Social Identity and Socio-Demographic Structure

Tom W. Smith

NORC/University of Chicago

February, 2006

GSS Topical Report No. 41

Introduction

People have many different social roles and the many identities associated with these roles are organized in a salience hierarchy with some identities performing central roles in a person's social and self-definition and other identities being downplayed or even unacknowledged (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002; Callero, 1985; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Huddy, 2001; Stets and Burke, 2000; Thoits, 1983; Thoits and Virshup, 1997). Socio-demographic attributes are one of the key generators of social roles and identities and tend to generate identities that are high in salience (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Huddy, 2001; Stryker and Burke, 2000;. Thoits, 1983, Thoits and Virshup, 1997; Tsui, Egan, and O'Reilly, 1992).What is not well understood is when and why certain people select some socio-demographic identities as salient and others chose other attributes to principally identify with.[1]

Several theories have been advanced to predict when certain social identities become relevant and are explicitly adopted as part of people's self-identification. First, distinctiveness theory argues that identities that distinguish people from others will be selected (Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 1998). Majority group members or people with modal attributes will tend to ignore or downplay those aspects since they fail to separate them from most others. Related to this general factor is the singling out of racial and ethnic minority groups (Huddy, 2001; Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 1998) . In a racialized society like the United States these are highly visible and socially germane groups. Racial and ethnic minorities are both externally labeled by the majority group and internally recognize such designations (Huddy, 2001; Thoits, 1986). Second, attachment level matters. People with more ties to a specific identity will be more likely to select it (Bliuc, McGarty, and Reynolds, 2003; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Thoits, 1983; Thoits and Virshup, 1997). For example, a person would be more likely to identify with an occupation if he/she was actively employed in that field, held some formal recognition of the same (e.g. state license or board certification), and belonged to a union or professional association related to the occupation. Third, general status theory indicates that people will mention a high status identity more so than a low status one (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Huddy, 2001; Thoits, 1983; Troyer, 2003; Tsui, Egan, and O'Reilly, 1992). Thus, members of elite, upper-class associations or social groups would tend to mention these as opposed to those belonging to plebeian groups and lower-class, social groups. Some researchers have blended together these separate theories. Huddy (2001), for example, joins together distinctiveness and status and emphasizes the role of "positive distinctiveness".

Data

The items on social identity were part of the 2003-2004 National Identity Study II (NIS II) of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). In the United States they were administered as a module on the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a full-probability, in-person

---

[1]While there are key differences between identity theory and social identity theory, there is also considerable overlap and as used herein both are relevant and applicable (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Stet and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Burke, 2000).

sample of adults living in households. The NIS II was fielded on a random half of the GSS and was done using a computer-assisted, self-administered questionnaire during the CAPI GSS. A total of 1213 respondents completed NIS II. For full technical details on the 2004 GSS see Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2005.

Measure

To measure people's social identities respondents were shown a list of 10 identities and asked to select which were "most important to you in describing who you are." Three choices: first, second, and third most important were recorded. The ten identities were: 1) occupation/ being a homemaker, 2) race/ethnicity, 3) gender, 4) age group, 5) religion or being agnostic/ atheist, 6) preferred political party, group, or movement, 7) nationality, 8) family or marital status, 9) social class, and 10) the part of America that you live in. (Full question wording appears in the Appendix.) For each of these 10 identities, choices were coded as 1) not selected, 2) third choice, 3) second choice, and 4) first choice.

Analysis

First, the rank or relative importance of people's social identities is examined. As Table 1 shows, family was the most frequently selected identity. 79% mentioned it among their three choices and it had a mean score of 3.0 on the scale that ran from 1 for not mentioned to 4 for mentioned first. This was followed by occupation with 49%/2.0, religion with 31%/1.6, region with 34%/1.5, gender with 28%/1.5, age with 23%/1.4, social class with 19%/1.3, race with16%/1.3, nationality with 13%/1.2, and political party with 4%/1.1. Overall 97.6% of respondents ranked three identities as their top choices, so there is very little missing data.

Family and occupation were also found as the top two identities in a study of Iowa adults (Mulford and Salisbury, 1967). Family, but not occupation, was ranked high in a study of a Canadian community (Goyder, 2003).

Next, the socio-demographic basis for selecting these identities is considered. For each identity the demographics most closely related to the identity are examined. For example, for family there are a number of germane variables - marital status, number of children, number of siblings, and family of origin and for social class the relevant variables are self-rated social class and the SES measures of occupational prestige, household income, and education.

As Table 2 shows, selecting family is strongly associated with having various types of familial ties. On marital status the married are most likely to mention family (86%), the ex-married the next most likely (76-77%), and the never married the least likely (65%). Likewise, parents of children are more likely to chose family than non-parents. But among parents, having a greater number of off-springs does not increase mentions of family. In regards to having siblings there is no statistically significant association, but parallel to the situation for children, those with no siblings are the least likely to mention family. Structure of family of origin is likewise related to selecting family. While the figures in Table 2 show variation of only borderline statistical significance, collapsing into two groups (having two parents/parental substitutes vs. having only one) shows that family mentions are more frequent among those raised by two parents (81%)

rather than one parent (73%)(prob.=.032).

These different family ties independently contribute to increasing family mentions. A scale of family ties was created running from 4 for someone not raised by two parents, with no siblings and no children, and never having been married to 8 for someone who was raised by two parents, who had one or more sibling and one or more child, and who is married. Mentions of family ranged from 45% for those scoring 5 or less to 71% with 6, 81% with 7, and 87% with 8. A multivariate OLS regression analysis also showed that being married, having a sibling, having a child, and having been raised by two parents are all significantly associated with more mentions of family.

Gender was also examined as a socio-demographic closely related to family. Previous research has found that women were more likely to identify with family than men were (Hooper, 1976; Mulford and Salisbury, 1967; Watkins et al., 2003), family roles are highly gendered, and all familial relationships except for cousins are described by gendered terms. As expected, women were more likely to mention family than men were (83% vs. 75%). Moreover, two different multivariate regression analyses with gender and the family relationship variables indicate that gender is an independent predictor of mentioning a family identity net of number of ties.

Mentions of occupation/housekeeping are greatest among the full-time employed (54%) and homemakers (50%) and least among others (mostly disabled people)(27%) and the retired (34%). Many in both of the later categories may not even have considered that this identity applies to them. This factor may also apply to the relatively low mentions among those in school (41%). Among those with paid employment, mentions of occupation rise with the prestige of their job, from 42% among those with occupational prestige below 30 to 64% for those in the top group (65+). However, in a notable deviation from the otherwise strong positive association, those in the middle prestige group (40-49) mention occupation less than expected (about 10 percentage points lower). This lower than expected level may result from the non-distinctiveness of people in the middle of the occupational status hierarchy.

Selecting religion as an identity is much higher among those actively engaged in religion and among some faiths more so than others. Even though being agnostic or an atheist were explicitly mentioned as part of this identity, few people not actively engaged in a religion chose this identity. As Table 2 shows, only 6% of those with no religious preference and just 5% of those never attending religious services identify with religion compared to 58% who said they were a "strong" member of their particular religion and 82% of those who attend church more than once a week.

Most of the differences in mentioning religion as an identity across major religions and the fundamentalist-to-liberal theological categories are the result of differences in levels of engagements in the various religions. In a multivariate OLS regression analysis subjective religiousness and attending religious services explain the relationship between theological orientation and religious identity. Likewise, with the major religions as dummy variables and attending religious services as a variable, there is no statistically significant difference between Protestants (the base category) and Jews, those in other religions, or those with no religion. Only the Catholics still mention religious identity less often than Protestants do.

Identification with region varies by region, but the pattern is hard to discern. People in

New England are most likely to mention the part of the country they live in (42%) and people in the West South Central region have the lowest level (24%). But these do not follow any clear regional divide since other southern and northern regions vary greatly in selecting region as an identity. One attribute of region that was thought to relate to selecting such an identity was provincialism vs. cosmopolitanism. This hypothesis is consistent with the greater regional mentions among those still living in the same city they grew up in vs. those living in different states (37% vs. 30%) and the greater levels in rural areas than in the largest central cities (40% vs. 21%), but only the former relationship is statistically significant and its magnitude is only moderate.

Gender identification is greater among women (32%) than among men (23.5%). It also marginally varies by marital status. The higher mentioning of gender among the widowed largely comes from the greater number of women in that category.

Age only marginally varies by age group. The relationship is curvilinear with age being most mentioned among the youngest (29%) and oldest (28%) age groups and least among the middle ages (17-22%). For labor force status there is no statistically significant variation in selecting age. The distinctly young group of students is most likely to choose age (31%), but even when students are compared just to non-students, the association is not statistically significant (prob=.352).

Social class identification has little association with either subjective or objective measures of socio-economic status. Self-rating in a social class, household income, and occupational prestige are unrelated to social class identity. Education has a weak and unclear connection to mentioning social class. Those with associate degrees are most likely to mention class, but there is no generally positive relationship between more education and more mentions of social class.

Race is more often selected by racial and ethnic minorities than by Whites and non-Hispanics. Mentions are also higher among those selecting only one ethnicity and among those mentioning none as opposed to those selecting two or more ethnic backgrounds. A multivariate OLS regression analysis indicates that the association with ethnicity is fully explained by the greater number of Blacks in the one and none categories, but crosstabular analysis with race or Hispanic ethnicity controlled for still shows that Whites and non-Hispanics who have a single or no ethnicity are more likely to mention race than Whites with multiple ethnicities are.

Mentioning ethnicity is unrelated to race, Hispanic ethnicity, ethnic identification, citizenship, or country of birth. It is associated with region raised in, but the pattern is unclear, matching neither major regions nor being similar to the regional pattern for area of the country. There is a tendency for mentions to be greater among non-citizens and immigrants, but the associations as not statistically significant. This group may be thinking of their non-American ties as opposed to an American identity.

Identification with a political party or group is greater among people with strong political ties. No independents without any partisan leaning mention a political identity and strong Democrats and Republicans are more likely to mention politics than those with weaker identifications. Also, eligible non-voters are also very unlikely to mention politics. Additionally, mentions are also greater among those aligned with third parties and third-party candidates.

Discussion

The preceding analysis of the selecting of top social identities by socio-demographic groups finds some support for each of the three main theories (distinctiveness, level of attachment, and status), but the connections are complex and far from uniform. Distinctiveness theory is clearly supported by the pattern on race identity and on politics with minority races and ethnicities and third-party members and voters more likely to mention these identities. It is also consistent with women mentioning gender more than men do as long as one thinks of women as a social, but not a numerical, minority in which new roles ("lady doctor," first women astronaut/supreme court justice/etc., first women in their family to ....) separate women from men. There is also some indication of distinctiveness playing a role on age where the youngest and oldest groups are most likely to chose age and for immigrants and non-citizens selecting nationality (but the associations are not statistically significant). Also, there may be some effect on occupation where those in the middle of the occupational hierarchy make fewer mentions than their middle-level status would predict (see status discussion below). However distinctiveness does not seem to have an effect on family, religion, region, and social class.

Attachment level appears to matter on the identity of family where number of familial ties definitely increases mentions, on religion where membership and active participation in a religion matter, on occupation where the employed in general and full-time employed in particular have are more likely to mention occupation, on region where the geographically stable are more likely to mention this identity, on race where those with a single ethnicity are more more prone to select race than those with mixed backgrounds, and on politics where voters and strong members of the major parties are more likely to mention a political identity. The one partial exception is that on family having familial attachments in the form of children and siblings lead to more mentions, but not the number of children or siblings beyond one. There are no measures associated with level of attachment for gender, age, social class, and nationality. Status is clearly associated with more mentions of occupation, but social class and race fail to show any such relationship. Likewise, on gender and nationality distinctiveness seems to trump status with the "minority" groups of women and non-citizen and immigrants being more likely to select an identity than the the dominant group. For most of the rest of the identities such as family, religion, age, region, and politics, there is no strong status dimension. In sum, all three explanations for choosing identities seem to make a difference in some circumstances. Level of attachment has the broadest influence. It is followed by distinctiveness. Status only seems to make a difference for occupation, but there the impact is substantial.

Conclusion

The ten socio-demographic identities examined in this study range dramatically in being selected as one of the top three social identities. Family was mentioned by 79% and chosen first by 50.5 %, while politics was mentioned by just 4% with only 0.3% placing it first. The ranking of these attributes in large part must depend on the relative value or importance that society assigns to the identities associated with these socio-demographics and there is some evidence that different societies give different valuations to these attributes (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002; Rhee

et al., 1995; Watkins et al., 2003). Within a society additional factors influence the salience of socio-demographics. The exact pattern of influence is complex and varies across variables. Level of attachment and social distinctiveness appear to have the most general role, while status seems to be much more limited in its impact.

Table 1

Rankings of Social Identities

	Mean	% Mentioning
Family	3.0	79.4
Occupation	2.0	48.5
Religion	1.6	30.8
Region	1.5	34.2
Gender	1.5	28.0
Age	1.4	22.8
Social Class	1.3	18.7
Race	1.3	15.9
Nationality	1.2	12.9
Political Party	1.1	4.1

Source: 2004 GSS, See Appendix for question wording.

Table 2

Correlates of Social Identities

A. Family

	% Mentioning
Marital Status (MARITAL)	
Married	85.8
Widowed	76.7
Divorced	76.0
Separated	75.7
Never Married	65.1
Prob.	.0000
Children Ever Born (CHILDS)	
None	68.1
One	82.9
Two	86.3
Three	84.0
Four+	81.5
Prob.	.0000
Children in Household (BABIES,PRETEEN,TEENS)	
None	75.8
One	87.0
Two	88.0
Three	85.9
Four+	74.0
Prob.	.0003
Siblings (SIBS)	
None	64.7
One	78.4
Two	79.5
Three	83.8
Four+	80.4
Prob.	.106

Table 2 (continued)

Family Raised in (FAMILY16)	
Mother & Father	81.3
Stepmother & Father	85.8
Mother & Stepfather	72.5
Father Only	60.5
Mother Only	73.3
Male Relative	0.0
Female Relative	84.6
Male & Female Relative	91.0
Other	74.0
Prob.	.098
Gender (SEX)	
Men	74.9
Women	83.3
Prob.	.003
B. Occupation	
Labor Force Status (WRKSTAT)	
Full time	53.7
Part Time	46.6
Temporarily not at Work	44.6
Unemployed	43.8
Retired	34.3
In School	41.1
Keeping House	49.7
Other	27.0
Prob.	.014
Occupational Prestige (PRESTG80)	
Less than 30	41.8
30-39	47.2
40-49	40.0
50-64	52.0
65+	64.1
Prob.	.0000

Table 2 (continued)

C. Religion

Religion (RELIG)	
Protestant	48.9
Catholic	26.7
Jewish	24.7
None	6.1
Other	29.4
Christian	21.2
Prob.	.0000
Theology (FUND)	
Fundamentalist	45.6
Moderate	31.7
Liberal/None	17.5
Other	31.7
Prob.	.0000
Religious Attendance (ATTEND)	
Never	4.9
Less than Yearly	14.6
Once a Year	7.8
Several Times Yearly	13.6
Monthly	23.4
2-3 Times a Month	31.3
Nearly Weekly	38.6
Weekly	43.7
Weekly+	81.6
Prob.	.0000
Religiousness (RELITEN)	
Strong	58.2
Somewhat Strong	30.2
Not Very Strong	11.6
No Religion	6.1
Prob.	.0000

Table 2 (continued)

D. Region

Region (REGION)	
New England	42.0
Midatlantic	30.5
East North Central	34.0
West North Central	36.7
South Atlantic	36.3
East South Central	34.8
West South Central	24.3
Mountain	36.0
West	36.7
Prob.	.008
Geographic Mobility (MOBILE16)	
Same City	37.3
Same State, Different City	35.1
Different State/Country	29.8
Prob.	.045
Community Type (SRCBELT)	
12 Largest Central Citiess	21.1
13-100 Largest Central Cities	31.8
Suburb of 12 Largest	36.2
Suburb of 13-100 Largest	32.5
Other Urban	35.2
Other Rural	40.1
Prob.	.060

E. Gender

Gender (SEX)	
Male	23.5
Female	31.7
Prob.	.016

Table 2 (continued)

Marital Status (MARITAL)	
Married	25.1
Widowed	34.6
Divorced	29.5
Separated	27.3
Never Married	34.3
Prob.	.043
F. Age	
Age (AGE)	
18-29	29.1
30-39	17.0
40-49	21.6
50-64	20.3
65+	27.9
Prob.	.052
Labor Force Status (WRKSTAT)	
Full Time	21.7
Part Time	23.1
Temporarily Off Work	28.6
Unemployed	26.9
Retired	25.8
In School	30.6
Keeping House	18.4
Other	16.8
Prob.	.819
G. Social Class	
Social Class (CLASS)	
Lower	25.4
Working	16.2
Middle	19.9
Upper	22.9
Prob.	.326

Table 2 (continued)

Education (DEGREE)	
No Degree	16.8
High School	16.6
Jr. College	26.6
4-Year College	21.3
Graduate Degree	18.4
Prob.	.030
Occupation (PRESTG80)	
Less than 30	21.1
30-39	19.4
40-49	15.1
50-64	17.3
65+	18.5
Prob.	.723
Household Income (INCOME98)	
Less than $10,000	24.2
$10-19,999	20.4
$20-39,999	17.4
$40-59,999	18.5
$60-74,499	17.2
$75-89,999	10.3
$90-109,999	15.3
$110,000+	26.5
DK	13.8
Refused	18.8
Prob.	.622
H. Race	
Race (RACE)	
White	10.3
Black	38.2
Other	38.6
Prob.	.0000

Table 2 (continued)

Hispanic (HISPANIC)	
Is	34.1
Is Not	14.2
Prob.	.0000
Ethnic Identity (ETHNUM)	
Names Only One	20.6
Names Two+, Chooses One	10.9
Names Two+, Can't Choose	9.8
Can't Name Any	21.8
Prob.	.0002
I. Nationality	
Race (RACE)	
White	12.7
Black	11.9
Other	17.4
Prob.	.119
Hispanic (HISPANIC)	
Is	18.2
Is Not	12.3
Prob.	.080
Citizen (CITIZEN)	
Is	12.6
Is Not	22.6
Prob.	.090
Born in US (BORN)	
Was	12.2
Was Not	18.8
Prob.	.135

Table 2 (continued)

Region Raised In (REG16)	
Foreign	16.8
New England	12.5
Midatlantic	20.6
East North Central	12.2
West North Central	16.1
South Atlantic	7.6
East South Central	15.0
West South Central	7.1
Mountain	17.5
West	9.8
Prob.	.007
J. Political	
Political Party (PARTYID)	
Strong Democrat	11.0
Democrat	2.4
Leaning Democrat	3.3
Independent	0.0
Leaning Republican	1.1
Republican	3.5
Strong Republican	5.1
Other	17.6
Prob.	.0000
Voted in 2000 (VOTE00)	
Voted	5.4
Did Not Vote	0.4
Not Eligible	7.0
Prob.	.003
Presidential Vote (PRES00)	
Gore	7.7
Bush	3.0
Nader	18.3
Prob.	.0000

Appendix: Question Wording

We are all part of different groups. Some are more important to us than others when we think of ourselves. In general which in the following list is most important to you in describing who you are? And the second most Important? And the third most important?

A. Your current or previous occupation (or being a homemaker)
B. Your race/ethnic background
C. Your gender (that is, being a man/woman)
D. Your age group (that is, Young, Middle Age, Old)
E. Your religion (or being agnostic or atheist)
F. Your preferred political party, group, or movement
G. Your nationality
H. Your family or marital status (that is son/daughter, mother/father, grandfather, grandmother, husband/wife)
I. Your social class (that is upper, middle, lower, working, or similar categories)
J. The part of America that you live in

References

Bagozzi, Richard P. and Lee, Kyu-Hyun, "Multiple Routes for Social Influence: The Role of Compliance, Internalization, and Social Identity," Social Psychology Quarterly, 65 (2002), 226-247.

Bliuc, Ana Maria; McGarty, C.; and Reynolds, K., "Predicting Political Behaviour in Opinion-based Groups: The Role of Social Identification and Social Identity Salience," Australian Journal of Psychology, 55 (2003), 34.

Callero, Peter L., "Role-Identity Salience," Social Psychology Quarterly, 48 (1985), 203-215.

Davis, James A.; Smith, Tom W.; and Marsden, Peter V., General Social Surveys, 1972-2004: Cumulative Codebook. Chicago: NORC, 2005.

Goyer, John, "Measuring Social Identities: Problems and Progress," International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 15 (2003), 180-191.

Hogg, Michael A.; Terry, Deborah J.; and White, Katherine M., "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory," Social Psychology Quarterly, 58 (1995), 255-269.

Hooper, Michael, "The Structure and Measurement of Social Identity," Public Opinion Quarterly, 40 (1976), 154-164.

Huddy, Leonie, "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory," Political Psychology, 22 (2001), 127-156.

Mehra, Ajay; Kilduff, Martin; and Brass, Daniel J., "At the Margins: A Distinctiveness Approach to the Social Identity and Social Networks of Underrepresented Groups," Academy of Management Journal, 41 (1998), 441-452.

Mulford, Harold A. And Salisbury, Winfield W., II, "Self-Conceptions in a General Population," in Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology, edited by Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967.

Rhee, Eun et al., "Spontaneous Self-Descriptions and Ethnic Identities in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures," Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 69 (1995), 142-152.

Stets, Jan E. and Burke, Peter J. "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," Social Psychology Quarterly, 63 (2000), 224-237.

Stryker, Sheldon and Burke, Peter J., "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," Social Psychology Quarterly, 63 (2000), 284-297.

Thoits, Peggy A., "Multiple Identities and Psychological Well-being: A Reformulation and Test of the Social Isolation Hypothesis," American Sociological Review, 48 (1983), 174-187.

Thoits, Peggy A., "Multiple Identities: Examining Gender and Marital Status Differences in Distress," American Sociological Review, 51 (1986), 259-272.

Thoits, Peggy A. And Virshup, Lauren K., "Me's and We's: Forms and Functions of Social Identities," in Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues, edited by Richard D. Ashmore and Lee Jussim. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Troyer, Lisa, "The Role of Social Identity Processes in Status Construction," Advances in Group Processes, 20 (2003), 149-172.

Tsui, A.S.; Egan, T.D.; and O'Reilly, C.A., "Being Different: Relational Demography and Organizational Attachment," Administrative Science Quarterly, 37 (1992), 549-579.

Watkins, David et al., "Gender Differences in Self-Construal: How Generalizable Are Western Findings?" Journal of Social Psychology, 143 (2003), 501-519.