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The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking

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ABSTRACT

To date, research has primarily used a singular identity framework for investigating how social identity shapes behavior. Thus, research has also largely ignored the role that having multiple, simultaneous identities may play in our lives. This paper reviews work that pushes that singular identity framework beyond either/or binary constructs of identity. Specifically, through exploring racial identity flexibility for biracial populations and activating a flexible, multiple identity mindset more broadly outside of racial domains, these results demonstrate the potential impact of multifaceted self-views on flexible behaviors. Related work concerning other multiply belonging individuals are also discussed in line with a call for needed research to pinpoint new models and mechanisms for understanding the multiplicity of belonging.

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A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. To wound any one of these images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups ...

–William James, 1890, *The Principles of Psychology*

This quote marks the beginning of identity research over 120 years ago. Although this quote captures some of the complexities surrounding social identity, present day definitions focus primarily on individual ingroup/outgroup perceptions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is this limited picture of identities equating simply to one ingroup and one outgroup that has led empirical research to primarily utilize a singular identity framework (i.e., you are either a woman or White). However, we actually *all* have multiple social identities that co-exist and fluctuate based on the person, the context, and the identities themselves (for a recent review see Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). Furthermore, as the United States is becoming increasingly diverse and complex through rises in immigration, increases in interracial marriage, and shifts in language surrounding biracial and transgender populations (U.S. Census, 2012), it is essential for research to acknowledge that we all belong to multiple social categories. It is that *multiplicity of belonging* that has been understudied.

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Although there is little empirical work, the multiplicity of belonging seems to straddle multiple definitions. For example, some research focuses on the multidimensional aspects of one particular social identity such as race (e.g., Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Other work highlights the intersectionality between distinct social identities such as race and sexuality and gender (e.g., Bowleg, 2013; Wilson, Remedios, & Rule, 2017) and still additional research emphasizes dual identity conflicts between two distant identities (e.g., Gocłowska & Crisp, 2014).

However, this previous work has not included two aspects of multiple identification that can directly inform theories surrounding identity complexity (e.g., Ashmore et al., 2004; Linville, 1987; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The first regards how multiply belonging may impact behavior and identification for people who have two or more identities coexisting within the *same* social domain (e.g., being biracial and belonging to two racial ingroups). How does that coexistence within the same shared space function uniquely compared to other multiple identities? The second relates to the simple fact that we all have multiple, simultaneously coexisting identities across distinct social domains (e.g., I am White, a woman, a Democrat, and a teacher). Here, how does activating a multifaceted sense of self impact behavior when one's default way of thinking about identity usually utilizes a singular identity approach?

I first outline research regarding how belonging to multiple identities within the same social domain may contradict current beliefs of simplistic either/or group membership. Next, I extend this work regarding flexible identification by examining some of these same processes for anyone, no matter what their demographic characteristics may be, as a way to pinpoint the nuance surrounding the multiplicity of belonging more broadly. Combined, this research underscores new angles from which to consider one's true sense of self in line with foundational identity research stressing the need for researchers to acknowledge the true variation that lives within and across social identities (e.g., Greenwald & Breckler, 1985; McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Turner, 1976).

The multiplicity of belonging within the same social domain

To date, social identity research has largely included monocultural, heterosexual, gender-typical, and monoracial participants. However, in order to build identity theories that account for the actual range and variation regarding group membership, research needs to embrace populations who do not fit neatly into these more traditional, fixed social categories. Specifically, identity research needs to start acknowledging populations who have two identities coexisting within the same social domain.

For example, work with bicultural populations has revealed that those who identify simultaneously with both their home and host cultures versus those who have assimilated to just one culture show increases in complex thinking and innovation (Simonton, 1988; Tadmor, Galinsky, & Maddux, 2012). Similarly, other research with bisexual individuals also show higher levels of cognitive flexibility compared to gay, lesbian, or heterosexual individuals (Konik & Crawford, 2004) and cognitive flexibility seems to also serve as a buffer to antibisexual prejudice (Brewster, Moradi, DeBlaere, & Velez, 2013). Other work focusing on individuals who are transgender (those who have a gender that does not match their natal sex) and who are intersex (those who have a biological sex that is neither fully male nor female) are also pushing identity discussions to consider what it means to be a "typical group member" (e.g., Ehrensaft, 2010; Olson, Key, & Eaton, 2015). My work to date has added to these

discussions of social groups who constantly straddle multiple group memberships by establishing differences for biracial (those who have parents from more than one racial background) versus monoracial populations (those whose parents are from the same racial background).

Biracial identities

To date, race has regularly been considered an “either/or” category that has divided the world into fixed groups. But the mixed-race demographic, one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2012), is now blurring those racial divisions. Studying mixed-race populations offers an opportunity for theoretical advancement in the understandings surrounding social categorization and belonging, by forcing construals of identity to take on a more multifaceted meaning (Gaither, 2015). In other words, the mixed-race population offers an extremely novel prospect for investigating the effects stemming from having multiple identities since they represent a group who has two social identities (their two racial backgrounds) that share the same social identity space (race).

Biracial identity development

Starting as early as three months of life, the racial exposure that a biracial Asian/White infant receives in their mixed-race family setting has been shown to impact how they process and visually scan faces from both of their White and Asian ingroups (Gaither, Pauker, & Johnson, 2012). Relatedly, mixed-race or racially ambiguous faces have been shown in research with adults to be more frequently categorized as a minority group member (i.e., a Black/White mixed-race face would be more often seen as Black; Ho, Sidanius, Levin, & Banaji, 2011). Recently, I showed that this bias in face categorization is much more malleable than once thought (Gaither, Pauker, Slepian, & Sommers, 2016), which prompted my investigation regarding how biracial children might also see racially ambiguous faces. Recent work has demonstrated that the racial exposure biracial children have in their lives growing up in Ann Arbor, MI which is predominately White shapes whether they show a strong Black categorization bias when processing mixed-race faces (Roberts & Gelman, 2016). I show that biracial children of any mixed-race background, growing up in the south side of Chicago, IL, and who report high levels of contact with different types of racial diversity, actually do not show a racial categorization bias when categorizing racially ambiguous biracial Black/White faces. Instead, these children are at chance levels and categorize ambiguous faces equally as often as either White or Black (Gaither, Kinzler, & Woodward, 2017). Thus, these data imply that being flexibly exposed to race early in development can lead to more nuanced and less fixed views about racial categories more generally.

But does this flexible racial exposure also affect behavior for biracial children? Children prefer to learn from people who are similar to themselves both concerning accent (Corriveau, Kinzler, & Harris, 2013) and racial group membership (Chen, Corriveau, & Harris, 2011, 2013). But for biracial children who belong to multiple racial ingroups, would they then prefer to only learn from a biracial teacher? Or would they instead show increased flexibility regarding from whom they are willing to learn?

In one of the first studies to date to directly compare biracial and monoracial children, I found that biracial Black/White and biracial Asian/White children reminded about their

minority ingroup identity (i.e., Black or Asian, respectively) preferred to learn from members of that minority ingroup significantly more often than their monoracial counterparts (Black and Asian children, respectively). Additionally, reminding biracial children about their White identity also shifted their tendencies to then prefer to learn from White teachers (Gaither et al., 2014). Thus, it is clear that early on within development, biracial youth are aware of their multiple racial identities and that there are tangible differences that may exist between biracial and monoracial children.

Adult biracial identity, behavior, and language

But does this same multiplicity of belonging to racial ingroups also affect adult behavior? Interracial interaction research has largely centered around interactions between White and Black individuals and has emphasized increases in anxiety and discomfort compared to same-race interactions (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Plant, 2004; Richeson & Shelton, 2003; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005). But Biracial Black/White individuals clearly conflate that racial Black-White binary. Although some work has shown that the social context can shift how biracial individuals racially identify (e.g., Cheng & Lee, 2009; Chiao, Heck, Nakayama, & Ambady, 2006; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009), these effects had not been studied within actual social interactions (Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002). Here, I examined the influence of priming one racial identity over the other for biracial Black/White participants when interacting with either a Black or a White interaction partner.

Participants primed with the same racial identity as their interaction partner (White prime and White interaction partner, Black prime and Black interaction partner), behaved in ways consistent with same-race interactions – they were more comfortable, displayed more eye contact, and were less anxious compared to participants primed with a different racial identity than their interaction partner (Gaither, Sommers, & Ambady, 2013). Thus, this work demonstrated that the outcome of a social interaction hinges not only on the identities of the two individuals involved, but also on the salience of those individuals' social identities in that local moment. At the end of this study, participants in the Black-prime condition self-reported identifying as more Black and participants in the White-prime condition reported identifying as more White. However, participants in both conditions also reported simultaneously identifying as biracial. Therefore, this study also marks some of the first empirical evidence to show that multiple social identities can be active simultaneously even within the same social domain.

Language is also one of the most prominent forms of identity expression (e.g., Ochs, 1993; Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Often termed “codeswitching,” Black individuals are known to navigate their social situations between using aspects of African American English versus Standard American English (e.g., Purnell, Idsardi, & Baugh, 1999; Walton & Orlikoff, 1994). Biracial Black/White participants again showed that priming a Black identity made their speech more in line with African American English (sounding more Black) and priming their White identity activated more Standard American English (sounding more White; Gaither, Goldberg, Gidney, & Maddox, 2015). Similarly, other work suggests that Black speech is also associated with different amounts of hand gestures and nonverbal behaviors compared to White speech (e.g., Fugita, Wexley, & Hillery, 1974; McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, & Hill, 2011; Ray, 2009). Again, asking biracial Black/White people to think about their Black identity resulted in a higher number of gestures and gestures that were larger compared to

when they thought about their White identity (Gaither, Cooperrider, & Goldin-Meadow, 2017). Therefore, in addition to demonstrating that biracial identities can function flexibly within social interactions, here I provide further support that the biracial population contradicts more essentialized or fixed definitions of race.

Conflicting identities

One additional feature of having multiple identities is that these identities may at times be in conflict (Gocłowska & Crisp, 2014). For example, stereotype threat research shows that when a stereotyped identity is salient, that identity activation influences subsequent test-taking performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Specifically, reminding an Asian woman about her Asian identity (positively stereotyped as being good at math), versus reminding her about her female identity (negatively stereotyped as being not good at math), differentially affected Asian women's performance on a math test in line with those stereotypes (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). However, being Asian and being a woman are identities from different social domains. What would happen if the identities were in the same social domain?

One previous study demonstrated that biracial individuals showed lower levels of racial stereotype susceptibility on a math test compared to monoracial individuals (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). However, this study primed a biracial identity by asking biracial participants to think about the ethnic food they ate during their upbringing rather than seeing how each of their respective racial identities may differentially influence performance.

To investigate this specific context, biracial Black/White participants were randomly assigned to think either about their Black identity (negatively stereotyped within test-taking scenarios), their White identity (positively stereotyped within test-taking scenarios), or they were not reminded about any of their racial identities before completing a verbal GRE. The objective of this study was to explore how thinking about differentially stereotyped racial identities may shift performance, but also to examine how a biracial identity specifically in this third condition may also impact stereotype threat. A White identity prime showed boosts in testing performance and a Black identity prime showed stereotype threat effects with lower testing performance. However, biracial participants not reminded about either of their racial identities performed just as poorly as those in the Black prime condition, likely because biracial participants in both the Black prime and control conditions identified equally as Black at the end of the study. These results suggest that when someone has conflicting identities that are co-existing within the same social domain, the negatively stereotyped identity specific to that context may end up as more dominant particularly when under diagnostic threat (Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, & Sommers, 2015). In sum, these data are among the first to investigate how two identities within the same social domain may compete while also demonstrating how differing stereotypes about those identities can equally impact behavior, pushing social identity theory beyond its simple ingroup/outgroup focus.

The multiplicity of belonging across different social domains

Earlier I stated that *everyone* – not just biracial individuals – has multiple social identities. Knowing that a multiracial identity is associated with increases in flexible behavior, could

this be exemplary of a more universal pathway regarding multiple identification outside of race-specific domains?

Past work shows that flexible thinking occurs more often when people consider multiple perspectives rather than relying solely on pre-existing beliefs (e.g., Nijstad, De Dreu, Rietzschel, & Baas, 2010; Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005). Other research has demonstrated that when different social identities are activated that mindset switch can impact academic outcomes, face perception, and other types of social behavior (e.g., Aronson, Steele, Salinas, & Lustina, 1998; Chiao et al., 2006; Pauker, Ambady, & Freeman, 2013). But these studies have not determined whether it is actually a multiple identity mindset that seems to shift people's default fixed thinking to more flexible reasoning.

In a series of studies, I first compared reminding multiracial individuals about their multiple racial identities to reminding monoracial individuals about their singular racial identity to see how this flexible/inflexible mindset about race may shape problem-solving abilities. Only multiracials reminded about their multiple racial identities solved significantly more creativity problems compared to the other groups. Thus, activating a multifaceted self-concept boosted flexible thinking for multiracial participants because they had a naturally existing multiple identity. However, a follow-up study illustrated that reminding monoracial individuals that they too have multiple social identities showed this same increase in creativity (Gaither, Remedios, Sanchez, & Sommers, 2015). Thus, this multifaceted self-concept seems to be a pathway that works broadly for any population regardless of racial background.

But does this multiple identity mindset need to be self-relevant to see these increases in flexible thinking? Some work has shown that imagining a counterstereotypic person reduces stereotypes (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001) and also increases problem-solving abilities because of the perspective taking it requires (Gołowska, Crisp, & Labuschagne, 2012). On the other hand, other research has argued that the content of an individual's identity is comprised of multiple components with some components being perceived as more important than others. This work shows that more well-rounded or integrated identities are associated with more positive psychological outcomes (Meca et al., 2015; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). And although some of this research stresses that the development of identity is complex across the lifespan, research has only begun to consider when belonging to multiple categories actually starts to impact child outcomes (for a review see Dunham & Olson, 2016).

To investigate if multiple identity mindsets also influence child behavior, I recruited 6–7 year-old children (an age when identity is becoming increasingly important) who were either reminded about their own multiple identities (e.g., being a friend, reader, and a neighbor), their own multiple physical traits (e.g., having arms, legs, and ears), or the multiple identities another child had (e.g., she is a friend, reader, and a neighbor). Results showed that only a self-relevant multiple-identity mindset positively influenced children's flexible thinking. Reminding children about their own multiple identities led them to solve a problem that required insight, to offer more suggestions for an object's potential use, to provide less fixed or essentialist reasoning about social categories, and to see people as capable of being categorized in diverse ways (Gaither, Fan, & Kinzler, 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest that promoting a multiple-identity mindset is a subtle, yet powerful manipulation that can possibly serve as an intervention to help reduce fixed thinking regarding problem-solving abilities. But perhaps more importantly, these data also illustrate one pathway

that could help promote more positive intergroup relations in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse.

Future directions

Combined, this research highlights two pathways for flexibility in thinking and behavior that are directly related to the multiplicity of belonging – (1) having multiple identities simultaneously sharing the same space within one social domain; and (2) having multiple distinct identities shared across multiple social domains, which are simultaneously activated. Both of these definitions push social identity theory beyond its normative binary of group membership since they emphasize that belonging to multiple groups simultaneously can significantly impact our behavior in different ways compared to historical definitions of social identity which focus on one group membership guiding behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, there are a few confounds to the current work in addition to a number of other questions surrounding how specifically the multiplicity of belonging impacts behavior.

Needed biracial research

First, the majority of the biracial adult participants in these studies all likely strongly identified as biracial since most of them responded to a recruitment advertisement reaching out specifically to biracial people. Although biracial children still showed similar racial identity flexibility (Gaither et al., 2014), it is possible that in order to see these flexible racial identity outcomes biracial individuals may need to identify with *both* of their racial backgrounds. Other work has shown that biracial individuals who identify as biracial have higher levels of self-esteem and well-being compared to biracials who only identify with one of their racial backgrounds (Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009), and this identification choice also leads to more positive psychological and mental health outcomes (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). In fact, I've shown that biracial Black/White individuals want to belong equally to both of their racial backgrounds which affects how they respond to feedback about their implicit racial attitudes (Howell, Gaither, & Ratliff, 2015) and their endorsement for fellow biracial political candidates running for office (Masuoka, Gaither, Aeroelay, & Remedios, 2017). In these examples in particular, we would likely not have found the same results regarding biracial individuals who chose to identify with only one of their racial backgrounds (e.g., Rockquemore, 2002; Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012).

Relatedly, biracial research has largely ignored the intersections between being biracial and other social identities such as gender. Research shows that race, in particular, is gendered meaning certain racial stereotypes are linked more firmly to certain genders such as the Black criminal stereotype being more strongly associated with Black men (Babbitt, Gaither, Toosi, & Sommers, *in press*; Johnson, Freeman, & Pauker, 2012). Therefore, by studying the intersections of various other social identities with biracial populations we can further advance our theories surrounding multiple identification and group membership with a population who naturally has two identities within the same social domain.

What is the mechanism?

However, the bigger question is: What is the mechanism that pushes flexible behavior? Do these findings link to identity integration and one's ability to move effortlessly *among* these identities? Or do these outcomes associate more with one's ability to think flexibly from different distinct perspectives when navigating *between* one's identities? Some work has already recognized that there are at least two approaches to viewing one's identities: (1) seeing them in relation to distance and how much they overlap with each other; and (2) seeing them in relation to conflict versus how much they are in harmony with each other (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Cheng & Lee, 2009; Gołowska & Crisp, 2014). Existing identity models also stress the multidimensional and context dependent nature linked to social identities and group membership (e.g., Ashmore et al., 2004; Hoelter, 1985; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

One possibility is that by having multiple, continually salient identities (e.g., being bicultural, biracial, bisexual), this experience could serve as a practice effect for flexible thinking. But as my own research has shown, multiracial individuals had to be explicitly reminded about their flexible racial identity in order to see increases in flexible thinking (Gaither, Remedios, Sanchez, et al. 2015). However, this still does not rule out the possibility that people who think more regularly from different perspectives may also have unique cognitive access to this flexible multiple identity pathway over others.

Additionally, whether a multiple-identity mindset has to be positive to influence flexible behaviors also remains unanswered. The fact that biracial Black/White individuals who were reminded of their Black identity performed worse on a test (Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, et al. 2015) suggests that known stereotypes surrounding identities could negatively impact behavioral and cognitive outcomes. In fact, Roccas and Brewer's (2002) work on social identity complexity implies that depending on the identities activated, social threat may be experienced, which could negatively affect flexible thinking (e.g., Rothgerber, 1997; Rydell, McConnell, & Beilock, 2009). Alternatively, research has also shown that high levels of self-complexity moderate the harmful effects of stress and depression (e.g., Brewster et al., 2013; Linville, 1987). These findings underscore the need to extend this work to other real-world domains that require flexible thinking such as job interview performance, negotiations, and decision-making (e.g., Ford & Gioia, 2000; Pruitt & Lewis, 1975) to pinpoint other possible boundary effects linked to context.

Conclusions

Overall, it is clear that the influence stemming from the intersectional nature of having multiple identities simultaneously has been completely underestimated. Thus, my work has both theoretical and practical relevance for understanding the nature and development of social identity and intergroup behavior. Studies with biracial populations and acknowledgement of multiple social identification will provide identity researchers with an innovative way to expand our current comprehension of identity formation and membership. My work suggests that belonging to multiple groups not only impacts behavior, but it also highlights the variability that really does exist both *between and* within groups. It is that variation regarding the intersection and overlapping nature of identities that pushes the binary of group membership to new angles.

In sum, although people may not always reflect on their multiple identities, here I propose that when people do, it may have positive consequences for a variety of outcomes and behaviors. As stated in a recent article, “Biologists may have been building a more nuanced view of sex, but society has yet to catch up” (Ainsworth, 2015, p. 291). I argue it is time for identity research to catch up with the multiplicity of belonging.

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