

# Identity Accumulation, Verification, and Well-Being

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## Introduction

According to popular culture, *happiness* and *self-esteem* are two outcomes that most people seek. Over 40 million results appear on an internet search for these terms, indicating that there is a great deal of literature and many websites are available with advice and information on the topic. From a research perspective, sociological social-psychology has focused on people's identities as intimately tied to the achievement of happiness and self-esteem.

An identity is the set of meanings people hold for themselves with respect to the roles they play (mother, minister, iron-worker), the groups or social categories they belong to (American, member of the PTA, female), or the important characteristics that distinguish one person from another (fair, dominant, moral). What does it mean to be who one is as a mother or a moral person, for example? Holding an identity situates a person in society in terms of the roles, groups, and categories that one holds and that give meaning to the individual. People act to portray their identity's meanings; thus, identities guide behavior. In addition, people act to verify their identities; that is, ensure that both the self and others see the individual as embodying those meanings. If a woman holds a student identity that has meanings of "intellectual" and "studious," she will act to give the impression of being intellectual and studious. If others imply that she is not intellectual or studious, she will act more strongly to be intellectual and studious to verify her identity by getting others to see her as she sees herself. If she is successful in this verification, she will feel good about herself; and if she fails, she will feel bad about herself.

Two hypotheses that link identities to psychological well-being, including happiness and self-esteem, have emerged. The first, referred to as the "identity accumulation hypothesis" (Thoits, 1983, 1986, 2003), draws heavily from the work of Durkheim (1951

[1897]) as well as the work of Mead (1934) and Cooley ([1902], 1964) to inform us how people derive self-meanings (i.e., identities) and a sense of connectedness from the social positions they hold. These meaningful connections to society in turn provide positive emotions and feelings of self-worth.

The second hypothesis, commonly referred to as the “identity verification hypothesis” (Burke and Stets, 2009), draws heavily from the work of Mead (1934) and Cooley ([1902], 1964) and their discussions of reflexivity to inform the process of having others confirm or verify persons’ sense of who they are: their identities. This confirmation, validation, or verification affirms the self and provides the positive sense of self that is reflected in measures of psychological well-being such as happiness and self-esteem.

Each of these hypotheses or approaches has found support in research when examined alone, but the way in which they relate to each other, in complementary or contingent form, is still unknown. In the following discussion, we review each of the two approaches, propose hypotheses based on these approaches, and then use newly collected data to test the proposed hypotheses and better understand the mechanisms involved in each approach and the way in which the underlying mechanisms can work together to benefit the individual.

## Identities

Because both approaches have a common understanding of *identity*, we begin with this concept, as understood within the context of identity theory. As we briefly indicated before, an identity is a set of internal meanings held by the individual that help define their “self”; that is, what it means to be who one is in terms of roles such as nurse, mother, professor (role identities); in terms of groups or categories such as Catholic, male, or volunteer organization member (social identities); and in terms of characteristics that distinguish one person from another such as moral, dominant, or outgoing (person identities) (Burke and Stets, 2009). The first two bases of identities we mentioned, roles and groups or social categories, tie one to or embed one in the social structure and shared culture. The third identifies self-characteristics, the meanings of which are also shared from the general culture; for example, being kind, or supportive, or dominant.

In addition to the internal meanings, each identity can also be characterized in terms of its salience (the likelihood of the identity’s being activated in a setting), its prominence (how important the identity is to the individual), and its level of commitment (how strongly the identity is tied to the social structure through role relationships and shared memberships). This last concept, identity commitment, reflects the number of persons one is tied to because of the identity; for example, an employee is tied to an employer and other coworkers because of the employee identity (Burke and Reitzes, 1991; Stryker, 1968).

Because we occupy many roles and groups or social categories in society, we all have multiple identities, each of which contains sets of meanings defining who we are; for example, as a mother and as a member of the country club. These identities tie us in multiple ways to society through those roles and groups. When activated, these identities provide guidance for our behavior to portray the meanings held in the standard, thus making clear who we are to ourselves and others. Clearly, having identities connects us to the social structure in terms of roles and group membership and provides us with meanings that are maintained through the verification process. Having more identities gives us more connections with others and more meanings that define us.

## The Identity Accumulation Hypothesis

Thoits (1983) captured these ideas of meaning and connectedness when she formulated what she termed the “identity accumulation hypothesis,” building on earlier work concerning the negative impact of social isolation. This work showed, for example, that there were higher rates of mental illness among those less strongly connected to society such as the unemployed, the unmarried, and the retired. Much of this work considered rates of mental illness rather than individuals who may or may not display symptoms. Yet, the logic and theory that apply to relationships among rate data do not necessarily apply to individual-level data (Robinson, 1950). For example, the rate of mental illness may be higher in populations that have more unemployed persons. But it is not necessarily the case that it is the unemployed persons who are ill. Trying to make this connection is known as the “ecological fallacy.”

To address the potential issue of the ecological fallacy with rate data, Thoits reformulated the social isolation hypothesis away from group-level thinking to individual-level thinking by examining individual identities as they are adopted and maintained in role relationships that are governed by specific meanings and behavioral expectations. Role expectations associated with identities, she wrote, “give purpose, meaning, direction, and guidance to one’s life.” The adoption of multiple roles, she added, provides an individual with a stronger sense of “meaningful existence and purposeful, ordered behavior [which] are crucial to psychological health” (Thoits, 1983: 175).

This reformulation indeed demonstrates that the idea of social integration/isolation can be applied at the individual level of analysis, and it further supports the idea that isolation, when considered at the individual level, can indeed affect individual levels of distress or psychological well-being. The general argument is that having multiple identities leads to greater social integration for the individual, which in turn provides more meaning and guidance for the individual’s behavior. It is argued that meaning and behavioral expectations are essential for the individual’s psychological well-being and ordered, functional behavior (Thoits, 1983).

According to the identity accumulation approach, when an individual acquires a social role such as worker, spouse, or volunteer, the person is connected (a) to the expectations and meanings associated with that role, (b) to other people connected to that role (i.e., role partners), and (c) to the social structure in which the role is embedded. The connections both to other people (that is, role partners) and the organization in which the role is embedded link the individual to the social world. Therefore, following this line of reasoning, if the adoption of a role better ties an individual to the social world, then the adoption of *multiple* roles results in a person's even greater attachment to and integration into the social structure.

For example, when an individual adopts the role of mother, she is connected not only to the other people associated with the role, such as the "child" and "father," but she is also tied to the institution of the family/kinship and its specific ideologies and institutional norms (Turner and Stets, 2006). In addition, she adopts meanings specific to the role of "mother" (such as being caring and protective) that are incorporated into the self to become one of the identities that inform her of who she is as a person. The expectations attached to the role position of "mother" also provide guidelines for how the person is to behave, and it is these expectations that direct her into carrying out particular actions such as caring for, bathing, and disciplining the child. In addition to directing one's behavior, these expectations carry meanings that comprise one's identity in that they inform a person of "who" one is by "what" one does, thus enabling a person to describe herself according to the meanings of her actions. She might describe herself as a person who is "caring" or "protective."

Holding an identity (1) increases one's social integration through ties to other people and the social structure, (2) provides individuals with multiple sources to derive self-meanings (identities), and (3) guides behaviors. These three characteristics are argued to reduce distress, prevent disordered conduct and, in turn, promote greater "psychological well-being" (Adelmann, 1994; Barnett and Baruch, 1985; Menaghan, 1989; Thoits, 1983, 1992). Essentially, people feel better when they are connected to others and the social world, know what they are supposed to do, and have meaningful understandings of themselves. Having multiple identities increases each of these psychologically beneficial outcomes.

Indeed, many scholars in the role accumulation literature have argued this point and validated its claims either directly or indirectly (Jackson, 1997; Simon, 1997; Thoits, 1983, 1986, 2003). Sieber (1974: 576) argued that multiple roles produce "ego gratification, namely, the sense of being appreciated or needed by diverse role partners". In another study on role accumulation, Miller, Moen, and Dempster-McClain (1991) found that the number of nonfamily roles in addition to being a wife and mother was related to increased levels of self-esteem and feelings of general life satisfaction and decreased feelings of detachment from the wife and mother role.

Based on these ideas, our first hypothesis is about replicating this existing work showing the connection between having more identities and feeling good about oneself.

*H1a: The greater the number of identities, the more one will experience positive emotions.*

*H1b: The greater the number of identities, the higher will be one's self-esteem.*

Because some of the reasoning for the identity accumulation hypothesis has to do with being connected with others, it may be that the positive effects are at least partly due to the number of others to whom one is connected. The concept of identity commitment reflects this number of others to whom one is connected because of the identity. We may therefore hypothesize that:

*H2a: The accumulation of identities for which there is higher commitment will lead to the experience of more positive emotions than accumulation of identities that have lower commitment.*

*H2b: The accumulation of identities for which there is higher commitment will lead to higher self-esteem than accumulation of identities that have lower commitment.*

## The Identity Verification Hypothesis

This first line of identity theory research built on the external aspect of identities that connected individuals to society through roles and groups and gave meaning and connection to those individuals. A second strand of identity theory examines the internal processes of identity verification and the way in which persons come to choose behaviors that both manifest the meanings held in their identity and defend those meanings from change (Burke and Stryker, 2016; Stryker and Burke, 2000). As indicated earlier, an identity is the set of meanings that define who a person is in terms of the roles they occupy, the groups or social categories they belong to, or the individual characteristics that define them as a unique social being.

When focusing on the internal aspects of identities, these sets of meanings, one set for each identity, are held in the standard for each identity. For the student identity, for example, the set of meanings may define the identity along dimensions such as studiousness, intellectualism, or sociability (Burke and Reitzes, 1980). One person's student identity may define him/her as moderately studiousness, not too intellectual, but quite sociable. Another student's identity may be very studious, very intellectual, and moderately sociable. Thus, the meanings of the identities internalized by individuals vary from one individual to another, but in each case, these meanings, as held in the identity standard, define who the individual is in the identity.

When an identity is activated in a situation, it begins to monitor or perceive how it is coming across in the situation, what identity-relevant meanings are being portrayed. These are often based on reflected appraisals, or how one thinks others see one in the situation based on their reactions and things they say. The comparator is the third part of the identity, and it compares the perceived self-relevant meanings (based on reflected

appraisals) with the meanings held in the identity standard. Any difference between the reflected appraisal meanings and the identity standard meanings is output from the comparator. This output of the difference is sometimes called the “error signal.” If the difference is zero—that is, the perceptions match the standard and there is no error—the person will continue to act as he or she has been. The person is being seen by others (the reflected appraisals) exactly as he or she sees him- or herself (the identity standard). The identity is being confirmed or verified. On the other hand, if there is a difference—that is, if the reflected appraisals do not match the identity standard—the output or error signal will register that difference, with greater error indicating a greater mismatch between the reflected appraisals and the identity standard.

Two concurrent outcomes are a consequence of the lack of identity verification or an error signal that is different from zero. On one hand, the person will feel distress, and have negative emotions and lower self-esteem (Burke, 1991; Burke and Stets, 1999; Burke and Harrod, 2005; Burke and Stets, 2009). Because these negative outcomes are a function of the square of the difference between reflected appraisals and the identity standard, people will feel bad whether the reflected appraisals are higher than or lower than the identity standard, as shown in the work of Burke and Harrod (2005) as well as Stets and Burke (2014a).

At the same time, and perhaps because of the negative feelings, people will change their behavior in an attempt to change the situational meanings such that the reflected appraisals will change in the direction to be more like the identity standard meanings. For example, if the person is seen as less fair than the degree of fairness held in their identity standard, the person will act to portray meanings of greater fairness. On the other hand, if the person is seen as fairer than the degree held in the identity standard, the person will act to portray meanings of less fairness (Stets et al., 2016). The behavior of the person depends upon the relationship of the reflected appraisal meanings and the meanings in the identity standard (Stets and Burke, 2014a). When the person is successful in bringing reflected appraisals in line with the identity standard, the person will feel more positive emotions, less distress, and greater feelings of self-esteem (Burke and Stets, 1999; Cast and Burke, 2002).

Based on these ideas about the impact of identity verification on psychological well-being, our second hypothesis is about replicating these results.

*H3a. The greater the degree to which people’s identities are verified, the more they will experience positive feelings.*

*H3b. The greater the degree to which people’s identities are verified, the higher will be their level of self-esteem.*

It is possible that both hypotheses 1 and 3 are true and that both the number of identities and the verification of identities increase one’s self-esteem. We certainly expect this to be the case if our results are consistent with the existing literature. However,

it is possible that the effects of the number identities and verification of identities are contingent on each other; more identities may increase self-esteem only if those identities are verified. Further, because non-verification of identities has been shown to decrease self-esteem and positive emotions (Burke and Harrod, 2005; Stets and Burke, 2014a; Stets and Burke, 2014b), we might expect that having more unverified identities will more strongly decrease self-esteem. We put this in the form of two hypotheses, H4 and H5.

*H4a: The greater the number of verified identities, the more one will experience positive emotions.*

*H4b: The greater the number of non-verified identities, the less one will experience positive emotions.*

*H5a: The greater the number of verified identities, the higher will be one's self-esteem.*

*H5b: The greater the number of non-verified identities, the lower will be one's self-esteem.*

In the following section, we outline the way in which these hypotheses will be tested. We describe the sample of respondents used, the measures that were used to indicate each of the constructs, and the procedures of analysis. Following that, we present the results of the testing and the implication of these results.

## Methods

### Sample

The sample consisted of 1,009 student participants from a large, racially diverse southwestern university who filled out a web-based survey that measured their identities, the degree of verification of each identity that they held, and their commitment to each identity. In addition, measures of self-esteem and emotions were obtained. The gender composition of the final sample was 666 women (65%) and 343 men (35%). This distribution reflects the fact that there were more women in the sample drawn predominantly from courses in sociology where it is common to have more women than men enrolled in these courses.

Respondents' ages ranged from 18–57 years, with a mean of 21 years. This reflects the overall population from which the sample was drawn. The final racial composition of the sample was 371 Asian (36%), 345 Latino (33%), 158 White (15%), 83 African American (8%), 51 Multiracial (5%), 25 Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2.5%), and 1 American Indian (0.5%). As the sample was derived from a racially diverse university, the sample's racial/ethnic diversity, in general, is representative of the student body from which it was drawn, where Asian and Latino persons constitute the majority of the population.

The average parental income for the sample reflects that of the overall population, with some slight variations. In the sample, 47% of respondents' parental income ranged from \$0–\$46,000, and 33% had a parental income in the range of \$46,001–\$93,000. This reflected slightly greater earnings than those of the general student body from which the sample was drawn.

## Measures

Each respondent completed a web-based survey that asked about seven role identities that each participant may have had. The identities included in this study were student, parent, sibling, spouse, member of a voluntary organization, member of a religious organization, and worker. Each of these identities is general and may apply in a variety of populations including the present sample of students. Respondents were asked to report if they held each of these identities, and responses were coded 0 if they did not hold the identity and 1 if they did. The *number of identities* was indicated by the sum of the scores for each of these seven identities, and ranged from 1 (all respondents are students) to 7 if the respondent occupied all of these roles. The average respondent occupied 3.4 of the identified roles.

To measure the number of identities held that had high (or low) levels of commitment, respondents were asked for each identity, “How many people do you know based on being a [identity]?” Response choices were “0,” “1–5,” “6–10,” “11–15,” “16–20,” and “more than 20.” A second question then asked, “How many of these people do you consider close to you?” Response choices were “0,” “1–2,” “3–6,” “7–10,” “10–15,” and “more than 15.” For each identity, the responses to this second question were divided at the median for that identity. A count was then made of the number of identities each person had that had above-average commitment (*high-commitment identities*) and the number of identities each person had that had less than average commitment (*low-commitment identities*).

*Identity verification* is the degree to which there is a correspondence between the way respondents define themselves in a role (the identity standard) and the way they believe they are seen by others in that role (the reflected appraisals). A measure of identity verification for each identity held by respondents was derived from the degree to which the respondents felt others' views of them (reflected appraisals) matched the way in which respondents viewed themselves (identity standard). This was done for each of the seven identities. For example, the item measuring verification for the worker identity was worded in the following manner: “Now think of yourself as a worker (hard-working, lazy, on-time, responsible, etc.). How much do[es] other people's view of you as a worker *correspond to or match* how you view yourself as a worker?”<sup>1</sup>

1. This corresponds very closely with the measure of identity verification used in the 2014 social identity module of the General Social Survey.



Respondents were provided with a list of response categories ranging from 0–100% and asked to select the degree (“Does not match at all, 0%,” “matches about 10%,” “matches about 20%,” and so on to “perfectly matched, 100%”) to which others’ views of them as a spouse, volunteer, worker, etc., matched how they viewed themselves (coded 0–10 for each held identity). Thus, rather than subtracting a measure of one’s own views from a separate measure of the reflected appraisals, as has often been done (e.g., Stets and Burke, 2014a), this measure served as a direct indicator of the level of verification of each identity an individual holds. Each respondent mentally compared her or his own views with the reflected appraisals and indicated how close were the two perceptions. An overall measure of *self-verification* across all of the identities was obtained by averaging the level of verification across all the identities each person possessed. A high score represented a high degree of verification.

As indicators of well-being, we included measures of self-esteem and positive and negative emotions. Three components of self-esteem identified in the literature were measured: *self-worth*, *self-efficacy*, and *authenticity* (Stets and Burke, 2014b). Self-worth is the degree to which individuals feel positive about themselves; that is, they feel that they are good and valuable. Self-efficacy is the degree to which people perceive that they have the ability to have an effect on the environment (Gecas, 1989). It is an assessment of what they are capable of doing in situations. Authenticity, the third component of self-esteem, involves feeling good about being able to take action that reflects one’s internal or personal standards as to who one really is.

Each of these measures used 7-item scales developed by Stets and Burke (2014b). Items for the self-worth scale were taken in part from items in the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1979), along with some newly created items. The omega reliability for this scale was 0.92. High scores represented high feelings of self-worth. The seven items for the self-efficacy scale consisted of three items from the Pearlin mastery scale (Pearlin et al., 1981) and four newly created items. The omega reliability for this scale was 0.89, with high scores representing high feelings of self-efficacy. The seven items for the authenticity scale were all newly constructed. The omega reliability of the scale was 0.88, with high scores representing high feelings of authenticity. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the items for each scale loaded only on the scale for which it was designed (Stets and Burke, 2014b). Items for all the scales are provided in Appendix A of this chapter.

Three emotions were measured in this research: happiness, sadness, and anger. For each of the identities that individuals held, after they were asked about the degree to which others saw them as they saw themselves. They were asked, “How did/does this make you feel? For each emotion, please indicate to the right how intensely you feel this emotion where (0) indicates ‘not feeling the emotion at all’ and (10) indicates feeling the emotion ‘with the maximum intensity.’” An overall measure of each emotion was then calculated as the average feeling of the emotion across all the

identities that they possessed. The omega reliabilities for the emotions were 0.89 for happiness, 0.94 for sadness, and 0.96 for anger. High scores represent a high degree of the emotion.

For hypotheses 2a and 2b, two new variables were constructed: the number of high-commitment identities one had and the number of low-commitment identities one had. For this, we divided the measure of commitment for each identity at the median of the responses across all respondents. We then counted the number of identities each respondent had that were above the median commitment (high-commitment identities) and the number of identities each respondent had that were below the median commitment (low-commitment identities).

To test hypotheses 4a and 4b, we created two more new variables: the number of non-verified identities one had and the number of highly verified identities one had. To create these, we began by dividing the distribution of the role-specific verification variable, which could range from 0–10 (0% agreement to 100% agreement), into thirds. The top third were highly verified, the lowest third were non-verified, and the middle third were medium-verified. Thus, for each respondent, we counted the number of highly verified identities they had, the number of medium-verified identities they had, and the number of non-verified identities they had. We focused on the top and bottom thirds to create a strong contrast in looking at the effects of the number of highly verified and the number of non-verified identities.

## Analysis

Because we had analyses of six correlated outcomes (three emotions and three components of self-esteem), each of which may have had error correlations due to omitted variables, we used structural equation modeling for each of the analyses, which allowed for and estimated these error correlations. Each model also included controls for age, family income, and education of parents. In addition, for each of the structural equation models, we tested whether the results varied by ethnicity or by sex.

## Results

Means and standard deviations of the main variables are included in Table 2.1. Basic correlations show positive relationships between both the number and verification of identities with both the self-esteem components and positive emotions. There are negative correlations between number and verification of identities with negative emotions. We also see that the number of identities has only a small positive correlation with the average level of verification of identities.

Table 2.2 presents the results for our hypotheses. Panel 1 of Table 2.2 reports the results for hypotheses 1a and 1b concerning the effect of the number of identities on

**TABLE 2.1 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables (N = 1009)**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1 Number of Identities	3.44	1.10	1.00															
2 Identity Verification	7.07	1.60	0.09*	1.00														
3 Not-Verified Identities	0.89	1.07	0.16*	-0.81*	1.00													
4 High-Verified Identities	1.41	1.33	0.44*	0.70*	-0.50*	1.00												
5 Low-Commit. Identities	2.86	4.81	0.32*	-0.12*	0.21*	0.00	1.00											
6 High-Commit. Identities	4.29	4.82	0.52*	0.11*	0.01	0.28*	-0.57*	1.00										
7 Low Verif. Low Commit.	0.38	0.68	0.14*	-0.57*	0.70*	-0.31*	0.47*	-0.26*	1.00									
8 High Verif. Low Commit.	0.44	0.70	0.20*	0.41*	-0.27*	0.52*	0.44*	-0.27*	-0.13*	1.00								
9 Low Verif. High Commit.	0.51	0.76	0.10*	-0.62*	0.77*	-0.41*	-0.12*	0.25*	0.08*	-0.26*	1.00							
10 High Verif. High Commit.	0.96	1.12	0.38*	0.57*	-0.41*	0.84*	-0.26*	0.51*	-0.29*	0.00	-0.32*	1.00						
11 Self-Worth	22.54	3.44	0.16*	0.28*	-0.21*	0.30*	-0.05	0.16*	-0.15*	0.14*	-0.15*	0.27*	1.00					
12 Self-Efficacy	20.21	3.81	0.09*	0.22*	-0.18*	0.24*	-0.02	0.06	-0.13*	0.14*	-0.13*	0.19*	0.57*	1.00				
13 Authenticity	19.54	3.80	0.06*	0.31*	-0.25*	0.27*	-0.10*	0.10*	-0.14*	0.11*	-0.22*	0.24*	0.56*	0.57*	1.00			
14 Happiness	-0.01	0.80	0.10*	0.39*	-0.36*	0.35*	-0.11*	0.15*	-0.30*	0.16*	-0.23*	0.30*	0.31*	0.21*	0.25*	1.00		
15 Sadness	0.00	0.78	-0.06*	-0.26*	0.20*	-0.25*	0.03	-0.03	0.13*	-0.13*	0.16*	-0.21*	-0.25*	-0.37*	-0.31*	-0.09*	1.00	
16 Anger	0.00	0.81	-0.07*	-0.23*	0.19*	-0.21*	0.04	-0.05	0.14*	-0.09*	0.14*	-0.19*	-0.20*	-0.32*	-0.27*	-0.07*	0.80*	1.00

\*  $p \leq .05$

**TABLE 2.2 Standardized Regression Coefficients for Tests of Hypotheses About Self-Esteem and Emotion (N = 1033)**

	Self-Esteem Component			Emotion		
	Worth	Efficacy	Authenticity	Happiness	Sadness	Anger
<b>Panel 1<sup>1</sup></b>						
Number of Identities	0.16*	0.09*	0.07*	0.10*	-0.07*	-0.07*
<b>Panel 2<sup>1</sup></b>						
Number of:						
Low-Commitment Identities	0.06	0.02	-0.05	-0.04	0.01	0.02
High-Commitment Identities	0.20*	0.06	0.07*	0.13*	-0.03	-0.04
<b>Panel 3<sup>1</sup></b>						
Identity Verification	0.31*	0.25*	0.31*	0.40*	-0.28*	-0.24*
<b>Panel 4<sup>1</sup></b>						
Number of Identities	0.13*	0.07*	0.03	0.06*	-0.04	-0.05
Identity Verification	0.29*	0.24*	0.31*	0.39*	-0.27*	-0.23*
<b>Panel 5<sup>1</sup></b>						
Number of:						
Not-Verified Identities	-0.07*	-0.07*	-0.15*	-0.25*	.10*	.12*
Highly Verified Identities	0.26*	0.20*	0.19*	0.22*	-.20*	-.16*
<b>Panel 6<sup>1</sup></b>						
Number of Low-Commitment:						
Not-Verified Identities	-0.07*	-0.06*	-0.07*	-0.22*	0.06*	0.08*
Highly Verified Identities	0.12*	0.12*	0.06*	0.09*	-0.11*	-0.06*
Number of High-Commitment:						
Not-Verified Identities	-0.04	-0.04	-0.13*	-0.12*	0.07*	0.07*
Highly Verified Identities	0.23*	0.16*	0.18*	0.20*	-0.17*	-0.15*

<sup>1</sup> All models included controls for age, family income, and parents' education. Full results are available from the authors. All models were tested whether the results varied by ethnicity ( $p = ns$ ) or gender ( $p = ns$ ). Each model is just identified and fits the data perfectly.

\*  $p \leq .05$

emotions and self-esteem outcomes. These results confirm earlier findings for the effects of identity accumulation: the greater the number of identities, the higher is each of the components of self-esteem, and the more positive (and less negative) is each of the emotions one feels. This was consistent with prior research, but we extended that research to include all the components of self-esteem and three specific emotions. These results confirmed the first set of hypotheses.

In Panel 2 of Table 2.2, we break down the number of identities into the number of identities with high commitment and low commitment. If the reason for the effect of identity accumulation is partly that it ties people to others who are important, then the results should show stronger effects for the accumulation of highly committed identities than for identities with low commitment. The results shown in Panel 2 of Table 2.2 are somewhat

mixed. In general, the effects of identity accumulation are stronger for identities with higher commitment, except for self-efficacy among the esteem components and sadness among the emotional outcomes. Thus, it is clear that the commitment process is an important part of the benefits of identity accumulation, but it is not always consistent.

We turn now to the third set of hypotheses concerning the identity verification hypothesis that identity verification increases self-esteem and positive feelings. These results are presented in Panel 3 of Table 2.2, where we see that the greater the average degree of verification of the identities respondents experience, the greater is their happiness, the less is their sadness or anger, and the greater is their level of all three components of self-esteem; namely, self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity. These results are consistent with prior research and the third set of hypotheses.

Panel 4 of Table 2.2 shows what happens when we put both the number of identities and the level of verification of the identities together into a model to examine the partial effects of each while controlling for the other. When identity verification is controlled, we see that the impact of the number of identities is diminished for all outcomes, and reaches non-significance in the case of sadness, anger, and authenticity. The impact of the level of verification on the outcomes has changed very little. On the other hand, testing for the differences in the coefficients reveals a significant difference only for the self-esteem components of worth and efficacy.

We turn now to tests of the fourth set of hypotheses concerning the impact on self-esteem and emotion outcomes of the number of highly verified identities and the number of non-verified identities. These results are in Panel 5 of Table 2.2. Here we see that the number of highly verified identities strongly impacts all the emotion and esteem outcomes: the greater the number of highly verified identities, the better one feels, and the greater one's self-esteem. These results support all parts of hypotheses 4a and 5a. On the other hand, in support of hypotheses 4b and 5b, when identities are not verified, a greater number of these non-verified identities *diminishes* the level of positive outcomes. The more identities that one has that are not verified, the less strong will be feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy, and authenticity, as well as happiness. Feelings of sadness and anger on the other hand are increased. Under this condition, more is clearly not better.

As a follow-up to our hypotheses on the effects of identity commitment on the identity accumulation hypothesis (Panel 2 of Table 2.2) we now examine the simultaneous effects of identity commitment and identity verification on the identity accumulation hypothesis. These results are shown in Panel 6 of Table 2.2. This analysis continues to show the negative impact of the accumulation of non-verified identities and the positive effect of accumulation of highly verified identities reported in Panel 5, for identities with high and low commitment. However, we see no significant differences in the impact of identity accumulation by levels of identity commitment. Of the 12 possible comparisons, only one comparison of the effect of identity accumulation between high and low commitment (happiness for highly verified identities) shows significance. We must conclude that identity accumulation does not have different effects for identities with high or low

commitment. Identity accumulation, however, does have substantially different effects for verified and not-verified identities.

Finally, for each of the results presented here, analyses of differences by gender and by racial/ethnic category showed no significance. The results are thus very robust and can be applied to males as well as females, and to each of the racial/ethnic groups.

## Discussion

Prior research within identity theory shows two different mechanisms whereby identities can lead to positive psychological well-being. The essence of the identity accumulation hypothesis is that because identities anchor individuals to the social system and provide meaning for individuals, having more identities provides better anchoring and more meaningful lives. In short, having more identities yields better psychological well-being in the sense of higher self-esteem and more positive feelings. The other approach, the identity verification hypothesis, suggests that having an identity verified—that is, having others view one as one views oneself—is a basic goal for all identities. Verification leads to higher self-esteem and more positive emotions, while the lack of verification leads to lower self-esteem and more negative feelings. Each of these hypotheses, the accumulation of identities and the verification of identities, has been supported in past research, but the two approaches have never been brought together, so it remained unknown whether these two mechanisms worked together, side-by-side, or if one mechanism had its effects because of the other. The present research examined both hypotheses together.

We began by replicating prior research in hypotheses 1 and 3, showing that each mechanism, identity accumulation and identity verification, independently had the hypothesized effect of increasing self-esteem and positive emotions as found in previous research. We then moved to a test of the specific contribution of identity accumulation when the identities are all either highly verified or not verified. Here we found, in accordance with hypothesis 4, that when people accumulate more identities that are highly verified, their psychological well-being is strongly enhanced, but when their identities are not verified, such accumulation of identities strongly degrades psychological well-being.

When Thoits first proposed the identity accumulation hypothesis, her thought was that the accumulation of identities would enhance well-being (Thoits, 1983), but over time she came to recognize that some combination of role identities may not be as beneficial as others, and that the accumulation of identities may not be beneficial if there is stress associated with the identities (Thoits, 1991). This insight can now be developed further by noting that it is not just stress associated with some role identities that prevents identity accumulation from having beneficial effects on well-being; it is the lack of verification of the identities that causes the distress and the accumulation of non-verified identities accumulates the distress. Looking at the process from the other end, verification of identities leads to positive feelings and self-esteem, and the *accumulation* of

verified identities accumulates the well-being of individuals. Thoits' (1983) fundamental insight of the importance for psychological well-being of accumulating ties to society through identities is upheld, with the proviso that those identities must be verified.

As a practical point, then, happiness and increased self-esteem can be had by taking on new identities: that is, becoming involved in new groups and role relations. We should do this, however, only to the extent that we can meet the expectations and obligations that come with a new identity; in other words, only to the extent that we can verify the new identity. It is clear that we pay a price in happiness and self-esteem for holding identities that are not verified. Finding ourselves in that position, we need to find a way to verify the new identity or, if possible, give up that identity.

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## Appendix A

### Items Used in Measures of Components of Self-Esteem

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#### Self-Worth

1. I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.<sup>a</sup>
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.<sup>a</sup>
3. I take a positive attitude toward myself.<sup>a</sup>
4. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.<sup>a</sup>
5. I usually feel good about myself.
6. I feel I have much to offer as a person.
7. I have a lot of confidence in the actions I undertake in my life.

#### Self-Efficacy

1. There is no way I can solve some of the problems I have.<sup>b</sup> (R)
2. I have little control over the things that happen to me.<sup>b</sup> (R)
3. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.<sup>b</sup> (R)
4. I feel as if what happens to me is mostly determined by other people. (R)
5. I certainly feel helpless at times. (R)
6. Sometimes I feel that I'm not able to accomplish what I want. (R)
7. I often feel unable to deal with the problems of life. (R)



**Authenticity**

1. I feel most people don't know the "real" me. (R)
  2. I find I can almost always be myself.
  3. I feel people expect me to be different than I really am. (R)
  4. I think most people accept who I really am.
  5. I just wish I were more able to be myself. (R)
  6. I feel the way in which I generally act reflects the "real" me.
  7. I often do not feel I am myself. (R)
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<sup>a</sup> Items from the Rosenberg (1979) scale; <sup>b</sup> Items from the Pearlin et al. (1981) scale.  
(R) = Item reverse-coded.

