

A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity

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A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity depicts a core sense of self or one's personal identity. Intersecting circles surrounding the core identity represent significant identity dimensions (e.g., race, sexual orientation, and religion) and contextual influences (e.g., family background and life experiences). The model evolved from a grounded theory study of a group of 10 women college students ranging in age from 20-24 and of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds.

Development of socially constructed identities has received increasing attention within literature and research in psychology and student affairs within the past decade. Racial identity (e.g., Cross, 1995; Helms, 1990, 1992, 1995), ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990, 1992), sexual identity (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), and gender identity (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992; O'Neil, Egan, Owen, & Murry, 1993) have received primary focus. Yet, most developmental models and related research have addressed only a single dimension of identity, such as race or sexual orientation. Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993), in their well-known Minority Identity Development model, do not specify type of minority status (e.g., race or gender or sexual orientation or disability could apply) and also do not address how an individual may simultaneously develop and embrace multiple minority statuses. Although research has frequently considered differences according to gender, age, or other particular social conditions, the models and research have generally not addressed intersecting social identities. In addition to racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities, college

students may have other identity orientations, such as social class, religious, geographic or regional, and professional identities (McEwen, 1996).

Not only have researchers placed increasing emphasis upon identity development, but the number of identity development models has also increased. In terms of models regarding multiple identities, the only frequently acknowledged model is that of Reynolds and Pope (1991). However, Reynolds and Pope's model concerns primarily multiple oppressions (not identities in general) and possible ways that one can negotiate multiple oppressions. McEwen (1996) has proposed a theoretically driven model concerning development of multiple identities, but this model has not been empirically tested. A small number of studies have addressed multiple identities, and some theoretical and autobiographical essays speak to the experience of multiple identities (e.g., Bridwell-Bowles, 1998; Espiritu, 1994; Moraga, 1998; Thompson & Tyagi, 1996). So, although existing literature can inform discussions on multiple identities, no models specifically concerning multiple identities have been developed.

Reynolds and Pope (1991) drew attention to the importance of multiple identities through their discussion of multiple oppressions. They used several case studies to provide examples of how individuals might deal with their multiple oppressions and then extended Root's (1990) model on biracial identity development to multiple oppressions. Specifically, Reynolds and Pope (1991), in creating the Multidimensional Identity Model, suggested four possible ways for identity resolution for individuals belonging to

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more than one oppressed group. These four options were created from a matrix with two dimensions - - the first concerns whether one embraces multiple oppressions or only one oppression, and the second concerns whether an individual actively or passively identifies with one or more oppressions. Thus, the four quadrants or options become:

1. Identifying with only one aspect of self (e.g., gender or sexual orientation or race) in a passive manner. That is, the aspect of self is assigned by others such as society, college student peers, or family.
2. Identifying with only one aspect of self that is determined by the individual. That is, the individual may identify as lesbian or Asian Pacific American or a woman without including other identities, particularly those that are oppressions.
3. Identifying with multiple aspects of self, but choosing to do so in a “segmented fashion” (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 179), frequently only one at a time and determined more passively by the context rather than by the individual’s own wishes. For example, in one setting the individual identifies as Black, yet in another setting as gay.
4. The individual chooses to identify with the multiple aspects of self, especially multiple oppressions, and has both consciously chosen them and integrated them into one’s sense of self.

The value of Reynolds and Pope’s (1991) work lies in their focus on the topic of multiple identities, their attention to the possible danger of considering an individual’s identity development too narrowly by only using identity development models that address singular dimensions of one’s identity, and their attention to identity resolution in the context of multiple oppressions. Yet, in the decade since the publication of Reynolds and Pope’s model, researchers have only minimally addressed multiple identities, contributing no application or testing of their model and little follow-up to their work.

McEwen (1996), drawing on her education

in mathematics and physics, considered how such dimensions and developmental processes regarding multiple identities might be represented. She suggested that the interaction and intersection of multiple identity development could be viewed as a conical structure with varying radii and heights. The conical structure is similar to a helix. The increasing length and circumference of the cone represent the greater complexity of an individual’s development as one’s age, experiences, education, and reflection change. A two-dimensional cross section of the cone, similar to a circle or ellipse, would represent an individual’s development at that particular point in time. Thus, an examination of many horizontal cross sections of the cone would provide a comprehensive picture of one’s development at various points in time. These horizontal cross sections, however, would not provide any sense of one’s developmental patterns over time.

On the other hand, vertical cross sections might incorporate only one or two dimensions of identity. However, a vertical cross section would suggest how an individual’s identity in that particular dimension or dimensions has developed over the span of one’s lifetime. A vertical “slice” would represent just one part of the picture of an individual at multiple points in time. Other kinds of cross sections of this conical representation could be considered. McEwen’s model, through various cross sections, enables a portrayal of intersections or interactions among identity development dimensions or between multiple identities not seen in other models.

In addition, theoretical discussions by Deaux (1993), a social psychologist, relate to the conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity presented here. She conceptualized identity as both defined internally by self and externally by others, which provides a foundation for understanding multiple identities. Other recent research (Ferguson, 1995; Finley, 1997; Kiely, 1997) underscored the importance of relative salience, sociocultural context, and overlapping identities. A strength in these studies lies in examining multiple identities; however, none provided a model of multiple identities nor suggested a process by which multiple identities are developed and negotiated.

In an effort to extend existing work on multiple identities, the researchers attempted to advance a more complex understanding of identity and present a model of multiple dimensions of identity development. The model evolved from a qualitative study conducted at a large public university on the East Coast. Using the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researchers explored the self-perceived identities and the multiple dimensions of identity from the perspective of women college students. The focus of the study was on students' understandings of their own identity and experiences of difference and of the influence of multiple dimensions of identity on an evolving sense of self.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were 10 undergraduate women all enrolled at a large East Coast university and diverse in race, cultural background, and academic major. They ranged in age from 20 to 24 and were predominantly of junior or senior class standing. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of participants included 5 who were White, 2 who identified themselves as African American or Black, 1 woman who identified herself as African, 1 as Sri Lankan, and 1 as Asian Indian. A variety of religious affiliations were also represented: Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Holiness Pentecostal.

Participants were drawn to the study using "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 1990), which emphasizes sampling for information-rich cases. The criterion for constructing the sample in this study was evidence of variation along identity dimensions such as race, culture, sexual orientation, and religion. An initial group of 5 participants was chosen from among those who responded to an invitation to take part in the study and who met sampling criteria for maximum variation and ability to participate. Consistent with grounded theory methodology and theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) 5 participants were added as the study progressed. These participants were identified through snowball sampling strategies or through

responses to invitations to participate extended at a campus leadership program. Sampling decisions were guided by initial data analysis, the opportunity for information-rich cases, and a commitment to a diverse sample. Saturation was achieved and sampling was ended when patterns and themes in the data emerged and a diverse sample had been accomplished.

Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews. The central purpose of the interviews was to engage in dialogue with participants to elicit their descriptions and perceptions of themselves and their understandings of identity development. This phenomenological approach emphasized the importance of providing a structure for participants to communicate their own understandings, perspectives, and attribution of meaning. Interviews were open-ended to permit and encourage participants' use of their own words in describing the internal and interpersonal processes by which they defined their identities and made sense of difference.

Three interviews were conducted with each participant. Interview protocols were developed in response to emerging patterns and themes for all participants as well as to pick up on experiences and perceptions particular to an individual. Initial questions were broad enough to create room for individual response and freedom. Subsequent interviews were more structured and focused specifically on particular identity dimensions identified in the previous interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and all were audiotaped.

Several strategies to assure trustworthiness of findings were employed. These included member checking by providing participants an opportunity to read transcripts and check initial analysis, and the use of an inquiry auditor to verify the work by essentially conducting a parallel process of data analysis and comparing notes.

True to grounded theory methodology, data analysis was conducted using three levels of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The first stage of coding involves

breaking down data and beginning the process of categorization. Axial coding takes initial categories and makes further comparisons that describe relationships between categories. Using selective coding, saturation of categories is examined, which means that further analysis produces no new information or need for additional categories. In short, all the data are captured and described by key categories, and a core category emerges that tells the central story of all participants as a group. This core category then is used to develop an emerging theory and conceptual model that is considered grounded in the data and reflective of the lived experiences of all participants.

In this study, data analysis produced over 2,000 concepts from raw data, 71 categories from initial comparison, 10 key categories, and 1 core category (Jones, 1997). The conceptual model was developed to provide a visual representation of the findings from the study.

RESULTS

Because the focus of this article is on the conceptual model developed from the findings, only a brief description of the 10 key categories is included. More detailed descriptions may be found elsewhere (Jones, 1997). The key categories that emerged from analysis of data from the interviews with participants were (a) relative salience of identity dimensions in relation to difference; (b) the multiple ways in which race matters; (c) multiple layers of identity; (d) the braiding of gender with other dimensions; (e) the importance of cultural identifications and cultural values; (f) the influence of family and background experiences; (g) current experiences and situational factors; (h) relational, inclusive values and guiding personal beliefs; (i) career decisions and future planning; and (j) the search for identity. The key categories represent themes and constructs that are interrelated and when integrated define the core category.

The core category provides an integrative function by weaving together the key categories in a way that tells the central story of all the participants. In this study, the core category was defined as the contextual influences on the

construction of identity. The contextual influences that emerged as significant included race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion. The core category also reflects the finding that identity was defined and understood as having multiple intersecting dimensions. The particular salience of identity dimensions depended upon the contexts in which they were experienced. Therefore, both difference and privilege worked to mediate the connection with and salience of various identity dimensions (i.e., race was not salient for White women; religion was very salient for Jewish women; culture was salient for the Asian Indian woman).

A Conceptual Model for Multiple Dimensions of Identity

The conceptual model presented here (see Figure 1) is intended to capture the essence of the core category as well as the identity stories of the participants. The model represents multiple dimensions of identity development for a diverse group of women college students. The model is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development. Therefore, the model is illustrative of one person's identity construction at a particular time. The model is also drawn to depict the possibility of living comfortably with multiple identities, rather than simply describing multiple dimensions of identity.

At the center of multiple dimensions of identity is a core sense of self. This center, or core identity, is experienced as a personal identity, somewhat protected from view, which incorporates "valued personal attributes and characteristics" (Jones, 1997, p. 383). The core was frequently described by participants as their "inner identity" or "inside self" as contrasted with what they referred to as their "outside" identity or the "facts" of their identity. Outside identities were easily named by others and interpreted by the participants as less meaningful than the complexities of their inside identities which they guarded and kept close to themselves and made less susceptible to outside influence. The words

these women used to describe their core included intelligent, kind, a good friend, compassionate, independent. They resisted using terms that conveyed external definition and identity categories to describe their core sense of self. To these young women, labels lacked complexity, accuracy, and personal relevancy. They believed that labels rarely touched the core of an individual's sense of self. For them, individual identity was experienced and lived at far greater depth than such categories suggested or per-

mitted. Surrounding the core, and at times integrally connected to the core, were what they experienced as more externally defined dimensions such as gender, race, culture, and religion.

The intersecting circles of identity in the model (see Figure 1) represent the significant identity dimensions and contextual influences identified by participants in this study. These dimensions were variously experienced and included race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and social class. The circles intersect

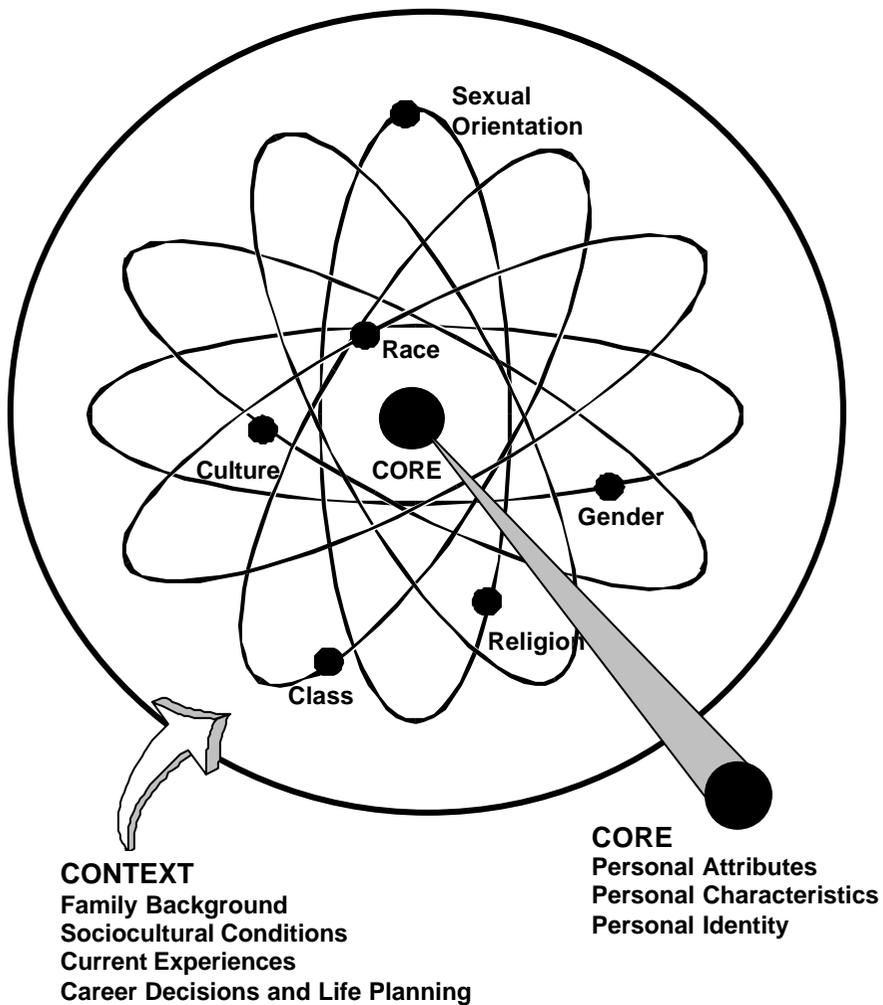


FIGURE 1.
Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity

with one another to demonstrate that no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions. For example, for all the participants, gender was an identity dimension to which they related. However, the description of what being female meant to them was quickly connected with other dimensions (e.g., Jewish woman, Black woman, lesbian, Indian woman). For those participants for whom culture was most salient, family and culture were inextricably connected.

The importance, or relative salience, of these identity dimensions is indicated by dots located on each of the identity dimension circles. The location of the dot and its proximity to the core represents the particular salience of that identity dimension to the individual at that time. For example, if culture is particularly salient to an individual, the placement of the dot on that dimension is closer to the core. If sexual orientation is not particularly salient to an individual at that point in time, the dot is farther away from the core. The model does, however, illustrate that various identity dimensions are present in each individual, yet experienced in different ways as more or less salient. For example, race was found to be very salient for the Black women in the study, and rarely salient for the White women. Similarly, culture was salient for the Asian Indian woman and religion for the Jewish women.

The intersecting circles and the various locations indicating salience of particular identity dimensions also represent that more than one identity dimension can be engaged by the individual at any one time. Identity dimensions then may be experienced simultaneously as well as more or less salient than other dimensions.

The context within which the individual experiences multiple dimensions of identity is represented by the larger circle that includes both the core and intersecting identity dimensions. These dimensions become more or less salient as they interact with contextual influences such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current life experiences, and career decisions and life planning. Participants perceived identity dimensions as both externally defined and internally experienced, and also influenced by

different contexts. When identities are imposed from the outside, dimensions are not seen as integral to core. However, when interacting with certain sociocultural conditions such as sexism and racism, identity dimensions may be scrutinized in a new way that resulted in participants' reflection and greater understanding of a particular dimension.

Influences of sociocultural conditions, family background, and current experiences cannot be underestimated in understanding how participants constructed and experienced their identities. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 is drawn to illustrate the relationship of these factors to the identity development process. Salience of identity dimensions was rooted in internal awareness and external scrutiny (e.g., race for Black women), and lack of salience seemed prevalent among those more privileged identity dimensions (e.g., sexual orientation for heterosexual women). These findings suggested that systems of privilege and inequality were least visible and understood by those who are most privileged by these systems. Thus, when difference was experienced, identity was shaped. When difference was not experienced, participants attributed these dimensions as relevant to others. Both privilege and difference mediated the connection with and relative salience of various dimensions of identity and shaped the connection to identity dimensions by the individual.

DISCUSSION

Interest in understanding multiple identities emerges from a growing awareness of the non singular nature in which individual identities are constructed and self-perceived. Extending Erikson's (1980) description of identity, more recent research draws attention to the importance of considering the influences of dimensions such as race, culture, social class, and sexual orientation, as well as the need for examination of the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which identities are constructed (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). The conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity presented in Figure 1 is drawn from the words and understandings of a diverse group of women college

students and depicts the complexities of identity development when multiple dimensions are considered. The model reflects an acknowledgment that different dimensions of identity will be more or less important for each individual given a range of contextual influences. It also presents identity development as a fluid and dynamic process rather than a more linear and static stage model.

The findings from this study and the resulting model reflect Deaux's (1993) conceptualizations of identities as both defined internally by self and externally by others. She suggested that "social and personal identity are fundamentally interrelated. Personal identity is defined, at least in part, by group memberships, and social categories are infused with personal meaning" (p. 5). More specifically, according to Deaux (1993):

social identities are those roles [e.g., parent] or membership categories [e.g., Latino or Latina] that a person claims as representative. . . . *Personal identity* refers to those traits and behaviors [e.g., kind or responsible] that the person finds self-descriptive, characteristics that are typically linked to one or more of the identity categories. (p. 6)

Thus, the core identity in this conceptual model might be described as "personal identity" in Deaux's language, and the multiple identities (intersecting circles) characterize Deaux's "social identities." Further, and particularly important to this discussion of multiple identities, Deaux (1993) indicated that, within the tradition of sociology, "multiple identities are assumed" (p. 5). An articulated assumption of multiple identities, however, does not seem to be the case within theories of student development.

Despite a complex discussion of identity development, Deaux (1993) provided no specific attention to how multiple identities are formed. Her research does, however, underscore the importance of the context in which social identities exist, distinctions between self-perceived inside self and outside identity, and the ongoing negotiations and relationships between one's personal and social identities that

contribute to the experience of multiple identities. This model of multiple dimensions of identity goes beyond Deaux's work in suggesting how multiple identities develop and change.

Although Reynolds and Pope (1991) focused on multiple oppressions, their model suggests an expanded understanding of multiple identities and the idea of relative salience, as supported by the findings of this study. The model proposed here extends the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991) by contributing to an understanding of "the multidimensional nature of human identity" (p. 179) and providing a more integrative framework for understanding identity. Specifically, our conceptual model addresses multiple identities more broadly than multiple oppressions and provides a dynamic representation of the fit of the core self with other identities and the changing relative salience of particular dimensions of identity. Further, as Reynolds and Pope suggested through their examples, this model also incorporates the importance of contexts to how multiple identities are formed and shaped.

Finley (1997), in a qualitative study of 6 women with multiple minority statuses, used the Optimal Theory Applied to Identity Development model (Myers et al., 1991) and the Multidimensional Identity Model (Reynolds & Pope, 1991), and found that "multiple identities followed overlapping, interweaving spirals of development" (p. 3921B). Finley also underscored both the importance of environmental influences on identity development and the complexity of the process. This complexity is typically not represented in other models. The model of multiple dimensions of identity and Finley's findings share an understanding of the identity development process as dynamic, non linear, and complex.

This conceptual model complements and elaborates upon McEwen's (1996) emerging model of multiple identities by portraying how one's personal identity and other multiple identities might relate at any one point in time. Both this model and McEwen's model suggest the presence and interaction of multiple dimensions of identity. This conceptual model, however, shows how identity can be understood and experienced differently at different points in

time, particularly in relation to one's personal identity and in terms of relative salience of each dimension. McEwen also suggested the importance of considering and representing the separate developmental processes of each individual's social identity over time.

The representation in the model of the relationship of the dots on the intersecting circles to the core identity suggests the evolving nature of identity and the changing salience of the various multiple identities. This aspect of the model that emerged from Jones's qualitative study (1997) also reflects Ferguson's (1995) findings in a quantitative study of the relationship of race, gender, sexual orientation, and self-esteem in 181 lesbians of African descent. Ferguson suggested that the women in her study "may be in a continual recycling process in which they retain ties with all three social identities and communities [lesbian, woman, and African American], but to greater or lesser degrees" (p. 4565).

Kiely (1997), in a study of racial identity, womanist identity, and social class variables in Black ($n = 173$) and White ($n = 163$) women college students, found that students' incorporation of multiple aspects of their identity was more common among Black women than White women in her sample. Kiely's research supports the description in this conceptual model that the relative salience of multiple identities is influenced by those identities that are privileged and by those that are externally scrutinized.

The conceptual model for multiple dimensions of identity represents the researchers'

attempt to capture the complexity of the identity development process. This model offers another option for thinking about multiple identities and the importance of contextual influences to the development of identity. The model does not portray a developmental process, although it incorporates the importance of the interaction and interface among one's multiple identities and hints at factors that contribute to the development of identity (e.g., contextual influences). It does provide a developmental snapshot of the most salient dimensions of an individual's identity, how the individual experiences those dimensions, and directions for the individual's future growth and development.

This conceptual model suggests the importance of understanding the complexities of identity development. Student affairs educators must not presume what is most central to individuals, but must instead listen for how a person sees herself. This study underscores the importance of seeing students as they see themselves or as they reveal themselves to others. The participants in this study wanted to be understood as they understood themselves and as the totality of who they were, rather than be understood through externally imposed labels and by a singular dimension. Reynolds and Pope (1991) stated that the professional's responsibility is to conceptualize, "understand and facilitate this integration of [college students'] identity" (p. 179).

In addition, the results of this study suggest that educators have a responsibility to help students from majority identity statuses under-

stand the implications of taken-for-granted identities. More specifically, student affairs educators can encourage students who are members of groups whose identity is not examined to consider these aspects of their identity. Similarly, educators must exercise caution in making assumptions about the relative salience of particular identity dimensions for students in traditionally marginalized groups.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of additional research on multiple identities and the development of models that depict this process. The model presented here has not been tested or widely applied. The inclusion of students' voices in this kind of research cannot be understated. Although this study was limited by a small sample, at one institution, of women who indicated an interest

in talking about their identity development, the presence of diverse voices and identities contributed to the richness of the data and an understanding of the complexity of the process. Future research that explores this process and incorporates Deaux's suggestion that with "shifting contexts . . . people must continually work at their identities" (p. 10) will add greater clarity to understanding multiple identities. As one participant in the study articulated, the process of identity development when multiple dimensions are considered is an "ongoing journey of self-discovery."

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