Identities and Addiction*

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May 29, 2005

1 Introduction

My purpose this afternoon is to introduce you to what may be, for most of you, a new approach to the understanding of social behavior that is called identity control theory or ICT. This approach grows out of symbolic interactionism with its attention to meanings and symbols, but adds a concern with ones position in the social structure and a refocusing of attention from behavior to perception in order to understand the goal-oriented nature of people.

I begin by noting that from a symbolic interactionist perspective, behavior is premised on a named, classified, or categorized world (Stryker 1980). Names like American, or alcoholic, or chair, or table attach to aspects of the environment, both physical and social. They carry meaning in the form of shared behavioral expectations that grow out of social interaction. From interaction with others, one learns how to classify and name the objects one comes into contact with, and in that process also learns how one is expected to behave with reference to those objects (Stryker 1980: 53-54). These names or classes provide the foundation for our understanding of the basic symbolic character of the world. It is also clear from this perspective that the social world contains both the physical and social objects as well as our structured responses to them. It is our responses to the socially defined and named objects that gives meaning to the objects.

Many of the class terms learned in interaction are the symbols that are used to designate positions, in the social structure, that carry the shared behavioral expectations we call roles. Roles, then, are not simply constructed or created through negotiated interaction, but exist, out there, enough to be seen, reacted to, and labeled within society. We see this objectification of roles when a child says, for example, they want to become a fireman or a nurse when they grow up.

People in society are named or labeled in terms of the roles or positions they occupy within the social structure. For example, my cousin is a cop and

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she is a recovering alcoholic both name people in terms of these positions and categories. More important for my purposes, people name not only others, but also themselves with respect to these positional designations. I am a professor. I am a father. These labels, like professor, or meat packer, or alcoholic, and the expectations attached to them become internalized and become part of our self. People are thus intimately tied to or become a part of the social structure. People and relationships, like society and the individual, are the collective and distributive aspects of the same thing (Cooley 1902: 2). These self labels thus define us in terms of positions in society, and these positions in society are relational in the sense that they tie individuals together. For example, I am a father and through this I am tied to my daughters; I am a professor and through that I am tied to colleagues and students. This is reflective of William James (1890) notion that we have as many selves as we have relationships to others.

Professor, student, mason, truck driver, husband, Canadian, African-American, author, and recovering alcoholic are all examples of named positions within the social structure. Occupants of these positions name themselves and share an understanding of what it means to be in one or more of those positions. The meanings tell what one expects of oneself as well as what others expect of one who is in such a position. These are identities and they are at the core of identity theory which examines the link between identities and behavior.

The examples of identities mentioned above illustrate two of the three bases for identities: Roles are one basis yielding role identities such as truck driver based on positions in the social structure. Groups or social categories are another basis yielding social identities such as Canadian or recovering alcoholic that are based on the group or classes recognized in the social structure. There is a third type of identity recognized in identity theory which is call a person identity. A person identity is a set of attributes/meanings that define who one is as an individual, across groups, across roles, across situations. For example, being a moral person, or being an aggressive person. What distinguishes such characteristics as identities rather than as traits is that, as with all identities, as we shall see, the characteristic is protected and defended against change or misattribution. While these person identities apply as individuating characteristics of persons, they are still social in that the concepts, categories, and labels are part of the culture in which the individual exists. The meanings of such characterizations are shared and people hold expectations for those who have such characteristics, including themselves.

For all of these different identities then, person, role, and social, the essence of the identity is in the meanings that are held for the self (by the self and others) that serve as standards for conduct. A central argument is that individuals are motivated to formulate plans and achieve levels of performance or activity that reinforce, support, confirm, and protect their identities. Note that this is a two-way process. I am saying that the self operates in choosing behaviors and that the behaviors reinforce and support the self. The mutual link between identities and behaviors occurs through their having a common underlying frame of reference. The frame of reference one uses to assess his or her identity in a situation is the same frame of reference used to assess his or

her own behavior in that situation. This common frame of reference lies in the meaning of the identity and the meaning of the performance. A link between identities and behavior exists to the extent that the meanings of each are measured along the same dimensions. People choose behaviors that share meanings with their identities. They avoid behaviors that have oppositional meanings to their identities. To be a male, for example, one chooses behaviors that have masculine meanings and avoid behaviors that have feminine meanings.

Identities are the sets of meanings people hold for themselves. They define what it means to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members. These meanings constitute what is called an identity standard.
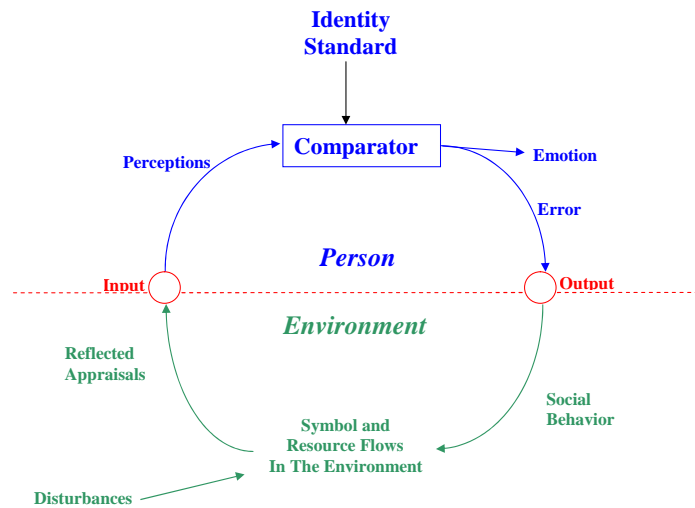

Figure 1: Basic Identity Model

In addition to the identity standard that defines what it means to be the identity in question, each identity has four other components. These are shown in Figure 1. First is the perception of self-relevant meanings in the situation, that is, perceptions of how I am coming across to myself and others in the situation. Second is a mechanism called the comparator that compares the situationally meaningful perceptions with the meanings in the identity standard. Third is an error function which is the output of the comparator and which measures the difference or discrepancy between the perceptions and the identity standard. Fourth is the meaningful behavior in the situation, which behavior is a function of the error. In addition to meaningful behavior, the error or discrepancy leads to emotional responses. People feel distressed and bad when the discrepancy is increasing or large, and people feel relieved and good when the discrepancy is decreasing or small.

Thus, the identity standard serves as a reference with which persons compare their perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the interactive situation. When

the perceptions match the meanings in the standard (that is, there is no error), people are doing just fine. Their identities are being confirmed or verified, and they will continue to act as they are; no changes are required. When, however, there is a disturbance that changes the interactive situation and thus the perceived situational meanings so that they no longer match the standards (that is, the error function is no longer zero), people will feel bad and change their behavior in order to counteract the disturbance and restore the match in meanings between perceptions and standard this is the self-verification process, and it lies at the heart of identity control theory (ICT). Of course, the biggest source of disturbances to the meanings we are controlling is other people trying to verify their own identities.

I began with the idea that the meanings of peoples behavior should match that of their identity standard. This elaboration of that premise says that people do more than produce behaviors that have the same meanings as their identity; more is going on than, for example, a male acting in a masculine manner. ICT states that people are active agents who control the level of meaning in the situation in an active manner that cannot be predicted in advance. To continue our example, if the person has an identity as a male measuring, say, 6 on some masculinity scale, then the person desires to act with behaviors that also measure 6 in masculinity. It is possible that the person knows exactly how to do this, but more likely the person will act in a masculine way at the same time perceiving what they are doing, and how others react to what they are doing and, on the basis of those perceptions, will assess whether the behavior is a 5, a 6, a 7 (or whatever). If the assessment is that the behavior is more like a 5, they will feel distress and increase the degree of masculinity in their performance. If the assessment is that the behavior is more like a 7, they will feel distress and decrease the degree of masculinity in their performance. And, if it is by chance a 6 they will feel good and continue to act as they are, but always with a watchful eye to continue to maintain the level at a 6 in spite of any disturbing influences of others in the situation. Notice that the person is controlling his perceptions of the level of self-relevant masculine meaning in the situation, not his behavior. His actions are whatever it takes to achieve a 6 in masculinity to be consistent with his gender identity.

Generally, neither we, nor others, know in advance what exact behavior will bring about this state of a match between the perceptions one has of self-relevant meanings in the situation and the meanings defining the self in the identity standard. Since the disturbances are not predictable, the behaviors that counteract them cannot be known in advance. In light of this, it seems to make little sense to talk about rational action or planned behavior. Instead, we need to talk about the goal states that our behavior accomplishes in spite of disturbances, disruptions, interruptions, accidents, and the contrivances of others.

Driving to work, for example, is not a particular set of actions, but a series of accomplishments of intermediate goals. I get in the car (in spite of the fact that I have to move a bicycle out of the way first), I start the car (in spite of the fact that the steering wheel lock initially prevented me from turning

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the key), I drive out of the cul-de-sac (in spite of a construction firms trucks blocking the street as they pour cement for a neighbors patio), and so on. If we think of these simply as behaviors in which we engage, we neglect the important fact that driving to work, for example, is accomplished variously in spite of unpredictable disturbances such as closed roads, excessive traffic, or high winds and dust storms. We cannot know in advance the exact behaviors that will accomplish the goal. As in the TOTE model of Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1965), we can only perceive our progress and perceive when the goal is accomplished.

For this reason, we need to focus on the goals people have and how they are set or changed. We need to ask not How do people accomplish some goal? because the answer is, however they can. We need to ask What goals are people trying to accomplish? The focus needs to be on the goals, not on the means. There are always a variety of means to accomplish some goal, and if one doesnt work, we try another. Within ICT, these goals are the meanings and expectations that are held in the identity standard. These meanings constitute the state of affairs that we strive to obtain, and maintain, as persons, as role occupants, and as group members. We know that we have accomplished the goals when we make our perceptions match the standards in whatever manner we can and in spite of situational disturbances to our performance.

2 Ties To The Social Structure

2.1 Cultural Naming

ICT is very individualistic in its formulation: Individual actions to change individual perceptions to match individual standards. What makes ICT sociological is that identities are tied to positions in the social structure, which positions are defined by our culture. Culture makes available the various roles, groups, and categories that make up the social structure. Culture makes available the names of the roles, groups, and categories, and culture makes available the expectations and meanings related to the roles, groups, and categories. People, as occupants of these positions, apply to themselves (as well as to others) these names as well as the meanings and expectations associated with them, as identities. These meanings (as identity standards) define who we are, as well as constitute the goals that someone located in a particular position obtains and maintains through the mechanism of identity verification, that is, matching perceived self-relevant meanings in the situation to identity standard meanings. We therefore are a part of the social structure that is named in the cultural categories I described earlier.

2.2 Meaning

To discuss the link between identity and social structure further, we must examine the thing that is controlled by identities that is, self-relevant meanings.

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Meaning, as you may have gathered by now, is at the core of both ICT and the symbolic interaction framework out of which it has grown. The content of an identity, within the context of ICT, is a set of meanings held by an individual that constitutes as I said before what it means to be who one is. Indeed, the beginning of my work in the area of identities was centered on the measurement of self-meaning and the incorporation of such measurement into an empirical research program (Burke 1980; Burke and Reitzes 1981; Burke and Tully 1977).

What an object or process means is given in our response to that object or process. Drawing on the work of Osgood and his colleagues (1957), ICT understands these responses to be bipolar in nature, each along a relevant dimension such as good and bad, dominant and submissive, or party-going and studious. It needs to be emphasized, however, that because our responses are not just cognitive, meaning is not just cognitive; it is also affective. And, future research must strive to more fully capture what it means to be who one is by expanding the areas of measured meaning to include both the cognitive and the more affective or emotional dimensions of meanings.

While some of the dimensions of meaning along which we respond may be wired into us as biological organisms, most are learned through shared experience, observation, and instruction. We learn the categories, as well as the meanings and expectations associated with those categories, from others around us and the culture in which we are embedded (Stryker 1980). To this extent, the meanings are shared and we can talk about symbolic meaning. Meanings are the responses to perceptions and perceptions are tuned to the dimensions of meaning made available in our culture to all the roles, positions, and groups that exist within it. Meanings are therefore tied to the social structure and to the culture within which identities are embedded. The self-relevant meanings held in the identity standard are the ones made available by the culture to define the social structure itself and, at the same time, our position within it.

Further, while there are some dominant dimensions of meaning that exist across situations and even across cultures such as evaluation, potency, and activity, (Osgood, May William, and Miron 1975) studies of particular identities such as the student identity (Reitzes and Burke 1980), gender identity (Burke and Cast 1997; Burke and Tully 1977), old age identity (Mutran and Burke 1979a; Mutran and Burke 1979b), the spouse identity (Burke and Stets 1999), and others have confirmed that relevant dimensions of meaning are quite varied across different roles. And, because it is the specific meanings, within the interactive context, that persons control, it is these specific meanings that must be measured to understand the connection between identity and behavior (Burke and Reitzes 1981).

2.3 Resources

There is another way in which identities are tied to social structure that can more clearly be seen when we take a different view of the nature of social structure. This other view is more ecologically oriented and focuses on the flow, transformation, and use of resources. This view suggests that social structure

itself may be conceived as the human organization of resource flows and transformations (Freese 1988).

We are familiar with the idea that people in some positions in the social structure have more access to resources, or access to different resources, than persons located in other positions. This is part of our view of the stratification system. However, what is not always recognized is that this is the nature of the social system: the allocation of rights and responsibilities for controlling resources. From this view, to repeat myself, social structure is the human organization of resource flows and transformations; social structure is the control of resources, whether it is oil in pipelines, information and programs in computers, the love and commitment one feels for that special person, or the next drink or fix for the addict.

A key idea that allowed ICT to go beyond the traditional limits of symbolic interactions narrow focus on symbolic meanings was the idea that another class of meanings, called signs, or sign meanings, could pertained to resources; controlling sign meanings results in the control of resources. The concept of signs is distinct from that of symbols. Symbolic meanings are shared; signed meanings are not shared and are individually perceived. Signs allow us to control active resources in the situation. The concept of resources that Freese and I (1994) developed was, however, not the usual notion of resources as consumable, valued, scarce commodities. Rather, we took the view, briefly, that resources are anything that functions to sustain persons, groups, or interaction, whether or not they are socially valued, or scarce, or even an entity. We included as resources not only food, air, social support, and information, for example, but also such abstract processes as conditions of sequencing, or of structuring, or of opportunity if those function to sustain us. The focus of this concept of resources is on the conditions and processes that sustain persons and interactions.

We also distinguished between active and potential resources (Freese and Burke 1994). Active resources are active in the sense of currently supporting persons, groups, or interaction in the immediate situation, for example, chairs in which to sit, light to see, air to breath, and comfort from others to feel. Potential resources, on the other hand, are resources that are not functioning as active resources. Potential resources may not be present in the situation, or may not be in the form or position to function as active resources providing current support: the car that is in the driveway, the clothes that are in the closet, the bottle that is in the drawer, and the hugs we are not receiving at the moment.

To active resources we tied the notion of signs and to potential resources we tied the idea of symbols (Freese and Burke 1994). Signs are a more general class than symbols, the latter being restricted to those signs that have shared, conventional meanings. Non-symbolic signs provide a direct experience of the situation that is not necessarily shared (Lindesmith and Strauss 1956).

By responding to and controlling sign meanings, we control active resources in the situation. By responding to and controlling symbolic meanings, however, we control potential resources that may become active in some future situation. Symbols thus allow planning, coordination, and communication about things not present in the immediate situation. Identity control theory tells us that

there are reference levels for both sign and symbolic meanings in our identity standards. It is our actions and behaviors that control these perceived meanings and through them the resources, both active and potential, that sustain us. And, we do this in the context of the positions in the social structure to which our identities are tied. Again, by verifying our identities, we obtain and maintain the goals that, through the distribution of resources, sustain ourselves and the social structure.

This augmentation of ICT to tie meaning to resources also helps us get beyond the problem of a theory of value (or utilitarian value). People act to verify identities. This means that signs and symbols are brought to configurations provided by identity standards. In this manner, resources are brought to levels set in the identity standards. The utility of a resource is the difference between the perceived level of the resource (what we have) and the level set in the standard (what we need). Negative utility is simply a perceived level of a resource in the situation that is greater than the level set in the standard. The general rule is that people simply attempt to counteract disturbances to their self-relevant perceptions and bring them into alignment with their identity standard; they act to increase perceptions that are too low and decrease perceptions that are too high. If the perception is at the appropriate level, no further action is necessary.

Viewing resources in this manner gives some additional insight because many of the goals we obtain involve controlling both the active and potential resources that sustain us. The manipulation of actual and potential resources to achieve that sustenance is the key. People act to verify their identities, and in so doing, against distractions and disruptions, they enact the processes that define the social system.

3   Identities And Addiction

At this point, I am sure all of you who are still awake are saying, I thought this was about identity and addiction. I have heard about identity, but where is addiction? Well, I know a lot about identity, I know much less about addiction. But, lets take this framework and see what kinds of questions we might raise using it.

From what we have so far, we know that identity control theory deals with the way in which persons act to control perceptions of symbols and resources to bring them into alignment with levels set in their identity standards. This is a perceptual control theory. People control their perceptions, not their behaviors. They may choose any behavior as long as it achieves the goals of matching perceptions to standards. This also holds for the behaviors involved in alcohol and drug use as well. Within the context of ICT, these behaviors around drug and alcohol use are not the result of some cause. Rather, they are the cause of some result, and that result is the control of perceptions.

Putting it another way, behavior is not because of something (an output), behavior occurs in order to obtain some perception and bring it into alignment with a standard. The laboratory rat does not press the handle because of the

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reinforcing food pellet that results, the rat presses the handle in order to get the food pellet and it wont do this if it is not hungry. The rat is likely controlling for the perceived level of blood sugar (felt as hunger), having some standard for what that level should be. The rat can be seen as controlling perceptions of blood sugar by doing what it can to control those perceptions and bring them into alignment with a standard: pressing the handle and eating the food pellet. Note that this perspective turns behaviorism upside-down. Reinforcement from a behavioristic perspective corresponds to the process of identity verification within ICT. Punishment is the process of moving perceptions out of alignment with identity standards, creating a discrepancy between perceptions and standard.

Similarly, the behavior of persons is conceptualized as occurring in order to bring perceptions into alignment with standards; in order to verify identities. People, however, are much more complicated than laboratory rats. We have a large symbol system and a level of complexity of our cognitive processes that apparently rats do not. People have multiple identities, and therefore multiple standards for the many meanings whose perceptions we need to control. For example, with eating, people are often controlling not only perceptions of blood sugar levels (where a discrepancy between actual level and the standard is felt as hunger), but levels of intimacy, levels of connection and separation, levels of information flow, and many others. Eating accomplishes all of these outcomes as it is a social occasion in which people bond, get caught up with one another, return to families or friends and separate themselves from work, or share information over a working lunch. We learn to economize our behavior and control many perceptions with a few behaviors, but in each case, we are bringing self-relevant meanings in the situation into alignment with the levels set in our identity standards for what it means to be a family member, a worker, a friend, or a unique biological person.

Lets look at three questions as they might be approached from the point of view of ICT: what makes a person become addicted? What keeps them addicted? What makes them stop? One caveat: we are only looking at the social psychological factors that identity control theory addresses. It is certainly recognized that there are other biological, psychological, and social conditions that also play a role.

If we examine what transpires when an adolescent begins to smoke, or drink, or use other substances from the point of view of ICT, we must look at the perceptions that are being controlled by the activity; and they may not be the same for each person. Nor are the levels of the meanings being controlled necessarily the same for each person. For example, if a particular social identity is involved, one which concerns being part of the in-crowd, then the perceived meanings that need to be controlled are those that define a person as part of the in-group and separates them from being part of the out-group. Such meanings may vary from group to group. And, the level of the meanings for each person may vary, some wanting to be in the heart of things, some wanting to be in but not in the center of the group. Some persons may want to be seen as daring,

others may want to be seen as like everyone else, and still others may simply want to be seen as not in the out-group.

Again, it is the society and culture we live in that provides the dimensions that become meaningful to any person or group. Communication between individuals is possible because of the shared symbolic meanings. What some behavior means is not entirely up to the individual, the individual makes using of behaviors that portray particular meanings within a local context and they engage in behaviors that shift those meanings to bring them into alignment with identity standards. I act in a way that shows toughness within the culture. Yet if people respond to my displays as if I am rather wimpy, I alter my behaviors until I get the reaction from others that confirms my toughness. And, in this way I learn how to control toughness.

The behaviors I choose to demonstrate my toughness are provided by the culture in which I exist. They must be interpreted by others in the same way. Taking up boxing, soldiering, NASCAR racing, killing someone in a rival gang, or just letting a cigarette dangle from my lip may each show toughness to some and merely stupidity to others. Meanings are often local, leaned and used in the context in which we interact with others. Substance use behaviors are enacted in order to manage meanings in some local situation. Becoming a user one learns what meanings to control and what behaviors control those meanings.

This is fully consistent with the observations of Becker (1953: 235) on becoming a marijuana user: An individual will be able to use marihuana for pleasure only when he (1) learns to smoke it in a way that will produce real effects; (2) learns to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use; and (3) learns to enjoy the sensations he perceives. I would add that there are other meanings that are also being controlled having to do with ones relationships with others, especially at the very beginning of the process.

Addiction is both biological and social. Withdrawal, as Lindesmith and Strauss (1956) noted years ago, is biological, but its interpretation and meaning are social. And, interpretations and meanings of withdrawal are all important for understanding the reactions of people, both the user and others, to it. This corresponds with Beckers (1953) finding that people have to learn what being high is with respect to marijuana.

This relates to some research by Jay Hull and his associates that helps to explain continued alcohol use (Hull 1981; Hull and Reilly 1983). Remember, in ICT people act to bring their self-relevant perceptions into alignment with their identity standards, and failure to do so results in distress and depression. Hull and his associates find that one of the effects of alcohol is to reduce the level of perception of self-relevant information in the situation. Without perceptions there can be no discrepancy and no control of perceptions and with no discrepancy there cannot be the level of distress that such discrepancy creates. This phenomenon would have to be learned experientially. But it means that alcohol can be used to reduce the distress of discrepancy when it is not possible to successfully alter meanings in the situation to bring about self-verification. If you cant change the meanings, then it is better not to perceive them in the first place and this could result in the continued use of alcohol, especially for persons

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located in the social structure in positions that make it difficult for them to verify their identities because of the lack of resources.

However, it is also important to recognize that it is not just the meanings themselves that are important. It is the relationship between these meanings and the meanings that are held in the identity standards of persons. The meanings that come from others labels and behavior toward a user (in controlling their own perceptions) are input by the user and compared to the users identity standard. It is the relationship of these meanings that is important how do the perceptions compare to the standard?

I am reminded of a study we did examining the patterns of behavior of husbands and wives while interacting to solve issues they had agreed were problems they faced (Stets and Burke 1996). We thought that the approaches of husbands and wives would differ along gendered lines, that men would be more aggressive and negative than women in their problem-solving styles because that is consistent with meanings of masculinity and femininity in our culture. We found the differences in negativity and aggressiveness between husbands and wives, but we found that it was the women who were more negative and aggressive. How to explain this result? Being good sociologists who can interpret almost any finding, we thought that perhaps the wives were behaving in a more aggressive and negative way in response to being treated as if they did not matter and had no power or worth. Of course this assumes that the identity standards of the women contained meanings suggesting that they did matter, that they had (or should have) power and worthiness. If someone says you are not very powerful and you think you are, you want to show just how powerful you are. Signs of power exist in aggressiveness and negativity in interaction.

To test this new hypothesis, we had a measure of attitudes toward women along traditionalnon tradition lines, and we found that the women who were most assertive and negative were precisely those whose husbands had the most traditional, non-egalitarian attitudes toward women and were likely behaving toward their wives in ways consistent their attitudes. When these attitudes were controlled, we found the differences between men and women in aggressive and negative behavior disappeared, suggesting that our hypothesis was correct. The women were apparently behaving in this more masculine/powerful way in order to counteract a disturbance to their self-views as equal persons of worth. The meanings of the behaviors of the women were not to be read in terms of masculinity and femininity, but in terms of avowing power and value; an attempt to counteract what they perceived as a disturbance to their situated self-views.

In a similar fashion, the behaviors of a user may not be just showing who they are, but may be counteracting disturbances to their situated self-views. For example, the development of a drug culture was a strong function of the suppression of the drug trade that began in 1915 and the consequent behaviors of users to counteract that disturbance. Prior to that, American drug addicts were generally scattered throughout respectable society and did not form a deviant subsociety (Lindesmith and Strauss 1956). The deviant subculture came about later as users changed their behavior and worked to control their supplies (resources) through control their perceptions. As societys attitudes changed,

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users changed their behavior much as the wives changed their behavior to protect their self-images. Similar observations could be made about the drug war on marijuana instigated by Harry J. Anslinger in the 1930s. It is thus clearly not just the meanings perceived by the user that gets them started into the addiction and sustains their continued dependence, it is the meanings that are created by others and to which the user reacts that also play a strong role.

What we see then from the point of view of identity control theory is that people engage in a variety of behaviors involving and related to drug use, all of which are designed to control perceptions of meanings that are relevant primarily to the person and social identities that the users hold. Specifically, to verify identities they have by drawing on the cultural meanings relevant to their identities. People portray certain images, not for the sake of the image itself, but for the meanings created by the image to be cool, or tough, or attention getting, to be with it, or whatever to be who one is. It is not the particular drug or substance, but the meanings that are important. People try alternative ways to see what works in order to achieve the fixed goals of verifying their identities.

What then does identity control theory have to say about why people may leave their drug dependency? This is much more speculative, but it has to do with identity change, and this is a topic that is only beginning to be studied. Identity change has to do with changes in the meanings that are held in the identity standard. Although we did not mention it at the time in Figure 1, such changes are the result of a higher-order perceptual control system as illustrated in Figure 2.

The output of that higher-order system is the standard of the lover-level system. Identity change then comes about when the higher level system changes its output (the identity standard) in order to achieve perceptual congruity with the higher level standard. Verification of a higher level identity can change the lower level identity.

For example finding religion may operate as a higher-level identity that makes continued substance abuse be disconfirming for that higher-level religious identity. As a result the lower level identity will change. It is also possible for two identities that are at the same level have conflict wherein the verification of one identity acts as a disturbance for the verification of the other identity. This can be resolved by a higher-level control system changing the standards of both conflicting identities so that they are no longer in conflict, perhaps changing more the identity that is less salient or less important. If substance use interferes with a job or with family life, and either of those latter two identities is very important, substance use becomes a disturbance for the family or job identities and the standards governing substance use may be achieved with alternative behaviors that do not act as disturbances. Similarly, AA may act both as a higher-level identity, like religion, and as an identity at the same level as an alcoholic identity to help change identity meanings and find alternative ways to control other important meanings than the continued use of alcohol. Again, identity control theory suggests that it is the control of self-relevant meanings that is important for the initiation, continuation, and termination of addictive
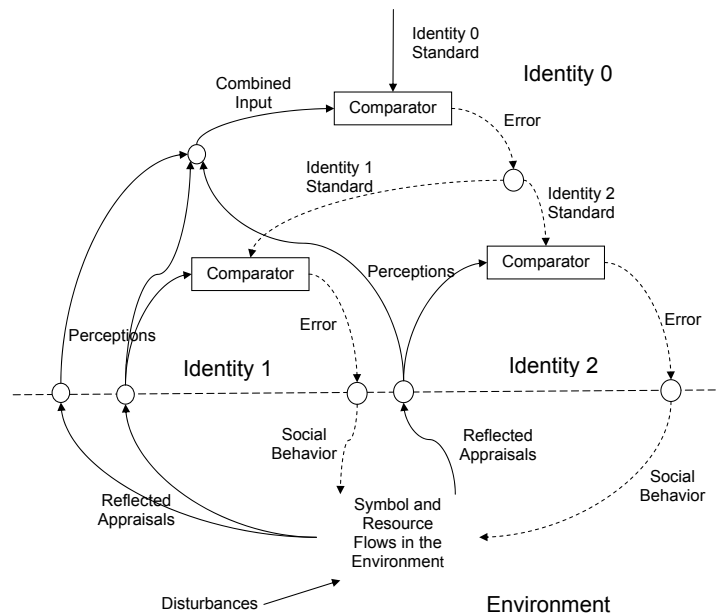
Figure 2: Identity Model Showing Two Levels and Three Identities

behaviors. The investigation of identity control processes may shed additional light on an important social problem from a social psychological point of view.

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