Overlapping and Intersecting Identities[1]

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualizing intersections of diversity has proven to be one of the primary challenges faced by researchers and policy makers. Dr. Rummens proposes a "mutli-dimensional" identity model whereby one's identity overlaps and intersections are recognized and acknowledged. Together with drawing on identification processes, such a model facilitates the discernment and understanding of "multiple jeopardies"; the distinction of identity markers that predominate in groups found to have less than equitable access to power and resources in a given society.

Recognition of socially-salient similarities and differences forms the cornerstone of social interaction (Rummens 1993). All social exchange is founded upon an initial determination of whether the Self is similar to Other or whether it is different from Other in some important way. In this assessment a wide variety of *identity criteria* may be called upon in order to establish whether I am I and You are You, or whether I plus You make We as furthermore distinct from They (Rummens 2003b). These criteria may be rooted in biological realities (e.g. age, sex), social statuses (e.g. generation; class; ethnicity), normative roles (e.g. gender; occupation), lived practices (e.g. culture, language) and/or espoused ideologies (e.g. religion; political philosophy). Their purpose is to sort individuals into culturally and socially relevant categories. The resulting personal and social identifications help to situate and position individuals and groups relative to each other within the larger societal framework. They are also central to each individual's self-concept and overall sense of well being.

To date, most research into these identity processes has tended to focus primarily on *single* types of identities that are then considered rather independently of each other (Rummens 2000); greater specificity is subsequently sought by examining the particular articulations of class, gender, 'racial,' linguistic, ethnic or religious identity in turn within different social institutions (see Rummens 2003a). While this line of foundational research has been and continues to be extremely useful, the underlying propensity to consider different identity markers in isolation from each other does have several inherent limitations. To begin, such an approach ignores the *plurality of identities* that individuals navigate and negotiate as they go about their daily lives. It is therefore not able to adequately capture the full complexity of individuals' experienced social realities. Nor is it able to determine and compare which identities become operative within a given cultural and/or societal *context* at any particular point in time, or examine the reasons therefore. Issues of *identity salience, centrality* and *choice* at both the micro- and macro-level can also not be readily explored. Yet it has become abundantly clear in the existing research that more than one type of identity can influence any given individual's life circumstances and/or inform their personal and social identifications. There is also increasing research evidence that individuals can in fact have *multiple identifications* even on a single identity criterion. These findings directly challenge existing practices of *a priori* identity ascription by social actors and analysts alike. In short, a narrow focus on a single identity ignores the unique ramifications of various identity constellations and concomitant identification patterns on individuals' life opportunities and lived experiences. Most importantly, it does not – because it cannot - consider the possibility of interactive effects between different types of identity. As a result relatively little is currently known about the impact of *identity intersections* per se on a wide variety of personal and social outcomes.

The challenge is primarily a conceptual one. Much of the work in this area has been stymied by the difficulty of visualizing identity in more than one dimension. This is critical since the very way we conceptualize a given social phenomenon directly informs the identification of relevant issues, the subsequent formulation of research questions, as well as the analysis of ensuing research data. It is also essential to the recognition of and responsiveness to existing social needs, the determination of priority policy and programme areas, as well as the effectiveness of initiatives subsequently pursued. The question therefore becomes this: how might we best address the plurality of identities and explore the possible interactions between them?

Conceptualizing Identity

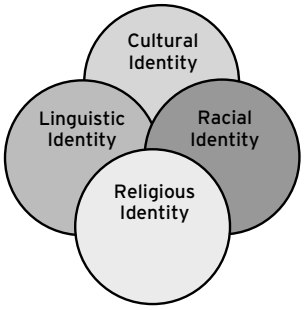
Identity may be defined as the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. The word comes from the French word *identité* and has its linguistic roots in the Latin noun *identitas, -tatis,* itself a derivation of the Latin adjective *idem* meaning "the same." This linguistic origin reflects the essentially comparative nature of the term. In practice it is used to refer to a degree of sameness or oneness with others with respect to a particular characteristic (Rummens 1993: 157-9).

It is helpful to distinguish between identity and *identification* per se; the former is a label whereas the latter term refers to the classifying act itself. Identification entails the determination and selection of shared and/or distinguishing characteristics. Which criteria are actually used in any given situation may be seen to be dependent on several factors. These include the purpose of the interaction as understood by each participant, the nature of the relationship between the individual social actors involved, as well as the particular historical, cultural, societal and situational context in which the particular social exchange takes place. Identity is thus best conceived of as being both relational and contextual in nature, and the act of identification itself best viewed as inherently processual *(Ibid).*

There are numerous *types of identity* each of which reflects a unique criterion that may be used to either differentiate between individuals or groups, or alternatively to establish or reinforce commonality among or within them. These criteria include - but are not limited to - considerations of sex, gender, age, generation, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, class, occupation, culture, ethnicity, 'race,' religion, nationality, language, ideology, and region or territory. The types of identities that these various identity criteria define are all based on those socially and/or culturally relevant similarities and distinctions that are operative in any given societal context. This means that both their nature and relative saliency is likely to vary from situation to situation, culture to culture, and society to society. They may also vary from interaction to interaction, and even from individual to individual.

It is important to distinguish between *types of identity* and *specific identities.* Each type of identity has a range of classificatory designations associated with it that serve to 'label' particular individuals, social categories and/or social groups. Thus a specific gender identity may be 'woman'; a specific sexual orientation may be 'bi-sexual'; a specific 'racial' identity may be 'Black;' and a specific linguistic identification may be 'francophone.' These specific identities serve to effectively distinguish between particular individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of a given identity marker.

Figure 1

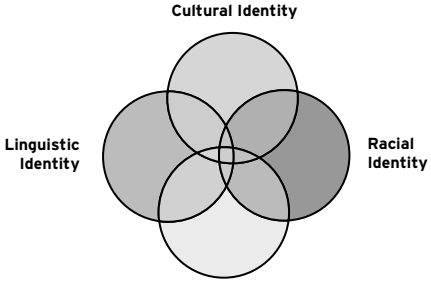


Identity Overlaps and Intersections

As concepts types of identities are clearly distinct. However, *in actual practice* various types of identities readily *overlap* both for groups and individuals (see **Figure One**).

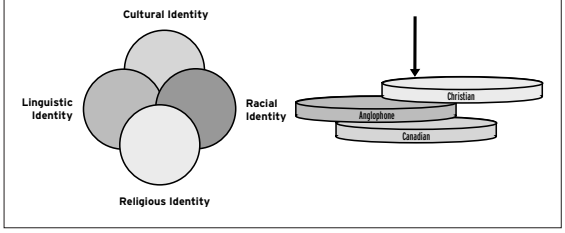
They can also intersect (see **Figure Two**).

Figure 2



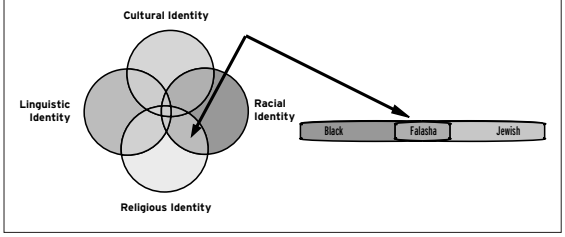
Whether individual types of identity overlap or intersect in any particular situation or point in time depends entirely on the nature of the relationship between them within a given societal context. When the interactional effect between two or more types of identities or specific identities is minimal or non-existent, these identities may be said to *overlap* (see **Figure Three**).

Figure 3 – Overlapping **Identities**



In contrast, when particular identities consistently inform or influence each other in important ways they effectively *intersect.* The identification patterns revealed by frequently intersecting identities point to constellations of uniquely salient identity constellations. They may also point to the existence or formation of new identities and/or identifications (see **Figure Four**).

Figure 4 – Intersecting **Identities**

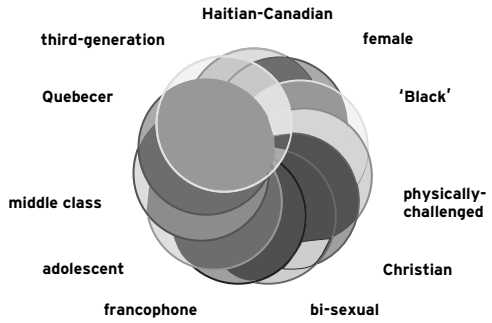


Identity Models

What does this all mean in terms of how we might best conceptualize an individual's *unique identity?* There are various ways of visualising the plurality of identities that are reflected or embedded within a single individual (see Rummens 2003b). Most existing models readily acknowledge that a variety of identities may be operative in different social interactions. However, the respective salience of these identities is not necessarily explored, nor is their centrality to the social actors themselves always considered. Moreover, the exact nature of the linkages between various types of identity and the particular individual is often left unspecified. Since the relationships among different types of identity are not always articulated, the very possibility of interacting effects is usually left unexamined. They consequently remain largely invisible.

In contrast, the explicitly *"multi-dimensional model"* presented below facilitates the simultaneous representation of three or more identity dimensions, and readily allows the consideration of *multiple* identity overlaps and intersections. The individual's unique identity may be visualized in three dimensions as a series of intersecting spheres; a fourth dimension would consist of change through time. When also viewed in two dimensions, the various overlaps and intersections become readily evident. The challenge to the researcher becomes the search for culturally-salient intersection patterns across individuals, both within and across social and societal contexts (see **Figure Five**).

Figure 5 – "Multi-Dimensional Approach"



The key challenges for identity researchers are to determine where, how and why various types of - or specific - identities overlap or intersect within a particular context. Which identities overlap? Which intersect? What 'new' identities - or configuration of identities - are reflected in the interstices? What patterns emerge both within a given society and across different social or cultural contexts? How can these be best explained?

Conceptualizing Diversity

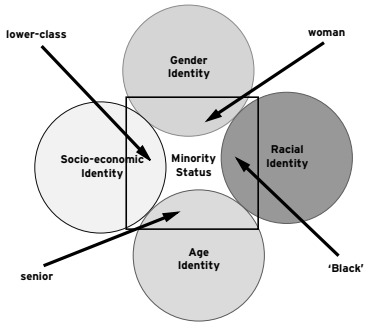
The term *diversity* can mean different things to different people. For some the word is simply used to acknowledge existing *variations* among individuals and across social groups in socially meaningful ways. For others the term is used specifically to refer to *differences that make a difference.*

Diversity constitutes an important subset of identity research, one that places an explicit focus on *differences* among individuals or social groups according to socially-salient identity criteria. Particular emphasis is then often placed either directly or indirectly on those social identifications that underwrite *unequal access* to social, political or economic power, privilege and/or prestige relative to the dominant majority group(s). The 'distinctions' made through such identifications actively serve to maintain or acknowledge these *inequities* in access to scarce social resources. The concept of diversity thus involves consideration of those identities and identifications which intersect with *minority status.* The 'diversity issues' thereby revealed are directly linked to human rights concerns and issues of social justice.

Diversity Intersections

Many types of identities readily intersect with both minority and majority statuses. Gender, age, class and 'race' are all widely used identity markers in many industrialized Western societies (see **Figure Six**). The corresponding

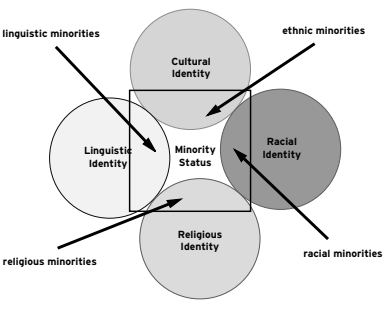
Figure 6 – Intersections of identit(ies) with Minority Status



specific minority identifications might include woman, senior citizen, lower class and 'Black,' while the respective majority identifications for each of these four types of identities are typically man, young adult, upper class and white.

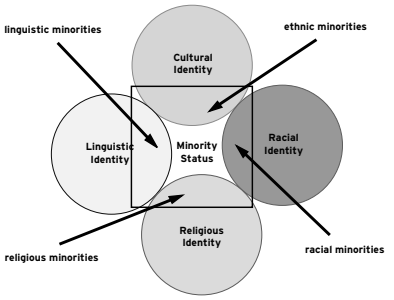
Additional types of identities that are especially salient within the Canadian context include cultural, linguistic, 'racial' and religious identities. Their intersections with minority status point to the various ethno-linguistic, ethno-'racial' and ethno-religious population categories and groups reflected in our diverse society (see **Figure Seven**).

Figure 7



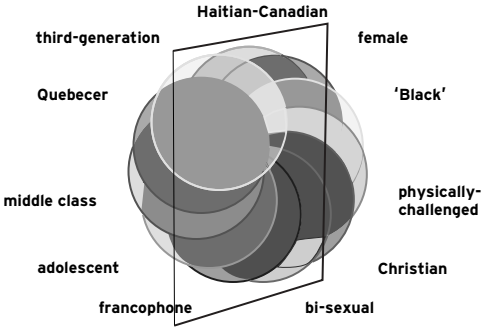
The picture becomes even more complex when the intersections among various types of identity are also considered (see **Figure Eight**).

Figure 8



Intersections of socially-salient identities with minority status are particularly important in revealing "*multiple jeopardies.*" Here multiple minority identifications intersect to affect an even less equitable social position for the individual or population category in question than might otherwise be expected using any single identification on its own (see **Figure Nine**).

Figure 9



The key challenge for researchers and policy makers interested in issues of diversity is to determine where, how and why various types of identities and/or specific identities intersect with minority status. Which in turn point to majority statuses? What kinds of patterns emerge? How can these be explained? What is the cumulative effect of the resulting multiple jeopardies both for individuals and social groups? What are the combined ramifications for individuals' social opportunities and life experiences? Do these identification patterns and concomitant outcomes vary across societal settings? Why or why not?

Identification Processes

Identity overlaps and intersections cannot be examined in a vacuum. Attention should also be given to the role played by various social actors in maintaining, or challenging, the existing status quo. Identities can be ascribed, achieved or simply assumed both by individuals and collectivities; however, they are also constructed, challenged, modified and discarded. In order to better understand these dynamics it is important to consider three distinct, yet intertwined and mutually reinforcing, identification processes.

Identity development/formation refers to the cognitive developmental processes that each individual undergoes throughout the maturation process as s/he explores his or her place in the world and develops a *unique sense of self* (Rummens 2000; 2004). The individual selects from among the various identifications available to her – and learns to navigate those denied - in developing a coherent *self-identity.* Since the latter concerns itself with the state of being a unique person distinct from all others as reflexively understood by that individual through time, this line of research has fallen primarily within the domain of psychology.

Identity construction refers to the active creation, formulation and expression of personal and/or social identities for the self, either by individuals or groups *(Ibid).* Identities do not simply exist *a priori* but are instead socially constructed. As such they are historically, culturally and socially situated. Identities are also both fluid and flexible, and change through time. Research in this area focuses on the culturally-determined nature of identity and has consequently been largely, though not exclusively, the domain of anthropology.

Identity negotiation refers to the inherently political nature of personal and social identification of self and/or other, between or among, and by or within groups, via the interactions of individuals *(Ibid).* A *personal identity* is the result of an identification of self by self with respect to other, or in other words a self-identification by the individual himself. A *social identity* is the outcome of an identification of self by other; it is an identification accorded or assigned an individual by another social actor (Rummens 1993). Personal and social identities may correspond, or they may not, with varying outcomes. Personal and social identifications not only entail social comparisons, they also constitute the active 'positioning' of individuals and groups within society. Such negotiation of identity is therefore best understood as relational, contextual and situationally-driven. Research in this area has been more the domain of sociology.

Careful conceptual distinction between *self-identity* on the one hand, and *personal* and *social identity* on the other helps to shed greater light on *identity development, construction* and *negotiation.* All three *kinds of identifications* are important to consider when examining the classification of individuals into socio-culturally-salient categories and groups. Since self-identification processes are very much influenced by available personal and social identifications, they are equally important to the study of individual self-definition. Joint consideration of self-, personal and social identifications thus helps to more effectively explore the various links between psychological, cultural and social realms. All three types of identification processes and all three kinds of identities are critically important to the exploration and understanding of identity and diversity intersections (Rummens 2003b).

Conclusion

Identity intersections entail a simultaneous integration of more than one identity and/or identification in such a

way that the outcome is uniquely different from the simple sum of its parts. In this way it differs from the mere overlapping of conjoined but otherwise separate identifications. Most existing research does not adequately explore identity overlaps and intersections or consider their relative impacts; nor is much attention given to the identification of factors that directly inform such alignments. Where it does do so, exclusive emphasis is often given to a select number of culturally-informed, socially-salient, contextually-situated types of identity. These efforts need to be expanded to consideration of other potentially salient identities, as well to more in-depth exploration of their relative, cumulative or combined impact on both personal and social outcomes.

Diversity intersections entail additional consideration of social inequities though an explicit focus on power differentials. They are important to address because where socio-culturally salient identifications intersect with minority or majority status, differential impacts on life circumstances, social opportunities and personal outcomes can often be found. Attention to these different social positions not only provides more precise information but also yields greater insight into social systems of marginalization and oppression.

In short, identity theory needs to better incorporate notions of *multiplicity* and *intersectionality* within existing paradigms. Identity research needs in turn to be more reflective of the realities that various *intersections of diversity* impose on individuals and social groups. A multi-dimensional, intersectional perspective is central to a more holistic vision of both personal and social identity structures as well as to a more dynamic understanding of diversity issues per se.

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Notes

[1] Some of the material presented in this article has been published as Rummens, Joanna Anneke. "Conceptualizing Identity and Diversity: Overlaps, Intersections and Processes." Special Issue: Intersections of Diversity. *Canadian Ethnic Studies,* Volume 35, No. 3, 2003b, (forthcoming).



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