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2

IDENTITY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- 2.1 Discuss the relationship between culture and identity.
- 2.2 Explain identity's nature.
- 2.3 Use intersectionality as a lens to examine identity paradigms, contradictions, and contrasts.
- 2.4 Describe different ways to distinguish among identities.

Identity includes culture. The two share a relationship. Two US television series, *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs*, debuted in 2021, constituting landmark moments for Indigenous people in front of and behind the television camera. *Rutherford Falls* was the first comedy to give responsibility for the management and creative control of a television series to a Native American showrunner. Half its writing team was Indigenous. A Native American actor from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation was the show's costar. The program's creator was Navajo. This series, credited by its showrunner and reviewers with changing how Indigenous people are perceived, focused largely on family members laughing together, loving each other, and solving day-to-day problems, rather than on trauma and tragic history. Like *Rutherford Falls*, *Reservation Dogs* is a comedy, in this case about four Indigenous teenagers in Oklahoma. Its showrunner also was Indigenous, and it had an Indigenous cast.¹ Native self-representation is a game-changer, diversifying the stories told about Native American and exposing audiences to a different point of view than they previously had been privy to. In both *Rutherford Falls* and *Reservation Dogs*, Native American characters were depicted in ways considered more authentic. They were not all portrayed alike, but were presented instead as being complex and flawed, just as their white counterparts in the macro-culture.²

Landmark events, those which are marked as historic or significant, occur through time. Those whose lives they affect, however, may be unprepared for how such world-changing moments will affect their identify. For example, a little more than two decades ago, the United States experienced the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and then in 2019 and 2020, the coronavirus pandemic affected the world. In August 2021, after fighting a war in Afghanistan for twenty years, the United States withdrew its forces from that country. The decision ceded control of Afghanistan to the Taliban who threatened reprisals against those Afghans who had helped the United States. The chaos of the withdrawal caused some to compare the fall of Afghanistan to the fall of Saigon in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War. Both in Vietnam and Afghanistan, the withdrawal of US troops set in motion huge flows of refugees and in the case of Afghanistan made it unlikely that the Afghan diaspora would return to Afghanistan.³ Then, in February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine causing tens of thousands of refugees to seek safety in Ukraine's neighboring countries and around the world.⁴

What commonalities do these disparate events share? Each was life altering. Each affected the identity of the people involved, in part, because each influenced how the

countries involved were perceived in the global arena. Each event also increased uncertainty and anxiety levels, modifying how individuals saw their place in the world. For example, each event determined how those involved pictured themselves and conceived of their relationships to others. No matter the event, or its causes, because of communications technology, we had front-row seats, and were able to be connected instantaneously to others in our community, across the country, and around the world. Being in the position to develop an understanding of the dynamic cultural forces at play within the United States and other countries during such crises better equips us to think critically about them. It also helps shape our sense of self and perception of others, impacting both communication and our relationships.

In the *Book of Wisdom: Wisdom to Live By*, first published in 2017, the Rwandan author Bangambiki Habyarimana notes, “We are nothing but bricks from our cultural molds.”⁵ Each of us is a product of our culture. How we communicate also is a product of our culture. The world contains an abundance of cultures, each theorizing about and enacting communication somewhat differently. Of course, culture goes beyond our nationality as it extends to race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, region, religion, occupation, political orientation, physical and mental ability, socioeconomic class, etc. In this chapter, when referring to culture, it means both national culture and co-cultures that are contained within the nationality. To help reduce uncertainty and anxiety so that we may promote increased cultural understanding, we need to discover creative ways to overcome ignorance and bridge cultural differences. Here, identity and perception of the self and others play paramount roles. Keeping this in mind, answer these questions about yourself:

1. Who am I? How might others answer this question for me? How might they answer it for themselves? To what extent, if any, do I think answers to these questions diverge or overlap around the world?
2. How does my national identity factor into my sense of self?
3. If I had been born into another culture, to what extent, if any, do I think my perception of myself and how I look at others would change?
4. How do self-conceptions develop, and how do they vary across cultures?

These are among the concerns we address in this chapter. Identity and communication are linked.

Before continuing your reading of this chapter, which of the following five statements do you believe to be true, and which do you believe to be false?

1. Anxiety about cultural differences and unwillingness to communicate with someone from a different culture are related to each other. T F
2. All members of a culture are similar to one another. T F
3. Learning about other cultures teaches us about ourselves. T F

4. Our avowed identity is the identity others attribute to us. T F
5. Identity is one-dimensional. T F

Resume reading to find out whether your answers are correct.
(Ans: 1. T; 2. F; 3. T; 4. F; 5. F)

KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY ACROSS CULTURES

2.1 Discuss the relationship between culture and identity.

Identity is our view of ourselves. A composite of our concept of self in concert with others' perceptions of us, it develops through interactions. Identity impacts intercultural communication, which, in turn, also helps define identity. Who are you? Who do others think you are? Are the two in sync? What aspect of your identity comes to your mind first? What aspect of your identity come to others' minds first (people such as your friends, family, classmates, professors, and strangers)? Which identity aspects have the most matches between your perceptions and others' perceptions of you? What role do other people and experiences play in how you feel about yourself and express your sense of self? Do others validate and value your identity?

According to US American intercultural communication scholar Stella Ting-Toomey's **identity negotiation theory**, individuals do not merely define themselves self-reflexively or relationally, but are a composite of multifaceted identities, with groups and cultural variability also affecting their self-perceptions.⁶ The cultural groups we belong to influence our self-definitions and the impressions we have of one another. We, alone, do not give shape to our identity. Others and intergroup or interpersonal experiences play roles too. Intercultural communication can enhance self-other understanding, that is understanding between oneself and others—a key communication benefit. To achieve this, however, we first need to overcome a number of critical intercultural barriers affecting our understanding of self and the sharing of our identity.

The Personal Benefits of Understanding Identity

Cultural identity is the sense we have of belonging to a group or culture; it is the sense we have of who we are as influenced by our culture. Intercultural communication demonstrates the many ways that cultural identity and personal experiences contribute to perceiving the world differently.⁷

When we journey into another culture, as a result of the comparisons we make with our own culture, we simultaneously journey deeper into our own culture.⁸ Rather than simply accept our differences, we may negatively judge aspects of other cultures by the standards of our own culture, a perception reflective of *ethnocentrism*—the belief that one's own culture is the norm or standard, superior to all other cultures, which we introduced in Chapter 1. Relying uncritically on such a perception impedes cultural understanding. A first step in overcoming ethnocentrism is to acknowledge that cultural practices different from one's own have equal value for those belonging to another culture.

Learning about people from other cultures can teach us about ourselves. Understanding how people think and behave is key to being able to communicate competently across cultures. Considering the strengths and limitations of your intercultural experiences can help you become mindful of your perceptual practices and place in society. As you widen the nature of your intercultural experiences, you will discover more opportunities to develop and demonstrate intercultural flexibility. As you boost your cultural self-awareness and sensitivity to others' cultural identities, you will find it easier to acknowledge and respect cultural diversity. Increasing your behavioral flexibility can free you to adapt your messaging and social skills to reflect the needs of specific intercultural contexts.



Do you belong to any cultural clubs on campus?

Anil Ghawana/Alamy Stock Photo

The “Glocal” Benefits of Understanding Identity

The word “**glocal**” indicates that concerns reflect and are characterized by both global and local considerations.⁹ We consider these next as we explore the link between identity and cultural diversity.

Community and Local Considerations

Many colleges have made efforts to become both more **demographically heterogeneous** (meaning the population includes people of all kinds of ages, races, religions, etc., as evidenced by reported population statistics) and more **psychographically heterogeneous** (meaning the population includes people with a wide range of opinions, values, goals, interests, etc., as evidenced

by reported population attitudes and aspirations).¹⁰ When individuals are part of a heterogeneous student population, they have more opportunities to interact with a diversity of peers who are from different cultural backgrounds, practice different ways of thinking, and have different attitudes, lifestyles, and goals.¹¹ Such differences, when appreciated and explored, can promote cultural understanding.

Of course, having diversity and delivering on diversity are not the same. Colleges offer many affinity groups, thereby also enabling students to customize their experiences. They can choose to access their already established preferences and predetermined interests rather than seeking out something new. Those with similar backgrounds and interests can still congregate. To reap the benefits of diversity requires more than a diverse student body.¹² While intercultural contact does not automatically lead to positive outcomes, having meaningful interaction with persons of diverse backgrounds and who have different ways of looking at the world may broaden students' frame of reference, but only if they have the right tools to reflect on and interpret the interactions.

The same principle applies to many of our neighborhoods. The demographic makeup of communities across the United States is in flux. The 2020 census reveals that the United States is more diverse, more multiethnic, and more multiracial than ever.¹³ Historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups continue to register significant population growth. In 2020, people of color represented 43 percent of the total US population, up from 34 percent in 2010. There are now seven states and territories where non-Hispanic whites make up less than 50 percent of the population.¹⁴ In a few decades, white Americans of European heritage are expected to no longer comprise a majority of the people living in the United States.¹⁵ Immigration and changing demographics continue remaking our social landscape, affording more opportunities for intercultural contact. Whether we interact with immigrants from Africa, Asia, Europe, or South America, increases in demographic and psychographic diversity have the potential to expand our lifestyles and ways of thinking. They also help to make our workplaces more creative and innovative.¹⁶ When we have deficient knowledge of other cultures, we inevitably experience uneasiness and avoidable misunderstandings. To benefit from intercultural contact, we have to become more knowledgeable about the cultures of those we're interacting with, in addition to reflecting on our own culture.

Despite reaping benefits from increasing demographic and psychographic heterogeneity, both also present challenges. World events can prompt reactive legislation, such as border closures, tariffs, travel bans, and anti-immigration policies, which can aggravate tensions. In fact, although the opportunities are there, few college students report forming close interracial or international friendships.¹⁷ We can increase our intercultural competence only if we open ourselves to multiple perspectives, actively seek knowledge about our own and other cultures, and take steps to establish meaningful intercultural relationships. Enacting such behaviors can help eradicate barriers and bridge whatever gaps exist between us.

Global Considerations and Power Struggles

Large numbers of people around the world communicate with each other daily for any number of reasons, one of which is economic. During the coronavirus pandemic, many areas experienced a shortage of personal necessities (from toilet paper to pots and pans), medical supplies, construction materials, and the list goes on. These shortages were mainly caused by the interdependence of raw material providers, manufacturers, and shipping services across the globe; as

the saying goes, when one player catches a cold, the rest all sneeze.¹⁸ Like it or not, we live in a global economy. Power structures such as **global capitalism** (capitalism that transcends national borders) touch all of our lives. **Globalization**, the creation of world markets, makes it imperative for people to understand how business is conducted in places around the world so that they can negotiate favorable trade deals and work together effectively to solve problems.¹⁹ Learning about other cultures and business practices better prepares us to work in teams that cross national and cultural barriers. Rather than filtering everything through our own culture's lens, we can learn to see the differences and adapt to each other.



The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated global shortages. What products did you worry about not having access to?
 istock.com/ArtMarie

Conflicts, both domestic and international, can nudge us to become involved in peacebuilding and efforts to create a more just world through mutually beneficial practices. For example, have you joined a protest march in recent years? If you have, was your motivation to participate due to climate change, gun violence, the killing of George Floyd, abortion laws, voting restrictions, anti-Asian hate, or something else? Conflicts between different cultural groups within a country occur frequently. In view of these conflicts, advocacy for diversity, equity, and inclusion permeates many sectors of our lives. Institutions of higher education, such as your college or university, are investing in efforts to help students like you learn more about the core sources of such conflicts and ways to address them in order to effect positive change.²⁰

Learning more about macro- or dominant cultures and the co-cultures or underrepresented cultures within them helps position us to handle or defuse conflicts and barriers of our own or others' making. Perspectives are not right or wrong. Developing cultural fluency

means understanding how standpoints differ. According to **standpoint theory**, a standpoint is what people use to perceive and make sense of the world.²¹ A person's standpoint determines what they see. What someone sees, fails to see, or prefers to see is also affected by the power they hold in society. Traditionally, the standpoint of people belonging to underrepresented groups and those possessing less power is often ignored and overlooked by those from the macro- or dominant cultural groups. Therefore, developing understanding for the standpoint of people who belong to one or more co-cultures enables individuals who identify with more powerful groups to develop a more comprehensive picture of the reality and humanity of co-culture members. Recall the example from the last chapter of a cartoon designed to pay tribute to Stephen Hawking's passing by depicting a man walking away from his wheelchair toward the lights, with the implied title of "finally free."²² The cartoon views a person from the disabled culture from the standpoint of the able-bodied culture. The well-intended effort revealed a gap in the able-bodied-centric worldview, the assumption that the life of a person who uses a wheelchair must be incomplete, and their life only can be full and complete when death releases them from this constraint. This standpoint inevitably reduces a person's identity to a single dimension, devaluing their humanity.



What role do athletic competitions play in identity?

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Too often, those with more power feel less inclined to try to understand the viewpoints of the underrepresented, assuming their own perceptions must be universally true. Thus, to succeed at effective intercultural communication, we need to recognize how cultural identity affects our own and others' standpoints, because that ultimately affects our communication

outcomes. People can simultaneously belong to a dominant (macro) and an underrepresented (micro) culture. For example, the LGBTQIA+ community is a co-culture (a micro-culture), as opposed to the dominant macro-culture of heterosexuality; however, within the LGBTQIA+ community, white gay men tend to enjoy more privileges than lesbian women, transgender people, and members of color.²³ The intersectionality of identity, a concept that we will dive deeper into later in this chapter, can influence a person's willingness to disrupt the status quo, which is a direct result of their standpoint.

Obstacles to Communicating with “Strangers”

People tend to feel more comfortable and emotionally secure when communicating with those they know, and less so when interacting with strangers in culturally unfamiliar settings.²⁴ In 2021, the Public Theater in New York City featured the interactive works of the experimental theater group 600 Highwaymen, which turned participants into actors and audience. The first work, called “A Thousand Ways: A Phone Call,” had pairs of remote participants who were previously unknown to each other, often thousands of miles apart, engaging in an hour-long phone call as they followed the instructions of an automated voice giving them questions to answer, such as “Describe yourself as a child.” The goal was for the two people to find a way to “see” one another without ever exchanging names with one another. In the theater group's second work, called “A Thousand Ways: An Encounter,” new pairs of strangers were brought together in a shared space, separated by clear plastic partitions, and this time asked to follow prompts on notecards placed on tables between them. As they responded, they had a chance to hear the other person and be heard. They shared moments of exposure as they revealed aspects of themselves to one another. Like its predecessor, “An Encounter” led each pair of individuals to uncover information previously unknown about the other. Together, the artworks explored the lines between strangeness and kinship and distance and proximity, prompting audience members to reconsider what they knew, how they used their imaginations to construct impressions of someone, and what they could learn about strangers and themselves. How would you feel about having an hour-long conversation, either by phone or face to face, with a total stranger? How much about yourself would you reveal? How much about the other person do you think you'd learn?

What happens when we are about to engage with someone from another culture, but we feel unready because we lack familiarity with their culture? Given such a predicament, we likely will experience higher levels of uncertainty—to be sure, higher than we would were we going to interact with someone from our own culture. Why? Recall our discussion of Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Anxiety Management Theory from Chapter 1.²⁵ The uncertainty and anxiety in these situations are driven by the belief that we possess insufficient information to understand the person, respond appropriately to their identity, and predict their behavior.

While we experience some uncertainty in most interactions, when our level of uncertainty reaches a tipping point, it turns into anxiety. The more uncertain about the other person we feel, the more discomfort we are in. Anxiety has a negative impact on a person's willingness to interact with someone from a different culture.²⁶ And as their anxiety

level increases, people become more apt to engage in *othering*, making others feel they don't belong. Othering could be driven by experiencing more fear of and the desire to avoid "the other"—anyone who is perceived not to belong to one's group and is therefore relegated to out-group status. It might also be caused by an existing bias favoring in-groups. Have you heard someone say, "Ugh! Those first-years (or seniors) are so annoying!" Many try to allay their negative feelings toward members of a perceived out-group by weaving a fictional paradigm that the other person belongs to an inferior culture, and that their own culture is better than the other's culture.²⁷

Such problematic messages pose dangers for intercultural relationships. To counter the escalation brought about by stereotypes and prejudice, we must be aware that anxiety, fear, and ethnocentrism might misguide us, making it increasingly challenging for us to communicate effectively with individuals beyond our own culture. In effect, by preconditioning us to misinterpret others' intentions and leading us to jump to conclusions, such perceptions function as barriers to intercultural understanding. To overcome these barriers, we need first to learn to recognize them, and once we do, we need to work to conquer them.

Rather than give in to our impulses, we need to be more aware. Skillful communication is central to developing intercultural understanding and bolstering intercultural communication competence. One way to achieve this is by increasing the number of our meaningful contacts with persons from other cultures, which may help us become more familiar with those whom we initially perceived to be "other." As our familiarity increases, we might reduce our uncertainty and anxiety, which, in turn, could help decrease misunderstandings. While some misunderstandings will take place, even among those who are familiar with each other, increased familiarity may equip us with confidence in seeking cultural information to fill in our cultural knowledge gaps. What can we do to accomplish this?

We can make the effort to get in touch with our feelings about difference. Some of us become anxious when anticipating having to interact with persons outside of our own experience and culture. For instance, have you ever felt yourself becoming tense after discovering that you would be communicating with persons from cultures with which you were less familiar or unfamiliar? Are there specific reasons why interacting with others outside of your own culture might cause you to feel nervous, become frustrated, lose confidence, experience stress, tense up, become angry, feel misunderstood, feel incompetent, lose your composure, or expect a negative outcome? When experiencing such feelings, how do you respond?

SELF-ASSESSMENT 2.1

HIGH ANXIETY

Purpose

The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess the amount of anxiety you experience when anticipating having to communicate with persons from cultures other than your own. Keep in mind that cultural difference can be driven by nationality (which often means a different linguistic

background), race and ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and neurological ability, religion, socioeconomic class etc. Choose one of the diversity factors when answering the questions. Then change the diversity factor to a different one to answer them again.

Directions

Respond to each statement by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with it. Give yourself 1 point if you never experience the feeling, 2 points if you almost never experience the feeling, 3 points if you sometimes experience the feelings, 4 points if you almost always experience the feeling, and 5 points if you always experience the feeling.

Statements	Always 5	Almost Always 4	Sometimes 3	Almost Never 2	Never 1
1. I feel nervous when communicating with a person from a culture different from my own.					
2. I become frustrated when communicating with someone from a culture different from my own.					
3. I feel less confident when communicating with someone from another culture than with someone from my own.					
4. I feel less competent when communicating with someone from another culture than from my own.					
5. I tense up when told I will have to work directly with a person from a different culture.					
6. I become angry when told I will have to work with a person from a culture with which I'm unfamiliar.					
7. I assume when interacting with a person from another culture that we will misunderstand one another.					
8. I do not know much about other cultures.					

(Continued)

(Continued)

Statements	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never
	5	4	3	2	1
9. I lose my composure when communicating with a person from another culture.					
10. I expect a negative outcome when I communicate with a person from another culture.					

Scoring Method: Column Sum

Add the scores in each column. Then add the column scores together to determine your total score.

The closer your total score is to 50, the more anxious you are about communicating with persons from different cultures.

How similar are your anxiety scores when you switch around the diversity factor, say from nationality to sexual orientation, or from age to physical ability? Different anxiety scores could indicate you are more comfortable in certain intercultural situations than the others.

One way to reduce high levels of anxiety is to learn about the other culture and expose yourself to cultural differences. You can seek more opportunities to learn about other cultures by reading about them and interacting with those outside your own culture.

Be proactive. Suggest creative solutions to use to diminish any negative thinking, increasing the likelihood that the intercultural encounters shared will be successful.

Identify the Basis of Identity Expectations

How do expectations influence attitudes toward others? Every culture has its own unwritten rules or norms for appropriate member behavior, and these behavioral norms vary from culture to culture. When individuals have misguided expectations regarding how a person from a culture other than their own should behave, it can lead them to misunderstand the other person's behavior. If someone finds communicating with another person rewarding, then they will interpret a violation of what they consider to be a behavioral norm by that person in the most positive way possible. If, however, they evaluate the behavior negatively, then their interaction is more likely to have a negative outcome. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon to see the costs outweighing the rewards when interacting with persons from another culture whom we don't know well. Too frequently, our interaction expectations are negative rather than positive. We expect to make an embarrassing mistake, have another person take advantage of our lack of knowledge, or reject us because of our differences. Stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and the rigid and often harmful images of cultural groups fostered by the media make it more challenging for us to take a risk and seek out interactions with members of other cultures. No matter who we are and where we live, overcoming barriers that stand in the way of successful intercultural relationships is in our best interest and can promote increased self-other understanding.²⁸

Stereotypes

You'll recall from Chapter 1 that a *stereotype* is a prejudgment—a rigid generalization, a hardening of the contents of a category. Represented by pictures we carry around in our heads, stereotypes underscore the social categories on which we rely. Stereotypes are derived from easily identifiable characteristics and attributes that we distinguish from our own but which we assume apply to and are shared by most members defined by the category. We learn many stereotypes from the media, rather than our personal experiences. Media offerings repeatedly present viewers with depictions of persons from all races and ethnicities, people living in poverty, people with chronic health issues, and older adults that leave impressions of what they are like. Too often, these depictions devalue and reduce members belonging to these groups to a simple and single concept. Then, when we interact with persons from these social categories, stereotypes are triggered without our even being aware of it. These stereotypes generate in us an expectation of how a member of the group will behave; when we then act on those expectations, we precipitate a self-fulfilling prophecy. We see the behavior that confirms our expectation, whether or not it is actually present. Thus, if we assume someone is rude, to us they will appear rude, even when they act benevolently.

While stereotypes can limit meaningful understanding of each other, there are valid and reliable categories we can use to differentiate cultural groups, such as individualism-collectivism, high and low power distance, monochronic and polychronic time orientation, etc. Still, when applying even valid group-based labels, we must be cautious. To the extent we view the members of a cultural group as completely homogeneous, we might fail to recognize differences among the individuals belonging to the group. For example, the United States is a highly individualistic society and culture, but not every single person in the United States exhibits a high tendency for an independent view of self. Even valid cultural labels of groups are approximations and not absolute descriptions of the groups. Differentiating among the members of a group means we can attribute characteristics to them as individuals who are cultural beings without relying on over-simplified or over-generalized stereotypes. That is, we can distinguish the individuals in the category from each other while using valid categories to understand the group. Differentiating among individuals helps prevent us from stereotyping against a group's members. Communicating with the members of different groups based on both their valid group traits and individual characteristics yields more effective results than does communicating with them based on the stereotyped characteristics attributed to the category itself.

Ethnocentrism

To loosen the grasp of ethnocentrism, we have to be cautious when basing our understanding of persons identifying with another culture completely on the cultural rules, perspectives, and norms of our own culture. We also have to be careful not to assume that all members of a culture are the same. While members of a culture may share similarities and have common bonds, they also differ in distinct ways from one another. Remember: Ethnocentrism draws its power from the belief that one's culture is the center of everything. Using one's own culture as the only frame of reference prevents a person from understanding and appropriately responding to the members of other cultures. Instead, because the psychological distance between us remains

unbridged, we may feel entitled to disparage members of the culture, avoid acknowledging them, or demonstrate indifference toward them.

The more ethnocentric we are, the more likely we are to negatively judge members of other cultures who think or behave differently than we do and the less likely we are to demonstrate sensitivity toward them or to take steps to diminish the psychological distance between us.

Media Images and Media Mirages

The media present us with an array of images of persons belonging to different identity groups, with some groups being more represented in media offerings than others. For a very long time in the United States, images of white individuals, especially heterosexual white men, have been predominant, which means that women and members of other racial groups are less prominent and presented less positively when they do appear. Women, for example, often are viewed from the heterosexual males' lens, or the "male gaze."²⁹ The lack of media representation of the Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (BIPOC) communities was driven by the fact that writers and creators of stories featured in media also have been predominately white. Even worse, the roles in stories about members of BIPOC communities are sometimes cast with white actors, leading to "whitewashing," which further diminishes diverse representation.³⁰ The danger in, for instance, white writers telling stories from the BIPOC community or hearing people portraying members of the deaf community, is that the media reflect societal stereotypes. These stereotypes reduce a character's identity to a single group label, such as race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexual identity, or age, reinforcing the one-dimensional, over-simplified understanding of people from the group that the audience often does not identify with. They may exacerbate ethnocentric tendencies by portraying members of specific underrepresented groups as terrorists, low-income, prone to violence, or victims of violence. We will talk more about the media's role in intercultural communication in Chapter 12.

IMAGINE THIS

SCOPING OUT STEREOTYPES—WHO'S SEEN AND IN WHAT ROLE?

Close your eyes. Visualize yourself in the company of varied others. How do the pictures in your head affect your behavior? Do you see each person as they really are? The three phases of this exercise will help you decide.

Phase 1. Work your way through four steps to scope out stereotypes:

Step 1. State the cultural group with which you identify (which could be your nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, neurological ability, class, religion, age, or region). Select ten adjectives or phrases that you believe apply to the group. Give each adjective or phrase a favorability rating on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents extremely unfavorable and 5 represents extremely favorable. Favorability means positive or desirable, in your mind.

Step 2. Think of a cultural group different from your own. Select ten adjectives or phrases that you believe apply to the group. Give each of these descriptions a favorability rating as in Step 1.

Step 3. Compute the total score for each group. The rating represents your general understanding of your own group and the other group. The higher the score the more favorable your perceptions. Now think about the descriptions you created: Which are valid cultural understandings, and which are stereotypes?

Step 4. Identify an individual whom you know pretty well and who belongs to the group you selected in Step 2. To what degree do your attitudes toward them support or contradict the description you created to represent their group as a whole? How much and in what ways does having had contact with one or more specific members of a cultural group beyond your own increase or decrease your understanding about the group as a whole?

Phase 2. Using Phase 1 as background, consider this: When viewing popular films and television programs, we live vicariously through others' experiences, considering what it means to be "the character," to be in their situation, to live their "truth." The fictional performances may influence real-life expectations. View two hours of scripted television or two feature films. As you watch, complete the following tasks:

1. Make a list of the characters appearing either in the programs or in the feature films, the identity group(s) to which they belong, the role they play, and whether their character is presented in a positive or negative light.
2. List the identity groups that were notably excluded.
3. Discuss the differences in the roles performed by the members of different identity groups.
4. For each role, rate the degree to which you think the character was presented in a stereotypical way on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying not presented stereotypically at all and 5 signifying absolutely presented stereotypically.

Phase 3. Write a descriptive paragraph summarizing your response to this question: In what ways, if at all, does the way identity is framed in our minds and in media affect our perception of the members of different real-world groups? Be sure to support your answer with examples based on your experiences.

THE NATURE OF IDENTITY

2.2 Explain identity's nature.

To understand ourselves, we need to be understood by others. To be understood by others, we need to understand others. When we communicate, we share aspects of our identity, which helps us develop a clearer picture of who we are. Let's next explore identity's nature and development.

Identity Is about Who We Are

Identity is about how we each see, conceive of, and define ourselves. It's about who we are, who we think we are, and who others think we are. It includes all the aspects of the self we believe to be consequential.³¹ In large measure, identity is self-created. It is a composite of the roles we

see ourselves performing, the positions we occupy, our group memberships, our familial or personal connections, and the personal attributes we attribute to ourselves. These often are indicative of how we would like others to perceive us.³²

Identity can be individualized or familial. We can be independent and distinguish ourselves from others establishing our **individualized identity**, or we can perceive ourselves to be interdependent and emotionally connected to others establishing our **familial identity**.³³

Identity, however, also depends on others' perception of us. Since we each perceive the world through our own individual lens, not everyone sees us as we see ourselves. Others may challenge our notion of self, negotiating with us to work out the conflict by co-creating an identity that can coexist somewhere between our **avowed identity** (how we identify ourselves) and our **ascribed identity** (the identity others attribute to us).³⁴ Now, think about your avowed identity. In what ways, if any, is it different from your ascribed identity? In what areas, if any, does your avowed identity match your ascribed identity? In what circumstances are they most likely to differ? Do they converge when it comes to your physical characteristics? Do they diverge when it comes to personality or values? When we communicate with someone we don't know very well, what identity are we most likely to ascribe to them? What identity are they most likely to ascribe to us? Identity has many faces; it is dynamic and plays a major role in our interactions with others, especially when it comes to intercultural communication.



Identity is about how we see and conceive of ourselves.

[istock.com/lechatnoir](https://www.istock.com/lechatnoir)

Presenting Identity to Others: Managing Our Face

On the series finale of the US television show *How to Get Away with Murder*, the lead character, Annalise Keating, played by US American actress Viola Davis, tried to explain who she was to the jury charged with the task of deciding whether she should be judged innocent or guilty of committing a series of murders. Annalise said, “I’m ambitious, Black, bisexual, angry, sad,

strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented, and exhausted. And I am at your mercy.”³⁵ If asked who you were, how might you respond? Answers describe significant parts of your avowed identity. They are representative of the roles you perform, the particular groups to which you belong, and the qualities you perceive yourself to have.

Face, Facework, and Identity

The term **face** is used as a metaphor representing the self-image we project to others. It represents our *public identity*—how others perceive us. Through social interaction and **facework**—the strategies we use to establish, sustain, or restore a preferred social identity when communicating with others—we do our best to make a positive impression.³⁶ We can maintain face, build face (put on our best face), lose face, or give face to someone else. Say, one of our avowed identities is that we are a team player, meaning that we actively seek opportunities to contribute to the team’s work, sometimes sacrificing our own needs for the team. Our facework then would successfully maintain our *avowed identity* of “team player,” and would likely also receive a matching *ascribed identity* of “a team player.” However, if we identify as a team player, but often fail to show up at the team meetings or decline to do what the team expects, our facework then would likely be unsuccessful in maintaining our avowed identity of a team player, which would result in a mismatch between our ascribed and avowed identities. We can, however, engage in restorative facework to repair the gap. For example, we can apologize to the team and make up the work. If our team changes its perceptions of us, then our avowed and ascribed identities would be aligned, again through our facework. According to Ting-Toomey, people from all cultures seek to maintain and negotiate face when interacting with others.³⁷ Whereas in individualistic cultures, people tend to focus on maintaining and promoting their own face, in collectivist cultures there is more of a focus on the face of others.

Identity Has Multiple Dimensions

Identity is multidimensional with interconnected parts. We constantly negotiate and share these parts, presenting different aspects of ourselves to different individuals in different interactional or conversational contexts. We seek others to affirm the identity that we believe to be most salient in each situation. When, for example, a specific role we perform is more salient to us than is our ethnicity, we desire others to recognize and affirm this. One of your textbook’s authors is from China. But being Chinese was never something she had to think about or identify when she was in China. When she came to the United States, being Chinese became a salient identity that she constantly refers to. Our identity is usually in dormancy when we are surrounded by people who are alike and becomes salient when we encounter those who do not share our background. Our identity also changes throughout our lives. Think about which part of your identity has changed most since you started college.

Personal Influences on Identity

Identity is not immune to familial influences, which set the baseline for person-to-person interactions. While we choose many of the groups with which we identify, others such as ethnicity, racial position, socioeconomic status, and sometimes religion become ours “involuntarily” via our parents and family. Thus, at the outset of our lives, familial background influences

our starting point. Families do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are the conduits and filters of macro- and micro-cultural influences. Ultimately, in conjunction with other societal influences, our standpoints are set. Understanding the standpoints with which we and others identify can help us better appreciate our and their journeys, definitions of self, and place in the structural matrix that we call society.

Societal Influences on Identity

Societal forces promote construction of specific aspects of identity, influencing how people think of themselves, their country, and culture; we see ourselves in relation to social groups and changing contexts. Policies, laws, the media, and educational, economic, and political structures provide us with identity frames and standpoints. As noted, these help us make sense of our place in the world. The structures of social power together with historical forces participate in shaping our identity. The Pew Research Center conducted a study on global perceptions of the United States, surveying more than 15,000 people in seventeen other countries in 2021, and found that after Joseph R. Biden was elected president, respondents viewed the United States much more favorably than during the previous administration.³⁸ Thus, people identifying as US American traveling outside the United States may have been received differently during the two administrations. So, identity is in flux. It is negotiable.

Cultural Influences on Identity

Individual experiences influence how we give meaning to concepts and events. Thus, members identifying with different cultural groups likely experience concepts and events in disparate ways. Consequently, the meaning given to family, patriotism, freedom, social security, disability, and health will differ, as will feelings about such phenomena as the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, coming of age, and the legalization of same-sex marriage. For example, in many communities across Africa, adults are perceived as “collective parents,” sharing responsibility for raising children. Dr. Lawrence Mbogoni, a Tanzanian-born African studies professor referring to the Igbo and Yoruba (Nigeria) proverb “It takes a whole village to raise a child,” noted,

[It] reflects a social reality some of us who grew up in rural areas of Africa can easily relate to. As a child, my conduct was a concern of everybody, not just my parents, especially if it involved misconduct. Any adult had the right to rebuke and discipline me and would make my mischief known to my parents who in turn would also mete out their own “punishment.” The concern of course was the moral well-being of the community.³⁹

This proverb has different forms in various African cultures and languages, such as in a Sukuma (Tanzania) proverb “One knee does not bring up a child” and in Swahili (east and central Africa) “One hand does not nurse a child.”⁴⁰ In Kenya, for example, a child in Swahili-speaking communities may be called “mummy” (if it is a girl) or “daddy” (if it is a boy) by their parents or be called “grandma” (if it is a girl) or “grandpa” (if it is a boy) by their grandparents. This reversal of linguistic ways of addressing kinship terms only takes place in family settings and is meant to reinforce the relational connection between the parties.⁴¹

The word “ubuntu” has gained great popularity since being used by the late South African archbishop Desmond Tutu and former US presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. The term is from the Bantu language groups (including Xhosa, Zulu, and Swahili) meaning “person,” and has come to signify “a humanitarian outlook” or “African humanism” particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, which emphasizes communalism and socialism as opposed to Western capitalism.⁴² The term ties strong feelings about a united African identity post-apartheid and collectivism to daily life.⁴³ Group cooperation and support are expected. Whereas in an individualistic culture, a “winner take all” attitude leads to individual competing against individual, cultural expectations in collectivist cultures lead the culture’s members to work collaboratively and enjoy rewards achieved together. Thus, group affiliation is inextricably linked with identity.⁴⁴

Acknowledging the extent to which culture influences identity, our everyday behavior, and communication with members of diverse cultures can be revealing.⁴⁵ During the coronavirus pandemic, members of co-cultures including Black and Latino/a Americans, fell victim to the disease only to find themselves being blamed for getting sick.⁴⁶ Astoundingly, just as people with preexisting conditions were more likely to experience negative outcomes with COVID-19, people subject to stigma due to race or class also were more likely to be deeply stigmatized by others when they fell ill. The stories told perpetuated racist ideas and generated false beliefs that certain social groups had been “contaminated” or lacked the initiative to protect themselves or go for treatment when sick. The reality was that the disease was attacking those who were high-income, low-income, homeless, and educated alike. Yet, those in lower-income classes, who often are Black and Latino/a, were often considered “essential workers” and were more likely to be living in households with more members; as a result, they unfortunately contracted the disease in greater numbers. Knowledge can combat misinformation. Correcting misinformation helps reduce anxiety and increases willingness to engage in communication with out-groups.⁴⁷

INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY: PARADIGMS, CONTRADICTIONS, AND CONTRASTS

2.3 Use intersectionality as a lens to examine identity paradigms, contradictions, and contrasts.

Culture affects what identity means and how we enact it. To distinguish our individual identity from the identity of others, we should examine how we come to know ourselves. Using the lens of intersectionality to explore perceptual paradigms, contradictions, and contrasts relevant to identity can foster appreciation of how intersecting factors influence our thinking about identity.

Looking through the Lens of Intersectionality

Paradigms provide frameworks for exploration. A **paradigm** is a pattern—a model or gateway to understanding. The paradigm of **intersectionality**, first defined by US American scholar and social activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes how an array of power structures merge and

intersect in the lives of groups on the margins, adding an important dimension to the understanding of culture. Intersectionality essentially “is grounded in feminist theory, asserting that people live multiple, layered identities and can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression.”⁴⁸ The lens of intersectionality sharpens our vision, providing a multifocal approach helping to clarify the various forces and interlocking oppressions that impact cultural stories. Those who are “outsiders-within” experience life from the margins, developing perspectives revealing how different kinds of discrimination interact. Their perspectives can draw attention to those invisibilities that too frequently escape us.⁴⁹ As such, intersectionality helps us understand the difference that combining differences, such as being a woman and a Black person, fosters.



A multitude of intersecting factors influence identity.

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Intersecting Identities

While the emphasis of intersectionality has been on the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, each of the cultural constructs we discuss below overlaps, intersecting with others, rather than existing independently. Experiencing life at the cross section of multiple factors gives us a nuanced perspective and a collection of experiences we call our own.⁵⁰ Forms of discrimination, including sexism, classism, or racism, combine to create lived experiences that together are more complex in influencing identity and privileging differentials than is any one of these factors on its own. Joined together, they influence access to education, health care,

employment, wealth, and more. For example, the experience of a Black lesbian woman who is living in poverty cannot be fully understood by just labeling the person as “Black,” “lesbian,” or “low-income” alone. Each group with which one identifies matters. Identity involves molding of myriad attributes. To understand ourselves and others, we must take them all in.

Identity Paradigms

Paradigms seem to describe reality, prescribing desired changes. People in different cultures develop different identities as cultures prescribe different norms and values in their members. In US American culture, for example, individual identity development is presented as the norm. Members grow up learning to be self-reliant and independent. When children turn eighteen, they are emancipated—legally freed from parental restrictions and rules. Members of cultures not adhering to this particular norm may find this practice problematic leading them to feel underrepresented.

In contrast, members of cultures in which familial or relational identity is presented as the norm value dependency. This, for example, is the case among people of Mexican descent and members of Ghanaian society. The interdependency of family members functions as their number one priority and leads them to develop their identities in ways unfamiliar to those from individualistic cultures. For familial culture members, the family will always provide guidance and serve as the basis for the development of their relational selves.

Individualistic and collectivistic tendencies exist in every cultural group, but to varying degrees, with one or the other predominating.⁵¹ For example, if a majority of the members in a culture put group goals above that of individuals, view the group as an extension of themselves, and present a strong identity with their culture, the primary and dominant cultural trait is *collectivistic*. Conversely, if the majority of members place individual goals before the group’s goals, view themselves as independent of groups, and have a weak identity with their culture, their primary and dominant cultural trait is *individualistic*.

INSIGHT BUILDER

CONSIDERING CULTURAL VALUES IN YOUR IDENTITY

This insight builder reveals whether your view of self and group is more independent or interdependent, helping you appreciate the role cultural values consciously and unconsciously play in your identity. (Note that culture can be any group with which you identify, including nationality, race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) For example, a group can be any collection of people, family, friends, work, community, etc.

Consider each statement below and assign a rating to each; score it a 1 if the statement is always false, 2 if the answer is mostly false, 3 if the statement is sometimes true and sometimes false, 4 if the statement is mostly true, and 5 if the statement is always true.

1. My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.
2. My relationships with those in my group are more important than my personal accomplishments.
3. I prefer to be self-reliant rather than dependent on others.

4. I am careful to maintain harmony in my group.
5. I don't change my opinions to conform with those of the majority.
6. I try to meet the demands of my group, even if it means controlling my own desires.
7. I have an opinion about most things: I know what I like and what I don't like.
8. The security of being an accepted member of a group is very important to me.
9. I take responsibility for my own actions.
10. I often consider how I can be helpful to specific others in my group.

Now, add the individual scores for odd-numbered statements together. Then, add the individual scores for even-numbered statements together. A higher score on the odd-numbered statements means that you have more of an independent view of yourself and the group, whereas a higher score on the even-numbered statements means you have more of an interdependent view of yourself and the group. What do your scores reveal about you?

Source: Hee Sun Park and Xiaowen Guan, "Cultural Differences in Self versus Others' Self-Construals: Data from China and the United States," *Communication Research Reports* 24, no. 1 (2007): 21–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090601128059>.

We all possess independent and interdependent views of self and the group with which we identify. Can you think of other examples revealing the ways in which your view of the self and the cultural group interact?

There also are myriad other ways to describe identity. Understanding others and ourselves is aided by considering the following:

Personal identity, the special qualities distinguishing a person from others in the same in-group, demonstrating their uniqueness.

Relational identity, the product of a person's relationships with others—whether it be a parent (guardian)-child, spouses or life partners, teacher-student, or employer-employee relationship.

Communal identities, those associated with large-scale communities that make themselves visible during interaction with others.⁵² Also subsumed under communal identities are identities associated with diversity indicators, such as gender identity, national identity, regional identity, religious identity, age identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, class identity, political identity, and physical and neurological ability. These categories feed into reflective views of the self. In other words, culture plays a role in each of the communal identities.

Social identity, meaning the groups of which people are members or nonmembers (their in-groups and out-groups).⁵³

Integrated identity, an amalgam of our personal, relational, and social/communal identities; the product of our multiple identities.

Identity, as a whole, guides our expectations for communicating with others. Culturally instilled, expectations change as the culture and social context change. Consequently, people

change identities regularly, with the identity most salient in a specific social context playing the lead or primary role but with the other aspects of identity also performing co-starring or secondary roles. While we introduced some of these in Chapter 1, we build on and add to them here, exploring key aspects of identity categories.

Gender and Gender Role Identity

To be an “I” means to be gendered.⁵⁴ Gender identity is typically determined at birth and is based on sexual anatomy. **Gender role identity**, in contrast, is socially derived and based on how a specific culture distinguishes between masculine and feminine behaviors and social roles.

Culture shapes conceptions of gender and gender role identity, and these shape communication.⁵⁵ How a particular culture treats the members of different genders reveals that country’s values. Over time, people internalize socially accepted cultural beliefs regarding how each gender ought to behave. For example, in the United States, girls learn to “play nice,” while boys learn to “act tough.” Gender is a relational construct with individuals enacting the gender ideologies they support.

As cultures vary, so do members’ thinking about what it means to be gendered. Based on messages we receive from others, including media, we develop an image of who we are and how we measure up to the ideals our culture sets for our gender. Of course, different cultures establish different gender ideals. Gender and culture are synched.⁵⁶ For instance, women in Islamic cultures typically follow more rules in their dress and behavior than do women in non-Islamic cultures. Traditionally in African cultures, full-figured women are perceived as more desirable because it is associated with wealth, well-being, and fertility, while in western European cultures people equate body fat with unattractiveness.⁵⁷

Notions of how many genders there are also continue to evolve. “Male” and “female” are only two in an array of possible gender-related identities. Some people are gender nonconforming, including the **transgender** community (who identify with a gender that differs from the sex assigned at birth) and those who are **genderqueer** (meaning they do not identify as either male or female). **Cisgender**, or gender conforming, in contrast, refers to a person who identifies with the gender that conforms with their biological sex.⁵⁸ Some Indigenous American tribes have long recognized third genders in their communities and called them people of “two spirit,” which is a translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*, referring to those who have both masculine and feminine spirits.⁵⁹ Similarly, the hijra are individuals in south Asia who, although assigned male at birth, express their gender as feminine and serve in more traditionally feminine community roles.⁶⁰ To what extent do you believe that your communication is influenced by gender constructions or restrictions related to cultural practices and what the culture that you identify with considers “normal”? We discuss gender and culture in more depth in Chapter 8.

Sexual Orientation Identity

Related to gender identity is **sexual orientation identity**. It refers to the gender of the person to whom an individual is sexually attracted. Scholars believe that sexual orientation develops mostly during adolescence, but it also can be traced to childhood when many of us recognize gender-associated behaviors. Heterosexual people, who are attracted to members of another

gender, have rarely, if ever, had to give much thought to how sexual orientation affects them, because their sexuality is typically unchallenged by society. The term *coming out* (of the closet) has been specifically coined for members of the LGBTQIA+ community who announce their hidden self-identity and sexual orientation to others.⁶¹ Despite growing acceptance by the general public, members of the LGBTQIA+ community continue to be judged negatively based on their sexual orientation. With their identities socially stigmatized by some, they do not share the same privileges as heterosexual people. For example, they have a harder time adopting children and are more frequently the victims of hate crimes.

National Identity

National identity or nationality is based on the country where one was born or where one resides. It represents the person's legal status in relation to that country or countries. What does it mean, for example, to be a citizen of the United States and/or another nation? For some US citizens, it means freedom and opportunity. For others, it means the pressure to make money and consume goods. And for some, it means out-of-control incarceration. What does your national identity mean to you? Many people take pride in their national identity. The perception of national identity can be affected by a country's image on the world stage. As such, the citizens of a country hosting the Olympic Games often experience a burst of national pride.⁶² In what ways, if any, did the United States being the first country to land astronauts on the moon affect a US American's national identity? What about the United States being the "top country" when it comes to the total number of COVID-19 deaths as of May 2, 2023?⁶³

National identity also influences world outlook. Because people around the world see the world and live differently, national identity has been the basis for an array of conflicts between and within nations. Ethnocentrism based on nationality and lack of meaningful knowledge about other countries often leads to our denigrating or idealizing those whose language or customs diverge from our own. We may come to view other nations as either underdeveloped or superior to us in all aspects. Such an outlook reduces our understanding of other cultures to an over-simplified and over-generalized one-dimensional perception.

The achievements and struggles of people mirror the achievements and struggles of their nations. National identity influences what a nation's people think is possible. Most nations are home to a number of different groups—but usually one group is dominant, exercising most of the power while other groups are less powerful and often underrepresented, divided by race or ethnicity, religion, language, geographical location, or socioeconomic class. Since the founding of the United States, for example, the dominant culture has been represented by persons of western European English-speaking ancestry. With wars, social justice movements, changes in immigration laws and regulations, and the acceleration of globalization, individuals of different backgrounds now are more represented in the same nation than ever before. They come into increased contact with one another, presenting challenges and opportunities for redefining the traditional dominant culture.

Regional Identity

Because most countries can be divided into different geographical regions with their own cultural traits, **regional identity** is connected to national identity. In the United States, distinct cultural

identities are associated with the Midwest, East Coast, West Coast, Pacific Northwest, Hawaii, and Alaska, as well as states such as Texas and New York. Consider the stereotypes associated with Texans and New Yorkers. What assumptions might the stereotypes attributed to them lead persons from other places to make about their communication practices? Regional identity also intersects with other aspects of diversity, such as religion, ethnicity, language, and political ideologies. Think about people in the former East Germany versus West Germany or the Oromia (south) and the Amhara (north) in Ethiopia. How could their assumptions pose difficulties for intercultural interactions? Regions often have their unique cuisine, manners, languages, or dialects, and means of relating to others that influences how people living in the region view themselves and how others view them.

Religious Identity

Too often, **religious identity** also becomes a trigger for regional or international conflicts, such as between the Palestinians and Israelis in Israel, the Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan, the Sunnis and Shiites in Saudi Arabia, and the Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Religion is a primary source of human identity and a defining factor in shaping in- and out-groups. In most religions, anyone who accepts a religion's beliefs and agrees to live their life according to the religion's precepts is usually permitted or encouraged to affiliate with other members of the in-group.

Though in some countries religion is a private matter, based on the principle that church and state are separate, in others, religion and the state are inseparable, with religion being an integral part of the state's power structure and publicly practiced. The armed conflicts precipitated by religious differences between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East are a testament to the difficulties experienced when attempting to negotiate religious identity.⁶⁴ For example, European national identities tend to be described in terms of ethnic and religious ancestry. Thus, in Europe, non-Christian youth associate less strongly with their national identities than Christian youth. Muslim youth show the lowest levels of identification.⁶⁵



What role, if any, does religion play in your identity?

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Religious landscapes, like cultures in general, undergo changes. Even when membership in religious groups decreases, religion can still have an important influence, and because religion shapes how and with whom many people communicate, it has implications for intercultural communication. Since September 11, 2001, interreligious dialogues have received significant attention as a stabilizing force for both national and regional security.⁶⁶

Age-Based Identity

Perceptions about the self and relationships to others often change with age. According to our **age-based identity**, we may dress differently, process emotions differently, perceive technology differently, orient toward life events differently and, in general, act differently.⁶⁷ Some societies are more age aware, with the United States being one of the more age-conscious countries. Age influences other aspects of culture as well. Some cultures give special significance to specific ages. For example, Latino/a families often celebrate their daughters' fifteenth birthdays with a quinceañera, a party recognizing the daughter's entry into adulthood. Jewish families have similar celebrations recognizing the thirteenth birthdays of sons and daughters with bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, respectively.

Age-based identity also is a factor in determining willingness and eagerness to communicate. Culture and social constructions shape attitudes relative to age, influencing our feelings about ourselves and others at different points in our lives. While in the United States age-based discrimination is illegal, we sometimes are guilty of treating others differently because of their age. Younger people may try to avoid communicating with older people due to their faulty perception that older people, in general, have declining physical and mental capacity; they also may perceive their value systems as incompatible. In 2020, according to US American journalist Laura Newberry, the coronavirus pandemic amplified ageism, turning it into "open season for discrimination" against older adults in the United States, exemplified by the trending hashtag #BoomerRemover on social media.⁶⁸ Some pressed to lift lockdowns despite warnings that it would endanger older adults who initially comprised some 80 percent of COVID-19 deaths.⁶⁹ The perception was that the lives of older people were less valuable than reviving the economy.

Cultures have different views on aging, which means an array of implications for how individuals feel about themselves and others as well as for intercultural communication. For example, in Zimbabwe, South Korea, and China, older adults are looked to for counsel and advice. What are your associations with the words "old person"? How do they impact your relationships and interactions with persons from your own and other cultures?

Racial Identity

Racism remains a pervasive issue in the United States. The United States has gone through a wave of racial reckoning since the death of George Floyd in 2020, with the social justice movement of Black Lives Matter further dividing the country.⁷⁰ How we think about **racial identity** influences how we think about ourselves and others. As a result, we have many socially constructed racial categories. Thus, race can be based on visible physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, and facial and other bodily characteristics associated with biology, or it

can be seen as a sociohistorical concept that views race as socially determined. Modern science has uncovered no biological basis for racial categorization because there is little genetic variation among us. When viewed instead as a social construct, race serves as an identity marker reflective of social forces and structures of power, invisibly and visibly positioning and privileging some groups over others. While it is challenging to reconfigure this dynamic, as we'll see in Chapter 7, it can be done.⁷¹

Ethnic Identity

Ethnicity refers to a group of people of the same descent or heritage who share a common and unique culture. **Ethnic identity** derives from ethnic group membership. For many, ethnic identity means having a sense of belonging to an ethnic community with its own traditions and customs, languages, dialects, set of values, and behaviors.⁷²

When we categorize ourselves as members of an ethnic group, we set ourselves apart from others not belonging to our group. If our ethnic group membership is stronger and more important to us than our other group memberships, then it may lead us to favor members of our group and create problems for us when we communicate with those belonging to other ethnic groups. For some people living in the United States, ethnic identity is strong. They feel a connection to people of their ethnicity beyond the United States, calling themselves Chinese American, Mexican American, Irish American, or Somali American. How strong is your ethnic identity?

We express our ethnicity to varying degrees depending on the situation in which we find ourselves, whether we believe it helps us define who we are, or if we think asserting it will be an advantage or disadvantage for us. Some of us feel more compelled to express our ethnicity, with underrepresented groups giving it more emphasis than dominant groups. Historically, people of color in the United States, for example, emphasize their ethnic identity more than white individuals. This is because the assimilation and growth in power and privilege of white ethnicities blurred the lines that once separated Anglo/English Americans, Irish Americans, and Italian Americans from each other. Similarly, Arabs in Israel place more importance on ethnic identification than do Jews.⁷³

Although sometimes used interchangeably with race, ethnicity is more descriptive of a specific social group, such as Hispanics, Chinese people, or Polynesians. Language and labels might serve as markers of racial and ethnic difference. For example, whereas the word “Black” emphasizes skin color, the label “African American” emphasizes heritage. Many African Americans prefer the label “Black,” however, since most enslaved Africans were stripped of their heritage. Pan-ethnic terms such as *Latinx* imply homogeneity when in actuality people identifying with these groups come from different countries and different cultures, with different languages and religions. Some Latino/a people prefer the word “Hispanic” emphasizing their linguistic heritage, whereas others prefer “Chicano” emphasizing the geographical origin.

Class Identity

Class identity describes one's economic position in society. As such, it shapes and helps regulate approaches to life. Classes exist in every society; however, they are delineated in different ways with varying importance and rigidity.

Where do you place yourself when it comes to the class hierarchy? For example, do you identify as a member of the lower, middle, or upper class? Class distinctions in the United States are based, in part, on income distinctions. According to the Pew Research Center, about 50 percent of US Americans fall into the middle-income group, 20 percent in the lower-income group, and 30 percent in the upper-income group based on the calculation of US median annual household income.⁷⁴ The class segmentation in the United States is not absolute, because income level varies relative to the cost of living from state to state.

Aside from income, other criteria affecting class assignment include occupation, education, and beliefs or attitudes. Clues to class identity are provided by the location, size, and decor of people's homes, their clothing and jewelry choices, their cars, and the way they communicate—including how they speak.

Cultural groups occupy different steps on the economic ladder giving some more flexibility and status. In Western individualistic cultures, it is assumed that if people are satisfied with their position in society, they will identify with the class to which they belong; if dissatisfied, they will identify instead with the class to which they aspire to belong.⁷⁵

Typically, most of a person's interactions are with others from the same class. Thus, economic positioning helps predict with whom we interact, and to some extent determine the nature of our interactions.⁷⁶ This phenomenon of class functioning as a barrier to communication across classes is more salient in high power distance cultures, where people are much more conscious of and sensitive to hierarchy than are low power distance cultures. For example, in high power distance cultures such as Indian cultures, marriage across different social castes is highly frowned on.⁷⁷

Class identity, of course, interacts with other identity aspects, because class inherently is associated with power and privilege. Case in point: More than 85 percent of the billionaires in the United States are male, and 75 percent of the millionaires are white.⁷⁸ Group memberships and the stereotypes we have relative to them help determine whether we have positive or negative expectations for our communication. If we have negative expectations for persons from different groups, we likely will try to avoid interacting with them. Too often, the media reinforce class discrimination by stereotypically portraying low-income individuals as unmotivated, uneducated, and verbally and physically aggressive.⁷⁹

Political Identity

Our national, religious, ethnic, age, or class identity is often related to our political identity. Generally speaking, **political identity** describes one's beliefs and attitudes toward particular political and economic structures that maintain social order. Political scientists typically describe political identity from the standpoint of economic interests whereas political psychologists believe that one's orientation toward politics is driven by personal moral values. The two are intricately intertwined. Fundamental to one's economic interest is the ideology of ownership in business, industry, and property being either private or public; choices regarding these factors lead to the two main competing economic systems in the modern world: capitalism and socialism. In addition to the macro-level ideology, political identity is also understood on a spectrum from conservative (or right wing) to liberal or progressive (or left wing). According to

moral foundational theory, there are five moral dimensions: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity.⁸⁰ Across the globe, researchers have found evidence that moral values favoring in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity are predictors of politically conservative orientation whereas harm/care and fairness/reciprocity tend to drive politically liberal orientation.⁸¹

Perceptions of the political system are highly subjective and fluid even within the same political system. In the United States, a Western capitalist country, for example, the political system is controlled by two major parties, Republicans and Democrats, which are often labeled as “conservative” and “liberal,” respectively. According to Gallup, in 2021, approximately 43 percent of adults in the United States identified as Republican, and 46 percent as Democrats.⁸² The word “divided” has been used consistently to describe public opinion on many issues; opinions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, voting and election reform, women’s reproductive rights, the Black Lives Matter movement, immigration, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan are closely tied to people’s political identity.



Public opinion in the United States is divided on many issues.

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Physical Ability–Based Identity

The Americans with Disabilities Act defines **disability** as both physical and mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities. We all have different levels of physical prowess, which, like age, evolve with time. Currently, about 20 percent of US adults live with some kind of disability causing difficulty in mobility, cognition, vision, hearing or self-care, and this proportion is doubled for adults over sixty-five years old and Native Americans and Alaskan Natives.⁸³ We all experience some kind of physical challenge that limits our bodily mobility during the course of our lifetimes, and it is likely that we will become less able-bodied as we age. Think of

it this way: Do you need a stool to reach a very high shelf? Do you need to wear a pair of glasses when reading and driving? Can you get to the top of a tall building using the stairs, not the elevator? How people view their own physical ability and that of others is influenced by attitudes toward **physical ability–based identity** as well as existing physical disability stigmas. Physical disability has traditionally been associated with inferiority compared to able-bodied people. The ascribed identity of people with disabilities often makes “disabled” the primary (and sometimes only) label, diminishing all other qualities possessed by the person. This assumption of inferiority can lead to well-intended yet condescending communication and behavior. Have you heard people from able-bodied culture exclaiming their joy at the achievements made by a person with a disability, saying something like “Look what they’ve accomplished!” This seeming compliment is viewed as condescending by many members of the disability community because it implies lowered standards for those who have physical disability and makes them the victim of their physical (dis)ability.

Intercultural communication scholars have called for the redefinition of disability. Instead of juxtaposing physical ability and disability on opposite ends, they place disability on a spectrum of able-bodied culture. Such redefinition can help reduce the negative stereotypes and stigma associated with physical disability.

The view of (dis)ability discussed here primarily has been driven by the Western concept of individuality and is of particular significance to individuals of European descent. There has been a lack of attention paid to the study of disability outside of Western cultures and the intersectionality of ability and other aspects of identity, such as gender, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity. However, the issue is not unique in Western industrial countries and cultures. For example, in India, China, and Sri Lanka, the asylums to shelter and educate those who are blind can be traced back 2,000 years. In Juchitan de Zaragoza in Oaxaca, Mexico, members who would traditionally be considered disabled in the West participate in the daily life of the community, and the local language, Zapotec, does not have the word “disabled.”

Neurological or Mental Ability–Based Identity

Related to physical ability identity is **neurological or mental ability–based identity**. How society describes neurological and mental disability and mental health overall has undergone major changes in the past few decades. The US National Institute of Mental Health estimated that approximately 20 percent of the population experience mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The COVID-19 pandemic had negative mental health impacts for many, including increased anxiety, stress, and other depressive symptoms.⁸⁴

Scholars and activists have criticized the traditional definition of neurological disability as a socially constructed standard to evaluate only the observable and diagnosable brain impairments and their negative impacts on major life functions. Such a definition not only marginalizes and stigmatizes those who experience those observable mental disorders as anomalies and outsiders, but also ignores the hidden and yet-to-be diagnosed variations of mental and neurological ability. Therefore, to reduce stigma associated with varying neurological conditions and mental abilities, there has been a push to reframe what was once considered mental

and neurological disability on a spectrum of neurodiversity and to adopt neutral words such as “neuroatypical” instead of “illness” or “disease” to avoid conveying the implication that neuroatypical people are “patients” who must be “cured” in order to be “normal.” In addition, members identifying with various neurological states are encouraged to identify with the group and engage in inter-ability and cross-ability communication to increase the visibility of the community, promoting the neurological state as a part of the person’s identity.⁸⁵

Identity Contradictions and Contrasts

A **paradox** combines contradictory features or qualities. For example, the statements “If I know one thing, it’s that I know nothing” and “Whatever you say it is, it isn’t” are paradoxes. Culture is the lens through which we view the world. Everything we perceive passes through this lens, influencing how we make sense of the world and ourselves, including how we respond to people, events, and other stimuli. However, not everyone thinks or perceives similarly. Identity itself can be a paradigm providing us with a pattern to fit the world into at the same time that it presents contradictions and illustrates cultural contrasts. Different paradigms, for example, have different starting points that may produce tensions. Here we consider the contradictions and contrasts inherent in two different determinants of identity: where you live and economic status.

The Geography of Identity: Contradictions and Contrasts

According to US American social psychologist Richard Nisbett, human behavior is a function of culture.⁸⁶ Thought practices and perceptions of reality are dependent on the cultural environment, leading to people developing contrasting, and sometimes paradoxical, worldviews.

Perception is a process comprised of different stages: selection, organization, interpretation, and response. Culture teaches us how to perceive, and we think about and see the world differently depending on what culture we come from. Cultures in North America, including the United States, and cultures in western Europe, including Great Britain, tend to teach the importance of individuality and individual choice, while cultures in east and south Asia, including in China, Japan, and India, are oriented toward group relations and obligations. In general, persons from group-oriented cultures are more sensitive in their perceiving practices taking in whole scenes rather than centering on specific objects in segmentation. They tend to focus on the broader context and avoid distinguishing objects from their surroundings. Persons from Western individualistic cultures, in comparison, are more apt to exhibit a “tunnel-vision” perceptual approach, focusing more on identifying what stands out to them and remembering that which was prominent.⁸⁷ The tendency for self-inflation is similarly prominent among US Americans with 94 percent of US American professors claiming to be “above average”—a paradox in and of itself. This self-promoting claim is rarely found in East Asian collectivistic cultures where people are prone to deflecting individual attention to their self-worth.⁸⁸

Every country, big or small, has regional cultures, variations within the national culture. For example, a study of collectivism and exposure to foreign media in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, three major metropolitan cities located in the northeast, east, and southeast of

China, showed that Beijing had the highest level of exposure to foreign media and lowest level of collectivism among the three cities.⁸⁹

If we live for an extended period of time in another culture, we might adjust our sensing and cognitive processes, changing to adapt to the practices of the host culture. We take on aspects of an identity we might once have considered unfamiliar. Did you move from one region to another when you started college? Did you experience any unexpected cultural shocks? Consider the ways in which the paradigm of intersectionality has influenced how important different components of your identity are and how they affect your life experiences and opportunities.

The Economics of Identity: Contradictions and Contrasts

In the United States, the wealthier a neighborhood, the greener the views and the more shade people experience, which lowers the average outdoor temperature, enabling those living in such neighborhoods to lead healthier lifestyles, in part because they're able to spend more time outside and breathe cleaner air. Lower-income communities have a limited number of trees and parks and significantly more concrete. The presence of more greenery has been shown to improve mental health, educational outcomes, and social connectivity. In the United States, trees cover about one-third of the surface in communities described as “white” and barely one-fifth of the surface in communities populated by people of color—exposing social equity issues correlated with identity.⁹⁰ In 2019, approximately 16 percent of all people of color lived in high-poverty neighborhoods, and this number increased to 20 percent for Black and Indigenous Americans. This stands in sharp contrast to the only 4 percent of white people who live in such neighborhoods.⁹¹



Lower-income communities have a limited number of trees and parks and significantly more concrete.

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Wealthier neighborhoods usually boast more shade and greenery.

istock.com/Kristen Prahl

IDENTITIES IN ACTION

2.4 Describe different ways to distinguish among identities.

Perceptions of our own and others' identities are highly selective, determining how we make sense of the world. How we perceive power, for example, influences the cues to which we attend. When we share common experiences, perceptions of power or anything else may overlap. However, no one perceives in an unbiased fashion or exactly like anyone else. Frames of reference do not exist in a vacuum, but instead are socially and culturally constructed. Not only previous experience, but also emotional state, can influence perceptions and interpretations. Distinguishing between dominant (or macro-cultural) and underrepresented (or micro-cultural) identities, reflecting on the nature of a multicultural identity, and identifying how expectations influence interactions with persons whose identities differ, will enable us to develop more informed and nuanced perceptions of "the other."

Dominant and Underrepresented Identity

To organize our perceptions, we create categories, which leads to our emphasizing but also ignoring some aspects of experience. Once we acknowledge a category, we may take its existence for granted. In the context of US society, the macro- and dominant culture is understood as that of

white people, and the micro-cultural identity is that of those who are BIPOC. Our racial and ethnic identity influences how we perceive and respond. For example, while 78 percent of Black people agree that the country hasn't gone far enough to give Black individuals equal rights with white people, only 37 percent of white people concur; while 50 percent of Black people believe that it's not likely that Black people eventually will have rights equal to those that white individuals have, only 7 percent of white people agree.⁹² The US Census revealed that the United States is undergoing a racial and ethnic shift, with the nation's historical ethnic and racial minorities soon to outnumber its white population and the percentage of people identifying with multiple racial groups growing.⁹³ How will this shift impact thoughts about other racial and ethnic communities and feelings of belonging? How will it affect our definition of racial and ethnic identity?

Members of dominant (macro) culture and underrepresented (micro) cultures do not develop their identities the same way, though some stages may overlap. The identity development models we discuss below are based on racial and ethnic identity.⁹⁴ Although the micro-cultural identity development model first started by focusing on the racial identity of Black people, other micro-cultural groups may experience similar stages. However, the historical context and triggering events of identity stage movement also can differ greatly across micro-cultural groups. Despite this, the essential development of identity lies in an individual's experiential, emotional, and intellectual understanding of what it means to be a member outside the dominant group.

Underrepresented (Micro-Cultural) Identity Development

Underrepresented racial identity development occurs in five flexible stages: (1) *pre-encounter* (when members have not yet examined their micro-cultural identity in terms of race and ethnicity); (2) *encounter* (usually during adolescence or early adulthood); (3) *immersion/emersion* (typically triggered by either the awareness that not all benefits enjoyed by dominant group members are available to others, and/or by negative events such as discrimination or name-calling); (4) *internalization* (when the micro-cultural group member develops an internalized identity); and (5) *internalization-commitment* (when micro-cultural group members develop an action plan demonstrating long-term commitment to the group's concerns). This model is based on the framework developed by William Cross, a theorist and researcher in the field of ethnic identity development (see Table 2.1).⁹⁵ Members may spend more time in one stage than in other stages, enact a stage differently, or get stage-stuck.⁹⁶

TABLE 2.1 ■ Underrepresented Racial Identity

Stages	Description	Significance
Stage 1. Pre-Encounter	Members accept the values and attitudes of the dominant culture.	The primary goal is assimilation; ideas about race and ethnicity are attributed to family and/or friends.
Stage 2. Encounter	Members have a series of encounters with dominant culture members, causing them to realize the significant differences between the macro- and micro-cultures and recognize racism's impact.	Members start to question dominant culture practices, which begins the transition to the next stage.

Stages	Description	Significance
Stage 3. Immersion/ Emersion	Members who have been de-emphasizing their micro-cultural ethnic or racial heritage come into contact with persons possessing a strong micro-cultural identity. Their interaction leads to their becoming interested in thinking about and acting on their own racial and ethnic heritage.	Members actively seek out opportunities to surround themselves with others who share the micro-cultural identity and develop a stronger sense of their own racial and ethnic identity. As they endorse the values and attitudes of their micro-culture, they may reject the values and attitudes emphasized by the dominant/macro-culture group.
Stage 4. Internalization	Members possess a strong sense of their group identity; they also possess an appreciation for other cultural groups.	More secure and confident with their identity, members are able to make meaningful connections with both the macro-cultural group members and form alliances with other micro-cultural group members.
Stage 5. Internalization- Commitment	Members possess a strong sense of identity and a general sense of commitment to the group.	Members develop a plan of action that addresses group concerns.

Source: Based on the work of William Cross.

Dominant (Macro-Cultural) Identity Development

The model of dominant (macro-cultural) identity development attributed to US American education scholar Rita Hardiman also contains four stages: (1) *unexamined identity*, (2) *acceptance*, (3) *resistance*, and (4) *redefinition/reintegration* (see Table 2.2). Rather than focusing on how white people develop identity, dominant (macro-cultural) identity development centers on the possibility of unlearning racism and other forms of discrimination.⁹⁷

US American psychologist Janet Helms offers a six-stage alternative approach to Hardiman's description of dominant group identity development (see Table 2.3).⁹⁸

Which of the preceding approaches do you believe best captures the realities dominant group members confront?

TABLE 2.2 ■ Dominant Identity Development

Stage	Description	Significance
Stage 1. Unexamined Identity	Members are aware of some physical and cultural differences but exhibit neither fear nor a sense of superiority toward members of other racial or ethnic groups.	Communication is not based on perceptions of racial difference.

(Continued)

TABLE 2.2 ■ Dominant Identity Development (*Continued*)

Stage	Description	Significance
Stage 2. Acceptance	Members accept, predominantly unconsciously, some of the basic racial inequities distinguishing dominant from underrepresented groups. Communication, however, is primarily with members of their own group.	Communicating with members of underrepresented cultures tends to be patronizing and inauthentic. Many members fail to move beyond this stage. Others find themselves prodded to see what they have failed to understand about their relationship with members of underrepresented cultures.
Stage 3. Resistance	Members shift from blaming underrepresented group members for their situations to blaming the social system and its institutions for problems of discrimination that persist.	Members may enact passive or active resistance to racism or affirm their dominant white culture.
Stage 4. Redefinition/ Reintegration	Dominant group members refocus their energy and integrate their whiteness with other identity dimensions. They are comfortable being white, feeling little need to express defensiveness for their privileges relative to racism or other forms of discrimination. The contention is that blame or guilt won't alleviate the race problem.	There is no single model of white identity—with some white people embracing white privilege and others rejecting it. With diversification of the US population accelerating, members of the dominant identity are becoming more race-conscious and facing more race-challenges as they confront the reality of, in time, becoming the minority.

Source: Based on the work of Rita Hardiman.

TABLE 2.3 ■ Alternative Model of Dominant Group Identity

Stage	Description	Significance
Stage 1. Contact	Members of the dominant culture—in this case, white people in US society—are oblivious and unconscious of their racial and ethnic identity as members of the dominant group.	Dominant culture members simply think they are just “a person” and “like everyone else.” They might have contact and communication with members of micro-cultural groups, but their perceptions are likely based on stereotypes.

Stage	Description	Significance
Stage 2. Disintegration	Triggered by a series of personal experiences, members of the dominant group start to recognize and become aware of their privilege of being part of the macro-culture.	A series of emotions arise as a result of privilege realization, including shame, guilt, anger, and depression. Members feel caught between the conflicted dual realities of dominant and underrepresented cultural groups. In order to reduce their discomfort, they might withdraw from interacting with micro-cultural groups or deny the existence of racism altogether.
Stage 3. Reintegration	Pressured by society, members of the dominant group might be forced to re-engage in conversing about racial and ethnic identity.	Members' feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety from the previous stage return and might turn into hostility and anger. They attribute the problems they experience to members of the underrepresented groups in the effort to justify their own privilege and superiority.
Stage 4. Pseudo-Independence	Members start to abandon the idea of white superiority and seek information to form an in-depth understanding of racial and ethnic identities and their implications.	Member understanding of inequities is mostly intellectual and abstract.
Stage 5. Immersion/Emersion	Similar to underrepresented members' identity development, in this stage members of the dominant group might seek a new way to be associated with their own identity group.	Increasingly comfortable confronting their own privileges and biases, the members of the dominant group form alliances with underrepresented group members, becoming active in fighting racial oppression.
Stage 6. Autonomy	Members of the dominant group are aware of their own privilege and their role in perpetuating racism.	Instead of feeling fearful and angry, dominant group members are knowledgeable and well-versed in racial dynamics and determined to abandon their entitlement. Having a nonracist white identity becomes their strong desire.

Source: Based on the work of Janet Helms.

Power Orientations of the Dominant and Underrepresented

Recall that in Chapter 1 we learned that cultures vary regarding their attitudes toward hierarchy and equality, with these determining their level of acceptance of high or low power distance relationships. *Power distance* is a measure of the degree to which the less powerful members of a culture accept the unequal distribution of power. Thus, the focus is on the relationship of persons of different statuses, with “power” represented by its explicit expressions including hierarchy. In general, the majority of members in low power distance cultures believe in equality, with power in its explicit form distributed more or less equally. The United States is a typical low power distance culture. In contrast to the United States, members of high power distance cultures accept differences in power as a natural part of society.

The power and privilege that dominant groups hold over underrepresented groups are often hidden. While members of the dominant group (macro-culture) may not think about or realize their privileges and power, these are perceived quite clearly by underrepresented group (micro-culture) members. In the United States, power remains primarily in white hands—oftentimes referred to as white privilege (see Chapter 7), which is a “weightless knapsack,” a privilege enjoyed without many members of the dominant culture necessarily realizing it.⁹⁹ Understanding these two different systems of power is necessary for those who internalize primarily one approach to power to interact effectively with those who internalize the other approach.

Categories may become rigid and unyielding. By changing our perceptual paradigm, we can develop more accurate understandings of persons outside of our own culture. While in this chapter we explore categories influencing identity, we need to recognize that the boundaries distinguishing them are arbitrary. We should not pigeonhole people into rigid categories but instead be mindful of exceptions when communicating with others. Indeed, US Americans identifying as mixed-race have just about tripled in the past decade. More than three-quarters of inter-racial marriages in the United States involve a non-Hispanic white partner. Younger people in the United States are identifying as members of broader and more inclusive communities.¹⁰⁰

Multicultural Identity Development

The number of multiracial people, those possessing a **multiracial or multicultural identity**, is rising. According to the 2020 US Census, approximately 10 percent of Americans reported being biracial or multiracial, up from only 3.2 percent in 2010.¹⁰¹ People identifying with more than one racial or ethnic group can choose to identify with either, neither, or both/all the racial and ethnic groups. Rather than fit themselves into a single racial category, such individuals may realize that their differences straddle categories. They also may find themselves struggling for acceptance in multiple cultures as they explore and negotiate their identity within each culture. Effectively, they live on the cultural edges. To resolve their identity issues, when prodded by members of their own culture or the macro-culture, they may opt to identify with only one of the cultures or both, securing their sense of self by accepting themselves, for example, as biracial, of mixed race, or multicultural with an identity

that is both flexible and adaptable. If one group with which they identify is dominant and another is an underrepresented group, they can embrace both dominant and underrepresented racial identities, feeling both privileged and marginalized.¹⁰² Again, multiracial and multicultural identity development inevitably echoes the need for understanding identity through intersectionality, acknowledging that people can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression.



The number of people who identify as multiracial is increasing.

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For example, in the factor model of multiracial identity, US American social justice educator Charmaine Wijeyesinghe listed a total of eight factors that influence a multiracial identity choice, including racial ancestry, early experience and socialization, cultural attachment, physical appearance, social and historical context, political awareness and orientation, other social identities (such as gender and sexual orientation) and spirituality. US American psychologist Maria Root's ecological framework for understanding multiracial identity development similarly includes an array of sources of influence, ranging from family socialization, physical appearance, and context, to region, history, and other social identities including gender, sexual orientations, and class. The models and the frameworks of multiracial or multicultural identity point to the multiple forces contributing to one's racial identity formation, including social identities that are in addition to one's racial or ethnic experience. Unraveling the formation of multiracial and multicultural identity compels us to understand the intersectionality of identity.¹⁰³

Increases in people identifying as multiracial and multicultural in the United States, the unprecedented speed of globalization, and racial divisions in US American society lead some to believe that identity is in a post-racial and post-ethnic phase, exhibiting more fluidity and driven, in large measure, by personal cultural preferences. South African author David Theo Goldberg in his 2015 book *Are We All Post-Racial Yet?* directly refutes this claim. In an interview, the author said that after Obama was elected in the United States as the first Black president, people started to say racism in the country was over, but the high-profile deaths in the Black community caused by the police and by white individuals like George Zimmerman, who was acquitted of murder after killing Trayvon Martin, painfully show that racial identity and race-related problems are very much present in the United States. “Post-raciality, in short, is a new form of racism,” said Goldberg.¹⁰⁴

Culture Shock and Identity Development

Exposure to different cultures over extended periods of time, such as when you move far away from home to attend college in a different region or when you study or work abroad, may have a transformative impact on identity development. During the cultural transition period, you might face unfamiliar cultural practices, finding yourself needing to make sense of and adapt to new ways of living. As you navigate, moving between your native culture and the new culture, you might experience **culture shock**—the feelings of anxiety and disorientation such as depression, anxiety, irritability, and withdrawal that are directly connected to adjustment difficulties.¹⁰⁵ As you manage these emotions, reflect on the experience, and navigate the differences, the process could signal your identity evolving.

Culture shock occurs when a person finds themselves transplanted into a setting they find unfamiliar or unsettling. Symptoms vary, but often include feeling isolated, irritated, longing for the familiar, and being critical of local customs and ways of doing things. Canadian anthropologist Kalervo Oberg and Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard’s model of culture shock, the **U-curve model**, divides the process into three phases: (1) anticipation, (2) disorientation or crisis, and (3) adjustment, learning to cope.¹⁰⁶ This description was extended by US Americans J. T. Gullahorn and J. E. Gullahorn into the **W-curve model**, which identified five phases, or perhaps six if the challenge of reentry into a home culture is included.¹⁰⁷ In the first phase of culture shock, called *the honeymoon stage*, the new arrival to the culture is excited, maybe even exhilarated, about all the new things being experienced. During the second phase, called *disintegration*, the person transitioning to the new culture begins to feel disoriented and uncomfortable as a result of being immersed in surroundings and lifestyles that are unfamiliar and having to expend so much energy adapting to their new environment. This typically precipitates an identity crisis, leading the newly transplanted individual to ask questions about who they now are and why they feel so exhausted, angry, sad, and perhaps even incompetent. During the third phase, known as the *reorientation or adjustment phase*, the person seeks a solution to their problems—needing to determine whether they are willing to adapt so that they can function in the new culture. The fourth stage of culture shock finds them *learning new rules and customs* to better navigate the new culture. Having made the decision to adapt, they now engage actively in the culture. The fifth and final stage is

biculturalism, where they are comfortable in both their native and new culture. Feeling they belong in their new culture, they no longer experience culture shock symptoms. Interestingly, after living in the “new” culture for an extended period of time, when returning to their native culture, the person may undergo “reverse culture shock,” experiencing the same cycle and identity issues on returning to their home country that the original culture shock precipitated. (We discuss culture shock further in Chapter 10.)

STRETCH YOUR UNDERSTANDING

IDENTITY COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

Identity bridges culture and communication. This exercise stretches understanding of how people from different cultures attempt to express or suppress aspects of their identity.

Select three friends or acquaintances, one identifying with a dominant racial and ethnic culture, one identifying with an underrepresented racial and ethnic culture, and one identifying with a biracial or multiracial culture. Ask each of them the following questions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying not at all and 5 signifying extremely, how strong do you believe your racial and ethnic identity is? Why?
2. Which of the following categories do you believe is most important in distinguishing you from others: age, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, neurological ability, class, or religion? Why?
3. Which identity categories have intersected with one another to affect your opportunities and life experiences (e.g., being a young, able-bodied, neurotypical, white, transgender, bisexual, Christian, politically progressive woman living in the East Coast and belonging to the middle-class)?
4. Which of the following “isms” do you believe has been most influential in your life: racism, sexism, ableism, or ageism? Why?
5. Which group do you believe is most privileged in the United States? How have the privileges of this group affected you personally, if at all?

Compare and contrast their responses. In what ways do their comments support or contradict your expectations? What role do you think your expectations play in your relationships with each person?

CREATIVE TIPS FOR DEMONSTRATING IDENTITY AWARENESS

Identity plays a premier role in intercultural communication. Yet, there is no single identity. Rather, different cultures, relying on different paradigms, develop identity in different ways. Created through communication, identity is dynamic and, to some extent, negotiable. When we are mindful and reflective of how we see ourselves and others, we are able to challenge, reexamine, and redefine our identity with respect to, and in relation to, our group memberships.

Demonstrate Cultural Self-Awareness

Cultural self-awareness starts with consciously and intentionally understanding the implications of cultural identity, including how our nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, religion, regional location, political orientation, physical and mental ability, and the intersection of these factors influence us. Ask yourself the extent to which belonging to specific macro- or micro-cultural groups affects your avowed and ascribed identities?

Demonstrate Cultural Understanding of Others' Identity

Identify the assumptions you make about members of your culture and other cultures. In what ways do your own nationality, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, religion, region, political orientation, and physical and neurological ability integrally connect to your assumptions? Assumptions influence communication. So be sure to document the ways in which the assumptions you make about others affect the nature and outcome of your interactions with them.

Engage in Communicating about Cultural Identity

Commit to learning and communicating about identity. Identities are multifaceted, complex, and continually changing. Work to understand the aspects of identity that you and others consider important, the identities you and they resist, and those which are open to negotiation.

Since we enjoy communicating with those who affirm our identity, it makes sense to communicate in ways that help others validate themselves.

CASE STUDY: THE CASE OF ALEXANDER KLEIN

Alexander Klein is a US American cisgender heterosexual white man in his late twenties from the Midwest; he identifies as able-bodied and neurotypical, Christian, politically moderate, and in the middle class. Alex also speaks conversational Japanese. He just joined a large Japanese company in Osaka and is tasked with selling equipment to US manufacturers. Alex enjoys his job but is having some difficulties communicating with his Japanese coworkers who are mostly men, and who habitually begin every workday at the company by exercising together. The team exhibits unflinching respect for the group's senior supervisor, an executive who has been with the company for more than twenty-five years and who expects all the firm's workers to do their best and demonstrate company loyalty. What are Alex's problems? First, he does not feel that his Japanese coworkers are willing to give him a straight answer about anything. At a team meeting, Alex brought up the issue of the flawed design of a piece of equipment. When he asked for the group's opinions, everyone was silent, turning their heads to the manager. Alex became frustrated because none of the group's members would say anything substantial until after their manager expressed his opinion. Then, when asked, they agreed with the manager, even though Alex didn't believe the manager's position represented the best thinking. Alex has several other beliefs about the company's operation. He thinks the firm's employees are lacking in competence and just trying to please their boss. He thinks it is a great waste of time for his Japanese coworkers to exercise together before starting the workday. He has suggested eliminating this activity

so that they can focus on getting down to work instead. Last, just the other day, the senior manager returned to Alex the report he had submitted a week earlier. His boss, who is somewhat older than Alex, specified that Alex should rewrite it, noting that Alex's report contained mistakes. Alex checked the report and became angry, primarily because his manager had corrected his English. Alex is frustrated and doesn't know what to do.

Demonstrate your understanding by answering these questions:

1. To what extent might cultural identity be playing a role in Alex's understanding and interpretation of his coworkers' behaviors?
2. Which of the cultural dimensions you have learned about (e.g., individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity, long-term and short-term orientation, high- and low-context communication, and monochronic and polychronic time orientation) may help explain Alex's expectations and the behavior of Alex's employer and coworkers?
3. Describe some of the cultural perspectives at play here. How might an understanding of the multiple points of view have defused the situation?
4. What could Alex have done to better manage his culture shock? What should he do from now on? Think for a second about what you are suggesting. Is it realistic? Does it apply to the cultural context Alex is facing?

THINK BACK TO MOVE AHEAD: CHAPTER SUMMARY

2.1 Discuss the relationship between culture and identity.

To help reduce uncertainty and anxiety so that we may promote increased cultural understanding, we need to overcome cultural barriers and bridge cultural differences. In this effort, identity, perception of the self and others, and expectations play paramount roles.

2.2 Explain identity's nature.

Identity is a composite of the roles we see ourselves performing, the positions we occupy, our group memberships, our familial or personal connections, and the personal characteristics we attribute to ourselves—which often are indicative of how we would like others to perceive us. Our integrated identity is an amalgam of our personal, relational, and social/communal identities. As such, it is a product of our multiple identities. Different cultures are subject to different societal forces and thus perceive identity differently.

2.3 Use intersectionality as a lens to examine identity paradigms, contradictions, and contrasts.

A paradigm is a pattern, a model or gateway to understanding. The paradigm of intersectionality concerns the merging and intersection of power structures and their impact on the lives of groups on the margins, adding an important dimension to our understanding of culture. Different paradigms provide us with different frameworks for

exploring identity, giving us opportunities to explore identity paradoxes, contradictions, and contrasts.

2.4 Describe different ways to distinguish among identities.

By distinguishing between dominant and underrepresented identity and exploring the nature and dimensions of multicultural identity, we better prepare ourselves to navigate between cultures.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify the ways in which our culture preconditions us to make assumptions about others outside of our culture.
2. Discuss the ways in which differences between your avowed identity and your ascribed identity can lead to intercultural communication difficulties.
3. Distinguish between different aspects and types of identity, demonstrating their impact on you.
4. Discuss what you can do to become more sensitive in cultural differences when communicating with persons from other cultures.
5. Provide examples of how media “mirages” bias our understanding of our and others’ cultural identities.

KEY TERMS

age-based identity

ascribed identity

avowed identity

cisgender

class identity

communal identities

cultural identity

culture shock

demographically heterogeneous

disability

ethnic identity

face

facework

familial identity

gender role identity

genderqueer

global capitalism

globalization

glocal

identity

identity negotiation theory

individualized identity

integrated identity

intersectionality

moral foundational theory

multicultural identity

national identity

neurological or mental ability-based identity

paradigm

paradox

physical ability-based identity
political identity
psychographically heterogeneous
racial identity
regional identity
religious identity
sexual orientation identity

social identity
standpoint theory
transgender
U-curve model
underrepresented identity
W-curve model

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