Measuring Identity Importance and Intersections of Identity

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Background
Identity offers a way of thinking about the links between the personal and the social, that is, how the psychological and social aspects of the self are tied together to create a self-concept (James, 1890; Mead, 1913; Turner, 1987). Individuals draw upon common group identities (e.g., racial/ethnicity), relationships (e.g., parent), and social roles (e.g., student) to develop rich, multi-layered, and diverse self-concepts (Ashmore, Deaux, & Volpe, 2004). Depending upon the context or situation, an individual’s self-concept might shift from a personal identity to a social identity (Onorato & Turner, 2004) or from one social identity to another; the personal or social identity determined most contextually or situationally relevant, distinctly influences affect, cognition, and behavior in that particular context or situation (Deaux & Eihher, 1998). Social or personal identities might intersect in meaningful ways, creating new identities, e.g., woman of color (Crenshaw, 1991). In an attempt to capture the complexity of personally relevant social and personal identities, a qualitative and interactive measure was created.

Measuring Personally Relevant Identities

Participants
Gender: 29 women and 21 men
Age: Average age = 19.82, range 18-27
Race/Ethnicity: White/European American (n=14); Latino/Chicano (n=12); Asian/Asian-American (n=16); Black/African American (n=2); Biracial (n=4); Declined to state (n=2)
Parental Education: 19 (83%) of the participants mothers and 22 (44%) of the participants fathers earned a college degree.
Language Nativity: More than half (58%) of the participants spoke a language other than English in their parents’ homes.
Major/Area of Study: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (n=8); Social and Behavioral Sciences (n=29); Humanities (n=10); Undecided (n=7)

Method
The two-part measure of identity was administered to fifty undergraduate students during focus groups and individual interviews. Following the interview participants were asked a series of questions assessing their experience while completing the measures. The discussion was recorded via audiotape or scribe. The interviews and focus groups lasted approximately 1 hour. Participants names were put in a drawing for the chance to win one of five gift certificates worth $20.

Measures
Identity List: Participants were first asked to describe their important and salient identities through a series of questions adapted from Eihher and Deaux (1994). Participants were instructed to:

- List any groups, either very broad (e.g., woman) or very specific (e.g., Black Student Association) to which they felt they belonged.
- Rank the items in order of importance.
- Indicate how often they thought about being a member of that particular group (e.g., all the time, monthly during meetings).
- For the most important and most salient groups, participants were asked a series of questions to better understand why they felt that group or identity was important to their self-concept. Sample questions included:
  - “Is there a particular time that any of your identities emerged or have you always had these identities?”
  - “Do you have any dominant identities (e.g., are you so important or salient that they impact your other identities)?”

Circles: Participants were asked if they felt their identities overlapped or if they were unrelated. Participants were instructed to choose one of three different sized circles to represent their various identities. They were asked to label the larger circles with their most important or salient identities, the medium size circles with their second most important identities, and the smallest circles with the remaining identities. To describe any overlap or intersections of identity, participants were instructed to arrange the circles in a way that best describes how the identities overlapped or intersected.

Sociodemographic: Participants were also asked to respond to a standard sociodemographic questionnaire (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender).

Analyses: Sociodemographic and open-ended responses to the questionnaire were recorded and analyzed descriptively. Circle data was recorded in terms of content, size, and overlap. Any similarities or differences between demographic form, list and circles were recorded and analyzed for themes. Themes and patterns of identity overlap, intersections and importance were recorded.

Results
Participants listed significantly more identities on the list measure (M=7.12, SD=2.94) than the circles measure (M=6.36, SD=2.66), t(49)=16.89, p<.01.

Discussion and Conclusions
Participant responses to the Identity List and Circles were informative and provided a more in-depth understanding of their identities than the sociodemographic questionnaire. A number of participants’ important identities were not listed in the standard questionnaire. Both measures captured intersections and overlap of identities, enabling participants to go into detail regarding their multiracial and multicultural backgrounds (e.g., Peruvian/White Baptist). Furthermore, the measure captured intersections of participants’ personal and social identities (e.g., woman engineer).

- **Identity List**: Enables participants to describe any number of identities. The importance and salience of each identity can be explained in more detail. Might be more apt to reveal the contextually relevant and salient importance identities.
- **Circles**: Allows for a more visual view of identity. Provides participants with a more detailed way to describe potential identity overlap or intersections. Might be more apt to reveal the contextually relevant and salient identities.
- **Demographic questionnaire**: Provides general information. Might not measure the variety of ways each participant uniquely identifies themselves.

Potential Applications

- **Job Interviews**: To gain more detailed information regarding the applicants identity
- **To assist clients with issues of identity**
- **Therapy**: To facilitate a better understanding of stigmatized identities to promote acceptance of differences and overall understanding
- **Classroom/Workplace**: To learn about the dynamic, contextual, and temporal aspects of identity.
- **To assist in understanding the heterogeneity of social groups**
- **To set up a discussion of identity, diversity and perspective taking**
- **Personal descriptions**: To allow for a more accurate personal profile
- **Diversity Trainings**: To visually represent diversity

Future Directions
The data will be further analyzed to determine if there are any similarities and differences between the identities listed on the list, circles, and demographic questionnaire.

We plan to continue to investigate the ways in which each of the three different methods of abstracting identity association correlate and differ. In particular, we will examine how applicable each measure is for explaining the complexity and intersections of identities.

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