Diversity in the person, diversity in the group: Challenges of identity complexity for social perception and social interaction

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Abstract

Social psychological research is increasingly coming to grips with the complexity of social identity within the individual, both from the perspective of perceivers trying to form impressions and make judgments about multiply categorizable targets, as well as from the perspective of actors using their different self-aspects as a framework for guiding their interactions with the social world. I review several contributions to the effort to better understand these issues and then explore some of their possible implications for understanding the nature and consequences of diversity within the group.

The importance of social categories in guiding social cognition and behavior was recognized decades ago by seminal figures in social psychology (Allport, 1954; Sherif, 1948; Tajfel, 1974). Since then, research on social categorization and associated phenomena such as stereotyping and intergroup conflict has flowed in a steadily increasing stream, attesting to the theoretical centrality and practical significance of these issues. Much of the social psychological research that has been conducted in this tradition has focused on one identity dimension at a time (e.g., race or sex or nationality) and has assumed the existence of distinct, discrete categories within a given dimension (e.g., clearly defined racial groups) rather than overlapping, blended, or ambiguous categories. In addition, researchers often tend either to adopt the perspective of the observer, asking how social categories are imposed on target persons in the course of social perception, or they adopt the perspective of the actor, asking how categorical identities are claimed or disavowed in the course of self-perception, and how these identities influence subsequent self-regulation. These research traditions have yielded undeniably rich and diverse insights into the dynamics of social categorization, but the picture they have produced has not fully come to terms with some of the inherent complexities of social categorization.

In recent times, researchers have begun to turn their attention more explicitly toward the multifaceted nature of social identities. The diversity of identity, within the individual, has been increasingly recognized and investigated, both from the perceiver’s and the actor’s perspectives. The impact of a group’s diversity on group dynamics and productivity has also been increasingly recognized in recent years, but the issue becomes more complicated when one recognizes the diversity that resides within the individual members comprising the group. In this article, I review some of the recent research and theory bearing on the diversity of identity, considering its implications both for individuals and groups. As will become clear, many key issues remain ripe for empirical exploration.

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DIVERSITY IN THE PERSON

For fairly obvious reasons, researchers interested in racism often conduct experiments in which a target’s apparent race (and/or the perceiver’s race) varies, while other aspects of the person are ignored or held constant. By focusing on this single identity dimension, the overarching role of race can be discerned and evaluated. Similar approaches have been taken in research on sexism, ageism, and other forms of identity-based prejudice, with many valuable insights accruing. However, these approaches ignore the inherently multifaceted nature of social identity. By arranging experimental manipulations so that only one specific social category is salient, researchers bypass fundamental questions about how the multiplicity of social identity might be spontaneously navigated in the absence of direct experimental cueing. Fortunately, other research approaches have more to say about this issue, and a picture is emerging of the factors that determine when and how particular identities become focal and how they function in relation to one another.

The Complexity of Identity

The idea that an actor’s identity is not stable but rather shifts across time was a central feature of the dramaturgical perspective advanced by the advocates of symbolic interactionism (Burke, 1945; Goffman, 1959). One particular variant of this approach, role theory (e.g., Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), proposed that each social identity an individual possesses exists in a hierarchy of salience; the actual momentary salience of any given social role is assumed to dictate its power to guide and constrain behavior, and as salience shifts, behavior shifts in a corresponding manner. From this perspective, the diversity of the person resides in the repertoire of social roles and identities occupied by the individual.

In more recent decades, the dynamics through which different social categories become self-defining have been conceptualized most influentially by self-categorization theorists (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Although framed in terms of how the categorization of the self changes across situations, the theory assumes corresponding patterns in the categorization of others. Its key insight is that social identities come spontaneously into focus in a given situation to the degree that they provide a contextually meaningful framework for defining it as an intergroup situation. The contextual meaningfulness of social categories is postulated to depend on the degree to which they provide comparative fit (by accounting for patterns of similarity and difference across individuals; e.g., Wegener & Klauer, 2004) and normative fit (by aligning observed behavior with the norms associated with particular groups; Oakes, 1987). Other variables that can contextually influence patterns of categorization include the relative distinctiveness of a given identity (e.g., Nelson & Miller, 1995) and the extent to which activating a categorical identity can satisfy momentarily influential personal goals and motives (e.g., Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). All of these perspectives emphasize dynamic and flexible shifts in the salience of social categories across time, with their influence on behavior waxing and waning correspondingly.

A given individual’s identity can shift across distinct dimensions (e.g., sex versus ethnicity versus nationality, etc.) as well as along a more “vertical” dimension, as emphasized in SCT (i.e., personal level, subgroup level, “basic” group level, superordinate group level). Consider Barack Obama. He can potentially be categorized as male, a US citizen, a politician, Christian, etc. Within any of these categories, relatively more inclusive or exclusive bases for categorization exist (e.g., for the geopolitical identity “US citizen,” we could think of “Chicagoans” as a more exclusive subtype for him and “North Americans” as a more inclusive one). In theory, all of these different ways of categorizing Obama could be relatively independent of one another, but in practice they clearly are not. For one thing, any of the seemingly distinct, independent bases for categorization can serve to define a more exclusive subtype of another category (e.g., “Black Americans” or “American Men”). Penner and Saperstein (2008) reported evidence showing that perceived race—a category often thought of in biologically essentialist terms (Hirschfeld, 1996)—is determined to a noteworthy degree by a person’s social status. That is, the racial categories ascribed to others, and the racial categories that are self-ascribed, can change as a function of changes in an individual’s social status, as marked by membership in categories like “prisoners” and “the unemployed.” Thus, conceptually orthogonal identity dimensions can interact to determine social categorization. Much more research needs to address the general psychological principles governing such interactions, although as reviewed below, many interesting clues are already available. The diversity of the person is greatly expanded beyond his or her basic repertoire of identities by the many potential interactions among these roles. It is evident not only in shifts in categorization across time but also in contemporaneous influences and intersections of identities that can modify their basic characteristics.
This idea carries important implications for how social categories are used. Stereotyping and prejudice, too, must be characterized by a degree of flexibility and context sensitivity, if the categorical representations giving rise to them are so dynamic and interactive. This idea has been supported by a number of recent studies. Wittenbrink, Judd, and Park (2001) showed that automatic evaluations of racial minority targets (specifically, African Americans) were moderated by the context in which these targets were presented (a church versus an urban street corner; see also Barden, Maddux, Petty, & Brewer, 2004). With respect to stereotyping, Garcia-Marques, Santos, and Mackie (2006) showed that the stereotypes applied to a given target tend to shift across contexts, because **contextually salient information gets incorporated into active stereotype representations.** Along similar lines, Mendoza-Denton, Park, and O’Connor (2008) showed that gender-based stereotyping changes across different contexts. For example, they found that expectations about the differential assertiveness of men versus women are moderated by the situation in which a target is depicted (e.g., at home versus in the workplace). There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization work in more complex ways. There could be a number of reasons why stereotypes shift when category members are encountered in different contexts. For one, specific contexts can activate specific categorical subtypes, in effect fine-tuning categorization
female. Such ambiguity is not easily tolerated, and intersex persons typically receive medical interventions that ultimately force them into one category or the other. Given the low base rate of intersex births and the fact that early “corrective” interventions are commonly pursued, we rarely if ever knowingly encounter intersex adults. However, other kinds of blended categories are becoming increasingly common, particularly the case of multiracial people. In the most recent national census in the United States, respondents were permitted for the first time to select more than one category when reporting their race; many people did so, and demographic projections indicate that steadily increasing numbers will likely do so in the future.

When people have one Black parent and one White parent, how will they categorize themselves with respect to race? How will others categorize them? Will both categories apply, or perhaps neither? Might one of the categories trump the other in defining an individual’s race? If neither category seems to fit, will new categories be created (see, e.g., Travassos & Williams, 2004, regarding the variety of distinct interracial categories that are commonly in use in Brazil)? There are a number of findings that provide possible answers to these questions. Regarding perceivers’ categorizations of ambiguous targets, research on the ingroup over-exclusion effect (Leyens & Yzerbyt, 1992) indicates that perceivers often assign ambiguous cases to outgroup categories rather than ingroups. One prediction following from this idea is that in the case of Black/White biracial targets, Black perceivers may be more likely to consider the targets to be White, while White perceivers may be more likely to consider them to be Black. Another, related possibility is that the criteria for membership in high status groups are more restrictive than those for membership in lower status groups, such that when their category membership is in doubt, individuals will be assigned to the lower status group (even by people who are not members of either group). This notion, known as the rule of hypodescent, was invoked as a legal principle defining the officially recognized racial identity of mixed-race persons (Banks & Eberhardt, 1998); that is, such persons were considered to be members of the lower-status ancestral racial group. Recent developments in molecular genetics indicate that “we are all multiracial” (Chakravarti, 2009, p. 381), so if a strict imposition of the hypodescent rule were to hold in the US context, it would mean that we are all Black.

Although in fact long abandoned as an official policy, the hypodescent principle may still be active as an implicit cultural theory regarding race. In support of this possibility, Peery and Bodenhausen (2008) found that when required to rapidly categorize ambiguous faces as “Black” or “not Black,” White and Asian perceivers were more likely to categorize the targets as “Black” if they were known (based on information learned during a previous training session) to have mixed-race ancestry, compared to when nothing was known about their ancestry. They also categorized these same faces as “White” or “not White,” and in this case, knowledge of a target’s mixed-race ancestry was associated with a greater likelihood of choosing the “not White” response. Thus, when a target was explicitly known to have both Black and White ancestry, he or she was more likely to be reflexively categorized by perceivers as Black and not White. Of course, the ways multiracial people categorize themselves is also a topic of considerable interest. Some evidence suggests that multiracial youth often feel pressured to choose just one monoracial identity (Herman, 2004). Barack Obama (2004), for example, wrote poignantly about his reasons for identifying as Black, despite having a White mother. His recent rise to international prominence raises many interesting questions about how voters construe the race of multiracial candidates and whether or not these construals correspond to the identities claimed by the candidates themselves (for an overview, see Peery & Bodenhausen, 2009). Much remains to be learned about the identification patterns of multiracial people, but one general lesson already seems apparent. Although many people assume that having a multiracial background represents a burden of identity ambiguity that is likely to undermine well being, this is not inherently the case (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

The psychological difficulties that have been associated with multiracial identities are better attributed to subtle but pervasive cultural messages that devalue or fail to recognize the reality of multiracial status (Sanchez, in press; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009).

The issue of blended categories clearly provides a rich set of questions that add additional complexity to questions about how different categories interact with one another. Collectively, the issues reviewed above indicate that social categorization must be viewed with an eye toward possible interactions between different aspects of a person’s identity. Next I consider the most frequently considered views regarding the interplay of different social categories.

Models of Multiple Category Management

Several different research programs have addressed identity complexity, from both the perceiver’s and the actor’s perspective. Depending on the approach, particular psychological structures and processes are postulated to characterize
how multiple identity facets function in relation to one another. Three possibilities emerge with some consistency across different research programs, so the discussion below is organized around these three primary patterns.

The first pattern is dominance, which occurs when a given identity tends to trump other potential identities, remaining salient in most circumstances while other identities fall off of the radar screen (Urban & Miller, 1998). To the extent that other characteristics are noticed, they will tend to function merely as piecemeal, personal features rather than organizing categorical identities (see Bodenhausen, Macrae, & Sherman, 1999; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Only the dominant category retains the power to define the individual’s social identity. From the perceiver’s perspective, category dominance would be reflected in routinely relying on the same category dimension(s) when construing and reacting to others. A relatively cut example might be a White racist, who views every non-White person through the lens of race. For such a person, other considerations such as sex, occupation, age, or religion matter little in comparison to a target’s race. Even people who do not necessarily explicitly endorse racist ideologies may allow race to dominate other bases for social categorization. Goff, Thomas, and Jackson (2008) showed that even such a relatively salient category as gender may be trumped by race in a sample of participants who were highly unlikely to endorse racist ideologies. They briefly exposed White undergraduates (from a large public American university) to a series of dark-skinned and light-skinned faces and had them categorize the faces in terms of race and sex. Black faces were categorized by race with very high accuracy, but when it came to sex, errors were evident, particularly the error of miscalclassifying Black females as males (an error rate in excess of 12% in one study). In contrast, Black males were very rarely miscalclassified as females, and both kinds of sex categorization errors were very rare among White targets. Goff et al. argue that this pattern of errors reflects the fact that, by default, the prototypic member of the category Black is a male. When responding to a person primarily in terms of a dominant category, prototypic features may be automatically inferred, even if they result in miscalclassifying the person on another identity dimension.

The categories that hold the power to dominate other possible bases for categorization are likely to be ones that are essentialized (Medin & Ortony, 1989), meaning that a deep underlying essence that fundamentally defines membership in the category is ascribed. Rothbart and Taylor (1992) described two key characteristics of essentialized categories: (1) immutability and (2) inductive richness (see also Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). It makes a good deal of sense that identities that are perceived to be both unchanging and deeply informative would be ones that tend to dominate social perception. Race (Hirschfeld, 1996) and sex (Prentice & Miller, 2006) are two identity dimensions that tend to be essentialized to a substantial degree by many social perceivers. One hypothesis following from this analysis is that the extent to which racism and sexism are expressed in people’s judgments and behaviors may be a function of the degree to which they essentialize these categories. Indeed, Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst (2002) and Keller (2005) provided evidence consistent with this idea. More pertinent to the present analysis, one could hypothesize that essentialized social categories will be the ones that “pop out” most inevitably when we are confronted by multiply categorizable targets. Stangor, Lynch, Duan, and Glass (1992) provided evidence that race and sex are both used spontaneously in the categorization of multiply categorizable targets. It would be interesting to determine whether the extent to which this is the case is related to individual differences in essentialist beliefs regarding these categories. Bastian and Haslam (2006) provided evidence that individuals who endorse essentialist beliefs in a general way tended to endorse stereotypes about a number of different social groups, suggesting the operation of a general lay theory (see also Molden & Dweck, 2006). However, there may nevertheless be differences in the extent to which particular identities are essentialized, and these differences may predict which identities are likely to form the basis for social categorization (and stereotyping) when multiply categorizable targets are encountered in the absence of experimental cueing toward particular dimensions.

A challenge to the view that essentialized categories (specifically, race) will tend to dominate social perception was provided by several experiments conducted by Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides (2001). They argued that the functionally most important categories are the ones that track coalitional affiliations. Race might look like a category of particular importance or dominance because it often covaries with people’s coalitional concerns (i.e., people tend to form coalitions with racial ingroup members), but in the studies conducted by Kurzban et al., race and coalition status were experimentally unconfounded. Using the “who-said-what?” paradigm (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978) that has frequently been employed to examine spontaneous use of social categories, they found that people readily abandon racial categorization when race no longer marks coalition boundaries. On the other hand, their studies pointed toward the consistent use of sex as a basis for categorization, regardless of coalition status. Does this result mean that sex inevitably trumps other social categories? A study by Eagly and Kite (1987) paints an interesting picture on this question. Examining the intersections of national and sex categories, Eagly and Kite found that for male targets, nationality tended to modify the characteristics that
were stereotypically applied to them. In contrast, female targets tended to be viewed similarly irrespective of their nationality. One interpretation of this pattern is that low-status essentialized categories will dominate social perception to a greater extent than high-status essentialized categories. Clearly, the idea that essentialized categories will inevitably dominate social categorization is untenable, and more research will be required to address questions about when and for whom such categories will tend to trump other bases for construing others.

Dominance patterns can also characterize self-categorization processes. In their influential analysis of social identity complexity, Roccas and Brewer (2002) characterized dominance as one of the less complex forms of managing multiple social identities. Strict dominance would involve a single identity defining the scope of the person’s ingroup on a cross-situationally stable basis, with other identities being largely irrelevant. A modified, hierarchical dominance pattern would exist when a person takes other aspects of his or her identity into account when thinking about other people who share membership in this dominant (primary) category, but not when thinking about others who do not share this identity (Brewer, Ho, Lee, & Miller, 1987). Brewer and Pierce (2005) documented that these relatively simple forms of social identification carry implications not just for self-perceptions but also for how others are judged. Specifically, outgroups are defined in a more rigid and monolithic way, and they are accorded less tolerance, when people have low-complexity social identities.

Why might a single category come to dominate one’s sense of social identity? In the case of minorities and stigmatized groups, sometimes the external social world can impose these identities on the individual (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), by virtue of their salience in the minds of many of the people with whom members of these groups interact (and also in broader cultural representations). Along these lines, Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Spears (2001) showed that one common response to discrimination is to identify more strongly with the relevant group. Multiracial people represent an interesting case that may be an exception to this rule, because as noted above, even though others may attempt to pigeonhole them into monoracial categories and subject them to corresponding discrimination and stigmatization, their own sense of self-definition is likely to be more complex and fluid than that. Along these lines, Pauker and Ambady (2009) showed that, compared to self-identified monoracial individuals, self-identified multiracial people are less likely to be influenced by racial category labels when processing faces. A correspondingly lower tendency to essentialize race was observed in this sample of multiracial people. The importance of psychological essentialism as a moderator of the dominance pattern was underscored by research showing that the degree to which bicultural individuals hold essentialized views of race predicts the degree to which their ethnic culture of origin dominates their social identity; moreover, this essentializing tendency was associated with greater difficulty in psychologically moving between the two cultural frames of reference (Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007).

Recently, Amiot, de la Sablonnière, Terry, and Smith (2007) proposed a stage model of social identity development, focusing in particular on what happens when taking on a significant new identity becomes a possibility. In the early “categorization” stage of their model, distinct aspects of identity exist in isolation from one another and one particular identity (the oldest, most established one) predominates over the others. This dominant identity is likely to be chronically salient and to be actively bolstered. The expected course of development from this stage is to acquire an ability to deal with the uncertainty involved in having more than one identity, such that more than one identity can be recognized and claimed by the self.

The second commonly recognized pattern of multiple-category management is compartmentalization, which occurs when various social categories exist as encapsulated, non-overlapping representations that take turns dominating social perception and self definition. No category has chronic dominance, and any of them can be momentarily focal while the others remain dormant. From the perceIVER’s perspective, this means that the immediate context will drive which categories stand out from among the multiple possible bases for categorization. Racism, sexism, and other specific forms of prejudice become situated rather than universal phenomena. This idea is at the heart of the activation-inhibition model of stereotyping proposed by Bodenhausen and Macrae (1998), building on the empirical studies reported in Macrae, Bodenhausen, and Milne (1995). The model proposes that when multiply categorizable targets are encountered, those social categories that can be readily discerned will compete with one another for momentary dominance in the mind of the perceiver. For the winning category, stereotypes associated with the category will be activated and applied to the target (unless they are unambiguously contradicted by available information). For other initially contending categories, the activation levels of their associated stereotypes will be actively inhibited, potentially producing lower accessibility than under baseline conditions (see Macrae et al., 1995). The model proposes a range of variables that can bias which of the competing categories will win the contest for momentary dominance, including the frequency and
recency of a category’s prior activation, the situational and general distinctiveness of a given identity, and the degree of fit between the target’s behavior and category prototypes (i.e., normative fit) among others.

In addition to the evidence reviewed in Bodenhausen and Macrae (1998), more recent studies on cross-cutting social categories supports the idea that stereotypes tend to be activated and applied in an “either/or” manner. That is, when stereotypes are activated about one identity, stereotypes about other potential bases of categorization do not appear to be influential, in keeping with the idea that they are inhibited. For example, Pittinsky, Shih, and Trahan (2006) exposed perceivers to targets that could be categorized on the basis of their ethnicity and/or their sex, and they looked for evidence of sex and ethnic stereotyping in reactions to these targets. Participants who were subtly cued to attend to sex applied gender (but not ethnic) stereotypes to the target, while those who were cued toward ethnicity applied ethnic (but not gender) stereotypes. Klauer, Ehrenberg, and Wegener (2003) and van Rijswijk and Ellemers (2002) also reported evidence that stereotyping of multiply categorizable targets follows an either/or (i.e., compartmentalization) pattern.

Research has also examined these dynamics as they apply to self-categorization. In the Roccas and Brewer (2002) model of social identity complexity, compartmentalization represents a more complex form of identification in which different identities come to the fore in different circumstances (see also Amiot et al., 2007). This idea clearly resonates with the main themes of self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). Another research tradition that fits well with the notion of compartmentalization is work on cultural frame-switching in bicultural persons (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). Here the idea is that bicultural individuals often possess two distinct cultural identities that take turns controlling processes of self-regulation in different contexts, depending on situational cues to the relevance of a given identity. One such cue may be language, and some research suggests that when using different languages, people appear to be expressing different personalities, presumably due to the invocation of different, culturally defined norms for behavior within each group of language users (Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martínez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2004). Chiao, Heck, Nakayama, and Ambady (2006) showed that even low-level perceptual and attentional processes could be modified by frame-switching. Compartmentalization effects of this sort are not limited to ethnically defined cultural identities. Hugenberg and Bodenhausen (2004) studied college students who held memberships in fraternities and sororities, and thus had a “Greek system” identity as well as a more superordinate “university student” identity. These two identities are associated with quite different “cultures,” or norms for self-regulation. Hugenberg and Bodenhausen showed that when one of these identities was salient, its associated norms became more cognitively accessible, while the norms of the rival identity were actively inhibited.

In Amiot et al.’s (2007) developmental model, the compartmentalization stage is the point at which different identities gradually come to be seen as complementary rather than oppositional. Compartmentalization of oppositional identities would be expected to produce different kinds of cognitive consequences, compared to when identities are viewed as complementary aspects of the self; indeed, Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, and Morris (2002) showed that standard frame-switching effects like those reviewed above are not found among individuals with multiple identities that seem to them to work in opposition to one another. In fact, for such people, situational cues that would normally trigger the use of a particular cultural frame often evoke responses that are more typical of the alternative (subjectively opposed) identity.

This brings us to the third possibility for managing multiple social categories, the idea of category integration. From the perceiver’s perspective, integration involves taking note of more than one of a target’s social category memberships and using them in some simultaneous fashion in responding to the target. They could be used additively, as often seen in research on evaluations of cross-categorized targets (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007). Alternatively, they could interact in some manner such that the impact of one categorical identity is modified by the presence of other one(s). Exactly this kind of interactive process is hypothesized in Kunda and Thagard’s (1996) parallel-constraint-satisfaction model of stereotyping in impression formation. Models of subtyping and subgrouping (Richards & Hewstone, 2001) can also be viewed as instances of category integration, to the extent that they are defined by conjunctions of categorical identities (see also Hutter & Crisp, 2005; Kunda, Miller, & Claire, 1990). For example, consider encountering a male hairdresser, Sergio, at the local salon. Compartmentalization would imply that Sergio is perceived either as a male or as a hairdresser, but integration would be evident if these two identities form a meaningful subtype having its own stereotypical associations. Whereas the category interactions proposed in Kunda and Thagard’s model are dynamic and would be expected to change across contexts, the category interactions involved in subtyping and subgrouping may be much more stable. Indeed, they may be thought of as creating a new, firmly fused categorical identity that can potentially be activated and used in a consistent way across contexts (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998). Even if encountered in another social situation, such as an anti-war protest, Sergio might still be perceived and evaluated in terms of his male hairdresser identity.
Of course, perceivers can also form individuated impressions of multiply categorizable targets (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). We might think of individuation as the ultimate in category integration, in that perceivers reconcile the implications of multiple identities (e.g., male, politician, African American, liberal, sports fan, dog-lover, etc.) in forming an impression of the target. However, in this situation the various facets of the individual may actually not function as organizing categories any longer, but instead may serve merely as a set of personal attributes. In this sense, the multiple category problem is transformed into a matter of multiattribute evaluation (see, e.g., Bodenhausen and Peery, 2009).

The issue of identity integration has been richly explored from the perspective of self-categorization processes. In the Roccas and Brewer (2002) model of social identity complexity, the most complex form of social identification is called merger, which involves the simultaneous recognition of multiple categories as being self-defining (e.g., occupation, ethnicity, sex, etc.). Across different contexts, multiple identities may remain salient and influential. For example, in a context that makes ethnicity highly salient, a person with a merged social identity would still be likely to feel a sense of shared identity with an ethnic outgroup member who happened to share the same occupation. Roccas and Brewer review numerous variables that can increase the probability that social identity merger will occur, including the experience of societal diversity, the presence of relevant individual needs and motives, variations in stress, and many others.

Identity integration is also a topic of great interest in research on multiracial and bicultural individuals (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Cheng & Lee, 2009). The general finding is that greater integration of these identities is associated with greater well being and more effective social functioning (e.g., Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Cheng and Lee argued that multiracial individuals’ degree of identity integration depends on (a) how much dissimilarity they perceive to exist between the racial groups that constitute their own ancestry and (b) how much conflict they perceive to exist between these groups. They also showed that the degree of integration is at least somewhat malleable and subject to experimental manipulation. Within this variability, there may be a general developmental trajectory to acquire a more stable sense of identity integration over time (Amiot et al., 2007). Strategies for resolving any apparent inconsistencies or conflict between identities may be discovered and implemented over time, laying the groundwork for a more integrated, complex social identity (Tadmore & Tetlock, 2006). Achieving an integrated social identity does not preclude continuing to show evidence of frame-switching across contexts (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002). It does not mean that there will no longer be any contextually driven shifts in momentary self-definition, but it does imply a greater overarching sense of personal integrity because the different self-elements do not seem to be fundamentally at odds with one another.

The research reviewed in this section makes it clear that the diversity that exists within the individual can result in a range of different patterns of social perception and self-perception. In some circumstances a simple focus on a single identity dimension may be sufficient to capture the relevant psychological dynamics, but in many other cases multiple categories need to be considered.

**DIVERSITY IN THE GROUP**

There has been increasing interest in recent years in understanding the challenges and opportunities that arise from diverse social groups, such as work teams, juries, and classrooms. In this section I explore the implications of within-person diversity for addressing these questions about group diversity. I begin by providing a very brief overview of the group diversity literature.

Sometimes diversity within groups is defined in terms of the extent to which different group members possess different information or cognitive skills, but most commonly, people think of group diversity in terms of basic demographic categories—particularly race/ethnicity and sex. The growing interest in how diversity influences a group’s functioning is timely, because all demographic trends point to the emergence of increasingly diverse societies in which many kinds of working groups are expected to be characterized by a greater degree of diversity (Golembiewski, 1995). A common presumption is that diversity should enhance group performance, because people with different backgrounds can be expected to bring different knowledge and skills to group tasks. Indeed, as the political economist Page (2007) shows, it is a logically derivable verity that groups having cognitive diversity of this sort will outperform groups selected on a more singular basis (e.g., selecting the individuals with the highest aptitude test scores). At the same time, the introduction of diversity into a group could create socioemotional tensions of the sort that have often been observed to arise in intergroup
situations. If members of different subgroups indeed do subjectively define the situation as an intergroup setting, then in(sub)group favoritism and related intergroup tendencies can begin to poison the morale and interpersonal relations within the group. In combination, these two ideas suggest that benefits from group diversity are possible but certainly not inevitable.

Influential reviews of the empirical literature on the consequences of group diversity (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Williams & O’Reilly, 1998) have concluded that the evidence is very mixed. On one hand, there is indeed evidence that racial diversity can enhance the quality of group task performance (e.g., Antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny, Levin, & Milem, 2004; Ely & Thomas, 2001), and not just by virtue of minority group members bringing new perspectives to the table. The presence of a different subgroup can also create competitive motivation resulting in performance increments (Lount & Phillips, 2007), and the presence of a minority group member can lead majority group members to think in more complex ways (Sommers, 2006; Sommers, Warp, & Mahoney, 2008). At the same time, there is evidence that the interpersonal dynamics within a group can suffer after the introduction of diverse group members (e.g., Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). In order to provide an integrative conceptualization of these kinds of findings, van Knippenberg, De Dreu, and Homann (2004) proposed their categorization/elaboration model of diversity, which recognizes the possibility of both negative effects arising from intergroup biases but also positive effects arising from the group’s cognitive diversification. The model specifies key variables that moderate the consequences of group diversity, and the most central of these is what van Knippenberg et al. term “diversity beliefs,” or lay theories containing assumptions about whether diversity is a good or a bad thing for a group’s functioning. In support of this idea, van Dick, van Knippenberg, Häggele, Guillaume, and Brodbeck (2008) showed in two longitudinal studies that, to the extent group members hold pro-diversity beliefs, diversity increased their degree of cognitive elaboration on group tasks. Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, and De Dreu (2007) further showed that it is possible to manipulate diversity beliefs, with the consequence of better group performance when groups actually were diverse.

Respects for Group Diversity

Once one accepts the fact that people are inherently multifaceted, and that the extent to which any given social category is spontaneously seen as relevant can vary across contexts, it becomes clear that the level of diversity within a group depends on which respects for diversity one considers. Consider a Black Christian woman who joins a law firm that is otherwise populated by White Jewish men. Clearly this represents an increase in the diversity of the group on three demographic dimensions, but do the majority group members register all of these forms of diversification? Do they all matter, and if so, do they matter to an equivalent degree? Or might their relative importance change from one context to another? As reviewed above, there are many possibilities. The problem of determining which respects matter for diversity assessments is analogous to the general problem of determining the respects that should be used for assessments of (dis)similarity; the shifting comparative context is likely to matter a lot (Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993). These considerations point to the importance of considering subjective or perceived diversity as a causal variable having its own importance—perhaps having more immediate causal significance in shaping group dynamics and performance outcomes than “objective” diversity; however that is defined (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Zellmer-Bruhn, Maloney, Bhappu, & Salvador, 2008; see also Harrison & Klein, 2007).

It may be that some of the inconsistent findings in the prior research on group diversity result from a failure to consider possible divergences between research participants’ perceptions of diversity and the distribution of “objective” group characteristics on which researchers choose to focus their attention in defining group diversity. Garcia-Prieto, Erwan, and Schneider (2003) proposed a model of team diversity that explicitly acknowledges the possibility of shifting respects for diversity within a given group. They argued that momentary social identity salience is influenced by a number of variables, including motivational states (such as a desire for distinctiveness or assimilation; see Brewer, 1991), the situational relevance (normative fit) of an identity, the visibility and contextual distinctiveness of a given identity (see Nelson & Miller, 1995), others’ reactions and expectations, etc. Once salient, these categories can then determine which goals and norms are salient as well as guide perceptions of other team members (Early & Mosakowski, 2000; Randel, 2002).

The same basic idea was taken up by Zellmer-Bruhn et al. (2008) in a study that examined changes in the subjective diversity of groups that unfold over time. They focused on momentary perceptions of (dis)similarity with other team members as an index of contextually defined subjective diversity. As in other diversity research, they distinguished

between “surface-level” diversity, which they defined in terms of social category similarity, and “deeper” diversity, defined in their study in terms of the perceived similarity of workstyles across members. When a group is newly formed, Zellmer-Bruhn et al. assume that the most obvious social categories (sex, ethnicity, nationality) will shape perceptions of social category similarity within a group, and these perceptions will in turn lead to assumptions about the degree of similarity on less immediately obvious characteristics, such as workstyle. As these other respects for defining diversity come into focus (in the course of interpersonal observation and information sharing during group interaction), subjective diversity should change. More generally, any variable that leads people to focus on different aspects of themselves or others should modify how and whether group diversity is momentarily experienced.

Managing Identity Complexities in Group Diversity

Given that the salience of different social identities can change within a group, it becomes important to consider questions about how multiple identities can interact and influence one another within the group context. Taking as a starting point a group that is in fact characterized by heterogeneity, how are these complexities perceived, both by group members themselves as well as outsiders? Here, we can turn to the same basic possibilities that govern the perception of multifaceted individuals.

Dominance

If a particular categorical dimension dominates perception of the group, then the crucial question is whether there is variability within the group on that particular dimension. If sex were the dominant category dimension and all group members were men, then it would not matter whether some men were Asian and some Caucasian; the group would be perceived as homogeneous, or low in diversity. On the other hand, if sex were the dominant category dimension and the group consisted of both women and men, then the group would be perceived as diverse. Dominance of this sort might conceivably emerge when the group’s activities are strongly associated with a particular social category, for example if the group’s task is a stereotypically masculine, agentic task. If women are present in the group, then it will be perceived as a diverse group. However, it may not necessarily be the case that if only men are present in the group, then no diversity will be perceived. Instead, in such a case, bases for categorization other than sex may suggest themselves to the perceiver (cf. Eagly & Kite, 1987).

A presumably more frequent basis for category dominance in a workgroup context would be a strong identification of the group members with the workgroup itself. If there is a sense of shared purpose, then the group’s functional identity (e.g., “the computer support team”) could dominate, leading again to low perceived diversity (we are/they are all “tech geeks,” and race, sex, nationality, etc., makes little additional difference).

Compartmentalization

Compartmentalization, as applied to a group, would imply perceiving meaningful subcategories within the group that would be salient to different degrees, depending on the context. If there is no strongly dominant category, then the respects that are used for determining a group’s diversity should be quite malleable. Depending on the actual compositional properties of the group, it could be perceived as diverse in some contexts (e.g., when sex is salient) but as homogeneous in others (e.g., when race is salient). At the group level, however, circumstances may work against the dynamic malleability of perceived diversity. In particular, the presence of multiple basis for diversity within the group can result in the potential development of “faultlines” within a group (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Faultlines emerge to the extent that multiple bases for categorization coincide, such that an intergroup situation exists on more than one dimension concurrently. For example, if it were the case that all of the women in a mixed-sex work group also differed from the men in terms of their age (e.g., the women are younger than the men) and their ethnicity (e.g., the women are not White and the men are), then a serious psychological faultline could emerge, and the tendency to see the group as being composed of two distinct subgroups would be harder to resist. Compartmentalization would likely not result in dynamically shifting perceptions in such a case, because any salient basis for categorizing group members would result in the same sorting of individuals into
subgroups. As previously noted, the research on crossed categorizations indicates that outgroup memberships tend to be additive; thus, simultaneous recognition of multiple bases for outgroup status should enhance the tendency toward evaluative differentiation between the two factions (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007). Available research in the context of organizational faultlines suggests a possibly more complex set of evaluative consequences (Thatcher, Jehn, & Zanutto, 2003). In particular, Thatcher et al. found a curvilinear pattern such that the presence of “medium” faultlines resulted in better group morale and productivity than either strong faultlines or a lack of faultlines in heterogeneous groups (i.e., groups that are high in diversity, but for which the various bases for categorization do not align in a manner that creates faultlines).

If the dynamics of intergroup evaluation are not necessarily as straightforward as relevant theory would suggest, the possible consequences for stereotyping processes remain even more uncertain. As previously discussed, currently available research indicates that stereotyping of multiply categorizable targets is often based on just one of the possible categorical identities. If a faultline exists, which of the intergroup-defining variables will be the focus of stereotyping? Will one of the categorical dimensions dominate the others in a stable manner, or will this shift across different contexts? In a workgroup context, it may be that a particular dimension will stand out as being most relevant and may thus tend to dominate the other dimensions in defining the relevant stereotypes. Perceived relevance may often be a function of stereotypic expectations about the group’s task (e.g., seeing it as an agentic, “male” task results in an emphasis on gender, while seeing it as a task requiring extensive experience results in an emphasis on age). Many important questions arise about the malleability of the stereotypic impressions each subgroup may have of the other, and how potential contextual shifts in these intergroup images might influence salient diversity beliefs (i.e., whether diversity is seen as valuable or problematic).

Integration

Subjective diversity and diversity-related beliefs within a group should also vary as a function of group members’ social identity complexity. When individuals see their own identities in a more complex and integrated way, they are likely to perceive—and be more accepting of—diversity within the group. Individuals with more complex social identities may be less likely to perceive a rigid subgroup structure within a group, because they are better able to appreciate shared identity facets even when they differ from others in some seemingly fundamental way (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Even if they do end up construing the situation as one involving distinct subgroups, the consequences may not be as problematic among people with more complex social identities. One of the critical factors determining whether diversity within a group is problematic or advantageous is the extent to which members of different subgroups feel respected and recognized within the overarching group (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). As Brewer and Pierce (2005) have shown, individuals with highly complex social identities are more accepting of ostensible outgroup members and thus less prone to fall into a negative intergroup dynamic with them.

Research on identity integration in the case of bicultural identities is also relevant. Particularly in cases that change longstanding precedents (e.g., cases where women and minorities enter into arenas that were historically the exclusive purview of white males), the situation can be perceived as a “culture clash” and the individuals involved need to negotiate a new, common culture in which all parties can participate. Until identity integration occurs, the distinct identities may be perceived as oppositional, and individuals may feel that their social identities are not valued. Swann, Polzer, Seyle, and Ko (2004) argued that people in groups seek verification of both their personal and their social identities. They report evidence indicating that verification of personal self-views results in better interpersonal dynamics within a group, while seeing it as a task requiring extensive experience results in an emphasis on age). Many important questions arise about the malleability of the stereotypic impressions each subgroup may have of the other, and how potential contextual shifts in these intergroup images might influence salient diversity beliefs (i.e., whether diversity is seen as valuable or problematic).
Along these lines, Cheng et al. (2008) recently argued that individuals with high levels of identity integration are best positioned to realize the hypothesized benefits of diverse group settings. In terms of social-emotional processes, such individuals should have the greatest comfort with diversity and should be much less inclined to see different social identities as necessarily reflecting conflict or incompatibility. In terms of task performance, individuals with highly integrated social identities have been shown to have better access to disparate knowledge and skill sets, making them better able to contribute to problem solving and other aspects of group productivity (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2007).

Obviously the effectiveness of teams and groups is not strictly a function of the characteristics of individual members. Even if a group is composed of many individuals with highly integrated social identities, psychological and social-structural features of the task environment are still relevant in either affording the opportunity for successfully exploiting the potential value of these individual assets or, alternatively, blocking their expression (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Sanchez-Burks & Lee, 2007). This suggests that in order to manage team diversity effectively, the working environment should be engineered in ways that promote the recognition and valuing of complex social identities, allowing for group members to experience social self-verification within the group. Such experiences may actually have the beneficial consequence of promoting the development of more integrated, complex social identities within group members, for example through the developmental mechanisms described by Amiot et al. (2007). One thing does appear to be clear—experiencing diverse environments can carry important benefits for the individual. Antonio et al. (2004) provided evidence that greater racial diversity within students’ social networks is associated with higher levels of integrative complexity in their reasoning, and Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, and Chiu (2008) showed that the extent which individuals have been exposed to multiple cultures predicts many important cognitive skills associated with creative thinking and problem solving. To the extent that individuals feel valued by (and committed to) a group, they are best positioned to offer these skills in the service of pursuing the group’s goals.

CONCLUSION

Social psychological research is increasingly coming to grips with the complexity of social identity within the individual, both from the perspective of perceivers trying to form impressions and make judgments about multiply categorizable targets, as well as from the perspective of actors using their different self-aspects as a framework for guiding their interactions with the social world. I have reviewed numerous, disparate contributions to the effort to better understand these issues, and I explored some of their possible implications for understanding the nature and consequences of diversity within the group. One general conclusion suggested by the available evidence is that there can be reciprocal beneficial relationships between social identity complexity within the individual and diversity within the group. Individuals with a more complex sense of self may be better able to offer diverse cognitive skills and knowledge in a group task environment, and it is this cognitive diversity that lies at the heart of the benefits of team diversity for group performance (Page, 2007). They may also be able to navigate the group environment with greater facility and thus contribute to positive interpersonal dynamics within the group. Conversely, experiencing diverse group environments provides individuals with opportunities to develop greater creativity and more integratively complex self-understandings. In short, diversity in the person and diversity in the group can potentially complement one another, resulting in better functioning at both levels.

However, much remains to be explored when it comes to these issues. The perceived and experienced sense of identity remains one of the key explanatory variables for social psychological theory (e.g., Markus, 2005; Tajfel, 1974), and there are still many issues to be empirically investigated concerning the ways whereby different self-aspects influence how identifications arise, particularly in diverse group settings that afford many distinct opportunities for categorizing the self and others.

REFERENCES


