

BOOK REVIEW: *IDENTITY THEORY* (2023) BY PETER J. BURKE AND JAN E. STETS**Rym Lina Mohammed-Azizi***University of Pécs, Hungary*

The discourse on identity has long served as a focal point across disciplines, bringing forth a spectrum of varying perspectives that converge as often as they diverge, an intricate dynamic that this book review explores. Broadly understood as the ways in which individuals perceive and define themselves, identity is deeply intertwined with social roles and expectations, it resides within the web of “meanings that define individuals as occupants of roles in society, members of groups or social categories, or unique persons with characteristics that identify them” (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 1). In *Identity Theory*, Burke and Stets build on Sheldon Stryker’s foundational work, which conceived of the “Self” as an array of distinct identities tied to the various roles a person occupies within social structures (Burke & Stryker, 2023, pp. 26-28). They further expand on this by examining how individuals construct, maintain, and adjust their identities through interactions that align with socially embedded expectations. For them, identity is a dynamic process, emerging from and continuously reshaped by the social contexts in which individuals operate, anchoring behaviors and guiding responses in diverse environments.

About the author: *Rym Lina Mohammed-Azizi is a Ph.D. Candidate at the doctoral school of literary and cultural studies, university of Pécs, Hungary. Her research centers on the exploration of identity in young adult literature.*

e-mail: medazizirymlina@gmail.com

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3029-0868>

Copyright © 2024 Rym Lina Mohammed-Azizi

Article history: Received: 2 November 2024; Reviewed: 15 November 2024; Accepted: 17 November 2024; Published: 9 December 2024



This open access article is published and distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Citation (APA): Mohammed-Azizi, R. L. (2024). Book review: *Identity theory* (2023) by Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets. *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*, 12(3), 190-196. <https://doi.org/10.46687/CVAG5265>.

This framework, grounded in *Symbolic Interactionism¹ Theory* (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 20), sheds light on the ways identity both stabilizes the self and adapts within a structured social world. Identity studies reveal the complexity of identity, addressing organizational challenges, enriching human understanding, and uncovering cultural and political influences. Its construction arises from personal narratives, material conditions, and social frameworks, notably during transitions, despite its fluid and context-dependent nature² (Alvesson et al., 2008, pp. 17-21).

From the first chapter, the reciprocal dependency between agency and social structure is established. While agency refers to the individual's ability to make choices, structure encompasses the pre-existing social norms and systems that guide or constrain those choices. In other words, individuals influence social frameworks through their actions, just as these frameworks (social roles, interactions, and structures) influence their identity, thus we have “persons who have identities that come into being with the emergence of structure” (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 16). This dynamic highlights how individuals both create and are constrained by societal norms:

there may be situational reasons for choosing a behavior that is at odds with our identity [...] one reason may be that a behavior is at odds with one identity but in accord with another in the case of conflicting identities. Another reason may be that the role we are in [...] may require us to act in ways that are not consistent with the meanings of other identities we might hold (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 225).

Mead asserts that “all the secondary selves – voter, church member, father – are related just as the different groups in society are related³. The organization of this inner social consciousness is a reflex of the organization of the outer world” (1934, p. 74). This illustrates the reflexive relationship between inner consciousness and external society, portraying the self as a mirror of societal

1. By “Symbolic Interactionism,” I am specifically referring to Traditional Symbolic Interactionism, distinct from its structural counterpart. Rooted in Mead’s (1934) work, “Symbolic Interactionism is a theoretical framework in sociology that describes how societies are created and maintained through the repeated actions of individuals” (Nickerson, 2023, pp. 2-3). Early thinkers like James and Cooley also contributed to this tradition, forming the foundation of identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2023, pp. 19-25).

2. This relational and ever-shifting nature of identity is further complicated by the fact that all identities are produced within systems of inequality that shape and define how they are understood and categorized (Lawler, 2014, p. 14).

3. In the context of societal groups, Social Identity Theory (SIT) examines how individuals categorize themselves and others into groups, influencing perceptions and interactions. Marginalized groups employ strategies like social mobility or social change, shaped by group identification, boundary permeability, and perceptions of stability and legitimacy, to navigate societal norms and hierarchies (Harwood, 2020, pp. 1-2).

organization and reinforcing the inseparable and complementary connection between the individual and the social world⁴.

After establishing this relationship, the authors proceed to discuss the origins and evolution of identity theory in the following two chapters. They examine the contributions of early thinkers such as W. James, C. H. Cooley, G. H. Mead, and H. Blumer (Burke & Stets, 2023, pp. 19-25). While James emphasizes the multiplicity of identities in his theory of the *multiple selves* (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 9), Erikson views identity as a lifelong process of personal development, stressing continuity and self-building by particularly highlighting the importance of achieving a unified sense of the self, which facilitates the transition between stages, stressing young adulthood. Though Erikson did not explicitly oppose the concept of “multiple identities” as understood in contemporary identity theory, he focused on the formation of a coherent and unified sense of self: “In all youth’s seeming shiftiness, a seeking after some durability in change can be detected” (1968, p. 235).

Building on Erikson’s framework, **the concept of prolonged identity exploration** suggests that identity formation does not stop after adolescence but continues throughout adulthood (Côté, 2006, p. 16). This idea challenges the traditional notion of a fixed, resolved self that is sought by young adults, and instead proposes that individuals in modern societies experience extended periods of identity exploration, driven by changing societal roles, expectations, and personal circumstances. In a world where adulthood itself is increasingly prolonged, the process of identity development becomes a dynamic and ongoing negotiation, offering fresh perspectives on the individual’s engagement with their social environment. Hence,

we need to conduct population-level surveys on the identity formation of young people if we are to fully understand why the transition to adulthood has become so prolonged and what we might expect in the future, not to mention the supports that people need in making what is increasingly a hazardous, nonlinear, and perhaps never-ending passage (Côté, 2006, pp. 15-16).

Aboulafia’s concept of the *composite self* serves as an elegant bridge between the theories of James and Erikson, which he coined after observing Mead’s “tendency to unify or organize different selves into a single self [...] So one answer to what self might be split into multiple personalities is the composite self, a more comprehensive organization of elementary or localized selves”

4. This connection parallels Identity Theory (IT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT), highlighting collective identity as a link between individual and group dynamics, especially in digital contexts. Identity verification fosters positive alignment, while nonverification triggers negativity, offering insights into social movements and digital activism beyond formal affiliations (Davis et al., 2019, pp. 268-270). Similarly, a study of healthcare professionals revealed how power hierarchies within in-groups can breed disillusionment with professional ideals, emphasizing the need to value diverse contributions and foster perspective-taking to enhance cohesion and reduce conflict (Bochatay et al., 2019, p. 806).

(2016, p. 6). In Mead's view, "we legitimately have different selves over against different groups, and there is a natural organization among these which makes us a whole man" (qtd. in Aboulafia, 2016, p. 6), highlighting the self as complex and multifaceted, capable of adapting to various social roles while remaining unified under the encompassing arc of the composite self. Mead further develops his theory by distinguishing between *primary and secondary selves*, where the *whole man* is conceived as the primary self – the unifier of the different selves. He asserts that "there is a relation between these various secondary selves to the primary self which belongs to action [...] An idea comes to us that does not come from the mouths of the selves that are presenting the case but from the primary self" (Mead, 1934, pp. 74-75). Here, the primary self drives agency and innovation, unconstrained by social roles, while secondary selves represent the context-specific identities that together form a cohesive whole.

Cooley and Mead corroborate the notion that identity is largely social and influenced by interactions with others, asserting that the self emerges from perceiving oneself through the perspectives of others. In this vein, Cooley's concept of the *looking-glass self* manifests this idea, wherein:

There is no sense of "I" [...] without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they... a social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self [...] a self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination, of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (Cooley, 1902, pp. 293-294).

In essence, the theory proposes that individuals construct their identity based on how they believe others perceive them. Society thus acts as a mirror, shaping their identity through social feedback. Mead draws on the "generalized other"; society's organized set of expectations, asserting that the self is shaped by internalizing and interpreting these societal roles; he explains, "The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called 'the generalized other'" (1934, p. 154). While society influences the self, Mead also highlights individual agency in responding to societal roles, bridging Cooley's looking-glass self and Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism. Blumer (1986), Mead's student, extends this idea by emphasizing individuals as active agents who interpret symbols and shape social reality. For Blumer (*ibid.*), society is fluid, continuously redefined through interaction, positioning individuals as central in creating societal structures and meanings. This is further developed in "The Development of Identity Theory" chapter, wherein the authors assert the roots of this theory in Structural Symbolic Interactionism (SSI), which parallels Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self. SSI focuses on how stable social structures – such as organizations, roles, and groups – shape and reinforce individual identities. As Stryker elaborates:

Although society emerges from social process, organized society exists before the appearance of all new members. Thus, the basic premise of the respective can be rewritten: Society shapes self shapes social interaction [...] structural interactionism sees the effect of social structures as a process by which large-scale structures such as class, age, gender, and ethnicity operate through more intermediate structures such as neighborhoods, schools, and associational memberships to affect relationships in social networks. The latter are proximate structures presumed to shape the content of self and its organization (2008, pp. 19-20).

On the other hand, Traditional Symbolic Interactionism (TSI) emphasizes the fluid social interactions that constantly reshape society. In Nickerson's delineation:

Instead of addressing how institutions objectively define and affect individuals, symbolic interactionism pays attention to these individuals' subjective viewpoints and how they make sense of the world from their own perspective [...] The objective structure of a society is less important in the symbolic interactionist view than how subjective, repeated, and meaningful interactions between individuals create society (Nickerson, 2023, pp. 2-3).

SSI emphasizes that while individuals actively negotiate their identities through social interactions, stable structures profoundly influence their expression and sustainability. The chapter underscores the importance of scientific tools, such as scales to quantify role-related behaviors, in analyzing patterns and predicting social behaviors. Expanding on this, it explores how shared social symbols shape identity meanings across contexts and how material, symbolic, and psychological resources sustain these identities. These resources are shown to directly affect the success of identity-verifying interactions, highlighting their essential connection to social identity. The authors examine key dimensions – prominence, salience, and commitment – and their influence on identity stability and dynamics, introducing the concept of *identity dispersion*, which captures contextual variations in identity meanings and sheds light on potential inconsistencies (Burke & Stets, 2023, pp. 213-235). They also present an identity model where feedback ensures coherence through norms, perceptions, a comparator, and behavior, showing how discrepancies between perceptions and standards prompt adjustments (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 205). Empirical studies highlight how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses restore verification after disruptions. They further investigate identity nonverification, exploring its sources, consequences, and the strategies individuals employ to regain equilibrium (Burke & Stets, 2023, pp. 142-164).

Building the previously discussed identity types (role, person, group, and social category), the next chapter examines how multiple identities coexist within an

individual, focusing on their hierarchical organization and contextual activation (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 186). The authors explore how individuals navigate a complex hierarchy of multiple identities, balancing and managing them to maintain a coherent self-concept⁵. However, individuals often face situations that challenge the stability of their identity, leading to profound transformations as they are compelled to renegotiate and redefine who they are in response to shifts in cultural contexts, personal conflicts, or external pressures (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 213), emphasizing how identity is not merely managed but also reshaped over time, and capturing the ongoing adaptability of the self in response to a dynamic world.

Identity Theory offers a valuable framework for examining how social structure and individual agency intertwine to shape identity. It highlights the dynamic process of adaptation and validation where external influences and personal initiatives intersect, providing insights into how people navigate their varied social roles, making the book relevant for exploring identity in various social settings. By the end of this review, I will adhere to the authors' proposed avenues for further research into identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2023, p. 236), integrating structural and perceptual dimensions and proposing new research avenues for counter-normative and stigmatized identities, e.g. those tied to gender or ethnicity, which are increasingly salient in modern society. I also find their call for research at micro, meso, and macro levels compelling, emphasizing a more comprehensive understanding of identity within complex social and cultural contexts.

References

- Aboulafia, M. (2016). George Herbert Mead and the unity of the self. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejap.465>.
- Alvesson, M., Ashcraft, K. L., & Thomas, R. (2008). Identity matters: Reflections on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies. *Organization*, 15(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508407084426>.
- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.
- Bochatay, N., Bajwa, N. M., Blondon, K. S., Perron, N. J., Cullati, S., & Nendaz, M. R. (2019). Exploring group boundaries and conflicts: A social

5. Within the framework of multiple identities negotiation, what factors determine which identity is prioritized for categorization in a given context? Hornsey (2008) has addressed this question through the lens of Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), explaining that social identity activation depends on fit and accessibility; key factors which jointly determine identity salience in any given context (Hornsey, 2008, p. 208). Individuals perceive high fit when category distinctions maximize intergroup differences and minimize intragroup differences, a concept rooted in classic categorization theory. SCT expands on this by emphasizing the dynamic, context-dependent, and perceiver-relative nature of this process (Hornsey, 2008, 208).

- identity theory perspective. *Medical Education*, 53(8), 456–466. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.13881>.
- Burke, P. J., & Stets, J. E. (2023). *Identity theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197617182.001.0001>.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). The looking-glass self. In J. O'Brien (Ed.), *The production of reality: Essays and readings on social interaction* (3rd ed.), 293–295. <https://doi.org/10.32376/3f8575cb.73d69f51>.
- Côté, J. (2006). Identity studies: How close are we to developing a social science of identity?—An appraisal of the field. *Identity*, 6(1), 3–25. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0601_2.
- Davis, J. L., Love, T. P., & Fares, P. (2023). Collective social identity: Synthesizing identity theory and social identity theory using digital data. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 82(3), 254–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272519851025>.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W.W. Norton Company.
- Harwood, J. (2020). Social identity theory. In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0153>.
- Hornsey, M. J. (2008). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(1), 204–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00066.x>.
- Lawler, S. (2014). *Identity: Sociological perspectives* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Nickerson, C. (2023). Symbolic interactionism theory and examples. *Simply Psychology*. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/symbolic-interaction-theory.html>.
- Stryker, S. (2008). From Mead to a structural symbolic interactionism and beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34, 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134649>.