

The Identity Construction Cycle

A Conceptual Framework for Human Development, Reflective Practice and Agency

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Abstract

Identity is often approached as a possession, category, role, narrative or developmental achievement. Each of these perspectives illuminates part of the problem, but none alone describes the ordinary sequence through which lived experience becomes self-understanding and then returns to the world as conduct and participation. This paper presents the Identity Construction Cycle, a conceptual framework developed within BE(YOU)FULL. The cycle proposes six connected movements: experience, interpretation, awareness, decision, action and participation. Participation produces further experience, so the process is recursive rather than linear. Identity, on this account, is neither an inner essence waiting to be discovered nor an unrestricted act of self-invention. It is formed within a relational and material field, through the meanings people give to experience, the degree of awareness they develop, the judgements and decisions they make, and the consequences of their participation with others and in the world. The paper positions the framework in relation to developmental, social, narrative, experiential and agentic accounts of identity. It then defines each movement of the cycle, identifies its feedback dynamics, and sets out propositions that can guide research and practice. The framework has potential relevance for education, youth development, mentoring, coaching and leadership because it connects reflection with agency and locates personal development within social participation. Its present status is conceptual. The paper therefore avoids claims of empirical validation and concludes with a research agenda concerned with operationalisation, longitudinal inquiry, cross-cultural testing and evaluation in applied settings.

Keywords: identity construction; human development; reflective practice; agency; meaning-making; participation

1. Introduction

Identity matters because it organises continuity without eliminating change. It influences what people notice, how they explain what has happened to them, which possibilities appear credible, and how they locate themselves in relation to other people and institutions. In education, identity affects belonging and engagement. In work, it shapes professional commitment, authority and adaptation. In mentoring and coaching, it is often present beneath the stated issue: a decision about role, direction or behaviour is also a question about the person one is becoming.

The scholarship is extensive and properly plural. Developmental accounts have examined identity in relation to life stages, crisis, exploration and commitment (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Symbolic interactionism locates the self within social exchange and the capacity to take the standpoint of others (Mead, 1934). Social identity theory shows how group membership and comparison become part of self-definition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Narrative approaches examine the evolving life stories through which people connect reconstructed pasts with imagined futures (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Learning theories, particularly those concerned with experience and participation, show that becoming is inseparable from what people do, where they do it and with whom (Dewey, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Agency-centred perspectives add intention, self-regulation and the capacity to influence events (Bandura, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

These traditions are not interchangeable. They ask different questions and employ different units of analysis. Their differences should not be flattened into a single theory. Yet they converge on a useful premise: identity develops through an interaction between person, meaning, relationship, action and context. The difficulty is that these elements are often discussed in separate literatures or treated as background assumptions. Practitioners may recognise their interaction but lack a concise model for tracing how one moment becomes another. A difficult experience is interpreted; an interpretation may become an assumption; an assumption affects awareness, choice and action; action alters relationships and environments; the resulting participation produces further experience. The process continues.

The Identity Construction Cycle was developed to make that sequence visible. It is not offered as a universal theory of identity, nor as a replacement for established scholarship. It is a mid-range conceptual framework: broad enough to travel across several applied fields, but specific enough to identify processes that can be examined, facilitated and, eventually, measured. The cycle consists of experience, interpretation, awareness, decision, action and participation. Its central claim is that identity is continuously formed through movement across these six domains within a relational field comprising self, others and the world.

This formulation rejects two simplifications. The first treats identity as a stable core that can be uncovered once and then expressed consistently. The second treats identity as wholly self-authored, as though choice operated outside history, embodiment, social position and material constraint. The cycle instead treats identity as situated construction. People inherit languages, roles, expectations and unequal conditions, but they also interpret, respond and participate. Their freedom is real but bounded; their constraints are powerful but not necessarily final.

The paper has four purposes. First, it positions the framework in relation to selected strands of identity and human development scholarship. Second, it explains how the framework was conceptually developed without presenting practice-based observation as empirical evidence. Third, it defines the six movements and the feedback relations between them. Fourth, it identifies propositions, applications, limitations and a research agenda. The intended contribution is practical and theoretical: to provide a disciplined account of how lived experience may become identity-relevant meaning, and how that meaning may return to social life through decision, action and participation.

2. Identity as Developmental, Relational and Agentic

2.1 Development without a final state

Erikson's work made identity a developmental question rather than a static description of personality. His account is associated especially with adolescence, but its wider importance lies in the proposition that the person continues to negotiate continuity and change across the life course (Erikson, 1968). Marcia's identity-status paradigm translated aspects of this work into patterns of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1966). Later identity research has refined, challenged and extended these ideas, yet the distinction between inherited or foreclosed positions, active exploration and committed direction remains useful.

The Identity Construction Cycle shares the developmental premise while departing from a stage-based form. It does not assign the six movements to particular ages, nor assume that people move through them once. The same person may show considerable awareness in one domain and little in another. A professional identity may be stable while a civic or relational identity is under revision. Development is therefore uneven, recursive and context-dependent. What changes is not simply the content of identity but the person's capacity to interpret experience, examine assumptions and act with responsibility under altered conditions.

This matters because language about 'finding oneself' can conceal the labour of becoming. Identity may feel discovered when a person encounters a name, community or practice that gives coherence to previously fragmented experience. Yet the experience becomes identity-forming through recognition, interpretation, commitment and participation. Discovery and construction are not necessarily opposites; discovery can be one event within a wider constructive process.

2.2 The self in relation

Identity is never produced in isolation. Mead's social account of the self placed interaction and the internalisation of social standpoints at the centre of self-formation (Mead, 1934). Social identity theory later demonstrated how group membership, categorisation and comparison contribute to self-concept and

intergroup conduct (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Wenger's account of communities of practice connected identity with participation: learning changes not only what a person knows but who they can become within a social practice (Wenger, 1998).

Within BE(YOU)FULL, this relational field is organised through three connected relationships: relationship with self, relationship with others and relationship with the world. The distinction is analytic rather than absolute. The inner dialogue uses social language; relationships with others are conditioned by institutions and environments; participation in the world affects self-respect, belonging and possibility. The three relationships provide the field in which the six movements of the cycle occur.

A relational approach also resists excessive individualisation. A person's interpretation may be shaped by prejudice, exclusion, economic insecurity or organisational power. Their available decisions may be narrowed by responsibilities, resources or legal status. To call identity constructed is not to imply that everyone has equal materials or equal permission to construct it. The framework must therefore attend to both agency and structure.

2.3 Meaning, narrative and continuity

Experience does not enter identity as unprocessed fact. Human beings remember selectively, interpret retrospectively and anticipate possible futures. Narrative identity research describes the internalised and evolving story through which a person connects past and future, producing a degree of unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Bruner similarly argued that meaning is organised through culturally available forms of interpretation rather than extracted from events as though it were already present (Bruner, 1990).

The cycle treats narrative as one important form of interpretation, not as the whole of identity. Some identity-relevant meaning is embodied, tacit, visual, affective or habitual before it becomes a coherent story. A person may repeatedly withdraw from authority without possessing a settled explanation for the pattern. Awareness can therefore involve putting language around what was previously felt, enacted or avoided. Narrative may consolidate that awareness, but the framework allows identity construction to begin before a stable narrative exists.

2.4 Agency, judgement and constraint

Agency concerns the capacity to act intentionally and to influence the course of events. Bandura's agentic account emphasises forethought, self-regulation and self-reflection, while Emirbayer and Mische describe agency as temporally embedded in past habits, present judgement and future projection (Bandura, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). These accounts help prevent reflection from becoming detached from conduct. Identity is not only what a person says about themselves. It is also reinforced, resisted and revised through repeated action.

The cycle distinguishes awareness from decision because insight does not guarantee movement. People can recognise a pattern yet continue it. They may lack resources, confidence or permission; competing values may remain unresolved; the cost of acting may be high. Decision is therefore a developmental threshold where understanding is converted into direction. Judgement operates within this threshold by weighing evidence, values, uncertainty and consequence. Agency is not unrestricted autonomy. It is situated capacity exercised within conditions that may enable, constrain or punish action.

This distinction has ethical importance. Frameworks of personal development can become unjust when structural problems are redescribed as failures of mindset. The Identity Construction Cycle does not locate all causation within the individual. It asks how a person meets experience, but also what kinds of experience institutions create, which interpretations they legitimate, whose awareness they suppress, and what forms of participation they make possible.

3. Conceptual Development and Status of the Framework

The Identity Construction Cycle emerged from the longer development of the BE(YOU)FULL philosophy and its applied work on identity, awareness, agency, judgement and participation. The framework's public lineage includes the propositions that identity is constructed rather than assumed, that awareness precedes deliberate change, and that agency requires movement from insight into responsible action (Simpson, 2026a, 2026b). The present paper is the first attempt to state the cycle as a research-facing conceptual model.

The process used to develop this paper is conceptual synthesis rather than empirical study. It combines three sources of material: sustained reflective development of the BE(YOU)FULL system; practice-informed observation across design, mentoring, coaching, education and organisational contexts; and selective engagement with established scholarship on identity, learning, reflection, agency and participation. Practice informed the questions and the intelligibility of the model. It does not provide a dataset, sample or evidential basis for claims about prevalence, causality or effectiveness.

This distinction is deliberate. Conceptual papers can make a legitimate contribution by clarifying constructs, specifying relationships and generating propositions for investigation. They lose credibility when professional experience is presented as though it were systematic research. Accordingly, the framework should currently be read as a reasoned proposition: a model that organises processes already visible across several literatures and provides a structure for future empirical work.

The model is parsimonious by design. Six movements were retained because each names a distinct developmental function while remaining connected to the others. Adding more components would increase descriptive detail but weaken usability; collapsing components would conceal important thresholds, particularly the difference between experience and interpretation, awareness and decision, action and participation. The cycle is therefore best understood as a conceptual map. It identifies terrain and movement without claiming to reproduce the full complexity of a life.

4. The Identity Construction Cycle

The cycle describes how identity-relevant development can unfold through six movements. The movements are presented sequentially for clarity, but in lived experience they may overlap, accelerate, stall or reverse. A decision can alter the interpretation of an earlier event. Participation can expose a person to language that changes awareness. Action can precede full understanding and later become meaningful through reflection. The model's sequence is therefore directional rather than mechanically linear.

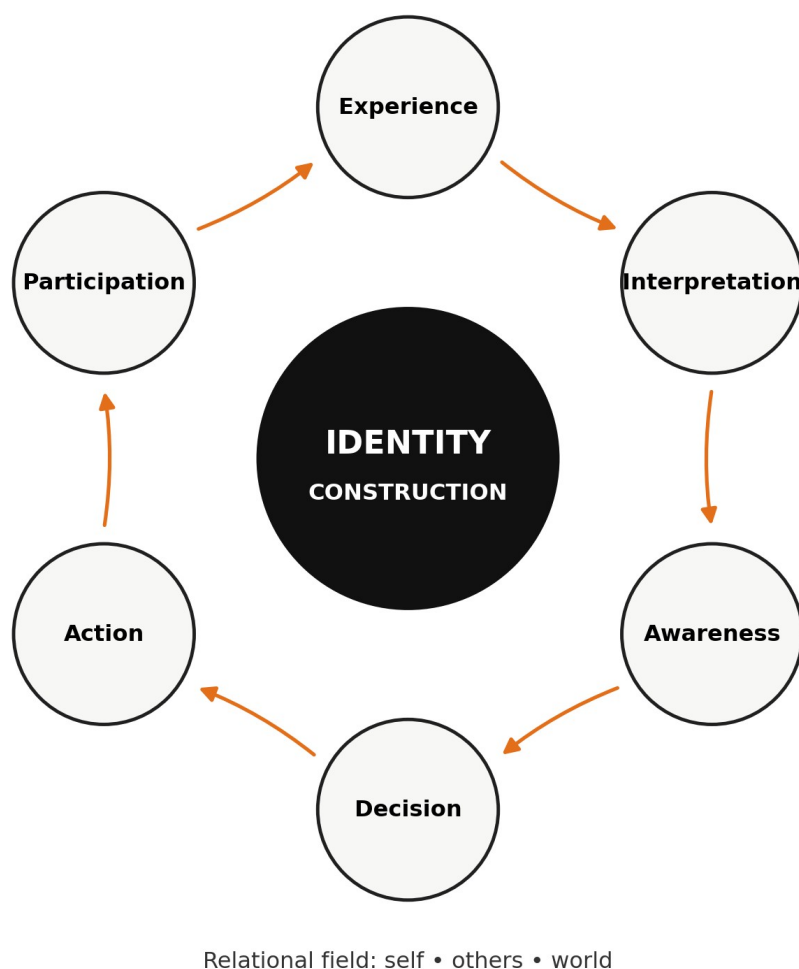


Figure 1. The Identity Construction Cycle. Participation generates renewed experience, while the entire cycle operates within relationships with self, others and the world.

Movement	Guiding question	Developmental function	Common error
Experience	What is happening, and under what conditions?	Provides the material of development.	Treating events as self-explanatory.
Interpretation	What meaning is being assigned?	Organises experience through language, memory, emotion and culture.	Mistaking one interpretation for the only possible account.
Awareness	What can now be noticed about self, others and context?	Makes assumptions, patterns and consequences available for reflection.	Confusing recognition with change.
Decision	What direction will be chosen?	Translates understanding into commitment under conditions of uncertainty.	Avoidance, false certainty or coerced choice.
Action	What is enacted?	Embodies intention and creates observable consequences.	Symbolic intention without sustained behaviour.
Participation	How does action enter relationships, practice and the wider world?	Produces belonging, contribution, feedback and further experience.	Ignoring power, reciprocity and social consequence.

Table 1. Analytic functions of the six movements.

4.1 Experience: the material of becoming

Experience includes events, encounters, conditions and embodied responses. It ranges from the dramatic to the ordinary: migration, achievement, bereavement, exclusion, a conversation, repeated classroom feedback, a new responsibility, the daily experience of being trusted or ignored. Dewey's

account of education stressed that experience is both continuous and interactive: each experience draws on what came before and affects the quality of what can be experienced next (Dewey, 1938).

In the cycle, experience is necessary but insufficient. Events do not carry one fixed identity consequence. The same organisational failure may be interpreted as evidence of personal inadequacy, poor leadership, an unsuitable role, a learning opportunity or a conflict of values. Material conditions limit the available range of plausible interpretations, but they do not remove interpretation altogether. The framework therefore avoids the claim that adversity automatically develops resilience or that opportunity automatically produces growth. Development depends partly on what happens next in the cycle.

Experience is also socially distributed. Some people are exposed repeatedly to institutional mistrust, stereotype or precarity; others receive affirmation, access and second chances. These patterns become identity-relevant because repetition can make a condition appear natural. A school, workplace or mentoring programme participates in identity construction through the experiences it routinely creates, not only through the values it declares.

4.2 Interpretation: meaning is made, not merely found

Interpretation is the process through which experience is selected, named and connected to prior knowledge. It is shaped by memory, emotion, culture, language, relationships and available narratives. Interpretation answers questions such as: What happened? Why did it happen? What does it say about me? Who is responsible? What is now possible? These answers may be explicit, but they may also operate as unexamined assumptions.

Interpretation is not free invention. Evidence matters. Other people can contest an account. Institutions maintain records, rules and categories. Bodies register threat and safety. Even so, the meaning of an event is rarely exhausted by description. Two people can agree about what occurred and differ sharply about its significance. The framework therefore places interpretation between experience and awareness: it is the first organisation of experience, but it can itself become the object of reflection.

Identity narrows when interpretation becomes rigid. A single setback becomes 'I am not capable'; a role becomes 'this is all I can be'; external praise becomes the only credible measure of worth. Conversely, endless reinterpretation can avoid responsibility by dissolving consequence into perspective. Reflective practice requires both openness and discipline: the capacity to consider another account while remaining answerable to evidence, values and effects.

4.3 Awareness: creating the possibility of choice

Awareness is the capacity to notice what is operating in and around an interpretation. It may include recognition of emotion, assumption, value, bodily response, social pressure, habit, contradiction or consequence. Schön's reflective practitioner describes a professional capacity to attend to situations that resist routine solutions and to reflect within and upon action (Schön, 1983). Mezirow's transformative learning similarly emphasises critical examination of assumptions, particularly when existing frames of reference no longer account adequately for experience (Mezirow, 1991).

Within the cycle, awareness creates distance without requiring detachment. A person can notice fear while still feeling afraid; recognise a defensive pattern while still being tempted to repeat it. This distance matters because automatic response becomes available for examination. Awareness does not guarantee freedom, but it can enlarge the field of possible response.

The framework distinguishes awareness from information. A person may know the language of bias, leadership or wellbeing without recognising how it operates in their own conduct. Awareness is identity-relevant when it unsettles the taken-for-granted relation between self-description and behaviour. It asks not only 'What do I believe?' but 'What patterns do my decisions and participation reveal?'

Awareness also has a relational dimension. Other people can perceive what the individual cannot yet see. Feedback, dialogue, supervision and mentoring can widen attention, although they can also reproduce power or impose interpretation. The quality of awareness therefore depends partly on whether the reflective relationship permits challenge without humiliation and accountability without reduction.

4.4 Decision: converting awareness into direction

Decision is the point at which awareness encounters commitment. It includes explicit choices, refusals, priorities and decisions to defer. Decision is not presented as a moment of perfect rationality. It is situated within uncertainty, emotion, time pressure, unequal information and competing obligations. What matters is that a direction is selected and some alternatives are relinquished, at least provisionally.

This movement is where judgement becomes visible. Good judgement is not the elimination of uncertainty; it is the disciplined weighing of what can be known, what matters, who may be affected and what responsibility the decision creates. A decision can therefore be developmentally significant even when the outcome is disappointing. The person may have acted with greater coherence, honesty or courage than before, and the consequences become material for later learning.

Not all decisions are freely made. Coercion, dependency and institutional rules may narrow choice sharply. The cycle can still be used, but the analysis must identify where agency is constrained rather than attributing the outcome to weak commitment. In applied work, a useful question is not simply 'Why did the person not decide?' but 'What conditions made this decision available, costly, dangerous or almost unthinkable?'

4.5 Action: identity enacted

Action gives behavioural form to decision. It can be public or private, immediate or sustained: speaking, leaving, applying, practising, apologising, setting a boundary, asking for help, changing a routine, or refusing participation in a harmful practice. Because action produces consequence, it tests the adequacy of interpretation and the durability of commitment.

Repeated action contributes to identity by changing both capability and self-expectation. A person who repeatedly undertakes difficult conversations may begin to experience themselves as capable of candour. A leader who repeatedly avoids accountability may strengthen an identity organised around status rather than responsibility. This reciprocal relation is consistent with agentic accounts in which self-belief, behaviour and environment influence one another (Bandura, 2001).

The model does not equate action with visible productivity. Rest, restraint, listening and deliberate non-action can be responsible forms of agency. The relevant distinction is not activity versus inactivity, but whether conduct is connected to considered purpose and consequence. Action becomes identity-forming because it establishes patterns, invites response and changes what the person and others can reasonably expect next.

4.6 Participation: identity enters the shared world

Participation extends action into relationships, communities and systems. It concerns how people occupy roles, negotiate belonging, contribute to shared practice and encounter the response of others. Wenger's account of learning in communities of practice is especially relevant: participation changes competence, recognition and identity together (Wenger, 1998). A person becomes a practitioner not only by knowing about a practice but by entering its obligations, language and standards.

Participation makes the social consequences of identity construction unavoidable. Decisions alter trust, access, culture and opportunity for others. Leadership identity, for example, is not secured by an internal sense of being a leader. It is negotiated through repeated participation in decisions, relationships and

institutional responsibilities. Likewise, belonging is not simply a feeling; it is affected by whether a community recognises contribution and permits meaningful presence.

The cycle returns from participation to experience because participation generates feedback. The response may confirm a developing identity, expose a gap between intention and effect, or reveal structural resistance. The person then interprets this new experience. In this way, the cycle can consolidate identity, revise it or expose a conflict that remains unresolved.

Participation also explains why identity construction has public significance. The framework is not a model of private self-improvement alone. Who people become is inseparable from how they affect the conditions in which others must live and develop. Contribution, responsibility and the quality of shared life are therefore not optional additions to identity; they are among its most consequential expressions.

5. Dynamics of the Cycle

5.1 Recursion and feedback

The six movements form a cycle because the effects of action and participation become subsequent experience. This feedback can stabilise or destabilise identity. Positive recognition may strengthen commitment, but it may also create dependence on approval. Failure may prompt learning, but repeated failure under hostile conditions may narrow aspiration. The developmental significance of feedback depends on how it is interpreted and whether awareness is available to examine the interpretation.

Recursion means that later movements can also alter earlier ones. A new decision may cause a person to reinterpret a past event. Participation in a community can provide language for experiences that had remained confusing. Sustained action can produce awareness that reflection alone did not reach. The arrows in the figure indicate a primary direction, not a prohibition on reverse influence.

5.2 Continuity, reinforcement and identity claims

Identity claims become credible when they are supported by patterns across the cycle. Saying 'I value collaboration' is one form of self-description. Interpreting disagreement with curiosity, deciding to include dissent, acting transparently and participating in ways that distribute voice provide stronger evidence. Over time, coherence between claim and participation can produce continuity. Incoherence does not make the claim meaningless, but it creates a developmental question.

Reinforcement can also sustain harmful identities. A person may interpret control as competence, act by restricting others, receive short-term compliance and treat the result as proof of leadership. The cycle is ethically neutral as a mechanism; it can describe constructive or destructive consolidation. Normative evaluation enters through judgement, consequence and the quality of participation.

5.3 Interruption and developmental thresholds

Cycles can stall. Experience may remain unprocessed because it is overwhelming or unsafe to examine. Interpretation may become fixed. Awareness may not lead to decision. Decision may be repeatedly declared without action. Action may occur, but participation may be denied through exclusion or lack of recognition. Identifying the point of interruption can improve the precision of developmental support.

The framework does not assume that movement should always be accelerated. Some experiences require time, safety, specialist support or collective action. Premature pressure to decide can reproduce coercion. Equally, indefinite reflection can become avoidance. The practical task is to distinguish necessary incubation from paralysis and to locate responsibility at the appropriate level: individual, relational, organisational or structural.

5.4 The three relational fields

Each movement can be examined through the relationship with self, others and the world. An experience affects self-understanding, occurs within relationships and is conditioned by wider systems. Interpretation draws on personal memory, social narratives and cultural categories. Awareness may concern an internal pattern, another person's perspective or an institutional condition. Decision and action affect all three fields, while participation is the point at which they become most visibly interconnected.

This three-field reading prevents the cycle from collapsing into introspection. For example, a young person's disengagement from school may involve a self-relation shaped by shame, peer relationships organised around protection, and an institutional environment that has repeatedly communicated low expectation. A purely individual intervention would miss part of the cycle. A purely structural account might miss the young person's emerging interpretation and agency. The framework asks practitioners to hold both.

6. Conceptual Propositions

The following propositions state the framework in a form that can be challenged and investigated. They are not empirical findings. Their purpose is to make the model sufficiently explicit for research design and critical debate.

Proposition 1

Identity-relevant development is more adequately explained as a recursive process than as a single act of discovery or choice.

The meaning of an experience changes through later reflection, action and participation; identity remains open to revision.

Proposition 2

Experience influences identity through interpretation rather than by direct transmission.

Material events matter, but their identity consequences depend partly on how they are understood, narrated and connected to prior experience.

Proposition 3

Awareness increases the range of possible response but does not, by itself, produce change.

A developmental account must distinguish recognition from decision, and decision from enacted behaviour.

Proposition 4

Repeated action and social feedback contribute to the consolidation or revision of identity claims.

Identity becomes more stable when self-description, conduct and participation show a continuing pattern, although stability can be constructive or harmful.

Proposition 5

Participation is both an outcome of identity construction and a condition for its continuation.

Participation creates belonging, competence, recognition and consequence, while generating the next cycle of experience.

Proposition 6

The quality and direction of identity construction depend on relational and structural conditions as well as individual agency.

Opportunities to interpret, decide, act and participate are unevenly distributed; responsible analysis must therefore include power, access and context.

7. Implications for Practice

7.1 Education and youth development

Education contributes to identity through more than curriculum. Assessment, grouping, discipline, recognition and participation communicate who is considered capable, trustworthy and entitled to speak. The cycle gives educators a way to examine this process. What experiences does the setting repeatedly create? Which interpretations are students likely to draw from them? Where are awareness and decision supported? What forms of action and participation are genuinely available?

For young people, the framework may support structured reflection without presenting identity as a task to complete. A mentoring activity might begin with a recent experience, explore competing interpretations, identify what the young person now notices, and then consider a decision small enough to enact. The final question concerns participation: who else is involved, what contribution is possible and what feedback will indicate learning? Such use should remain developmental, not diagnostic.

The framework may be particularly useful where programmes seek to build agency but rely mainly on confidence language. Confidence can matter, yet agency requires opportunities to decide, act and participate with consequence. A young person cannot practise meaningful agency in a setting that offers only pre-determined choices and symbolic consultation.

7.2 Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching conversations often move too quickly from the presenting issue to action planning. The cycle encourages a more exact diagnosis of where work is needed. Is the person lacking experience, struggling to interpret it, unaware of a pattern, unable to decide, hesitant to act, or excluded from meaningful participation? Different interruptions call for different responses.

The model also guards against treating the practitioner as the author of the client's identity. Interpretation should be examined, not replaced by the mentor's preferred story. Awareness should be widened without manufacturing disclosure. Decisions should remain owned by the person unless safeguarding, legal or organisational responsibilities require intervention. In this respect, the cycle is compatible with ethical practice that respects autonomy while maintaining attention to consequence and context.

Reflective review can use the cycle retrospectively. After an action, the person examines what happened in participation, what feedback was received and how that experience alters the original interpretation. This closes the loop and converts action planning into developmental learning rather than a sequence of disconnected goals.

7.3 Leadership and organisational development

Leadership identity is frequently discussed in terms of traits, style or personal brand. The cycle shifts attention to the pattern through which leaders interpret events, notice consequence, decide under uncertainty and participate in systems of accountability. It therefore makes identity observable without reducing it to a competency checklist.

At organisational level, the model can be used to examine culture. Repeated experiences create shared interpretations; some interpretations become norms; norms shape what people notice and what decisions appear safe; actions are rewarded or punished; participation confirms the culture. Cultural change requires intervention across the cycle. A new statement of values changes little if experience, incentives and permission remain untouched.

Leadership development using the cycle should also include the world beyond the organisation. Decisions affect communities, environments and public trust. A coherent leadership identity cannot be evaluated solely through internal performance. Participation and consequence provide the wider test.

8. Limitations and Research Agenda

The framework has several limitations in its present form. First, it is conceptual and has not been empirically validated. The six movements may prove too broad for some research questions or may require additional distinctions in particular populations. Second, a cycle can imply orderly progression even where development is fragmented, traumatic or collective. The paper has attempted to qualify linearity, but the visual simplicity may still invite over-simplification.

Third, the framework is vulnerable to individualistic use. Although relationship and structure are integral to the model, practitioners may focus on the person's awareness and decisions while neglecting institutional power. Future operationalisation must therefore include contextual measures and not treat participation as a purely voluntary outcome. Fourth, the framework was developed within a specific intellectual and practice history. Cross-cultural inquiry is required to test whether its constructs travel adequately across different understandings of selfhood, responsibility, relationality and community.

A credible research programme should begin with construct clarification rather than immediate claims of effectiveness. Qualitative studies could examine whether participants recognise the six movements in accounts of identity change and where their experiences depart from the model. Longitudinal case studies could trace how interpretation, decision and participation interact over time. Comparative work could test the framework in education, youth mentoring, professional coaching and leadership development without assuming that the same indicators apply in each setting.

A later phase could develop an interview protocol or reflective measure aligned with the cycle. Such tools would need to distinguish identity content from process: the framework is concerned less with which identity a person holds than with how identity-relevant meaning is formed, examined and enacted. Any quantitative instrument would require careful validation, including discriminant validity against constructs such as self-efficacy, reflective capacity, identity commitment and perceived agency.

Intervention research should avoid using the cycle as a branded package whose success is presumed. A pilot evaluation might compare ordinary goal-setting with a cycle-informed reflective process, examining the quality of decision ownership, follow-through, learning from feedback and perceived participation. Mixed-method designs would be useful because behavioural change without an account of meaning would capture only part of the framework.

Finally, research should investigate institutional cycles. Schools and organisations also encounter events, interpret them, develop or suppress awareness, decide, act and participate. Studying the interaction between personal and institutional cycles may show why individual development is sustained in some environments and neutralised in others.

9. Discussion

The Identity Construction Cycle contributes a process language to a field already rich in theories of identity. Its value does not depend on claiming that experience, meaning, reflection or agency are new concepts. They are not. The contribution lies in their arrangement and in the distinctions maintained between them. Experience is separated from interpretation; awareness from decision; action from participation. These boundaries help explain why knowledge does not automatically become change and why private intention does not amount to social contribution.

The framework also links personal development to public life. Identity is often discussed as self-definition, authenticity or psychological coherence. Those concerns are legitimate, but they can become self-enclosed. By ending the visible sequence with participation and returning it to experience, the cycle treats the consequences of identity as part of identity construction itself. A person learns who they are partly through what their participation makes possible or difficult for others.

This position has implications for authenticity. Authenticity cannot mean unfiltered expression of whatever is presently felt. The self is developmental, relational and capable of error. A more responsible authenticity involves congruence between examined values, decisions and participation, combined with openness to revision when consequences expose a gap. The cycle therefore supports integrity without demanding a final, unchanging self.

The model is equally compatible with continuity. Construction does not mean that identity is infinitely fluid or arbitrary. Habits, commitments, relationships, institutions and embodied histories produce durability. People need sufficient continuity to take responsibility for earlier actions and maintain trust. The cycle explains continuity as an achieved and reinforced pattern rather than proof of an untouched essence.

For practitioners, the framework's main promise is diagnostic clarity. It allows a conversation to remain close to the actual interruption. For researchers, its promise is testability: the propositions can fail, require modification or prove useful only within bounded settings. That possibility is a strength. A framework becomes academically credible not by being protected from challenge, but by being stated clearly enough to be challenged.

10. Conclusion

Identity is neither finished at a particular age nor recreated from nothing at every moment. It develops through continuity and revision, within relationships and institutions, under conditions that distribute agency unevenly. The Identity Construction Cycle offers one way to describe this movement. Experience is interpreted; interpretation can become available to awareness; awareness can inform decision; decision can be enacted; action enters shared life through participation; participation generates further experience.

The framework's central proposition is modest but consequential: identity is constructed through a recursive relation between meaning and participation. This construction is personal without being private, agentic without being unconstrained, and developmental without assuming a final state. It helps explain why reflection alone may not change conduct, why action without awareness can reproduce old patterns, and why participation is necessary to test identity claims against relationship and consequence.

The present paper establishes the conceptual version of the model. Its next stage should be empirical, critical and collaborative. The cycle must be examined in diverse contexts, refined where its categories fail and resisted where it is used to individualise structural harm. If it withstands that work, it may provide a useful common language across education, mentoring, coaching, leadership and human development. Its purpose is not to tell people who to become. It is to make the process of becoming more visible, more reflective and more responsible.

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