

PETER J. BURKE AND JAN E. STETS

IDENTITY THEORY



Identity Theory

All people derive particular identities from their roles in society, the groups they belong to, and their personal characteristics. Introduced almost thirty years ago, identity theory is a social psychological theory in the field of sociology that attempts to understand identities, their sources in interaction and society, their processes of operation, and their consequences for interaction and society. The theory brings together in a single framework the central roles of both meaning and resources in human interaction and purpose. This book describes identity theory, its origins, the research that supports it, and its future direction. It covers the relation between identity theory and other related theories as well as the nature and operation of identities. In addition, the book discusses the multiple identities that individuals hold from their multiple positions in society and as well as the multiple identities activated by many people interacting in groups and organizations. And, it covers the manner in which identities offer both stability and change to individuals. Co-authored by the developers of the theory, this book accessibly presents decades of research in a single volume, making the full range of this powerful new theory understandable to readers at all levels.

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Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets

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To our students and to the students who follow them.

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Preface

This book had its beginnings almost fifteen years ago when we were on sabbatical at the University of Iowa. Over the years, we kept promising ourselves that we would get back to finishing it, but inevitably other research projects, journal articles, and book chapter obligations got in the way. Those who tend to write research articles will understand this. This past year we took the Nike slogan “Just Do It!” seriously and began a flurry of writing that culminated in this book. Ironically, the long delay has proven to be beneficial for this book. Over the years, our ideas and work in identity theory have matured theoretically and methodologically, and we have discovered some fascinating patterns given our empirical results. These insights keep us excited in forging ahead to discover more. Thus, on the one hand, the current book is much better, more developed, and more complete than it would have been if we wrote it many years earlier. On the other hand, in taking time out to write this book, we realized that there was much more that needed to be developed in identity theory. This realization makes it clear that we are working with a rich theory that has still more to say about the self and the self-society relationship.

We admit that an important reason behind writing this book at this time is to give scholars within sociology and across the social sciences a clear and organized statement on identity theory in sociological social psychology. To date, no such book exists. Over time, we became increasingly frustrated with this fact, so we decided it was time to provide one. Identity theory research has been scattered across numerous journals, book chapters, and conference papers, and we wanted to provide a place where scholars could obtain a clear and organized understanding of the theory. We think we have accomplished this goal although our readers are the ultimate judge of this.

We also think it is important to make this theory more accessible to a wide array of scholars and even to those outside of the academy who simply wish to learn more about the self. We hope we have come close to meeting this loftier goal.

We received much help and encouragement in writing this book. We are especially grateful to the students in our graduate social psychology seminar at the University of California, Riverside. The students read each of the chapters and provided us with useful feedback. The book is better because of their insights, and we thank each of them, including Emily Asencio, Michael Carter, Allison Cantwell, Christine Cerven, Jesse Fletcher, Michael Harrod, Richard Niemeyer, Shelley Osborn, and Yvonne Thai. They are much relieved that this is finally in print!

We also are indebted to George McCall who wrote the foreword. We have always admired his work, and we have learned much from him. We also would like to thank Sheldon Stryker. The work that served as the basis for this book all began with Sheldon's ideas about the nature of identities and the relationship between identity and society. His support and encouragement have meant a great deal. Together, Sheldon Stryker and George McCall were the earliest thinkers on identity theory in sociology. We hope we have added some important ideas to their already forward-looking thinking. And we hope that students of identity theory will continue to push this theory theoretically, methodologically, and empirically so that we have a better understanding of self and the intricate interplay of self and society.

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Foreword

For more than thirty years now, Peter Burke has been perhaps the most insightful symbolic interactionist around, as his emphasis on the correlated meaning of identities and of behaviors (ideas consolidated for most of that time within an adaptation of William Powers's perceptual control theory) has allowed Burke not only to incorporate earlier thinking about identities (such as my own) but also to conduct a fruitful program of empirical research on these previously airy topics. Throughout this extensive period, Burke has enjoyed numerous coauthorships, but for nearly half of those years, his most consistent collaborator by far has been Jan Stets, his close colleague and wife. For these two to have jointly produced the current volume on identity theory is a most fortunate development for every potential reader.

The concept of identities (i.e., who one is) is best developed within structural symbolic interaction theories, of course, but Burke's differentiating fundamental insight lies in applying to identities Powers's perceptual control theory—that for human beings it is not the control of output or behavior that matters (as it does in most cybernetic theories) so much as the control of perceptions (or input). That is to say, humans maintain a steady and stable environment in the face of disturbances, and they do so by changing their actions (output) to make their perceptions (input) match a reference standard. In what seems a simple move, Burke makes measured identities serve as such a reference point, and from there he and his collaborators elaborate a rich and powerful theory. Understanding and accepting these ideas is difficult for most social scientists because they are so unfamiliar. Burke and Stets do a masterful job of explicating these basic ideas that are so central to their version of identity theory.

Burke has elsewhere contended that what best sets apart many contemporary theories in social psychology is that they have developed, not through the thinking of one eminent theorist, but rather through cumulative testing and building in systematic agendas of research. Key here is that “the ideas in these theories are subject to continuous testing through active programs of research” (Burke 2006c, p. xi). Indeed, over the past couple of decades the Burke/Stets research group has been arguably the most productive we have in sociological social psychology, conducting a systematic and mature program of both survey and laboratory research that supports and extends identity theory. It is one of the greatest strengths of this book that Burke and Stets demonstrate in such detail just how this program of empirical research serves to test, elaborate, and expand the core theoretical model.

In fact, this book seeks to pull together for the first time—and to build upon—the many articles and chapters that constitute their highly ambitious and compelling program of theoretical development and empirical research. Burke and Stets systematically and clearly explicate that program—a real challenge in view of its very size, involving as it does at least twenty-seven different coauthors and some twenty different publication outlets. Many readers who are familiar with only one or a few contributions of this program will find quite astonishing the scope, integrity, and power of identity theory that receives full systematic exposition here for the very first time.

The first three chapters of this book nicely assemble, explicate, and evaluate all the background concepts the authors will need. Chapter 1 locates the idea of identities relative to the key concepts of structural symbolic interaction—such as self, language, and interaction. All three of these are subtly transformed within identity theory, but especially the concept of interaction, which has to be viewed as taking place among identities rather than among persons and centering on the meanings of the behaviors rather than the behaviors themselves. Chapter 2 reviews the historical roots of identity theory, not only in symbolic interaction, but also, just as crucially, in the cybernetics perspective. Chapter 3 builds on these historical roots to examine how contemporary versions of identity theory actually developed, culminating (thus far) in Burke’s perceptual control theory emphasis.

Chapter 4 is the heart of the book, in which Burke and Stets explicate their fundamental perceptual control theory of identities—with its implications and explanations for stress and self-esteem—and review the research program’s many studies on that model’s central process of identity-verification.

The following five chapters relate adaptations of that core model to deal with major and quite obvious complications that simple model faces; and in spelling out each of those elaborations, Burke and Stets helpfully review their empirical support within the extensive program of research.

The final chapter confronts questions of where that theoretical development might next go and how the research program might adapt to those directions. Closely related to these two emphases, an appendix usefully details

past and current measures of the major identity concepts—useful because the Burke/Stets program of research has been so extensive and methodologically variable that many researchers need a good road map.

In summary, this book not only enjoys the most expert authorship but also pulls together and systematically explicates the cumulative theoretical research tradition of identity theory, perhaps the most significant in sociological social psychology today. Every scholar (current or prospective) in any branch of social psychology could profit immensely by a careful reading of this most important and timely book.

George J. McCall

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Identity Theory

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1

Agency and Social Structure

What does it mean to be who you are? An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. For example, individuals have meanings that they apply to themselves when they are a student, worker, spouse, or parent (these are roles they occupy), when they are a member of a fraternity, when they belong to the Democratic Party, when they are Latino (these are memberships in particular groups), or when they claim they are outgoing individuals or moral persons (these are personal characteristics that identify themselves as unique persons). People possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups, and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of society. Identity theory seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim; how these identities relate to one another for any one person; how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts, and feelings or emotions; and how their identities tie them in to society at large.

Identities characterize individuals according to their many positions in society, and it is important to note as we move through the chapters in this book that both the individual and society are linked in the concept of identity. In a broad sense, this is a book about the relationship between the individual and society. Although much of our focus will be on the individual, it is always to be remembered that the individual exists within the context of the social structure. As Cooley (1902) pointed out, the individual and society are two sides of the same coin. Like Coleman (1990), Stryker (1980 [2002]), and others, it is our view that society (social structure) is created

by the actions of individuals, though it is recognized that these actions are produced in the context of the social structure they create and are influenced by this context. There is, thus, an elaborate system of mutual influences between characteristics of the individual and characteristics of society. This being true, we need to understand both the nature of the individuals who are creating society as well as the nature of the society in which the individuals are acting.

The dependence of society on the individuals that make it up can be seen in the following thought experiments. Imagine a society in which the average intelligence or IQ was 60—that is, a society with individuals who are very different from the individuals in our own society, whose average IQ is 100. Most of these individuals could barely take care of themselves, let alone form the complex web of social relations we take for granted. Such a society would be nothing like our own; change the nature of the individuals and the nature of society changes. A similar thought experiment shows the dependence of the individual on the society in which he or she lives. Imagine the kind of individual you might become if you lived in a changed (different) society, for example, Nazi Germany or in an Eskimo clan at the turn of the century. Imagine how different you would become growing up in such a society; the nature of the individual depends upon the society in which he or she lives.

It is on the first half of this picture that we will concentrate: the nature of the individuals and the basis of their actions and action choices, that is, their motivations. However, we do not intend to neglect the social structural side of the picture entirely, for the nature of the individuals and what they do depends in large part on the social structural positions in which they are located. What we have to say in these chapters is built on the emerging perspective known as structural symbolic interaction (Stryker 1980 [2002]).

Some Thoughts on Social Structure

Sociologists are interested in understanding the nature of social structure—its forms and patterns, the ways it develops and transforms itself. We have always been somewhat surprised, however, to learn that sociologists often do not have the same phenomenon in mind when talking about social structure and sometimes end up talking past one another. For some, social structure is an idea about how the behavior of individuals ought to be patterned. For others, it is the actual patterns of behavior of those individuals. Initially, we want to emphasize the latter position and thus distinguish between social structure and ideas about social structure.¹ We also want to be clear that in discussing patterns of behavior we have available many different levels of analysis in looking at those patterns, which is a key point in understanding the link between the individual and social structure. At one level, we can look at the patterns of behavior of one individual over time and come to

know that individual, and by pooling several such patterns across similar individuals, we can come to know individuals of a certain type. This does not tell us about social structure. At another level, we can look at the patterns of behavior across and between individuals such as store clerks and shoppers to see how those patterns fit with the patterns of others such as other store clerks and higher management to create the larger patterns of behavior of the whole store. At a higher level still, we can look at how different stores relate to one another and to the companies that supply them. It is these larger, interindividual pattern and intergroup patterns that can be thought to constitute social structure.

In this book, we will be talking about how people act to protect and verify their conceptions of who they are. In this vein, for example, Jason, a scientist, may act in ways that make it clear to himself, as well as to others, that he is careful, analytic, logical, experimentally inclined, and so on. In doing this, Jason is engaging in a variety of patterns of action and interaction that conveys these images. These are individual patterns of behavior; they help us understand the individual scientist, Jason. They do not speak to our understanding of social structure. However, these same patterns of behavior may be part of a larger, social structure. We may note, for example, that persons who do the things Jason does, and do them well, are elected to higher positions in their scientific organizations. If we step back and take an even broader view, we may see that there is a flow of such persons as Jason into positions of prominence within their scientific societies and, indeed, perhaps into positions of eminence in policy and governmental circles. From these positions of power, they may help maintain boundaries between such scientists and others as well as help keep resources flowing to the groups and organizations to which they belong. This flow of persons into positions of importance through the mechanism of elections and appointments is part of the social structure, as are the mechanisms that support and sustain this flow of persons, goods, and services.

The actions are still being taken by individuals, but we now see them in a very different way. We see the social structures that emerge from individual actions, as those actions are patterned over time and across persons. In this way, social structure is a very abstract idea. It is not something that we experience directly. Our senses are not well tuned to these patterns as they occur over time and across persons (not to mention across space as well). Nevertheless, we can become aware of them and study them. Indeed, many of the patterns are well recognized, named, and attended to. They enter our everyday language as things like General Motors, the New York Yankees, the Brown family, and Milwaukee. Some are recognized but are harder to point to, such as "the working class" or "the country club set," which do not have a legal status and do not maintain offices or locations. We can only point to individuals who may contribute to the patterns of behavior that constitute the structure. Some structures we tend not to see at all (without special effort and thought) such as the patterns of action that block access of

African Americans to the educational system or the patterns of actions that create the “glass ceiling” in organizations preventing qualified women from rising to positions of power and authority. Nevertheless, these too are parts of social structure, and it is the job of sociologists to discover, attend to, and understand these patterns.

The task we have set for ourselves in this book is to introduce a basis for understanding social structure, in the sense we have begun to outline above, as arising from the actions of individual agents or actors and as feeding back to those agents to change them and the way they operate. However, to do so requires us, at least, to understand the agents or actors that are producing the actions, the patterns that constitute social structure. Depending upon the nature of the agents, we would have a variety of forms of social structures. If our agents had full information and were perfectly rational, we would have very different forms of social organization than if our agents were acting without full information or acting with misinformation or making decisions not on the basis of rationality, but perhaps on the bases of self-interest, fear, love, cowardice or some combination of these other motives.

To accomplish this task we have set for ourselves, we will have to deal more directly with understanding the individual actor, but, as sociological social psychologists, we want to keep in mind that our actor is always embedded in the very social structure that is being created by that (and other) actor(s). For this, we review some ideas about the nature of the actors or agents that are producing the behavior in which we are ultimately interested.

Agents

Agents are actors. In sociological parlance, agents have been referred to by a number of terms and have had a variety of properties. We refer to “individuals,” to “actors,” to “person and other.” Generally speaking, the terms “individual,” “actor,” “person,” and “other” refer to individual human beings, though at times “actor” has been used to refer to a corporate entity (see Coleman 1990). Sociologists, like people in general, have attempted to represent the world as they see it, and they have tried to build theories to account for human behavior and patterns of interaction among humans. In these theories, the agent is the entity that acts. Agents have a variety of properties and these properties help us understand both the different types of agents and the different kinds of actions they may take. For example, actors (agents) whose legitimate means to a goal is blocked may resort to illegitimate (criminal) means (Merton 1957); actors who interact frequently with one another come to like one another (Homans 1950). Resorting to criminal activity, interacting, and liking are actions that agents may take under predictable conditions.

What is seldom talked about, however, is the fact that when agents are human beings, the agent who resorts to criminal activity in one context may be the agent who interacts frequently and is a best friend in another context.

A theory of criminality has little to do with a theory of sentiments and interactions. We all recognize this, but our theories generally ignore it. Our theories are, in fact, not about whole human beings. They are theories about aspects of human beings, and each aspect appears (in our theories) to have little to do with the other aspects.

Role theory (see Linton 1936; Nadel 1957) has recognized this and does not claim to be about people, but only about those aspects of people (or interaction systems) that are called roles. What is confusing in role theory is that it is not always clear that it has anything to do with “people.” Roles are often described in terms of their structural features (for example, how they relate to other roles) or their behavioral features (for example, what behaviors are accomplished by the role) or their expectational features (for example, what behaviors are expected, that is, prescribed and proscribed) by the role. In talking about relationships, behaviors, and expectations, we avoid dealing with people altogether. However, we have also thrown away a notion of agent. To avoid this problem, whenever an agent is needed to actually take some action, hold an expectation, or be in a relationship, the person is brought back into the theory as part of the background. Persons take actions as holders of a particular role, but the focus is on the role and the actions. Persons hold expectations, but it is the content of the expectations and the implications of that content for behavior that is important—not the person who holds those expectations or who engages in the behavior.

When persons become important in role theory it is usually because of the recognition that persons may hold multiple roles and therefore may be agents in multiple systems of interaction. The question then is how these multiple agencies are accomplished and what consequence they have. Here, for example, we may be looking at role conflict and the stress that a person feels when serving as an agent in incompatible interaction systems (Burke 1991). Or we may be looking at the way in which being an agent in several interaction systems serves to enhance and energize the person (e.g., Thoits 1983). In these cases, there is explicit recognition of the multiple agencies that may exist within a single person. This approach will be taken in this book. *“Person” becomes the link between the various agencies that exist within the person.* For example, Mary is a teacher and a mother. Mary may gain information in her role as a teacher that can be passed on to herself as a mother in order to help her children learn something. In this case, “teacher” is linked to “mother” by being in the same person. Teacher and mother are each agents that can act independently or jointly or can interact with each other.

Sometimes the agent is a person in a generic relationship with other persons, for example, in an exchange relationship. In this case, particular roles are not relevant except as they emerge from the nature of the exchange relationship itself. For example, one person may be more dependent upon the other for the attainment of various exchange outcomes because there are fewer alternatives. If there is only once grocery store in town, I am likely

more dependent on the store than the store is on me. In exchange relationships, the behavioral decisions that are made by each agent are understood to be a function of the nature of the exchange relationship, the position of each agent in that relationship, and the nature of human problem-solving under the specified conditions (Cook and Rice 2003). Supposedly, the way in which humans solve problems holds across various roles and positions in society as long as they have the stated characteristics, for example, of power dependency (Emerson 1962).

Sometimes the agent is a person in a generic relationship with his or her environment generally, for example, in a learning situation in which reinforcements are applied following behavioral decisions. In this case, particular roles are not relevant, nor are particular relationships with other persons at all. Studying agents in this kind of learning situation, researchers seek knowledge and understanding of agency in its least contextualized format. How do persons choose actions in a very abstract setting?

These last two examples of the study of agency (in exchange relationships and in learning situations) come from research that is conducted in laboratory settings for the most part. In such settings, the purpose is to control as many factors as possible in order to understand the nature of human agency in the idealized conditions usually expressed in theories. Of course, it is recognized that these idealized conditions do not include anything about the fact that humans can act as agents in many systems simultaneously. As a result, the distinction between person and agent is blurred or lost. Yet this ability of humans to act as agents in many systems simultaneously (as we will see) may be key to our understanding of social structure. Person and agent are thus not synonymous, and it is imperative to distinguish carefully between them in our theories.

Although both person and agent are abstract concepts, empirical instances of persons are easily visible to our senses. Empirical instances of agents as separate from persons are not. We must be trained to see them, just as we had to be trained to see the relationship between the earth and the sun. Our senses “see” the sun traveling across the sky; they do not “see” the earth rotating on its axis. Yet the earth rotating on its axis has a better fit with the rest of astronomy and physics than the sun traveling across the sky and has come to be accepted if not experienced.

This distinction between person and agent is central to identity theory. In identity theory, an identity is an agent. Each person has many identities, for example, friend, parent, worker, church member, and club member; and each of these identities is an agent. Part of what makes interaction and the social system work is the fact that different identities *within* persons engage in transactions (as the example mentioned above of Mary who is a teacher and a mother) as well as different identities *between* persons (for example, between Mary the teacher and Veronica the mother of one of Mary’s sixth-grade students). Both of these kinds of transactions and interactions need to be incorporated into our theories. An identity is also a theoretical construct.

The particular view of these constructs that will be discussed in this book is called identity theory, and it grows out of the perspective of structural symbolic interaction. Before discussing identities and their nature per se, we want to give a little background to put our understanding of identities in context.

Structural Symbolic Interaction

The term “structural symbolic interactionism” was coined by Stryker (1980 [2002]) to refer to a set of ideas about the nature of the individual and the relationship between the individual and society. This set of ideas draws upon the writings of a large number of scholars and thinkers including the Scottish Moral Philosophers, William James, Charles Cooley, W. I. Thomas, and George Herbert Mead (Stryker 1980 [2002]). Collectively, these people and other modern writers including Herbert Blumer, Manford Kuhn, George McCall, Morris Rosenberg, Sheldon Stryker, Ralph Turner, and Eugene Weinstein laid the groundwork for the scientific approach to identities and for the relationship between identities and society (social structure) that constitutes structural symbolic interactionism. Clearly, the intellectual debt of structural symbolic interactionism is large. In chapter 2, we more fully review the contributions of some of these people when we examine the roots of identity theory. In this introductory chapter, we will only provide a brief overview of some of the important points and assumptions that we draw on in the rest of the book. These points may be organized around three central concepts: the self, language, and interaction.

The Self

The self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual's consciousness of his or her own being or identity. The self has the ability to take itself as an object, to regard and evaluate itself, to take account of itself and plan accordingly, and to manipulate itself as an object in order to bring about future states. As McCall and Simmons (1978, p. 52) point out, “The individual achieves selfhood at that point at which he first begins to act toward himself in more or less the same fashion in which he acts toward other people.” This reflexive behavior is the core of the self. The self is able to be both subject and object. We do not want to give the impression, however, that the self is a little “person” or *homunculus* residing inside of us that does these things. The self is rather an organized set of processes within us that accomplishes these outcomes. Our job is to understand that organization, how it occurs, and how it both maintains itself and changes over time.

According to Mead (1934), the “self” grows out of the mind as the latter interacts with its environment to solve the problem of sustaining the biological organism (person) that holds it. Mind, itself, arises and develops

out of social interaction processes. Mind is the mechanism that controls the meanings that govern our responses to the environment. Mentality comes in, according to Mead, when the organism is able to point out meanings to others and to itself. The ability to pick out meanings and to indicate them both to the self and to others gives control to humans. This control is made possible by language, which encapsulates the meanings in the form of symbols. It is when one's self is encapsulated as a symbol to which one may respond, as to any other symbol, that self-control becomes possible and the "self" emerges.

The responses to the self as symbolized object are from the point of view of others with whom we interact (taking the role of the other toward ourselves), and this implies that our responses are like their response, and the meaning of the self is 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 we interact. This becoming as one is implied in the shared meanings of the objects and symbols to which we respond in social interaction. It is implied in the fact that in using language, we communicate the same meanings to ourselves as to others. The self is both individual and social in its 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 language communication, symbolic interaction and, ultimately, social structure.

Because the self emerges in social interaction within the context of a complex differentiated society,² because people occupy different positions within society, the self reflects this differentiation into components or what James (1890) called "multiple selves." Each of these smaller "selves" within the overall self is called an identity. Thus, self as father is an identity, as is self as colleague, self as storekeeper, self as student, and self as any of the other myriad of possibilities corresponding to the various roles one may play. Each of these is a different identity, and each may act as an agent instigating behavior within the different roles.

Identities are also important because they provide us with ties to others and to what is social in a situation. Part of their content consists of symbols and meanings pertaining to the self. In order to discuss these symbols and meanings, we need to turn to the second of the three central concepts: language.

Language, Signs, and Symbols

All organisms learn to respond to cues in their environment. Some stimuli come to stand for other stimuli. As in Pavlov's experiments, the sound of a bell (stimulus 2) came to stand for food powder sprinkled on the dog's tongue (stimulus 1) and led to the same response: salivation. A sign is a stimulus that calls up a response that is the same as or similar to the response previously evoked by some other stimulus. In the Pavlov experiments, the

bell is a sign of food powder; the readings on a thermometer are a sign of the temperature; the needle on a car's gas gauge is a sign of the amount of fuel in the gas tank. Signs may also refer to other signs. For example, the word "toothache" refers to the signs one feels when a tooth decays to the point that it impinges on the nerve. A dictionary defines words in terms of other words.

Meaning is the response to a stimulus. In this, we are guided by the work of Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957). One stimulus, for example, the word "fire," means the same thing as another stimulus, for example, an actual fire. The word "fire" leads to a set of responses that are a subset of responses previously elicited by the actual fire. Thus, in Pavlov's experiments, the bell came to have the same meaning as the food powder. What is important here is that meaning does not reside in objects. Meaning is a response to an object or stimulus, and meaning acts as a further stimulus to action. Meaning thus mediates much of our behavioral responses to various stimuli and allows us to get beyond the simple stimulus-response patterns that may characterize other animals.

A symbol derives its meaning from social consensus and is arbitrary, varying from one culture to another. Different symbols may have the same meaning (e.g., "sun" and "sol"), or the same symbol may have different meanings in different contexts (e.g., "sol" meaning an old French coin and "sol" meaning the sun as derived from Latin). Because the meanings of symbols are socially defined, those meanings are shared. Symbols are relative to social groups and language communities in which the same signs are interpreted in the same way by most persons. Symbols thus evoke the same meaning responses in different individuals.³ Importantly, symbols evoke the same meaning in the person who uses them as in the person to whom they are directed. Words are our most important and most versatile symbols and provide a means of communication, which can be both subtle as well as complex.

Language is symbolic communication. Because each person is simultaneously a producer and hearer of language (having a self), a person may carry on communication with himself or herself in the form of thought, as chains of reasoning and as imagined possibilities dealing with both things present and things not present. In this case, the two partners of a conversation are both within ourselves—one talking, the other listening and responding. Out of this can grow future actual states or conditions that originally exist only symbolically. We can think about a dinner party. We can think about the things that need to be done in order to have a dinner party. We can think about the ordering and sequencing of the things that need to be done, and we can begin to do them. In this way, something that does not now exist (a dinner party) can come to exist. Thus, through the possibility of responding to oneself and one's own thoughts, plans can be made, action opportunities created, and the past remembered. Indeed, there is a tendency to symbolize virtually everything that is important to us, in order, through thought and interaction, to bring that which is symbolized under our control.

Interaction

To some extent in talking about language, we have already been discussing interaction because much of interaction involves language or symbolic communication. Because we are dealing with selves and symbols, most interaction is not between persons *qua* persons but between persons who are occupying named positions (statuses) in named groups or organizations while engaged in named patterns of behavior (roles).⁴ The interaction is thus not between whole persons but between aspects of persons having to do with their roles in the groups or organizations: their identities.⁵ As a father, one can talk with his daughters. As a husband, he talks with his wife. As a member of an organization, he talks with other members. As a friend, he talks with friends. 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.⁶

For now, we want to deal with the nature of interaction between identities, as they are positioned by statuses and roles in particular groups, organizations, or structures of one sort or another, including informal structures such as networks of friends. In doing this, we can take two different perspectives: agency and structure. With respect to the latter, we focus on the external, structural side and talk about taking on a role or playing a role. From this point of view, the structures in which the identities are embedded are relatively fixed, and identities (people) play out the parts (roles) that are given to them. District managers do the things that district managers are supposed to do. Variations across persons taking on the same identities are viewed as relatively minor, except insofar as they affect the success of the group, organization, or structure. A district manager who cannot increase sales may be replaced with another district manager who can increase sales. What is important is that the structure persists and develops according to its own principles.

However, we can also focus on the agency side. We can take the point of view of the identities that are engaging in the role behavior and talk about making or creating a role. In this case, the identities create the parts that they play out in the situation by making behavioral choices and decisions through negotiation and compromise, conflict and contention.⁷ The identity of store manager uses the resources available in the situation—the money, telephone, computer, merchandise, and sales clerks—to create and enact the role of store manager. What is important from this perspective are not the structural “givens” or requirements, but how such things can be used and manipulated to accomplish what is necessary within those limitations. Individual variation is important here because it was through individual variation (and competition) that the current district manager (and not someone else) became district manager, and it is through such individual abilities that the current district manager will succeed or fail.

These are each perspectives, not arguable descriptions of fact. Both are true, but incomplete. From the structural perspective, *how* a district manager

increases sales is not relevant. What is relevant from the structural perspective is *that* the district manager does increase sales. To the district manager, however, as the agent involved in the situation, *how* to increase sales is what is relevant.

The issue for the social theorist is to bring the two together in a meaningful way that allows us to move back and forth across levels (agents and structures) to understand how structures are the accomplishments of agents and also to understand how agents always act within structures they create. The agent as district manager is both agent (whole unit) and district manager (part of the structure). This hierarchical arrangement of parts and wholes has always been troublesome to social and behavioral scientists (e.g., Koestler 1969) who have generally opted to confine themselves to one level or another or to cross levels without examining the interface.

The concept of interaction is where these two perspectives meet. Moreover, it is in understanding interaction that we are forced to deal with the two levels of the individual and society. Signs, symbols, and language are key to this. When we examine social action generally, and interaction specifically, we see two different kinds of things going on: the use of symbols and the use of signs. Individuals use symbols (words, language, and the naming of things including the self) to engage in what Herbert Blumer (1962) called symbolic interaction to bring order out of the chaos of the world. In order to interact with others, we must first establish both who they are and who we are. Rachael is the "district manager." Joseph is a "store manager." In general, we do not know what to do with respect to others until we know their meanings for us and our meanings for them. This is the process of identifying the other. I know how to behave toward that person and have expectations about how that person will behave toward me only when I identify the other. Joseph identifies Rachael as the district manager and identifies himself as the store manager. He knows what each of these categories of persons is supposed to do, how they relate to each other, who controls what, who reports to whom, and so on.

We must learn the identity of the others with whom we would interact. They must be labeled symbolically (named) and thus given an identity. We, too, must be identified or have an identity. The categories and classifications that are used for this purpose are provided by language and culture in which we are enmeshed. This helps solve another problem for the potential interactants, which is to come up with a set of meanings that is at least to some extent shared. By using the shared symbols, which have been learned, some consensus is provided. We already have common categories, concepts, and labels. In addition, we already have common reactions to these categories, concepts, and labels. Thus, Joseph is able to assume that Rachael also identifies herself as a district manager and that she identifies him as a store manager.

There is another use of the shared concepts and labels in addition to using them to label each other's identities. That is to provide what