



CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL IDENTITY: CONCEPTS AND OVERVIEW

Identity development was named in the landmark document “The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)” (American Council on Education, 1937/1994a), and since then student affairs professionals and scholars have been working with the concept to enhance student learning and development. In the eight decades since the *SPPV* was written, social identity has remained central to student development. Indeed, as we describe in this chapter, evidence suggests that it is even more significant in the twenty-first century than it was in 1937.

In this chapter we provide a brief history of social identity as an organizing concept of the self and within higher education. We describe oppression and privilege based on social identities, which are important contexts in which to understand the development, enactment, and ongoing construction of social identities. As a precursor to subsequent chapters in which we describe specific domains of identity (for example, race, social class, gender), we conclude this chapter with a discussion of intersecting and multiple identities.

Definition and Historical Context

The notion of social identity emerged through the last half of the twentieth century as a central organizing concept for understanding self in society and, in the context of higher education, as a foundation for understanding student development. Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009) stated, “Enhancing the

development of students has long been a primary role of student affairs practitioners. Identity development theories help practitioners understand how students go about discovering their 'abilities, aptitude and objectives' while assisting them to achieve their 'maximum effectiveness' (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 69)" (p. 577). But what exactly is social identity, why does it matter in college student development, and from what intellectual traditions are common theories drawn and/or born?

The study of identity takes place in a number of academic disciplines on which student affairs educators rely: psychology, sociology, social psychology, history, and anthropology, among others. The most commonly cited authors among college student development scholars tend to be psychologists and social psychologists, though sociological and human ecology approaches are becoming more visible in the student affairs literature (Torres et al., 2009). Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2011) noted "identity is one of the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences" and "the number of publications on 'identity' has steadily increased in the past few decades" (p. 1) across psychological, sociological, and related fields.

Vignoles et al. (2011) provided an integrative view of identity at four levels: individual, relational, collective, and material. *Individual* or *personal identities* are self-definitions at the individual level of goals, values, beliefs, and other individually held self-evaluations and expected future selves. *Relational identities* include roles (for example, child, student, coworker) that one establishes in relationship with and to others, in the interpersonal space created by social interactions. *Collective identities* are an individual's sense of self within or outside social categories such as ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. *Material identities* are social entities beyond the self, consisting of geographic places and material artifacts of modern life. So a college student may understand herself as having individual-level values ("I hold traditionally conservative views about how government should address an economic downturn"), relational identities ("I am captain of the basketball team"), collective identities ("I am Arab American and Muslim"), and material identities ("I am a proud Michigan native who drives a Detroit-made car"). These identities interact in ways that yield innumerable unique outcomes for individuals and that change over time. The student here will likely end her term as basketball captain but may retain an athletic identity after college; she may not always live in Michigan but may retain her sense of "home" there and loyalty to local industries. Any college campus has as many unique identity combinations as it has students, faculty, and other employees.

Vignoles et al. (2011) also pointed out that cultural and historical definitions of what identities mean change over time; for a student to be

conservative, a women's team captain, Arab American, Muslim, and native Michigander takes on different meanings at different points in time and in different places. Importantly, they noted, "The range of identity categories available in a given social context, and the meanings that are given to them, are constructed through a confluence of social processes over historical time" (p. 4). In other words, not everyone has access to every identity category at every point in time and in every context. This concept connects to ecological approaches to understanding student development, which stipulate that person-environment interactions shape core elements of the person and affect the direction of development (see Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model in Chapter Two).

Postsecondary educators—and student affairs professionals in particular—have built on the tradition of attending to students' social identity development. Initially, they relied primarily on identity theories from psychology, over time expanding to sociological, social psychological, and ecological models. Researchers created these models in parallel with important social movements that drew attention to the diversity of human experience and identities, and student affairs professionals and scholars responded to increased diversity on campus. Professionals use social identity theories in their work with individuals, groups, and intergroup dynamics.

The earliest identity models used in higher education came from the Freudian and Eriksonian traditions and their focus on resolving a series of developmental crises toward healthy growth (see Chapter Thirteen). Chickering brought this approach firmly into the higher education context in his 1969 book *Education and Identity*, providing a foundation from which to consider the processes of identity development. At the same time, both within and outside the college context, social identities—and in particular those identities not in the majority—became more visible through the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and early gay rights organizing.

Researchers responded with new ways of thinking about the development of race, gender, and sexual orientation identities. African American scholars developed models of Black identity (for example, Cross, 1971) highlighting the contrast between Black identity and White identity. The 1970s spawned the women's movement and models related to gender (Gilligan, 1977; Josselson, 1973) and eventually feminism (hooks, 1981). The 1974 declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness and the increasingly visible gay rights movement led to the development of homosexual identity models (Cass, 1979), later expanded to include lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities (D'Augelli, 1994a). In the 1980s, theorists sought synthesis of individual racial and ethnic group models designed to encompass the experiences of

all minoritized group members, such as the minority development model (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989) and the multiethnic model (Banks, 1984). As the twentieth century came to a close, White (Helms & Carter, 1990), Latino (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001), Asian (Kim, 2001), ethnic (Phinney, 1990), and bi/multiracial (Renn, 2000, 2004; Root, 1990) frames and explanations for the identity development of their respective groupings followed. Scholars paid less attention to the development of gender identity per se, though studies of differences between men's and women's development and experiences became common (Baxter Magolda, 1989, 1992).

From the 1970s through the 1990s, most theories used to describe college students' social identities came out of the psychological tradition. Few theorists used samples of college students to derive their models, leading to a body of "student development theory" that was related to social identities but not specific to the collegiate context. The theories also tended to focus on single social identities, leading to depth in understanding racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation identity development but limiting consideration of identity development across a range of domains. Theories that are specific to one domain of identity are necessary for understanding individuals and groups, but they are not sufficient for the broader task of examining development across multiple domains. In response, researchers addressed both of these issues—basing theories on college students and addressing identity holistically.

During the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, scholars delved deeper into the complexity of multiple identities and their extensive overlapping influences and formations (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones, 1997, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991). The introduction of legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of *intersectionality* into higher education scholarship resulted in a host of studies exploring its utility as developmental theory. Originally based on understanding the subjectivity of African American women in the judicial system, intersectionality theory after 25 years now covers intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and other identities that locate power and privilege in some categories at the expense of members of other categories. Like others (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Torres et al., 2009), we do not consider intersectionality itself a developmental theory, as it does not describe or predict individual growth in the direction of developmental complexity, but we advocate for its use as a lens for understanding how the intersecting identities of individuals contribute to development and how development unfolds within the broader societal context of interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (Collins, 1991). Awareness of intersectionality

theory and models of multiple dimensions of identity specific to college student development (see Jones & Abes, 2013) has led the field of student development to view identities as intertwined, interactive, and unique for each individual.

In the last two decades, the social identity literature expanded rapidly, as did foundational knowledge related to privilege, oppression, and multiple identities all outlined in this chapter. This expansion signifies a shift away from the dominance of mostly positivist psychosocial and cognitive structural theories to guide student development, toward inclusion of a wider range of research methods and social science disciplines, such as sociology and developmental ecology. To enhance college students' development, student affairs professionals in general—and counselors, social justice educators, and the staff of multicultural, women's/gender, and LGBT resource and cultural centers in particular—have also begun to seek out ways to work with students on issues of oppression, privilege, and power as they address multifaceted identity issues (see Black & Stone, 2005; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Patton & Chang, 2011; Patton, Kortegast, & Barela, 2011; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2011).

Harnessing the complexity of multidimensional individual, relational, collective, and material identities in changing social contexts brings both the interpersonal and intrapersonal components of development to the foreground. In addition, much of the foundation of the social identity literature is methodologically grounded in social constructivism and less so in the more positivist tradition of a number of theories we discuss later in this book. How individuals and groups make meaning of the world they occupy is vital to understanding social identity, which makes social constructivism a worldview and method appropriate to consider these ideas. Recognizing the burgeoning availability of resources on these topics, we first review selected literature tied to the key concepts of oppression and privilege and then examine specific research linked to these and related concepts in the higher education literature.

Oppression

While scholars disagree about the meaning of oppression, inequities in power are a key component of most definitions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Oppression consists of a family of concepts and conditions, including roadblocks to

holistic development (Young, 2000) and, on campus, the creation of a negative climate for members of minoritized groups (Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003), making it an important consideration for student affairs.

Bohmer and Briggs (1991) defined oppression as "those attitudes, behaviors, and pervasive and systemic social arrangements by which members of one group are exploited and subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges" (p. 155). Oppression includes injustices perpetrated, sometimes unconsciously, by members of privileged or majoritized groups (in the United States, those groups include those who are middle or upper class, White, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, men, and without obvious mental, physical, or emotional impairments) against members of oppressed or minoritized groups (basically, anyone *not* in all of the aforementioned categories). Research has shown that individuals place themselves in various locations along an oppressed-oppressor continuum, "depending upon the contexts, time, and social and legal relationships involved in their interactions" (Sonn & Fisher, 2003, p. 117). An individual may be privileged along some dimensions but not along all (for example, a cisgender gay Black man is privileged by his gender but oppressed based on his race and sexual orientation). To recognize and eliminate oppression, it is important to inspect the visible and invisible interaction of privilege and oppression.

Though perpetuated through individual actions, oppression is a systemic issue. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) noted, "Oppression involves institutional control, ideological domination and the impositions of the dominant group's culture on the minoritized group. No individual member of the dominant group has to do anything specific to oppress a member of the minoritized group; prejudice and discrimination is built into the society as a whole and becomes normalized and taken for granted" (p. 40). Oppression, therefore, is woven into the fabric of tacit societal assumptions and is both a structural and a political issue. Indeed, oppression has long been an element of the dominant culture in the United States (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003), and exposing its invisible, toxic nature heightens awareness and may encourage members of majoritized groups to change their perspective and take social action to address more equitable change.

Oppression can take many forms, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 2000). Microaggressions, the "constant and continuing everyday reality of slights, insults and invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent" others (Sue, 2010, p. xv), also contribute to oppression. The outcomes of oppression on individual students span personal and relational or interpersonal domains. Minority stress theory

(see Meyer, 2003) posits that experiencing prejudice and discrimination leads to negative health and mental health outcomes that could have deleterious effects on college students' performance, learning, and development. Systematic oppression keeps people from some social groups out of higher education altogether, and it creates negative, hostile, or unwelcoming climates for those minoritized individuals who do enter college (see Hurtado et al., 2003). Under certain conditions the interaction of minority stress and negative campus climate might become a catalyst for the development of agency and resilience, but it also could easily impede student development, learning, and success. Harvey (2000) claimed that "we need more adequate concepts of power, and an analysis of hidden power, in our own relationships and in social structures on the large scale" (p. 187) to take appropriate first steps toward dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate cycles of power and privilege for some people at the expense of others.

Privilege

In the United States, a centuries-old democracy, the notion of privilege had been largely ignored, but McIntosh's (1989, 2003) articulation of the myth of meritocracy made widespread inequities more difficult to ignore on campus. Such inequities include: One in two offspring of families earning \$90,000 or more per year attains a college degree by age 24, but only one in 17 offspring of families earning \$35,000 or less per year does (Lott, 2012); women faculty and administrators are underrepresented at more prestigious institutions, overrepresented at less prestigious ones, and earn less on average than men (Lee & Won, 2014); unlike their peers with disabilities, nondisabled students can choose to live anywhere on campus without regard to building access; college calendars follow a schedule based on Christian holidays but rarely on the holidays of other faiths; and White students are more likely than Black and Latino students to attend institutions with more resources for learning and student development (John & Stage, 2013). Privilege is "defined in relational terms and in reference to social groups, and involves unearned benefits afforded to powerful social groups within systems of oppression" (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012). Most privileged individuals in U.S. society either cannot see or refuse to see the power they hold, leaving privilege invisible and intact for those who possess it (McIntosh, 1989, 2003, 2012, 2013; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). Many people with privilege unknowingly take advantage, often devoid of any thought about the inequity their privilege enacts in the lives of people without privilege (McIntosh, 1989, 2003).

In her classic 1989 article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" Peggy McIntosh described the concept of white privilege in a way that was accessible to many readers; in it she listed 26 everyday occurrences in which White people carry privileges that people of color in the United States often do not have (for example, "I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my race widely represented" and "If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race," p. 11). The notion of the "invisible knapsack" took hold in student affairs circles, and there is a number of lists of privileges in different social categories (including gender, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, religion) that circulate through professional networks, training, and online resources.

McIntosh (1989, 2003, 2012) discussed two kinds of privilege: *unearned entitlements* or privileges everyone should possess, such as feeling safe on campus and in the workplace, and *conferred dominance*, giving one group power over another. Conferred dominance bestows privilege on a single group, simultaneously making individuals who are members of this group pivotal as oppressors with power. Many people in the United States have advantages because of some part of their status (for example, being socioeconomically secure, heterosexual, cisgender man, or Christian). However, they do not see dismantling privilege as their responsibility because they do not see themselves as oppressors. Furthermore, some individuals see their privileged status (for example, White, wealthy) outweighed by an oppressed status that is also part of their identity (for example, lesbian woman) and never recognize the privilege they hold. McIntosh (2012, 2013) advocated for teaching about privilege as a way to help individuals move beyond this ignorance to act on their privileged status as allies to members of oppressed groups (see also Case et al., 2012).

The unbalanced social structure of the United States "bestows privilege in a manner that impacts relationships between people who would otherwise be peers" (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 177). The intricate connections between self, others, and environment shape awareness and lack of awareness of privilege. Privilege comes in many seen and unseen manifestations in U.S. society, yet "The study of privilege adds a whole new dimension to analysis of social systems and individual experiences. It changes everything" (McIntosh, 2013, p. xii). In order to shed light on some of these often-invisible privileges, we discuss them here, followed by a short review of selected literature examining privilege in university contexts. In enumerating a handful of categories of privilege, we wish to avoid the implication that these are the only—or most important—ones operating in higher education. Readers can extend these examples into other categories of social privilege and oppression.

White Privilege

White privilege in the United States derives from historical, cultural, and political forces of domination and control by White people over indigenous people, voluntary immigrants of color and their children, and those people of color brought forcibly as slaves and captives (who might be called "involuntary immigrants"). Individuals who are perceived as having lighter skin and the phenotypical features expected in people with ancestors from Europe possess white privilege. Whiteness studies scholar Tim Wise (2011) uses "White" or "White folks" to describe "those persons, typically of European descent, who by virtue of skin color or perhaps national origin and culture are able to be perceived as 'White,' as members of the dominant racial group in the Western world" (p. xii). As a shifting social construction, definitions of the White population have varied throughout U.S. history, and no consensus has emerged for "the optimal term one should use to describe American descendants of European and Middle Eastern immigrants" (McDermott & Samson, 2005, p. 247). The U.S. census coined the term White, the most common one in use, though other terms, such as Caucasian, European American, and Anglo, are also used by White people to place themselves in an ethnic or racial category.

As an identity construct, whiteness is "ill-defined, illusory (as an identity marker) and elusive" (Jackson, 1999, p. 52). By contrast, white privilege is explicitly defined as a "system of benefits, advantages, and opportunities experienced by white persons" bestowed solely because of skin color (Donnelly, Cook, Van Ausdale, & Foley, 2005, p. 6). White privilege is often hard for White people to recognize, while easy for non-White people, to see and experience its deleterious effects. Wise (2014) described white privilege as "any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative social mistreatment" (§ 11) that people perceived as White enjoy but which are not available to people not perceived as White. These benefits may be material, social, or psychological. Lund and Colin (2010) stated, "White privilege is viewed by many as a birthright and is in essence an existentialist norm that is based upon the power and privilege of pigmentation" (p. 1).

Since McIntosh wrote about the invisible knapsack, White privilege has increased rapidly as a topic for discussion in myriad bodies of literature, including counseling (for example, Israel, 2012; Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011), higher education (for example, Cabrera, 2014; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015), psychology (for example, Case et al., 2012; Sue, 2013), and student affairs (for example, Bondi, 2012; Edwards, Loftin, Nance, Riser, & Smith, 2014). She offered a fitting metaphor for white privilege,

describing it as “a weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 2).

Since the majority of college students in the United States are White, they are the group most often used as subjects in research conducted on campus—in psychology, marketing, medicine, and so forth. They may begin to see themselves reflected back, whereas racially minoritized students may remain invisible to them because, as Tatum (2000) noted, “dominant access to information about subordinates is often limited to stereotypical depictions of the ‘other’” (p. 12). Yet there is also evidence that awareness of white privilege can be a stepping-stone to anti-racist action; White people can move from “acceptance of oppression to naming oppression (the feeling of guilt), to reflection and redefinition (learning from guilt), to multiperspective integration (to act on what one has learned from guilt)” (Arminio, 2001, pp. 246–247).

Social Class Privilege

Socioeconomic status (SES) and social class are related but distinct concepts. Rubin, Denson, Kilpatrick, Matthews, Stehlik, and Zyngier (2014) explained, “SES refers to one’s *current* social and economic situation, and consequently, it is relatively mutable, especially in countries that provide opportunities for economic advancement. In contrast, social class refers to one’s socio-cultural *background* and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations” (p. 196). SES and social class influence self-perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Social class privilege attaches to individuals who have a higher socioeconomic status in relation to individuals of lower socioeconomic status. In the United States, “the rich are supported by a general ideology that equates success with hard work and individual merit” (Lott, 2012, p. 654). The ideas that “intelligence and ambition will elevate our socioeconomic position” and that “class privilege is deserved” (Lott, 2012, p. 654) reinforce the myth of meritocracy and mask the effects of class privilege. Even in higher education, which may appear to be an engine for promoting social class equity by, for example, conferring degrees on first-generation college students, social class privilege operates to perpetuate societal inequity (Rubin et al., 2014; Seider, 2008)

For individuals, social class has three components: “a social class of origin, a current felt social class and an attributed social class” (Barrett, 2011, p. 7). When a shift in class occurs, identity can change, and felt and attributed social classes can be at odds with each other. A sharp social class contrast experience in college can lead to attrition of working-class students (Barrett, 2011;

Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). Ignoring these inequities and others saturating contemporary economic and social systems perpetuates class privilege and class oppression.

Class privilege is also shaped by intersections with other domains of identity including "race, gender, sexuality, and geography" (Borrego, 2003, p. 4). An individual's social connections and experiences, often referred to as cultural capital, open doors and extend power. Though social class is often measured with criteria like income, occupation, and education, "class rests on other people's evaluation of our presentation of self" (Kimmel, 2003, p. 7), or what Barrett (2011) called attributed social class.

Most people think of class as "the kind of work they do, income they earn and their education" (Ostrander, 1984, p. 4). In contrast, members of the upper class frame their assets as "ownership of wealth, exercise of power, and membership in an exclusive network" (Ostrander, p. 5). Wealth, power, and a closed social network keep class distinctions in the hands of the rich who preserve class invisibility and maintain the social class status quo. At elite higher education institutions that fully fund all admitted students, regardless of their ability to pay, classism and social class privilege operate to create differential access to resources and opportunities such as unpaid summer internships, study abroad, and high-priced recreation during breaks (see Aries & Seider, 2005, 2007; Seider, 2008). Across diverse institutions the differential effects of social class privilege and oppression shape transition to college, experience in college, and college outcomes (Langhout et al., 2009; Radmacher & Azmitia, 2013).

Research on students' social class identities and experiences is relatively new in the field, though there is evidence that college students can learn to talk about their social class and its role in privilege and oppression (Barrett, 2011; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). For example, Sanders and Mahalingam (2012) found that a structured intergroup dialogue program created opportunities for students to explore class as a racialized phenomenon, to overturn taboos about social class discourse, and to break down class-based stereotypes.

Gender Privilege: Male Privilege and Cisgender Privilege

There are at least two types of gender privilege operating in higher education. The first relates to the power that men retain, even now that women are a majority among U.S. undergraduate enrollments, to shape campus culture and discourse. The second relates to the power that cisgender people who conform to a binary notion of gender (that is, male/man and female/woman)

have over individuals who are transgender, who experience gender fluidity, or who otherwise express gender in a nonbinary way (by, for example, wearing clothing and hairstyles typical for women while also wearing facial hair typical for men). These two types of gender privilege are enactments, respectively, of sexism and genderism (the expectation that every individual fits into one and only one of two genders; see Bilodeau, 2009).

McIntosh's (1989) work on white privilege emerged from her observations of male privilege when she was the associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. In the opening of the "Invisible Knapsack," she stated, "Through work to bring Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10). In the quarter century since she made this observation, women have made progress in higher education in terms of representation across academic fields, yet they still operate at a disadvantage in the student body, administration, and faculty, where male privilege remains strong.

Male privilege is "a special status conferred on males in societies where male supremacy is the central social organizing feature" (Phillips & Phillips, 2009, p. 683). College men—and particularly White men—benefit from privilege on campus in a number of ways, including feeling safe most of the time to walk alone, being able to wear what they choose without worrying that their character will be judged, seeing people like themselves participating in nationally televised sporting events, and setting campus norms for socializing, without fearing they will be sexually assaulted at a student party. They can participate in what sociologist Michael Kimmel has dubbed "Guyland," a culture in which norms of heterosexual masculinity govern all aspects of campus life, from academics to athletics to parties (see Kimmel, 2008; Kimmel & Davis, 2011). On most campuses, male students will also take most of their courses with male faculty and have a man leading the institution and board of trustees. Even though women make up the majority of students in higher education, across institutional sectors and types, male privilege is pervasive, often not visible, and instrumental in shaping the experiences of students of all genders.

Cisgender privilege includes "the collective advantages that are accepted, most often unknowingly, by those who are not positioned in opposition to the dominant ideology of the gender binary" (Taylor, 2010, p. 268). Taylor continued, "Simply put: A person who is able to live in a life and/or body that is easily recognized as being either man/male or woman/female generally needs to spend less energy to be understood by others. The energy one need not expend to explain their gender identity and/or expression to others is gendered

privilege" (pp. 268–269). Citing McIntosh's invisible knapsack metaphor, Taylor listed dozens of privileges available to cisgender people, including "being able to find a safe public bathroom, seeing people of one's gender expression in media, and expecting to be able to find doctors willing to provide urgent medical care" (p. 269). Other cisgender privileges include not having to tell others what pronouns to use in referring to oneself, being able to shop for clothing without being questioned or considered suspicious, and being able to participate in intercollegiate and international athletic leagues without a physical examination or genetic test to "prove" one is competing in the "correct" gender. Binary gender normativity is so pervasive that even with growing awareness of transgender individuals in society and on campus, genderist microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and violence remain substantial obstacles to student success (Bilodeau, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2015).

Heterosexual Privilege

Like the other categories of privilege we discuss here, heterosexual privilege is pervasive and largely invisible in U.S. society, though lesbian, gay, and bisexual activism for equal rights to serve in the military, to be protected from employment discrimination, and to marry someone of the same gender have brought attention to some of the legal privileges and protections from which heterosexual people benefit. Feigenbaum (2007) explained that "heterosexism is not about individuals or how comfortable they are around queers"; rather, "dominance, and the practices that support it are often replicated, reinforced, and reflected by the attitudes, behaviors and practices of even our best-intentioned allies" (p. 7). An "invisible knapsack" list of heterosexual privilege might include items such as "I can hold hands with my partner in public without fear of harassment or violence," "I don't have to worry about being fired from my job if people find out my sexual orientation," and "I feel confident that my healthcare providers are not judging me based on my sexual orientation."

As with other privileged identities, many people who identify as heterosexual do not think about their sexual orientation until they recognize their relationship to others who do not identify as heterosexual (Evans & Broido, 2005). Participants in a qualitative study of heterosexual college students described times when they became aware of heterosexism and homophobia and attempted to distance themselves from it, even when it occurred in faith-based settings that were important to them (Mueller & Cole, 2009). They were aware of discrimination against gay and lesbian people, but felt largely incapable of interrupting heterosexism, in part because as one student

said "So much in our culture assumes your straightness" (Mueller & Cole, 2009, p. 330). They discussed some of the more visible political movements (military service, same-gender marriage), but were less able to articulate the everyday privileges of being heterosexual, one of the most fundamental being "these students had rarely or ever thought about their sexual orientation" (p. 333). These students reflected the dominant culture that rarely perceives heterosexuality as a social identity and takes heterosexual privilege for granted (Evans & Broido, 2005).

There is some evidence that interventions can increase awareness of heterosexual privilege in college students. Mueller and Cole (2009) reported that their participants appreciated the opportunity to talk about their heterosexual identity and its meaning, which also caused them to reflect on privileges associated with it. Kim Case and colleagues (Case, Hensley, & Anderson, 2014; Case & Stewart, 2009, 2010) demonstrated that participants in an undergraduate diversity course in Kentucky increased their awareness of heterosexual privilege, and Walls et al. (2009) documented graduate students in social work as they learned about heterosexual privilege.

Ability Privilege

Examining attitudes toward people with disabilities and their treatment throughout history reveals that ability privilege and the psychological, social, emotional, and economic freedom it bestows on its holders is very real (see Evans, 2008; Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005; Griffin, Peters, & Smith, 2007). Wolbring (2014) stated, "Ability privilege is based on the *reality* that one has certain advantages if exhibiting certain abilities, and individuals enjoying these advantages are unwilling to give up these advantages" (p. 119, italics in original). Historically, disability has been viewed as "a sign of spiritual depravity, a cause for ridicule, a genetic weakness to be exterminated, something to be hidden away, a source of pity, a community health problem, and a problem to be fixed" (Evans, 2008, p. 11). Language used to describe people with disabilities indicates that nondisabled people view them as "less than" normal (Marks, 1999). Terms such as "learning disabled," "hearing impaired," or "brain injured" suggest that the individual so described cannot function at the level or in the way that society expects (Evans & Herriott, 2009). Meanwhile people who live with ability privilege find themselves represented in all forms of media, reflected among public figures, and are free to live, study, and work where they wish, with little regard to their ability to access necessary facilities, programs, and services.

By assuming one normative way to do things (move, speak, learn, and so forth), society privileges those who carry out these functions as prescribed and oppresses those who use other methods (Evans & Herriott, 2009; Wolbring, 2014). "Ableism"—the "pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people [with] ... disabilities on ... individual, institutional, and societal/cultural levels" (Rauscher & McClintock, 1997, p. 198) is an evident form of privilege in society and on college campuses (Evans, 2008).

In reality, the causes of disability and enablers of ability privilege are environmental conditions and attitudes, not physical and mental impairments (Griffin et al., 2007; Wolbring, 2014). The physical barriers that prevent people from accessing buildings, separate individuals in educational settings, fail to provide alternative methods of consuming information (for example, visual captioning for those with hearing loss), and so on place people with disabilities at a disadvantage. Nondisabled people are equally responsible for often discounting the talents and skills of anyone with a disability (Evans & Herriott, 2009).

Christian Privilege

Around the world, religious traditions differ regionally, as do degrees of homogeneity of religious and spiritual practices. In general, whatever religion predominates in a specific location is privileged, in that it is recognized and honored while other religious traditions are at best ignored and at worst outlawed and persecuted. Christian men founded the United States at a time when Christianity was the dominant religious tradition in Europe, and the majority of residents of the United States who practice a religion today are Christian. As a result, Christian privilege is ingrained in national history, law, society, and culture. Seifert (2007) defined Christian privilege on campus as "the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith in America's colleges and universities" (p. 11).

The dominant religious groups in the United States include, but are not limited to, Roman Catholics, mainstream Protestant groups (for example, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians), evangelical Christian groups (including Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, Assembly of God), Eastern Orthodox followers (for example, Greek, Russian), and those who belong to smaller denominations, including members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and Seventh-Day Adventists. Non-Christian religions (for example, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam) are relatively small in number in the United States and their members face oppression, prejudice,

and discrimination (Schlosser, 2003). Atheist (see Mueller, 2012) and agnostic students are also subject to living in a Christonormative society in which they are doubly disadvantaged by not belonging to the Christian majority and not subscribing to a faith tradition.

Christian privilege is embedded in the academy (Seifert, 2007). The first colleges in the British colonies that would become the United States were founded to train ministers for Protestant congregations. Ritual, symbols, and practices representative of Christian privilege in U.S. higher education are clearly delineated examples of assumed Christian "cultural markers" (Seifert, p. 11). Christian privilege includes having academic calendars arranged around major Christian holidays; seeing public representations of Christianity such as Christmas trees on campus; and not having to explain the importance of major religious holidays to faculty in order to reschedule an examination or be excused from class. Christian students typically do not pray five times a day, as observant Muslim students do, and thus do not have to plan academic schedules to accommodate their religious observances. Similarly, Christian student athletes are not often expected to compete on Sunday morning, the traditional time for Christian worship, whereas Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu student athletes may be expected to compete on their religious holy days.

As with all of the privileges we discuss in this section, Christian privilege and religious oppression intersect with other aspects of identity; few students carry privilege across all domains of identity, and sometimes awareness of one oppressed identity can lead students to understanding and empathy with other groups (McIntosh, 2013). McIntosh (2012) called on scholars and educators to continue to pursue the field she called privilege studies in order to unmask additional areas of privilege and to develop effective strategies to interrupt cycles of privilege and oppression.

Summary

We have described six categories of privilege, but there are privileged and oppressed categories in nearly every social identity category. In the chapters that follow, we describe the ways that experiences of privilege and oppression shape identities and identity development, catalyze resistance and agency, and influence student learning and outcomes. We noted at the outset of this section that we were isolating social identity categories in order to highlight specific features of privilege and oppression in each, but any individual's identity is made up of multiple, intersecting, mutually constituting, and mutually influencing categories. The highly personalized—if not unique—array of privileges and oppressions that individuals experience influences their life

patterns and possibilities. In the next section we describe contemporary models of multiple social identities.

Multiple Identities

Returning to Vignoles et al.'s (2011) four-level, integrative view of identity (as individual, relational, collective, and material), and considering contexts of multiple, interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, it becomes clear that an inclusive model of identity development must account for the complexity of students' backgrounds, characteristics, beliefs, and aspirations. Traditional, linear stage theories of identity, mostly derived from Erikson (1959/1980) as we describe in Part Three of this book, were once the foundation for understanding college student identities. Yet social constructions of identities such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, geography, and ability play an important role in understanding identity dimensions (McEwen, 2003b). Some identity dimensions, like geography and material goods, are not developmentally grounded, yet they play a critical role in self-definitions.

The study of intersecting identities emerged in student affairs and other fields at the end of the twentieth century and expanded rapidly in the twenty-first century. Delworth (1989) was one of the first student affairs scholars to raise the issue of the intersection of gender and ethnic identity while raising questions about the lack of consideration given to the convergence of identities. Reynolds and Pope (1991) then described multiple identities and oppressions in the context of counseling. Based on an analysis of the scholarship on multiple identity constructs of race, class, gender, and sexuality, sociologist Weber (1998) concluded that the intersection of multiple identities is a socially constructed, contextual phenomenon enacted in everyday life that motivates action to create a more equitable society. This discourse has become more visible as research in student affairs (for example, Abes, 2012; Abes et al., 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Stewart, 2008, 2009), and related disciplines like psychology (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008; Stanley, 2004) and counseling (Greene, 2012; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Williams, 2005), has illuminated the concept of multiple identities and their corresponding privileges and oppressions. The influence of intersectionality theory (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991) is also visible in recent and emerging research on college student development, though as we stated earlier, intersectionality is not a development theory per se.

Jones and McEwen (2000) first articulated a conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity based on a grounded theory study of ten undergraduate women of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Portrayed at the center of the three-dimensional model is the core sense of self (one's personal identity), including personal attributes and characteristics, and other factors important to the individual. Surrounding and enveloping the core is the context within which identity occurs; special attention is given to family background, socio-cultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning. The model depicts significant identity dimensions (race, culture, gender, family, education, sexual orientation, social class, and religion) as intersecting circles surrounding the core identity. Dots located on each of these intersecting circles represent the importance of the identity dimension to the individual. The closer the dot is to the core, the greater the importance of that identity dimension to the individual at that time. Like Reynolds and Pope (1991), Jones and McEwen (2000) added to the research by offering an alternative to linear development, describing and illustrating their model as "a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development" (p. 408).

Based on Abes and Jones's (2004) study of lesbian identity development and meaning making, Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) reconceptualized Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple identity dimensions. They drew on concepts of self-authorship theory (see Chapter Sixteen) and feminist theoretical conceptualizations of multiple identities (for example, Anzaldúa, 1987/1999) to create a model that incorporates interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive elements (self-authorship) and recognizes the concurrent, nonhierarchical experience of multiple identities (Abes et al., 2007; Knight, 2002). Abes et al. (2007) embraced a postmodern approach of understanding identities as variable in meaning across contexts, mutually constructing, and performative (Butler, 1990). For example, a Latina, Catholic lesbian woman will experience her identity differently in different campus contexts and over time; her ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and religious identities will influence one another; and she constructs her identity through performing it in daily interactions and in how she presents herself to others. As she does so, "repetition creates a sense of self, including a core sense of personal values, however fluid that sense of self might be" (Abes et al., 2007, p. 15). None of the relationships depicted in the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) stand alone, as all dimensions must be understood in relationship to each other.

The original Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000) depicted a core of personal characteristics, attributes, and

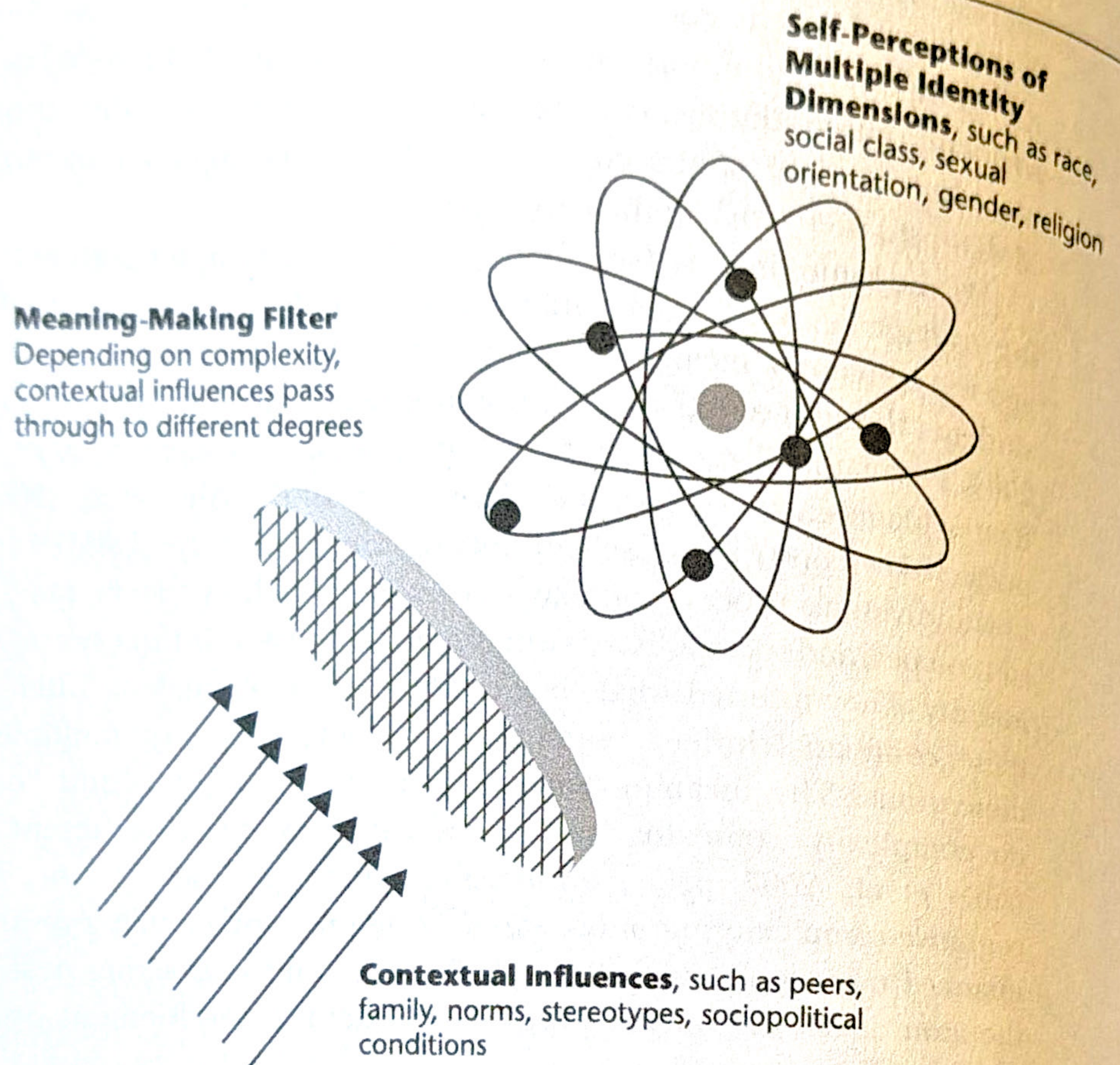
identity, around which orbited identity dimensions such as race, gender, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and culture. Distance from the core represented salience of these dimensions at any given point in time. The “atom model,” as it was dubbed for its resemblance to a two-dimensional depiction of an atom, was embedded within a context of family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, and career decisions and life planning. Student affairs educators and scholars quickly incorporated the MMDI into their work in the early 2000s.

At the same time, self-authorship theory (see Chapter Sixteen) was gaining traction among student affairs and student development professionals, and the concept of meaning making became important in understanding how students thought about their own and others’ identities (see Abes & Jones, 2004; Pizzolato, Chaudhari, Murrell, Podobnik, & Schaeffer, 2008; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Abes et al. (2007) incorporated key constructs of self-authorship theory into the RMMDI to explain how individuals process contextual influences such as “peers, family, norms, stereotypes, and sociopolitical conditions” (p. 7) vis-à-vis their sense of self and identity. They inserted what they called a “meaning-making filter” between these contextual influences and the self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions. The meaning-making filter acts as a sieve, and “depending on complexity, contextual influences pass through to different degrees” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 7), influencing identity self-perceptions. Increased cognitive complexity and more sophisticated meaning making result in more nuanced messages passing through the sieve and interacting in the core of the atom itself. The model portrays this identity development process (see Figure 4.1).

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) discussed the model using portraits of three participants who demonstrate multiple dimensions of identity through formulaic meaning making (relatively simple), transitional meaning making (conflict within identity, more complex), and foundational meaning making (in which the relationship between context and perception of identity is complex). Reformulating Jones and McEwen’s (2000) multiple dimensions model to include meaning making “provides a richer portrayal of not only *what* relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also *how* they come to perceive them as they do” (p. 13). The RMMDI captures the complexity of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive development in relation to multiple dimensions of identity.

Jones and Abes (2013) elaborated on the MMDI, its application, and its relationship to other bodies of theory (including intersectionality, queer theory, and critical race theory) in their book *Identity Development of College Students:*

FIGURE 4.1. RECONCEPTUALIZED MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY



Source: Abes, Jones, & McEwen (2007).

Advancing Frameworks for Multiple Dimensions of Identity, and it seems likely that they will continue this line of research and theory development. We include examples of multiple dimensions of identity throughout this book when we describe theories and practical applications. Studies of intersecting identities (for example, gender and race, race and sexual orientation, or religion and race) are commonplace in contemporary literature and deepen knowledge about the complexity of lived experiences in higher education and society. Overarching models, such as the MMDI, which explain multiple dimensions of identity, provide useful heuristics for understanding how the various pieces may fit together and influence one another.

Future Directions

Social identities, oppression, and privilege are key concepts in understanding college student learning and development in the United States. Equally important is understanding how students make meaning of multiple, intersecting identities in the early twenty-first century. Student affairs educators and researchers have the benefit of drawing from early models of student identity that, while limited in their generalizability, provided a language for describing important intrapersonal, psychosocial identity development during college. Educators can also draw from the tradition of “single category” theories that provide insight into specific social identities (gender, race, sexual orientation, ability, and so forth) and enhance and deepen understanding of environments that are inclusive and optimal for growth. With attention now on multiple dimensions of identity, educators can use knowledge of early models with insights from the single category theories to explore the ways that identities develop over time and in varying contexts. As a set, all of these theories illuminate college student experiences of privilege, oppression, and intersecting social identities.

Jones and McEwen (2000) developed one of the first holistic models of student development for application in the academy, yet the first clarion call for attention to the whole student came over eight decades ago in “The Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV)” (American Council on Education, 1937/1994a). Continued work on single identity categories such as race, sexual orientation, and ability—and within them, on specific identities such as African American, heterosexual, nondisabled—is vital to continued understanding of the identities and experiences of students. Research that focuses on combinations of identities (such as White Muslims, people who are biracial and bisexual, and working-class Jews) will enhance the ability of student affairs educators to serve students effectively. And studies that press forward with holistic approaches to understanding identity in the context of interpersonal and cognitive development and in relation to multiple dimensions of identity will provide empirical evidence to support effective programs and services in higher education.

Understanding the development of social identities, particularly how students of different social identities learn about themselves and one another, is important to student affairs educators. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) offered a developmental model of intercultural maturity that provided guideposts for scholarship and practice in this area. King, Perez, and Shim (2013) found that students benefitted from sustained exposure to differences, a

feeling of safety, and using an array of approaches to engage in intercultural learning. Additional studies that explore how privilege, oppression, and intercultural learning operate in academic settings can enhance higher education practice and enrich student outcomes. In setting forth an agenda for the future of Privilege Studies, McIntosh (2012) urged scholars to elicit "personal testimony about privilege and disadvantage ... [because] [e]ach of us contains some of the data we need in order to know ourselves. Listening to others' testimonies allows us to know ourselves even better, know others better, and recognize the matrices of power we are all in" (p. 203).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do social identities matter in higher education and college student development?
2. In what disciplinary traditions did many of the social identity theories that are used in student development originate? Why do disciplinary traditions matter in understanding how to interpret and use a theory?
3. What are the four levels of social identity? Give examples of each.
4. Describe the evolution of social identity development models from the 1960s through today.
5. How would you explain the concepts of oppression and privilege to a group of undergraduate students?
6. Name three categories of privilege. Describe what they have in common and what is different about them.
7. Why did Jones and McEwen create the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity? Describe its key components.
8. What did Abes, Jones, and McEwen change when they introduced the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity?
9. Describe three ways that you could use the RMMDI in your work with students.
10. What forms of privilege and oppression do you experience? What key steps will you take to become aware of how they shape your interactions with students as you work to create environments that facilitate development?