

CHAPTER 4

Culture and the Individual: Cultural Identity

The particular human chain we're part of is central to our individual identity.

ELIZABETH STONE

The value of identity of course is that so often with it comes purpose.

RICHARD GRANT

Identity is an abstract, multifaceted concept that plays a significant role in intercultural communication interactions. Globalization, intercultural marriage, and immigration patterns promise to add even greater complexity to cultural identities in this century.¹ With this in mind, we will use this chapter to discuss some of the various aspects of identity. In Chapters 2 and 3, we examined how the deep structures of culture contribute to your identities, and we will return to the topic of identities throughout the book.

Since the concept is so pervasive, it is necessary to have a good appreciation of exactly what identity entails. To provide that understanding, we begin by pointing out the expanding need to understand the role of identity in our culturally diverse society. This is followed by a theoretical definition of identity, a discussion of a few of your various identities, and an examination of some of the many different ways identity is acquired. We then address the assortment of ways in which you establish and enact your cultural identities and the role of identity in communication. Next, we look at the growing phenomenon of bicultural and multicultural identities that are being produced by globalization. The chapter will conclude with an examination of some of the negative aspects of identity, which include stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

According to Pinney, a principal objective of one's adolescent years is the formation of an identity, and "those who fail to achieve a secure identity are faced with identity confusion, a lack of clarity about who they are and what their role is in life."² This suggests that identity development plays a critical role in the individual's psychological well-being. Thus, the necessity of understanding your sense of identity is self-evident.

An understanding of identity is also an essential aspect of the study and practice of intercultural communication.³ Increased international contact driven by the processes of globalization and armed conflicts, and domestic diversity arising from immigration, intercultural marriages, and divergent values add to the importance of identity in intercultural situations.

The growing awareness of identity among U.S. Americans was demonstrated in the 2000 census, which was the first time respondents were allowed to select more than one category to report their racial identity. Some 2.4 percent of the respondents, representing almost seven million U.S. Americans, identified themselves as being of two or more races.⁴ Another question on Census 2000 allowed individuals to write in their "ancestry or ethnic origin." That question produced about five hundred different categories,⁵ and more than ninety of the categories had populations in excess of one hundred thousand.⁶ The Census Bureau reports that the information will help users "tailor services to accommodate cultural differences" and "address the language and cultural diversity of various groups."⁷ It is also a good measure of diversity in the United States and the level of awareness that people have about their identity.

The unsettled world that we all live in is in part influenced by adherence to varying perceptions of identity. Writing in the *New York Times*, Brooks talks of a "great reshuffling of identities, and the creation of new, often more rigid groupings."⁸ He contends that despite the influence of information technologies and the forces of globalization, "old national identities are proving surprisingly durable."⁹ Brooks sees people becoming more self-segregated and distancing themselves, socially and physically, from groups that exhibit different cultural traits, which can encompass political views, religious beliefs, and lifestyle choices. The rapidly changing world order and the upheaval of traditional social structures are creating a high degree of uncertainty among many people. In reaction to these changes, "[m]any millions of people believe that their best haven of certainty and security is a group based on ethnic similarity, common faith, economic interest, or political like-mindedness."¹⁰ In other words, as people struggle to adapt to the dynamics of modern social life, filled with the push and pull of globalization and traditional ways, identity is becoming an important factor in how they live their lives and with whom they associate.

Of immediate concern to the study of intercultural communication is how identity influences and guides expectations about your own and others' social roles, and provides

CONSIDER THIS



Who am I? Stop for a minute and reflect on that question. Jot down a few of your thoughts. Some people find the question relatively easy and are able to produce a lengthy list of identifiers. Others may struggle and be able to write down only a few items. Regardless of the length of your list, the answers provided will offer insight into some of your many identities.

guidelines for your communication interaction with others.¹¹ For example, in the United States the cultural model for classroom interactions between a professor and students is very well defined. During lectures, students are free to ask questions and respectfully challenge the professor's assertions. Students are aware that the professor may call on them to answer questions about the lesson, and this anticipation instills a motivation to be prepared. Identity as professor or student provides the blueprint for classroom behavior. However, the blueprint described here is designed for a classroom in the United States. In collective cultures, such as Japan, the identity roles are the same, but the expectations are quite different. Japanese students do not normally expect to be called on to answer questions, and they seldom ask their professor questions during class. This example is somewhat oversimplified, but it demonstrates the importance of understanding the role of identity in an intercultural situation.

There are many more reasons for the need to gain an awareness of identity and its influence on intercultural interactions. We believe, however, that the above discussion should convince you of the need to become better acquainted with both your own identity and that of others. To help you with that task, we will begin with a definition of identity.

EXPLAINING IDENTITY

As we mentioned earlier, identity is an abstract, complex, and dynamic concept. As a result of those characteristics, identity is not easily defined, and therefore communication scholars have provided a variety of descriptions. Gardiner and Kosmitzki, for example, see identity as "a person's self-definition as a separate and distinct individual, including behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes."¹² Ting-Toomey considers identity to be the "reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization process. Identity basically refers to our reflective views of ourselves and other perceptions of our self-images."¹³ In a more concise definition, Martin and Nakayama characterize identity as "our self-concept, who we think we are as a person."¹⁴ For Mathews, "Identity is how the self conceives of itself, and labels itself."¹⁵ While all of these definitions treat identity in its broadest sense, some communication scholars address cultural identity more specifically.

Fong contends that "culture and cultural identity in the study of intercultural relations have become umbrella terms that subsume racial and ethnic identity."¹⁶ She defines cultural identity as

The identification of communications of a shared system of symbolic verbal and nonverbal behavior that are meaningful to group members who have a sense of belonging and who share traditions, heritage, language, and similar norms of appropriate behavior. Cultural identity is a social construction.¹⁷

Lustig and Koester look at cultural identity as "one's sense of belonging to a particular cultural or ethnic group."¹⁸ Ting-Toomey and Chung see cultural identity as "the emotional significance that we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture."¹⁹ For Klyukanov, "cultural identity can be viewed as membership in a group in which all people share the same symbolic meanings."²⁰

This blizzard of definitions is not meant to confuse you but instead to demonstrate the abstractness of identity, which makes it difficult to construct a single, concise description agreeable to all. Part of the difficulty stems from how identity has been studied: it was an

early topic of interest in the fields of psychology and sociology,²¹ and only later became a subject of investigation for intercultural communication scholars, who began to examine the cultural components of identity. As a result, some definitions address "identity" and others speak of "cultural identity." However, as we will demonstrate throughout the chapter, we believe that culture influences every facet of all your identities.

Identity is dynamic and multiple. By this we mean that identity is not static, but changes as a function of your life experiences.²² In addition, you have more than one identity. Consider how you identified yourself in grade school, in high school, and after you entered college. During that time, you acquired some new identities and set aside some old ones. For example, you left behind the identity of a high school student and assumed that of a college student. However, you did retain the regional identity of your hometown and state and your cultural identity. Perhaps you gave up your identity as a member of a high school sports team, such as swimming or volleyball, and took on the identity of a sorority or fraternity member. As you can see, your identity is a composite of multiple identities, which are integrated; they do not work in isolation, but instead operate in combination based on the situation. As an illustration, when you are in the classroom, your identity as a student is salient, but you are still a male or a female, a friend of some of your classmates, a part-time employee, a son or daughter, and perhaps even a wife or a husband, to list just a few identities.

To help reduce some of the complexity of and better understand people's multiple identities, some researchers have constructed categories to classify the different kinds of identities. Turner offers three categories of classification: human identities, social identities, and personal identities.²³ *Human identities* are those perceptions of self that link you to the rest of humanity and set you apart from other life forms. *Social identities* are represented by the various groups you belong to, such as race, ethnicity, occupation, age, hometown, and others. Social identity is a product of the contrast between membership in some social groups and non-membership in others (i.e., the in-group/out-group dichotomy). *Personal identity* arises from those things that set you apart from other in-group members and mark you as special or unique. These things may be innate talents, such as the ability to play a musical instrument without formal training; special achievements, like winning an Olympic gold medal; or something as intangible as aregarious personality.

Hall offers a similar categorization of identity. He says, "Each of us has three levels of identity that, depending on the context, may or may not be salient in our interactions with others. These three levels are personal, relational, and communal."²⁴ *Personal identities* are those that make you unique and distinct from others. *Relational identities* are a product of your relationships with other people, such as husband/wife, teacher/student, or executive/manager. *Communal identities* are "typically associated with large-scale communities, such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, or religious or political affiliation."²⁵

Hall's communal identity is essentially the same as Taylor's social identity, and Dykxne provides a further classification of that type of identity, which is considered important during intercultural communication.

Our social identities can be based on our memberships in demographic categories (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, social class), the roles we play (e.g., student, professor, parent), our membership in formal or informal organizations (e.g., political parties, social clubs), our associations or vocations (e.g., scientists, artists, gardeners), or our memberships in stigmatized groups (e.g., homeless, people with AIDS).²⁶

This section has provided a theoretical understanding of identity as an abstract concept and attempted to show that an individual's identity is "made up of numerous overlapping aspects or subidentities."²⁷ We also discussed some ways of organizing your multiple identities into broad categories. Since they are the most relevant to intercultural communication interaction and study, we will now look at some different social identities and examine how they are influenced by culture.

SELECTED SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Although we use the terms *identity* and *identities* interchangeably, we have also pointed out that in actuality one's identity consists of multiple identities, which act in concert. The importance and saliency of any single identity is a function of the situation. As the context varies, you may choose to emphasize one or more of your identities. While attending class, your identity as a student will be in the forefront, but when you arrive at work, your occupational identity will become paramount. In both environments, however, some of your identities, such as race and biological sex, will also be present, albeit in a secondary role. Regardless of the identity or identities that are on display, all are tempered, to various degrees, by culture. In this section, we will examine a few of your many identities and illustrate how culture influences each.

Racial Identity

We should begin by explaining that *race* is a social construct arising from efforts to categorize people into different groups. According to Collier, race has been used by academic, government, and political agencies to identify groups of people as outsiders.²⁸ Researchers employing this perspective approach race as a socially constructed term related to issues of power. Allport indicates that anthropologists originally designated three separate races—Mongoloid, Caucasoid, and Negroid—but added others later.²⁹ These categories divided people into groups based solely on physical appearances. Today, racial identity is commonly associated with external physical traits such as skin color, hair texture, facial appearance, and eye shape.³⁰ Modern science, however, has found that there is very little genetic variation among human beings, which belies the precision of racial categorization as a means of classifying people. The concept has been further eroded by centuries of genetic intermixing,³¹ which is becoming an increasing occurrence in contemporary society through intercultural marriage. The concept of racial identity persists in the United States as a socially constructed idea, no doubt abetted by the historical legacy of events such as slavery, the early persecution of American Indians, issues of civil rights, and most recently, a growing influx of immigrants.

Ethnic Identity

Because "the difference between the terms *race* and *ethnicity* has not been clarified adequately in the literature,"³² the distinction between racial and ethnic identity can also be unclear and confusing. The problem is compounded further because people frequently delineate their ethnic identity in "highly individual ways according to their particular situation and circumstances."³³ From our perspective, however, racial identity is tied to a biological heritage that produces similar, identifiable physical characteristics. Ethnicity

or ethnic identity is derived from a sense of shared heritage, history, traditions, values, similar behaviors, area of origin, and in some instances, language.³⁴

Some people derive their ethnic identity from a regional grouping, such as

- The Basques, who are located along the Spanish-French border
- The Bedouin, who are nomadic Arab groups that range from the eastern Sahara across North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, to the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia
- The Kurds, a large ethnic group in northeast Iraq, with communities in Turkey, Iran, and Syria
- The Roma (commonly called Gypsies) who are scattered across Eastern and Western Europe

In each of these groups, the sense of ethnicity transcends national borders and is grounded in common cultural beliefs and practices.

The ethnicity of many U.S. Americans is tied to their ancestors' place of origin prior to their coming to the United States from places such as Germany, Italy, Mexico, or China. After the arrival of the original immigrants, subsequent generations often refer to themselves using terms such as "German-American," "Italian-American," "Mexican-American," or "Chinese-American." As Chen explains, the hyphen both separates and connects the two cultural traditions.³⁵

During the early years of the United States, immigrants often grouped together in a particular region to form ethnic communities, and some of these continue today, such as Chinatown in San Francisco and Little Italy in New York. New ethnic enclaves, like Little Saigon in the Los Angeles area, have developed following the arrival of more recent immigrants. In these areas, the people's sense of ethnic identity tends to remain strong, because traditional cultural practices, beliefs, and often language are followed and perpetuated. But as time passes, members of younger generations often move to areas of greater ethnic diversity and frequently marry into other ethnic groups. For some, this can dilute their feelings of ethnic identity, and today, it is not uncommon to hear U.S. Americans refer to their ethnicity by providing a lengthy historical account of their family's ethnic mergings. Others, especially those with a Euro-American heritage, will often simply refer to themselves as "just an American" or even "a White American." Frequently, they are members of the U.S. dominant culture, which grew out of Judeo-Christian religious traditions imported from Western Europe, and whose lineage is characterized by an extensive history of interethnic marriages over the years. Martin and Nakayama write that many cultural practices associated with "whiteness" are beyond the awareness of the actual participants, but are more

IMAGINE THIS



Jason recently graduated from college. At the age of two, he was adopted in his native China by a Swedish-American couple and taken to live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jason has spent his entire life in Minneapolis and has had little contact with Chinese culture.

Shortly after the fall of Communism in 1989, Ingrid was born in a relocation camp for political refugees in West Germany. Her mother was from East Germany and her father was a native of Russia. Soon after her birth, Ingrid and her parents moved to England, where she has spent the past eighteen years.

What are the ethnic identities of Jason and Ingrid?

discernible by members of minority culture groups.³⁶ Thus, “whiteness” is often associated with positions of privilege.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is quite different from biological sex or sexual identity. *Gender* refers to how a particular culture differentiates masculine and feminine social roles. As Ting-Toomey tells us, “Gender identity, in short, refers to the meanings and interpretations we hold concerning our self-images and expected other-images of ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness.’”³⁷

Cultural influences on what constitutes gender beauty and how it is displayed vary between cultures. In the United States, despite the threat of skin cancer, many young women consider having a good tan to be part of their summer beauty regimen. In Northeast and Southeast Asian cultures, however, dark skin is considered a mark of lower socioeconomic status and exposure to the sun is avoided. So important is light skin that both men and women often use skin-whitening cosmetics.³⁸ Language is another means of expressing gender differences. In Japanese, certain words are traditionally used exclusively by women, while men employ different words to express the same meaning. In English, there is little or no distinction between words used by women and those used by men. Cultural variations in gender identity can also be evident in fashion. James found that in Denmark:

The men are more concerned with their weight than the women, who wear loose-fitting clothes, and hardly a miniskirt is to be seen—even among teenagers. This is because being extravagantly sexy is not the main way for women to advance themselves in Denmark.³⁹

This is quite in contrast to fashion in the United States and many Western European nations.

Gender identity refers to the ways particular cultures differentiate between masculine and feminine roles.



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National Identity

National identity refers to your nationality. The majority of people associate their national identity with the nation where they were born. But national identity can also be acquired by immigration and naturalization. People who have taken citizenship in a country different from their birthplace may eventually begin to adopt some or all aspects of a new national identity, depending on the strength of their attachment to their new homeland. Alternatively, people residing permanently in another nation may retain a strong attachment to their homeland. National identity usually becomes more pronounced when persons are away from their home country. When asked where they are from, international travelers normally respond with their national identity—i.e., "We are from Canada." There are, however, many instances where local affiliation outweighs national affiliation. Texans, for instance, are noted for identifying themselves as being from Texas rather than from "the States." International sporting events and periods of international crisis can also stimulate strong feelings of national identity.⁴⁰

As we have indicated, identity is dynamic and can change contextually over time. A particularly interesting example of this dynamism is ongoing in the European Union, where younger generations are moving away from the national identity of their parents and adopting what might be termed a "transnational" identity. Thomas Reid reports that young adults from European Union nations tend to "think of 'Europe' as their native land."⁴¹ To test this assertion, one of the authors asked two international graduate students—one from Austria and one from Germany—attending a U.S. university about their national identity. The student from Austria considered herself to be a "European" rather than Austrian. The other indicated that she still referred to herself as German, but said she had many friends who were confused about their national identity. Concern about national identity is so great in France that the government



So strong is national identity that people often maintain their national identities even when they move to a different country or culture.

has established a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity, which is tasked with "better integrating newcomers and protecting French identity."⁴²

Most nations are home to a number of different cultural groups, but one group usually exercises the most power and is often referred to as the dominant culture because its members maintain control of economic, governmental, and institutional organizations. This control leads to the establishment of a "national character," which has been defined as follows by Allport:

"National character" implies that members of a nation, despite ethnic, racial, religious, or individual differences among them, do resemble one another in certain fundamental matters of belief and conduct, more than they resemble members of other nations.⁴³

In the United States, the dominant culture is considered to comprise members of Western European ethnicity, and cultural traits arising from that heritage are ascribed to the nation as a whole and referred to as the "national character."

Regional Identity

With the exception of very small nations like Monaco or the Holy See (Vatican City), every country can be divided into a number of different geographical regions, and often these regions reflect varying cultural traits. The cultural contrasts among these regions may be manifested through ethnicity, language, accent, dialect, customs, food, dress, or different historical and political legacies. Residents of these regions use one or more of those characteristics to demonstrate their regional identity. For example, although the total population of Belgium is just over ten million, the country has three official languages—Dutch, French, and German.

In the United States, many regional identities are delimited by state boundary lines, and almost everyone is proud of his or her home state. Residents of Texas and California offer prime examples of pride in regional identity. Louisiana is marked by a distinct cultural tradition derived from its French historical heritage. Regional identity can also be based on a larger geographical area, such as New England, "down South," "back East," or the Midwest.

In Japan, regional identity is marked by a variety of different dialects (e.g., Tokyo, Kansai, Tohoku, etc.) and some of those dialects (e.g., Kagoshima and Okinawa) are difficult for Japanese from other regions to understand. Japanese living overseas often form clubs based on their home prefecture and hold periodic gatherings to celebrate their common traditions. Despite reunification, separate East and West German identities remain a reality. Mexicans demonstrate their regional identity when they tell people they are from Sinaloa, Michoacan, Oaxaca, or Mexico City. Political division resulting from war has imposed regional identities on residents of North and South Korea.

Organizational Identity

In some cultures, a person's organizational affiliation can be an important source of identity. This is especially true in collectivistic cultures, but far less so in individualistic cultures. To illustrate this dichotomy, we will contrast organizational identity practices in Japan, a collectivistic culture, and the United States, an individualistic culture.

While this practice is becoming less prevalent among younger employees, Japanese businessmen employed by large corporations have traditionally worn a small lapel pin to signal company affiliation. There is no similar practice among managers and executives in the United States. Although some in the United States occasionally may wear a polo shirt or a tie with a company logo, this is not a common or habitual practice. In Japan, a person's organizational identity is so important that during introductions the company's name is given before the individual's name. For example, Mrs. Suzuki, an employee at the Tokyo Bank, would be introduced as *Tōkyō Ginkō no Suzuki san* (literal translation: Tokyo Bank of Suzuki Mrs.).⁴⁴ In the United States, an individual is introduced by his or her name first and then by his or her organization. On business cards, the Japanese businessperson's company and position are placed above his or her name. On American business cards, the company name is normally at the top, followed by the individual's name in large, bold letters, and the organizational position is under the name in smaller type. These rather simplistic and seemingly mundane examples offer insight into how collective cultures stress group membership and individualistic cultures emphasize the individual.

Personal Identity

Earlier in this chapter we noted that personal identity consists of those characteristics that set one apart from others in his or her in-group, those things that make one unique, and how one sees oneself. Cultural influences also come into play when determining personal identity. Markus and Kitayama report that "people in different cultures have strikingly different construals of the self, of others, and of the interdependence between the two."⁴⁵ People from individualistic cultures like the United States and Western Europe work to exemplify their differences from others, but members of collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize their group membership or connection to others. While still slaves to fashion, most U.S. Americans try to demonstrate their personal identity in their dress and appearance. In collective cultures, like Japan, people tend to dress in a similar fashion because it is important, and often even necessary, to blend in.

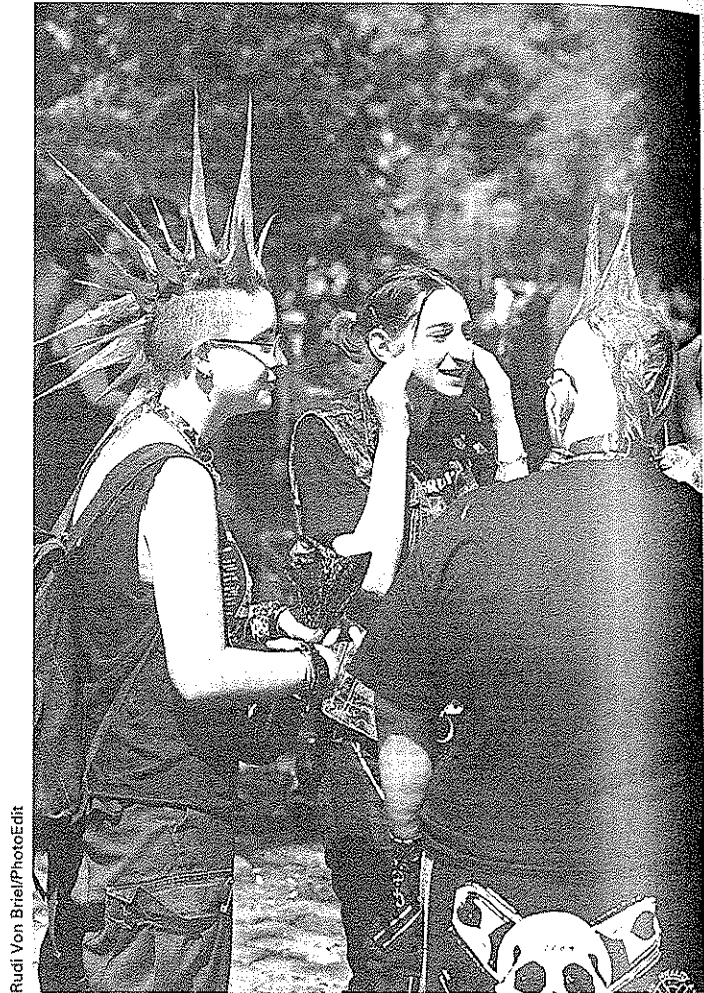
Cyber and Fantasy Identity

The Internet allows you to quickly and easily access and exchange information on a worldwide basis. As Suler, a psychologist, informs us, the Internet also provides an opportunity to escape the constraints of everyday identities:

One of the interesting things about the Internet is the opportunity it offers people to present themselves in a variety of different ways. You can alter your style of being just slightly or indulge in wild experiments with your identity by changing your age, history, personality, physical appearance, even your gender. The username you choose, the details you do or don't indicate about yourself, the information presented on your personal web page, the persona or avatar you assume in an online community—all important aspects of how people manage their identity in cyberspace.⁴⁶

The Internet allows individuals to select and promote what they consider the positive features of their identity and omit any perceived negative elements, or even construct entirely new identities. According to Suler, some online groups require participants to

Personal identity arises from those objects and ideas that help set you apart from the dominant culture and that you believe mark you as a member of a certain group.



Rudi Von Briel/PhotoEdit

assume an “imaginary persona,” and infatuation with these invented identities can become so strong they can “take a life of their own.”⁴⁷ The Internet is replete with websites, such as Facebook, that allow users to construct a cyber identity that may or may not correspond to their actual identity. The website Second Life is another notable example of the “virtual world” websites that facilitate cyber identity construction. Originally begun as a social networking site, where participants constructed avatars to represent themselves, it is now used by companies to hold meetings for employees working in distant locations.⁴⁸

Fantasy identity, which also extends across cultures, centers on characters from science fiction movies, comic books, and anime. Every year, people attend domestic and international conventions devoted to these subjects. For example, the 2008 Hong Kong Ani-Comics and Game Fair Festival was expected to draw 400,000 visitors over five days.⁴⁹ Comic-Con International has been held annually in San Diego, California, since 1970; in 2007 it attracted more than 125,000 attendees and exhibitors.⁵⁰ At these gatherings, some attendees come dressed, individually or in groups, as their favorite fantasy character or characters. For a few hours or days, they assume and enact the identity of their favorite media character.

There are many additional forms of identity that play a significant role in the daily lives of people. For example, we have not examined the functions of age, religion, socio-economic class, physical ability, or minority status, all of which are part of most individuals' identity and are influenced by culture. However, the several different identities discussed should give you an awareness of the complexity of the topic and of how culture can influence our identities. Now, let us look at how we acquire our identities.

ACQUIRING AND DEVELOPING IDENTITIES

As we discussed earlier, identities are largely a product of group membership. This is mentioned by Ting-Toomey when she writes, "Individuals acquire and develop their identities through interaction with others in their cultural group."⁵¹ Identity development, then, becomes a process of familial and cultural socialization, exposure to other cultures, and personal development. We have already looked at the family in Chapter 2, but the influence of family on identity is so great that we need to touch on a few points here. The initial exposure to your identity came from your family, where you began to learn culturally appropriate beliefs, values, and social roles.⁵² Guidance from family members begins at a very young age, when they teach children the proper behavior for boys and girls. This instills gender identity. Interacting with extended family members teaches different age-appropriate behaviors. It is also the family that first begins to inculcate the concept of an individual- or group-based identity.

Upon entering school, you were required to learn and demonstrate the behaviors that are culturally ascribed for a student. The media also played a considerable role in your identity development. The near-constant exposure to media stereotypes creates a sense of how we should look, dress, and act in order to present age- and gender-appropriate identities. Media is used to recruit people to join different groups, such as those for or against a specific activity such as gay marriage, abortion, or the war in Iraq, and inclusion in such a group imparts another identity.

From a theoretical perspective, Phinney offers a three-stage model to help understand identity development.⁵³ Although her model focuses on ethnic identity among adolescents, it can also be applied to the acquisition and growth of cultural identity. *Unexamined ethnic identity*, the initial stage, is "characterized by the lack of exploration of ethnicity."⁵⁴ During this stage, individuals are not particularly interested in exploring or demonstrating their personal ethnicity. For members of minority cultures, this lack of interest may result from the desire to suppress their own ethnicity in an effort to identify with the majority culture. Majority members in the United States, on the other hand, seem to take for granted that their identity is the social norm and give little thought to their own ethnicity.⁵⁵

The second stage, *ethnic identity search*, begins when individuals become interested in learning about and understanding their own ethnic identity. Movement from stage one to stage two can result from a variety of stimulations. An incident of discrimination might move members of a minority to reflect on their own ethnicity. This could lead to a realization that some beliefs and values of the majority culture can be detrimental to minority members,⁵⁶ and stimulate a movement toward one's own ethnicity. Dolores Tanno grew up in northern New Mexico and had always considered herself Spanish. After leaving New Mexico, she discovered that some people saw her as Mexican rather than Spanish, and this motivated her ethnic identity search.⁵⁷ Increased interest in ethnic identity could come from attending a cultural event, taking a culture class, or some other event that produces a greater awareness of one's cultural

heritage. *Ethnic achievement*, Phinney's final stage of identity development, is reached when individuals have a clear and confident understanding of their own cultural identity. For members of a minority, this usually comes with an ability to effectively deal with discrimination and negative stereotypes.⁵⁸ Identity achievement can also provide one with greater self-confidence and feelings of personal worth.

Martin and Nakayama have constructed separate four-stage identity development models for minority and majority members. In the minority model, *unexamined identity*, the initial stage, is similar to Phinney's model, in which individuals are not really concerned with issues of identity. During stage two, *conformity*, minority members endeavor to fit in with the dominant culture and may even possess negative self-images. *Resistance and separatism*, stage three, is usually the result of some cultural awakening that stimulates a greater interest in and adherence to one's own culture. Concurrently, rejection of all or selected aspects of the dominant culture may occur. In the final stage, *integration*, individuals have a sense of pride in and identity with their own cultural group, and demonstrate an acceptance of other cultural groups.⁵⁹

The model for majority identity development follows a similar first stage, *unexamined identity*, where identity is not a concern. *Acceptance*, the second stage, is characterized by acquiescence to existing social inequities, even though such acceptance may be at an unconscious level. At the next stage, *resistance*, members of the dominant culture become more aware of existing social inequities, begin to question their own culture, and increase association with minority culture members. Achievement of the fourth and final stage, *redefinition and reintegration*, brings an increased understanding of one's dominant culture identity and an appreciation of minority cultures.⁶⁰

Based on how they were achieved, your identities can also be classified as ascribed or avowed.⁶¹ This refers to whether your identities were obtained involuntarily or voluntarily. Your racial, ethnic, and sexual identities were assigned at birth and are considered *ascribed*, or involuntary. In hierarchical cultures where social status is often inherited, such as Mexico, a person's family name can be a strong source of ascribed identity. By contrast, your identity as a university student is *avowed* because you voluntarily elected to attend the school. Although being a university student is a voluntary identity, your culture has established expectations that delineate appropriate and inappropriate social behavior for college students. When enacting your college student identity, you will normally try to conform to those socially appropriate expectations, sometimes consciously and at other times subconsciously.⁶²

ESTABLISHING AND ENACTING CULTURAL IDENTITY

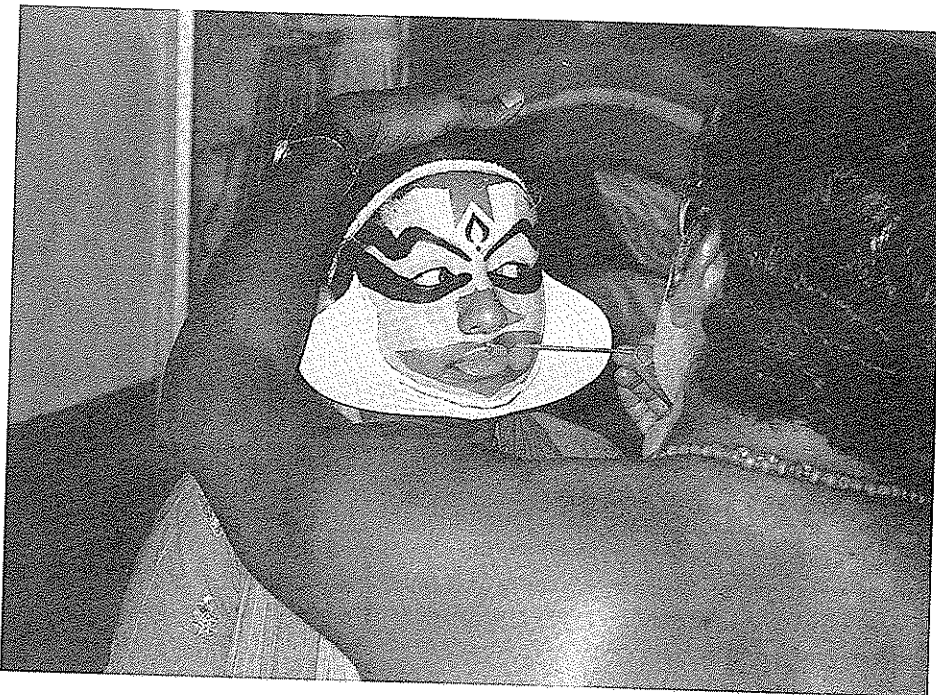
By now, you should have a clear understanding of what constitutes identity, an awareness of some of your many identities, and the difference between ascribed and avowed identities. This background will help you better understand how cultural identities are established and acted out.

As you go about your daily routine, stepping through various contexts, different identities are established, re-established, and displayed. By interacting with others you continually create and recreate your cultural identity through communication.⁶³ As Molden tells us, "It is through communication that we are able to express and (hence make known) our similarities and dissimilarities to others."⁶⁴ The communication employed to create and enact identity can take a variety of forms, including "conversation, commemorations of history, music, dance, ritual, ceremonial, and social drama of all sorts."⁶⁵

As noted earlier, initial identity development and display are products of interaction with family members. Families are the source of stories that tie us to the past and provide us with a "sense of identity and connection to the world."⁶⁶ These stories are also infused with cultural beliefs and values, which become part of one's identity.

Culture's influence in establishing an individual's identity is demonstrated by contrasting student interaction styles in U.S. and Japanese schools. In the United States, individualism is stressed and even young children are taught to be independent and develop their personal identity. Schools in the United States encourage competition in the classroom and on the playing field. Students quickly learn to voice their opinions and feel free to challenge the opinions of others as a means of asserting their own identity. Being different is a common and valued trait. This is in contrast to the collective societies found in South America, West Africa, and Northeast Asia, where children learn the importance of family dependence and interdependence, and identity is "defined by relationships and group memberships."⁶⁷ This produces activities that promote identity tied to the group. In Japanese preschools and elementary schools, students are frequently divided into small groups (*han*), where they are encouraged to solve problems collectively rather than individually.⁶⁸ The young Japanese students' identities are drawn from their study group and the school they attend. They are taught to avoid being different and to adhere to the Japanese proverb "A tall tree catches much wind."

Identities are also established and displayed in cultural rites of passage, which are used to help adolescents gain an increased awareness of who they are as they enter adulthood.⁶⁹ In some underdeveloped societies, the rite can involve a painful physical



Identities can be displayed in cultural rites of passage.

experience, such as male or female circumcision, but in developed nations, the rite is usually less harsh and is often a festive celebration. The bar mitzvah, for instance, is used to introduce Jewish boys into adulthood, when they become more responsible for religious duties. In the Mexican culture, girls look forward to their *Quinceañera*, held on their fifteenth birthday. The celebration is a means of acknowledging that a young woman has reached sexual maturity and is now an adult, ready to assume additional family and social responsibilities. In addition, the celebration is intended to reaffirm religious faith, good morals, and traditional family values.⁷⁰ In the White American culture, rites of passage into adulthood are generally not as distinct, but are often associated with the individual attaining a greater degree of independence.⁷¹ Graduation from high school or college, for example, brings increased expectations of self-sufficiency and a new identity.

Once established, identities are enacted in many ways, beginning in childhood and progressing through adolescence into the adult years. Individuals in almost every culture have ways of displaying their religious or spiritual identity. Many Jews wear yarmulkes or other distinctive clothes, and among Christians it is common to see a cross worn as an item of personal jewelry. Many Muslim women wear the traditional headscarf (*hijab*) as a means of conveying their religious identity.⁷² Some men and women wear a red dot (*pottu*) on their forehead as a sign of their devotion to the Hindu religion. Each of these symbols identifies the wearer as belonging to a specific religious group, and thus is a sign of both inclusion and exclusion.

Identity is often signaled by involvement in commemorative events. The Fourth of July in the United States, Bastille Day in France, and Independence Day in Mexico are celebrations of national identity. The annual Saint Patrick's Day parade in New York City is an opportunity for people of Irish heritage to take pride in their ethnic identity. Oktoberfest celebrations allow people to rekindle their German identity, and the Lunar New Year is a time for the Chinese and many other Asian cultures to observe traditions that reaffirm their identities. Every summer, villages and cities all across Japan hold *matsuri* festivals, which are based on ancient Shinto traditions. These celebrations serve as a symbol of unity within the community and offer an opportunity for the participants to evince their regional identity.

While many customs of identity enactment are tradition-bound, evolving circumstances can bring about new ways. This type of change was discovered by David and Ayouby, who conducted a study of Arab minorities in the Detroit, Michigan, area. They found that a division existed between how early immigrants and more recent arrivals understood Arab identity.⁷³ Immigrants who arrived in the United States years earlier were satisfied "with meeting and enacting their ethnicity in a ritualistic fashion by eating Arabic food, perhaps listening to Arabic music, and even speaking Arabic to their limited ability."⁷⁴ The more recent Arab immigrant arrivals, however, had a "more politicized identity,"⁷⁵ resulting from their experiences in the civil wars and political turmoil of the Middle East. They felt that being an Arab involved taking a more active role in events in their native land, such as sending money back or becoming politically active.⁷⁶

There are certainly many more ways of establishing and enacting your identity than we have discussed here. For instance, we did not address the obvious cultural identity markers of language, accents, or family names. But this overview should convince you of the complexity of your identities and how they are shaped by culture.

IDENTITY IN INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS

We have pointed out that your identity is established through communicative interaction with others. According to Hecht and his colleagues, identity is also "maintained and modified through social interaction. Identity then begins to influence interaction through shaping expectations and motivating behavior."⁷⁷ As was previously discussed, you are constantly moving in and out of different identities as you interact with other people, and with each identity, you employ a set of communicative behaviors appropriate for that identity and setting. Your culture has shaped your understanding and expectations as to what are the correct communication practices for various social settings—for example, a classroom, hospital, or sales meeting. However, these understandings and expectations are culture bound,⁷⁸ and what is appropriate in one culture may be inappropriate in another. We have already illustrated how student/teacher interaction differs in the United States and Japan. Students and teachers in the two countries have quite different culturally established standards for how they should act and communicate in the classroom. However, what if a Japanese student were placed in a U.S. classroom, or vice versa?

In an intercultural meeting, the varying expectations for identity display and communication style carry considerable potential for creating anxiety, misunderstandings, and even conflict. This is why Imahori and Cupach consider "cultural identity as a focal element in intercultural communication."⁷⁹ Continuing with our student/teacher example, try to imagine how students from a culture that does not value communicative assertiveness would feel in a typical U.S. classroom. Being unaccustomed to having the instructor query students, they would probably be reluctant to raise their hands and would likely consider U.S. students who challenged the teacher to be rude or even arrogant. To avoid potential problems during intercultural interaction, you need to develop what Collier calls intercultural competence. Intercultural competence occurs when the avowed identity matches the identity ascribed.

For example, if you avow the identity for an assertive, outspoken U.S. American and your conversational partner avows himself or herself to be a respectful, nonassertive Vietnamese, then each must ascribe the corresponding identity to the conversational partner. You must jointly negotiate what kind of relationship will be mutually satisfying. Some degree of adjustment and accommodation is usually necessary.⁸⁰

Collier is saying that in order to communicate effectively in an intercultural situation, an individual's avowed cultural identity and communication style should match the identity and style ascribed to him or her by the other party. But since the communication styles are likely to be different, the participants will have to search for a middle ground, and this search will require flexibility and adaptation. As a simple illustration, the Japanese traditionally greet and say goodbye to each other by bowing. However, in Japanese/U.S. business meetings, the Japanese have learned to bow only slightly while shaking hands. In doing this, they are adjusting their normal greeting practice to accommodate those individuals from the United States. Longtime U.S. business representatives to Japan have learned to emulate this behavior. Thus, a mutually satisfying social protocol has evolved. In achieving this, the participants have demonstrated the principal components of intercultural communication competence: motivation, knowledge, and skills.

IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

There is no denying that modern society is creating more multicultural social groupings. In subsequent chapters, we will talk about how global business is now being conducted in a transnational environment, cross-cultural health care is a growing field, and multicultural education is gaining importance. We will illustrate the fact that forces such as globalization, immigration, and intercultural marriage are bringing about an increased mixing of cultures, and this mixing is producing people who possess multiple cultural identities. Chuang notes that "cultural identity becomes blurry in the midst of cultural integration, bicultural interactions, interracial marriages, and the mutual adaptation processes."⁸¹ Martin, Nakayama, and Flores further support this idea by reporting that "increasing numbers of people are living 'in between' cultural identities. That is, they identify with more than one ethnicity, race, or religion."⁸² To explore this further, we will look at the change in attitude toward identity in international adoption, the growth phenomenon of "ethnic shopping," and the rise of what are called "intercultural transients."

In the past, it was not uncommon for children of international adoption to be raised by their United States families with little or no appreciation of the culture of their native land.⁸⁵ This was evident in the 2002 Academy Award-nominated documentary *Daughter from Danang*, which related the trials of a mixed Vietnamese and American woman who returned to Vietnam in search of her identity after twenty-two years in the United States.⁸⁶ She was driven by a desire to find out more about her birth family and herself, but because she had never been exposed to the Vietnamese culture, the reunion ended in disaster. The potential for such unfortunate meetings should be reduced in the future, because a greater awareness of the importance of cultural identity is moving many parents to recognize and promote the cultural traditions of their adopted children.⁸⁷

Immigration, intercultural marriage, and multiracial births are creating a social environment where many United States youths consider cultural diversity as a normal part of social life.⁸⁸ Kotkin and Tseng contend that in the United States there is "not only a growing willingness—and ability—to cross cultures, but also the evolution of a nation in which personal identity is shaped more by cultural preferences than by skin color or ethnic heritage."⁸⁹ Hitt points out that sociologists call this evolving trend "ethnic

shifting" or "ethnic shopping," and that "more and more Americans have come to feel comfortable changing out of the identities they were born into and donning new ethnicities in which they feel more at home."⁹⁰ To illustrate this bending of ethnic identities, he relates that the 2004 Irish-Canadian parade queen in Montreal was half Irish and half Nigerian.⁹¹ The Internet has afforded people an opportunity to conduct in-depth genealogical research, and one result is a growing number of U.S. Americans who now consider themselves American Indians.⁹² According to Wynter, the

CONSIDER THIS



Between 1990 and 2006, international adoptions in the United States increased from 7,093 to 20,679, peaking at 22,884 in 2004.⁸³ According to an MSNBC report, "Stanford University sociologist Michael Rosenfeld calculates that more than 7 percent of America's 59 million married couples in 2005 were interracial, compared to less than 2 percent in 1970."⁸⁴

blurring of racial and ethnic boundaries has also been promoted by U.S. corporations.⁹³ This can be seen in many entertainment genres, such as hip-hop, country and western, and alternative music, which enjoy fans from every ethnic category. Products, especially clothes, endorsed by prominent sports figures are worn by members of all cultural groups. United States sports fans identify with team members from China, Cuba, the Caribbean, Latin America, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, and many other nations, as well as those from a variety of U.S. ethnic groups.

The global marketplace is giving rise to what Onwumechili and his colleagues have termed "intercultural transients." These are "travelers who regularly alternate residence between their homeland and a host foreign country,"⁹⁴ and must manage frequent cultural changes and identity renegotiations.⁹⁵ Over the past decade, a growing number of nations have made dual citizenship available, which has added to the number of intercultural transients. Carlos Ghosn serves as a model example of an intercultural transient. Ghosn was born in Brazil, attended schools in Lebanon and France, and speaks five languages. A citizen of Lebanon, he is the CEO of both Nissan (a Japan-based company) and CEO of Renault (a French firm), positions he holds concurrently.⁹⁶ To fulfill his responsibilities, Ghosn has to divide his time between Japan, France, and the United States, and must adjust to the intricacies of each culture. As transportation technology continues to make access to distant lands easier, the ranks of intercultural transients will expand.

Issues of identity can be expected to remain complex—and perhaps become more so—as multiculturalism increasingly characterizes contemporary society. It is clear, however, that the old understanding of a fixed cultural identity or ethnicity is outdated, and identity is rapidly becoming more of an "articulated negotiation between what you call yourself and what other people are willing to call you."⁹⁷ But regardless of what form they may take or how they are achieved, your identities will remain a consequence of culture.⁹⁸

THE DARK SIDE OF IDENTITY

By now, you should have a good idea of what identity is and how it can influence your intercultural communication interactions. It should be equally clear that fundamentally, identity is about similarities and differences.⁹⁹ In other words, we identify with something as a result of preference, understanding, familiarity, or socialization. You may prefer hip-hop style instead of cowboy boots and jeans. You may understand American football better than cricket, and you may be more familiar with hamburgers and French fries than with bratwurst and sauerkraut. You will likely have greater tolerance toward those people and things you prefer, understand, and find familiar.

Similarities and differences also play a critical role in social relations. "Psychologists conducting research in the area of interpersonal attraction have established an important principle: the more similar two people are to each other, the more likely they are to like one another."¹⁰⁰ But by definition, intercultural communication involves people from dissimilar cultures, and this makes difference a normative condition. Thus our reaction to, and ability to manage, those differences is key to successful intercultural interactions. Our preference for things we understand and are familiar with can adversely influence our perception of and attitude toward new and different people and things. This can lead to stereotyping, prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism.

STEREOTYPING

When confronted with a lack of familiarity or similarity, we often tend to stereotype. Because we meet so many strangers and are often faced with unusual circumstances, stereotyping is a common occurrence. Thus, stereotyping can be a natural way of dealing with the unknown. The problem arises when we are unable to recognize that we may hold negative stereotypes.

Stereotypes Defined

Stereotyping is a complex form of categorization that mentally organizes your experiences with, and guides your behavior toward, a particular group of people. It becomes a means of organizing your images into fixed and simple categories that you use to represent an entire collection of people.¹⁰¹ Psychologists Abbate, Boca, and Bocchiaro offer a more formal definition: "A stereotype is a cognitive structure containing the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about some human social groups."¹⁰² The reason for the pervasive nature of stereotypes is that human beings have a psychological need to categorize and classify. The world you live in is too big, too complex, and too dynamic for you to know it in all its detail. Hence, you want to classify and pigeonhole. The main problem is not in the pigeonholing or categorizing, but rather "the difficulty lies with the overgeneralization and the often negative evaluations (attitudes and prejudices) that are directed toward members of the categories."¹⁰³

Stereotypes can be positive or negative. Stereotypes that refer to a large group of people as lazy, coarse, vicious, or moronic are obviously negative. There are, of course, positive stereotypes, such as the assumption that Asian students are hardworking, well mannered, and intelligent. However, because stereotypes (as the word is currently defined) narrow our perceptions, they usually jeopardize intercultural communication and take on a negative tone. This is because stereotypes tend to overgeneralize the characteristics of a group of people. For example, we know that not *all* Asian students are hardworking and intelligent, and that there is no large group of people in which everyone is lazy.

Learning Stereotypes

Stereotypes are everywhere and they seem to endure. Why? Perhaps one way to understand the power and lasting impact of stereotypes is to examine how they are acquired. Remember, you are not born with stereotypes; they are learned. And like culture, they are learned in a variety of ways. The most obvious, and perhaps most important, agent of stereotypes is the socialization process, which begins with our parents. While many parents might try to avoid teaching their children to think in stereotypes, we tend to agree with Schneider when he notes that many parents directly or indirectly promote them.¹⁰⁴ Children who hear their parents say, "All those homeless people are just too lazy to find a job" are learning stereotypes. Once children enter school, peers become an important carrier of stereotypes. Of course, the socialization process continues as children become members of various religious and social groups. These groups, while teaching the virtues of a particular point of view, might also intentionally or unintentionally teach stereotypes about an opposite view. For example, by learning one particular

view of religion and at the same time hearing of the "evils of religious terrorists," children might be acquiring stereotypes about Muslims.

Many stereotypes are provided by the mass media and widely disseminated through a variety of media forms such as advertisements, movies, and TV sitcoms and soap operas. Television has been guilty of providing distorted images of many ethnic groups, the elderly, and gay people. Media has also played a role in perpetuating certain stereotyped perceptions of women and men. Wood offers an excellent summary of television's portrayal of men and women when she writes, "Media most often represents boys and men as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive, and largely uninvolved in human relationships, and represents girls and women as young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent."¹⁰⁵

Finally, stereotypes may evolve out of fear of persons from groups that differ from one's own. For example, many people view a person with a mental illness as someone who is prone to violence. This conflicts with statistical data, which indicates that people with mental illnesses tend to be only as prone to violence as the general population. Yet because of well-publicized isolated cases of mentally ill persons killing other people, the stereotype is the rule instead of the exception. This is how many stereotypes develop in the first place: a series of isolated behaviors by a member of a group unfairly engenders a generalized perception that represents all members of the group.

Stereotypes and Intercultural Communication

As we have pointed out, in most instances stereotypes are the products of limited, lazy, and misguided perceptions. The problems created by these misperceptions are both serious and numerous.¹⁰⁶ Adler reminds us of the harmful effect stereotypes have on intercultural communication when she notes:

Stereotypes become counterproductive when we place people in the wrong groups, when we incorrectly describe the group norm, when we evaluate the group rather than simply describing it, when we confuse the stereotype with the description of a particular individual, and when we fail to modify the stereotype based on our actual observations and experience.¹⁰⁷

Let us look at four additional reasons why stereotypes hamper intercultural communication. First, stereotypes are a kind of filter; they only allow in information that is consis-

IMAGINE THIS



You have just reviewed the concept for a new TV sitcom. The story is about a brother and sister who live with their father, a widowed Wall Street investment banker, in a co-op on Central Park in New York City. The story is about how the brother and sister deal with their father's many girlfriends, who are all young white fashion models. The family is white but has a Puerto Rican housekeeper, and the co-op doorman is an African American, who is often called on to help the brother and sister. There are no other cast members.

What is wrong with this sitcom concept?



IMAGINE THIS

- *White men can't dance.*
- *All African Americans are good basketball players.*
- *Mexicans are never on time because they are lazy.*
- *Polish people have strange names.*
- *Jews like to study a lot.*

In the above examples, identify which stereotypes are positive and which are negative.

tent with information already held by the individual. In this way, what might be the truth is never given a chance. For example, women were stereotyped for many years as a rather one-dimensional group. The stereotype of women as homemakers often keeps women from advancing in the workplace. Second, it is not the act of classifying that creates intercultural problems; rather, it is assuming that all culture-specific information applies to all individuals from a particular cultural group.¹⁰⁸ Stereotypes assume that all members of a group have exactly the same traits. As Atkinson, Morten, and Sue note, "They are rigid preconceptions which are applied to all members of a group or to an individual over a period of time, regardless of individual variations."¹⁰⁹

Third, stereotypes also keep you from being successful as communicators because they are oversimplified, exaggerated, and overgeneralized. They distort because they are based on half-truths and often-untrue premises and assumptions. Guirdham reaffirms this important point when he reminds us that stereotypes alter intergroup communication because they lead people to base their messages, their way of transmitting them, and their reception of them on false assumptions.¹¹⁰ Fourth, stereotypes are resistant to change. Because stereotypes are usually developed early in life and are repeated and reinforced by the in-group, they grow in intensity each passing year. In fact, contact between in-groups and out-groups often only buttresses the stereotype. As Meshel and McGlynn point out, "Once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change, and direct contact often strengthens the pre-existing associations between the target group and the stereotypical properties."¹¹¹

Avoiding Stereotypes

Because culture and stereotypes are both learned early in life, we recommend that the first stages of avoiding stereotypes begin in childhood. There is ample evidence that children who have positive face-to-face contact with other groups hold fewer negative stereotypes than those who are denied such contact.¹¹² In fact, research suggests that most positive contact can diminish many of the effects of stereotyping.¹¹³ The assumption is that stereotypes can change when members of different groups increase their interaction with each other. Through this interaction, fictitious and negative stereotypes can be proven false.

To assess the stereotypes you currently hold, ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Who is the target of my stereotype?
- What is the content of my stereotype?

Why do I believe the stereotype is accurate?

What is the source of my stereotype?

How much actual contact do I have with the target of the stereotype?

Is there an effective method trying to counter stereotypes is advanced by Ting-Toomey and Chung, who ask you "to distinguish between inflexible stereotyping and flexible stereotyping."¹¹⁴ As the word would indicate,

stereotyping is rigid, intransigent, and occurs almost automatically. Because these stereotypes are so deeply entrenched, you refuse to accept perceptions that run counter to the stereotype. When you try to engage in flexible stereotyping, you begin by being aware of a tendency to engage in categorization. The two most important aspects of being open are "being open to new information and evidence" and "being aware of your own discomfort."¹¹⁵

REMEMBER THIS



Prejudice occurs when a person holds a generalization about a group of people or things, often based on little or no factual experience. Prejudice can be positive (liking a certain group or thing) or negative (disliking a certain group or thing).

PREJUDICE

In the broadest sense, prejudices are deeply held negative feelings associated with a particular group. These sentiments often include anger, fear, aversion, and anxiety. Allport offers a detailed definition of prejudice:

Prejudice amounts to a rigid and irrational generalization about a category of people. Prejudice is irrational to the extent that people hold inflexible attitudes supported by little or no evidence. Prejudice may target people of a particular social class, sex, sexual orientation, political affiliation, race, or ethnicity.¹¹⁶

In a communication setting, according to Ruscher, the negative feelings and attitudes by those who are prejudiced are often exhibited through the use of group hostile humor, or speech that alleges the superiority of one group over another.¹¹⁷ In this sense, hostility toward others is an integral part of prejudice. As with the case with stereotypes, beliefs linked to prejudices have certain characteristics. First, they are directed at a social group and its members. Often those groups are defined by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and the like. Second, prejudices involve an emotional dimension. According to Brislin, prejudices deal with "feelings about what is good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral and so forth."¹¹⁸ These either/or attitudes often cause discussions of prejudiced attitudes to turn into heated debates. Third, there is a centrality, which refers "to the extent to which a belief is important to an individual's attitude about others."¹¹⁹ As you would suspect, the less intense the belief, the less resistance you will have in changing your prejudices or those of other people.

Functions of Prejudice

Like stereotypes, prejudices are learned and serve a variety of functions for the people who hold them. For example, for some people prejudices offer rewards ranging from feelings

of superiority to feelings of power. Let us spend a moment looking at four of the most common functions prejudices fulfill.¹²⁰

EGO-DEFENSIVE FUNCTION

The *ego-defensive function* of prejudice allows people to hold a prejudice without having to admit they possess such beliefs about a member of an out-group. An example of this type of prejudice might be found in someone who says, "My history grades are low this semester because the professor feels sorry for the minority students and is giving them the higher grades." These types of remarks permit persons who utter them to articulate prejudicial statements while maintaining a sense of self instead of truly examining why their grades were low.

UTILITARIAN FUNCTION

The *utilitarian function* of prejudice allows people to believe that they are receiving rewards by holding on to their prejudicial beliefs. The most vivid examples of this function are found in attitudes related to the economic arena. People often find it very useful, and to their economic advantage, to say, "Those immigrants have so little education that they are lucky to have the jobs we offer them." This sort of sentence reflects utilitarian prejudice because the holder of the prejudice can use the belief as a justification for offering minimal pay to the workers in question.

VALUE-EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

We see people maintaining the *value-expressive function* of prejudice when they believe their attitudes are expressing the highest and most moral values of the culture. These usually revolve around values related to religion, government, and politics. Persons who believe their God is the one and only true God are being prejudicial against people who hold different views.

KNOWLEDGE FUNCTION

When carrying out the *knowledge function* of prejudice, persons are able to categorize, organize, and construct their perceptions of other people in a manner that makes sense to them—even if the sense-making is not accurate. In this way, the world is easy to deal with in that people are not perceived individually but rather as members of a group. It is the knowledge function that produces an abundance of labels. People are seen not as individuals with a variety of characteristics, but rather as "Jews," "Mexicans," "gays," or "feminists," and these labels deny the existence of the person's unique characteristics.

Expressions of Prejudice

Prejudice is expressed in a variety of ways—at times subtle and indirect but on other occasions overt and direct. Over fifty years ago, Allport's research revealed five expressions of prejudice.¹²¹ They remain relevant today and many contemporary social scientists continue to base their theories on Allport's work.¹²²

First, prejudice can be expressed through what Allport refers to as *antilocution*, which involves talking about a member of the target group in negative and stereotypic terms. People would be engaging in this form of prejudice if they told a friend, "You can never trust anyone who has been a member of the Communist Party." Another example of antilocution prejudice is the statement, "Don't pay those immigrants very much. They don't have any education and will only waste the money."

Second, people act out prejudice when they *avoid and/or withdraw* from contact with the disliked group. The problems associated with this form of prejudice are obvious. How do you interact, solve problems, and resolve serious conflicts when you are separated from other people? On both the international and domestic levels, avoidance and withdrawal have often characterized an intercultural exchange. History is full of examples of how one nation or group of people refused to attend or withdrew from an important peace conference. For decades, the political leaders of Israel and Egypt rebuffed each other, only to discover much later that talking benefited both parties. After more than fifty years of hostility, North and South Korea are now engaged in a dialogue designed to improve relations. What is true with regard to governments is also characteristic of individual behavior. Have there been occasions when you, like governments, withdrew from communication because a person was a different color or spoke a different language?

Third, when *discrimination* is the expression of prejudice, the prejudiced person will attempt to exclude all members of the group in question from certain types of employment, residential housing, political rights, educational and recreational opportunities, churches, hospitals, or other types of social institutions. Often in cases of discrimination, we observe ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice coming together in a type of fanaticism that completely obstructs any form of successful intercultural communication. When discrimination replaces communication, you see overt and covert expressions of anger and hate that restrict one group's opportunity or access to opportunities that rightly belong to everyone. When a real estate agent will not show certain homes to African Americans, there is discrimination. When businesses promote less qualified men instead of competent women, you have discrimination.

Fourth, when prejudice moves to the next level of expression, you often see *physical attacks*. This form of prejudice often accelerates in hostility and intensity if left unchecked. From the burning of churches to the writing of anti-Semitic slogans in Jewish cemeteries to attacks on gays, physical acts occur when minorities are the targets of prejudiced activity.

The fifth, and most alarming, form of prejudice is *extermination*. This expression of prejudice leads to acts of physical violence against the out-group. History is replete with examples of lynching, massacres, and programs of genocide. In cases such as Hitler's "master plan," the "killing fields" of Cambodia, the former Serbian "ethnic cleansing," tribal warfare in Kenya, and the religious conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, you see attempts to destroy an entire racial or ethnic group.

Causes of Prejudice

There are no simple explanations for the causes of prejudice, which in most instances are multiple. Experts have isolated a few of the root motivations of prejudice, and we will look at some of these in order to better understand how prejudice can be a major deterrent to successful intercultural interaction.

SOCIETAL SOURCES

A great deal of prejudice is built into the major organizations and institutions of a society. According to Oskamp, these organizations produce laws, regulations, and norms that create prejudice within a society. These laws and regulations help "maintain the power of the dominant groups over subordinate ones."¹²³

MAINTAINING SOCIAL IDENTITY

At the beginning of this chapter, when we discussed identity, you will recall that we pointed out how important people's identities are for connecting them to their culture. This connection is a very personal and emotional one. It creates a bond between individuals and their culture. Anything that threatens that bond, such as members of the out-group, can become the target of prejudice.

SCAPEGOATING

Scapegoating occurs when a particular group of people, usually a minority, are singled out to bear the blame for certain events or circumstances, such as economic or social hardships, that adversely affect the dominant group. The role of scapegoating, and its link to prejudice, is made clear by Kaplan when he notes how scapegoating allows members of the in-group to act out their frustrations and hostilities by being prejudiced against the out-group.¹²⁴ Scapegoating generates arguments and justifications based on fear and imagined threats posed by the out-group. According to Stephan and Stephan, these assumed, unsubstantiated threats can be political, economic, or social concerns believed to threaten "the physical or material well being of the in-group or its members."¹²⁵ Throughout history, black people, Jews, immigrants, gay people, and other minority groups have frequently been used as scapegoats.

Avoiding Prejudice

Avoiding prejudice is not an easy assignment because like most aspects of cultural perception, racial and cultural prejudices are learned early and are reinforced through continued exposure. Nevertheless, research has revealed that two techniques are often successful in dispelling prejudicial views: personal contact¹²⁶ and education.¹²⁷ The research on the value of personal contact as a method of reducing prejudice has a history dating to the early 1950s. The rationale for personal contact, at least in its expression, is a simple one: the greater the frequency of positive contacts between in-group and out-group individuals, the lower the level of perceived prejudice. According to Oskamp, the contact needs to meet certain conditions to be successful, the most important being "equal status between groups" and cooperation "toward common goals."¹²⁸

There are two types of educational programs that psychologists have used to help reduce prejudice. The first type centers on what are called *multicultural education curricula*. According to Stephan and Stephan, these curricula "usually [consist] of materials on the history and cultural practices of a wide array of racial and ethnic groups."¹²⁹ The materials in multicultural curricula are often presented from the point of view of the minority groups rather than from the perception of the dominant culture. The second type, *cultural diversity training*, is used mainly in business and organizational settings and

consists of programs designed "to teach managers and employees to value group differences, increase understanding between groups, and help individuals recognize that their own behavior is affected by their background."¹³⁰ Regardless of the program selected, the explicit goals remain the same—to increase intergroup dialogue and reduce prejudice.

RACISM

As we step fully into the twenty-first century, it appears that for most people of color Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that children "will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" remains a dream, because, as Vora and Vora point out, "Both blatant and very subtle forms of racism permeate organizational and personal levels of our society, from governmental, business, and educational institutions to our everyday interactions."¹³¹ Racism acts in these institutions, and in society in general, target many groups and for a host of reasons. As Gold notes, "Forms of racism are experienced by groups such as Asian Americans, Latinos, Arabs, and American Indians, whose racialization is associated with factors such as religion, foreignness, clothing, culture, citizenship, gender and language."¹³² Racism is not only a problem in the United States. Many studies point out that racism is on the rise throughout the world.¹³³ Although racism exists for many reasons, experts seem to agree that at its core racism is driven by "culture, economics, psychology and history."¹³⁴

It is difficult to make a complete assessment of the consequences of racism because the effects are both conscious and subconscious. What we do know is that racism is damaging to those who are the recipients of this destructive behavior as well as to the racists themselves. It devalues the target person by denying his or her identity, and it destroys the culture by creating divisions and making it less cohesive. As Leone notes, racism results "in the virtual isolation of a specific group or groups from the political, social and economic mainstream of a nation's life."¹³⁵

What is sad but true about racism is that it seems to have been present throughout the world for thousands of years. History is full of examples. In the recent past we saw African Americans being forced to ride in the back of buses, Jews being required to wear a yellow Star of David, Japanese Americans being isolated in camps during the Second World War, American Indians having their land confiscated, and South African society divided along racial lines. Today we see manifestations of racism in the form of racially offensive graffiti, property damage, intimidation, and even physical violence. People also practice more subtle forms of racism, such as uttering racial slurs or telling ethnic jokes. We will examine this harmful and insidious characteristic of racism so that you can work to eliminate it in your professional and private lives.

Racism Defined

Racism, in many ways, is an extension of stereotyping and prejudice, as you can see in the following definition advanced by Leone:

Racism is the belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race. It denies the basic equality of humankind and correlates ability with physical composition. Thus, it assumes that success or failure in any societal endeavor will depend upon genetic endowment rather than environment and access to opportunity.¹³⁶

REMEMBER THIS

Racism occurs when persons believe their race is inherently superior to another race. Racist individuals will often engage in discrimination against people of one or more other races.

It is important to notice the word “superiority” in this definition. It is this idea of superiority that allows one group of people to mistreat another group on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, or sexual preference. The folly of racist thinking is that it is not only unethical and cruel, but it is also constructed on false premises. It is now common knowledge, for those who are willing

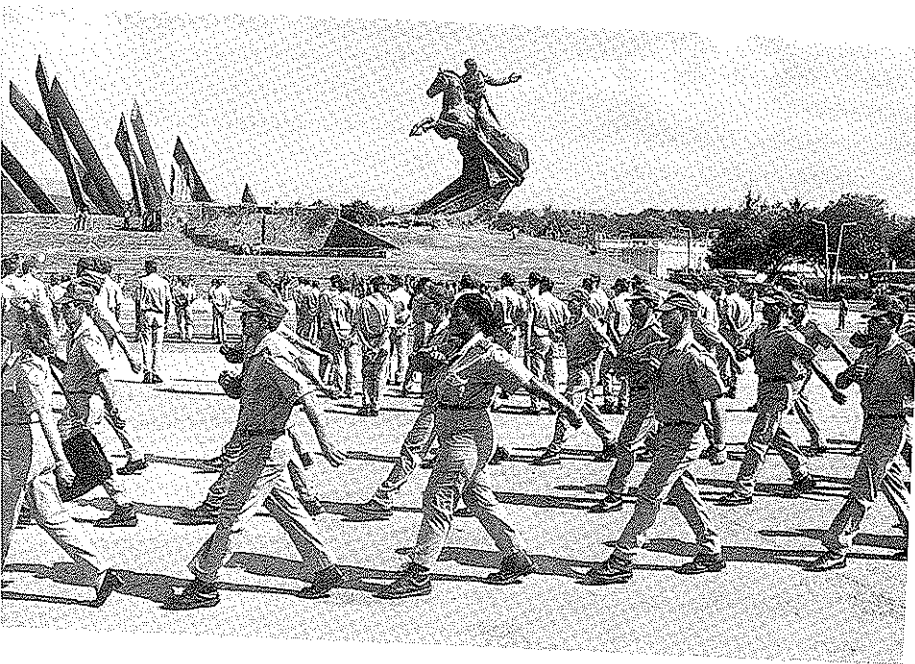
to be receptive to the knowledge, that “the big differences among human groups are the result of culture, not biological inheritance or race. All human beings belong to the same species and the biological features essential to human life are common to us all.”¹³⁷ Yet in spite of this truth and wisdom, racism remains a major hindrance to successful intercultural communication.

Expressions of Racism

As already mentioned, racism can be expressed in a variety of forms. Some of these are almost impossible to detect, while others are blatant and transparent. In general, these forms can be categorized as either personal or institutional. “Personal racism consists of racist acts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors on the part of the individual persons.”¹³⁸ Referring to institutional racism, Bloom is very specific when he writes, “Institutional racism refers to racial inferiorizing or antipathy perpetrated by specific social institutions such as schools, corporations, hospitals, or the criminal justice system as a totality.”¹³⁹ While “institutional racism may be intentional or unintentional,”¹⁴⁰ its consequences have a detrimental effect on specific groups and society as a whole.

Avoiding Racism

Although views about race are deeply entrenched, there are four steps you can take to reduce racism in yourself and others. First, *try to be honest* with yourself when deciding if you hold some racist views. It is a simple point to state, but a difficult one to accomplish. Yet, confronting your racist views, if you hold any, is an important first step. Second, *object to racist jokes and insults* whenever you hear them. This daring and sometimes courageous act will send a message to other people that you denounce racism in whatever form it may take. Third, as straightforward as it sounds, we urge you to *respect freedom*. The United States Constitution states, “nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” From this declaration, it follows that to preserve liberty you must work to see that all individuals are free from political and social restrictions. Fourth, examine the *historical roots of racism*. The rationale for such an examination is clearly documented by Solomos and Back when they note that before the full impact of racism can be grasped and challenged, one must be able to understand and explain “both the roots of contemporary racist ideas and movements and the sources of their current appeal.”¹⁴¹



Ethnocentrism is learned early in life and is continuously reinforced.

We conclude by reminding you that racism, stereotyping, and prejudice are pervasive because they are often learned early in life, and like much of culture, become part of our way of seeing the world. The African-American author Maya Angelou makes the same point when she writes, "The plague of racism is insidious, entering into our lives as smoothly and quietly and invisibly as floating airborne microbes enter into our bloodstreams."¹⁴²

ETHNOCENTRISM

People from one culture might view people who eat raw horsemeat as being barbarous and abnormal. But the people who eat raw horsemeat might consider people in other cultures as cruel and uncaring because they commonly assign the elderly to convalescent homes. Both ways of thinking demonstrate an ethnocentric attitude. At the core of ethnocentrism are judgments about what is right, moral, and rational. These judgments permeate every aspect of a culture's existence. Examples range from the insignificant (earrings should be placed in the earlobes, not in the nose) to the significant ("We should enact trade quotas to protect U.S. jobs from cheap foreign imports"). What you see here is the very natural tendency to use one's own culture as a starting point when evaluating the behavior of other people and cultures.

Defining Ethnocentrism

Alfred Kroeber and Edward Sapir provide a contemporary explanation of ethnocentrism:

Ethnocentrism is the notion that one's own culture is superior to any other. It is the idea that other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards.

standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position.¹⁴³

It is this "narrow lens" that links ethnocentrism to the concepts of stereotyping, prejudice, and racism that we just finished discussing.

Characteristics of Ethnocentrism

LEVELS OF ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism can be viewed as having three levels: *positive*, *negative*, and *extremely negative*. The first, *positive*, is the belief that, at least for you, your culture is preferred over all others. This is natural, and inherently there is nothing wrong with it because you draw much of your personal identity and many of your beliefs from your native culture. At the *negative* level, you partially take on an evaluative dimension. You believe your culture is the center of everything and all other cultures should be measured and rated by its standards. As Triandis notes, "We perceive in-group customs as universally valid. We unquestionably think that in-group roles and values are correct."¹⁴⁴ Finally, in the *extreme negative* form, it is not enough to consider your culture as the most valid and useful; you also perceive your culture to be the most powerful one, and even believe that your values and beliefs should be adopted by other cultures.

ETHNOCENTRISM IS UNIVERSAL

Anthropologists generally agree that "most people are ethnocentric" and that "some ethnocentrism seems necessary as a kind of glue to hold a society together."¹⁴⁵ Like culture, ethnocentrism is usually learned at the unconscious level. For example, schools that teach mainly the history, geography, literature, language, and government of their own country and exclude those of others are encouraging ethnocentrism. When your history books contain only the accomplishments of white males, you are quietly learning ethnocentrism. Students exposed to limited orientations develop the belief that America is the center of the world, and they learn to judge the world by American standards. What is true about American ethnocentrism is true about other cultures. When children in Iran learn only about the wisdom of Allah, they are learning to judge all religious truths by this singular standard. And when the Chinese, as they have done for thousands of years, refer to their country using ideograms meaning "Central Kingdom," they are teaching ethnocentrism. Even the stories and folktales that each culture tells its young people contribute to ethnocentrism. Keesing described this subtle teaching when he writes, "Nearly always the folklore of a people includes myths of origin which give priority to themselves, and place the stamp of supernatural approval upon their particular customs."¹⁴⁶

ETHNOCENTRISM CONTRIBUTES TO CULTURAL IDENTITY

Another reason ethnocentrism is so pervasive is that it provides members of a culture with feelings of identity and belonging. As Rusen notes, "Belonging to this group, to this nation, or civilization, gives them self-esteem, makes them proud of the achievements of their own people."¹⁴⁷ The manner in which this idea translates into ethnocentrism

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is clearly articulated by Scarborough: "People have great pride in their culture; they must, because culture is their source of identity; they have difficulty understanding why others do not behave as they do, and assume that others would like to be them if they could."¹⁴⁸ Haviland and his colleagues echo this same important function when they write:

To function effectively, we may expect a society to embrace at least a degree of ethnic pride and a loyalty to its unique cultural traditions, from which its people derive psychological support and a firm social bond to their group. In societies where one's self-identification derives from the group, ethnocentrism is essential to a sense of personal worth.¹⁴⁹

Ethnocentrism is strongest in moral and religious contexts, where emotionalism may overshadow rationality and cause the type of hostility the world witnessed on September 11, 2001. Explaining the link between ethnocentrism and devotion to one's culture, Brislin observes, "If people view their own group as central to their lives and as possessing proper behavioral standards, they are likely to aid their group members when troubles arise. In times of war the rallying of ethnocentric feelings makes a country's military forces more dedicated to the defeat of the (inferior) enemy."¹⁵⁰

There can be serious consequences if you engage in negative ethnocentrism at the same time as you are trying to practice successful intercultural communication. One of the major interpersonal consequences of ethnocentrism is anxiety. The argument is simple and is clearly enunciated by Gamble and Gamble: "The more ethnocentric you are, the more anxious you are about interacting with other cultures; when we are fearful, we are less likely to expect a positive outcome from such interactions, and less willing to trust someone from another culture."¹⁵¹

Avoiding Ethnocentrism

Avoiding ethnocentric perceptions and behavior is not an easy task. There are, however, some suggestions that we can offer that might help reduce the negative consequences of ethnocentrism. First, try to avoid dogmatism. You can begin by asking yourself to think about the following questions:

- Jews cover their heads when they pray, but Protestants do not. Is one practice more correct than the other?
- Catholics have one God, Buddhists have no god, and Hindus have many gods. Is one belief more correct than the others?
- In parts of Iran and Saudi Arabia, women cover their faces with veils, whereas women in the United States do not. Is one behavior more correct than the other?
- In China, people eat with chopsticks, while in the United States they use metal or plastic utensils. Is one method more correct than the other?

These sorts of rhetorical questions are limitless. We urge you to remember that it is not the questions that are important but rather the dogmatic manner in which people often answer them. The danger of ethnocentrism is that it is strongest in political, moral, and religious settings. In these contexts, it is easy to let culturally restricted views overshadow rationality. Hence, we again urge you to be alert to narrowness and intolerance in any form. St. Thomas Aquinas said much the same thing hundreds of years ago: "Beware of the man of one book."

Second, learn to be open to new views. Triandis converts this important idea into action when he writes, "When we make a comparative judgment that our culture is in some ways better than another, we need to learn to follow this judgment with two questions: Is that really true? What is the objective evidence?"¹⁵² One of the main missions of this book is to expose you to a variety of cultures so that you might be able to carry out the advice of Triandis by knowing the "truth" about other cultures. This lack of knowledge is a major cause of ethnocentrism.

SUMMARY

- There are many reasons behind the need to understand identity, including personal and psychological well-being. Identity is also a focal point of intercultural communication, which is becoming increasingly important as a result of both globalization and domestic diversity within the United States.
- Identity is a highly abstract, dynamic, multifaceted concept that defines who you are. Turner places identities into three general categories: human, social, and personal. Hall uses three similar categories: personal, relational, and communal.
- Every individual has multiple identities—racial, ethnic, gender, national, regional, organizational, personal, and perhaps cyber/fantasy—that act in concert. The importance of any single identity is a result of the situation.
- Identity is acquired through interaction with other members of one's cultural group. The family exerts a primary influence on early identity formation. Identity development models have been constructed by Phinney and by Martin and Nakayama.
- Identities are established through group membership and are enacted in a variety of ways, including rites of passage, personal appearance, and participation in commemorative events. Concepts of identity within the same group can change over time.
- Identity plays a critical role in intercultural communication. Competent intercultural communication is achieved when the participants find commonality in ascribed and avowed identities.
- As society becomes increasingly multicultural, new concepts of cultural identity are evolving.
- Stereotyping occurs when persons categorize experiences about another group of people and let those categorizations guide their behavior. Stereotypes refer to the behavioral norm of the whole group of people, not individual persons.
- A prejudice is a strong feeling or attitude toward a particular social group or thing.
- Racist persons believe that their race is superior to another race of people.
- Ethnocentrism occurs when persons believe their culture is superior to other cultures.

ACTIVITIES

1. Construct a list of as many of your identities as you can. Using the list, draw a pie chart with each identity receiving space proportional to that identity's importance to you. Compare your chart with other classmates' charts.
2. Select an ethnicity other than your own and try to answer the five questions from page 172 and 173.¹⁵³
3. Working with some members of your class, try to list some examples of what you believe to be examples of American ethnocentrism.
4. What is the relationship among stereotypes, prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism?
5. Can you think of some intercultural communication problems that were not discussed in this chapter?

DISCUSSION IDEAS

1. Why is an awareness of identity important in your personal life? What are some of the situations in which this awareness would be beneficial?
2. How would you define identity? How would you explain your identities to another person?
3. What are some of your different identities and how did you acquire them? What are some differences between your identities and the same identities in another culture?
4. How did you establish some of your identities? How do you enact those identities?
5. Discuss the following statement: "Prejudice can never be eliminated because it is so deeply rooted in human nature."