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# The Effects of Multiple Identities on Psychological Well-Being

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*The authors propose that the effects of multiple identities on psychological well-being depend on the number of identities, importance of those identities, and relationship between them. Specifically, this model predicts that when identities are highly important, having many versus few identities leads to greater psychological well-being if the identities are in harmony with each other—providing resources and expecting similar behaviors—but leads to lower psychological well-being if the identities conflict with each other—depleting resources and expecting incompatible behaviors. However, when identities are less important, neither the number of identities nor identity harmony should affect well-being. The authors further propose that emotions corresponding to self-perceptions of actual/ought self-discrepancies mediate these effects. Results supported this model. The authors discuss implications of this model for well-being in the context of the increasing social complexity of modern life.*

**Keywords:** *identities; roles; multiple; self-complexity; self-concept*

He has as many social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares. . . . From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting . . . or it may be a harmonious division of labor.

(James, 1890, p. 294)

As James (1890) suggests, people belong to multiple social groups and can navigate the demands of these social groups with ease or difficulty. The ability to navigate one's constellation of social groups has become an

important issue for many people given the increasing social complexity of modern society. Women build successful careers in addition to their traditional familial responsibilities. Men do more nurturing at home than ever before while still pursuing their careers. To be admitted to college, high school students must not only do well in school but also play sports, volunteer, and have a social life (Rimer, 2007). More and more people have multiple racial and ethnic identities (Root, 1996). Researchers investigating the effects of multiple identities have reached conflicting conclusions regarding

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whether multiple identities increase versus decrease well-being. We present and test a new model that reconciles the conflict. Research on multiple identities and psychological well-being draws from a wide array of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and women's studies, and researchers in these disciplines use different terminology—*social roles*, *social identities*—to describe the effects of identities on well-being. The term *identity* in this article refers to both social roles and social identities.

### *Contrasting Evidence on the Association Between Number of Identities and Well-Being*

Some theories and research suggest that having more identities leads to better mental health. For example, self-complexity—the number and distinctiveness of self-aspects that make up a person's self-concept—has been associated with better mental health (for a recent review, see Koch & Shepperd, 2004). Specifically, self-complexity inhibits “spillover” from negative events in one dimension of the self to the rest of the self (Linville, 1985, 1987), provides more ways for a person to self-affirm (Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992), and correlates with lower depression (Gara et al., 1993). Similarly, other theorists have proposed that identities provide resources and thus lead to greater well-being (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974). Some empirical research supports this theory (for reviews, see Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Thoits, 2003). For example, a study of Chicago residents found that self-reports of more identities corresponded to lower reports of anxiety and depression (Menaghan, 1989).

In contrast, other self-complexity and identity research suggests that having more identities lowers well-being. Self-complexity has been associated with greater depression (Gara et al., 1993; Woolfolk, Novalany, Gara, Allen, & Polino, 1995) and longer depressive episodes (Woolfolk et al., 1999). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis of the self-complexity literature found an overall slightly negative relationship between self-complexity and well-being and great variation in positive and negative effect sizes across studies, suggesting that moderators of the self-complexity–well-being relationship likely exist (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002). Similarly, some identity researchers have argued that having more identities lowers well-being because they deplete limited time and energy by expecting incompatible behaviors (role conflict) and demanding too much overall effort (role overload; Coser, 1974; Goode, 1960; Gove, 1984; Merton, 1957). In line with these hypotheses, some studies have found that having more identities is associated with greater role conflict and role overload compared to having fewer identities

(for reviews, see Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Doress-Worters, 1994), and such role conflict and role overload lead to lower psychological well-being (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Coverman, 1989; O'Driscoll, Ilgen, & Hildreth, 1992).

To summarize, research on the link between multiple identities and psychological well-being has produced mixed results but has not explained why multiple identities sometimes increase and other times decrease well-being. This is the objective of the present article. We hypothesize that the impact of the number of identities on psychological well-being depends on the relationship between and importance of those identities. Specifically, we propose that having more identities leads to higher well-being when identities facilitate one another but lower well-being when identities conflict with one another, especially for important identities. We also expect that emotions corresponding to self-perceptions of actual/ought self-discrepancies mediate this effect. Specifically, we posit that when people perceive that they are not meeting obligations associated with their important identities, they feel negative emotions. In support of these predictions, we next highlight research that has explored moderators of the association between number of identities and psychological well-being.

### *Identity Harmony*

Theories and research examining the relationship between number of identities and well-being have yielded competing predictions. Some research suggests a positive relationship (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974; Thoits, 1983), arguing that identities provide resources that help people fulfill their multiple obligations. Other research suggests a negative relationship (Coser, 1974; Goode, 1960; Menaghan, 1989; Merton, 1957), arguing that multiple identities conflict or compete with one another for limited resources. For example, the *role meaning hypothesis* (Simon, 1995) suggests that multiple identities lead to better well-being if they require similar behaviors but lead to lower well-being if they require different behaviors. Similarly, Settles, Sellers, and Damas (2002) found that interference—difficulty fulfilling the expectations of multiple roles—between student and athlete roles was related to lower well-being. Based on the implicit and direct evidence that suggests the importance of considering the harmony between identities, we propose that identities may either facilitate or conflict with each other, and this may determine whether having more identities increases or decreases well-being. In particular, we predict that having many identities that facilitate each other increases well-being, but having many identities that conflict decreases well-being.

### *Importance of Identities*

A number of theorists have suggested that identities vary in importance (sometimes called *salience* or *centrality*) to a person (Stryker & Serpe, 1982, 1994). Some research suggests that higher identification with groups is associated with higher well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Cameron, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). Other theorists have suggested a moderating effect of identification—only events related to important identities should affect well-being (Burke, 1991; Thoits, 1991). For example, Barnett, Raudenbush, Brennan, Pleck, and Marshall (1995) found that the importance of marital identity moderated the effect of change in marital quality on psychological distress (anxiety and depression) over time. Married people who perceived their marital identity as important experienced lower distress when the quality of their marriage identity increased and greater distress when the quality of their marriage decreased compared to people who viewed their marital identity as unimportant. Thus, we suggest that the subjective importance of identities helps determine their effects on psychological well-being.

### *Combined Effects of Harmony and Importance*

Some research suggests that identity harmony and importance may interact to predict well-being. Settles (2004) found that interference between woman and scientist identities did not affect depression levels when neither of the identities was central to the self-concept but did predict higher depression when either or both identities were central. Similarly, Noor (2004) studied employed British women and found that work-interfering-with-family conflict predicted higher psychological distress only when the work identity was highly salient.

### *Combined Effects of Number, Harmony, and Importance*

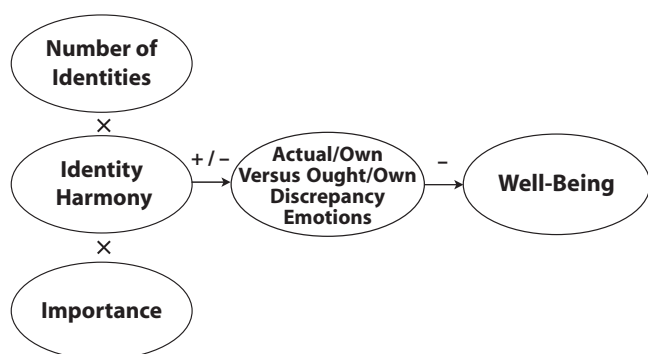
Integrating these perspectives, we predict that the effect of number of identities on psychological well-being depends on both the importance of and harmony between those identities. We expect that those who have conflicting important identities are likely to experience lower psychological well-being as the number of important conflicting identities increase. Conversely, we predict that those who have facilitative important identities will experience greater psychological well-being as the number of important facilitative identities increase. For those who have unimportant identities, we only expect a main effect of identity harmony, such that conflicting unimportant identities will be associated with lower psychological well-being and facilitating unimportant identities will be associated with greater well-being, regardless of number of identities.

### *Mediation by Self-Discrepancy Related Emotions*

Drawing upon self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and identity-discrepancy theory (Large & Marcussen, 2000; Marcussen, 2006), we further hypothesize that self-discrepancy-related emotions mediate the interactive effect of number of identities, identity harmony, and importance on well-being. According to self-discrepancy theory, the self has multiple representations. The actual self represents the attributes and traits one actually has, the ideal self reflects attributes one would like to have, and the ought self represents the attributes one feels one should have. Also, an individual can think of these representations from a self or significant other perspective. Self-discrepancies are the perceived differences between the actual self and the ideal and ought selves. In general, discrepancies between the actual self and ideal self are associated with dejection-related emotions and discrepancies between the actual self and the ought self are associated with agitation-related emotions (Higgins, 1987).

We hypothesize that emotions based on self-perceptions of ought self-discrepancies—guilt, self-contempt, and uneasiness—mediate the effect of the three-way interaction of number of identities, identity harmony, and importance on psychological well-being (Figure 1). Highly important, but not unimportant, identities place strong behavioral expectations on people (for recent reviews, see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Fleming & Petty, 2000) and produce inner turmoil when they require conflicting behaviors (cf. Noor, 2004; Settles, 2004). The more people's important identities conflict, the less they may be able to fulfill obligations to their identities, thus increasing negative emotions corresponding to self-perceived ought self-discrepancies. As the number of highly important conflicting identities increase, so may self-perceived ought self-discrepancies, and their corresponding emotions, thus decreasing well-being. In contrast, if many highly important identities provide resources that help fulfill the expectations of the others, having more highly important identities may actually make it easier to fulfill the expectations of all the identities, reducing guilt, self-contempt, and uneasiness and thus increasing well-being. But for less important identities, we do not expect that identity harmony and number of identities will interact to predict ought self-discrepancy-related emotions and well-being because the expectations of these identities are not linked to strong behavioral demands.

In sum, we propose that identities may either facilitate or conflict with each other, and we suggest that this identity harmony (i.e., facilitation or conflict) will determine when having a greater number of identities leads to higher or lower well-being. Moreover, these effects should be stronger when the identities are highly important than when they are less important. We also expect



**Figure 1** Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance mediated by discrepancy emotions model.

emotions associated with actual/ought discrepancies from one's own perspective to mediate these effects. Thus, we predict a Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction predicting psychological well-being, mediated by emotions related to self-perceived ought discrepancies.

## OVERVIEW OF PRESENT STUDY

The present study extends previous research in several ways. First, we evaluate the correlates and process by which number of identities, identity harmony, and importance are associated with psychological well-being in the same study. Second, we allow participants to freely list their identities. Some research on multiple identities has constrained the number and type of identities that participants can list, in order to examine particular types and configurations of identities. However, some have argued that such an approach may bias results (Allison, 1991; Koch & Shepperd, 2004). The present study attempts to examine multiple identities broadly, and thus we allow participants to freely list up to 12 of their own identities and to rate both the importance of and facilitation or conflict between the identities they listed.

## METHOD

### *Participants and Design*

Three hundred seventy-two undergraduates from a large Midwestern research university participated in this study for course credit. Participants had to list at least two identities in order to have an identity harmony score, so our analyses included only those who listed two or more identities. An additional 50 people participated

but only listed one identity, so they were not included in the analyses. An additional 15 people were not included in the analyses because of their responses to the number measure (identity listing). One listed mostly items that were clearly not identities (e.g., "part of the ocean, not just a wave"). Also, 13 people mistakenly listed multiple identities in a single response box (usually the first box) rather than one per box, which invalidated their measures of relationship and importance. One additional person was not presented with the identity listing at all due to a computer malfunction.

The study included 56.2% females and 41.7% males. Participants were on average 19.1 years old, with a standard deviation of 1.3 years. The most common ethnicity was Caucasian (66.7%), followed by Asian American (12.9%), African American (8.1%), Mixed Heritage (4.0%), Latino American (2.7%), Native American (0.3%), and Other (3.2%). The vast majority of participants were not married (97.1%) and were not parents (95.7%). Most participants (91.4%) had lived in the United States for more than 10 years, 0.8% had lived here 6 to 10 years, while 5.6% had lived here for 5 years or fewer. The percentages in the text only add up to 97.8% because 8 participants (2.2%) were missing demographic data. An additional 11 participants entered an invalid value for the fill-in-the-blank age question, so they are not included in the age summary.

### *Procedure*

Upon arriving at the lab, participants signed a consent form that explained that they would complete a series of questions about groups they belong to and their social roles. Participants then sat down at computers separated by dividers, which provided privacy. The computer presented all questionnaires, using MediaLab experimental software. Participants listed their identities and then completed scales measuring importance of each identity, identity harmony, discrepancy-related emotions, and psychological well-being. Finally, they completed demographic items. When participants finished the questionnaire, the experimenter debriefed, thanked, and dismissed them.

### *Predictor Variables*

*Number of identities.* The computer prompted participants to list all of their important identities (i.e., group memberships and social roles). The prompt read: "We all have various aspects of our identity and how we think about ourselves. Some of these are related to groups, such as gender, race/ethnicity, religion, politics, nationality, sports teams, work, social/academic clubs, families, friends, and so forth. Others are related to roles, such as student, sibling, parent, employee, friend,

significant other, club or team member, and so on. For example, Christy is a friend, sister, African American, psychology major, member of the student council, member of the track team and member of a sorority. Think about the aspects of your identity that are IMPORTANT TO YOU and list them on the next few screens. . . . When you feel like you are straining to list aspects, it is probably a good time to stop.”

We conducted a pretest to determine the typical range of the number of identities people in this population listed. In pretesting, 159 participants were allowed to list as many identities as they liked. The number listed ranged from 0 to 15, with a median of 6. Only 4.1% ( $N = 5$ ) of participants listed more than 12 identities, and 8.8% ( $N = 14$ ) listed 12 identities. Due to this pretest data and constraints of the software used, participants could list up to 12 identities. Only 9% of participants listed 12 identities, similar to the corresponding percentage in pretesting. Participants typed each social identity in a text box and then were asked, “Do you have more groups or roles to list?” They indicated whether or not they had more groups or roles to list by responding yes or no. If they responded yes, they were presented with another box in which they could list another social identity. Once they responded no (or had listed 12 identities), they were forwarded to the questionnaire asking them to rate the importance of the identities they had listed.

*Importance of identities.* We measured the importance of each identity by asking participants to complete the four-item Importance to Identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). MediaLab software inserted the name of each identity participants had listed into these questions. The four items read: “Overall, my group membership [identity listed was inserted here] has very little to do with how I feel about myself” (reversed), “The group [insertion] I belong to is an important reflection of who I am,” “The group [insertion] I belong to is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am” (reversed), and “In general, belonging to this group [insertion] is an important part of my self-image.” Responses were made using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Participants answered these four questions for each of the identities they listed in turn. For each identity, responses to each of the four importance items were internally consistent ( $\alpha$ s ranged from .81 to .90 with a mean  $\alpha$  of .86), and thus we averaged them to create an importance score for each identity. Then, we averaged each participant’s importance scores for each identity to obtain an average importance score across all identities listed (mean  $\alpha$  across all identities = .59<sup>1</sup>).

*Identity harmony.* We measured participants’ perceptions of the harmony between their identities using three pairwise items. We presented participants with the names of two identities they had listed and a response scale. They repeated this procedure for all pairs of the identities they had listed. The first response scale, developed by Tompson and Werner (1997), read: (–2) “Membership in one group or role has a very harmful or conflictual effect on the other” to (2) “Membership in one group or role has a very facilitative or helpful effect on the other.” The second response scale read: (–2) “Membership in one group or role always takes up so much time and energy that it makes it hard to fulfill the expectations of the other group or role” to (2) “Membership in one group or role always frees up time and energy for me to fulfill the expectations of the other group or role.” The third response scale read: (–2) “The two groups or roles always expect conflicting behaviors from me” to (2) “The two groups or roles always expect the same behaviors from me” and was prefaced by instructions that specified that “Behaviors include concrete actions, such as working on campaigns, showing up to athletic practice, and taking exams, as well as less concrete behaviors such as acting friendly, shy, or aggressive.” Responses to the three pairwise items were internally consistent for each pair of identities (mean  $\alpha = .68$ ), so we averaged them to calculate an overall identity harmony score between each pair of identities. We then calculated the average of the identity harmony between each pair of identities for each participant (mean  $\alpha$  across all identities = .82<sup>2</sup>), in order to control for the number of pairs of identities.

### Mediator

*Self-discrepancy-related emotions.* We assessed the unique emotions that have been empirically shown to result from each of the four types of self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987; Strauman & Higgins, 1987) by adapting a measure of affect developed by Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, and Elliot (1991). We dropped several items that were neither consistent with the others in Devine and colleagues’ analysis nor corresponded to specific self-discrepancies and added several items to better measure emotions related to ought self-discrepancies. The adapted scale included 37 affect items. For each item, we asked participants to indicate the degree to which it described their current feelings using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *does not apply at all* (1) to *applies very much* (7). We divided the affect items into four groups consisting of the unique emotional consequences of each type of self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987; Strauman & Higgins, 1987). Not all of the affect items were used in the groupings and no item was used in more than one grouping. Responses to the items in each

subscale were internally consistent and were averaged<sup>3</sup> to create the scale scores.

We expected emotions linked to actual/own versus ought/own self-discrepancies—guilt, self-contempt, and uneasiness (Higgins, 1987)—to mediate the effect of the three-way interaction on well-being. Accordingly, the actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions scale contained the following seven items: guilty, disgusted with myself, angry at myself, annoyed at myself, self-critical, uneasy, and uncomfortable ( $\alpha = .90$ ). We also measured emotions related to the other three types of self-discrepancies to evaluate whether the mediation of the three-way interaction was unique to actual/own versus ought/own self-discrepancies. Emotions related to actual/own versus ought/other discrepancies—fear, threat, and resentment (Higgins, 1987; Strauman & Higgins, 1987)—were measured with five items: angry at others, irritated with others, disgusted with others, threatened, and fearful ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Emotions related to actual/own versus ideal/own discrepancies—disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration (Higgins, 1987)—were measured with two items: disappointed with myself and frustrated ( $r = .65$ ). Emotions related to actual/own versus ideal/other discrepancies—embarrassment and shame (Higgins, 1987)—were measured with two items: embarrassed and shame ( $r = .59$ ).

#### Outcome Variable

We measured four aspects of psychological well-being. First, we measured depression with the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale for nonclinical populations (Radloff, 1977). For this scale, participants responded to items such as “During the past week, I felt sad” using a 7-point scale ranging from *rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)* (1) to *most or all of the time (5–7 days)* (7). Second, we measured anxiety with Bradley and Lewis’s (1990) six-item anxiety subscale, which asked participants to indicate how much items such as “I feel nervous and anxious” applied to them in the past few weeks using a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* (0) to *all of the time* (3). Third, we measured well-being with Bradley and Lewis’s six-item Well-Being subscale, which asked participants to indicate how much items such as “I have been happy, satisfied, or pleased with my personal life” applied to them in the past few weeks using the same 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* (0) to *all of the time* (3). Finally, we measured perceived stress with the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). For this scale, participants responded to items such as “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and ‘stressed’?” using a 5-point scale ranging from *never* (0) to *very often* (4).

We reversed the depression, anxiety, and perceived stress scores so that higher numbers indicated higher well-being. The scores on the four scales were highly internally consistent ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and highly correlated with each other ( $r_s > .60$ ,  $p_s < .001$ ) so they were standardized and averaged. This average was then standardized so that the regression predictor would be standardized and main effects could be interpreted (Aiken & West, 1991).

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) of predictor and outcome variables are presented in Table 1, and correlations are presented in Table 2. Average importance scores were high, ranging from moderately important to highly important. Range of this variable is somewhat restricted, which could make it harder to see its effects.

Average relationship scores indicate that people’s identities tended to facilitate each other,  $t(371) = 13.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = .33$ . Women reported a significantly higher number,  $t(362) = 4.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = 7.01$ , and importance,  $t(362) = 2.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 5.53$ , of identities and had lower well-being,  $t(362) = -3.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M = -.16$ , and higher actual/own versus ideal/own discrepancy-related emotions,  $t(362) = 2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 3.83$ , than did men ( $M_s = 5.64, 5.38, 0.20$ , and  $3.47$ , respectively). People of color reported having significantly fewer,  $t(362) = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 5.95$ , but more facilitating,  $t(362) = 2.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = .41$ , identities than did Caucasians ( $M_s = 6.65$  and  $.29$ , respectively). People of color also reported significantly lower well-being,  $t(362) = -2.58$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = -.18$ , significantly more actual/own versus ideal/own,  $t(362) = 2.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 3.97$ , and actual/own versus ideal/other,  $t(362) = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M = 2.60$ , discrepancy-related emotions and marginally more actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions,  $t(362) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $M = 3.27$ , than did Caucasians ( $M_s = 0.08, 3.54, 2.21$ , and  $2.99$ , respectively).

We also tested for gender and ethnicity differences in the results by regressing well-being on gender and the interactions of gender with all the main effects and interactions of number, identity harmony, and importance, then regressing well-being on ethnicity (Caucasian vs. people of color) and all interactions with number, identity harmony, and importance. Despite the gender and ethnicity differences in some of the predictors and well-being, there were no interactions of gender or ethnicity with any of the main effects or interactions of number, identity harmony, and importance ( $\beta_s = -.16$  to  $.12$ ,  $p_s > .19$ ). Thus, neither gender nor ethnicity moderated the effects of number, identity harmony, or importance on well-being.

**TABLE 1:** Descriptives of Predictors and Outcome Variables

	N	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Number of identities <sup>a</sup>	422	5.82	3.26	1.00	12.00
Identity harmony	372	0.33	0.48	-1.67	2.00
Importance of identities	372	5.47	0.71	2.81	7.00
Psychological well-being	372	0.00	0.88	-2.86	1.98
Actual/own versus ideal/own emotions	372	3.67	1.66	1.00	7.00
Actual/own versus ideal/other emotions	372	2.33	1.33	1.00	7.00
Actual/own versus ought/own emotions	372	3.07	1.33	1.00	7.00
Actual/own versus ought/other emotions	372	2.29	1.08	1.00	6.00

a. For the 50 participants who listed only one identity and were not included in the analyses due to their lack of a harmony score, the average importance of their identity was 4.93 (range from 2.75 to 7), and average well-being score was -.05 (range from -2.24 to 1.57).

**TABLE 2:** Pearson Product-Moment Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Number of identities	1.00							
2. Identity harmony	0.09*	1.00						
3. Importance of identities	0.05	0.26***	1.00					
4. Psychological well-being	0.08	0.16***	-0.01	1.00				
5. Actual/own versus ideal/own emotions	-0.04	-0.13**	0.04	-0.70***	1.00			
6. Actual/own versus ideal/other emotions	-0.08	-0.06	0.01	-0.50***	0.64***	1.00		
7. Actual/own versus ought/own emotions	-0.06	-0.06	0.05	-0.67***	0.83***	0.77***	1.00	
8. Actual/own versus ought/other emotions	-0.07	-0.11**	-0.03	-0.47***	0.51***	0.47***	0.56***	1.00

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

### Overview of Multiple Regression Analyses

We tested our hypotheses using multiple regression. All variables were continuous, so we standardized them and formed interaction terms multiplicatively, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991).<sup>4</sup> Then, we regressed well-being on number of identities, identity harmony, importance, and the two-way and three-way interactions between these variables. When interactions were significant, simple effects within each identity harmony (1 *SD* above and below the mean) and importance (1 *SD* above and below the mean) combination were assessed using the method suggested by Aiken and West.

In addition, as a complementary method of breaking down the three-way Number  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction, we examined the effects of number and relationship of each person's highly important versus moderately important identities separately, *within each person*. This within-person analysis reduces the possibility that the moderating effect of importance is simply due to differences between the kinds of people who list highly important versus moderately important identities. A majority (1,764; 73.3%) of identities listed were highly important—an average endorsement of 5 (*agree somewhat*) or higher that the identity is important. Only a very small percentage (135; 5.6%) were unimportant—an average endorsement of 3 (*disagree somewhat*) or lower that the identity is important.

Therefore, for the within-participants analysis, we coded each identity for each participant as either highly important if importance was 5 (*agree somewhat*) or higher or as low to moderately important if importance was less than 5, since there were not enough truly unimportant ( $\leq 3$ ) identities to analyze Number  $\times$  Identity Harmony effects for those identities separately. Then we calculated the number of highly important identities and the number of low to moderately important identities for each participant. We also calculated separate identity harmony (average pairwise relationship) scores for each person's highly important and low to moderately important identities.

We then used the three-equation method detailed by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005) to test whether emotions linked to actual/own versus ought/own self-discrepancies mediated the interactive effects of number of identities, identity harmony, and importance predicting psychological well-being. Lower order effects are presented first.

### Psychological Well-Being

Results of the multiple regression predicting well-being are presented in Table 3. People whose identities facilitated each other had higher psychological well-being than those whose identities conflicted with each other. This was qualified by a Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity

**TABLE 3:** Well-Being Predicted by Number of Identities, Identity Harmony, and Importance

Variable	Well-Being	
	$\beta$	t
Number of identities	.02	0.44
Identity harmony	.23***	3.43
Importance	-.08	-1.58
Number $\times$ Harmony	.12**	2.11
Harmony $\times$ Importance	-.02	-0.30
Number $\times$ Importance	-.07	-1.43
Number $\times$ Harmony $\times$ Importance	.08**	2.02

NOTE: All variables were standardized before analyses.  
\*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Harmony interaction. Having more identities marginally predicted higher well-being for people whose identities facilitated each other ( $\beta = .16, t = 1.88, p = .06$ ) but not for people whose identities conflicted with each other ( $\beta = -.09, t = 1.08, p = .28$ ). Supporting our model, these effects were qualified by a Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction (see Figure 2). We explored the pattern of this interaction using both the Aiken and West (1991) and within-participants analysis methods, described earlier. As the results in Table 4 demonstrate, the results were virtually the same using both methods, though the significance levels vary slightly.

*Number and identity harmony of highly important identities.* A main effect of identity harmony of important identities revealed that having important facilitating identities predicted greater well-being than having important conflicting identities. This was qualified by the expected Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony interaction (see Figure 2, top). Simple slope analyses for the main effects of number revealed that having a greater number of important facilitative identities predicted greater psychological well-being, but having a greater number of important conflicting identities predicted lower psychological well-being.

*Number and identity harmony of low to moderately important identities.* For low to moderately important identities, only a main effect of identity harmony occurred, indicating having low to moderately important facilitating identities predicted higher well-being than having low to moderately important conflicting identities (see Figure 2, bottom).

*Self-Discrepancy-Related Emotions as a Mediator*

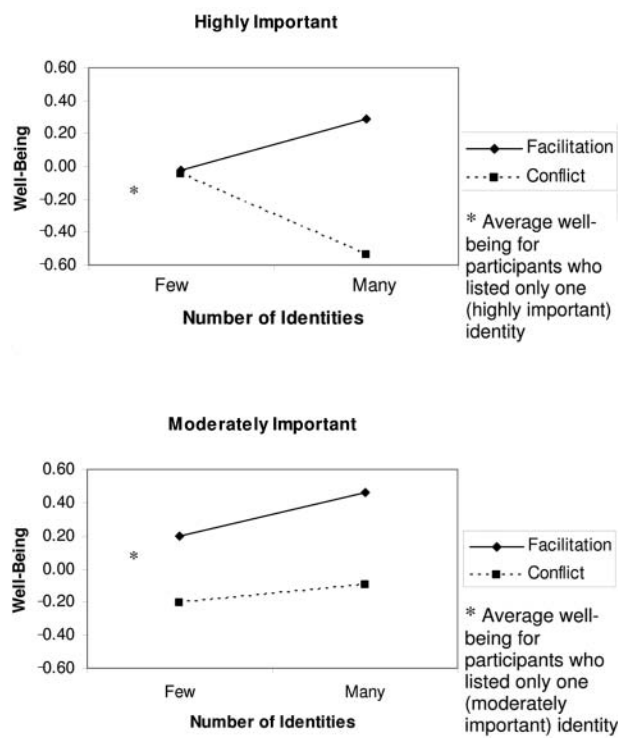
Next we examined whether the Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction predicting psychological well-being was mediated by emotions related to actual/own versus ought/own self-discrepancies (Figure 3), using the method detailed by Muller et al.

**TABLE 4:** Effects of Number of Identities and Identity Harmony for Highly Important Versus Low to Moderately Important Identities Separately

Variable	Well-Being	
	$\beta$	t
Important (between-person)		
Number	-.05	-0.63
Harmony	.21***	3.13
Number $\times$ Harmony	.20***	3.38
Simple slope analysis for number		
Facilitating identities	.16*	1.91
Conflicting identities	-.25**	-2.35
Moderate (between-person)		
Number	.09	1.33
Harmony	.24**	2.50
Number $\times$ Harmony	.04	0.49
Important (within-person)		
Number	.02	0.34
Harmony	.17***	2.93
Number $\times$ Harmony	.17***	2.71
Simple slope analysis for number		
Facilitating identities	.17**	2.12
Conflicting identities	-.17*	-1.90
Low to moderate (within-person)		
Number	.04	0.58
Harmony	.19*	1.89
Number $\times$ Harmony	-.03	-0.23

NOTE: All variables were standardized before analyses.  
\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

(2005). We already established that the three-way interaction predicts the dependent variable, psychological well-being. Next, we regressed self-discrepancy-related emotions on the three-way interaction and all lower order terms. As expected, the three-way interaction did not predict actual/own versus ought/other, ideal/own, or ideal/other discrepancy-related emotions (Table 5). Thus, none of these emotions mediated the effect of the three-way interaction on well-being. However, the three-way interaction did predict actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions (Table 5). We next entered the Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction (with all lower order terms), actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions, and all two-way and three-way interactions between these discrepancy-related emotions, identity harmony, and importance into the regression model predicting well-being (Figure 3). As expected, the effect of the three-way Number of Identities  $\times$  Identity Harmony  $\times$  Importance interaction on well-being was no longer significant, whereas the effect of actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions was highly significant. None of the interactions of discrepancy-related emotions with identity harmony or importance were significant ( $\beta s = -.03$  to  $.03, ps > .38$ ).

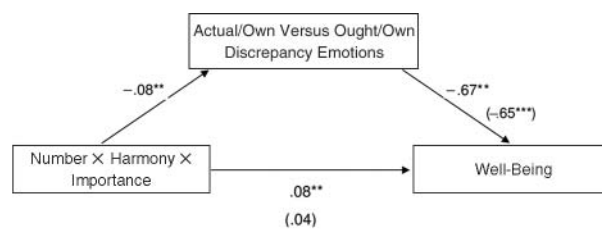


**Figure 2** The effect of number of identities, identity harmony, and importance on psychological well-being.

Thus, actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy-related emotions *fully mediated* the effect of the three-way Number of Identities × Identity Harmony × Importance interaction on well-being.

**DISCUSSION**

Replicating and extending previous research, we found that the association between the number of identities and psychological well-being depends on both the harmony between the identities and their importance to the person’s self-concept. Having highly important identities that facilitated each other was associated with greater psychological well-being when participants had more identities compared to those who had fewer identities. However, having highly important identities that conflicted with each other was associated with lower psychological well-being when participants had more identities compared to those who had fewer identities. For low to moderately important identities, only a main effect of identity harmony occurred, such that a more facilitating relationship between identities was associated with greater psychological well-being. There was also an overall main effect of identity harmony, consistent with previous research showing that having facilitating



**Figure 3** Mediation of the Number of Identities × Identity Harmony × Importance interaction predicting psychological well-being.

NOTE: All terms were standardized before running analyses, and numbers are standardized beta coefficients. We tested mediated moderation using the method detailed by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005). Numbers in parentheses are coefficients with three-way interaction and actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy emotions entered simultaneously. This final equation also included all main effects and two-way interactions of number, harmony, and importance and two-way and three-way interactions between actual/own versus ought/own discrepancy emotions, harmony, and importance. \*\**p* < .05. \*\*\**p* < .01.

identities predicts higher well-being than having conflicting identities (Settles et al., 2002; Simon, 1995). However, in the present study, this effect was qualified by the three-way interaction with number of identities and importance. In contrast with some previous research (Branscombe et al., 1999; Cameron, 1999; Jetten et al., 2001), there was no main effect of importance on well-being, perhaps because we measured importance across many different identities rather than importance of only one identity. In sum, the present results clarify the conditions under which number of identities, identity harmony, and importance predict higher or lower well-being.

Furthermore, the present results clarify the process by which these effects occur. Specifically, we proposed and found that the interactive effects of number, identity harmony, and importance of identities on well-being was mediated by emotions resulting from discrepancies between actual/own and ought/own standards (i.e., guilt, self-contempt, and uneasiness). These results suggest that increasing numbers of highly important facilitating identities are associated with higher well-being because they lower emotions related to perceived discrepancies between who one is and who one ought to be (and what one is doing vs. what one ought to be doing), and increasing numbers of highly important conflicting identities are associated with lower well-being because they increase these emotions.

A large literature in women’s studies and sociology has examined the effects of parent, worker, and spouse identities on psychological well-being, using nonstudent samples (for reviews, see Barnett & Hyde, 2001;

**TABLE 5:** Discrepancy-Related Emotions Predicted by Number of Identities, Identity Harmony, and Importance

Variable	Discrepancy Emotions							
	Actual/Own Versus Ideal/Own		Actual/Own Versus Ideal/Other		Actual/Own Versus Ought/Own		Actual/Own Versus Ought/Other	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Number of identities	-.01	-0.16	-.05	-0.89	-.01	-0.22	-.04	-.73
Identity harmony	-.19***	-2.85	-.08	-1.25	-.14**	-2.12	-.12*	-1.74
Importance	.09	1.64	.04	0.77	.10*	1.88	.01	.22
Number $\times$ Harmony	-.06	-1.08	-.04	-0.66	-.11*	-1.92	-.01	-.24
Harmony $\times$ Importance	.07	1.44	.04	0.79	.04	0.74	.07	1.27
Number $\times$ Importance	.02	0.39	.02	0.43	.02	0.46	.02	.45
Number $\times$ Harmony $\times$ Importance	-.03	-0.69	-.06	-1.44	-.08**	-2.03	-.05	-1.21

NOTE: All variables were standardized before analyses.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Doress-Worters, 1994). The present study conceptually replicates and extends these results, using a student sample, few of whom hold these traditionally studied identities. Rather than presenting a model tied to specific identities (e.g., being a mother and working outside the home or being a woman and being a scientist; Settles, 2004), we present a general model of how multiple identities affect psychological well-being. Supporting the generalizability of our model and despite differences between men versus women and Caucasians versus people of color in the predictors and well-being, neither gender nor ethnicity moderated any of the main effects or interactions of number, relationship, and importance on well-being. This suggests that our model is equally applicable to both genders and people of different ethnicities, at least in the present sample. Though the ranges of the number of identities, identity harmony, importance of identities, and psychological well-being might differ for older samples or for particular configurations of identities, there is no reason to believe that the relationship between these variables would change, but this should be tested in further research.

In addition, the methodology implemented in the present study allowed us to examine a wide array of identities. Typical research on the effects of multiple identities, which may have a specific goal to examine particular types of identities, constrains the number and type of identities that people can choose. For example, researchers might only allow participants to report their feelings about their woman and scientist identities (Settles, 2004) or choose from a group of experimenter-provided traits in the card-sort tasks typically used to assess self-complexity (e.g., Linville, 1987). Koch and Shepperd (2004) argued, based on a review of the self-complexity literature, that constricting the number and valence of self-aspects that people could choose from may bias the self-complexity and well-being that people

report. For example, a number of researchers have distinguished between positive and negative self-complexity, generally finding that positive self-complexity is good for well-being and negative self-complexity is bad for well-being. Furthermore, the amount of positive versus negative self-complexity seems very dependent on the number of positive versus negative traits provided for participants to choose in the card-sort tasks typically used to measure self-complexity (J. D. Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Woolfolk et al., 1995). Koch and Shepperd point out that many of the studies that have found positive mental health effects of self-complexity have been predominantly measuring positive self-complexity. On the other hand, some authors (Allison, 1991; Settles et al., 2002) have suggested that role conflict researchers have tilted the odds in favor of supporting their view by primarily studying identities that are especially likely to conflict (e.g., work and family for women). As suggested by Koch and Shepperd, the present study remedied this problem by allowing participants to freely list the identities that were important to them and using a computer to ask participants questions about each identity they listed.

### Limitations

There are some limitations to the present research. As previously mentioned, our study used a student sample rather than the older adult samples typically used in previous research, so it remains to be seen whether the present model generalizes to other populations. Future research should include more diverse samples with respect to age.

In addition, we asked people to list important identities, based on the theory that only group memberships that are subjectively claimed, and thus somewhat important to the self-concept, can be considered identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The importance of the identities listed was high, so our importance measure had a

restricted range. Thus, we cannot be sure that our results would generalize to less important identities, such as those that might emerge if participants were told to list more than 12 identities and were *not* told only to include important ones. On the other hand, the restricted range of the importance variable means that our results are somewhat conservative because a restricted range makes effects harder to detect. Future research should attempt to collect identities that vary more in importance, to test the generalizability of our model.

Also, due to our correlational design, causality cannot be determined. For example, it could be the case that those who are lower in psychological well-being, such as people who are depressed, may view their identities in more pessimistic and conflicting terms than those who are higher in psychological well-being, but it seems unlikely that reverse causality would explain the complex, interactive effects of number, identity harmony, and importance found in the present study. Also, the consistency across the results of the between- and within-participants importance analyses reduces the likelihood that our results are due to individual differences between people who list highly versus low to moderately important identities.

In a similar vein, statistically, discrepancy emotions and well-being are interchangeable. In contrast to our argument that discrepancy emotions mediate the effect of the predictors on well-being, it is possible that discrepancy emotions and well-being are both outcome variables that just happen to be highly correlated or that well-being mediates the effects of the predictors on discrepancy emotions. However, previous research supports the view that discrepancy emotions mediate the effects of the predictors on well-being rather than the reverse (Heidrich, Forsthoft, & Ward, 1994; W. K. Campbell, Sedikides, & Bosson, 1994). Thus, we contend that discrepancy-related emotions mediate the effect of number on psychological well-being.

The current findings have considerable practical as well as theoretical importance. Research indicates that a growing number of people may be adopting multiple identities. For example, women now have a greater number of roles than they did in the past, as many more women now participate in higher education and in the paid labor force. Men's roles may not have changed in number, but their domestic responsibilities have increased to partially compensate for women's greater responsibilities outside the home (see Barnett & Hyde, 2001, for a review). In addition, demands for organizations to be adaptive to rapid change have resulted in a greater frequency of people taking on multiple identities in the workplace (Weick, 1977). And finally, a greater number of people consider themselves to be multicultural or multiracial (Root, 1996), and these identities

may prescribe conflicting behaviors (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002).

Our model and findings clarify the conditions under which multiple identities may increase or decrease psychological well-being and suggest some things that individuals and their groups can do to increase well-being. For example, people could increase their well-being by (a) adopting identities that facilitate their other important identities, (b) dropping or reducing the importance of identities that conflict with other important identities, and/or (c) changing the relationship between their important identities to be more facilitative. People could create a more facilitative relationship between their identities by altering their beliefs about what behaviors indicate being a good ingroup member. For example, a woman who works may believe that being a good mother requires 100% of her time. A woman with this belief would necessarily perceive her worker and mother roles as conflicting. However, if she altered her perception of what being a good mother entailed, these identities could be perceived as facilitative. Rather than perceiving work as taking time away from being a mother, she could perceive having a job as helping support her family by providing financial resources and providing a positive role model for her children. In addition to individuals changing their own beliefs about what is necessary to be good group members, people may need to persuade others in their groups to change their expectations as well. For example, the working mother mentioned previously might need to clarify to her children and spouse how they benefit from her work identity. Indeed, since groups establish norms and expectations for their members, increasing the well-being of individuals in groups likely requires help of others in the groups. Family members, groups, organizations, and societies that want to help increase rather than decrease their member's psychological well-being could encourage and assist in these efforts by changing their expectations to be more compatible with the requirements of other identities and by directly supporting their members in fulfilling the expectations of other identities.

## CONCLUSION

Given the increasing frequency of complex identifications, more and more people must negotiate their multiple identities. Based on this research, we propose that taking on numerous identities can be either detrimental or beneficial to well-being depending upon the importance of and relationship between them. Individuals and society may be able to improve our collective well-being by establishing reasonable standards for behavior in multiple areas of life and assisting people in meeting these standards.

## NOTES

1. Due to a computer glitch, we had to omit one person's data from calculations of the reliability of importance and harmony scores across all identities. Thus, only 371 participants' data were included in these calculations.

2. Participants who only listed two identities ( $n = 34$ ) are not included in the calculation of the reliability of harmony scores because they only have one harmony score. Only 337 participants' data were included in this calculation.

3. This is consistent with Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, and Elliot (1991), who also averaged the items in each of their scales.

4. We present the standardized regression coefficients, denoted by  $\beta$ . According to Aiken and West (1991), when running a standardized regression, in which both independent and dependent variables are standardized, the "B" coefficient produced by SPSS is standardized (equivalent to the usual "Beta"), and the "Beta" produced by SPSS is incorrect. Therefore, the  $\beta$ s in the text are the "B"s produced by SPSS from standardized regressions, which according to Aiken and West are equivalent to the "Beta"s produced in a nonstandardized regression.

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