

SITUATED IDENTITIES THEORY

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Situated Identities Theory

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Social Psychology, Symbolic Interactionism

Proponents: George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons

1. Core Principles

The **Situated Identities Theory** (SIT), primarily developed by George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons in their foundational work, posits that the self is not a monolithic, stable entity, but rather a collection of identities that are activated and performed based entirely on the immediate social context. This theory argues forcefully against the notion of a single, unified self that is consistently expressed across all environments. Instead, an individual possesses a repertoire of potential identities, each corresponding to a specific role or relationship, and the selection of which identity to manifest is determined by the specific situation, the audience present, and the collective definition of that setting. Behavior, therefore, can radically shift, often appearing inconsistent to an external observer, precisely because the identity being performed is tailored to the environment.

Central to SIT is the understanding that human behavior is inherently adaptive and performative. When an individual enters a new social arena, they engage in a rapid assessment process to determine the appropriate social script and the corresponding identity required. For example, the identity assumed by a person acting as a **parent** in a family setting differs fundamentally from the identity they adopt as a **manager** in a corporate boardroom, or as a **student** in a classroom. Each situation provides different constraints, expectations, and goals, necessitating a unique alignment of self-presentation. This fluid approach to identity allows the individual to maximize social effectiveness and maintain status within the particular interactional context.

This theoretical framework emphasizes the distinction between the "internalized self" (the sum total of all potential identities) and the "situated self" (the specific identity currently being expressed). The theory suggests that we are continually engaged in identity bargaining and validation. If the identity performed is not accepted or validated by the audience--the co-participants in the situation--the individual must adjust their performance or redefine the situation until a stable, mutually acceptable social reality is established. Thus, identity is not merely an internal psychological state but an interactional achievement, constantly subject to negotiation and confirmation within the confines of the present situation.

2. Intellectual Background and Development

Situated Identities Theory emerged primarily from the intellectual tradition of Symbolic Interactionism, particularly the Chicago School associated with scholars like Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. SIT takes Goffman's dramaturgical approach--where social life is viewed as a

stage, and individuals are actors managing impressions--and integrates it more systematically with a role-based understanding of identity. While Goffman focused extensively on the techniques of presentation and impression management, McCall and Simmons focused on the organizational structure of the self that enables these multiple performances.

Historically, SIT developed in contrast to other competing identity frameworks emerging within sociology during the mid-20th century. Notably, it differentiates itself from the structural approach to Identity Theory championed by Sheldon Stryker (the Iowa School), which emphasized the stability of the self derived from structural positions (e.g., social class, kinship roles) and measured identity salience through commitment and internalization. While Stryker focused on the enduring aspects of identity rooted in social structure, SIT prioritized the immediate, dynamic, and interactional aspects of identity. SIT argued that focusing solely on structural roles failed to explain the radical shifts in behavior and self-perception that occur when an individual moves rapidly between highly divergent social settings.

The formal presentation of SIT in the 1960s provided a crucial bridge between macro-sociological role theory and micro-sociological studies of interaction. It offered a sophisticated lexicon for discussing how individuals manage the inherent contradiction of maintaining a sense of personal continuity (a self-concept) while exhibiting behavioral discontinuity dictated by situational demands. The theory provided empirical researchers with a framework to study identity as a variable dependent on social context, rather than a fixed personality trait, encouraging studies that analyzed the mechanisms of face-to-face interaction and the interpretive processes involved in defining a situation.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The theoretical structure of SIT is built upon several interconnected concepts that describe the mechanics of identity selection and performance within a social setting. Understanding these terms is essential for grasping how the theory explains behavioral variation and consistency across the social landscape.

The **Situated Identity** is perhaps the most fundamental concept. It refers to the particular definition of self that an individual claims and performs within a specific situation. This identity is inherently transactional; it exists only in relation to the immediate audience and the expectations of that environment. It involves not just behaviors but also specific attitudes, dispositions, and even emotional expressions deemed appropriate for that moment. For instance, in a medical context, a person assumes the situated identity of a "patient," which carries specific behavioral expectations (being compliant, reporting symptoms accurately, etc.).

Role Performance is the execution of the behaviors, gestures, and verbal cues associated with the situated identity. SIT views performance quality as crucial; the individual seeks to perform the

role competently to achieve the desired outcomes (e.g., respect, information, goal attainment). This performance is constantly monitored and adjusted based on the feedback received from the audience. If the performance falters, the situated identity may be challenged, leading to embarrassment or a breakdown in the interaction.

Furthermore, the **Definition of the Situation** is the shared, momentary agreement among participants about what is happening and what roles are relevant. Before any situated identity can be performed, the participants must first agree on the situational definition (e.g., "This is a formal job interview," or "This is a casual gathering of friends"). This definition dictates the acceptable range of situated identities that can be activated. If one person defines the situation as playful while another defines it as serious, identity performance becomes fraught with miscommunication and conflict, necessitating repair or re-negotiation of the definition itself.

4. Mechanism of Identity Activation

SIT provides a clear mechanism for explaining how an individual determines which identity from their total repertoire is most appropriate to activate. This process is highly cognitive and involves assessing the social demands and potential rewards associated with various identity options available in the current context. This selection is not random but follows a rational or near-rational calculus based on experience and social knowledge.

The process begins with an assessment of **Identity Prominence** and **Identity Salience**, though SIT typically focuses more on the immediate situational relevance rather than the general salience defined by structural commitment. In the moment of interaction, the individual judges which identity offers the greatest potential reward, status, or effectiveness given the immediate audience and task. For example, if a professor encounters a former student who is now a colleague, the individual must choose between activating the "mentor/professor" identity or the "peer/colleague" identity, a choice heavily influenced by the setting (a university meeting versus a social gathering) and the stated purpose of the interaction.

Once an identity is tentatively selected and performed, the mechanism of **Identity Verification** takes over. This involves interpreting feedback from the audience--verbal affirmation, non-verbal cues, and behavioral responses--to confirm whether the situated identity is accepted. If the audience responds in a way that validates the claimed identity (e.g., treating the individual claiming the "expert" identity with deference), the performance is reinforced. If the audience contradicts the performance (e.g., questioning the "expert's" credentials), the individual faces pressure to either revise the performance, switch to a different situated identity, or challenge the audience's definition of the situation. This constant checking and adjustment highlight the dynamic, interactional nature of identity maintenance.

5. Applications and Examples

Situated Identities Theory has proven highly useful across various fields of social inquiry, particularly those focusing on dynamic human interaction, communication, and organizational behavior. Its explanatory power lies in its ability to reconcile the apparent contradiction between an individual's stable sense of self and their dramatically changing behavior across settings.

In **Organizational Behavior**, SIT helps explain role conflict and organizational integration. Employees often hold multiple situated identities (e.g., team member, subordinate, mentor, friend). When the demands of two identities conflict within the same setting--for example, when a manager must simultaneously be an advocate for their team and a strict enforcer of company policy--identity strain occurs. SIT provides a framework for analyzing how individuals prioritize, segment, and strategically deploy these competing identities to manage the social expectations and power dynamics inherent in the workplace.

In **Communication Studies**, SIT illuminates how individuals adapt their language, tone, and communication styles. A person communicating with a child adopts a different situated identity, characterized by simpler language and encouraging tone, than when communicating with a superior, which requires a more formal, deferential identity. The theory suggests that communication competence is largely determined by the ability to correctly identify the required situated identity and perform it convincingly, thereby facilitating smoother interaction and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, SIT is valuable in understanding **Social Deviance and Conformity**. Deviant behavior can often be viewed as the activation of a situated identity that conflicts with the prevailing social definition of the situation. For instance, a person who adheres to the "joker" identity in a setting defined as "solemn ceremony" creates tension because their chosen situated identity is inconsistent with the collectively agreed-upon social script. Conversely, conformity involves activating the situated identity that perfectly aligns with the audience's expectations, demonstrating the power of situational context in regulating social behavior.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its utility in explaining micro-level interaction and behavioral shifts, Situated Identities Theory has faced several significant criticisms, primarily regarding its potential minimization of internal consistency and structural constraints.

One major criticism is that SIT potentially overemphasizes the situational determination of the self, thus failing to adequately explain **Self-Consistency**. Critics argue that if identity is purely situated, the individual would possess no core or enduring self; yet, individuals generally experience a strong sense of continuity and personal history. While McCall and Simmons acknowledged the

overarching self-concept, their focus on the immediate situation sometimes makes it difficult to account for why certain identities might be more resistant to situational pressure than others, or why individuals often experience discomfort when required to perform an identity that fundamentally conflicts with their internalized values.

A second limitation concerns the neglect of **Macro-Sociological Factors**. SIT, rooted in micro-sociology, often treats the social situation as the primary determinant, potentially overlooking the rigid influence of large-scale social structures, such as class, gender, race, and institutional power. These structures often pre-determine the range of acceptable situated identities available to an individual, limiting the degree of "choice" or "negotiation" implied by the theory. For example, a person's race might fundamentally restrict the positive identities they can effectively claim in certain power-laden situations, regardless of their performance competence.

Finally, **Methodological Challenges** exist in empirical research based on SIT. Since situated identity is inherently fluid and only observable during the interaction itself, measuring the transition between identities or accurately capturing the subjective "definition of the situation" is complex. Researchers must rely heavily on observational data and post-hoc interpretation, making quantitative testing of identity salience in relation to situational demands difficult compared to structural identity theories which use survey instruments to measure generalized identity commitment.

7. Further Reading

McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1966). [Identities and Interactions: An Examination of Human Association in Everyday Life](#). Free Press.

[Symbolic Interactionism](#) (Wikipedia entry for foundational context).

[Identity Theory \(Social Science\)](#) (Wikipedia entry detailing related identity frameworks).

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.