Identity Adaptiveness:
Affect Across Multiple Identities

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Most empirical work that examines the effects of stereotypes on targets considers only one of a target's many social identities. This study examined how individuals implicitly affectively orient themselves toward their social identities in situations in which one or another of these identities is relatively adaptive. An adaptive identity is one associated with stereotypes that predict desirable performance in a given context. One hundred and twenty-one Asian American females generated ethnicity- and gender-related memories in contexts in which their gender identity was relatively adaptive, their ethnic identity was relatively adaptive, or neither identity was relatively adaptive. Self-reported affect expressed in these memories was analyzed. In a context in which their ethnic identity was adaptive, participants generated more positive ethnicity-related memories than gender-related memories. In contrast, in a context in which their gender identity was adaptive, participants generated more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories. When neither identity was adaptive participants expressed similar affect toward both. Similar results were found when blind raters coded memory affect. Findings suggest that stereotypes and different social contexts do not simply result in targets' "identification" or "disidentification" along a single dimension of identity, but rather prompt a reorientation of implicit affect across their multiple identities.

Writing a half century ago, Gordon Allport considered the consequences of being a target of stereotypes and prejudice. As an example Allport referenced the case of a Jew confronted by anti-Semitism: "Since he cannot escape his own group, he thus in a real sense hates himself—or at least the part of himself that is Jewish" (1954, p. 151).

In this quote from his landmark work *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport raises two critical issues for the study of stereotyping and prejudice. First, Allport draws attention to the effects of stereotypes on their targets, a perspective that has been somewhat neglected by social psychologists to date. The bulk of research on stereotyping and prejudice has typically focused on the holders of stereotypes rather than on the targets. For example, researchers have tended to focus on how stereotypes bias perceivers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994; Brewer 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). More recently social psychologists have begun to examine more closely the experience of being the target of stereotypes and prejudice (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

A second critical issue embedded in Allport's observation is the recognition that any given target of a stereotype has a complex and multifaceted self and multiple social identities. Individuals simultaneously belong to many different social identity groups and possess many diverse social identities. Only part of the self is associated with any given stereotype. At different times, and in different situations, different social identities may become salient. Recent research has revealed that the salience of different identities can have a dramatic impact on one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior (e.g., Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999).

The present research examined the consequences of being in social contexts in which stereotypes about a group to which an individual belongs may be salient. Specifically we examined how different contexts, associated with different identities and different stereotypes, influence individuals' implicit affect toward two of their social identities. Our central question was whether, in particular social contexts, individuals implicitly tend to be more positively affectively oriented toward a particular social identity that is more adaptive than toward other social identities. Greenwald & Banaji (1995) have demonstrated that attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994) have critical implicit modes of operation and that implicit measures are particularly important in research on stereotypes and prejudice.

Identity Adaptiveness

Each of an individual's many social identities is linked to a host of stereotypes or common generalizations about members of that particular identity group. Consider, for example, some of the social identities and stereotypes associated with being an Asian American female. Being polite, being hardworking, and being

skilled in quantitative domains are three stereotypes often associated with her Asian identity. Being nurturant, being emotional, and being skilled in verbal domains are three stereotypes often associated with her female identity.

Different identities and related stereotypes have considerable influence on behavior. Social contexts can make certain social identities salient to individuals and, often unbeknownst to them, have an impact on their behaviors. In a widely cited study, Steele and Aronson (1995) examined the academic performance of African American students and found that they underperformed on a verbal test when they were placed in a social context that made them vulnerable to negative stereotypes about African Americans' intellectual abilities. However, when African American students were placed in a context that did not make them vulnerable to these stereotypes, but that presented the same academic challenge, they did not underperform. Similar results highlighting the debilitating effects of stereotypes on academic performance have been found for members of other identity groups, including women (Steele, 1997) and Latinos (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998), in several intellectual domains. Thus, individuals who are the targets of stereotypes seem to be quite vulnerable to social contexts that make negative identities and stereotypes salient.

While much research has documented the debilitating impact that negative stereotypes can have on individuals (for a review see Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998), suprisingly little attention has been paid to the potential facilitating effects that some stereotypes may have. Two recent studies are notable exceptions. These studies suggest that some stereotypes can facilitate performance. Levy (1996) found that elderly people performed significantly better on a memory task when previously primed with positive stereotypes about the elderly, compared to others previously primed with negative stereotypes about the elderly. Shih et al. (1999) found that Asian American women performed better on a mathematics test when their ethnic identity was subtly made salient, but worse when their gender identity was subtly made salient, compared to a control group for whom neither identity was made salient. Cross-cultural investigation indicated that two popular U.S. stereotypes—that "Asians have superior quantitative abilities compared to other ethnic groups" and that "women have inferior quantitative abilities compared to men"—led to the observed shifts in performance.

These findings, that stereotype activation may sometimes facilitate performance, suggest that self-stereotyping in certain contexts might be adaptive. We use the term "identity adaptiveness" to refer to the extent to which a social identity, in a given context, is associated with stereotypes that predict enhanced performance in a domain. Of course an identity that is adaptive in one context is not necessarily adaptive in other contexts. For example, a woman called on to engage in a nurturing task may find her gender identity adaptive because women are commonly stereotyped to be caring and nurturing. In striking contrast this same woman may find that in another context, for example when taking a mathematics test, her

gender identity is maladaptive because it is associated with stereotypes that predict depressed performance. If her gender identity becomes salient in a mathematics test, her performance may be hampered by the common stereotype that women have inferior quantitative skills compared to men.

Not only will a given identity be more or less adaptive in different social contexts, but for any individual in a given context, different social identities will be more or less adaptive. At the same time that one identity may be adaptive to the context another identity may be irrelevant or in some cases even maladaptive (e.g., Shih et al., 1999). For example, an Asian American woman who attends a prestigious university has at least three different social identities that may be salient at different times: (1) her gender identity; (2) her ethnic identity; and (3) her identity as a student at an elite university. Each identity, linked to common stereotypes, is associated with distinct predictions for her behavior.

In sum, little research attention has been paid to instances in which a single social identity may be adaptive to a context. There has also been a lack of empirical work on the dynamics of multiple identities in the self-stereotyping literature. Typically researchers have taken a circumscribed view of social identity, studying a single dimension of the identity of individuals and examining the effects of this identity in different social contexts. The fact that social contexts can make identities more and less salient (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioko, 1978; McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979; Richeson & Ambady, 1999) is only beginning to come to the forefront of empirical research, a shortcoming the present study addresses.

Implicit Affect and Identity Adaptiveness

Several theories of the self suggest a positive relationship between the adaptiveness of a particular identity to a context and an individual's implicit affect toward that identity relative to their other social identities.

First, self-categorization theorists argue that people use cognitive strategies to maintain positive perceptions of their social identities. Research on self-categorization has found that people may select and highlight those categories to which they belong that most contribute to a positive identity in a given context (Turner, 1987). When membership in one category implies a negative social identity or is threatening, a person, in order to restore a positive sense of self, may selectively increase the salience of other social categories to which he or she belongs (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In addition to category salience, investigated by self-categorization researchers, one might hypothesize that affect toward one or another of one's multiple social identities may also be affected by context.

Second, a drive for favorable self-evaluation is thought to underlie many cognitive, emotional, and behavioral phenomena. This drive is considered essential for successful social adaptation and functioning (Baumeister, 1995). Self-affirmation theory is one influential body of work that has examined ways in which people seek

to support a favorable view of the self (Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993; Steele, 1988). According to self-affirmation theory people are motivated to find something positive to affirm about themselves. Several experiments have shown that when one dimension of the self is threatened, such as by a failure in a domain, people are motivated to compensate by succeeding in another area (Steele, 1988). Thus, research on self-affirmation, which indicates that people respond to a threat to the self by enhancing some facet of the self-concept, suggests that at an intra-individual level enhancement might take the form of favoring an adaptive identity over a less adaptive or maladaptive one.

Third, research on self-complexity (Linville, 1985, 1987) suggests a link between the adaptiveness of an identity and one's implicit affect toward the identity. Greater self-complexity—possessing a number of different social identities and roles—is thought to provide a buffer for individuals against stressful events. Individuals who are less complex, having fewer identities and roles, are more likely to be debilitated by a negative event. In contrast, individuals who have more complex self-representations may be protected from negative events because of the buffer offered by additional identities when one identity is adversely affected. Self-complexity theory suggests that when one identity is less adaptive, individuals may compensate, in part, by favoring other more adaptive identities.

Fourth, extending the work on self-enhancement motives to an intra-individual level also provides a theoretical foundation for the present study. Self-enhancement research indicates that individuals make downward social comparisons in an attempt to enhance self-esteem (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wills, 1981, 1983). If no direct information on others who are worse off is available, individuals sometimes even fabricate comparisons with others (Wood, 1989). A link between identity adaptiveness and implicit relative identity affect can be considered an intra-individual self-enhancement comparison: Individuals favor one part of their social self, the part that in a given context enhances the overall self.

In accord with these theories we hypothesized that when a particular identity is adaptive in a social context individuals will display more positive affect toward that identity than toward another unrelated, less adaptive, or even maladaptive social identity. In a different context in which another identity is more adaptive, we hypothesized that individuals will display more positive affect toward that identity.

The Present Study

The present study examines this relationship between the adaptiveness of a particular identity to a context and individuals' implicit affect toward that identity. We examined two identities of a target population, Asian American women: their gender identity and their ethnic identity. We examined the relative affect Asian American women expressed toward each of these two identities in three different contexts: a context in which their Asian ethnic identity was relatively adaptive (a

mathematics test), a context in which their female gender identity was relatively adaptive (a verbal test), and a control context in which neither their ethnic identity nor their gender identity was relevant (no manipulation).

Implicit identity affect was gauged using a free recall task. Participants generated memories associated with each of the two identities, which they then rated for the extent to which the memory was a positive or negative one for them. The memories were also rated by blind coders. We expected that Asian American women would display more positive affect toward their ethnic identity than toward their gender identity when their ethnic identity was relatively adaptive, but that this effect would be reversed in a social context in which their gender identity was relatively adaptive.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-two Asian American female undergraduate students at Harvard University were recruited and tested individually. Participants were paid for their participation.

Design and Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: ethnic identity adaptive, gender identity adaptive, or control.

In the *ethnic identity adaptive* condition participants were placed in a context in which their ethnic identity was more adaptive than their gender identity: participants completed a mathematics test. In this context the Asian ethnic identity is relatively adaptive compared to the female gender identity because Asians are stereotyped as having superior quantitative skills compared to other ethnic groups (Steen, 1987). In addition, in this context a female gender identity may be maladaptive, since women are commonly stereotyped as having inferior quantitative abilities compared to men.

After completing the mathematics test participants were asked to freely recall and write out, devoting a sentence to each memory, "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your gender identity" and "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your ethnic identity." The order in which gender identity and ethnic identity memories were solicited was counterbalanced across participants. Participants were then asked to review each memory generated and to indicate, using a 7-point Likert scale, how positive or how negative each memory was for them.

In the *gender identity adaptive* condition, participants were placed in a context in which their female gender identity was more adaptive than their Asian ethnic

identity. In this condition participants completed a verbal test. In this context the female gender identity is relatively adaptive because women are commonly stereotyped as having stronger verbal skills than men (Steele, 1997). In addition, in this context an Asian ethnic identity may be maladaptive since it makes salient to these women that they are members of a non-native English-speaking ethnic group. After participants completed the verbal test the same procedure described above was used. Participants were asked to freely recall and write out, devoting a sentence to each memory, "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your gender identity" and "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your ethnic identity." The order in which gender identity and ethnic identity memories were solicited was counterbalanced across participants. Participants were then asked to indicate how positive or how negative each memory was for them.

In the *control* condition participants were placed in a context in which neither their Asian ethnic identity nor their female gender identity was adaptive. In this condition participants came into the laboratory to complete a psychology study. They were asked to freely recall and write out, devoting a sentence to each memory, "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your gender identity" and "the first three memories that come to mind that you associate with your ethnic identity." The order in which gender identity and ethnic identity memories were solicited was counterbalanced across participants. Participants were then asked to indicate how positive or how negative each memory was for them.

Procedure

Participants were greeted by an Asian American female experimenter who was blind to the experimental condition to which each participant was assigned. Participants were told that the study would consist of their completing a set of questions and were then given a randomly selected questionnaire packet and were asked to follow the instructions on the packet. They were then led to a quiet room in which they worked.

The first page of the packet was a cover sheet with instructions to the participant to go through the questions in the order presented. Following the cover sheet was one of three manipulation questionnaires. In the ethnic identity adaptive condition, participants completed a 20-item mathematics test and were then asked to free-recall three gender-relevant and three ethnicity-relevant memories. In the gender identity adaptive condition, participants were asked to complete a 20-item verbal test and then to free-recall three gender-relevant memories and three ethnicity-relevant memories. In the control condition there was no manipulation task; participants were immediately asked to free-recall three gender-relevant memories and three ethnicity-relevant memories.

After participants recalled three memories for both their ethnic and gender identities they were asked to rate each of the six memories on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from -3 (for an extremely negative memory) to $+3$ (for an extremely positive memory). After participants completed their packet they were thanked, paid, and debriefed.

Coders' Ratings of Memories

In addition to participants' own ratings of memory affect, independent ratings of the affect of each memory generated by participants were obtained from blind coders. Ratings from two independent coders were obtained to clarify the specific effect of context: Would participants generate similar memories across experimental conditions but rate them differently as a function of the context, or would context cause them to generate different memories across the experimental conditions such that an independent coder, uninfluenced by context, would recognize the effect? Two coders independently reviewed each memory generated by study participants and assigned independent affect scores for each memory. Coders were instructed to "code for how positive or negative the event is for someone to have experienced." The two coders were blind to the experimental condition from which each memory was drawn and were blind to the participant's own affect rating for each memory.

Results

Relative Identity Affect

The main dependent variable in this study was relative identity affect, which was calculated as the difference between the mean self-report affect rating of each participant's three ethnicity-related memories and the mean self-report affect rating of each participant's three gender-related memories. For each respondent, for ease of calculations, each memory affect score was converted from the scale of -3 to $+3$ to the scale of 1 to 7. Two mean identity affect scores, a mean ethnicity affect score and a mean gender affect score, were then calculated for each participant.[1]

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[1]The focus of this study is the relative affect an individual has for each of two identities, in different social contexts. For this reason we calculate and analyze a composite index, relative identity affect. Significant shifts in relative identity affect may result from three occurrences: more positive affect being expressed toward a contextually adaptive identity, more negative affect being expressed toward a contextually maladaptive identity, or a combination of the two: more positive affect being expressed toward a contextually adaptive identity and more negative affect concurrently being expressed toward a contextually maladaptive identity. In future work researchers may wish to examine which of these occurrences drives shifts in relative identity affect under what conditions.

The mean identity affect score for each identity (ethnic and gender) ranged from 1 (the case in which the most negative affect possible was expressed for that identity) to 7 (the case in which the most positive affect possible was expressed for that identity). The difference between the two mean identity scores was calculated to derive a single relative identity affect score for each participant. Mean gender identity affect was subtracted from mean ethnic identity affect.

Accordingly the range of possible scores for the self-report relative identity affect variable was −6 to +6. A relative identity affect score of −6 would be the case in which the respondent expressed the most negative affect possible for her ethnic identity (a value of 7) but the most positive affect possible for her gender identity (a value of 1). In contrast a relative identity affect score of +6 would be the case in which the respondent expressed the most positive affect possible for her ethnic identity (a value of 7) and the most negative affect possible for her gender identity (a value of 1). A relative identity affect score of 0 would be the case in which identical scores were generated by a participant for both her ethnic identity and her gender identity.

Participants' Self-Ratings of Memories

As predicted participants in the three conditions differed significantly in their self-reported relative identity affect scores, an index of the relative affect generated toward each of two social identities (see Figure 1). Specifically, participants in the ethnic identity adaptive condition, the mathematics test, on average recalled more positive ethnicity-related memories than gender-related memories, $M = 0.837$. In
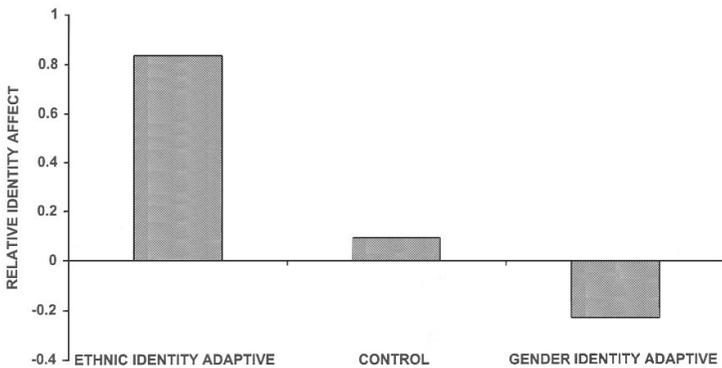

Fig. 1. Participant-rated relative identity affect by condition.

contrast, participants in the gender identity adaptive condition, the verbal test, on average recalled more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories, $M = -0.228$. The mean relative identity affect score in the control condition fell in the middle, $M = 0.095$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences among the means of these three conditions, $F(2, 113) = 3.69$, $p = 0.028$, $\eta = 0.248$. A contrast analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that participants would generate more positive ethnicity-related memories than gender-related memories in the ethnic identity adaptive condition, but more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories in the gender identity adaptive condition, compared to participants in the control condition. Lambda weights $+1$, -1, and 0 were used for the ethnic identity adaptive, gender identity adaptive, and the control condition, respectively. This pattern of results was significant, $t(113) = 2.651$, $p = 0.005$, $r = 0.247$.

Coders' Ratings of Memories

Analyses were also conducted on the independent coders' ratings of participant-generated memories. The level of reliability between the two independent coders was high. For the gender ratings the effective interrater reliability was $R = .824$. For the ethnicity ratings the effective interrater reliability was $R = .806$.

Relative identity affect as rated by the independent coders was calculated in a manner similar to the relative identity affect score for participants' self-ratings. The scores of the two coders were averaged, and a mean affect score was calculated for the three gender memories and for the three ethnicity memories of each participant. A relative identity affect score for the independent ratings of memory affect was then calculated by subtracting the mean affect score for the gender memories from the mean affect score for the ethnicity memories.

As predicted the relative identity affect scores for the independent memory affect ratings differed significantly across the three conditions (see Figure 2). Specifically, participants in the ethnic identity adaptive condition, the mathematics test, on average recalled more positive ethnicity-related memories than gender-related memories, $M = 0.347$. In contrast participants in the gender identity adaptive condition, the verbal test, on average recalled more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories, $M = -0.427$. The ratings in the control condition fell in the middle, $M = 0.172$.

An ANOVA revealed significant differences among the means of these three conditions, $F(2, 119) = 3.90$, $p = 0.023$, $\eta = 0.247$. A contrast analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that independent ratings of relative identity affect would be similar to self-ratings: more positive ethnicity-related memories than gender-related memories generated in the ethnic identity adaptive condition, but more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories generated in the gender identity adaptive condition, compared to the control condition.
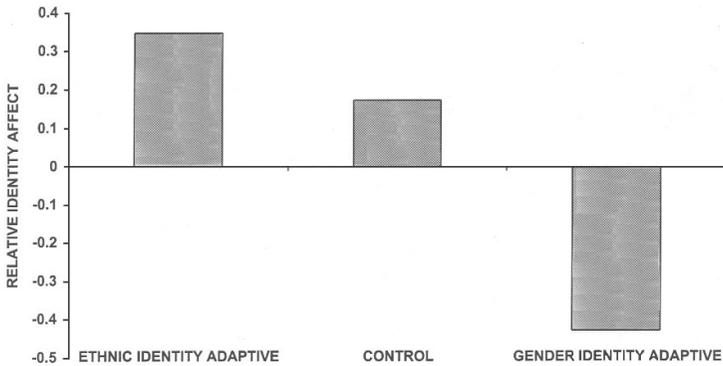
Fig. 2. Coder-rated relative identity affect by condition.

Lambda weights +1, −1, and 0 were used for the ethnic identity adaptive, gender identity adaptive, and control conditions, respectively. This pattern of results was significant, $t(119) = 2.73$, $p = 0.004$, $r = 0.247$.

Discussion

This study found that the relative adaptiveness of an identity to a particular social context influenced how individuals affectively oriented themselves toward that identity. As predicted participants felt more positive about an identity that was adaptive to a social context than about another identity that was irrelevant or maladaptive. Participants were subject to two possible influences when rating their memories for affect: the content of each memory they had recalled and also the experimental condition in which they coded each. In this study independent coders' ratings corroborated participants' self-ratings. In contrast to participants, independent coders based their assessment solely on the content of the memory. Together these findings show that shifts in relative identity affect are a function of different memories being recalled in different contexts, and are a potentially useful index of how an individual is affected by being in a context in which one or another of his or her multiple social identities is more or less adaptive.

Examples of the memories generated by participants illustrate the core finding that memories recalled for adaptive identities were more positive in affect. Asian American women in the context of a mathematics test, a context in which their ethnic identity was relatively adaptive, recalled such positive ethnicity-related memories as

"a family celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year." But in the context of a mathematics test Asian American women recalled more negative gender-related memories, such as "being ignored in physics class because I was a girl, while attention was given to male students."

Conversely, Asian American women asked to take a verbal test, a context in which their gender identity was relatively adaptive, recalled more positive gender-related memories than ethnicity-related memories, such as a participant's description of her excitement as she prepared to go on her first date. But in the context of a verbal test Asian American women recalled more negative ethnicity-related memories, such as "being called a China-girl by a boy who walked by me on the street."

These data have important theoretical and practical implications for our understanding of the consequences of identity adaptiveness and for our understanding of the experience of being the target of common cultural stereotypes.

First, and perhaps most important, the present data show that the effects of stereotypes on targets do not simply result in "identification" or "disidentification" along a single dimension of identity. Instead stereotype-relevant social contexts prompt an implicit reorientation of an individual's affect across his or her many identities. This suggests that the experience of being the target of common stereotypes is a good deal more complex than has been examined. To date researchers have typically opted to study one identity, and have primarily argued that individuals may deal with a maladaptive identity by distancing themselves from it (Fordham, 1988, and Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Examining multiple identities of a target opens up promising avenues for enriching our understanding of the experience of being the target of common cultural stereotypes. We find empirical evidence that what researchers may currently frame as distancing or alternatively disidentification (Steele, 1997) likely involves critical patterns of "different identification." That is, one strategy people may employ when trying to reconcile a maladaptive social identity with a social context is to affectively favor another more adaptive or context-irrelevant social identity. Future research in this vein may prove critical to developing models that elucidate the long-term effects of identity adaptiveness and maladaptiveness, and the experiences of people who find themselves chronically in situations in which one or another of their social identities is maladaptive, such as some ethnic minority students in certain educational settings (Fordham, 1988) and women in historically male institutions.

Second, the data suggest that the effects that stereotypes made salient by social contexts can have on their targets are far-reaching. To date most empirical research on social context, identity salience, and the self-application of stereotypes has focused on academic domains. Stereotypes embedded in social contexts have other observable intra-individual effects, in this case effects on implicit affect for different social identities.

Third, these data raise the related issue of "optimal adaptiveness," and the extent to which we are strategic in our affiliation and identification patterns. Brewer (1991) provided evidence that individuals reconcile two conflicting drives in their social identification patterns: a desire to affiliate and a desire to remain distinct. The present findings suggest that people may be decidedly more utilitarian in their identity dynamics, favoring social identities that may be "optimally adaptive" in given contexts. We find this pattern in the implicit affect displayed for two different social identities. In future research this trend should be examined across other identities, and in other contexts.

Fourth, these data challenge the utility of theorizing about a singular and unified "social self." Our results suggest that the social self is multifaceted and complex. People psychologically differentiate among their different social identities. Theorizing about social identification without considering the component identities salient in a given social context, or the implications of the adaptiveness of an identification for an individual in a given context, may be of limited utility. As Abrams (1992, p. 65) remarked, and Rubin & Hewstone (1998) underscored, "there is no logical reason why evaluations of all of one's social-group memberships should be equally positive, or that positive regard of several implies positive esteem for any particular one." Our data provide empirical evidence for this point.

Increasingly the experience of being the target of a stereotype has moved from the margin of social psychological inquiry to the center. The present study looked even further within the target individual than much current research, examining an intra-individual phenomenon: how individuals affectively orient themselves toward their different social identities, which, by virtue of associated stereotypes, prove to be more or less adaptive to different social contexts. We found compelling contextually determined patterns of implicit identity affect, suggesting more complex effects of stereotypes on their targets than previously appreciated.

Gordon Allport recognized that many different aspects or "action tendencies" such as one's "habits, or expectancies, or mental sets, or attitudes" concurrently reside within the self. Allport further observed that in people "conflicting action-tendencies are called into play according to the situation that exists" (Allport, 1962, p. 123). The current work supports Allport's insights about the multifaceted nature of the self, and the role of social context in triggering different aspects of the self. Evidence presented here further suggests that in the case of one's social identities, those that are adaptive to a social context are affectively favored. It seems fitting that Allport's prescient comments appeared in 1962 in an early article in the *Journal of Social Issues*.

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