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Emotion and Identity: Evolutionary Theories

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Abstract – Identity control theory was formed in the context of structural symbolic interaction, which attends to the different positions in the social structure in which persons with given identities are embedded and to the impact of structural position on identity processes. One of the differences among social positions is the amount of resources the position controls and hence the amount of status accorded to the occupant. I examine the effects of social status on the emotional impacts of the lack of identity verification. Status, conceptualized as a symbolic marker indicating who has control of resources, is hypothesized to have two effects. Status and resources help persons verify their identities, and at the same time, help to suffer the consequences of a lack of verification. Data from the spousal identity of 286 newly married couples are examined and generally support these hypotheses. The implication of these findings for existing theory and future research are discussed .

Identity theory grows out of structural symbolic interaction (Stryker [1980] 2002). Two features that are particularly important in structural symbolic interaction are society and self. Society is viewed as a stable and orderly structure as reflected in the patterned behavior within and between social actors. When we look at the patterned behavior across social actors and see how these patterns fit with the patterns of other social actors, we find larger inter individual patterns that constitute the core of social structure. While actors are creating social structure, they are also receiving feedback from the social structure that influences their behavior. In this way, actors are always embedded in the very social structure that they are simultaneously creating. In this study I develop theoretically the role of emotions in identity theory by examining individuals' emotional reactions to identity non verification (in a positive and a negative direction) and identity verification, which occurs once versus repeatedly, and which is perpetrated by a familiar other compared with an unfamiliar other. Predictions from identity control theory (ICT) are used to guide the analysis. An experiment simulates a work situation and invokes the worker role identity. Workers either receive feedback that is expected, given their worker identity standard (identity verification); feedback that is more positive than they would expect (a lack of identity verification in a positive direction); or feedback that is more negative than they would expect (a lack of identity verification in a negative direction). The workers' emotional reactions' to each situation are investigated. Contrary to ICT, identity non verification in a positive direction results in positive (not negative) emotions; the persistence of verifying and non-verifying feedback decreases (rather than increases) the affective response to the feedback; and feedback from a familiar other does not significantly influence actors' emotional reactions. The findings raise some questions about current thinking in ICT and suggest important extensions for emotions in identity theory.

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Although numerous adaptive-evolutionary treatments of emotion have emerged over the years (e.g., Ekman & Davidson, 1994; Plutchik, 1994), an evolutionary-psychological approach distinguishes itself from other evolutionary approaches by adopting an explicitly adaptationist perspective (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992). An adaptationist perspective is guided by the simple assumption that the mind is comprised of many mental adaptations, each of which is the product of natural and sexual selection operating over many generations during the course of human evolution (Buss, Haselton, Shackelford, Bleske, & Wakefield, 1999). Our ancestors faced a multitude of adaptive problems—evading predators, gathering food, finding shelter, attracting mates, caring for kin, and communicating with conspecifics, to name just a few (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Buss, in press). Because each of these adaptive problems required a unique solution (escaping a predator involves different skills than acquiring a mate), evolutionary psychologists argue that we should expect that our minds consist of a great variety of distinct psychological mechanisms, each shaped to address a specific adaptive challenge (Barrett, 2005; Symons, 1979). Similarly, we argue that it is reasonable to expect that humans have evolved a multitude of distinct emotions, each

designed to deal with a specific set of adaptive problems.

Emotions affect the way that we think and behave in a variety of personal and social contexts (Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Holmes & Anthony, this volume; Morris & Keltner, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2005). Evolutionary approaches to emotion and social decision-making have ranged from broad theoretical models of emotion (Buck, 1999; Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990) to empirical investigations of specific emotions (Ketelaar & Au, 2003). One of the broadest theoretical approaches to emotion and decision-making (emotions-as-commitment devices) uses the tools of experimental economics to explore game-theoretic aspects of emotions. A second theoretical approach proposes that emotions are superordinate cognitive programs that coordinate thoughts and behaviors in response to specific adaptive challenges. We describe each of these approaches before turning to a brief review of recent empirical research linking specific emotions to specific adaptive problems.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that the non-random distribution of fear stimuli is a legacy of the evolutionary past. The absence of fear responses to evolutionarily novel sources of danger (automobiles, electrical outlets, etc.), for example, suggests that emotional responses are not simply the product of rational deliberation. Instead, human fears are the result of domain-specific mechanisms that correspond to ancient sources of harm such as dangerous animals, bodily insults, heights, social evaluation, and the risk of social exclusion (Costello, 1982; Marks & Nesse, 1994; Nesse, 1990; Ohman & Mineka, 2001; Seligman, 1971). Snake fear is perhaps the best researched example.

Although snakes do not pose much of a risk in modern environments, snakes and humans have coexisted for millennia and snake bites can be lethal. In the laboratory, researchers can condition people to fear snakes and snake-like stimuli using mild electrical shocks. By contrast, it is difficult to condition fear to other stimuli, even those with strong semantic associations with shock (e.g., damaged electrical outlets; see Ohman & Mineka, 2001 for a review). Unlike responses to evolutionarily novel sources of harm, biologically prepared fear responses (snakes, spiders, etc.) are notoriously difficult to extinguish (see Mineka, 1992; Cook & Mineka, 1990; Nesse, 1990; Marks & Nesse, 1994; Seligman, 1971 for reviews).

Recent ideas concerning the development of self and identity have stressed the importance of moving away from an approach which is mainly concerned with outcomes, to one which focuses instead on processes of development and, more specifically, on a relational perspective on these processes. Identity and Emotion focuses on the individual development of identity and the processes involved. The contributors to the study material are specialists in this approach, and offer challenging ideas on the development of identity as a self-organizing process. The study offers a wealth of new ideas and insights, but also concentrates on the ways these insights can be translated into research. Recent ideas concerning the development of self and identity have stressed the importance of moving away from an approach which is mainly concerned with outcomes, to one which focuses instead on processes of development and, more specifically, on a relational perspective on these processes. This change has also led to increased attention to the role of emotions in the development of self and identity. These developments offer new possibilities and challenges for theory and research. However, they also lead to new concerns and questions at a theoretical, as well as a methodological level. In 1996, a workshop on the development of self and identity was organized with the explicit intention of focusing on these new trends.

The main topics of the workshop were the conceptualization of the development of the person as an emotional, relational, and self-organizing process and the way in which such a dynamic conceptualization can be translated into empirical research employing methodological approaches which are adapted to the study of dynamic processes in self-stability and change.

During the intense and lively workshop discussions, new ideas were developed, and serious attempts were made to clarify and elaborate the development of self and identity as an inherently emotional process embedded within a relational context. Most of the contributors to this volume were participants in the workshop. Using the workshop discussions as a starting point, they were asked to elaborate their perspective both theoretically and methodologically. Their ideas and the comments provided by others reflect and extend the nature of the workshop discussions and provide an illustration of the self-organizing, dialogical, and open approach which is advocated in this volume. In the organization of the original workshop and the preparation of this volume we have received considerable support from individuals and organizations. Here we wish to express our gratitude for their help.

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