

Chapter 2

Identity Theory

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Introduction

Over the past four decades the concept of identity has been one of the major topics areas of both theoretical and empirical development within sociological social psychology (Burke & Stets, 2009; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010; Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stets, 2006; Stryker, [1980] 2002; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This sustained interest in the concept of identity is based on the primary importance of understanding individuals as situated in social interaction and embedded within society. Generally, we consider an identity to be a shared set of meanings that define individuals in particular *roles* in society (for example, parent, worker, spouse, or teacher role identity), as members of specific *groups* in society (for example, a church, book club, or softball group identity), and as *persons* having specific characteristics that make them unique from others (for example, an athletic or artistic person identity). Thus, people have many identities (James, 1890), and they are of different kinds (Burke & Stets, 2009).

One of the primary goals of identity theory is to specify how the meanings attached to various identities are negotiated and managed in interaction. Specifically, identity theorists focus on how identities relate to one another (given their likelihood of being brought into situations and how central or important they are to individuals), as well as how identities relate to role performance (or behavior), affect (feelings), physical and mental health (such as stress, anxiety, and depression), the self-concept (such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity), and social structure.

In this chapter, we begin with a brief review of identity theory's roots in symbolic interactionism, more generally, and structural symbolic interactionism, more specifically. Following this, we discuss central ideas in identity theory including the definition of an identity, identity verification, identity salience, identity centrality/prominence, resources, and the bases of identities: role, group, and person identities. We then review the two primary ways in which identities have been empirically investigated: through survey research and laboratory research. This is followed by a review of how the central ideas in identity theory have been measured.

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Three topics that have captured the attention of researchers for some time include multiple identities, identities and emotions, and identity change. We review these topics, directing attention to advances both conceptually and empirically. Researchers also have been applying identity theory to a variety of sociological areas of investigation. We review the application of identity theory to three major areas in sociology: crime and law, education, and race/ethnicity. Finally, we discuss future substantive and theoretical advances for identity theory. Substantively, we direct attention to situational factors, identity formation and change, negative/stigmatized identities, and identities within social movements. Theoretically, we point to how identity theory can establish a link to other theories such as affect control theory, expectation states theory, exchange theory, and social identity theory.

In identity theory, there are three major research programs: the interactional (McCall & Simmons, 1978), structural (Serpe & Stryker, 2011), and perceptual control programs (Burke & Stets, 2009). Most theoretical and empirical activity has occurred within the perceptual control and structural programs of research. Consequently, we draw upon these research programs more heavily in this review. Importantly, we view these two research programs as complementary and not competing, thus providing an integrated view of current and future research in identity theory.

We emphasize that this chapter reviews *identity theory* and not the use of the term *identity* in the literature. The concept of identity has been used to examine such issues as identity construction (Sandstrom, 1990), identity performance (Riessman, 2003), and identity work among those with stigmatized identities such as the homeless (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or parolees (Opsal, 2011). This research is typically qualitative and often based on in-depth interviews and ethnographies. Frequently, identity is left undefined (e.g., see O'Brien, 2011) and identity theory rarely frames the research (see Granberg, 2011 for an exception). In this chapter, we discuss identity as a theory and systematic program of research that has been developing for over 40 years. The research program within identity theory is historically rooted in the structural version of symbolic interactionism, it is largely quantitative, and it uses the definitions and processes outlined in the theory to empirically test hypotheses. While a review of this literature necessarily narrows the scope of the chapter, it simultaneously provides clarity as to our focus.

Symbolic Interactionism

In general, symbolic interactionism's theoretical formulation can be organized into two distinct schools of thought: the Chicago and Iowa Schools. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Herbert Blumer was the most influential voice shaping the meaning of symbolic interactionism within the Chicago School. The major counter-voice to Blumer in this period was Manford H. Kuhn, identified with the Iowa School. Blumer's work provides much of the content of current *traditional* symbolic interactionism. Kuhn's work represents a major early effort to define a *structural* symbolic interactionism, which has been most influential for identity theory (Stryker, [1980] 2002).

Important issues separate the symbolic interactionisms of Blumer and Kuhn, but the two share a view of society as a product of social action and interaction. Social life is a dynamic flow of events involving many people. Since both society and persons are derived from social processes, both take on meanings in and through interaction. The symbolic capacity of humans means they have minds; they think. When individuals think about themselves, self-conceptions are constructed that refer to who and what they are, and these self-conceptions are shaped by the social process. Contained in this imagery is the idea that humans, both individually and collectively, are active and creative.

Asserting that his symbolic interactionism represented Mead's ideas, Blumer (1969) argued that the development of general theory is not a useful endeavor. People continuously construct their behavior anew in the course of social action. Consequently, the meanings and definitions that underlie social interaction also undergo continuous reformulation, and those applicable at one point in time will not be

applicable at subsequent points in time. Blumer concluded that, at best, sociologists can construct post-hoc understandings of social behavior but cannot effectively develop theory-based explanations to predict an ever changing landscape of behavior. He also rejected quantitative sociological analysis, arguing that numerical representations of social action do not capture the meanings developed in the course of social interaction. Rather, he suggested that using interpretative methods that represent actors in their own voice (for example, listening to conversations, focus groups, interviewing, life histories, letters, diaries, and public records) provide a rich understanding of the construction of meanings associated with social interaction. For Blumer, interpretive methods are useful in assessing how micro interactions develop.

Labeling his framework “self-theory” to differentiate it from Blumer’s vision of symbolic interactionism, Kuhn (1964; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) aspired to precise theory-based generalizations and their rigorous empirical test. Accepting the position that social structure is created, maintained, and altered through symbolic interaction, he asserted that once created, structure constrains further interaction. He brought role and reference group ideas into his framework (Merton, 1957; Merton & Rossi, 1950). He assumed that social structure is composed of networks of positions that organize relations among persons. He further posited that role expectations, shared by others, are linked to those positions. Recognizing that the relations of expectations to behavior are loose, he saw greater determinacy in specifying the link between self and behavior. Taking Mead’s views of self as an object, Kuhn presented the self as the most significant object within the meanings of social action.

Kuhn maintained the concept of a core self as a set of stable self-meanings, which provide stability to personality, predictability to behavior, and continuity of interaction. As a way of measuring the stable self, he developed the Twenty Statements Test (TST), which measured people’s responses (allowing up to 20 answers) to the question, “Who am I?” This questionnaire was important because it was a way in which symbolic interactionists could begin to examine internal processes in a quantifiable manner across people. However, he indicated that a person’s actions do not simply follow the dictates of the core self. Persons use the role-taking/role-making process and self-control to allow for creativity in behavior. Thus, individuality is a product of a variety of component parts including social networks, social status, role expectations, choice behavior, and personal attributes and traits. This process of contextualizing how one defines an identity demonstrates the link between social structure and the self.

The primary distinction between Blumer’s traditional symbolic interaction and Kuhn’s structural symbolic interaction is the extent to which interaction is negotiated anew versus structured. Compared to the former orientation, the latter leans more heavily on the impact of structure on interaction, leaving open the possibility of negotiated, subtle meanings that over time may result in change in the social structure (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Implied in the structural version is the idea that human behavior is to some extent indeterminate since neither the course nor outcomes of interaction are completely predictable from conditions preceding that interaction (Stryker & Vryan, 2003).

Structural Symbolic Interactionism

While symbolic interactionism’s imagery asserts that individuals and society are mutually constitutive, the structural symbolic interactionist perspective gives causal priority to society on the grounds that individuals are enmeshed in society from birth and cannot survive outside of pre-existing organized social relationships. Society can be characterized as social structures comprised of patterned behavior and interactions. Recently, there has been a refinement in the conception of social structure by differentiating large, intermediate, and proximate social structures (Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). Large social structures are those features of the stratification system such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, and socioeconomic status. A basic premise of sociology is that in most societies, these

structures serve as social boundaries having important consequences for individual life chances including the probability of entering particular networks of social relationships (cf. Blau, 1977). Large social structures can provide persons with a group identity through which they can identify with others based on sharing both the social location and the meanings associated with a given stratification characteristic.

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

Taken together, the above provides an image of society as a differentiated but organized mosaic of role relationships, groups, networks, organizations, communities, and institutions cross-cut by structures of age, gender, ethnicity, class, and religion. Subparts can be independent or interdependent, isolated or closely related to one another, cooperative or conflicting. Further, social structures affect the likelihood that the individuals located within them will evolve particular kinds of selves. These individuals will have particular kinds of motivations and symbolic resources that will facilitate interacting with particular kinds of others with specific backgrounds and resources of their own. Thus, while individuals develop their own self-definitions, these self-definitions are influenced by the realities of the social structures within which they are embedded.

Social structures also influence social interaction by both constraining and facilitating entrance into and departure from networks of social relationships within which people generally live their lives. Actors adjust to how “closed or open” the social environment is to interactions that express different selves and behaviors (Serpe, 1987). Much interaction simply reproduces existing structures, that is, people choose to interact in a manner that is prescribed by both the situation and structure (Burawoy, 1979; Serpe & Stryker, 1993). This is not to say that human action does not produce some creativity and that social change is not possible, only that there is pressure to conform and not disrupt the social order. A major theoretical task for structural symbolic interactionists becomes specifying the features of interactions that lead to varying degrees of change and stability in social structures (Serpe & Stryker, 1987).

If social structures influence the self and social interaction, it is also true that the self emerges in social interaction and within the context of a complex and organized society. Since the relationship between the individual and society is reflexive, then as society is differentiated and organized, so too must be the self. This brings up the image of individuals having many “selves” as they have others with whom they interact and come to know them in a certain way (James, 1890).

Key Concepts in Identity Theory

An Identity

An *identity* is a set of meanings attached to roles individuals occupy in the social structure (Stryker, [1980] 2002) (role identities), groups they identify with and belong to (group identities), and unique ways in which they see themselves (person identities) (Burke & Stets, 2009). *Meanings* are individuals’ responses when they reflect upon themselves in a role, social, or person identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, a woman may have the meaning of being principled when she thinks about how moral she is, efficient when she thinks of herself as a worker, and reliable when she thinks of herself

as a member of the local PTA. Principled, efficient, and reliable are the meanings that help define her in her moral person identity, worker role identity, and PTA group identity. More generally, identities help organize an individual's "place" in an interaction, guide behavior, facilitate the development of stable social relationships, and make interaction possible (McCall & Simmons, 1978). This is all within the context of social structure.

Verification

An important concept in identity theory is identity verification. *Identity verification* is individuals perceiving that others see them in a situation in the same way they see themselves. In order to understand how identity verification occurs, we briefly review the perceptual control dynamics that occur for any one identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).

When an identity is activated in a situation, a feedback loop is established according to the perceptual control model. This loop has five major components. First is the *identity standard* or self-meanings that individuals associate with their identities. Second is the *perceptual input* of meanings about the self in a situation including how individuals see themselves, and the feedback that they received from others (known as reflected appraisals). Third is a process that compares the perceptual input meanings with the identity standard meanings. This is known as the *comparator*. The fourth component is *emotion*, which signals the degree of correspondence between input meanings and identity standard meanings. A correspondence in meanings results in positive emotion while a non-correspondence in meanings results in negative emotions. Finally there is *output* to the environment in the form of behavior that carries meaning. On the one hand, the identity standard guides individuals in the direction of output/behavior that carries meanings consistent with the identity standard meanings. On the other hand, output/behavior also is a function of the comparison between the perceptual input meanings and the identity standard meanings. When there is a non-correspondence between input and identity standard meanings, output will be modified in the situation in an attempt to change input meanings to match the identity standard meanings.

In general, the perceptual control identity process is unconscious and relatively automatic. It becomes conscious if and when a non-correspondence between perceptual (self-in-situation) meanings and identity standard meanings becomes large. The goal is correspondence between the two. When perceptions are congruent with the standard, *identity verification exists*, and positive emotion is experienced. Identity non-verification leads to negative emotion. Negative emotion will create a greater pressure or drive to reduce the non-correspondence between input and identity standard meanings. Behaviorally, this translates into individuals working harder to resolve the non-correspondence or discrepancy, doing whatever it takes to facilitate congruity, assuming that there are no significant situational constraints.

Importantly, negative emotion results irrespective of whether the direction of the discrepancy is positive (persons exceed their standard) or negative (persons fall short of their standard). In the case of non-verification in a negative direction, individuals may need to strengthen their behavior to convince others that they are who they claim to be. For non-verification in a positive direction, persons may need to temper what they are doing, thereby pushing the identity system less forcefully.

It is easiest to understand the verification process for *one* identity that a person invokes in a situation. However, individuals have multiple identities. The idea of multiple identities follows from James' (1890) notion that a person has multiple selves, each self corresponding to the different people who come to know the person in a particular way. Now we talk about multiple identities rather than multiple selves, but the idea is the same. Over the course of our life, we take on different identities, and in any situation, we have many identities that could be activated. Research suggests that multiple identities are activated in situations when the identities share meanings (Deaux, 1992; Stets, 1995).

For example, a feminine gender identity and the mother identity simultaneously may emerge in a situation because they both share the meanings of care and nurturance. Thus, enacting the mother identity facilitates expression of a feminine gender identity. More generally, multiple identities are conceptualized within the self as organized into hierarchies of salience (Stryker, [1980] 2002), centrality or prominence (McCall & Simmons, 1978), and levels of control (Burke & Stets, 2009). Below, we briefly review the salience and centrality/prominence hierarchies which have received the most attention. Later we will discuss the control hierarchy.

Salience

Given the image of people having multiple identities, at issue is which identities will be enacted in a situation. An assumption in identity theory is that individuals work to develop a self-structure that reflects the organization of the various identities they hold. One theoretical formulation of the organization of identities is the concept of *identity salience* (Stryker, 1968, [1980] 2002). Identity salience is defined as the probability that one will invoke a specific identity across situations. More salient identities are those that have a greater likelihood of being brought into situations either through verbal or behavioral action. Explicit in this formulation is the individuals “choice” to enact an identity across situations. As such, identity salience is viewed as a behavioral indicator and represents an agentic aspect of identity in social action (Serpe, 1987; Serpe & Stryker, 1987, 1993; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1983).

The relative level of identity salience across a set of identities makes up the *identity salience hierarchy* (Serpe, 1987; Stryker, [1980] 2002). Implicit in this hierarchical formulation is that for identities that have higher salience, individuals may actively seek out opportunities to perform that identity. For example, if a man is giving a presentation at a professional organization, and the presentation does not focus on issues related to the family, the person may work into his presentation the fact that he has become a grandparent for the first time. Invoking the grandparent identity within the context of the professional identity demonstrates that his grandparent identity is salient in his hierarchy of identities.

Identity salience is based on how committed one is to the identity. Commitment brings in social structure because it refers to the degree to which people are tied to particular social networks. Access to particular social networks reflects one’s placement in the social structure. For example, an individual who has limited educational opportunities beyond high school is not likely to develop strong social relationships with professionally trained individuals. Additionally, the person is less likely to be engaged in other community level activities that are most often open to those who have advanced degrees or an educational pedigree. When a person’s ties to a set of particular others depends upon playing out a particular identity, then that identity will be salient to the individual. Thus, the greater the commitment to an identity, the greater the identity salience (Serpe, 1987; Stryker, [1980] 2002; Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

Commitment

Commitment has been conceptualized in two ways: from a structural perspective and a perceptual control perspective. From the structural perspective, commitment has two dimensions: an interactional and an affective dimension that reflects the extensiveness and intensity of network ties, respectively (Serpe, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Interactional commitment, characterized as a quantitative indicator, is made up of the number of the people an individual interacts with as a

result of holding a given identity and the number of interactions with those people. Commitment to an identity will increase as the size of the social network increases and the number of social interactions with members of the social network increase (Adler & Adler, 1989).

Affective commitment, reflective of a qualitative indicator of people's experiences in interaction with others, is made up of the assessments of how others see them with respect to their behavior within the identity, and the amount of affective discomfort they would experience if they were no longer engaged in interaction with others associated with an identity. Those who perceive that others have a positive evaluation of them, and who experience affective distress if they no longer interacted with others associated with an identity have higher affective commitment to that identity.

From the perceptual control perspective, commitment is the degree to which individuals work hard to verify who they are (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). The harder they work to verify an identity, the more committed are they to that identity. This view of commitment complements the above view because it highlights how identity commitment occurs not only externally, given ties to others in the social structure, but also internally, given the pressure to match self-in-situation meanings with one's identity standard meanings. In this latter view, most of this pressure comes from reflected appraisals, that is, those to whom one is tied by having the identity, thereby implicating the earlier external view of commitment.

Centrality/Prominence

Rosenberg (1979) presents a theoretical scheme that uses *centrality* as the axis for organizing aspects of the self-concept. He indicates that centrality is based on how important self-concept components such as dispositions or identities are to individuals. An identity that is highly important to one's self-concept has greater centrality.

McCall and Simmons (1978) use the concept of a prominence hierarchy to represent the organization of identities. An identity ranking based on *prominence* represents the importance of the identity to the individual. It characterizes their desires and values, and how they want others to see them. The more prominent an identity, the more it will be invoked in a situation. Several factors influence where an identity appears in the prominence hierarchy. Individuals are more likely to have identities high in their prominence hierarchy when they receive support from others for the identity, when they are committed to the identity, and when they receive rewards (both extrinsic and intrinsic) for the identity.

The distinction between salience and centrality/prominence is not just conceptual. How each is measured implies a different set of indicators. Salience is based on probable behavior, while centrality/prominence is based on the internalized importance of an identity. Stryker and Serpe (1994) focused on the relationship between salience and centrality/prominence and asked if these concepts are equivalent, overlapping, or complementary. They found that some identities can be salient and central (for example, the athletic/recreational and extracurricular role identities) while other identities can be salient but not central (for example, the academic and personal involvement role identities), thus showing their independence. They conclude that since these two concepts are theoretically different, when possible both should be included in identity theory research.

Resources

Resources are anything that sustains or enhances a system of interaction and the people connected to it, including verifying people's identities (Freese & Burke, 1994). What is important is not what is counted as a resource but rather what persons do in the situation that is resourceful in verifying their identities.

In this way, resources are viewed not in static terms as ‘in place’ ready to be consumed, but in dynamic terms as ‘in motion’ in a situation (Freese & Burke, 1994). Identity theorists have operationalized three types of resources: structural, interpersonal, and personal (Stets & Cast, 2007). The more one uses these resources, the more identity verification is facilitated.

Structural resources are those processes that afford individuals greater influence in the social structure, and by extension, interactions. An example would be one’s occupational status. *Interpersonal resources* are those processes that arise out of relationships and that help verify individuals. An example would be taking the role of the other. *Personal resources* are beliefs about the self along such dimensions as worthiness and competence that facilitate identity verification (Stets & Cast, 2007).

Bases of Identities

The importance of organizing identities into three bases, that is, role, group, and person identities helps us understand how individuals are tied to various aspects of the social structure (roles and groups) while at the same time they seek to establish their distinctiveness as human beings (persons) (Burke & Stets, 2009). Role identity was the earliest conceptualization of an identity (Burke, 1980; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, [1980] 2002), and it was a clear extension of symbolic interactionism (Thoits & Virshup, 1997).

To understand role identities, we need to first understand roles and social positions. *Roles* are the shared expectations attached to social positions in society such as teacher, student, and parent. For example, the expectations/roles associated with the position of student may include attending classes, completing assignments, passing courses, and earning a degree. A *role identity* is a set of internalized meanings associated with a role. For example, the student role identity may involve the meaning of being “academically responsible,” the performance of which should match this meaning by attending class, taking lecture notes, doing homework assignments, and passing tests (Burke & Reitzes, 1980).

Group identities are those meanings that emerge in interaction with a specific set of others like our family, work group, and clubs. It implies involvement with these others, sharing and attempting to fulfill the expected ways of behaving that each group member has of the other, and participating in the group’s activities. Examples include being a member of a professional organization, civic group, or recreational team. Group identities are different from *social identities*, that is, the meanings associated with an individual’s identification with a social category (Hogg, 2006; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social categories are created by society for stratification purposes and often are ascribed such as one’s race/ethnicity or gender. Such categorization facilitates understanding the status of groups of people in the social structure, the resources they have access to, and how they should be treated. In turn, this helps make interaction predictable and smooth. When individuals’ social identities are in play, they attend to the perceptions of the collectivity’s attitudes and values. The actions of individuals are based not on their self-definitions, but on the definitions outlined by category membership. We think that the social category meanings that social identity theorists highlight is important, but we see this identity as based on a “grouping” rather than a group identity because it does not involve interaction for a common purpose (Burke, 2012).

Person identities are based on a set of meanings that distinguish the person as a unique individual, not as a person who holds a specific role or is a member of a group (Burke & Stets, 2009). Person identities are culturally recognized characteristics that are internalized and define the person in distinct ways. For example, persons can see themselves as moral and internalize the cultural meanings associated with this identity (Stets & Carter, 2011, 2012). One’s internalized identity standards or goals guide behavior.

It is important to point out that role, group, and person identities often overlap and cannot be easily separated in situations. Within groups people play out various roles, and individuals enact these

various roles in different ways given the unique person identity standards they bring to their roles. Which identity that is the focus will necessarily omit issues related to other identities. For example, let us consider a person who is a student (in a role) attending a particular school (group membership). When the school identity is triggered at a school pep rally, we may observe how individuals perform the school chant. However, we may neglect to examine that at the pep rally some students may take the lead in the chants more than others because they are in the role of class president, football captain, or captain of the varsity cheerleading squad. We also may not observe that some students may be very rowdy at the pep rally perhaps because they have a person identity of being aggressive. Thus, taking the lead in the school chants and doing so more aggressively than others simultaneously verifies the group (school) identity, the role (leader) identity, and the person (aggressive) identity. Thus, we need to be sensitive to the simultaneous activation of the different bases of identities in interaction.

Methods

Survey Research

Most researchers in identity theory have used surveys to collect data on different aspects of the identity process. Only in rare instances have they leveraged existing cross-sectional surveys such as the GSS to study identities (Stets & Tsushima, 2001). Many existing surveys simply do not ask the relevant questions needed to understand and explain the different dynamics underlying identities. Consequently, identity researchers have relied on their own data gathering efforts to conduct cross-sectional surveys on different groups in society to study an array of identity issues (e.g. Owens & Serpe, 2003; Stets & Harrod, 2004).

One of the most common issues that has been examined in cross-sectional surveys is how one's identity guides behavior in situations. For example, researchers have studied how commitment to and salience of a religious identity influenced time spent in religious activities (Stryker & Serpe, 1982), how a salient blood-donor identity was related to donating blood (Callero, 1985), and how a salient and prominent mother identity influenced their behavior such as making sacrifices (Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991). Cross-sectional surveys have used college students to examine the identity-behavior relationship such as the relationship between the student identity and school performance (Burke & Reitzes, 1981), gender identity and physical and sexual abuse in dating relationships (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988), and the environmental identity (being concerned about the environment) and taking action to protect the environment (Stets & Biga, 2003).

Though longitudinal data can be costly and time-consuming to obtain, we can learn a great deal about the dynamics of identities when the identity process is captured in real-time and in the natural setting. Indeed, a host of identity findings have emerged from a major longitudinal study that followed newly married couples during the first two years of marriage in two communities in Washington State (Tallman, Burke, & Gecas, 1998). Important findings stemming from this data reveal that while verification of the spousal identity had positive consequences such as increased love, trust, commitment, and self-esteem (Burke & Stets, 1999; Cast & Burke, 2002), identity non-verification had negative consequences such as distress (Burke & Harrod, 2005). Longitudinal research on identities also has been carried out on college students. From this research, we have learned how a new situation such as entering college influenced the degree to which prior identities were maintained (Serpe & Stryker, 1987). More recently, a longitudinal panel has tracked students involved in science-training programs to assess commitment and salience of the science identity (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012).

We simply do not have enough longitudinal data available to study identities. Sometimes, because situations that researchers want to study are sensitive, infrequent in their occurrence, or data collection is too costly, the methodological tool of vignettes is employed to obtain the data. Individuals typically

are exposed to a hypothetical situation and asked to imagine how they would think, act, and feel as an actor or observer in the situation. For instance, one study that examined the relationship between a salient mother identity and the emotion of jealousy gave parents two brief stories, and they were to indicate how the mothers in the stories felt when the fathers in the stories actively participated in childcare (an activity that is typically the domain of mothers) (Ellestad & Stets, 1998).

In some studies, individuals read about situations that they might have experienced, and they are asked to report their thoughts, actions, and feelings the last time the situation occurred. If they did not experience the situation, they are to imagine what they would think, do, and feel. This has been used in recent research that has examined the moral identity and its relationship to moral behavior and moral emotions (Stets & Carter, 2006, 2011, 2012; Stets, Carter, Harrod, Cerven, & Abrutyn, 2008). Using vignettes is not without potential problems, for example, individuals may lack the experience that would provide an informed answer, or what they tell you they would do in the situation may differ from what actually occurs. One needs to be judicious as to how often and for what purpose this methodological tool is used.

Laboratory Research

Laboratory work enables researchers to study the identity process in a specific context created in the laboratory under controlled conditions. The goal in laboratory research is to test theoretical relationships rather than reproduce the natural environment. This is not to say that laboratory research cannot approximate events in the natural setting. For example, researchers have simulated the leadership identity using task discussion groups in the laboratory (Riley & Burke, 1995). Other researchers have simulated the worker identity by creating a work situation in the laboratory, and they have examined individuals' emotional responses to receiving feedback from a manager that was what the worker expected (identity verification) or did not expect (identity non-verification) (Stets, 2003, 2005; Stets & Asencio, 2008; Stets & Osborn, 2008).

An advantage of laboratory research is that it is able to create situations that are analogous to those found in the natural setting but that may be difficult to study because the researcher has limited access to the investigative site or the investigation is of a sensitive nature. For example, to study the relationship between the moral identity and moral behavior, a researcher needs data on individuals engaging in dishonest activity. It is hard to gain access to these behaviors in the natural environment. To study this activity, a laboratory study was devised in which individuals were placed in a moral dilemma of a testing situation, and they had the opportunity to cheat (an act of commission) or not report that they were over-scored (an act of omission) on a test (Stets, 2011; Stets & Carter, 2011). Measures of their moral identity and negative emotions were obtained. The results revealed that those with a higher moral identity were less likely to cheat. Further, individuals were more likely to report feeling bad when perceptions of who they were in the situation fell short of or exceeded their moral identity standard based on how they thought that others viewed them. Survey and laboratory research both have their limitations. Because survey research often gathers retrospective information on individuals, we miss observing the individuals in real-time. Laboratory research permits the collection of data in real-time, thereby supplementing survey research.¹ When the two are used in combination (Stets & Carter, 2011), we obtain a better understanding of past and current situations that potentially influence individuals thoughts, actions, and feelings.

¹The purpose of laboratory research is to discover law-like patterns. The intent is to test theoretical relationships under carefully controlled conditions rather than generalize to the natural setting.

Measurement

We summarize below how the major concepts in identity theory have been measured. In instances where the measure has changed over time, we discuss the most recent measure under the assumption that as measures evolve, they better approximate the identity concepts.²

An Identity

As mentioned earlier, an identity is the *meanings* people provide when they think about themselves. Individuals *control* their identity meanings at a particular level (Burke & Stets, 2009). Therefore, the goal in measuring identity meanings is to identify the current level at which individuals' meanings are set. To do this, one must first obtain the meanings that are held in the population from which the sample is drawn. This may involve asking respondents about the important and relevant meanings for themselves. This is in contrast to a researcher assuming the content of the identity meanings or deriving the meanings from some other population (Burke & Tully, 1977). The identity meanings are then measured using a semantic differential in which the meanings are placed on a scale of polar opposites, following the Osgood idea that meaning is contrastive (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). For example, gender identity may involve meanings of being very independent/not at all independent, very aggressive/not at all aggressive or very active/very passive. Individuals respond to these meanings as they think about themselves in an identity. This helps formulate their current level at which their identity is set.

Meaning is understood not in an absolute sense but in a relative sense. What it means to claim a particular identity is always understood in relation to its opposite, for example, the feminine gender identity is in contrast to the masculine gender identity, the husband identity is distinct from the wife identity, and the moral identity is different from the immoral identity. The bipolar nature of the semantic differential reflects this. To find the relevant meanings for an identity in relation to its opposite, the statistical procedure of *discriminant function analysis* is used to find the bipolar meanings which best distinguish the identity from its opposite. Researchers have used the semantic differential to measure a host of identities such as one's gender identity (Stets & Burke, 1996), the student identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981), the spousal identity (Burke & Stets, 1999), the environmental identity (Stets & Biga, 2003), and the moral identity (Stets & Carter, 2011).

Verification

Identity *verification* occurs when people's identity meanings match the perceived meanings about themselves in a situation. This is measured by taking one's identity meanings and subtracting it from the reflected appraisals, that is, how people think others perceive them in the situation.³ If one is interested in the reaction to verification (or the lack thereof), the subtracted value is squared. Squaring the

²For more detailed information on identity measures, see Burke and Stets (2009).

³Some researchers have used the actual appraisals of others as a proxy of reflected appraisals (Burke & Harrod, 2005; Burke & Stets, 1999). The idea is that others will communicate their views, individuals will perceive these views, and then they will infer that this is what the other thinks of them. However, others may selectively communicate some views (such as positive views) and not others (such as negative views) (Felson, 1980). Even if others communicate their views accurately, this information may be ignored, distorted, or rejected (Stets & Harrod, 2004).

value reflects the identity theory assumption that the negative reaction in response to identity non-verification is curvilinear (Burke & Harrod, 2005). People will feel bad irrespective of whether others view them more negatively or more positively than their own identity meanings. If one is interested in how identity meanings are tied to behavior meanings, the value is not squared in order to establish that the meanings of the identity and the behavior are in the same direction. Further, the value is not squared if one is interested in identity change so that one can identify the direction in which the identity change occurred.

Salience

Identity *salience* is the readiness or probability to act out an identity within and across situations. This is measured by asking respondents to imagine meeting different people for the first time (for example, a co-worker, member of the opposite sex, and a friend) and indicate the certainty by which they would tell each person about a particular identity (“almost certainly would not to almost certainly would”) (Owens & Serpe, 2003). If certainty is high, then the salience of the identity is high.

Commitment

Identity commitment has been conceptualized as people’s position in a network of social relations, and it has been measured along two dimensions: the *interactional* (the number of others that persons interact with based on an identity and the amount of time spent in the identity) and *affective* (the depth of the ties to others based on an identity) (Owens & Serpe, 2003; Serpe, 1987; Stryker et al., 2005). Operationally, each dimension contains three questions. For interactional commitment, individuals are asked how often they do things with others related to an identity, how much time, and how much money they spend in identity-related activities. For affective commitment, persons are asked how much they would miss others related to an identity if they could not spend time with them, how close, and how important these others are to them.

Centrality/Prominence

Identity prominence (McCall & Simmons, 1978) or centrality (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) is how important an identity is to an individual. There are two measures that have been used. First, other identities that individuals may claim are paired with the identity of interest to see which identity is more important in the way they think of themselves, thereby producing an overall ranking of identities from high to low (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Alternatively, a one-item question has been used in which people indicate how important the identity is to them (Stets & Biga, 2003).

Resources

Resources are of three kinds: structural, interpersonal, and person. Measures of structural resources are a person’s education, income, occupational status, and race (Burke, 2008; Stets & Cast, 2007; Stets & Harrod, 2004). When individuals use these resources, they demonstrate that they have the knowledge and skills to accomplish their goals including obtaining identity verification. Interpersonal resources include, but are not limited to taking the role of the other, being trusted, and being liked

(Stets & Cast, 2007). These interpersonal processes bind actors together and help facilitate the establishment of a mutually verifying context. Measures of personal resources include self-worth and self-efficacy (Stets & Cast, 2007). When worthy and efficacious feelings about the self are in motion, individuals are likely to be more persistent in achieving identity verification because they will continue their efforts toward this goal even when they periodically fail.

We now turn to several substantive issues that have facilitated advancing identity theory as a theory. These areas are still rich and fertile for more development, so there is still more work to do.

Multiple Identities

Conceptually, there are two perspectives that help us understand how multiple identities are interrelated. An *internal perspective* focuses on how multiple identities are interrelated within the self. This involves investigating the hierarchy of identities within the perceptual control system of the self (Burke & Stets, 2009). It would also include examining identities in terms of their rank ordering given all of the identities that individuals may claim (Stryker, [1980] 2002). An *external perspective* addresses how multiple identities are related to the positions individuals hold in the social structure and the groups to which they belong (Thoits, 1983).

Internal Perspective

Control Hierarchy

Since individuals claim person, role, and group identities, at issue is how these different bases of identities are interrelated. Borrowing from Powers (1973), it has been argued that identities can be understood as forming a hierarchical system composed of an interlocking set of individual control systems at multiple levels (Stets & Harrod, 2004; Tsushima & Burke, 1999). At the highest level in the hierarchical system, the *principle level*, are person, role, and group identities, which provide the standards or goals for the *program level*, the level just below it. At the program level, individuals perceive the degree to which the goals set by the identities have been accomplished. If the identity goals have been accomplished, the identity meanings are maintained; otherwise they are modified. Look at another way, the identities at the principle level provide the meanings and standards that guide the selection and implementation of behavior at the program level, and the behavior will sustain or alter those identity meanings.

Theoretically, the principle level is also hierarchically arranged with person identities carrying the most abstract meanings; thus operating at the highest level like a “master” identity influencing the selection of role and group identities just below it, at a less abstract level (Burke, 2004; Stets & Carter, 2006). For example, the moral person identity may involve meanings of being caring, helpful, and compassionate. In turn, individuals may choose roles consistent with these meanings such as the parent, priest, or nurse role, and they may become involved in groups that encompass these roles such as being a member of a family, parish, or hospital.

Salience Hierarchy

Given the internal ranking of identities within the self, if an identity ranks higher in relative salience, then it will be activated across situations more often than lower salient identities.

As already mentioned, salience is influenced by a commitment to an identity in terms of the number and deepness of the ties to others on the basis of an identity, and the greater motivational force to respond to non-verifying meanings in a situation.

When an identity is salient and activated in a situation, it becomes a filter or lens that directs attention to controlling meanings in the situation that are consistent with one's identity meanings. To be clear, it is not simply the person but also situational cues that may introduce meanings that encourage the activation of one identity over another. Individuals will interpret these situational cues by relying on shared symbols and cultural meanings and identify the particular identity that is called forth (Stets & Carter, 2012). However, the identity may not get invoked if other situational factors impede the expression of the identity such as others in the situation that may encourage the adoption of an alternative identity. For example, when a person must decide whether a friend should drive home drunk from a party, rather than invoking the moral identity and driving the friend home, partygoers may encourage the person to continue having a good time and ignore the drunk friend who is about to leave, thus encouraging a self-interested identity over the moral identity (Stets & Carter, 2011). Alternatively, moral exemplars may be present in the situation who reinforces the meanings of the moral identity, reminding the person to respond in a moral manner.

The above illustrates how various situational factors facilitate or impede the expression of a salient identity depending upon whether the elicited meanings complement or contradict the salient identity meanings. More generally, situational meanings may simply constrain the expression of a salient identity as when one moves to a new environment (such as going off to college) and is unable to reconstruct social relationships based on the identity (Serpe & Stryker, 1987). Alternatively, the situation may impede the exercise of "choice" in the identity an individual enacts, thereby imposing the enactment of a particular identity (Serpe, 1987; Serpe & Stryker, 1993; Stryker, [1980] 2002).

Identity salience and the perceptual control system of identities both have the image of a hierarchy. How might the two be related? It may be that the more central or prominent particular person identities are to an individual in the control hierarchy, the more these identity meanings will infiltrate particular roles and groups that share these identity meanings, and the more salient will be these person, role, and group identities relative to other person, role, and group identities the person claims and that exist in the salience hierarchy. However, situations carry their own meanings about the particular identities that should be enacted. To the extent that situational meanings are consistent with individuals' salient person, role, and group identity meanings, and this occurs often, the salience of these identities should strengthen, and strengthen as well more prominent identities in the control hierarchy. To the extent that situational meanings are inconsistent with salient person, role, and group identity meanings, and to the extent that this persists over time, the salient identities should weaken, as well as weaken more prominent identities in the control hierarchy.

External Perspective

Roles

Since individuals can be tied to the social structure in multiple ways, having multiple identities can create competing demands and potentially lead to conflict and distress. Thoits (1983, 1986) has argued that rather than multiple identities creating problems and stress, they provide meaning and direction in people's lives, thus reducing anxiety and depression and counter-normative behaviors. Thoits also maintained that multiple identities fostered positive beliefs in self-efficacy and well-being such as high self-esteem. High self-efficacy and esteem and positive mental health such as few psychological problems can be more generally viewed as personal resources that facilitate involvement in multiple identities (Thoits, 2003) and that can potentially buffer the stress associated with maintaining them as

evident in stress research. Thoits argued that if multiple role identities generated conflict, the source of this conflict is in claiming obligatory role identities rather than voluntary role identities.

Obligatory role identities are identities that individuals are expected to assume over the life course such as student, worker, spouse, and parent. Individuals may not think these identities represent their “real self,” but they are normative in society. Thoits maintains that when obligatory identities compete for attention in a situation, individuals are more likely to experience conflict and distress because they cannot easily exit any one of the identities to resolve the conflict. Alternatively, voluntary role identities are those identities which offer more agency and choice, and which are easier to exit should they begin to compete with other identities and generate distress. Examples of voluntary identities include the friend, triathlete, gourmet cook, or choir member identity. People claim voluntary identities because they derive personal benefit from them, and they can abandon these identities when the costs begin to outweigh the benefits. Not surprisingly then, Thoits (2003) found that those with more voluntary identities reported higher self-esteem, mastery, and lower distress than those with more obligatory identities. Voluntary identities offered more control over one’s life than obligatory identities, and this greater control fostered these salutary outcomes.

An alternative to Thoits’ argument is that positive outcomes emerge from claiming multiple identities not because of their voluntary nature, but to the extent that they are verified in a situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). When an identity is not verified, individuals experience distress. Conversely, when an identity is verified, individuals feel good. The more identities that are verified, the better one should feel. Thus, accumulated multiple identities of all kinds have benefits, but only if the accumulated identities are verified.

Groups

Multiple identities may emerge in groups, particularly when membership in one group intersects with membership in another group. Specifically, a person may claim one identity in a group, but then something in the situation activates an identity that a person has in another group. For example, during the evening dinner hour, the mother identity may be enacted as a woman talks to her children, but as the conversation turns to a medical problem, she may invoke her physician identity. A person may also have different ties with different others in the same group. When a supervisor is discussing administrative responsibilities with a friend who is also a co-worker, role conflict may emerge when the worker identity and friend identity compete for attention.

People will spend more or less time in an identity depending upon the level of commitment and salience.⁴ Indeed, Stryker (2000) argues that differential involvement of individuals in social movements is a function of how committed and salient competing identities are to the activist identity. For example, individuals may have a spouse or worker identity to which they are more committed and which is more salient to them that precludes them from full participation in a social movement.

Identities and Emotion

Early on, Stryker (1968) posited three main components to self: I am (cognitive), I want (conative), and I feel (affective). Identity researchers tended to focus on the “I am” and neglected an analysis of the “I feel.” This is not to say that identity researchers were not interested in understanding what elicited positive and negative feelings when individuals entered an interaction, and how negative

⁴ However short or long the duration in an identity, the goal is to verify the identity.

emotions were resolved. For example, McCall and Simmons (1978) maintained that negative emotions emerged when a prominent identity was not supported by others in an interaction. Indeed, research revealed that the lack of confirmation of a prominent identity was tied to negative emotions (Ellestad & Stets, 1998). McCall and Simmons also argued that individuals engage in a variety of strategies to mute negative feelings such as rejecting others who are non-supportive or withdrawing from the interaction. Again, empirical evidence has shown that coping strategies emerge when individuals experience negative feelings (Stets & Tsushima, 2001).

Similar to McCall and Simmons, Stryker (2004) linked emotions to the support (or lack thereof) of an identity, but it was a salient identity rather than a prominent identity. Additionally, Stryker went further than McCall and Simmons in theoretically integrating emotions into identity theory by offering a series of propositions. For Stryker, identities emerge out of various roles that individuals occupy in social networks. Emotions influence the formation of networks because individuals who share common affective meanings are more likely to enter into and maintain social relationships with each other. When positive affect is linked to an identity, the feeling stems from meeting role expectations, and it encourages individuals to seek more relationships on the basis of that identity. Thus, interactive commitment to the identity is increased as is the social network and the salience of the identity. Negative affect stemming from an identity discourages increased relationships on the basis of that identity. Thus, interactive commitment is reduced as is the network and salience of the identity.

Stryker also argued that more salient identities will generate more intense positive affect if behavior is consistent with the identity, and it will generate more intense negative affect if the behavior is inconsistent with the identity. Intense affect has implications for identity commitment and salience. Strong positive emotions tied to identity enactment will increase ties to others based on that identity (commitment) and, in turn, increase the salience of that identity. Alternatively, strong negative emotions will reduce identity commitment and its salience.

Another way to look at the idea that emotions are confirming or disconfirming a prominent or salient identity is to view emotions as signaling the degree of correspondence between perceptual meanings of the self in the situation and identity standard meanings (Burke & Stets, 2009). Correspondence or identity verification produces positive emotions and non-correspondence or identity non-verification produces negative emotions. Identity non-verification involves self-perceptions in the situation falling short of one's identity standard as well as exceeding one's identity standard. Negative emotions motivate individuals to change the non-verifying state to a verifying state. Similar to McCall and Simmons' idea of coping strategies, individuals will engage in a variety of behavioral and cognitive strategies such as doing something different in the situation or reinterpreting the perceptual meanings of the self in the situation in order to create a verifying state.

A variety of studies have examined the emotional outcomes of identity non-verification (Stets, 2003, 2004, 2005; Stets & Asencio, 2008; Stets & Osborn, 2008). In these studies, a work situation was simulated in the laboratory that invoked the worker identity. Workers/participants received feedback from a manager/confederate in the forms of points earned for their work. Workers were previously informed as to how points were allocated to work output. Workers were placed in one of three conditions. Either they received feedback (points) from the manager that was: (1) what they expected for their work (identity verification), (2) more positive (received more points) than what they expected (identity non-verification in a positive direction), or (3) more negative (received less points) than what they expected (non-verification in a negative direction).

The results revealed that identity non-verification did not always lead to negative emotions as hypothesized in identity theory. While negative emotion occurred for identity non-verification in a negative direction, positive emotion emerged for identity non-verification in a positive direction. These unexpected findings indicated that more empirical tests are needed. The findings may be unique given the laboratory setting in which participants may not have invested in the identity they were enacting and sought only to enhance themselves rather than verify themselves. Alternatively, in the

laboratory study, participants were not able to refute the feedback that they received from the manager on their work. If they were given the opportunity to refute the feedback, they may have been less likely to align their emotional reaction in the direction of the feedback.

Identity researchers have begun to refine their research on emotions by moving beyond a focus of positive and negative emotions to an analysis of specific emotions. Stets and Burke (2005b) generated a series of testable hypotheses regarding how specific emotions might emerge from the identity process. In doing this, they examined several relevant dimensions that could be explored such as the source of one's identity standard meanings (self or other), the source of one's identity discrepancy (self or other), and the relative power and status of the self and other in the interaction. For example, if the source of people's identity meanings is primarily themselves (they've built up a set of expectations they hold for themselves), and if they feel responsible for not being able to verify their identities (an internal attribution), they may feel *sad*. Alternatively, if others are primarily the source of people's identity meanings, and if individuals see another as responsible for not being able to verify their identities (an external attribution), *anger* may be felt. Adding the dimension of power, if the other who is responsible for not verifying one's identity is of higher power than the person, the person may feel *fear*; if the other is of lower power than the person, the person may feel *rage*. In general, if individuals make distinctions in terms of how they are feeling in situations, then identity theorists need to explain the conditions under which these distinctions emerge. The above research begins to address these conditions.

An analysis of specific emotions in identity theory has extended to an investigation of moral emotions. For example, Stets and her associates (Stets & Carter, 2012; Stets et al., 2008) studied the moral emotions of shame and guilt, and their relationship to one's moral identity and moral behavior. Consistent with identity theory, they found that reports of shame and guilt were more likely to occur when individuals experienced non-verification of the moral identity. Specifically, when individuals with a high moral identity perceived that others in the situation did not see them as acting as moral persons, this lack of verification as to who they were influenced feelings of guilt and shame.

Identity Change

Identity change occurs when the meanings of an identity shift over time. In identity theory, it is assumed that identity change is ongoing but very gradual (Burke & Stets, 2009). Individuals may not find their identity as different from yesterday, last week, or last month. It is only when considering a longer period of time ranging from months to years that they may see a difference. While the identity verification process involves matching meanings of the self in the situation with identity meanings, thus supporting identity meanings and resisting identity change, resisting identity change does not mean that identity change does not occur at all. Burke (2006) discusses three ways in which identities may change. They include: (1) changes in the situation which prompt changes in the identity meanings, (2) multiple identities that conflict in a situation causing both identities to change, and (3) identity meanings and behavior meanings that conflict causing a modification in both meanings.

Changes in a situation can cause a discrepancy between identity meanings and perceived meanings of the self in the situation. If situational changes persist and people's meanings of themselves in situations are unable to adjust to match their identity meanings, their identity meanings may slowly change. Empirically, we see this in a study which tracked the changes in the gender identity meanings of newly married couples over the course of a year upon the birth of the first child (Burke & Cast, 1997). The birth of a child is a change in the situation that is generally irreversible. Becoming parents tends to move individuals to more traditional "gendered" meanings of parenting, and this was clearly the case in this study. The researchers found that in order to successfully accommodate

the situational change of a newborn, the gender identity of husbands became somewhat more masculine and the gender identity of the wives became somewhat more feminine.

Changes in a situation can cause a more dramatic shift in one's identity as when individuals enter environments that provide few possibilities for choosing which identities to enact. In other words, the social structure is "closed" rather than "open," thereby constraining individuals' identities and actions (Serpe, 1987; Serpe & Stryker, 1987, 1993). Examples of "closed" environments include prisons, the military, cults, and mental hospitals. Aside from how "open" or "closed" is the environment, there are environmental changes that occur as part of life course transitions that may influence identity change such as going off to college, getting married, becoming a parent, grandparent, and retired person. However, unexpected changes also alter one's identities such as divorce, unemployment, the loss of a home, or the loss of a loved one.

A second source of identity change is the simultaneous activation of two or more identities in a situation. For example, a woman's gender identity may contain meanings of being nurturing and somewhat passive, but in her lawyer identity at the firm, her worker identity contains meanings of being aggressive and proactive. Unless she is able to compartmentalize being a woman from being a litigator, the two identities will likely conflict and cause distress. Behaving in ways consistent with one identity will diverge from the meanings of the other identity. According to identity theory, this conflict is resolved and distress is reduced by the meanings in each identity slowly moving toward each other over time and reaching some middle ground (Burke & Stets, 2009). In the above example, the woman may modify her gender meanings to involve being more assertive over time, while at the same time she may alter her worker identity to include a more temperate orientation. To be clear, once identity meanings are modified, they are changed in whatever situations the identity is expressed.

Indeed, research reveals that a compromise in identity meanings does occur over time between conflicting identities. For example, in a study of newly married couples in which one's gender identity and spousal identity were measured along the traditional masculine to traditional feminine dimension, those who had a more feminine gender identity compared to their spousal identity in one year increased their femininity of their spousal identity in the next year (Burke, 2006). Similarly, those who had a spousal identity that was more feminine than their gender identity in one year increased their femininity of the gender identity in the following year. Thus, the meanings of each identity were being modified over time to bring them into alignment.

When one considers the issue of which identity is likely to show more change, identity theory suggests that less committed and less salient identities will be more likely to change than more committed and more salient identities. If more individuals expect a person to enact behavior consistent with a set of identity meanings, then it would be costly to change the meanings of this identity than an identity based on fewer ties to others. Additionally, since salient identities are more likely to be invoked in a situation, there will be more occasions to enact behaviors based on more salient identities than less salient identities. Thus, it would be easier to change less salient identities because the likelihood of enactment is not as high.

The third source of identity change is when identity meanings are inconsistent with behavior meanings in a situation. In general, individuals will try to behave in ways such that the meanings are consistent with their identity meanings. When the meanings are not consistent, individuals will try to enact alternative behavior that better reflects their identity meanings. This assumes that the situation is not constraining the individuals to act in a particular way, and that another competing and more salient identity has not been invoked which may direct a different behavior. At the same time that alternative behaviors are enacted to see if they better match identity meanings, identity meanings will slowly change to be more like the behavior meanings in the situation. Thus, changes occur for both the identity and the behavior over time, serving to reduce the inconsistency between the two.

Empirical work evidences the above dynamic. Returning to the study discussed above of newly married couples gender identity and spousal identity (Burke, 2006), the findings also revealed that

when those with a feminine spousal identity engaged in more masculine household activities in one year, they reduced their level of masculine tasks the following year. And, when those with a masculine spousal identity engaged in more feminine household tasks in one year, they increased the level of masculine tasks in the following year. Thus, they were modifying their behavior over time to better match their identity meanings. However, at the same time, their spousal identity meanings were changing to adapt to the meanings of their behavior in the situation. Those who were acting too masculine for their spousal identity slowly changed their spousal identity to become more masculine over time, and those who were acting too feminine for their spousal identity slowly changed their spousal identity to become more feminine.

Bridging to Other Sociological Areas

By using identity theory to theoretically inform other sociological areas of investigation, we are gaining further insight into sociological issues and problems. Below, we briefly discuss how identity theory has informed some sociological areas such as the sociology of crime and law, sociology of education, and sociology of race/ethnicity. Given space limitations, this is just a sampling of the inroads that identity theory has made into various sociological fields.

Sociology of Crime and Law

Violence Research

Researchers have argued that identity theory can provide an important theoretical development in domestic violence research because all behavior, including aggressive behavior, is rooted in issues of self and identity (Stets & Osborn, 2007). An important goal in interaction is to confirm people's identities. By first understanding people's identities, we can then identify how aggressive behavior facilitates or impedes verification of those identities.

The relationship between identity verification and aggression was investigated among newly married couples (Stets & Burke, 2005a). The researchers found that when people's spousal identity was not verified by the other in the marriage, it reduced their perceived level of control over their environment. In order to compensate for this reduced control, these individuals asserted control over their spouses, and heightened control over their spouses was associated with acts of aggression toward them. Using aggression to regain control disrupted later identity verification because aggression in one year significantly reduced verification of the spousal identity in the following year. Further, aggression led to a spiral of more aggression in subsequent years. Thus, identity disruptions at the individual level threatened established relationships at the interactive level and jeopardized the institution of marriage at the social structural level.

Identity theory has been applied to an understanding of the criminal identity using incarcerated offenders at a southern California correctional facility (Asencio & Burke, 2011). An unexpected finding from this research was that the incarcerated initially internalized the non-verifying feedback from others that they were criminals rather than challenging this feedback by engaging in alternative behavior to counteract it. This occurred controlling for the amount of time incarcerated. The incarcerated may have felt that they did not have the power or resources to resist the non-verifying feedback. Indeed, other research reveals that having power or resources in the situation was important in resisting non-verifying feedback (Cast, Stets, & Burke, 1999).

Law

Identity theory has been used in the related area of law. Specifically, it has been invoked to explain the lapses in judgment of lawyers who defend corporate and government scandals without recognizing their biases in defending such scandals (Robertson, 2009). Robertson argued that attorneys may have multiple identities that contribute to their poor judgments. For example, when attorneys assume the identity of lawyer, it involves aggressively defending their clients who may be a corporation or government agency. However, attorneys may also have the identity of employee in the corporation or agency they are defending. This latter identity might be more salient than the identity of lawyer, thereby influencing biased judgments and behavior to protect the organization or agency, which financially supports them. In the lawyer identity, behavior is organized around providing sound legal advice to the client, while in the employee identity behavior is focused more on advocating for the organization's goals under the guise of legal advice. Robertson argued that when attorneys allow the employee identity to guide their behavior, they have a stake in a favorable outcome for the corporation, because in winning the case, it facilitates verification of their employee identity. In this way, attorneys acting in the employee identity are subject to the same distortions and biases as the corporation, thus the lawyers place themselves in the worse position to offer independent counsel. Partisan bias clouds their judgment.

Robertson (2009) discussed how attorneys can enhance independent judgment and avoid the pitfalls of partisan bias. She argued that they should avoid dual role identities in organizations. For example, they should avoid taking on the role identities of employee and legal expert in a company or government agency. The risk is that the identity of lawyer will be subordinated to the employee identity such that the attorney's judgment will be filtered through these other identities. A further problem can contribute to partisan bias when an attorney has other identities that may threaten impartiality. For example, a company may want their employees to adopt the cost-saving strategy of environmentally friendly behaviors in the workplace, and the attorney who is giving legal counsel to the company is an environmental activist. A successful outcome for the company would verify the attorney's activist identity, once again blurring the line between advocacy and independent counsel. Robertson indicated that attorneys can take steps to raise the salience of the lawyer identity over other identities by spending more time in the lawyer identity and establishing ties to others who share that identity.

Sociology of Education

In science, mathematics, and engineering (SME) disciplines, women are underrepresented. In a series of papers using a sample of high school students who attended summer programs designed to foster SME interests, Lee (1998, 2002, 2005) used identity theory to explain women's underrepresentation in SME disciplines, and how it might be overcome. Lee (1998) found that females' perceptions of themselves (as more feminine) was more discrepant with how they perceived other science students (as more masculine) compared to males' views of themselves (as more masculine). Females saw themselves more like other females than other science students. Females also saw themselves as different from occupants in SME disciplines. These findings contributed to females reduced interest in science and provide insight into why women are not inclined to an SME identity.

What fostered an SME identity for women is attendance at SME summer programs (Lee, 2002). Specifically, experiencing emotionally satisfying relationships with others also involved in science activities (affective commitment) encouraged salience of the science identity and engaging in SME activities. This forging of good relationships with other SME students helped women to maintain science activities after they had left the summer program, thereby showing a more prominent science identity over time (Lee, 2005). Indeed, recent research revealed how participation in science training

programs was associated with an increased commitment to the science identity, which, in turn, increased the salience of the science identity, and one's intention to pursue a scientific career (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012).

Sociology of Race/Ethnicity

An important development in identity theory is how identity processes operate across different races/ethnicities as social categories. Owens and Serpe (2003) studied the role of self-esteem, commitment, and salience of the family identity for Blacks, Latinos, and Whites. An important finding stemming from this work was that sources of identity salience differ for Latinos as opposed to Whites and African Americans. Commitment (both interactive and affective) influenced the salience of the family identity for Latinos, but self-esteem influenced the salience of the family identity for Whites and African Americans. The former finding revealed how significant the family was for Latinos compared to Blacks and Whites. However, this familial emphasis may have unintended effects on the formation of other relationships. For example, other research revealed that compared to Whites and Blacks, Latinos were less likely to have their friend identity verified (Stets & Harrod, 2004). Stets and Harrod suggested that because of Latinos devotion to the family, they may be more likely to rely on and confide in kin members than friends. If friendships are not encouraged and developed, it may become difficult to acquire the resources such as care, trust, and loyalty that are necessary to facilitate verification of the friend identity.

In other analysis of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos, Stryker and his collaborators (Stryker et al., 2005) examined how large-scale, intermediate, and proximate levels of social structure impacted commitment to family, work, and voluntary associations. They found that across all ethnic groups, the degree to which individuals interacted with the same set of others in multiple networks (e.g., the individuals one related to at work were the same individuals one related to in voluntary associations) had positive effects on interactive and affective commitment to work and voluntary association relationships. This supports the identity theory assumption that losing a position and an identity in one network threatens relationships in another network to the degree that the networks have common members.⁵

Future Directions

Though identity theory has developed over the years, there are areas that can serve as fertile ground for further development. We discuss some of these areas below, including an examination of situational factors, identity formation and change, negative identities, and social movement activity. Working to develop these areas will extend the theory beyond its current boundaries as well as identify the scope conditions of the theory. Further, identity theory can advance by establishing links to other theories. Studying these linkages may put us in a better position to understand and explain behavior because it allows us to study multiple processes simultaneously. We discuss the potential of this with four theories: affect control theory, expectation states theory, exchange theory, and social identity theory.

⁵The above discussion is not intended to be exhaustive as to how identity theory has helped inform various sociological areas of study. For example, we have not discussed how using identity theory in environmental sociology has helped us better understand environmental behavior (Stets & Biga, 2003). When one's environmental identity was examined, including its prominence, commitment, and salience, researchers found that these identity factors significantly influence pro-environmental behavior.

Substantive Areas of Investigation

Situational Factors

In identity theory, given the internal structure of the self, research has revealed that more salient identities provide a stronger guide for behavior in situations than less salient identities. However, more research is needed on situational factors that independently cue particular identities in a situation that may not be salient to individuals. Thus, at issue is the extent to which salient identities act as a filter in situations, directing behavior that is consistent with the identity meanings, compared to situational meanings that may direct behavior. Looked at another way, what characteristics of situations permit more or less *choice* as to the identities that are invoked in situations (Serpe, 1987)? For example, a large number of others in a situation who are tied to each other based on a particular identity may encourage that identity to be invoked in the situation compared to another identity. Alternatively, the presence of a strong, salient identity exemplar in a situation may encourage the salient identity to be invoked. The power of others in a situation also may encourage the invocation of a particular identity with more powerful individuals directing one's identity compared to the less powerful. Still another factor may be the norms in the situation that constrain individuals to enact certain identities that are consistent with the norms. For example, the more individuals see a situation as directing them to behave morally, the more they may invoke the moral identity (Stets & Carter, 2012). In general, we need to more closely examine the context within which identities are embedded to investigate how they may independently influence the enactment of some identities over others.

Identity Formation and Change

As individuals age, they will likely take on identities that are considered normative given life course transitions. These are obligatory identities (Thoits, 2003). However, not all individuals assume these identities at the expected time, some claim them more easily than others, and some do not take them on at all. Additionally, individuals may take on a host of voluntary identities throughout the life cycle. In identity theory, we need to better understand how identities form, why they form when they do, and whether this formation varies by age, class, or race/ethnicity. For example, it is possible that those with more resources (for example, more education, wealth, and power) will be more likely to take on more identities compared to those with fewer resources.

Additionally, it may be important to study the relationship between the formation of obligatory identities and voluntary identities. For example, do individuals take on more voluntary identities as they leave obligatory identities, for example, divorcing or becoming unemployed? Are some individuals more likely to form voluntary identities that satisfy meanings not found in obligatory identities? Are the factors that influence the formation of voluntary identities significantly different from those factors that influence the formation of obligatory identities?

Though we are making progress on understanding identity change, there is still more research that is needed. We need to better understand the conditions that change one's commitment to an identity, the salience of the identity, and the prominence of the identity. One avenue of study is the role of reflected appraisals versus self-appraisals in producing identity change. For example, self-appraisals may be instrumental in identity change as individuals come to define themselves differently over time given changes in their location in the social structure.

Negative/Stigmatized Identities

Most research in identity theory has examined positive, normative identities (for example, student, friend, worker, spouse, and parent) rather than negative, stigmatized identities. An assumption in

identity theory is that individuals seek to confirm the meanings in their identities, irrespective of whether those meanings are positive or negative (Burke & Stets, 2009). Given all of the identities that persons may claim, it is possible for individuals to have some identities that are predominately positive in meaning, others that are predominately negative, and still others that have a mixture of positive and negative meanings. It is important to examine whether some identities are more easily verified (such as identities with positive meanings) than others (such as identities with a mixture of positive and negative meanings).

When a person assumes a negative identity such as criminal, alcoholic, or homeless, identity verification is feedback along the same dimension of meaning as the negative identity. While there are other identities than a stigmatized identity that an individual may hold, it may be difficult to verify these other identities because the stigmatized identity may become a “master status,” and all identity meanings that a person holds may be interpreted in light of the stigmatized meanings. Quantitative research is needed to examine this.

Another aspect of negative identities in everyday life that has not been addressed by the current research is the presence of the meanings associated with occupying counter normative role identities such as “childlessness” or “non-religious.” The individual who has chosen to remain childless throughout their adult life or the person who has chosen not be part of an organized religion (whether agnostic or atheist) has those identities activated when interacting with a person who holds the opposite and socially valued role identity of parent or religious person. While these identities may not be viewed as stigmatizing, they are in fact aspects of people’s lives that may bring negative social and self-evaluations into play. Because they locate the individual in a social space of “not” holding a role identity that others value, the impact may be instrumental in the areas of self-concept (esteem, mastery, authenticity), emotions, and mental health.

Social Movement Activity

More research is needed on the relevance of identity concepts to social movement activity. Currently, social movement research focuses on the collective identity, that is, a sense of “we-ness” that emerges in a group on the basis of group members experiencing a common set of interests. Identity processes at the individual level that we have discussed in this chapter tend to get omitted from the analysis. Over a dozen years ago, an effort was made to bridge identity theory research with social movement’s research (Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). In this work, we obtained a sense of just how rich the connection is between identity concepts and social movement processes.

For example, Stryker (2000) maintained that one of the reasons why individuals differ in their level of participation in social movements is that individuals have multiple identities. To the extent that commitment to networks or groups related to an identity overlap with the networks or groups involved in a social movement, then a person may be more likely to participate in the movement. Gecas (2000) pointed out that research on the collective identity does not go far enough in incorporating culture; it needs to consider one’s values in social movement participation. He argued that if we recognize that people have value identities, that is, “desired personal qualities or desired social conditions” (Gecas, p. 96), if the values held within identities overlap with the values of a social movement, then we can expect greater movement participation. Kiecolt (2000) focused on how social movement participation changes one’s identities. For example, movement participation can change the salience hierarchy of identities, shifting an identity up or down in the hierarchy.

The above ideas are ripe for empirical testing. Social movement activity is about the collective as well as the individual. Thus, it is important to examine how identity theory concepts and processes enhance our understanding of movement participation at the individual level, and how individual and collective identities collide, complement, or otherwise are independent of one another during movement activity.

Bridging to Other Theories

Affect Control Theory

The similarities and differences between affect control theory and identity theory have been discussed elsewhere (Owens et al., 2010; Smith-Lovin & Robinson, 2006). The primary distinction between the two theories involves what is being maintained in the situation. In identity theory, individuals act in a situation with an eye toward maintaining the meanings held in their identity. Since the identity meanings are the internal representation of people's external positions in the social structure in the form of roles and group memberships, maintaining identities correspondingly facilitates maintaining the social structure within which identities are embedded. In affect control theory, individuals act to maintain all the fundamental or cultural meanings of a situation including one's own identities meanings, the identity meanings of others in the situation, the behavioral meanings in the situation, and the setting meanings. These meanings are the fundamental, cultural meanings of a society, thus to the degree that the meanings in the situation are sustained, culture is being maintained.

From an identity theory perspective, we might bridge these two theories by suggesting that in the course of verifying meanings in a situation, both the social structure *and* culture are maintained. For example, in focusing on the verification of people's identity meanings, it is important to point out that these meanings come from culture (Burke & Stets, 2009). Early on, individuals learn the meanings that define roles and group memberships from parents, educators, peers, and the media. These meanings are tried on, and they are modified and refined through role-taking and observations of others' behavior (Williams, 2002). Thus, in verifying an identity in a situation, individuals are simultaneously verifying the cultural meanings tied to that identity. If people draw on cultural meanings to guide their behavior, then to what extent are individuals acting to maintain the cultural meanings of a situation at the same time they are maintaining their own identity meanings? For example, do persons work to maintain the identities of others in a situation, or do they only do so when it sustains their own identity meanings (Smith-Lovin & Robinson, 2006)?

From an affect control theory perspective, researchers have typically not focused on salient identities that are activated across situations nor have they conceptualized the self in stable terms, as having a clear structure that is organized (Owens et al., 2010). This focus may help establish a bridge. Recent work in affect control theory is beginning to study how the self shows some stability in terms of maintaining a particular self-image across situational encounters (MacKinnon & Heise, 2010). Thus, affect control theorists are developing some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the self in identity theory.

Expectation States Theory

Expectation states theory and identity theory can be connected by incorporating the status process into the identity process. An important assumption in expectation states theory is that when individuals enter an interaction, they develop corresponding performance expectations of one another (an evaluation of how much each will contribute to the goals of the interaction) by locating one another's status relative to themselves. Those evaluated as higher in status will be evaluated as more competent, be expected to contribute more to the interaction, receive more deference from others, and be held in high esteem compared to those lower in status. Essentially, higher status individuals have greater influence in an interaction than lower status individuals. Identity theorists have studied the role of status in the identity verification process, and they have found that those with higher status were more successful in having their identities verified than those with lower status (Burke, 2008; Cast et al., 1999; Stets & Harrod, 2004). Thus the greater influence of higher status individuals occurs not only for external (task) assessments but also internal (self) assessments. High power should have the same effect as high status.

Expectation theorists could bring the identity process into the status process. In identity theory, people bring their group, role, and person identities into situations. At issue is how identities are sustained when performance expectations might be challenged or even reversed in a situation. As others have argued, if negative performance expectations assigned to females by males in a mixed gender group can be reversed with these new positive performances expectations for women carrying over to subsequent group interactions (Lucas, 2003) would this reversal in performance expectations for women occur for individuals who claim a masculine gender identity that contains stereotypical views about women (Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stryker, 2008)? And, would this reversal carry over to subsequent interactions for those who claim a masculine gender identity? If the success in modifying performance expectations is variable, this variation may be due to the nature of meanings in individuals' identities.

Exchange Theory

There are similarities between identity theory and exchange theory such as how repeated interactions are associated with increased commitment and positive emotions (Burke & Stets, 2009). In exchange theory, repeated interactions are repeated exchanges, while in identity theory, it is repeated identity verification. However, there are differences. For example, exchange theory focuses on value preferences guiding exchanges while identity theory focuses on meanings that serve to sustain the self and the interaction. More importantly, there are opportunities for bridging the two theories.

Lawler (2003) identifies one avenue for linking the theories. He argued that the stronger persons are affectively attached to a social unit (for example, a relationship, organization, community), the more this will increase their commitment to their role identities. Further, when role identities are strong, this will increase people's emotional attachment to the social unit. Thus, the relationship between role identities and emotional attachment within a group is reciprocal. Others have argued that exchange theorists might want to examine the role of multiple identities during exchange interactions rather than a single identity, as well as assess the relative salience of identities prior or during an exchange to examine their influence on the course and outcome of an exchange (Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stryker, 2008).

Social Identity Theory

Finally, the similarities and differences between identity theory and social identity theory have been discussed elsewhere (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). We discuss three areas in which there may be a bridge. These include how identities are conceptualized, the significance of the identity verification process in group behavior, and the different bases of identities: person, role, and group identities.

In social identity theory, identities are understood in terms of membership in one category or another. Self-categorization involves people identifying the prototypical attributes of a category and seeing themselves as having these attributes. In turn, they will feel and act according to the norms of the group. Social identity theorists could incorporate the more nuanced understanding of identities in identity theory by describing the self in terms of meanings rather than self-categorizations. The self could be conceptualized along an array of meanings, and in terms of having higher or lower levels of these meanings, rather than in dichotomous terms.

Second, in social identity theory, prototypical members usually identify more strongly with a category, and therefore act in ways that benefits the group (Hogg, 2006). However, social identity theorists could use the identity verification process as an alternative mechanism that motivates behavior. Members of a category could be acting so that there is consistency between perceived

self-meanings as to who they are given the category and their identity standard meanings. In a related way, less prototypical members may be more likely to be perceived as a threat because they are not acting in ways consistent with the norms of the category. Their identity standard meanings are not entirely consistent with the standards of the group. In identity verification terms, their identity as a member of a category is not being verified. One of the ways to resolve this non-verification would be to change their behavior to match the group standard meanings. Over time, this would change the meaning of their identity standard.

Finally, identity theory historically has focused on role identities while social identity theory traditionally has emphasized categorical identities. We prefer the concept of group identities over categorical identities to emphasize the important sociological process of interaction and shared purpose among individuals. Within groups people play out various roles, and individuals enact these various roles in different ways, given the unique person identities they bring to their roles. Thus, in situations, group, role, and person identities may not be easily separated, and we may need to examine their simultaneous occurrence. This poses a challenge as to how we might examine their independent effects, but perhaps these effects cannot be understood as independent.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the development of identity theory, now four decades old, beginning with its theoretical foundations in symbolic interactionism. Structural symbolic interactionism, from which identity theory directly emerges, reminds us that identities are always embedded in social structures whether large, intermediate, or proximate. These structures both constrain and facilitate entrance into and departure from networks of social relationships from which identities emerge. The central concept of identity theory formulations is “self,” understood as comprised of many meanings and thus identities that are hierarchically arranged thereby creating a self-structure. A number of distinct research programs have developed out of identity theory that represents differential levels of analytical focus. Importantly, we maintain that these research programs are not competing explanations, but rather complementary, resulting in a more complete understanding of how a theory rooted in symbolic interaction can provide a set of explanations for the statement “society shapes self shapes social interaction.”

Following the suggestions of Stryker and Burke (2000), we have presented theory and research associated with the challenges facing the future development of identity theory. We outline some of these challenges. First, we need to continue the development of theoretical and empirical specifications of the bases of identity. The question of how different aspects of identity come into play in different social structural situations and with different constellations of identities in which individuals are embedded is the challenge of studying multiple identities. A richer understanding of the role of emotions as they relate to identity processes is needed such as the specific feelings that individuals may experience within and across situations as they play out different identities. Third, because identities are not static but change in terms of their meaning, we need a deeper understanding as to how identities take shape and evolve over time. Fourth, identities are always enacted within a context and more research is needed as to how contextual factors facilitate or impede the expression of identities. Finally, rather than fragmenting the field into yet more theories, we think that it is important to bridge identity theory to other theories. Doing so will make the relationship of identity theory to other theoretical research programs clear and assist social psychologists in forming a better understanding of social action.

The next decade of social psychological work on identity should see theoretical development and research that draws on the logical connections between related research paradigms within identity theory and beyond, to other theories. The result will be a comprehensive research agenda aimed at investigating the interrelated and reflexive nature of social, role, and person identities to social structure and culture.

Acknowledgments We would like to thank members of the Social Psychology Seminar at the University of California, Riverside for the comments on an earlier draft.

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Handbook of Social Psychology

DeLamater, J.; Ward, A. (Eds.)

2013, XII, 649 p. 7 illus.,

ISBN: 978-94-007-6772-0