In this paper I develop and discuss the concept of "identity-relevant stressors." Identities refer to individuals' conceptions of themselves in terms of the social roles that they enact (e.g., spouse, parent, worker, churchgoer, friend). An identity-relevant experience is one that threatens or, alternatively, enhances an identity that the individual values highly; identity-irrelevant experiences occur in roles that the individual does not value highly. This concept can help solve a problem in the stress literature, namely the inability of stress theory to account parsimoniously for social status differences in psychological distress. I propose that 1) individuals' identity structures (their hierarchical identity rankings) should vary systematically by social status; 2) because of differential resources, lower-status individuals should be exposed to proportionately more identity-threatening stressors and higher-status individuals to more identity-enhancing experiences, and 3) variation in exposure to identity-relevant experiences should explain status differences in psychological distress more fully than conventional measures of life events and chronic strains. To illustrate the potential utility of this theoretical approach, I discuss gender and marital status differences in psychological distress as cases in point.

Research on stress and mental health has reached an impasse on a key problem: The inverse relationships consistently found between social status and psychological distress (see Link and Dohrenwend 1980 for a review) cannot be explained parsimoniously by stress theory as it is currently being formulated. I will argue that a potential solution to this problem can be found in theoretical work on social identity.

Stress theory generally holds that as major life events and chronic strains accumulate, the individual's ability to readjust can be overwhelmed, resulting in greater vulnerability to physical or psychological disorder (Brown and Harris 1978; Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1974; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Pearlin 1989). Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), coping resources such as high self-esteem and a sense of control (Pearlin and Schoeller 1978; Rosenfield 1989; Wheaton 1982), and perceived social support (Cohen and Wills 1985; Kessler and McLeod 1985) can act as stress buffers, enhancing the individual's ability to readjust and thus reducing the probability of physical or psychological disorder. Extended to sociodemographic differences, stress theory suggests that the greater prevalence of psychological distress in lower-status groups (e.g., women, minorities, the elderly, the unmarried, those of lower SES) can be explained by the combination of high exposure to stress and a relative lack of stress-buffering resources in these groups.

Although evidence generally shows that lower-status group members experience more negative events and/or chronic strains (e.g., Brown and Harris 1978; Kessler 1979a, 1979b; McLeod and Kessler 1990; Myers et al. 1974; Pearl and Johnson 1977; Pearl and Lieberman 1977), studies also show that stress exposure alone does not explain the inverse relationships between social status and psychological symptoms. Members of lower-status groups repeatedly have displayed greater psychological reactivity, or vulnerability, to stressors than their higher-status counterparts (Cronkite and McLeod 1984; Kessler 1979a, 1979b; Kessler and Essex 1982; McLeod and Kessler 1990; Pearl and Johnson 1977; Thoits 1982, 1984, 1987a; Turner and Noh 1983; Ulbrich, Warheit, and Zimmerman 1989; Wheaton 1982). These vulnerabilities are thought to be due to a relative lack of coping resources. Although members of disadvantaged groups tend to have lower self-esteem, a weaker sense of control over life circumstances, and fewer sources of...
social support, the evidence is mixed regarding whether these differences in stress-buffering resources account for higher anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms in lower-status groups or for their differential reactivity to stress experiences. For example, several studies show that the lack of a single psychosocial resource (such as high self-esteem, a strong sense of control or mastery, or high social support) in the face of negative events does not explain differential vulnerability to events by gender, age, marital status, and/or socioeconomic status (Brown and Harris 1978; Thoits 1982, 1984, 1987a; Turner and Noh 1983). Kessler and Essex (1982), however, found that low self-esteem, a weak sense of mastery, and low social support could explain marital status differences in reactivity to various chronic role strains when each of these resources was interacted singly with strains. Turner and Noh (1983) went one step further and examined combinations of low resources. They showed that the lack of two stress-buffering resources (low social support in conjunction with a low sense of personal control) explained working-class women's vulnerability to negative life events. Thoits (1987a, pp. 18-19), however, also examined low support-low mastery and low mastery-low self-esteem combinations and was unable to account for gender, age, marital status, or SES differences in vulnerability to controllable and uncontrollable life events.

These very mixed findings suggest that the specific stress-buffering resources which explain differential vulnerability may vary in a complex fashion according to the status groups being compared, the types of stressors being assessed, or both. Further exploration of the "lack of resources" hypothesis clearly is warranted. But identifying the resources (or resource combinations) that account for differential vulnerabilities to stress is likely to be complicated further by the recent findings that disadvantaged groups are not pervasively vulnerable to all types of stress (Wethington, McLeod, and Kessler 1987). When cumulative indices of events or strains are disaggregated into particular types of stressors (e.g., love loss events, income loss events, uncontrollable events), what appeared initially to be vulnerabilities of disadvantaged groups to stressors of all types were actually vulnerabilities to specific subsets of stressors (Kessler and McLeod 1984; Thoits 1987a; Ulbrich et al. 1989; but see McLeod and Kessler 1990).

This observation has led several stress theorists to argue that sociodemographic distributions of distress (and vulnerability) may not be due exclusively to a lack of coping resources. Stressors that are unique to different social groups may be involved as well (Aneshensel and Pearlin 1987; Belle 1982; Gore and Colton forthcoming; Gove 1984; Kessler and McLeod 1984). Aneshensel and Pearlin (1987) point out that studying stressors which are common to both men's and women's lives has limited our understanding of the effects of stressors that impinge uniquely on women (e.g., sex discrimination). More generally, sociodemographic differences in distress may be due, at least in part, to events and demands that are more characteristic of one group's experiences than of another's.

I am concerned here with this recent argument. Although, the "unique stressor" approach has been fruitful, as I will discuss very briefly, it also creates a theoretical problem. To illustrate, I will focus on gender and marital status differences in psychological distress because the "unique stressor" approach has been applied most often to these statuses. Virtually all studies show that homemakers exhibit significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression than employed husbands, and most studies show that employment does not benefit wives as much as husbands, particularly when it is combined with rearing young children (e.g., Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Clark 1981; Gore and Mangione 1983; Radloff 1975; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983; see review in Thoits 1987b). Gove (1972, 1984; Gove and Tudor 1973) has attributed the higher distress of wives relative to husbands to the unique strains induced by traditional gender roles. These strains include social isolation (among homemakers), low-gratification, low-prestige occupations (among employed wives), role conflict and role overload, and the burdensome demands of nurturing others.

Research has examined and confirmed a number of specific strains and conflicts suggested by Gove (and many others) as placing wives at higher risk of distress and disturbance than husbands (e.g., Baruch and Barnett 1986; Kandel, Davies, and Raveis 1985; Kessler and McLeod 1984; Rosenfield 1989; Ross et al. 1983). I will cite two very different examples. First, Ross and her colleagues (1983) explored specific combinations of the household division of labor...
IDENTITY THEORY AND STRESS RESEARCH

(traditional versus shared), the couple’s attitudes toward the wife’s employment (favorable versus unfavorable), and the wife’s employment status as these factors affected both spouses’ depression levels. Wives in highly traditional marriages and both spouses in “transitional” marriages were far more depressed than husbands and wives in egalitarian marriages. Traditional gender roles (for wives) and inconsistencies between traditional gender-role attitudes and actual behaviors (for both spouses) produced high levels of depression relative to husbands and wives who were nontraditional in their attitudes and behaviors. Thus this research identified situations that were distinctively troublesome for wives and for husbands. In a very different approach, Kessler and McLeod (1984) reasoned that socialization into nurturant roles and the burdens of caring for others both emotionally and instrumentally make women uniquely vulnerable to what they term “network events”—stressful events that happen to family members and friends about whom they care. Using data from five large life-events surveys, Kessler and McLeod demonstrated that women’s higher psychological distress and emotional vulnerability to events relative to men could be attributed in large part to women’s higher exposure to network events alone.

A “unique stressor” approach to status differences in distress has explanatory advantages, as such studies show. On the other hand, adopting a unique stressor approach entails a theoretical disadvantage: Sociodemographic patterns in psychological distress (by gender, by minority status, by age, by social class) can no longer be explained parsimoniously. For example, gender role-related stressors accounting for wives’ psychological difficulties compared to husbands’ would not apply straightforwardly to divorced women compared to divorced men, nor to widows compared to widowers, much less to elderly or lower-SES persons compared to middle-aged or high-SES persons. Presumably each sociodemographic group at high risk of disorder faces exposure to stressors that are uniquely troublesome to that particular group. Thus one would need different stress explanations for distributions of distress by each sociodemographic characteristic of concern (age-related, social class-related, and so on).

This potential lack of parsimony might be forestalled by an alternative solution that integrates both the common stressor and the unique stressor perspectives. The concept of “identity-relevant stressors” is suggested here as a possible solution.1

IDENTITIES AND
IDENTITY-RELEVANT STRESSORS

In response to open-ended instruments such as the “Who Am I?” (Kuhn and McPartland 1954), individuals typically list a number of social self-descriptions (as nouns). These include social roles (e.g., father, wife, daughter, speech therapist), social attributes (e.g., male, black, Catholic), stigmatizing characteristics (e.g., alcoholic, criminal, mental patient), social-biographical categories (e.g., ex-wife, ex-convict, retired colonel), and social types (e.g., opera lover, bird-watcher, intellectual) (Rosenberg 1979). Of key interest in this paper are what have been termed role-identities (McCall and Simmons 1966; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Serpe 1982).

Role-identities are self-conceptions in terms of one’s position in the social structure (e.g., “I am a father, husband, welder, union member, uncle. . . .”).2 Specifically, role-identities are viewed here as self-conceptions based on enduring, normative, reciprocal relationships with other people. My emphasis here is on relationships that are ongoing (as opposed to transitory or occasional, such as those involved in being a customer, a dental patient, or a voter), that are currently enacted (as opposed to lapsed, such as being divorced, formerly employed, or a nonattending church member), and that carry fairly clear rights and obligations in relation to others (as opposed to solitary activities engaged in for their intrinsic pleasure, such as reading, jogging, and bird-watching). In operational terms, only positions in the social structure (as enacted in role relationships) are treated as indicators of this concept. For example, if an individual is regularly in contact with several

1 Simon (1990), Braboy (1990), and Schulte (1990) extended my original concept of “identity-relevant events” to “identity-relevant strains.” I adopt the more inclusive concept of “identity-relevant stressors” in this paper.

2 Technically, perhaps, role-identities should be termed “positional-identities.” However, because positions are enacted as roles, I will retain the more familiar term “role-identity,” or simply “identity,” for brevity.
different friends and conceives of herself as a friend, she would be designated as holding the friend identity.3

This conceptualization is more specific than others (e.g., McCall and Simmons 1966) because it excludes self-conceptions based on social attributes (such as gender, race-ethnicity, or religion), stigmatized attributes (such as physically disabled, mentally ill, or criminal), and "ex-roles" (such as divorced, retired, or unemployed) (see Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge 1986 for a detailed review of identity concepts). Social characteristics and stigmas (e.g., female, disabled) present special problems for the specification of the concept of role-identity. These attributes are structural positions, are enduring, are enacted in the present, and have associated sets of reciprocal behavioral expectations. Conceptually they could be classifiable as role-identities. These "attribute roles," however, are not included here in the concept of role-identities for the following reasons.

Generally speaking, individuals carry their "attribute roles" into all situations. That is, one remains old, black, female, or disabled across time and place. Attributes influence the social positions one can hold and the style or quality of interactions with other people, rather than serving as the basis or reason for the interaction itself (for similar reasoning see Hoelter 1985; Stryker 1987).4 For example, females and males are expected to behave toward each other in certain patterned ways, but the reason for female-male interaction usually is not gender enactment per se. Rather, gender-role behavior occurs within more specific institutional contexts—e.g., husband-wife, parent-child, teacher-student, dating couple, friend-friend. Therefore, because of their general, cross-situational influences, attributes are not treated here as role-identities in themselves. There is one qualification: If social attributes or stigmas (such as Catholic, alcoholic, or criminal) serve as the actual reason for interaction with others in specific situations (e.g., in Catholic conventions, in AA meetings, or within a prison), those attributes would be considered role-based identities—in these examples, as church member, group member, and deviant identities, respectively.

What about the exclusion of "ex-roles"? Many would argue that being divorced or unemployed is a role, but "ex-roles" involve no role partner with whom one interacts regularly or with whom one shares reciprocal rights and obligations on the basis of these statuses. "Ex-roles" are states marked by the absence of a role partner and thus do not meet the criteria for a role-identity employed here.

Of course, individuals still may conceive of themselves in terms of social attributes, stigmatizing characteristics, and "ex-roles" (although empirically, these self-conceptions seem quite rare).5 Certainly minorities, the disabled, the mentally ill, the divorced, the unemployed, and other devalued and/or deviant groups face special life circumstances because of their characteristics, and such circumstances are likely to engender problems and subsequent psychological difficulties. I treat these characteristics as exogenous variables whose influences on existing role relationships and psychological symptoms must be taken into account or, alternatively, as variables whose effects on symptoms are to be explained through the lack or possession of, and the quality of, conventional role-identities.6

What have role-identities to do with psychological well-being? Elsewhere I have argued that because roles are sets of behavioral expectations (or "scripts") which are attached to positions in the social structure, identities based on positional roles should provide the individual with a sense of who he or she is (in an existential sense) and how he or she ought to behave. Thus role-identities should give individuals a sense of meaning and purpose in life (among other things).6

---

3 Counts of the number of relationships predicated on a particular position are useful as an indicator of the strength of commitment to an identity (Stryker and Serpe 1982).

4 As Goffman (1963) points out, this is why persons with invisible stigmas (e.g., alcoholics, ex-convicts, ex-mental patients) attempt to keep these attributes secret from "normals."

5 For example, in response to a five-item self-administered "Who am I?" 85 percent of a stratified random sample of 700 married and divorced adults living in the Indianapolis area mentioned one or more social roles as self-descriptions (Thoits, unpublished data 1990). In contrast, only 1 percent mentioned one or more stigmatizing attributes, 2 percent mentioned "ex-roles," and 13 percent mentioned social characteristics (old, male, etc.). Positive adjectives (e.g., "considerate," "loving," "responsible") were the most common self-descriptions after social roles: 44 percent cited such adjectives.

6 It becomes an empirical question whether these variables affect psychological distress directly, or do so indirectly through their effects on conventional role-identities. I am hypothesizing indirect effects.
life and should provide behavioral guidance (Thoits 1983). Moreover, because the role expectations attached to positions are normative expectations, the adequacy of individuals' identity performance has implications for self-evaluation as well (Hoelter 1983; Sieber 1974). Failing to meet normative expectations in identity performance should decrease self-esteem; satisfactory or highly competent identity performance should promote self-esteem. In short, the possession of role-identities and the adequacy of various identity performances should be major sources of individuals' self-concept and self-esteem, respectively, and therefore should be important in the development and maintenance of psychological well-being. One implication, then, is that anxiety, depression, and disordered behavior should be reduced by the possession of one or more role-identities. Corroboratively, a number of studies, some longitudinal, show that the accumulation of role-identities is generally beneficial for psychological well-being (Baruch and Barnett 1986; Gore and Mangione 1983; Kandel et al. 1985; Menaghan 1989; Repetti and Crosby 1984; Sprietz, Snyder, and Larson 1979; Thoits 1983, 1986).

Extended to sociodemographic differences, the identity-accumulation hypothesis suggests that men and women, the married and the unmarried, and members of other low- and high-status groups may differ in the mean number of identities they possess and thus that mental health differences between these groups might be explained partially by their levels of identity accumulation. Not surprisingly, however, this idea is too simple and has been disconfirmed. For example, the sheer number of identities held is not sufficient to account for gender and marital status differences in psychological distress (Baruch and Barnett 1986; Gore and Mangione 1983; Kandel et al. 1985; Thoits 1986). Even when men and women who hold the same number and combinations of role-identities are compared, distress differences by gender are still observed (Aneshensel et al. 1981; Gore and Mangione 1983; Thoits 1986). For example, employed married mothers exhibit significantly higher anxiety scores than employed married fathers. One might be tempted to attribute this finding to unique strains and conflicts experienced by women. Yet the further finding that unemployed husband-fathers are significantly more distressed than unemployed wife-mothers (Radowff 1975; Thoits 1986) and employed husband-fathers (Menaghan 1989) suggests a different conclusion: The same role-identities may have different meanings or importance for the genders. The lack or the possession of particular identities may affect the psychological well-being of men and of women differentially.

A related idea exists in identity theory. It is commonly argued that role-identities vary in their centrality or salience for individuals' self-conceptions (McCall and Simmons 1966; Rosenberg 1979; Stryker and Serpe 1982; Weigert et al. 1986). That is, multiple identities must be organized hierarchically; individuals probably invest themselves in (or commit to) some social roles that they hold more strongly than others. Roles that are socioculturally appropriate in view of the individual's characteristics, that are prestigious or economically rewarding, and that are enacted competently (Hoelter 1983; Rosenberg 1979) are likely to be more salient in an individual's identity hierarchy than less normative, nonprestigious, or incompetently enacted roles. The more salient the role-identity, the more meaning, purpose, and behavioral guidance the individual should derive from its

---

7 Recent evidence suggests that identities which are less discretionary and more difficult to exit (e.g., parent, spouse, worker, son/daughter) are psychologically beneficial only when ongoing strains in the role domain are low (Thoits 1991). Identity accumulation may be far less important for well-being than the quality of experience within the identities that are held, regardless of their number. Thus, when comparing the well-being of those who do and do not hold a particular role-identity, one may need to control for stress experiences in the role. Alternatively, one might disentangle the costs and the benefits of holding an identity by assessing distinguishable components of well-being, such as self-esteem, a sense of meaningfulness, and depressive symptoms (e.g., Umberson and Gove 1989). An often-used but tautological strategy is to infer the benefits derived from an identity from the negative psychological impacts of its loss (e.g., bereavement).

8 Stryker (1980; Stryker and Serpe 1982) defines salience in terms of the probability that an individual will choose to enact a particular identity in any given situation. In contrast, the term "salience" is used here to refer to the subjective importance that a person attaches to a particular role-identity (consistent with the concept of "psychological centrality" used by Rosenberg 1979; see also Gecas and Seff 1990; Hoelter 1983). More specifically, "salience" here means the relative importance of particular roles for how individuals think of themselves or define themselves.
enactment, and thus the more that identity should influence psychological well-being. 9

It follows from this argument that events or strains which disrupt or threaten to disrupt an individual’s most salient role-identities (identity-threatening stressors) should be more psychologically damaging than stressors which disrupt or threaten less valued role involvements (i.e., those which are identity-irrelevant). Conversely, identity-enhancing events—events that facilitate the performance of salient identities or add a desired role to an identity structure—should increase individuals’ psychological well-being more than desirable events associated with less valued role involvements. In other words, identity-relevant experiences may be more powerful predictors of psychological distress (and well-being) than identity-irrelevant experiences, and may be more powerful than the summary measures typically used in stress research—for example, the number of negative events experienced in a given period or the sum of reported strains weighted by their frequency or intensity. Note that this concept also is consistent with and could encompass the unique stressor being pursued in current research. For example, among those who highly value their nurturant roles (e.g., mother, caregiver), negative events happening to loved ones should be highly distressing (Kessler and McLeod 1984); among those who highly value both work and family identities, clashing expectations in those roles should be highly distressing (Ross et al. 1983).

This conceptualization may not seem new. Other theorists have pointed to the self-concept as a key determinant of the impacts of major life changes. For example, Brown and Harris (1978) speculated that when events and difficulties deprive the person of an essential identity, feelings of hopelessness and thus of depression will result (pp. 236–37). Drawing explicitly from symbolic interactionism, Oatley and Bolton (1985) tied the etiology of depression more formally to disruption in a role that “had been primary in providing the basis for a person’s sense of self,” especially when there are few alternatives allowing that sense of self to be maintained (p. 372). Similarly, Hammen and her colleagues (1985a, 1985b) proposed that negative events which are inconsistent with individuals’ dominant self-schemas can produce depression. J. D. Brown and McGill (1989) reasoned that the accumulation of life events which are inconsistent with individuals’ self-concepts (termed “identity-disruptions”) will be threatening and thus illness-provoking. Burke (1990) suggested that social stressors in general might be reconceptualized as “identity-interruptions.” More generically, Pearlin (1989) argued that people’s values regulate the meaning, the importance, and thus the impact of various life experiences on well-being; from that point it is but a short step to valued aspects of the self that specify the influence of events and/or chronic strains. Sociologists and psychologists seem increasingly to appreciate the importance of identities (or self-schemas) within the stress process, although most scholars link these phenomena primarily to depression.

My argument is similar to those of a number of these theorists, but it differs in several ways as well. First, the influences of positive, identity-enhancing experiences are incorporated theoretically, in addition to identity threats. Unlike Burke, I retain the notion of stress as a distinct concept because not all social stressors are necessarily identity interruptions or identity threats. (For example, a legal battle over property lines does not constitute an identity threat; it is simply a major change that disrupts usual activities and requires substantial behavioral readjustment—i.e., a major life event. A legal battle for child custody, however, is an event that directly threatens the active retention of a highly valued identity, namely parent. Thus, identity-relevant experiences are an important subset of life’s events, strains, hassles, and uplifts.) Further, I do not restrict the impact of identity-relevant experiences to depressive outcomes; identity-threats may be depressing, anxiety-provoking, or simply upsetting, whereas identity-enhancing events should promote positive affect, satisfaction, and well-being. Finally, unlike other theorists (as will be seen below), I extend the implications of these issues beyond the psychological reactions of individuals to broader sociodemographic differences in psychological distress (see also Gecas and Seff 1990; Gore and Colten forthcoming).

---
9 Alternatively and in more complex fashion, the meaning of identities may reside in their combinations (e.g., husband-father-worker may signify “family breadwinner” and wife-mother-nonworker may signify “homemaker”). Such “configural identities” may vary in their salience to individuals and thus in their effects on well-being (Thoits 1991).
Four recent studies offer support for the proposition that the impact of stressors depends on their identity-relevance. G. W. Brown and his colleagues (1987) found that severe events occurring in life domains to which women were highly committed (e.g., family, work) were more powerful predictors of depression onset than the accumulation of negative experiences in general. Using prospective data, Hammen and her colleagues (1985a, 1985b) showed that subjects with interpersonally dependent self-schemas become depressed in response to negative interpersonal events, whereas those with self-schemas based on achievement activities became depressed in response to failure events. Prospective studies by J. D. Brown and McGill (1989) showed that positive life events increased physical ill health and health center visits only among subjects with low self-esteem; in this case, positive events were inconsistent with these subjects' self-conceptions. Finally, using cross-sectional data, Simon (1990) found that both mothers and fathers who were highly committed to the parental role were significantly more distressed in response to their children's chronic health and behavior problems than parents who were less committed to the parental role.

On the other hand, two studies based on the same set of cross-sectional data failed to show that the distressing influences of chronic role strains were exacerbated for parents and/or workers who ranked these identities high in their salience hierarchies, compared to those who ranked them low (Braboy 1990; Schulte 1990). These negative findings might be due to the cross-sectional rather than the prospective nature of the data; parents and/or workers experiencing high role strains may have coped with those strains by devaluing the role-identity in which their difficulties occurred. Interestingly, Wheaton (1990) found that persons who experience high levels of chronic strain in a role are significantly less distressed by the subsequent loss of that role than are persons who experienced little strain before the loss. If high strain reduces the salience of the role-identity involved, the psychological impact of role loss should be mitigated. That is, the identity becomes less relevant or central to the self; consequently its loss has less psychological impact. Alternatively, not all chronic role strains (captured in summary strain measures) may be identity-threatening; for example, too many overtime hours and too many deadlines may be recurrent job difficulties with only minor implications for self-conception, whereas persistent troubles with co-workers or negative performance ratings from a supervisor may directly threaten a person's work identity. Although current evidence for the identity-relevant stress proposition is mixed and indirect, the results from prospective studies are consistent and encouraging.

SOCIAL STATUS AND IDENTITY-RELEVANT STRESSORS

As noted earlier, no theorists to date have extended these promising ideas and findings more generally to social status differences in psychological distress. Yet the notion of identity-relevant experiences can be extrapolated quite straightforwardly to status differences. First, it seems reasonable to propose that the salience of different role-identities varies systematically by social status. If we return once again to gender and marital status as examples, women may view and value themselves more often in terms of primary relationships (spouse, parent, relative, friend) because of differential gender socialization, whereas men may view and value themselves predominately in terms of their occupational or achievement-related activities (worker, group member, athlete) (Belle 1982; Bielby and Bielby 1989; Gore and Colten forthcoming; Kessler and McLeod 1984). The unmarried may view their work, friend, or group member identities as more salient than the married because they have more time and energy available for investment, or, in the case of the widowed or divorced, as compensation for previous loss of the spouse role (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974). If highly salient identities are in fact key sources of meaning, purpose, and behavioral guidance, women should be distressed more than men by the loss of or threats to identities based in primary relationships, whereas men should be damaged more than women by loss of or threats to identities based in achievement activities. Threats to identities valued more highly by the unmarried than by the married also should be more disturbing to the unmarried than to the married (and vice versa, of course).

Second, exposure to identity-relevant experiences should vary by social status (Aneshensel and Pearlin 1987). One's social charac-
characteristics (gender, age, minority status, SES) influence not only the number, types, and organization of role-identities that one holds, but also the financial and psychosocial resources that are available. It is reasonable to expect that because of differential resources, identity-threatening stressors should be proportionately more frequent among lower-status individuals; identity-enhancing experiences should be proportionately more frequent among higher-status individuals. One also might posit that the impact of any particular stressor will be contingent on the size of the identity structure. That is, persons who have many role-identities on which to fall back in the face of loss or severe threat may be less devastated by stressful experiences than persons who initially have few role-identities (Linville 1987; Oatley and Bolton 1985; Sieber 1974; Thoits 1983). If lower-status individuals hold fewer initial roles, they should be more vulnerable or more emotionally reactive to identity-threatening stressors than comparable persons of higher status.

Finally, if identity-threatening stressors in fact are distributed unequally by social status, higher exposure to identity-threatening experiences should account more fully for the greater psychological disturbance (and vulnerability) of lower-status group members relative to their higher-status counterparts (Gecas and Seff 1990; Swindle, Heller, and Lakey 1988; Thoits 1987a). Differential exposure to identity-relevant experiences should be more predictive of status differences in psychological distress than the total number of negative events of chronic strains experienced (summed without regard for their identity-relevance) or than stressors disaggregated into subtypes (such as controllable/uncontrollable, expected/unexpected, and the like).10

This argument does not deny the role of psychosocial (and financial) resources in the stress process. One would expect coping and social support resources to vary inversely by social status. One also would expect the relative lack of these resources to influence the occurrence of stressors and to exacerbate the effects of stress exposure. An emphasis on identity structures and identity-relevant experiences is meant to further specify theoretically what types of stressors should be more psychologically damaging, and to help explain why some social groups are more reactive to certain subsets of stressors than others. Investigators have begun to disaggregate stressors into different types (e.g., chronic strains, network events, uncontrollable events) in order to examine their differing psychological influences (Kessler and McLeod 1984; McLeod and Kessler 1990; Thoits 1987b). In essence, I am advocating a different disaggregation strategy: into negative or positive experiences that occur in role domains which individuals value highly (identity-relevant) or value little or not at all (identity-irrelevant).11

The hypotheses implied by the discussion above can be summarized fairly simply (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical approach outlined here offers several advantages. First, as suggested earlier, it combines “common stressor” and “unique stressor” explanations of prevalence patterns of psychological disorder. The “common stressors” faced by members of socially disadvantaged groups are conceptualized as identity-threatening. Simultaneously, “unique stressors” are captured by variations in which events and strains are identity-threatening for members of various social groups. This approach can produce unique explanations of status differences in distress (e.g., Gove 1972; Kessler and McLeod 1984) that are more generalizable, as well as generate testable hypotheses. For example, if men actually value themselves in terms of their breadwinner role more highly than do women (see Bielby and Bielby 1989), their wives’ employment and/or their own unemployment should constitute threats to those valued

10 Note that when a stressor is categorized as identity-relevant or -irrelevant, it represents an interaction effect. The categorization of the stressor depends on the (preassessed) organization of the identity hierarchy. For example, if a person ranks the worker identity high in his or her hierarchy, subsequent negative events in the work domain (e.g., trouble with boss, demotion, being fired or laid off) will be categorized as identity-relevant; if the work identity ranks low in the hierarchy, the same events will be categorized as identity-irrelevant. An alternative way to compute this interaction would be to multiply the stressor by a number indicating the salience of the appropriate identity in the person’s preassessed hierarchy.

11 Of course, one might classify experiences more elaborately as highly identity-threatening (or -enhancing), moderately identity-threatening (or -enhancing), or slightly to not at all identity-threatening (enhancing), depending upon the rank of an identity in the hierarchy.
identities. In these cases, husbands' distress levels should approach or exceed wives'—a pattern which has been found in recent studies (Ross et al. 1983; Thoits 1987a). Differential rates of distress (and vulnerability) should be a function of the meanings of particular stressors and of the relative distributions of identity-threatening and -enhancing experiences in the population. The same conceptual factors—identity structures and identity-relevant experiences—can be applied to differences in distress based on gender, marital status, racial/ethnic status, age, and social class. At the same time, the approach is sufficiently specific to enable the examination of stressors that are uniquely troublesome to members of different social groups.

Second, this theoretical approach begins to address the problem of how events are appraised by individuals. Stress researchers commonly argue that the impacts of life changes and role demands depend upon how they are perceived or appraised—for example, as harms/losses, threats, or challenges (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Yet with few exceptions (cf. Swindle et al. 1988), factors that affect appraisals have been left unspecified. This approach suggests that undesirable events or ongoing difficulties in an important identity domain will be appraised as major losses or as highly threatening; stressors in less important domains will be viewed as challenges or perhaps as minor hassles. In other words, appraisals of stressors as threatening or as nonthreatening will depend on an individual's preexisting identity hierarchy. Thus an identity approach constitutes a step toward solving another problem in the stress literature that has been left unaddressed: predicting appraisals, or the meanings of perceived demands.

Third, this approach may begin to distinguish conditions under which stress exposure is more likely to result in physical illness, in psychological problems, or in both. Stress theory can be criticized for its lack of specificity with respect to outcomes; the same theoretical factors (stress exposure, lack of coping resources) are used to explain the occurrence of physical illness and of poor mental health. It seems reasonable to suspect, however, that processes leading to ill health differ from those resulting in psychological problems. Threats to self-conception or to self-esteem commonly are believed to be involved in the etiology of psychological disorder. Physiological arousal in response to stressors of all types is thought to increase susceptibility to disease. One might hypothesize that exposure to identity-relevant stressors will influence psychological symptoms directly and will influence physical health both indirectly (through psychological disturbance) and directly (because stressors should increase disease susceptibility regardless of their identity relevance). Identity-irrelevant stressors should influence physical health directly and should affect psychological well-being only indirectly (through illness). The reciprocal relationships between physical and psychological illness, of course, make these possible pathways difficult to detect, but the relative timing of acute changes in symptoms and the relative strength of associations (between all types of stressors and physical illness and between identity-relevant changes and psychological disturbance) may allow these processes to be differentiated further.

On the other hand, this approach has disadvantages. First, one must know a person's identity hierarchy at some Time 1 in order to classify subsequently occurring experiences as identity-relevant or -irrelevant and to compare the effects of such experi-
ences on distress at some later Time 2. Therefore this approach requires prospective designs and longitudinal data, which are time-consuming and expensive. Second, with respect to life events, a moderately strong association is likely to exist between identity-relevant events and the average magnitude or severity of life events as conventionally assessed (e.g., Brown and Harris 1978; Dohrenwend et al. 1978; Holmes and Rahe 1967). Therefore this categorization of events (and strains) may be an unnecessarily elaborate and complex way of ultimately obtaining subjective event (or strain) magnitudes. The correspondence between identity-relevant events and conventionally-assessed major events should not be perfect, however. Further, the meaning of a stressor (its potential stressfulness or magnitude) is indicated before it occurs rather than normatively (by panels of judges) or subsequently (when perceived stressfulness or magnitude may be confounded with the person’s current psychological state). In addition, this approach should capture systematic variations in the meaning (or magnitude) of events and strains for different subgroups in the population.

A third disadvantage of this approach is that it may restrict the “meaning” of stressors too severely. As one anonymous reviewer argued, job loss probably affects a poor person more than a rich person, but not because the job is more identity-relevant to the poor person. Rather, the rich person has more resources for obtaining a new job and for weathering a period of unemployment. More generally, experiencing readjustment demands without sufficient resources may be more predictive of distress than experiencing identity threats. Although this is a reasonable alternative, I would argue that it remains an empirical question. Further, as discussed earlier, this approach is not intended to replace the psychosocial resources hypothesis, but only to specify more closely what types of stressors may generate psychological symptoms as well as be exacerbated by the lack of psychosocial resources. When investigators find patterned reactions to stress by social status, they commonly explain those findings post hoc in terms of unobserved constructs—in terms of identity threats, self-esteem threats, or the like. I believe that it is time to place this idea at theoretical center stage and to test its utility directly against competing explanations, in combination with psychosocial factors which are reliably known to buffer stress.

REFERENCES


Gecas, Viktor and Monica A. Seff. 1990. “Social Class

---

12 The argument put forth in this paper is not tested here because prospective data collection is still in progress.


Simon, Robin W. 1990. "Parental Role Strains, Parental Identity Salience, and Gender Differences in Psycho-
logical Distress.” Unpublished paper, Department of Sociology, Indiana University.


PEGGY A. THOITS is Professor of Sociology at Vanderbilt University. Her current research examines adults' identity structures and the effects of identity-threatening and identity-enhancing events on psychological well-being over time.