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Does 1+1=3?: Combining Disparate Identity Meanings

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ABSTRACT

Within social psychology, it is commonly accepted that individuals simultaneously occupy multiple statuses, enact multiple roles, and negotiate identities (i.e., meanings of self as an occupant of those positions). Less clear are the mechanisms and outcomes for managing these multiple identities and the, sometimes disparate, meanings associated with them. In this paper, we draw upon existing literature to suggest a strategy for combining identities and present a potential way to measure this approach.

INTRODUCTION

"I am now one of those privileged people, and I sometimes feel like a class traitor in academe." William Pannapacker wrote these words under the pen name Thomas H. Benton in an essay published by the Chronicle of Higher Education (2007). He is not alone in giving voice to the challenges of melding the class identities within the academy (c.f., Grimes and Morris 1997; Linkon 1999). In these works and less formal discourse such as blogs posts, academics from family backgrounds in the working- or poverty-classes describe facing the challenge of navigating two very different social worlds and incorporating two divergent identities into their self-concept. Such faculty may feel a sense of discomfort or even guilt when comparing life in the middle-class world of academia to that of family and childhood classmates who are struggling to make ends meet. At the same time they may have a sense of lacking the skills and the experiences to feel comfortable and fit in the middle class world they now inhabit. While it is commonly accepted that individuals simultaneously occupy multiple statuses, enact multiple roles, and negotiate identities (i.e., meanings of self as an occupant of those positions), what is not as clear are the mechanisms and outcomes for managing these multiple identities and the, sometimes disparate, meanings associated with them. In this paper, we draw upon existing

literature to suggest a strategy for combining identities and present a potential way to measure this approach.

It is not only social interactions that present challenges when individuals are trying to navigate multiple identities, such as combining one's class identity within higher education. These individuals must also reconcile disparate self-meanings. Identities represent the meanings that one applies to self as an occupant of a social position. As a result, blue collar academics not only occupy multiple roles they also hold multiple (conflicting) identities simultaneously—the identities of blue collar and academic. Given that identities have consequences for relationships, self-evaluation, and behavior, the implications of such tensions transcend the immediate interactions. A host of sociological theories of identity (i.e., affect control theory, identity theory and identity control theory) articulate the processes of identity management as it relates to a single identity. What is not as clear from these theories are the processes individuals use to manage multiple identities simultaneously. In this paper, we begin by briefly highlighting sociological conceptualizations of self and identity. We then draw on existing strategies to propose two stages of identity management in reconciling conflicting identity meaning. We conclude by offering a potential way to measure these processes.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SELF AND IDENTITY

The self cannot be understood as a unidimensional or static object. Rather, it is a mosaic of identities that stem from specific formal social statuses occupied by an individual (Stryker 1980), social identities associated with membership in groups and organizations (Stryker 2000), less formally recognized social categories and groups to which she belongs (cf., Turner 1985), and identifications linked to characteristics, traits, or attributes (Smith-Lovin 2003). This broad conceptualization allows us to capture the wide variety of information by which people define themselves as similar to and different from others and by which they organize and evaluate behaviors and relationships. The collection of identities held by an individual is best understood as an interconnected system. Many theories of identity provide a framework for this more holistic understanding of the identities that comprise the self. According to these perspectives, identities are hierarchically arranged on the basis of their relative importance to the individual (McCall and Simmons 1966/1978).Within this complex system, the various components are sometimes highly dependent on one another and sometimes not. Individual identities are sometimes compatible and reinforce one another and they sometimes conflict with or challenge one another (Stryker 2000).

These identities have important consequences for shaping interactions and behaviors as individuals seek to conform to role expectations and the views they hold of themselves and those others hold of them. More specifically, individuals have a vested interested in being perceived by others in ways that validate the identities they hold for themselves. Thoits (2003) summarizes this process well: "Because we not only know ourselves through the eyes of others, but evaluate our worth, goodness and competence through others' eyes as well (Cooley, 1902) we are motivated to gain the rewarding approval of other people by anticipating and meeting their expectations"(179).

Identities more important to the individual are more likely to be enacted across situations. Considering only the position of identities in the hierarchy is not sufficient for understanding which identity is activated and enacted in a *given* setting. Symbolic interactionists have long noted the importance of defining the situation in social interactions (Blumer 1969). A key component of defining the situation is to negotiate meanings of self and others. Many settings limit the identities that are relevant or that can be enacted. Thus, in any given situation an individual can only enact those identities that are validated by others. Furthermore, the more individuals who are present in a given situation, the larger the number of others who must agree on a shared definition of the situation, the more restrictive the range of identities available to each participant. In ongoing relationships, it is not just the number of others *present* in a given situation that constrains the number of available identities but also *potential* interaction partners who are connected to those who are present. This validation is complicated by the multifaceted nature of society and selves in modern societies which make available a set of possible identities. The outcomes of such negotiations and interactions serve to reinforce some identities with identities that are successfully enacted and confirmed by interaction partners may become more important and salient to the individuals increasing the likelihood that they will be activated in future settings. In sum, people live their lives as agents in tension with, in response to, restricted/constrained and enabled by the social structures within which they are embedded.

Given the multiplicity of statuses held by any individual, and the differing demands created by the role sets of any given social position, it might seem that most individuals would remain in a state of constant conflict and strain. Considerable work within role theory has examined the impact of this multiplicity of social positions on the individual (cf., Simon 1995; Thoits 1983, 1986). In some cases, this multiplicity of roles has been found to have positive effects on well-being and, in other studies, it has been shown to have a negative effect (Thoits, 1983). The differential impact of role conflicts may be explained by differences in how the identities related to those roles fit into the individual's self structure and by the individual's success at managing competition or conflict among their roles and identities.

Until recently, identity theorists have afforded little attention to the interplay between and among the various identities held by the individual. Exceptions were studies focusing on conflicts between two specific identities. For example there are studies that examined specific combinations of potentially problematic identities (cf., Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Yeung and Strombler 2000; Dufour 2000). A sizable literature on the discrepancy between being a "good leader" and being a "good woman" (c.f. Eagly and Karau, 2002) also exists. In addition, there is a growing literature investigating how expectations for being an "ideal worker" may come at the cost of fulfilling the expectations of being a "good mother," although this literature is not explicitly focused on identity processes (Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007). While these studies are helpful in understanding the interplay of (and potential conflict between) two specific identities, they do not offer a unified or systematic way of understanding multiple identities. More recently the issue of multiple identities has been the focus of work by Burke (2003), Smith-Lovin (2003, 2007) and Thoits (2003).

We now build on this growing body of work to examine the issue of repeated conflict or competition among identities, and identify a new mechanism that may be used by individuals. For the purposes of this discussion, we focus on only those identity conflicts that occur on a

repeated basis and only on those conflicts involving identities that are central to the person's overall definition of self. Individuals are more likely to enact such highly important identities even when they are not directly relevant to an interaction (Turner 1978). In addition, we and our interaction partners are often unable or unwilling to set such identities. When we experience incongruity among identities important to us, we must do something about it. As cognitive misers we are also motivated to minimize our effort in managing the conflict, so that it is only for identities that are important (or central), that we are motivated to expend the cognitive and relational effort. In contrast, when identities are less important or central to us we are less motivated to do so.

We also restrict our focus to repeated situations that evoke conflicting important that are related to very different meanings or that are linked to very different behavioral scripts. In such cases, individuals are more likely to pressure to choose actions that will fulfill some self-meanings while simultaneously leaving unfilled the expectations associated with other social positions. As a result, the behaviors that reinforce one identity may disconfirm another identity. For example, if a woman behaves in ways consistent with being a woman (i.e., nurturing and deferential) then her behaviors will be inconsistent with expectations for being a leader (i.e., dominating and assertive) (Rogalin 2007). Such disconfirmation is more likely to become a source of distress and when it occurs on a regular basis, when it involves important identities, or when it makes it difficult to fulfill responsibilities and obligations to others. Though his theoretical arguments are focused on identity control theory, Burke (1991) argues that social stress is likely to emerge when an individual fails to meet the expectations of one identity due to the expectations of another identity. Sharp contrasts between identities can lead to cognitive dissonance and the inability integrate the conflicting identities with one another and with ones overall sense of self (Mahaffy 1996). Such identity challenges may have consequences for interpersonal relationships, self-evaluations, and the evaluations made by significant others (Cast and Burke 2002).

We will now turn our attention to two bodies of work that offer potential strategies for extending our understanding of multiple identity consequences.

Affect Control Theory

Affect control theory (or ACT) offers a potential solution for understanding how individuals deal with multiple identities. ACT (Heise 2007) is premised on the assumption that individuals behave in ways to maintain their own identities and the identities of others (Rogalin, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2011). According to the affect control principle, individuals behave in ways to minimize deflection, which is the difference between the fundamental sentiments and the transient impressions an individual has after social interaction. Fundamental sentiments are the culturally stable meanings of identities and behaviors individuals carry with them across social interactions. Transient impressions are the affective meanings created during social interaction.

ACT draws from empirical and theoretical work by Osgood and colleagues (1957) who argue that individuals cross-culturally interpret meaning across three dimensions: evaluation (good to bad), potency (powerful to powerless), and activity (quiet/still to noisy/lively). EPA

(evaluation, potency, activity) profiles measure fundamental sentiments about people, objects, and behaviors. While Osgood et al. (1957) argue that these three are the fundamental dimensions of meaning *cross-culturally*; ACT assumes that the specific EPA profiles *vary between* cultures (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 1999).

Work by Averett and Heise (1987) illustrates how identities are supplemented with additional information, called modifiers. Modifiers allow specific behavioral expectations to be generated by the amalgamation equations that take into account both the role identity and the modifier. A role identity is defined as the initial identity. In our opening example, "academic" is a role identity and "blue collar academic" is the modified identity with blue collar as the modifier. Role identities may be modified by a supplementary status (as well as by other factors) to define a particular identity for individuals within a given interaction. Averett and Heise (1987) also suggest that these modifications may result in new expectations for and interpretations of the interaction. Over the course of repeated interactions, a similar modification may occur for competing identities held by the individual.

When the modifier and the role-identity have similar meanings on the dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity, this has little significance. However, when the meanings of the modifier and the role-identity differ markedly, the resulting weighted average of the new modified identity may be substantially different from the original identity. Further, the strategy of amalgamation is a situational adjustment. We now turn our attention to a mechanism by which the temporary can become persistent.

Identity Management Model

Keeton et al. (2011), drawing on Keeton (1999), extended the idea of *amalgamation* as used by Averett and Heise (1987) to suggest three strategies that individuals may use to manage competing, multiple identities: compartmentalization, reprioritization, and blending.[1] Compartmentalization refers to the separation of competing identities into different parts of the social environments. Reprioritization occurs over time when one of the equally valued identities becomes devalued so that the default of enacting the most important identity can be used to resolve conflict or competition. Blending is the merger or redefinition of competing identities in a way that creates a distinctive new identity. Burke (2003) suggests similar strategies to those suggested by Keeton et al. (2009), although not using the same terminology. In this paper, we restrict our discussion to identity *blending,* as it is the strategy that is most relevant to repeated competition/conflict among highly valued identities. Blending is also the only strategy suggested by Keeton et al. that directly addresses the multiple identity question. Reprioritization and compartmentalization focus on ordering of single identities.

For Keeton (1999), blending occurs when individuals combine two conflicting identities into a new related but distinctive identity that is associated with a unique set of expectations. Blending extends amalgamation beyond a given interactional setting by shifting the basis of self-identification in a lasting manner. In addition, this new identity provides a means for soliciting validation from interaction partners. The new expectations can then be used by the individual for self-evaluations and behavioral guidance.

Management of Multiple Identities

We propose that the strategies proposed by Averett and Heise (1987) and Keeton et al. (2009) are two stages in reconciling conflicting identity meanings. As we mention above, Averett and Heise (1987) offer a situation-based solution while Keeton et al. (2009) offer a more integrated, cross-situational redefinition of self. Rather being two distinct strategies, what begins with amalgamation sometimes extends into identity blending. For example, existing literature has demonstrated how different groups of women combine meanings associated with employment and motherhood. For urban Azande women, being a "good mother" is tied to notions of work and being a "good provider" (Clark 1999). Among the urban Azande, anyone can provide care for a child, but only a *mother* can work to earn money to provide for her children as they grow and to ensure their future. From this literature, we can see that some women are better able to merge these different aspects of their selves (e.g., being a good urban Azande mother is equated with being a good provider), while other women experience these in terms of a struggle for balance (e.g.,"working" moms in the United States).

For women who define themselves using a professional identity, the (potential) identity conflict may be even greater. For these women, it is not enough to redefine the mother identity to incorporate employment. They must also manage their career-based identity. Averett and Heise (1987) would suggest that on a situation, by situation, basis, these women would just use "mothers." When a woman was at work, she would simply modify her "employee" identity and when she was at home, she would simply modify her "mother" identity. However, if both identities are master identities, then this is more problematic. We suggest that this is a situation in which a new, blended identity would be created. This new identity supersedes the two identities of worker and mother in both work and home contexts. The creation of this new identity occurs over time, across many interactions, and requires negotiation and validation from others.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

But, the question remains, how do we measure this process of identity blending? A key obstacle to a more unified understanding of multiple identities is the difficulty of measurement (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Though recent work has more directly examined the issue of multiple identities in both theory development and empirical work (c.f., Burke 2003; Burke and Stets 2009; Keeton et al.2009; Smith-Lovin 2003; Stryker 2000; Thoits 2003), the measurement remains a challenge.

Drawing from ACT, Rogalin and Keeton (2010) propose one possibility for measuring identity blending, using the concept of deflection. Deflection is defined as the difference between the fundamental sentiments and transient impressions. Deflection is operationalized as the following:

$$(A_e - A'_e)^2 + (A_p - A'_p)^2 + (A_a - A'_a)^2 + (B_e - B'_e)^2 + (B_p - B'_p)^2 + (B_a - B'_a)^2 + (O_e - O'_e)^2 + (O_p - O'_p)^2 + (O_a - O'_a)^2$$

Where *A* refers to the actor in the situation, *B* refers to the behavior in the situation, *O* refers to the object of the situation, *e* refers to evaluation, *p* refers to potency and *a* refers to activity. This operationalization of deflection can be used as a potential starting point for operationalizing blending. Rather than taking the difference between the fundamental sentiments and transient impressions, one would take the difference between the difference between the fundamentals of both identities and the difference between what the identity means to a particular person. So for example, if the two identities were blue collar academic, then this is what identity blending would look like:

(Academic in general- Blue collar in general) - (Academic me – Blue collar me)

Where *academic in general* and *blue collar in general* would represent the fundamental sentiments associated with the identities of academic and blue collar and *academic me* and *blue collar me* would represent what those two identities meant to a particular person.

More formally, this manner of operationalizing blending would be:

$$[(A_e - B_e)^2 + (A_p - B_p)^2 + (A_a - B_a)^2] - [Am_e - Bm_e)^2 + (Am_p - Bm_p)^2 + (Am_a - Bm_a)^2]$$

Where *A* refers to academic in general, *B* refers to blue collar in general, *Am* refers to academic me, *Bm* refers to blue caller me, *e* refers to evaluation, *p* refers to potency and *a* refers to activity. The larger the number, the more a person has blended the two conflicting identities.

As pointed out by Kalkhoff (2010),[3] calculating a percent change would be a beneficial, supplementary analysis for this proposed measure of blending. Specifically, this percent change would capture the difference between the fundamental sentiments of each identity and the difference in what each identity meant to that person. More formally, this percent change would be:

$$\left[\frac{(\text{Academic me} - \text{Blue collar me}) - (\text{Academic in general} - \text{Blue collar in general})}{(\text{Academic in general} - \text{Blue collar in general})}\right] \times 100$$

This percent change could be a means of capturing the relative shift in the meanings.

Though not easily addressed, answers to this measurement question and other questions of multiple identities are likely to prove critical for advancing several lines of research within social psychology. One such area examines work on multiple identities and well-being. Previous work on role conflict has presented a mixed picture regarding the impact of multiple roles/identities. Thoits (2003) and others have suggested that the key to understanding the differing effects of role conflict may lie in understanding the identities associated with the roles and the nature of those identities. Stets and Harrod (2004) have suggested that multiple identities may be beneficial only when they are verified. However, it may be a function of the unique constellation of identities held by the individual rather than the number of identities that shape well-being. Discrepancy among identities in the constellation presents challenges for identity verification and, thus, may be detrimental for well-being. Smith-Lovin (2007) argues that when a person is simultaneously engaging in multiple identities, mixed emotions are likely to result.

Further, she argues that individuals engaging in multiple identities (with mixed emotions) simultaneously can support cultural redefinition of identities, which inform another area of research, social change. It is interesting to note that the process of identity redefinition begins with amalgamation within a given interaction. In some cases, identity redefinition transcends the situation and becomes more fully integrated into the individual's self through blending. Over time, across multiple interactions, such identity blending may give way to social change, with many individuals enacting a new, shared identity that blends aspects of two previously conflicting identities. However, while we can theorize about this process, the question of measurement remains a significant challenge.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Keeton (1999) originally used the term “amalgamation” for this management strategy; but to avoid confusion with Averett and Heise's (1987) concept of “amalgamation,” we will refer to this strategy as “blending.”

[2] We would like to thank Jane Brooks for her assistance in writing this paragraph.

[3] Discussant comments at the 2010 Group Processes Mini-Conferences in Chicago, IL.

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