motivated to engage in prosocial behaviors at work (Grant, 2008). However, it is important to qualify that this affective link is likely activated for people who have genuine self-esteem, not those who have an inflated but inaccurate sense of self-worth and are more likely to be anxious and insecure (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker, 2006). Based on these studies of positive emotions and self-regard, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 3: The more favorably an individual regards his or her work identity, the more that individual will experience positive emotions, which will increase the number of relationships the individual will form with others at work.*

Second, positive emotions broaden cognitions, increase perceptions of self-other overlap (or interconnectedness), and lead to more complex understandings of other people (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). For example, Waugh and Fredrickson (2006) integrated the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions with Aron and Aron's (1996) self-expansion theory and found that new college roommates who experienced more positive emotions were more likely to expand their self-concept to include the roommate. That is, they were more likely to characterize their relationship with their roommate in terms of "us" and "we" instead of "you" versus "me." One month later, roommates who experienced positive emotions also had more complex understandings of their roommates' identity. These patterns also hold with respect to ingroup-outgroup interactions. In diverse groups positive

emotions increase feelings of oneness, which inspire people to construct inclusive group identities (whereby "us" includes "all of us") instead of holding to divisive group identities (Dovidio, Gaertner, Isen, & Lowrance, 1995; Fredrickson, 2009).

When positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, this also improves facial recognition. The impact of positive emotions is strong enough to override racial biases in facial recognition so that people are just as accurate in recognizing the faces of different racial group members as they are their own group members (Johnson & Fredrickson, 2005). Improved facial recognition indicates an increased ability to see people as unique individuals, which can enhance people's ability to build more diverse relationships at work.

These findings suggest that the positive emotions generated by high self-regard may help individuals build higher-quality relationships with others.

> *Proposition 4: The more favorably an individual regards his or her work identity, the more positive emotions the individual will experience, which will increase the quality of relationships the individual will form with others at work.*

Third, positive self-evaluations can be particularly important for strengthening individuals who face identity-threatening experiences by increasing access to self-affirmational resources (Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Self-affirmation theory (Steele & Berkowitz, 1988) claims that individuals are able to protect the perceived integrity and worth of the self by focusing on important values and competence in a domain that is unrelated to a threat. As a result, individuals who have high regard for a particular identity in one domain respond more openly and less defensively to identity-threatening situations in another (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006, for a review). In turn, this openness can strengthen them by enabling them to build higher-quality relationships.

First, people who engage in self-affirming processes are more open to compromise and to hearing opinions that differ from their own (Correll, Spencer, & Zanna, 2004). They are also less likely to use stereotypes or to disparage out-

group members (Fein & Spencer, 1997), more likely to view authority figures (e.g., teachers and administrators) as trustworthy and fair, even if they are of a different racial group than one's own (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006), and more likely to look to others to provide models for growth and inspiration, rather than making downward comparisons in order to protect their own self-esteem (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001). All of these findings suggest a positive relationship between self-evaluations and social resources.

> *Proposition 5: The more positively an individual evaluates his or her work-related identity, the greater his or her access to self-affirmational resources that will increase the quality of relationships the individual forms at work.*

Developmental Perspective and Social Resources

According to the adaptive approach to positive identity development, the positivity of identity increases as the identity content achieves a better fit with some combination of internal and external standards (Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Pratt, 2000; Pratt et al., 2006). When individuals at work experience identity change that better fits the standards of their organization, the individuals' work selves become more aligned with the requirements and goals of a particular organizational or occupational setting. This type of cultural alignment process helps individuals see themselves as more similar to others who have also adjusted themselves to fit with the context. Because people who see themselves as more similar are attracted to one another and have an easier time relating (Byrne, 1961, 1971), we propose the following.

> *Proposition 6: The more an individual's work identity changes to better fit external standards, the greater the number and quality of relationships that individual will form with others at work.*

Ibarra's (1999, 2003) research on identity development suggests a different pathway by which positive identity adaptation facilitates the building of social resources. Her work suggests that identity construction is a social process and

that individuals seek to forge new connections with others who affirm identities as they develop and transform over time (Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Swann, 1987). When individuals' identities are affirmed by others, they feel more connected to the group and perform more creatively (Swann, Milton, & Polzer, 2000). Accordingly, we offer the following.

> *Proposition 7: The more an individual's work identity changes to fit external standards, the more that individual will seek relationships with additional others to verify the new identity.*

Structural Perspective and Social Resources

According to the complementary approach, having multiple compatible identities is an important feature of positive identity structures. People who maintain complex yet compatible identity structures are likely to engage in multiple corresponding life domains (e.g., be deeply engaged in work, family, and community service; Rothbard, 2001). Given this engagement in multiple domains, a person with a complementary identity structure may also have more frequent interactions with a diverse group of otherwise unconnected people (e.g., work colleagues, extended family, and neighbors; Bell, 1990). Bell (1990) found that black women who are career oriented and do not construct impermeable boundaries between their work world and their personal (cultural) world have greater access to social resources. Specifically, flexibility in managing multiple roles allows these women to build larger networks and to form more interracial friendships than women who compartmentalize their work and cultural identities and therefore often experience social isolation, alienation, and estrangement. According to social network theorists, the most resourceful social networks are composed of many ties with different people who represent different social groups and life domains (see Ibarra, Kilduff, & Wenpin, 2005, and Podolny & Baron, 1997). Those who bridge structural holes in social networks by brokering relationships between otherwise disconnected individuals possess a greater amount of social capital than those whose networks are more dense (i.e., having multiple ties between people; Burt, 1992).

Having relationships with a diverse group of people is important for identifying and accessing career opportunities (Burt, 1992; Higgins & Kram, 2001) and for gaining social support (Bell, 1990). Thus, research on identity structures suggests that a complementary identity structure will lead to the building of social resources.

> *Proposition 8: The more an individual's work identity structure contains complex yet compatible facets, the more that individual will form relationships with diverse groups of people.*

Finally, research also suggests that a complementary identity structure can influence the building of social resources by affecting the quality of interpersonal relationships. Two different takes on social resources lend support to this claim. One view is grounded in research on social networks. When individuals are able to draw on different facets of their identity at work, they may also disclose more information and expand opportunities for discovering shared interests or perspectives. This disclosure may thus help them to form multiplex (Burt, 1983) relationships with coworkers (i.e., links that incorporate more than one type of relationship—e.g., coworker, neighbor, friend—and therefore allow for greater exchanges of resources).

The second view also builds on the assumption that complementarity may increase the depth and breadth of self-disclosure. According to Kahn, a complementary identity structure is important for increasing psychological presence, in which people "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances" (1990: 694). According to Kahn's (1992) study of personal engagement, when people draw connections between different facets of their self-concepts, their increased sense of wholeness or intimacy with self also translates into building intimacy with others. Complementarity promotes authenticity and trust, which help people safely work through differences and difficult conversations. Given the increased likelihood of forming intimate, multiplex relationships at work, we propose the following.

> *Proposition 9: The more an individual's work identity structure contains complex yet compatible facets, the*

higher the quality of relationships that individual will form with others at work.

These propositions demonstrate how the four positive identity perspectives can facilitate the building of social resources. They provide an exciting opening for scholars to research new means by which positive identity construction matters in work organizations—in this case, by strengthening individuals through the cultivation of social resources.

DISCUSSION

The typology of positive identity perspectives and the links to employee strengthening create a scaffolding of propositions that have value to organizational researchers. Our four-part typology of positive identity perspectives brings new precision to understanding the mechanisms that account for how and why work-related positive identities are functioning in any particular theory. We see this effort as consistent with the mechanisms movement in the social sciences more generally (Hedstrom & Swedberg, 1998) and in the organizational sciences more specifically (Anderson et al., 2006).

First, while existing organizational research has conceptualized identity as a mechanism in numerous theoretical accounts (Ashforth et al., 2008), our typology helps organizational researchers recognize that there are four distinct ways in which positive identity construction can influence important outcomes: through the virtuous content of an identity (virtue perspective), through the regard an individual has for an identity (evaluative), through the path or trajectory of developing the identity (which includes two types—progressive and adaptive), and through the structure of the identity (which also includes two types—balanced and complementary). By linking identity construction to important outcomes, such as employee strengthening, we see that these different types of positive identity construction have their effect through changing perceptions (e.g., ingroup-outgroup boundaries), emotions (e.g., pride, contentment), and behaviors (e.g., helping). For example, in Propositions 1 through 9 we suggest that cultivating a more virtuous work-related identity expands an individual's circle of moral regard (cognitive), that enhancing regard for an identity

generates positive emotions (emotional), and that individuals who engage in identity adaptation will actively seek out individuals who will affirm and verify this new self-view (behavioral). Future research can also explore and test other means through which work-related identities have their impact on additional outcomes that matter at the micro and macro levels. For example, micro theorists studying commitment, engagement, and involvement at work who treat identity as a mediating mechanism (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Pratt, 2000) could consider whether the content, structure, development, or evaluation (or some combination of the four) are working together to account for the effects of identity on attachment to or identification with a social entity like an organization or profession.

Second, at the macro level there is the potential to deepen our understanding of how micro processes of identity construction motivate and build social resources that help to explain patterns of change in network structures. For example, as community or city leaders celebrate and make claims about a region's compassionate or courageous actions, this collective identity change could spawn the cultivation of more positive (virtuous) identities for regional members. Based on the arguments developed here, we would expect to see corresponding changes in the cultivation of social resources by regional members, which could change the pattern of the region's social networks. This hypothetical scenario illustrates how deepening our understanding of positive identity construction reveals new insights about how micro processes relate to macro patterns. Thus, our typology deepens our current understanding of how positive identity construction can be a causal force in theoretical explanations, allows for greater theoretical precision when using identity as a mechanism, and opens up many new avenues for future research.

New Questions and Future Research

The typology we have created opens up important new questions for identity researchers considering (1) the antecedents to identity construction (e.g., the importance of context and "jolts" that activate identity construction), (2) different types of identity threats, and (3) the link-

ages among various types of positive identity construction. At the same time, the propositions we have generated about employee strengthening invite consideration of (4) an expanded range of outcomes that could be linked to positive identity construction at work. Further, both the typology of positive identity construction and the propositions about strengthening spawn new questions for (5) macro organizational scholars and (6) researchers interested in positive organizational scholarship. We consider each of these extensions below.

First, our framework invites consideration of the antecedents to positive identity construction. In particular, organizational researchers might consider how the organizational context enhances positive identity construction. For example, how do organizational practices (i.e., regular activities engaged in by employees in a particular unit or organization; Orlikowski, 2002) shape employees' self-constructions in ways that make employees' identity more positive? Research suggests that individuals are more likely to take on an organization's identity characteristics if they engage in organizational practices that enact these identity qualities (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, in press). Several field studies support this claim. In a study of employee attachment to a Fortune 500 retailer, results indicated that employees took on a more prosocial (i.e., caring, humane) identity after participating (via financial contribution) in an employee support program (Grant et al., 2008). In a different study employees of a Fortune 500 company participated in a corporate-sponsored community service initiative, which prompted members to view the organizational identity as distinctive and positively valued, increasing members' regard for their work organization as a collective identity (Bartel, 2001). Other research has shown that practices that create and sustain hope help people to see themselves as progressing or moving forward in their life story (Carlsen, 2008; Carlsen & Pitsis, 2009). Finally, research shows that multicultural organizations that promote the practice of learning from cultural differences (Cox, 1993; Ely & Thomas, 2001) can facilitate positive structuring of identities.

In each of these studies, organizational practices helped to cultivate different types of positive identity construction, opening new research domains for linking the organizational context and employees' work-related identities. Future

research might also consider how different kinds of institutionalized practices, such as socialization practices, shape positive identity construction (Michel, 2007), as well as how everyday conversational practices (LeBaron, Glenn, & Thompson, 2009) affect the different routes to positive identity construction in work organizations.

A focus on positive identity construction invites consideration of different kinds of catalysts for positive identity construction. For example, it prompts consideration of jolts that are appreciative (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005) rather than threatening. Appreciative jolts arise when the experience of affirmation changes an individual's sense of who he or she can be or desires to be. In this case the prompt to alter one's self-definition comes from movement toward the positive or desired state instead of movement away from the negative or undesired state. Identity scholars would do well to consider the full range of prompts to identity work or identity change that disrupt self-understanding. The nature and impact of such prompts may differ depending on what form of positive identity construction is being studied (e.g., role models may impact identity development, prosocial acts may strengthen virtuous identity content, and positive feedback may jolt evaluations of identity and increase self-regard).

Second, our typology also offers new directions for refining how we think about threats to individual identities. Research on identity threat presents an opportunity to link the prominent scholarly emphasis on repairing identities to the four-part typology of positive identity construction. The virtue perspective suggests that identity threats arise when the content of an individual's self-definition moves away from or is inconsistent with strengths or virtues. The evaluative perspective, which places the most emphasis on identity threat, suggests that identity threat stems from decrements in self-regard, often triggered by external perceptions. According to the developmental perspective, identity threats may arise when identities stagnate (e.g., career plateaus; Elsass & Ralston, 1989) or when the identity does not fit with internal or external standards (Pratt et al., 2006). Finally, the structural perspective suggests that identity threats may arise when the structure of multiple identities becomes unbalanced or misaligned.

By considering each of these different sources of identity threat, we open up new ways to study how individuals experience and respond to identity threats in the quest to construct a positive identity. Future research should examine the relative impact of different types of identity threats, as well as the tactics that can facilitate coping with these threats in order to construct identities that are more positive. One model of this type of research can be found in Kreiner and Sheep's (2009) discussion of identity work tactics that transform identity challenges into opportunities for positive identity growth. Another example is Maitlis's (2009) description of the process through which musicians renarrate themselves in expanded and empowering ways following professional traumas.

Third, the typology also prompts consideration of the interrelationships among the different forms of positive work-related identities. For example, it may be that some virtuous identity attributes are evaluated more positively than other kinds of identity attributes. It is also possible that a virtuous identity may cause greater tension for an individual's identity structure, as the individual struggles to live up to such noble qualities across multiple identities. Alternatively, future research may explore how an identity structure affects the progress and adaptation of an identity over time. Finally, as the different sources of positivity for a particular identity increase simultaneously, we would expect the identity to become more positive overall. However, it is not clear whether the different forms of positivity are additive, compensatory, hierarchical, or interactive (Ashforth, 2009). These are the kinds of questions that we hope will spawn further theoretical and empirical consideration.

Fourth, our positive identity typology and the link to employee strengthening also invite consideration of outcomes other than the cultivation of social resources. We began with the link between identity construction and social resources because of the mutually constitutive nature of identity and relationships. Both identity and social resources are linked closely to how individuals locate themselves and are located by others in a social structure. While many identity theorists make this point, Burke says it quite succinctly: "Identities thus define us in terms of positions in society, and these positions in society are relational in the sense that they tie indi-

viduals together. . . . Therefore, an inherent link exists between identity and social structure" (2004: 6). Future research will need to determine how identity construction might be related to the building (or destroying) of other forms of individual resources (e.g., financial, cultural, knowledge resources) that are less relational in nature. For example, research on communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggests that different forms of positive identity construction might be related to the cultivation of and access to knowledge resources.

Fifth, new questions and research opportunities also arise by applying the four perspectives on positive identity construction at a more macro level of analysis. For example, at the organizational unit of analysis, organizations have been construed as ethical (Verbos, Gerard, Forshey, Harding, & Miller, 2007), sustainability focused (Hamilton & Gioia, 2009), and compassionate (Dutton et al., 2006). Likewise, researchers have suggested that organizations have capacities for "self-regard" (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), adopt narratives of becoming (Carlsen, 2006, 2008; Corley & Harrison, 2009), and strive to balance the multiple facets of their identity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009). In addition, researchers working at the organizational level of analysis suggest that positive organizational identities can foster similar resourcing dynamics that create desirable organizational-level outcomes (Brickson & Lemmon, 2009; Glynn & Walsh, 2009). It might even be possible to examine the utility of the typology for considering meaningful differences in the types of positive identity construction at the community level (Marquis & Davis, 2009). We hope researchers will take up these possibilities in future research.

Finally, the typology of positive identity perspectives builds on the efforts of organizational scholars to expand the domain of inquiry in organizational studies through explicit application of a positive lens, and it unearths new research questions for researchers interested in identity (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Caza & Caza, 2008; Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, & Dunn, 2005; Luthans, 2002; Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Roberts, 2006; Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2002; Wright, 2003). Our propositions linking different forms of positive identity to social resources are a beginning move in exploring how positive identities (or identity construction more gener-

ally) could contribute to the development of social resources, as well as other critical resources such as optimism, efficacy, resilience, or psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). A more concerted effort to link identity construction to employee strengthening opens up important research questions for organizational scholars about how identity-related processes can be psychologically or physiologically building or depleting. At the same time, this paper opens up a critical new domain for researchers interested in positive psychology (e.g., Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002) who have not explicitly considered how positive identity content, evaluation, structure, and development contribute to individual flourishing.

Practical Implications

Our typology offers new insights about the potential agency of individuals in constructing positive work-related identities—even individuals embedded in contexts not conducive to these processes. For example, individuals can begin to discover, embody, and then incorporate strengths and virtues into their work-related identities. Self-assessments (e.g., Values in Action Inventory, Strengthsfinder) and feedback exercises (e.g., Reflected Best-Self Exercise; Roberts, Spreitzer, Dutton, Quinn, Heaphy, & Barker, 2005) are assessments and interventions explicitly designed to help individuals attend to and see themselves as having more virtuous identities. Cognitive reframing of the self can enhance regard by helping people focus on the ways in which their identities favorably distinguish them from others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Renarrating the self in interaction with others affords an additional means of constructing a more positive work-related identity that can have important implications in the context of negotiations and other conflictual interpersonal interactions (Kopelman, Chen, & Shoshana, 2009). Paying attention to different role models (Ibarra, 1999) and sensemaking (Ashforth et al., 2008; Maitlis, 2009; Pratt et al., 2006) can facilitate adaptive identity development, while proactive feedback seeking (Ashford & Tsui, 1991) can facilitate progression through identity stages. Intentional efforts to engage in boundary work can increase complementarity among the various facets of one's identity (Bartel, 2001), while proactive manage-

ment of when nonwork identities become salient at work can enhance compatibility (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009).

Thus, this paper underlines the potential of individuals to act agentically so as to shape over time who they can become both inside and outside work organizations. At the same time, it is important to be cautious in interpreting these practical implications until there is empirical support substantiating how these different positive identity processes interact with one another to affect outcomes like the building of social resources.

Our typology also reveals a variety of ways in which organizations can facilitate positive identity construction by focusing on the different pathways to positivity. We mentioned studies that suggest important links between organizational practices and positive identity construction. In addition, policy makers and leaders might also consider how organizational culture (e.g., shared values, beliefs, norms) shapes the ways individuals define themselves, by providing them with the cultural "toolkits" (Swidler, 1986) necessary to construct the self as virtuous, worthy, progressing, or harmonious (balanced or complementary). For example, Verbos and colleagues (2007) suggested that authentic leaders, positive organizational processes, and an ethical organizational culture can encourage individuals to construct themselves in more virtuous ways. Future research must continue to provide evidence for these claims.

We do offer a word of caution, however, with respect to the role that organizations might play in effecting positive identity construction. Organizations must use this more complex understanding of the pathways to positive identity with care. For example, Pratt (2000) documented how Amway tried to "manage" newcomers' identification with the organization. According to Pratt's research, Amway was able to manipulate newcomers' evaluations of their work-related identity by creating identity discrepancies between their current and desired selves. These discrepancies created a motivation for identity change, and identification with Amway was the proposed bridge to a new self. When individuals faced "nonmembers" who were not supportive of their membership in the organization (e.g., family or friends who did not buy their products), they were encouraged to disengage from such relationships. As a result, construct-

ing a "positive" identity at Amway generated social resources for individuals at work while sometimes destroying potentially meaningful family relationships and friendships outside of work. Thus, organizations should carefully weigh the ethicality of practices and cultures designed to encourage or discourage certain types of self-construction.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

The expansive view of positive identities and work organizations should be tempered by consideration of limitations and boundary conditions that are necessary for this research domain to move forward. One important variable to consider is the centrality of a particular work-related identity, which can influence the potency of the relationships that we propose (Ashmore et al., 2004). Individuals differ in the extent to which they consider particular identities to be central to their self-concept. For instance, members of the same occupation vary in terms of how important that occupation is to their self-concept—for example, nurse-midwives (Caza, 2009), chefs (Fine, 1996), and woman scientists (Settles, 2004). Likewise, the centrality or importance of an identity that has virtuous attributes (i.e., moral identity; Aquino & Reed, 2002) may moderate the relationship between virtuous identity construction and resource generation. Future research should consider the moderating role of identity centrality when examining relationships between positive work-related identity construction and employee strengthening.

Second, our typology asserts that constructing a more positive work-related identity involves viewing oneself as more virtuous, holding one's identity in higher regard, adapting to or progressing toward an ideal state, or balancing identity tensions. Yet the process of positive identity construction increases in complexity when considering the iterative, dynamic nature of identity construction. Individuals put forth identity claims, which are then accepted or denied by others based on their expectations and perceptions of the credibility of such claims (Baumeister, 1999; Gergen, 1994; Goffman, 1959; Swann, 1987). The importance of studying this mutual process is evident in studies explaining how negative or neutral identities become more positive, as in the case of temporary workers (Bartel & Dutton, 2001), negatively stereotyped

professionals (Roberts, 2005), leaders (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009; Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009), team members (MacPhail, Roloff, & Edmondson, 2009; Milton, 2009; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002), and mentors (Ragins, 2009). In all of these cases, the process of identity change is best captured by simultaneously considering the focal individual and the relational partners who affirm or deny that individual's self-definition so that it can become more positive. In addition, because individuals are often immersed in a complex set of relationships with others, who may not always be receptive to their identity construction efforts, the links between positive identity construction and the cultivation of social resources will be more complex and nuanced than what we have presented here. The propositions that we offer in this paper can serve as a springboard for future research that captures the iterative relationship between seeing oneself in more positive ways and having the identity granted, affirmed, or verified by others.

Third, it is important to consider the cultural limitations of the identity processes implied by our approach. Research in cultural psychology suggests that individuals in different cultures may have different construals of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and different needs for positive self-regard (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). As a result, the motivation to construct a positive identity and the way individuals go about constructing a positive identity may vary depending on the culture in which they are embedded.

Fourth, some organizational researchers have cautioned against adopting an overly sunny view of positivity (Hackman, 2009) and have even suggested that "there is an unarticulated dark side to positiveness" (Fineman, 2006: 281) in work organizations. These cautions have important implications for a "positive" perspective on work-related identities. As noted previously, the desire to create a positive identity is viewed by most researchers as a fundamental human need, yet it may lead to behaviors with negative consequences. For example, this fundamental need may contribute to self-deceptions that have negative consequences for individuals, relationships, and organizations. Some research suggests that individuals who have a tendency to adopt unrealistically positive self-images experience less personal growth, learn less, and engage in behaviors that are detrimental to social interactions (Brookings & Serratelli, 2006; Colvin, Funder, & Block, 1995; Lee & Klein, 2002; Martocchio & Judge, 1997). At the extreme, inflated self-views may lead to a sense of personal impunity, resulting in discrimination toward others (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), or even violent behavior toward others (Baumeister et al., 1996). Thus, it must be acknowledged that constructing a positive identity without a basis in reality may result in potentially negative consequences.

Finally, although identity has a long history as a construct of interest across multiple disciplines, a focus on positive identity has generated more recent excitement (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). As a result, the novelty of this positive approach to the construct of identity is subject to the "kumbaya effect"—the temptation to gloss over necessary questions about the inner workings, limits, trade-offs, boundaries, and potential drawbacks of a new construct (Ashforth, 2009). Thus, researchers interested in pursuing this course of research must continue to uncover the limits, boundaries, relationships, and contradictions of the four perspectives we have outlined in our typology.

CONCLUSION

This paper opens up new possibilities for seeing and appreciating the different pathways to positivity in work-related identity construction. Given the vibrancy and breadth of interest in and importance of identity research in our field (Ashforth et al., 2008; Bartel, Blader, & Wrzesniewski, 2006; Corley, Harquail, Pratt, Glynn, & Fiol, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2004), frameworks that help to organize and bring coherence to the growing diversity of theory make this paper particularly timely. In this paper we developed the logic for four different pathways for positive identity construction, and we provided illustrative propositions for seeing how positive identities can strengthen individuals through the cultivation of social resources. In a world where workplaces leave their marks on employees through a variety of means, we hope to open up consideration of and investment in how organizations can be sites of positive identity construction in ways that add value to the individual and beyond.

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