Multiple social identifications and adolescents' self-esteem

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Maya Benish-Weisman [a,] [*], Ella Daniel [b], David Schiefer [c], Anna Möllering [c], Ariel Knafo-Noam [d]

[a] University of Haifa, Israel
[b] Tel Aviv University, Israel
[c] Jacobs University Bremen, Germany
[d] Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The research examined the relationship between multiple social identifications and self-esteem. Early adolescents (M = 11.4, SD = .95) and mid-adolescents (M = 15.9, SD = 1.18) from Germany and Israel (n = 2337) were studied. Respondents described their social identification as students, family members, and as members of the majority national group and reported self-esteem. A longitudinal, cross-sectional and cross-cultural design revealed, as predicted, multiple social identifications related positively to self-esteem concurrently; they also related positively to self-esteem longitudinally over the course of a year. Moreover, multiple social identifications were found to be antecedent to self-esteem, not vice versa. Finally, multiple social identifications were found to decrease over time. The article discusses the contribution of multiple social identifications to self-esteem at different ages and in various contexts.

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Adolescents' lives are embedded in rich social contexts, as they are connected to multiple social groups and play many social roles. Their subjective feeling of inclusion in a particular group or role is an important part of their evolving identity (Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011). Surprisingly, however, only a handful of studies have examined the *accumulative* effect of social identifications, especially across developmental periods and cultures. Moreover, although there is ample research documenting that a single social identification (e.g., with a cultural group) is positively associated with self-esteem in youth (e.g., Smith & Silva, 2011), only a few studies consider the relations between *multiple* identifications and self-esteem (e.g. Kiang, Yip, & Fuligni, 2008).

In our study, we investigated three aspects of multiple social identifications. First, we asked whether self-esteem is — beyond the positive relationship with single social identifications — also related to the accumulation of multiple social identifications (MSI). Based on the "identity accumulation hypothesis" (Thoits, 1983, 2003), we proposed that adolescents with more social identification will enjoy higher levels of self-esteem compared to those with fewer social identifications. It is not only the content of specific social identification that matters to self-esteem, but also the increased number of identifications. Identity composed of multiple factors enhances feelings of meaning and security (Thoits, 1983), acting as a buffer to threats to the self (Linville, 1985) and enhancing self-esteem. Second, we sought to clarify whether MSI relates to future self-esteem or whether self-esteem relates to future MSI, using a longitudinal study of adolescents to determine the answer to

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* Corresponding author. Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Mt. Carmel, Haifa, 31905, Israel.
E-mail address: maya.bw@edu.haifa.ac.il (M. Benish-Weisman).

this. Third, as we know nothing about the developmental process of multiple social identifications, we asked if the numbers of social identities increase or decrease during adolescence. We investigated all three research questions, both cross-sectionally with a sample of 2737 adolescents from Germany and Israel, and longitudinally with a subsample of 496 of the previously studied adolescents over a year.

Social identifications and self-esteem in adolescence

Social identification, the subjective feeling of belonging to a certain group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), is a core aspect of a person's identity (Turner, Reynolds, Haslam, & Veenstra, 2006). According to classical Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals, at least to some degree, define themselves in terms of their membership in particular social groups. The positive attributes of these groups are incorporated in personal identity which, in turn, enhances positive self-evaluation and self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). Likewise, numerous theoretical and empirical studies have suggested social identification contributes to well-being such as self-esteem by promoting feelings of uniqueness and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) a sense of psychological security, intellectual stimulation and collaborative learning (see Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Social groups provide a special link to feelings of belonging and social support (Haslam et al., 2008), as they offer people who identify with them an option to create helpful social relationships.

Both personal and social identities become increasingly important developmental issues during adolescence (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Meeus, 2011; Phinney, 1993). Research on ethnic identity development (e.g., Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1993) has shown that the development of social identities follows patterns similar to those of the development of individual identity. Social identification, in turn, becomes especially important in enhancing self-esteem during adolescence, when youth reflect on and become more aware of their social memberships and the external evaluations associated with them (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002) and, at the same time, strive for a sense of belonging and recognition by others (Tanti et al., 2011).

Social identification is based on inner feeling of accepting multiple social roles (being a student, being a family member, belonging to a specific nationality). Note that the term *social identification* needs to be distinguished from the term *social role*. Social identification refers to subjective feelings of belonging to a certain group, whereas social roles involve the actual participation in a certain social group, even if the role is not part of one's self concept (Burke & Tully, 1977). For example, a person could attend school and fulfill that role by showing role-specific behavior but feel no identification with the social role of a student (i.e., being a student is not of particular importance to that person). Our focus here is on the more subjective, self-relevant social identification.

As introduced above, ample studies have highlighted the contribution of social identification to self-esteem (for a review, see also Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011). However, people do not belong to one social group but to multiple groups, acquiring multiple social identifications (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The current study included identification with three social groups described in the literature as important to adolescents and varying in their size and proximity to adolescents' lives (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000): *family*, the narrowest cycle that includes a few people with whom the adolescent has an intimate relationship; *school*, a broader social group including hundreds of people, some but not all of whom the adolescent knows personally (i.e., peers, teachers); and *nation* that includes millions of people. All these social groups have been proven to feature prominently in adolescents' lives.

As the initial social group with which adolescents identify (Fuligni, 2011), an adolescent's family provides the first opportunity to feel a sense of belonging to a social group (Parke, 2004), and the degree to which adolescents identify with their families affects their development (Fuligni & Flook, 2005). The family is the primary agent of socialization and transmission of values and world views and the first source of self-localization. Family identification found to be positively related to self-esteem (Owens & Serpe, 2003) and to academic motivation (Fuligni, 2011). Another study found changes in the quality of the parent—adolescent relationship to be linked to changes in self-esteem in the schooling context (Dotterer, Lowe, & McHale, 2013).

Similarly, the school (which can be assumed to be the second major socialization institution after the family) constitutes a salient domain in identity formation (Flum & Kaplan, 2012; Meeus & Dekovic, 1995). It contributes to how students view themselves, how they direct their behavior, and how they consider their achievements (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). Previous research has found identification with school to be positively related to various measures of psychological well-being, including self-esteem (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009).

A third social group important to adolescents is the national group. Theoretical reasoning for this assumption is rooted in research on cultural or ethnic identity which has shown that identification with cultural groups significantly contributes to an individual's psychological well-being (for reviews, see Phinney, 1991; Phinney et al., 1997; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Smith & Silva, 2011). Most of this research has focused on members of ethnic minority groups (especially immigrants). Few studies have considered the role of cultural identification for members of cultural majority groups. One reason is that cultural belonging is often more salient in the everyday life of minorities than majorities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2002). The present study attempted to fill this gap by examining the relationship between multiple social identifications (i.e., with family, school, and nation) and self-esteem among cultural majority members.

Self-esteem has often been considered an important indicator of general psychological well-being, especially among adolescents (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen, & Wold, 2012; Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). Understanding the relationship between social identification and self-esteem is of considerable interest (compared to other measurements of well-being), as