

## Social comparison in identity theory

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The study of social comparison has its roots in Festinger's ideas. His original informal social communication theory focused on how the group influenced an individual's opinions and abilities (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). Individuals adopted a group's standards by comparing their own opinions and abilities with the consensus in the group and modifying their views so that they were in accordance with the group's norms. His social comparison theory that followed did not focus on the power of the group as much as the agency of the individual; it emphasized individuals comparing themselves to others in order to seek information about the world and their place in it (Festinger, 1954). Since this seminal work, a large body of research has emerged showing the contingent and multifaceted nature of the social comparison process (Guimond, 2006; Suls & Wheeler, 2000).

Research on social comparison has advanced from Festinger's (1954) emphasis on people comparing their *opinions and abilities* to those of others, to comparing one's *emotions* to others (Schachter & Singer, 1962), to the idea that social comparison is so commonplace that it involves individuals comparing any of their characteristics to those of others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Festinger maintained that people were most likely to engage in comparisons with similar others and thus employ lateral comparisons to get an accurate evaluation of one's opinions and abilities. This was the self-evaluation motive. However, he also recognized that individuals desire to improve themselves, which leads them to compare upward with others who are thought to be better off than they are. Years later, researchers began investigating the self-enhancement motive or the desire to feel good about oneself. What facilitated a positive self-image was engaging in the downward comparison process, or individuals comparing themselves to those who were worse-off than themselves (Wills, 1981). Yet continued research showed that these generalizations did not always hold.

The upward comparison process was not always uplifting and inspiring to individuals, and the downward comparison process did not always make one feel better. It depended on whether the individuals doing the comparison saw their targets as similar or different from them (Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakoff, 1990). Although similarity to the target can produce identification and assimilation, dissimilarity to the target can lead to a contrast effect. Assimilation with superior targets can lead to positive feelings such as optimism, whereas a contrast to upward targets can produce negative feelings such as depression (Smith, 2000). Additionally, whereas assimilation with inferior targets may induce fear that one could experience a similar plight, a contrast to inferior targets may induce pride that another's plight will never happen to one (Smith, 2000).

Although characteristics of the target were important in the social comparison process, it turned out that characteristics of the individuals making the comparison also were important. Persons who were more likely to engage in the comparison process were those who had a tendency to have a more chronically activated self (they frequently thought about their self-view), who were empathic toward others, and who had a certain degree of negative affectivity and uncertain self-view (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Compared to those with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem make more downward comparisons, and compared to those with a stable self-esteem, those with an unstable self-esteem compare upward (Wheeler, 2000).

Although self-processes are important in activating the social comparison process, we maintain that identity processes are also important. In this chapter, we attempt to show how the social comparison process extends to the issue of maintaining one's identity. We rely on identity theory, an important theory in sociological social psychology for the last 30 years, to guide our argument (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980/2002; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Like the social comparison theory, identity theory begins with the view that individuals are active agents. However, in identity theory, instead of individuals comparing themselves to others to see how they stand relative to others in the world, they compare themselves to others to confirm or verify their existing identities.

Festinger maintained that an important way in which individuals are active agents is through comparing themselves with others on things that mattered to them, such as their opinions and abilities. In identity theory, others are important because they provide individuals with feedback that is consistent (thus verifying) or inconsistent (non-verifying) with how individuals see themselves given their identities. In this way, the comparison process is integral to the identity process in that persons assess the degree to

which others' views of them match their own self-views. These and other ideas in identity theory that are linked to the comparison process are highlighted in this chapter.

Given that some may be more familiar with social identity theory in psychology than with identity theory in sociology, we initially point out several distinctions between the two theories as they relate to the social comparison process. Social identity theory is premised on the idea that in-group members make comparisons between themselves and out-group members; thus, the comparison process is integral to intergroup relations (Hogg, 2000). Self-categorization theory – an extension of social identity theory – focuses on how a person's self-concept relates to the in-group prototype. Assimilating the self with the in-group prototype leads to uncertainty reduction. This is consistent with Festinger's (1954) idea that knowing that one is correct (reducing uncertainty) is an important motive underlying social comparison.

Identity theory maintains Festinger's original focus on individuals comparing themselves with other individuals rather than with groups. In identity theory, what is crucial is the verification of individuals' person, role, and group identities. As we will see, social comparison occurs at the individual, role, and group levels to make identity verification possible. The verification of group identities comes closest to the concerns of social identity theorists, but identity theory is broader in scope because it includes an analysis of person and role identities as well.

For the remainder of this chapter, we begin with a discussion of identity theory in more detail: defining identity and reviewing the major components of the identity process. We next discuss how the social comparison process is intrinsic to the theory. We then review the three different bases of identities – person, role, and social – and show how the social comparison process is slightly different for each identity but nonetheless equally important in the verification of person, role, and social identities. Finally, we discuss how identity verification provides integrative and communal functions in society.

## IDENTITY THEORY

### Defining an Identity

Within identity theory, an identity is the set of *meanings* that define who one is when one is a member of a particular group (social identity), when one is an occupant of a particular role in society (role identity), or when one claims particular characteristics that identify the person as a unique person (person

identity; Burke & Stets, 2009). Following Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957), meaning here is understood as an internal response to a stimulus. In terms of an identity, the stimulus is the self and meaning emerges as individuals reflect on themselves as a member of a group, in a role, or as a person with a set of characteristics that distinguish them from others (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, a woman may have the meaning of being submissive when she thinks about how dominant she is as a person, may see herself as efficient when she thinks of herself in the worker role, and may define herself as dependable as a member of her church group. Submissiveness, efficiency, and dependability are the meanings that help define her person identity of dominance, role identity of worker, and social identity of church member. She will control these self-meanings when interacting with others so that they are maintained at a level (whether high or low) set by her and understood by others. Thus, she will act in ways that connote submissiveness, efficiency, and dependability.

People possess many identities because they describe themselves in various different ways, inhabit many roles, and consider themselves members of many groups. The meanings that define individuals as persons, role holders, or group members come from the culture in which individuals, roles, and groups are defined and the meanings are thus shared with others. Additionally, as people manifest and maintain the meanings that define them in their identities, they produce and reproduce the social structure in which the persons, roles, and groups are embedded.

### The Identity Process

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, each identity is composed of four basic parts (Burke & Stets, 2009). First is the *identity standard*, which contains the meanings that define the identity: what it means to be who one is in terms of the characteristics the person claims, roles the person occupies, or groups to which the individual belongs. Second is the *input* or perceptions of the self in the situation, which are relevant to defining one's identity. These perceptions indicate how the person is coming across in the situation given the identity the person is claiming. The perceptions are based on reflected appraisals or how persons think others see them in the situation. Third is a *comparator* function that serves to compare the perceived meanings of the self in the situation with the self-defining meanings in the identity standard. This comparison is simply a difference in magnitude for each of the dimensions of meaning that are being perceived. Such difference or discrepancy between the input meanings and the identity standard meanings may be

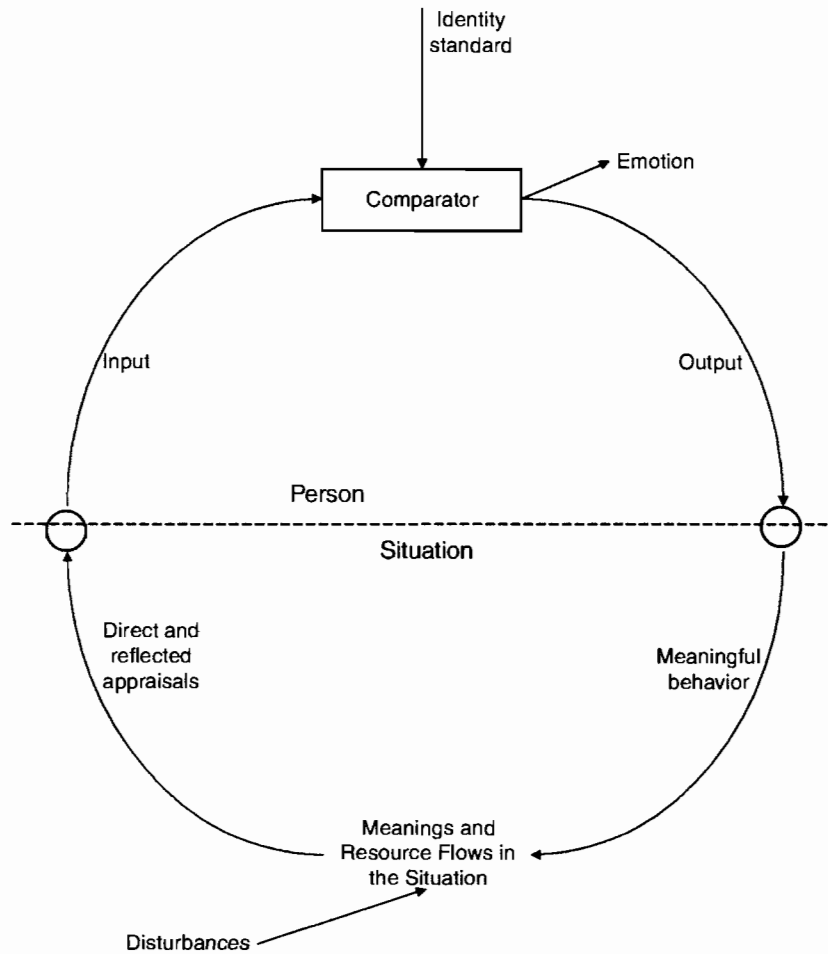


FIGURE 2.1. Model of an identity.

positive, negative, or zero. Fourth is the *output* of the comparator function (the difference/discrepancy between the input and the identity standard). Output takes the form of behavior that conveys the meanings of the identity standard within the situation. When the comparator registers a discrepancy, individuals change their behavior and thus the meanings in the situation in order to return the input of perceived meanings to be in agreement with the self-defining meanings in the identity standard.

In Figure 2.1, the cycle from the input, through the comparator, the output, the situation, and back to the input forms a negative feedback loop that

controls self-perceptions in the situation to match the identity standard.<sup>1</sup> This process is not turned on and off, but is ongoing and continuous whenever there are meanings in the situation that are relevant to the identity. The meanings in the identity standard can be thought of as goals to be met by the individual when an identity is activated. These goals constitute the way in which the situation should be – the self-perceptions one should have. When the perceptions of meanings of the self in the situation come to match the meanings in the standard, the identity is verified, the discrepancy is reduced to zero, behavior conveys the meanings in the standard, and people feel good. If, however, situational disturbances occur (bottom of the figure), usually in the form of others in the situation acting in ways to change the meanings of how the self is perceived, the self-perceptions in the situation no longer match the identity standard, and the identity is not verified. When this happens, the comparator registers discrepancy between self-perceptions and the identity standard, and the person feels distressed – upset or angry. The particular emotions felt help the person modify his or her behavior appropriately to change the meanings of the self in the situation to bring him or her back into alignment with the identity standard meanings (Stets & Burke, 2005).

As an example of the negative feedback system, imagine Jack who has a masculine gender identity of being “tough.” In situations, he will act in ways that convey this gender meaning to others (the output in Figure 2.1). To do this, he obviously shares with others an understanding of what “tough” means, the actions that convey it, how one should appear, and the resources that produce these meanings. If in a bar he encounters a group from a motorcycle gang who treat him as a “wannabe” tough guy, this feedback (as Jack perceives it) creates a discrepancy between how he wants to be perceived in the situation according to his masculine gender identity standard (“tough”) and how he perceives that he is being seen by the motorcycle crowd (“not so tough at all”). This discrepancy, as registered in the comparator in Figure 2.1, creates some distress (an emotional response) in Jack and causes him to change his behavior (output) to appear even tougher to get his message across in the situation (Swann & Hill, 1982). If this results in an acceptance of Jack as a person who is “tough” and he perceives that people treat him that way, his identity is once again verified, his distress diminishes, and he feels better, but he continues to act in this new way to keep his identity verified in this situation.

<sup>1</sup> Identity theory also deals with the conditions under which the identity standard itself will change slowly over time (Burke & Stets, 2009). This is identity change. However, a discussion of identity change would be lengthy and a significant departure from our primary purpose of discussing the comparison process.

There is consistent empirical support for the identity process as outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Research reveals that feedback from others in a situation (reflected appraisals) serves as a guide to how individuals are coming across in the situation (Stets & Harrod, 2004), how the meaning of people's behavior (output) reflects the meanings held in their identity standard (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Riley & Burke, 1995; Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012; Stets, Carter, Harrod, Cerven, & Abrutyn, 2008), how when people's identities are not verified, they experience distress (Burke & Harrod, 2005; Burke & Stets, 1999; Riley & Burke, 1995; Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012), and how when identity nonverification occurs, individuals will change their behavior to bring behavioral meanings back into alignment with the identity standard meanings (Burke, 2006).

Identity theory developed out of structural symbolic interaction theory, tracing back to the Scottish moral philosophers up through James, Cooley, and Mead (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980/2002). However, a second important source of ideas on which identity theory is based is traced to the perceptual control model of Powers (1973). Identity theory incorporates Powers's ideas that people act to control their perceptions and not their behaviors. Behavior is chosen to control the meanings in identity-relevant perceptions to bring them into alignment with the identity standard. Through this mechanism, individuals maintain their own integrity, social roles are played out in organizations, groups, and boundaries between groups are maintained, and all of this is accomplished in the face of countless and unpredictable factors and forces (often others in the situation) that tend to disturb the order.

### The Social Comparison Process

In identity theory, a key place where the comparison process operates is in a person assessing the degree to which meanings of the self in the situation match the meanings in the identity standard. To reiterate, the meanings of the self are based on the feedback from others (reflected appraisals) in the situation. There are four characteristics of this comparison process that are important to highlight, which we discuss more fully later. These include (a) the content of people's comparison (b) the purpose of the comparison (c) the standard in the comparison, and (d) the nature of the others involved in the comparison process.

In identity theory, the content of a person's comparison is *meaning* – any *meaning* that is relevant in defining the self and one's identity. At issue is not that an opinion, ability, emotion, or any other characteristic becomes the basis of comparison, but rather that these characteristics carry particular

meanings that are relevant to a person's identity, and these meanings guide the person's behavior within and across situations. The focus on meaning is suggested in Festinger's (1954) early formulation in which the social comparison process occurred not for all skills, but for those that were *meaningfully* important to an individual.

Similar to self-verification theory (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003), an individual's goal in identity theory is to *verify* one's identity. This is the purpose of comparing the meanings of the self in the situation with identity standard meanings. The person is motivated to confirm the view of self rather than enhance or improve the self-view. The verification motive is consistent with Festinger's (1954) original idea that individuals desire to know that their opinions are correct. In identity theory, it does not matter whether the identity meanings in the standard generates a negative identity or a positive identity. Whatever the valence of the meanings, the individual seeks to verify them.

In much of the literature on social comparison, the assumption is that the standard for comparison is another person's characteristic(s). The self is evaluated relative to this standard and feels good or bad as a result of the comparison. In identity theory, the standard is the identity standard. It is internal to the individual and does not reside in others. In the situation, a person looks to others who provide feedback with respect to how the person is coming across. The person perceives this feedback and compares the meanings of this feedback with the meanings in his or her identity standard. Discrepancies cause a person to try to change the perceived meanings in the situation so there is a better fit between the meanings as to who one is in the situation with the meanings in the identity standard.<sup>2</sup>

However, when a person takes on a new identity, the identity standard is not fully formed. The full set of meanings is not yet known. In this case, the social comparison process may be invoked in order to help create the identity standard by learning from others through a process of imitation or modeling. A person may watch others' reactions to events, infer what these reactions connote and denote, and begin to specify the meanings for that identity. Additional observations, even direct communication with others, helps solidify the identity standard meanings. In this way, identity meanings may be initially constructed with the help of others. Over time, individuals come to

<sup>2</sup> Identity theory suggests that when one cannot change the meanings in the situation to match the identity standard meanings, the identity standard will slowly change over time toward the situational meanings, and congruence will once again be achieved, thus verifying the changed identity standard (Burke & Stets, 2009).



claim these meanings as their own. Thus, the standard of comparison in identity theory is similar to the standard in social comparison theory – another person – when identity standards are being constructed. Once the standard is constructed, it becomes internalized and becomes one's own standard in the control process outlined in Figure 2.1.

The final feature of the comparison process that we highlight is the nature of the others involved in the comparison. In identity theory, individuals seek feedback from others with whom they typically come into contact in the situation. This feedback serves to indicate how one is coming across in a situation and whether it is consistent with the meanings stored in the identity standard. For an individual's person, role, and social identities, the others who frequent the situation are likely to be somewhat different. We discuss these identity bases in more detail in the next section. Here, for person identities, when one is trying to verify the constellation of meanings that makes the person unique and distinct from others, close associates such as family members, friends, and neighbors are likely to be the source of the feedback. When person identities are verified, individuals should feel that they are living out their true self, that they are being who they really are at their core. Such authenticity is likely to be attained with close associates.

For role identities, individuals seek verification of those meanings that they claim for themselves while taking on a particular role in society such as student, spouse, or parent. However, for every role identity that individuals take on, there is a corresponding counter-role identity to which it is related (Burke & Stets, 2009). Thus the student role identity has the corresponding counter-role identity of teacher, the husband role identity has the corresponding counter-role identity of wife, and the parent role identity has the corresponding counter-role identity of child. In this way, the other, with whom the person interacts and from whom the person seeks feedback, complements the person's role identity. Finally, for social identities, one compares oneself to others in the same group. Here, similarity rather than complementarity plays a larger role. However, it is not similarity on all dimensions. Rather, it is only similarity on those dimensions that are relevant to the in-group identity, to distinguishing in-group from out-group, and to measuring up to the internal standard that reflects the group prototype. The group prototype is the ideal that is most-like members of the in-group and least-like members of the out-group.

One further point we make about the nature of others involved in the comparison process is that these others are not just passive objects; they are active participants who are interacting with the self in the situation, and they seek to have their identities verified. Thus, each person in the interaction is

attempting to achieve identity verification as well as provide feedback to the other's identity. This is a mutually verifying context; the actions of each person in the situation are intended to verify not only his or her own identity but the identities of all others in the situation (Burke & Stets, 1999). Therefore, comparison processes are engaged in by all persons in the situation. For the interaction to work, common sets of mutually verifying meanings must come to be agreed on, creating a stable situation, stable individuals, and a stable social structure.

#### PERSON IDENTITIES

The person identity is the set of meanings that define the person, and in their constellation make the person unique from other individuals. The basis of this identity highlights the need for individuals to be distinct from others. Later we will see that social identities satisfy the need to be similar to others (identifying with the in-group) as well as different from others (the in-group vs. out-group distinction).<sup>3</sup> The meanings within the person identity standard are based on culturally recognized qualities or characteristics that individuals internalize as their own. In American society, these many qualities include, for example, being masterful or controlling (Stets, 1995; Stets & Burke, 1994), assertive (Swann & Hill, 1982), and moral (Stets & Carter, 2006, 2011, 2012; Stets et al., 2008). What distinguishes these self-meanings from personality traits is that they are controlled and maintained by the individual. When person identities are verified, individuals experience feelings of authenticity; who they truly are is confirmed by others (Burke & Stets, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Blanton and Christie's (2003) deviance regulation theory (DRT) focuses on the behavioral choices people make in order to maintain their personal identities. In DRT, people compare themselves to others and adopt behaviors that differ from others when those differences generate a positive view of themselves, and they avoid behaviors that differ from others when those differences produce a negative view of themselves. The emphasis on self-enhancement is different from the focus on self-verification in identity theory. Additionally, the role that others play in DRT is minimal except as objects that provide a standard for comparison with the self. In identity theory, the situation is reversed. Others interact with the self and impute meanings to the self, which the self then compares to an internal (self-defining) identity standard of meaning. Further, in identity theory, the emphasis is more on the meaning of the behavior rather than of the behavior itself.

<sup>4</sup> The person identity figures more prominently into identity theory compared to social identity theory. In social identity theory, because person identities have little to do with group processes, researchers do not closely examine them. Instead, they simply assume that person identities are shaped by group life and that person identities will vary in their subjective importance and their accessibility in people's minds (Hogg, 2006). In identity theory, because the meanings of one's person identity refer to important aspects of the self and form an essential ingredient as to who one is, these meanings tend to be activated across situations.

For one to understand who one is as a unique individual, one must look within and identify those characteristics that distinguish one from others among the range of relevant characteristics made available in the culture.<sup>5</sup> This necessarily involves the social comparison process. It entails persons observing others and judging how much they depart from the average of others. If the departure is significant, then the characteristic, or characteristics, creates a combination of meanings that help form one's person identity.

For example, a person, Sean, may see himself as highly moral and controlling. Sean arrived at this self-definition by comparing himself with others who he routinely comes in contact with, such as family members and friends. When Sean behaves in ways consistent with these identity meanings, he may find through social comparison that across situations he, as a person, does not cheat nearly as much as his friends and that he is more honest and truthful than they are. Additionally, he may find that compared to his siblings, he desires to control others much more than they do. Further, he may compare himself to his girlfriend and find that he does not trust others as much as she does; he monitors others closely. Such comparisons lead him to define himself as more moral and controlling than the average person he knows. This example makes it clear that although persons have the desire to be unique, they cannot establish this distinctiveness without having others with whom to compare themselves.

There are two other ways in which the social comparison process emerges in the person. First, for individuals to know what behavior corresponds to their person identity meanings, they have to compare their actions with the actions of others who claim similar person identity meanings. They come to know these actions through interaction with others and through the role-taking process. To the extent that their actions are like the actions of others with similar person identity meanings, they will evaluate their performance positively and feel good about themselves. To the extent that their actions depart from the actions of these others, they may conclude that they failed in their performance, and they will feel bad about themselves. For example, if Sean claims the person identity of being moral, he should not lie to his parents if they ask him whether he has ever tried marijuana. He has observed that others who lie generally are not viewed as moral, nor do they see themselves as moral persons. If he were to lie, he would be conveying meanings contrary to his identity and he would experience negative feelings and judge his behavior

<sup>5</sup> It does not matter whether these meanings distinguish individuals in a positive or negative light. Individuals will seek verification of whatever self-meanings they think apply.

to be not reflective of his true self. For a person with a lower moral identity, the same lying may convey meanings consistent with his or her identity.

Second, when others are providing feedback regarding the meanings implied by one's behavior, their feedback is based on their understanding of the shared meanings in a common culture. To the extent that the meanings implied by a person's behavior suggest dishonesty, feedback from others will reinforce those meanings. For example, if Sean's friends find that he has not reported all of his earnings to the Internal Revenue Service, their feedback will not support Sean's view of himself as a moral person because they judge his cheating behavior as immoral. If Sean has made claims of being a moral person, they may point out the inconsistency between his claim as a moral person and his actions in (not) reporting his taxes. They may ridicule his claim as a moral person. They may give off indications of incredulity to his moral claims.

#### ROLE IDENTITIES

The role identity is the set of meanings that people attribute to themselves while in a role. For example, the student role identity may include the meaning of being "academically responsible." The parent role identity may mean being "nurturing" and "loving." It is possible for different individuals to have different meanings for the same role identity. For instance, for one person, the parent role identity may mean being "caring" and "supportive" while for another it may mean being "strict" and "controlling." When role identity meanings are not held in common between a role holder and others in a situation, the role holder must negotiate the meanings with those others who may have a different understanding of that role identity. The role holders may find that they have to compromise as to the role identity meanings they can claim and the behaviors that maintain those meanings. Comparisons with others who have the same role as well as others who hold counter-roles provide the basic information needed for this.

Individuals will engage in the comparison process with others to help formulate the internal meanings and interpretations they will bring to their roles from the realm of cultural possibilities. Individuals will sample among those who hold the same role and examine the meanings and expectations held by these others about the role. What meanings individuals' adopt as their own will depend on how the meanings fit with other meanings that individuals claim given other role identities they hold in their repertoire. Conflicting meanings will create stress for individuals so they will be avoided. For example, if a young woman has the work role of nurse, she may take on the meanings of

being “helpful” and “compassionate” in the nurse role identity. As a first-time mother, she may assume meanings in the mother role identity of being “kind” and “thoughtful” compared to meanings of being “demanding” and “tough.” The mother role identity meanings of being “kind” and “thoughtful” are more consistent with her nurse role identity of being “helpful” and “compassionate” than with the meanings of being “demanding” and “tough.”

In addition, individuals will compare themselves with others who hold the same role to identify the behaviors that will demonstrate the particular identity meanings they adopt. They acquire these behaviors through interaction with similar role holders and seeing the role from the role holder’s perspective. Further, others in the situation who provide feedback to a role holder will base their evaluation of the role holder on the average behaviors they have observed from others who have claimed the same role. A role holder’s departure from the expected way to behave, on average, will generate non-verifying feedback.

What is unique about interaction for those claiming role identities is that the interaction operates under the principle of role identity reciprocity. In other words, individuals relate to each other as persons with different role identities. Because each person has a different identity in the situation, there will be different perceptions and actions between individuals. For instance, Katie, in the student role identity, will have particular goals and engage in certain behaviors that may be different but interrelated to the goals and behaviors of the teacher role identity. Katie may desire to excel in an area of study given her meaning of being a “responsible academic,” she may use resources such as texts, videos, and the computer, and she may engage in behaviors such as attending lectures, completing homework assignments, and taking exams. Correspondingly, her teacher, Henry, given the identity meaning of “educator,” may desire that Katie learn. Therefore, he provides resources such as books, movies, speakers, and Web-based computer material, and he engages in action such as lecturing, stimulating class discussions, and distributing homework exercises and exams. Rather than Katie and Henry acting alike in their identities, they are acting differently, with each person’s perception and actions interconnected to the other in the situation.

The preceding example reflects social comparison not in terms of similarity but in terms of complementarity. The interrelatedness of identities with counter-identities is successful when individuals effectively make compromises in the situation and the roles fit together easily. Each identity has its own interests and goals to fulfill, and these initially may compete with the interest and goals of other identities in the situation. People need to coordinate with each other for effective interaction to take place. Ultimately, the goal of everyone

in a situation is to verify his or her identity. Mutual identity verification often requires cooperative and mutually agreed-on ways of behaving, often arrived at through the normal give and take of interaction. Each person's behavior is not the same as the other in the interaction given the role identities and counter-role identities of each, so individuals' respective actions must reflect this complementarity in a coordinated manner. This coordinated effort might involve individuals modifying their goals somewhat – that is, altering their identity standard a little – to accomplish identity verification and facilitate the verification of the other's identity.

To illustrate how noncooperative behaviors can generate problems in identity verification, let us take a student-teacher interaction again. If Katie does not attend class or attends class but surfs the Internet on her computer or sends text messages to her friends on her cell phone, she is not verifying her student role identity, and she is not providing the feedback necessary for Henry to verify the teacher role identity as instructor. Alternatively, if Henry does not provide good instruction or test Katie on her knowledge of the course material, then Henry is failing to verify his teacher role identity as well as the student role identity of his counterpart – Katie. More generally, if individuals do not obtain verification for their role identities, they will become less satisfied with their roles and may withdraw from the interaction.<sup>6</sup> For example, research shows that when husbands and wives successfully negotiate the behavior of each in a marriage, what develops is a strong emotional attachment to the other, commitment to the marriage, and a movement away from a self-focus (an "I") to a global unit (a "We") (Burke & Stets, 1999). When there are problems with verifying the husband and wife role identities, couples are more likely to separate or divorce (Cast & Burke, 2002).

Social comparison can act to foster or impede verification of role identities. The verification of role identities results in a heightened sense of self-efficacy. If individuals are getting feedback from others in the situation that they are performing their role well, that they are accomplishing what they set out to do, this will increase feelings of agency, power, and control that characterize self-efficacy. In turn, higher self-efficacy facilitates the opportunity try on more roles, thus providing more occasions for individuals to learn that they are competent (Burke & Stets, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Other things could happen. For example, a person could remain in the interaction but ignore or reinterpret the meaning of others feedback so that it is consistent with one's own identity standard meanings. If this does not occur, and the person is unable to exit the interaction, identity theory suggests that identity meanings will come to align with the feedback meanings of others.

### SOCIAL IDENTITIES

A social identity refers to those meanings individuals use to define themselves in terms of social group memberships (Stets & Burke, 2000). These meanings emerge from social comparisons as individuals categorize themselves as similar to some people, labeled the in-group, and different from other people, labeled the out-group. Thus, similar to social identity theory, we see social identities as emerging out of the comparison process, which produces distinctiveness from others as well as sameness with others (Hogg, 2000).

Like the idea that person identities help define individuals as distinct from others, a social identity draws clear boundaries between people's sense of belongingness, from which they derive a "we" or "us-feeling," and their sense of being excluded, from which they derive a feeling of "them." Social identity verification brings members of the in-group into a cohesive whole but separates them from other groups. Because members of the out-group are engaging in the same processes as members of the in-group, we have a situation of maintaining or growing differences between groups and decreasing variability within groups, both of which contribute to the overall structuring of society.

At the same time, having a particular social identity means being like others in a group and seeing things from the group's perspective. It is assumed that individuals as group members think alike and act alike. Thus, there is uniformity in thought and action in being a group member. Individuals do not have to interact with other group members in order to think and act like the group. Simply identifying with the group is enough to activate similarity in perceptions and behavior among group members.

Social comparison processes, therefore, are involved in the very definition of groups that give rise to social identities. In addition to this, social comparison is involved in the verification of social identities. For example, Jason is on a Little League team. He is thus a member of a social group of interacting persons, the Little League, his own team. He is accepted as a team member because he comes to games and practices, learns the rules and strategies, works on improving his playing, and wears the team uniform. He engages in all of the meaningful behaviors that identify him and all other members of the team as Little League players. By others accepting him as a team member, his social identity is verified and his feeling of self-worth is enhanced. He feels part of something larger than himself, a "we" or "us."

By engaging in social comparison, Jason notes that the amount of competitiveness he shows in the group is similar to the amount of competitiveness shown by others in the group. He is not feeling better than or worse than the others, but he is feeling like the others. If a disturbance occurs, for example,

other group members provide feedback to him that he is showing higher than acceptable levels of competitiveness in the group, this would become a threat to his team member identity, and he may feel shame or anxiety as a consequence. As a result, he will take corrective action, modifying the meanings produced by his behaviors to have his perceptions match his standard. He may show less competitiveness to confirm the accepted level of meanings for the group. Having done this, he will feel better, his self-worth will rebound, and he will no longer be marginalized from the group.

In addition to using comparison processes as part of the identity verification process, comparison processes are also used to set the identity standard for a social identity. For example, when Jason first joined the Little League, he likely had some understanding of the meaning of being a ballplayer and team member. But, as he participated, he learned through social comparison processes other sets of meanings that helped form his identity standard for being a Little League player. He saw that others showed a certain level of competitiveness when playing the game. He saw that team members encouraged each other to improve their game, shared information about the importance of practice, and taught each other different techniques that fostered excelling at the sport. All of these observations involve comparison of the others with the self, and where different, the observed meanings became part of his team member identity standard and came to guide his behavior. Successfully maintaining those new meanings made Jason accepted as a Little League player and team member by others on the team, by the coach, and by his family and others in the community.

The verification of social identities facilitates feelings of inclusion, acceptance, belongingness, and self-worth. The comparison process is intimately involved in the accomplishment of these communal feelings. More generally, it facilitates cohesion that is necessary for a stable social structure.

#### **PERSON, ROLE, AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES: A POSTSCRIPT**

Empirically, social, role, and person identities often overlap and cannot be easily separated in situations. Within groups people play out various roles, and individuals enact these various roles in different ways given the unique person identity meanings they bring to their roles. Once again, the comparison process is central to the verification process. The nature of the feedback that serves as the basis of comparison with one's identity standard involves others who also are persons within roles within groups in those situations. An example may help illustrate this point.



In thinking about the type of person who works for Company A or for Company B, we might find that Company A workers' person identity carries meanings of being independent and autonomous, whereas Company B workers see themselves as dependent. In playing out the worker role within their respective companies, Company A workers may define their worker identity in terms of freedom from supervision and control, whereas Company B workers may define their work identity in terms of being responsive to directives from management. At the group level, Company A employees may define themselves as a relatively disorganized group, unable to unite and organize a ball team for the intercompany tournament, whereas Company B employees may see themselves as a close, cohesive group who are able to form a well-organized and skilled ball team. Thus, we have a Company A worker who is independent, has a disdain for being supervised, and avoids group activities. The Company B worker is dependent, respectful of authority, and a team player. The nature of the others who provide feedback to Company A workers would be other Company A workers who are similarly placed in the company. The same would be true of the Company B workers. These others are persons who have a role (worker) within the group (company). Thus, in situations, feedback may come from individuals who claim identities from multiple bases: the person, the role, and the group.

#### INTEGRATIVE AND COMMUNAL FUNCTIONS

As we have already discussed, social comparison is important for the formation as well as verification of identities, and it is the verification of identities that provides communal and integrative functions in society. Several principles are at work here. First, verification does not occur in isolation. It almost always involves others who provide feedback (the reflected appraisals process). The meanings in this feedback are then perceived and compared with one's identity standard. The important point is that the verification process brings people together in interaction at a very basic level of connection, responding to the meanings of each other's behavior.

Second, for verification to proceed, because it is based on matching perceived meanings of the self in the situation with meanings held in an identity standard, everyone in the interaction must share a common culture with commonly understood meanings. As people who have lived in different cultures can attest, without these shared meanings, communication and interaction would be difficult and the verification process would be next to impossible to sustain. The shared common culture provides a second integrative and communal function brought about through the verification process.

Third, because identity verification is a continual process that goes on whenever relevant meanings exist in the situation, people strive to make it efficient and robust. They seek out others who facilitate verification and avoid those who make verification difficult (Cast & Burke, 2002). Most efficient is the situation in which the actions of individuals not only provide meanings that verify their own identities, but also meanings that verify the identities of those with whom they are interacting. We have termed this a mutual verification context (Burke & Stets, 1999). As Burke and Stets point out, the mutual verification context provides strong incentives to be maintained. The people involved develop strong emotional ties, trust, and a sense of “we-ness.”

In addition to the aforementioned, each identity base provides some additional forms of connection when identities are verified. As already indicated, the verification of social identities maintains a common core of meanings shared by group members (Stets & Burke, 2000). One becomes tied to many similar others and receives recognition, approval, and acceptance from those others. The verification of a role identity serves to maintain a connection to the counter-role through complementary meanings. In addition, verification of a role identity helps maintain the larger group or organization in which the role and counter-roles are embedded. Finally, verification of a person identity serves to maintain the individual as a distinctive entity within the culture that is shared with others. The shared culture allows for a shared understanding of meanings from which identities are derived. Person identities allow individuals to maintain some uniqueness in the set of meanings that define them as individuals given pressures to be similar to others.

We make one final point. We have focused on the integrative and communal consequences of the identity verification process in the preceding discussion. However, this integration and community are apparent only when there is also separation, differentiation, and the existence of out-groups. Identity verification serves both purposes. Helping form and maintain in-groups results in the creation of out-groups. Forming and maintaining roles produces counter-roles. In such a manner, society is structured and maintained.

#### CONCLUSION

As social comparison theory and research has progressed over the last 50 years, it has expanded its scope and understanding of the process and the contexts in which it is carried out so that social comparison is an entire field of research (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). The complexity and ubiquity of the social comparison process continues to develop. In this chapter, we have discussed how the social comparison process is central to the identity process. Thus, we are

moving social comparison into another area of investigation. In so doing, it suggests that researchers consider some of the aspects of social comparison in identity theory in their work on the comparison process as the following suggests.

First, the social comparison is central to helping individuals *form* and *maintain* the meanings held in their person, their role, and their social identity standards. When identity meanings are being formed, individuals turn to others and the meanings they have adopted for their identities to help in the construction of their own identity meanings. Once they have established their identity standard meanings, they again turn to others who provide feedback as to whether their behavior carries the same meanings that are embedded in their identity standard. To the extent that this occurs, identity verification has occurred, and individuals will feel good about themselves. Thus, social comparison is important to the development of identity standard meanings and the verification of these meanings over time.

Second, in identity theory, it is not the comparison of opinions, abilities, or emotions that are the focus, but *meanings* that are held in the identity standard. These meanings are maintained in the situation. These meanings pertain to the person (“What does it mean to be me?”), to the role (“What does it mean to be a student, or spouse, or worker, or parent?”), and to the group (“What does it mean to be a member of a church or a community-based action group?”). Meanings that are not controlled as part of an identity are not attended to. Only those meanings that are part of an identity standard will be attended to in social comparison.

Third, others with whom one compares oneself are not themselves passive objects, but active participants in interaction with the self. These others control meanings in the situation, which are relevant to their identities, and they seek to have these identities verified as well. Thus, everyone in the interaction is seeking identity verification. Indeed, from an identity theory perspective, that is the nature of interaction. If a set of meanings is held in common by interacting parties, and if this leads to identity verification for all interacting parties, then a mutually verifying context has been established.

The comparison process operates for all the person, role, and social identities individuals claim. The verification of these three bases of identities facilitates integrative functions in society. We see integration when one identifies with an in-group, or when actors complement each other in the role identity and counter-role identity interaction. However, integration is not possible unless we simultaneously have differentiation. An in-group makes no sense without an out-group. A role makes no sense without a counter-role. Persons are not distinctive unless there are others available for contrast. This is how society is organized.

We have shown that social comparison theory and identity theory have much in common. Social comparison is central to the establishment and verification of identities, and identities give substance and motivation for social comparisons. Future research will further elaborate the connection between social comparison theory and identity theory. Past research in identity theory has not attended to social comparisons very much, and this needs to be corrected. Likewise, the scope of social comparison could be enlarged to include the identity processes that we discussed in this chapter.

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