

How personal theories of the self shape beliefs about identity continuity

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Although previous research has suggested that one's personal identity is maintained via the stability of certain essential features (such as personality traits, memories, or moral qualities), the current framework proposes that people hold a dynamic representation of their identity that includes theories about their own development over time. In this chapter, we discuss two types of theories people hold about their identity, and we suggest that changes that are inconsistent with these theories are perceived as disruptive to identity. First, people have causal theories about how features of identity are interrelated—beliefs about which features were caused by or the cause of other features. Changes in more causally central features—those involved in a greater number of cause-effect relationships—are seen as more disruptive to the overall causal theory and thus, are more disruptive to continuity of identity. Second, people also hold expectations and desires about how their personal qualities will change in the future. Because people generally expect improvements, positive changes are seen as identity-consistent, whereas negative changes (especially to central features) are seen as disruptive to identity. Overall, we conclude that since the self-concept does not seem to be defined by a static list of personal features, identity continuity is most preserved when changes in features are consistent with (rather than conflicting with) one's own causal and developmental theories of the self.