

Switching social identities happens seamlessly

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People can switch seamlessly between different social identities, new research shows.

Each person has multiple [social identities](#), such as: employee, parent, young person, friend or even fan of a particular sports team.

Previous research has shown that frequently switching task tends to result in lower performance: longer completion times and reduced accuracy.

The new study by the University of Exeter finds that identity switching may pose less difficulty.

"Our lives have sped up a lot in recent years and decades, so we have to switch more often between different identities," said Anna Zinn, of the University of Exeter.

"Due to the pandemic, many more people now work from [home](#)—so they no longer have the slow switch of a commute separating home from work.

"Our research aimed to find whether rapidly activating different identities comes with a cost.

"We were surprised to find that these switches are extremely effective—people can switch quite rapidly with no apparent difficulty."

The researchers note, however, that this ability might come with a downside.

"We might have little control over these switches," Zinn explained.

"For someone working from home, it may be important to stay in a professional identity—but our findings suggest you could easily be drawn away from it.

"The next stage of our research is to examine these possible drawbacks, and whether steps such as having a dedicated workspace at home can limit them."

The researchers conducted several studies using the "Implicit Association Test," in which participants have to quickly sort words and images into categories.

Using this method, participants were made to think about a certain identity—for example, the researchers encouraged them to think of themselves as "[young people](#)" by asking them to sort images of faces by age.

It was then possible to make people [switch](#) to a different identity—or at other times stay in the same identity—to observe the effects.

One study also created a new "minimal group" identity, by asking participants to remember images of people's faces as members of a newly formed group (the participant was encouraged to think of these people and themselves as part of the "blue group").

Switching between this new identity and existing identities was also seamless.

The study, carried out by a team including Lancaster University, was funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC).

The paper, published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, is entitled: "Social identity switching: How effective is it?"

More information: Anna K. Zinn et al, Social identity switching: How effective is it?, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104309](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104309)

Provided by University of Exeter

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