Identity Control Theory[*]

Peter J. Burke
University of California, Riverside

Identity control theory (ICT) focuses on the nature of persons identities (who they are) and the relationship between the persons identities and their behavior within the context of the social structure within which the identities are embedded. ICT grows out of identity theory (Stryker, 1994; Stryker and Burke, 2000) and structural symbolic interaction theory more generally (Stryker, 1980). Central to all of these theories, including the symbolic interaction perspective, is the idea that behavior is premised on a named and classified world and that people in society name each other and themselves in terms of the positions they occupy. Further, these positional labels or names and the expectations attached to them become internalized as the identities that make up the self. These self labels thus define persons in terms of positions in society and these positions carry the shared behavioral expectations. Further, these positions, conventionally labeled roles and groups, are relational in the sense that they tie individuals together. For example, with respect to roles, father is tied to son or daughter; with respect to groups, the in-group is related to the out-group and in-group members are related to other in-group members. This is reflective of William James notion that people have as many selves as they have relationships to others (James, 1890). Thus, through their identities, people are intimately tied to the social structure,.

The social structure, in this view, is not fixed or static. Fluidity of the structure of social relations is conceptually brought about by introducing Turners concept of role-making (Turner, 1962), which takes place situationally as persons interact and negotiate common meanings that may reshape, reinterpret, and otherwise change the situation. However, this is variable. Some structures (open) are more open to role-making, negotiation, and change than others (closed). In the more open structures, names and classes as well as possibilities for interaction may be modified through negotiation and interaction. In closed structures such modifications are made only with difficulty.

1 Meaning

Central to ICT is the concept of meaning around which identities are formed. What does it *mean* to be father, or son? What does it *mean* to be an American?

An identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or as a member of a social group that define who one is (Burke and Tully, 1977). Identity control theory takes the definition of meaning from the work of Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957), which in somewhat simplified terms is a response that a person has to a stimulus; meaning is a response. From Mead, a symbol is a stimulus to which people share a common response. Thinking about myself as a father (the stimulus) calls up in me a set of responses (set of meanings) similar to those called up in others. These responses define for a person what it *means* to be a father, e.g., being strong, being caring, or being the breadwinner. These common responses lead to common expectations and understandings about what a father is and what a father does, as well as shared understandings about the relation of father to son or daughter and the position of father in the family.

2   Control Of Perceptions

Each identity is viewed as a control system with four components (Burke, 1991). The set of meanings for a given identity is held in what identity control theory terms the *identity standard* one of the components of an identity. In addition to the identity standard containing the self-defining meanings, an identity contains *perceptions* of meanings in the situation that are relevant to our identity (most of which come from the feedback from others about how we are coming across in the situation), a *comparator* that functions to compare the perceived meanings with the meanings in the identity standard, and an output function of the comparison, sometimes called an *error* or *discrepancy* that represents the difference between perceptions and the identity standard. Finally, as a function of the error or discrepancy, there is meaningful behavior enacted in the situation that conveys meanings about our identity.

If, in an interactive setting, people perceive their identity-relevant meanings to be congruent with the meanings in their identity standard, that is the discrepancy is zero, people continue to do what they have been doing. If the discrepancy is not zero, people change their behavior in such a way as to counteract the disturbance and reduce the discrepancy back toward zero. By changing their behavior, people change meanings in the situation. These altered meanings are perceived and again compared to the meanings in the identity standard. Thus, each identity is a control system that acts to control perceptions (of meanings relevant to their identity) by bringing them into congruency with the meanings in their identity standards, thus reducing toward zero any discrepancy or error caused by a disturbance.

This process of controlling perceptions of identity-relevant meanings to make them congruent with the meanings in the identity standard is the process of identity verification. Thus, people act to verify or confirm their identities, and in so doing, they bring about a situation in which relevant (perceived) meanings are consistent with their identity standard. The meanings in the identity standard represent goals or the way the situation is supposed to be. If the identity is a role identity, then the behavior that brings about the changes in the situational

meanings to make them consistent with the identity standard is appropriate role behavior. If the identity is a group or category based identity, the behavior which verifies the identity is the behavior that maintains group boundaries and divisions in the social structure. Thus, by verifying identities, people create and maintain the social structure in which the identities are embedded.

Note that by controlling perceived situational meanings, role players and group members are bringing about and maintaining certain conditions or states of affairs by whatever behaviors accomplish that. They are not engaging in particular behaviors except insofar as those behaviors bring about the condition of meanings that are perceived to be the way things are supposed to be. It is the outcome that is important; an outcome that is accomplished by various means in spite of various unpredictable disturbances. For this reason, the meanings in the identity standard may also be conceptualized as goals to be achieved or realized by having perceptions that match the outcomes indicated in the identity standard.

As discussed above, identities control perceived meanings to bring them into alignment with meanings held in the identity standard. Meanings, also discussed above, are responses to stimuli. Identity control theory distinguishes between two types of meanings: *symbolic* meanings and *sign* meanings (Lindesmith and Strauss, 1956). Symbolic meanings are responses to stimuli that are shared with others. These stimuli are symbols. The meaning of the symbol pen is understood and shared by persons in the same culture. When one person talks about a pen, others understand. Signs, however, are stimuli whose meanings are not necessarily shared with others, but which help us manipulate resources in the situation (Freese and Burke, 1994). Using a pen to take notes, a person feels how the pen fits into her hand and how it flows along the surface of a sheet of paper and how it makes marks with ink that are controlled to form writing. The responses that she has to the pen in its use are sign meanings. Sign meanings allow us to control resources present in the situation.

3 Resources

Resources within identity control theory are processes that sustain persons, groups, or interaction (Freese and Burke, 1994). This is a functional definition in which resources are defined by what they do rather than what they are. Resources are of two types: *actual* and *potential* (Freese and Burke, 1994). Actual resources are resources in the situation that are in use in the sense of currently sustaining persons, groups, and interaction (e.g., the pen that is writing, the chair that is supporting an individual, the idea that solves a problem). Potential resources are resources that are not being used, but have the potential for use at a future time (e.g., the pen or chair that is not in use, food in the pantry, oil in the pipeline). Sign meanings allow us to control actual resources. Symbolic meanings allow us to control potential resources through thinking, planning, and action. When an identity controls meanings relevant to the identity in the

situation, it controls both sign and symbolic meanings, and through them it controls actual and potential resources.

As described at the beginning, identities are primarily defined in terms of the named categories and positions of the general social structure. Further, the identitys position in the social structure, i.e., in a group or network, governs its access to the actual and potential resources either directly or through network ties. In this way, the resources controlled by identities are those that sustain the social structure by sustaining the groups, the roles, the individuals, and the interaction that defines these. To understand identity functioning in an empirical sense then, one must understand the location of the identity in the social structure.

4   The Bases Of Identity

ICT distinguishes between three bases of identities. These are *role identities*, what it means to be in a role such as father, *social identities*, what it means to be in a group or category such as American, and *person identities*, or what it means to be the unique biological being that one is. Identities based on each of the different bases operate in the same way, wherein people seek to verify the identity or make the relevant situational meanings (both signs and symbols) match the meanings held in the identity standard by counteracting any disturbances. Analytically, each of these bases differs in the resources that are controlled through the control of meanings. For a role identity, control of meanings results in control of resources that sustain the role and the group within which it operates. For a social identity, control is of the resources that help sustain the group and maintain its boundaries. For a person identity, control is of the resources that sustain the individual as a unique biological being. Analytically, these differences are clear, although in practice and empirically, it is often difficult to know which resources go with which since we are often all of these at once: a biological being who is a group member in a role.

People have many identities, one for each of the many persons they claim to be, roles they have, and groups and categories to which they belong. This complexity of the self with its many identities reflects the complexity of society (Stryker, 1980). In ICT, the multiple identities are arranged into a hierarchy of control systems in which some identities are higher than others in the sense that the outputs of those identities at the higher level are the standards of those identities at a lower level (Tsushima and Burke, 1999). Higher-level identities have their own perceptions, standard, and comparator just as the lower-level identities.

While the output of the comparator of the lower-level identities leads to behavior that maintains (when there is no discrepancy) or alters (when there is a discrepancy) meanings in the situation, the output of the comparator of the higher-level identities acts to alter the standards (identity meanings) for lower level identities. In this way, higher-level identities act as general principles that guide the programs of lower-level identities. Higher level identities include such

master statuses as ones gender, race, or class, and many person identities, the control systems of which are used across situations, roles, and groups. One may, for example, not be just a friend but a female friend; one may be not just an American, but a black American; one may be not just a professor, but a diligent professor. In each case, the master status of gender or race, or the person identity as diligent act to change the manner in which friend, American, or professor are played out.

5   Identity Change

The most obvious outcome of a discrepancy between the perceived identity-relevant meanings and the meanings held in the identity standard is behavior that counteracts any disturbance to the perceived meanings and quickly brings them back into alignment with the identity standard. At the same time, however, ICT recognizes the less obvious outcome that identities change: i.e., the identity standard slowly changes in the direction of the situational meanings. Both outcomes occur simultaneously, but at much different speeds. If the disturbed situational meanings are restored quickly, any change to the identity standard may not be noticed. If the discrepancy persists, however, because the person cannot change the situational meanings for one reason or another, the slowly changing identity standard will continue to move toward agreement with the situational meanings and the person will come to see themselves as consistent with the situational meanings. The discrepancy has been removed not by changing the situational meanings to be in agreement with the identity standard, but by changing the identity standard to be in agreement with the situational meanings, but this generally takes a long time and most people would leave the situation rather than endure such changes to who they are.

Nevertheless, in persons who have been prisoners of war, in persons who are brought into cults, and in persons who are abducted and kept for a long period of time with their abductors, we see the changes in the identities that are brought about. In each case, these powerless persons are unable to verify their (former) identities by changing perceived meanings in the situation. These persons with their lack of power and status are unable to change their perceptions and their identity standards slowly change to match the perceptions. This result was shown in research that examined identity verification among status unequals (Cast, Stets, and Burke, 1999). The identities of persons with less power or status came to be more in alignment with the perceptions of meanings provided by more powerful others. The reverse was not true. Of course, children have very little power and their identity standards are strongly set by their parents who have the power.

6   Emotions

In ICT, the verification process of identities is tied to emotional outcomes that help guide the process (Burke, 1991). When the discrepancy between identity relevant perceptions and the identity standard is small or decreasing, people feel good. When the discrepancy is large or increasing, people feel bad or distressed. These consequences have been shown in research by Burke and Harrod (2005) who found that persons become distressed, angry, and depressed when their spouses view of them is different (better or worse) than their self-view or identity standard. Current work in ICT examines the role of identity verification in the production of self-worth, self-efficacy and feelings of authenticity (Cast and Burke, 2002) and is developing predictions about the specific emotions that may be felt when identities are verified or not verified (Stets and Burke, 2005).

7   Future Research

Because ICT is part of a continuing research program, new developments and additions to the theory are always being made; the theory is not fixed. I mention a few areas that new research is exploring, understanding that this list is both incomplete and changing. Research is undergoing on (1) how identities change in response to external events and the other identities an individual holds, (2) how the multiple different identities an individual has relate to each other, (3) how the social context in which identities are or are not verified influences the variety of emotions felt, (4) how identity verification is related to the health and well-being of individuals, (5) how the identities of persons in interacting groups influence interaction and group processes, and (6) how ICT relates to other developing theories in social psychology such as justice theory, exchange theory, expectation states theory, and status characteristics theory. It is clear that much work remains for the future development of this theory (Burke, 2004; Stryker and Burke, 2000).

SEE ALSO: Identity Theory, Social Psychology, Self, Role-taking

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