

IDENTITY DEFENSE: NARRATIVES OF ACHIEVEMENT AND THREAT

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

This PhD project is part of a broader project that incorporates qualitative, computational, and experimental psychological methods to understand the identity impact of shared national narratives, from the perspective of its connection with the lived experiences of generational and ethnic groups within the national collective. In the broader project, we ask how generational and ethnic experiences shape common and group-specific representations of the national narrative, and how exposure to common and group-specific core elements of the national narrative impact national identification and social cohesion. To the extent that individuals' life narratives are socially shared, the common themes and narrative elements of a nation's citizens could reveal the central meaning of the national identity. Through the life narratives of individuals and their narratives of their nation, we aim to understand both the psyche of individuals as well as the larger cultural narrative of their nation.

For the present PhD project specifically, we will focus on narratives of achievement and threat both in personal life narratives and in representations of the national narrative. We ask (1) how appraisals of achievement and threat in these narratives are similar and different across generational and ethnic groups, and (2) how these appraisals relate to identity defense. From a function perspective, identities fulfill fundamental human needs for belongingness, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and meaning (Vignoles, 2011). The achievements and threats of individuals and of the collective that they belong to, and the appraisals of such experiences (e.g., as learning opportunities to grow in resilience, as indication of success and failure in goal pursuit) could then fulfill or frustrate key identity motives. Whereas fulfillment of identity motives would likely strengthen an identity and contribute to individual well-being, the lack of or even frustration of motive fulfillment could result in individuals seeking means of identity defense, from disidentification or detachment from a collective, to increased intergroup animosity.

Psychology's approach towards identifying parsimonious theory-driven latent factors facilitates systematic investigation of psychological mechanisms but has much limitation in understanding the complexity of large samples of natural narratives. Computational methods of natural language processing provides the tools for handling the complexity of narrative data but has constraints in the translation of computational results into conclusions that allow the understanding of latent psychological constructs. In this project, we consider the complementarity of these methods in addressing our research question. Through advances in computational text analysis, we expand the data space that we analyze both in size and in dimensionality. Our sense-making of the computational methods will draw from psychological and more broadly social science thinking of psychological and collective processes. In so doing, we integrate diverse theoretical and methodological approaches toward human narratives to consider how latent psychological meaning of achievement and threat appraisal is encoded in multiple levels of language use and narrative structure. Our interdisciplinary approach will allow us to extract these different levels of meaning to advance predictions of identity defense.

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

The selected PhD student will work closely with the supervisor to develop a psychological framework for understanding appraisal of achievement and threat in narratives and its consequence for identity defense. With guidance from the co-supervisor, the student is expected to develop expertise in computational text analysis and consider the translation of computational results in understanding latent psychological constructs. Combining the theoretical work and the developed technical competence, the student will spend the first two years of the PhD candidature to examine similarities and differences across generations and ethnic groups in the appraisals of achievement and threat, and develop computational approaches for understanding of these key psychological constructs. Narrative data for this purpose will have been collected at the time of

the student's matriculation. In the last two years of the candidature, the student will design and conduct social psychological experiments to test the effects of the identified achievement and threat appraisal text elements on identity defense and social cohesion outcomes.