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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

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Publication Date

2026

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Navigating Binary Identity Systems: Intersectionality and Safety Cue Monitoring by Minoritized Individuals

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Abstract

Identity labels are embedded in social hierarchies that constrain how intersectional identities can be expressed, often producing dissatisfaction among minoritized individuals. Drawing on the ADDRESSING model framework, this qualitative study ($n = 12$) explored how individuals with multiple minoritized identities express and conceal aspects of themselves through nonverbal and interpersonal cues. Semi-structured interviews revealed that participants continuously navigate competing identity expectations and engage in vigilant safety-cue monitoring during social interactions, which we interpret as involving adaptive use of social-cognitive processes such as Theory of Mind (ToM) to anticipate prejudice. Thematic results indicate that intersectionality is associated with unique psychological burdens, particularly inner dissatisfaction when lived experience conflicts with rigid categorical labels. Within this sample, the polycultural context of Hawai'i appeared to offer potential protective factors, with participants describing collectivistic orientations as linked to greater awareness of possible prejudicial mindsets but lower reported expectations and experiences of discrimination.

Keywords: intersectionality; minoritized identity; social cognition; theory of mind

Introduction

Identity does not exist in isolation – it is shaped by systems of power, social norms, and cultural expectations. This study supports how socially constructed identity labels often map onto broad structural dimensions of advantage and disadvantage (e.g., racially dominant versus racially minoritized, heteronormative versus non-heteronormative, able-bodied versus disabled). Individuals whose lives span multiple such dimensions may struggle to reconcile these categories, leading to feelings of misfit and dissatisfaction.

Intersectionality, defined by Crenshaw (1989), reveals how multiple inequalities intersect, compound, and are mutually constitutive, making visible the complex power relations central to identity (see also Al-Faham et al., 2019; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Thomas et al., 2008). Hill Collins' (2000) work links intersectionality to a "matrix of domination," outlining how interlocking systems of oppression are organized across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. The ADDRESSING model (Hays, 2001) provides a structured framework for understanding how these forces interact across nine key dimensions of identity: Age, Developmental Disability, Disability acquired later in life, Religion and Spiritual Orientation, Ethnic/Racial identity, Socioeconomic Status, Sexual Orientation, Indigenous Heritage, National Origin, and Gender. By mapping how privilege and disadvantage are distributed across these categories, the model reveals how social hierarchies influence individual

experience and interpersonal dynamics, emphasizing that minoritization arises from enduring social and institutional processes rather than statistical representation. This is important for exploring social cognitive processes, as identity can actively influence cognition in an individuated way that cannot reliably be tracked through demographics.

Defining the Minoritized Experience

The term "minoritized" is typically preferred over "minority" because it emphasizes the active process of marginalization embedded within systemic structures. Systemic prejudice, spanning across and beyond racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, is deeply rooted in U.S. cultural attitudes. The ADDRESSING model provides a concrete structure for investigating the dissatisfaction that emerges when people balance multiple identities across different dimensions of privilege and marginalization (e.g., dominant versus minoritized positions in sexuality, race, ability, or religion). In this study, we treat "minoritized" as referring to identities that occupy socially disadvantaged positions within these dimensions (for example, queer relative to heteronormative, disabled relative to able-bodied, or racially minoritized relative to White in the U.S. context), while recognizing that each participant embodies a unique configuration across categories rather than belonging to a single, uniform group. Although frameworks like the ADDRESSING model are important for identifying patterns of inequality, they can also highlight tension within one's identity itself. The ADDRESSING framework aligns with intersectionality, which is treated here as a key theoretical lens contesting the notion that identity can be analyzed in categorical isolation.

Labels that help describe and study identity often fail to capture the complexity of individuals who exist at the intersection of multiple cultural, racial, and social influences. Someone may simultaneously experience both privilege and marginalization depending on social context, leading to internal conflict and uncertainty about belonging. This tension contributes to cultural dissonance, described as a sense of fragmentation or inconsistency when one's lived experience does not align with socially recognized identity categories. Systemic prejudice translates into measurable psychological distress and adaptive behaviors among minoritized groups. Individuals high in stigma consciousness (the expectation of being judged based on a negative group stereotype) experience pressure and anxiety that negatively affects performance in dominant environments (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007).

Individuals at the intersection of two marginalized identities, such as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB) persons with developmental disabilities, face simultaneous oppressions rooted in heterosexism and ableism (Thompson et al., 2001), often met with institutional siloing that fails to recognize the combined impact of multiple minority statuses and the positionality each individual holds (Harley et al., 2002). Thomas et al. (2008) also observed the compounded stress of African American women due to gendered racism, layering how multiple minoritized identities create a unique phenomenological experience that is common, yet distinct.

Therefore, this study draws on multiple frameworks of minoritized identity and prejudice to explore how people with minoritized identities express and conceal aspects of who they are through nonverbal and interpersonal cues, arguing that while identity labels help us understand systemic power, they also risk creating rigid categorical boxes that obscure intersectionality. This is important for researchers, as participants may come into the lab with increased cognitive load due to identity and environmental factors beyond the scope of a given study, impacting their performance on experimental tasks.

Theory of Mind as a Social Navigation Mechanism

Since mental states are unobservable, the cognitive effort to understand them is considered inherently theory-like. Theory of Mind (ToM) is a cognitive mechanism defined as the capacity to attribute mental states, including beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, and knowledge, to oneself and others (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1993), yet can have variations in conception across cultural models (Lillard, 1998) and sequential development across different cultural contexts (Shahaeian et al., 2011; Yu & Wellman, 2024). This ability is recognized as essential for forming and maintaining human social relationships. ToM functions as an imperative social mechanism, enabling individuals to predict, interpret, and respond to others' behaviors, necessary for successful social navigation (Burdett, 2017; Zainal & Newman, 2018).

While the basic capacity for ToM is universal (Burdett, 2017; Yu & Wellman, 2024), the specific sequence in which children master mental state concepts is culturally sensitive (Shahaeian et al., 2011). ToM is generally viewed as a universal capacity for mental-state reasoning; however, individuals with minoritized identities may be socialized to deploy this capacity more intensively in situations where identity-based prejudice is possible, repeatedly attending to others' intentions and evaluations as part of navigating social risk. Soares Miehlestein (2024) argues that a heightened awareness of potential prejudice compels increased utilization of mental perspective-taking to predict and prevent negative social outcomes, demonstrating ToM's function in modulating behavior to navigate environments defined by social power differentials.

Heightened ToM as Adaptive Defense

Minoritized individuals frequently navigate social environments where prejudice is a constant or anticipated

threat (Dunn, 2021). This context fosters a chronic vigilance about social standing and compels frequent monitoring of others' cues for potential bias, which can involve repeated perspective-taking and mental-state reasoning about how one is being perceived (as written about as double consciousness by Brannon et al., 2015). This broader defensive pattern was conceptualized as Social Perception Anxiety by Soares Miehlestein (2024), a rational, non-clinical form of vigilance driven by validated concern that one's minoritized identity will be detected and trigger negative bias, within which ToM is a social-cognitive mechanism recruited to interpret others' intentions.

Empirical evidence supports the functional necessity of this cognitive defense. Prior work provides evidence that elevated but non-clinical levels of anxiety can heighten ToM (Nikolić et al., 2019). Taking this as a parallel to rational awareness of social bias can look like active social monitoring behaviors, and minoritized individuals can be "testing the waters" to probe the social landscape to predict others' mental states related to acceptance or prejudice. This serves as a self-protective mechanism and requires ToM to actively assess dynamic cues in real time. High levels of stigma consciousness compel individuals to constantly monitor external interpretations of their actions (Mosley & Rosenberg, 2007; Pinel, 1999), aligning with how ToM arguably functions for sophisticated anticipation of negative judgment. For the present study, qualitative reports were expected to follow this narrative, outlining active mentalization due to awareness of minoritized status.

Behavioral Modulation and Cultural Context

The need for defensive adaptation translates into survival tactics involving the modulation of behavior, appearance, and presentation. Individuals regulate their identity expressions to "blend in" and minimize outgroup identification when interacting with those in social power who may hold prejudice (Brannon et al., 2015; Dunn, 2021). Examples include: passing (appearing ethnically "white"; transgender individuals concealing gender history), overcompensation (e.g., African American women working to exhaustion to counteract stereotypes of being lazy), and identity concealment (censoring actions to avoid discrimination). For transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, systemic marginalization and fear of stigma lead to the adaptive strategy of identity concealment to pass (Rood et al., 2016; Rood et al., 2017). The ability to "pass" as cisgender is often perceived as a privilege that mitigates minority stress, while the inability to pass results in heightened fear of violence, discrimination, and disrespect. Across different scenarios and identities, this presents a need to attend to stereotypic information about one's own identity, one's own behavior and appearance in alignment with stereotypes, the potential prejudicial mindsets of others, safety cues given by others, and adapt in real time based on the incoming information to navigate social interaction(s).

The cultural context of Hawai'i, identified as the most collectivist U.S. state and characterized by polyculturalism, offers a complex dimension to these survival tactics (Okamura, 1980; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). While pressure to anticipate prejudice remains, local research suggests the region's collectivist orientation can act as a protective factor. Higher collectivist self-construal correlated with lower Social Perception Anxiety for local Hawai'i participants, even when experiences with discrimination were high (Soares Miehlestein, 2024), suggesting the local environment provides comfort and a form of "blending in" that differs from the more segregated mainland U.S. context (as observed by Heinrichs et al., 2006; Schreier et al., 2010). As the present study was conducted in Hawai'i, cultural context must be a considered factor that impacts social cognitive processes like ToM and perceptions of ingroup/outgroup.

The Present Study

Intersectionality creates unique psychological burdens stemming from combined pressures of multiple marginalized statuses (Brannon et al., 2015). The struggle to manage negative social perception often requires concealment or blending in – survival tactics that reduce victimization risk but increase psychological dissatisfaction (Rood et al., 2016). When intersectional identities must be negotiated across structural dimensions of privilege and disadvantage, conflicting community messages can generate internal conflict, social strain, and a diminished sense of belonging. Building on empirical work on minority stress and social vigilance, the present study examines how minoritized individuals describe monitoring interpersonal environments for safety cues and adjusting identity expression in response. We treat these behaviors as involving broader social-cognitive processes such as attention to others' social group membership, threat appraisal, and perspective-taking, and we theoretically propose that ToM may be one of the capacities recruited when individuals actively infer others' [prejudicial] intentions and likely [negative] reactions. It is expected that one's minoritized identities will interact with other held identities (minoritized or not), creating a need to navigate complex social situations and make real-time decisions about whether, when, and how to express particular aspects of self. A qualitative method was chosen to allow a guided exploration of these processes while giving participants space to introduce additional factors that may not be salient to researchers *a priori*.

Method

Twelve individuals were recruited to participate in a semi-structured interview about their minoritized identity-related experiences. All participants self-identified as holding at least one minoritized social identity (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, or sexuality). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 40 years ($M = 24.6$) and represented diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds reflective of the Hawai'i context. The sample size of $n = 12$ participants was

determined based on principles of thematic saturation in qualitative research, where core themes typically emerge within the first few interviews in focused studies with relatively homogeneous populations, as presently defined as the experience of having multiple minoritized identities, and sample recommendations vary from one to 25 participants for a phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Procedure and Materials

After providing informed consent, participants were sent the semi-structured interview guide to preview 24 hours before their scheduled interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes on Zoom. The lead investigator conducted all interviews, using the interview guide as a flexible framework to ensure consistency. The guide was organized around five broad themes: (1) identity expression: how participants express or conceal identity aspects in daily life; (2) perceived reactions and safety: how participants anticipate others' reactions and how this affects behavior; (3) experiences of marginalization: personal accounts of discrimination and microaggressions; (4) social shaping of identity: family, peer, and community influences on self-concept; and (5) preparation and coping: strategies used to navigate social interactions where identities may be visible or scrutinized. The audio recordings were automatically transcribed by Zoom and subsequently cleaned by trained research assistants (RAs) to correct errors and input nonverbal information not captured auditorily.

Analysis Plan

An inductive hybrid thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and meaning-making processes across participant narratives. During data collection, the lead researcher took notes according to expected themes (e.g., Prejudice Awareness, Cultural Mis-Match, and responses to instances of oppression) and emerging thematic content. During transcript cleaning, RAs documented recurring ideas and patterns, creating a preliminary list of predominant overarching themes (e.g., contrasts between Hawai'i and mainland experiences). The lead investigator and RAs collaboratively developed the codebook between original hypothesized themes, notes taken during the interviews (e.g., inclusion of religious experiences), and preliminary RA observations (e.g., Feeling Americanized, Political Ideology). The codebook evolved iteratively during the coding process as preliminary codes solidified through descriptions and exemplar quotes. Some codes were synthesized into higher-order classifications, reflecting participants' experiences with identity negotiation, identity navigation, and intersectional pressures, though many were distinct and needed to be kept as individual codes. Three RAs independently coded the transcripts with the finalized codebook before switching to calculate interrater reliability. Most full discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings and revisions in code wording/definitions. Interrater reliability was calculated across all coded

transcripts, resulting in an agreement rate of 81%, indicating strong consistency.

Results

Coding was guided by the a posteriori codebook, and the central thesis supported was that a binary system is perceived to exist within identities, and intersectionality creates navigation conflict within minoritized individuals. Table 1 summarizes the final set of codes that emerged, capturing the varied recurring topics in participants' narratives. Each code represents a cluster of closely related content reported, such as explicit mentions of anticipated prejudice (Prejudice Awareness) or descriptions of strategically disclosing or concealing aspects of identity (Identity Expression). Due to the intersectionality of the participants, no between-identity comparisons could be distinguished, further contributing to the overarching finding that minoritized individuals attend to and actively negotiate identity expression and disclosure based on the present social context and perception of how others perceive them through cues given verbally and nonverbally.

Table 1: Code Number and Names.

Code #	Code Name
1	Prejudice Awareness
2	Hawai'i vs. Not/Intense Mainland Experience
3	Identity Expression (Intentional)
4	Identity Expression (Nonverbal)
5	Other Culture
6	Language
7	Education/Academics/Intelligence
8	Friends/Community
9	Additional Identity (Cultural, Gender)
10	Cultural Mis-Match
11	Within Community/Family -isms/phobias
12	Within Family/Friend Conflict
13	Political Ideology
14	Sense of Belonging
15	Testing the Waters (for others' response)
16	Immigrant Status (first/second generation; inaccessible sense of community/culture)
17	Feeling Americanized
18	Internal Identity Comparison
19	Lack of Representation
A	Inaction due to fear of repercussions
B	Action taken against prejudice/oppression

The overarching themes spanning social context, identity expressions (intentional and nonverbal), community belonging, and cultural mismatch were consistently identified across interviews. The breadth of the 19 themes demonstrated the complexity and context-dependent factors included in experiences reported. Identity expression played an important role, particularly as visual cues for otherwise invisible identities. Noted by Participant #10, "whenever I'm

studying, there are little literal stickers showing off my queer identity. The flags and everything. So yeah, that's how I have been able to showcase (my queer identity)" [Identity Expression, Intentional]. One of the most notable themes was feeling more accepted in Hawai'i compared to the mainland United States. As noted by Participant #02, "Yeah. And I don't feel othered in social groups the way that I am on the continent" [Hawai'i vs. Not]. See Figure 1 for the frequency distribution of each code across all participants.

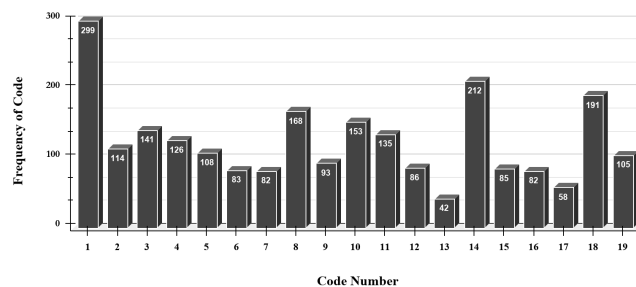


Figure 1: Frequency of Each Code.

In the iterative codebook development process, the distinction between an "inaction due to fear of repercussion" (A) and "action taken against prejudice/oppression" (B) became necessary to distinguish between the choice a minoritized individual must make to modify their behaviors (or appearances) when confronted with potential prejudice held by others. During an in-class discussion, Participant #07 felt a conversation lean towards a classmate expressing their racist perspectives and #07 narrates that she *could* have spoken up and debated the other classmate, but stayed silent due to a desire to avoid conflict, incur judgment from the professor and other classmates because of how outspoken she is, and felt it was better for all to let the moment pass. Though, #07 concludes this story by noting the persistent mental preparation she does before each subsequent class to ready herself if any classmate shares similar ideologies. She would now be ready to verbalize an assertive response while reducing the disruption it may cause to the class. This scenario and the coding need are representative of a type of binary choice that minoritized individuals are faced with, and also the increased cognitive load from incidents related to prejudice (even when not directed at the individual).

The codes of Internal Identity Comparison, Lack of Representation, and Sense of Belonging further demonstrate how navigating intersectional identities led to identity negotiation and conflict. Themes addressing both individual (e.g., Feeling Americanized) and systemic (e.g., Within Community/Family -isms/phobias) factors most supported the hypothesis related to a binary identity navigation. Again, the binary that emerged wasn't inherently a forced two-choice option *within* an identity, such as between male and female gender identities, but rather between intersecting identity domains, such as being a "good" Christian to fit with familial expectations or openly expressing one's queer identity. While both are authentic, Participant #04 explained how her Christian identity is primarily expressed (and

expected) around her family, and being bisexual would contradict that identity in her family and the church's eyes, so she chose to repress her queer identity in that context for preference of her familial values. Around friends, she expresses her queer identity but often downplays her religious background because of the known conflict. Some individuals may effectively navigate both, but other layers (e.g., Other Cultural Expectations, Political Ideology, Immigrant Experience, Lack of Representation) inhibit others from embracing their full selves in all social spaces. As Participant #02 reported, the fetishization of her Filipino appearance on social media was understood as stemming from a lack of representation of other Filipino [women] across all forms of media. This generated a desire to become that representation, but she inevitably deals with numerous comments about her appearance, which takes a large emotional and cognitive toll to continuously be exposed to.

Safety cues were context-dependent, leading to overarching codes like Sense of Belonging, but often were combined with codes such as Language, Additional Identity, Political Ideology, and Testing the Waters. This "testing the waters" act is argued to actively utilize ToM because of the dynamic cues that must be attended to throughout the interaction. Prejudicial mental states were inferred through behavior, visual symbols, and conversational content, shared identity, and even shared other identity/culture (inferring the accepting values associated with that identity observed were present to lead to a welcoming of the minoritized identity to be expressed). Participant #06 shared an example of local Hawai'i accents (and/or Hawai'i Pidgin creole use) to implicitly identify themselves and others as local and *likely* sharing a more accepting ideology related to queer (LGBTQ+) identities. While experiencing prejudice related to being local and Native Hawaiian, #06 observes the connection that, in their experience, those from the continental U.S. tend to have less warm approaches to diversity and #06 will intentionally conceal their queer identity and downplay their cultural background until confirming they would be received well.

Discussion

This study explored the complex, lived experiences of individuals with minoritized identities, focusing on how they navigate expression, concealment, and safety in interpersonal interactions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with $n = 12$ participants connected to the unique polycultural context of Hawai'i, the thematic analysis supported that identity negotiation is a dynamic process shaped by context, identity differences, and representation. The thematic analysis and participant stories revealed that participants described navigating a binary system within and across their identities, with intersectionality contributing to conflicting pressures and expectations. Themes related to prejudice awareness, conflicting cultural or community messages, and actions (or inaction) taken in response to oppression were central to the navigation conflict reported.

The main finding was that individuals with intersectional identities constantly navigate this "binary" within identity expectations, resulting in significant internal and external conflict and tension. This is argued to uncover the social cognitive processes (primarily ToM) that activate during social interactions and that minoritized individuals actively attend to the potential for prejudice held by others through subtle cues signaling others' mental states. It was outlined explicitly by participants monitoring the verbal and nonverbal cues given by others, indicating their prejudiced (or not) ideologies, and potential consequences of social exclusion/relationship termination (particularly by close family or friends). Once a cue was perceived, the participant responded accordingly (if prejudice or unclear cues were given, they were tentative in expressing their minoritized identity or speaking out; if the same/similar identity or safety cues were given, they were more comfortable and expressive). While another person having the "same" identity was a clear cue, other identities perceived as related (e.g., political affiliation) were sufficient to assume safety. While not an objective measure of ToM, this study can be considered as evidence that there is a phenomenon beyond hypervigilance that engages deeper social cognition that can and should be more deeply explored through various methodologies. Again, the argument is made for ToM utilization, as this mental process is engaging in real-time mentalization and monitoring of the mental states of others throughout an engaged or prospectively dynamic interaction. This phenomenon, particularly as it is spontaneously occurring by other agents, is difficult to document through experimental or quantitative methods.

Systemic Power and Adaptive Cognition

The experiences detailed affirmed that identity navigation occurs within systemic power structures, as outlined by Hays' (2001) ADDRESSING model. High levels of Prejudice Awareness was demonstrated, recognizing this as a foundational social reality for minoritized individuals. This awareness necessitates modulation of identity displays based on perceived social and physical safety.

Under conditions of chronic stigma, constant vigilance may increase social monitoring demands, which can recruit ToM processes to anticipate others' evaluations and adjust behavior. Minoritized individuals are compelled to engage in frequent perspective-taking to predict and mitigate potential prejudice from those holding dominant identities. This constant threat assessment imposes significant cognitive load, contributing to higher psychological burdens (Heinrichs et al., 2006; Schreier et al., 2010). This is distinct from social anxiety (or at least a non-clinical level, as separately observed by Nikolić et al., 2019), as this phenomenon is validated by experiences with prejudice, social rejection, and explicitly communicated consequences from family, friends, or community members if the individual deviates from expectations (e.g., comes out as queer). Therefore, while it may present similarly to anxiety if verbalized (e.g., "What if I am attacked because of my

Pride pin?”), it has been validated by prior instances (or observations of similar others) and repercussions of past expressions where it is a genuine fear to monitor for. This is then combined with the broader socio-political context, where Hawai‘i may be “safer” than the continental U.S. due to multiculturalism and local values of community. Those who are aware of the high tension between their identity group and the broader context would still have the cognitive burden to monitor for safety versus threatening cues.

Intersectionality and Cultural Context

Intersectionality contributes to psychological burdens from pressures of multiple marginalized statuses (Brannon et al., 2015; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Reinka et al., 2024). Navigating conflicting cross-cultural information and values leads to cultural dissonance (Martinez-Taboada et al., 2017), present here even when navigating two identity-related cultural contexts. This conflict is exacerbated when rigid identity labels fail to capture the complexity of multicultural and intersectional lived experiences. For our participants, this dissonance manifested as internal fragmentation when their complex reality conflicts with socially recognized identity categories. This was demonstrated through the binary decisions that could be made to conceal one identity (e.g., queer identity) while expressing others (e.g., Christian), but feeling as though both could not be fully expressed at once. This parallels vigilance of key safety cues, but adds an additional cognitive load to the individual because they are not just monitoring for one identity, or even each of their identities in isolation, but the combined identities (e.g., being queer *and* Native Hawaiian) as others’ ideologies may be welcoming of a queer person (or if they are Native Hawaiian), but not when they are *both*.

The cultural (collectivist) context of Hawai‘i adds a complex dimension that must be noted before concluding. This protective effect of collectivism in Hawai‘i contrasts with the more segregated mainland context where groups tend to be more separated. As Soares Miehlestein (2024) observed, with collectivism being associated with lower Social Perception Anxiety specifically for those raised in Hawai‘i, local minoritized individuals may be able to cognitively rely on the broader cultural context and incur less of a cognitive load. Given how the socio-political climate has escalated on the mainland U.S. since this study was conducted, a follow-up study is warranted to understand how U.S. enforcement of immigrant deportation may have psychologically impacted a broader sample of U.S. citizens.

Limitations and Future Directions

The generalizability of these findings within cognitive science is limited by the study’s qualitative methodology, small sample size ($n = 12$), and as it was conducted within Hawai‘i. The unique cultural context of Hawai‘i, which is empirically distinct from the U.S. mainland in terms of increased collectivism and polycultural norms, means the observed findings may not translate to other environments (Kashima et al., 1995; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). The study

findings themselves were strengthened by the narrow focus on Hawai‘i, but again, has implications that can be theorized to be applicable to other contexts, but not directly.

Future research could employ quantitative methods to test specific relationships, such as measuring the frequency of “Testing the Waters”-like behaviors in relation to objective measures of social safety and prejudice awareness. Though, this may not capture the same form of ToM utilization because an experimental context would not be able to recreate the adaptive cognitive circumstances that were reported in this study. Qualitative work can capture phenomenology, enhancing ecological validity of observed social cognitive processes, but recognizably has a tradeoff with generalizability and psychometric evaluation of construct validity and reliability of specific activation of a given cognitive process of interest. Future studies should identify specific cultural scripts that may act as protective factors against the high cognitive load associated with navigating systemic prejudice. Other qualitative methods, like focus groups, may provide deeper reflections to begin operationalizing the ToM utilization occurring to measure in a quantitative way with larger samples. Currently, more work needs to be done to consider potential psychometric measure adaptation/creation to quantify minoritization, intergroup dynamics, and activation of ToM. This paper should stimulate a discussion of how qualitative reports of social cognition can aid in theory development to include unique intersectional social experiences.

Conclusion

The findings support that minoritized individuals are shaped by constant, high-stakes negotiation of identity, demanding active cognitive labor to anticipate and mitigate the impacts of systemic oppression. Identity expression is a flexible, dynamic process dictated by continuous assessment of social safety in the environment. Participants actively interpreted verbal and nonverbal cues that functioned as signals of others’ values, trust, and acceptance, including worn items, conversational content, and signals of value systems such as political ideology. The study demonstrates how intersectionality creates unique psychological burdens through the navigation of binary identity systems. However, this strategic behavioral modulation often involves identity concealment, which, while reducing victimization risk, not only increases psychological dissatisfaction and feelings of inauthenticity but also cognitive load. Within a minority stress framework, ToM may function as an adaptive social-cognitive strategy that helps minoritized individuals anticipate others’ perceptions and navigate prejudicial environments. ToM could arguably serve as a mechanism for social survival for minoritized individuals, as they must frequently attend to and infer the mental states of others. Future work needs to investigate this deeper, but the qualitative reports by these participants has begun to assert how a baseline vigilance or stigma consciousness does reflexively engage deeper social cognitive processes that impact everyday identity visibility.

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