

Fluidity of social identities: implications for applying intersectionality

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Abstract

Purpose – Intersectionality addresses complex avenues of oppression that emanate at the intersections of one's identities. However, the intersectional framework assumes static identities, which are increasingly being acknowledged for their fluidity. This research explored the extent of the fluidity of social identities to draw implications for the application of the framework in research.

Design/methodology/approach – 27 participants from a post-graduate elective course on diversity and inclusion identified their significant social identities, and submitted a write-up using hermeneutic phenomenology in which the participants shared their lived experiences of the fluidity of their social identities in different spaces they occupy or find themselves in.

Findings – Fluidity-triggering stimuli in different environments and their associations with identity-related motives were uncovered using thematic analysis. Stimuli operating at micro-, meso- and macro-levels rationally explained identity fluidity. However, in addition to types, intensity and frequency of stimuli, psychological factors, such as identity status, were decisive in determining the degree of generalization of stimuli across individuals and spaces that significantly influenced identity fluidity.

Originality/value – This research explored the extent of the fluidity of social identities to draw implications for the application of the intersectional framework in research. The findings contribute to future research by identifying limitations of the intersectional framework based on the fluidity of social identities arising from environmental stimuli that operate at micro-, meso- and macro-levels, and the extent of psychological generalization of these stimuli across spaces.

Keywords Behaviorism, Identity-related motives, Identity statuses, Safe spaces, South Africa

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Identity is essentially a concept of oneself. In psychology, which oriented itself towards understanding the individual from within and how the individual relates to the group, many prominent models of self-concept are founded on the self-schema theory. From such a theoretical foundation, post-adolescence identity is a relatively stable understanding of oneself and representation of oneself to others (Hermans, 2019). From a sociological perspective that orients itself towards individuals within systems and society, the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) uses the intersection of individual identities to help understand one's position of privilege in society as well as hierarchical relations within and between identity groups (Dharani *et al.*, 2020).

The intersectional framework is founded on the premise of fixed individual identities. However, from the alternative theoretical foundation of the self-categorization theory, the stability of identities is challenged. From such a theoretical foundation, post-adolescence identity is variable and context-dependent. Research comparing the self-schema and self-categorization theoretical foundations for identity has provided some evidence that a shift from personal to social identity introduces an important type of fluidity in the self-concept (Onorato and Turner, 2004). As such, if social identities are better regarded as responsive to variables within any respective environment or spaces that an individual occupies (Lähdesmäki *et al.*, 2016; Malcolm and Mendoza, 2014), then it demands a multivalent recognition to stretch social identities based on contexts (Calás *et al.*, 2013). The implications of the above for relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997) and intersectionality have remained empirically understudied. Nonetheless, potential theoretical implications for using the intersectional framework for research in the field of diversity and inclusion, as well as having practical implications for addressing issues of justice and fairness for all individuals in the workplace (Dahanayake *et al.*, 2018) are accepted by scholars.

To address this gap in the literature, this research used a sample of post-adolescent participants who had voluntarily enrolled in an elective course about diversity and inclusion. Participants were requested to share their social categorizations and personal stories of their lived experiences in different spaces they occupy or find themselves in their lives to assess the extent of fixity or fluidity of social identities. Additionally, a thematic analysis identified external factors that triggered the fluidity of social identities. The analysis was used to link individual psychological attributes that determine the extent of social identity's fixity or fluidity to assess their theoretical implications for using the intersectional framework for research.

Literature review

Identity has been dissected into various categories, such as visible identities (e.g. race and gender) and invisible identities (e.g. sexuality and accents), vertical (those that pass from parents to children) and horizontal (developed from joining a peer group during, mostly adolescence) identities (Solomon, 2012), individual (who am I?) and social (who are we?) identities (Popova, 2021), to name a few. Social identity, the part of self-concept derived from group membership, not only influences one's sense of self but also groups people with shared characteristics, making it significant for sociologists who focus on individuals within systems and society. Individuals may define themselves based on these social identities and be defined by others as belonging to a particular group or groups – the latter was regarded by Clayton and Opatow (2003) as “imposed identities.” Since positions of marginalization are unlikely to arise from self-prescription to an identity (Dharani, 2024), imposed social identities are salient in understanding discrimination.

While categorization such as visible and invisible identities are largely founded on the realism of biological differences (Kroger, 2008) that include attributes that are physically

visible (such as height, weight, body shape, etc.) and those that are invisible (such as one's physical strengths and limitations), social identities operate on relativism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) since these are understood by individuals by comparing themselves to others (Brons, 2015). As such, biological elements may be embedded in epistemological stances of objectivism, and the psychological and sociological elements extend it to subjectivism. Social identities that are founded on a constructivist paradigm lead its definition to be: "the subjective concept of oneself as a person" (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006, p. 309).

Fluidity of identities

There is consensus among identity development theories that identity develops during the stages of pre-adolescence (Phinney, 2000) and adolescence (Erikson, 1978). As such, identity development theories have focused on adolescents to explain their complex construction, motives and statuses of development. For example, Marcia (1966) theorized four statuses of identity development based on the extent of exploration and commitment to an identity. These statuses include (1) Foreclosure (committing to an identity without exploration), (2) Diffusion (not having committed to an identity yet not, exploring different developmental alternatives in the domain of that identity) (3) Moratorium (in a state of active exploration hence not having committed to an identity) and (4) Achievement (having sufficiently explored an identity over a period to commit). Other theories have explored the motivation behind the development of identities, for example, Vignoles *et al.* (2006) devised a six-factor model of identity-related motivations, including (1) Continuity, (2) Self-esteem, (3) Self-efficacy, (4) Belonging, (5) Distinctiveness and (6) Meaning.

Despite the time-honored literature around identity, there is a lack of agreement among scholars regarding the fixity or fluidity of identity post-adolescence. The self-schema theory conceives "the Self" as a relatively stable cognitive representation or schema and regards identity as a fixed self-perception. On the contrary, the self-categorization theory argues that self-perception is highly variable and context-dependent (Onorato and Turner, 2004). Like the degree of the malleability of personality traits that are frequently argued amongst scholars, identity fixity and fluidity in post-adolescents have also developed opposing schools of thought. Similar to the degree of consensus that personality is more malleable in one's formative years and, like clay, hardens with age, yet the degree of its hardening is contested, individual identity is frequently defined in the singular, yet identity is agreed to be formed as a collection of identities that contribute in varying degrees of significance to one's overall concept of oneself, and the heightening of consciousness regarding a sub-identity within this hierarchy can lead to a perception of the fluidity of identities.

Foundational reasoning for identity fluidity is also akin to arguments regarding the malleability of personality traits. For example, being more extroverted might be adopted as it is consciously or unconsciously judged to function better, similarly, identity is also argued to shift based on an adaptive response to the environment. This is founded on the same school of thought that posits that behavior cannot be attributed to the individual alone, but to the outcome of the "dance" of social relations (Smit, 2014), and situational and environmental differences that demand behavioral and positioning responses and adaptation to varying requirements of the space. For example, "oppression breeds the power to oppose it" (Solomon, 2014, 11:40) suggests that it is the dance between oppressors and the marginalized that generates their respective identities. It is claimed that speaking of Nazis, Albert Einstein said: "I thought I was a physicist, I did not bother about being non-Aryan until Hitler made me conscious of it." (Robinson, 2019). While the internally driven self-perception may be founded on influences from social responses, making it environment-dependent, imposed social identities of individuals can be viewed as more static since societal

compartmentalization are unlikely to be founded on an ongoing interplay of identity with the context that makes them fluid. Nonetheless, social hierarchies can vary across spaces based on their historical development and social contexts. This variability can introduce fluidity of social identities (Onorato and Turner, 2004).

Identity motives and fluidity

Since his start of identity research, Erikson (1978) regarded one of its foundational motivations to be based on finding selfsameness throughout one's lifetime, making continuity across time (being the same person in the past, today and in the future) and coherence across contexts (referred to as "spaces" by Erikson). Such motivations suggest implications for identity fixity or fluidity. For example, this continuity motivation suggested that scholars largely regarded that once identities were developed during adolescence and achieved (Marcia, 1966), they formed largely fixed or static aspects of self-concept to satisfy the continuance motive. An exception to this relates to identities that develop over a lifetime that are predominantly role-based identities such as parent- or grand-parenthood and professional identities. As new identity domains emerge as life progresses, such as occupation during young adulthood (Arnett, 2000), parenthood during adulthood (Vogl *et al.*, 2018) and grandparenthood during later stages of life, some older identities become less significant with age, while others heighten in psychological significance. This entails that while identity formation may be a focus of psychological development during adolescence, new identities are formed that require integration with older identities (van Doeselaar *et al.*, 2018), making it a dynamic self-perception.

Further research contributed to additional identity development motivations. For example, motivations of self-esteem and self-efficacy not only link identity development to personality traits but also suggest its developmental direction. Since protection and enhancement of core self-evaluation personality traits of self-esteem and -efficacy is "one of the least contested claims in social psychology" (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006, p. 308), a positive self-perception motivation largely regards identity development to be a unidirectional focus on its ambitions aim, proceeding from the low statuses to high. This positive self-perception motivation suggests that identities are dynamic, as a commitment to identities that serve this motivation allows identities to evolve. However, despite having a one-way direction, life experiences and context variations induce dynamism (Clayton and Opatow, 2003), as a fluctuating path to this fixed, high ambition, though "a reverse developmental pathway is also possible" (Meeus *et al.*, 1999, p. 419). Batory (2015, p. 166) concluded that "Identity is dynamic because of its relational character and permanent (re)construction."

Two additional fundamental motivational goals of identity are empirically tested which include tensions between belonging to a group yet aspiring for distinctiveness to differentiate from the group (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006). This tension between these often polarized positions does not support the existence of a fixed end-target, but an optimized balance between identifying with an element of identity and differentiating from it that is subject to variations founded on differing psychological demands of everyone. Stage development theories suggest that belonging needs are sought during the conforming stage of development when children follow their familial conventions (Dharani *et al.*, 2021). Upon satisfaction of these, pre-adolescents socialize with peers outside the family home and differentiate themselves from the family, forming horizontal identities (Solomon, 2012) and experiencing this tension between conforming and differentiating. Thereafter, the individuating stage pushes individuals into a greater focus on uniqueness, aspiring to be different, even from their identity groups. Such acts heighten leadership potential, positively contributing to self-esteem (Barrett, 2018). Thus, the motivations of belonging and distinctiveness make identity achievement not fixed but either dynamic or fluid.

Lastly, [Solomon \(2012\)](#) not only regards horizontal identities to be limited to the groups outside the family home that adolescents join during the differentiation stage but also upon joining a similar group of people for support after experiencing adversity. Referred to as “forging meanings” ([Solomon, 2012](#)) from life experiences that trigger individuals to build identities in later stages of life, these align with a later stage of psychological development of self-actualizing, during which meaning in life is sought and integration with similar people to form new identities based on a shared purpose can help to align one’s meaning with day-to-day life ([Dharani et al., 2021](#)) to satisfy the identity-related motivation of “meaning” ([Vignoles et al., 2006](#)). This motivation is unlikely to be satisfied should identity be static or fixed; thus, requires identity to be dynamic and evolving with life experiences.

Identity fluidity and intersectionality

Intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, facilitates a better understanding of an individual’s experiences by acknowledging their multiple identities and the hierarchal position at the intersections of these identities rather than independently considering these social positions ([Bauer et al., 2021](#)). Social identities (which group/s do I belong to?) are particularly significant for understanding how multiple identities intersect and determine positions of privilege on the hierarchy in society ([Dharani et al., 2020](#)). Positions that are lower on the social hierarchy of privilege emanate from historic injustices such as slavery, or cultural norms such as patriarchy. As such, it is unsurprising that the concept of intersectionality was coined by [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) as a framework that assisted in understanding the experiences of black women in a society that compounds these socially marginalized identities of blackness and womanhood in one being ([Cummings, 2021](#)). The social challenges posed by the position of privilege and oppression at the intersection of identities formed the intersectional framework that is popularly used for understanding the complex relationship between social identities and societal privileges. The complexities of examining the intersection of identities along with their interdependencies to the context or systems are aided by this theoretical framework ([April et al., 2022](#)). Since privilege remains unrecognized and the benefits arising from it are mostly unconscious in the psyche of those privileged, the framework also permits cognition and a better understanding of individual experiences of discriminatory behavior and oppression.

Since its conception, the intersectionality framework has been extended to examine intersections of various identities, extending its scope to examine more than two social categories. However, while the framework facilitates an understanding of how individuals experience spaces differently from one another and other contributions, it is founded on the premise of fixed social identities. In their research across spaces in transnational businesses, [Calás et al., \(2013\)](#) challenged this premise and highlighted the framework’s failure to acknowledge “mobile selfhood” emanating from “mobile subjectivities.” Some scholars have counter-critiqued this perspective by highlighting differences in subjective perspectives of marginalization versus global systems of domination, such as the universality of racism due to global colonialism ([Alatas, 2003](#)) or sexism due to global patriarchal systems of hegemonic masculinity ([Morrell et al., 2013](#)), that generate relatively stable hierarchies based on social identities across the world. Others have counter-critiqued this perspective as overlooking different levels of intersectionality shared by [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) in coining the framework of structural, political and representational intersectionality.

Nonetheless, the fluidity of social identities is demanding prominent scholars in the field of diversity and inclusion to investigate and theorize intersectionality based on a relational perspective ([Syed and Özbilgin, 2009](#)). However, empirical research investigating identity fixity, dynamicity over life and fluidity across spaces is limited. In respect of identity stability, empirical research has confirmed that the more an element

of identity was connected with a sense of continuity, the greater is the perceived centrality of that identity element, but only over two months period (Batory, 2014). Empirical evidence beyond such periods has concluded identity to be dynamic. For example, in a sample of older academics, domain-specific identities based on the subject studied or professions entered were found to be dynamic with the changing landscape of their respective practice, confirming a continuous need for appropriately balancing such identities (Iwaniec-Thompson, 2021). For identity fluidity in the differently-abled, microaggressions in spaces were found to increase identification with one's disability (Meade, 2021). More extreme examples of a heightening of identities are explored in the psychology of terrorism, where perceived injustice, need for identity and need for belonging were identified as psychological "vulnerabilities" that underpinned a shift toward radicalism (Borum, 2004). Within such shifts of identity, in the alignment of belonging needs satisfied by identities, experiences of exclusion were found to heighten belonging motivations to join another group that corresponds to the belonging motivation of identity formation (April *et al.*, 2022).

However, researchers have not explicitly investigated the fluidity of social identities from the perspective of the intersectional framework. In the current scenario of the world that is, at least in pockets, becoming increasingly cognizant of matters of diversity and inclusion thus effectively addressing diversity and inclusion concerns within certain spaces, the variability of experiences is profound. To address this gap in the literature, this research aimed to identify factors that trigger identity fluidity to better understand the fluidity of social identities and to draw theoretical implications for the application of the intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1991).

The study

Since the research aimed at exploring the fluidity of social identities from an intersectional framework perspective, it was essential that the participants were not homogenous with respect to their domain-specific identities, incorporated multiple social identities that generated unique intersectional experiences and occupied or found themselves in different spaces in which they would experience varied attitudes towards their social identities. Known as the rainbow nation (Mahadea and Kaseeram, 2018) with a recent history of racial segregation (Mariotti and Fourie, 2014), varying degrees within segregated cultures regarding external and internal hegemony (Dharani *et al.*, 2020) and currently having the highest Gini coefficient in the world (World Bank, 2017), South Africa presents a nation that has embarked on an amalgamation of previously segregated social identities with a significantly varying degree of success that have created "pockets" of homogeneity, diversity, inclusion and equity. As such, the setting is uniquely well-positioned to meet the context and sampling needs.

Sampling

To address the research aims around intersectionality, the study focused on the intersections of the social identities of the participants (Abrams and Hogg, 1988). Since the question of the fluidity of intersectionality arises post-development of identity (Erikson, 1978), adolescents, pre-adolescents, children and infants fell outside the sampling scope of the research. Lastly, not only did the ideal participants for the study need to be adults, an awareness and some understanding of social identities and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) was deemed important to obtain relevant and valuable data regarding identity fluidity. As such, socially diverse participants were sought from a post-graduate elective course that focused on diversity, inclusion and equity that laid the foundations for exploring their identities in different spaces.

Enrollment in the course was voluntary, so the research sampling was based on convenience sampling. However, due to the course outline which highlighted that the course content aimed at exploring diversity, inclusion and equity, it is expected that the participants volunteering for the course had an interest and experiential insights to share on the subject. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty's Ethics in Research Committee. Among other aspects, a few aspects of ethical abidance that were ensured by the committee included: informed consent being sought, confidentiality and anonymity of the participant being ensured, and data being protected and saved on a secure University server. Additionally, participants were assured that there would be no repercussions for not providing consent and that they could revoke their consent retrospectively, if they wanted, by contacting the researcher.

Methodology

Social identities are founded on the constructivist paradigm. The study followed an inductive approach and a qualitative method. To effectively address the research aims, not only was it important that the participants were cognizant of their identities but that the data comprised rich, personalized descriptions of the experiences in their lifeworld in different spaces to thematically organize them for theory development (Lauterbach, 2018). Since "A narrative approach is being recognized as a means of examining the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a changing sociohistorical context" (Phinney, 2000, p. 28), detailed stories of the participants' lived experiences were required to identify stimuli in the different environments they occupy or find themselves in; therefore, this research adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological method. While Giorgi (2004) acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher and advises researchers to "bracket" or disregard their experiences and backgrounds when conducting the research, this is not possible in hermeneutic phenomenology, as interpretation is seen as inevitable when deriving theories from life stories of the participants (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007). Hermeneutics encourages interpretive elements (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007) of the participant's own analyses of their experiences, as well as reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Holmes *et al.*, 1994). This entails using the researcher's personal knowledge and experiences to draw meanings and assumptions from the participants' reports of their life experiences that they may have difficulty interpreting their own life to answer the research question themselves. Nonetheless, reflexivity (Koch and Harrington, 1998) by the researcher was limited to the implications of the application on fluidity of the intersectionality framework.

Method and data analysis

A write-up was requested from the participants of the course, which was preferred over interviews, it permitted the participants greater time to apply the framework and reflect on their life compared to interviews during which there is a greater likelihood to respond to inquiries in a timeframe that sustains the rapport of the conversation. Additionally, there were limited options for in-person interviews due to the pandemic restrictions. While the self-reflective document was encouraged to encapsulate personal narratives freely, the following questions were shared to direct the participants' writing. (1) What are your own, personal individual differences, and how do these differences show up in the spaces occupied and traversed by you. (2) What are some personal challenges for showing up authentically or inauthentically in these different spaces (are you able to, or unable to, be yourself – when/how/in what situations/around whom). (3) Who and what do you encounter in these different spaces – and how do those encounters affect your behavior and psychological well-being. (4) What are the diversity challenges/struggles which you have encountered (in the past) and are still encountering (in the present), in those spaces. (5) What personal skills have you used (or

are still using) to navigate those diverse spaces and diverse people successfully or unsuccessfully in those spaces. The participants were also given the option to consider spaces specifically addressed to those that they experience on a normal day-to-day basis (e.g. at home, in formal environments at the office (such as meetings), in work-related informal environments (such as when socializing), or online spaces during social distancing), or those experienced in the past (e.g. comparisons between different workplaces from your past, or different geographic locations where you have lived), with the option to categorize these into broad areas.

The data analysis first identified the social identities of the participants and categorized into social and personal identities. Personal reflection documents were uploaded on NVivo, and thematically, open-coded by the researcher (Kelle, 2012; Scott and Howell, 2008). Identity-related motivations were captured from the data (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006), and data for patterns and commonalities between different social categories and codes were used to group categories with common themes using axial coding (Hays and Wood, 2011).

Results

Data were used to list the participants' identities. For example, P23 shared: *"I would describe myself as white, male, heterosexual, South African and English-speaking"* (P23:860). Since language dictates the sequence of adjectives, in the example above, white preceding English-speaking is not interpreted as race being more significant an identity than language for the participant. However, its inclusion is considered indicative of the element's significance for the participant's identity. Twenty-nine participants completed the self-reflective document, out of which informed consent was received from twenty-seven (93% response rate) who formed the sample for the study. The sample represented a variety of backgrounds (five nationalities; the majority being South Africans and all but one were South African residents). Gender (52% men, 48% women), racial (37% black, 26% white, 26% Colored, 11% Indian), ethnic and other social categories were diverse (see Table 1).

The most common domains of social identity were related to gender, race, nationality and sexuality, with religion and ethnicity being significant for some participants. Social identities, where our participants referred to group membership (using the "we" term), were predominantly vertical identities that had passed from their parents to them (Solomon, 2012), constituting mostly visible identities as shared by P6: *"my family members and myself all primarily share the ... key defining areas of my identity (race, religion, immigrant-status, sexual-orientation, and being career ambitious)"* (P6:221). Sexuality did not attract much discussion by the participants, potentially since none of the participants shared deviation from heteronormative positions, making them a part of the dominant group. Nationality was addressed predominantly by non-South Africans. As such, from a generalized perspective, marginalized groups emerged as being more cognizant of their social identities that either excluded them or deprived them of privilege.

Factors impacting social identity fluidity

Six prominent spaces were identified by our participants: (1) the family home, (2) educational institutions, (3) close friend circle, (4) neighborhoods, (5) workplaces and (6) transportation between these spaces. There was consensus that social identities were most subdued within close friend circles. For example, P20 stated: *"My closest friends are very similar to myself"* (P20:851), and P22 shared: *"When I am in this space ... it feels like a safe space ... It is easy being my authentic self"* (P22:859). Family homes, educational institutions and community spaces presented a mixed response from our participants. In these spaces, participants shared differing levels of their social identity awareness which were attributed to factors in

Table 1.
List of participants and
their social identities

#	Significant social identities
1	Indian, woman
2	Black, man, heterosexual, Christian, African, millennial
3	Black, woman, Mozambican, foreigner, South African resident
4	Black, woman
5	White, man, heterosexual, not believing in any particular religion, South African
6	Colored, woman, heterosexual, Muslim, immigrant, South African resident
7	Black, woman, South African
8	Black, woman, Congolese, South African resident
9	White, man, Christian, Afrikaans
10	Colored, man, Indian married to white woman, mixed-race children
11	Colored, woman, previously and currently disadvantaged, South African
12	Black, man, Mpondo, isi-Mapondo speaker
13	Colored, woman
14	Indian, man, heterosexual, middle-aged, able bodied
15	Black, woman, foreign, able-bodied, international student, South African resident
16	Black, man
17	White, man, heterosexual, Cape Townian, English, no disabilities
18	Colored, woman, middle-aged
19	Indian-Malay heritage, woman, Muslim
20	White, man, heterosexual, South African, able-bodied, middle-upper class
21	Black, man, heterosexual, Mosotho
22	Colored, man, heterosexual, Christian, Cape Townian, South African, Young, middle-class, English, able-bodied
23	White, man, heterosexual, South African, English
24	Colored, man, heterosexual, Camissa heritage
25	White, man, middle-aged
26	White, woman, heterosexual, Christian, German
27	Black, woman, Ndebele

Source(s): Table by author

spaces. For example, P6 shared: “*With my entire family being extremely open-minded and accepting, I ultimately and truly feel the freedom to come into the home as my authentic self, regardless of where my ever-changing identity takes me*” (P6:221:2), while Participant 19 stated: “*I was taught to serve the men in my family. I know to start making tea when I hear my father arrive at our family home . . . I’ve come to think of these as . . . betrayal of my feminist values*” (P19:847). Workplaces and transportation between spaces presented the greatest shifts, both heightening or dampening, of social identities for our participants.

A review of the factors within these spaces was categorized into stimuli operating at micro-, meso- and macro-levels (Syed and Ozbilgin, 2009). These details are shared in their respective headings below:

Micro-individual level. While behaviors of any individual stem from beliefs and attitudes at a broader, societal traditions level (Syed and Ozbilgin, 2009); nonetheless, where participants identified individuals as the elementary unit of influence on their social identities (Emirbayer, 1997), the stimulus was coded as micro-individual level. These stimuli operated within the “dance of relationships” between individuals (Smit, 2014) and were not associated with the physical space or built environment. As such, micro-level stimuli are viewed as operating in psychological spaces (Shklariski et al., 2021) rather than physical spaces.

Encounters with individuals where participants felt pre-judged before getting acquainted with them or had an expectation of being pre-judged led to a heightening of awareness of the specific social identity/ies upon which they were being or expecting to be pre-judged. P6

clearly stated: *“The major . . . roadblock that prevents me from showing up authentically within psychological spaces are fears of being judged by others”* (P6:221:3). Anticipations of pre-judgment arose from generalizing prior experiences with similar individuals that formulated their mental models that were based on the attributes of such individuals (Dharani and April, 2022). For example, P20 shared: *“I am usually dismissed as too young, a ‘whitey’, and incapable of making a decision”* (P20:851:2). The use of the word “usually” highlights a generalized expectancy of pre-judgment from people older than the participant who are not white. This generalized expectation made them cognizant of their social identities, which in this case were the participants’ youth and whiteness. Since pre-judgment was anticipated, the identities of the individual or group encountered, and the participants’ mental models associated with them, represented the stimulus.

Negative pre-judgments, or stereotype threats (Steele and Aronson, 1995), dominated the research data, with limited cases of positive pre-judgments shared by the participants. Even when positive pre-judgments were shared, these were attributed to qualities about oneself (Kramer, 1994) such as being intelligent or knowledgeable, rather than benefits arising from positive stereotypes arising from their social identities. Only a small minority of participants exhibited cognition of this positive group stereotype. For example, P23 stated: *“ . . . patients of all races would visibly express their relief when they saw that it was me who was seeing and treating them as opposed to my colleague”* (P23:860:2), *“Dr N, who identified as black”* (P23:860:3). *“These moments provided extremely uneasy but stark reminders of my privilege as a white male”* (P23:860:4). These “reminders of privilege” acted as stimuli that heightened cognition of their dominant and privileged group associations.

Interactional examples of interpersonal stimuli that heightened awareness of marginalized social identities ranged from micro-aggressions to physical aggression. Heightening of identity awareness by micro-aggression is empirically proven in academic literature (Meade, 2021) and our participants reinforced this relationship. P6 shared an example in a workspace where it was stated that: *“ . . . we need more testosterone in the lab’ (in reference to hiring new employees), have further heightened my awareness of my identity as a woman in the workspace”* (P6:221:4). P1 linked microaggressions with an identity-related motivation (Vignoles et al., 2006) and shared how experiencing: *“microaggressions that occurred, which subconsciously affected me and lowered my self-esteem”* (P1:205). Not only did these threats when faced by oneself, but also when observed being faced by others with whom the targeted social identity was shared, heightened awareness of the said social identity within the participant. On the other end of aggression, instances that triggered fears of physical violence acutely heightened awareness of the elements of identity/ies that the threats targeted. These were either individual-specific (frequently against marginalized individuals in managerial or leadership positions), generalized across a social identity (frequently against women) or generalized across spaces (most frequently in spaces of transport between spaces). P18 shared: *“ . . . as a middle-aged, colored female, a shift in my intersectional identity occurred as race, which was the predominant identity in the past [during Apartheid] has faded and given rise to a heightened gender identity . . . With its high crime rates, females in general, are more selective on when and how use is made of public transport”* (P18:840:6).

In conclusion, interpersonal interactions that either posed a psychological or physical threat to participants acted as lubricants for the targeted identity to become more fluid and take on a more central or salient intersectional position. However, the more generalized the expectation of such threat from either individuals of certain social identities (e.g. men) or across spaces (e.g. transport specific versus across all spaces), a lower the fluidity response was noted.

Meso-group level. Biological differences were brought to the forefront of our participants’ consciousness when their domain-specific goals were obstructed due to ergonomics. For example, P21 shared: *“our offices’ design does not provide for disabled people; . . . they feel it*

[as their identity] from the moment they enter our premises" (P21:853). Similarly, P6 shared: "Within . . . my identity as a young, Muslim, immigrant, [a] woman of color, usually [being a woman] comes to the forefront of my consciousness, working in the male-dominated pathology industry, particularly in a position that requires a lot of technical work – heavy lifting, manipulation of tissue, handling of electric equipment (bone saws), and heavy containers of chemicals, my inability to do some of the tasks . . . heighten my awareness of . . . being a woman" (P6:860:5). Spaces catered for dominant social groups, which acted as reminders of marginalized social identities.

Similar to ergonomics that obstructed task achievement for the participants, processes, rituals and routinized behaviors in spaces posed a similar obstruction. These ranged from an absence of egalitarian traditions at work, hierarchical structures with unfair representation at different levels of the hierarchy, normalization of workplace aggression, discriminatory practices, etc. P2 shared a workspace-specific scenario: "When customers walked in, the majority being male, they gravitated towards a male salesperson . . . I witnessed customers seeking a second opinion from a male sales staff after receiving a recommendation from a female staff member. The intersectionality of sex and race allowed them to form opinions about intellectual or technical capabilities. This meant that female staff members would have to work much harder to prove their competence." (P2:210). This entailed that the physical spaces associated with such behaviors triggered a heightening of certain social identities, in the above case of gender and race, in such spaces.

While certain meso-level stimuli existed that heightened awareness of one's social identities, the extent of the fluidity of these social identities was determined by their variation across spaces. For example, the availability of safe spaces, where belonging to the social identity did not pose a threat from the surrounding environment, contrasted with unsafe spaces where threats against elements of one's social identity are experienced. This variation lead to the said element of identity becoming fluid. A consistent threat (either low or high) across spaces towards any aspect of one's social identities, as shared by women of a high threat and white, heterosexual men for low threat, led to its relative stability.

Macro-national or global level. Certain stimuli operated at a national level, and the experiences of such stimuli infiltrated virtually all spaces within the country. These were either perpetuated through national leaders, laws and/or belief systems. Since these transgressed spaces, the experiences at a micro-individual level and a meso-group level became similar across spaces. For example, P2 shared: "The former president, who ruled for over three decades, had firm opinions against the LGBTQI + community and would make his opinions abundantly clear" (P2:210:2), and P16 stated: "Homophobia is prevalent in Zimbabwe, with the judicial system perpetuating the persecution of LGBTQIA+ and same-sex couples" (P16:833). In such scenarios, except for small pockets of safe spaces, such as gay bars or clubs, the threat was experienced across all spaces. Since many of such spaces were operated illegally, the legal threat against the participants' sexual identity was felt within safe spaces as well.

Adding to this macro-national level threat were cultural and religious norms, as shared by P23: "the pastor preached that practicing homosexuality is a sin that precludes one from heaven" (P23:860:6). Gender-role associations were shared by participants as operating at a global level that was experienced through interpersonal and inter-group levels, at the family home, where our participants experienced patriarchy (Ross, 1995), to organizations with strong glass-ceiling for women (Xu, 2011), and at the national level that lacks atypical leader representation (Samdanis and Özbilgin, 2020). Similarly, race-based privilege (Steyn and Mpofu, 2001) and internal hegemony (Dharani et al., 2020) were seen as generalized global hierarchies. These macro-level factors led to consistency in experiences across spaces, making these social identities relatively stable. In comparison, race emerged as less static than gender since the family home and communities lacked racial diversity creating some safe spaces within which racial identities could become less central for participants.

Universal power disparity emanating from language was also frequently shared. English is used as a lingua franca in 130 countries worldwide (Melitz, 2018), making English speakers (Flores and Rosa, 2015) and their accents (Roessel et al., 2020) into a global hierarchy that benefits some over others. An exception to this was shared by P9: “*Many of my German colleagues . . . couldn’t speak English fluently and preferred to communicate in German. I did not feel included, and it created a sense of isolation*” (P9:231). Typically, in addition to speaking English, accent-based prejudgment was prevalent (Chakraborty, 2017), as shared by P21: “*I have learned over time that due to my accent . . . in English, people . . . write me off as not intelligent . . . and throw off my suggestions and ideas*” (P21:853:2).

Ways of promoting equity also heightened social identities. These ranged from experiences arising from affirmative action as a means for enhancing equity (Dharani, 2024), movements such as #metoo and #blacklives matter, to subtle reminders of one’s social identity, as shared by P21 who stated: “*The application process . . . required one to tick his/her race . . . I was overwhelmed, regard[ing the emphasis on] . . . skin color*” (P21:853:3). Similarly, macro-level threats targeted invisible identities, such as immigration status. P16 stated that immigration processes (e.g. visa renewals) acted as constant reminders of his status, which was: “*. . . exacerbated by acts of xenophobic violence, and the treatment of migrants around the world*” (P16:833:2). In conclusion, macro-level triggers operated at a national or global level that decreased the fluidity of social identities.

Subjectiveness of experiencing stimuli. Participants originated from a range of homogenous communities to diverse communities. P21 stated: “*. . . coming from a less diverse country like Lesotho, I am yet to meet diverse individuals*” (P21:853:4), while P9 shared: “*Growing up . . . I on many occasions interacted with children that were ‘different’ to me, skin color didn’t matter*” (P9:231:2). Participant 27 shared: “*I did not suffer many identity difficulties as a child. Everyone I knew was black and [of] Ndebele [ethnicity]*” (P27:866). However, growing up in such a racial and ethnic homogenous environment entailed a diffusion status of these identities (Marcia, 1966). As such, when entering new, diverse spaces, diversity acted as stimuli that trigger an acute and previously unprecedented consciousness of these identities, as shared by P15: “*The South African set up was a completely different set up to adapt to. This is the place where I realized with the constant reminder that ‘I am black’*” (P15:830). The extent of diversity in social identities in one’s formative years sets a baseline for comparison of new spaces participants occupied later in life. The relative homogeneity of the social identities during childhood followed by diverse workspaces in adulthood heightened self-awareness of it in participants who were accustomed to a homogenous community in their formative years. For example, P18 shared that “*the spaces traversed during my upbringing such as school, Church and the neighborhood we lived in, allowed very little exposure to racial differences*” (P18:840:1). When referring to her work, she stated: “*. . . the company’s workforce was still very much white-dominated. The minority groups were not allowed to forget who was in charge*” (P18:840:2). She emphasized awareness of her racial identity in comparison to homogenous spaces in her formative years. For the family home, she shared: “*. . . the spaces I navigate at home and amongst family result in the intersectional identity of race losing significance*” (P18:840:3). On the contrary, when sharing her experiences in her neighborhood, she states: “*Moving . . . to a new area occupied predominantly by white people . . . In an instant, the identity of race increased in prominence in my new neighborhood which was never a consideration before*” (P18:840:4). She concludes: “*Drawing from . . . [my] lived experiences, the fluidity of . . . identity is supported, showcasing how identities shift based on the variables encountered in each space*” (P18:840:5). As such, the extent of exposure to other identities in the formative years influenced the subjective perception or sensitivity of stimuli in spaces to identity fluidity where homogeneity in formative years led to fluidity of identities when moving across diverse spaces in later years.

On the contrary, the extent of fixity of identities was subject to experiences that brought them to their consciousness in the formative years. For example, P27 shared: “*My home life*

was inundated with violence because my father beat my mother every other day for various reasons which did not make sense” (P27:866:2). Such experiences of gender-based violence in formative years resulted in a stable gender identity across spaces for the participant. Similarly, another of our participants shared his childhood story when he disappeared from the family home, without the knowledge of his parents to spend time with his childhood friend who was the family’s Black worker’s son: *“After searching, they eventually found me at the farmworker’s house. Being concerned about my whereabouts, they were visibly upset but relieved that I was OK. I consequently received [a] stern talk and was told that having lunch with the worker and his family was inappropriate. Thinking back, I realized now that this incident led me to become aware of racial differences and, to a certain extent, my ‘whiteness’” (P9:231:3).* The participant concludes: *“Being a white male . . . my identity, in the main, remained static” (P9:231:4).* From such examples by our participants, a foreclosed status (Marcia, 1966) of vertical identities leading (Solomon, 2012) to its fixity can be concluded.

Discussion

Although identities are developed during adolescence (Kroger, 2008), they remain responsive to stimuli in the external environment that influences the degree of prominence of domain-specific identities for individual identity, making them appear fluid. Post-adolescent fluidity of identities relates to the flexibility in the degree of centrality and salience of any social identity as a constituent of individual identity. The analysis of factors that influenced the fluidity of social identities revealed that external stimuli that threatened identity-related motives (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006) triggered fluidity. This finding is aligned with empirical evidence available in the literature that links exposure to social threats with self-identity based on regulatory needs (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). For example, one foundational motive behind identity development is of belonging to a group. From an evolutionary perspective, when faced with survival threats, belonging to a group ensures self-preservation (Lähdesmäki *et al.*, 2016). As such, when encountering such physical or psychological threats, the sense of belonging to a group is a regulatory response to the stimuli. In terms of identity fluidity, the regulatory response to the stimulus is one of altering the degree of consciousness regarding the element of identity that supports the belonging motive. The identity-related motive targeted by the stimuli results in a response by the psyche to make the identity that serves the motive a more central element of one’s identity (Batory, 2015). An individual’s identity constitutes multiple elements of domain-specific identities. This psychological movement of the sub-identity within the identity of the individual makes it appear fluid.

Similarly, where belonging needs are satisfied, distinctiveness from the group permits additional psychological benefits. When ego threats are experienced (Neff *et al.*, 2007), the psychological response is one of elevating identities that satisfy the distinctiveness, self-esteem or self-efficacy motives (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006). Similar links can be sketched for continuity and meaning motives to self-perception and meaning threats (Heine *et al.*, 2006). While Batory (2015) found threats to meaning and self-esteem motives to be especially distressing, the research findings suggest that the level of distress is individual- and threat-specific. The nature of the threat determines the targeted identity-related motive/s. For example, social identity stereotype threat, which is found to negatively affect the performance of individuals high in ethnic identification (van Laar *et al.*, 2008), heightens the consciousness of identities that support the belonging motive (e.g. ethnicity) as well as the distinctiveness motive. Additionally, since external stimuli or threats are internally processed, it makes the response subject to internal factors, such as an individual’s core self-evaluated personality traits and the stage of psychological development of the individual (Dharani *et al.*, 2021). For example, someone with high self-esteem is unlikely to experience significant distress when facing threats targeted at identities that are developed for

supporting the identity-related motive of self-esteem, and an individual in the differentiating stage of psychological development (Barrett, 2018) is more likely to experience distress when the belonging-motive is threatened.

Hierarchical nature of stimuli

The more consistent the level of stimuli that target social identity-related motives across spaces, the more stable the regulatory response to it, making it static. This entails that both the lack of threats across spaces and consistency of the degree of threats across spaces lead to the steadiness of the regulatory response, giving an individual the perception of fixity of the said element of identity. As such, macro-national/global level stimuli that, by definition, stretch across spaces result in the fixity of the element of identity. On the contrary, meso-group level stimuli that are space-specific lead to a heightening of one's consciousness about the element of identity targeted in that specific space, which appear fluid if a contrasting degree of stimuli exists in other spaces. For example, the existence of safe spaces (environments in which individuals with marginalized social identity do not experience triggers and can avoid psychological and physical threats targeted at that space) results in differing levels of psychological response, making these elements of identity appear fluid. The existence of safe spaces has been acknowledged in research to signal prejudice in the broader environment (Gainsburg and Earl, 2022), which supports this research's assessment of differing attitudes experienced by such marginalized groups across spaces. On the contrary, a lack of any safe spaces can result in a perceived fixity of the social identity. Lastly, the micro-individual level, if varied across inter-personal experiences and/or across spaces, can lead to greater fluctuations of awareness of certain elements of identity giving them exacerbated fluidity.

While the above presents logical reasoning of fixity or fluidity of elements of identity, psychological generalization of stimuli across groups of people or spaces is more subjective than rational. Due to the significance of psychological perceptions, the extent of fixity or fluidity of social identities can only be partially explained by examining the degree of stability of stimuli across spaces or compartmentalizing stimuli into macro-, meso- and micro-levels (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Instead, identity fluidity is arguably more reliant on psychological perceptions that determine the extent to which stimulus is generalized across individuals and spaces.

Psychological determinants of generalization

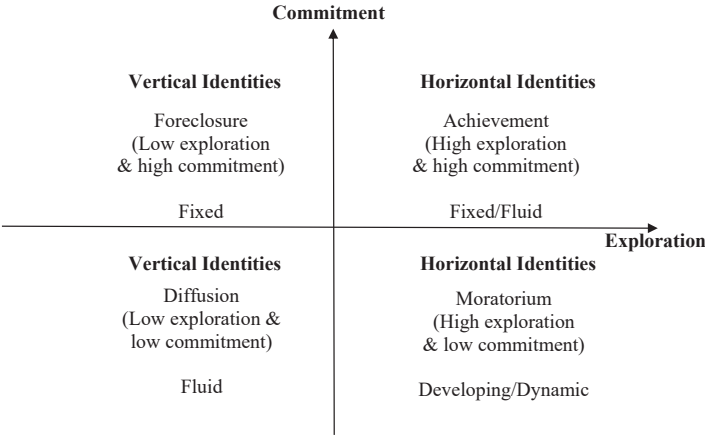
The extent of generalization of stimuli across spaces, which is found by the research to influence the perceived fixity or fluidity of social identities, has been investigated in the literature. In respect of intersectionality that facilitates an understanding of an individual's experiences of oppression or discrimination, fear learning procedures are salient to attenuate fear generalization (McClay *et al.*, 2009). A generalization of discriminatory threats has been proven to follow the intensity of the stimulus (McClay *et al.*, 2009). As such, more intensive threats, such as survival threats, can trigger greater generalization of the threat across individuals, groups and spaces than less intense threats, such as micro-aggressions. However, from a behaviorist perspective (Skinner, 2009), frequent reinforcement (Lejeune *et al.*, 2006) of imposed social identities, even if experienced through less-intense threats in various interpersonal encounters across different spaces such as micro-aggressions, can also contribute to the fixity of social identities. While fear generalization is not solely determined by the similarities between stimuli, this finding suggests fear generalization is associative in nature. Disassociations through discriminative fear learning procedures have empirically been shown to diminish fear generalization (McClay *et al.*, 2009). These can be determined by the pace of individual learning and unlearning and developing and remolding mental models (Dharani and April, 2022) that underpin the extent of generalization across individuals, groups or spaces that support perceptions of fixity of identities.

In addition to the attributes of the external stimuli, internal processing factors can influence the regulatory response and its generalization across individuals and spaces. Since development during one's formative years is psychologically salient for constructing these internal processes, personality attributes and identity development statuses emerge as vital for fluidity versus fixity of identities. The internal assessment of the intensity and consciousness of the frequency of threats are filtered through these personality attributes. For example, the generalization of threats to self-esteem and self-efficacy across spaces that are subject to an assessment of the intensity of the stimulus or its frequency is subject to the individual's baseline core self-evaluation personality traits (Judge and Bono, 2001). In respect of identity development during adolescence, the development of vertical social identities that are imposed by the outside (Clayton and Opatow, 2003) typically require low exploration. This confines these identities to development statuses of foreclosure and diffusion (Marcia, 1966). Foreclosed identities with high commitment achieved during the identity development stage were found to be relatively more fixed than diffused identities that have low commitment. Foreclosed social identities, even when encountering triggering stimuli in the environment, did not lead to implications regarding one's own social identities. For example, an individual with a foreclosed self-identity of being of average height in stature, when surrounded by tall people in an environment as a triggering stimulus, would perceive others as tall, regard it as an exception to the norm and maintain their identity as being average height. On the contrary, a diffused identity status is more likely to respond to the stimulus by regarding themselves as being short.

In the case of diffused identity statuses, these identity categories were imposed upon individuals post their identity development stage, such as black racial identity that may have been inconspicuous due to lack of racial diversity during identity development stages but became significant when the individuals moved to spaces where black identity was imposed on them in new spaces occupied post-adolescence. These findings provide an insight into identity status post-identity development and the fixity or fluidity of these identities, which is diagrammatically shown in Figure 1.

While horizontal identities did not frequently constitute social identities; nonetheless, these are briefly addressed for completeness in the understanding of identity statuses and degrees of fluidity. An inherent nature of horizontal identities is high exploration by individuals. Explored and uncommitted horizontal social identities, in the moratorium status, did not emerge as identities in the data except for those that were under development,

Figure 1.
Marcia's (1966)
status of identity
formation during
adolescence and
Solomon (2012)
concept of vertical and
horizontal identities
classified as either
fixed, fixed/fluid, fluid
or developing/dynamic
by the author



Source(s): Figure by authors

even in their post-adolescence years. As such, these were dynamic in nature. On the contrary, achieved horizontal identities that deviated from vertical identities by horizontal identities frequently posed challenges with family and/or community acceptance. The degree of fixity of horizontal, achieved identities was subject to the degree of acceptance by the family home. P26 stated: “*My home’s . . . liberal environment . . . allows for freedom of speech and social innovation*” (26), an attribute that supported the fixity of the achieved horizontal identities. In the absence of supportive family homes, the participants exhibited incoherence in identities across spaces, making these identities fluid.

Implications for intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (1991) that aided the understanding of multiple sources of oppression for black women in the United States. Due to the macro-global nature of the historically led oppression of the black race and culturally led female gender, it may continue to be largely accurate to regard these identities as fixed. This is evidenced by similar expressions shared by this study’s participants, for example, participant 11 shared: “*Not only did I have to defend myself against the male species, but I also had to defend myself against the white females*” (P11:806) that highlights its relevance today.

While the findings largely support the fluidity of identities, the fixity of female gender and black racial identity was evident from the study’s sample. Nonetheless, implications of identity fluidity on the intersectional framework are significant because (1) The intersectionality framework has been used to understand degrees of privileges beyond black females in the US, many of which are potentially fluid identities. (2) Progress in the field of diversity and inclusion has led to some successes, such as in the case of homosexuality which was deemed an illness (Solomon, 2012) and is now, arguably, increasingly becoming an accepted identity group in certain industries and areas within cities. Even for black women, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, affirmative action and workplace policy changes that aim to address diversity, inclusion, equity and justice can be expected to, at the least, develop small pockets of “safe spaces” where threatening stimuli towards individuals at the intersection of these social identities would be limited. Such “safe spaces” can cause identities to become more fluid. (3) Polarization of sentiments regarding diversity and inclusion, similar to political polarization between left- and right wings, is evident in numerous countries. Such polarized positions support the inconsistency of stimuli across spaces for marginalized identities that trigger its fluidity. (4) With the increased pace of change, volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, well-established historically- and culturally constructed hierarchies (Dharani *et al.*, 2020) are increasingly being challenged and molded. (5) Globalization and transnationalism have led to increasingly varied spaces worldwide being occupied by the same individual (Calás *et al.*, 2013). These spaces differ in historical contexts, cultures, leadership stances and subsequently not only societal hierarchies that position individuals differently on hierarchies of privilege are different, but the social categorization of certain people in different spaces can vary. This was shared by Participant 15, who stated: “*I now understand why South Africa is called ‘the white man’s world’ and in DRC [The Democratic Republic of Congo] the ‘Man’s world’*” (P15:830:2). (6) The emergence of virtual spaces due to social media and remote working practices present a novel online space of existence for individuals. With multiple intersections being researched, support for some “safe spaces,” shifting hierarchies, varied positions of privilege across spaces and the emergence of new online spaces, it is questionable if the intersectional framework, as it exists currently and is popularly used, can be applied across the board. It can be expected that complexification of the framework that not only facilitates investigations at the intersection of identities but also across spaces (inter-space intersectionality) that are changing (inter-space, dynamic intersectionality) would

need to be developed to address the changing landscape and varied exposures across changing landscape for assessing positions of privilege and oppression experienced by certain social groups or individuals.

For theories to stay ahead of practice, the time for theoretical complexification of the intersectional framework may be here. However, some currently prominent factors raise the question of whether the time for its application has arrived yet. Some vital factors of the world today include: (1) Socially imposed identities that are in “diffused” status were found to be more fluid from the study’s analysis. This status of identity development emerged from formative years spent in relatively secluded, homogenous communities. Globalization and interconnectivity are decreasing the existence of such spaces. As such, the fluidity of elements of social identities can be expected to decrease with increasing awareness of one’s globalized social categorizations. (2) Existence of safe spaces was found to be limited to close friend-circle for most participants and the family home for some participants. Inconsistency of stimuli to induce fluidity of social identities requires more numerous and adequate safe spaces for marginalized identities. Since the development of numerous safe spaces presents a long road ahead, limited fluidity of social identities can be foreseen in the near future. (3) Psychological subjectivity of generalizing threats across spaces is seeded in one’s formative years. This entails that changing such psychological perceptions can be expected to occur over generations, leaving identities to remain stable till such a psychological shift is socially prominent. (4) The intensity of threatening stimuli that support generalization is marked by some of the greatest atrocities witnessed by the world, such as the transatlantic slave trade and the Holocaust. As such, founded on these intense examples of aggression, generalizations of stimuli across spaces are also intense. (5) Privilege remains largely unrecognized amongst the privileged, with benefits arising from it being attributed to self (Dykema *et al.*, 1996) rather than from belonging to an identity. This makes hierarchies rigid and discrimination prevalent which is unaccommodating for the evolution of spaces in favor of the oppressed. A response to it by the marginalized is to develop and leverage identities that are higher on the hierarchy of privilege to compensate for positions of oppression, as shared by Participant 8, who stated: “*my . . . accent has provided me with the privilege to be divorced from the stereotypes of ignorance and laziness that . . . [is] often ascribe to blacks*” (P8:226). Based on current world factors, the application of the intersectional framework for an overwhelming majority of marginalized social identities remains relevant.

Conclusion

Due to evidence of the fluidity of identities, the use of the intersectional framework requires context-specific investigations. Most research leveraging intersectionality as a framework already addresses the setting and limits findings to it. It is recommended that in addition to strictly limiting the context, limitations arising from internal processes such as (1) participants’ personality traits, (2) their baseline of identity fluidity arising from their formative years, (3) diffused identity status (Marcia, 1966) of social identities of the participants, (4) stage of psychological development, or (5) extent of generalized threat to their identity/ies across spaces or groups are assessed. Limitations also arise from external factors such as (1) instability of stimuli that lead to varying levels of threats against identity-related motives across spaces, (2) shifting social hierarchies of privilege due to progression or regression of the general aims of diversity and inclusion, (3) new domains experienced that trigger development of new identities and (4) exposure to alternative hierarchies of privileges due to trans-national or trans-cultural lifestyle (Calás *et al.*, 2013). These external triggers processed internally cause identity fluidity which can have consequences for applying intersectionality framework. Assessing implications of the above on research findings is vital before drawing research conclusions.

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