

## 2009 Undergraduate Research Award Essay

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After three years of research involving affect control theory, I wanted my honors thesis to be the culminating project that would make a real contribution to the affect control literature. Being a business major, I was naturally interested in work. Trying to come up with a way to tie work with a theory about controlling for and reacting to interactions emotionally, however, was not as intuitive as I had wanted. The sociology literature involving work was more concerned with networks, structure, and organizations than emotions.

I began looking at ideas by using Google Scholar; however, using search terms like “work AND emotions” did not produce much progress. I modified the terms a bit, using similar key words like “occupation\*” to catch alternate endings. After trying limitations on subject areas and searching for articles by sociologists studying work with no luck, I decided to use Sociological Abstracts to glean any work-related articles for ideas. Frustrated and exhausted by the search, I finally ran across a gem in the middle of the night: occupational identities.

Though not directly related to emotions, identities were closer to the micro-sociological focus I had wanted than were structure and organizations. With a preliminary route, I dropped some of the limits on subject areas and started to search relevant databases like EconLit and the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. After reading about some interesting work trends in the United States, I started reading some of the more current works cited in those papers.

Following references opened many more disciplines, like public policy and comparative politics. Some sources were of better quality than others for various reasons, but with a lot of evidence pointing to the pattern of increasing workloads per capita in the United States, I had found what I needed for my project. The logic at the time was that if Americans are working more, then what does that mean for our occupational identities? Are occupational identities somehow more salient in identity negotiation, emotion experience, etc.?

I presented the idea to my research mentor and she gave me the green light to begin a literature review. Because my project would bridge sociology with other social science fields like psychology, economics, labor, etc., I used GIL to search for basic explanations of frameworks in each of those fields and specifics on the growing workload. Using a variety of sources, from books for theory to websites for statistics, I developed my hypotheses. If Americans are working more and sociological literature suggests that we choose occupational identities that most closely confirm our other identities, then it follows that our occupational identities are a growing representation of our “selves.” Emotional experiences are dependent on identities. This ultimately means that our emotions are dependent on our occupational identities. There has to then be some correlation between occupational identities and emotions.

The next hurdle came in trying to find a dataset to test my predictions. With no funding to conduct my own study, I had to rely on secondary data sources. Luckily, there are many that deal with emotions and occupations. One thing that has been absent from the affect control literature is a nationally representative study, so I made it a goal to use nationally representative data. Because of the framework and assumptions of the theory,

most tests employ vignettes or other idiosyncratic methods. I had to find a dataset that reconciles the problems with the assumptions, mainly identity activation, that a person is operating under the identity I am interested in at the time of the study.

After reading more about occupational identities and identity negotiation in general, I came up with a workable solution and found a suitable dataset. I settled on the General Social Survey (GSS), judging it to be the highest quality survey in the country, partially because it has been conducted since 1972 by the University of Chicago, funded by the NSF, and is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences other than the census.

I compared simulations under affect control theory to GSS results, but the analysis yielded some interesting results. Some emotions were correlated with occupational identities, but some were not. This could be a fluke in the design or a rejection of the hypotheses. To find out which it was I tried to find similarities between the groups of emotions. Then, I had my meeting with Dr. McMurry. Taking her suggestions into consideration, I started doing more research to see if there were any gaps in my literature review. I tried PsycInfo and WorldCat, both suggested by Dr. McMurry, as well as revisiting Sociological Abstracts, more specifically digging into affect control theory.

Consulting with my research mentor, I wanted to see all the possible reasons for my results. The answer was not in the sociological literature; it was a psychological explanation. The distinction between moods and emotions is mostly semantics in sociology. In psychology, however, there is a real debate. Whereas most sociologists ignore moods because of their trans-situational nature, psychologists have set criteria for

distinguishing between the two. Applying the most common criteria for the mood-emotion distinction, I found that the “emotions” that affect control theory predicted correctly using occupational identities were in fact moods and not emotions.

Revisiting affect control theory in hindsight, the results make complete sense. Characteristic emotions, the ones simulated in this study, are defined as emotions experienced if identities were perfectly confirmed across all interactions. They, therefore, fit the definition of moods: having a long duration, having low intensity, and having no direct cause, in other words, trans-situational. The precise thing that sociologists have ignored all these years was a staple of one of the most influential theories in sociology, and *that* will hopefully be a real contribution to the literature.

## ABSTRACT

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Moods, Emotions, and Occupational Identities: A Test of Affect Control Theory  
(Under the Direction of DAWN T. ROBINSON)

Affect control theory uses mathematical equations to predict emotions that arise from specific interactions (consequent emotions), emotions that arise from particular role relationships (structural emotions), and emotions that arise from confirming interactions within a salient identity (characteristic emotions). Most tests of the theory to date have taken place in the laboratory or idiosyncratic field settings and most have focused on consequent emotions. This paper investigates whether occupational identities are so socially salient that they can be used as sole predictors of emotion and tests the effectiveness of affect control theory in predicting those emotions. Using the 1996 General Social Survey as empirical data, the author analyzed the correlation between the likelihood of a person experiencing each of thirteen emotions and his occupational identity. To answer the second research question, the author generated characteristic emotions predictions using affect control theory simulations and compared them to reported emotional experiences among occupants of ninety-seven occupational identities. Results show that occupational identities do not make good sole predictors of moods and emotion, but affect control theory increases the precision of some of those predictions. Both occupational identities and characteristic emotions are better at predicting moods than emotions. Building on literature, the author proposes a theoretical distinction between moods and emotions in affect control theory based on these results.

INDEX WORDS: Affect Control Theory, General Social Survey, Characteristic Emotions, Occupational Identities, Moods, Emotions

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