

A Theory of Self-Esteem*

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Abstract

Self-esteem has been conceptualized as an outcome, motive, and buffer, but there is no overall theory of self-esteem. In this article it is suggested that identity theory can provide a theoretical framework for the integration of the various conceptualizations of self-esteem. We suggest that self-esteem is an outcome of, and necessary ingredient in, the self-verification process that occurs within groups, maintaining both the individual and the group. Verification of role identities increases an individual's worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem. The self-esteem built up by self-verification buffers the negative emotions that occur when self-verification is problematic, thus allowing continued interaction and continuity in structural arrangements during periods of disruption and change. Last, a desire for self-esteem, produced in part through self-verification, stabilizes the group because it motivates individuals to form and maintain relationships that verify identities.

Self-esteem continues to be one of the most commonly researched concepts in social psychology (Baumeister 1993; Mruk 1995; Wells & Marwell 1976; Wylie 1979). Generally conceptualized as a part of the self-concept, to some self-esteem is one of the most important parts of the self-concept. Indeed, for a period of time, so much attention was given to self-esteem that it seemed to be synonymous with self-concept in literature on the self (Rosenberg 1976, 1979). This focus on self-esteem has largely been due to the association of high self-esteem with a number

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of positive outcomes for the individual and for society as a whole (Baumeister 1993; Smelser 1989). Moreover, the belief is widespread that raising an individual's self-esteem (especially that of a child or adolescent) would be beneficial for both the individual and society as a whole.

Self-esteem refers most generally to an individual's overall positive evaluation of the self (Gecas 1982; Rosenberg 1990; Rosenberg et al. 1995). It is composed of two distinct dimensions, *competence* and *worth* (Gecas 1982; Gecas & Schwalbe 1983). The competence dimension (efficacy-based self-esteem) refers to the degree to which people see themselves as capable and efficacious. The worth dimension (worth-based self-esteem) refers to the degree to which individuals feel they are persons of value.

Research on self-esteem has generally proceeded on the presumption of one of three conceptualizations, and each conceptualization has been treated almost independently of the others. First, self-esteem has been investigated as an *outcome*. Scholars taking that approach have focused on processes that produce or inhibit self-esteem (e.g., Coopersmith 1967; Harter 1993; Peterson & Rollins 1987; Rosenberg 1979). Second, self-esteem has been investigated as a *self-motive*, noting the tendency for people to behave in ways that maintain or increase positive evaluations of the self (Kaplan 1975; Tesser 1988). Finally, self-esteem has been investigated as a *buffer* for the self, providing protection from experiences that are harmful (Longmore & DeMaris 1997; Pearlin & Schooler 1978; Spencer, Josephs & Steele 1993; Thoits 1994).

While research in each of these directions is extensive (see Baumeister 1998; Gecas 1982; Mruk 1995; Wells & Marwell 1976; and Wylie 1979 for reviews), little has been done to synthesize the three research streams into an overall integrated model. The present article sets forth a theory of self-esteem that integrates the three conceptualizations within the context of structural symbolic interaction, or identity theory (Stryker 1980). Ervin and Stryker (2001) began the process by discussing the links between self-esteem, identity salience, and identity commitment (embeddedness of individuals within the social structure). The connections between the different conceptualizations of self-esteem, however, remain unclear.

The research presented here attempts to synthesize the views on self-esteem by focusing on the vital role that self-esteem plays in the process of self-verification within groups. According to identity theory, the self is composed of multiple identities that reflect the various social positions that an individual occupies in the larger social structure. Meanings in an identity reflect an individual's conception of himself or herself as an occupant of that particular position or "self-in-role" (Stryker 1980). Self-verification occurs when meanings in the social situation match or confirm meanings in an identity. Thus, when individuals enact and verify an identity, they simultaneously produce and reproduce the social structural arrangements that are the original source of those meanings. In adopting such a position in our investigation, we maintain the central focus on the individual within

the social structure that has traditionally characterized the structural symbolic interactionist position (Stryker 1980).

We suggest that the verification of an identity produces feelings of competency and worth, increasing self-esteem. When individuals are able to verify group-based identities by altering or maintaining meanings in the situation that match the meanings in their identities, self-esteem increases through such efficacious action. Verification of group-based identities is also likely to produce self-esteem, since confirmation of identities within the group signifies approval and acceptance of the self (Burke & Stets 1999).¹ Conversely, a lack of self-verification within groups is likely to leave the individual feeling inefficacious and unaccepted by the group.

It is further suggested that self-esteem works as a type of defense mechanism. When individuals are unable to verify their identities, the self-esteem produced by previous successful efforts at self-verification “buffers” or protects individuals from the distress associated with a lack of self-verification (when self-verification processes are disrupted), thereby preserving threatened structural arrangements (Burke 1991, 1996). In protecting the self against distress while the situation is “resolved” (Thoits 1994), however, self-esteem is used up or diminished. Thus, self-esteem is analogous to a “reservoir of energy.” Like any other resource, self-esteem can be built up, but when used, it is lost. Here, the reservoir of self-esteem is filled up by successful self-verification and used up when the self-verification process is disrupted. Like other aspects of the self, self-esteem is highly stable but is responsive to changes in social situations. When these changes include persistent problems in self-verification, self-esteem is likely to decline even more as the energy reservoir is depleted.

Finally, it is suggested that people seek to maintain or increase their self-esteem by creating “opportunity structures” or contexts for self-verification (Swann 1983, 1990). People seek opportunities (and the groups that provide them) to verify their identities and avoid situations (and groups) where self-verification is problematic. Such efforts help individuals manage and maintain their self-esteem. In this way self-esteem can be viewed as a self-motive, organizing and providing direction for behavior. Such efforts not only serve the individual but also help account for the formation and maintenance of group relations. These ideas are investigated by focusing on the verification of a family-based identity (the spouse identity) within a sample of newlywed couples.

Identity Theory and Self-Esteem

IDENTITY VERIFICATION

An identity is a set of meanings that represent the understandings, feelings, and expectations that are applied to the self as an occupant of a social position (Burke & Tully 1977; Stets & Burke 2000). These meanings serve as standards or reference levels in an identity-control system (Burke 1991). Figure 1 portrays identity models

for two interacting individuals. There are four main conceptual parts to each identity-control system: the identity standard, the comparator, the output, and the input. Identity standards provide an internal reference for the individual about the meanings and expectations that are to be maintained. Inputs into the system are perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the social environment. The comparator compares these perceptual inputs with meanings contained in the standard. The output of the system is meaningful behavior that works to alter the situation so that a match between self-relevant perceptions of the situation and meanings contained in the standard is maintained. This is the self-verification process.

The normal operation of a role identity (the self-verification process) results in behavior that produces a match between self-relevant meanings in the situation and the meanings and expectations held in the identity standard. The actions taken to do this constitute the role behaviors of the person occupying the role, and these behaviors enact/create/sustain the social structure in which the role is embedded. Perceptions of the behaviors that are relevant to the identity the individual is seeking to verify thus become relevant to the verification of that identity (Burke & Reitzes 1981). For example, when a husband thinks that in his role as husband he should be doing approximately 30% of the housework, he will engage in behaviors that reflect that, and meanings in the situation that are relevant to the verification of that identity become relevant. For example, he will begin to pay attention to the amount of time he puts into housework because it is relevant to the verification of that identity. The amount of time he spends with his buddies watching sports will not, however, be directly relevant to the verification of his spouse identity.² By behaving in ways consistent with his husband standard in an effort to verify those meanings, he both produces and reproduces structural arrangements that leave women responsible for the majority of housework (Berk 1985; West & Zimmerman 1987).

If the husband's wife has an identity that implies that she be responsible for 70% of the housework, then their identities are complementary. If however, he thinks he should be doing 30% and she thinks she should be doing half, then their identities are not complementary. He will be thinking that he should be doing less and that his wife should be doing more (compared to what his wife thinks he should be doing), and his wife will be thinking that she should be doing less and that he should be doing more (compared to what her husband thinks she should be doing).

The above example illustrates the idea that when the identity is relevant to a role that stands in relation to other roles in a group, self-verification within a group is not just a function of one's own activity but of one's activity in relation to others' activity; that is, the behavior of others can inform us about who and what we are.³ Thus, in a two-person relationship, the identity of each is verified in relation to the activities of the other (Burke & Stets 1999). This idea can also be seen in Figure 1. The behavior of one person (output of the control system) affects the situation and

FIGURE 1: Identity Model for Two Interacting Individuals

Images can be viewed by selecting
the HTML version of this article

thus also affects perceptions (inputs of the control system) for both persons. Roles are interdependent and complementary, and the identity standards that evolve over time between individuals must reflect that complementarity for conflict to be minimized (Riley & Burke 1995). If the identity standards of interdependent interaction partners are not complementary, then self-verification is not possible for either role partner. In addition, from the point of view of the group the mutual verification of the interdependent role identities in the group results not only in consequences for the individuals *as individuals*, but also in the stable patterns of interaction that define the structure of the group (Burke & Stets 1999). In the situation above where the husband's and wife's identities are not complementary then, the husband and the wife are both unable to verify their identities, and this will have consequences for both of them as individuals and for their relationship.

When disturbances occur in the identity-verification process (that is, when identities are not verified), distress results in the form of negative emotional responses (such as anxiety, depression, or anger), which motivate the person to reduce the disturbance and bring perceptions back into alignment with the identity standard (Burke 1991, 1996).⁴ These negative emotions can be avoided by quickly acting to remove or counteract the disturbance. For the most part, this process is ongoing and automatic as the individual responds to subtle changes in the situation.

For example, two friends, Jennifer and Jolene, are having a conversation. Jennifer thinks that as a friend she is a good listener. While conversing with Jolene, Jennifer may get the impression that Jolene doesn't seem to think that she has Jennifer's full attention. Jennifer is likely to make small, unconscious adjustments in her behavior. She may begin to do such things as nod her head a little more or shift her body closer to Jolene to indicate that she is actively engaged in the conversation. When disturbances are large, such as might exist if Jolene were to come out and directly tell Jennifer that she is being a terrible listener, Jennifer will make larger adjustments, and she is likely to experience strong negative emotions (such as guilt). Her drastic adjustments to her behavior might include stopping whatever she is doing so that she can sit down and directly concentrate on what Jolene is saying in order to bring perceptions in the social situation back into line with her identity standards. When the disturbances are large, unanticipated, or difficult to correct, stronger negative emotions come into play and people work to reduce them by discovering new actions or negotiating with others in an attempt to bring things back to normal, making the situational meanings match those in the identity standard (Burke 1991, 1996; see also Thoits 1994).

This is the general process of self-verification. In the next section, we integrate these processes with research on self-esteem, suggesting how each of the three conceptualizations of self-esteem (outcome, buffer, and motive) is tied to the self-verification process. In brief, we suggest that processes of self-verification produce self-esteem and that the self-esteem produced sustains the individual and social groups. When persistent problems arise, self-esteem sustains the process of self-verification and maintains the social structure that is reflected in role identities and reproduced through role activity.

SELF-ESTEEM AS AN OUTCOME OF IDENTITY VERIFICATION

As discussed, the basic motivation or "goal" in the identity model is to match perceived meanings in the situation with the internal meanings of the identity standard, implying an important relationship between goals and achievements. Others have similarly focused on the importance of the relationship between goals and achievements. For example, James ([1890] 1950) suggests that self-esteem is the ratio of "successes" to "pretensions" implying a relationship between what individuals accomplish and their goals. This pairing is similar to the pairing of self-relevant perceptions ("successes") and the standard or goal ("pretensions") in identity theory. Put simply, identity theory focuses on the degree to which individuals are able to achieve a match between an identity goal or "ideal" (the identity standard) and perceptions of the environment or the "actual" performance of the self, much like James's focus on the degree to which successes match pretensions. Therefore, self-esteem can be thought of as a direct outcome of successful self-verification.

Perceptions of what is “accomplished” or the “actual” are perceptions that arise from three distinct processes related to role performance within groups: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, and self-attributions (Rosenberg 1990). The first two processes are more strongly related to worth-based self-esteem than efficacy-based self-esteem (Gecas 1982). When individuals receive self-verifying feedback within the group (through reflected appraisals and social comparisons), feelings that one is accepted and valued by others within the group are reinforced, increasing worth-based self-esteem (Brown & Lohr 1987; Burke & Stets 1999; Ellison 1993). Indeed, it has been suggested that worth-based self-esteem is most at risk when an individual is faced with possible exclusion from social groups (Leary & Downs 1995). In contrast, efficacy-based self-esteem is more likely to result from self-attributions. When individuals reflect on their behavior and observe that they have been successful at maintaining a match between situational meanings and identity standards, efficacy-based self-esteem results from such “successful” behavior (Bandura 1977, 1982; Burke & Stets 1999; Franks & Marolla 1976; Gecas & Schwalbe 1983).

For example, if a worker considers that part of her identity as a worker is to strive to maintain low levels of absence from work, she will make sure that she misses as little of work as possible. She may accomplish this by such behaviors as setting an alarm to make sure she gets up on time, taking proper care of her car so that it is a reliable source of transportation to work, and going in on days that she is under the weather. When these behaviors enable her to maintain high levels of attendance at work, she is likely to feel that she can control the situation around her such that she is able to miss as few of days of work as possible, producing efficacy-based self-esteem. However, if she is unable to regularly attend work because of oversleeping or car troubles, she is likely to feel frustrated that she is unable to control the events around her, decreasing her efficacy-based self-esteem. Furthermore, if she receives feedback from a superior that acknowledges her high level of attendance at work, she is likely to feel that that her behaviors are valued at work, thereby increasing her worth-based self-esteem. If the superior thinks that her attendance is inadequate, on the other hand, she is likely to feel rejected and unappreciated, reducing her worth-based self-esteem. In this way, self-esteem is gained and lost through self-verification processes.

The above processes are related to role performance within a group and suggest that both role performance and group membership are simultaneously relevant and important. For this reason, the verification of role identities within a group should produce both worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem. Thus, we hypothesize that

Hypothesis 1a: The greater the self-verification for an individual in a group or relationship, the higher that individual’s efficacy-based self-esteem.

Hypothesis 1b: The greater the self-verification for an individual in a group or relationship, the higher that individual’s worth-based self-esteem.⁵

While self-verification increases feelings of competency and worth, disruption of the self-verification process has been shown to have negative emotional consequences. Distress in the form of depression and anxiety can result from a disruption in the self-verification process (Burke 1991, 1996; Higgins 1989). Other negative emotions such as jealousy (Ellestad & Stets 1998) and anger (Bartels 1997) have also been identified as resulting from disruption of the self-verification process. Individuals are likely to experience these negative emotions when perceptions of the environment and meanings contained in identity standards do not match, in other words, when the self-verification process is disrupted.

When disturbances to self-verification are large, or more persistent, people may extricate themselves from the situation or shed the identity in order to avoid the negative feelings that arise from persistent discrepancies between situational meanings and identity standards. In the interest of maintaining the social structure and interpersonal relationships, however, this possibility must be minimized. Therefore, people must have resources that can support them through these periods ensuring that negative emotions do not become too overwhelming. Self-esteem seems to be one such resource that functions to maintain individuals and social relationships.⁶

Exactly how self-esteem operates as a buffer is less clear in the literature. Some have suggested that self-esteem works to maintain positive self-views by processing feedback in a self-serving way (Baumeister 1998): individuals with high self-esteem are more likely than those with low self-esteem to perceive feedback as consistent with their positive self-views, to work to discredit the source of the feedback, and to access other important aspects of the self to counteract negative feedback (Blaine & Crocker 1993; Spencer, Josephs & Steele 1993; Steele 1988). Others argue that those with high self-esteem have a more stable sense of self and are more stable emotionally, both qualities that provide them an "emotional anchor" (Baumeister 1998; Campbell 1990; Campbell, Chew & Scratchley 1991). People with high self-esteem appear to have more "cognitive resources" at their disposal, enabling them to deal more effectively with unsatisfactory circumstances (Baumgardner, Kaufman & Levy 1989; Spencer, Josephs & Steele 1993; Steele 1988). Thus, self-esteem has been found to protect the self from "stressors" such as experiences and information that might otherwise prove "harmful" to the self (Longmore & DeMaris 1997; Spencer, Josephs & Steele 1993), distress (Cohen 1959; Coopersmith 1967; Rosenberg 1979), and especially depression (Burke 1991, 1996; Mirowsky & Ross 1989; Pearlin & Lieberman 1979; Pearlin et al. 1981).

If we think about self-esteem as a personal resource that provides individuals with a type of "energy" to support them during stressful times, then as a resource, self-esteem becomes something that can be both built up and depleted. A useful way to think of self-esteem then is to think of it as analogous to an "energy reservoir" that is filled up by successful self-verification and used to sustain that process when

it is disrupted. It provides “short-term” credits (McCall & Simmons 1978) that maintain the individual when self-verification is not possible. Swann (1983) points out that *some* process acts to sustain individuals as they seek to modify the environment so that feedback verifies the self — we suggest that self-esteem serves such a function. When individuals encounter stressors, namely situations in which self-verification is problematic, self-esteem sustains individuals while they work to alter situational meanings in an effort to restore the match between situational meanings and identity standards (Burke 1991, 1996). For example, if an individual has a student identity that implies getting good grades and he or she fails an exam, high self-esteem helps to buffer the depression, anger, or anxiety that he or she might feel as a result of not being able to verify that identity. Over time, the student with high self-esteem will work to alter meanings in the situation by studying harder so that a better grade is earned on the next exam, thereby bringing meanings in the social situation back to reflect the meanings in the student identity.

When self-verification becomes problematic and an individual would normally experience distress, self-esteem should provide a buffer against the negative emotions associated with disruption in self-verification processes. Self-esteem protects the individual from potentially debilitating emotions as they work to reestablish and maintain a match between standards and perceptions. Self-esteem can buffer the individual from such negative effects both directly and indirectly. Not only should self-esteem be associated with higher levels of well-being (direct buffering effect), but self-esteem should also *moderate* the effects of a lack of self-verification (indirect buffering effect). Therefore, we also hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: The less the self-verification, the greater the distress.

Hypothesis 3: The higher an individual’s self-esteem, the less the distress.

Hypothesis 4: The higher an individual’s self-esteem, the less impact a lack of self-verification will have on levels of distress.

Hypothesis 4 reflects the expectation that self-esteem moderates the effect of problems in self-verification on distress that is specified in hypothesis 2.

Further, if self-esteem is viewed as analogous to a reservoir of energy, then persistent problems in identity verification over time should eventually begin to deplete self-esteem, reducing its overall level as it is used up. Further failure for the student who is unable to perform to her identity standards will have an increasingly greater impact on her self-esteem over time, and she is likely to become more and more frustrated. Persistent effects of a lack of verification will be over and above any effect of the current level of self-verification. Thus, we also hypothesize that

Hypothesis 5: The more persistent the lack of self-verification, the greater the loss in self-esteem.

While self-esteem may be viewed as both an outcome and a resource when the self-verification process fails, it has also been conceptualized as a goal in and of itself. This line of research views self-esteem as a self-motive. Self-motives provide both a standard and a direction for behavior. Self-esteem as a self-motive thus suggests that individuals attempt to maintain or enhance their self-esteem to some desired level (e.g., Kaplan 1975; Rosenberg 1979; Tesser 1988). Research from this perspective suggests that people are motivated to maintain or enhance current levels of self-esteem.

The maintenance or enhancement of self-esteem may be accomplished in several ways. Individuals may directly act in ways that increase their self-esteem when it has been lowered, they may redefine the situation to reflect more positively upon them, or they may work to create an impression of themselves that is more positive, both in terms of worth and efficaciousness (see Rosenberg 1990). For example, research finds that individuals account for negative situations by attributing the cause to external factors (e.g., Snow & Anderson 1992), selectively compare themselves to those worse off (e.g., Wood & Taylor 1991), and by interacting only with those who support a positive conception of them (e.g., Epstein & Morling 1995).

It is difficult to separate the effects of enhancement and self-verification, because for positively evaluated identities they are confounded (Morling & Epstein 1997; Swann et al. 1987), and most identities that individuals hold are positively evaluated. It is only when individuals have low self-esteem that the two motivations are at cross-purposes. Verification would seek to maintain the low self-esteem; enhancement would seek to raise self-esteem.⁷ It becomes more complicated with our suggestion that one of the consequences of self-verification is the enhancement of self-esteem. In this case, seeking the goal of self-verification also yields the outcome of self-esteem. Individuals gain self-esteem not only through enhancement, but also through self-verification.

It is possible that one also can seek to enhance self-esteem by seeking out and creating "opportunity structures" or social relationships with individuals who verify or confirm a person's identity (Swann 1990). If people are motivated to develop and maintain relationships to maintain self-verification processes as well as self-esteem processes, it follows that when such processes are problematic, people will be motivated to leave such relationships. Husbands and wives whose identities are not verified within the marital relationship are likely to feel unloved and rejected by their spouse and may come to believe that they are unable to alter the situation so that they are accepted for who they are. In such a situation, husbands and wives may make the difficult choice to leave their spouses in an effort to find a relationship in which they are loved and accepted; in other words, where they are able to verify their identities (Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon 1994). An inability to

verify identities and enhance self-esteem should produce instability in social relationships.

While we do not have information about the levels of self-esteem and self-verification for our sample of newlywed couples before their marriage, we do have some information about the stability of the relationship (separation and divorce) in the first years of their marriage. We suspect, given the evidence, that both self-esteem and self-verification motivations are simultaneously present, and we are thus led to hypothesize that

Hypothesis 6: The less an individual receives self-verification within a relationship, the more unstable the relationship.

Hypothesis 7: The lower an individual's self-esteem within a relationship, the more unstable the relationship.

Methods

SAMPLE

We examine our hypotheses with three waves of data from a longitudinal study investigating marital dynamics in the first two years of marriage (Tallman, Burke & Gecas 1998). Each data-collection period included a ninety-minute face-to-face interview, a fifteen-minute videotaping of a conversation focused on solving an area of disagreement, and four consecutive one-week daily diaries kept by each respondent. The present analyses are based on information gathered during the face-to-face interview at each data-collection period.

The sample was drawn from marriage registration records in 1991 and 1992 in two midsize communities in Washington State. Of the 1,295 couples registered to marry, 574 met the criteria for involvement (both were over the age of 18, were marrying for the first time, and had no children). These couples were contacted and asked to participate; 286 completed all data-collection processes in the first period. There was a 15% attrition rate from the first data collection period to the second period and an additional 4.2% attrition rate from the second to the third period of data collection. Couples who dropped out of the study after the first or second round were more likely to be young ($p < .05$), less educated ($p < .05$), and of a lower socioeconomic status ($p < .05$).⁸

MEASURES

Worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem were measured by constructing new scales using established items from the Gecas and Schwalbe Self-Esteem Scale (Gecas & Schwalbe 1983), Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1979), and Pearlin's

Mastery Scale (Pearlin et al. 1981). The Rosenberg scale does not distinguish between the two dimensions of self-esteem and includes items relevant to each. The Gecas and Schwalbe scale items are designed to tap both dimensions, and the Pearlin scale measures primarily efficacy-based self-esteem. Items were first selected from these scales on the basis of their face validity as measuring either self-worth or self-efficacy and placed into two separate scales. Separate exploratory factor analyses of each of the scales (efficacy and worth) confirmed their unidimensionality and the lowest-loading items were dropped.⁹ The results are shown in Table 1. Self-worth is measured with seven items and has an omega reliability (pooled over the three years) of .88. Self-efficacy is measured with nine items and has an omega reliability of .85 (pooled over the three years). Items were directionally aligned, standardized (since items from different sources varied in the number of response categories), and summed to create the scale scores. A high score on each scale indicates a high level of self-esteem.

Three of the most common indicators of distress, or "subjective well-being," were used in our analyses (Diener et al. 1999). *Depression* was measured using twelve items from the CES-D (Radloff 1977). Items asked respondents questions such as how many days during the last week they had experiences such as "feel lonely," "sleep restlessly," and "feel you could not get going." Response categories range from 0 ("not at all") to 7 ("seven days"). The items form a single factor with an omega reliability of .95 (pooled over the three years). Items were aligned and summed. Possible scores range from 0 to 84. A high score indicates a high level of depression.

Anxiety was measured using nine items from the SCL-90 (Derogatis et al. 1971). Respondents were asked, for example, how many days during the week they had "felt keyed up or excited," "felt hands trembling," and "felt nervous or had an upset stomach." Response categories range from 0 ("not at all") to 7 ("seven days"). Items were aligned and summed. The omega reliability for the anxiety measure is .89 (pooled across the three years). Possible scores range from 0 to 56 and a high score indicates high anxiety.

Hostility was measured using a five-item subscale of the SCL-90 (Derogatis et al. 1971). Respondents were asked, for example, how many day during the last week they "got angry over things that weren't really too important," "had temper outbursts," or "wanted to hurt or smash something." Response categories range from 0 ("not at all") to 7 ("seven days"). Items were aligned and summed. The omega reliability for the scale is .83 (pooled over the three years). Possible scores range from 0 to 35 with a high score indicating high hostility.

Separation/divorce is used as an indicator of relationship stability. It was measured using a dummy variable with 0 indicating that the couple was still together ($N = 199$) at t_3 and 1 indicating that the couple was divorced or separated at t_3 ($N = 32$).

Self-verification is measured following procedures used by Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon (1994) and Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde (1992), who examined

TABLE 1a: Self-Worth Scale

Items	Loadings
I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.	.68
I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	.67
I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	-.47
I take a positive attitude toward myself.	.76
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	.73
I wish I could have more respect for myself.	-.55
At times, I think I am no good at all.	-.59
Reliability (Ω)	.88

TABLE 1b: Self-Efficacy Scale

Items	Loadings
There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have.	-.53
Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life.	-.67
I have little control over the things that happen to me.	-.62
I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life.	-.66
There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.	-.51
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	-.48
I am able to do things as well as most other people.	.44
I certainly feel useless at times.	-.56
Confident vs. lack confidence	-.44
Reliability (Ω)	.85

the extent to which an individual's view of the spouse was congruent with the spouse's self-views on attributes relevant to their self-concept. In this research, we focus on the spousal role identity and compare the individual's own meanings and expectations in their spousal role identity with the views of them held by their partner. Self-verification exists when self-views are confirmed by the views that the spouse has for the individual. Strictly, we would want to measure the individual's *perceptions* of the spouse's expectations for him or her, but we do not possess this measure; thus we use the spouse's actual expectations as a proxy for the perceptions.

Respondents rated eleven spousal role activities. These were rated both in terms of the degree to which they felt they themselves should engage in the activity (own identity standard) and the degree to which they felt that their spouse should engage in that activity. Examples of the activities include "being responsible for maintaining contact with parents and in-laws or other members of the family," "being responsible for taking care of bills and accounts," and "being responsible for yard work." Response categories ranged across a 5-point scale from doing all the activity in the relationship (coded 4) to doing none of the activity (coded 0). While most of the items dealt with household activities, and the spousal role in all its complexity

clearly includes more than this, the meanings controlled by these activities are, nevertheless, important aspects of the spousal role identity. However, to the extent that the identity is not fully measured with this scale, there will be measurement error and tests of hypotheses will be weakened.

The degree of agreement is assessed by calculating the average absolute difference between one's self-description scores and the perception of oneself held by the spouse. The score could range from 0, indicating perfect agreement, to 4 indicating maximum disagreement. The scale was based on the mean of the eleven differences. The final score was reversed and thus has a possible range of 0 (maximum discrepancy/lack of verification) to 4 (perfect agreement/verification). The actual self-verification scale scores ranged from 2.30 to 4. The omega reliability for the spousal identity scale is .80 (pooled across the three years).

Persistence in a lack of self-verification was measured using a dummy variable representing a greater-than-average amount of discrepancy (or lack of self-verification) over a period of time. In this sample, the average level of self-verification was 3.63. Thus, at t_2 , an individual was assigned a value of 1 on the persistence variable if the amount of self-verification both at t_1 and t_2 was less than average ($N = 83$) and a 0 otherwise ($N = 312$). Similarly, at t_3 , an individual was assigned a value of 1 if the amount of absolute self-verification was less than average at t_1 , t_2 , and at t_3 ($N = 52$) and a 0 otherwise ($N = 343$). There is no persistence measure at t_1 since there was no temporal persistence at the beginning of the marriage.

Sex is coded 0 for females and 1 for males.

ANALYSES

Our analyses are divided into two parts. First, to investigate the effects of self-verification on self-esteem and distress as well as the buffering effects of self-esteem, we use cross-sectional time-series analysis procedures (Baltagi 1995; Greene 1990). These provide estimates of effects based on a pooling of cross-sectional relationships in the data and on correlations in changes of the variables over time. Second, in order to investigate the effects of identity verification on relationship stability, we use logistic regression. In these analyses, because of the nonindependence between husbands and wives, their errors are allowed to correlate.

The following control variables were included in the preliminary analyses: expected inequality in household labor, education, occupational status, income, race, sex, and presence of a child. Only sex exerted a significant and consistent effect across models. In the interest of parsimony and to avoid problems of multicollinearity, the only control variable included in the analyses presented here is sex. In addition, preliminary analyses showed the variance-covariance matrices for males and females to be not significantly different. This is sufficient to conclude that whatever model underlies the data, it is the same for both males and females.

Results

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations for all the measures. In this table we see that mean levels of depression (11.28), anxiety (6.27), and hostility (4.71) are fairly low over the two-year period. Also, the mean value of self-verification is high (3.64 on a 4-point scale) over the three points in time. Thus, on average, the individuals in this sample experience a fair amount of self-verification and self-esteem and relatively low amounts of distress over these sample points.

Table 3 presents standardized coefficients of the cross-sectional time-series analyses that investigate the effects of self-verification processes on self-esteem. These are comparable to standardized regression coefficients. The results in Table 3 confirm our first hypothesis that self-verification increases self-esteem; this is true for both worth-based ($b = .09$) and efficacy-based ($b = .09$) self-esteem. Thus, self-verification does result in higher self-esteem; conversely, a lack of self-verification decreases self-esteem.

Hypothesis 5 suggested that a persistent lack of self-verification would have an increasing negative effect on self-esteem over time. This hypothesis is also supported by the results in Table 3 for both worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem. Compared to those who do not experience a persistent lack of self-verification, individuals who experience persistent discrepancy (or lack of self-verification) over time have lower efficacy-based ($b = -.18$ at t_2 and $b = -.35$ at t_3) and worth-based self-esteem ($b = -.15$ at t_2 and $b = -.29$ at t_3) above and beyond immediate effects of a lack of verification. These results illustrate the increasing effects of a lack of self-verification over time. Thus, not only does a lack of self-verification reduce self-esteem, a *persistent* lack of self-verification depletes self-esteem even further. These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of self-esteem as an energy reservoir that is depleted by persistent problems in self-verification.

As shown, a lack of self-verification lowers self-esteem, but hypothesis 2 suggests that a lack of self-verification also produces distress. This hypothesis is supported by the results in Table 4, which show that the less an individual's self is verified, the more an individual is depressed ($b = -.07$), anxious ($b = -.07$), and hostile ($b = -.07$). However, hypotheses 3 and 4 suggested that self-esteem buffers the distress in two ways. First, self-esteem buffers distress directly: the higher individuals' self-esteem, the lower their distress (hypothesis 3). Second, self-esteem is hypothesized to moderate the effects of a lack of self-verification. Individuals with high self-esteem should experience less distress from a lack of self-verification than those with lower esteem (hypothesis 4). If this is the case, the interaction term for self-verification x self-esteem should be significant and positive.

The results in Table 4 provide some support for both these hypotheses. In support of hypothesis 3, those with higher worth-based self-esteem are less depressed ($b = -.10$) and less hostile ($b = -.10$). Those with higher efficacy-based self-esteem are less depressed ($b = -.30$), less anxious ($b = -.19$), and less hostile ($b = -.16$).

TABLE 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among Measures

Measure	Mean	S.D.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Worth t_1	-.01	.62	1.00								
(2) Worth t_2	-.02	.63	.63*	1.00							
(3) Worth t_3	.03	.61	.54*	.57*	1.00						
(4) Efficacy t_1	-.02	.54	.70*	.59*	.63*	1.00					
(5) Efficacy t_2	-.01	.59	.54*	.70*	.58*	.71*	1.00				
(6) Efficacy t_3	.05	.57	.49*	.53*	.74*	.68*	.70*	1.00			
(7) Depression t_1	11.54	8.60	-.31*	-.38*	-.30*	-.40*	-.43*	-.41*	1.00		
(8) Depression t_2	11.27	9.55	-.18*	-.33*	-.24*	-.22*	-.39*	-.29*	.47*	1.00	
(9) Depression t_3	11.03	11.43	-.18*	-.22*	-.27*	-.22*	-.28*	-.35*	.44*	.35*	1.00
(10) Anxiety t_1	6.91	7.06	-.18*	-.25*	-.19*	-.26*	-.28*	-.25*	.63*	.38*	.43*
(11) Anxiety t_2	6.12	6.04	-.20*	-.26*	-.17*	-.21*	-.31*	-.25*	.42*	.66*	.33*
(12) Anxiety t_3	5.78	6.50	-.14*	-.19*	-.16*	-.16*	-.25*	-.23*	.39*	.33*	.70*
(13) Hostility t_1	5.41	5.35	-.22*	-.25*	-.23*	-.27*	-.29*	-.29*	.61*	.29*	.38*
(14) Hostility t_2	4.44	4.79	-.19*	-.24*	-.20*	-.15*	-.26*	-.22*	.36*	.59*	.33*
(15) Hostility t_3	4.29	4.70	-.14*	-.17*	-.22*	-.18*	-.28*	-.29*	.33*	.30*	.64*
(16) Self-verification t_1	3.64	.19	.16*	.17*	.09*	.20*	.15*	.14*	-.21*	-.12*	-.08*
(17) Self-verification t_2	3.63	.20	.18*	.13*	.12*	.17*	.18*	.20*	-.20*	-.17*	-.14*
(18) Self-verification t_3	3.63	.21	.17*	.11*	.15*	.15*	.14*	.21*	-.13*	-.11*	-.15*
(19) Persis. discrep. t_2	.21	.41	.11*	.08	.10*	.11*	.08	.10*	-.18*	-.07	-.01
(20) Persis. discrep. t_3	.13	.34	.11*	.09*	.14*	.09*	.09*	.16*	-.16*	-.03	-.00

TABLE 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among Measures (Cont'd)

Measure	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)
(1) Worth t_1											
(2) Worth t_2											
(3) Worth t_3											
(4) Efficacy t_1											
(5) Efficacy t_2											
(6) Efficacy t_3											
(7) Depression t_1											
(8) Depression t_2											
(9) Depression t_3											
(10) Anxiety t_1	1.00										
(11) Anxiety t_2	.50*	1.00									
(12) Anxiety t_3	.53*	.49*	1.00								
(13) Hostility t_1	.64*	.29*	.38*	1.00							
(14) Hostility t_2	.38*	.58*	.37*	.45*	1.00						
(15) Hostility t_3	.46*	.32*	.64*	.47*	.42*	1.00					
(16) Self-verification t_1	-.18*	-.17*	-.13*	-.26*	-.14*	-.09	1.00				
(17) Self-verification t_2	-.10*	-.19*	-.09*	-.18*	-.14*	-.09	.41*	1.00			
(18) Self-verification t_3	-.13*	-.18*	-.10*	-.19*	-.12*	-.18*	.29*	.48*	1.00		
(19) Persis. discrep. t_2	-.15*	-.14*	-.06	-.20*	-.08	-.05	.60*	.55*	-.30*	1.00	
(20) Persis. discrep. t_3	-.10*	-.12*	-.02	-.21*	-.04	-.08	.44*	.40*	.45*	.77*	1.00

(N = 401)

* $p < .05$

TABLE 3: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Cross-sectional Time-Series Analysis of Self-Efficacy and Self-Worth

	Outcomes	
	Self-Efficacy	Self-Worth
Self-verification	.09*	.09*
Persistent discrepancy	-.18* / -.35 ^a	-.15* / -.29 ^a
Sex	—	—
N (individuals)	470	470

^a Effect at t_2 /effect at t_3
* $p \leq .05$ — $p > .05$

However, only efficacy-based self-esteem appears to buffer the effect of problematic (low) self-verification on depression ($b = .09$), anxiety ($b = .12$), and hostility ($b = .09$).

Finally, it was suggested that individuals are motivated to maintain or enhance self-esteem partially through the establishment and maintenance of opportunity structures where self-meanings are verified and esteem is enhanced. Thus, individuals should be less likely to leave relationships that verify identities as hypothesis 6 suggests and more likely to leave relationships when their self-esteem is not maintained through self-verification as suggested in hypothesis 7. Results of a logistic regression of separation/divorce on self-verification, the esteem components, and emotional reactions are presented in Table 5. The results support both these hypotheses. The more identities are verified, the less likely couples are to divorce or separate (the odds drop 40% for every standard deviation increase in self-verification), while those with lower efficacy-based self-esteem (though not worth-based esteem) are more likely to divorce or separate (again, the odds drop about 40% for every standard deviation increase in efficacy) independently of their self-verification status. The fact that self-esteem and self-verification are both significantly related to the stability of the relationship suggests that both are important to the maintenance of relationships.

Discussion

In this article, an overall theory of self-esteem has been developed by bringing together various conceptualizations of self-esteem into the framework of identity theory, as well as extending identity theory. In brief, it is suggested, and the findings support, the idea that self-esteem can be understood as a central component of basic identity processes. The verification of identities in social groups not only accomplishes the role behaviors that maintain social arrangements but also builds up self-esteem. Individuals who verify their identities see themselves as effective

TABLE 4: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Cross-sectional Time-Series Analysis of Negative Self-Feelings

	Outcomes Using Worth and Efficacy		
	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility
Self-verification	-.07*	-.07*	-.07*
Persistent discrepancy	—	—	—
Self-worth	-.10*	—	-.10*
SV x worth	—	—	—
Self-efficacy	-.30*	-.19*	-.16*
SV x efficacy	.09*	.12*	.09*
Sex	-.12*	—	—
N (individuals)	470	470	470

* $p \leq .05$ — $p > .05$

and competent (high efficacy-based self-esteem). Self-verification accomplished jointly and mutually with others in a relationship or group was shown also to increase worth-based self-esteem when others confirm the individual's identity through their own role performances.

In addition, while researchers have shown that self-esteem serves as a buffer against the negative feelings that arise from disruptive or threatening experiences, we would suggest that these disruptive or threatening experiences describe problems in self-verification. Self-esteem operates as a type of personal resource (particularly efficacy-based) that protects individuals from these experiences, allowing individuals to remain engaged in the situation while they either find new ways of verifying their identities or identity standards adjust to new levels in the negotiation process. But, because self-esteem is used up in the process, there are limits to this buffering effect. When individuals are persistently unable to verify their identities, the decline of self-esteem is even greater, leaving individuals more and more vulnerable to the negative effects of a lack of self-verification (including the loss of self-esteem). Therefore, when social relationships do not contribute to self-verification, individuals may leave such relationships and seek identity verification, and the resulting self-esteem, elsewhere. As such, a desire for self-esteem motivates individuals to seek both verifying and enhancing social relationships.

While we have posited here that self-verification produces self-esteem, it is possible that self-esteem is also associated with higher levels of self-verification. Indeed, to some degree, the conceptualization of self-esteem as a buffer or reservoir of energy that individuals use when self-verification attempts fail reflects this process. Basically, the more self-esteem an individual has "in reserve," the more resources the individual will have to try various things to alter perceptions such that they match identity standards. Thus, while we have not directly assessed how

TABLE 5: Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression for the Effects of Discrepancy, Esteem, and Depression on Likelihood of Separation or Divorce

	Separated or Divorced
Self-verification	.62*
Self-worth	—
Self-efficacy	.61*
SV x worth	—
SV x efficacy	—
Depression	—
Anxiety	—
Hostility	—
Chi-square / df	44.89 / 8
N	460

Note: Data on individuals, using cluster option to account for lack of independence between husbands and wives.

* $p \leq .05$ — $p > .05$

self-esteem might in turn affect self-verification, a reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and self-verification is certainly implicit in our model.

It should be noted that the discussion has been limited to nonstigmatized identities and thus does not address whether similar effects would be found when investigating negative or stigmatized identities. The perspective adopted here would suggest that to the extent that an identity (negative or positive) is necessary to one's membership within a particular group, verification of identities related to that group should have positive effects on the individual.¹⁰ For example, the alcoholic who is stigmatized and negatively evaluated by his family is welcomed with open arms by drinking buddies at the local watering hole. The identity of alcoholic is central to his or her inclusion with the group at the bar, but not to his or her inclusion within his or her family. Thus, self-verification of a socially stigmatized identity may produce self-esteem when the identity is central to inclusion within the group and the group is the source of the feedback.

It should also be noted that while many of the coefficients relating to self-esteem and to levels of distress may appear to be small, there are two things to keep in mind about them. First, the above results are for the analysis of a single identity only (and limited aspects of that identity), albeit an important identity.¹¹ Our measures of self-esteem and our measures of distress are global, not specific to the particular identity investigated. It would be surprising to find that verification of one identity would have substantial effects on outcomes that are measured at a global level (see Hoelter 1986 for a discussion on the relationship between role-specific and global measures of self-esteem). Second, the self-concept is very stable over time, as research has shown (Burke & Cast 1997; see Demo 1992 for a review). Small effects accumulate over time, however, and therefore the small effects we

observe here may actually be quite dramatic for the individual as they accumulate over time.

There are other factors that future research should consider as well. First, there may be real structural constraints to an individual exiting a relationship or situation in which he or she is unable to verify identity. When such constraints exist, identities are likely to decline in salience and individuals are likely to reduce their commitment to those identities (Stryker & Burke 2000). For example, workers who are unable to exert control over their work may do such things as simply do the basic minimum at their job, avoid it as much as possible with high absenteeism, or focus on other identities that they are able to verify (c.f., Steele 1988). However, when unable to effectively “escape” in this manner, individuals may even turn to alcohol and drugs in order to cope (Snow & Anderson 1992).

Second, there may be more than one identity that an individual is seeking to verify at any one point in time. Because there are several important identities within the family (parent, spouse, child, sibling, etc), these different identities may compete with each other; that is, one identity may be particularly salient or prominent for an individual and verification of that identity becomes more important. For example, given our model, one might wonder why it is that individuals stay in abusive relationships. Beyond obvious resource constraints, it may be that the individual has a spouse identity that entails a high tolerance for abusive behaviors, but it may also be that the individual is verifying another important identity. A woman may remain in an abusive relationship because her parent identity implies that she provide an environment in which her children’s needs are met and where they have interaction with their father. Staying in the relationship may enable her to verify this important identity.

Third, it has also been assumed that feedback from others is consistent. Because individuals tend to seek out relationships that verify their identities, consistency in feedback (from one individual or across a variety of sources) is likely. This may not always be the case. For example, abused women often experience inconsistent feedback from their spouses. This is evidenced by their inability to predict the behaviors of their spouses and the beating-honeymoon cycle. This is likely to create a situation in which the individual feels both the push and pull of the relationship, resulting in the individual perhaps choosing to not leave the relationship — the small amount of verifying feedback from the spouse during the honeymoon phase may be enough to entice her to stay, at least in the short-term. While recent research has begun to address both the verification of multiple identities (Burke 2001; Smith-Lovin 2001; Stryker 2000) and the importance of consistency in feedback in understanding the development and stability of self-esteem (Kernis & Waschull 1995), more research in this area is needed to provide a more complete account of the processes investigated here.

Overall, the findings presented in this article support our extension of identity theory to incorporate self-esteem. It would appear from these results that efficacy-

based self-esteem and worth-based self-esteem are equally affected by verification processes, at least for the individuals in the present study. In spite of both this and the fact that the two forms of esteem are closely related ($r = .71$), they appear to operate differently. As a direct buffer, efficacy appears to be more powerful than worth-based self-esteem, and efficacy is the only form of self-esteem that buffers the negative effects of problems in self-verification. These findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that a sense of control (what we have referred to as efficacy-based self-esteem) moderates the effects of “stressors” on individual well-being (see, e.g., Mirowsky & Ross 1989, 1990). Thus, from the research presented here, a sense of self-worth is less critical than the feeling that one can control the things happening in understanding how and when individuals are able to cope with stressful situations. This may mean that as long as individuals feel that they are able to exert some control over the situation, they are better able to deal with stressors.

One somewhat surprising finding in the present study is that it is low *efficacy*-based rather than *worth*-based self-esteem that appears to motivate individuals to leave relationships. Because our hypothesis that worth is based upon recognition and acceptance by others, we would have expected that failure in this area would be more likely to lead one to leave unaccepting others. It is possible that the collinearity between the two forms of esteem is suppressing the effect, but it is also possible that efficacy-based self-esteem is a more central component of self-esteem than self-worth, as some have suggested (Ervin & Stryker 2001; Sangster & Burke 1993). Alternatively, efficacious behaviors that produce efficacy-based self-esteem may be central to ensuring worth-based self-esteem. That is, worth-based self-esteem may come from those relationships in which efficacy-based self-esteem is produced. An individual who is able to act efficaciously in his or her environment may be producing situations that also produce worth-based self-esteem. In such a scenario then, efficacy-based self-esteem is causally prior to worth-based self-esteem. Regardless of the explanations for these findings, they suggest that worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem are indeed two distinct components of self-esteem and operate somewhat differently as motives and mediators of the stress process. Determining the exact nature of these differences and their implications for individual well-being and group stability is another important direction for future research.

In sum, the work presented puts forth an integration of the various views of self-esteem and provides a way of thinking about the connection between two components of the self that have been central in social psychology, namely identities and self-esteem. It is also a reminder that the very “personal” process of self-verification occurs within a social environment or, more specifically, within social groups and relationships, with consequences for the group, both in terms of the well being of its members and its stability. We have suggested that self-verification

is a central motive or organizing principle behind individual behavior, and self-esteem appears to play an important role in the entire process.

Self-esteem is not simply a product of self-verification. As we have discussed here, a desire for self-esteem may be one of the reasons individuals enter into (and conversely, exit) relationships, and the self-esteem gained through self-verification serves an important protective function for the self by directly and indirectly reducing the amount of stress individuals experience when they are unable to verify important self-meanings. As such, self-esteem may work as a type of “social lubricant” helping individuals deal with various stressors or “bumps along the road” thereby allowing them to function meaningfully and effectively from day to day in the roles and social structures within which they exist. In this way, the processes we have outlined here are fundamental to the maintenance of social structure and the individuals that operate within that structure.

Notes

1. The self is composed of multiple identities (McCall & Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980), and thus self-verification involves the verification of all relevant identities. Here, since we are focusing on only one identity, we use self-verification and identity verification interchangeably.
2. This is not to say that these behaviors in the friend identity may not affect the verification of other identities, such as the spousal identity. Certainly, behaviors associated with one identity may interfere with the verification of other identities.
3. This does not mean that other sources are not influential in the self-verification process. However, the group in which the identity is based is likely to be viewed as more important and more credible, and thus more likely to be influential. For example, one’s coworkers might give feedback to the individual about his or her performance as a spouse, but feedback from one’s spouse will probably be more significant.
4. We note that in the present research we limit our discussion to nonstigmatized identities. Whether stigmatized identities follow the same pattern remains an open question.
5. In later hypotheses, *self-esteem* is taken to mean both worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem.
6. Perhaps self-esteem evolved as one of the “glues” (along with empathy and commitment) that help to keep society intact.
7. Swann et al. (1987) proposed that verification is primarily a cognitive process while enhancement is primarily an affective process. Each process thus operates under a somewhat independent system.
8. A fuller description of the data and data-collection process is available elsewhere (Tallman, Burke & Gecas 1998).
9. For the self-worth scale, the first eigenvalue was 3.01 and the next only .84. For the self-efficacy scale, the first eigenvalue was 2.75 and the next only .42.

10. The findings of some research is consistent with this idea (Kaplan 1975; Wright, Gronfein & Owens 2000).

11. We also recognize that the effects of identity disconfirmation would likely vary with the levels of salience and commitment to the identity in question (cf. Burke 1996).

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