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Identity Theory: A Literature Review

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## Identity Theory: A Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to look back at the foundations of how identity is formed and to explore the work performed by seminal researchers in this field. As part of this journey, the reader will appreciate the biological origins of gestures, how the mind attaches meaning to these gestures over time, how feedback from others (through language) is essential in how we verify our own personal identity, and how culture and environment activity play a prominent role in how we view ourselves as part of a larger society. This paper will also highlight research that emphasizes how identity is dynamic; that all of us are a compilation of several role-based identities that exist in salience with each other, with one identity rising to prominence over others as environments and activities change.

Aside from a personal identity, we are all participants of a social identity, as members of one or more groups. In these groups, our identity is either affirmed or contradicted, and research indicates our personal identity will actually change over time to meet the affirmations of a group, depending on how much feedback we receive and how much value we place on the source of the feedback. More recent research on how identity is affected by our emerging global society suggests that cultural norms that may once have establish barriers between groups are now being dissolved, as we become one Internet-driven community with the ability to interact with people from every corner of the earth.

How will this affect the future of identity research? My own work in this area will research identity in virtual spaces and will explore what influences the choices a person makes for a virtual identity, and how that identity is impacted by the ability to remain completely anonymous.

## Mind

“The transformation of the biologic individual to the minded organism or self takes place through the agency of language, while language in turn presupposes the existence of a certain kind of society and certain physiological capacities in the individual organisms.”

- George Herbert Mead

### *Biological Beginnings*

In the beginning, there was a central nervous system. This biological system is a seat of activity, with the ability to send impulses to any number of muscle groups, in an effort to carry out the activities of daily living. Aside from the involuntary acts necessary to sustain life (respiratory functions, etc.), the central nervous system responds to commands from our brains to carry out any number of movements. What causes our brains to command a gesture to take place?

George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) and (1896-1934) both worked in this foundational area of research. Mead (1934) studied how the mind can cause us to simply mimic a gesture in response to a similar gesture (think of someone who has never experienced the waving of a hand in greeting) as a simple biological act, without attaching any meaning to it. Over time, a relationship between the brain and the central nervous system may begin to form, depending on the gesture. In this manner, the gesture becomes more of a referential symbol, depending on the circumstance.

Vygotsky (1978) also looked at these biological acts of mimicry, particularly as it applied to young children in their early stages of development. In their earliest stages, children are only capable of mimicking what they see others do, without attaching any meaning to the gesture.

According to both Mead and Vygotsky, it is when meaning is attached to the gestures (particularly through the use of language as a tool), that they become useful in building a sense of self.

### *Attaching Meaning*

According to Vygotsky, tool use is uniquely human. Attaching meaning to a gesture is what makes us different from the animal kingdom. Rather than making an action out of rote habit (as a dog that has been conditioned to come to his food dish when he hears a dinner bell), repeated gesturing in response to a similar set of stimuli causes our mind to attach some level of importance to a gesture, creating a meaningful tool. Mead (1934) described this as a “Process between organism and environment.” Mead goes on to explain that the “Mind arises in the social process only when that process as a whole enters into, or is present in, the experience of any one of the given individuals involved in that process.” Simply stated, one person can wave at another person with an attached meaning of greeting (even if the second person has no idea what the gesture means) and eventually the mimicking of the gesture on the part of the second person (with the circumstances surrounding when the gesture is used, facial expression, etc.) will ultimately cause the second person to attach a meaning similar to the intent of the first person. As more of these acts become part of our personal gesture “toolkit,” an identity is emerging. A key developmental aid to this process is language.

### *Language*

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of language as a mediator by stating, “The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously independent lines of development, converge.” With language comes the

intelligence to weigh problems of present behavior with future consequences, involving both memory and foresight (Mead, 1934). This is what makes us developmental beings, and capable of processing feedback as a tool by means of introspection, dynamically changing our self-perceptions over time in response to how others view us.

### Self

“The language process is essential for the development of the self. The self arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.” (Mead, 1934)

Vygotsky’s work with children indicated that speech is the tool that enables a young child to be able to master his surroundings, long before personal behavior is mastered. His use of “tools” such as language were essential in what Vygotsky considered “productive work;” the solution of the problems at hand. In this manner, language promotes self-government, and is linked to self-perception (Vygotsky, 1978). As we develop the self through language, we are also able to interact and participate in activities with those around us.

### *Culture and Environment*

Research into social identity by Hogg and others reveal that most of us are birthed into some cultural association, whether nationality, political or social (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). These associations have a defined set of accepted behaviors and actions, which create the defining characteristics of the group (Dewey, 2002). Our individual identity can be compared to the normative behaviors of the group through the process of feedback and self-verification. Stryker (2000) asserts that identity and ethnicity are equivalent, and consist of “The ready-made set of endowments and identifications that every individual shares with others from the moment

of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in a given place.” In my own experience, I was born into an Italian-American family that still practiced many of the cultural customs that would have been observed if the family was living in Italy. I was Italian-American by birth but What if I was German? Given the input of an Italian-American identity, anyone would have become Italian-American over time, due to the inputs and environment. It causes one to wonder how identity is affected by adopting older children into a culture radically different than that they were birthed into.

### *Feedback*

Feedback is a method by which we self-verify the identity we have created for ourselves, by using (among other things) a stimulus-response mechanism (Dewey, 2002). If we were to use our earlier example of the hand wave gesture, what might happen if the first person waved his hand, and the second person, in response, stuck out his tongue? Clearly, the tongue gesture was part of the second person’s gesture “toolkit,” but that response was not appropriate to the original stimulus. This stimulus-cognition-response mechanism is the beginning of the mediated acts Vygotsky uses to form an activity system (Vygotsky, 1978). When these stimulus-response experiences become part of our memory, it gives rise to a self-perception, based on the responses of others with whom we interact (Mead, 1934).

### *Self-Verification*

As we obtain feedback from others through interaction, that feedback will either verify the self-perception (self-worth) we have of ourselves based on our tools and the meanings we have attached to them, as well as our memory of previous interactions, or it will refute how we see ourselves in terms of our self-efficacy, or the ability to manage our environment (Tafarodi & Swann Jr, 1995). The use of these tools, also considered resources, are constantly in motion and

positive feedback will cause people feel good and competent about themselves and continue the activities that verify a favorable self-worth (Stets & Cast, 2007). It would be no surprise to discover, we tend to gravitate toward people who affirm our self-identity. This is fundamental feature of social interaction (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992).

Interestingly enough, self-verification also seems to be valid when the self-perception is *negative*. The research of Swann and others indicates that while most of us can understand gravitating toward people who affirm our positive self-worth, the opposite also seems true. His work supports the hypothesis that if we have a negative self-perception, we tend to seek out interactions with those people who will affirm that perception (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992, Hixon & Swann, 1993).

Self-verification is constantly in motion and our self-value is highly impacted by (a) the amount of feedback we receive from others, and (b) the value placed on the source of the feedback (Burke, 1991). Understandably, parental support and acceptance from infancy through adolescence is essential to developing a healthy self-perception. When this support is lacking, or has been abruptly discontinued (for example, through the death of a person whose feedback we attach value to), the resulting negative feelings can be one of the primary markers of depression (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Our self-verification is constantly in motion and research proposes that over time, our self-perception actually changes to align with the feedback we receive (Burke, 2006).

### Society

Once we have developed a self-perception, have received feedback that affirms that self-perception, and can interact with others within our environment or culture, we have a reasonable sense of self-worth (positive or negative). It is when we begin to voluntarily choose to mingle

our identity with others through interactions with groups, that we realize how many “identities” we may actually possess, and that they may not all act in harmony to each other.

### *Role-based Identities*

Research by Burke and others into the subject of role-based identity reveals that each of us may have several identities that interplay with each other at any one time. Each of these identities subscribes to a different set of rules, depending on the group they associate with. For example, many of us hold multiple identities as a parent, a spouse, a child, a professional in a particular discipline, member of a church, etc. Each of these identities has a set of normative behaviors that acts as a standard for membership in that group (Burke, 2006). In this case, each identity is verified by matching the self-perception of that identity to the identity standard. When there is congruence, there is positive emotion. A lack of identity verification registers negative emotion (Stets, 2005).

### *Salience*

How well our multiple identities exist in harmony together is an indicator of salience. Identities that have common underlying frames of reference have high salience and conversely, identities that don't share common meaning in the performance of their roles have low salience (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). A personal example of this is in my identity as a Ph.D. student, compared with my identity as an instructional design analyst for a small college. In my role as a student, my identity is in expanding knowledge, “boldly going where no man has gone before.” It is a high-energy state of achievement, as each new body of research expands my existing knowledge and enables me to create new solutions in my work. At the college where I worked, the leadership was very conservative, budgets were restricted and the general attitude was, “Why

should we change; we have always done it this way.” My identity as a student and my identity as an instructional designer were not congruent, which created a disruption of my identity process and cause high levels of distress. Burke (1991) states that, “Stress is a relationship between external conditions and the current state of the person; and distress, or anxiety is the internal, subjective response to that relationship. According to Burke, distress is the interruption of the identity process where we compare our self-perceptions to the identity standard (see figure 1).

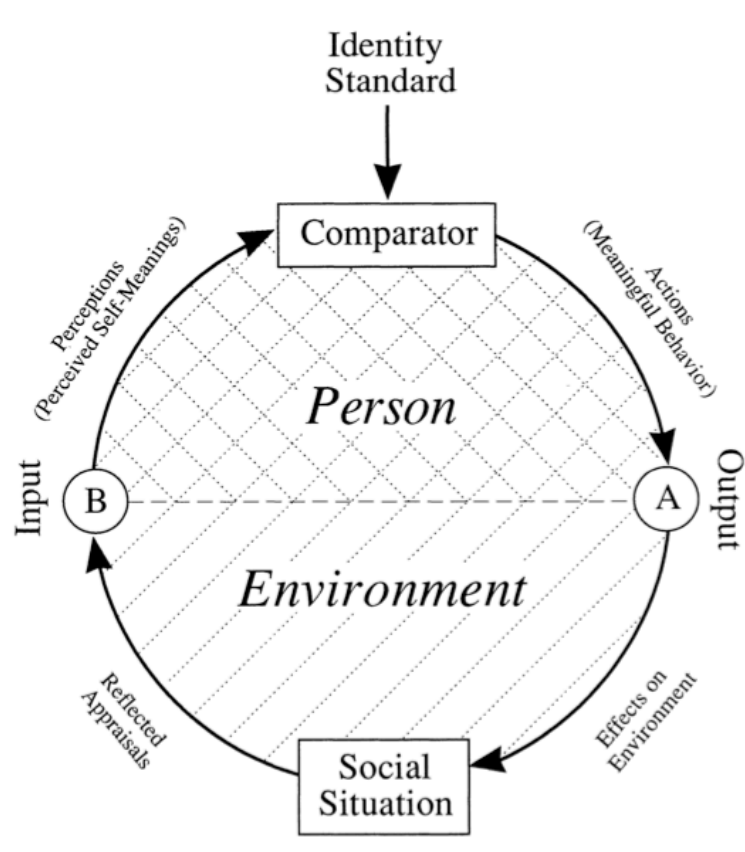


Figure 1. Burke's Control-System View of Identity Process

In this conceptual framework, the environment is a continual social interaction system that includes resources and the behaviors of others (discussed more in Group Membership). According to Burke (1991), neither the input meanings nor the identity standard actually cause

behavior. Output behavior results from the comparison process between the input meanings (self-perception) and the identity standard. Interestingly, distress is also observed when feedback is *more* positive than a person's self-perception.

### *Group Membership*

In his research on social identity, Stryker (2000) suggests that people become members of a particular group because of a common identity and shared belief system that makes collective action possible. It is through repeated activities within a group that personal, role-based identity is verified, and collective identity is strengthened. When a group identity is particularly strong, an "us" versus "them" attitude can develop, causing high-group affiliation and the willingness to take behavioral risks (Smith, Terry & Hogg, 2006). It is through these symbolic social interactions that society and self are conceptualized, group social behavior is structured and governed and personal identity is shaped in favor of the group standard (Stryker, 2007). As mentioned before, identity is so dynamic that when a group member receives non-verifying feedback concerning their occupation of a role within the group, they adjust their personal standard to the feedback (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, Stets, 2005). This is reminiscent of the Hawthorne Electric study done by Mayo from 1924-1933, where workers increased or decreased productivity as a collective group when the lights were brightened or dimmed. Mayo concluded that human beings responded to the social and psychological experience of participation. In this case, the collective group assumed a common identity based on shared experience. As a collective, the group assumes an "identity" not as an entity, but as a continually evolving "image" in the mind of each of its participants (Holland, Fox and Daro, 2008).

### *Modernity*

If we consider the term modernity descriptive of the current cultural environment in which we live, then all identity processes take place within this global sphere. Where once there existed closed communities (with high barriers to entry) with which to develop an identity, the Internet age has created one Universal identity to which we all belong (Giddens, 1991). Instant, anywhere, anytime access to world events, Voice Over Internet Protocol that enables real-time conversation to anyone in the world who has the same software on their computers, MySpace, Facebook, and any number of other social networking pathways, have crumbled what were once considered cultural and environmental barriers to participation. If we reconsider Stryker's (2000) suggestion that people become members of a particular group because of a common identity and shared belief system that makes collective action possible, then modernity enables people from every corner of the Earth to be part of a collective group, even if they have never met. This "virtual" role-based identity is just as subject to salience as any other role-based identity, enabling a member to travel in and among several of these collectives, now seeking self-verification from any number of interactions in something of a "salience hierarchy," with identities higher in the hierarchy more likely to be invoked in a particular situation. Giddens (1991) makes the observation that "A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor – as important as it is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." With that statement, role-based identity transforms into *role-play*.

When role-play is coupled with anonymity in a virtual space, membership in any number of group collectives can occur simultaneously. Using historical tools like language, and more advanced tools such as those offered in multiplayer games, it is now possible to assume any number of role-based identities that are either extensions of existing real-life identities, or those completely created out of fantasy. Smith, Terry & Hogg (2006) suggests that when there is

anonymity, a shared collective vision and high affiliation, members are more likely to exercise behavioral risks than in other situations. They also states that group members are selective about if and when they will adopt the norms of a particular group, as long as it achieves their personal goals. Translated, this means that while the identity salience may be just as strong in a virtual world as a real world, the lack of physical interactions create an environment where members feel less committed as a whole to other members of the group. With more and more social interactions occurring virtually, one can speculate how self-verification might take place going forward, if feedback is based on an identity that is a virtual fabrication. Will I be able to get self-verifying feedback about my identity if my identity in a particular group is a virtual vampire? How salient will that identity become, compared to my other role-based identities that are more human?

### Discussion and Conclusion

There is considerable research into identity: how it is formed, influenced, and verified. Mead and Vygotsky support the formation of identity as a process that is continually in motion and rests not only in cultural and environmental factors, but the feedback of others and how that feedback either affirms or disavows our self-perception. All of us have multiple role-based identities, depending on our activities and associations, and these identities can be salient and exist in harmony with each other, or be in opposition to our other roles, depending on our interactions. At any time, one identity can demand priority over another, and the identity that demands priority may or may not be the identity that holds the most personal value. Modern society enables us to have identities that may or may not be based in activities that occur in real life. How these alternative identities are formed, how they engage in activities alone and in groups, is the focus of my own research.

In a database search of 603 dissertations about identity theory, only a few actually addressed the phenomenon of identity in virtual spaces or in role-play. Using abstracts from the dissertations, it is apparent that historical identity formation also applies to virtual spaces, with identities very much influenced by intergroup activities and context. In his work identity and pop culture, Zingsheim (2008) supports the idea that identity is “radically contextual,” using X-Men superheroes as his subject of analysis. In his dissertation abstract, he states that, “While not limited to mediated or pedagogical contexts, mutational identity directs one's attention to the multiplicity of subjectivities and identities that coalesce to form the self, allowing the potential for an understanding of the ways in which these multifaceted aspects of one's self are mutually influencing each other while subject to constant shifting.” Even here, identity is dynamic and constantly shifting, with multiple identities competing for salience. Using the popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role Play Game (MMORPG) Everquest, Otto (2007) studied identity in an environment very similar to my own research environment of Second Life. Otto explored the nature of community in Everquest, interviewing participants who believed that Everquest was indeed a community and had substantive relationships with other players while in the game. Many members chose to actually meet in real life, furthering the level of affirmation for the identities established in the game. In his abstract, he also briefly described the more negative aspects of addictive and intensive play, causing the game to be nicknamed Ever-Crack.

My own research in this space will focus on how one chooses an identity in a virtual environment, and my research questions (which like identity, are dynamic and in constant change) will address: (a) What causes people to choose certain identity traits in a virtual world and how far removed are those traits from real life, (b) Can virtual worlds be used to test diversity, inclusion and identity in the development of real world programs, and (c) Can the use

of virtual worlds for business and education conferencing encourage tolerance, even among people at the same geographic location? My hypothesis is that there is a link between real –life identities that are not congruent, and the desire to give those less salient identities priority in a virtual space.

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