MULTIPLE IDENTITY AND COALITION BUILDING: HOW IDENTITY DIFFERENCES WITHIN US ENABLE RADICAL ALLIANCES AMONG US

EDWINA BARVOSA-CARTER

University of California, Santa Barbara

Conventional wisdom holds that differences among us prevent the formation of radical alliances that are working for social justice. Implicit in this view is the assumption that each individual or group is the repository of only one set of perspectives, practices and beliefs. Attention to multiple identity in various fields, however, has shown this assumption to be false. Through a case study of Latino/a politics, I show that multiple identity can play a decisive role in the formation of diverse coalitions. I suggest that multiple identity can increase links between individuals and a range of politicized groups. It can underpin a synergistic process of identity and community (trans)formation that can become the basis for radical political alliances.

KEY WORDS: Multiple identity, coalition building, Latino/a, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, Chicago

We typically think of identity as singular, stable, and definitive. But in 1970s Chicago, members of two different and divided ethnic groups created and adopted a new identity. With this new identity they understood themselves collectively as members of a single, larger, internally diverse, and politicized ethnic group. Together these two ethnic groups used their newly forged Latino/a identity to unify themselves and to mobilize together to combat discrimination and seek social justice. In the process, Latino/a-identified peoples engaged both a new identity and retained the identities they already had—including national, sexual, gender, age, ideological, class, professional, and other identities.
What these historical events suggest is that we should emphasize identity as a set of qualities that define each person as a specific human being. These sets of qualities are large, diverse, and contain subsets of qualities that form different identities—multiple identities—that stand within an overarching identity. The idea of multiple identity has been gaining wider acceptance in a variety of academic fields. Yet, we know little about the political implications of multiple identity. I address this issue here by analyzing the politically strategic formation of Latino/a identity in 1970s Chicago through the concept of multiple identity. Bringing case and concept together, I describe three implications that multiple identity has for the creation and mobilization of diverse political coalitions, especially radical alliances that seek social justice.

MULTIPLE IDENTITY

The idea of multiple identity has a variety of sources both ancient and modern. Versions of the concept can be found from Plato’s Republic to psychoanalytic theory, from postmodernist thought, post-colonial theory and various feminisms (Lauretis, 1990; Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 1994) to sociology (Giddens, 1991) and empirical psychology (Ryan, 1995; Singer, 1995; Gregg, 1995). Yet, while conceptions of multiple identity date to antiquity, it is modernity that has made multiple identity itself widespread. Modern conditions have made multiple identity prevalent by segmenting everyday life into a variety of different social milieux—each with its own social identity (Giddens, 1991). To function well in these many settings, all modern peoples have had to acquire different social identities appropriate to each context. In this way, modernity has made multiple identity a real and necessary aspect of life for everyone living in modern conditions.

The identity effects of social segmentation have also been compounded by the unprecedented interpenetration of cultures in modern history. Wars, colonization, de-colonization, natural disasters, economic transformations, and other events have displaced millions of people around the globe (Bammer, 1994). Cultural intermixture generates multiple identity when displaced peoples (and their new neighbors) respond to changing life conditions by learning new identities (e.g., gender, ethnic, national, and subcultural identities) while maintaining their pre-existing identities. Owing to cultural interpenetration, millions of people today are born of mixed heritage and are socialized to two or more religious, subcultural, ethnic and/or conflicting gender identities (Spickard, 1989). Not only
households but also entire regions have become areas where contradictory social milieus are co-present. Inhabitants of these "borderlands" often learn and retain several identities in order to thrive in the diverse social contexts that comprise the places where they reside (Anzaldúa, 1987).

While the conditions creating multiple identity have received increasing attention there is, however, no single model of multiple identity that all theorists of multiplicity follow (Lugones, 1994; Lauretis, 1990; Basch et al., 1994; Braidotti, 1994; P. Smith, 1988; A.M. Smith, 1994; Rosaldo, 1989). I define multiple identity as a concept in which the self is made up of a number of different but integrated identities. Each identity is a frame of reference that includes a scheme of values and a set of meanings and practices. These identity frames of reference (or identity frames) are related to a nearly endless array of possible social identities. These include: gendered and sexual identities, cultural, ethnic and racial, ideological and subcultural identities, identities based in nationality, physical ability, specific lifestyle, socio-economic status, language group, subnational region, generation, and so on. The identity frames of any individual person are potentially many, diverse, and possibly contradictory. Although distinct, these different identities are not entirely separate from each other, but are instead loosely integrated and mutually conditioning. As people move from one social context to the next, they foreground and inhabit (or perform) the identity that they consider (consciously or unconsciously) to best fit their immediate situation. People, therefore, inhabit their identity frames (a) situationally—in response to the contours of their immediate context, and (b) relationally—in social relation to those with whom they share that context. Based on my definition, therefore, multiple identity has five characteristics: multiplicity, contradiction, mutual conditioning, situationality, and relationality.

MULTIPLE IDENTITY AND COALITIONS IN 1970s CHICAGO

Multiple identity played a key role in the political activities among Spanish-speaking and surnamed people in 1970s Chicago. This population contained two disadvantaged groups: Mexicans (Mexican immigrants and native-born Mexican Americans) and Puerto Ricans. The former group—Mexicans and Mexican Americans—arrived in Chicago in several waves throughout the twentieth century. The earliest Mexican arrivals were lured to Chicago with the promise of permanent employment. Once arrived, they were exploited as strikebreakers and paid the lowest wages of all unskilled laborers (Acuña, 1988). Mexican-origin residents settled in
four neighborhoods. Steel workers settled in South Chicago, meat packers in Back of the Yards, rail workers in Near West Side—and later arrivals inhabited Pilsen (Acuña, 1988). Residents of these barrios felt little self-awareness as members of a Mexican-origin community before the 1940s. But between the 1940s and the 1960s, ethnic community consciousness and social and political organizing increased. Yet this organization was often centered in each of the barrios (Gómez-Quitones, 1989) and it was not until the mid-1960s that more citywide organizations sought to bring Mexican Americans together into a community of interest (Padilla, 1985).

Puerto Rican immigration to Chicago, in contrast, began in the 1940s and peaked during the 1960s. Economic transformations in the United States reduced jobs on the island and drove many Puerto Ricans to seek work in the U.S. By the 1960s, Puerto Ricans in Chicago were primarily living in Westtown. Yet, unlike the circumstances faced by Mexican immigrants to Chicago (the economy had by 1960 begun to transform, reducing the number of unskilled industrial jobs), Puerto Ricans often could only find low-paid, non-industrial, dead-end work.

The diverse histories of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago are a clue to the distinctions between the two ethnic groups. For most of this century, neither ethnic group identified with the other, but rather identified by national origin—as Mexican or Puerto Rican. Mexican Americans, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were (and still remain) divided—both among and within each group—by different histories, cultural practices. Spanish dialects, regional origin, employment patterns, class, ideology, citizenship, and legal status in the U.S. In short, Puerto Ricans and people of Mexican origin lived and organized in different parts of Chicago and were separated not only by neighborhood but also by social, cultural, linguistic, and historical factors. Mexican Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans had little social or economic contact and no substantial political alliances in Chicago prior to the 1970s.

The deep differences between these groups were not well acknowledged in the broader social and political dynamics of post-war Chicago. Longstanding Euro-American stereotypes typically failed to distinguish the two ethnic groups, instead projecting onto them a single racialized, language-based identity that became part and parcel of the systems of ethnic subordination played out in twentieth century Chicago (Padilla, 1985; Acuña, 1988). Perceived as a single Spanish-speaking mass, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were subject to the same discrimination in employment practices, housing, education, and city resource allocation. Police brutality, judicial system injustices, employment discrimination, and workplace harassment prevented Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans
alike from achieving equitable wages, decent housing, adequate health care, and basic legal protections.³

Mexican American and Puerto Rican groups had tried but largely failed to make gains in these areas using traditional electoral means (Gómez-Quiñones, 1989). But in the 1970s, as Felix Padilla’s sociological study of events shows, the political tactics of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans began to include a new political strategy. This new strategy involved the creation of a third ethnic identity—a Latino/a identity around which Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans could mobilize for social justice. In Padilla’s words Latino/a ethnic identity was an innovation conceived and adopted as “another form of group consciousness among the Spanish-speaking populations” (Padilla, 1985, p. 61). The innovation of Latino/a identity was intended to bring cohesion to disparate Puerto Rican and Mexican American groups. Those who advocated Latino/a identity held the conviction that Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans could make more political gains as a Latino/a collectivity than as separate ethnic groups.⁴

The founding aspects of this new ethnic identity were shared social justice values and goals derived from common experiences of ethnic/racial discrimination, economic marginalization, and persistent social barriers to upward mobility (Padilla, 1985, pp. 64–83, 138–146). Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans drew clarity and conviction for these social justice values from the discriminatory treatment and impoverished living conditions inflicted on them by the privileged white majority. These values translated into a shared interest agenda that included the achievement of decent employment, housing, and health care. With these founding values, Latino/a identity was from its very conception a politicized identity.

In addition to social justice values and goals, shared linguistic heritage was also used to signify and demarcate Latino/a identity. Spanish language was central to the “approximating myth” or “narrative of common origin” that served to describe the diverse Spanish-surnamed group as a single collectivity.⁵ But, as Padilla makes clear, language alone has long failed to unite these diverse groups. Where common Spanish language had failed, the integration of a social justice agenda into a new ethnic identification dramatically increased the possibility of mutual support, solidarity, and coordinated action toward shared goals within the multi-ethnic coalitions that subsequently formed.

Many activists worked to persuade Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans to view themselves also as Latinos/as. Hector Franco in particular played an important role in advocating Latino/a identity and in the multi-ethnic organizing which brought together Puerto Ricans and
Mexican Americans as Latinos/as. Franco, a Puerto Rican activist, was influenced by his own participation in multi-ethnic coalitions, such as the Allies for a Better Community, to which he was introduced by his friend and colleague Sally Johnson, an activist who worked to mobilize poor blacks and Puerto Ricans in Westtown (Padilla, 1985, pp. 108–117).

Although Latino/a identity originated with organizers like Hector Franco, it became widely accepted in the course of community organizing through new interactions between members of the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities (Padilla, 1985, p. 155). Increased contact among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans generated personal ties and shared practices among members of both groups. Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans both created (i.e., performed) and internalized Latino/a identity through their ongoing social interactions.

Because the aim of Latino/a identity was to unify and mobilize two separate ethnic groups, coalition activity became the preferred mode of political action for the Latinos/as in Padilla’s (1985) study. As his study shows, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans who also identified as Latino/a began to work collectively to resist discrimination, particularly in employment. The primary vehicle for this struggle was the Spanish Coalition for Jobs. This coalition was a collective of 23 Mexican American and Puerto Rican community organizations that originated from all of the principal Puerto Rican and Mexican American neighborhoods across the city: Pilsen, Westtown, South Chicago, and Lakeview. Nine of these organizations were job referral agencies frustrated by the refusal of major employers in Chicago to hire virtually any of the Latinos/as they regularly referred to them. The pattern of discrimination was clear and new federal legislation on Affirmative Action convinced the coalition members they were right to attempt to reverse the patterns of economic marginalization from which they had long suffered.

The Spanish Coalition for Jobs used a combination of formal negotiation, consumer power, and protest tactics to fight discriminatory hiring practices. The Coalition’s first target was Illinois Bell, which with nearly 44,000 employees had only 300 Latinos/as on its payroll. At a public meeting in August 1971, Coalition spokespeople asked Illinois Bell to alter its current hiring policies to increase significantly the number of Latinos/as they employed. When Illinois Bell refused and offered to hire only 115 additional Latinos/as, the Coalition began a year-long protest campaign against the company. Several subsequent negotiations also failed to bring results and were followed by additional protests. Ultimately, through continued pressure, the coalition succeeded in its primary objective when Illinois Bell agreed to hire over 1,300 Latinos/as over a four-year period.
IMPLICATIONS FOR COALITION BUILDING

By analyzing the development of Latino/a identity and politics in Chicago we can better understand the implications that multiple identity has for building coalitions with social justice goals. The first implication is that people can and do identify with more than one community. Since people with multiple identity do alternate among different identities in everyday contexts, they can also relate to and participate in the politics of more than one group. Padilla described this multiplicity of identifications as it took place in Chicago. There, in his words, "the Latino-conscious person sees himself as a Latino sometimes and as Puerto Rican, Mexican American, Cuban and the like at other times," (Padilla, 1985, pp. 61–62). In political contexts, multiple identity allowed people to foreground Latino/a identity in situations of general concern, and national ethnic identity when the political issues were narrower. A number of Padilla’s respondents described how this dynamic worked in everyday political settings. One commented that in his own practices, "I try to use [Latino] as much as I can. When I talk to people in my community, I use Mexican, but I use Latino when the situation calls for issues that have city-wide implications" (Padilla, 1985, p. 62). Another comment shows how Latino/a and other ethnic identifications varied in terms of the political issues at stake and the expected intra-coalition dynamics.

When we move out of South Chicago and South Chicago is to have a relationship with the Westtown Concerned Citizens Coalition, it will have to be around issues that affect them equally. We cannot get South Chicago to get mad at Westtown if Westtown doesn’t support their immigration situation. That is a Mexican problem that cannot be resolved through a Latino effort. But we can get them to come and talk to Westtown about jobs, about things that are hitting everybody. (Padilla, 1985, p. 62–63)

Here Latino/a ethnic identity was salient in those instances when the political context involved the Spanish-speaking and surnamed community as a whole. When the context involved either the Mexican American or Puerto Rican community specifically, these national identifiers were foregrounded and different mobilization tactics were adopted.

In general then, one contribution that multiple identity makes to coalition building is that people with multiple identities can internalize and retain a number of different identities through which they have potential connections to a wide range of social groups and communities. In the
case of Latino/a political mobilization, for example, the internalization of Latino/a identity among residents showed that they could acquire a new Latino/a identity and also retain their existing identities as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Catholics, and so on. Consequently these people could be simultaneously linked to a Latino/a community as well as a range of other more specific groups.

Where multiple identity increases the number of links between individual citizens and social groups, multiple identity also increases the opportunities for possible coalition building. Each link represents the possibility for recruiting an individual to a given social or political movement. It also represents the presence of a social link and an identity frame of reference that can be appealed to for judgment and action through public discourse. In this way multiple identity increases the avenues for political participation.

A second implication of multiple identity for coalition building is how it contributes to a synergistic development between identity formation and community building in which the development of one feeds the growth of the other. The open, fluid, yet durable, characteristic of multiple identity enables residents to acquire new identifications throughout their lifetime. This capacity, in turn, enables community building and transformation where the internalization of a new identity frame feeds the organization of a new community. In Chicago, for example, a few community organizers initiated Latino/a identity as part of a particular political strategy. Their articulation of Latino/a identity spread to others. This new Latino/a identification led to an increase in existing social networks through the formation of new Latino/a community organizations. Identification and engagement with these new Latino/a organizations led more Puerto Rican and Mexican American residents to internalize the practices, meanings, and values ascribed to Latino/a identity. Widening Latino/a identification fostered still more Latino/a community organization. More Latino/a community organization led to yet wider Latino/a identification and so on. This process proceeded synergistically, that is, once initiated, the dual processes of identity and community formation fueled each other.

For individual citizens, therefore, the internalization of an additional identity into their existing identity scheme opened them to a process of community building. Latino/a identity enabled residents, including community organizers, to draw upon Latino/a individual and group identification to build a Latino/a community. As a multi-ethnic collectivity, the Latino/a community in Chicago relied on newly established inter-ethnic social connections. The making and accepting of these connections by Mexican American and Puerto Rican residents depended on multiple identity as an identity structure open and fluid enough to take on new
identity and durable enough to retain existing identity frames in spite of change.

The synergistic development between identity formation and community building can forward efforts to achieve social justice. In Chicago this synergistic process led to the formation of a set of uniquely Latino/a community organizations and networks and a Latino/a-specific social, economic, and political agenda. It also enabled the production of a set of symbols around which otherwise separated groups (Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans) could come together to mobilize politically despite their cultural, historical and other differences. Because multiple identity underpins this synergistic process of identity and community (trans)formation, multiple identity played a key role in political mobilization aimed at changing socio-political conditions and securing rights and opportunities that had been unjustly denied. In this way, multiple identity was a necessary but not sufficient condition of the identity and community innovations central to the coalition building strategy adopted by Puerto Rican and Mexican American activists in 1970s Chicago.

Finally, third, multiple identity can play a role not only in the formation of diverse coalitions, but also in the relations within those coalitions once they are formed. A well-functioning coalition requires organizers and members to find (or create) shared issues that will form the common ground for intra-group communication, decision-making, and action. The large number of different frames of reference that members will bring to a diverse coalition makes this task more difficult. Many of these perspectives will be at odds with one another or possibly at odds with the concerns that organizers and members have used to galvanize the coalition. The result can be intra-group contestation that can paralyze or destroy a coalition. Multiple identity can influence intra-coalition interactions by providing people with the capacity to foreground some identity frames of reference while de-emphasizing others by shifting among their various identity frames as different settings demand or allow. Consequently, multiple identity provides a flexibility of social positioning that can smooth intra-coalition interactions.

In Chicago, for example, Mexican American and Puerto Rican coalition members would—in particular political contexts—foreground their shared identification as Latinos/as and in the process de-emphasize their differences as separate ethnic groups. The multiplicity of identifications held by these coalition members meant that they could emphasize their Latino/a identity for political action when necessary, and in the process temporarily de-emphasize the differences among them in terms of their other identity axes of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. By foregrounding
one axis of their identities for the purposes of political mobilization, they
did not, however, eliminate other identities or the differences they repre-

tended.

Within the coalition process, therefore, multiple identity enables coal-
ition members to temporarily de-emphasize task-irrelevant differences in a
way that does not ultimately deny those differences or banish them com-
pletely from the person or the organizational matrix of the coalition. By
enabling coalition members to bracket (i.e. set aside but not banish) their
identity differences until they are relevant for coalition goals, multiple
identity can help the internal functioning of coalitions where the members
are diverse both within and among themselves. This is not to say that
coalition building will no longer involve the difficult work of forgoing
commitment to common concerns and goals among those who have many
differences. Nor is this to say that the work of coalition building will not at
times fail. Rather, multiple identity is a flexible and open identity structure
that makes it possible for people to foreground those identity frames of
reference that they share with others in the context of specific political
projects. Foregrounding shared perspectives in this way enables (though
does not guarantee) cooperation on specific political goals despite the con-
tinued presence of deep difference and diversity.

Multiple identity also provides citizens with a (relatively greater or
lesser) number of identity frames of reference. The greater the number of
frames of reference, the greater the likelihood that a person’s repertoire
of identities will contain some frame of reference that will allow them to
identify similarly to other members of a coalition. Imagine, for example,
Puerto Rican activist Hector Franco and his coalition involvement with
Sally Johnson. Because Franco is not African American, he likely did not
know—as Johnson likely did—exactly what contemporary discrimination
against Blacks feels like. He did, however, certainly know the general his-
tory of African-American experience since colonial enslavement brought
Africans to the Americas. His unique personal history gave him a first-
hand understanding of poverty. And although he may not have experienced
segregation laws directly, he most likely knew that Jim Crow laws
were applied to Mexican Americans as well as Blacks in Texas
(Montejano, 1987). Franco had also experienced de facto discrimination
against Spanish-speaking and sumamed peoples in Chicago.

Together, his knowledge and biographical experiences would have pro-
vided Hector Franco with two (overlapping) identity frames of reference
(a class and ethnic identity) that included a detailed grasp of both poverty
and ethnic and racial discrimination. African Americans such as Sally
Johnson in coalition with Hector Franco would have also had identity
frames that included understandings of both poverty and racial discrimina-
tion. As members of different marginalized groups in the U.S., their under-
standings would have been somewhat different, though also broadly
similar. As coalition partners, then, Franco and Johnson and other partici-
pants in their coalition would have shared (albeit imperfectly) at least two
identity frames of reference (e.g., working class/poor and disadvantaged
ethnic minority). As coalition members they may not have known exactly
what other members’ experiences have been. Yet, through their multiple
identity frames they have some intersection of frames of reference. These
frames will, in turn, equip them to understand approximately the experi-
ences and concerns of others in the coalition who are different from them-
selves. In other words, the partial intersection of identity frames of
reference can make it possible for coalition members to partly understand
and identify with very different people with whom they are working. This
partial intersection of identity frames of reference can be (though may not
always prove to be) a sufficient common perspective from which coalition
members can negotiate agreement on shared problems and goals, and plan
for common action to pursue those goals.

Critics of this contention will no doubt respond that the partial overlap
of identity frames and perspectives within a coalition still leaves a wide
field of differences and contradicting perspectives open. These differences,
they will claim, will foment contestation within a diverse group and ulti-
mately render it paralyzed by perpetual internal confrontation and irreconc-
cilable differences. To this I have two replies. First, it is impossible to exile
differences or contestation from political coalitions (or any diverse social
organization). Human diversity is too extensive to eliminate. And granted,
the presence of diversity can always contribute to disagreement and
contestation that can become divisive and polarizing. But the disagreement
and contestation that spring from difference can also be the source of
political critique and the creative energy behind new political insights and
solutions. Since intra-coalition contestation has both advantages and disad-
vantages, the problem that faces us is not how to eliminate contestation
and disagreement from diverse coalitions. It is, instead, to understand how
contestation and disagreement within coalitions can be harnessed and
directed away from an unrelenting emphasis on division and separation,
and steered toward the establishment and pursuit of shared political,
social, and economic objectives. Both possibilities are always open within
the coalition process. Only the second, however, stands a good chance of
helping people achieve the social and political changes they envision.

Various organizational possibilities can help harness difference and
contestation in a productive manner. Among Latinos/as in Chicago, for
example, disagreement existed about the political means that should be used to achieve shared goals. Some established community groups favored grassroots mobilization and protest politics (e.g., Centro Latino, Pilsen Neighbors, Westtown Concerned Citizens Coalition). Others favored electoral politics and lobbying to achieve and/or influence traditional political powers (e.g., Mexican Civic Committee, League of United Latin American Citizens, Puerto Rican Congress) (Padilla, 1985, p. 71). Within the Spanish Coalition for Jobs, these differences were reflected not only in the subgroups of the coalition, but also in the coalition's political tactics. Rather than allow dissension to dissolve the coalition, differences were channeled productively by combining protest tactics with sophisticated, formal negotiations with Illinois Bell. Both tactics were directed at the same social justice goals. Here disagreeing members could negotiate their different perspectives based on a common commitment to shared goals grounded in their shared Latino/a identification.

Those who suggest that groups must fully resolve all differences within their communities before they engage in multi-ethnic or other diverse coalitions must reconsider their claims against examples such as this and organizational possibilities such as broad coalitions and fluid political positionings. In any case, multiple identity gives people the capacity to emphasize the frames of reference that are appropriate to specific acts of coalition building, maintenance, and mobilization. In addition, multiple identity provides flexibility that is a necessary (though not sufficient) component of successful cooperation in the coalition process. The flexibility of multiple identity also enables people to enact subtle shifts in position in political contexts. These shifts in identity-position can be used to leverage the internal diversity of a community in order to achieve political ends. In this way, the flexibility inherent in multiple identity better enables people to work together productively as members of a diverse political coalition.

CONCLUSIONS

Multiple identity has several implications for coalition building and the mobilization of radical alliances. First, multiple identity provides people with a range of actual or potential affiliations to social groups based on age, gender, class, race, ethnicity, ideology, physical ability, and so on.9 The potential for politicization and mobilization of these groups for social justice goals is always present. People are therefore linked to not one, but a number of potentially politicized groups. Second, the openness and durability of multiple identity allows people to create, internalize, and inhabit
new and/or transformed identifications while maintaining their existing identities. This, in turn, enables a synergistic process of identity (trans)formation and community building. In this process, new or transformed identifications and communities can become the basis for political coalitions aimed at social change. Third, multiple identity furnishes people with intellectual flexibility that can diffuse and/or draw advantage from intra-coalition contestation. This flexibility increases the likelihood that coalition members will be able to locate and or work from shared perspective(s) within diverse coalitions and to make strategic re-positionings during political action that can help them achieve their political goals.

My main point is that multiple identities can connect people to a number of social groups and communities that can, in turn, potentially become politicized and mobilized in order to achieve particular social justice goals. Identity-community formations, though durable, are open to constant revision and amendment. The fluidity and change that accompany the durability of multiple identity means that the relationship between multiple identity and politics transcends “identity politics” by denying that specific identity frames are an essential aspect of the self (i.e., unchanging touchstones already there for political mobilization). Rather, as witnessed in the Chicago case, multiple identity means that new identifications can be strategically generated to unify previously unconnected groups of people. Theoretically and empirically then it is possible for multiple identity to help us forge new identifications specific to particular social or political crises that can be used to bring cohesion, political direction, and motivation to disparate groups of people who share common concerns but also deep diversity.

While multiple identity can make key contributions to the formation and mobilization of diverse coalitions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of these contributions. Multiple identity’s contributions to coalition building largely involve the creation of possibilities. That is, multiple identity enables certain types of events but cannot guarantee that those events will occur. For example, multiple identity gives coalition members the capacity to shift among frames of reference, and to temporarily bracket and set aside perspectives they do not share with other coalition members. Likewise, multiple identity provides citizens with an open, fluid, yet durable identity structure that opens the way for adopting new or transformed identity (and community) formations and to using these politically to achieve social justice goals. Yet, multiple identity does not guarantee that coalition members will actually exercise this capacity in order to increase the cohesion of the coalition. Nor does it guarantee that the political mobilization arising from these identity-community formations will be able to achieve their intended aims.

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Many factors determine whether or not diverse coalitions will be formed and how successful they will be in their pursuit of social justice. Institutional, material, and historical factors all have a significant effect on coalition building. Multiple identity is one psycho-social factor that can aid in the formation of diverse coalitions. Realization of the possibilities that multiple identity introduces will depend on the combined influence of these other contributing factors. Regardless, multiple identity has important implications for coalition building and radical politics. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that difference is inherently divisive, the events analyzed here show that multiple identity— as difference within us—can play an integral role in coalition building that brings together different people to work toward social justice. By focusing on multiple identity we can better see how differences within us can help us work together despite the differences among us.

Notes

1 Consequently, a few thinkers have begun to explore the implications multiple identity has for democratic politics. Among these are Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985), Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller and Cristina Stanton Blanc (1994), Anna Marie Smith (1994), Yen Le Espiritu (1994) and Lisa Lowe (1991). Lowe and Espiritu, in particular, have suggested that multiple identity might play an important role in the formation of multi-ethnic coalitions.

2. A Cuban population also resided in Chicago at this time. However, since they did not constitute a disadvantaged group, they are not a focus of Felix Padilla’s study from which the central case study of this essay is drawn.

3. By creating a common crisis, Euro-American stereotyping and subjugation of the Mexican American and Puerto Rican populations as a monolith aided the creation of a Latino identity.

4. A similar discussion continues today. Some Mexican Americans, for example, argue that as roughly 80% of the Latino population in the U.S. it dilutes Chicano/a influence to identify with other Latinos/as. Other activists insist that a coalition among Spanish-speaking and surnamed groups (along with other minority groups) is the best path for political and economic reform. For a discussion of contemporary Latino/a identity, see L. DeSipio (1996).

5. The formation of a “community” is always an approximation that cloaks internal diversity. For thorough accounts of the role of approximation in community formation, see Cohen (1985) and Anderson (1991). In 1970s Chicago, as today, for example, it is problematic to use Spanish language to demarcate the Latino/a community since many native born Latinos/as are not fluent in Spanish and Latinos/as who are Spanish speaking speak a range of Spanish dialects so diverse as to be sometimes mutually unintelligible. The use of the Spanish language to signify Latinos/as thus performs a gross (but often helpful) approximation.

6. Some readers may question the “Latino” character of an organization named the “Spanish” Coalition for Jobs. The naming of the “Spanish” Coalition for Jobs is interesting against the backdrop of widespread “Latino/a” self reference—less because it erases
or undermines Latino/a self-identification (Padilla shows it to be widespread) and more because it performs a strategic re-positioning that seeks to turn the misconceive Euro-American stereotype of the “Spanish masses” to good political effect. The socio-historical conditions of the 1970s differ from our own, in which the term Latino/a has much wider currency—but still competes with terms imposed by the dominant culture such as “Hispanic”.

7. Padilla stresses that Affirmative Action was an important influence on Latino/a coalition building because it authorized opposition to existing forms of discrimination.

8. The connection among these three aspects—individual identity, group identity, and community—is a possible but not necessary one in any given case. A person may be socialized to an identity frame, but the inculcation of this personal identity frame does not necessarily lead to continued self-ascription of a group-identity or identity group-based community over a lifetime. For example, a woman may have grown up with her Jewish family and internalized a Jewish identity frame (i.e., internalized Jewish values, practices and systems of meaning) but, as an adult, may not identify herself as Jewish or understand herself as a member in the “Jewish Community.” Yet, others may ascribe Jewish group identity and Jewish community membership to her, asserting that she is subject to the standards of the community. Since she does not self-ascribe as Jewish or as a Jewish community member, she may resist such a positioning or she may accept such a positioning, but perhaps only in certain contexts.

9. There is a sense in which some identities within a multiple identity can become more or less significant over time. This dimension of multiple identity is more complex than I have had space to describe here. For additional details, see Barvosa-Carter (1998)

References


**Biography**

Edwina Barvosa-Carter is assistant professor of Chicano Studies and Political Science at University of California, Santa Barbara. She earned her Ph.D from Harvard University in 1998 and her M.A. from Cambridge University in 1993. Her current research focuses on the political implications of multiple identity.