Identity Verification, Control, and Aggression in Marriage*

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In this research we study the identity verification process and its effects in marriage. Drawing on identity control theory, we hypothesize that a lack of verification in the spouse identity (1) threatens stable self-meanings and interaction patterns between spouses, and (2) challenges a (nonverified) spouse's perception of control over the environment. In response to both of these circumstances, spouses increase control over their partners to counteract disturbances to self-in-situation meanings and to regain the perception of control over their environment. When increased control over the partner does not reaffirm one's identity or restore the perception of control, one may use aggression to gain control. Analysis of data from newly married couples over the first two years of marriage provides results that are consistent with this thesis. In general, we see how the lack of identity verification is tied to the control process, leads to dysfunctional interaction patterns in marriage, and more broadly threatens a stable social structure.

In social psychology, very little about "who one is" originates from within the individual (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). Individuals learn about themselves mostly through others. This is the hallmark of the "looking glass self" (Cooley 1902) or the reflected appraisal process (Kinch 1963). Significant others such as spouses, friends, and parents communicate their reactions and evaluations verbally and nonverbally, and this influences the way people see themselves. Over time, individuals build up a view of what it means to be who they are. These meanings constitute the self-concept (Rosenberg 1979), composed of all the identities that define individuals. Such identities guide behavior across situations.

People seek to have their identities verified by others. Identity verification occurs when people perceive that important others attribute meanings to them which are the same meanings they hold for themselves. To make this happen, individuals monitor others' reactions and work to counteract any apparent misperceptions (Burke and Stets 1999; Cast and Burke 2002; Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999).

Research on identity verification has found that when others do not confirm persons' identities, persons experience negative emotional arousal such as depression and distress (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 1999; Higgins 1989) and hostility (Cast and Burke 2002). Alternatively, identity verification results in positive arousal such as high self-esteem and mastery (Burke and Stets 1999; Cast and Burke 2002; Moretti and Higgins 1990).

Identity verification not only affects individuals' feelings but also influences their relationships. For example, lack of identity verification reduces marital commitment, emotional attachment to the spouse, and a sense of unity or "we-ness" (Burke and Stets 1999). This lack is even related to separation and divorce (Cast and Burke 2002). In short, identity verification is important in sustaining the self as well as social relationships, both of which constitute the foundations of social structure.

We extend research on identity verification by examining how identities are disrupted at both the individual and the interactive level through the control process. Control is a fundamental process at the individual level in regard to desiring control over the environment (Bandura 1995; Burger 1992; Gecas 1989), and at the interactive level as in influencing others to get what one wants (Goffman 1959; McCall and Simmons 1978). Our thesis is that the lack of identity verification will threaten not only established identity meanings but also the perception of control over the environment (Cast and Burke 2002; Swann 1983, 1990, 1996). When this occurs in marriage, spouses will respond to threats to their identity meanings by increasing their control over their partner to make the partner respond differently so that self-verification may be accomplished. Controlling the partner also compensates for a sense of diminished control over the environment; it facilitates reassertion of control over one's world (Stets 1993, 1995).

When the lack of verification persists or the perception of control is not regained despite one's effort at control, an individual may use physical aggression as the ultimate resource to reassert control in the situation (Stets 1992). The connection between identity verification and aggression thus is not direct, but the result of a two-step process: lack of verification leads to increased control to (re)gain verification; lack of control leads to aggression to (re)gain control. Although aggression has the short-term consequence of restoring control, over the long term it destabilizes the relationship by provoking further non verifying contexts and the accompanying aggression. The result is a tenuous interpersonal relationship which, when experienced across individuals and over time, threatens a stable social order. We test this thesis by studying couples in newly formed marriages.

THEORY

Identity Control Theory and Identity Verification

People seek to have their identities confirmed so that their world will be controllable (Swann 1983, 1990, 1996). It does not matter whether the identity meanings involved are positive or negative (Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, and Tafarodi 1992). Once people become committed to their identities, they find ways to confirm them (Swann and Read 1981; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler 1992). Indeed, self-confirmation is particularly important in interaction (Turner 1987): it helps actors navigate when the unexpected occurs, and provides a guide in awkward or novel situations (Burke and Reitzes 1981). When others see the self in a verifying manner, this self-verification provides an emotional anchor that leaves individuals less vulnerable when encountering life's events. They know who they are; others also come to know them and support that view; and this situation helps to keep them on an even keel (Cast and Burke 2002). As Pinel and Swann (2000:133) remarked, "Self-verifying evaluations are what the purr of the automobile is to the driver or the roar of the jet engine is to the pilot: a signal that all's as it should be."

To facilitate verification, people employ various strategies (Swann 1990). They may engage in selective interaction—that is, choose to interact with others who confirm who they are and to avoid those who do not do this (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler 1992). They may display identity cues such as dressing the part or using a particular style of speech so that others recognize who they are and respond accordingly, thereby confirming their identities (Stone 1962). People also may use interaction strategies that influence others to behave in a way that confirms their own self-views.

When individuals are unable to control the situation so as to receive the verifying information they expect, they may withdraw physically or psychologically from relationships in which they receive the disconfirming feedback. For example, research shows that people become less intimate with their spouses when their spouses perceive them differently than they perceive themselves (De La Ronde and Swann 1998; Ritts and Stein 1995; Swann, De La Ronde, and Hixon 1994). If withdrawal is not viable, actors may construct the illusion of verification by seeing more support for their self-views than actual-

ly exists: they may selectively dismiss discrepant information or selectively recall verifying information (Pinel and Swann 2000). Alternatively, their self-views may change slowly over time to more closely resemble the way they are perceived.

In identity control theory (ICT), identity verification occurs when perceptions of self-relevant meanings in a situation match one's internal identity standard (Burke and Stets 1999; Cast and Burke 2002). If such verification is to take place, however, an identity first must be activated in a situation. When an identity is activated, a feedback loop is established; this loop has four important components.

The first component, the *identity standard,* is the set of meanings defining who one is in the situation. The second element, *perceptual input,* is how one sees oneself in the situation with respect to the same set of meanings as held in the identity standard. The perceptual input is based in part on direct observation of oneself in the situation and in part on the reflected appraisals—that is, how one thinks others see him or her in the situation. Third, the *comparator* compares the perceptual input with the identity standard and registers the degree of discrepancy between the two. The results from the comparator are registered in the fourth component, *output/behavior* to the environment. The identity system can be regarded as aiming to act so as to match situational inputs to the internal standard and reduce the discrepancy to zero, thus verifying the identity. This system attempts to control the perceptual input to match the standard (Carver and Scheier 1981, 1998; Powers 1973).

Behavior is strictly guided neither by the meanings given in reflected appraisals nor by internal self-meanings; rather it is the result of the relation between the two. The identity system works by modifying meaningful behavior to the social situation; such modification changes the self-relevant meanings in the situation, and thus indirectly alters the perceptual input to match the internal standard (identity verification). When the output of the comparator is zero (no discrepancy between perceptions and the standard), no change in behavior is indicated. When the output departs from zero because of a disturbance to the meanings in the situation, behavior changes to counteract the disturbance and verify the identity by bringing the perceptions of self-relevant meanings back into alignment with the self-standard. Identity verification deals with meanings (Burke 1989; Burke and Reitzes 1981); when the meanings are different, the behavior will be different.

In general, a central tenet in ICT is that people seek ways to establish and maintain situations and relationships in which their identities are verified. These are identity verification contexts that maintain the identities of all persons in the context. Disturbances in these contexts are countered in order to protect and preserve the identities and, by extension, the social structure in which the identity belongs. When the identity is attached to a role in the social structure (role identity), the process of confirming the identity and counteracting the disturbances is the process of enacting the role—arranging resources and meanings in accord with the preset levels contained in the role identity standard in spite of disturbances. One verifies a cab driver identity, for example, by being and acting as a cab driver; one verifies a spousal identity by being and acting as a spouse. Similarly, when an identity is attached to a group or social category, the process of confirming the identity and counteracting disturbances by being a group member increases cohesion within the group and maintains boundaries between groups and social categories. Yet, behavior that attempts to counteract disturbances is not always an effective, stabilizing response.

Lack of Identity Verification: Control and Aggression

The lack of identity verification is both a direct threat to the maintenance of identity meanings and an indicator of one's inability to control the situation (to achieve verification). Over time, the inability to counteract disturbances and control perceptions so as to maintain a match to one's identity standard will reduce one's perception of self-efficacy (Burke and Cast 2002); self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable of executing actions necessary to manage situations (Bandura

1995; Gecas 1989). When efficacy beliefs are reduced, we hypothesize that individuals will engage in compensatory action by increasing their control over another in the situation in order to regain the perception of control over the environment (Stets 1993, 1995). Increasing one's control over another also serves a second purpose, however: it is a mechanism to make the other respond in a self-verifying manner, thereby realigning self-in-situation meanings with identity standard meanings. In other words, controlling another is a vehicle by which one's identity is verified. Thus control over another ultimately serves the self, either to restore the feeling of efficacy or to reaffirm who one is.

To control another is to use power (Emerson 1972; Homans 1974; Thibaut and Kelley 1959): it is getting others to do something they would not have done otherwise (Stets 1993, 1995). In this way, control is the behavioral dimension of influence, whereas power is the structural dimension: that is, who is at a structural advantage in the situation (Molm 1981). Because control is a fundamental process in interaction, a certain amount of control is expected among individuals (Goffman 1959; McCall and Simmons 1978).

The control that we examine here is different from the everyday interactional control in two ways. First, we focus on unidirectional rather than bidirectional control to see how one person uses control in interaction (rather than how both persons use it). Second, while we recognize that control may take a positive form (for example, making another laugh can induce happiness), we focus here on control in a negative form: that is, imposing oppressive behavior or restricting another's activity.

In marriage, when the actor's spouse does not verify the actor's identity, the actor may increase control over the spouse in an attempt to regain a feeling of efficacy and to make the spouse respond so as to verify the actor's identity.[1] If the actor continues to feel nonefficacious, does not succeed in making the spouse respond in a way that confirms the actor's identity, or both, the actor will work harder at getting the spouse to verify him or her (Burke 1991; Swann and Hill 1982). If success still is not achieved on either front, the actor may use aggression as a last resort to achieve control. In this way, increased control over the spouse may lead to acts of interpersonal aggression. Control is used to (re)gain verification; aggression is used to (re)gain control.

In keeping with the latter relationship, research has documented the relationship between control and the use of aggression as a strategy to regain control (Johnson 1995; Stets 1992; Stets and Pirog-Good 1990). In fact, in their review of domestic violence research in the 1990s, Johnson and Ferraro (2000) argue that more research is needed on the relationship between control and aggression in order to theoretically develop the area of interpersonal aggression. We attempt to do this in the current research by arguing that much of the relationship between control and aggression at the interactive level, which threatens stable social relations and an established social structure, is due to a lack of identity verification, a theoretical process at the individual level.

The aggression that is relevant to our thesis is violence which is mostly minor, and which is often reported in connection with individuals resolving family problems; in contrast is more serious violence which often results in injury and which typically is reported in the context of criminal activity and victimization (Straus 1999). Johnson and his colleagues (Johnson 1995; Johnson and Ferraro 2000; Leone et al. 2004) label the former type of aggression *common couple violence* or, more recently, *situational couple violence,* and the latter *patriarchal* or *intimate terrorism.* Situational couple violence generally emerges during family arguments in which at least one person lashes out in a

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[1] The choice of behaviors actually used to counteract disturbances would depend in part on other self-meanings that the person is maintaining. In general, people would avoid behaviors that increase disturbances or discrepancies for other important self-meanings. Thus not all persons would necessarily increase control or increase control in the same way over the spouse because such behavior could disturb other identities that are less likely to carry the meaning of control. A response of control, however, is expected to be common enough to show up in the present data.

desire for control in the situation. The aggression usually is relatively mild, and injury is not serious. Although both partners may be engaging in aggression, it is unlikely to escalate over time. In contrast, patriarchal/intimate terrorism is associated with domestic violence in which one person, typically the man, uses more severe forms of aggression; the need to control extends beyond the situation and involves control over the relationship in general. Such aggression is likely to escalate over time, and the injury to the woman can be serious.

Research on situational couple violence usually involves studies of aggression in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships including national household surveys in the United States and elsewhere. In contrast, investigation of patriarchal or intimate terrorism usually involves crime studies such as the National Crime Survey, police call surveys, and data from battered women's shelters (Johnson 1995; Straus 1999). As Johnson (1995) points out, most survey research on violence in family households is unlikely to gather rates on intimate terrorism because the (male) perpetrators would be unlikely to agree to participate in such a survey, and the (female) victims would be terrified that their partners would find out how they responded. To this we add that longitudinal survey data (such as the data examined here) will be likely to lose couples involved in intimate terrorism through attrition because the victims will leave their partners at some point. More generally, although data from crime studies and shelters that capture intimate terrorism are important for intervention, survey research that captures situational couple violence helps us in the development of prevention strategies. By theoretically understanding assaults by partners in the general population, we can ward off more serious assaults because those serious attacks begin with lesser altercations (Straus 1999).

In keeping with the samples used in research on situational couple violence, we investigate the identity verification process using a representative sample of couples during the first two years of marriage. As formalized below and as modeled in Figure 1, we expect that the lack of verification of the spouse identity will have two consequences. First, it signals the loss of control over the situation and thus threatens self-efficacy beliefs. In response to this threat, people will be motivated to increase their level of control over their spouse to regain the perception of control. Because the theoretical process of identity verification is not gender-specific, we expect it to predict both men's and women's control over the spouse.

Second, the lack of verification threatens established identity meanings, and people will work to counteract the source of the discrepancy: that is, the behavior of the partner that is failing to confirm one's identity meanings. Increased control over the partner also will be used to achieve verification. When an increase in control over the spouse is ineffective in reasserting control, actors will resort to aggression, both minor and severe, to (re)gain control. Aggression thus does not result directly from the lack of verification, but from the lack of control.

Since aggression disrupts the self because of the untoward physical harm, we anticipate that it will reduce identity verification in the year following its use. The victim of the aggression, given the harm, will be less highly motivated to continue to confirm the aggressor's identity meanings; the aggressor, given the obstacles the victim is perceived to create for him or her, will be less highly motivated to continue to verify the victim's self-meanings. In short, although aggression may generate some control over the partner, in the long term it will disrupt the verification process, reducing the trust on which the verification process rests (Burke and Stets 1999). These negative longer-term consequences of aggression are well documented (Feld and Straus 1990; Gottman 1994).

Given the above theoretical reasoning, we offer the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Identity verification will increase self-efficacy beliefs.

Hypothesis 2: Identity verification will decrease control over one's spouse.

Hypothesis 3: A reduction in self-efficacy beliefs will increase control over one's spouse.
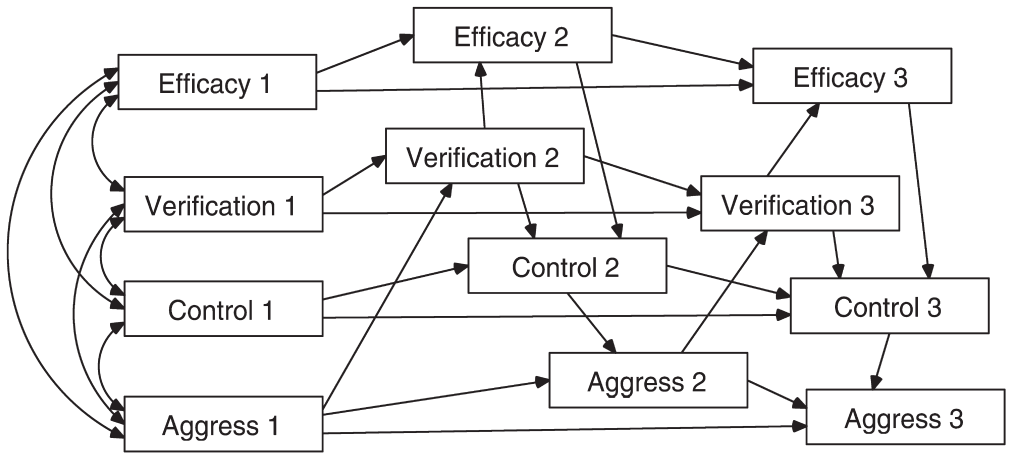
Figure 1. Structural Equation Model for Relationships Between Identity Verification, Efficacy, Control, and Aggression

Hypothesis 4: Control over one's spouse will increase the level of aggression.

Hypothesis 5: Aggression will decrease the amount of identity verification in the year following its use.

We set forth some scope conditions for the theory on which these hypotheses rest. First, we assume that the spouse identity is salient (likely to be activated) and prominent (important). In view of the respondents' newlywed status, these conditions are likely to be fulfilled for the spouse identity. Second, we assume that people work first to change situational meanings rather than self-standards (identities) to achieve verification. Although identities can and do change, the process is much slower and occurs only when one cannot change the situational meanings (Cast and Burke 1997) or when one lacks power in the situation (Cast et al. 1999). Third, the meanings of the behaviors that people choose in attempting to bring about identity verification are generally consistent with their identities. For this reason we expect that this model would work better for those who view themselves as more controlling and more aggressive than for those who regard themselves in the opposite manner. We should observe the hypothesized effects across the entire sample, however.

METHOD

Sample

The data for this research come from a longitudinal study of marital roles that investigated marital dynamics in the first two years of marriage (Tallman, Burke, and Gecas 1998). The sample for this study was drawn from marriage registration records in 1991 and 1992 in two mid-sized communities in Washington State. Of the couples recorded in the marriage registry during that period, about 45 percent (574 couples) met the criteria for involvement: both spouses were over age 18, were in their first marriage, and had no children living with them.

Of the couples who met the criteria for involvement in the longitudinal study, 286 couples completed all the data collection in the first year. The couples do not differ significantly from couples throughout the United States who marry for the first time. For example, their mean age is similar to the national mean (about 25), and their mean educational level resembles the national level ("some college") (Vital Statistics 1987). In the United States, first-married persons are typically white (86 percent) (Vital Statistics 1987). In the present sample, 89 percent are white, 3 percent are black (underrepresenting blacks nationally), and 9 percent are other minorities (overrepresenting Asians and Hispanics

nationwide). This sample reflects the racial distribution in Washington State (World Almanac 1992).

We find 15 percent attrition from year 1 to year 2, and another 4 percent from year 2 to year 3. These figures do not include the 13 couples who were separated or divorced after year 1 or the 16 couples who were separated or divorced after year 2, who were no longer included in the sample. Couples who dropped out of the study after the first or second year were more likely to be young ($p < .01$), less highly educated ($p < .01$), and of a lower socioeconomic status ($p < .01$). They also recorded higher levels of aggression in the first year, both minor ($p < .01$) and severe ($p < .01$), which result in a decrease in the variance of the dependent variable in years 2 and 3. This outcome would reduce the influence of factors on aggression; thus it would be more difficult to observe effects in later years.

Each data collection period included a 90-minute face-to-face interview, four one-week daily diaries kept by respondents at 10-week intervals, and a 15-minute videotape of couples' conversations as they worked to solve areas of disagreement previously identified by them. The data for the current analysis are based on information from the interviews in all three data collection points over the two-year span.

Measures

Identity verification. To measure identify verification, we need two elements: a measure of the actor's spousal role identity standard and a measure of the actor's perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the situation (reflected appraisals). Lack of verification occurs insofar as there is a difference between these two sets of meanings. In this study we have a direct measure of the actor's spousal identity standard, but not of the actor's reflected appraisals. Ideally we would want a measure of the actor's *perceptions* of his or her partner's appraisals of the actor. Lacking such a measure, however, we used as a proxy the spouse's *expectations* for the actor (what the actor *should* do). This proxy is two steps removed from the ideal measure,

and therefore incurs some risk of introducing measurement error. Insofar as measurement error is present, estimates will be attenuated and tests of hypotheses will be conservative. We return to this issue after describing our measure of identity verification.

Respondents rated each of 11 spousal role activities by how much they felt that they *should* engage in that role activity (their identity standard), and then by how much they felt that their spouses *should* engage in that activity.[2] Because this information is collected on each spouse, we can determine whether there is a correspondence between a person's identity standard (the actor's role expectations for himself or herself) and the partner's role expectations for the actor. The spousal role activities that we examine include three areas that are important components of the spousal role: instrumental, expressive, and economic. The meanings of the behaviors, not the behaviors themselves, are important. An example of an instrumental item is "being responsible for cleaning the house." For the expressive area, an example is "maintaining contact with parents and in-laws or other members of the family." Finally, an example of an economic item is "providing income for the family before the children are born." Response categories for all the items ranged from "not doing that activity in the household" to "doing all of that activity in the household" (coded 0 to 4). (The full set of items is listed in the appendix.) In the appendix, these items factor into a single underlying dimension of meaning containing 76 percent of the common variance of the items. The omega reliability is high (.88) (Heise and Bohrnstedt 1970).

Identity verification is operationalized as the amount of agreement between (1) the actor's self-rating of how he or she *should* be (the identity standard) with respect to each of the spousal role activities and (2) the partner's expectations of the actor (how the actor *should* be) in each of these activities (our

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[2] Higgins (1989) distinguishes between *oughts* and *ideals* as standards. Our use of *should* to capture identity meanings and expectations that are held in the standard does not make this distinction and could represent either.

proxy for the reflected appraisals).[3] We calculate the absolute difference between the two scores. In light of the response categories, a maximum disagreement score of 4 in an area would occur when the respondent reported that he or she should perform all of an activity and the partner reported that the respondent should perform none of the activity (or vice versa). We averaged the disagreement scores across the 11 areas, with a theoretical range of 0 (perfect agreement) to 4 (maximum disagreement). To make this a measure of verification (in which the presumed reflected appraisals match the meanings in the identity standard), we then subtracted these scores from 4, the maximum value. Thus, the higher the score, the greater the verification of the spousal identity.

In the use of the spouse's *expectations* as a proxy for the actor's reflected appraisals in the measure outlined above, we make some assumptions: (1) the meanings in the actor's identity standard (the *shoulds*) generally correspond to the meaning of the actor's role performance; (2) the spouse appraises the meanings of the actor's role performance negatively if they differ from the spouse's expectations as to how the actor *should* behave;[4] (3) the spouse acts so as to convey the meanings of his or her appraisals and expectations to the actor; and (4) the actor perceives the spouse's behavior and infers the spouse's appraisal (reflected appraisals).

Our proxy measure of the expectations mentioned in the second assumption is two steps away from our desired measure of reflected appraisals mentioned in assumption 4. Among casual acquaintances or in one-time encounters, these would be large steps, where error could enter easily. Kinch (1963), however, suggests that several conditions can reduce the level of error which might affect these assumptions: (1) self's familiarity with the other, (2) the level of familiarity with the situation, and (3) the actor's past experiences in interpersonal situations. All of these conditions should be met among the newly married couples in the present sample. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that a spouse's *expectations* for an actor are correlated highly both with his or her *appraisals* of the actor and with the actor's *perceptions* of those appraisals. Thus, although our measure of identity verification is not exactly what we want, we believe that it is a close approximation and a useful proxy.

Self-efficacy. Following Cast and Burke (2002), we measure self-efficacy by using five items from Pearlin and associates' mastery scale (Pearlin et al. 1981): (for example, "There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have.") We also include two items from Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale that are based on efficacy ("I am able to do things as well as most other people"; "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure"), and one item from Gecas and Schwalbe's (1983) efficacy-based self-esteem scale ("confident vs. lacks confidence"). These items form a single factor with an average omega reliability of .85 across the three years. The items are aligned in the same direction, standardized, and summed. A high score indicates high self-efficacy.

Control. We assessed the control measure using the 10-item control scale (Stets 1993, 1995). Respondents were asked whether they "never," "seldom," "sometimes," "fairly often," or "very often" engaged in a series of acts with their spouse during the year (coded 0 to 4): for example, "I make my spouse do what I want," "I keep my spouse from doing things I do not approve," and "I set the rules in my relationship with my spouse." The items formed a single scale in all

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[3] Swann and his colleagues (Swann, Hixon, and De La Ronde 1992; Swann et al. 1994) also used this procedure to measure discrepancy when they examined husbands' views of their wives in comparison with wives' self-views on attributes relevant to their own self-concept (and vice versa).

[4] The spouse's expectations for the actor are understood to indicate meanings, which, if enacted by the actor, would verify the spouse's identity. These expectations or meanings also guide the spouse's behavior toward the actor—that is, treating the actor in line with the expectations. If the meanings of the actor's identity are different from the meanings of the behavior based on the spouse's expectations, the identity would not be verified. Also, behaviors by the actor that do not meet the spouse's expectations are non-verifying of the spouse's identity; therefore they are disturbances that should be counteracted by the spouse as part of the spouse's self-verification process. Offering negative appraisals of that activity would be one way to counteract the disturbance.

three years, with an omega reliability of .85 across the three years. We standardized and summed the items in each year; a high score represents more frequent control over the spouse.

Aggression. In year 1, respondents were asked how often, during the past year, fights with their partner had resulted in the respondent's hitting, shoving, or throwing things at their partner. Response categories ranged from "never" to "four or more times" (coded 0 to 4). Because this question asks about acts that refer primarily to minor violence (Straus 1990b), it is a measure of minor aggression. This measure also has been used in the National Survey of Families and Households, which involves interviews with a probability sample of over 13,000 respondents (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988).

In years 2 and 3, we used the conflict tactics scale (CTS) to measure physical aggression in marriage (Straus 1990c). Respondents were asked how often during the past 12 months they had used each of the following tactics during an argument with spouse: (1) "threw something at their spouse," (2) "pushed, grabbed, or shoved," (3) "slapped," (4) "kicked, bit, or hit with a fist," (5) "hit or tried to hit with an object," (6) "beat up," (7) "choked," (8) "threatened with a knife or gun," and (9) "used a knife or gun." Response categories ranged from "never" to "more than 20 times" (coded 0 to 6).

Following Straus (1990c), we created two indices of physical aggression: minor and severe aggression. We summed items 1 to 3 above to form minor aggression; we used the remaining items to form a severe aggression scale. To take into account different degrees of severity in the severe aggression items, we created a "severity weighted scale" from items 4 to 9 (Straus 1990c). We first recoded the response categories to the midpoints of each category. Then we multiplied these values by the following weights: "kicked, bit, or hit with a fist" = 2; "hit with an object" = 3; "beat up and choked" = 5; "threatened to use a knife or gun" = 6; "used a knife or gun" = 8. In this sample we found no instances of threatening to use or using a knife or gun. We then summed the weighted items to form severe aggression.

Because of the change in the way we measured aggression between year 1 and years 2 and 3, the indicator of minor aggression is different in year 1 than in the latter years. In addition, because severe aggression was not measured in year 1, only the measure of minor aggression is estimated in that year.

Criticisms have been leveled at the conflict tactics scale, and Straus has responded (see especially Straus 1990a, 1990d). For example, the CTS does not measure the context surrounding an aggressive act. When someone hits another with an object, we do not know whether the object used is potentially lethal (such as a fireplace poker) or nonlethal (such as a wad of newspaper). Straus (1990d) maintains that the context should be assessed in separate questions. Another problem is that an aggressive act by a man is likely to be more damaging than an aggressive act by a woman because of gender differences in size and strength. On the one hand, the underestimation of aggression could be corrected by increasing the CTS scores by the percentage to which the respondent's height and weight exceeded that of his or her partner (Straus 1990d). On the other, Straus (1990a) maintains that it is important to focus on aggressive *acts* rather than on the *consequences* of those acts in terms of injury because (1) such emphasis is consistent with the legal definition of assault (where it is not necessary that an injury result), thereby permitting an integration of family research with criminology and legal research; and (2) it reflects an emphasis on the moral value of nonviolence, in which any act of aggression is wrong, whatever its outcome. In this research we focus on *acts* of aggression.

Survey research using the CTS is more likely to measure relatively gender-balanced forms of minor aggression used in the home, whereas data from crime studies and battered women's shelters are more likely to capture serious, gender-imbalanced aggression, with men as the perpetrators and women as the victims (Johnson 1995; Straus 1999). Consequently, in this research we expect to find more gender parity in the *use* of aggression, though not necessarily in the *consequences* of aggression, because men can inflict more damage than women.

Analysis

The structural equation model represented in Figure 1 shows that each of the variables exerts effects on itself over time;[5] these are the stability or persistence effects. In addition, we have allowed the effects of year 1 of a variable to influence the variable in year 3. Identity theory has explained these lagged effects in terms of the way in which identities change over time, a somewhat oscillatory process in which the initial change is often too much and then swings back producing the final result (Burke and Cast 1997). These lagged effects are necessary for the three identity or self-based measures but not for the aggression measures. The remaining paths in the model follow from the five hypotheses, with effects from verification to both efficacy and control over the partner, from efficacy to control over the partner, from control over the partner to aggression, and from aggression in one year to verification in the following year. Effect coefficients estimated between the exogenous variables would be biased because the true effects would be confounded with covariances resulting from common prior variables at time zero. For this reason, we simply allow the exogenous variables to be correlated. For simplicity in the diagram, we have not represented the error terms on any of the endogenous variables. The model assumes no correlations among these error terms.

In estimating this model, we designate husbands and wives as separate groups (a two-group model), and we test whether the process for wives and for husbands is identical. In the absence of theoretical reasons that suggest differences, we constrain the parameters for wives to be identical to those for husbands. We also constrain theoretically identical parameters in the model to be identical. Thus, for example, the effect of verification on efficacy in year 2 is constrained to be the same in year 3, with similar constraints for the other effects. We use identical models for both the severe and the minor forms of aggression, but we discuss the effects of each separately.

We estimated the model using full-information maximum-likelihood procedures.[6] The initial estimates of the model showed that it did not fit the data. For the minor aggression model, the chi-square was 190.6 with 135 degrees of freedom ($p < .01$); for the severe aggression model, the chi-square was 149.3 with 119 degrees of freedom ($p < .05$). The poor fits of these models were the result of differences in some of the coefficients for husbands and for wives; this outcome suggests that allowing these effects to vary would improve the models. The effect of aggression in year 1 on aggression in year 2 was different for husbands than for wives for minor aggression (see Table 4 below). In addition, the effect of minor aggression in year 2 on minor aggression in year 3 was different for husbands than for wives. Further, the effect of efficacy in year 2 on control over the spouse in year 2, and the effect of efficacy in year 3 on control over the spouse in year 3 was different for husbands than for wives. The remaining effects for wives and for husbands are kept equal, as are the theoretically equivalent coefficients between years. Finally, for minor aggression, it was necessary to include a path from efficacy to aggression for both husbands and wives (chi-square was

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[5] Not shown in the model are two control variables: (1) the respondent's age, and (2) the respondent's status derived by averaging the respondent's education (measured in years), and the Stevens and Cho (1985) SEI scale measuring occupational prestige. We entered these two variables into the model as exogenous control variables. Each is related to efficacy, verification, control, and aggression in time 1, but they are unrelated to the other variables. To simplify the presentation, we do not show them in the model.

[6] Because the outcome measures of aggression are highly skewed, they do not conform to the normal assumptions of structural equation modeling. For the kinds of aggression measures used here, tobit analyses are often employed (Burke, Stets and Pirog-Good 1988). In analyses not reported in this paper, we compared tobit analyses of the outcome variables with OLS analyses of the outcome variables for each year in the cross-sectional data. The results showed that the tobit analyses were *more* sensitive than the OLS analysis and showed higher levels of significance. For this reason, although we urge caution in interpreting the results of the present analysis, we are quite confident that our results with this skewed measure are robust. In addition, we tested all of the coefficients using bootstrapping methods to confirm the reported significance levels.

12.1 with 1 df, $p < .01$). These changes resulted in excellent model fits, as shown in Table 4.

RESULTS

The first two columns in Table 1 present the average verification levels and standard deviations in the spousal identity for wives and for husbands at all three time points. The verification levels are not significantly different for husbands than for wives in any of the three years, nor do the average discrepancy levels change significantly over time. The last four columns in Table 1 show the average levels and standard deviations of self-efficacy and control for husbands and for wives over the three time points. Like the average levels in the spousal identity verification, self-efficacy levels do not differ significantly for husbands and for wives in any of the three years, nor do they change substantially over time. We find a gender difference in average levels of control: wives report higher levels of control over their spouse than do husbands in all years. This finding supports other research in which women reported significantly greater control over their partner than did men (Stets 1992). The mean control levels for both wives and husbands decline steadily from year 1 to year 3; this decrease in control over the spouse through time is significant (beta = $-.12, p < .05$).

Table 2 reports the average levels of minor and severe aggression for husbands and for wives during the first three years of marriage. Overall we find that minor aggression accounted for about 75 percent of all aggression in the study, and most aggression was mutual between spouses (73 percent for minor and 82 percent for severe). Across all three years, wives report significantly more minor and severe aggression than do husbands. These findings are consistent with other research showing that women are slightly more likely than men to report aggression (Stets 1992; Sugarman and Hotaling 1989). Because the measures of aggression in year 1 and year 2 are different, the means cannot be compared. Between years 2 and 3, however, we see a decline in minor aggression for husbands, but not for wives. The level of severe aggression does not change.

Rather than an actual gender difference in aggression, there may be a *reporting* difference, with men underreporting their aggression (Stets and Straus 1990). To explore this

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Spousal Identity Verification, Efficacy, and Control in Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 for Husbands ($N = 200$) and Wives ($N = 202$)

	Spousal Identity Verification				Efficacy				Control			
	Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives	
Year	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Year$_1$	3.65	.19	3.64	.19	−.02	.63	.02	.58	9.59*	5.29	10.71*	5.21
Year$_2$	3.66	.19	3.67	.19	−.05	.63	.05	.57	8.44*	4.82	9.91*	5.28
Year$_3$	3.64	.21	3.63	.22	.04	.65	.04	.60	7.82*	4.57	9.37*	4.77

* $p < .05$ for difference between husbands and wives.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Minor and Severe Aggression in Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 for Husbands ($N = 200$) and Wives ($N = 202$)

	Minor Aggression				Severe Aggression			
	Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Year$_1$	.16*	.55	.32*	.75	—[a]		—	
Year$_2$	.35*	.87	.65*	1.50	.07*	.54	.60*	2.62
Year$_3$	.21*	.72	.63*	1.82	.04*	.38	.58*	2.68

* $p < .05$ for difference between husbands and wives.
[a] Not available in Year 1.

possibility, we conducted the following analysis. In year 1, respondents were asked not only how often they hit, shoved, or threw things at their partner, but also how often their spouse did so to them. Respondents were not asked about their spouse's aggressive behavior in year 2 or year 3.

The results are presented in Table 3. Husbands reported that their spouse committed these minor acts of aggression significantly more often than they did, and wives reported that they committed these minor acts significantly more often than their spouse. Thus both wives and husbands reported significantly more acts of minor aggression by wives than by husbands in year 1. In addition, we found no significant difference between wives' and husbands' reports of aggression by husbands or by wives. Indeed, we saw substantial agreement in their reports and in the view that wives' levels of minor aggression were higher. These data, however, apply only to minor aggression and only in year 1. The wives' rate of aggression may be higher because they were acting in "self-defense." Although this cannot be tested in the current data, previous results from a national survey revealed that women initiate aggression as often as men (Stets and Straus 1990). Yet respondents may interpret the term *initiation* as who began the argument, not who began the hitting (Stets and Straus 1990).

Table 4 provides the model estimates separately for minor and severe aggression as

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Reports of Minor Aggression in Year 1 for Husbands ($N = 200$) and Wives ($N = 202$)

Husbands				Wives			
Self		Spouse		Self		Spouse	
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
.16*	.55	.31*	.80	.32*	75	.20*	.58

* $p < .05$ for difference between husbands' reports on self and spouse, and between wives' reports on self and spouse. We found no significant differences between husbands' and wives' reports on men or between husbands' and wives' reports on women.

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Table 4. Standardized Estimates for the Model in Year 2 and Year 3, for Husbands ($N = 200$) and Wives ($N = 202$)[a]

	Dependent Variables									
Independent Variables	$Verify_2$	$Efficacy_2$	$Control_2$	Minor $Aggress_2$	Severe $Aggress_2$	$Verify_3$	$Efficacy_3$	$Control_3$	Minor $Aggress_3$	Severe $Aggress_3$
$Verify_1$	.43					.11				
$Efficacy_1$		.71					.38			
$Control_1$			.72					.29		
Minor $Aggress_1$	–.11			.46/.76[c]					0[b]	
$Verify_2$		.08	–.05			.43				
$Efficacy_2$			0/–.15[d]	–.07			.43			
$Control_2$				.06	.05			.47		
Minor $Aggress_2$						–.11			.15/.50[e]	
Severe $Aggress_2$						–.18				.18
$Verify_3$							.08	–.05		
$Efficacy_3$								0/–.15[d]	–.07	
$Control_3$									.06	.05
R^2 (H/W)	.20/.20	.55/.49	.55/.57	.27/.44	.02/.02	.25/.28	.60/.53	.55/.55	.10/.25	.13/.07

[a] Separate models were run for minor and severe aggression. Test of model fit for minor aggression: $\text{chi-square}_{132} = 157.4, p = .07$. Test of model fit for severe aggression: $\text{chi-square}_{118} = 126.4, p = .28$.

[b] 0 nonsignificant coefficient. All reported coefficients are significant at .05 level. Subscripts on variables represent year.

[c] These husbands/wives coefficients differ significantly ($\text{chi-square}_1 = 6.4, p < .05$).

[d] These husbands/wives coefficients differ significantly ($\text{chi-square}_1 = 9.5, p < .05$).

[e] These husbands/wives coefficients differ significantly ($\text{chi-square}_1 = 17.4, p < .05$).

final outcomes.[7] The results reveal that verification of the spousal identity leads to an increase in self-efficacy in year 2 and year 3, for both wives and husbands. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1. Thus a mismatch between identity standard meanings and reflected appraisals (as indicated by the spouse's expectations) affects one's beliefs about the level of self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that verification of an identity also will lead to decreased control over the spouse. This hypothesis is supported in Table 4. The more verification husbands and wives experience for the spousal identity, the lower their level of control over the spouse. This effect is stable across time: it occurs in year 2 and year 3. Thus nonverification of an identity leads to increased efforts to control the (nonsupportive) spouse in order to induce the spouse to confirm one's identity claim. The fact that the other is disconfirming one's self-view is at the heart of elevated levels of control over the other.

In Hypothesis 3 we anticipate that control over the spouse is not only a function of the verification process, but also the result of a compensatory process with respect to feelings of efficacy. We expect that because the lack of verification results in reduced self-efficacy, individuals will compensate by increasing their control over their partner to reestablish the perception of control over their environment. The findings shown in Table 4 are consistent with this hypothesis, but only for wives. Decreased self-efficacy for wives (but not for husbands) significantly increases their control over their spouses in years 2 and 3. As we noted earlier, wives report a higher overall level of control over their spouse than do husbands. Now we see that wives apparently use control as a mechanism to regain feelings of efficacy in a way that men do not. Thus, although both husbands' and wives' feelings of self-efficacy are reduced when their spousal identities are not verified, only the women use control to help regain these feelings.

Increasing one's control over the spouse may not increase verification. In other words, increasing one's efforts to cause the spouse to respond differently to one's identity claims may not restore the perception of control in the marriage. Control also may not restore feelings of efficacy. In the face of such failures, Hypothesis 4 suggests that individuals may resort to aggression as the ultimate mechanism to regain control in the situation. Thus, the more strongly one spouse controls the other, the more prone the latter becomes to using aggression. The results in Table 4 are consistent with this idea. Increased control leads to minor and severe aggression for husbands and for wives in year 2 and year 3. Therefore this effect is general (for both minor and severe aggression) and persistent (across the years).

Finally, Hypothesis 5 suggests that aggression used in an attempt to regain control is itself disruptive to the self-verification process, and ultimately leads in a spiral to more aggression. The results presented in Table 4 support this hypothesis. Aggression in one year significantly *reduces* verification of the spousal identity in the following year; this holds in year 2 for minor aggression and in year 3 for minor and severe aggression. Therefore, although aggression generally exerts a positive direct effect on aggression (both minor and severe) in the following year, it also exerts an indirect effect on later aggression through a disruption of the self-verification process for the spousal identity. In this way, aggression is not only due to nonverification of the spousal identity, but is also the catalyst for further disruption of the verification process when it occurs, and leads to further aggression in subsequent years.

Beyond the results directly relevant to the hypotheses, we observe other notable results in Table 4. First, the persistence of aggression over time varies by gender. For minor aggression, we find a greater persistence between year 1 and year 2 for wives than for husbands; this pattern continues between year 2 and year 3, though the level of persistence declines for both wives and husbands. Between year 2 and year 3, severe aggression persists only slightly for both husbands and wives.

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[7] We present the R^2 values in the table for interested readers. Because we wish to test the presence of certain predicted relationships and not to "explain" aggression, we focus on the significance of the predicted effects.

Second, although we offered no hypothesis concerning the direct effect of feelings of self-efficacy on aggression (we hypothesized an indirect link through control), it became necessary to include such a direct path for minor aggression (but not for severe aggression). This effect of feelings of self-efficacy on minor aggression holds for both women and men: reduction in feelings of efficacy increases not only the use of control over the partner, but minor aggression as well.

Finally, the R^2 values displayed in Table 4 show that the model is more successful in accounting for minor than for severe aggression. These values also reveal that the model accounts for wives' aggression more effectively than for husbands', and for aggression in year 2 more accurately than in year 3.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the context of identity control theory, individuals seek to have their identities verified: to have their self-meanings confirmed by the way others treat them. Failure in this process, which occurs when people's perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the situation do not match the self-meanings they hold in their identity standard, leads directly to at least two outcomes. First, especially as issues with self-verification persist, people will begin to feel a loss of control over their world, and their feelings of self-efficacy will diminish. Second, corrective action through increased control over another is undertaken both to change the meanings in the situation so as to bring them into alignment with the identity standard, and to restore feelings of efficacy.

When efforts at control fail to produce the desired results, people will work harder by increasing their control over others. When this fails, they may turn to aggression as a last resort. Some may act more aggressively than others because their desired level of control is set so high that it is easily threatened (Burger 1992). Ultimately, however, aggression that is used to gain control will decrease the amount of verification that occurs.

In this paper we have explored these ideas using data from a three-year study of newly married couples. In general we found support for our hypotheses. Using a fairly comprehensive measure of the spousal identity, which included instrumental meanings of this identity ("who does what labor in the home"), expressive meanings ("who contributes to the emotional fabric of the marriage"), and economic meanings ("who provides most of the income in the household"), we found that a lack of verification reduced feelings of efficacy and increased the levels of control. Heightened control was associated with aggression, which in turn reduced the verification in the year following its use. These points suggest that identity disruptions at the micro level threaten established social relations at the meso level; these effects reverberate at the macro level, jeopardizing stable social structural arrangements.

We offer one warning about these findings, however: because we lacked a direct measure of the reflected appraisals to measure identity verification as the difference between the actor's standard and the actor's reflected appraisals, we used the spouse's expectations as a proxy for the reflected appraisals. The spouse's expectations are at least two steps away from the actor's reflected appraisals, and this circumstance introduces some degree of measurement error. Nevertheless, the findings are quite clear.

Unexpectedly we found that several aspects of the model concerning the role of aggression differed for wives and for husbands. The use of minor aggression in one year predicted the use of aggression in the next year more accurately for women than for men. This finding, along with reports of higher levels of aggression by women (Table 2), suggests that the *meaning* of aggression may be somewhat different for men than for women.

Central to the symbolic interaction perspective underlying identity control theory is the idea that identities are meanings and that change in the meanings in the situation bring about self-verification through meaningful behavior (Burke and Reitzes 1981). Because meaning lies in people's responses to stimuli (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957), the meaning of aggression resides in people's responses to the aggression. If women's and men's use of aggression bring different consequences, perhaps because of the differences in physical stature and men's ability to

inflict more damage, the meaning of aggression will be different.

In identity control theory, behavior is used to control perceptions. If any meaningful act fails to have an effect, we would expect such a failure initially to lead to a more extreme form of the act. Aggression is used to cause changes in the meanings of a situation (so as to create a sense of control). If aggression by women toward men is less consequential than the reverse, women are more likely to resort to stronger tactics to try to create this sense of control.[8] This would account for women's greater reliance on more severe forms of aggression and for their greater persistence in the use of aggression.[9] Men simply can cause more injury and damage; when this occurs, the results may be frightening not only to the women but also to the men. For this reason, male aggression may be less stable over time than the less harmful female aggression; As a result female aggression may persist over time more strongly than male aggression, as we found in this research.

Aside from the gender differences in the consequences of aggression, there are other reasons why we might find a higher rate of aggression by women than by men in the family (Straus 1999). Some of the meaning of women's aggression resides in societal norms: society may be more accepting of a woman who slaps her partner than of a man who commits this act (Straus 1999). Also, we suspect that the reduction in tolerance of assaults by men may be due to the increased attention, in recent years, to domestic violence, in which men typically are the perpetrators and women the victims. Women also may be more likely than men to resort to aggression in the home because (1) women need an "attention-grabbing" device to get their partners to discuss a problem rather

than avoid it; (2) women are more fully invested in identities tied to the family and thus will be offended more deeply by negative feedback; and (3) women often respond aggressively toward their children, and this may spill over to their response to their partners (Straus 1999). Therefore, in general, aggression by women may carry the meaning of a non-serious but useful device to gain what they want.

We also found that the model predicted minor aggression somewhat more successfully than severe aggression, with larger R^2 values for these effects. Again, these differences in predicting minor and severe aggression suggest differences in meaning between the two types. Previous research examined how minor aggression is viewed as more "legitimate" than severe aggression, given the tendency for fewer serious consequences (Stets and Pirog-Good 1990). Severe forms of aggression generally are regarded as deviant, if not criminal; more interpersonal costs are associated with their use because they would be more likely to end a relationship. Because of the lesser costs associated with minor aggression, it is more available as a general tool for regaining control. Perhaps for this reason, we find that both women and men use minor aggression not only as an extension of controlling their partner, but also as a device to regain control when feelings of self-efficacy are diminished (a result not initially predicted by the theory).

To understand aggression and its role in marriage, one must understand the meanings associated with aggression and how it is tied directly to the lack of control and indirectly to the lack of verification. The meaning of minor aggression differs from that of severe aggression; therefore the use of these two forms as a last resort will differ. And as the meaning of aggression by wives and by husbands differs or changes over time, the pattern of use will also differ and change.

The model predicted aggression in the second year more accurately than in the third year; this fact suggests that the meanings of aggression change over time. Although the amount of aggression in the third year generally has not diminished, its persistence decreases, an indication that it is usually not the same people who are aggressive from one

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[8] In line with this argument, Straus (1990d) observes how the CTS may distort gender differences in aggression because, in view of the average gender differences in size and strength, the results may underestimate males' minor violence and overstate females' severe violence.

[9] This is similar to the finding of Stets and Burke (1996) that wives use more negative forms of behavior than husbands in order to compensate for their lesser power and status in family interaction.

year to the next. Some of the individuals who used aggression earlier for control are less likely to do so by year 3, while a new set of individuals (who did not use aggression early in the marriage) are likely to do so in the third year perhaps for control. It is possible that couples abandon the use of aggression over time because they have learned that it interferes with the verification process.

In general, this research illustrates that the lack of identity verification generates problems on many different levels of sociological analysis. This lack produces negative emotional arousal, particularly when the feedback is negative and particularly when it involves identity meanings that "fall short" of the evaluative meanings in the identity standard. In addition, our research shows more social consequences that go beyond the individual level, as when people respond in maladaptive ways by increasing their control over intimate others, or resort to aggressive behavior. Such responses exert effects at the interpersonal level: by increasing control and responding aggressively, actors are disassembling or disabling the very verification contexts needed to maintain their role identities and relationships.

If role relations are to continue smoothly, each person must act to verify not only his or her own role identity, but also those of the others in the particular social setting. Persons who impose upon a spouse and force the spouse to treat them differently so that their own identity is confirmed not only fail to confirm their partner's role identity, but endanger the very foundations of the relationship, normally goodwill and trust (Burke and Stets 1999). When relationships become unstable across actors and over time, the stable social structure surrounding individuals and relationships is threatened. In this way, we see how the events at the individual level can reverberate at the level of society.

Appendix

Aspects of the Spousal Role Used in Identity Verification

1. Cleaning the house
2. Preparing and serving the meals
3. Washing, ironing, and mending the clothes
4. Home repair (R)
5. Yard work (R)
6. Taking care of bills and accounts
7. Shopping for groceries
8. Maintaining contact with parents and in-laws or other members of the family
9. Initiating sexual activity (R)
10. Providing income for the family before children are born (R)
11. Providing income for the family after children are born (R)

(R) Item reverse coded.

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