Symbolic Interactionist Theories of Identity

George Herbert Mead's foundational work was termed *symbolic inter-actionism* by Herbert Blumer, who took over Mead's famous social psychology course after Mead's death and who became a persistent advocate of symbolic interactionism for half a century. I am not sure if Mead would have approved this label, but more importantly, symbolic interactionism, as it has evolved over the last sixty years, has tended to focus on the dynamics of *self* more than either symbols or interaction—as Blumer had advocated. People's behaviors in interaction with others in social settings are governed by their conception of themselves. Self serves as a kind of gyroscope for keeping behaviors consistent and in line; moreover, as has increasingly been emphasized in symbolic interactionist theory, individuals are motivated to verify their sense of self in the eyes of others.

The notion of *identity* became one prominent way to reconceptualize self over the last few decades.[1] In general terms, self is now viewed as a set or series of identities that can be invoked individually or simultaneously in

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[1]Aside from these figures, others seeking a theory of self and identity include Eugene Weinstein, Mary Glenn Wiley, and William DeVaughn, "Role and Interpersonal Style as Components of Interaction," *Social Forces* 45 (1966): pp. 210–16; Peter J. Burke and Judy C. Tully, "The Measurement of Role/Identity," *Social Forces* 55 (1977): pp. 881–97; Nelson N. Foote, "Identification as the Basis for a Theory of Motivation," *American Sociological Review* 16 (1951): pp. 14–21; Tamotsu Shibutani, *Society and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1961); Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959); Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self" in *Behavior and Social Processes*, ed. Arnold M. Rose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). For a review of the history of identity and self theories, see Viktor Gecas and Peter J. Burke, "Self and Identity," in *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology*, eds. Karen S. Cook, Gary Alan Fine, and James S. House (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995), pp. 41–67. For a very recent review of identity theories, see Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

situations, but once evoked, individuals' actions are directed at having others verify an identity or identities. At the same time, identities can act as filters of selective perception and interpretation as individuals mutually role-take with one another.

Thus, the effort to develop a more refined theory of self has been the major thrust of much interactionist theorizing. In this chapter, I will review several of these new theories of identity dynamics. Moreover, the most recent work on identity processes has converged with more recent theorizing on the sociology of emotions for the obvious reason that people put their identities on the line during interaction; thus, depending upon whether individuals succeed in verifying or fail in getting others to verify an identity or identities, the emotions that are aroused will shape the subsequent flow of the interaction and, over time, the structure of a person's identity system.

Sheldon Stryker's Identity Theory

Designations and Definitions

In Sheldon Stryker's view, human social behavior is organized by symbolic designations of all aspects of the environment, both physical and social.[2] Among the most important of these designations are the symbols and associated meanings of the positions that people occupy in social structures. These positions carry with them shared expectations about how people are to enact roles and, in general, to comport themselves in relation to others. As individuals designate their own positions, they call forth in themselves expectations about how they are to behave, and as they designate the positions of others, they become cognizant of the expectations guiding the role behaviors of these others. They also become aware of broader frames of reference and definitions of the situation as these positional designations are made. And most importantly, individuals designate themselves as objects in relation to their location in structural positions and their perceptions of broader definitions of the situation.

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[2]Sheldon Stryker, *Symbolic Interactionism: A Structural Version* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/ Cummings, 1980); "Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Relevance of Symbolic Interaction Theory for Family Research," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (1968): pp. 558–64; "Fundamental Principles of Social Interaction," in *Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smelser, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1973), pp. 495–547. For a more recent version of the theory, see Sheldon Stryker and Richard T. Serpe, "Commitment, Identity Salience, and Role Behavior," in *Personality, Roles, and Social Behavior*, eds. William Ickes and Eric Knowles (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982), pp. 199–218; Richard T. Serpe and Sheldon Stryker, "The Construction of Self and the Reconstruction of Social Relationships," *Advances in Group Processes* 4 (1987): pp. 41–66; and Sheldon Stryker, "Exploring the Relevance of Social Cognition for the Relationship of Self and Society," in *The Self-Society Dynamic: Cognition, Emotion, and Action*, eds. Judith Howard and Peter L. Callero (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): pp. 19–41.

Behavior is, however, not wholly determined or dictated by these designations and definitions. It is true that people are almost always aware of expectations associated with positions, but as they present themselves to others, the form and content of the interaction can change. The amount of such change will vary with the type of larger social structure within which the interaction occurs; some structures are open and flexible, whereas others are more closed and rigid. Still, all structures impose limits and constraints on what individuals do when engaged in face-to-face interaction.

Identities and the Salience Hierarchy

Stryker reasoned that identities are parts of larger sense of self, and as such, they are internalized self-designations associated with positions that individuals occupy within various social contexts. Identity is thus a critical link between the individual and social structure because identities are designations that people make about themselves in relation to their location in social structures and the roles that they play by virtue of this location. Identities are organized into a *salience hierarchy*, and those identities high in the hierarchy are more likely to be evoked than those lower in this hierarchy. Not all situations will invoke multiple identities, but many do. The salience hierarchy determines those identities that are invoked by people as they orchestrate their roles and interpret the role behaviors of others. As a general rule, Stryker proposes that when an interaction situation is isolated from structural constraints, or these structural constraints are ambiguous, individuals will have more options in their choice of an identity, and hence, they will be more likely to evoke more than one identity. But as a situation becomes embedded within social structures, the salience hierarchy becomes a good predictor of what identities will be used in interaction with others.

Commitment and Self

Stryker introduced the idea of *commitment* as a means for conceptualizing the link between social structure and self. *Commitment* designates the degree to which a person's relationship to others depends on being a certain kind of individual with a particular identity. The greater this dependence is, the more a person will be committed to a particular identity and the higher this identity will be in the person's salience hierarchy. Having an identity that is based on the views of others, as well as on broader social definitions, will tend to produce behaviors that conform to these views and definitions.

When people reveal such commitment to an identity in a situation, their sense of self-esteem becomes dependent on the successful execution of their identity. Moreover, when an identity is established by reference to the norms, values, and other symbols of the broader society, esteem is even more dependent on successful implementation of an identity. In this way,

cultural definitions and expectations, social structural location, identity, and esteem associated with that identity all become interwoven. And in this process, social structure constrains behavior and people's perceptions of themselves and others.

The Key Propositions

In the early version of the theory, Stryker developed a series of "hypotheses" about the conditions producing the salience of an identity, the effects of identities high in the salience hierarchy on role behaviors, the influence of commitment on esteem, and the nature of changes in identity. These are rephrased somewhat and summarized in Table 16.1. To state Stryker's argument more discursively, here is what he proposed: The more individuals reveal commitment to an identity, the higher this identity will be in the salience hierarchy. If this identity is positively evaluated in terms of the reactions of others and broader value standards, then this identity will move up a person's hierarchy. When the expectations of others are congruent and consistent, revealing few conflicts and disagreements, individuals will be even more committed to the identity presented to these others because they speak with the same voice. And finally, when the network of these others on whom one depends for identity is large and extended, encompassing many others rather than just a few, the higher in the salience hierarchy will this identity become.

Once an identity is high in the salience hierarchy of an individual, role performances will become ever-more consistent with the expectations attached to this identity. Moreover, when identities are high in the salience hierarchy, individuals will tend to perceive situations as opportunities to play out this identity in roles, and they will actively seek out situations where they can use this identity. In this way, the congruence between those identities high in people's hierarchies and the expectations of situations increases.

This congruence increases commitment because individuals come to see their identities as depending on the continued willingness of others to confirm their identities. As commitment increases, and as individuals become dependent on confirmation of their identities from others, their role performances have ever-more consequences for their level of self-esteem. Moreover, as people become committed to identities and these identities move up in their salience hierarchy, they come to evaluate their role performances through broader cultural definitions and normative expectations; as people make such evaluations, they become even more committed to their identities.

External events can, however, erode commitments to an identity. When this occurs, people are more likely to adopt new identities, even novel identities. As individuals begin to seek new identities, change is likely to move in the direction of those identities that reflect their values. In this way, cultural values pull the formation of new identities in directions that will increase

Table 16.1   A Revised Formulation of Stryker's Hypotheses on the Salience of Identity

1. The more individuals are committed to an identity, the higher will this identity be in their salience hierarchy.

2. The degree of commitment to an identity is a positive and additive function of

   A. The extent to which this identity is positively valued by others and broader cultural definitions

   B. The more congruent the expectations of others on whom one depends for an identity

   C. The more extensive the network of individuals on whom one depends

   D. The larger the number of persons in a network on whom one depends for an identity

The Consequences of High Salience

3. The higher in a person's salience hierarchy is an identity, the more likely will that individual

   A. Emit role performances that are consistent with the role expectations associated with that identity

   B. Perceive a given situation as an opportunity to perform in that identity

   C. Seek out situations that provide opportunities to perform in that identity

The Consequences of Commitment to Identity

4. The greater the commitment to an identity, the greater will be

   A. The effect of role performances on self-esteem

   B. The likelihood that role performances will reflect institutionalized values and norms

Changing Commitments to Identity

5. The more external events alter the structure of a situation, the more likely are individuals to adopt new identities.

6. The more changes in identity reinforce and reflect the value-commitments of the individual, the less the individual resists change in adopting a new identity.

the congruence between cultural definitions and role performance as individuals develop new identity commitments and as their self-esteem becomes dependent on successful role performance of these identity commitments.

Identity and Emotions

Emotions are implicated in these processes in several ways.[3] First, those role enactments that generate positive affect and reinforcement from others in a situation strengthen a person's commitment to an identity, moving it higher in the salience hierarchy. As individuals receive this positive feedback from others, their self-esteem is enhanced, which further increases commitment to the identity, raising it in the salience hierarchy and increasing the chances that this identity will shape subsequent role performances.

Second, when role performances of a person and others are judged inadequate in light of normative expectations, cultural values, definitions of the situation, or identities being asserted, negative emotional reactions mark this inadequacy. Conversely, when role performances are adequate or even more than adequate and exemplary, positive emotions signal this fact. Thus, emotions are *markers of adequacy* in role performances, telling individuals that their performances are acceptable or unacceptable. This marking function of emotions works in several ways. The individual reads the gestures of others to see if a role performance has been accepted, and if it has, then the person experiences positive emotions and will become further committed to the identity presented in the role performance. If, on the other hand, the reaction is less than positive, then the individual will experience negative emotions—such as *anger* at self, *shame*, and *guilt*—and mobilize to improve the role performance, or if this is not possible, to lower the commitment to this identity being asserted in the role, moving it lower in the salience hierarchy and, thereby, causing selection of a different identity that can be more adequately played out in a role. Not only do individuals get emotional about their own performances as they role-take with others and assess themselves in light of the responses of others, but they also inform others about the latter's role performances. Because role performances must be coordinated and meshed together to be effective, inadequacy by others will disrupt one's own role performance, and if this occurs, a person will manifest some form of *anger* and negatively sanction others. Thus, emotions become ways for individuals to mutually signal and mark the adequacy of their respective role performances in ways that facilitate the coordination and integration of roles.

Finally, emotions are also a sign of *which* identities are high in a person's salience hierarchy. If emotional reactions are intense when a role performance fails or when it is successful, this intensity indicates that a person is committed to the identity being played in a role and that the identity is high in the salience hierarchy. Conversely, if the emotional reaction of the

[3]Sheldon Stryker, "The Interplay of Affect and Identity: Exploring the Relationship of Social Structure, Social Interaction, Self and Emotions." Paper presented at the American Sociological Association meetings, Chicago, 1987; Sheldon Stryker and Richard Serpe, "Commitment, Identity Salience and Role Behavior: Theory and a Research Example," in *Personality, Roles and Social Behavior*, eds. W. Ickes and E. Knowles (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982), pp. 199–218.

individual is of low intensity, then this might signal that the identity is lower in the salience hierarchy and relatively unimportant to the individual.

In identity theory, then, emotions motivate individuals to play roles in which they receive positive reinforcement, and emotions also inform individuals about the adequacy of their performances and their commitments to identities in the salience hierarchy. Emotions thus drive individuals to play roles in ways that are consistent with normative expectations, definitions of the situation, cultural values, and highly salient feelings about self.

George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons' Theory of Identity

Role Identity and Role Support

In contrast with Stryker's more structural theory, where culture and social structure designate many of the identities held by individuals, George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons emphasized that roles are typically improvised as individuals seek to realize their various plans and goals.[4] A role identity is, therefore, "the character and the role that an individual devises for himself (herself as well) as an occupant of a particular social position."[5] Role identity constitutes an imaginative view of oneself in a position, often a rather idealized view of oneself. Each role identity thus has a conventional portion linked to positions in social structure as well as an idiosyncratic portion constructed in people's imaginations.

Role identities become part of individuals' plans and goals because legitimating one's identity in the eyes of others is always a driving force of human behavior. Moreover, people evaluate themselves through the role performances intended to confirm a role identity. But, as McCall and Simmons emphasized, the most important audiences for a role performance are individuals themselves who assess their performances with respect to their own idealized view of their role identity. Still, people must also seek role support from relevant audiences outside their own minds for their role identities. This support involves more than audiences granting a person the right to occupy a position, and it includes more than approval from others for conduct by those in a position. For an individual to feel legitimated in a role, audiences must also approve of the more expressive content—the style, emotion, manner, and tone—of role performances designed to legitimate a role identity.

Because much of a role identity is rather idealized in the individual's mind and because a person must seek legitimization along several fronts, there is always discrepancy and disjuncture between the role identity and

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[4]George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons, *Identities and Interactions* (New York: Basic Books, 1960). A second edition of this book was published in 1978, although the theory remained virtually unchanged.

[5]Ibid., p. 67.

the role support received for that identity. People idealize too much, and they must seek support for performances that can be misinterpreted. As a result, there is almost always some *dissatisfaction* by individuals about how much their role identity has been legitimated by audiences. These points of disjuncture between identity and legitimating support motivate and drive individual behavior. Indeed, for McCall and Simmons, the most distinctive emotion among humans is the "drive to acquire support for (their) idealized conceptions of (themselves)."

The Mechanisms for Maintaining Role Support

To overcome the discrepancy between what people desire and get in role support for an identity, several mechanisms are employed. One is the accumulation of *short-term credit* from interactions where discrepancies have been minimal; these emotional credits can then carry individuals through episodes where the responses from others provide less than whole-hearted role support. A second mechanism is *selective perception of cues* from others where individuals only see those responses confirming an identity. A third mechanism is *selective interpretation* of cues whereby the individual sees the cues accurately but puts a spin or interpretation on them that supports a role identity. A fourth mechanism is *withdrawing from interactions* that do not support an identity and seeking alternative situations where more support can be garnered. A fifth mechanism is *switching to a new role identity* whose performance will bring more support from others. A sixth mechanism is *scapegoating* audiences, blaming them for causing the discrepancy between performance and support. A seventh mechanism is *disavowing unsuccessful performances* that individuals had hoped to legitimate. And a final defensive mechanism is deprecating and *rejecting the audience* that withholds support for a role identity. When these mechanisms fail, individuals experience misery and anguish, and through such experiences, people learn to be cautious in committing themselves so openly and fully to particular role performances in front of certain audiences.[6]

The Hierarchy of Prominence

The cohesiveness role identities of individuals vary, McCall and Simmons argued, in how the elements of an identity fit together and in the compatibility among various role identities. There is also a hierarchy of prominence among role identities; although this hierarchy can shift and change as circumstances dictate, it tends to exist at any given point in an interaction. This prominence reflects the idealized view of individuals, the extent to which these ideals have been supported by audiences, the degree to which individuals have committed themselves to these identities, the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (to be discussed shortly) associated with an identity, and

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[6]Ibid., p. 75.

the amount of previous investment in time and energy that has been devoted to an identity.

From this perspective, interaction revolves around each individual asserting through role performances identities that are high in their prominence hierarchy and that they seek to legitimate in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of others. At the same time, each individual is interpreting the gestures of others to determine just what identity is high in the prominence hierarchy of others and whether or not the role performances of others are worthy of role support and other rewards. To some degree, the external structure of the situation provides the necessary information about what positions people occupy and what expectations are placed on them by virtue of incumbency in these positions. Yet, for McCall and Simmons, most interactions are to some degree ambiguous and unstructured, allowing alternative role performances and varying interpretations of these performances.

Much of the ambiguity in interaction is eliminated through simple role taking in a person's inner forum or cognitive repertoire of vocabularies, gestures, motives, and other information that marks various identities and role performances. Humans have, therefore, the capacity to construct interpretations in light of the vast amounts of information that they accumulate in their inner forum or what Alfred Schutz called "stocks of knowledge at hand." This information might have to be assembled in somewhat different proportions and balances, but humans' capacity for mind and thought enables them to do so with amazing speed and accuracy.

Individuals will often improvise a role, adjusting their identities and role performances in light of how they interpret the roles of others. As such improvisation occurs, various expressive strategies are employed; these strategies revolve around orchestrating gestures to present a certain image of self and to claim a particular identity that is high in the prominence hierarchy. Conversely, individuals read the dramaturgical presentations of others to *altercast* and determine the self that is being claimed by these others. In essence, then, interaction is the negotiation of identities, whereby people make expressive and dramaturgical presentations over identities that are high in their respective prominence hierarchies and that can be supported, or that can go unsupported, on the basis of role performances.

The Underlying Exchange Dynamic

This process of negotiation among individuals is complex and subtle, involving an initial but very tentative agreement to accept each other's claims. In this way, people avoid interrupting the expressive strategies that are being used to impart their respective identities. As this process unfolds, however, it moves into a real exchange-negotiation whereby individuals seek the rewards that come with legitimization of their role performances. At this point McCall and Simmons merge their interactionist theory with exchange theory (see chapters in Part V).

They begin by classifying three basic types of rewards: First, there are *extrinsic rewards*, such as money or other reinforcers, that are visible to all. Second, there are *intrinsic rewards* that provide less visible means of reinforcement for the individual—rewards such as satisfaction, pride, and comfort. And third, and most important, there is *support for an identity*, which McCall and Simmons believe is the most valuable of all rewards. Individuals are motivated to seek a profit—rewards less the costs in securing them—in all their interactions. Moreover, there are separate types of calculi for each of these three categories of reward, and there are rules of the marketplace: Rewards received by each party to an exchange should be roughly comparable in their type (whether extrinsic, intrinsic, or identity support), and rewards should be received in proportion to the investments individuals incur in receiving them (a principle of *distributive justice*).

These negotiations are affected by what McCall and Simmons term the salience of identities, which are those identities that, for the immediate interaction at hand, are the most relevant in an individual's hierarchy of prominence. This salience of identities constitutes, in McCall and Simmons' words, a situated self that is most pertinent to the present interaction. This situational self determines a person's preferences about which role identities he or she will enact in a given situation, but the preferences of the situational self are fluid and changeable. In contrast, the ideal self is more stable than the situated self, while being the highest-order identity in the prominence hierarchy. A person's ideal self will thus influence which identities should be salient in an interaction and how they will be invoked to constitute a situated self. Besides the prominence hierarchy, other factors also influence the formation of a situated identity. The needs that an individual feels for support of an identity, the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to be received by claiming a situated self, and the opportunity for profitable enactment of a role in relation to a situated self all shape identity formation.

All these factors are, in McCall and Simmons' view, potential reinforcers or payoffs for roles emitted in claiming an identity. These payoffs vary in value, however. Support of the *ideal self* brings greater rewards than either extrinsic or intrinsic rewards. The patterns of payoffs for rewards can also vary. For extrinsic and intrinsic types of rewards, when payoffs match expectations and desires, needs for them decline somewhat (in accordance with satiation or the principle of marginal utility). If people receive either more or less than they expected or desired of these two types of rewards, then their immediate need for these rewards suddenly escalates. In contrast, the payoff schedule for role support for an identity reveals a more complicated pattern. Role support for what was desired or expected does not increase the desire for further role support of an identity. A moderate discrepancy between the support sought and received increases the desire for support of an identity. But, extreme discrepancies operate differently, depending on the sign of the discrepancy: If people receive support that greatly exceeds their expectations, they immediately desire more role support,

whereas if they dramatically receive less role support than expected, their desire for this role support drops rapidly.

Because payoffs will almost always, or at least eventually, be less than expected, discrepancies will be chronic, even after individuals have employed all the defense mechanisms to reduce discrepancies that were discussed earlier. Hence, people are constantly driven to overcome this discrepancy, but this search to reduce discrepancy is complicated by the payoff schedule for role support. Moderate discrepancies drive people to seek more role support, whereas large ones reduce efforts to secure role support for an identity. And when people have received more support than they expected for an identity, they want even more of this reward, raising this identity in salience and, over time, increasing its prominence in the hierarchy.

Peter J. Burke's Identity Control Theory

Working squarely within the symbolic interactionist tradition, Peter J. Burke and various colleagues, particularly Jan E. Stets, have developed yet another variant of identity theory.[7] For Burke, individuals carry general views of themselves to all situations, or an *idealized self*, but it is the *working self* or *self-image* that guides moment-to-moment interaction.[8] The idealized self may, of course, influence just how individuals see themselves in a situation, but the key dynamics of self revolve around trying to verify this working self or self-image in situations as individuals play roles. At other times, Burke has also conceptualized self as a rough hierarchy.[9] At the more abstract level is a *principle self* in which cultural standards contained in broader values and beliefs become part of how individuals see themselves, but this principle-level self influences behavior in situations through *a program-level identity* consisting of the goals that individuals seek to realize in a concrete situation. In general, the more a program-level identity is guided by a principle-level self and the more the goals of the program-level self are realized in a situation, the greater are persons' sense of efficacy and

[7]Peter J. Burke, "The Self: Measurement Implications from a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43 (1980): pp. 18–20; "An Identity Model for Network Exchange," *American Sociological Review* 62 (1997): pp. 134–50; "Attitudes, Behavior, and the Self," in *The Self-Society Dynamic,* eds. Judith Howard and Peter L. Callero (cited in note 2), pp. 189–208, "Identity Processes and Social Stress," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): pp. 836–49; P. J. Burke and D. C. Reitzes, "An Identity Theory Approach to Commitment," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 54 (1991): pp. 239–51; P. J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, "Trust and Commitment through Self-Verification," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62 (1999): pp. 347–66; and Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[8]Burke, "The Self: Measurement Implications from a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective" (cited in note 7).

[9]T. Tsushima and P. J. Burke, "Levels, Agency, and Control in Parent Identity," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62 (1999): pp. 173–89.

the more positive are their sentiments toward themselves and the situation.[10] Yet, unlike other identity theories, Burke's approach does not place great emphasis on a salience or prominence hierarchy. Instead, the theory seeks to explain the internal dynamics of self as individuals play a role in an effort to verify the identity associated with this role.

Role Identities

For Burke, self is an occupant of a role in a situation. This situation is, in turn, typically embedded in a larger social structure and associated cultural meanings, Roles are thus the link between self, on the one side, and social structure and culture, on the other. By virtue of playing a role, individuals incorporate meanings and expectations associated with this role into their identity in the situation. Individuals have diverse experiences and any role has multiple meanings; thus, the identities associated with a role will vary from person to person. Burke's identity theory, however, is less concerned with the actual content of a role identity than with the dynamics of how this identity is sustained in interaction with others in a situation. This emphasis leads Burke to see identity as a cybernetic control system in which individuals seek to regulate their behaviors so that feedback from others signals that these others have verified the identities presented by individuals.

Identity as a Cybernetic Control System

In conceptualizing identity as a cybernetic control system, Burke sees the dynamics of this system as revolving around following elements:[11]

1. An *identity standard* operating as a *comparator* or criterion for assessing whether or not an identity is verified and for directing initial behavior in a role

2. A set of inputs from others who are responding to the behaviors of a person playing a role and asserting an identity

3. A comparison of inputs with the comparator to determine if the responses of others are congruent with the identity standard guiding role behaviors

4. A set of behavioral outputs on the environment guided by the degree to which inputs match the identity standard contained in the comparator

These elements are delineated in Figure 16.1. Individuals have a set of meanings about their identity in a situation. This identity is translated into a standard that, in turn, becomes a comparator or basis for matching inputs

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[10]Ibid. See also Peter J. Burke, "Identity Processes and Social Stress" (cited in note 7).

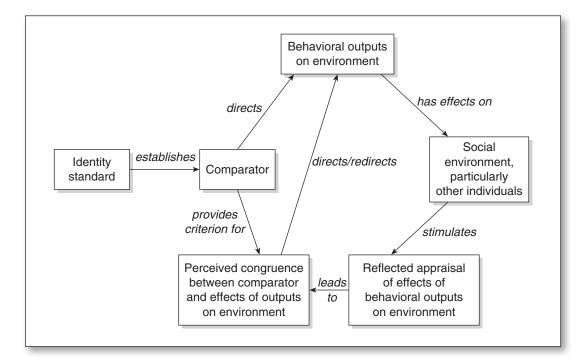[11]Peter J. Burke, "Identity Processes and Social Stress" (cited in note 7).

Figure 16.1 The Cybernetic Control System in Burke's Theory

to the standard to see if, indeed, the standard has been realized. As individuals play a role in a situation, they emit outputs of meaningful behavior on the environment, particularly to other individuals in the situation who, in turn, respond to these behavioral outputs. As individuals emitting outputs role-take with others in a situation, they experience *reflected appraisals* that become inputs of self-meanings that are compared to the identity standard. Depending on whether or not the identity standard is met, the next round of behavioral outputs will vary. When the identity standard is realized, individuals will experience more positive emotions, and their subsequent behavioral outputs will revolve around commitments to others in the situation. When inputs from others signal that the identity standard is not realized, people will experience negative emotions, and the next round of behavioral outputs will seek to change the responses of others so that a role identity can be confirmed.

Thus, in Burke's theory, humans are motivated to have inputs match up with identity standards. Behavior is goal directed in the sense that individuals try to elicit from others in a situation responses that match their identity standard. To achieve this result, individuals orchestrate their gestures and use other signs in behavioral performances that, they hope, will allow them to receive inputs that match the identity standard.[12]

[12]Lee Freese and Peter J. Burke, "Persons, Identities, and Social Interaction," in *Advances in Group Processes*, eds. Barry Markovsky, K. Heimer, and Jody O'Brien (Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1994).

In Burke's model, a separate control system is operative for each identity.[13] That is, if multiple identities are presented in a situation, each is guided by the dynamics outlined in Figure 16.1. For example, if a professor seeks to present an identity as both an intellect and a sexually attractive person, then two role identities—intellect and sexy—are revealed in behavioral outputs, and two cybernetic control systems revolving around two comparators (dictated by the two identities), two sets of inputs, two comparisons, and two outputs are operative. However, higher-level identities—or what Burke sometimes terms *principle-level identities*—often provide more general frames of reference for lower-level or program identities, thereby simplifying the control process. For instance, if a college professor is in the classroom, the higher-level identity revolving around beliefs in the importance of intellectual activity per se may provide guidance for how the lower-level program identity of being sexually attractive is to be orchestrated in role behaviors. In this way, the two identities are not contradictory, and the control systems guiding efforts at confirmation will not work at cross-purposes.

Multiple Identities

In recent years, Burke along with Jan Stets has identified three types of identities: person identity or an individual self-conception (or what some call core-identity); role identity tied to particular roles; and social identity tied to a social group.[14] Individuals can have all three of these identities in play during an interaction, but the dynamics of identity control operate in the manner described above. Also, people have different levels of identity, such as a principle identity or a moral identity. These too, as well as other identities that a person may have, operate in the same cybernetic manner outlined in Figure 16.1.

Since many potential identities can be in play at any given moment for a person, identity-control dynamics can become complicated. Still, there is probably some limit on how many identities can be salient since humans have limited cognitive capacities to store the relevant information and bring it to bear in a particular situation.

Identity and Emotions

In a number of research projects, Burke and Jan Stets have explored the effects of verification, or the failure to verify an identity, on people's emotional arousal.[15] When role identities are verified by the responses of others, people will experience positive emotions, and moreover, they will generally

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[13]Peter J. Burke, "Relationships Among Multiple Identities" (Conference in Bloomington, IN: The Future of Identity Theory and Research, 2001).

[14]Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory* (cited in note 7); see Table on p. 129.

[15]P. J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, "Trust and Commitment through Self-Verification" (cited in note 7).

have enhanced self-esteem, which can insulate them from the negative efforts of periodic failures to confirm the identity. When a role identity is not verified, people will experience distress, anxiety, and other negative emotions, including lowered self-esteem.

Identity Verification. If a role identity is consistently confirmed in interaction with others, individuals will increasingly come to trust these others; they will develop commitments to these others; they will reveal emotional attachments to these others; and they will become more oriented to the group and social structure in which a role identity is confirmed. For example, a person whose identity standard demands that he or she be considered a good student will feel positive emotions toward others, such as professors and follow students, when this identity is confirmed; if this verification consistently occurs in school situations, this person will trust others, develop attachments to them, and become oriented to the intellectual culture of the university community.

As a role identity is verified across repeated encounters with others in a situation, individuals develop trust in others, commitments to the situation, and positive emotions toward those who have verified their identity. As these reactions to identity verification play out, the salience to the person of the role identity being presented and verified increases. And the more salient an identity—that is, the more important it is to the individual and the more it guides behavioral outputs—the greater the motivation of the individual to ensure that inputs from the environment do indeed confirm this identity. Thus, a student who has enjoyed success in confirming the role identity of good student will be increasingly motivated to verify this identity as it takes on greater salience.

Failure to Verify Identity. More interesting, perhaps, are situations where inputs from others' responses do not match the identity standard. Several conditions produce this outcome. One is where a person's outputs cannot change the situation, no matter how hard he or she tries; under these conditions, a person experiences a loss of efficacy and a greater sense of alienation, disaffection, and estrangement. For instance, a person who cannot match performance with a work identity and, yet, who cannot leave his or her job will experience this range of negative emotions. Another condition is interference from other identities possessed by a person where confirmation of one role identity does not allow another to be confirmed. For instance, a person who has an identity as a good student and a great athlete will often discover in college that only one of these two identities can be consistently confirmed. Still another condition is an over-controlled identity in which the elements of a role identity are so rigidly woven together that a person sees a perceived slight to one of these elements as an attack on all elements. Such identities will be difficult to verify, even if most of the elements are accepted by others in the situation, because the individual is

simply too rigid in his or her expectations for how others should respond. A final condition increasing the likelihood of failure to verify an identity is where an identity is only episodically played out in a role or only occasionally becomes salient, with the result that the individual is simply out of practice in emitting the behavioral outputs that allow others to verify the identity.[16]

Whatever the source of incongruence between (1) the expectations dictated by an identity standard and (2) the responses of others, discrepancies between (1) and (2) will inevitably cause individuals to experience distress and potentially other negative emotions. Several conditions increase the level of distress experienced. One is the importance to a person of others who have failed to verify a role identity. The more significant to an individual are others whose responses fail to match identity standards, the more intense is the sense of distress and the more motivated is the individual to adjust behavioral outputs to secure the appropriate responses from these significant others. Another condition is the salience of the role identity itself. The more important to a person the verification of a role identity in a situation, the more distressed that person will become when this identity is not verified. Still another condition is the more that a role identity reflects a commitment to others and the group, the more intense is the sense of distress when others do not verify the identity, especially if this identity is built around principle-level elements or the cultural values and beliefs of the group. Another condition influencing the level of stress is the direction and degree of incongruity between expectations set by a role identity and the non-confirming responses of others. When the responses of others fall below expectations, individuals will experience distress and be motivated to adjust behavioral outputs to secure verifying responses from others. More complicated is when expectations established by an identity standard are exceeded. Preliminary research indicates that the degree to which expectations are exceeded determines the responses of individuals.[17] The more expectations are exceeded, the more individuals are forced to adjust their identity standards and, as a result, the more they will experience distress, whereas if expectations are exceeded to a more moderate degree, the identity standards do not have to be radically adjusted, and hence, the person will experience positive emotions.

Failure to verify an identity repeatedly will, over time, cause less intense negative emotions because people begin to adjust their identity standards

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[16]Burke, "Identity and Social Stress" (cited in note 7) and "Social Identities and Psychosocial Stress," in *Perspectives on Structure, Theory, Life-Course, and Methods*, ed. H. Kaplan (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1996); Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory* (cited in note 7), pp. 77–79.

[17]Jan E. Stets, "Justice, Emotion, and Identity Theory," (Conference in Bloomington, IN: The Future of Identity Theory and Research, 2001); Jan E. Stets and T. M. Tsushima, "Negative Emotion and Coping Responses within Identity Control Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64 (2001), pp. 283–295.

downward, lowering their expectations for how others will respond.[18] But when an identity standard is not initially verified, individuals will adjust their outputs in an effort to get the identity verified. Thus, for example, a student who has the identity of good student will study much harder if he or she does not meet expectations on an examination, although if this individual consistently fails to do well, the role identity and expectations associated with this identity will be adjusted downward, and the student's motivation to study harder will likely decline. Another option when an identity standard is not verified is for the individual to leave the situation, if possible, and thereby avoid the negative emotions that come from incongruities between expectations and responses of others.

In sum, Burke's identity theory generates a number of testable propositions, some of which are summarized in Table 16.2. These and other propositions are implied by the theory, but equally important, they also come from efforts to test the theory. Although some research has been performed on the other identity theories summarized in this chapter, Burke's theory is subject to ongoing research. The generalizations offered in this chapter have, to varying degrees, been confirmed by research. Moreover, in recent years, efforts have been made to reconcile Burke's identity theory with that offered by Stryker as well as McCall and Simmons.[19] Thus, it is likely that various theories of self will become more unified in the future.

Jonathan H. Turner's Theory on Transactional Needs

As part of my general theory of microdynamic processes, I see *transactional needs* as a critical force in human interaction.[20] Humans have certain

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[18]All cited in note 17.

[19]Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity Theory" (cited in note 1); Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63 (2000): pp. 284–97.

[20]See, for examples, *A Theory of Social Interaction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); *Face-to-Face: Toward a Sociological Theory of Interpersonal Behavior* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); *Theoretical Principles of Sociology, Volume 2 on Microdynamics* (New York: Springer, 2010); *Human Emotions: A Sociological Theory* (London: Routledge, 2008); "Toward a Theory of Embedded Encounters," *Advances in Group Processes* 17 (2000): pp. 285–322; Jonathan H. Turner and Jan E. Stets, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of The Sociology of Emotions*, eds. Jan E. Stets and Jonathan H. Turner (New York: Springer, 2006), pp. 544–68; Jonathan H. Turner, "Emotions and Social Structure: Toward a General Theory," in *Emotions and Social Structure*, eds. D. Robinson and J. Clay-Warner (New York: Elsevier, 2008), pp. 319–42; Jonathan Turner, "Self, Emotions, and Extreme Violence: Extending Symbolic Interactionist Theorizing," *Symbolic Interaction* 30 (2008): pp. 290–301; "Toward A Theory of Interpersonal Processes," in *Sociological Social Psychology*, eds. J. Chin and J. Cardell (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2008), pp. 65–95; Jonathan Turner, "Identities, Emotions, and Interaction Processes," *Symbolic Interaction* 34 (2011): pp. 330–39.

Table 16.2   Key Proposition of Burke's Identity Theory

1. The more salient an identity in a role, the more motivated are individuals to achieve a sense of congruence between the expectations established by the identity standard and the responses of others in a situation.

2. The more the responses of others match the expectations dictated by an identity standard, the more positive are the emotions experienced by individuals and the greater their self-esteem, and the more enhanced are positive emotions toward self, the more likely are individuals to

   A. Develop a sense of trust with others who have verified their identity

   B. Develop emotional attachments to these others

   C. Develop commitments to these others

   D. Become oriented to the standards of the group in which the situation is embedded

3. The less the responses of others match an identity standard, the more likely are the emotions experienced by individuals to be negative, with the incongruence between expectations set by an identity standard and the responses of others increasing with

   A. Multiple and incompatible identity standards from two or more role identities

   B. An over-controlled self in which the elements of the identity are tightly woven and create inflexible identity standards

   C. A lack of practice in displaying an identity in a role

   D. Efforts to change and/or leave the situation that have consistently failed

4. The intensity of negative emotions from a failure to verify an identity increases with

   A. The salience of an identity in the situation

   B. The significance of the others who have not verified an identity

   C. The degree of incongruity, whether above or below expectations associated with an identity standard

5. The intensity of negative emotions from the failure to verify an identity will decrease over time as the identity standard is readjusted downward so as to lower expectations.

fundamental need-states that, to varying degrees, are always activated when individuals interact. These are transactional needs in two senses: First, some of these needs, and typically all of them, are activated during interaction; second, success or failure in meeting these needs dramatically affects the flow of interaction. These needs are listed in Table 16.3, but I will only focus on the most important need in this hierarchy of need-states: the need to

verify self and the identities making up self. I have come to visualize self as composed of four fundamental *identities*, although people can probably have an identity about almost anything. For example, recently, there has been great interest in people's moral identities or the extent to which, and the arenas into which, people see themselves as moral.[21] Still, the most central identities are (1) *core identity*, or the fundamental cognitions and feelings that people have about themselves that are generally salient in almost all situations (some have termed this *person identity*); (2) *social identities*, or the cognitions and feelings that people have of themselves as members of social categories (for example, gender, sexual preference, ethnicity, class, or any social category) that define people as distinctive and that generally lead to differential evaluation of memberships in social categories; (3) *group identities*, or cognitions and feelings about self that stem from membership in, or identification with, corporate units revealing divisions of labor (groups, communities, and organizations being the most likely sources of a group identity); and (4) *role identities,* or the roles that people play in any social context, but particularly the roles associated with membership in the divisions of labor in corporate units and, at times, memberships in social categories or what I term *categoric units.*[22]

I am skeptical that there is a neat linear hierarchy of prominence or salience among identities, as is posited by most identity theories, but I would argue that some are more general than others; the more general is the identity and the more likely it is relevant and salient in a wide variety of situations, the more individuals seek to have it verified by others. Figure 16.2 summarizes the relations among the four identities that I am emphasizing. The core identity is the most general, followed successively by the social identity, group identity, and role identity. I also emphasize several properties of this hierarchy of identities. First, the lower an identity is in generality, the more likely are individuals to be aware and able to articulate their identity. For example, most people can probably tick off the cognitions and feelings that they have of themselves in role and group identities, whereas social identities and core identities are not only more complex but they also have elements that are unconscious even as they affect the behaviors of persons

Second, the higher is an identity in the hierarchy portrayed in Figure 16.2, the more intense are the emotions associated with this identity. Moreover, many of the emotions, particularly negative ones, may be repressed, but this

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[21]See, for example, Steven Hitlin, ed., *Handbook of The Sociology of Morality* (New York: Springer, 2010); Steven Hintlin, *Moral Selves, Evil Selves: The Social Psychology of Conscience* (London, UK: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008).

[22]This label comes from *Amos Hawley, Human Ecology: A Theoretical Essay* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986). I now use this term to denote a category of persons, seeing this category as constituting a social unit that defines individuals as distinctive, while carrying a level of evaluation of moral worth and set of expectations for the behavior of persons who are members of such categoric units.

Table 16.3 Transactional Needs

1. **Verification of identities**: Needs to verify one or more of the four basic identities that individuals present in all encounters

   (a) **Core identity**: The conceptions and emotions that individuals have about themselves as persons that they carry to most encounters

   (b) **Social identity**: The conception that individuals have of themselves by virtue of their membership in categoric units that, depending upon the situation, will vary in salience to self and others; when salient, individuals seek to have others verify this identity.

   (c) **Group identity**: The conception that individuals have about their incumbency in corporate units (groups, organizations, and communities) and/or their identification with the members, structure, and culture of a corporate unit; when individuals have a strong sense of identification with a corporate unit, they seek to have others verify this identity.

   (d) **Role identity**: The conception that individuals have about themselves as role players, particularly roles embedded in corporate units nested in institutional domains; the more a role identity is lodged in a domain, the more likely will individuals seek to have others verify this identity.

2. **Making a profit in the exchange of resources**: Needs to feel that the receipt of resources by persons in encounters exceeds their costs and investments in securing these resources and that their shares of resources are just and fair compared to (a) the shares that others receive in the situation and (b) reference points that are used to establish what is a just share.

3. **Group inclusion:** Needs to feel that one is a part of the ongoing flow of interaction in an encounter; the more focused is the encounter, the more powerful is this need.

4. **Trust:** Needs to feel that others' are predictable, sincere, respective of self, and capable of sustaining rhythmic synchronization through talk and body language

5. **Facticity:** Needs to feel that, for the purposes of the present interaction, individuals share a common intersubjectivity that the situation is indeed as it seems and that the situation has an obdurate character

does not prevent these repressed emotions from affecting behavior or individuals' emotional reactions when these identities are not verified by others.

Third, because they are more general, social and core identities are carried to virtually all social situations, whereas role identities and group identities are more likely to be salient when actually in a role or responding to a group. Yet, I should not over-generalize because some roles can be highly salient—say, the role of mother—and invoked outside the family in a wide variety of situations, while group identities can often be carried about to many situations, as is the case with a rapid fan of a sports team.
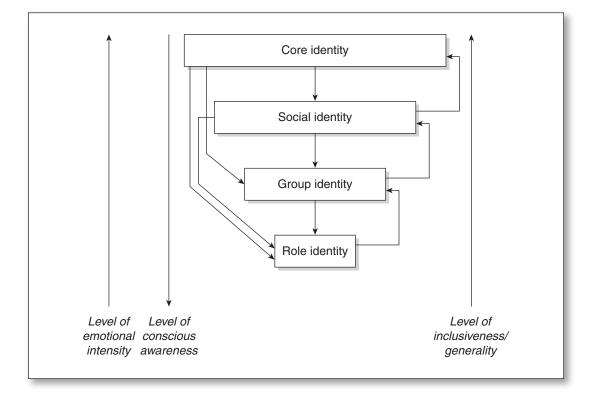
Figure 16.2   Types and Levels of Identity Formation

    Fourth, identities are often embedded in each other, with lower-level or narrower identities being successively embedded in more general identities. Consequently, failure to verify a role identity can arouse intense emotions because it is also part of a group, social, and core identity. For example, a person's role identity as mother may be a larger component of her core identity, with the result that a great deal is at stake when this mother seeks to have her mother-identity verified through various roles. In fact, it may also be involved in social identity (as a female) and even group identity (family), thus making its verification critical because, if the role of mother is not verified, this mother's entire identity structure will be perceived as under attack and potentially collapsing.

    The dynamics of identities reveal many of the cybernetic processes outlined in Burke's theory. People orchestrate their behaviors in an effort to verify any or all of the four identities in a situation; if others signal their acceptance of an identity or identities, a person will experience positive emotions from *satisfaction* at the lower-intensity end to *joy* and *pride* at the higher-intensity end of positive emotions. In contrast, if an identity is not verified, individuals will experience negative emotions such as *anger*, *fear*,

embarrassment, *shame*, *guilt*, and many other negative emotions. When people are aware of their emotions, these emotions signal to them that, a la Stryker's argument, something has gone wrong in the presentation of self and that, following Burke's theory, motivates individuals to re-appraise their behavior and modify their actions so as to secure verification of an identity. But, these dynamics only unfold if a person is aware that an identity has not been verified.

As McCall and Simons suggest, people often invoke a variety of defensive strategies to protect self from this fate. People often engage in selective perception and/or interpretation of the responses of others; they often disavow the audience that has rejected their claims to verification; and they often leave situations where they cannot have identities confirmed by others. Yet, I do not think that McCall and Simons go far enough; people often repress the negative emotions that have come from failure to verify an identity; they simply push these feelings below the level of consciousness and do not feel them consciously, although the emotions may still be evident to others or become transmuted to a new, often more volatile, emotion that others must endure. Thus, true defense mechanisms break the cybernetic cycle from behavior at time$_1$, followed response of others, assessment of others and, then, behavior at time$_2$ that takes into account these responses from others and, thereby, seeks to ensure that the identity on the line is verified.

In Table 16.4, I enumerate various types of *defense mechanisms*, seeing *repression* as the master mechanism that removes emotions from consciousness; then, additional types of defense mechanism may be subsequently activated: *displacement* (venting emotions directed at self on others); *projection* [imputing the repressed emotion(s) to other(s)]; *sublimation* (converting negative emotions into positive emotional energy); *reaction formation* (converting intense negative emotions into positive emotions directed at others who caused the negative emotion); and *attribution* (imputing the cause of emotional reactions). The first five defense mechanisms are those often posited by the psychoanalytic tradition, while the last—attribution—comes from cognitive psychology (earlier from Gestalt psychology). Attribution is generally not considered a defense mechanism, but I think that it may be the most sociologically important mechanism. People make attributions for their experiences, and they generally make self-attributions (that is, see themselves as responsible) when experiencing positive emotions, whereas with negative emotions, they may blame others, categories of others, and social structures in an effort to protect self from having negative self-feelings.

This *proximal bias* for positive emotions to be attributed to self or others in the immediate situation and this *distal bias* for negative emotions to target more remote objects as responsible for these negative feelings have large effects on interaction and people's commitment to others and social structures. People feel positive emotions about themselves and perhaps immediate others when experiencing the positive emotions that come with identity verification. They feel that they have been positively sanctioned and have

Table 16.4   Repression, Defense, Transmutation, and Targeting Emotions

Repressed Emotions	Defense Mechanism	Transmutation to	Target
anger, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, and alienation	displacement	anger	others, corporate units, and categoric units
anger, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, and alienation	projection	little but some anger	imputation of anger, sadness, fear, shame, or guilt to dispositional states of others
anger, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, and alienation	reaction formation	positive emotions	others, corporate units, and categoric units
anger, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, and alienation	sublimation	positive emotions	tasks in corporate units
anger, sadness, fear, shame, guilt, and alienation	attribution	anger	others, corporate units, and categoric units

met situational expectations, and in so doing, they feel good about themselves because their identity or identities have been verified. In contrast, when people have not met expectations, have been negatively sanctioned, and hence, have failed to confirm an identity in a situation, the negative emotions aroused, such as *shame*, are too painful and are repressed. Then more remote others, such as members of a social category or social structures, are blamed for their feelings. In this way, despite feeling negative emotions, a person can protect self by seeing objects outside of self as causally responsible for negative emotions. These negative emotions generate prejudices against members of social categories (by gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, for example) and alienation and/or loss of commitment to social structures seen as causing negative emotions. In contrast, positive emotions increase commitments to others and situations.

If emotions have these proximal and distal biases, how are more remote objects, such as social structures, ever to generate commitments for individuals when self-verification, meeting expectations, and receiving positive sanctions from others remain local, tied to encounters at the micro level of social organizations? What would allow for positive emotions to break the centripetal force of the proximal bias built into attribution processes? My

answer is that when people *consistently experience* positive emotions in particular types of situations, they begin to make attributions to the larger social structures in which these situations are embedded. As they do so, they develop positive feelings about, and commitments to, these structures because they see these structures as causally responsible for the verification of self and the positive feelings that arise from identity verification. In this manner, consistent self-verification will ultimately lead to commitments to those social structures in which encounters have aroused the positive emotions than come with self-verification. And, the more identities that are verified, the greater will these commitments ultimately be. Indeed, if a group-identity with particular types of corporate units or even a whole society did not already exist, it is likely to form when individuals validate other identities within a particular type of social structure. And to the extent that other identities are tied to roles in divisions of labor and are verified in encounters within this division of labor, identity dynamics become the underlying force behind commitments to this social structure and perhaps the larger institutional domain in which this structure is lodged. For example, a good student who has consistently been rewarded and had the role identity of student verified will, over time, develop commitments to successive schools and eventually the entire institutional domain of education.

In this way, forces like transactional needs for verification of self can have large effects on more macro-level social structures, and vice versa. Macrostructures that set people up for success in verifying role identities and any other identities tied to these roles in groups and organizations will reap what they sow: commitments from individuals. And these commitments may eventually move to the institutional domains or whole society in which these groups and organizations are embedded.[23]

Conclusions

Over the last forty-five years, Mead's seminal ideas about the dynamics of self have been significantly extended and refined theoretically and assessed by careful empirical research. Theories now emphasize that individuals carry multiple identities, although there is some disagreement as to whether or not, or perhaps the degree to which, they constitute a linear hierarchy of prominence or salience. What is clear is that there are cybernetic/Gestalt dynamics operating for self. Persons seek to have their identities verified by others by assessing others' reactions to their behavioral outputs to see if these outputs are consistent with an identity and are acceptable to others. Yet, some would argue that this cybernetic process can be distorted by the

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[23]I have developed many formal propositions on these identity dynamics and their effects on macrostructures. See, for examples, my *Face-to-Face* and *Theoretical Principles of Sociology* (both cited in note 20).

repression of the negative emotions that are aroused when such an important dimension of human behavior—verification of identities—becomes problematic. But, all identity theories agree that the failure to verify an identity generates negative emotions that motivate individuals to bring perceptions of self in line with others' responses to self. Such is the case even if the responses of others and the emotions felt by a person to these responses must be repressed to gain congruence. For most identity theories, there is a clear cognitive bias emphasizing that people generally bring their behavioral outputs, identities, and reactions of others to presentations of identities into congruence; only the more psychoanalytically oriented identity theories would also suggest that congruence can be achieved by the activation of defense mechanisms. Needs for verification of identities for all symbolic interactionists are the driving force of interaction, and the flow of interaction revolves around the extent to which people's identities are mutually verified. And when they are, individuals feel positive emotions and may, if these emotions persist, begin to make commitments to the larger social structures in which interactions occur.

Identity verification dynamics are one key to understanding the connection between micro interactions and macro social structures. Emotions are the key link, and the most powerful emotions come from identity dynamics. So, larger scale social structures depend upon the consistent arousal of the positive emotions that come with identity verification in face-to-face interactions. Thus, identity theories go a long way to closing what is often considered a gap between the micro level of interaction among people and the macro level of social structure of a society.