Chapter 11

Self, Identity, and Interaction in an Ecology of Identities

LYNN SMITH-LOVIN

Arguably, one of the most significant theoretical accomplishments of the 1960's was Sheldon Stryker's (1968, 1980) linking of symbolic interactionist ideas with mainstream sociological concerns about social structure. In a sense, Stryker rescued the study of symbolic interaction from a somewhat counterproductive fascination with idiosyncratic, creative, atypical behavioral productions in ill-defined, unconstraining behavioral settings. He reasserted the ability of the basic symbolic interactionist principle—that society shapes self which then shapes social behavior—to inform a powerful theoretical view of how social structure and the individuals that exist within it effect and constitute one another. Following role theory in concentrating on the stable, reoccurring interactions in our social system, Stryker once again made social psychology relevant to the mainstream concerns of our discipline. By linking the role patterns with the internalized meanings that roles had for individuals, he provided the connection between social structure, meaning and action that drives structural symbolic interaction today.

Particularly important was research conducted by Stryker and Richard Serpe (1982; Serpe, 1987) that developed an explicitly ecological understanding of the multiple-identity self. This work showed how a change in environment (from high school to college) led to two parallel developments. First, identities motivated students to seek out groups in the new environment that would allow the expression of identities that had been salient in their high school lives. Individuals largely recreated themselves in the new environment. Second, the social structure of the new environment had an impact on the selves that could be sustained in that setting. When groups were not available to reaffirm old identities, those identities withered and decreased in salience. This dynamic ecology of individual agency and social structural resources gave us a powerful pictures of how selves and social environments sustain and shape one another.

We have not seen substantial development in this very productive line of work in the past couple of decades. In the 1970's, David Heise (1978, 1979) introduced another very powerful idea into structural symbolic interactionist thought—affect control theory. He

used William Power's (1973) control model to show how identity meanings acted as a reference signal to control behavior. The emphasis in this new theory was on how stable identity meanings, acquired through past experiences in one's culture and evoked through definitions of social situations, were compared to current impressions that were produced by social interaction. The central premise of the theory was that people acted to maintain the alignment of their identity meanings with the impressions created by the local social interaction, either through actions or through cognitive reinterpretation of events. Peter Burke (1991) later developed his own version of this control model in the context of identity theory.

The focus of work in structural symbolic interaction shifted rather completely from a central concern with the ecology of the self and society to a research program that focused on one identity at a time and how it was maintained in interaction. In a sense, affect control theory had no model of the self. It implicitly accepted Stryker's theoretical view of a multiple-identity, hierarchically organized self that made predictable choices about what identity would be salient within the context of any given situation. The control theories of identity were concerned only with the behaviors, attributions, and emotions that occurred once a situation had been defined (and relevant self-identities within that situation determined) (Smith-Lovin and Heise 1988). In a sense, we had a theory of social situations, not of the relationship between individuals and the social structures in which they were embedded.

The same focus largely absorbed the attention of Burke and his colleagues who pursued the more cognitive identity control theory (c.f., Burke, 1991; Stets, 1995; Stets & Burke, 1996). As Stryker and Burke (2000) note in their recent review of identity theory, the "external" and "internal" threads of structural symbolic interaction have proceeded relatively independent of one another, and more emphasis has been given to the latter in recent years. But, just as many of us turned to the interrelationship of emotion, identity and action in the late 1980's, it seems that it is time to once again link social systems with selves and the emotional experiences that they engender. In their review, Stryker and Burke point to the need to develop the potential of a multiple-identity self within the context of our theories. Furthermore, in our research programs, we find that we cannot interpret individuals' actions in a substantial number of situations without analyzing the multiple identities that they hold and how those identities may operate together to form lines of social action. Several of us, relatively independently, have turned to this theoretical puzzle—Stryker (2000) in his consideration of social movement participation, Stets (1995) in her analysis of simultaneously held role- and personal- identities, Burke (1995; this volume) in his analysis of subjects in network exchange experiments and in small task groups, myself in an analysis of mixed emotions (Smith-Lovin, 2002), and a number of psychological researchers as well. It is time to tackle systematically the question of when and how people occupy multiple identities simultaneously. Doing so will help us re-connect our work to important substantive issues like social movement participation and to the important work that people like Peggy Thoits (1983, 1986, this volume) are doing on the ways in which multiple identities affect mental distress and other important outcomes.

In this chapter, I attempt to break the broad question of how multiple identities operate within situations into a manageable set of more specific issues. This formulation allows us to use some well-formed ideas from other research traditions to link social structure and individuals into an ecology of identities. I can then make some rather straightforward arguments, based on affect control theory, about how multiple identities will produce emotions and actions.

Questions, Definitions, and Scope

I focus on three basic questions. First, what conditions determine the structure of available identities within a social system, and therefore the likelihood that social actors have relatively complex (multiple identity) selves? Second, when do people occupy two or more identities within the same social situation? Third, how do those simultaneously held identities produce lines of social action and emotional responses?

Before proceeding, I will clarify a few definitions and scope conditions. I use the term "identity" in a somewhat broader sense than Stryker's (1980) identity theory definition. I will include (1) the role-identities associated with positions in the social structure (Stryker, 1980), (2) the social identities that are associated with membership in groups and organizations (Stryker, 2000), and (3) the category memberships that come from identification with some characteristic, trait or attribute (Turner, 1985). For example, when we asked 38 members of the university community at Arizona about their identities in an experiential sampling study I conducted in 1995, they reported 559 distinct identities. These ranged from positional role-identities with clear role alters (e.g., bartender, landlord, sister), to activity-based identities with ambiguous alters (e.g., artist, camper, music lover), to social identities based on group membership (e.g., church member, Greek), to salient personal characteristics (e.g., African-American, believer, responsible person). I argue that this wide range of social entities should be studied together because they represent the ways that people think about themselves in situations. Since cognitive labeling and affective meaning are inextricably intertwined, and lead inevitably to processes of control and identity maintenance (MacKinnon, 1994), I argue that these self-labels should be treated in a single theoretical statement.

In the theoretical argument here, I hope to talk about identities that operate at the same level of the perceptual control system, rather than those that represent higher or lower levels of reference signal. Both Heise (1979) and Burke (Tsushima & Burke, 1999) have noted that multiple levels of control system exist, with shifts at higher levels effectively re-setting the reference levels that are operative at lower levels. Here, I attempt to analyze the relationships among those identities whose meanings directly determine the generation of lines of action and emotional responses to the actions of others, rather than those at higher levels. A rough operational criterion would be the nouns that people might use spontaneously (or when asked) to name themselves within the context of a situation.

What are the conditions, then, that make it more likely that an actor will occupy simultaneously more than one identity in the context of the same situation? I begin by using base rate logic (Mayhew, 1974). Before we explore more complex social processes, it makes sense to consider what conditions will make it more likely *by chance alone* that a person will occupy more than one identity simultaneously. This baseline logic requires that we step back from the typical concerns of individual-level or even interactional-level analysis, and think of identities as entities in a larger social structure. We are asking, essentially, when people are more likely to have more complex selves. Given a larger number of potential self-identities, it is more likely by chance that an actor will enter a situation where more than one of these identities is relevant and operates as an active identity standard for interaction. Logically, multiple identity occupancy should occur more often when the self is relatively complex (that is, when the individual has a relatively large number of identities in his or her salience hierarchy).

Social Structure and Complex Selves

So, the question becomes: when do people have more or less complex selves? The tentative answers to such a question come from our theoretical understanding of what identities are: they are, at their core, the internalizations of role-identities, group memberships, and individually differentiating characteristics. All three of these identity sources have networks as their source. In the case of role-identities, it is a network relation with an alter that defines a position within a social structure that has rights, responsibilities, and behavioral expectations vis a vis some other position (Stryker, 1980). In the case of group membership, it is a membership tie to a group of alters who are similar in some defined way (Hogg, 1992; Turner, 1985; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the case of personal identities, it is network ties with others that create salient differences (Turner, 1985; Berger, Cohen & Zelditch, 1972).

Notice that homophily—the tendency to associate with similar others—does not create self-identities when it is perfectly strong. Most small, isolated, indigenous societies had a name for themselves that we translate roughly as "the people." Race or ethnicity does not appear as a salient identity until one is embedded in a system with *other* national or ethnic groups. It is the contrast, the interaction with dissimilar others, that makes a personal identity out of some personal characteristic (Berger et al., 1972). When homogeneity on a characteristic is very high, we get a taken-for-granted orientation toward that characteristic rather than an identification with it. Perhaps this is why all societies have age and sex categorization systems, and correspondingly salient self-identities for these characteristics (Sanday, 1976). These are the only two features where interactions among non-similar others are certain to occur within even the smallest, simplest society.

The clear dependence of self-complexity on network relations is very useful, for there is a substantial literature about how features of social systems link to network characteristics. The first principle upon which we can draw is the well-known relationship between size and differentiation. In virtually any domain—from the entire social system to the most ill-defined voluntary group—larger size leads to increased internal differentiation, with a concomitant rise in role differentiation (Mayhew, 1983;; Mayhew, James & Childers 1972; Mayhew & Levinger 1976; Mayhew, Levinger, McPherson & James, 1972; Kasarda, 1974). Relations between actors shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft as systems grow large. In larger systems, we interact with those who are functionally interrelated but different from us; in smaller systems, we interact with those who are similar.

McPherson and Ranger-Moore (1992) have made a closely related argument about the dimensionality of the salient socio-demographic space that he calls "Blau space." They note that there are few characteristics that distinguish individuals in small, technologically simple societies (primarily age, sex and physical capabilities). As society grows in size and scope, however, the scale of the system requires other dimensions of social life such as wealth, education, and other characteristics to organize social interaction. Perhaps more importantly, McPherson argues that salient dimensions of social differentiation become less correlated in large, modern systems, leading not just to greater diversity in the system as a whole, but allowing the development of distinctive regions (niches) that may be less connected with the rest of the system.

The second general social law that we can use in our argument here is homophily, the fact that social contact among individuals is a declining function of distance in Blau space (McPherson Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). Homophily organizes social networks in all known human groups, but the character of the social structure created by homophily

changes as systems grow and social dimensions become less correlated. The decreasing correlation of relevant social dimensions has the effect of creating cross-cutting social circles: homophilous interactions on one dimension become more likely to create contacts with alters who are dissimilar on another (Blau 1977).

Both the size—differentiation principle (which should have its largest effect on role-identities) and the unfolding of Blau space in larger, technologically advanced systems (which should have its largest effect on membership- and category-based identities) lead us to predict that there will be more identities and people will have more complex selves in larger social systems. Of course, the differentiation in larger systems also will create lower density of interactions among actors (and segmentation of that interaction). These processes will work against the relationship between system size and identity structure complexity. But even with considerable homophily of interaction, the greater differentiation of larger systems should produce a less unified, more differentiated self structure.

An Ecology of Identities

We can develop a somewhat more subtle view of the relationship between social systems and self structures by using the ecological framework developed by scholars who study the interplay of population distributions, networks and social groups. McPherson (1983) developed an ecological theory that should apply to any social entity that (1) spreads through homophilous network contacts and (2) involves some level of competition for the time or energy of actors. Entities as wide ranging as group memberships (McPherson, 1983; McPherson, Popielarz & Drobnic, 1992; Popielarz & McPherson, 1995), occupations (Rotolo & McPherson, 2001), musical taste communities (Mark, 1998a), cultural traits (Mark, 1998b) and religions (Chaves & Giesal, 2001) have been successfully analyzed using this framework. Since identities within a self structure should meet these criteria, I argue that an ecology of identity is a useful model for examining the relationship between system-level characteristics and the range, diversity and overlap of identities.

In a recent simulation study, McPherson (1999) analyzes the relationship between the level of homophily in a system and a number of outcomes that are directly related to identity—the number of distinct groups, the heterogeneity within groups, and membership overlap (the extent to which actors in the system are members of multiple groups simultaneously). Remembering that "group" here can represent any social entity that spreads through homophilous networks and competes for time and energy, all of these features should be related to the self complexity of actors within the system. In the simulations, a high level of homophily suppresses the extent of overlap of groups and the diversity of people within the groups. Effects on group size and the number of groups (net of system size) are minimal, primarily because homophily has countervailing direct and indirect forces. The direct effect of homophily is to create more, smaller groups. But homophily also has an effect on tie stability—homophilous ties are more likely to survive for longer periods—and the effect of tie stability is to make groups less numerous and larger. When homophily's direct effects on group size and number, and its indirect effects through tie stability, are taken into account, the net effect is near zero.

Therefore, any impact on the complexity of self structures from homophily should come from the overlap of groups or the diversity of groups, both of which should make for a more complex self. Homophily within a social system is likely to be created when socio-demographic dimensions are more correlated, since homophily on multiple dimensions

can be optimized simultaneously in such a system. Under such conditions, groups (and other social entities like communities that hold similar tastes, engage in similar activities, etc.) will tend to be small and less diverse, leading to a simpler self.

Selves in Networks

By focusing on the dependence of selves and their multiple identities on network ties, we can make use of the extensive literature on density and diversity of networks in different regions of social space to draw implications about self structure. For example, we know from Peter Blau's (1977) structural analysis that numerically smaller categories of people will have more out-group ties than those in larger categories (e.g., African-Americans have more ties with Anglos than Anglos do with African- Americans). Actors higher in the stratification system are more likely to have diverse networks that range further through the social system than those who are lower in the stratification system (Lin, 2001). Each of these well-established empirical facts has an implication for self complexity. Individuals occupying numerically smaller categories will have more complex selves than individuals from numerically larger categories, because they interact with more people who are different from them. Higher status actors will have more complex selves than lower status actors, because they have networks that extend into more distant reaches of the social system.

Having used properties of social systems to draw implications about when actors will have complex selves, I now turn to the more familiar domain of interaction to suggest how these complex selves will be enacted in actual situations.

Complexity of Situations

A complex self is a necessary condition for multiple identities to be enacted in a given situation. Increasing self complexity may make such multiple identity enactment more likely by chance. But there is also the possibility that interactions are segregated in ways that lead complex selves to be played out in relatively simple single-identity interactions. Indeed, Bernice Pescosolido and Beth Rubin (2000) have pointed out mechanisms that vary with historical time that should operate with a countervailing force. They have suggested that the historical trends that I outlined in the section above have progressed beyond an unfolding of salient dimensions to a post-modern society where individuals mostly bridge structural holes, connecting non-overlapping entities. In such a post-modern world, where most network ties are bridging ties, individuals would have complex selves but would seldom encounter situations in which multiple identities were relevant.

Pescsolido and Rubin (2000) suggest that the primary mechanism driving the post-modern "spoke" network structure, where individual actors act as bridging ties between otherwise unconnected groups, is the stability of ties. If ties are stable, long-term relations, the fact that most group memberships are recruited through network ties should lead one bridging tie to become many. Social groups will become cross-cutting social circles if ties persist long enough for new ties to build on the first connection between the groups. Indeed, McPherson's (1999) simulation studies of system-level parameters and their effects on group structure show a clear, strong positive relationship between tie stability and the membership overlap of groups. These simulations also show that tie stability fosters larger, more diverse groups that survive longer (although in smaller numbers). The

simulation results from these system-level relationships lead to our first insights for situation-level predictions. A tie that has persisted for longer periods of time is more likely to evoke multiple, overlapping group memberships and, net of other social forces, to result in the simultaneous operation of multiple identities.

The suggestion that interactions in multiplex relationships are more likely to involve multiple identities may sound definitional, but it is not. Stryker's (1968, 1980) original specification of the basic Meadian principle—society shapes self shapes social behavior—focused on role choice behavior. He argued that commitment to an identity (the extent of one's social network ties that are dependent on that identity) influenced salience of an identity in the self hierarchy, which then influenced which role-identity one *chose* to enacted when a given situation allowed for the enactment of more than one self-identity. The clear implication of this thinking is that when multiple identities are options in a given interaction, a choice will be made to enact *one* of them (the most salient one) in preference to the others. A multiplex relationship to an alter does not require a multiple identity interaction. On the contrary, the research traditions spawned by Stryker, Heise and all of their structural symbolic interactionist colleagues typically assume that one identity will prevail and dominate a well-defined interactional setting. Here, I loosen that (often implicit) assumption. Therefore, the suggestion that multiplex relationships are more likely than interactions with alters with whom one has only a single relation to evoke multiple identity standards for behavior is a base rate prediction from the structure of the relationship.

This structural relationship applies most clearly to identities formed from role relationships and, perhaps, from group membership. But multiple identities can also be evoked in a situation by interactions with diverse others. Here, one can make use of arguments about salience of status characteristics in expectation states theory. When interactants are differentiated by one or more noticeable characteristics, those characteristics are likely to become salient (in the sense of organizing expectations and action)—in other words, they are likely to evoke identities that will operate as reference standards in the context of the interaction.

We know that most interactions occur in the context of larger institutional foci, and that the composition of these settings has powerful effects on the direct connections among actors within those settings. McPherson and I have shown that most of the observed similarity among friendship ties that form in groups, for example, is due to the opportunity structure of the group rather than individual choices that are made within the group (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1985, 1986). Therefore, we can think of setting-level versions of our earlier social system differentiation arguments to predict when interactions will involve alters who differ in some socially-important characteristic (either roles or category memberships): people who interact in large, diverse groups or institutional settings with low internal correlations among social characteristics will be more likely to be embedded in interactions with diverse others, and to occupy multiple identities within those interactions.

Up to this point I have attempted to answer the first two questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, using information from social ecology and network theory to suggest when multiple indentities will be available in self structures and operative within situations. I now move onto more social psychological processes to discuss how multiple identities will be processed in a situation where they are relevant and psychologically accessed. Here, I will draw more explicitly on the "internal" branch of recent identity theories.

Multiple Identities and Identity Standards

As Stryker and Burke (2000) noted in their recent review article, the "internal" branches of structural symbolic interaction—affect control theory and identity control theory—largely assumed the problem of multiple identities away, by assuming that one identity becomes paramount in a given interaction and that actors operate to maintain that identity. As we have encountered the obvious shortcomings of this theoretical position, some intermediate solutions have evolved to deal with multiple identities. Affect control theorists, largely following the work of Chris Averett from the late 1970's, have added qualifiers to role-identities (Averett & Heise 1987; Smith, 1999). For example, socio-demographic characteristics can be combined with identities to create amalgams like "a Black Doctor" or " a Rich CEO." The fundamental meanings of these qualified identities can be predicted very accurately using the same empirical paradigm that affect control theory uses to estimate meanings in general: the meanings of both the identity and the qualifying characteristic are assessed on the three dimensional structure (evaluation, potency and activity) developed by Osgood and his colleagues (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957, Osgood, May & Miron, 1975) to measure affective meaning. The meaning of the composite is assessed using the same scales. Then the meaning of the composite is regressed on the meanings of the identity and qualifier in isolation to develop an empirically derived model of how the two combine to form a new fundamental meaning for the composite identity. Not surprisingly, when the attribute closely matches the identity in meaning, the identity is not changed significantly by the addition of a qualifier (e.g., a rich CEO). In this case, the qualifying characteristic is already included in the prototypical meaning of the identity, and is reflected in its affective meaning within the culture. When the qualifier *is* significantly different in meaning, the resulting amalgam (a weighted average of the two) can be substantially different from either of te original meanings. This, then, is one possibility of handling at least some identity combinations—those that link one central identity with some additional, atypical socio-demographic qualifier.

A simple averaging of meanings is not likely to capture the ways in which people operate with multiple identities in all situations. However, there is good reason why it seems to work fairly well as a provisional first step. In the ecology of identities that I discuss in the earlier sections, it is likely that identities that are commonly linked within social systems (i.e., are held simultaneously by a relatively large number of actors within those social systems) have similar meanings in the three dimensional evaluation-potency-activity space. If this were not true, the co-occurrence would lead to pressure for change in the cultural meanings of these identities over time, as we saw people who occupied those identities behave in ways that maintained a very different set of meanings (the other, co-present identity). Therefore, identities that are simultaneously held are likely to be similar in meaning. This pattern is implied strongly by the control system that is necessary to maintain these identities.

When identities are relatively close in meaning, they can be maintained simultaneously by similar actions, no matter what the alters' responses in the context of the situation. Since it is the meaning in the three-dimensional space that determines the actual processing of the event, two identities that are close in the meaning space are *effectively* the same identity. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that two simultaneously held identities that are close in meaning might easily be combined into a slightly different, composite identity standard that will then be maintained through interaction. This will be the typical situation when multiple identities are evoked.

Consider, however, the relatively unusual case where two identities *are* quite different in meaning, but are simultaneously evoked by the situation. In this case, actions (by self or alter) that maintain one identity will be disruptive to the other. In the conceptual language of affect control theory, deflection will result. Since any (weighted) average of the two identities will create a composite that is quite distant in the three-dimensional meaning space from either of the original identities, such an amalgam is unlikely to occur. If we assume that actors may intermittently attend more or less to various identities that they hold within the course of an interaction, such a composite, being quite distant from either of the original identities in meaning, would lead to considerable deflection when one or the other gained temporary foregrounding in cognitive processing. Indeed, the deflection might *create* the attentional shifts that would shift attention toward the individual identities.

A more realistic view would reject the central processing model that currently dominates our models of human psychology, and replace it with a connectionist model (Humphreys & Kashima, 2002; Robinson, this volume). There are several indications in recent theoretical discussions that a connectionist model might be more consistent with the new challenges introduced by multiple identity standards. The distributed representations that are possible within the connectionist model are well suited to characterizing a multiple-identity self. And the parallel processing offers a potential answer to the problem of how multiple identities operate within a given situation. Multiple aspects of the self—multiple role-identities that are potentially relevant to the situation, or a mix of more general self-conceptions and specific role-identity meanings—can be activated by a situation. Events can be perceived and processed simultaneously from the point of view of multiple identities.

If identities rather disparate in meaning are processed in parallel, maintenance in one will result in deflection for the other. To the extent that deflection is experienced psychologically as a sense that the world is unpredictable, not right, or disturbing, one would expect stress to result. Perhaps there also might be a heightened probability of leaving the interaction. One phenomenon that this parallel multiple-identity processing could explain is the common experience of mixed emotions (Smith-Lovin, 2002). If our control models are correct, emotions are experienced primarily as the result of the confirmation or disconfirmation of role-identities that are activated within a setting. If an actor is occupying more than one identity simultaneously, and experiencing events from those multiple perspectives, it is natural that a mixture of emotions (some of which might be quite different in character) would be felt as a result of events. For example, a directive action that would support the identity of "judge" might produce negative deflection on the evaluation and positive deflection on the potency dimension for "woman." This might produce a mixture of feelings of being tense (the judge) and being bitchy (the woman).[1]

I will note in conclusion that the connectionist representation of identity processing is also quite consistent with affect control theory's view of the relationship between individuals and the culture from which they derive identity meanings. Consider the view that each individual represents a variety of self-conceptions (identities) within a parallel distributed processing system, and that the meanings associated with these self-conceptions are shared with other individuals and represented symbolically by cultural artifacts like books, films and language use. This distributed cognition model captures several features

[1] These results are from affect control theory simulations using Program INTERACT, which is available on the web at www.indiana.edu/heise/socpsych.

that are central to affect control theory and other sociological theories that grew out of Meadian symbolic interactionism. First, it accurately represents the relationship between the individual and the collective. Individual meanings are developed out of contact with society (in both its personal and artifactual forms). Furthermore, individuals act as both learners, carriers and (within limits) innovators of cultural meanings. Therefore, the ideas presented in this chapter connect to the social system level in two ways. I use ecological theory to suggest the connections among identities that are created by the complex selves that individuals create under varying social structures. Then, I use a connectionist model of individual processing that more accurately represents how individual actors operate as part of an interconnected cultural system. This connectionist model shows how actors process multiple parts of a social system simultaneously in their own interactions, carrying partial representations of a larger interconnected cultural system in their self structures.

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