



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help

Note: This is a short, but difficult, reading. I have highlighted various words and phrases that are either important, or that should jump out to you as things we have covered in the class. However, parts of this reading go beyond what we will ever cover in an Intro course, so do your best to get through it and realize that you may not understand every aspect of what they are saying. In other words, don't get bogged down by the reading—just keep going.

You should pay particular attention to:

- how “the self” relies on social interaction
- how “the self” involves taking oneself as an object of thought
- how “identity” is different from the self

A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity*

Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke

Department of Sociology

Washington State University

* Chapter for *Handbook of Self and Identity*, edited by Mark Leary and June Tangney, Guilford Press, Forthcoming.

A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity

Thoughts on Social Structure

A sociological approach to self and identity begins with the assumption that there is a **reciprocal relationship** between the self and society (Stryker, 1980). The self influences society through the actions of individuals thereby creating groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. And, reciprocally, society influences the self through its **shared language and meanings** that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object. The latter process of reflexivity constitutes the core of selfhood (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Mead, 1934). Because the self emerges in and is reflective of society, the sociological approach to understanding the self and its parts (identities) means that we must also understand the society in which the self is acting, and keep in mind that the self is always acting in a **social context** in which other selves exist (Stryker, 1980). This chapter focuses primarily on the nature of self and identity from a sociological perspective, thus some discussion of society is warranted. The nature of the self and what individuals do depends to a large extent on the society within which they live.

Self and Identity in Sociology

Self

The symbolic interactionist perspective in sociological social psychology sees **the self as emerging out of the mind, the mind as arising and developing out of social interaction**, and patterned social interaction as forming the basis of social structure (Mead, 1934). The mind is the thinking part of the self. It is covert action in which the organism points out meanings to itself and to others. **The ability to point out meanings and to indicate them to others and to itself is made possible by language**, which encapsulates meanings in the form of symbols. When one's self is encapsulated as a set of symbols to which one may respond to itself as an object, as it responds to any other symbol, the self has emerged. The hallmark of this process – of selfhood – is reflexivity. **Humans have the ability to reflect back upon themselves, taking themselves as objects**. They are able to regard and evaluate themselves, to take account of themselves and plan accordingly to bring about future states, to be self-aware or achieve consciousness with respect to their own existence. In this way, humans are a *processual* entity. They formulate and reflect, and this is ongoing.

To be clear, the responses of the self as an object to itself come from the point of view of others to whom one interacts. By taking the role of the other and seeing ourselves for others' perspectives, our responses come to be like others' responses, and the meaning of the self becomes a shared meaning. Thus, paradoxically, as the self emerges as a distinct object, there is at the same time a merger of perspectives of the self and others, and a becoming as one with the others with whom one interacts. This becoming as one is possible through the shared meanings of the objects and symbols to which individuals respond in interaction. In using language, individuals communicate the same meanings to themselves as to others. The self is, thus, both individual and social in character. It works to control meanings to sustain itself, but many of those meanings, including the meanings of the self, are shared and form the basis of interaction with others and ultimately social structure.

Self-Concept. Over time, as humans point out who they are to themselves and to others, they come to develop a concept/view of who they are. Here, humans are an entity that embodies *content* and a

structure. Sociologists have spent considerable time in understanding the content and structure of the self: one's self-concept. Early views of the self-concept were concerned only with self-evaluation. Self-concept often meant self-esteem (one's evaluation of oneself in affective (negative or positive) terms)) (cf., Rosenberg, 1979). To broaden this view, Rosenberg (1979) suggested that there was more to the self-concept than self-esteem. He defined the self-concept as the sum total of our thoughts, feelings, and imaginations as to who we are. Later conceptions elaborated and refined this view suggesting that the self-concept was made up of cognitive components (given the collection of identities) as well as affective components or self-feelings including self-esteem (both worth-based and efficacy-based self-esteem) (Franks & Marolla, 1976; Stryker, 1980).

In general, **the self-concept is the set of meanings we hold for ourselves when we look at ourselves**. It is based on our observations of ourselves, our inferences about who we are, based on how others act toward us, our wishes and desires, and our evaluations' of ourselves. The self-concept includes not only our idealized views of who we are that are relatively unchanging, but also our *self-image* or *working copy* of our self-views that we import into situations and that is subject to constant change and revision based on situational influences (Burke, 1980). It is this *self-image* that guides moment-to-moment interaction, is changed in situated negotiation, and may act back on the more fundamental self-views.

For sociological social psychologists, the self-concept emerges out of the reflected appraisal process (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Although some of our self-views are gained by direct experience with our environment, most of what we know about ourselves is derived from others. According to the reflected appraisal process, which is based on the **"looking glass self"** (Cooley, 1902),¹ **significant others communicate their appraisals of us, and this influences the way we see ourselves**. In a now classic review of studies on the reflected appraisal process, Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) found that rather than our self-concepts resembling the way others actually see us, our self-concepts are filtered through our perceptions and resemble how we think others see us.

Felson (1993) summarizes a program of research in which he has attempted to explain why individuals' are not very accurate in judging what others think of them. Among the causes of the

discrepancy is the apprehension of others to reveal their views. At best they may reveal primarily favorable views rather than both favorable and unfavorable views. Consistent with other research (DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987; Kenney & Albright, 1987), Felson finds that individuals have a better idea of how groups see them than how specific individuals see them. Presumably, individuals' learn the group standards and then apply those standards. In turn, when group members judge individuals, they use the same standards that individuals originally applied to themselves. Thus we find a correspondence in self-appraisals and others appraisals' of the self.

In our investigation of the reflected appraisal process with newly married couples, we find that social status derived from one's position in the social structure also influences the appraisal process. The spouse with the higher status (education, occupation, and income) in the marriage is more likely to not only influence their partner's self-views, but also their partner's views of them (Cast, Stets, & Burke, 1999). Spouses with a lower status in the marriage have less influence on the self-view of their higher status counterparts or on how their higher-status counterparts view them.

Self-Evaluation. The aspect of the self-concept that has received a significant amount of attention in sociological social psychology is the evaluative part of the self-concept, better known as self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). Two dimensions of self-esteem have been identified: *efficacy-based* self-esteem (seeing oneself as competent and capable) and *worth-based* self-esteem (feeling that one is accepted and valued) (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Others have labeled the distinction "inner self-esteem" (being effective) and "outer self-esteem" (acceptance by others) (Franks & Marolla, 1976). As Gecas and Burke (1995) point out, the significant interest in self-esteem is largely due to assuming that high self-esteem is associated with good outcomes such as personal success while low self-esteem is associated with bad outcomes such as deviance. While these associations are a bit misleading since research does not always show such consistency in these outcomes, part of the inconsistency may be rooted, among other things, in measuring self-esteem in global terms rather than more specific terms (Hoelter, 1986; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995).² Nevertheless, self-esteem remains a high profile topic of investigation and has been examined from a variety of different viewpoints: as an *outcome* (Rosenberg,

1979), as a *buffer* against stress (Longmore & DeMaris, 1997), and as a *motive* that directs behavior (Kaplan, 1975; Tesser, 1988).

Cast and Burke (1999) use identity theory as a theoretical framework for the integration of these different conceptualizations of self-esteem. They argue that self-esteem is intimately tied to the identity verification process.³ They point out that: 1) high self-esteem has been found as an outcome of the identity verification process (Burke & Stets, 1999), 2) high self-esteem that is generated from the identity verification process can act as a buffer or resource when the verification process fails, and 3) the desire for self-esteem may be what motivates people to create and maintain situations or relationships that verify one's identity. They also argue that the two components of self-esteem (worth-based and efficacy-based) are each rooted primarily in the different bases of identities. They argue that verification of *group-based* identities has a stronger impact on worth-based self-esteem while verification of *role-based* identities has a stronger impact on efficacy-based self-esteem. Analyzing data from a sample of newly married couples, their results support the integration of the different viewpoints on self-esteem into identity theory.

If (worth-based) self-esteem is a source of motivation, so too is self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy is seeing oneself as a causal agent in one's life. As Bandura (1995) points out, efficacy is a *belief* about one's causative capabilities. Whether one actually has control, objectively, is less relevant than what one perceives to be the case. Like self-esteem, positive outcomes have been associated with high self-efficacy such as effectively coping with life's stresses and adopting good health habits (Bandura, 1995). Our own research finds that identity verification not only enhances feelings of self-worth as noted above, but also feelings of control over one's environment (Burke & Stets, 1999). Some have also recently linked self-esteem with efficacy by arguing that people with high self-esteem should also tend to perceive themselves as competent and, in turn, exhibit more involvement in social movements to try to effect social change (Owens & Aronson, 2000).

Identity

Because the self emerges in social interaction within the context of a complex, organized, differentiated society, it has been argued that the self must be complex, organized and differentiated as

well, reflecting the dictum that the “self reflects society” (Stryker, 1980). This idea is rooted in James’ (1890) notion that **there are as many different selves as there are different positions that one holds in society** and thus different groups who respond to the self. This is where identity enters into the overall self. **The overall self is organized into multiple parts (identities), each of which is tied to aspects of the social structure.** One has an identity, an “internalized positional designation” (Stryker, 1980, p. 60), for each of the different positions or role relationships the person holds in society. Thus, self as father is an identity, as is self as colleague, self as friend, and self as any of the other myriad of possibilities corresponding to the various roles one may play. The identities are the meanings one has as a group member, as a role-holder, or as a person. What does it *mean* to be a father, or a colleague, or a friend? These meanings are the *content* of the identities.

Most interaction is between persons who occupy positions (statuses) in groups or organizations in society. Interaction is thus not between whole persons, but between aspects of persons having to do with their roles and memberships in particular groups or organizations: their identities. As a parent, we talk with our children. As a spouse, we talk to our partner. As a member of an organization, we talk to our employer. An assumption and implication of the above is that any identity is always related to a corresponding counter-identity (Burke, 1980). **When one claims an identity in an interaction with others, there is an alternative identity claimed by another to which it is related. The husband identity is enacted as it relates to the wife identity, the teacher identity is played out in relation to the student identity and so forth.** In each of these cases, there are things that are not talked about because they are not relevant to that identity, and there are things that are more likely to be talked about given the identity that is currently being claimed. There are various styles of interaction that are appropriate in each situation for each identity. We move into and out of these modalities very easily, and generally with very little thought. Often we operate in two or more identities at a time as in being both a friend and colleague.



STUDYDADDY

Get Homework Help From Expert Tutor

[Get Help](#)