

Identity (Social)

According to identity theory, identities define who a person is in terms of the groups or categories to which they belong (social identities), the roles they occupy (role identities), and the personal characteristics they claim (person identities). For example, an individual's social identity as an American or an Hispanic is what it *means* to him or her to be an American or an Hispanic; an individual's role identity as a truck driver or a student is what it *means* to that individual to be a truck driver or a student; a individual's person identity as a dominant person or a moral person is what it *means* to that individual to be dominant or moral. The focus on meaning comes from identity theory's origins in symbolic interactionism. Social, person, and role are three different bases for identities, though each functions in the same way. I will talk more about these bases later.

The meanings of identities are derived from the culture which is shared among persons so that the understanding of the meanings is shared and communicated. People act to create and maintain meanings in interaction with others that identify and reflect who they are. They do this through their words, their actions, their dress, and appearance. Truck drivers act and dress like truck drivers. They have and maintain the tools, equipment, licenses, skills and language that are necessary to be truck drivers. In this way they identify themselves as truck drivers and others can identify them as truck drivers and interact appropriately with them, whether those others are other truck drivers, dispatchers, truck stop personnel, or loaders. In addition to displaying their identities, people also protect and maintain their identities (the identity-verification process) when the meanings in the situation are changed by circumstances or others verifying their own identities.

Identity components

To understand the identity-verification process, I first outline the component parts of an identity, which parts are the same for role, person, and social identities. The first part is the **identity standard** which is the set of meanings defining the identity. These are the meanings that the person displays and maintains while in the identity. Second are the meanings of the **output** or **behaviors** enacted in the situation. In identity theory, it is not the behavior as such that matters, but how that behavior is interpreted; what it means. People act to reproduce in the situation the meanings held in the identity standard. The third part is the **perceptual input** of identity relevant meanings from the situation. People perceive how they are coming across to others, either directly (direct appraisals) or indirectly through what are called reflected appraisals. Reflected appraisals are what each person thinks others think of them. For example, if I act in such a way to make myself understood as a dominant person, but the reaction of others indicates they think I am meek (I think they see me as meek – the reflected appraisal), then I am not getting my message across and I will act in an even more dominant manner.

The fourth part is the **comparator**, which functions to compare the perceived meanings with the identity standard meanings. This comparison is a simple difference. When the difference is zero, the person perceives that the meanings she is portraying in the situation match those held in her identity standard. When they match, her identity is being verified. Others see her the way she sees herself. According to identity theory, people control their perceptions of identity relevant meanings to have them match the meanings in their identity standard. They allow their behavior to vary in order to keep the perceived meanings constant, matching the identity standard that defines them.

Verification process

In identity theory, people are motivated to verify their identities – to make sure the meanings in the situation reflect the meanings held in the identity standard. One could view this as a goal, to make the situational meanings match the identity standard meanings. This is true for all identity bases: social identities based in group or category memberships, role identities based on the roles one occupies, and person identities that make one a unique individual. When verification does not occur for any of these identities, when the reflected appraisals do not match the identity standard, there are several outcomes. First, there is a negative emotional response to non-verification. The strength of the negative emotion is a function of the squared amount of difference between the reflected appraisal meanings and the identity standard meanings. When a person has a certain level of dominance as an important meaning in their person identity standard, they become upset if others see them either as more dominant or as less dominant than defined in the identity standard.

At the same time a person is feeling an emotional response, the person also begins to act in ways that change the displayed meanings in the interaction situation. The behavior is a function of the plain (not squared) difference between the reflected appraisal meanings and the identity standard meanings. If a person is seen, for example, as less dominant than the identity standard, that person will increase the dominance meanings in their behavior. The person may act gruffer, more abrupt, more commanding, more forceful, or some combination of these or other behaviors that convey the appropriate meanings to impress upon others who one is. By perceiving others reactions that convey impressions, reflected appraisals come to match the identity standard. Similarly, if the person is seen as aggressive and authoritarian, that is more dominant than

defined in the identity standard, and the person will act in ways that convey less dominance until the reflected appraisals are brought into agreement with the identity standard.

In addition to the immediate emotional response and the adjusted behavior to achieve identity verification, there is a longer term consequence of maintaining or not maintaining verification over time. This longer term effect influences the self-esteem of the person. A person who continues to have difficulty verifying an identity, especially an important identity, will lose self-esteem. Being able to achieve verification of important identities over time will increase feelings of self-esteem. In this way, self-esteem is earned or lost by one's achievements with respect to identity verification. Self-esteem cannot be given to a person; rather it is earned by a person in their own mind by their own successes or failures at verification. Identity theory sees self-esteem as made up of three parts or bases: self-worth or feeling of value, self-efficacy or feeling competent and able to accomplish things, and authenticity or feeling you can be your true self.

Identity bases

There are three different bases for the identities that persons have. Social identities are based on group or category membership, role identities are based on the roles a person occupies within a group or organization, and person identities denote the meanings each person claims as defining and describing him or herself as a distinct person. While identities from each basis have the same component parts and each operates in the same manner for verification, they differ in the nature of the meanings they contain and the consequences of verification or non-verification.

Social identities

The meanings in a social identity define a person to be similar to others in their group or category, and to be different from persons in other contrasting groups or categories. All the

persons in a fraternity, for example, define themselves in terms of upholding the principles of the fraternity and being different than other fraternities, perhaps emphasizing academics over sports. By verifying this social identity, persons help maintain the principles and distinctions of the fraternity, and they maintain the distinctions and separations from other fraternities. By being like others, they are accepted by others in the fraternity for who they are; they belong and their self-worth, one of the bases of self-esteem, is maintained or enhanced.

Role identities

The meanings in a role identity do not make persons like others with whom they interact (as in the case of social identities), but make them complementary to role partners, that is persons occupying counter-roles. The role of student is complementary to the counter-role of professor. The role of daughter is complementary to mother. The role of fraternity president is complementary to the counter-roles of the other officers in the fraternity. Verifying a role identity means carrying out the expectations and standards of the role, and this in turn allows the occupants of counter-roles to carry out their duties and obligations – that is, verify their role identities. Verification of a role identity is an accomplishment and as a consequence leads to an increase or maintenance of feelings of self-efficacy or competence, the second basis of self-esteem.

Person identities

The meanings in a person identity are those that make him or her a unique individual. These meanings, like dominance or sincerity or morality, are always with the person, in all situations, in all groups, and in all roles. In that way these meanings are very central or core to the person and verification of these meanings allows the person to be who they truly are as an individual.

Verification of a person identity leads to an increase or maintenance of feelings of authenticity, the third basis of self-esteem.

Mutual verification

Because identity verification takes effort to maintain meanings in the face of disturbances or events in the situation that change meanings away from the identity standard, it is advantageous to interact with others who, in being themselves, allow us to be ourselves. When husbands and wives, for example, verify their partner's identity in the process of verifying their own identity, we have a situation of mutual verification; they are supporting each other's identity meanings. Mutual verification has been found to raise the self-esteem of the partners, increase their love and trust, and strengthen their bonds as a couple or group. They become a "we" rather than two "I"s. Mutual non-verification, on the other hand has been found to lead to separation and divorce.

Identity and society

Because society is made up of groups and organizations with their roles and divisions of labor, as well as categories of persons who may or may not be granted access to these groups, roles, and organizations, it is clear that identity verification by maintaining the categories, groups, roles, and organizations also maintains society. This is the link between individuals and society. Individuals hold identities that link them to positions in society (roles and groups) that are defined by the shared culture. Because these identities are self-defining, they are enacted and protected. It is who we are. But, by enacting and protecting identities, people enact the roles, maintain the groups, and keep the divisions and separations between social categories. It is clearly a circular process. Societies and cultures define the roles, groups, and categories. Individuals take these roles, groups, categories, and organizations on as identities and reproduce

the meanings that define themselves, their roles, their groups and organizations, that is, their society. In the process they feel good and gain self-esteem.

However, this is not always possible. Sometimes (perhaps often) people have trouble verifying their identities because others who are more powerful maintain meanings in situations that do not fit the identity standard. This, of course, leads to negative emotions, and over time an erosion in self-esteem. Conflict can arise as people compete for particular meanings in the interaction that fit with their identities. People may leave situations and others that do not verify their identities, they may abandon identities that are not verified, and identities may change over time so that they fit the meanings being provided by more powerful persons. Indeed, according to identity theory, all of these things happen. Identity theory also tells us some of the conditions under which these alone or in combination happen.

Understanding social, role, and person identities goes a long way to understanding persons, interaction and society.

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See also Group Identity, Self (Social Self), Symbolic Interactionism, Self, Philosophical Theories of, Emotions

(Burke & Harrod, 2005; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000, 2003; Stryker & Burke, 2000)

Additional readings

- Burke, P. J., & Harrod, M. M. (2005). Too Much of a Good Thing? *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 68, 359-374.
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