

Identity Theory: Reconstruction and Application

Curtis M. Kularski

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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Identity theory, previously named Identity Control Theory, is a sociological theory designed to explain the process of identity production and maintenance. Identity theory was created by and continues to be developed by Peter Burke and Jan Stets (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Burke 2005; Stets and Burke 2014). Other theorists such as Sheldon Stryker and Michael Carter have contributed to the extension of the theory into more specific types of identity such as gender identity and moral identity (Stets and Burke 2014:57-59). Identity theory is based in the symbolic interactionism metatheoretical framework and the concept of a perceptual control system. It is one of several theories in the identity theory research program.

Metatheory

Identity theory is based in the symbolic interactionism metatheory and the perceptual control system model (Burke and Stets 2009:18). Symbolic interactionism contributes to identity theory a claim about social reality that objects and events in a situation can be represented as symbols. George Herbert Mead, one of the primarily scholars responsible for the development of symbolic interactionism, described a process in which the mind and the self-concept develop together through a social process (Burke and Stets 2009:19). The self is a social object that is understood in relation to the environment. Mead describes phases of self which include the “I” and the “me”. The “I” functions as the situational actor and the “me” functions as the perceiver. The actor

creates meaning through social behaviors, such as symbolic communication. The perceiver interprets symbols from social interaction and the environment. Symbols are understood in the context of the social and cultural background (Burke and Stets 2009:21).

Mead's symbolic interactionism assumes the existence of names and categorized objects and concepts in the social environment. Named objects and concepts are essential to the communication of a shared meaning. Classifications are a way to communicate abstract concepts through symbolic communication. Names and classifications compose the symbolic method of communicating shared meaning. Symbols are arbitrary, containing meaning due to social consensus. Objects that contain meaning that is independent of social agreement are called signs (Burke and Stets 2009:10).

Named social roles, such as student and teacher, are a type of symbol that contains shared meaning within the context of a social group. The role names are symbols that are associated with a social status and also contain information about the type of behavior that can be expected from a person with that role (Burke and Stets 2009:26).

Symbolic interactionism refers to meaning making in a singular identity or role, but functions with a complex self as well. William James established the idea of a complex self prior to the creation of symbolic interactionism. The complex self is composed of many roles or identities. This idea is important to identity theory because it

allows for symbols to have different meanings and expectations in different social contexts, or in different identities (Burke and Stets 2009:24).

The idea of a perceptual control system is also part of the metatheory of identity theory. Control systems are mechanisms that have an objective of maintaining a homeostatic range of input by changing outputs. A commonly used analogy for this is a thermostat. A thermostat uses a temperature measurement to determine if a variation in heating or cooling is needed. In the concept (and the analogy) it is not expected that the input represent reality, only the perception of it. The identity control system seeks to maintain homeostasis of meanings based on perceptions (Burke and Stets 2009:61).

William Powers describes a perceptual control model that uses general principles of a control system where outputs are determined by inputs, including human social interaction. The perceptual control model describes a flow of perceptions and behaviors. The flow is a feedback loop that is composed of perceptions, a comparator, error signal and an output behavior. The objective in perceptual control is to regular outputs such that the inputs will match a pre-determined standard. “People control their perceptions, not their behaviors.” (Burke and Stets 2009:29)

Scope

Burke and Stets do not state explicit scope conditions. They remark that identifying the scope conditions of the theory should be a component of future research

and development of the theory (Burke and Stets 2009:197). The metatheory and propositions of the theory suggest that the theory is applicable to a scope of social situations where the actors are engaged in an exchange of symbols. The functioning of the theory relies on a reactive social environment and therefore is best suited to interpersonal situations where communication is open and complex. Recent developments in identity theory expand the scope to include identity maintenance with signs and resources as well as symbols. This development treats social actors as biosocial beings which exist as more than symbols or carriers of symbols (Stets and Burke 2014). Identity theory is only useful in the micro world for explaining individual behaviors and cannot predict revolutions or other macro-level phenomena beyond the contributions of the group identity to the behavior of the individual.

Identity theory does not define or limit the meaning of society. Society and social group being abstract in the theory leaves the scope open to the inclusion of subculture and countercultural groups. The theory does not specify how the identity standard is established. Deviance may only be predicted as a means of meaning maintenance. Identity theory is applicable to meaning maintenance in the context of large societies and in smaller social groups.

Definitions

Identity theory is composed of numerous mechanism and components which have definitions specific to their role in identity production.

Symbols are objects or gestures that have social value. Symbols are associated with a specific meaning or a set of meanings. Generally signs and symbols are synonymous, but there are some distinctions. Both are types of symbolic information. Signs relate to observable phenomena in the environment. Symbols require a social agreement on their meaning. Signs are almost universally assigned the same meaning, whereas symbols are culturally relative. A fuel gauge is a sign. Its meaning is correlated to a physical occurrence. Linguistic communication is symbolic. There is no meaning without knowledge of the language and the cultural context in which it exists (Burke and Stets 2009:11). For symbols to be useful they must be backed by a shared meaning (Burke and Stets 2009:12).

Meaning is the response to stimuli. In the context of the theory this refers to the cognitive response to symbolic stimuli. Meaning can also be a stimulus itself. If a symbol requires action, the symbol will first trigger the response of an interpretation of the stimulus, and then will trigger action based on the meaning of the symbol (Burke and Stets 2009:13). A red stop light is a symbol of a socially established protocol for traffic behavior. A red stop light triggers the meaning of the symbol, the social conventions regarding the symbol. The social conventions then act as a stimulus to trigger an action.

The identity process is the cycle through which the identity is verified and adjusted based on the inputs received from the environment. Identity is composed of the identity standard, inputs, a comparator and the outputs (Burke and Stets 2009:61). Identity does not refer to any single concept, but to the process. Identities are perceived

by external identities based on their outputs. Those outputs in turn become inputs for those external identities. Based on this theory identity is at the center of social interaction. An alternative definition of identity is “the set of meanings that define who one is in terms of a group or classification.” (Stets and Burke 2005:44).

Inputs are perceptions that are evaluated in the identity process. Perceptions are internal interpretations based on stimuli from the environment. The stimuli may be reactions from external identities, one’s own behavior or cues to the social environment. Perceptions are not absolute analogs for social truths (reality). Perceptions are based on a sample. Just as a thermostat can be deceived by a close source of heat, perceptions can be deceived by incomplete information (Burke and Stets 2009:65-66).

The Comparator determines any difference between input and the identity standard. This difference is called the error signal. Error signal can be thought of numerically. The error signal can be positive if the attribute being compared is higher than the expectation of the identity standard or negative if the attribute is perceived to be below the level specified by the standard (Burke and Stets 2009:66). Any error, positive or negative, can cause emotional distress. To resolve the distress, the comparator produces output to reduce the error (Burke and Stets 2009:51).

Output is meaningful behavior designed to alter the perceptions. The actual behaviors are not relevant. The objective of the behaviors is not to change the environment, but to manage meanings (Burke and Stets 2009:66-67).

Environment is not explicitly defined in the theory. The context of the usage of the term environment implies that environment includes the social construction of a physical environment, the baseline meaning that participants bring to a social interaction and the cultural context in which the social interaction is occurring. Only the perceptual and symbolic values of the environment are important for identity theory (Burke and Stets 2009:8-12).

Prominence is the centrality of the identity to the self concept. Prominence can be interpreted as the importance of the identity to the person. Prominence may be affected by external support, self-support and commitment of the identity (Burke and Stets 2009:40).

Commitment is the degree to which a person is invested in the identity. The investment, and commitment, may be altered by the positive feelings, esteem and other rewards associated with the identity (Burke and Stets 2009:40,47).

Identity Verification is a term that refers to successfully reaching homeostasis between external perception and internal meaning. An identity is verified when there is no error signal (Burke and Stets 2009:50).

Interruptions are situations which can break the identity process loop and as a result cause a failure in the identity process (Burke and Stets 2009:75).

Distress or emotional distress is an aversive affective state, such as anxiety, arising from a failure to verify an identity in the identity verification process (Burke and Stets 2009:51).

Propositions

The general assumptions of identity theory can be modeled in a control loop diagram (Figure 1). At the beginning of the process it is assumed that an identity standard exists and is active. The theory does not specify the origin of this identity standard or any process by which the standard can be adjusted.

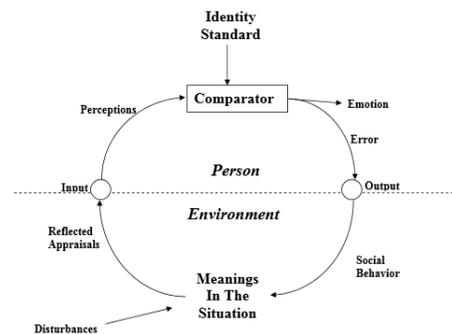


Figure 1 Basic Identity Model (Stets and Burke 2005:46)

Input perceptions are received from the environment and then compared to the identity standard. The comparator will produce a signal that corresponds to how well the perceptions match the identity standard. If the perception is higher on an attribute of the identity than is expected in the identity standard, then a positive error occurs. If the perception is lower than the goal level of the attribute in the identity standard, then a negative error occurs. After the error signal is produced, an output behavior occurs. If the error is positive, then the behavior will be intended to reduce the perception of that particular attribute. If the error is negative, then the behavior will be intended to increase the perception of the affected attribute. If there is no error signal, then identity

verification is reached and behavior remains constant for the iteration (Burke and Stets 2009:66). The most essential assumption of identity theory is that people seek consistency of meaning. If the meaning of the identity is not verified when compared with the perceptions, then some response will be generated to correct the discrepancy. If the identity is not verified, then emotional distress will occur (Burke and Stets 2009:51). If the identity is verified, then self-esteem is increased (Burke and Stets 2009:80).

Identity theory assumes that each person has multiple identities. A single identity may be activated or multiple identities may be active at the same time (Burke and Stets 2009:130). Identities that are more salient are more likely to be activated (Burke and Stets 2009:132). An identity may be activated based on its correspondence with the identity of an interaction partner. For example, if a person holds a student identity it is more likely to be activated when interacting with someone who holds a teacher identity. When multiple identities are activated there is a hierarchy that determines which identity guides behavior. The hierarchy is determined by the commitment and prominence of each identity. More committed and prominent identities are more likely to guide behavior than identities with lower commitment or prominence (Burke and Stets 2009:132-134).

The structure of the control system is a continuous feedback loop which is always actively working on managing identity meaning. There are several situations in which the process may be interrupted. Interruptions create distress in the same way that incongruence between the identity standard and the input perceptions create distress. If an interruption occurs, then the identity cannot be verified (Burke and Stets 2009:77).

Derivations

Identity theory predicts social behavior. It is not possible to predict specific human behaviors using identity theory, but general themes or patterns of behaviors can be predicted (Burke and Stets 2009:36-37). Identity theory predicts that when the identity standard is incongruent with the perceptions from the environment, an error signal occurs and the person experiences distress. The distress encourages the person to resolve the incongruence by creating a behavior that is designed to change the perception of the identity by the opposite measure of the error signal. If someone has a masculine identity with a masculinity rating of 5, but perceives that others interpret him as only presenting a masculinity rating of 3, then the error signal is -2. The output behavior must then be increased by +2 to compensate for the error signal. If the perception is that the masculinity rating is 5, then no error occurs and the identity is verified. Upon identity verification self-esteem is increased (Burke and Stets 2009:80).

New Research

Overdoing Gender: A Test of the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis by Robb Willer, Christabel Rogalin and Bridget Conlon applies identity theory. The purpose of the article is to report on four studies that were conducted to address a hypothesis related to the over-performance of masculine identity. The article bridges several theoretical

programs related to identity and gender processes. The theoretical programs range from post-modern philosophy in the form of feminist theory to empirically-driven social theory in the form of identity theory (Willer et al. 2013:981-986).

State of Knowledge

The authors of the article use various metatheoretical backgrounds to frame their research including masculinity studies, psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism. Identity theory is used to predict the interaction between multiple identities and the outcome of a person receiving feedback that is inconsistent with the identity standard (Willer et al. 2013:985).

Most of the ideas used from masculinity studies and psychoanalysis are consistent with symbolic interactionism and can be observed through the identity theory perspective. The primary idea from psychoanalytic theory used by Willer, et.al. is reaction formation. In identity theory reactions are the product of the comparator after an error signal is generated. The definition of reaction formation used by the authors relies on the perception that an identity trait presented is “socially unacceptable.” (Willer et al. 2013:982) Identity theory explains this reaction as the socially unacceptable identity trait being inconsistent with the identity standard and therefore requiring a strong reaction (output) to resolve the discrepancy. From masculinity studies the authors refer to an idea of men as gatekeepers of gender. This idea can be attributed to the meaning of the masculine role containing a high status value and therefore having social authority to

control the definitions of the genders as a component of the role. Masculinity studies provides general context for the masculine identity including identifying specific values which are important to that identity.

Identity theory is still being developed by its theorists and their colleagues as of the publication date of the article. The version of identity theory referenced by Willer, et. al. is the version described in this paper (Willer et al. 2013:1018). In the simplest form, what is known about identity theory by Willer et. al. at the beginning of the research is gender-relevant behaviors are driven by the gender identity contained in the identity standard (Willer et al. 2013:986).

Operations of the Research

This article is primarily an attempt to support the masculinity overcompensation thesis. The authors did not engage in their research for the purpose of theory building. In the course of their research the authors applied identity theory.

The research program conducted by Willer et al. consisted of three studies. The first study consisted of a laboratory experiment in which 51 men and 60 women were administered a gender identity survey, the Bem Sex Roles Inventory. The participants were all students in the same sociology department. The participants were given feedback sheets ranking their gender on a scale from 0 to 50. 0 to 25 was labeled masculine, 26 to 50 was labeled feminine. The scores supplied on the feedback sheets were false and had

no correlation to the responses on the initial survey. Half of the men were given a score of 11, the other half were given a score of 32. After receiving feedback the participants were given two additional surveys containing questions about their views on the Iraq war, homosexuality and buying a vehicle (Willer et al. 2013:992-993).

The second study was performed using the same initial survey instrument and feedback sheet as described for the first study, but the assessments after the feedback was given were different. The assessment for the second study was a group-based dominance attitudes inventory. The inventory focused on questions involving forcefulness in group situations and the treatment of inferior groups. The purpose of the second study was to assess attitudes of dominance, rather than traditional markers of masculinity (Willer et al. 2013:994).

The third study was similar to the first in that participants were administered the Bem Sex Roles Inventory. The participants were 54 undergraduate men. After completing the survey the participants were given feedback sheets, just as in the first two studies. The participants were then given political and religious views surveys, followed by a post-study questionnaire. In this study participants were asked to give saliva samples at pre-arranged intervals during the study. The first sample was taken during the intake survey, the second was after completing the gender survey, the third was after receiving the feedback and the final sample was taken before completing the post-study questionnaire. All of the saliva samples were tested to determine each participant's testosterone levels during the study (Willer et al. 2013:1006).

Findings

The findings of the first study showed more negative views of homosexuality and more positive views of war were present on average in men whose gender feedback score was in the feminine range than those whose gender feedback score was in the middle of the masculine range. There was no significant difference between the groups of women. On the survey of vehicle preference men whose masculinity was threatened reported that SUVs were desirable and indicated willing to spend more money on them than those men whose masculinity was not threatened. Women across conditions showed no difference. In a post-study evaluation, men who had their masculinity threatened reported more negative emotions than those who were given a rating in the masculine range (Willer et al. 2013:995).

Study 2 found that the men who had their masculinity threatened did express stronger dominance attitudes than unthreatened men. There was no effect of gender threat on the responses of women. The hypothesis that men who were threatened would express overall more conservative attitudes was not supported (Willer et al. 2013:1001).

Study 3 did not find any significant difference in the testosterone levels of men who were threatened compared to those who were not threatened when measured after the manipulation. Study 3 did find that the level of overcompensation on the Iraq war and attitudes toward homosexuality was positively correlated with a higher basal testosterone level (Willer et al. 2013:1008).

Overall the studies found that the predictions of identity theory were supported. Men whose gender inventory results did not verify their identity performed overcompensation through their attitudes. The correlation between degree of overcompensation and testosterone level confirms that biology is a factor of identity (Willer et al. 2013:1011).

Interpretation

The authors interpret their findings as supporting most of their hypotheses, including supporting the masculinity overcompensation thesis, which states “men react to masculinity threats with extreme demonstrations of masculinity.” (Willer et al. 2013:1011, 980) The finding that men overcompensate for gender identity threats, but women do not is interpreted as being due to the cultural expectation of the masculine identity being more salient with regard to other identities in the complex self than femininity (Willer et al. 2013:1012). The findings are also attributed to the level of commitment to the identity, which is due to the level of “social esteem” (status value, in terms of identity theory) associated with the masculine identity (Willer et al. 2013:1013).

The version of identity theory used by the authors includes only symbolic contributions to the meanings contained in the identity standard; therefore the findings are not discussed in terms of the biosocial or sign components of identity that were later added to the theory. The findings of testosterone having an effect on the level of

overcompensation could be explained as a biosocial component of the gender identity standard.

New State of Knowledge

The new article does not perform any work of theory development, so the contributions to theory are minimal. The studies discussed in the article provide support for identity theory, confirming that it is productive in predicting the output behavior of men when their masculine identity is threatened.

The finding that testosterone levels are correlated with the degree of overcompensation contributes data that would allow identity theory to be refined to include hormone levels as a component of the identity standard, or perhaps as a moderating factor to the input perceptions. This particular study did not find a direct mediation of masculine overcompensation through testosterone levels, but the contribution of that hypothesis to the research explores the possibility of a biological component to the output behavior. Testosterone levels were not shown to be affected, but perhaps future research could find other biological changes as a result of failure to verify an identity.

Conclusion

Identity theory predicts output behaviors based on input perceptions, relative to an internally held collection of self meanings in the form of an identity standard. Failure to verify the identity standard against input perceptions causes distress and an output behavior designed to correct the discrepancy between perception and identity standard.

Identity theory predicts output behaviors based on input perceptions, but does not provide an explanation for how the identity standard is created. The theory also does not explain how perceptions work, only that they exist and are then compared with the identity standard.

Empirical research supports the predictions of identity theory. Research conducted by Willer, et.al indicates that men whose masculine identity is threatened react by increasing the strength of their presentation of gender-linked attitudes, a form of output behavior. Willer, et.al also incorporate biological elements to their study of identity presentation, offering a possible new direction for identity theory research.

Identity theory is a robust theory that is evolving as new research is performed. Previous gaps in the theory's predictive capability have been resolved by adding new concepts to the identity control model (Stets and Burke 2014).

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