Education Policymakers' Identity and Decision-Making in an Increasingly Complex World

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BACKGROUND

Educational decision-makers like superintendents and school board members in the United States preside over 54-million public school students in 98-thousand public schools (McFarland et al., 2019). Yet, research on educational decision-making has rarely considered these decision-makers themselves. The current study investigated educational decision-makers' identity and perspective on their decision-making. The study adopted a phenomenological lens and was framed by the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI; Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

METHOD

1. The seven participants held senior decision-making roles in the same education system.
2. We interviewed each participant three times using a life-story phenomenological protocol (Seidman, 2013): Interview 1: the past to the present; Interview 2: the present role; Interview 3: insights from the previous two interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one-hour.
3. Interviews were analyzed with Kaplan and Garner's (2016) DSMRI Analysis Manual.

FINDINGS

- Each decision-maker's life-story integrated past life roles, and concurrent life roles, with the decision-making role.
- All participants' educational decision-making role identities and meaning-making about decisions reflected a cultural frame of "advocate."
- Each participant's narrative reflected a unique metaphor based in past roles that framed the person's role identity as a particular type of advocate.

Educational decision-makers' role identity and decisions are based in life-long personal stories that reflect cultural as well as idiosyncratic meanings.

The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) (Kaplan & Garner, 2017)
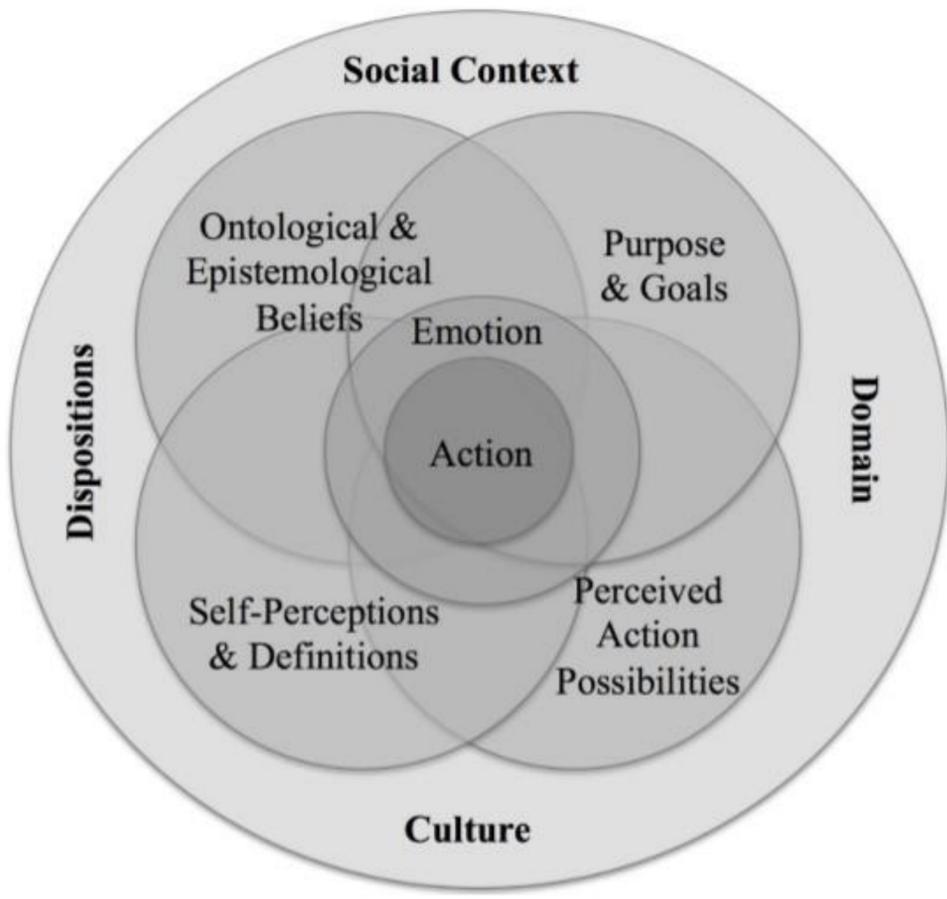
Participating educational decision-makers constructed their role identity as "advocates" who serve different communities.

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The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI; Kaplan & Garner, 2017)

The DSMRI conceptualizes role-identity as ". . . a (more or less coherently connected) network of role-specific self-perceptions and self-definitions, assumptions and beliefs, values, goals, emotions, and actions that are held by the actor to be central to who they are in the role" (Kaplan & Garner, 2017, p. 2040). The DSMRI features four multi-elemental and interdependent components - Ontological and Epistemological Beliefs, Purpose and Goals, Self-Perceptions and Self-Definitions, and Perceived Action Possibilities. Their interdependence implies that a shift in a single element could reverberate throughout the role identity system. The DSMRI highlights three complementary facets of the role identity system: *Content*—the number, type, and richness of the elements, such as the goals, self-perceptions, and beliefs; *Structure*—the degree of alignment and tension within and between the components and across roles; and *Process*—the dynamics of change in the content and structure of the role identity components and as a whole. The role identity emerges in a non-linear, non-deterministic, chaotic, fractal-like, manner within the confluence of cultural mediating means, social positioning and interactions, personal dispositions, and domain characteristics, on the basis of its "initial conditions"—the decision-maker's past.

Implications of Findings

- The findings of this study point to the potential convergence of theories on identity and decision-making.
- The DSMRI can serve as a scaffold for facilitating individual educational decision-makers' and decision-making teams' systematic and reflective decision-making.
- Educational stakeholders including researchers, think-tank staffers, students, families, and advocacy groups may build on the findings to better engage with educational policymakers by presenting information to align with the way they construe their role identity.
- The findings of this study constitute but a first step, and there are numerous questions to be pursued, concerning educational decision-makers' formation of identities and decision-making along their career, while holding different roles, and when engaged with different situations and issues.