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## **SOCIAL IDENTITY SIMILARITY EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL EVALUATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Research on the social construction of identity has emerged concurrently from different areas. Identity control theory and social identity theory each attend to different portions of the social identity dynamic. Traditionally, work utilizing social identity theory has been examined using a distribution of resources model between experimentally defined groups. This research employs evaluations of blame between subjects in order to determine if these effects are present in a post behavior evaluative framework. Results would indicate that status differences between groups can have the effect of moderating in-group bias suggesting that group affiliation alone isn't sufficient to predict behavior.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research on the nature of identity in social psychology focuses on the relationship between society and an individual and how this influences the formation and composition of individual identity (Owens 2006). Much research has focused on favoritism shown by the person toward the group with which they are affiliated (Tajfel 1982). What has received less attention is the expression of this identity when evaluating another member of the community in a situation with which they are not involved. What is of interest to a theory of identity is how individual group affiliations of the person evaluating works in conjunction with the group affiliation of the person being evaluated to produce an appraisal.

Sheldon Stryker has stated that identities are “internalized designations of positions claimed and validated in social interactions” (Stryker and Craft 1982:162). This idea has seen substantial refinement and modification over the years but most research in the field of identity in sociological social psychology still proceeds with the spirit of this definition as its foundation. Before examining interactions between individuals it is necessary to have a working understanding of how a cohesive identity is formed and the dynamics involved in its generative processes.

The incorporation of identities into the self is understood to be a lifelong process. As an individual learns the rules of behavior of a group they come to identify themselves as a member of the social group. These behaviors are incorporated into the person’s repertoire along with the group identity to which they are connected (Arena and Arrigo 2005). From this multiplicity of identities actors build a sense of self. This represents a general description of the creation of identity and the self though some debate exists as to the specific nature of this process.

## **THEORIES OF IDENTITY**

Social identity theory (SIT) focuses on discussing the nature and extent of the cognitive processes of categorization and self-enhancement. Social arrangements are represented by social belief structures the individuals possesses about the nature of inter-group relations and the best ways to achieve or maintain positive distinctiveness, that our group is better than their group. These structures have a number of different elements; beliefs about the social status of one’s group, beliefs about the stability of this status, its legitimacy, and how permeable are the group boundaries (Hogg 2006). It is theorized that these belief structures are arranged in order to generate evaluatively positive distinctiveness between groups. This has the result of the in-group being evaluated positively, and by virtue of being a group member the individual, resulting in self-enhancement.

Identity control theory a sociological approach, places a participant in a social system whose behavior is then predicated upon position and interpersonal connections within the system. Individuals possess different identity standards that represent what it means to be a member of a group, an occupant of a role, or simply the type of person they are (Burke 2004). The arrangement and type of social connections which characterize identity standards vary between identities, but are tied to the social structures in multiple ways. Society gives form to

each identity giving it a name and proscribing what behavior will make it up. An important part of this description is the detailing of the resources that arise from the appropriate fulfillment of these identities. This is a primary source of the power of the social system to delineate identity to the individual. These processes occur during social interaction. The identity standards held by the individual indicate behavior to be displayed resulting in a response that is compared to that which is expected. This response is weighed against the identity standard by what is termed the comparator, and action is taken if a match is not found (Stryker and Burke 2000). A match is termed identity verification, while inconsistency has been theorized to result in action on the part of the individual to modify first the behavior and then the identity standard to match the response they are receiving (Burke 2006). This theory emphasizes consistency between the socially supplied identity standard and the situations in which the individual finds them self.

Building from this idea identity control theory explores how the identities that come to make up the self interact with one another and the situations that individuals encounter (Burke 2004). Cast, Stets, and Burke (1999) found that higher status in the social system gave high status partners in a spousal relationship the ability to define the situation and delineate the role behavior of the lower status partner. Possibly in relation to this behavior by the high status partner Stets (1997) found that low status partners emitted more negative behavior. This was found to have the unintended consequence of reaffirming the status hierarchy as it signaled to the higher status partner that they possessed higher status. With the social structure influencing the meaning of the identity standard it is reasonable to suspect that status, importance in the social structure, would be important to understanding their expression. The effects of status on interaction have been examined, but how this may effect evaluations of others requires exploration. Social identity theory presents a useful guideline for how members of in-groups and out-groups will evaluate one another (Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1978) along with the underlying metacognitive processes that lead to such behavior (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, and Hinkle 2004), but the theory doesn't always take into account the effects of the status information found in the social belief structures.

Social structure and subsequently status in the social structure can be interpreted as important to each theory of identity. ICT places position in the social structure as being central to identity standards, and social belief structures pertain directly to the status of the individual's group in relation to the rest of society. Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004) attempt, with system justification theory, to distinguish between the different tendencies that may affect an individual during inter-group processes. The three motives; ego justification, group justification, and system justification encompass the various contradicting tendencies that are present during group processes. Group and ego justification are addressed by SIT as the need to maintain a favorable image of one's group and one's self respectively. System justification, the social and psychological need to imbue the status quo with legitimacy, highlights the importance of status and a potential conflicting force for the self enhancement motives theorized by SIT. The work done here specifically with disadvantaged groups and out-group favoritism demonstrates the importance of status and the benefits of integrating and expanding theories of identity.

To use these theories to examine the expression of identity it is useful to focus on the evaluations of others and examine how the individual identities of both participants precipitate a specific judgment. Identities supply a wide range of behavioral information. A part of this is the impact that sharing identities has on how we evaluate others. One of the main functions of identities is to tell us who we are in relation to others and how we should interact with them. The two theories of identity discussed propose two potentially conflicting predictions in regards to evaluative behavior. ICT suggests that a drive for consistency is present while SIT suggests self enhancement processes should result in a universal positive in-group bias.

This study seeks to examine how identity similarity influences judgment. SIT would suggest that people who are more similar to the evaluator will be judged less harshly as they are present within the same social group as the evaluator. ICT would refine this prediction to only when the evaluator has a positive identity standard for the group identity. As the person being evaluated becomes less similar it is suggested that the evaluation will become more extreme as the potential for self enhancement to the evaluator changes.

## **METHODS**

To test this hypothesis, a questionnaire was designed and administered to undergraduate students currently enrolled in introductory sociology classes at a large Midwestern university. Participants were asked to anonymously report basic demographic data such as sex, age, ethnicity, birthplace, and parental income range. Three of these variables sex, age, and parental income range were inserted into vignettes the participants were asked to read and then queried about. Multiple forms of two vignettes were included with each questionnaire varying the combinations of these variables between the two questions and among each version of the questionnaire. The specific version of the questionnaire that was received by the participant was independent of their individual characteristics allowing for variation in the amount of similarity between the participant and the person referenced in the vignette. This methodology is based upon the “factorial survey approach” first delineated by Rossi and Anderson (1982). Variation in social judgment based upon subgroup characteristics such as gender has been inconsistent (Byers and Zeller 1998), but this study seeks to examine subgroup similarity as a possible clarifier of this relationship.

The vignettes presented as little information as possible to minimize the amount of extraneous information that could influence the judgment of the participant. A generic version of these vignettes may be found in appendix A. Along with this demographic information, different times, places, and speeds were given between the two vignettes in the questionnaire, but the amount over the speed limit was held constant at ten miles per hour for both vignettes. Each of the demographic variables possesses multiple values creating a 2X2X3 design. Sex was broken into the traditional male and female categories. Age was restricted to a young adult option of twenty years and an elderly adult option of seventy years. Parental income was broken into three separate ranges of 1-24,999, 25,000-49,999, and 50,000 and above based upon national census information obtained for the local area. Each of these ranges represents thirty percent of the distribution of the state population.

These variables represent social identity groups which are salient to those who could be present in the research sample. Each respondent is a member of these identity groups at some level. This will allow for either similarity or difference between the participant and the actor in the vignette on each of these identities permitting the effect of identity congruence to be examined on the individual identity level. It will also be possible to examine the various interactions that may be present by investigating the total identity congruence between the evaluator and the person presented in the vignette.

After reading the vignettes, five questions were presented. Question 1 presented choices consisting of dollar amounts where the respondent was asked to choose how large a fine should be administered for the legal transgression. This question serves as a simple measure of the sanction the participant feels is appropriate for the transgression based upon the information presented to them. This question should be the most directly related to the in-group favoritism predicted by SIT. Question 2 asked the participants to determine how likely they feel that the person in the vignette is actually guilty of the crime for which they are being punished. Questions 3 and 4, ask about how severe the respondent felt the crime was and if they agree with punishing the defendant respectively. Each of the three preceding questions target less explicit areas in which the in-group favoritism predicted by SIT may be employed. Lower evaluation of guilt, severity, or desire to punish a crime would all be the predicted outcomes based upon SIT. Finally, question 5 seeks to directly gauge the amount of perceived similarity between the participant and the person in the vignette by asking directly to what extent do you identify with the person. (Appendix B)

The hypothesis for this study is that in the cases that participants are evaluating figures in the vignettes with the same gender, age, or income an increase will be observed in positive bias for that person's behavior. Effects of this positive bias will be a decrease in support for the punishment of the individual. This means lower suggested fines, a lower perception of their guilt, a decreased perception of the severity of the crime, and less agreement with the punishing of the individual. Deviation would indicate that other processes are playing a role and that structural factors presented in identity control theory are potentially influencing their behavior.

## RESULTS

A final sample of 271 participants was analyzed after data collection. A small number of forms, 5 (.018%) were returned blank while 6 forms (.022%) were returned incomplete with only the first set of questions answered. To begin the analysis, connections between the questions were examined using a bivariate correlation procedure. The amount of the fine indicated by the respondent was found to be significantly positively correlated to the perceived guilt, perceived severity, and agreement with punishment. This would suggest that these three factors are in some way representing a single concept that relates to the magnitude of desired punishment for the infraction.

Questions two, three, and four were also found to be significantly correlated to each other supporting the idea of a single concept. This suggests that the amount of the fine is related to the participant's perception of the individual and the infraction. In support of the idea that

similarity is important the extent that the participant identifies with the individual is significantly correlated with the perceived level of guilt and to the extent to which they agree with punishment, both judgments of the individual, but not with how severe they view the crime. This indicates that while severity of the crime is related to the magnitude of the punishment it does so in potentially a different way than the other two questions. These results are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Vignette Question Correlations**

	Fine	Guilt	Severity	Agree Punish	Identification
Fine	1				
N	534				
Guilt	.168**	1			
N	532	533			
Severity	.428**	.123**	1		
N	533	533	534		
Agree Punish	.427**	.408**	.418**	1	
N	532	532	533	533	
Identification	-.071	.183**	.020	.094*	1
N	533	533	534	533	534

\*\*= Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*= Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The extent to which the respondent judges the figure in the vignettes to be guilty is significantly correlated to the other questions gauging their perception of the offense. What diverges from the behavior predicted by SIT is that self identification is positively correlated with both perception of guilt and agreement with punishment. As the respondent increasingly self identifies with the person in the vignette these factors also increase rather than decrease as would be predicted by SIT.

In order to explicate the findings of the Correlational analysis further investigation was conducted utilizing the three congruence variables. These variables indicate whether the participant shared the identity of the individual in the vignette on the three domains. Due to the nature of the research methodology it was possible to carry out a within subjects repeated measures design employing gender as each participant had responded to a vignette which contained a gender congruent and gender incongruent figure. To further aid in clarity this analysis was structured by gender to clearly demonstrate differences in marginal means for gender congruence and gender incongruence between men and women.

Gender congruence has differential influence based upon the question being answered and the gender of the respondent answering the question. The research design presented a male character in the first vignette and a female character in the second. Consequently interpreting results based on congruence must take this into account. SIT would posit that as a person moves from an out-group member to an in-group member positive evaluation should increase

and negative evaluation should decrease. For women in this study, movement from a male figure in the first vignette to a female figure in the second resulted in an increase in their mean responses for the amount of the fine given and perceived severity of the crime. When they were evaluating another woman they tended to give higher fines and perceive the crime as being more severe than when they were evaluating men. Significance was found for male respondents on the perceived severity of the crime only, but taking into account the design of the questionnaire this means that when they were evaluating another man they perceived the severity of the crime to be less than when they were evaluating women. These findings are inconsistent with SIT as men demonstrate the hypothesized in-group bias, but women are found to display an out-group bias. This would seem to indicate the importance of examining identity congruence in order to accurately predict evaluative behavior. These results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Effects of Gender Congruence**

Question	Participant Gender	Mean Difference Vig1-Vig2	F value	Sig.	N
Amount of Fine	Male	-.018	.048	.826	115
	Female	-.139	7.812	.006**	155
Severity of Crime	Male	-.297	12.1	.001**	115
	Female	-.278	25.6	<.001**	155
Self Identification	Male	.387	5.615	.020*	115
	Female	.033	.053	.818	155

\*\*= Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*= Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Finally, it was interesting to note that the amount of self identification was not significantly different for women based upon the gender of the person in the vignette. There was no change in the extent that they identified with the figure in the vignette when the gender of the figure varied. Men, in contrast, when moving from a male figure in the first vignette to a female figure in the second decreased the amount that they self-identified with the figure.

## DISCUSSION

Ridgeway (2005) has looked closely at developing the links between social structure and interpersonal behavior using what she calls social ordering schema. These ordering schemas have three important components: they specify relationships between social elements, they are social rather than individual, and when executed, they give rise to observable social structure. This is comparable to ICT's identity standard and SIT's social belief structures which give information about status in the social network. Using this concept in connection

with socio-cognitive processes posited by SIT gives us a deeper understanding of interpersonal behavior. Outside the presence of a specific social ordering schema general socio-cognitive group processes as presented in SIT operate with respondents utilizing a basic rule of similarity in determining how another individual will be evaluated. When specific social ordering schemas are present this more textured information is utilized in the decision making process even when at times it is in direct contradiction to the positive in-group bias that is usually predicted. Gender in this study was the most differentiated variable and is also a central feature in social structure. Consequently gender identity would be highly likely to possess a social ordering schema that would contain instructions towards a status hierarchy.

This status hierarchy has been found in the past to be a motivating influence for the presence of out-group favoritism in lower status groups (Reichl 1997). Favoring the out-group when a person is a member of a low status group potentially has greater benefits than favoring the in-group by acknowledging the status structure and responding in the approved way. This would suggest that status hierarchies utilized by the individual in social ordering schemas would be important in understanding and predicting group behavior in a social environment. The tendency for women to suggest higher fines and a greater severity of the crime when evaluating other women would imply women are reacting in a way congruent with what would be expected of the lower status group. Men, being the dominant social group, express in-group bias as predicted by SIT.

Social identity theory tells us that people will display, default group processes which have been learned to be the most effective in situations where richer information is absent. In cases where this richer information is present it will be utilized as society has informed the individual that this is a more desirable and/or rewarding pattern of behavior. What these occasions are and what the changed behavior may be is addressed in identity theory with its emphasis on social position. It is only through the knowledge of both individual socio-cognitive processes and macro level social structure that an accurate understanding of behavior can be obtained.

Gender serves as a clear example for this study that while men display typical in-group bias women, perhaps based upon their different societal position; respond in a much different way. Identities serve as ways to distinguish groups in society from one another and it seems incorrect to continue to assume that these distinctions are always separate yet equally manifested in the social hierarchy. Psychological group processes are important as they tell us how individuals behave outside of constraint, but in order to have a complete picture of human behavior the social contextual influences on the processes must be understood. Further refinement of the methodology and an increased emphasis on the contribution of preexisting literatures on status structures will be of benefit to understanding how the identity of a subject interacts with the identity of the evaluator to form unique judgment behavior.



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## APPENDIX A

[Case #]. [Generic sex appropriate name] a [Age] [Sex] was ticketed for doing 45 MPH in a 35 MPH zone while driving on West Oak Street at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday October 12th 2006. Income disclosure as part of the program established that [Generic sex appropriate name] earns [Income amount] per year establishing him in the [Income class descriptor] income class.

## APPENDIX B

1. Circle what you feel would be an appropriate fine.

[Response Options: \$1, \$25, \$50, \$100, \$200, \$400, \$800]

2. How likely do you think it is that the defendant is guilty? With 1 meaning not guilty and 6 meaning they are definitely guilty.

[Response Scale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

3. How severe do you feel the crime was in this case? With 1 meaning not severe at all and 6 meaning the most severe possible?

[Response Scale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

4. To what extent do you agree with punishing the defendant? With 1 meaning you highly disagree and 6 meaning you highly agree.

[Response Scale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

5. To what extent do you identify with the defendant in the description? With 1 meaning you don't identify at all and 6 meaning you identify completely

[Response Scale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

**APPENDIX C**

**Table C1. Variable Descriptives**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N.*
Gender			540
Age			542
Q1	3.04	.94	534
Q2	4.23	1.41	533
Q3	2.03	1.02	534
Q4	3.02	1.31	533
Q5	3.44	1.56	534
Gender Congruence			533
Age Congruence			535

\*= Two vignettes for each participant

**Table C2. Variable Correlations**

	Gender	Age	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Gender Con.	Age Con.
Gender	1								
N	540								
Age	-.094*	1							
N	533	533							
Q1	-.057	.130**	1						
N	532	533	534						
Q2	.039	.129**	.168**	1					
N	531	533	532	533					
Q3	.053	.110*	.428**	.123**	1				
N	532	533	533	533	534				
Q4	.008	.165**	.427**	.408**	.418**	1			
N	531	533	532	532	534	533			
Q5	.068	.023	-.071	.183**	.020	.094*	1		
N	532	533	533	533	534	533	534		
Gender Congruence	.016	-.002	-.054	.020	-.031	-.004	-.050	1	
N	533	533	532	531	532	531	532	533	
Age Congruence	.533	.000	-.010	-.065	-.016	-.016	-.257**		1
N	533	533	534	533	534	533	534	533	535

\*\*= Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*= Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

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