

## **Examining the Relationship Between Identity, Injustice, and Emotion**

National Science Foundation Sociology Program recommends funding of collaborative research at the University of Georgia and Duke University

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Scholars widely agree that under-reward makes people feel negative emotions like depression and anger. But two major sociological theories of identity— affect control theory and identity control theory— make diametrically opposing predictions about how people respond to over-reward. Four experiments that the National Science Foundation will fund for 2005-2007 address two main questions: (1) *How do people feel when they are treated better than they feel they deserve?* (2) *What is the relationship between feeling and action in these situations of over-reward?* The collaborative research at Duke University and the University of Georgia will use innovative physiological measures to resolve this theoretical controversy in the sociological literature. This research will offer a new understanding of the relationship between identity, injustice, and emotion, while developing new measurement techniques to better distinguish the theoretical constructs of emotion and identity disconfirmation. The researchers hypothesize that emotional response to injustice is more related to identity than to justice itself. It is only when one thinks that one is being a bad *person* by being over-rewarded— getting ahead at someone else's expense and with their knowledge— that over-reward makes one feel bad. Over-reward will lead to negative emotion only when it creates a negative identity. Otherwise, the experience of receiving more than one deserves will disconfirm the pre-existing identity in a positive direction, and produce positive emotion. An interesting, counter-intuitive prediction of affect control theory is that even though over-rewarded participants will feel good, they will act to reduce the over-reward in future rounds of the experiments. These experiments have broader implications for work settings, political policy discussions and for understanding social movement. They will specify the conditions that lead to behavioral remedy for injustice, and the occasions in which other mechanisms are likely to be available for resolving any stress that results from over-reward. Since those who are under-rewarded are often not well positioned to help themselves gain more resources, the reactions of the over-rewarded are key to addressing many types of unjust inequality.