

Deep Diving into Identity: Assessing the relationship between multiple marginalized identities and student perceptions on the university experience

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations in the U.S. spend nearly \$8 billion on diversity and inclusion efforts each year (Marketwatch, 2019). Despite this investment, many organizations report little, if any, gains in diversifying their membership or creating more inclusive cultures where all members (e.g., employees, students) thrive and stay for the long-term. Women and others representing historically marginalized groups continue to report fewer positive experiences and more discrimination and exclusion than their white male counterparts across a range of sectors. These experiences are more pronounced for those who possess *multiple* marginalized identities. For instance, women of color in STEM faculty positions are more likely than non-URM women to report microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) and feeling ostracized and devalued (Carter-Sowell & Zimmerman, 2015), likely reflecting the intersection of their racial and gender identities. Intersectionality reflects the crossing of multiple forms of often marginalized identities that yield distinct perspectives and oppressive consequences for individuals (Hooks, 1984).



Individuals' multiple identities also inform their needs, values, and perceptions, and shape life experiences. For example, Galinsky and colleagues (2013) found that overlapping racial and gender stereotypes affected preferences for interracial dating, leadership selection, and athletic participation. Creating more inclusive organizations, including colleges and universities, therefore requires that organizations recognize and adapt to individuals' multiple and varying identities so that all members can bring their "full selves" (Debebe & Reinert, 2014) to a given role. These identities can include personal identities (e.g., gender), relational identities (e.g., mother), or social identities (e.g., Muslim).

RESEARCH QUESTION

To date, however, intersectional studies primarily focus on the intersection of race and gender, ignoring other identities that may be equally marginalized. This omission may help explain why efforts to create more inclusive climates often fail. That is, by failing to account for the *multiple* ways that individuals identify and define themselves, prior work risks oversimplifying the perspectives and experiences of diverse individuals. The purpose of this study is to address this gap. Specifically, we sought to understand: *How does one's experience as a college student differ depending upon the number of marginalized identities one claims?*

METHOD

We collected pilot data from 40 undergraduate and graduate students from the U.S. and abroad. We developed and administered an on-line survey to capture students' campus experiences and how they identify themselves. Some questions measured turnover intention, sense of belonging, and satisfaction as a student. The questions were posed on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The participants were also asked to describe themselves in relation to several identity groups, including gender, race, religion, health-related identity, veteran status, and sexual orientation.

Measures

- Number of marginalized identities.** To assess the number of marginalized identities, we created dummy codes for the following demographic variables: gender, race/ethnicity, health status, veteran status, religion, and sexual orientation. Responses were coded a 0 if the respondent identified as (respectively), cisgender male, White, no physical or mental health issues, non-veteran, Christian or Catholic, and heterosexual. Responses were coded a 1 if the respondent identified in other ways reflecting identities that tend to be marginalized. For all respondents, we created a number variable (NUMMARG) that reflected the sum of their marginalized identities.
- Inclusive Climate.** We used the 6-item scale developed by Nishii (2013). $\alpha = .75$
- Satisfaction as a student.** We used the 3-item job satisfaction scale developed by Spector (1997). $\alpha = .84$
- Turnover intention.** We adapted the 3-item scale developed by Meyer, et al. (1993) $\alpha = .62$
- Institutional identification.** We used the 5-item organizational identification scale developed by Smidts, et al. (2001). $\alpha = .84$
- Well-being.** We used the 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh scale developed by Tennant, et al. (2007). $\alpha = .84$

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for our variables of interest are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	M	sd	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. # of Marginalized Identities	1.98	1.17	--						
2. Identification with Institution	3.85	.72	-.52***	.84					
3. Turnover Intentions	1.43	.65	.39*	-.47**	.62				
4. Culture of Inclusion	3.80	.56	-.29	.77***	-.27	.75			
5. Satisfaction as a Student	4.29	.64	-.46**	.83***	-.59***	.65***	.84		
6. Anxiety	3.62	.70	.23	-.38*	.35*	-.28	-.40*	.77	
7. Well-Being	3.14	.64	-.39*	.52***	-.56***	.37*	.53***	-.57***	.84

*p < .05, ** p < .01, ***p < .001

RESULTS (CONT.)

To test our research question, we examined the bivariate correlations between the number of marginalized identities and the outcome variables shown in Table 1. Results indicate that:

- On average, participants had a total of 1.98 marginalized identities that included *gender, race, religion, sexual identity, health status, and veteran status*.
- The number of marginalized identities was negatively related to institutional identification ($r = -.52, p < .001$), satisfaction as a student ($r = -.46, p < .01$), and well-being ($r = -.39, p < .05$)
- In contrast, the number of marginalized identities was positively related to turnover intentions ($r = .39, p < .05$)
- Students identifying as Caucasian reported greater institutional identification ($M=4.04, SD= .67$) and lower intentions to leave ($M=1.24, SD=.45$) than students who reported other, marginalized racial identities ($M =3.50, SD=.70; M=1.79, SD=.82$, respectively).
- Students identifying as Christian or Catholic reported greater satisfaction as a student ($M=4.52, SD=.50$), a more defined institutional identity ($M= 4.16, SD=.60$), and experienced a greater sense of well-being ($M=3.57, SD=.53$) than the students who reported other, marginalized religious identities ($M=4.07, SD=.69; M= 3.53, SD= .71; M=3.20, SD=.42$, respectively).
- Students identifying as heterosexual reported greater institutional identification ($M= 3.96, SD=.61$) than students who reported other, marginalized sexual identities ($M=3.36, SD=1.01$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

- Findings are consistent with the organizational literature showing that a single identity can shape many individual and organizational outcomes such as satisfaction, inclusion, and turnover (Ramarajan 2014).
- Results suggest that the more marginalized identities a student has, the more likely they are to leave the university and the less likely they are to be satisfied as a student.
- An inclusive campus climate is likely to influence student satisfaction and boost retention rates. Therefore, campuses should consider the results and expand their Diversity and Inclusion programs beyond just race and gender.
- The smaller sample size likely diminishes generalizability.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Our pilot study inherently has a number of limitations. First, the sample size ($n=40$) restricts our ability to conduct more sophisticated analyses and to generalize our findings. Second, gathering data from one survey and not conducting a follow-up due to the Covid-19 shutdown prevented us from attaining information regarding causality. Final, the self-report survey left room for self report bias and social desirability in responses.
- In future research, the implications of the relationship between multiple marginalized identities and self efficacy or performance in the classroom and/or workplace can be studied. For future recommendations, we could look at the possibility of widening access to the survey to all students attending different universities to obtain more participants and acquire more sufficient results.