

Intersections of Identity: Navigating the Complexities

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Abstract

Much of the multicultural literature is dominated by theoretical concepts and research related to racial identity. This line of research and scholarly discussion has provided a significant contribution to the understanding of racial factors relative to the development of the self (identity development, self-esteem, self-concept). Multicultural identity theories have emerged in the literature and have contributed to an understanding of the relationship between sociocultural factors and the psychological health of diverse populations. Identity models have helped us better understand an individual's psychological affiliation and connection to particular racial and/or cultural groups. They have also helped us examine the ways in which social identities are connected with social oppressions that take several manifestations (e.g., racism, heterosexism, sexism). However, intersections of social identity have largely been ignored in multicultural literature. This paper discusses the confluence of psychosocial and societal factors that may affect the manner in which an individual integrates multiple social identities. Intersections of social identity may include membership in a majority group (e.g., male), and membership in a marginalized, oppressed group (e.g., African American) or they may include memberships in two or more marginalized social groups (e.g., Asian American woman). For these individuals, psychological development involves a complex negotiation between two divergent worlds, often presenting a host of psychological tensions for the individual. The manner in which individuals navigate their multiple and layered identities reflect their experiences and perceptions of sociocultural factors that occur in their daily lives.

Introduction

Psychology's general focus has been to observe and explain human phenomenon. Traditional, Western psychology has often attempted to explain human behavior through a Euro/American social structure that is based on dominant-subordinate group relations. Consequently, European and Euro-American psychologists have implicitly and explicitly established a normative standard of behavior against which all other cultural groups were and continue to be compared.¹ That is, the normative standard includes White, heterosexual, male, Christian, able-bodied, medium-to-high SES, educated, English speaking, Eurocentric individuals

The world is composed of many cultural, ethnic, and national groups. The United States is considered by many to be multicultural, however the dominant culture is primarily the product of Eurocentric philosophies, customs and values. Consequently, much of our research,

¹ Joseph White and Parham, Thomas. *The psychology of Blacks: An African American perspective*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall) 1990).

theoretical paradigms, scientific literature and practice are products of Eurocentric doctrines and biases. Due the ongoing and increasing racial and ethnic changing composition of the United States, more attention and understanding of various cultural groups has gained increased theoretical, empirical and clinical significance.

The field of psychology has recently embraced research and discourses focused on racial and cultural sensitivity of individuals and of groups. Individuals and cultural/ethnic groups have lived in the United States with varying racial histories, ethnic socialization and social class experiences, religious orientation, gender identity, sexual orientation and other collective identity experiences.² These particular discourses are quite recent in the field of psychology. Initially, the field only looked at human behavior and existence from an individual perspective. It focused on the belief that all individuals are unique and that personal development and identity formation should be understood from an individual dimension within the Eurocentric model.

Identity

Identity development has been conceptualized as an individual's understanding of him/herself as a separate, distinct being from any other person. This conceptualization is largely based on Erikson's³ seminal work regarding psychosocial development. He proposed an eight stage ego development model that each person experiences throughout their entire life cycle. Erikson proposed that one of the eight stages of development, "Identity vs identity confusion", is a critical adolescent developmental task and is a time when the ego integrates and synthesizes numerous childhood identification fragments into a single structure. Erikson's stage model

² Janet Helms, and Donelda Cook. *Using Race and Culture in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Theory and Process*. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon) 1999).

³ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. (New York: Norton) 1950); Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. (New York: Norton) 1968).

assumes a linear procession in which individuals complete developmental tasks associated with each stage to move to the next task. In order for a stage to be mastered, the previous stage must be resolved. One of the primary goals in this process is for the individual to successfully integrate two perceptions (e.g., inner perceptions of the self and external perceptions of others) into a congruent whole.

Marcia⁴ expanded Erikson's theory and proposed that identity involves exploration of different identity choices and then committing to a specific identity. Instead of proposing a stage model, Marcia theorized that individuals go through a process of states as they explore and then commit to an identity. Not all individuals will occupy or experience all of these states; however closure and continuity will be attained in one of the states, which will serve as a dominant thread throughout the individual's life.

Both theorists provided a traditional view of identity, particularly from a personal identity perspective. They attempt to explain identity development from a Eurocentric, individualistic perspective, and although they have contributed to our understanding of "identity", "self", and "self-esteem", they do not fully explain the development of an individual's group or social identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class). Consequently, traditional theories may not aptly apply to women, non-White European racial/ethnic groups, and for collectivistic cultures whose family systems, cultural norms, and developmental milestones may be different than traditional Eurocentric cultural patterns. It is at this point that psychologists began expanding their conceptions of personal identity, by including the sociocultural forces that affect identity.

⁴ James E. Marcia. "Development and Validation of Ego-Identity Status," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3(1966): 551-558.

Multicultural Perspective

Psychology's history is rooted in a Eurocentric paradigm, particularly as it has attempted to explain human behavior and functioning. Up until the late 1960's and early 1970's, research literature primarily referred to sociocultural variables as "demographic" information, rather than examine the psychosocial relevance attached to factors such as "race", "culture", and "gender". Consequently, the field of psychology looked at human behavior from a monocultural perspective, which focused on White, middle-class, heterosexual men and emphasized traits and characteristics associated with masculinity, such as individualism, independence and autonomy.⁵

Given this foundation, psychology was often narrow in its scope in explaining and examining the manner in which individuals formed their identity and the accompanying influencing factors involved in the process. Traditional theories focused on individual, personal development of identity and often ignored the group dimension of human existence.⁶ To better understand identity development from both an individual and group perspective, Sue⁷ developed a tripartite framework for understanding multiple dimensions of personal identity. He used three concentric circles to illustrate three levels of identity: individual, group, and universal. At the individual level, the individual shares characteristics with respective group members and with all human beings, however unique characteristics such as genetic endowment and unique individual experiences are salient aspects to this dimension of identity. The group level is characterized by components such as race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, culture, religion and age. These aspects of identity are considered to be similar with respective group members. Each of these

⁵ Carmen B. Williams. "Counseling African American Women: Multiple Identities-Multiple Constraints," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 83(2005): 278-283.

⁶ Derald W. Sue and David Sue. *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice (4th ed.)*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley) 2003).

⁷ Derald Sue. "Multidimensional facets of cultural competence," *The Counseling Psychologist* 29(2001): 790-821.

components influence the manner in which group members view themselves, as well as how society views group members. Membership in these groups "...may result in shared experiences...and serve as powerful reference groups in the formation of worldviews".⁸ At the universal level, individuals share experiences common to all human beings, such as similar biological and physical characteristics, experiences of birth and maturation.

Sue's⁹ framework contributed to the existing literature and discussion that focused on the importance and salience of the influence of culture, group membership, and societal forces in identity development. The advent of major social changes in the United States during the late 1950's brought attention to "minority" populations and the historical discrimination and oppression that many people experienced that was, and continues to be, pervasive in the lives of many clients coming to psychologists. This increased contact with diverse clients led to the emergence of multiculturalism as a salient force in psychology.¹⁰

Social and Group Identity

During the past thirty years, psychology has placed more emphasis on multicultural issues, particularly in examining the impact of sociocultural factors in individuals' lives.¹¹ Numerous conceptual frameworks and empirical research have emerged specifically exploring mental health and developmental issues related to women, non-white individuals, non-heterosexual, and disabled people. In particular, a focus on understanding identity development

⁸ Derald W. Sue and David Sue. 13.

⁹ Derald W. Sue.

¹⁰ Paul Pederson (Ed.). "Multiculturalism as a Fourth Force in Counseling [Special issues]," *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70(1991).

¹¹ Donald Atkinson, George Morten, and Derald W. Sue. *Counseling American Minorities*. (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown), 1989); Linda J. Myers, Suzette L. Speight, Pamela S Highlen, Chikako I. Cox, Amy L. Reynolds, Eve M. Adams, and C. Patricia Hanley. "Identity Development and Worldview Toward an Optimal Conceptualization," *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 70(1991): 54-63; Amy L. Reynolds and Raechele L. Pope. "The Complexities of Diversity: Exploring Multiple Oppressions," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 70 (1991): 174-180.

from a multicultural perspective has gained increasing theoretical, empirical, and practical attention.¹² These perspectives have helped to bridge the gap between traditional psychological theories of identity development and current mental health issues and psychosocial experiences related to sociocultural factors.

Multicultural theories of identity development have expanded the personal identity development question of “Who am I?” to “Who am I *and* Who am I relative to others?” These theories have been developed during the last 35 years¹³ and have focused on the fact that “race, ethnicity and culture are powerful variables in influencing how people think, make decisions, behave and define events.”¹⁴ Initially, multicultural identity theories examined racial/ethnic identity development.¹⁵ Throughout the years, racial identity models have served as the basis for additional identity development models related to gender identity,¹⁶ gay and lesbian identity¹⁷ and more recently, social class identity.¹⁸

¹² Sabine, E. French, Edward A. Seidman, LaRue Allen, and J. Lawrence Aber. “The Development of Ethnic Identity During Adolescence,” *Developmental Psychology* 42 (2006): 1-10.

¹³ Carmen B. Williams. “Counseling African American Women: Multiple Identities-Multiple Constraints.” *Journal of Counseling & Development* 83 (2005): 278-283.

¹⁴ Derald W. Sue, and David Sue. p. 15.

¹⁵ Donald Atkinson, George Morten, and Derald W. Sue. *Counseling Minorities*. (Dubuque, IA: Brown), 1983); William E. Cross. “The Negro-to Black conversion experience: Towards a psychology of Black liberation,” *Black World* 20 (1971): 13-27; William, E. Cross. “A Two-Factor Theory of Black Identity: Implications for the Study of Identity Development in Minority Children” In *Children’s Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development*, edited by J. Phinney & M. Rotherman (pp. 117-133). (Newbury Park: CA: Sage), 1987); Janet, E. Helms. “Expanding Racial Identity Theory to Cover Counseling Process,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 33 (1986): 62-64; Janet, E. Helms, (Ed.). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research and practice*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 1990).

¹⁶ Nancy, E. Downing and Kristin L. Roush. “From Passive Acceptance to Active Commitment: A Model of Feminist Identity Development for Women,” *Counseling Psychologist* 34 (1985): 695-709.

¹⁷ Vivian Cass. “Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 (1979): 219-235; Richard Troiden. “The Formation of Homosexual Identities,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 17 (1989): 43-73.

¹⁸ William Lui, Geoffrey Soleck, Joshua Hopps, Kwesi Dunston, and Theodore Pickett, Jr. “A New Framework to Understand Social Class in Counseling: The Social Class Worldview Model and Modern Classism Theory,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 32 (2004): 95-122.

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Multicultural models have been considered psychological models in that they primarily have provided explanations of individuals' internal and interpersonal reactions to societal "isms", discrimination and oppression. Many of the models were constructed as developmental or stage-based models that described a sequential process toward healthy identity development for individuals in marginalized and oppressed social groups. A complete description and review of each identity model is beyond the scope of this writing, however, identity models have a number of similarities: a) they provide a conceptual framework to describe the psychological and sociocultural affiliation and connection to respective social groups; b) they describe a progression through a series of stages or ego statuses of nonacceptance/unawareness to self-acceptance/awareness of a specific social group. Each ego status or stage involves exploration into their respective group identity, which must be resolved for successful progression to the next status or stage. A few models focus on the impact of "isms" (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) on identity development as contributing factors in acceptance or non-acceptance of a respective social identity throughout the progression of statuses.

Identity models do not purport to provide a comprehensive theory of personality, but rather they provide a framework in which to understand identity from a broad spectrum that involves the exploration and resolution of personal, group, and societal factors. Additionally, it should not be assumed that all individuals within respective social groups experience the same sequential process of developing a healthy social identity. Individual and group experiences of socio-historical and current manifestations of "isms", oppression, and discrimination are internalized differently and should be explored from both an etic and emic perspective. The intersection of personal and group identity development can be better understood using this paradigm.

Multicultural identity models have undoubtedly helped inform the psychological community about the experiences of marginalized and oppressed social groups. In addition to these models, social identity theory¹⁹ has helped explain the process by which individuals identify with respective social groups. People are categorized by others and categorize themselves based on their belief of shared attitudes, customs, and values common to in-group members. A feeling of “belonging” or “togetherness” is an important aspect of every person’s sense of self. Social categories help create a frame of reference that contributes to an individual’s place and definition in society.²⁰ Frames of reference can intersect in many ways regarding one’s social identity(ies). For individuals who are members of a majority group and marginalized or oppressed group, their process of moving toward healthy personal and group identity involves negotiation of privilege and discrimination concurrently. For individuals who are members of oppressed and marginalized groups, in particular, their process of moving toward healthy personal and group identity involves a process of personal self-acceptance as a member of a marginalized group *and* acceptance of membership in respective marginalized social groups. The process of exploring and resolving several psychological and sociocultural tasks is complex when one or more of an individual’s identities is stigmatized and oppressed.

Typically, theorists and researchers examine race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and class separately, rather than examining the intersections among them Constantine, 2002; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Moradi & Subich, 2003).²¹ Consequently, traditional multicultural

¹⁹ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. “An integrative theory of intergroup conflict.” In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by W.G. Austin & S. Worchel (pp. 33-47). (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole), 1979).

²⁰ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior.” In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by S. Worschel & W.G. Austin (Eds.), (pp. 7-24). (Chicago, IL: Nelson- Hall), 1986).

²¹ Madonna, G. Constantine. “The Intersection of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Social Class in Counseling: examining Selves in Cultural Contexts,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development* 30 (2002): 210-215;

identity models have compartmentalized and ignored individuals who identify with multiple social identities by examining sociocultural variables separately.

Intersections of Identity

Until recently, models of identity have primarily focused on single social identities. Researchers and theorists have contended that single-identity models are inadequate to describe and understand individuals' multiple social identities. Individuals are simultaneously members of multiple social groups and categories, which may intersect in numerous ways. For example, women of color often identify as women and as racial group members. Membership in both groups places these individuals in marginalized, non-dominant groups. Another example of multiple identities is White males who identify as gay or bisexual. Membership in one group (White male) places this individual in a dominant racial and gender group, while identification as gay or bisexual places this individual in a marginalized, non-dominant group. Given that identity models and theories focus on one social identity, they often omit experiences related to the convergence of multiple identities within one individual. In a world that is rapidly confronted with complexity of personal and group identities, few individuals define themselves with a single identity. However, the extent to which individuals are aware of more than one social identity is influenced by personal experiences, the salience of more than one identity and by social contextual factors.

Mary Fukuyama and Angela D. Ferguson. "Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People of Color: Understanding Cultural Complexity and Multiple Oppressions." In *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, edited by R.M. Perez, K.A. DeBord, & K.J. Bieschke (pp. 107-131). (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association), 2000); Bonnie Moradi, and Linda M. Subich. "A Concomitant Examination of the Relations of Perceived Racist and the Sexist Events to Psychological Distress for African American Women," *Counseling Psychologist* 31 (2003): 451-469.

Tajfel described social identity as "...those aspects of the self-concept which derive from his [sic] knowledge of his membership in social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."²² Individuals may be aware of only one social identity due to the emotional significance attached to that membership, racial/ethnic socialization experiences related that membership and experiences of "-isms" connected with membership in one or more respective social groups. This may be particularly true of individuals who have membership in one social group that is dominant and another membership in a social group that is non-dominant (e.g., a White gay male). Awareness of group memberships may be uneven for individual and their acceptance of one group membership versus another may be at varying progressive states during their lifetime. For example, some individuals may be aware of their racial and gender membership before they are aware of other group memberships. Memberships in racial and gender social groups have distinctiveness, significant sociocultural and sociopolitical histories, and perhaps higher salience relative to other social categorizations.

Salience of one or more social identities may also be affected by historical confrontations and/or interactions between communities. For example, individuals of color who also identify as sexual minorities may find that "...elements of each group may be rejecting of the other group in what has been termed as an invisible [racial/ethnic] group. Membership in these two mutually stigmatizing groups may cause the individual to be more socially isolated than by identifying with either group alone."²³ Consequently, individuals may only identify with one social group in order to avoid continued social isolation.

²² Henri Tajfel. *Human Groups and Social Categories*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1981), 255.

²³ Beverly Greene. "When the Therapist is White and the Patient is Black: Considerations for Psychotherapy in the Feminist Heterosexual and Lesbian Communities," *Women & Therapy* 5 (1986): 62.

Identification with respective social groups may be influenced by the way(s) in which individuals have experienced and internalized multiple forms and layers of social oppression. Experiences with oppression may cause an individual to shift his/her affiliation or identification with respective social groups in order to avoid internalizing negative reactions and attitudes connected to a social group. If membership in one social group buffers an individual from prejudice and discrimination faced in another social group, the individual may select to only identify with the social group that provides the least negativity. Sociopolitical factors influence the development and progress of acceptance of one's social identities and thus affect the way in which an individual integrates those identities.

We currently know very little about individuals' subjective representations of multiple group identities. Social identity theory applies primarily to large collective in-group identities. In-group membership is considered to be members' attachment to one another by virtue of their perceptions of similarities to one another (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).²⁴ Social groups all adhere to unique cultural meaning systems that define reality for individuals within the group. Cultural meaning systems are structured in cultural schemas, which define how the world works, the status of people in it, as well as the status of the individual relative to others. They define how group members will behave toward and perceive both in-group *and* out-group members. The degree to which individuals perceive others within respective social groups as being similar to themselves varies from person-to-person and from context-to-context. Thus, individuals who identify with the same social group may perceive the other as an out-group member, depending on their perceptions of dimensions of similarity. Consider the following example:

A group of women have all met in a social setting. When a group of men enter

²⁴ Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B Brewer. "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6 (2002): 88-106.

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the room, the group may perceive gender as being the most salient characteristic and thus, behave toward one another based on dimensions of gender. The same group of women may be meeting in the room, however the group of women are all Caucasian. When a group of Asian American women enter the room, the dominant characteristic may be perceived as race. If a group of Asian American men enter the room, the group may again shift, depending on the emphasis of the social context.

In this example, when group members perceived themselves and others along distinct differences, (e.g., gender or race), in-group and out-group membership was relatively easy. Moreover, in-group and out-group members in the first part of the example may have only identified with one social group based on gender or race. In the second part of the example, when the group of Asian American women were members of both social groups (gender and race), the in-group membership (Asian American women) partially overlapped with another in-group social group (Asian Americans), however the racial dimension may have simultaneously placed the Asian American women as out-group members relative to gender dimensions. Asian American women whose racial/cultural/ethnic identity had high emotional salience may consider their in-group membership being more connected to race/culture/ethnicity rather than to gender. Asian American women in this example who may have experienced discrimination and oppression as women, rather than as being Asian American may also feel greater in-group membership within racial/cultural/ethnic dimensions, rather than along gender dimensions.

Individuals identify with and categorize themselves along various social group dimensions. Their subjective perceptions of in-group and out-group memberships may change and shift according to their perceptions of similarities, common collective in-group characteristics, beliefs, and values, cultural meaning systems, socioracial histories and experiences of oppression. Social contexts may also place emphasis on one social dimension more than another social dimension, thus causing individuals to identify in different ways regarding their membership in one or more social groups.

Conclusion

Most individuals identify with more than one social identity, although only one may be prominent for any one person at any given time. Salience of a social identity may be influenced by context, privileges and power associated with one or more social identities, and awareness of the existence of a social identity. Current multicultural identity models suggest that identity development is a linear process, however the integration of multiple social identities may be more reflective of a process of negotiation between inner and outer world conflict(s) associated with one or more social identities. For example, individuals can feel positively about one social identity due to their own personal regard for that identity, but also feel neutral or negative about another social identity due to the negative and oppressive attitudes they receive from their family, community members of other social forces. This experience may cause an individual to unevenly identify and integrate their multiple identities.

Identity development models that provide a framework in which to better understand the complex process of integrating multiple social identities is needed. Models that describe the dynamics and interactions of multiple group identification will greatly expand our understanding of the process involved in navigating intersections of multiple identities.

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