

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY THEORY

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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose – The purpose of this chapter is to review the historical development of identity theory from 1988 to the present, and then outline some thoughts about future directions for the theory.*

*Methodology/approach – The chapter discusses major advances in identity theory over the past 25 years such as the incorporation of the perceptual control system into the theory, the introduction of “resources” in which symbolic and sign meanings are important, new views of the social structure, the relevance of the situation in influencing the identity process, the idea of different bases of identities, broadening our understanding of multiple identities, studying identity change, and bringing in emotions into the theory.*

*Findings – Throughout the review, empirical work is identified and briefly discussed that supports the major advances of the theory.*

*Research limitations – The chapter suggests a number of ways that identity theory may be developed in the future such as examining negative or stigmatized identities. Additionally, there is a discussion as to ways in which the theory may be tied to other theoretical traditions such as affect control theory, exchange theory, and social identity theory.*

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Social implications – *Identity theory has had a number of applications to various areas in society, including understanding crime, education, race/ethnicity, gender, the family, and the environment.*

Originality/value of chapter – *This is the most recent overview of identity theory over the past 25 years. It becomes clear to the reader that the theory offers a way of understanding the person as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral agent who influences the structure of society but who is also influenced by the social structure.*

**Keywords:** Emotions; identity; resources; self; verification

## IDENTITY THEORY IN 1988

By 1988, we had just left Indiana University (IU), but what remained with us was the intellectual influence of IU theorists Sheldon Stryker and David Heise. We arrived at Washington State University (WSU), where we became influenced by other scholars such as Viktor Gecas and Lee Freese. At WSU, identity theory began to really flourish. Stryker had developed many of the central ideas of structural symbolic interaction (SSI) as well as the main framework of identity theory (Stryker, [1980] 2002). So, we begin with early central ideas.

In Stryker's work, the core idea, taken from Mead, was that "society shapes self shapes social behavior." This SSI idea gave causal priority to society on the grounds that individuals were enmeshed in networks in society from birth and could not survive outside of preexisting organized social relationships. Society was characterized as social structures comprising patterned behavior and interactions. Two levels of social structure were apparent. The first level included the networks in which people and their identities were embedded, for example, people in their families, classrooms, and work groups in which the parent, student, and worker identities emerged, respectively. Second was the larger bounding social structure of organizations and institutions, which influenced the probabilities that people with their identities entered into various networks. For example, persons with certain class backgrounds would not find easy access to a country club, and children in the inner city would not find access to better schools.

Social behavior was conceptualized as role choice behavior, and the primary question was why persons chose one particular course of action among those open to them. For example, why would a person spend

a Saturday with his children rather than on the golf course? The answer was that individuals were viewed as having multiple identities that might influence behavior, and some identities were more likely to be invoked than others. In the example above of the parent and golfer identities, the parent identity was invoked over the golfer identity.

Drawing from Mead and James, the self is made up of many identities. People internalize the meanings that they apply to themselves when they are occupants of positions in the social structure such as father, student, carpenter, or golfer. Thus, people may have a father identity, student identity, carpenter identity, or golfer identity. The positions and the meanings and expectations attached to them come from a common culture that is shared with others. In this common culture, people understand what it means to be a father, student, carpenter, and golfer. Identities thus link persons to the social structure and to culture. Further, with many identities, there are many links: father to family, golfer to the country club, and student to the classroom. Thus, each person is tied in multiple ways to the social structure. In converse fashion, different parts of the social structure are linked through the nexus of identities held by a person, thus providing ties between disparate parts of the social structure. For example, Ralph, being a bus driver for the transit authority and a Parent Teacher's Association (PTA) member, links the school system to the transit authority.

The main thesis of the identity research program at this time was that role choices were a function of identities so conceptualized, and the many identities within the self were organized in a salience hierarchy reflecting the importance of hierarchy as a societal organizational principle (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). The salience of an identity is the probability that a particular identity will be activated across a variety of situations and thus influence the role choices made by the person. Identities that are more salient are more likely to be enacted or activated across situations. In our example of the parent/golfer above, a more salient parent identity would be more likely to be invoked ahead of the golfer identity.

Salience, in turn, is a function of the commitment to the identity, where commitment is understood as the degree to which the person is tied to others in the social structure on the basis of the identity in question, considering both the number and strength of those ties. The greater the number of ties to others and the greater the strength of these ties to others, the stronger is the identity commitment. The parent identity in the above example may have had higher commitment than the golfer identity thus leading to its higher placement in the salience hierarchy than the golfer identity. Thus, commitment (structure) shapes identity salience (self) shapes

role choice (social behavior). This basic model was subject to numerous tests and applications that both strengthened and refined these ideas (Serpe, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1982, 1983).

While this early work was being developed, another research line began to emerge that looked at the nature of identities and how they operate to produce behaviors expressing those identities. While more salient identities are likely to be invoked in any situation, at issue was the kind of behavior that individuals invoke given the identity they choose. The solution to understanding the link between identity and behavior was based on the traditional symbolic interaction idea that identities are self-meanings, and that self-meanings develop in the context of meanings of roles and counter roles (Burke, 1980; Burke & Tully, 1977). In the SSI view, behaviors, like identities, were characterized by meaning, and the link between identities and role behaviors existed in the meanings they shared (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). People who have identities with certain meanings choose behaviors that convey these same meanings. The large breakthrough came when it was discovered that it was possible to empirically and reliably measure meaning, including self-meanings (identities) and role behavior meanings using the semantic differential scale (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The methodological innovation made possible a strong program of empirical research to continue to build the theory.

Following the work of Osgood et al. (1957) Osgood, May, and Miron (1975), meaning was defined as an internal response to a stimulus that mediated between the stimulus and a behavioral response to that stimulus. This internal response interpreted the stimulus, giving it meaning on which the behavioral response was predicated. To measure this internal mediation response, Osgood and his colleagues devised the semantic differential, which captured meaning as a set of responses to a word or concept stimulus. The responses were captured by the respondents marking their responses on a series of bipolar adjective pairs such as strong–weak.

Testing a large number of bipolar response scales and a large number of concept stimuli, Osgood found that the underlying structure of responses could be understood, in part, as consisting of three fundamental dimensions, which were labeled as evaluation (good–bad), potency (strong–weak), and activity (active–passive) (EPA), plus a number of additional dimensions. The fundamental dimensions (EPA) accounted for about 50% of the mediational response, while the remaining 50% of meaning took a large number of additional dimensions to be portrayed.

In terms of matching identity meaning to behavior, given the variety of identities and behaviors across society and the vast array of meanings that

might represent them, it was deemed necessary to discover the relevant dimensions for each identity. Rather than relying on the fundamental EPA dimensions, identity theory sought to distinguish the meaning of any one identity from the meanings of possible counter identities associated with the identity. This procedure, as suggested by Burke and Tully (Burke & Tully, 1977), used a discriminant function to find the relevant adjective pairs that best accomplished this discovery of meanings that distinguished identities from counter identities.<sup>1</sup> In this way, a smaller number of relevant adjective pairs could be identified and used to measure the meaning of any particular identity. As Burke and Reitzes (1980) showed, this same procedure could be used to measure the meanings of behaviors that might be linked by common meanings to the identity in question.

The semantic differential then began to be used to measure a large number of different identity meanings: gender identity (Burke, 1989b; Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988; Burke & Tully, 1977), student identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1980), ethnic identity (White & Burke, 1987), academic identity (Burke & Hoelter, 1988), old age identity (Mutran & Burke, 1979a, 1979b), and body image identity (Stager & Burke, 1982). In all of these cases, the meanings contained in the identities were consistent with the meanings of the behavioral choices made by the individuals.

Thus, by 1988, when the first Group Processes Conference was held, we had a good understanding of the nature of identities, the nature of commitment in the way individuals with these identities fit into the social structure, and how that influenced identity activation or enactment through its effect of the salience on the identities. We also knew the mechanism that linked identities and the behavior choices that were made: maintaining consistency in meaning. We turn now to examine how the theory has grown and changed over the last 25 years.

## IDENTITY THEORY SINCE 1988

### *Perceptual Control System*

Since 1988, there have been a large number of important extensions to identity theory. Perhaps the most significant was the introduction of the perceptual control system into identity theory drawing on the work of Powers (1973). This was first presented in work that examined the origins of distress in identity disruption (Burke, 1991). The idea was that people

did not just act in ways that were consistent with their identities. Rather they used feedback from others (reflected appraisals) as well as their own direct appraisals to understand the meanings of the behaviors they were enacting. On the basis of this, they altered their behavior in order to make their perceptions of the meaning match the meanings in their identity standard. This was a very subversive idea, which ran counter to much thinking in the social and behavioral sciences. The tradition was that people controlled their behavior. The idea that people controlled their perceptions by engaging in whatever behavior worked to match perceptions of meaning to identity standard meanings was not commonly understood.<sup>2</sup> Again, the perceptual control perspective emphasizes the idea that it is the meaning that is important not the behavior itself, and meaning is subject to social confirmation. By looking at others' responses, one can confirm that one is adjusting the meaning of the situation in the desired manner.

This led to the important idea that achieving a match between perceived meanings and the meanings held in the identity standard was identity verification, while failure to achieve this match was identity nonverification. The degree of mismatch or discrepancy between perceptions and the identity standard led to a similar degree of distress (an emotional reaction) and to behavior to correct the situation. From this idea followed a series of studies in which the meanings of the identities as well as the meanings of the reflected appraisals using the same scales were measured. This allowed the calculation of a discrepancy or difference between the reflected appraisals and the identity meanings reflecting the degree to which the identity was not verified.

We then showed that the magnitude of this difference or discrepancy predicted changes in behavior over time as people worked to reduce the discrepancy and increase the level of identity verification. For example, [Stets and Burke \(2005a\)](#) showed that in marital interaction when the spousal identity is not verified (for either the husband or the wife), their level of efficacy slips, and they increase their control over their spouse in an attempt to regain the verification that was lost. A later study ([Burke, 2006b](#)) examined the leadership identity and leadership behavior in small task-oriented groups. Here it was shown that as the level of leadership behavior displayed in the group by a participant slipped below that implied by their leadership identity, the participant increased his or her leadership behavior in the next discussion. Similarly, if the behavior showed too much leadership for the level implied by their identity, the participant reduced the level of such behavior in the next discussion. In these cases, the change in behavior

following a discrepancy between perceptions and the identity standard was an inverse linear function of the magnitude of the discrepancy. A positive discrepancy led to a reduction in the behavior meanings, while a negative discrepancy led to an increase in the behavior meanings.

There was an unfortunate naming problem that occurred after the identity control system appeared in the literature. We and others began to talk about identity control theory. This was unfortunate because it began to drive a wedge between what Stryker and Burke (2000) called two strands of a single identity theory. Research and discussion began to appear that wanted to “test” the differences between the two strands. There are no incompatible differences. The perceptual control strand incorporates all aspects of the other strand and, in that sense, is more encompassing, but not different. In later work, we returned to using the language of “identity theory” to describe all of the work in this whole theoretical and research program because, in our minds, it is one unified theory, but with researchers testing different ideas in the theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Serpe, 2013).

### *The Introduction of Resources*

Another big extension to identity theory was not only to deal with symbolic meanings (the traditional province of symbolic interactionism) but also to introduce sign meanings to understand the full range of resources and their control (Freese & Burke, 1994). For Mead (1934), the meaning or response to symbols is shared with others through convention or social agreement. When one uses a symbol, others respond to the symbol in the same way as the person responds to the symbol. In this sense, the symbol has the same meanings to the person who uses it as to the person to whom it is directed. Fundamental here is the notion of shared meanings.

However, signs have meaning that is gained by direct and immediate experience rather than social agreement (Freese & Burke, 1994; Lindesmith & Strauss, 1956). For example, what it means to be crammed into an airline seat is not something that is understood through words or symbols. Its meaning is directly experienced. Moving one’s chair into the table at dinner is accomplished by direct experience – not too close, and not too distant, and at the proper orientation. Indeed, most of our interaction with objects in the environment is governed by signs. Certain feelings and perceptions guide our reactions to objects to bring them to be the way that they “should” be, without language or symbols. Keeping one’s car in

the middle of the lane, stacking up the fireplace wood, scraping off dishes after dinner are all examples of responding to nonlinguistic signs to maintain order.

Including sign meanings in the set of meanings that form the identity standards and the meanings that are controlled in the situation greatly broadens the scope of identity theory. It recognizes that people are biosocial beings who exist and are maintained in the world. People are more than symbols or carriers of symbols; people also use and are sustained by signs. The introduction of sign meanings allows identity theory to deal with more than talk and ideas. It allows identity theory to deal with resources that had been the domain of exchange theory.

In identity theory, resources are defined by their function: they are anything that sustains and supports individuals, groups, or interaction. The verification process of controlling perceived meanings in the situation to be in line with the meanings held in the identity standard could now include such things as students using money to purchase books as part of the student identity verification process. Resources and resource interactions could now take a central role alongside of symbolic interactions in understanding human behavior and creating and maintaining social structures. The verification process is understood in the same way that it always has been, but now includes both sign and symbolic meanings in the situation being brought into alignment with those meanings in the identity standard.

Stets and Cast (2007), for example, showed that identity verification was facilitated by personal, interpersonal, and structural resources. Among the personal resources are beliefs about the individual including one's worth and efficacy. They noted that positive and efficacious self-feelings help people be more persistent in the face of difficulties in verifying the self. Among the interpersonal resources, which arise out of relationships, are role-taking, trust, and liking, which have been shown to facilitate building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Finally, structural resources include one's education, occupational status, and income.

Stets and Cast (2007) examined two identities of newly married couples who were studied at three points in time over two years. These identities were the person identity of sociability or friendliness and the role identity of spouse.<sup>3</sup> The results showed that all three categories of resources facilitated the verification of both the person identity and the role identity for both men and women across all waves of the study. Thus, resources are important in the verification process that helps to sustain individuals (the person identity) and relationships (the spouse identity).



Additionally, Stets and Cast found that identity verification facilitated the acquisition of *more* personal, interpersonal, and structural resources over time, perhaps because identities involve the acquisition and control of resources, and the verification of identities facilitates this acquisition and control. Thus, those whose identities were more strongly verified had more resources available to them in the future: a case of the rich getting richer, or the resource poor losing both the identity verification and future resources. In general, incorporating resources and signs into identity theory has broadened the scope of what it can cover and has opened up new ways to understand the embedding of identities in the social structure.

### *New Views of the Social Structure*

During the past 25 years, identity theory had added a new view of social structure in terms of resources. Resources can be divided into *actual resources* – those resources that are currently functioning to support persons, groups, or interaction (e.g., a table around which people interact, the chairs on which they sit, and the room in which the interaction takes place) – and *potential resources* – those resources that are not currently functioning as resources, but may function at a future time or after some transformation (e.g., crude oil transformed into gasoline that can be used to move people in an automobile to work). Recall that sign meanings are not necessarily shared but are understood by individuals experientially within any situation; they control actual resources in the situation. Symbolic meanings can be thought of as controlling the potential resources to be used at some time in the future (Freese & Burke, 1994). By controlling sign and symbolic meanings in the verification process, identities control actual and potential resources.

Identity theory takes the view that social structure, including the stratification system and all of the institutional processes, involves the allocation of rights and responsibilities for controlling various actual and potential resources, which is the consequence of all the identities working to maintain verification. In this way, identities are intimately tied to the social structure because the operation of identities maintains the flow of resources that, in turn, maintains all of the groups, organizations, and individuals in society. People act to verify their identities. In doing so, in the face of distractions and disruptions, they enact the processes that define and maintain the social system.

Identity theory also has developed the conceptualization of the social structure by distinguishing large-scale (macro), intermediate (meso), and proximate (micro) structures that both contain and influence identities (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). Large-scale structures are features of the stratification system such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, and socioeconomic status. These structures serve as social boundaries that have consequences for individual life chances including the probability of entering particular networks of social relationships and having access to particular resources. They provide persons with a social identity through which they can identify with others based on sharing both the social location and the meanings associated with a given stratification characteristic. They can also be identified by others as having various rights, responsibilities, and access to resources.

Intermediate social structures are more localized networks, for example, neighborhoods, associations, and organizations. They create social boundaries that increase or decrease the probability of particular kinds of social relationships forming. Proximate structures are those closest to interpersonal interactions such as families, departments within larger corporate or educational structures, or social clubs within schools (Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stryker et al., 2005). Proximate structures provide persons with social relationships directly related to a specific role identity, and enactment of the role identity supports their participation within these structures. Additionally, proximate social structures provide access to others who have counter identities necessary for role enactment (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012).

Social structures affect the likelihood that individuals within them will evolve particular kinds of identities, and this division of social structures into large-scale, intermediate, and proximate levels distinguishes structures on the basis of the way in which they influence identities. For example, social identities are more likely to develop in large-scale social structures, while role identities are more likely to develop in proximate social structures. Person identities, because they are always with people, should emerge across all the social structures: large scale, intermediate, and proximate. The effect of social structures on individual identities is underscored. While individuals develop their own meanings for identities, these identity meanings are influenced by the cultural expectations tied to the social structures within which they are embedded.

Also important in understanding the functioning of identities is Serpe's (1987) distinction between "open" and "closed" structures, wherein the behavioral choices of identities are facilitated or obstructed, respectively,

foreshadowing Thoits' (1992) distinction between voluntary and obligatory identities where there is more or less choice involved with the identity. While much interaction reproduces the existing social structures, individuals do have agency to change social structures. At issue is identifying the conditions under which there is pressure to conform to expectations and thus produce a stable social structure compared to modify expectations and thus change the social structure (Serpe & Stryker, 1987). In addition to understanding these different ways in which identities are embedded in the social structure and the consequences of that embedding, identity theory has also looked to understand the ways that identities are always embedded in situations when they are activated.

### *The Influence of the Situation*

In identity theory, we have begun to recognize the importance of the situation within which all interaction takes place, and we have brought the situation into the theory showing the relationship between situational meanings and identity meanings (Burke & Franzoi, 1988), the importance of the cognitive situational meanings (framing rules) and affective situational meanings (feeling rules) for identity processes (Stets & Carter, 2012), and the relevance of prior emotions in the situation for the functioning of identities (Stets & Osborn, 2008).

Burke and Franzoi (1988) used experiential sampling methods to capture identity meanings and meanings of the situation in which the respondents found themselves at every one-and-a-half-hour intervals (on average) over a two-day period. Two identities (friend and student) occurred often enough in the data that the meanings of these identities and the meanings of the situations in which these identities were activated could be analyzed. Meanings were measured using semantic differential scales to capture the degree of evaluation, potency, and activity for both the identities and the situations. The results showed a strong effect of the evaluation of the situation on the evaluation of the identity, of the potency of the situation on the potency of the identity, and of the activity of the situation on the activity of the identity.

Stets and Carter (2012) studied the moral identities of students in eight different situations, paying particular attention to the identity relevant meanings in the situation. To the extent that relevant dimensions of meaning in a situation correspond to dimensions of meaning in one's identity standard, then we can refer to the meanings in the situation as strong or

*potent* for an identity, and the identity is relevant for the situation. For example, situations involving behaviors such as not allowing another student to copy one's answers during an exam had a relatively low level of moral meaning and thus had lower moral potency than other situations pertaining to not allowing a friend to drive home drunk, which had higher moral potency (Stets & Carter, 2012). Consequently, the moral identity would be less likely to be activated in the former than the latter situation. Stets and Carter argued that potency is a function of cognitive and affective aspects of situations. The cognitive aspect is the framing rules or the interpretation made on a situation; the affective aspect is the feeling rules or how individuals should feel in a situation given the interpretation made by the framing rules.

The researchers found that the moral identity predicted the choice to behave morally more strongly when the moral potency of the situation was high than when it was low. They also examined the degree to which respondents felt guilt and shame when they thought others did not see them as acting in the situation as their moral identity would indicate (i.e., there was a discrepancy between the reflected appraisals and their moral identity standard). The reactions of guilt and shame to the discrepancy were much stronger for situations that were morally potent than less morally potent situations. Thus, some of the variation in moral behavior for persons who have the same moral identity is due to situational influences, in this case, the degree to which the situation contained moral meanings relevant to the identity.

Another way in which the situation may influence the operation of identities has to do with the fact that when we move from one situation to the next, the feelings generated in one situation may influence identity processes in the new situation. Stets and Osborn (2008) examined the role of people's feelings across encounters by studying their reactions to feedback across three separate, but distinct, tasks in a laboratory study that simulated a work situation and the worker identity. After the participants (workers) performed each task, they received feedback that exceeded or fell short of what they expected to receive. Across the three tasks, the feedback oscillated from more (an "over-reward") or less (an "under-reward") than what they expected (or vice versa). What they found was that positive feelings associated with an initial over-reward (on the first task) persisted beyond the point of their initial arousal. The positive feelings continued to be experienced following feedback on the second and third task, even when the participants received an under-reward for their performance. The positive feelings tempered the negative feelings associated with subsequent

under-rewards. However, negative feelings did not show the same persistence effects as positive feelings. The negative feelings did not continue beyond the point of their initial arousal unless individuals continued to receive an under-reward on subsequent tasks.

In general, the findings showed the carryover effects of positive feelings within an interaction, but not negative feelings. Interestingly, the maintenance of positive feelings appears to act as a buffer, serving to soften the blow of later unexpected outcomes. Thus, emotions may influence interactions beyond their initial encounter to influence feelings in subsequent encounters.

### *New Bases of Identities*

While SSI initially thought of identities in terms of role positions in the social structure, such as mother, spouse, or teacher, thus identifying *role* identities, there is another class of structural positions in society that is important. There are groups and categories to which one belongs such as membership in a local church or the PTA on the one hand, as well as membership in broad social categories such as race, class, and gender on the other hand. These are *social identities*, and we have come to see the importance of extending identity theory to include them (Stets & Burke, 2000). We have demonstrated that the theory applies to these identities as well, though there are differences between role and group identities that are important.

Having a particular social identity means being at one with the members of a particular group or category, being like the others and seeing things from the group's perspective. In contrast, having a particular role identity means fulfilling the expectations of the role, coordinating with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control resources for which the role has responsibility. In group-based identities, the actor need not interact with other group members, but in role-based identities, some form of interaction and negotiation is usually involved. For group-based identities, similar actions and perceptions create a bond and a group forms. For role-based identities, relations are reciprocal rather than parallel, there are differences in perspectives, and interaction and negotiation creates micro-social structures within groups. Finally, social identities based on major social structural divisions, such as race, class, and gender, are always with the person across situations, and society makes them almost always relevant. The result is that these social identities have higher salience than

other social identities and even many role identities, which are not always with the person across situations.

Verification is at the heart of both role-based and group or category-based identities, and while the verification process for each is the same, that is, matching perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the situation to the meanings of identity standard, the process and consequences of each are different. Verifying a role-based identity means engaging in the behavioral requirements of the role, that is, enacting behavior consistent with the role, and others responding appropriately to the behavioral enactment. Verifying a group-based identity means acting like others in the group and gaining acceptance by other group members that one is like them. While verifying a role identity makes one different from others in counter roles, verifying a social identity makes one similar to others in the group or category.

The social identity of gender was one of the first identities that was measured and studied (Burke, 2006a; Burke & Cast, 1997; Burke et al., 1988; Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 1996).<sup>4</sup> We found that people produced behavior with the same meanings as their identity standard, and they responded with negative emotions and attempts to correct the situation when the identity was not verified. In addition, we have studied the ethnic identity (White & Burke, 1987) and age-based identity (Mutran & Burke, 1979a, 1979b).

Recently, we have extended the bases of identities and have shown that identity theory applies to *person identities*, that is, identities based on the person as a unique biosocial individual (Stets, 1995; Stets & Biga, 2003; Stets & Burke, 1994; Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012). Person identity standards include the meanings that set the person apart from others as a unique individual. These meanings are not attached to roles or groups, but are part of how individuals define themselves. They are always with the person and are relevant in most situations across groups and roles. Because of this, person identities are thought to have higher salience and commitment than other identities, and in some ways act as master identities influencing other role or social identities that persons take on. Since there are many dimensions of meaning that may be relevant to individuals that set them apart from others, it is easier to study person identities by focusing on just one or two dimensions at a time. For example, some people are more controlling than others and this is a characteristic that people want to maintain at the level they feel is appropriate for them (Stets & Burke, 1994, 1996).

More recently, attention has been paid to the moral identity, a person identity having to do with the level of morality that one holds for oneself

(Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012). This research measured the moral identity along the combined dimensions of “caring” and “fairness” and showed that persons with a higher moral identity were less likely to cheat in a laboratory study. Reflected appraisals with respect to the moral identity were also measured using the same scales, and, as mentioned earlier, greater discrepancy between the identity standard and the reflected appraisals (whether the appraisals were too high or too low) led to a higher level of the negative moral emotions of guilt and shame. Thus, like role and social identities, person identities, too, are verified by reflected appraisals matching the meanings held in the identity standard, and their lack of verification leads to negative emotions.

While identity theory looks at the verification process of all identities in the same way, that is, that reflected appraisals are brought to match the meanings of the identity standard, we have suggested that the consequences of verifying identities with different bases are different. The argument builds upon the self-esteem theory put forth and tested by Cast and Burke (2002) that self-esteem is a function of the verification of identities. We have argued that there are three dimensions of self-esteem that have been recognized in the literature, self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity, and that each is a function of the verification of identities formed on each of the identity bases discussed earlier (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Because of its emphasis on performance, the verification of role identities leads to an increase in self-efficacy. Because the verification of social identities is associated with being part of a group of similar others, and therefore accepted by them as a member, verification of social identities leads to an increase in self-worth. Finally, because person identities are a core part of who one is as a person, the verification of person identities leads to an increase in feelings of self-authenticity. We examined the consequences of verification of the gender social identity, the student role identity, and the moral person identity and confirmed this pattern (Stets & Burke, 2013a). Thus, while the verification process is the same across all identities and identity bases, the self-esteem outcomes of that verification are different for identities of different bases.

Finally, we point out that in any situation, several identities from different bases may all be active at the same time. People with their person identities may be in a role, which is part of a group. People may find themselves like their role partner as members of the same group. But, they are different because of the different internalized role requirement each plays out as well as each being uniquely different because of the different person identities each has.



*A New Conceptualization of Multiple Identities*

Prior to 1988, multiple identities were understood in role identity terms, and they were conceptualized as rank ordered within the self, given all the identities that individuals might claim (Stryker, [1980] 2002). If an identity was ranked higher in relative salience, it was more likely to be activated across situations than an identity ranked lower in relative salience. Additionally, there was an analysis of how individuals could hold multiple role identities, but rather than them causing conflict and distress, they could provide meaning and direction in people's lives (Thoits, 1983, 1986).

After 1988, we began to broaden our understanding of multiple identities by considering all the person, role, and social identities: (1) within the person and (2) across persons within a situation. Within the perceptual control system and borrowing from Powers (1973), identities could be understood as forming a hierarchical control system composed of an interlocking set of individual control systems at multiple levels (Burke, 1997; Stets & Harrod, 2004; Tsushima & Burke, 1999). Multiple identities could be at the same level in which the identity standards of each would be set or controlled by a higher level within the system. Multiple identities also could exist at different levels, where one identity was higher than the other within the system, and where the output of the higher identity was the standard for the lower identity. Each of these arrangements has different implications. Further, when we discuss these arrangements across persons, one issue is how individuals coordinate their own identities so that all identities can be verified in the situation.

*Multiple Identities within Persons*

Here we discuss identities at the same level rather than identities at different levels because there is empirical research on the former but not the latter. Thus, for identities at the same level, each of the identities has its own perceptual input, standard, and output, though the outputs of the two identities must be combined in some manner as there is only one person acting. If the two identity standards have no overlap in meanings, the two identities can operate independently of each other. The output (behavior) meanings of one identity have no implication in the situation for the output meanings of the other identity. For example, claiming the athlete identity may have no meanings in common with claiming the identity of singer.

However, the meanings in the two identity standards may have some overlap or commonality such that the output meanings of one identity may overlap with the output meanings of the other identity, for example,



claiming the identities of assertive and masculine. In this case, each identity supports the other because the meanings of one align with the meanings of the other. Still yet, the output meanings of one identity could conflict with the output meanings of the other identity, for example, claiming the identities of assertive and feminine. The behavior that verifies one identity may not verify the other identity. The resolution to this conflict would be for the standards of both identities to change so that the meanings of each come into agreement. The standard of one identity may change more than the other, and it is likely that the identity with the higher salience and/or higher commitment will change less because of the stronger ties to others implied by having higher salience or commitment. To maintain such ties, the identity cannot change much without disturbing the whole network.

A study of leadership within a group examined the relationship between two identities (the task identity and socioemotional identity) for individuals in task-oriented groups (Burke, 2003). This study showed that the two leadership identities within persons had nothing significant in common. Each operated independently of the other to influence task and socioemotional behavior, and each was shown to independently bring about changes in leadership behavior to increase identity verification. However, it was interesting that disturbances to the performance of one identity were positively correlated with the disturbances to the performance of the other. If people were pushed by situational exigencies to do too much (or too little) task leadership (relative to their identity standard), then those same exigencies pushed their socioemotional leadership to be too high (or too low).

Another study on multiple identities within the person examined married people's gender identity and mastery identity and assessed how their meanings on each identity influenced attempts to control their spouse (Stets, 1995). The findings revealed an overlap in the meanings of the gender identity and the mastery identity with masculine meanings imparting higher levels of mastery, but there was no influence of mastery identity meanings on gender identity meanings. Both gender identity (but not gender) and the mastery identity influenced attempts to control the spouse. Lower levels of the mastery identity and higher levels of the masculine gender identity both increased attempts to control the spouse. While masculinity is consistent with controlling others, it was suggested that those with low mastery might enact controlling behavior to compensate for their perceived lack of control over their environment.

In still another study, the researchers examined how social status influenced the verification of three identities (worker, friend, and academic identity) that were held by a sample of people (Stets & Harrod, 2004).

The meanings in the three identities had little in common, so each of the identities operated quite independently. Yet the verification of each was in part a function of the location of the individual in the status structure of society: persons with higher status (as indicated by age and education) were better able to verify all of the different identities they held.

### *Multiple Identities across Persons*

How do people coordinate with others in a situation so that everyone's relevant identities can be verified? While it is possible that the meanings being controlled by the identities of one person are independent of other's identities in a situation (e.g., what one does has little influence on what another does and vice versa), this is unlikely. More likely, people are activating identities relevant to the situation (and relevant to the identities of others also involved in the situation), and the concern is to control relevant meanings in either a cooperative or a competitive fashion. With multiple people in the situation, and with each trying to verify their identities, the actions of one person may be a disturbance to others and make verification more or less difficult. Several studies have examined the relationships among multiple identities within a situation as individuals attempt to both manifest and verify their identities.

In one study, the researchers studied the leadership identities of each of four participants in small task-oriented groups who were working together to accomplish a series of four discussion tasks (Riley & Burke, 1995). The level of the leadership identity of each of the participants as well as the level of leadership behavior that was enacted by each participant was measured. The findings revealed that the leadership identity, in general, predicted the level of leadership behavior, but there were still instances when some participants engaged in more than the expected level of leadership (given the level of their leadership identity), while others engaged in less than their expected level. The findings also revealed that those who engaged in too much or too little leadership behavior for their identities in any of the four tasks were less satisfied with their role in the group, and they acted to increase or decrease their leadership behavior in the next task (if it was less or more than expected given their leadership identities). Participants thus were managing their leadership behavior to both match the meanings in their identity standard and match the coordinated behaviors of others in the task-oriented group to accomplish the task. Perhaps amazingly, they were generally able to do this.

In another study, the researchers examined the relationship between the spousal identities of newly married individuals over a period of three years

(Burke & Stets, 1999). They found that verification of the spousal identity of each partner had the consequence of increasing (1) positive feelings of love for the spouse, (2) trust in the spouse, and (3) a sense of “we-ness” or a strong bond between the spouses. Nonverification of the spousal identity moved the relationship in the opposite direction. While the degree of verification of the spousal identity, like all identities, is subject to exogenous disturbances, the general movement is increasingly stronger bonds between spouses in what we called “mutual verification” contexts, that is, a context in which each spouse verifies the identity of the other spouse at the same time verifying their own spousal identity. Alternatively, lack of verification impels movement toward reduced love, trust, and weaker bonds, leading to marital dissolution (Cast & Burke, 2002).

In yet another study examining the relationship between the spousal identities of newly married individuals over a period of three years, the researchers looked at the impact of the reflected appraisals of each spouse on the spousal identity of the other partner as well as the self over time (Cast, Stets, & Burke, 1999). When spouses interact within the family, each person’s spousal identity must complement the spousal identity of the other in order to avoid conflict. In this way, each person’s identity will influence the other’s identity in terms of taking on the meanings of the spousal identity attributed by the partner. The researchers hypothesized that the degree to which each identity would influence the other would be a function of the relative status of the husband and wife, with the spousal identity of the higher-status partner having a stronger influence on the meanings of the spousal identity of the lower-status partner. Indeed, this is what they found when status was measured as the level of education and income of each of the partners. Further, it did not make a difference if the higher-status partner was the husband or the wife. If the status of each partner was relatively equal, the influence on the spousal identity was equal in both directions – husband to wife and wife to husband. Looking at the way in which multiple identities in a situation influence each other has brought us to consider the question of identity change more generally.

### *Identity Change*

Identity change occurs when the meanings in one’s identity shift over time. Since 1988, more theorizing and empirical work has emerged on identity change. One of the things we know is that identity change is ongoing but generally very gradual. Because the perceptual control system is a dynamic

model, everything, including the identity standard, is always changing, but the changes are generally small and slow, so that one is mostly aware of the stability. Individuals may not find their identity as different from yesterday, last week, or last month. It is only when considering a longer period of time ranging from months to years that they may see a difference. For example, in the study above on the relationship between status and the degree of influence on the meanings of the partner's spousal identity, the spouse identity of the lower-status spouse changed in the direction defined by the higher-status spouse through reflected appraisals. However, this change occurred slowly over a three-year period, but was cumulative and significant (Cast et al., 1999).

There are three ways in which identities may change (Burke, 2006a). Two of these changes we have already discussed. The first occurs when identity standard meanings and behavior meanings conflict, causing a change in both. When behavior meanings do not match identity standard meanings, reflected appraisals (the meanings that others are attributing to the self in the situation) may either exceed or fall short of one's identity standard meanings. Research has studied whether identity change is more likely to occur when reflected appraisals meanings are higher or lower than identity standard meanings (Cast & Cantwell, 2007). They found that when the reflected appraisals do not match the identity standard, peoples' identities slowly change in the direction of the discrepant reflected appraisals, but individuals also successfully acted to change the reflected appraisals over time. Both processes occurred simultaneously. However, it did not matter if the reflected appraisals were too high relative to the identity standard or if they were too low; the amount of change in the identity was the same.

If situational changes persist and people's meanings of themselves in those situations are unable to adjust to match their identity meanings, their identity meanings may slowly change. For example, one study tracked the changes in the gender identity meanings of newly married couples over the course of a year upon the birth of their first child (Burke & Cast, 1997). The birth of a child is a change in the situation that is generally irreversible. Becoming parents tends to move individuals to more traditional "gendered" meanings of parenting, and this was clearly the case in this study. The researchers found that in order to successfully accommodate the situational change of a newborn, the gender identity of husbands became somewhat more masculine and the gender identity of the wives became somewhat more feminine. Essentially, changes in the meanings in the situation that cannot be counteracted through the verification process will produce changes in the identity standard meanings in the direction of the

situation meanings so that the identity can be verified. However, this change is very slow, occurring over weeks, months, or even years.

In addition to changes in the situation bringing about changes in identities, the existence of multiple identities that conflict is another source of change. For example, a person who is a minister and has an identity that stipulates meanings of gentleness may also have an identity of masculinity that encourages meanings of toughness. To work together toward the same goal, the meanings in one or both of these identities will change. As mentioned earlier, the less salient and committed identities may be more likely to change or to change more than identities that have higher salience or commitment.

Another form of identity change not involving changes in the meaning of the standard centers on changes in the salience of identities. For example, changes in a situation can cause a shift in one's identity as when individuals enter environments that provide few possibilities for choosing which identities to enact. In other words, the social structure is "closed" rather than "open" (Serpe, 1987; Serpe & Stryker, 1987, 1993). An open structure is one that allows more choice in how to behave compared to a "closed" structure in which individuals have little choice in the way they enact an identity. An example of empirical research on this was a study of five identities held by newly enrolled college students who were followed over the first four months at school (fall term) (Serpe, 1987). The relative salience (probability of enacting the identity across situations) of the coursework, extracurricular, athletic/recreational, personal involvement, and dating identities were measured along with their commitment (ties to others in the social structure based on the identity) at three points in time.

While there was stability in these identities over time, there was change in the level of salience of the different identities as the students came into a new (college) environment. The degree of change in salience was, in part, a function of the degree of "openness" of the structure in which the identity was embedded. Thus, the coursework identity, which allowed the least choice, showed the least amount of change in the level of salience as a function of commitment. The athletic/recreational and dating identities were seen as embedded in open structures and thus allowed the most individual choice. Here, the most change occurred in the level of salience as a function of the level of commitment to the identity.

In general, identities can and do change both in the meanings that define the identity and in the level of salience of the identity. If a person has difficulty in verifying an identity over time, the identity is likely to change slowly over time, while if the reflected appraisals affirm the identity, it is

likely to remain stable over time. Similarly, if the social structure in which the identity is embedded allows more freedom of choice, the salience of the identity can change more easily as a function of commitment or the number of people one is connected to given the identity.

### *The Introduction of Emotions*

Since 1988, more serious attention has been given to the role of emotion in identity theory beginning with the idea that negative arousal (distress) was experienced with individuals' identities were not verified in a situation (Burke, 1991). This idea provided an important insight into how emotions emerged within the self and jump-started research on emotions in identity theory over the next 25 years. Essentially, when individuals get support for their identity (Stryker, 2004), or when others in a situation see them in the same way that they see themselves given their identity claim (Burke & Stets, 2009), they will feel positive emotions. In turn, the identity may increase in salience and commitment. Alternatively, the lack of support or shared view as to who one is in the situation generates negative emotions. Correspondingly, the identity may decrease in salience and commitment.

The emotional outcomes of the identity verification process have been examined in a longitudinal survey study that followed newly married couples during the first two years of marriage (Burke & Harrod, 2005; Burke & Stets, 1999), and in a series of studies simulating the worker identity in the laboratory (Stets, 2003, 2004, 2005; Stets & Asencio, 2008; Stets & Osborn, 2008). In all these studies, researchers found that when individuals thought that others saw them as failing to meet their identity standard, they experienced negative emotions. However, when they thought that others saw them as exceeding their identity standard, the longitudinal survey found that individuals reported negative feelings even though others' evaluations were more positive than their own evaluations (Burke & Harrod, 2005). The laboratory studies found individuals reported positive feelings when others saw them as exceeding their identity standards. Identity theory predicts a cognitive consistency process to individuals' emotional reactions, and the longitudinal survey supported this: people seek evaluations that match their self-views and avoid evaluations that do not match their self-views. However, the laboratory findings were suggestive of a self-enhancement process: people seek positive evaluations and avoid negative evaluations.

Recently, it has been argued that the cognitive consistency effect may not have emerged in the laboratory studies because at least two important factors were not measured: the reflected appraisal process (how people *think* that others see them in the situation) and the relevance of the situational meanings for the identity (Stets & Burke, 2014). Researchers used a large data set derived from seven studies that included both a survey and laboratory component to address the emotional responses that occur when identities are not verified (Stets & Burke, 2014). They examined whether individuals showed an enhancement response (they feel good) or consistency response (they feel bad) to identity nonverification in a positive direction (the meanings in the reflected appraisals are more positive than the meanings of the identity standard). They included a measure of both the reflected appraisals and the relevance of the situational meanings for the identity. The results showed that when reflected appraisals and situational meanings were taken into account, there was more evidence for a consistency effect (negative emotions) than an enhancement effect (positive emotions). This helps put prior research into perspective and identifies some of the measurement issues that can make it difficult to distinguish between consistency and enhancement effects.

Early on, it was hypothesized that more frequent nonverifying feedback would result in more intense negative emotions (Burke, 1991). The more the individuals receive feedback that others see them differently than how they see themselves, the more they will be unable to initiate or sustain whatever they are doing, and the more distressful their emotional reaction. Contrary to this, findings from the worker identity laboratory studies discussed earlier revealed that negative emotions become less rather than more intense (Stets, 2003, 2005). While a stronger negative response to repeated identity nonverification would indicate that individuals were resisting how others saw them, a weaker negative response would indicate that individuals were modifying their self-views in the direction of others' views. This is identity change.

It was also hypothesized that nonverification from significant others (family and friends) compared to nonsignificant others (strangers and acquaintances) would bring about more intense negative emotions (Burke, 1991). In interaction with a close other, each is likely to verify the identity of the other as they verify their own identity, resulting in a "mutually verifying" relationship. When such a relationship is disrupted, it could be experienced as particularly distressful and intense. This was tested in two ways. Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), researchers examined whether interaction in the family, comprising significant others,



resulted in more negative emotions than interaction at work, comprising nonsignificant others (Stets & Tsushima, 2001). Though identity nonverification was not directly tested either at home or at work, the analysis revealed that more intense anger was reported in the family than at work.

In a study that extended the worker identity studies discussed earlier, some participants had an opportunity to get to know their coworker for 10 minutes before the study began (this was the “familiar” condition and was a proxy for significant others) compared to not being given this opportunity (the “unfamiliar” condition and a proxy for nonsignificant others) (Stets, 2005). The results showed that familiarity did result in more negative emotions from identity nonverification, although it occurred only when the nonverification occurred once compared to more than once during the study. Because of the limitations in the above two studies (either there was no direct test of the verification process or there was no direct measure of significant others), more empirical work is needed.

More recently, an analysis on the source of nonverifying feedback has been expanded to consider the different emotions that may emerge depending on who is responsible for the nonverification: either the person or the other in the situation (Stets & Burke, 2005b). Thus, the attribution process is brought into the theory. For example, when individuals are responsible for their own identity nonverification, they may experience feelings such as embarrassment or shame. Alternatively, when others are responsible for the nonverification, individuals may experience feelings such as annoyance or hostility. While embarrassment or shame are negative feelings directed inward, annoyance or hostility are negative feelings directed outward.

Another expansion on the source of nonverifying feedback adds a consideration of the status and power of the nonverifying other relative to the person seeking identity verification (Stets & Burke, 2005b). Here, one’s position in the social structure is brought into the theory. For example, when the self rather than others is responsible for nonverification in a situation, the person may feel shame when others in the situation have higher status than the person, embarrassment when others are of equal status to the person, and discomfort when others have lower status. When others rather than the person are responsible for the person’s nonverification in a situation, the person may feel fear when others in the situation have higher power than the person, anger when others are of equal power, and rage when others have lower power.

We do know that those with higher status will be more likely to experience identity verification than those with lower status because they are



more influential in getting others to confirm their self-views (Cast et al., 1999). Because identity verification produces positive feelings, higher-status people will be more likely to enjoy positive feelings and less likely to experience negative feelings than lower-status people. Two studies support this idea.

Using GSS data, the relative status of identities in the home and at work was studied (Stets & Tsushima, 2001). In the home, the parent identity has the highest status, the child identity has the lowest status, and spouses, interacting with each other, have equal status. At work, the employer identity has the highest status, the employee identity has the lowest status, and coworkers, interacting with each other, have equal status. Consistent with the above, those with lower-status identities either at home or at work were more likely to report more intense anger. Further, those with lower-status identities were more likely to report their anger lasting a long time. In another study of the newly married couples, the higher-status person (higher education, occupation, and race) was more likely to have his or her spousal identity verified (compared to the lower-status person), and was less likely to report anger, depression, and distress for identity nonverification than lower-status persons (Burke, 2008).

Researchers in identity theory have begun to study specific emotions. Early research studied jealousy and anger in the home and at work (Ellestad & Stets, 1998; Stets & Tsushima, 2001). More recently, moral emotions such as anger, empathy, guilt, and shame have been examined (Stets, 2011; Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012; Stets, Carter, Harrod, Cerven, & Abrutyn, 2008). Like other emotions, moral emotions emerge from the nonverification process.

Emotions have been examined not only as an outcome of the identity process but also as a resource to be used for identity verification. Positive emotions can be a resource, regulating the negative feelings that emerge when people experience identity nonverification. This was shown in the Stets and Osborn (2008) research discussed earlier. The positive feelings continued to be experienced following feedback on the second and third task, even when the participants received feedback that fell short of their expectations on those tasks. The positive emotions associated with positive feedback appeared to temper the negative feelings associated with subsequent negative feedback. Negative emotions did not show the same persistence effects as positive emotions. The negative emotions did not continue beyond the point of their initial arousal unless individuals continued to receive negative feedback on subsequent tasks. Thus, emotions do more than signal verifying or nonverifying outcomes. Emotions influence

interactions beyond their initial encounter to influence feelings in subsequent encounters as well as achieve verification.

### *Identity Theory Applications*

While identity theory has developed as a theory over the past 25 years, simultaneously, the theory has found application in a variety of substantive areas. We review some of these areas including crime and law, education, race/ethnicity, gender, the family, and the environment.

#### *Crime and Law*

Interpersonal violence is a serious problem in our society. It has been suggested that identity theory can help us understand domestic violence because aggressive behavior is rooted in issues of self and identity (Stets & Osborn, 2007). An important goal in interaction is the verification of people's identities. If people experience identity nonverification, they may resort to aggression in an attempt to restore verification. This was investigated in a study of newly married couples (Stets & Burke, 2005a). It was shown that when an individual's spousal identity was not verified, that individual tended to increase their control over their spouse, which control included acts of aggression. Using aggression in one year significantly reduced identity verification of the spousal identity in the following year, resulting in even more aggression in later years: a spiraling down of the relationship.

Recent work has applied identity theory to the criminal identity of incarcerated offenders (Asencio & Burke, 2011). This study showed that the incarcerated offenders, rather than countering nonverifying feedback from peers and significant others as might be expected under identity theory, began to incorporate the noncriminal reflected appraisals into their identity (that they were not a criminal), changing their criminal identity toward a noncriminal identity. This occurred even controlling for the amount of time the individuals were incarcerated. This finding, like the results in the earlier study by Cast et al. (1999), revealed how identities can be changed when the person does not have the power or resources to resist discrepant reflected appraisals as is the case for incarcerated people.

Robertson (2009) used identity theory to explain the lapse of judgment that sometimes occurs among lawyers when they defend corporate and government scandals without recognizing their biases. In defending scandals, she argued that lawyers may have two relevant, but competing,

identities: that of attorney who works to protect and interpret the law, providing sound legal advice to his or her agency, and that of agency employee who works to protect the agency and advocate its goals. Robertson argued that when attorneys allow the employee identity to guide their behavior, they have a stake in a favorable outcome for the corporation, because in winning the case, it facilitates verification of their employee identity. In this way, attorneys acting in the employee identity are subject to the same distortions and biases as the corporation, thus the lawyers place themselves in a position that is unable to offer independent counsel. Partisan bias clouds their judgment. Robertson argues that to prevent this, agencies need to put procedures in place to maintain and strengthen the salience of the lawyer identity and reduce the salience of the employee identity.

### *Education*

In science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, men greatly outnumber women. In a series of studies, identity theory was used to explain women's underrepresentation in STEM disciplines and to explore how the underrepresentation might be overcome (Lee, 1998, 2002, 2005). The research revealed that gender meanings of being feminine were held by females for themselves. In contrast, more masculine gender meanings were held for science students, including occupants of the STEM disciplines. For females to enter the STEM disciplines, they would be taking on meanings that were contrary to the meanings of their gender identity. To avoid this gender identity nonverification, they chose not to enter the STEM disciplines.

Women who participated in a STEM summer program experienced emotionally satisfying relationships with others involved in science activities, which fostered a scientist identity (Lee, 2002). These good relationships were indicative of affective commitment. In turn, the bonds had the effect of increasing the salience of the scientist identity and engaging in STEM activities. Further, these bonds helped women to maintain science activities after they left the summer program, showing a more prominent or important scientist identity over time (Lee, 2005).

Other researchers have examined the educational aspirations of high school students by including students' academic identity in the standard Wisconsin status attainment model (Burke & Hoelter, 1988). While the original Wisconsin model worked well for White males, only when academic identity was included did the modified model work to predict educational expectations for groups for which it had not worked well previously, namely, White females and Black females. However, the model still did not

work well for Black males. Since the measure of the meaning of academic identity was invariant across all four groups (White males and females and Black males and females), the researchers reasoned that it must be the meaning of the educational expectations that set Black males apart.

A follow-up study confirmed this reasoning by showing that there were two sets of meanings about going to college that were held among the four groups in different proportions (Burke, 1989a). On the one hand, there were a set of social meanings of going to college (being with friends, participating in college social life), while on the other hand there were a set of work meanings (learning more about careers, getting a better job). While people in all groups had varying degrees of each of these views about the meaning of going to college, Black males had predominantly more of the social meanings of going to college, while White males had predominantly more of the work meanings of going to college. When the analysis of the Wisconsin model including academic identity was estimated for only persons who had predominantly more work meanings of college, the model worked well in predicting educational expectations for both White and Black males. When the model was estimated for persons with social meanings of college, the model failed for both White and Black males. This made clear the underlying mechanism of matching identity meanings with situational behavior meanings as important for the verification of identities, as well as the importance of measuring meanings relevant to the identity.

### *Race/Ethnicity*

Researchers have studied how identities operate across different race/ethnicities as well as how race/ethnicity as a social identity manifests itself. In one study, it was discovered that the salience of the family identity for Blacks, Whites, and Latinos had different sources across the different groups (Owens & Serpe, 2003). The salience of the family identity was a function of self-esteem for Whites and Blacks. However, for Latinos, a salient family identity was a function of commitment both in terms of the number of ties and depth of the ties to the family. This revealed how significant the family was for Latinos compared to Blacks and Whites.

This familial emphasis may have other unintended effects for Latinos. For example, other research revealed that compared to Whites and Blacks, Latinos were less likely to have their friend identity verified (Stets & Harrod, 2004). The researchers suggested that because of Latinos devotion to the family, they may be more likely to rely on and confide in kin members than friends. If friendships are not encouraged and developed, it may

become difficult to acquire the resources such as care, trust, and loyalty, which are necessary to facilitate verification of the friend identity.

Other analyses of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos found that increased commitment (including both more and deeper ties) to work and to voluntary association identities for all three ethnic groups was a function of interacting with the same individuals at work and in the voluntary associations (Stryker et al., 2005). Viewed in another way, this supports the identity theory assumption that losing a position and identity in one network threatens relationships and an identity in another network to the degree that the networks have common members.

### *Gender*

Research has examined the effect of gender identity on school performance on a large sample of 1,688 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade children (Burke, 1989b). The results revealed that gender identity had separate and somewhat different effects on school grades across a range of subjects. Across all subjects, boys and girls with a more feminine gender identity performed better even when controlling for sex, race, grade, IQ, and sex of teacher. While overall girls outperformed boys in these grades, a good portion of the difference appeared to be due not to sex but to the impact of what it means to be a boy or girl, that is, gender identity. Controlling for gender identity reduced the degree to which girls outperformed boys, but did not eliminate it (except in math and science in the sixth grade).

Others studied gender identity in adulthood by examining the problem-solving interactions of newly married couples (Stets & Burke, 1996). The focus was on negative and positive behaviors in conversations as coded in the interaction of husbands and wives working to solve one or more issues they agreed were problematic. Based on the dominance and competitive meanings of masculinity, the researchers expected that husbands and wives with a more masculine gender identity would be more likely to use the negative behaviors (e.g., criticisms, defensive talk, and putdowns) and less likely to use positive behaviors (e.g., agreeing and using humor) in the problem-solving interactions. They also expected that, based on expectation states theory, males/husbands (who have a higher status in structure) would use more negative behaviors than females/wives (who have a lower status in the social structure).

While the data supported the identity theory predictions about the effects of gender identity (masculinity predicting more negative and less positive behavior than femininity), the results for status were the opposite of the expectations: females/wives engaged in more negative and less

positive behavior than males/husbands. To understand this reversal with respect to sex differences, Stets and Burke discussed how women, because of their low status, suffer from a stricter standard regarding competence. Women have to work harder than men to be viewed as capable. Thus, acting more “masculine” by using more negative behaviors compared to men is a way to be seen as credible and capable in interaction. Interestingly, rather than reversing the power structure within the marriage, wives’ more negative behavior simply helps equalize power between themselves and their spouses.

This same pattern of women having to work harder appeared in another study that examined the effects of leadership identity, legitimation of being a leader, and gender status in small task-oriented discussion groups (Burke, Stets, & Cerven, 2007). The investigators hypothesized that resources that come with both high status and legitimation through authorization of being in the leader position (support for a person’s leader position comes from people in higher positions in the situation) would increase the ability of individuals to verify their leadership identity. The findings showed an asymmetric effect of these factors.

Women were undervalued for their leadership compared to males. Women benefited from legitimation to engage in more leadership behavior than their nonlegitimated counterparts. This benefit of legitimation brought their evaluation up to the level suggested by their leadership identity, thus verifying their identities. Men, on the other hand, were evaluated at the level of their leadership identity without the benefit of having their leadership position legitimated. With legitimation, males were evaluated above their level of leadership identity. This overevaluation resulted in their leadership identities not being verified. Thus, the principle that legitimation and status provide resources that help in the verification of identities must also consider the expectations that come with those resources: women without leadership legitimation suffer from a deficit of expectations, while men with leadership legitimation suffer from expectations that are too high.

### *Family*

As discussed earlier in this chapter, there is evidence that verification of the spousal identity results in positive outcomes such as increased trust and commitment in the marriage; nonverification of the spousal identity produces the opposite effects (Burke & Stets, 1999). Also discussed earlier in this chapter, research has revealed that the views of the higher-status spouse in the marriage will be more likely to influence (1) the spousal

identity views of the lower-status spouse and (2) the lower-status spouse's view of the spousal identity of the higher-status spouse (Cast et al., 1999).

In addition, research shows the effects of both structural power (occupation and education) and relationship power (the person who is in love the least has the most power) on spousal identity meanings and spousal behavior meanings (Cast, 2003). At issue is whether married persons behave in ways that are consistent with their own spousal identity or with how their spouse sees them. The results showed that those with the greater structural power and/or relationship power had more influence on their spouse's role performance than the reverse. Further, the more powerful persons were better able to resist the influence of their spouse on their own role performance. There was no difference in the way the process worked for husbands or wives. In general, the findings revealed that structural and relationship power influence how the spousal identity gets played out in a marriage.

Finally, research has investigated the transition to parenthood among newly married couples (Cast, 2004). The results indicated that parenthood per se did not hurt marital well-being when prior levels of well-being were controlled. However, the failure to verify the parent identity had a large impact on both individual and marital well-being. When the parent identity was not verified, parents were more depressed, anxious, and had lower feelings of esteem and efficacy. They also reported less happiness, love, liking, and trust in the marriage.

### *The Environment*

One other area in which identity theory has been applied is to the environment, particularly environmentally responsive behavior (Stets & Biga, 2003). Historically, researchers have predicted environmental behavior from one's attitudes about the environment, and only a modest relationship has been found (Tarrant & Cordell, 1997). When one's environment identity is included in the analysis, that is, seeing oneself as environmentally friendly and supportive of the environment versus environmentally unfriendly and exploitative, environmentally responsive behavior emerges out of the identity process rather than the attitude process. Thus, more research is needed that includes one's environment identity in studies on one's behavior toward the environment.

The above applications indicate the viability of identity theory in explaining different aspects of social life. Because identity theory focuses on behaviors as a means to control perceptions of sign and symbolic meanings relevant to one's identities, and because identities are relevant in any

situation in which people find themselves, identity theory can be applied to a wide range of social and institutional settings. Any theory of criminal behavior or family behavior, for example, would benefit from considering the identity relevant meanings that are controlled by that behavior. In this way, identity theory can help us understand the full range of social behavior with which sociology is concerned. The general principles of identity theory should apply and be useful in a host of social contexts.

## IDENTITY THEORY FOR THE FUTURE

As we look to the future of identity theory, there are two primary concerns that manifest themselves: the need for future development of the theory and the need to integrate it more strongly into the overall framework of social psychological theories.

### *Theory Development*

We suggest three areas of future research development. These involve resources, stigmatized identities, and identity change.

#### *Resources*

More research is needed on the role of resources in the identity process, including understanding both *actual resources* (resources that are currently supporting identities, interactions, and groups in the situation), and *potential resources* (resources that are not currently being used, but may be used in the future). Additionally, while there has been some research on resources being used to facilitate verification, as discussed earlier, the focus has been on symbolic meanings to the exclusion of sign meanings. Both sets of meanings are contained in the identity standard. However, it is the sign meanings that are attached to resources in the situation. When these meanings are controlled (especially those contained in role identity standards), they provide the resource infrastructure that allows groups, organizations, and institutions to exist (Burke, 2004).

For example, the family, as a group, needs to be sustained. Role identities, such as the spousal identity and the parent identity, need to be verified to help facilitate maintenance of the family unit. In the parent identity, sign meanings will be controlled in order to verify the parent identity such as



having a crib for the infant, food to feed the child, clothes to keep the child warm, a car to transport the child to the doctor, money, a home, and all other material and nonmaterial resources such as love, support, and care. To the extent that the control of sign meanings verifies identities within the family such as the spousal identity, the parent identity, the child identity, the sibling identity and so forth, then by extension, the family unit is sustained. And, when this is repeated across the thousands of families in the United States, for example, the implications for the flow of material resources across the country are immense. To understand all this, more research on the role of sign meanings in the identity verification process is needed.

In addition to the sign meanings that are part of the identity standard for all identities, there are also emotion meanings, that is, emotional responses to signs and symbols. Some identities carry stronger emotion meanings than others. For example, the clown identity likely has happiness as a meaning in the identity standard, the identity of rape victim may have meanings of anger and fear, and the identity of widower may have meanings of grief and sorrow. We hypothesize that the failure to verify identities that contain both cognitive and emotion meaning (compared to those that contain only cognitive meanings) will result in stronger negative reactions because both the cognitive and affective meanings are not verified. If the identities carry weaker emotion meanings, the negative emotional reaction to nonverification might not be as strong. This needs to be investigated. Further, whether the strength of the emotional response is a function of the number of meanings not being verified (more nonverified meanings leading to a stronger emotional response) or the nature of the meanings not being verified (cognitive and emotional meanings, or alternatively, cognitive or emotional meanings) also needs empirical investigation.

### *Stigmatized Identities*

Most of the identities that have been researched are normative or positive identities. Very little research has examined negative, stigmatized, or counternormative identities. What are the outcomes of verifying negative, stigmatized, or counternormative identities? Two consequences are possible, and research needs to sort through these and perhaps other possibilities. One possibility is that while society, in general, views such identities as negative or stigmatized, the people who hold these identities may not see them as negative in the same way. Because it is the meanings held in the identity standard of the individual that are involved in the verification, if the identity standard does not contain negative meanings for the individual,

then verification should proceed normally, with positive feelings generated for verification, and negative feelings generated for nonverification.

A second possibility is that people who hold the stigmatized identity see these identities as negative. Verification of a negative identity may remind the person of the negative valence attached to who they are, but the verification of who they are may reduce the negative feelings. When nonverification occurs, these negative feelings may become stronger both because of the negative valence of the identity and also because of the failure to verify one's identity. Verifying a negative or stigmatized identity may be the best of a bad situation – nonverification would be worse. Empirical research needs to test these expectations.

### *Identity Change*

The sources of identity change are another area in which research is needed. We have already conducted studies that show identity change results from nonverification and from holding identities with slightly different meanings. Both of these are endogenous sources. We also have shown how the meanings of the identity of one person can influence the meanings of an identity of another person. This is an exogenous source. However, we have not examined exogenous sources beyond this one. For example, the placement of an identity in the social structure may be more or less likely to lead to identity change. This might be the case because of the differential distribution of resources across the social structure with the result that identities higher in the social structure have the necessary resources of power and status for verification compared to identities lower in the social structure.

Another source of exogenous identity change that has yet to be investigated is the impact of what have been called “open” versus “closed” structures (Serpe, 1987). In more open systems where choice is possible, people can find positions in the social structure that reinforce the meanings in their identities. In more closed structures where choice is less possible, identities may have to change in order to fit into the rules and responsibilities associated with different positions. Also, the overall balance between endogenous and exogenous sources of identity change would be important to learn.

Finally, we need to examine changes in identities involving increasing or decreasing salience, prominence, or commitment. Also unexplored is how and why individuals take on specific identities when they do, and what encourages them to exit or abandon them when they do.

*Links to Other Social Psychological Theories*

While the development of identity theory per se is important, the relationship between identity theory and other social psychological theories within the overall structure of social psychology also needs to be better understood. Over time, identity theory has been linked to a number of other social psychological theories to show common approaches as well as ways in which each theory can augment the other to the benefit of both. For example, researchers have made associations between identity theory and affect control theory (Smith-Lovin & Robinson, 2006), expectation states theory (Burke, 2008; Cast et al., 1999; Stets & Harrod, 2004), network exchange theory (Burke, 1997), justice theories (Stets, 2003; Stets & Osborn, 2008), legitimation theory (Burke et al., 2007), social comparison theory (Stets & Burke, 2013b), social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000), and social movements theory (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). But, there is still more work to be done.

For example, affect control theory reminds us that we act to maintain not only our own identities in a situation but also the identities of others. At issue for identity theorists is to consider whether, in situations, individuals maintain the identities of others only when it simultaneously sustains their own identities, or whether individuals are motivated to maintain the identities of others as distinct from maintaining their own identities. As another example, and looked at from a different perspective, theorists in expectation states and exchange theories might examine how identity processes operate within their theoretical frameworks. For instance, are performance expectations associated with one's status in a group more likely to be challenged if one's identity meanings conflict with those performance expectations? If a high-status male is not assertive in the group, is it because he views himself as having a timid identity? Under what conditions will status meanings or identity meanings have more influence in guiding one's behavior?

In exchange theory, how might behavior choices be different when we take into account not only the structural conditions of the exchange network (such as negatively connected networks or power-imbalanced networks) but also the agency of the individuals' identities involved in the exchanges. If people are exchanging in different power network structures, how might they behave when, for example, the identity of themselves as "fair" or "unfair" (their fairness identity) is considered? Will we see more equitable exchanges or will the position in the network predict one's behavior in the exchange? Further, when the fairness identity is not verified in

an exchange, will individuals modify their exchange behavior by sacrificing more or less depending on whether they are underverified or oververified for being fair and whether they are in a power advantaged or power disadvantaged position?

Finally, identity theory historically has focused on role identities, although it is now theorizing and studying social/group and person identities, while social identity theory has consistently emphasized social identities. Within groups people play out various roles, and individuals enact these various roles in different ways, given the unique person identities they bring to their roles. Thus, in situations, group, role, and person identities may not be easily separated, and we may need to examine their simultaneous occurrence. This poses a challenge as to how we might examine their separate effects, even when these effects might not be independent of each other. In this way, the relationship of social identity theory and identity theory can be better understood.

Independent of their simultaneous occurrence within a group, we need more research on the relationships among person, role, and social/group identities. Do multiple identities within a person that cross the different bases relate differently than, for example, multiple person identities, multiple role identities, or multiple social/group identities? Are the consequences of the verification of person, role, and social identities different? For example, does the verification of person, role, and social identities form the basis of three dimensions of esteem: authenticity, self-efficacy, and self-worth, respectively? Does the verification of person identities increase feelings of authenticity, the verification of role identities increase self-efficacy, and the verification of social identities increase self-worth? Further, does the verification of one identity, such as a social/group identity, and the self-worth that it generates encourage individuals to pursue the verification of other identities, such as role and person identities, especially when they may be difficult to verify?

While social identity theorists generally do not focus on person identities given the depersonalization process that social/group identities activate (persons identify with groups rather than conceive of themselves as individuals/actors), and while role identities have been more the focus in identity theory, person identities also guide behavior in situations. While we are beginning to study person identities such as the moral identity (Stets & Carter, 2006, 2011, 2012; Stets et al., 2008), the control identity (Stets, 1997; Stets & Burke, 1994, 1996), and the environment identity (Stets & Biga, 2003), there are many more person identities that need to be examined as we come to better understand all of human social behavior.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, we find there have been many additions as well as elaborations and clarifications of identity theory since 1988. Among the more significant developments are the perceptual control system, the link of symbols and signs to resources, an extension of the bases of identities beyond role identities to group/category and person identities, a clearer recognition of the role of the situation, and the introduction of emotions. There is much more to learn and more theoretical clarity and expansion that is needed. However, the future is bright and the theory remains a promising approach toward understanding how, in the words of Stryker, “society shapes self shapes social behavior.”

## NOTES

1. Affect control theory restricted the number of dimensions of meaning to only the EPA dimensions in order to be able to use the same semantic space across a wide variety of concepts and identities.
2. Obviously there are restrictions on the behavior chosen to at least not contradict other identities, including those having to do with morality and propriety.
3. Later, we discuss the extension of identity theory to include two additional bases for identities beyond that of roles: person identities and social identities.
4. Early on, we conceptualized gender identity as a role identity, not having a clear theory about the different bases of identities that we have today. Nevertheless, the general principles held.

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