

Navigating Identity: An Examination of Identity Formation Among Marginalized Communities

Jaisal Sahgal

The Doon School

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i08.026 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i08.026>

Received: 15 August 2024 / Accepted: 25 August 2024 / Published: 29 August 2024

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the process of identity formation within marginalized communities, analyzing the interplay of social, cultural, and psychological factors. By examining how identity intersects with socioeconomic status, historical contexts, and the impacts of discrimination, the paper reveals the complex mechanisms behind individual and communal identity development. Drawing from an empirical review of relevant psychological literature, the paper sheds light on the multiple pathways through which identity is shaped in marginalized contexts. It delves into the influence of societal structures and historical contexts on the presentation of the self of marginalized individuals, highlighting they navigate through the external factors that push them to the sidelines employing hegemonic instruments. Through an analysis rooted in psychological theory and empirical evidence, this research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of identity formation, enhancing the dissection of how identity is performed within and through marginalized communities.

Keywords: Navigation, marginalized communities, social, cultural, economic and psychological factors

Introduction

Throughout an individual's lifetime, their identities are shaped by their interactions with the world around them. These identities are influenced by social events, conflicts, and other factors involving interactions with other people (Frosh, 1991). Moreover, individual identity is also impacted by historical, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on how identity develops within evolving cultural norms, values, and attitudes in marginalized groups (Galliher, McLean, & Syed, 2017).

The concept of identity formation, as described by Erikson (1977), involves integrating past knowledge, current experiences, and future goals to establish a sense of self. Similarly, developing individual and group identities is a complex process influenced by psychological, biological, social, cultural, and environmental factors, all of which shape individuals' knowledge, experiences, and aspirations (Mann, 2006). It's important to note that, according to Goffman (1959), the formation of individual identity is influenced by its connection to a larger collective. This connection suggests that identity functions as a specific type of social representation that influences an individual's interaction with the social world, highlighting the significance of marginalized groups in this context.

Goffman (1959) builds upon this context by introducing expectations and beliefs into the conversation. He says that people “assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting” (Goffman, 1959, p.1). This inherent assumption often leads to the understanding that individuals who do not possess characteristics pertaining to a specific group are considered others when present in that social setting. This is how marginalized or minority groups come into being. In order to understand the positioning of individuals residing in these groups, it is imperative to consider the intersections that craft their identities (Cerezo et al., 2019). Moreover, these intersections often become internalized due to hegemonic power implications (Foucault, 1995), which leads to a specific form of the aforementioned social representation of their identities. Understanding oppression is crucial for understanding how marginalized people build their identities. Identity development among marginalized groups relies on their ability to build an accurate self-identity (Salazar & Abrams, 2005).

Understanding these intersections that contribute to the identity formation of individuals in a marginalized group requires considering the interplay of social, cultural, and psychological factors. A well-integrated and functioning identity consists of multiple self-representations that change based on psychological and social factors (Mann, 2006). These factors may include but are not limited to race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, economic status, and more. These factors, also become the basis for discrimination in line with Goffman's (1959) understanding of how people perceive certain individuals with pre-existing assumptions. In this case, cultural factors perpetuate othering and the formation of marginalized groups.

This paper will deeply examine the role of the aforementioned factors in structuring individual and collective identity and how they significantly influence the social representation of the self in everyday life. It will also briefly explore identity theories that help structure the construction of the self and its perceptions in the social world (Mann, 2006). Finally, it will offer a roadmap of how marginalized identities are navigated in the modern world dominated by the intersection of socio-cultural elements and contexts.

Background:

It is imperative to discern the background of how these identities come into being before delving into the intersections that impact their positioning in marginalized communities. According to social identity theory, the self is reflexive, able to identify and name itself in reference to other social categories (Stets & Burke, 2000). For instance, individuals identify themselves and others in specific social structures by categorizing their responsibilities. According to McCall and Simmons (1978), this categorization creates expectations about both others and one's own behavior. Similarly, according to identity theory, identity is defined by categorizing oneself as an occupant of a position and incorporating the meanings and expectations connected with that role's performance. An example of this categorization and positioning can be witnessed through socio-economic context.

Socioeconomic status is a social classification that indicates an individual's relative position in the social hierarchy. It encompasses tangible material resources, such as income, education level, occupational rank, and perceived social standing (Kraus et al., 2012). Individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds encounter different opportunities and experiences, resulting in varied outcomes. Research indicates poverty is associated with limited opportunity structures and life chances. Consequently, these limitations may significantly impact identity formation. Additionally, constrained opportunities can contribute to a decreased quality of life and a diminished sense of happiness (Wang et al., 2020).

According to social identity theory, historical or cultural context significantly influences the formation of individual identities and the construction of marginalized groups. Erikson (1977) asserts that the concept of identity is inherently tied to historical context. Understanding the development of individual identity requires an evaluation of the prevailing historical values. For example, children inherit cultural norms and languages from their families, fostering a sense of belonging and generational continuity. This connection to a historical community shapes individual identity pertaining to ethnic ethos. Pre-existing assumptions about a particular ethnic group also impact individuals within that group. For marginalized ethnic groups, historical contexts become sites of resistance against pressures to assimilate into the dominant culture (Kay, 2005).

Taking these factors and more into account is essential to dissect the impact of discrimination on members of marginalized communities because “identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority” (Kay, 2005, p.1). Moreover, these impositions, or pre-existing assumptions, set certain constraints on the presentation of self in everyday life, so much so that

individuals to resist or avoid discrimination might adhere to the more significant expectation of the collective group they are a part of (Mann, 2006). Studying these intersections also becomes important to highlight systematic purges inflicted on identity formation often ignored in the mainstream literature on identity formation because it often perpetuates “unquestioned acceptance of knowledge produced by those who are systemically privileged” (Moffitt, Juang, & Syed, 2020, p.2-3).

Discussion:

Before delving into social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors that shape identity in marginalized groups, it is first imperative to establish how the identification process within these communities works. Helms and Cook (1999) outlined the shared mechanisms and assumptions pertaining to identity formation in marginalized groups. They laid out four elements, including majority groups reap benefits from marginalization while marginalizing minority groups; marginalized groups internalize this marginalization, resulting in negative self-perception; shifts in these beliefs by the marginalized individual stem from an event that induces cognitive dissonance; thus, introducing new information that conflicts with the existing knowledge held by a marginalized individual is essential to challenging previously held beliefs. These shared mechanisms come into being through the intersection of multiple external factors (Salazar & Abrams, 2005).

As mentioned, cultural context is key to establishing these shared mechanisms. For instance, according to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), underplaying academic performance, among African-American students may stem from a desire to maintain racial identity and cultural cohesion. High-achieving African American youngsters acquire a ‘raceless’ persona, which can lead to interpersonal conflict and ambivalence. Adopting ‘raceless’ actions and attitudes has severe psychological effects on African-American pupils (Howard, 2000). That impact may include but is not limited to, hostility, a sense of disassociation, conflict, and a lack of belonging with the larger collective pertaining to cultural and ethnic cognition. Another example, in line with cultural identity, was also seen in a study done on the ethnic identities of South Africans before and after the transitional election in 1994. Research has indicated that Black African identification was specifically associated with attitudes toward Afrikaans Whites rather than whites in general or English Whites (Duckitt & Mphuthing, 1998).

Social contexts, like cultural factors, also play a major role in individuals' identity development within marginalized communities. Social factors such as political affiliations, religious ties, gender orientations, and more serve as new sources of meaning, as they did not determine identity in pre-modern periods (Castells, 2010). Individuals' viewpoints and behaviors are influenced by their many identities. However, the importance and visibility of a specific identity

can fluctuate based on societal conditions and personal circumstances (Mofidi & Aghapouri, 2023). For instance, when it comes to collective identities related to social factors, intergroup approaches suggest that conflict between privileged and marginalized groups arises from the limited availability of resources such as power, wealth, and prestige. Therefore, groups create belief systems to rationalize their interests, perceive their own group and its members positively, and strengthen unity and collaboration within the group, while simultaneously harboring aversion, bias, and even animosity toward members of other groups, and engaging in political and partisan actions that benefit their group's interests (Blankenship et al., 2017).

Other social factors such as gender and sexuality also play a major role in how the performance of self is impacted in marginalized groups. In Herek's (1995) work, heterosexual identities are associated with a belief system known as heterosexism, which serves to diminish and marginalize non-heterosexual behaviors, identities, and groups. When examining violence against gay individuals, Herek argues that heterosexist behaviors enable individuals to uphold the values that are integral to their sense of self, specifically norms rooted in gender and sexuality. Aligning with the principles of social identity theory, Herek (1995) suggests that acts of violence against gay individuals may enable heterosexist individuals to feel more positive about their own heterosexual orientation. Moreover, assaults against gay individuals provide a means for young men to validate their own heterosexuality concerning their ego (Howard, 2000).

Economic factors too, often intersecting with social aspects, influence identity performance in marginalized groups. Class structure and diverse economic backgrounds play a key role in how an individual performs and is identified. The environment in which individuals are raised, and live can have a profound and lasting impact on their personal and social identities. As a result, this shapes their perceptions and emotions toward their social environment and influences key aspects of their social behavior. In contrast to individuals from middle-class backgrounds, those from lower or working-class backgrounds are less inclined to define themselves solely based on their economic status. They are more likely to have interconnected self-concepts and tend to attribute social events to specific circumstances due to their alleged lower sense of personal control. (Manstead, 2018).

The impact of economic status on individual identity in marginalized communities has been extensively researched. Research conducted by Aries and Seider (2007) revealed that affluent college students placed greater emphasis on social class as a component of their identity compared to their lower-income counterparts. The study found that lower-income participants tended to minimize the significance of social class and positively framed their socioeconomic status, associating it with positive values. Similarly, a survey by Ostrove (2003) of female college graduates indicated that those from working-class backgrounds experienced higher levels of alienation during their college years and were more likely to perceive college as a pathway to

upward mobility in comparison to their upper-class peers. Additionally, a separate study (Hasso & Lopez, 1998) highlighted the challenges faced by students from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds at prestigious academic institutions as they strive to navigate their marginalized status. These examples showcase that there persists an interdependent relationship between economic status and how identity is represented and presented in marginalised arenas. Economic factors also impact access and opportunity, which pushes individuals from marginalized communities to perform in a certain way in order to match their peers from different economic backgrounds.

It should be noted that these factors do not work independently when shaping the development of identity in individuals from marginalized communities. They interact on various levels. Intersectionality is based on the idea that social constructs have tangible effects, even at the individual level. This implies that instead of viewing a social identity category, such as race, as impartial or unbiased, an intersectional perspective must clearly acknowledge the influence that dictates how, when, and in what manner this construct is applied and to whom (Moffitt, Juang & Syed, 2020). Similarly, marginalized groups often encounter intricate decisions when it comes to defining and embodying their own identities. They may opt, or feel compelled, to conform to the standards and principles of the dominant group, thus forsaking alternative identities, or at least evaluating them against the criteria of the dominant group, and diluting the collective bonds that initially characterized them as a group. Conversely, they may accentuate a separate identity in contrast to dominant norms and visibly demonstrate this, deriving individual pride and collective strength from such resistance (Kay, 2005).

Conclusion

The process of marginalization is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that has been significantly influenced by various socio-economic and cultural changes over time (Kay, 2005). These changes are primarily attributed to the rise of capitalism, imperialism, modernization, industrialization, and globalization, all of which have contributed to the redefinition and reformulation of marginalization. Moreover, the process of marginalization is not static; it is continuously evolving at both collective and individual levels of identity development. It is also crucial to highlight that marginalized groups and their identities are socially constructed, and as such, they are subject to ongoing modifications. In studying marginalized groups, close attention must be paid to the factors contributing to the prominence of marginalized identities in different contexts (Mann, 2006), like the ones mentioned above. Understanding the situational cues that make these identities salient is essential for comprehensive analysis.

Similarly, identity formation within marginalized communities is multifaceted and influenced by many social, cultural, and psychological factors. Acknowledging the intricate interplay of these

elements and their impact on identity development is imperative. Recognizing these complexities is fundamental for advancing social justice, equality, and inclusivity.

Ignoring the intersectionality of identity development in marginalized communities, which persists as a gap in the literature on psychological aspects of identity, often leads to subordination and annihilation of marginalized groups and individuals from the larger discourse. A heightened focus on the interplay of factors is also imperative for a more comprehensive offering and access to inclusive psychological aids (Salazar & Abrams, 2005).

References

Aries, E., & Seider, M. (2007). The Role of Social Class in the Formation of Identity: A Study of Public and Elite Private College Students. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 147(2), 137–157. <https://doi.org/10.3200/socp.147.2.137-157>

Blankenship, B. T., Frederick, J. K., Savaş, Ö., Stewart, A. J., & Montgomery, S. (2017). Privilege and Marginality: How Group Identification and Personality Predict Right- and Left-Wing Political Activism. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 17(1), 161–183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12132>

Castells, M. (2010). *The Power of Identity*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Cerezo, A., Cummings, M., Holmes, M., & Williams, C. (2019). Identity as Resistance: Identity Formation at the Intersection of Race, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(1), 036168431987597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319875977>

Duckitt, J., & Mphuthing, T. (1998). Group identification and intergroup attitudes: A longitudinal analysis in South Africa. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(1), 80–85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.80>

Erikson, E. H. (1977). *Life History and the Historical Moment: Diverse Presentations*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of acting white. *The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176–206. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01112192>

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)

Frosh, S. (1991). *Identity Crisis: Modernity, Psychoanalysis and the Self*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Galliher, R. V., McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2017). An integrated developmental model for studying identity content in context. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(11), 2011–2022. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000299>

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday.

Hasso, F. S., & Lopez, L. M. (1998). Frontlines and Borders: Identity Thresholds for Latinas and Arab American Women. In J. O'Brien & J. A. Howard (Eds.), *Everyday Inequalities: Critical Inquiries* (pp. 253–279). Blackwell.

Helms, J. E., & Cook, D. A. (1999). *Using race and culture in counseling and psychotherapy: theory and process*. Allyn and Bacon.

Herek, G. (1995). Psychological heterosexism in the United States. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identities over the Lifespan: Psychological Perspectives* (pp. 321–346). Oxford University Press.

Howard, J. A. (2000). Social Psychology of Identities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 367–393. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/223449>

Kay, R. (2005). Identity and Marginality. *ESharp*, 6(1), 1–6. https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_41175_smxx.pdf

Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., Mendoza-Denton, R., Rheinschmidt, M. L., & Keltner, D. (2012). Social class, solipsism, and contextualism: How the rich are different from the poor. *Psychological Review*, 119(3), 546–572. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028756>

Manstead, A. S. R. (2018). The Psychology of Social class: How Socioeconomic Status Impacts thought, feelings, and Behaviour. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57(2), 267–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12251>

McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions: An examination of human associations in everyday life*. Free Press.

Moffitt, U., Juang, L. P., & Syed, M. (2020). Intersectionality and Youth Identity Development Research in Europe. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(78). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00078>

Mofidi, S., & Aghapouri, J. (2023). The Role of Kurdish Identity in Shaping Political Identity: A Case Study of Kurdish University Students in Rojhelat, Kurdistan-Iran. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 10(3), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1465>

Ostrove, J. M. (2003). Belonging and Wanting: Meanings of Social Class Background for Women's Constructions of their College Experiences. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(4), 771–784. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0022-4537.2003.00089.x>

Salazar, C. F., & Abrams, L. P. (2005). Conceptualizing Identity Development in Members of Marginalized Groups. *Journal of Professional Counseling: Practice, Theory & Research*, 33(1), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15566382.2005.12033812>

Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>

Wang, Y., Yang, C., Hu, X., & Chen, H. (2020). The Mediating Effect of Community Identity between Socioeconomic Status and Sense of Gain in Chinese Adults. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(5), 1553. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051553>