5-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Desrochers, Stephen; Andreassi, Jeanine; and Thompson, Cynthia (2004) "Identity Theory," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol1/iss1/14

Identity Theory[1]

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Identity theory is a microsociological theory, which links self attitudes, or identities, to the role relationships and role-related behavior of individuals. Identity theorists argue that the self consists of a collection of identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role (Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identities can be defined as one's answers to the question 'Who am I?" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Many of the "answers" (e.g., "I am a father") are linked to the roles we occupy, so they are often referred to as "role identities" or simply, "identities." For example, familial identities might include those of spouse or parent and occupational identities might include those of accountant or salesperson. In turn, these role identities are said to influence behavior in that each role has a set of associated meanings and expectations for the self (Burke & Reitzes, 1981).

The concept of identity salience is important in identity theory because the salience we attach to our identities influences how much effort we put into each role and how well we perform in each role (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). According to Stryker (1968), who originated identity theory, the various identities that comprise the self exist in a hierarchy of salience, where the identities that are ranked highest are most likely to be invoked in situations that involve different aspects of the self. Stryker gave the example of a former New York mayor who decided not to run for another term of office in order to maintain favorable relationships with his sons. At the time, the mayor's account was met with disbelief by some. Stryker argued that those who did not believe the mayor's rationale most likely had a family identity that was low in their salience hierarchy.

Identity theory should not be confused with social identity theory, which emphasizes group process and intergroup relations rather than role behavior. Identity theory focuses on the self as comprised of the various roles an individual occupies (e.g., mother, friend, employee), while social identity theory posits that the groups to which people belong (e.g., political affiliation, Sierra Club member, nationality) can provide their members a definition of who they are (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). This entry will focus on identity theory, rather than social identity theory. Because our focus is on identity theory as formulated by Stryker and Burke, we do not review

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[1] Material in this article also appears as part of the Sloan Work-Family Encyclopedia at
http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpIDTent.html

other sociological approaches to identity, such as identity construction, nor do we review the plethora of developmental and personality psychological perspectives on identity formation.

(For a discussion of sociological perspectives on identity construction, see Cerulo, 1997. Readers interested in theories of identity formation by Erickson, Marcia and other developmental and personality psychologists, as well as measures and methods used to test these theories, should consult the Society for Identity Formation website at: http://srif.sdstate.edu/.)

In addition to the distinction between social identity theory and identity theory, we should also note that there are two major "strands" of identity theory. Stryker's version emphasizes social structure and identity salience, whereas Burke's version emphasizes social-cognitive systems, identity maintenance processes, and the content of identity. For a more detailed discussion of the similarities and difference between these two, see Stryker and Burke (2000).

Measurement Issues

A variety of research designs have been used to evaluate identity theory, including paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991), questionnaires administered in telephone interviews (Reitzes & Mutran, 1994; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), structured interviews (Simon, 1995; Simon, 1997; Thoits, 1992), experiential sampling (Burke & Franzoi, 1988), as well as diaries and video analysis (Cast & Burke, 1999; Wickrama, Conger, Lerenz & Matthews, 1995). However, the majority of these studies relies on either written or telephone interview questionnaires.

Studies also vary in terms of which aspects of identity they measure. Many have measured only the salience of identities. Some have measured the content, or self-meanings of identities (the set of beliefs that define an identity). But these approaches do not address the reflexivity of identities. Identities have been defined as reflexively applied cognitions about the self-in-role, meaning that our perceptions of our identities are influenced by what we think others think of us as we enact our various roles (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). This suggests that role identity should be measured in terms of how I think others think of me as a (father, mother, etc.). However, relatively few studies have measured identity in this manner (e.g., Cast & Burke 1999; Pasley, Futris, & Skinner, 2002). More often, research testing identity theory tends to measure identity in terms of individuals' self-contained evaluations. For example, identity salience is typically measured by asking respondents to rank which identities they would be most likely to tell others about (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Nuttbrock & Freudiger, 1991), by asking them to choose which identity is most important to them (Lobel & St. Claire, 1992), or by simply asking respondents to complete Likert-type scales on the centrality of specific identities (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Desrochers, 2002). However, as noted by Marks and MacDermid (1996), individuals may have many roles that are salient, the possibility of which can be missed when they are asked to rank their roles (requiring them to choose which is "more" important) or to rate the importance of only a few roles (e.g., worker and parent). Similarly, the content of identities is usually measured by asking respondents what their identities mean to them (Minton & Pasley, 1996; Simon, 1995; 1997) without considering their perceptions of their significant others' views of their identities. As such, measures of the content and salience of identities often do not reflect their reflexivity.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Research informed by identity theory has contributed to our understanding of the costs, benefits, and meanings of occupancy in work and family roles. One line of research examines whether differences in the number, type, and salience of roles occupied by men versus women can explain gender differences in distress that can result from combining work and family. Another line of research focuses on the meaning of work and parent identities. What follows is a brief discussion of early and recent efforts to apply identity theory to the study of work and family.

Early efforts to apply identity theory to work and family tended to do so in support of the role accumulation hypothesis. Because identities are believed to provide individuals with purpose and behavioral guidance, some have argued that self-esteem and other aspects of psychological well-being are enhanced by having more identities (Sieber, 1974; Thoits, 1986) and by being more strongly committed to all of them (Marks, 1977; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994). Thoits (1986), for example, found that multiple role identities reduced anxiety, depression, and distress. This argument is consistent with the focus of current "expansionist" and "role balance" perspectives (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Marks, 1977; Marks & MacDermid, 2001), which suggest that energy is abundant and expandable and that having multiple roles is related to higher self esteem and enhanced well being. However, research has shown that the relationship between self-enhancement and multiple role occupancy is complex, depending on gender and the quality of roles involved. (See Barnett & Hyde (2001) for a comprehensive review of this research.) Some have argued that, to the extent that identities conflict with each other, being committed to multiple identities can be stressful (Burke, 1991; Desrochers, 2002; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Today, a growing number of researchers, including Simon (1995, 1997) and Pasley (Pasley et al., 2002) are examining the content of identities. Simon (1995) argued that work and family roles have different meanings for women and men. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 employed married parents, she found that the majority of men in her study viewed work and family roles as interdependent and overlapping, and did not report negative consequences (e.g., distress) from combining the two roles. Specifically, economic support was perceived as "synonymous with being a good father and husband" (p. 186), thus allowing men to fulfill the expectations of their parental role by being the family breadwinner. Women, on the other hand, perceived the work and family role as independent such that when performing one role, they could not at the same time perform the other role. Only a minority of the wives perceived economic support as an important part of their role, while the majority reported feeling "pulled in different directions," "constantly needed" or "confused." However, Simon noted that for the five women who perceived work and family as interdependent, their incidence of psychological symptoms was no different from men's. In a later study, Simon (1997) examined the content of work and family identities in greater depth.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Identity salience and work role performance

Lobel and St. Claire (1992) examined the effects of family responsibility and career identity versus family identity salience (i.e., the relative value placed on one's career) on the level of effort expended at work. As expected, those with a high level of career identity salience were

willing to work harder and tended to receive higher merit increases than those with more salient family identities. Their results support the usefulness of career identity salience as a predictor of work effort for both men and women.

Identity salience and family role behavior

Identity salience among new mothers. Nuttbrock and Freudiger (1991) found that new mothers' structural commitment to the mother role (measured as the extent to which the quality of her social support changed as a result of childbirth) predicted personal sacrifice and acceptance of the burdens of motherhood, but only indirectly, through its impact on the salience of the mother identity.

Father identity salience and father involvement. Minton and Pasley (1996) found that aspects of the fathers' identity (competence, satisfaction, and investment in the father role) predicted his involvement after divorce. In a more recent study of married fathers who are raising children, Pasley, Futrix, and Skinner (2002) found that men who believe that their wives view them favorably as fathers tended to be more involved with their children. (To be more precise, Pasley et al. actually measured the psychological centrality of identities rather than their salience. For the purposes of this entry, we treated the two as the same. Although the two concepts are very similar, they are subtly different. For a detailed discussion of these similarities and differences, see Stryker and Serpe, 1994). These studies suggest that the growing literature on father involvement would be well served by giving greater attention to the salience of their parent identities.

Spouse identity and self-esteem. Cast and Burke (1999) found higher self-esteem among respondents whose husbands and wives "verified" their spousal identities. That is, when individuals' evaluations of their own identities as spouses were consistent with evaluations of themselves provided by their husbands and wives, they tended to have higher self-esteem than when there was disagreement. This also seemed to have long-term implications for their marriage. Greater spousal identity verification was associated with a lower likelihood of divorce or separation when re-interviewed years later.

Identity salience and the consequences of combining work and family roles

Role strain and psychological distress. Identity theory contributes to our understanding of the differences in distress levels of men and women who combine work and family roles. In 1992, Thoits proposed that gender differences in the salience or importance of role identities explain gender differences in distress when women and men engage in the same role (e.g., employee). She found that, overall, identity hierarchies were very similar across gender and marital status. For example, across gender and marital status, the three most salient identities were parent, spouse and friend. Although the hierarchies were strikingly similar, within each identity there were some gender and marital differences. The prediction that women would value roles based on primary relationships more highly than men (e.g., parent, spouse, friend, son/daughter) and that men would value roles based on achievement more than women (e.g., worker) was supported only among married participants. The reverse was found among divorced participants.

In particular, divorced women ranked achievement-oriented roles (e.g., employee) higher than married women while divorced men ranked primary relationships (e.g., friend, son, relative) higher than married men. Contrary to expectations, psychological symptoms associated with a particular role did not depend on the position of an identity in an individual's salience hierarchy. The only difference found was that married men benefited more (e.g., experienced fewer psychological symptoms) than their wives from the employee role.

When Thoits examined the psychological effects of role combination, she found that when roles were perceived as interdependent (i.e., one role contributes to the other), the combination of the family and employee role was associated with lower distress levels. Divorced men with custodial and worker roles were significantly less distressed than other individuals whereas divorced women with a custodial role who did not work were significantly more distressed than other individuals. Similarly, married men experienced high distress when they were unemployed and low distress when they were employed. To explain these findings, Thoits suggested that, for married men and divorced men and women, the work role helps to fulfill the familial role as these roles are perceived as interdependent (i.e., because the individual is serving as the breadwinner of the family) (Thoits, 1992).

Work-family conflict. Cinamon and Rich (2002) found that married computer workers and lawyers whose career identities were more salient than their family identities, as well as those who rated both work and family identities as highly salient, had higher work-family conflict than those who placed family above career. Rather than examining the pattern of salience, Desrochers, Hilton and Larwood (2002) treated the salience of career and parent identities as independent variables and examined the extent to which they predict work-family conflict. They found that parent identity salience, but not career identity salience, predicted conflict. Surprisingly, though, parent identity salience was negatively associated with conflict, such that greater importance attached to parenting, the lower the work-family conflict.

Physical health. Wickrama, Conger, Lerenz and Matthews (1995) found that work satisfaction had a greater positive influence on perceived physical health for husbands than wives, whereas parental satisfaction had a greater positive influence on perceived physical health for wives than husbands. However, they were careful to point out that their sample of rural couples was more likely than an urban sample to favor traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, these findings clearly suggest that identity has implications not only for psychological well-being, but also physical well-being.

Identity salience and role segmentation/integration

Much of the recent theory and research on the issue of role segmentation and integration has been grounded in boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996), an approach that is derived in part from identity theory (see entry on Boundary Theory). For example, Ashforth, et al. (2000) have focused on the blurring of roles that may occur when boundaries between work and family roles are permeable (e.g., receiving calls from home while at work) versus impermeable (e.g., personal calls are not allowed at work). With respect to identity salience, a stronger identification with a particular role may increase the likelihood that the role is integrated with other roles, and may increase the reluctance to exit the role. When

roles are integrated, role blurring may result in more confusion and anxiety about which role should be most salient at a particular time. For example, an individual with a strong family identity at home may be unable to focus on his job when a child is at home sick. In contrast to role integration, role segmentation is associated with large discrepancies in role identities. The benefit is that each role is associated with a particular time and place, allowing an individual to immerse oneself completely in each role. The downside is that the contrast between roles makes it more difficult to transition between roles. For instance, an executive with a large discrepancy between the worker and family role may have trouble displaying nurture at home when he or she has worked all day. Ashforth et al. (2000) argued that the role segmentation-role integration continuum is important for understanding the degree to which employees will value organizational solutions to work-family conflict.

Implications for Practice & Research

The works we have reviewed have tended to support identity theory as formulated by Stryker and Burke. However, what seems to be lacking in the literature is an in-depth critique of identity theory (for example, an anonymous reviewer argued that the theory is descriptive, taxonomic, and tautological, but we could find no published critique of the theory, other than a comparison with social identity theory by Hogg et al). We believe that this lack of scrutiny is one of the major challenges that identity theory must address. Another major challenge for identity theory is the problem of multiple identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Although we have reviewed studies that have examined the extent to which multiple role involvement is beneficial for psychological well being and whether identity salience is the reason for different distress levels among males and females, the effect of identity salience on work-family conflict has rarely been studied empirically (see Cinamon & Rich, 2002 and Desrochers et al., 2002 for exceptions). Despite these challenges, given the insights learned from identity research to date, researchers may want to use the theory as a framework for future hypothesis development and testing.

In terms of more practical implications, Friedman, Christensen and DeGroot (1998) suggested that managers should identify where work falls in the spectrum of an individual's priorities in life and experiment with the way in which work is done so that organizational performance is enhanced while time is created for an individual's personal pursuits. Indeed, if research supports the notion that individuals vary in preference for the degree to which role boundaries are segmented versus integrated, companies should not force individuals to blend work and family roles (e.g., working at home so that one can take care of children) without considering the individual needs of the workers (Ashforth et al., 2000). For individuals who prefer greater segmentation between work and family roles, for example, Ashforth et al. suggested that organizations should consider implementing practices that limit early morning or late afternoon meetings, weekend travel, and having employees check emails at home (Ashforth et al., 2000). For individuals who prefer greater integration, on-site childcare or telecommuting options may meet their needs.

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