

Social and Cultural Identities Can Be...

Context specific

How you experience your identities and communicate about them to people around you depends on the context. Context could include where you are, who you're with, or your current thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Directly observable or concealable/remain hidden

Some identities may be directly observable by people around you (e.g., the color of your skin, the texture of your hair, your body's size and shape), while others may require you to communicate, or disclose (e.g., the gender of the person you are dating). Sometimes an identity could be both observable and concealable, for example someone could practice a particular religion and keep that concealed, however, when they wear a specific piece of clothing (e.g., a yarmulke, a hijab, a cross necklace), their religious identity may be more directly observable.

Categorical and/or continuous

Some people experience an identity as "this or that" whereas other identities may be experienced as more fluid or may be experienced on a spectrum. Sometimes "checking a box" can appropriately categorize our identities. Sometimes "filling in the blank" is a more accurate and affirming way to describe our identities and experiences. In psychology, education, and healthcare we often ask people to fill out forms and questionnaires to help categorize or quantify people's experiences – it can be very invalidating to be told you must "check a box" for either "X" or "Y" when you actually identify as both, neither, or something else.

May change over time

Some identities may stay the same across your life and some may change. Some of these changes may be intentional (e.g., obtaining a higher paying job, obtaining a college degree) while others may be unintentional or less under your control (e.g., the process of aging, forced displacement from your home, losing a job because your employer goes out of business).

Historically dominant versus Historically targeted

Some identities are historically or currently more privileged and powerful (e.g., In the USA: White, male, society's definition of 'psychologically healthy') and some identities may be historically or currently targeted or marginalized (e.g., In the USA: Person of Color, female, society's definition of having 'mental health problems'). These are context specific and social and cultural identities generally include both historically dominant and historically targeted identities (for more information about this refer to the ADDRESSING Identities Worksheets). Folks with historically dominant identities often have more or easier access to services (including healthcare), and there are often more barriers for to services for folks with historically marginalized identities.

Take some time to reflect on the above information and write down some notes below. How do the above categories apply or not apply to how you experience your identities across your day-to-day life? How do these experience impact your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors? Is there any type of experience you want to take committed action towards changing in an effort to reduce your suffering and/or build a more accepting and supportive community?

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