

Submitted: March 14, 2013

First Revision: August 24, 2013

Accepted: August 26, 2013

FURTHER EXAMINING THE BUFFERING EFFECT OF SELF-ESTEEM AND MASTERY ON EMOTIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This research further investigates the buffering effect of self-esteem and mastery on respondents' emotional reaction within identity theory. Using data from a study invoking the worker identity, I investigate how subjects' reports of self-esteem and mastery influence their emotional reactions to identity non-verification. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the results support the prediction that mastery buffers subjects' negative emotional reactions to identity non-verification. However, contrary to expectations, such predictions do not hold for self-esteem. The implications for these differences and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Identity theorists posit that identity verification affects actors' emotions and self-views (Burke and Stets 1999; Stets 2003). Identity verification is associated with an increase in positive emotions and self-views; failing to achieve identity verification (i.e. identity non-verification) leads to negative emotions and self-feelings (Burke and Harrod 2005; Burke and Stets 1999). Building on Cast and Burke (2002), I investigate whether subjects' reports of self-esteem and mastery, as reservoirs of energy, buffer subjects' negative emotional responses to identity non-verification outside of the close, personal relationship of newly married couples. If confirmed among strangers involving an identity they likely have limited commitment to it supports the robustness of the buffering effect of non-verifying feedback as previously found.

Identity theorists stress that actors' sense of self is derived from their social position and earlier interactions (Stets 1997; Stryker, Serpe and Hunt 2005). From these, actors internalize society's meanings and expectations of the identity. Identity meanings are important because they guide one's behaviors. When an identity is activated, identity meanings from the identity standard guide the actor's behaviors to be consistent with identity standard. Successful identity enactments lead to identity verification, leading to positive self-feelings for the actor; when identity enactments are unsuccessful, it leads to identity non-verification and negative self-feelings. In addition to the immediate emotional reactions associated with identity enactments, Cast and Burke (2002) argue that identity verification increases the self-esteem and mastery held within a reservoir of energy buffering negative emotional reactions during problematic identity enactments.

To date, there has only been one empirical investigation of this buffering effect. Here I extend our understanding of this effect with a sample invoking an identity subjects likely have limited extensive or intensive commitment to—a worker in a laboratory setting. As identity theorists have demonstrated, the amount of commitment one has to an identity affects the effort spent securing congruence between the identity standard and inputs from the environment (Burke and Reitzes 1991). Testing the buffering effect using a sample without the confounding commitments of newly married couples enables a test of the robustness of this theoretical process.

THEORY

Identity Theory

Identities refer to meanings attributed to the self when holding a role (Burke and Stets 2009). Actors behave according to the context of meanings associated with their social structural position (Stryker 1980). Successful identity enactments result in positive emotions (e.g. self-esteem and mastery) (Burke and Stets 1999). Feedback inconsistent with one's self-views, leads to negative self-feelings. Identity theory proposes an internalized control model monitoring the identity process (Stets and Burke 2009). Active identities are controlled by a feedback loop with four elements. The *identity standard* holds the meanings associated with the identity. Second, *inputs* reflect reflected appraisals and perceptions of how well situational meanings match their identity enactment. Third, the *comparator* determines congruence between the inputs and the identity standard. A discrepancy between the input and the identity standard generates an error signal, indicating something is amiss. *Output* reflects the individual's identity enactments. Emotions result from the comparison of inputs to the meanings within the identity standard. When congruence exists (i.e. self-verification), positive emotions and self-views result; incongruence (i.e. a lack of self-verification) leads to a reduction in emotions (e.g. self-esteem and mastery).

Cast and Burke (2002) argue that self-esteem and mastery are outcomes of the self-verification process. They envision self-esteem and mastery held in a reservoir of energy which is increased with successful identity enactments and depleted by failed enactments. Cast and Burke argue this energy is important because it allows one to overcome the immediate negative effects of problematic interactions. When faced with problems verifying an identity, the reservoir of energy is utilized to overcome the “potentially debilitating emotions” associated with identity non-verification (Cast and Burke 2002:1049).

Simply positing actors experience emotions omits substantial information; emotions also vary in intensity (Stets 2003; Stryker 2004). Affecting one's emotional response is things like the level of commitment one has to the identity or the nature of the discrepancy (Stets and Ascencio 2008). Burke (1991) argues that the frequency of disconfirming feedback affects the intensity of the emotions experienced. Persistent interruptions are considered problematic because they imply that one's efforts to overcome these interruptions are unsuccessful. When the magnitude of the discrepancy is larger than what can be automatically handled by the buffering effect using the reservoir of energy, a more forceful action is needed to resolve the discrepancy (i.e. exiting the situation or changing the identity standard).

This research represents an advancement of the buffering effect of self-esteem and mastery for several reasons. First, as important as Cast and Burke's (2002) study is, it reflects a single test of the theoretical process. Second, their sample of newly married couples likely carries confounding meanings and commitments unique to the sample, and possibly, affecting the results. Third, as Burke and Reitzes (1991) identified, the level of commitment one has to an identity affects the amount of effort spent confirming the identity. Behaviorally, commitment affects the motivation one has to maintain congruence between the inputs from the environment and the identity standard. The level of commitment to the spousal identity is certainly higher than the commitment students have to an identity enacted within an experiment. By testing the buffering effect with students evoking their worker identity, it tests the power of this theoretical process. If it can be found within this sample, it suggests that the effect is quite robust. Here I investigate the robustness of this buffering effect.

HYPOTHESES

H1: Identity non-verification will lead to negative emotions.

H2a: Identity disconfirmation will lead to less negative emotional reactions for actors with high self-esteem as compared to lower self-esteem.

H2b: Identity disconfirmation will lead to less negative emotional reactions for actors with higher mastery than for those with lower mastery.

METHODS

Data come from an experiment simulating a work environment. Volunteers were recruited from classes at a large public Northwestern university and earned \$10 for their participation. Subjects complete three simple tasks, and under all conditions, are told they perform average work. Participants are randomly assigned to one of three conditions: receiving more points than expected, receiving the expected number of points, or receiving fewer points than anticipated. Both male and female students were recruited. After the feedback about their performance, points are then allocated. Following this, participants are asked a series of questions, including asking them their emotional reactions to the number of points received. A total of 282 participants are obtained. However, the present study is restricted to only those subjects receiving fewer points than they expected and those receiving the expected points for a total of 188 responses being analyzed.

Procedure

A participant and a confederate are escorted into a room by the supervisor. They are told that an advertising agency is conducting an ad campaign for a new car. The agency needs feedback about the effectiveness of the campaign. Subjects are told they will be engaging in three simple clerical tasks, exactly like those to be done by the ad agency's workers. Their help is needed to determine the amount of time the project will take. Subjects first fill out a brief background questionnaire. The supervisor then "randomly" assigns the subject to be the worker and the confederate as the manager. The participant is then taken into a room and watches an instructional video of the tasks. In the video, the "worker" receives 100 points after the manager

determines the worker's effort to be of "average" quality. This sets the identity standard that average work equals 100 points. After viewing is completed, the subject begins working.

Work begins by the manager reviewing the three tasks with the subject. Subjects are told that after the task, the manager will give them 100 points for average work and 50 points for below average work. To guarantee the subject understands the reward schedule, a manipulation check is given. This also reinforces the identity standard that average work leads to 100 points from the instructional video. Furthermore, it reinforces that the manager determines the points they receive. Regardless of condition, subjects ultimately receive feedback that their performance is of average quality. Subjects in the identity non-verification condition are awarded 50 points for their "average" performance. The remaining subjects receive the expected 100 points. Subjects' emotional reactions are obtained by responses to questions following the allocation of points. After all the information is collected, subjects are debriefed as to the true nature of the study. The study lasted approximately one hour.

Manipulation Checks

To determine if subjects adopted the identity standard of 100 points for average work, they are asked to indicate how many points they expected to receive given their work performance. Because subjects are always told they performed average work, subjects should indicate they expect to receive 100 points. Results confirm the experimental manipulation is successful. The mean response is 100.89 which is not significantly different from 100 ($t = .71$, $p = .48$). Subjects are also asked to attribute responsibility for their points. Nearly all respondents (96%) indicated the manager was responsible for their points.

Measures

The dependent variable is the sum of the subject's positive and negative emotional reactions to the points received. Emotions are captured by the subject circling the number that best represented their feelings, on a scale of 0 ("Didn't feel the emotion at all") to 10 ("Intensely felt the emotion"). Items were coded such that a larger number reflects greater negative emotions. This scale has an alpha reliability of .88. The items and factor loadings of these items are available in the appendix.

Identity non-verification is a dummy variable where a 1 represents subjects receiving fewer points than expected. *Self-Esteem* is measured using Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem scale. Items are coded such that a higher score represents greater self-esteem. The self-esteem scale has an alpha reliability of .83. *Mastery* is measured using the Pearlin et al. mastery scale (1981). Items are coded such that a higher score represents greater mastery. The mastery scale has an alpha reliability of .78. [1]

Control Variables

Gender is coded as 1 for females, 0 for males. *Persistence* is coded 1 if the subject was included in a condition where points are administered at prearranged intervals, 0 if they receive

points only once. Familiarity is coded 1 if the subject was in a condition where the subject spent time speaking with the confederate before beginning the experiment, 0 otherwise.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.
Emotions	22.57	16.92
Persistence, 1 = Persistence	.5	.5
Familiarity, 1 = Familiarity	.5	.5
Underreward, 1 = Underrewarded	.5	.5
Gender, 1 = Female	.49	.5
Self-Esteem	34.81	4.12
Mastery	23.11	3.07

Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations among Variables in the Models (N = 188)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Emotions	1.00						
2. Persistence	-.01	1.00					
3. Familiarity	.01	-.00	1.00				
4. Underreward	.66*	.02	.00	1.00			
5. Gender	-.10	-.00	-.01	-.02	1.00		
6. Self-Esteem	-.03	-.04	.09	.02	-.08	1.00	
7. Mastery	-.12*	-.09	.08	-.09	-.07	.68*	1.00

Note: * $p \leq .05$

RESULTS

Table 3 provides the results from the two models, one each for self-esteem and mastery as the dependent variable of interest. Within Table 3, we see support for Hypothesis 1. Respondents in the underrewarded condition, individuals' experiencing identity non-verification, report negative emotions as anticipated. This is observed both in Model 1 investigating the effects on mastery (Beta = .64) and Model 2 investigating the effects on self-esteem (Beta = .65). Hypotheses 2a and 2b investigate whether the buffering effect is different by experimental condition. Unexpectedly, Hypothesis 2a is not supported. Self-esteem does not buffer the negative effects of being underrewarded. Lastly, Hypothesis 2b is supported. Subjects reporting greater levels of mastery who are underrewarded report significantly lower negative emotions (Beta = .18), supporting the buffering effect.

Table 3. Standardized OLS Estimates of Negative Emotional Reactions on Identity Disconfirmation

Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Persistence, 1= Persistent Condition	-.02	-.03
Familiarity, 1 = Familiarity	.00	.01
Underreward = 1 (Urew)	.64*	.65*
Gender, Female = 1	-.13*	-.11*
Self-Esteem (SE)	--	-.11
Mastery	-.26*	--
SE*Urew	--	.08
Mastery*Urew	.18*	--
R ²	.48	.45
N	188	186

Note: * $p \leq .05$

-- Not included in Equation

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigates how robust the reservoirs of self-esteem and mastery are in buffering identity non-verifying feedback. Cast and Burke (2002) found that these reservoirs of energy buffer respondents within the first three years of marriage. However, an open question remains whether this buffering effect exists for an identity the actor is less committed to than that of spouse. Because as Burke and Reitzes (1991) argue, one's commitment to a given identity affects the amount of effort s/he is willing to invest to maintain congruence (identity verification) between their identity standard and environmental inputs. Using data mimicking a workplace, I investigate how self-esteem and mastery buffer subjects' negative emotional reactions to identity non-verification. The present study tests the robustness of the buffering process of self-esteem and mastery using students involving their worker identity. This is achieved using a sample and identity with limited emotional attachments between actors. Support for the buffering process implies that the buffering is a robust and ubiquitous process for an activated identity.

After first establishing an identity standard, subjects were exposed to feedback inconsistent with this standard to trigger the negative emotional reactions expected by identity theory. Consistent with theoretical predictions, inconsistent feedback is associated with increased negative emotional reactions. The main effects of self-esteem and mastery reducing the intensity of negative emotions are mixed, but follow the pattern found by Cast and Burke (2002). Like their research, the results here also show that mastery (self-efficacy) is more robust than self-esteem (self-worth) in reducing the negative effects of identity non-verification. Moreover, the buffering effect is only seen for mastery like presented by Cast and Burke (2002).

It is likely that the nature of the worker identity is responsible for the mixed results. Being a worker carries meanings of being task-orientated, where successful identity enactments leads to increases in mastery as one's attributes positive outcomes to one's own actions (Burke and Stets 1999; Gecas 1989). Because the present study invokes subjects' worker identity, non-verifying feedback requires tapping into the reservoir of mastery to sustain the self during

difficult interactions. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is linked to one's sense of belonging or acceptance within a group (Burke and Stets 1999). Because the present study did not challenge the subjects' sense of acceptance or belonging to a group, it is understandable why they did not tap into their reservoir of self-esteem.

Along these lines, future research should provide additional theoretical and empirical effort to trying to understand how the nature of the identity in question affects the reservoir of self-esteem utilized to overcome difficult interactions. This research suggests that the nature of the identity in question impacts which reservoir of self-esteem buoys the actor through the situation causing the non-verifying feedback. Similarly, other IT research has found that identity verification is different depending on the identity in question (Stets and Harrod 2004). While Stets and Harrod's research is focused on how status affects the verification of different identities, it suggests that the nature of the identity in question may be important. For example, they find educational achievement is positively associated with verification of task-oriented identities, while membership in a particular racial/ethnic group is related to socio-emotional identities such as friend. Although we should be cautious about placing too much weight upon a single study, it suggests that there may be differences between socio-emotional and instrumental identities that may be important for this buffering effect. Future research may wish to explicitly examine this possibility.

Finally, another avenue of theoretical and empirical work that researchers may wish to address is how the nature of the identity (person, role, or social) influences how status functions when an identity is not verified. These differences may be important for how a particular form of self-esteem functions to buffer non-verifying feedback. Burke (2004) argues that each of these forms of identity is attached to the social structure in different ways. For instance, social identities are based upon the shared meaning of membership with others within the group (Stets and Burke 2000), may use worth-based self-esteem to buffer identity non-verification. Role identities, which are based upon one's role performances, might rely upon efficacy-based self-esteem to protect the self when identity non-verification occurs. These are unanswered questions that require empirical investigation to help us better understand the buffering process of self-esteem/mastery first discussed by Cast and Burke (2002).

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Appendix A. Factor Loadings of Emotions

Items	Factor Loading
Anger	.81
Resentment	.81
Disgust	.79
Sadness	.53
Satisfaction*	.82
Gratefulness*	.69
Deserving*	.61
Alpha Reliability	.88

Note: *Reverse Coded

Appendix B. Specific Emotions Asked of Subjects

Anger
Resentment
Disgust
Sadness
Satisfaction
Gratefulness
Deserving

ENDNOTES

[1] Cast and Burke (2002) use self-esteem as inclusive of self-worth and self-mastery. Here I use the term self-esteem to refer to the Rosenberg (1979) self-esteem scale. Also, I use the term mastery to refer to the dimension of self that is captured by Pearlin et al.'s (1981) scale. For the present research, by the term self-esteem I am referring, roughly, to what Cast and Burke (2002) label as self-worth. Similarly, when referring to mastery, I am referring to what they refer to as self-efficacy. These items are used because the additional variables necessary to replicate Cast and Burke's scales are not available in these data.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The author wishes to thank Alicia Cast for comments on a previous version of the paper. This research was supported by National Science Foundation Grant SES-9904215 to Jan E. Stets, Principle Investigator.

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