Levels, Agency, and Control in the Parent Identity*

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Identity theory has defined agency as the ability to achieve internalized goal states represented in identity standards despite changing or opposing environmental conditions. Agency is thought to result from the ability to modify standards or goals lower in the identity control hierarchy in light of principles higher in the hierarchy. In this paper we seek to expand our understanding of agency in identity through an in-depth study of the parent identity. We examine how parents relate standards higher in the identity hierarchy (such as whether the children are critical thinkers, loving, autonomous, and intellectually stimulated) with standards lower in the hierarchy (such as assuring that their children have completed their homework, are off to school, or are involved in sports). We predict that parents who relate the two levels will experience greater agency. The increase in agency should result in higher levels of efficacy and lower levels of stress. Data based on in-depth interviews with single and married mothers tend to confirm this prediction, but also indicate the importance of role-taking, resources, and family background for the development of the higher-level identity standards.

Identity theory proposes that hierarchically organized feedback control processes continuously regulate the meanings which compose a given role-identity. According to the theory, an identity acts, through the process of self-verification, to eliminate discrepancies between perceptions of self-relevant meanings in the environment and internally held meaning standards (Burke 1991; Swann 1990). These identity standards are conceptualized as "goal states"; The goals are achieved when the situation is altered through social behavior so as to bring the perceptions of self-relevant meanings contained in the situation into line with those contained in the standards. In the hierarchical model of identity theory, goals or standards at one level are the outputs of higher levels that have their own perceptions and standards or goals, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Burke 1996). Both the perceptions and the standards that exist higher in the hierarchy are more abstract and more general; they organize perceptions and standards which are lower in the hierarchy, and which are more concrete and more situated.

Identity theory has defined agency as a person's ability to achieve internalized goal states represented in identity standards despite changing or opposing environmental conditions. Agency is thought to result from the ability to modify standards or goals lower in the identity control hierarchy in light of principles higher in the hierarchy. We wish to explore this question of the relationship between (on one hand) these higher- and lower-level control systems in an identity and (on the other) the agency of persons using them. Specifically, we are interested in the relationship between higher, more abstract *principle-level* standards (e.g., values such as neatness) and lower *program-level* standards (e.g., making one's bed).

Principle-level standards are conceptualizations of abstract goal states such as values, beliefs, and ideals. Program-level standards represent more concrete goals accomplished in situated activity, such as going to the store or making sure the children get off to school. The nature of the relationship between these levels in the identity model, however, has only begun to be explored. We are particularly interested in the operations
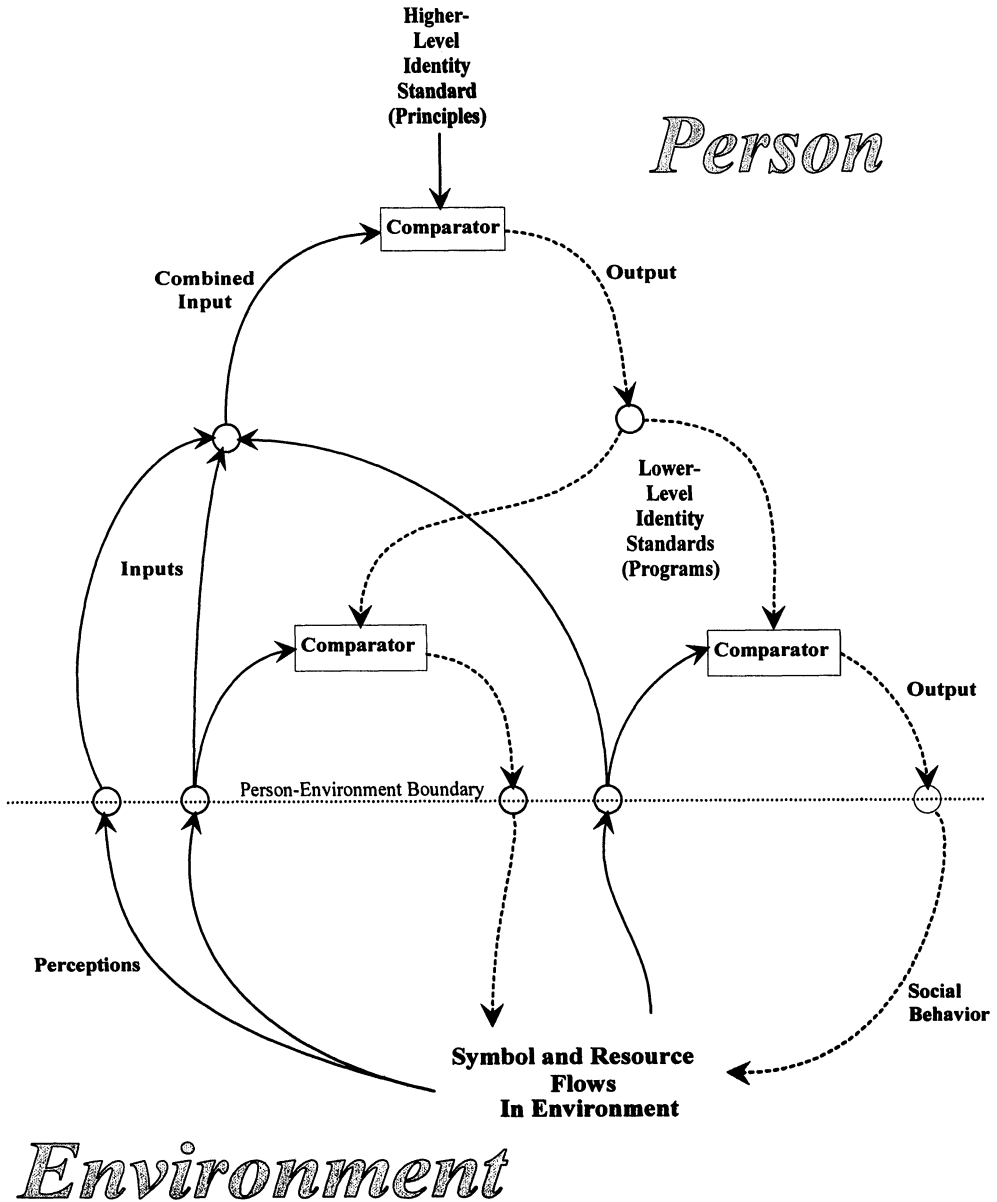
Figure 1. Identity Model Showing Two Levels.

of the two levels of identity processes and the relationship between them. By examining these levels of perception within the identity model, we see the significance of the reflective self: that is, a self capable of identifying or even adjusting lower-level goals and behaviors to meet higher-level standards (Bandura 1980, 1991; Mead 1934) in the realization of personal agency within socially defined parameters (Schwalbe 1987).

To initiate this line of inquiry, and in the absence of well-defined measures and procedures, we decided that a more qualitative approach would be appropriate. In this way we could begin to identify the levels and to gain an initial understanding of their organization in our respondents' identities from their own perspectives. Through this dialogue we can clarify the relationship between the principle and the program lev-

els of their identity standards as parents. We use this information to identify the processes, relationships, and concepts on which to focus in developing questions that will benefit both from further qualitative study and from more standardized methodologies. Somewhat unexpectedly, we also found this information helpful in understanding the historically problematic relationship between social class and parenting values and practices (Bernstein and Henderson 1969; Bronfenbrenner 1958; Gecas and Nye 1974; Kohn 1977, 1983)

Understanding the relationship between principles and programs of action (the two levels) is also important in that it helps us to clarify the meaning of *agency* for human actors. A system that employs effective agency must be adaptable, or able to reorganize itself to counteract disturbances and changes in the environment. It must be able to modify lower-level goals in the pursuit of higher-level goals through action and reflection (Bandura 1980, 1991). This is the principle of variable actions to achieve constant goals (Burke 1998). We expect that an actor's inability to align principle-level with program-level standards and perceptions will result in diminished agency.

In humans, identity-relevant perceptions are organized in a multilevel control system in which perceptions at each level are composed of emergent patterns of perceptions from lower levels. For humans, basic sensory perceptions of energy intensities exist at the lowest level. As we move up the hierarchy (but without covering all the levels), lower-level perceptions are organized into patterns that give rise to perceptions of sequences of events, programs of action, principles, and ultimately perceptions of the self and the state of the individual as an entity.[1] Perceptions at each level are composed of combinations and patterns of perceptions at lower levels; hence they become increasingly abstract as we progress from the lowest to the highest level of the hierarchy. Each level of perception may be regarded as a lens that has been crafted to perceive special aspects,

conditions, or meanings from the environment: for example, warmth, caloric intake, linguistic concepts, the sequence of events, and programs of action as well as values such as compassion or beauty.

Although perception control theory contains 11 levels (Powers 1990), most of these are either below or above the individual's level of awareness. Here, we focus primarily on levels that persons are or can be aware of; in general we distinguish only a "lower" and a "higher" level, which correspond roughly to "programs" and "principles" in Powers's (1990) nomenclature. Also, because we are dealing with identities (in this case the parent identity), we are not interested in all perceptions, but only in those pertaining to the meanings of being a parent.

Because identity theory has not fully explored the relationships between levels, we take the opportunity to investigate these two levels of the identity model through an in-depth study of 30 mothers as they deal with the issues of education and discipline for their children. Through a series of open interviews and conversations, we can identify the meanings and concepts that constitute the parent identity at its different levels, and we can explore the relationships between the levels and the implications of these relationships for human agency.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

We conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 15 single mothers and 15 married mothers with children in elementary school in a northwestern community. Each of the mothers had at least one child in elementary school between the second and the fifth grade. The elementary school distributed letters describing the study and invited parents to participate. Interested parents returned an information form to their child's teacher. In addition, mothers attending a parenting program aimed primarily at single, low-income parents were invited to participate. Because most of the mothers who responded through the school were married and middle class, this step helped to diversify our sample.

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[1] Powers (1990) names the levels: intensity, sensation, configuration, transition, event, relationship, category, sequence, program, principle, and system.

In addition to conducting the interviews, we spent time observing mother-child interactions at school and community events and programs, and engaging in informal conversations with a number of mothers. We used the information gained in this way to refine and develop our interview schedule and to strengthen our sensitivity to the perceptions and concerns of parents in general.

The mothers' ages varied between 30 and 42; most of the mothers had more than one child. We limited our sample to mothers of children in grades 2 to 5 in order to enhance our ability to make comparisons across cases. We did so because we believed that mothers of children in similar age categories would be more likely to have similar experiences and to face similar issues of concern regarding their children's education and discipline; thus they would be comparable. We also felt that elementary school children generally depend more strongly on their parents than do older children for basic needs, assistance in projects and problem-solving tasks, and arrangement of recreational activities. The higher levels of interpersonal interaction between parents and children of this age group, we believed, would provide a rich context in which parents could identify the meanings of the parent identity and could recall significant parenting-related experiences. Fourteen of the married mothers were categorized as middle class in terms of income; only two of the single mothers could be so classified.

The interviews lasted from one to two hours each. We were particularly interested in the mothers' standards for dealing with their children in each of two areas: education and discipline. We view these standards as part of the set of standards that define the parent identity for each area. Questions for the interview were organized according to three primary areas: (1) mothers' standards for the education of their children, including their own role in helping their children achieve these standards; (2) mothers' standards for discipline, including disciplinary strategies and techniques; and (3) mothers' standards for the parent identity in general, including their perceptions of the primary responsibilities of parenting. We ordered the questions for each of these sections so as to provide opportunities to discuss lower- and higher-order levels of perception of the parent identity.

To explore this differential use of program- and principle-level standards across respondents, two coders classified each mentioned standard or goal as to whether it was a principle- or a program-level standard. These codings made clear that the respondents tended to focus either on program-level or on principle-level goals, and it became possible to classify them by their main focus. Thus each respondent was classified into one of two categories (principle focus or program focus) for each of the socialization dimensions: education and discipline. In two instances the coders disagreed on the placement of a parent; the final coding was the result of discussion and agreement between the coders.[2]

FINDINGS: PROGRAMS AND PRINCIPLES

Before examining the relationship between program standards and principle standards in our data, and exploring the implications of that relationship for agency, we need a clearer understanding of these two levels in the parent identity as they are manifested in the respondents' replies. Initially we thought that program-level standards governed patterned sequences of situated behavior such as "getting the kids off to school" or "stopping the kids from fighting." These could be distinguished from principle-level standards such as "being self-sufficient," "being timely," or "being attentive," which organize all the program-level perceptions and are not tied to specific situations.

Lower-Level Standards: Programs

We organize our discussion around education and discipline, the two areas of parenting on which we focus here.

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[2] These two cases involved the classification of parents who articulated one or two higher-level principles but who never related how these principle-level goals were tied to any particular situated programs of activity. Ultimately both were classified as program-level in their orientation.

Education. With respect to program-level goals or standards for the parent identity in education, we have in mind the kinds of routines in which parents engage to help with the educational process for their children. Such routines are manifested in several different ways in the interviews—some more explicitly, some more inferentially. On the subject of completing school work, for example, Sharon,[3] a lower-middle-class mother of three, said, "I do help them; I do remind them . . . 'Hey, you have this' . . . I guess I do keep harping on them. . . . But there are times when I do force him to do things, like homework . . . I do force him." These are routines of "reminding," "harping," and "forcing." Sharon had been raised in a religious environment that promoted both education and traditional family roles; she is a well-educated stay-at-home mom who finds parenting a constant source of stress and confusion.

Some respondents were less clear about such program routines. Becky, a low-income, single mother of three who lives with her boyfriend and who is also a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, replied as follows to the question "Have your kids ever discussed their educational goals with you?" "Yeah, John [Becky's youngest son] wants to know if he needs to learn how to read to be a geologist, and going to school, and stuff like that, college." "Do you talk about that?" "We have. Not much." Later, the interviewer asked what it meant to Becky for her children to get an education. She replied, "[A]s much as I can now, that's great. That's why I like the remedial stuff. It helps them out more." For this respondent, education is something that happens at school; she has few routines or programs for promoting it herself. "I was tied to my chair to learn how to spell," she said, remembering her family of origin. She mentioned that she chose to limit her participation with her children's education at home because she was afraid she would abuse them if they did not cooperate. During the interview, Becky made no mention of associating education-related programs with higher-order principles.

Discipline. We see some of the same types of programs in the area of discipline. When asked about discipline procedures, Sharon replied, "Well, it's a lot of confrontation. I set a lot of timers, and if [they] don't get it done by then it's either . . . [they] go to bed early, or . . . lose a privilege, or . . . get a swat on the bottom, so [they] get to choose what their punishment is." "Does that work?" "Oh, sometimes . . . and I am frustrated a lot with Frankie; we have more confrontations that I would like."

Confrontation is one program for discipline; *ignoring* misbehavior is another. Becky responds by ignoring some problems of discipline: "A lot of time I just ignore it. I don't do anything. That's why the house is always a mess, because I don't make them do anything." Another program is grounding. Again, Becky responded to the question, "How do you usually discipline your children?" with "Grounding. . . . We have a real problem with calling names and fighting, so they get two days' grounding [and] go to bed at seven for fighting . . . that includes weekends." Among the more positive side of things she could do with respect to child control and discipline, Becky said, "Aside from saying prayers every night and telling them I love them, when I go off to work I tell them that I love them. And I hope that helps them to have a good day. That's the only thing I can think of."

At the program level then, all respondents identified routine procedures in which they engage as parents when dealing with issues in their children's education and discipline. These routines are organized activities, behaviors, or habitual methods of procedure in dealing with their children. Program-level standards are the criteria which, if not met in the parents' perceptions, require program-level activity such as reminding, confronting, ignoring, expressing love, grounding, or harping. All the parents include program-level standards as part of their parent identities. All of these programs involve dealing directly with the child or children in the immediate situation.

As mentioned earlier, we also saw another set of program-level perceptions and responses, used by some parents, that are at a higher or more abstract level. These

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[3] The respondents' names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

perceptions and behaviors involve, for example, talking to teachers and school counselors, providing educational materials for the children in the home, encouraging self-control, talking with the children about their schoolwork (education) or their behavior (discipline), finding out about school schedules, opportunities, programs, and resources, or attempting to understand what the child is thinking or doing. Yet even though these programs are more abstract and do not necessarily deal with the immediate situation,[4] they are still programs in that they are organized patterns of behavior which are named or described by the respondents. In the following discussion, we treat them all as programs.

Higher-Level Standards: Principles

Principle-level perceptions are composed of patterns of perceptions either from the program level or lower in the hierarchy. The patterning of these lower-level perceptions creates new gestalts that cannot exist at lower levels because they involve comparing programs and understanding the relationships among programs. A respondent's parent identity, for example, may include the principle-level standard of wanting her child to be a critical thinker; yet this standard must be sustained through actual instances in which her child engages in critical thought. In the absence of such instances, the parent must create programs of activity in which the child demonstrates critical thought.

Education. Carol is a middle-class, stay-at-home mother with an advanced degree in biochemistry, who spoke about some of the general principles guiding her in the education of her children. For example, when asked to discuss what it means for her children to "get an education," she said, "It's important to have a teacher who is going to challenge [the children] and stretch their minds." She also suggested that "there are different ways of learning and different kinds of intelligence, and that's important to understand." Carol added, "We think it's

important for children to be involved in dramatics, and music, like jazz."

Marsha, a professional, single mother, responded similarly by saying, "I think it's really important for kids to be well-rounded, and not to put more emphasis on one thing or the other." She also suggested that if kids are to get a good education, one must "make sure they have the resources they need [for school], like a computer, and books, and paper, and a place to study, and encyclopedias."

For Carol and for Marsha, perceptions at the principle level are matched to principle-level standards or goals to judge the kinds of programs in which they may engage in serving their children's educational needs. Is this a good teacher? Are my children being challenged? Are the children's various capacities being encouraged? Does this contribute to my child's being well-rounded? Are the proper resources present? If perceptions at this level do not match the identity standards that these mothers hold as part of their parent identity, the children may engage in any of a variety of programs of activity as long as the programs satisfy the principle involved. The important point is that these parents use principles as "guides" for programs, and choose among programs until the higher level standard is met. Again, this is the principle of taking variable actions to meet fixed goals.

Discipline. In regard to discipline, we see again the higher (more abstract) level of the goals involved. In this context, Marsha spoke of helping her daughter when problems existed: "It is important to just listen to them." She also suggested that it is important for children to learn how to handle issues themselves:

> My oldest one came home [from school] and said, "Mom, this isn't fair in school. We're doing things in groups again." And she works really hard, she gets good grades, and she is just motivated like that. But she does all the work, and the whole group gets the grade. "That's how life is," I said. . . . "Well, you're gonna have to go with it. If you care about how the group does, and you want to get the project done, or whatever, just do it."

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[4] They may be triggered, however, by events in the immediate situation.

One of the most common general princi-
ples that mothers discussed, especially in
regard to discipline, was the principle of
showing love for the children, or, as Becky
put it, "Givin' 'em love. That's all I know."
Another commonly mentioned principle was
consistency in discipline. In the words of
Cynthia, a lower-middle-class single parent
of three young and highly active boys, "I'm
always changing to find out what works, or
to find something I can be consistent in. . . .
[P]unishment is not very good if you can't be
consistent. . . . [S]panking is one I don't *want*
to be consistent in, so . . . grounding is one
I'm consistent in."

To reiterate, principles appear to be
identified by the parents as general rules for
organizing activities. They show themselves
as general values, criteria, or reasons for
choosing one program over another.
Principles abstract characteristics from pro-
grams that can be seen only by "stepping
back" and by comparing and relating pro-
grams to one another. Consistency, being
loving, being intellectually challenging, giv-
ing freedom to grow are all standards and
perceptions that exist at the principle level.

In general, then, it appears that the
respondents spontaneously describe dealings
with their children in terms that correspond
to what we call programs and principles. All
of the interviews contained descriptions of
programs and principles, though the relative
frequency of each varied from respondent to
respondent. Some respondents seldom men-
tioned principle-level goals or standards
governing their choice of programs; others
spoke quite frequently about the general
principles underlying their interactions with
their children.

Overall the sample divided quite easily
between parents whose identities were orga-
nized by principle-level standards and
parents whose identities were organized pri-
marily by program-level standards. Although
almost all of the parents in the sample men-
tioned at least one principle, particularly
"love," as a parent identity standard, those
whom we classified as having principle-level
orientations utilized an array of principles to
organize multiple aspects of their parent
identities. They were able to perceive the
implications of these principles for many

programs in multiple situations. In contrast,
those parents whom we classified as having
program-level orientations may have men-
tioned one or two principles, but found it
difficult to see the implications of these prin-
ciples for program standards and situated
activity.

Because we classified parents into prin-
ciple-oriented or program-oriented cate-
gories separately in education and in disci-
pline, we were led to ask whether parents
who are oriented toward principles in one
area also oriented toward principles in the
other. In the present sample of mothers, the
answer is quite strongly affirmative: of the
30 mothers in this study, 21 (70 percent)
were classified as operating at the principle
level in the area of education, and 22 (73
percent) were classified as operating at the
principle level in the area of discipline. Of
the 30 mothers, 19 (63 percent) were classi-
fied as principle-oriented in both areas,
while eight (26 percent) were classified as
program-oriented in both areas. Only three
respondents (10 percent) were classified dif-
ferently in the two areas.[5] This finding sug-
gests that the "capacity" to control percep-
tions at the higher (principle) level develops
more fully in some individuals than in oth-
ers, and that, once developed, it is used in
multiple areas. It also appears that most of
the parents in our sample possess this gener-
al ability to operate at the principle level. We
return to these points later.

FINDINGS: LEVELS AND AGENCY

Having discussed the two levels of iden-
tity functioning that concern us, we now
explore the consequences for the parents of
being principle-oriented versus program-
oriented, and discuss the implications for the
agency of the parent identity.

Education

With respect to parents' perceptions of
their children's self-directed behavior
regarding schoolwork, program-oriented

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[5] One was principle-oriented in education and
program-oriented in discipline; two were principle-
oriented in discipline and program-oriented in edu-
cation.

parents were likely to perceive the need to consistently *remind, nag,* or *force* their children to complete their work. Parents with principle-level orientations perceived their children as more self-directed and capable of completing school projects on their own. When asked how she disciplined her children, Sally, a principle-oriented, lower-middle-class, married mother of four, stated: "I have standards for them and I want them to do good, I guess, and I see this at a young age. I never ask them to do homework. I like to start that early. [With] my first grader, we do that right away; then [he] can go play. So a lot of these things . . . become a habit; it's just part of who they are." Sally emphasized that her desire to share her principles with her children was a primary motivation for being a stay-at-home mom, even while her husband was enrolled as a full-time PhD student at the university.

When Sarita, a middle-class mother of three elementary-school age children, was asked about her own role in her children's education, she discussed her efforts to help her son become more self-motivated by working closely with his teachers:

> And in the third grade, we particularly asked a teacher. We said he had a lack of self-confidence, and he needed help in that way, and he really jumped in that way and he always was in the top of the classroom. He knows that himself. . . . But he went to the fifth grade and he was in the top math group, and then probably, even in homework, he couldn't do it, and he [said], "I haven't learned that one yet," or stuff like that. And I would say, "Well, why don't you look at the book in the chapter before that?" . . . [W]e actually . . . [told] his teacher in the beginning that he needs self-motivation because he doesn't really push himself very much, and the teacher was very great.

Like Sally and Sarita, all of the principle-oriented mothers emphasized the importance of their children's learning how to make their own choices based on their own motivation to learn. Sometimes, they perceived that their children needed assistance, but their goal in regard to discipline and control was for their children to become self-motivated. All but two of the interviews with principle-centered mothers contained comments such as, "Homework, it's fine, and mine usually read a lot or play the piano or computer or do something that's good for them," or "Sam is our all-around kid. He's real good at school, as well as real academic oriented. He likes to read." The only exceptions were two mothers whose children were diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

A different picture emerges from Melinda, a program-oriented, lower-class, married mother of three. At the time of the interview, her children could be seen through the sliding-glass door on the patio where we were sitting. They were taking pickles out of the refrigerator and dripping the juice on the kitchen floor. "Like now," she said, "Just look at them. They don't think about what they are doing. They're slobs." She continued to complain that her children did not understand how to take care of their apartment, that they would probably have torn it up by the time they were ready to move, and that they were not self-motivated to clean up after themselves or even do their own homework. When asked how her eldest daughter was doing in school, Melinda said, "She's very bright, and she likes to write. She's a good writer. But she's failing in school because she doesn't do the assignments. And I'm always getting notes from the teachers saying the kids haven't done their homework. But they don't even tell me when they have it."

The data consistently reveal the differences between program-oriented and principle-oriented parents' perceptions of their children's abilities to complete their schoolwork in a self-directed manner. The program-oriented parents' perception that they need to exert more external controls over their children's behavior, with respect to both their schoolwork and their home responsibilities, is a source of stress in their parent identity. Again, Becky, the low-income single mother of three, who comes from a physically and emotionally abusive family of origin, emphasized that helping her children with homework was a source of stress she would rather avoid because they were uncooperative. In fact, when asked about her friends' influence on her drinking, she said:

The biggest excuse I ever had to drink was because [my kids] were driving me crazy. That's the only one that's really hanging [over me], 'cause I'm not in with the crowd anymore, that celebrate New Year's and Christmas and stuff like that. But I've always got those kids.

Becky also found it difficult to understand her children's interests. When asked to describe her son's special interests, she said, "He talks about rocks all the time, it's yak, yak, yak. He asks questions a lot. It drives me nuts."

Program-oriented mothers, in general, offered less descriptive information about their children's interests and abilities, and did not seem to know much about those interests. These parents were also much less likely than principle-oriented parents to describe their home environments as contexts for learning and exploration, and much less likely to make associations between their children's home life and their performance in school.

Principle-oriented parents are more likely to emphasize the importance of their children's learning values (principles), as opposed to skills (programs), as part of their education. The reason appears to be their belief that if their children have values, they will be more likely to make good choices in any situation. Sarita, a stay-at-home mom who makes dolls for a hobby and who owns a large van for transporting her children and their friends to activities and outings, spoke as follows when asked about her goals for her children's education:

> Gaining skills is important, but at an early age, just teaching them to do things quickly, easily, [is] not good for them. I think it's good for them to make lots of mistakes. . . . So we don't set educational goals. But education is really important. . . . I want them to be . . . socialized. . . . In a school situation, they see lots of different people who have the same values, but also different values, and that's also important for them to know . . . that people have different values and they are not the same. And I want them to learn what is important to them. And also, in the school situation, I don't want them to waste their time . . . and I want them to work hard

on their subjects, but I don't see that [as the] goal in education.

Almost all of the principle-oriented parents emphasized that the most important aspect of their children's education was learning values such as respect for others and for themselves, citizenship, excellence, and inquisitiveness (principles). These values, furthermore, were often taught at home. "I guess my hope," said Elizabeth, a pastor's wife and mother of three who serves as a substitute teacher in a local school, "is that we've laid some foundation in them in early years [so] that what happens at home will carry over at school, so they'll make good choices." Another mother, Cathy, is a single parent who lives with her children, including a precocious nine-year-old, in a small trailer with fragile electrical wiring. Recently, she had to take the children to sleep in a local church when a short circuit started a small fire. When asked about her role in her children's education, Cathy replied:

> My role as a parent is to help my children in any way possible, both socially and academically, [and] emotionally, allowing them to experience things and becoming their own person, and teaching them proper ways to do things . . . that allow them also to still be an individual. And to be able to be an active and productive part of society when they become older. . . . And hopefully someday they'll just be real great parents, too, and I'll see things turn around. I don't want them to go through the abuse I went through.

Program-oriented parents, on the other hand, seemed more likely to state that "getting a good education" involved skill acquisition, going to college, or even learning to use computers (programs). As Becky replied when asked what it meant for her son to get an education, "As much as I can now, that's great. That's why I like the remedial stuff. It helps them out more." Subsequently, when asked about her own educational aspirations for her children, she said, "Just passing. I think the computer is going to do it all."

Program-oriented parents seemed more likely to perceive the school as the primary source of their children's education. They tended not to create a home environment or a social context for their children that would

be conducive to learning skills as well as values. We encountered very few program-oriented parents who described their home as a place of learning, or their own relationship with their children as encouraging the development of values. For these parents, children are often sources of disturbance, as in the case of Becky, who cannot tolerate her son's interest in rocks, or Sharon, who is constantly engaged in confrontation with her child. In other instances, children are simply present and have little meaningful interaction with the parent. In general, the program-oriented parents did not describe efforts to teach values or to engage in interactions that indicate an ability to empathize, taking the child's role when providing support and control.

Many program-oriented parents help their children with their schoolwork. Their principle-oriented counterparts, however, spend less time on schoolwork per se; they are more attentive to providing a home environment with resources such as books, computers, musical instruments, games, and art materials that will present their children with an array of activity choices conducive to learning, whether or not they are related to school. Cathy, quoted above, provided an example of this kind of activity:

> He wanted a chess game for Christmas, and it was a magnetic chess game so he could use it for traveling. Well, Santa Claus got it for him, and it came with a book. He's reading up on how to play, and he wants to learn how to get really good at chess . . . not many fourth graders learn how to play chess. They're more into Nintendo and that kind of stuff. . . . [H]e likes to do that kind of stuff too, but he wants to know how things work. He likes to take things apart and put them back together, better than they were starting out. At three, he took apart a car, and it had a siren, and he put it back together and it worked better. Last year, his dad got him a kit to build a radio, and he built a radio and made it work. There's nothing I think either of my children couldn't do.

By constructing such an environment at home and by monitoring their children's peer groups to assure that their friends shared similar values, principle-oriented parents seemed more likely to play an active role in their children's education. Their children were less exposed to unmonitored media or peer influences. Principle-oriented parents appeared more able to maintain their desired perceptions of their children's educational experiences by attending to the associations between everyday practices and interactions (programs) and the implications of these practices for the kinds of values they wished their children to internalize (principles). Not only did they talk about values and general principles; they also showed how to perceive the general principles in routine activities (programs).

As Suzanne stated, "I'd like to see them grow to be moral, to stay off drugs, to work hard, care for other people, not have a selfish attitude." When asked how she worked to accomplish these goals, she said,

> [R]ead them stories about people behaving well, and set a good example. I'm sure that's the most important part. And . . . make friends with people that you feel have the same values. . . . They seem to gravitate towards friends that have the same family background as they do. I've always thought that was really interesting, this diverse group of friends, but I always think they have some core values, and have really strong values.

In regard to education, then, program- and principle-oriented parents appeared to differ in several ways. In contrast to the principle-oriented parents, the program-oriented parents seemed to emphasize skills rather than values. They tended to focus on school as the location for learning rather than seeing learning as occurring in many arenas, including the home, and they tended to be less aware and less appreciative of their children's needs and interests. Finally, program-oriented parents were likely to deal with the immediate situation rather than developing orientations for dealing with a variety of situations and conditions. We see this theme again in the area of discipline.

Discipline

The emphasis that principle-oriented parents place on values provides the foundation for nearly all of their interactions with their children, whether at home or at school, on family vacations, or at community events.

Principle-oriented parents perceive their children's internalization of values as a very important process which, as the child matures, will rely less heavily on direct parental influence and direction.

When asked what she does in her family to keep her children from getting into trouble, Suzanne, a principle-oriented mother said, "I think knowing that they are well loved is real important. That they are real important to us, and they are important to themselves, and don't do things that are dangerous or whatever. We try to teach them what's right and wrong. And we make home a good place to be . . . so they like to be home."

Yvette, principle-oriented single mother of one preschool age and two school-age boys who lives on public assistance and has experienced periods of homelessness, put it this way:

> [B]etween the two of them [her school-age boys], they figured out that . . . we do our homework when we get home from school. . . . [I]t's pretty simple: You put a coat on if it's raining out, you put shoes on, you don't go out in the rain without your shoes. Smarten up, this is life. . . . [A]nd when they figured out that they actually had some real contribution [to make] to us as a whole, and we could do a lot more things if they could do their job all week in school, we were allowed to do our work without having to stop and pamper them, or spank them, or do whatever it takes for them to do what they needed to do. They just learned.

Elizabeth, a principle-oriented, upper-middle-class married mother of three replied as follows when asked how she keeps her children from getting into trouble:

> I guess my hope is that we've laid some foundation in them in early years [so] that what happens at home will carry over at school, so that they'll make good choices. And a lot of the things we have done at home with discipline have been based upon choices . . . feel free to watch TV after you've got your homework done, or feel free to go out and play with your friends after you've got your bed made. I want for them to feel that some of it is a choice that they'll have to make, so that they'll make good choices when they are away from us. . . . [W]ith [two-

year old] Shannon I do this all the time. Like just now, she was outside the door playing knock-knock and didn't want to come in, and I said, "OK, you have the choice to come in now, on your own, or for mommy to bring you in and put you in your room. Which do you want to do?" [I try] to give them the choice so that they realize you have choice in your life, and you choose one, and the consequence might not be so good. And I've chosen things that I hope will work, and Grant and I are consistent enough about life choices and lifestyle that they know . . . the standards we have for ourselves and that we try to follow those and try not to say one thing to somebody's face and do something else, that we are consistent. And hopefully that our standards and our morals will eventually become theirs, not because that's what we want them to do, but because that's what they want.

Principle-oriented parents seem to perceive their children as increasingly capable of making their own decisions, based on values of which the parent usually approves over time. The internalization of values, for these parents, means that their children will be able to encounter a variety of situations and to be presented with diverse options for action, and then will be able to make choices of which the parent generally would approve as well. This approach contrasts quite strongly with the approach usually taken by program-oriented parents.

Program-oriented parents often find their children's behavior more difficult to manage over time. As their children grow, these parents tend to find that the external means of control which they have been accustomed to using become less effective, and that their children's actions become less predictable and more vulnerable to situational contingencies. Louise, a lower-middle-class single parent who works full-time as a television technician, described her efforts to discipline her children:

> We've got different varieties [of discipline] and it depends on how tired I am. The latest one [is that] whenever I find someone goes to the bathroom and don't flush, they clean the toilet. It's working. That's a nice way of doing it, and then . . . you always fall back on the nagging and the yelling. . . . [T]hen, [for] cussing, we've tried the twenty-five cents,

and that doesn't work well, so we . . . [made] them do push-ups . . . sometimes it's not always convenient to do it, but they'll do ten to twenty-five, depending on what they said. . . . But I go with grounding, for the most part, or take away certain privileges, or I'll make the things gone . . . and then the swatting. . . . I don't like doing that, but . . . now and then . . . it's the only way to get their attention. . . . [T]hen there's times when I'll physically . . . pick [my son] up and dump him on his bed because he was throwing one of his [tantrums], . . . like, "I don't want you around me." And this is because he throws fits. But we're workin' on it. First, I was threatening to . . . throw a cold cup of water on him, but . . . you don't threaten 'em, you just do it. And that'll stop it; it stops the tantrum. But they keep getting harder to handle every day, because they got more mouths on 'em, and more knowledge, so they question you more every day, and that can be real frustrating. They're very energetic and sometimes that's hard to handle, especially when you're watching them run down the grocery store aisle . . . it's like, "Wait a minute, what's the rules here?"

DISCUSSION

"What's the rules here?" is an important question for program-oriented parents because they perceive rules as the fundamental guides for their children's behavior. Thus such parents assume the roles of *rule makers* and *rule enforcers*. They experience great frustration in their efforts to maintain their children's adherence to the rules. These rules are standards that these parents possess as part of their parent identity, but they tend to be program specific: Don't run down the aisles, flush the toilet, don't throw a tantrum, don't talk back, do your homework. General principles that may underlie sets of rules across situations seem not to be activated.

Parents whose primary disciplinary function is to make and enforce program-level rules also tend to find that the parent role itself, and their interactions with their children, are sources of disturbance. In response to their own negative associations with the role, they actually may distance themselves from their children (see Snow

and Anderson 1987).[6] As Becky stated about her son's interest in rocks, "[H]e talks about rocks all the time. . . . He asks questions a lot. It drives me nuts." Sharon has similar perceptions of her experiences as a parent. She laments, "I had these kids that were just trials to me."

For these parents, a program-oriented parenting style seems to be associated with a great deal of stress related not only to the discipline of their children, but also to the parent role in general. In these cases, the parent's effectiveness is thwarted by her extreme difficulty in her attempts to maintain a basic sense of order, control, and predictability.

The principle-oriented parents' greater agency and effectiveness seem to stem from two factors. One is the increased efficiency that arises from having principles with which to choose, evaluate, and coordinate the variety of programs used for child rearing, as we anticipated from the perspective of the hierarchy of levels in identity theory. The other factor seems to flow from the *consequences* of using and teaching principles. By learning general principles, these parents' children become autonomous and gain agency; they are able to take care of themselves and thus relieve the parents of the frustrations of parental micro-management. This result was unexpected from the viewpoint of identity theory, but is understood more clearly if we examine the factors that appear to differentiate parents who developed principle orientations from those parents who relied on program orientations.

We suggest that these differences are the consequence of three related factors that became apparent in the interviews. The first is the *resources* that are available or perceived to be available to help match perceptions to standards. The second is the degree to which the parent is able to *empathize* with

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[6] This observation is somewhat different from the usual view that role distancing occurs because a person occupies a socially stigmatized or negatively evaluated role. Here the negative associations are personal. Nevertheless, these negative feelings about the role may prevent these parents from taking the time to develop general principles to guide their parental activity.

or take the role of the child, as opposed to treating the child as an object. The third involves the relationship between the parent's identity standards and her *experiences in her family of origin.* Other characteristics appear to be associated with these, either as cause or as consequence. We discuss each in turn.

Resources

Resources act to sustain the social system, interaction and persons (Freese and Burke 1994). Four types of resources emerged in this study as differentiating program-level from principle-level parents: *time, money, knowledge,* and *people.* Program- and principle-oriented parents differed both in the amount of each resource they possessed and, more important, in how they used their resources.

Time. The time element appeared again and again in the interviews. Those operating at the program level often found it very difficult to accomplish routine child care. Almost all of the single mothers from lower-status groups indicated that the pressures of being their children's sole provider and caretaker constrained the time and energy available for helping children with schoolwork, participating in extracurricular activities, and providing consistent discipline, support, and supervision. We also found that program-oriented parents tended to resent the time needed for child care, whereas principle-oriented parents seemed to value this time with their children.

Money. Principle-oriented parents, regardless of their social class, utilized more money and material resources for parenting than did the program-level parents. It was more likely that they had purchased a variety of materials for their children's enrichment, including books, computers, musical instruments, tickets to cultural events, and materials for hobbies. These parents expressed satisfaction in providing these items with respect to their children's development and education. Even lower-income principle-oriented parents were more likely to report that they had forfeited spending in other areas, such as clothing for themselves

or "going out," in order to channel existing resources toward their children.

Knowledge. Program-oriented parents seemed to lack knowledge about the school, about educational programs and opportunities (except for the remedial classes in which their children were often placed), or about other available sources of support. This was particularly true for low-income program-oriented parents.

People. Many of the program-oriented parents were single mothers who did not have a spouse or other support person to help with the children. Without such help, the immediacy of child-rearing activities may have deprived them of time in which to step back to think about general principles and long-term goals.

All of these differences in resource availability are related to social class. Yet not all lower-class participants were program-oriented, nor were all middle-class parents oriented toward principles. The quantity of resources in the form of time, money, information, and support may have facilitated the development of a principle orientation in the parent identity, but other factors also were at work. Program- and principle-oriented parents also used whatever resources they had differently; the latter maintained a more empathic orientation to their children.

Empathy

Our interviews and observations suggest that the mothers with parent identities operating at the principle level tended to be much more in touch with their children's feelings, needs, and wants than were the program-oriented mothers. *Empathy* is the ability to take the role of another and to genuinely experience and respond to the other's cognitive and affective states (Davis 1986). It is a result of sharing the other person's perceptions, and is a primary means of achieving cooperation between and among persons who otherwise might exist in a state of conflict (Burke and Cast 1997; Davis 1986; Davis and Oathout 1987).

As a perceptual control system, an identity regulates itself by changing its outputs (activities) to counteract disturbances

(Powers 1973, 1990). Conflict results when the outputs of other systems disturb the system in question. In the families of program-oriented parents, the children (one system) opposed the "regulation," the "nagging," the "forcing," and the treatment as "objects" by the parent (another system); the parents resented the children's interruptions and time demands. It appears that the principle-oriented parents could understand what the child was trying to do by taking the role of the child. These parents then could either find ways to facilitate the self-regulation in which the child naturally engages, or find ways to help the child achieve his or her goals in an acceptable manner (Frank et. al 1986; Gibbs and Schnell 1985; Grusec and Goodnow 1994).

The program-oriented parents appeared not to associate their own parenting practices and standards with their children's motivations for action. The principle-oriented parents seemed more often to emphasize the significance of their interactions with their children for the development of their children's own values and beliefs. Through activities such as story telling, getting to know their children's peers, and teaching their children how to persevere in problem solving, the principle-oriented parents took an active role in helping their children to construct both principle- and program-level standards. These practices, in turn, provided a basis and an opportunity for role-taking. The principle-oriented parents became more aware of their children's preferences and perceptions through their consistent interactions; these interactions provided the parents with the opportunity to perceive whether their children were internalizing the standards they tried to teach.

By respecting the child and the child's goals, these parents bootstrap the process. Rather than managing the child, they help the child to manage himself or herself. This approach provides more time for other things, for the child as well as the parent. Parents who can understand the perceptions that their children are controlling can implement disciplinary practices that are more likely to result in a positive response from the child, and can create a relationship with the child that is not overburdened by con-flict. The consequences for efficacy and esteem on the part of both the parents and the children would seem to be enhanced enormously by such a process, which dispels conflict and negative feelings.

The bootstrapping is real because the use of empathy to help the child manage himself or herself creates more time for the parent. This additional time can be used to attend to higher-level concerns and principles; in turn, these generate even more time to acquire information and other resources, to become involved in larger issues to augment the child's welfare as well as the parent's. The parent's empathy with the child greatly facilitates this process.

Parent's Background

Another factor is also important in the development of a principle orientation in these mothers' parent identity, namely the memories and perceptions of the parent identity in their own families of origin (Kottre 1995; Schacter 1996). We were reminded of this point by one aspect of the data that became clear only after much review: Almost all of the mothers who were operating on the program level reported that they had been abused or had felt unwanted and neglected as children.[7]

These mothers expressed considerably more difficulty in discovering and using appropriate strategies to match their perceptions to their standards than did parents who perceived their childhood as "normal." They tended to perceive themselves as needing to spend more time in building up their own feelings of self-worth in order to achieve their parenting goals, or as needing to improve their parenting skills. In particular, they tended to assign more negative meanings to themselves, to their children, and to parent-child interactions.

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[7] Five of the seven mothers who operated at the program level in both education and discipline had been abused as children. Only one mother who had been abused was able to operate at the principle level in both areas. Though divorced and currently in poor economic circumstances, she had a college degree and frequently associated with mothers who had principle-level orientations.

Although self-worth is a higher-order perception or goal for the parent, the efforts expended in maintaining this perception have the potential to distract the parent from expending energy on goals that are related more directly to the parent identity, including understanding the child's perceptions. The program-oriented mothers also tended not to see the child's point of view but to interpret the child's behavior and intentions through a self-focused perceptual lens (Bernstein and Henderson 1969). These parents often interpreted their children's actions as negative attributions about the parents, or viewed them as interruptions and annoyances. In either case, they were seldom able to move beyond these self-focused perceptions; this fact brings us back to the role of empathy in dealing with children and in the ability to move toward a principle-level focus.

CONCLUSIONS

The interplay between background, resources, and empathic ability appears to be an important factor in the nature of each mother's parent identity. Being raised in a home that allows the development of empathy and role-taking ability, and possessing sufficient time and resources, facilitate the development of a parent identity with a principled orientation to child rearing and an understanding of the relationship between general principles and their manifestation in situated program activity. Such an identity, in turn, seems to strongly influence the parent's agency and efficacy.

We have also noted that the mother's type of parent identity appears to be related to her style of child rearing; such a style has long been a subject of investigation by family-oriented social psychologists. For Bronfenbrenner (1958) the central question was the relationship between social class and the parents' permissiveness or restrictiveness. For Kohn (1977, 1983) it was the relationship between social class and conformity or autonomy values.

Given the association with social class, we ask whether these two different types of parental identities may be only a matter of social class or cultural orientation. Our data show a clear correlation with social class, but it is not perfect. The child-rearing practices observed by Bronfenbrenner and Kohn seem to be tied more closely to the type of parent identity than to social class. With respect to their child-rearing practices, program-oriented middle-class parents resemble program-oriented lower-class parents more closely than principle-oriented middle-class parents. Similarly, principle-oriented lower-class parents seem to resemble principle-oriented middle-class parents more closely than program-oriented lower-class parents.

Yet we also have a hint that the type of parent identity developed by a respondent is like the type present in her parents. Also, it is not hard to see that the children of these parents are developing orientations similar to those of their parents. Some are learning to deal with general principles and others are not, but this does not occur entirely by embracing one set of values over another.

The results reported here may help us to understand more clearly the relationship between values and social class as presented by these authors. We suggest that the reason for the emphasis on rules and procedures (or, in our terminology, program-level standards) is that program-oriented parents experience and perceive a greater need to discipline their children with force and more authoritarian means of control. They do so in part because it is less likely that their children have developed principle-level standards to guide their own behavior. Thus the parents believe it necessary to constantly monitor and admonish them in order to maintain control.

Furthermore, program-oriented parents tend to spend less time with their children, perhaps because of the problems with control and confrontation, and are less likely to role-take (which may have lead to the problems with control and confrontation). Their children thus are more likely to engage in unsupervised activities and appear to be more susceptible to peers and television as agents of socialization, even if these influences are negative. As a result, these parents seem to be both more permissive, in their lack of supervision, and more controlling, in their perception that they need to constantly

nag, force, or coerce their children to control their behavior.

Principle-oriented parents, on the other hand, the category in which we placed most of the middle-class respondents, exert control over their children in more subtle ways: through role-taking and empathy, by instilling higher-level principles, and through purposeful role modeling. In applying these means of control, the principle-oriented parents can perceive that their children are internalizing the kinds of standards the parents want them to adopt in order to guide their own behavior. Thus the value of self-direction that Kohn (1983) found in persons who experienced greater job autonomy and job complexity (characteristics associated with middle-class jobs) is realized by our principle-oriented parents in their efforts to nurture self-motivation in their children. Because they are more likely to perceive that their children possessed self-control, they are also more likely to state that they can trust their children and that their children are creative and effective problem-solvers.

As Bronfenbrenner (1958) suggested, there is evidence that the perceived permissiveness of the lower class and the concurrent tendency to use authoritarian means of control in child rearing actually reflect rejection of the child and a relative inability to take the child's point of view into account. Bronfenbrenner states, in comparison, that the middle-class mother's actual permissiveness reflects her recognition of the child's needs and a willingness to accommodate those needs rather than a desire to obtain freedom from the child by encouraging him or her to play alone. These contrasting observations seem to us to resemble the differences that we found to result from parent identities which are oriented either to program-level or to principle-level standards.

The type of identity standards held by mothers (with respect to education and discipline) can readily be categorized as focusing either on programs for action or on principles for assessing and choosing such programs. A mother's type of parent identity makes a significant difference in the practices she follows, the results she obtains, and

her own sense of efficacy and accomplishment. Those mothers whose parent identity is oriented toward the principle level are more efficacious in accomplishing program-level goals and in assuring that the program-level activities also feed back to maintain the principle-level goals toward which they are oriented. According to our initial definition, they clearly possess more agency.

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