

Us or them: The role of social identity complexity in intergroup bias reduction

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BACKGROUND

- The process of **social categorization** whereby people categorize others in terms of their group memberships (or social identity) is at the root of intergroup prejudice.
- People favor their ingroup members by comparing them with outgroup members, and also believe that they have more positive attributes and are more attractive than members of outgroups. Additionally, although not as common as aforementioned ingroup favoritism, outgroup derogation often emerges as a result of social categorization, and together they constitute an intergroup bias.
- Acknowledging such an important role of social identity in the formation of intergroup bias, previous research (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1989) have successfully tested the effectiveness of recategorization of people's social identities on reduction of intergroup biases.
- Because of the fact that our society is rather complex and is divided into multiple social dimensions (e.g., gender, religion, political ideology), starting with Roccas and Brewer (2002)'s introduction of the concept of social identity complexity, recent investigations (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Miller et al., 2009) have begun to look at how multiple group memberships (or social identities) jointly influence an individual's intergroup attitudes.
- The concept of **social identity complexity** postulates that when an individual acknowledges and accepts the distinctive memberships of his or her multiple ingroups, and recognizes that those groups overlap with each other only partially, his or her social identity is said to be *complex*. In this case, some of his or her fellow ingroup members are likely to be members of outgroups as well, which leads to tolerance toward outgroup members for both cognitive and motivational reasons (Roccas, & Brewer, 2002; Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Miller et al., 2009).

PURPOSE

- Previous studies on social identity complexity has regarded social identity complexity as an individual difference variable, and primarily looked at its relationships to other individual difference variables, such as tolerance toward outgroups, and universalism values (Roccas, & Brewer, 2002).
- Miller, Brewer, and Arbuckle (2009) shed light on possibility of situational influence of social identity complexity and its role on intergroup bias reduction.
- The main purpose of this study was to test whether experimentally inducing people with more complex social identity could influence both of their explicit and implicit attitudes toward outgroup members in a causal way.
- Three potential mediators of the causal relationship between social identity complexity and reduction of intergroup bias were also examined: (1) motivation, (2) cognitive ability, and (3) need for cognitive balance.

METHOD AND HYPOTHESES

Participants

The experiment was conducted with a sample of 202 people (136 female, 66 male) who signed up via the website of the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 34 ($M = 20.02$, $SD = 2.34$). Compensation for the participation, voluntarily chosen by participants, was either 5 dollars in cash or extra course credits for those who are enrolled in an introductory psychology course.

Procedures

The study design was 2 X 2 (multiple vs. single identity X cognitive vs. motivation), and each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions .

- First, participants in the single identity condition were instructed to write about their single most important identity and how it relates to their life. On the other hand, participants in the multiple identity condition, for the purpose of complex social identity inducement, were instructed to write at least five group memberships they hold and were told that those different groups they belong to overlap with each only partially.
- Participants then read a short vignette about a hypothetical person, which describes in either explicit or implicit way a person's different group. Their attitudes toward a hypothetical person were then assessed.
- Next, participants completed Symbolic Racism (SR) scale and Implicit Association Test (IAT).
- Either participants' motivation to categorize others into different groups or their cognitive ability to recognize and recall other person's different group memberships was then assessed. All participant's mood states were measured as well.
- Finally, participants completed manipulation check questionnaire.

Hypotheses

- Participants in multiple identity condition were expected to display more favorable attitudes toward a hypothetical person, less bias toward outgroup in both explicit and implicit forms, as measured by SR scale and IAT respectively, than those in single identity condition.
- Participants in multiple identity condition were expected to be less motivated to categorize other person into different social groups than those in single identity condition.
- Participants in multiple identity condition were expected to show diminished cognitive ability to recognize and recall other person's different group memberships than those in single identity condition.
- Participants in multiple identity condition were expected to feel temporary stress (indexed by anxiousness and nervousness) more than those in single identity condition.

RESULTS

- Results from the present study revealed participants in multiple identity condition showed less biases than those in single identity condition across all measures (see Figure 1 and 2), although only the result from attitudes toward hypothetical person was significant ($t(198) = 1.98$, $p = 0.04$).
- Result from the mood state measure showed that, consistent with the hypothesis, participants in multiple identity condition felt more negative mood than those in single identity condition, and all results were significant at 0.05 level.

CONCLUSIONS

- The present study has shown that inducing people with complex social identity, by cognitive manipulation (i.e., experimental instruction to think that different groups people belong do not overlap much) and situation cue (i.e., writing about their own multiple memberships and reading about a person who has multiple memberships) indeed influenced their attitudes toward outgroup members.
- As predicted by Miller et al. (2009), however, the present study has failed to provide significant causal relationship between experimentally induced social identity complexity and people's intergroup attitudes, because the social identity complexity develops over time.
- Nonetheless, the present study is valuable because although non-significant, findings were in line with hypothesized direction, thus shedding lights on possibility of short-term manipulation of social identity complexity and its role in reduction of intergroup biases.
- With modified and more rigorously tested experimental manipulation might prove to be effective in modifying one's social identity complexity, which may lead to reduced level of intergroup biases.

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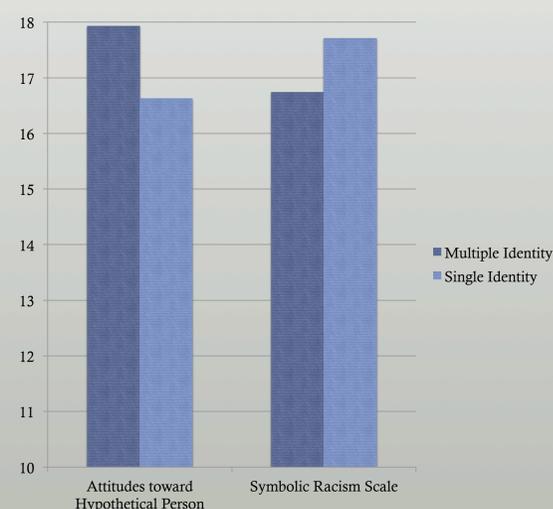


Figure 1. Explicit Measures.

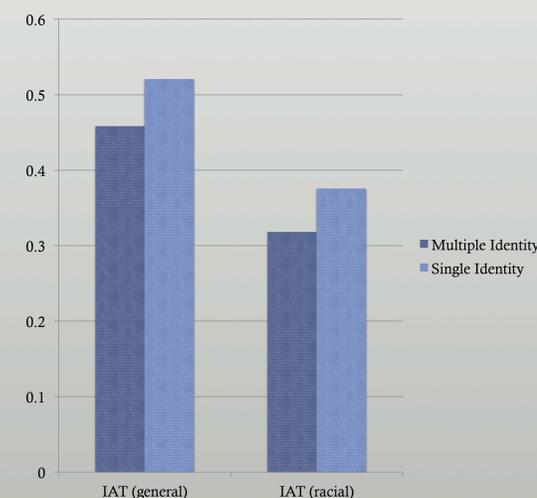


Figure 2. Implicit Measures.