

GETTING IDENTITY THEORY (IT) RIGHT

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we advance an understanding of identity theory (IT) as originally created by Sheldon Stryker and developed over the past 50 years. We address misunderstandings of IT concepts and connections. We provide definitions of key ideas in IT, propositions that identify important relationships, and scope conditions that outline the circumstances to which IT applies. Our goal is to provide scholars with an accurate view of IT so that it can continue to advance the science of human behavior in sociology and beyond.

Keywords: Commitment; formalization; identity; identity salience; identity theory; meaning; network; role; role performance

INTRODUCTION

We thank the editors of *Advances in Group Processes* for sharing with us *Identity Theory: Analysis and Reconstruction* by Barry Markovsky and Jake Frederick and inviting us to comment. We are grateful for the opportunity. Just over 50 years ago, identity theory (IT) was introduced to the scientific community (Stryker, 1968). Three of us have been involved with this theory, spending our careers using and developing IT for most of its history; the fourth recently has begun using and developing IT after teaching it and following its developments closely for many years.

In what follows, we discuss IT but not the mechanics of theory construction or codification, as presented by Markovsky and Frederick (M-F) in the first half of their paper. Though a worthy goal, our task is not to formalize IT fully for that would require a different paper and involve a careful synthesis of the literature on

IT over the past 50 years, numbering hundreds or more theoretical and empirical papers. Rather, our task is to correct misinterpretations of IT concepts and relationships in the second half of M-F's paper.

M-F's understanding and reconstruction of IT is based on four early writings of Stryker: Stryker (1968, 1981, 2002 [1980]) and Stryker and Serpe (1982). M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 172) maintain that these writings identify the theory's core statements and are the most frequently cited publications. We discuss why limiting the analysis to these four writings is problematic. Following this, we discuss M-F's lower-order terms, higher-order terms, propositions, and scope conditions on IT, and we identify where corrections are needed.

FORMALIZING IT

We agree with M-F that the formalization of theories can provide many benefits to the discipline, including helping to discover missing links and errors in logic. This assumes that the formalization *is* the theory and not a misunderstood view. A mistaken formalization of a theory does much harm and prevents scientific progress. There may be erroneous definitions of concepts, and propositions that are identified may not exist in the theory. Correctly formalizing a theory can be difficult because theories, especially those in active research programs, are living, growing entities (Berger, Wagner, & Zelditch, 1989).

Theories change as research leads to new understandings. This is so because any theory is about something, the underlying character and processes of which are themselves in the process of being understood. Theories are reformulated over time and only begin to crystallize as ideas emerge and are tested. For example, over the past 25 years, there have been major advances in IT, such as incorporating into the theory: the perceptual control system; "resources" including symbolic and sign meanings; emotions; and the different bases of identities. Often, however, changes in a theory are manifest only in the ongoing reports of research using and testing the theory.

To engage in the formalization of a theory that is part of an active research program, we need a good understanding of the theory, its background, and the changes and developments it has undergone so that the formalized theory represents the current state of the theory: that it *is* the theory in its current form. We think that scholars who undertake to formalize a theory must accept responsibility for obtaining a full understanding of the theory.¹ Otherwise, the formalization may focus needlessly on ambiguities and logical gaps that have since been recognized and surmounted, while failing to recognize current issues in the theory that, if surfaced, would serve the field well.

M-F maintain that the four sources they use to discuss and formalize IT represent the theory's core statements and are the most highly cited. To believe

¹M-F appear to be familiar with later work on identity theory as they rely on some of it to help construct their arguments. Thus, in formalizing identity theory, theory and research that follows the early years should not be neglected.

IT's core statements as they exist today are reflected fully in Stryker's early work is misguided because other crucial aspects of the theory, now accepted as core by those who work within the theory, are omitted. For example, omitted from their formalization are concepts and relationships related to the perceptual control process of identities that operate alongside IT's structural aspects (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2014a; Stets & Serpe, 2013; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Stryker, 2016). These writings are easily accessible to those who seek a full understanding of the theory they would formalize and critique. For example, some 20 years ago, Stryker and Burke (2000) discussed the way in which the structural emphasis, reflected in Stryker and other's work, and the cognitive, perceptual emphasis in Burke and other's research, fit together to form a single unified theory.

In one of the last papers that Stryker and Burke wrote together, they directly discussed this issue, pointing out how each emphasis in IT was inspired by George Herbert Mead:

Mead visualized human social behavior and interaction as proceeding on two related fronts. One exists in situations and organizational life external to the subjective inner worlds of individual actors but deeply impacting these inner worlds; the other occurs within the subjective worlds of actors as the actors interpret and respond to the situations and organizational life they find themselves in...Neither Burke nor Stryker visualizes the internal and external processes as independent of one another. Rather, they represent the two fronts identified by Mead. (Burke & Stryker, 2016, p. 658)

Identity scholars are incorporating both aspects of the identity process in their research (Burke, 1991, 2008; Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2018; Cast, Stets, & Burke, 1999; Hunt & Reichelmann, 2019; Kiecolt, Hughes, & Momplaisir, 2019; Markowski & Serpe, 2018; Savage et al., 2017, 2019; Stets & Burke, 2005; Stets & Cast, 2007; Stryker, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). IT is multifaceted in its focus, and any consideration of the core components of the theory must be comprehensive and reflect the internal and external aspects of identities in all their complexity.

If the four sources do not represent fully the core statements in IT, the sources also do not enjoy, uniformly, the highest citation count given all the work in IT. Stryker's (2002 [1980]) symbolic interactionism, from which IT emerges, remains a classic (citation count = 4,246).² However, of M-F's remaining sources, there are other works that enjoy high citations and that form the core of IT, for example, Burke's (1991) theoretical discussion of the perceptual control identity process (citation count = 2,035).³

What M-F's four sources do share is that they represent the earliest statements and hypotheses on IT. However, IT and research have developed and proliferated over the past 50 years. Indeed, between us and including all of Stryker's published work on IT, at least another 120 nonoverlapping articles on IT (by our conservative

²Citations are from google scholar effective the writing of this chapter.

³There is no guarantee that highly cited sources represent the core of a theory. Thus, we need to be cautious with using this metric.

estimate), never make their way into M-F's analysis of IT. This doesn't include the work of many other identity scholars. IT, like many theories in social psychology, has experienced considerable expansion over the years. This depth of knowledge needs to be incorporated into the task of formalizing the theory.

INTERPRETING IT

Theories are more than just the definitions and statements of relationships that appear in a formalization. Theories always are about something. To understand a theory, one must understand what it is about, and the background and issues that it addresses. Since M-F did not present this material, we begin with some background on IT so that readers have a sense as to what IT is about. IT grows out of structural symbolic interaction (SSI), and is rooted, most influentially, in the work of [Mead \(1934\)](#). The goal in SSI is to examine how social structures influence the structure of the self, and how the structure of the self, as well as internal self-processes, influence social behavior and ultimately social structure ([Stryker & Burke, 2000](#)). [Stryker's \(2002 \[1980\], pp. 53–54\)](#) first five statements on SSI, reproduced below, are important for understanding the concept of identity. The first statement makes clear the symbolic interactionist perspective and begins with the influence of social structures on the self:

- (1) Behavior is premised on a named or classified world. The names or class terms attached to aspects of the environment, both physical and social, carry meaning in the form of shared behavioral expectations that grow out of social interaction. From interaction with others, one learns how to classify objects one comes in contact with and in that process also learns how one is expected to behave with reference to those objects.
- (2) Among the class terms learned in interaction are the symbols that are used to designate "positions," which are the relatively stable, morphological components of social structure. These positions carry the shared behavioral expectations that are conventionally labeled "roles."
- (3) Persons who act in the context of organized patterns of behavior, i.e., in the context of the social structure, name one another in the sense of recognizing one another as occupants of positions. When they name one another, they invoke expectations with regard to each other's behavior.
- (4) Persons acting in the context of organized behavior apply names to themselves as well. These reflexively applied positional designations, which become part of the "self," create internalized expectations with regard to their own behavior.
- (5) When entering interactive situations, persons define the situation by applying names to it, to the other participants in the interaction, to themselves, and to particular features within the situation, and use the resulting definition to organize their own behavior accordingly.

From these statements, we glean several important ideas. Through using symbols such as language, we name and classify social and physical objects, and

this naming carries meaning in the form of behavioral expectations as to how to respond to those objects. From interaction, we learn about social objects such as positions (a stable aspect of social structures), and the meanings/behavioral expectations that are tied to these positions, which are roles. We name others in terms of their positions and apply corresponding meanings/expectations for their behavior, and we name ourselves in terms of our positions and internalize the meanings/expectations for our own behavior. This internal positional designation and the meanings that it carries are key to identities for Stryker. Finally, when we enter situations, we name the situation, others, and ourselves, and the meanings including identities that emerge from this naming help organize behavior. The above ideas – especially the centrality of meaning – will reemerge as we discuss IT. We now review M-F’s lower-order terms, higher-order terms, propositions, and scope conditions in the order they were presented in their paper.

Lower-order Terms

M-F’s lower-order terms that they see as key in discussing IT include *social position, role, role performance, role expectation, counter-role, related identities,* and *network*.

We support the authors’ definition of *social position*:

Definition 1 _{M-F & S-B-S-S}: **A *social position* is a socially recognized category of actors.**⁴

As Stryker noted in his second statement on SSI above, social positions are symbols as to the kind of persons one can be in society (for example, a mother, activist, guitarist, and so forth), and social positions cue one as to how to behave. It is these behavioral expectations attached to positions that Stryker defines as a *role*.

However, M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 173) define a *role* differently:

Definition 2 _{M-F}: **A *role* is a set of duties, rights, and obligations associated with a social position.**

We do not understand why M-F write that Stryker never clearly defined a role. Stryker defines it in all the sources M-F rely on. What is important in Stryker’s definition of a role is that behavioral expectations carry *meanings*, as identified in his first statement on SSI above. Meaning is central to Mead, to SSI, and to IT. Meaning is a shared idea or shared interpretation of a stimulus that calls forth a response (Burke & Stets, 2009; Burke & Tully, 1977). If the stimulus is a social position, a role is the shared interpretation (meaning) by a person and others to whom that person is connected as to how the person will behave while in that

⁴Subscripts in the definition numbers represent the authors of each definition either as M-F (Markovsky and Frederick) or S-B-S-S (Stets, Burke, Serpe and Stryker).

social position. A role is not the behaviors, or even the expectations for certain behaviors, but rather, it refers to the shared meanings of the behavioral expectations that the social position carries. Any number of behaviors may produce and maintain these meanings.

In sociology more generally, there are two relevant conceptions of a role: one based on structural role theory (interaction based on fixed behaviors expected of persons occupying a status), and one based on SSI (interaction based on shared meanings and their maintenance) (Stryker 2002). Without incorporating the background of SSI into IT, M-F follow the structural role theory approach in their understanding of role. What structural role theory omits is the important aspect of meaning that exists in a role. For example, for an individual, the position of student may cue the meaning of being “involved,” which may be portrayed in the person joining campus groups, frequently participating in class discussion, or taking the lead on a group class project, all of which the self and others would agree display “involvement.” The choice to behave in these ways is not based on prescriptions, but on what this position means to the person – meanings that a person shares with others – and that may be maintained in interaction by any number of behaviors including the three just mentioned.

With a deeper reading of IT, it becomes clear why the term “role” as a set of prescribed behaviors for a position in society is not relevant (Stryker, 2002). When an identity such as a role identity is activated in a situation, the person engages in symbolic interaction to display and maintain the meanings that form the content or standard of the role identity.⁵ The identity is not linked to fixed role behaviors as espoused in structural role theory, but to the variety of behaviors that maintain the meanings associated with the role identity. IT was not meant to explain the behaviors associated with a “role,” but to explain the choice of which role identity is activated in a situation, and how the behaviors activated reflect the meanings the person acting associates with that role identity. Given the above:

Definition 2 _{S-B-S-S}: **A role is shared behavioral expectations that convey the meanings associated with a social position.**

We now review the remaining lower-order terms presented by M-F. *Role performance* is (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 173):

Definition 3 _{M-F}: **Role performance is behavior enacted when fulfilling a role.**

In role performance, it is the *meaning* of the behavior, not the behavior itself, that is important, thus reiterating the point that symbolic interaction and IT focus on meaning. The choice of behavior is only relevant to the extent that the meanings that it implies are consistent with and maintain the meanings in one’s

⁵This is the process of self-verification (Burke & Stets, 2009).

role identity, which is tied to a social position (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Stryker, 1981). Thus, if a role consists merely of enacting prescribed behaviors, then identity theorists have a different view. Therefore:

Definition 3 _{S-B-S-S}: **Role performance is behavior based on shared behavioral expectations that convey the meanings associated with a social position.**

M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 173) define *role expectation* as “expectations for role performance.” Since a role is shared behavioral expectations (meanings) associated with a social position, role expectation is redundant. Thus, we see no need for this term.

A *counter-role* is (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 173):

Definition 4 _{M-F}: **A counter-role is a role associated with one social position that complements another social position.**

Complement means to fill up or complete. The IT view is different. A role or the set of meanings associated with one social position *is defined* by its relation to counter-roles, that is, the corresponding set of meanings/behavioral expectations associated with the role/social position to which it is related: “There can be no employer without employee, no mother without child, no professor without student” (Stryker, 2002 [1980], p. 58).

Thus:

Definition 4 _{S-B-S-S}: **A counter-role is a role associated with one social position that is defined by its relation to a role associated with another social position.**

M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 173) define *related identities*:

Definition 5 _{M-F}: **Related identities are a set of identities, each of which is based on the same role or counter-role.**

Because identities have not yet been defined (see definition 7 below), this definition is somewhat out of place, and the reader may want to return to this discussion after identities have been defined. The concept of related identities is sometimes mentioned in passing in various articles (Stryker, 1991; Stryker, & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).⁶ However, in IT, related identities can refer to identities of all kinds. Thus, we need to recognize that identities have different bases. For some time, identity theorists have discussed how identities are not only based on the roles that people play in the social structure (e.g., professor, truck driver), but the groups (e.g., photography club, PTA) and categories (e.g., race, class) to which they belong, and the persons they claim to be (e.g., fair,

⁶What has been discussed more often is the concept of counter-identities (Burke, 1980; Burke & Stets, 2009; Burke & Tully, 1977; Cast, 2003). Like counter-roles, counter-identities cannot exist without having other identities to which they are related.

dominant). Thus, there are role identities, group and category identities, and person identities (Burke, 2004; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000, 2014a; Stets & Serpe, 2013). To account for these multiple bases in the theory and to avoid a focus only on role identities, we offer:

Definition 5 _{S-B-S-S}: **Related identities are those identities of others that are connected to a person because of an identity.**

The last of M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 173) first-order terms is a *network*:

Definition 6 _{M-F}: **A network is a set of actors, each tied to every other either directly or indirectly.**

Social networks are important in IT through the idea of identity commitment:

Commitment, as a particularized translation of "society," focuses on social networks: the number of others to whom one relates through occupancy of a given position; the "importance" of others to whom one relates through occupancy of a given position; and the multiplexity of linkages, that is, the number of distinctive kinds of activities attached to a particular linkage to another or others. The concept of commitment can lead as deeply into social networks as a theorist is prepared to go. (Stryker, 2002 [1980]: 81)

In IT, the focus is on the connections between a person with an identity and other persons to whom they are *directly* connected because of that identity. The number of direct connections and the importance of those direct connections are usually examined. The "multiplexity of linkages" that Stryker mentions are later discussed as "social network overlap," which is the number of persons found in one social network based on one identity that also are found in another social network based on another identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1983; Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). More generally, social networks are important in IT because they tie individuals to others based on identities.⁷ Therefore, we define a social network as:

Definition 6 _{S-B-S-S}: **A social network is a set of connections between a person with an identity and other persons to whom they are directly connected because of the identity.**

This has sometimes been referred to as a "network of commitment" (Stryker, 2002 [1980]).

HIGHER-ORDER TERMS

Rather than follow the order in which M-F discuss their higher-order terms: commitment, identity, and identity salience, since the concept of identity is

⁷Future work may want to broaden this social network view (e.g., Walker & Lynn, 2013).

central to the theory, and because identity commitment and identity salience depend on understanding what an identity is, we first discuss an identity. Then, we discuss identity salience and its source: identity commitment.

M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 175) define *identity*:

Definition 7 M-F: **An identity is role-related self-perceptions.**

This definition refers to role identities, and as mentioned above and discussed below, IT sees identities as having multiple bases. Self-perceptions are used to refer to the cognitive aspect of identities that M-F want to highlight in Stryker's writing. Stryker (1991, p. 38) recognized the problem with a uniquely cognitive conceptualization:

Cognitive representations or meanings do not constitute the whole of "self." In the initial paper presenting identity theory (Stryker, 1968), three hierarchical modalities of self, including a cognitive, a cathectic, and a conative (an "I am" modality, an "I feel" modality, and an "I want" modality) self were postulated; but then the theory developed utilizing a totally cognitive conception of the self. Recently, an attempt has been made to integrate affect into identity theory; see Stryker (1987).

It took over 15 years for Stryker's 1987 statement on emotion in IT to be published (Stryker, 2004). In his 2004 article, he points out that the affective component is part of identity meanings, and it is a component equivalent to the cognitive component of identities. The definition of identities that we provide below (meanings applied to the self) allows for the responses of the self (to itself as an object) to occur along the cognitive, cathectic, and conative dimensions (Stryker, 1968).

Stryker's (2002 [1980]) fourth statement above on SSI is important to understanding identities. He saw people's internalized positional designations to be their identities. Individuals are tied intimately to social structure through meanings in the form of behavioral expectations that characterize how persons accomplish their positional designations. These meanings are not simply behaviors, but all the symbols and signs (as Mead would argue) that individuals use to maintain who they are in an identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).⁸

Early on, researchers pursued a close examination of identities as the meanings that persons attribute to themselves (Burke, 1980; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Burke & Tully, 1977). The idea of identities as meanings has continued to be reiterated in major statements on the theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets, 2018; Stets & Burke, 2014a; Stets & Serpe, 2013). In Stryker's early formulation, meanings *are* the internalized positional designations. Thus, if a woman sees herself as a lawyer, friend, and daughter, her internalized positional designations carry meanings that characterize who she is, perhaps meanings of being "an advocate," "reliable," and "understanding" in these roles. Early understandings of the nature of the named social positions were as roles in the social

⁸See Burke and Stets (2009) and Burke and Tully (1977) for a more detailed discussion of meaning.

structure, and the identities were understood to be role identities (e.g., [Burke & Tully 1977](#); [Stryker & Burke, 2000](#)).

Later identity work broadened the concept of named positions to include other bases of meaning than just roles: meanings based on social categories such as female or Hispanic (category identities), groups such as the city baseball team or local church congregation (group identities) ([Stets & Burke, 2000](#)), and meanings that distinguished one person from another such as being more (or less) moral ([Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012](#)) or fair (person identities) ([Savage et al., 2019](#); [Stets, Burke, & Savage, 2018](#)). In all cases, however, the identities are meanings: what it means to be a fair person, a member of a club, or a female. Identities are meanings attached to individuals (or self-meanings) as a person, role player, and group or categorical member. Therefore:

Definition 7 S-B-S-S: **An *identity* is a set of self-meanings derived from being a distinct person, role player, or member of a group or category.**

Identities often are activated in a situation when the self-meanings correspond to the relevant meanings in a situation, and individuals behave based on those meanings ([Stets, 2018](#)). This is consistent with Stryker's fifth statement above on SSI. For example, if in a classroom, meanings of "understanding" and "discovery" emerge, the student identity may be activated. However, situations often carry multiple meanings. If familiar others are in the classroom and meanings of "support" and "aid" are present, the friend identity also might be invoked. And, if the subject matter in the classroom is about "gender relations," one's gender identity might get activated. Stryker's notion of identity salience helps us understand which identity (or set of identities) is likely to be invoked in situations in which multiple identity meanings exist.

[M-F \(2020, Chapter 7, p. 177\)](#) define *identity salience*:

Definition 8 M-F: **Identity salience is the psychological prominence of an identity.**

This definition fundamentally misrepresents and confuses two key concepts that have been defined explicitly in IT: identity salience and identity prominence. [M-F](#) argue that this definition is guided by [Stryker and Serpe's \(1994, p. 18\)](#) discussion of salience as having properties of "a cognitive structure or schema." However, the "cognitive structure or schema" that Stryker and Serpe are discussing in that reference is not about salience, but about the meanings within one's identity, expressed in the term "identity schemas." Identity schemas are "internal organizations of stored information and meanings operating as frameworks for interpreting experience" ([Stryker & Serpe, 1994, p. 18](#)). The idea of identity schema is analogous to the identity standard in IT ([Burke & Stets, 2009](#)). It is the set of meanings that comprise how persons see themselves in an identity.

In [M-F's](#) definition of salience, they do not explain what is meant by psychological prominence. Additionally, their definition confuses the distinction between identity salience and identity prominence that already exists in IT

(Stets & Serpe, 2013). Identity salience is the probability of invoking an identity across situations. Stryker is consistent with this definition in his early writings (Stryker, 1968, 1981, 2002 [1980]; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), and later writings (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, 2018; Merolla et al., 2012; Serpe & Stryker, 1987). M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 176) objection to this definition is that "it expresses what identity salience does, that is, it causes identities to be invoked, rather than what it is." However, in IT, salience does not cause identities to be invoked or activated. The cause of activation lies in the nature of the meanings in the identity schemas relative to the meanings in the situation. Salience is about the *probability* of an identity being activated, where the probability ranges from 0 to 1. Identities do have different probabilities of being enacted, and those probabilities can change.

Identity prominence, on the other hand, is the subjective *importance* of an identity to an individual. Research has maintained a conceptual distinction between identity salience and prominence (sometimes earlier discussed as centrality (Stryker & Serpe, 1994)). While early research did not establish a causal relationship between prominence and salience (Ellestad & Stets, 1998; Stryker & Serpe, 1994), later research showed a causal ordering from prominence to salience (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, 2018). Given this conceptual and empirical work, we cannot confuse salience and prominence, naming one as the other. Therefore, we maintain the definition of salience as conceived in IT:

Definition 8 _{S-B-S-S}: **Identity salience is the probability that an identity will be invoked across situations.**

M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 174) final higher-order term is *commitment*:

Definition 9 _{M-F}: **Commitment is a sense of obligation to an activity, entity, or viewpoint.**

M-F maintain that Stryker's definition of commitment is not clear, so they define commitment as an "individual disposition" (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 174). Conceptualizing commitment as a disposition – a sense of obligation – is not how identity theorists conceptualize it. In his four early works, Stryker reasons that the concept of commitment incorporates the way in which society and social structure are relevant to social behavior by pointing to social networks and the number and importance of others to whom one relates based on a social position and its corresponding identity. Commitment shows how we are tied to society through connections to others because of our identities. These connections are external to the individual.

Stryker discussed commitment as "the degree to which one's relationships to specified sets of other persons depend on being a particular kind of person" (Stryker, 1981, p. 24; 2002 [1980], p. 61), and later clarified that this focal person occupies particular positions in relationships and plays out the roles associated

with these positions (Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Further, tied to positions and roles are corresponding identities. One person may have many connections to others because of an identity; another may have only a few. It is these connections that are central in commitment.⁹

Stryker's earliest discussions of commitment indicated that it involved two dimensions: the *number* of direct connections (alternatively labeled as *extensive* commitment) and the *importance/strength* of the direct connections (also labeled as *intensive* commitment) to others because of an identity (Stryker, 1968, 1981, 2002 [1980]).¹⁰ Empirical work on commitment grew out of this, sometimes using alternative terms such as *interactional* and *affective* commitment to describe the two dimensions, respectively (Merolla et al., 2012; Serpe, 1987, 1991; Stryker & Serpe, 1982, 1994).¹¹ Therefore:

Definition 9 _{S-B-S-S}: Identity commitment is the number and strength of ties to others based on an identity.

PROPOSITIONS

M-F present nine propositions about the causal relationships among terms they believe are central to IT. Their propositions are chosen from longer lists of ideas that Stryker proposed in his early publications to illustrate the kinds of hypotheses one might explore from the newly developing SSI perspective (Stryker, 1968, pp. 561–63; 1981, pp. 24–25; 2002 [1980], p. 83; Stryker & Serpe, 1982, pp. 207–208).

M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 179) begin their discussion by offering three propositions that attempt to sort out the relationship among three terms: commitment, salience, and a positive evaluation, as variously proposed by Stryker:

⁹An additional identity view of commitment is reflected in the idea that it is “the sum of the forces, pressures, or drives that influence people to maintain congruity between their identity setting and the input of reflected appraisals from the social setting” (Burke & Reitzes, 1991, p. 243). Here, the structural ties that link persons to others based on an identity and that form the basis of commitment are a strong force that maintains consistency between one's identity setting and reflected appraisals (others' views as perceived by the self). Thus, external forces influence the internal motivation to maintain consistency between self and other's views of the self.

¹⁰Extensiveness can be measured by counting the persons related through an identity in terms of the frequency of contact and duration of interaction, while intensiveness can be measured by emotional closeness and the degree of dependency with respect to an activity related to an identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1983).

¹¹As Stryker (1968, p. 561) made clear, commitment “refers to both dimensions indifferently. [This] obviously ignores a number of significant theoretical and empirical problems” concerning the relationship between the two components and their relative importance. He chose to defer these questions until a later point. There is still a need to develop this aspect of commitment.

Proposition 1 _{M-F}: C→E: The greater the commitment to an identity, the more positive the evaluation of the identity.

Proposition 2 _{M-F}: E→S: The more positive the evaluation of the identity, the greater the identity salience.

Proposition 3 _{M-F}: C→S: The greater the commitment to an identity, the greater the identity salience.

The first two propositions are based on Stryker's early thinking about these relationships. These ideas were modified later by Stryker & Serpe (1982), who found that a positive evaluation is an outcome of identity salience but not identity commitment.¹² Proposition 1 was never supported, so we do not include it. Proposition 2 should be stated in the reverse causal order as that stated by M-F.¹³ Thus:

Proposition 2 _{S-B-S-S}: S→E: The greater the salience of an identity, the more positive the evaluation of the identity.

We support proposition 3 above. The commitment to salience relationship is present in research (Leveto, 2016; Merolla et al., 2012; Serpe, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).¹⁴ M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 180) fourth proposition is:

Proposition 4 _{M-F}: N→S: The more closely P's network is associated with a role, the greater the identity salience of P's corresponding identity.

This proposition is based on the following original hypothesis dealing with commitment by Stryker (1968, p. 562, 1981, p. 24, 2002 [1980], p. 83), which we offer as the corrected proposition:

Proposition 4 _{S-B-S-S}: The more a given network of commitment is premised on a particular identity as against other identities that may enter that network of commitment, the higher that identity will be in the salience hierarchy.¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, a person's "network of commitment" refers to all the persons to whom one is connected based on the identities one holds (for example,

¹²Early on, positive evaluation was an identity invested with a cathectic response (Stryker, 1968). The early finding that a positive evaluation is an outcome of identity salience is consistent with later research that examined other cathectic responses related to an identity, such as self-esteem and emotions (Cast & Burke, 2002; Stets & Burke, 2014b).

¹³While cross-sectional findings do not establish causation, causation implies association, and no association implies no causation.

¹⁴Since reformulated Proposition 2 and Proposition 3 were supported, commitment does not have a direct relationship on the positive evaluation of an identity (Proposition 1), but commitment does have an indirect relationship on the positive evaluation of an identity through identity salience.

¹⁵In later writings (Stryker, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), there is a slight variation in this wording, but the meaning is the same.

in the mother identity, one may be connected to six others, and in the professor identity one may be connected to 20 others). The hypothesis thus compares the number of connections based on one identity to the number of connections based on another identity. Further, the hypothesis states that if the number of connections for one identity is greater than the number of connections for another identity (more commitment to one identity than the other), the former identity will be higher in the salience hierarchy than the latter. This is the same as proposition three (commitment leads to salience) but comparing two different identities.

It is not clear why M-F introduce “a network associated with a role” in this proposition as it does not implicate identities. Also unclear is what M-F are conceiving of as measuring the closeness of P’s network to a role. Finally, they discuss the level of salience of one identity rather than comparing the salience of two identities.

M-F’s (2020, Chapter 7, p. 181) proposition 5 is:

Proposition 5_{M-F}: L→S: The larger P’s network based on a role r for whom related identities have identity salience, the greater the identity salience of r-related identities to P.

This proposition presumably rewrites Stryker’s (1968, p. 562, 1981, p. 24, 2002 [1980], p. 83) original hypothesis, which we offer as the corrected proposition:

Proposition 5_{S-B-S-S}: The larger the number of persons included in a network of commitment premised on a given identity for whom that identity is high in their own salience hierarchies, the higher that identity will be in the [focal person’s] salience hierarchy.¹⁶

We again have the concept of a network of commitment or the set of persons (relationships) (Stryker & Serpe, 1982) to whom one (call her “A”) is connected because of an identity. However, instead of discussing the number of persons in that set (call that set “B”), Stryker’s hypothesis refers to the salience of the relevant identities of those connected persons (“B”). The hypothesis suggests that if “B’s” identity saliences are high, persons in B likely will enact their relevant identities frequently, which will provide more opportunities for “A” to activate her identity, that is, the identity salience for “A” will increase. Thus, this hypothesis relates the salience of the identities held by a set of others (“B”) to “A’s” own identity salience. An example may be helpful.

Imagine a professor (“A”) is connected to 50 students (“B”). If those students have highly salient student identities, they will frequently invoke their student identities, providing many opportunities for the professor to invoke her professor identity, and thus increase its salience. In contrast, another professor also may be

¹⁶In Stryker (1981, p. 24), what is added is “or a counter-identity” to “...for whom that identity...”

connected to 50 students, but the salience of these student identities is low, and therefore, seldom invoked (perhaps the students would rather spend their time partying). Therefore, these students provide little opportunity for the professor to invoke the professor identity, hence the lower salience of this professor's identity.

Grammatically, M-F's proposition 5 is confusing. The larger P's network of role-related identities (which we would want to expand to any identity base (role, group/category, or person)) that have identity salience (which is likely intended to mean "that have high identity salience"), the greater the identity salience of the role-related identities.¹⁷ This is tautological. M-F appear to want to link P's network of others' identity saliences to P's own identity salience, which is what Stryker intended, but we do not see the proposition as clearly representing this idea.

The text that follows proposition 5 suggests that M-F are trying to maintain Stryker's ideas, but we run into a little more confusion. M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 181) write:

This would predict that the "mother" identity becomes more salient for P if, as a mother, she is surrounded by others for whom she believes "spouse," "son," "daughter" and "caregiver" identities already are salient (we assume M-F mean highly salient).

Since earlier M-F focus on the same role and counter-role identities in their definition of related identities, "spouse" is neither the same role nor a counter-role to the mother identity. Further, at issue is not whether a person believes that other identities are highly salient, but whether these identities are highly salient and frequently invoked across situations. What one believes is not relevant.

M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 181) sixth proposition is:

Proposition 6_{M-F}: S→T: The greater the identity salience, the more role performances and role expectations are consistent.

This is based on Stryker and Serpe's (1982, p. 208) statement "[T]he more salient an identity, the more likely will be role performances consistent with the expectations attached to that identity." Proposition 6 misses Stryker's ideas about salience and the performances associated with it. If we return to Stryker's (2002 [1980], p. 83) earlier statement (which we offer as the corrected proposition 6), he says:

Proposition 6_{S-B-S-S}: The higher an identity in the salience hierarchy, the greater the probability of role performances being consistent with the role expectations attached to that identity.¹⁸

These slight alterations in wording between 1980 and 1982 should not interfere with our understanding of Stryker's meaning. As pointed out earlier, salience is

¹⁷All identities have the property of salience; some are high in salience and some are low.

¹⁸In Stryker's other writings (Stryker, 1968, 1981), there are minor modifications in this wording, but the meaning is the same.

the probability of invoking an identity. The more salient is an identity, the more likely or probable that a role performance will occur from that identity, and thus reflect the meanings tied to that more salient identity. If the identity is less salient, any performance is less likely to occur for that identity. Performance in that situation thus may reflect the meanings of some other identity.

In their translation of Stryker's hypothesis to proposition 6, M-F do not include the idea of a probability or likelihood of a performance that is part of the definition of salience. It is not a case of role performances becoming more consistent with expectations, which is a matter of "degree," as M-F's proposition states. This changes the substantive character of Stryker's hypothesis as well as the implied measurement of the meanings in the identity and the role performances. For example, rather than measuring whether the meanings of one's performances *are* the meanings of the highly salient identity, one would measure (in M-F's terms) the *degree to which* the meanings of one's performances are consistent with the meanings of the highly salient identity. However, for Stryker, the point is that meanings enacted that are not consistent with the highly salient identity indicate the highly salient identity is not being enacted.

M-F's last three propositions also have to do with identity salience.¹⁹ Proposition 7 states (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 181):

Proposition 7_{M-F}: S→O: The greater the identity salience, the more a situation is perceived as an opportunity for role performances tied to related identities.

This is based on Stryker's original hypothesis (2002 [1980], p. 84), which we offer as the corrected proposition:

Proposition 7_{S-B-S-S}: The higher an identity in the salience hierarchy, the greater the probability that a person will perceive a given situation as an opportunity to perform in terms of that identity.²⁰

Stryker maintains that seeing the situation as an opportunity for identity invocation is more likely to emerge for identities that have higher salience compared to identities that have lower salience. M-F's proposition again loses any notion of the probability that something happens, and it substitutes the idea of the degree to which it happens. M-F also add the phrase "tied to related identities," which is not to be found in Stryker's hypothesis. Stryker is referring to an identity that is high in the salience hierarchy, not an identity that is "tied to related identities."

Proposition 8 states (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 181):

¹⁹M-F earlier redefined identity salience as psychological prominence, and this is not consistent with identity theory. This makes evaluation of these final propositions difficult. We hold this redefinition in abeyance for the time being.

²⁰In Stryker's other works (Stryker, 1968, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), there are small changes to this wording, but the meaning is not significantly different.

Proposition 8_{M-F}: S→M: The greater the identity salience, the more P seeks opportunities for role performances tied to related identities.

This is based on Stryker's original hypothesis (2002 [1980], p. 84), which we offer as the corrected proposition:

Proposition 8_{S-B-S-S}: The higher an identity in the salience hierarchy, the greater the probability that a person will actively seek out opportunities to perform in terms of that identity.²¹

This statement is an extension of Stryker's previous statement (in proposition 7). If an identity is invoked in a situation, it must be the case that the situation was an opportunity for the identity to be invoked. We then move from "seeing opportunities" to "seeking out opportunities" for invoking an identity, suggesting that one may choose to enter situations in which the identity may appropriately be invoked.

Stryker's idea of the probability of invoking an identity and the probability of seeking out opportunities to invoke an identity is omitted from M-F's proposition 8. M-F also again add the phrase "tied to related identities," which is not found in Stryker's hypothesis.

M-F's (2020, Chapter 7, p. 181) final proposition 9, is:

Proposition 9_{M-F}: S→V: The greater the identity salience, the more role performances reflect shared norms and values.

Stryker's (2002 [1980], p. 84) statement, which forms the basis of this proposition, is different.²² He states: "The greater the commitment, the higher the identity salience, the higher the probability that role performance will reflect institutionalized values and norms." We offer the latter part of this statement as the corrected proposition to stay with the focus of M-F.

Proposition 9_{S-B-S-S}: The higher the identity salience, the higher the probability that role performance will reflect institutionalized values and norms.

If the identity is enacted, the meanings of the role behavior will reflect the meanings and expectations of the identity, which contain values and norms. Thus, if the probability that an identity will be enacted is high, the probability is high that the role behavior will reflect the institutionalized values and norms of society as given in that identity.

²¹Again, in Stryker's other writings (Stryker, 1968, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), the wording is slightly different, but the meaning is not.

²²Once again, in Stryker's other works (Stryker, 1968, 1981; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), there are small wording changes, but the meaning is the same.

In M-F's proposition, we do not see any reference to the idea of a probability that is contained in Stryker's statement. Rather, they use the notion of the *degree to which* role performances reflect values and norms. In IT, it is not a question of degree. An identity is invoked or not, and the behavior reflects institutionalized values and norms or not.

Out of the nine propositions M-F offer as representing the core of IT, only one (proposition three) do we support (identity commitment leads to identity salience). However, because M-F's earlier definitions of commitment and salience are not consistent with IT, the terms that form even this proposition are problematic. For the first two propositions, we suggested that they are superseded by an alternative proposition, which we offered. This alternative proposition represents empirical work in IT and assumes that the terms defined within it are consistent with IT. The remaining propositions do not incorporate the ideas of Stryker or IT. We offered alternative propositions that we believe do reflect accurately the ideas of Stryker and of IT.

M-F (2020, Chapter 7, p. 178) indicate that as they entered into examining the propositional structure of IT, "it seemed to make the most sense to focus primarily on its most-cited later versions" [from the four early writings that M-F identified as core]. As we have shown, we looked across all iterations of Stryker's statements to ensure that we captured his ideas rather than relying on one version that may have changed or developed over time. M-F also indicate that their "propositions extend the theory by relating identity salience to a set of additional consequences" (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 181). We presume this extension is in propositions 7 and 8 where the authors included "related identities." We do not know the theoretical relevance of this extension, or why an extension was made here and not elsewhere in their propositional structure. Before we entertain an extension of any theory, it seems wise to first ensure that the fundamentals of the theory have been captured. Finally, while Figures 7 and 8 of Chapter 7 provide a helpful visual that summarizes the causal associations across the nine propositions M-F offer, the diagrams have errors based on their own propositions. Proposition 5 should be $L \rightarrow S$, and not $V \rightarrow S$, which they represent in Figs. 7 and 8 of Chapter 7. Also, proposition 9 should be $S \rightarrow V$ and not $S \rightarrow L$, which they depict in Figs. 7 and 8 of Chapter 7.

SCOPE CONDITIONS

Scope conditions provide the circumstances under which a theory holds. M-F (2020, Chapter 7, pp. 182–183) list four scope conditions that they have intuited from their reading of IT, which we discuss. The first says that P's identity salience is nonzero. In IT, identity salience is a probability and can take on values from 0 to 1. Zero salience is unlikely, but if identity salience is zero, it would simply mean that the identity is never invoked in a situation (and another will be invoked). IT does not rest on identity salience being nonzero.

The second scope condition indicates P has multiple roles. IT is not only about being a role player, but also about being a member of a group or category and

being a unique person. Thus, this statement places an undue constraint on the conditions to which the theory applies.

The third condition indicates that consensus exists on the roles relevant to a situation. Consensus is a matter of degree, and meanings are always subject to negotiation to maintain shared meaning, which makes interaction possible. Identities of all kinds (beyond role identities) help us define situations, but it is unlikely that complete consensus on the identities ever exists. Consequently, we do not see this scope condition as useful.

The final scope condition, that P is a member of a network relevant to one or more of his/her identities, is true by definition. According to IT, you cannot be a member of a network and not have an identity. If P is a member of a network, P occupies a social position, and thus, assuming P has the capacity to attribute meaning, P has a relevant identity. Conversely, if P has an identity, P is in a social position that is part of a network. Because this condition is always true, we do not see its statement as necessary. In general, we do not see the four scope conditions that M-F offer as helpful in identifying the circumstances under which IT holds.

Identity theorists generally have not indicated scope conditions for the theory, though it would be good to articulate some. We offer some ideas toward this development. Since IT applies to actors who have a self, the theory would apply to humans as opposed to nonhumans. At what age IT is relevant for humans requires a careful analysis about when the self has developed to assume person, role, and/or categorical/group identities. Relatedly, there may be some who lack the mental acuity to maintain identities or who are not able to attribute meanings. Thus, when we are researching children, adolescents, delusional, or autistic individuals, we need to think about what it means to have the capacity to attribute meaning and a developed self, and thus whether IT would apply. Further, IT is intended to explain which identities are enacted in a situation when there are multiple possibilities. Therefore, we are dealing with a complex, differentiated human society or social structure. The theory may not hold if the society is too simple and undifferentiated. We do not know how simple is too simple, but some societies may be too undifferentiated for the theory to hold. In general, scope conditions remind us that a theory has boundaries, so future identity theory work may want to identify these boundaries formally.

CONCLUSIONS

Codifying an existing and developing theory is an important but arduous task. It can help in understanding and learning a theory, but the task can be difficult to accomplish when a theory has an active research program, as does IT. The research program of IT contains changes and developments in our understanding that have resulted in hundreds of publications to date. The tools and techniques that M-F have presented in their paper are sound. However, applying them to IT – or indeed any theory – accurately and adequately requires something beyond the tools and techniques themselves. It requires a full understanding of the whole theory – its background, its development, and what

it is attempting to explain. As we wrote earlier, a theory is more than a set of definitions, propositions, and scope conditions. A theory is about something. It has a background, it has a context, and it has a perspective.

When statements are reworded, sometimes for the sake of parsimony, it can dramatically change the meaning of what was originally intended, leading to erroneous ideas about a theory. When the whole of a theory is not examined, it makes interpretations even more precarious. This halts scientific progress for the research community. We agree with M-F that there should not be interpretive flexibility with respect to a theory. That is why we originally agreed to respond to this article. We also agree with M-F that, just as with any developing theory, ambiguities and inconsistencies sometimes creep in and must be noticed and resolved. Unfortunately, we do not agree that M-F's version of IT is "more parsimonious, communicable, semantically consistent and logically sound than the original" (Markovsky & Frederick, 2020, Chapter 7, p. 185). We have identified where their reformulation is in error, and we thank the authors for – perhaps inadvertently – encouraging us to undertake some definitional and propositional formalization for IT. We caution the reader, however, that as we indicated at the outset, we have not attempted to formalize the whole of the theory. That task requires more work and many more definitions and propositions than offered here.

IT has many ideas that reside within its boundaries. When trying to understand behavior, identity theorists examine external, social structural aspects of society as a force and product of the self, and they examine the internal, perceptual control dynamics of the self. These dual foci of research are not different modules that are distinct and that need to be formally bridged as M-F advocate toward the end of their article. The programs of research with these different foci are both rooted in SSI and share core ideas such as the centrality of meaning, the importance of self and identity, and the enactment of meaningful behaviors as we live in a complex differentiated society. In short, they comprise one theory. To ignore this fact is fundamentally to misinterpret and misrepresent what *is* IT.

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