# Social Identities and Psychosocial Stress

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## Introduction

In order to understand the role of identities in the stress process, I begin with a short discussion of the nature of social identities as understood in the context of identity theory. Following that, I briefly review an interruption theory of stress based on the work of Mandler (1982) and show how the underlying mechanisms which produce the stress response in that theory are mechanisms that are relevant to identity theory. These mechanisms allow identity theory then to account for patterns of stress that are noticed across a variety of social situations and positions in society. While much of the literature on stress emphasizes the overload hypothesis, in which the person is overwhelmed with stimuli to process (job demands, social expectation, noise, etc.), the present chapter focuses on the interruption hypothesis in which the normal processing of perceptions or actions in the perception/action control system is disrupted. Other theories that have addressed issues relating to identities and stress are also briefly reviewed, and their relationship to identity theory is discussed.

The chapter then continues with an examination of a number of the most examined lines of research on social stress and discusses the relevance of identity interruption theory for each area. These lines include research on the stress effects of role conflict and status inconsistency, life events, and type A behavior, as well as the buffering effects of social support and coping. It is shown that the identity interruption model (slightly modified) provides a unifying framework for understanding the research results in all of these areas. The main thrust of this discussion is that the same mechanisms which provide our basic goals and directions in life (our identities) are the mechanisms which also provide our basic sources of distress.

**Identities**

Identity theory itself is not so much a theory as it is a theoretical framework that has developed as part of structural symbolic interaction (Stryker, 1980). As Stryker (1984) points out, its beginnings can be traced to the work of George Herbert Mead for ideas on the nature of the self and the role of symbol and meaning (cf. Mead, 1934), and to the work of several authors that can be grouped together under the rubric of role theory, for ideas on the nature of social structure and the place of individuals within it (cf. Stryker & Statham, 1984).

Drawing on the symbolic capacity of persons, the approach of identity theory as outlined by Stryker (1980) suggests that 1) human behavior is dependent on a world in which physical and social aspects of the environment are named and classified and 2) the names carry meaning in the form of shared behavioral expectations. Among the important things named are positions within social structure that carry shared expectations for behavior, i.e., *roles*. Persons acting in the roles label themselves and others as occupants of the positions, and from the labels or names come to have expectations about their own and others' behavior. When persons name themselves in the context of a position, this name and set of *shared meanings*, in the form of expectations, become a part of the self within that role or *role identity*.

Role identities, or identities as I will often refer to them, are thus components of the self-concept. They are the meanings and expectations one attributes to oneself in a role (and that others attribute to one). They originate and are maintained in social interaction through self-presentation and altercasting (Goffman, 1959; Weinstein, 1969). The self-meanings come to be known and understood through interaction with others. They are learned from the responses of others to one's own actions. One's actions develop meaning through the responses of others, and over time become significant symbols that call up within the person the same responses that are called up in others. Thus, the meanings are shared.

The meaning of an identity lies in the direction and intensity of one's mediational response to it (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957)[1]. Similarly, the meaning of one's behavior lies in the

response to it (Burke, & Reitzes, 1981). Thus, meaning is the link between one's identity and one's behavior. The meanings of a role identity are assessed through one's behavior in the position. Both the self and others respond to one's behavior in terms of the meaning implications that behavior has for who one is (i.e., one's identity). This is an interpretive process based on shared symbolic communication and it allows for both the social control of behavior as well as for the self-control of behavior. The link between identities and behavior through meaning is not just a descriptive statement about the relationship between identities and behavior. Burke and Reitzes (1981), drawing upon a number of other researchers, suggest that the link is motivational; that people are motivated to bring the meanings of their behavior into consistency with the meanings of their identities. This was termed *semantic congruence*.

(Figure 1 about here)

From a more formal perspective, then, an identity consists of four main parts as outlined in Figure 1. The first part is the *identity standard* which is a set of self-meanings defining the character of the identity, that is, what it means to be who one is. Second is an *input function* consisting of perceptions of identity relevant meanings concerning who one is in a situation. It has the same dimensions of meaning as are contained in the standard. Thus, if the standard contains a self-definition in terms of being dominant and strong to a given degree, the input function monitors the degree of dominance and strength one appears to have in a situation. Third is a *comparator,* which compares the perceived self-meanings with the meanings in the identity standard and indicates the difference between them (error). Finally, there is an *output function* that translates the error into meaningful actions and behaviors that act upon the social situation. These behaviors change the situation and the self-meanings that are perceived by the input function, thus completing the feedback loop. In a self-regulating fashion, the perceptions are controlled by the behavior to be congruent with the identity standard, thus minimizing the error output of the comparator. Individual behavior is thus a *joint* function of the perceptions (inputs) and the identity standard.

In terms of the way an identity operates, the standard or setting is scaled in the meanings persons hold for themselves in a role. For example, a person's gender identity might be set at a certain degree of masculinity; or a person's college student identity might be set simultaneously at certain degrees of academic responsibility, intellectualism, sociability, and personal assertiveness[2] Whatever the settings, these standards within the identity process establish the meaning of the person's "identity." Using Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum's (1957) view of meanings as mediational responses, the identity standard can be thought of as a "set" or *N*-dimensional vector of meanings. These are "fundamentals" in the language of Affect Control Theory (Smith-Lovin & Heise 1988).

Identity theory also considers the inputs to the identity process to be in the form of an *N*-dimensional vector of *perceived* meanings of who one is as implied by the social setting -- the reflected appraisals. The notion of reflected appraisals lies in Cooley's (1902) idea of the looking-glass self wherein people see themselves as reflected in the reactions of others to them. Thus the reactions of others convey meanings about oneself which is part of the input for the identity process. Both the input and the standard are thus of similar content and can be compared. It is the comparator that evaluates the degree to which they correspond. When the input meanings are incongruent with the meanings of the identity standard, (1) a subjective feeling of distress occurs that increases with the degree of incongruence (Zanna & Cooper 1976), and (2) because of the distress, outputs from the identity system to the environment will change.

The environment is a social interaction system that includes resources (in the sense of things that sustain individuals and social structures including food, esteem, power, heat, oil, etc.), as well as the behaviors of oneself and the behaviors of others. The outputs to the environment from the identity system are meaningful behaviors that may modify the resources and behaviors of others (Burke & Reitzes 1981; Burke & Freese, forthcoming). Normally, the effect of these outputs (social actions) on the social interaction system completes the feedback loop, resulting in new inputs to the identity system (reflected appraisals or perceptions of self-meanings in the social setting). These new inputs tend toward congruence with the standard and result in decreased dis-

tress. The achievement of congruence, however, is not automatic. Rather, people continue to vary their outputs to achieve and maintain congruence, attempting to keep the behavior of others reflecting the identity standard they possesses (Swann & Hill 1982). This process of achieving and maintaining congruence may become relatively efficient and automatic over time as the individual learns the patterns of the interaction system and how to effectively manipulate them. It is the inputs that are the controlled variable in the identity control system. It is the inputs that are altered (by changing output behavior) to match the standard. The input meanings themselves do not cause behavior, nor does the identity standard itself cause behavior. Output behavior results from the comparison of the input meanings with the identity standard.

It is the self-regulatory aspect that defines identities as different from general personality traits. In this view, personality traits are constructs developed to account for consistent patterns of behavior over time (Wiggins & Pincus, 1992). They are usually conceptualized as habitual dispositions to act in a certain manner that are acquired through learning and socialization. Behavior resulting from habit is not under self-control[3] This is not a criticism of the concept of personality traits, but is meant only to highlight the feedback control process which is central to the concept of identity, and to distinguish the stability achieved through such feedback processes from the stability which is achieved in an S-R model through habituation. The former I am calling identities, the latter, traits. The point is not whether given characteristics are identities or traits, but whether they are maintained by a feedback control process. Given this distinction, for traits, the level of a behavior should be directly tied to the level of the trait, while for identities, the level of a behavior should be inversely tied to the *relationship* between the level of the identity standard and the level of the perceptions. In this view, an identity is a feedback control process in which a set of self-meanings serve as a standard against which to compare self-relevant meanings in situations. Behaviors resulting from that comparison maintain the input of the feedback system.

This model of the identity process builds on current evidence that people feel some level of distress when they receive feedback that is incongruent with their identity, *even if that feedback is*

*more positive than their identity*. While this conclusion may seem somewhat counterintuitive, it has been documented relatively extensively. For example, early experimental evidence showed that people who expect failure are somewhat discomfited by success (Aronson & Carlsmith 1962; Brock, Adelman, Edwards, & Schuck 1965; Deutsch & Solomon 1959). Recent survey research has shown that positive life events have negative health consequences for persons with low self-esteem but not for those with high self-esteem (Brown & McGill 1989). And other recent experimental research has shown that people seek positive feedback if they have positive self-concepts but prefer negative feedback if they have negative self-concepts (Swann, Pelham & Krull 1989). In general, the thrust of current and past research supports congruence theories rather than enhancement theories of the self.[4]

## The Concept of Stress

The traditional view is that stress is a set of demands on individuals that tax or exceed their resources for managing them.[5] There is another view of stress that is emerging which is in contrast to the concept of stress as overload. Though no longer new, this more recent, cognitive view of stress focuses on *interruption* and subsumes the idea of overload (Mandler, 1982). The basic premise of interruption theory is the well-documented finding that *autonomic activity (distress or anxiety) results whenever some organized action or thought process is interrupted*. Interruption is the disconfirmation of an expectancy or the noncompletion of some initiated action. The autonomic activity instigated by interruption (stress) serves as a signaling system that demands attention. This can result in the adaptive response of increasing attention to crucial events or, in more extreme situations, of drawing attention away from other needed areas (Baddeley, 1972).

The difference between overload and interruption is documented by Kirmeyer (1988). She studied police radio dispatchers whose completion of particular tasks on the job is frequently interrupted as new calls come in. She showed that the amount of distress dispatchers experience is directly related to the number of objective interruptions that occur per hour. The total work load

(number of all tasks per hour), while correlated with distress, appears to affect distress levels entirely through the *rate of interruptions* that occur. This view of distress as the result of interruption has also been fruitfully applied by Berscheid (1983) in her study of emotional arousal. She pointed to a number of studies that demonstrated (a) the attention-getting properties of interruption, (b) the arousal that follows interruption, and (c) the analysis and interpretation of the meaning of the interrupting event which helps individuals understand which "emotion" they are experiencing and what they can do about it. She showed, for example, with respect to romantic love, that interruptive obstacles seem to act to heighten passion (arousal) rather than decrease it.

The degree of autonomic activity caused by the interruption of organized processes depends both on the *degree of organization* of the interrupted process and the *severity* of the interruption (Mandler, 1982). The interruption of a highly-organized activity or cognitive process will result in a high level of autonomic activity. Also, severe interruption, that is the process of repeatedly initiating an activity in a situation with repeated interruptions or the interruption of a highly salient activity or cognitive process, will result in a high level of autonomic arousal. Strong autonomic arousal in response to interruption is experienced subjectively as distress.

This view of stress from interruption theory relates very well to an identity theory approach to stress as well as to the understanding of stress processes as described by sociologists (e.g., Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981; House & Harkins, 1976) as well as some psychologists (e.g., Higgins, 1989).

**Identities and Stress**

The logic of the argument linking identity processes with the stress process may already be apparent to perceptive readers. The key is to remember the following three important points. When an identity is activated, identity processes operate continuously through time to maintain congruence between the identity standard and reflected self-appraisals. The identity standard is a set of expectancies in the form of meanings, and the output of the identity system (meaningful

behavior) is linked to its input (perceived self-meanings) primarily through the social environment. An identity process is a *continuously operating, self-adjusting*, feedback loop: individuals *continually* adjust behavior to keep their reflected appraisals congruent with their identity standards or references. In familiar situations, this adjustment process is nearly automatic, requiring little or no attention. Since the identity process is continuous, the amount by which one's reflected appraisals differ from one's identity standard is kept small. The existence of a relatively large discrepancy is likely to indicate some type of interruption in the identity process that has suspended the normal condition of continuous congruence between reflected appraisals and the identity standard (Stotland & Pendleton, 1989).

As the incongruence between one's reflected appraisals and one's identity standard is created and grows beyond the minimal discrepancies that are handled automatically (or perhaps ignored), first, one's attention is directed to the discrepancy as the identity process is brought under conscious control (Schlenker, 1987). If the incongruence increases, distress increases providing both an alarm system and motivation to remediate the problem discrepancy (Young, 1989).

To the extent that an identity is well-established, there is better organization of the feedback process. In addition, the more salient the identity, the more important is this process. Both of these conditions, organization and salience, are important. Interruption theory suggests that the interruption of more organized and salient processes (such as identity processes) leads to the heightened autonomic activity experienced as distress (Mandler 1982).

To illustrate this, I consider an example of a woman executive who fails to perceive herself (as an executive) in a situation as being as powerful (one of the general and universal dimension of connotative meaning -- cf., Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957; Osgood, May & Miron 1975) as her identity standard indicates. Suppose her rather automatic efforts to establish herself as more powerful in the situation by modifying her behaviors meet with no success: she is viewed as ineffective, or she cannot control the situation or modify the flow of resources in the situation (all of which have meaningful implications for her "powerfulness"). Her identity processes fail or are

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interrupted. Because these established and important identity processes are interrupted, the model

suggests she will feel distress. *Social stress results from the interruption of the continuously adjust-*

*ing identity processes.*[6]

There are a number of ways that this might happen as outlined in Burke (1991). Let me list

them before discussing each in more detail. The first, or *Type I* interruption, is the *broken loop*.

Remembering that when activated, an identity is a highly organized, continuously operating

feedback loop of adjusting outputs to maintain congruence between inputs and the identity

standard, breaking this continuous loop would constitute an interruption of a highly organized

process and be a major source of distress (Mandler, 1982) in the form of heightened autonomic

activity. Much of the literature on the impact of life events fits this type of interruption. The *Type II*

interruption of the identity process is understandable when it is recognized that people have more

than one role identity, and that it is possible that *maintaining one identity acts to undermine and*

*interrupt the processes that maintain another identity* -- the classic role-conflict situation to which

we shall return. Carver and Scheier (1988) present a very similar idea, suggesting that problems in

the smooth flow of self-regulation sometimes arise as when there is conflict between identity

standards (reference values in their language) which results in anxiety.

The third manner of interruption (*Type III*) is related to the first two, but has a different

source. This I have called the *over-controlled* identity. Each identity is a control system which is

driven by the size of the error signal or discrepancy between the inputs and the identity standard. In

a loosely controlled system (as compared with a tightly controlled system), a larger degree of

discrepancy or error is tolerated before control mechanisms are brought into play to reduce that

error. A tightly controlled system requires more sensitivity to error (hence a larger autonomic

response to discrepancy when it occurs) and it requires more attention and resources to monitor that

potential discrepancy which may draw away from resources used to maintain other identities. The

maintenance processes of these other identities, without proper resources, may be disrupted and

lead to distress. Thus heightened distress occurs not only from the greater sensitivity to error of the over controlled identity, but also from other identities that cannot be sufficiently attended to.

The fourth manner of interruption (*Type IV*) proposed by Burke (1991) is based on the fact that people have multiple identities, not all of which are activated at the same time. In this sense, all identities are *episodic in nature* and the continuity of their processes is routinely interrupted, and therefore a certain amount of distress is built into the functioning of all identities. However, there is variability in the degree to which any identity is episodic, and this variability occurs across identities, across people and across time. Some identities are taken on briefly and infrequently so that the smoothness of the control system has little chance to develop as being an actor in a school play. Other identities have a strong component of frequently being "on" and "off" without predictability as with police and fire protection roles. In each of these cases the interruptions may bring about heightened distress. There is relatively little research bearing on this type of interruption and no further mention of it will be made in this chapter except to suggest that research is needed.

**Related Models**

Before going on to examine research on stress in light of identity theory and the interruption theory of stress, I want to examine a couple of other models of identities as they have been related to the stress process. The model of identity theory presented above is most similar to Brown's identity disruption model (cf., Brown and McGill 1989) which suggests that the negative effects of life events operate through the process of creating alterations in self-concepts -- alterations that have a negative impact on health. According to Brown and McGill (1989) there is a two-step process in which life events first create a change in a person's identity and then the identity disruption has a negative impact on health. They suggest four ways in which the first step may occur. A life event may cause an individual to abandon an existing identity (for example through the death of a spouse or the loss of a job). A life event may cause an individual to adopt a new

identity as when that person becomes married or joins the labor force. A third form occurs when life events disrupt an identity by changing the structure of the self-concept. An example would be a son or daughter leaving home and the centrality or salience of that identity declines while other identities may gain prominence. The last form of impact occurs when life events cause a person to reevaluate an existing identity, for example when a job loss causes a person to question their identity as a successful business person.

With respect to the second step wherein identity disruption has a negative impact on health, Brown and McGill (1989) suggest that since identities function to facilitate the processing of personal information (Markus, 1977), to provide guidelines for present and future behavior (Gergen, 1971, Markus & Nurius, 1986), and to act as the basis for people to react to each other (Swann, 1987), any disruption of identities would cause people to have to devote extra attention to these tasks thus depleting energy and resources that might be used elsewhere. Such depletion of resources may thus limit a persons ability to withstand illness. Additionally, with the disruption of an identity, the utility of that identity for predicting and controlling events is diminished, and such loss of control may also have negative health consequences.

The similarity of Brown's identity disruption model and the merger of identity theory and interruption theory is readily apparent. He defined identity disruptions as any change to existing identities: abandoning old identities, adopting new identities, or changing the structure of the self-concept. Brown, however, does not as clearly specify the mechanisms by which such disruptions influence stress reactions as are specified in Mandler's (1982) model. The negative effects of such identity Changes are brought about in Brown's model as a result of a rather vague "loss of efficiency" in processing self-relevant information and in making behavioral decisions.

The identity interruption model I present here is concerned less with "changes" to existing identities and more with the disruption of the continuously operating identity process. Severe interruption of this continuous process, i.e., repeated interruption or interruption of salient processes, produces the heightened autonomic activity that is distress. Distress comes not from the

loss of efficiency as in the Brown model (though loss of efficiency may contribute to further stress if it creates more interruptions of the identity process). The problem is the distress and its consequences.

Another model of self-processes that underlie distress responses comes from the work of E. Tory Higgins and his students. This model has come to be known as self-discrepancy theory (e.g.., Higgins 1987, 1989; Higgins, Klein, Strauman 1985; Higgins, Bond, Klein, Strauman 1986; Higgins Strauman, Klein 1986). This work deals with the emotional consequences of a cognitive discrepancy between two parts of the identity system: the identity standard and perceptions of the way the current state of the identity. The basic premise of the theory is that relations between different self-beliefs produce emotional vulnerabilities irrespective of the content of those self-beliefs. Much of the following description of the theory is taken from Higgins (1989). The theory distinguishes between three different domains of the self, and two standpoints. The three domains are the *actual* self, or beliefs about the current state of who you are (the self-concept), the *ought* self, or beliefs and standards about the person you ought to be (the ought self-guide), and the *ideal* self, or beliefs and standards about the type of person you ideally would be (the ideal self-guide). The two standpoints are (1) *one's own* standpoint concerning the three domains and (2) the standpoint of a *significant other* (e.g., mother, father, spouse, friend) concerning the three domains.

Self-discrepancy theory assumes that people are motivated to reach a condition in which their self-concept matches their relevant self-guide. This assumed motivation to achieve congruence between the self-concept and the self-guides is like the assumption made in other cognitive consistency models such as identity theory above. It is assumed that discomfort is associated with a discrepancy, and the amount of discomfort is a function of the magnitude of the discrepancy. As a result of prior socialization, people learn to self-regulate to minimize differences between their current self-state and the reference value provided by either the ought self-standard or the ideal self-standard.

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The second assumption of discrepancy theory is that each of the different types of discrepancies are associated with distinct emotional-motivational states (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Sanchez-Bernardos & Sanz, 1992). Considering, for the moment, only the standpoint of the self, two different types of discrepancy are central to the theory. These two are actual self vs. ideal self and actual self vs. ought self. A person who experiences an actual vs. an ideal self-discrepancy finds that they are not the person they ideally would want to be. This situation represents the absence of a positive outcome and is associated with outcome feelings of sadness, dejection and, in more extreme cases, depression. A person who experiences the other type of discrepancy, actual self vs. ought self, finds that they are not being the person that is their duty or obligation to be. More to our purposes here, this situation represents the presence of a negative outcome and is associated with outcome feelings of fear, worry and anxiety.

Because the discrepancy, when it occurs, is a cognitive structure relating two distinct self-beliefs, it is subject to the information processing rules that have been found to apply to all cognitive structures. The likelihood that a self-discrepancy will produce psychological distress of either the depressive or agitative sort depends upon how accessible that cognition is. Accessibility, in turn, is a function of such factors as how recently the cognition has been activated before, whether it has been recently primed, and the nature of the relationship between the meaning of the discrepancy and the meanings in any stimulus event. If the cognition has been recently activated or recently primed or if the meanings in the stimulus event align with the meanings associated with the cognition, the cognition is more likely to be activated and therefore more likely to produce distress.

The similarity between Higgins self-discrepancy model and the identity interruption model is also readily apparent. While discrepancy theory does not deal with role identities or tie the self to social structure in the way that identity theory does, it is still possible to equate the ideal-self and ought-self of the discrepancy model with identity standards in the identity theory and the perceived self with the input side of the identity theory model (the input of relevant information concerning

the current state of the self or identity). With this equation, discrepancy is the outcome of the comparator. While identity theory suggests that distress is a function of interruption of the identity process, such interruption may be signaled by a large discrepancy between input and standard. Higgins' work suggests that perhaps the negative outcomes are a function of the magnitude of the discrepancy itself, and not necessarily just the interruption of the process. More importantly, however, is the suggestion that there are two different types of identity standards (ought and ideal) and that discrepancies with each have their separate (relatively unrelated) effects of distress and dejection (Higgins, 1989). This is important for it allows us to investigate both types of outcomes from an integrated perspective. Identity theory needs to be modified to take these different types of standards (and perhaps others as well) into account. In what follows, I will assume such as modification when talking about the merger of identity theory and interruption theory into an identity interruption theory or model.

In the following sections, I briefly present four areas of research that are central to stress research in sociology and social psychology Each of these areas is relevant to one of the four types of identity interruption discussed earlier. While each has to some extent been directly concerned with the concepts of role identity in understanding the sources of distress, the mechanisms are not clearly specified. It is the thesis of this chapter that in each case, the application of identity interruption theory would help clarify the stress process. I do not presume to review all of the relevant literature in each of the areas, but rather will attempt to provide a sense of the types of research that have gone on, and how identity interruption theory would be relevant and provide some illumination. The first of these areas is life-events research. In terms of its relation to the identity interruption model, these processes may be seen as constituting examples of what I have called *Type I* interruptions, where one normal cycle of the identity process is broken.

**Life Events - Type I Interruptions**

After Selye's research discovery of the General Adaptation Syndrome (1976) and the

nonspecific physiological reaction of the body to a variety of stimuli from the injection of toxins,

or certain hormones, to physical and behavioral stressors like extreme heat or cold and forced

exercise, there developed interest in the physiological consequences of social-psychological

stressors. In this context, Holmes (Holmes & Rahe,1967; Holmes & Masuda, 1974) hypothesized

that events that disrupt habitual activities and demand adjustment to new states would be the source

of social psychological stressors leading to the same physiological distress reactions as observed by

Selye. Based on the work of Meyer and his idea of the "life chart" (1951) as well as on the

concepts of homeostasis and adaptation, Holmes and Rahe developed a list of events which

demand readjustment. These were weighted for the amount of readjustment demanded, and it was

found that the more of these events that happened to people in the prior year, the greater was the

likelihood that the person would suffer from some physical illness.

It was the contention of Holmes and Rahe that the important factor was change itself, apart

from its meaning or direction, not whether the change was culturally good or bad, desirable or

undesirable. As Mirowsky and Ross (1989) point out, however, as researchers began to apply these

ideas to psychological distress rather than somatic distress, they also began to question the

assumption that change independent of its meaning or direction was the important consideration. In

trying to understand the mechanisms by which these events might bring about psychological

distress, it seemed to many that the undesirability of the change would be of psychological

consequence. Such events often mark what Dohrenwend (1973) termed *status loss*. And as research

unfolded, this seemed to be borne out. For example, Ross and Mirowsky (1979) found that when

events were rated for both their desirability and the amount of change or readjustment they

required, only the desirability of the event had any effect; the amount of readjustment had almost

no effect once desirability was controlled.

Before going on to look at some of this research in more detail, let me first make the

connection between this line of research and the identity interruption model. Much of the research

on the impact of life events on distress fits into what I have termed *Type I* interruptions of the

identity process, that is, breaking the smooth flowing cybernetic feedback loop that maintains

identities.   The identity process is a closed loop through the situation or social environment from

input to output and back to input. When that loop is broken, the identity process ceases to function

normally. There are two ways in which the loop can be broken (Burke, 1991). In the first way

(*Type Ia*) the loop can be broken at the point on the output side of the loop in Figure 1. In this case,

an individual's behavior in a situation has little or no effect on that situation in terms of restoring

the congruity between the inputs and the identity standard. The behavior may not influence the way

others behave toward, label, or treat the individual. Attempts at meaningful interaction may fail.

Others may not recognize the individual's efforts. Others may not pay attention. Others may impose

a meaning on the individual independent of the his or her wishes or behavior. All of these

situations lead to feelings of low self-efficacy, alienation, disaffection, estrangement and the like

on the part of the individual (cf., Blauner 1964; Burke and Tully 1977; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983;

Seligman 1975).

The issue here is the controllability of events that happen to individuals. Not all events are

relevant, however. Only the control of those events which are part of the identity maintenance or

self-verification system matter; events that are meaningful for the particular identity in question,

events whose meanings are part of the inputs that are compared to the identity standard. According

to identity interruption theory, control or its lack over events that do not feed into the self-

verification system would not have distressful effects as interruption of any other process not

relevant to the self would not distress the self-system. The issue here is not whether events

themselves are controllable or not as suggested by several writers (Thoits, 1983; Dohrenwend,

1973; Grant, et al. 1981). Rather the question is the loss of control by an individual over events that

are part of the identity maintenance process. Whether events are inherently controllable or

uncontrollable is relevant only insofar as that when dealing with events that are usually under one's control (controllable) one may well have alternative plans, schedules, procedures, etc. in place such that there is less interruption of the identity process itself than would otherwise be the case.

Another example of a *Type Ia* interruption would include the loss of identity, or the loss of a sense of self ("it's as if I don't exist") which is the source of distress identified by Stein, Vidich, and White (1960). This type of interruption is also the source of distress associated with the loss of a job (Gross 1970) or the loss of a loved one (Croog 1970) where one's identity (standard) is no longer applicable. In such cases, the feedback to maintain the identity is not forthcoming from others no matter what behavior is output -- one can no longer act in the usual way to control reflected appraisals. For example, Strobe, et al. (1982) noted that the death of a spouse disrupts many ongoing aspects of one's life as the partner on whom one has depended for many shared response sequences is lost. And, that disruption is a source of distress interfering with post-death adjustment. Consistent with the predictions of identity interruption theory, Remondet, Rule, and Winfrey (1987) find that those widows with advanced warning of a spouse's impending death began, in their interactions with others, to plan and make decisions for their future (housing, financial and legal affairs), and began to interact with others their own (i.e., without their spouse) before the death suffered less disruption and less distress.

It is possible now to see how attempts to classify life events has led to some "success" at understanding mechanisms by which such life events had effects on the psychological distress of persons. The success was a bit illusory, however, as each classification scheme was based on a different principle and there was no strong theoretical link among them. As mentioned, the distinction between desirable and undesirable events was the first, but there were others (Thoits, 1983). For example, among the other dimensions that have been considered are (1) controllable versus uncontrollable events (which we have already discussed), (2) expected versus unexpected events, (3) major versus minor events, and, more recently, (4) identity relevant versus identity

irrelevant events. Each of these classifications can be reinterpreted from the point of view of identity interruption theory.

Consider first the question of whether events are desirable or undesirable. As pointed out much research has found that only undesirable events lead to distressful outcomes (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). The issue here is reminiscent of the debate between self-enhancement models and self-verification models (Swann, 1990) in which it was argued whether distress was a function of negative feedback to a self that sought to enhance or a function of discrepant feedback to a self that sought to reduce discrepancy. The problem was that most research used subjects that had high self-esteem (as do most people) with the result that discrepancy reduction and self-enhancement are confounded. Only when persons with low self-esteem experienced positive or desirable life events was a test situation created, and in this situation Brown & McGill (1989) found evidence of negative health consequences for positive life events. Because this ideas is relatively counter-intuitive, I briefly describe their work.

Brown and McGill (1989) completed two separate studies. The first involved 261 adolescents who completed self-report measures of life events (over the prior 12 months), self-esteem and physical well-being. Health status was reassessed four months later. The analysis regressed time two health status on time one health status, the number of positive events, the number of negative events, self-esteem and three interaction terms representing interactions of self-esteem and positive events, self-esteem and negative events, and self-esteem, positive events and negative events (3-way). The results showed, aside from the effect of time one health status on time two health status, only an effect for the interaction of self-esteem and positive events: persons with low self-esteem suffered more distress than person with high self-esteem, but did so significantly more when subjected to frequent positive life events. The second study replicated the findings of the first with a more objective measure of health status (number of visits to a health facility) using a sample of college students.

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The point being made by this research is that positive life events can and do have negative consequences if they interrupt normal identity maintenance processes as they do in this case for people with low self-esteem. It must be argued, therefore, that the findings of no distressful outcomes for positive life events in much prior research occurred because identities were not interrupted by these events; rather, the events were likely to have been either anticipated or easily incorporated into the identity maintenance system. Since most people have relatively high self-esteem, positive life events will in general interrupt identity processes very little, while negative life events will be more likely to interrupt identity processes and result in distress. Hence this was a fruitful distinction to be made in accounting for distress, but perhaps not for the correct theoretical reason.

Consider another of the ways of classifying life events: the degree to which the event is expected. The research has been quite clear. With a variety of ways of determining the predictability or expectedness of events, most research has shown that unexpected events tend to increase psychological distress or be associated with depression (Thoits, 1983; Fontana, et al. 1979). Again, from an identity interruption perspective, unexpected events are more likely to interrupt normal identity maintenance processes. When an event has been anticipated, it is possible to build its occurrence into the self-verification process. Again, consider the findings of Remondet, Rule, and Winfrey (1987) that those widows with advanced warning of a spouse's impending death who began to plan and make decisions for their future (housing, financial and legal affairs), and who began to do things on their own before the death suffered less disruption and less distress.

The other broken loop interruption (*Type Ib*), which consists of interruptions of the identity process control cycle at the point at which input is received from the environment (see Figure 1), has received less attention. In this case, the individual may not be able to perceive (understand) the meanings in the situation (environment), or may perceive them incorrectly. Here, we deal with the individual's perception of the situation (input side) rather than his or her behavior in the situation (output side). In this case, the individual's behavior has effects but he or she does not perceive

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those effects, or misreads or misunderstands them for some reason. The individual may have

feelings of being misunderstood. The individual's efforts may be ineffective because he or she

does not know how to read or understand the meanings that others display. This might happen

when one is in a new culture or subculture with which one is not familiar. It may happen because

one distorts perceptions for some reason (e.g., attributional biases, cf., Bradley 1978; Kruglanski

and Ajzen 1983) or does not fully understand the implications of those perceptions (Brown and

Harris 1978).

The difference between a *Type Ib* and a *Type Ia* interruption is that in a *Type Ia* interruption

one's behavior has no effect while in a *Type Ib* interruption one can see the effects of one's behavior

but the effects are unexpected. The perceived meanings cannot be brought into congruence with

the identity standard. This creates the distress associated with being in new and strange

environments, meeting new people, or entering into new roles such as getting married or starting a

new job. Because a *Type Ib* interruption involves shifts of meaning and not loss of control entirely,

adjustment is possible and likely to be accomplished relatively quickly so that the overall amount

of distress should be less for this type of interruption.

**Role-conflict and Status Inconsistency - Type II Interruptions**

This is perhaps the most general of the areas to be discussed because it covers a wide set of

applications and focuses on a general set of mechanisms which other substantive research areas

(such as work and gender) have drawn upon. The early work on role-conflict in the sociological

tradition examined the topic from either a structural point of view or an interactionist perspective

(Stryker & Macke, 1978). Each of these perspectives had their own focus and approach. The early

work of the more structural perspective examined role-conflict (Gross, McEachern, & Mason,

1958) or role strain (Secord & Backman, 1974) with a focus not so much on the individual

subjective experience as on the behavioral choices that individuals might be made under different

conditions, or on the responses of the social system to organize social relations to avoid conflict

and strain. *Role Conflict* has been defined in a number of ways in the literature although most definitions distinguish *intra-role conflict* and *inter-role conflict*. The former exists when a person in a particular role position is confronted with incompatible expectations for their performance in that position as when, for example, a professor is expected by her students to behave one way, and by her dean to behave in another manner. The latter exists when a person occupies two different roles which have conflicting expectations for behavior. For example the a person who is both a "son" and a "fraternity member" may have different expectations applied to them by their parents and by their fraternity brothers with respect to their drinking behavior (Gross, McEachern, & Mason, 1958).

As Secord and Backman (1974) point out, there are a number of ways in which conflicting expectations can come about. Actors may disagree on what expectations are included in a given role. They may disagree on the range of permitted or prohibited behavior. They may disagree on the situations to which a given expectation applies. They may disagree on whether the expected behavior is mandatory or simply preferred. And, they may disagree on which should be honored first when one expectation conflicts with another. In all of these situations, the early work of the more structural sociological approach has typically focused either on the incumbent's behavioral responses to the conflicts and their resolutions (through conforming to one or another of the expectations, to trying to compromise an follow parts of both, or to innovate and create some new response) or have discussed ways in which the social system tries to minimize the occurrence of such role-strain situations (e.g., through scheduling, through the distribution of power for sanctions, through bargaining, or through role allocation strategies). Little attention was paid to the subjective feelings of the role incumbent caught in a role-conflict or role-strain situation (Secord & Backman, 1974) as some of the more recent work has done. Nevertheless, the seed of the early work and concerns with distress can be traced to this work.

The early work of the interactionist approach within sociology examined a number of the same questions and issues, but looked at society from the bottom up, so to speak. That is, they

emphasized the emergence of structure from the symbolic interactions of individuals which became possible with the development in humans of a self-system (Stryker & Macke, 1978). With this perspective, work came to focus more on the individuals who experience conflicting expectations of interacting as they engaged in "making" roles and negotiating over interaction strategies, as well as displaying, protecting and validating their self-concepts (Turner, 1956, 1962, 1978). Here, role-conflict is important because it is often seen as disrupting the basic predictability of interaction, and with a heightened emphasis on the idea of person/role fit, role conflict brought about the possibility of a disruption of that fit (Goffman, 1962; McCall & Simmons, 1966). The idea that role and person (through the self) begin to merge (Turner, 1978) meant that role-conflict began to be seen as a conflict within the self, with the consequent feelings of distress. While the theoretical framework is not always well spelled out, it is from this perspective, then, that current concerns emerge, for example, about role conflicts between and among combinations of spouse, parent and worker roles which may account for gender differences in stress and depression.

While some of this work simply counted up the number of roles that persons have, and has variously argued that with more roles there should be more conflict among them and hence more stress, or with more roles there are additional avenues of support, gratification, etc., and hence less stress (for example, see discussions in Thoits, 1983; Barnett & Baruch, 1985, Baruch & Barnett, 1986). In general, however, the simple role-count hypothesis received little support, and when effects were found, they were of mixed results. It is only when the way in which the person is linked to the roles (aspects of role identity) and the particular meanings of each of the role identities are considered in relation to each other, do clearer results emerge. As Barnett and Baruch (1985) suggest, by focusing only on the number of role identities, there is a confounding of the number of role identities with having particular identities or the ways in which particular individuals are involved in their roles.

It is precisely this question, of course to which identity interruption theory speaks, because it focuses on the disruption of particular identity processes and asks in what way and how often is the

particular identity process disrupted. It also wants to know if that particular identity is one for which there is high commitment and if the normal identity processes are well embedded in routine activities. Each of these latter characteristics would make any interruption more distressful according to Mandler's hypothesis. Some role identities are more likely to intrude on and interrupt other role identity processes, especially if the social system has not yet adapted to buffer the roles from each other and prevent their mutual interruptions. Detailed studies of particular role identities are needed.

With respect to the latter question, for example, a recent study by Greenberger and O'Neil (1993) examine the relations between role strain, anxiety and depression and a variety of role/person relationships including commitment, role demands and satisfactions, role evaluations and social support for role-related activities for the roles of parent, spouse and worker. They find that men are prone to more anxiety when they are not involved in their work role identity in a manner consistent with their gender identity, and women are more prone to depression as well as to anxiety when they are not involved in their parenting and spousal role identities in a manner consistent with their gender identity. Interestingly, women were also more prone to anxiety and depression when they were involved in their work role identity in a manner *inconsistent* with traditional female gender identity. However, the women in this study were young, and part of a dual-earner family. Their gender identities may not have been as traditionally feminine with respect to the work area as women in general or perhaps older women. This suggests that more attention needs to be paid to clearly measuring the specific contents and expectations of persons' identities. This thought is echoed by Marks (1994: 112) who suggest that it is important to know exactly "how ... commitments [to different role identities] fit together with each other, how they take their place within the whole system or organization of commitments, we cannot know whether or not they will tend to generate role strain."

Another example of this type of research in the role conflict tradition is given in the work of Gore and Mangione (1983). In commenting on the fairly common findings that levels of stress

among employed married women are higher than among employed married men, they suggest that work is compatible with the family-role expectations of men, but is less compatible with the family roles of most women (cf. also Gove & Tudor, 1973). Their own research begins to specify this relationship further by showing this to be especially true when there are young children (under age 6) in the household. Because of the different expectations held for mothers and fathers of young children, parental and work identities are much more likely to conflict for women than for men. It is not just the presence of children, but the meaning of that for the role identities of mothers and fathers.

This idea that particular expectations for and particular involvements in role identities are the crucial aspects to consider when trying to understand the link between role conflict and stress is carried further by Thoits (1992). This study also took the question of the number of identities further than most studies, which as we have seen generally focus only on the combinations of parent, spouse, and worker. Thoits studied adults who held any of up to 17 different roles, including not only the three traditional roles usually considered, but also such noninstitutionalized roles as "friend," "lover," and "caregiver" as well as "son/daughter in law," "relative," "neighbor," and "churchgoer". Importantly, she also distinguished between being a role occupant in any of these roles, and indicating that role constitutes an important identity for the person (a salient identity). The overall results suggest that it is not the case that the salience of an identity is an important characteristic (salient identities give meaning to one's life) that might reduce stress reactions to events. What matters instead, Thoits (1992) suggests, is which role-identities are held, in which combinations, and by which gender. Further, that assessing variations in the meaning of particular identities to different individuals is a step which must be taken.

This is fully consistent with the general principles of identity interruption theory. It may seem that a special explanation must be made for each person and the particular combinations of role identities they have and the particular meanings of those identities to those persons, this is only apparent. The general principles are of the interruption of identity processes. If we want to

understand the stress processes as it applies to one class of persons compared to another class of persons, then the common features of that class of persons, in terms of the identities they have, must be shown, as well as the differences that exist between them and the other class of persons. As a simple example, we might ask how are the meanings of being female different from the meanings of being male, such that the control of one set of meanings and not the other is interrupted by controlling the meanings of being a parent?

Related to role-conflict, and often discussed with it (Stryker & Macke, 1978) because of the similarity, is the phenomenon of *status-inconsistency*. Though like the study of role-conflict the study of status-inconsistency had its origins in a structural approach within sociology, from the very beginning, the stress response was an outcome frequently investigated (e.g., Jackson, 1962; Jackson & Burke, 1965). The issue addressed by this research concerns the potentially conflicting expectation held for people of different status ranks in society. As formulated by Lenski (1954), American social structure is characterized by a number of status dimensions that are not equivalent. Sometime referred to as class, status, and power, the dimensions have usually been operationalized by education, occupation and income (or sometimes race). Since people can have different ranks on each of these status dimensions, the argument runs, they may have inconsistent expectations held for them based variously on their education (which may be high, for example) and their occupational prestige (which may be low). While a large number of outcomes of such conflicting expectations have been investigated over the years (e.g., political liberalism, social participation, symptoms of stress. cf. Curtis & Jackson, 1977), the stress response is of concern here. Clearly, the same general explanatory mechanisms are being studied here as in role conflict studies, and a general theoretic approach that incorporates both types of studies is called for.

Although status inconsistency research has had many of the same problems as role conflict research in terms of finding consistent, replicable effects (cf. Curtis & Jackson, 1977), status inconsistency research was plagued from the beginning by methodological issues concerning the proper form of analysis. When examining the effects of status inconsistency, it was not possible to

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hold each status dimension constant and at the same time vary the level of inconsistency, since inconsistency is defined by the difference between two status dimensions. By defining inconsistency in terms of an interaction effect, Jackson & Burke (1965) were able to overcome the methodological problems associated with earlier research. The results of this study using national data from Gurin, Veroff & Feld (1960) showed that persons with high ascribed status (in term of race) and low achieved status (either occupation or education) had more symptoms of stress than the converse form of inconsistency and especially more than those who had no inconsistency.

This would be consistent with expectations from identity interruption theory and if one views having a high ascribed status as a proxy for having an identity with a certain high level of expectations for performance in the identity standard, then low achieved status in terms of occupation or education represents a discrepancy with that high level of performance expectation. It is precisely under these conditions that distress and agitation should occur.

On the other hand, not all studies of status inconsistency found the expected effects of distress (e.g., Lystad, 1969). Cassidy and Warren (1991) suggest that attention needs to be paid to the specific meanings that the particular statuses under consideration have. It may well be the case that real inconsistency does not exist, or exists only under certain special circumstances. For example, Galtung's (1966) points out that in the case of the black physician, inconsistency may exist only when such a person interacts with a white physician or with a black laborer, and, further, perhaps only when the particular status dimension is salient. As with understanding role conflict, the conclusion seems to be that one must consider the identities that are activated, and the particular meanings that are involved with the particular identities in order to know whether there is the real possibility of interruption due to inconsistency.

**Type A Personality and Other Highly Controlled Identities - Type III Interruptions**

*Type III* interruptions with their consequent distress occur in the a "tightly" or overcontrolled identity. A "tightly" controlled identity is one that attempts to match the reflected appraisals (input

signal) to the actual identity (standard) almost exactly. A "loosely" controlled identity, in contrast, allows the reflected appraisals to vary to a degree before indicating a discrepancy and altering the output. A tightly controlled identity is likely to lead to greater frequency and higher levels of distress, especially in environments that with variable reflected appraisals or resource flows. *Individuals who have a tightly controlled identity must monitor and adjust their identity process frequently, and because conscious attention is limited, this frequent adjustment can interrupt other processes or be interrupted by other processes.* These frequent interruptions by the process itself are associated with distress (Shapiro, 1992).

For example, "Type A" personalities appear to have more tightly controlled identity systems with more rigid, and therefore easily interrupted, organizations (cf., House 1974; Jenkins 1971). Such tightly controlled identity systems are not only more easily interrupted, but interruptions cause more disruption than for more loosely controlled identity systems. Experiments have shown that Type A persons are impatient with delay (Burnam, Pennebaker, & Glass, 1975) and react with annoyance and impatience when completion of a task is delayed (Glass, Snyder, & Hollis, 1974). In the study of police dispatchers, Kirmeyer (1988) shows that Type A persons feel more distress than others, even when the number of objective interruptions of their job performance is controlled. Similarly, a number of studies have shown that Type A persons were more stressed by events and interruptions than Type B persons (e.g., Davilla, Mariotta, & Hicks, 1990; Jamal 1990). While the Type A personality has been studied primarily with respect to work roles, similar manifestations may show themselves in other situations and other roles. For example, Authoritarianism (Adorno Frenkel-Brunswik. Levinson, and Sanford 1950) and closed-mindedness (Rokeach 1960) may represent other manifestations of this sort of tightly controlled identity system. This would explain higher distress levels for people with these characteristics.

Similar patterns can also occur in other role identities as, for example, gender identity. A person with a strong gender identity might closely control his or her gender-relevant reflected appraisals. In this case, a person with a strong masculine identity is not necessarily extremely

masculine (though is more likely to be given the correlation between strength and extremity of attitudes), but he cannot tolerate being in situations where he is perceived as very much different from the meaning of "masculine" as his identity has defined it; any perception that does not strongly agree with his identity standard must be quickly corrected. Because of the degree of attention that must be given over to control of the perceptions of self-meanings relevant to gender other identity processes may come into conflict with this time/attention and the different identity control processes interrupt each other (c.f., Eisler & Skidmore, 1987).

On the other hand, a person with a more androgynous gender identity is more flexible and does not need to control his reflected appraisals as much as the person with a sex-typed identity. In this case, androgyny is viewed not as having both masculine and feminine traits, but as having an open and flexible identity that allows an individual to behave in ways that are to their advantage, even though he or she may be sometimes perceived as more masculine and sometimes as more feminine. In this sense, the androgynous person does not need to work as hard to maintain his or her gender identity as the sex-typed person and is therefore less likely to have an interrupted identity process or have the identity process interrupt other activities. Roos and Cohen (1987) found exactly this result in their longitudinal study of sex roles and stress. They found that androgynous individuals had greater resilience and suffered less interruption and stress from life events than more strongly sex-typed individuals. This mechanism could also account for the findings that persons with androgynous gender identities tend to have higher feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Spence and Helmreich 1978; Spence and Helmreich 1979).

Related to the tightness of the control system governing the identity process is the effect of time constraints on role performance. Earlier I discussed the potential conflict between two identities that may be competing for time, for example a work/profession-based identity and a family-based identity. However, time constraints on the role performance of a single identity can have much the same effect. With time constraints proper performance may not be possible so that some control over meaningful performance is lost and the identity system is disrupted. In addition,

the identity system may become more tightly controlled with the increase of time pressure,

resulting in other processes being interrupted (time for family gives way as work demands

increase) or in the interruption of the tightly controlled identity process (failures become more

disruptive because of the time pressures, minor interruptions have greater impact and lead to more

distress).

**The Buffers of Social Support and Coping - Reducing and Preventing Interruptions**

While much of the research on stress has looked at the causes and conditions of distress, there

is also a great deal of research that has tried to understand why some events and conditions buffer

the effects of stressors. What makes some persons more vulnerable to stressors than other persons?

The usual answer is that some people are protected by buffers of one sort or another which prevent

the stressor from having its "normal" impact (Wheaton, 1983, 1985). Primary among these

moderators or buffers of the effects of stressors are social support, a sense of mastery, and active

coping (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1991). My purpose in this section is to bring the study of stress

buffers into the framework of identity disruption theory. If distress is the result of interruptions of

the normal control process of identity maintenance or self-verification, then factors which prevent

or reduce such interruptions should buffer the effects of stressors. Can we understand social

support, mastery and active coping strategies in these terms?

I begin with social support. There is an abundance of research that has shown that people with

social support are less vulnerable to stressors than those without social support (Mirowsky & Ross,

1989; Pearlin & McCall, 1990). Yet, the measures of social support are quite varied (being married,

having close friends, being involved in various networks). While they all have in common ties of

one sort or another to other persons, the nature of these ties and the concept of support generally

are often not well specified (Buunk & Hoorens, 1992, Barrera, 1988). While having "fulfilling

personal relationships" is often seen as the important characteristic (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989) to be

captured, being married as an indicator, for example, does not always do the job (Pearlin, 1975;

Gove, Hughes, & Style, 1983). As Pearlin and McCall (1990) point out, not a lot is known about how social support has the effects it does and the *social* character of social support has been generally ignored. The go on to present a model of the support process as it occurs in interaction, dealing in this specific instance with marital support (which is one of the most studied). They have divided up the process into four stages, but for the purposes here, Stage III, dealing with the forms and functions of support, is the most important, for it is here that they discuss the actual mechanisms of support, and these functions tie in to the way an identity system operates. What we can see is that *support operates primarily by restoring or strengthening the normal self-verification processes that have been interrupted.*

Five different mechanisms are discussed by Pearlin and McCall (1990), and while these were not framed in identity maintenance terms in their report, I have taken the liberty to do so here. The first is that support by one person shapes the meanings that the distressed persons has been trying to control when the identity process was interrupted. In so doing, the supporting person helps the distressed person achieve congruence between the identity implications of the stressful situation and the identity standard of the distressed person: "I am not a bungling idiot," "the boss did not repudiate all of my work." The second mechanism is related to this because it also involves the joint manipulation of meanings to reestablish some form of self-verification for the distressed person. Being let go from one job becomes an opportunity to find a better job. The third mechanism is one of expanding the possibilities of control of the situation to reachieve congruence. If the identity interruption occurs because the person can find no action alternatives that bring identity-relevant inputs back into congruence with their identity standard, then the supporting person may help find an action alternative that had not been considered.

The fourth mechanism is recognized by Pearlin and McCall as directly relevant to the self-concept, though their view of the self-concept seems limited to self-esteem. There is, obviously, much more to the self than self-esteem as presented earlier (cf. Rosenberg 1976, 1979) though self-esteem is clearly an important part of the self. What Pearlin and McCall suggest is that self-esteem

suffers when a person faces stressful problems and that the supportive person may restore the loss of self-esteem in the distressed person by reinterpreting problems for example, as the result of a difficult supervisor rather than as the result of something the distressed person has done. This, however, seems much like the first mechanism mentioned above when seen from an identity interruption theory perspective. However, the restoration of self-esteem by direct means ("you're great, you're smart, you can do that") and by affection and contact is a new mechanism, though it still has the effect of reestablishing self-verification. The fifth mechanism of support that Pearlin and McCall discuss is that of protecting the distressed person from other stressors while the current situation is being dealt with and the last is to divert the attention of the distress person away from the immediate problem. This last mechanism is interesting because it appears to activate an alternative identity and allow normal self-verification processes to resume with this other identity. By allowing the person to achieve a sense of efficacy and esteem in this alternative identity, some of the negative effects of the distressed identity are ameliorated. The respite may also allow the person the opportunity to approach the problem from a new perspective or with fresh ideas, and thereby reestablish the normal control and flow of the identity processes.

The use of others in the self-verification process is a double-edged sword, however. While it can facilitate the identity maintenance processes, it can at times disrupt them. Both the positive and negative aspects of the behavior of others as it relates to achieveing correspondence between a current state and the goal state contained in an identity standard is shown in a study by Ruehlman and Wolchik (1988). Behavior which facilitated the congruence was supportive and reduced stress while that behavior which acted as a hindrance and interrupter was related to distressful feelings. Also, as hypothesized by Burke (1991), significant others were especially important in this facilitation/hindrance process because of their importance in the maintenance of identities generally.

The second most mentioned buffer from the effects of stress is *coping* which is often viewed as a resource (Pearlin, et al., 1981). Distinctions are often made among coping responses according

to the function of that response to (1) modify the situation giving rise to the stressful problem, (2) modify the meaning of the problem to reduce the threat, and (3) manage the symptoms of distress. By delineating these functions of coping, however, it can be seen that we are not dealing with something new. These are among the functions that support provides. Hence, whether a person accomplishes these functions on their own (coping) or with the help of others (support), it is the functions that are important. We have already seen how these functions can be interpreted in terms of the identity disruption model as working to restore the normal functioning of the identity processes in question. Coping is nothing more than the actions that are taken in managing an identity process (including one that may have been interrupted), hence coping can have direct effects on reducing distress. The *ability* to cope, however, as an individual variable suggests that some persons have acquired greater skills in maintaining their normal identity processes. Having such skills should make some people less vulnerable to the kinds of interruptions of identity processes that occur. The *knowledge* that one has these skills and abilities is a sense of *mastery* which has also been seen as a buffer to stress (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1991). Interestingly, Pearlin, et al. (1981) originally saw mastery, or the extent to which people see themselves as being in control of the forces that importantly affect their lives, as a potential source of distress if it were to be diminished by events.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this chapter has been to present a view on the origins of social stress based upon a merger of identity theory an Mandler's (1982) interruption theory of stress which I have called identity interruption theory. With this theory, it becomes clear that one of the more ubiquitous aspects of our time, stress, is often the result of the same process that defines who we are and provides our anchor to society -- our identity. According to identity theory, our behavior is driven by an error signal representing the difference between the inputs to the identity system and the identity standard. The function of the behavior is to reduce that difference. The inputs to the

identity system are the identity relevant meanings perceived in the situation (either perceived directly in the case of relevant resources under the control of our identity, or indirectly in the case of reflected appraisals). The identity standard is the set of meanings defining both who we are symbolically and the level and flow of resources that we maintain. In this continuously operating process, failure to maintain input meanings close to the meanings defined in the identity standard leads to distressful feelings. Interruption of this process is stress. The type of distress that is felt, anxiety or depression, is a function of the type of identity standard that is involved in the interrupted process. If the identity standard is an "ideal" based on the way a person wishes to be then interruption leads to depression. If the standard is an "ought" standard based on the way the person feels obliged to be through the norms and expectations of other, interruption leads to anxiety responses. Finally, social support is seen as providing help to a person to maintain or restore an interrupted identity process, while coping is the way a person helps him or herself maintain or restore an interrupted identity process.

Research is needed in the future to bring this unified perspective into fruition. While all of the mechanisms are well documented, I have had to interpret past research from the identity interruption perspective. Direct testing is needed, as is the establishment of procedures to measure the actual meanings that are interrupted by life events and by other roles and positions in society. The difficulty is that, while the principles of the theory are clear and universal, the way in which they are manifest in social life is variable. The principle involves discrepancies in self-meanings independent of the content of those meanings. Measurement, however, must deal with the content of the meanings. It is easy to see why there has been a movement to the study of different causes for different people or different groups of people (Thoits, 1987) if one focuses on the content meanings rather than the general process.

The discussion of resources in much of the stress literature has tended to focus on the resources that buffer the effects of stress are resources that  can be used to overcome the effects of stress (Wheaton 1983, 1985). Within identity theory, however, resources are themselves part of the

identity maintenance process. The meanings that are controlled include both the symbolic

meanings that are usually considered within a symbolic interaction context as well as sign

meanings that are indicative of the current state of resources in the situation (Freese & Burke,

forthcoming). Control of meanings thus includes control of the symbolic definition of the self in

role, but also control of the level and flow of resources that are part of the function of the identity

in that situation. Interruption of the identity process, thus includes disruption of the symbols

defining the self as well as disruption of the levels and flows of resources under the control of the

identity. Recognition of this side of the identity process is important in all identity spheres, but has

perhaps received more attention in the work role than elsewhere. Future research needs to continue

to bring together both the symbolic and resource aspects of the identity process as they relate to

stress.

Another area of research that is needed builds upon aspects of the identity interruption model

not dealt with in the present chapter. This is the possibility of persons changing their identity in the

sense of shifting the meanings of the identity standard as a way of coping and reducing the distress.

As Kiecolt (1994) points out, the decision to change oneself is often motivated by the distress

brought on by various stressors which have disrupted an identity. Though no real studies of this

process exist, she suggests that there are a number of conditions which need to be met before a

person is likely to use this coping strategy, including access to structural support for self-change, a

belief that self-change is possible, and social support for the self-change.

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**Endnotes**

[1] The details of the nature of the mediational response and identity meaning are discussed in Burke and Tully (1977).

[2] These were the dimensions of symbolic meaning found by Reitzes and Burke (1980) to distinguish among the role/identities of college student, high school student, graduate student, college graduate, non-college peer.

[3] It should also be clear that such self-controlled processes are not necessarily conscious. Persons may not be aware of what they are doing.

[4] Swann (1990) has begun to develop an integration of self-enhancement and self-congruence theories which notes the conditions under which each process may dominate motivation.

[5] In addition, we need to separate social stress from environmental stress (noise, pollution, carcinogens, etc.). Social stress, I argue, operates through identity processes. Environmental stress operates through biological systems. Some stressors may be both environmental and social producing distress through identities as well as through other mechanisms. A holdup or a rape, for example, may threaten ones biological existence as well as one's sense of who one is.

[6] It is possible that in the future we may need to distinguish interruption from prolonged failure of congruence between identity perceptions and identity standard. The latter might be exemplified by occupational stress when performance can never be up to what one wants or others demand (cf., House 1974) or by people with stigmatized identities where the person receives feedback that they are not good even though they want to be -- i.e., their identity says they are good. Currently, the only difference between interruption and prolonged failure would be in the degree of distress experienced and the greater likelihood of identities being changed under conditions of prolonged failure of congruence.
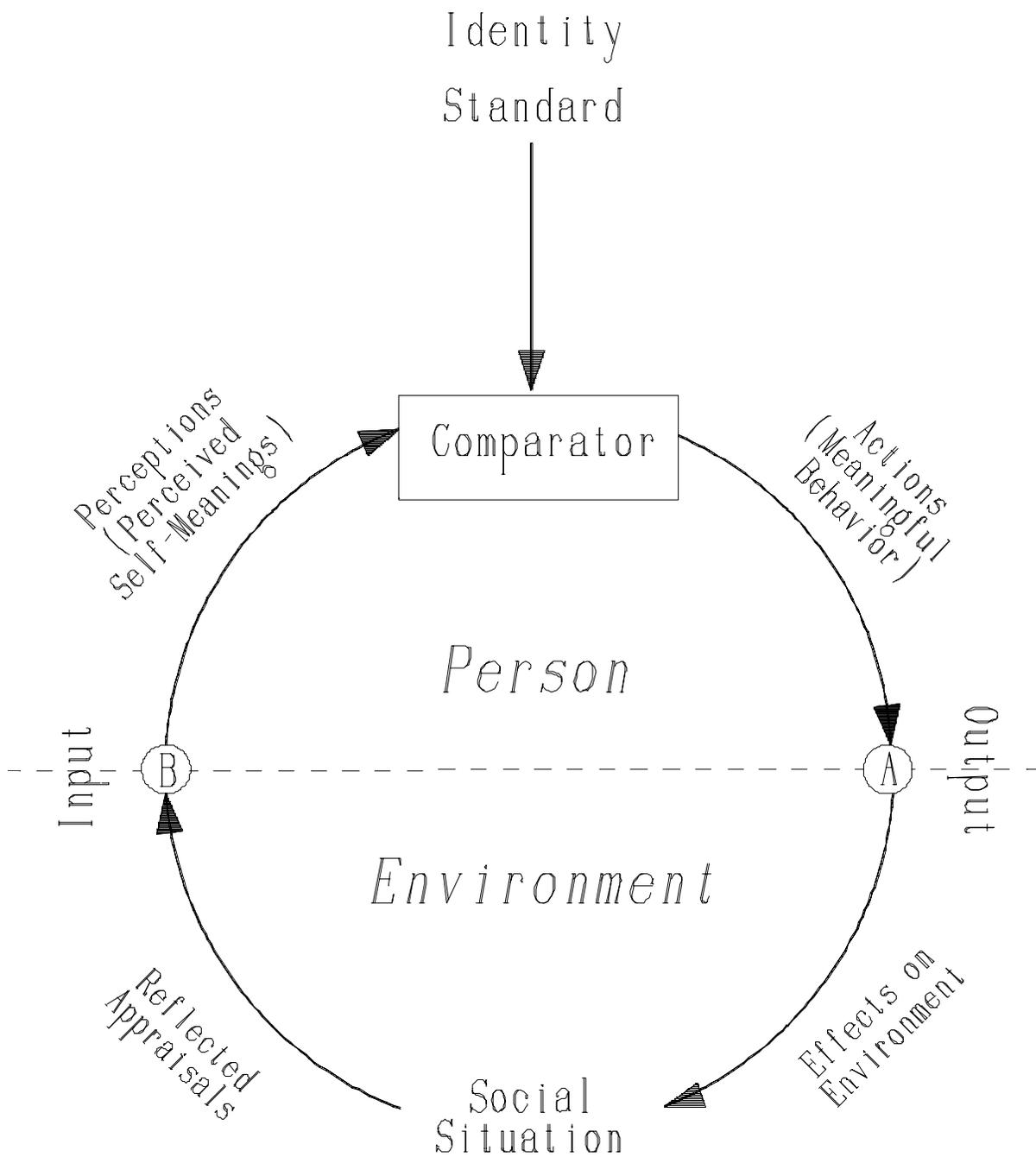
**Figure 1**. Control System View of the Identity Process, Showing the Cycle of Meaning with Possible Points of Interruption at A and B.