



To thine own self be true? Clarifying the effects of identity discrepancies on psychological distress and emotions



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ABSTRACT

After many years of research across disciplines, it remains unclear whether people are more motivated to seek appraisals that accurately match self-views (self-verification) or are as favorable as possible (self-enhancement). Within sociology, mixed findings in identity theory have fueled the debate. A problem here is that a commonly employed statistical approach does not take into account the direction of a discrepancy between how we see ourselves and how we think others see us in terms of a given identity, yet doing so is critical for determining which self-motive is at play. We offer a test of three competing models of identity processes, including a new “mixed motivations” model where self-verification and self-enhancement operate simultaneously. We compare the models using the conventional statistical approach versus response surface analysis. The latter method allows us to determine whether identity discrepancies involving over-evaluation are as distressing as those involving under-evaluation. We use nationally representative data and compare results across four different identities and multiple outcomes. The two statistical approaches lead to the same conclusions more often than not and mostly support identity theory and its assumption that people seek self-verification. However, response surface tests reveal patterns that are mistaken as evidence of self-verification by conventional procedures, especially for the spouse identity. We also find that identity discrepancies have different effects on distress and self-conscious emotions (guilt and shame). Our findings have implications not only for research on self and identity across disciplines, but also for many other areas of research that incorporate these concepts and/or use difference scores as explanatory variables.

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1. Introduction

At least since the Chicago School, sociologists and other social and behavioral scientists have theorized and empirically explored the nature and importance of the self in social relations. The self is the ongoing social process in which people examine themselves as others would examine them. It is the ability to take oneself as an object (Mead, 1934). One of the major questions that has come to the fore over the last several decades concerns which self-motive dominates individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, including in interaction with others. On the one hand, the desire to be viewed favorably (i.e., self-enhancement) may be among the most fundamental of human motivations across cultures (Kim, 2011: 148). On the other hand, despite the incredible amount of research that has been devoted to understanding self-enhancement and its effects

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(Leary, 2007), the competing notion that people want others to view them as they view themselves (i.e., self-verification) is also alive and well in the literature. Based on the results of an extensive meta-analysis, Kwang and Swann (2010) conclude that the desire for self-enhancement does not outmode the desire for self-verification (see p. 275).

In sociology, fervor surrounding the verification/enhancement debate has been building around mixed findings in tests of identity theory, particularly those focusing on control system process for identities (Burke, 1991). In this work the concept “identity” refers to the set of meanings that an individual holds for her/himself as a unique person or in connection with a particular occupied role or group membership (Stets and Serpe, 2013). Despite being one of the most influential concepts in the social sciences, identity researchers have yet to reach agreement on how exactly identity processes work (Schwartz et al., 2011). In research on identity theory, the crux of uncertainty is again whether individuals are principally motivated to verify or enhance self-views. When identity discrepancies arise—that is, when reflected appraisals do not match internalized identity meanings—a critical question is whether “direction” matters in its consequences. That is, are people equally distressed by “over-evaluation” and “under-evaluation” (a U-shaped relationship indicative of self-verification), or are they uniquely distressed by under-evaluation (indicative of self-enhancement)? As we detail below, identity theory assumes that people seek self-verifying evaluations. Yet paralleling mixed findings in psychology, some tests of identity theory lend support to the self-verification principle at its core, while other tests favor competing self-enhancement theories (e.g., Rogers, 1961; Jones, 1973; Kaplan, 1975; Tesser, 1988).

Insofar as the validity of an explanation depends upon the validity of its foundation, the uncertainty concerning the relative importance of self-motives in processes involving identity is far from trivial. Whether implicitly or explicitly, all theorizing in the social sciences makes assumptions about the individual (North, 1990). We share the view that developing accurate, powerful theories on the micro-level is one of the keys to unlocking “secrets” of patterns on the macro-level (Collins, 2004). Furthermore, to the extent that the basic assumptions of a theory are inaccurate, the usefulness of the theory and work that draws on it are correspondingly impaired (Shrivastava and Mitroff, 1984). Studying identities is important because our understanding of them informs research on an array of social phenomena, including exchange (Burke, 1997), stratification processes (Hunt, 2003), distributive justice (Stets and Osborn, 2008), morality (Stets and Carter, 2011, 2012), life course transitions (Cast, 2004), mental health (Marcussen, 2006; Wright et al., 2014), gender issues (Willer et al., 2013), environmental behavior (Stets and Biga, 2003), and the effects of incarceration (Asencio and Burke, 2011), to name a few. As the study of identities is firmly rooted in the discipline of sociology, accurate knowledge of the basic processes of identity is important. In this respect, advancing our understanding of the motivational aspects of the self will contribute to the goals of building useful theoretical and applied knowledge.

Our concern is that there are problems at the method-theory nexus that compromise the goals of theoretical progress and useful practical application in the program of research on self and identity. Focusing here on sociological contributions, we point out that the accepted procedure for examining the predicted U-shaped relationship between identity discrepancies and negative affect (1) relies on a difference-score measure of identity discrepancy that is not ideal (see, e.g., Edwards, 1994, 2001), and (2) has the potential to produce misleading results by not precisely evaluating directional effects of identity discrepancies. Both problems have implications for the growth of the theory. To address them we employ polynomial regression with response surface analysis (see Shanock et al., 2010). This method does not use difference scores, and more importantly, it allows one to determine with statistical confidence whether and how the direction of a discrepancy matters. As we argue below, this is essential for adjudicating the verification/enhancement debate, here in the context of identity theory.

In this research we engage the ongoing debate by examining three different models of identity processes: self-verification (assumed by identity theory), self-enhancement, and a mixed motivations model that allows both motivations to operate concurrently. In what follows, we begin by providing an overview of identity theory with a focus on issues germane to the verification/enhancement debate. We then discuss methodological problems in tests of identity theory that in our view preclude unambiguous conclusions. Next we describe the methods for the current study and provide details about our analysis strategy (response surface analysis). After presenting our results, we conclude by discussing the implications of our study for future research on identity theory and for other areas of research in the social sciences.

2. Theory

2.1. Identity theory

Identity theory consists of a group of explanations focusing on the interactional dynamics of identities (McCall and Simmons, 1978), their structural foundations and organization within the self (Stryker, 1980), and the internal processes of identity (Burke, 1991). Our focus is on the latter approach, or what may be referred to as the perceptual control system branch of identity theory (hereafter identity theory).¹

¹ While sociologists working in identity theory have always viewed the interactional (McCall and Simmons, 1978), structural (Stryker, 1980) and perceptual (Burke, 1991) approaches to identity as theoretical “variants” sharing a common metatheoretical foundation, some researchers have erroneously treated them as different theories in competition with one another (see Wagner and Berger, 1985 for a discussion of types of theory growth). Therefore, where the approaches must be delineated, we advocate the use of terms that distinguish their unique foci. For example, what has been referred to as “identity control theory” is more precisely referred to as a variant of identity theory with a focus on the perceptual control system. For further details, please see Burke and Stets (2009), Serpe and Stryker (2011), Stets and Serpe (2013), and Stets and Burke (2014a).

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