

# Identity Coherence, Social Stress, and Well-Being

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Much like stratification systems produce both functional benefits and inequality in societies, the multiplicity of identity meanings contained within the self can be seen as both a resource and a potential burden. Individuals with more complex selves can, in some cases, be buffered from situational stress. When selves are comprised of distinct relationships, attributes, and activities that do not share meanings, social breakdowns relating to any one aspect are less likely to impinge on the maintenance of the others (Linville 1985, 1987). The accumulation of many identities can have an insulating effect, decreasing commitment to each, and offering alternative sources of meaning and order when disruptions occur (Thoits 1983, 1986a). It can also increase our access to different sources of social support, facilitating coping in the face of stressful circumstances (Thoits 1986b). At the same time, complex selves place us at higher risk of status inconsistency and role conflict (see Stryker and Macke 1978). Status inconsistency results when our social position differs across social hierarchies (e.g., race, class, gender). Others' expectations for our behavior come into conflict, fracturing our self-concept and reducing our self-esteem (Jackson 1962; Jackson and Burke 1965). Role conflict occurs when different demands are placed on us by our different roles (e.g., work and family).

We believe that these seemingly discrepant sets of findings can be unified through the framework of identity meanings (Heise 2007). Identities with common meanings (e.g., wife and mother, boss and leader) are likely to be activated together, and verified by comparable sorts of behavior. When our selves are comprised of identities that carry similar meanings, we have more options for maintaining our sense of self through interactions, and tend to have others perceive and treat us in ways that meet our expectations. When our selves are comprised of identities with quite divergent meanings and these competing identities become situationally relevant, choosing an appropriate line of action can prove a challenge. Different sorts of behavior optimally confirm each, and others' perceptions and treatment of us may differ from our expectations.

Possessing many different identities can be a resource, but only when these identities carry comparable, positive meanings. When meanings conflict, or when valued identities are threatened and we lack viable alternatives, self-verification and our social interactions are both disrupted, causing social stress and a loss of mastery and self-esteem (see Burke 1991). The chronic experience of these conditions can negatively impact our mental and physical health. In this sense, the possession of coherent identity meanings can be seen as an additional source of privilege for those with consistently high statuses and a stress buffering resource for those with consistently low statuses. For those whose statuses vary greatly, identity incoherence may instead be a source of social stress, and a burden on mental and physical health.

We explore these paradoxes of the self by studying the relationship between identity coherence, social stress, and well-being. We hope to leverage recent theoretical developments (MacKinnon and Heise 2010; Schröder, Hoey, and Rogers 2016) and methodological innovations (Hoey and Schröder 2015; Hoey, Schröder, and Alhothali 2016) to mathematically represent the (in)coherence of self-relevant meanings, overcoming important limitations and critiques of earlier work. Using these novel tools will allow us to test and validate key model predictions based on social theory, and speak to longstanding but as yet unanswered questions in sociology about the fundamental nature of self and identity (Schröder, Hoey, and Rogers 2016).

## Research Design

We recruited 200 respondents via Amazon Mechanical Turk, who completed our study online via Dartmouth's Qualtrics survey platform. Participants identified the five social settings in which they spent the majority of their time, then reported (1) the top five identities that they would use to describe themselves in each setting, and (2) the top five identities that others would apply to them in each setting. Each identity provided was rated on the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity, as well as an identity prominence scale. After completing these measures, participants responded to a series of measures assessing (1) their self-esteem and self-efficacy, (2) their recent experiences of anxiety, depression, and social stress, (3) their physical health, (4) their perceived and received social support, and (5) their socio-demographic characteristics.

Our initial set of planned analyses will explore variation within social domains. We hypothesize that meaning coherence among the top identities reported for a given social domain (i.e., those likely to be enacted together) can be directly linked with both social stress and health outcomes. Specifically, we expect that respondents with high within-domain variation in identity sentiments will report more social stress and more mental and physical health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, chronic health problems) than those with low within-domain variation – this includes variation in self-views across identities as well as divergences between self-views and others' views of self. We have recently completed our initial data collection, and analysis will be underway shortly.

In the future, we hope to expand this line of work using experience sampling to document respondents' experiences in the context of everyday life rather than in a survey or a research lab. We believe that such a design would help show that the processes tested in our initial study extend to actual experiences in interaction and their consequences – effects stemming from the identities we enact and others' responses to them, not simply our subjective beliefs about the self. Further, experiential data would allow us to test for the hypothesized causal relationship between identity incoherence, social strain, and negative health outcomes.

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