

CHAPTER

three

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Nature of Identity

- Identity as Self

- Functions of Identity

The Connection Between Identity and Face

Theories and Models of Identity

- Self-Aspects Model of Identity

- Social Identity Theory

- Communication Theory of Identity

Implications of Cultural Identity

- Ethnic Identity

- Age

- Gender and Sex

- Negotiating Between Identities

Summary

Discussion Questions

Key Terms



YOUR OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. explain what identity is, describe its influences and functions, and discuss its impacts on communicating with others;
2. describe the connection between identity and face, and explain how facework helps shape and reinforce identity;
3. discuss and critique the various theories that explain the nature, purpose, and influences of identity; and
4. discuss the implications of identity related to ethnicity, age, and gender.

Ripped From the Headlines



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With new technology such as smartphones, digital cameras, and tablets becoming a typical part of everyday life, a new trend has arisen in the realm of social media. Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become popular depositories for self-taken photographs, with the person in the picture also acting as the photographer. Oftentimes, these pictures focus on the face and eyes, although it is not uncommon for individuals to snap a full-body shot. As this phenomenon continues to become more commonplace on social media, scholars and social media experts have begun to analyze the significance of posting a “selfie” online.

Randi Zuckerberg, founder of Zuckerberg Media and editor-in-chief of Dot Complicated, has elaborated on the phenomenon known as posting a “selfie.” A selfie involves a person who is both the photographer and subject of a picture that is intentionally taken to be uploaded to a social media website. “Social media for a lot of people is about self-identity and expression,” says Zuckerberg. “So for a lot of people . . . they get a lot of validation from people liking or commenting on a photo of them.” The trend of posting selfies has risen

in popularity as social networking has continued to gain popularity. Many people follow particular implied rules when posting a selfie. Generally, the photo is taken from an upward perspective, with the camera facing downward; there is a contrast between the portrait and the lighting in the background; or the portrait is taken in front of a mirror that reflects the person’s image. Since many of these pictures are taken with the intention of being posted on a social networking site, there is an expectation for people to comment on, “like,” or discuss the photo.

As we move through this chapter and discuss the importance of identity and its relationship with culture, reflect on how this idea of a “selfie” relates to the impact social media has on our lives. It is important to remember that social media sites as we know them today (i.e., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) are a relatively new development; as little as a decade ago, most people either did not participate in or even know about online social media. However, with its current popularity, social media is actively changing the ways people perceive self-identity, as well as how they express it. As you learn more about identity’s place in culture and your life, think about the ways you use social media to express yourself and how your expressions can be perceived in this new online social environment.

Your **identity** is the representation of how you view yourself and how others might see you. Almost every word you utter in the presence of others, and virtually every way you express yourself nonverbally, is an expression of your identity. This chapter will explore the issue of identity and perhaps get you to think more closely about how your communication and your identity are linked. The first section in this chapter describes what an identity is, as well as what influences one's identity construction. You will also learn that your identity serves several functions, and that certain factors impact how you communicate your identity to others. Next, you will read about face theory and how the concept of face is tied closely with identity. Third, you will be exposed to various theories that explain the nature, purpose, and influences of identity. Finally, you will be encouraged to think about the issues and implications regarding various ways we construct our identity, particularly those based on ethnicity, age, and gender and sex.

THE NATURE OF IDENTITY

IDENTITY AS SELF

To understand identity and how it plays into communication and culture, we first should explore the notion of self. According to Campbell, Assenand, and Di Paula (2000), the **self** is a complex set of beliefs about one's attributes, as well as memories and recollections of episodes that confirm such beliefs. These attributes and memories form a **schema** of oneself, or a mental structure that contains various bits of information that define who a person is and guides how he or she communicates with others (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013). For example, a 20-year-old male college student majoring in chemical engineering might see himself as energetic, someone's son, technical in how he approaches problems, and busy with schoolwork. These descriptors might form that student's schema. In communication encounters, part of this schema might compel him to be more task than relationship oriented in how he works with teammates on group projects. He might also see himself as somewhat dependent on his parents and might not yet possess the self-confidence to assert himself in certain situations.

One really cannot discuss the self without acknowledging the scholarship of George Herbert Mead, who wrote *Mind, Self, and Society* (1962) and other works that explore the self in relation to society. Mead talks about the distinction between the "I" and "me" in oneself, as well as the synthesis of the two. The "me" represents the self as learned through interactions with others. The insights gained through these interactions become internalized and become the "me." In contrast, the "I"

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The self can be whatever the person believes.

turn helps develop one's self-concept. This process can be viewed as "self-shaped-by-society-shaped-by-self" (Tanno & González, 1998).

There is more than just one layer to the self, and this is especially true when we attempt to communicate aspects of our self to others. Brewer and Gardner (1996) and Hecht and colleagues (Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005) discuss three levels of self-representation: the individual, the interpersonal (relational self), and the group (collective self). The individual level reflects the personal self that includes the self-concept (e.g., funny, young, analytical). The interpersonal level is the relational self that derives from the relationships or connections with others (e.g., wife in a marriage, second oldest child in one's family of origin). Hecht et al. (2005) point out that not only is an individual identity developed from a relationship, but that very relationship eventually takes on its own identity, its own relational culture. The group level represents the collective self, which is reflected in group memberships (e.g., faith community, being the "analytical one" in most class group projects).

Gudykunst and Kim (1992) point to several cross-cultural differences in how the self is constructed and perceived. For instance, citizens of the United States generally view the self in more individualistic terms. An individualistic person might view the self as a composite of personality traits, character markers, and personal accomplishments. In addition, these individuals' self-esteem can be bounded by

is the attitude of the individual in response to society or the community. The "I" is akin to Freud's "ego," the aspect that is more self-serving. The "I" and "me" are integrated into an individual who understands himself or herself as he or she interacts with society. Mead explains that the "me" sometimes has to reign in the "I" to keep it in line with community norms and standards.

Suppose you think of yourself as a funny person because it seems easy to get a laugh from others when you make sarcastic remarks or tell jokes in social situations; this funny person might be considered your "I." But it can be easy for the "I" to use comedy and sarcasm to poke fun at others or even cause serious offense. This is where the "me" steps in, to remind the "I" that there are norms of empathy and politeness, and that one might lose friends if humor is always implemented at others' expense. This synthesis of "I" and "me" is a function of communication, which in



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You may be known as the “funny one” in your group of friends, or your group may be known as the outgoing group of people in relation to other groups of friends.

how independent they are or how well they stand on their own feet (Geertz, 1975). In particular, Akande (2008) differentiates academic and nonacademic self-esteem and finds that people from individualistic cultures have higher nonacademic self-esteem than do those from collectivist cultures; the opposite is true about collectivist individuals.

Continuing with the general view of self, the collectivistic self might be more likely to take into account ties to family or friends (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Rather than just viewing one’s accomplishments as the results of one’s own individual talent and hard work, the collectivist might see these accomplishments as a result of the support of parents, or collaboration with colleagues. The collectivist self might also be tied to one’s workplace or school attended. The collectivist self might even deny importance of the individual self. This is often the case in Japanese culture, especially when one is interacting with someone of higher status (Doi, 1986).

Most of us can think of ways we identify with more than just one cultural group (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Chances are you do not think of yourself just in terms of country of origin but also in terms of your gender or sex, perhaps your religious affiliation, your academic major, and any other classification according to group membership or aspect around which people share some common ground. This phenomenon might be especially noticeable to an individual who immigrates to

another country and has to struggle to fit in, while at the same time maintaining his or her sense of cultural identity. To illustrate, Lu (2001) conducted an observational study of students in Chinese schools in Chicago, utilizing Collier and Thomas's definition of cultural identity, which is identifying with and gaining acceptance into a group that shares your values, belief systems, and norms of conduct. Lu concluded that the students generally worked hard to maintain their Chinese identity but, at the same time, put great effort toward establishing themselves as Chinese Americans. This struggle for dual identity at times seemed to imply tension for the students as they were assimilating.



Web Feature 3.1

To get more information on maintaining cultural identity, visit the **Cultural Identity** link.

FUNCTIONS OF IDENTITY

Understanding the personal, interpersonal, and collective levels of self can serve several functions (Simon, 2004; Spencer-Oatey, 2007). For one thing, identity can give us a sense of belonging, or even guide us to individuals and groups with whom we might feel community. Having a sense of who we are can help us find people with whom we might belong. This may be the case for a person graduating from high school and entering college. The new student is trying to find a sense of belonging and, thus, might find a student group that shares her or his attitudes or interests. Second, if we know where we belong, we might also figure out where we do not belong and, more important, how we see ourselves “anchored” in this world. Such might be the case for students who belong to political groups; belonging to a particular political group can remind them of which groups’ philosophies or ideologies they do not agree with. Third, a strong sense of identity can build our self-esteem and confidence. If we can pinpoint positive aspects, we can feel good that those things help define who we are. Unfortunately, some people more quickly zero in on what they think are negative self-aspects, which can contribute to a negative self-esteem, especially if they belong to groups in which they feel they do not measure up (e.g., feeling academically inadequate in a group of honor students).

REMEMBER...

- The *self* is a complex set of beliefs about one's attributes, as well as memories and recollections of episodes that confirm such beliefs.
- A *schema* is a mental structure that contains various bits of information that define who a person is and guides how he or she communicates with others.
- Self-representation of one's identity comprises three levels: the individual, the interpersonal (relational self), and the group (collective self).
- Cultures vary in the way they view identity and its functions.
- Having an identity and conveying it to others serves several functions.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN IDENTITY AND FACE

Understanding the nature of identity can be enhanced even further by examining the notions of face and facework (Spencer-Oatey, 2007). **Face** refers to the image of self that we project or show to others (Goffman, 1967). **Facework** includes the communicative actions we take to project our face, maintain the face of self and others, or even threaten another person's face (e.g., in criticism). Face is constructed through social interaction (Spencer-Oatey, 2007). For example, if you think you are a funny person (face), you might goof off or make funny remarks in front of your peers (facework), and if they laugh at your antics, then you are receiving affirmation of the face you are trying to project.

Moreover, the construction of face and the reinforcement or disconfirmation of face are social elements based on the judgments of others (Lim, 1994). This means that face is not just something we construct for ourselves; this construction also takes into consideration others' judgments of us so that we learn to project the very best aspects of ourselves that get positive confirmation from those with whom we interact. Other people's attempts to save or threaten our face can confirm or disconfirm the aspects of face we project, thus compelling us to continue to negotiate our projected identity. As in the previous example, suppose after many attempts to get laughs in social situations, people instead rolled their eyes or ignored you. This response might compel you to rethink your image of yourself as a funny person.

Identity is a negotiable concept. Whether or not we realize it, we decide which aspects of our identity to present to the world. Ideally, the aspects we think show us in a more positive light are part of our facework. Goffman (1967) claims that because of this tendency, face is primarily a compilation of positive attributes. Face is typically not associated with negative qualities, or the qualities we believe we do

It is important to understand others' cultures so there are no misunderstandings.



“Are you sure you tried hard enough to be on time?”

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not own (Goffman, 1967). One caveat to this is the fact that people vary in their perceptions of what attributes are positive, negative, or neutral (Spencer-Oatey, 2007). For example, you might take pride in the fact that you are punctual for events and appointments, and you may even lose patience with people who are chronically late. However, not all cultures value punctuality; rather, some view time as a fluid concept. Therefore, someone who holds the latter view of time might judge your punctuality negatively and even say you are punctual *to a fault*.

Face and identity are arguably social phenomena because, while we can make individual distinctions about what is and is not part of our identity, the projection of our identity in public is partially dependent on how that identity is received, accepted, affirmed, or rejected by the social world and, more important, by those in our social networks. For this and other reasons, in this textbook, we treat face as an interpersonal communication issue; the portrayal of one's face is an inherently communicative act (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

Face and identity are not identical, but they are strongly linked. Imahori and Cupach (2005) contend that face is a social, interactional phenomenon, which is what makes it distinct from one's identity. In other words, identity is the individual occurrence, whereas face is relational and social. While this might help us make the distinction between these two constructs, we might also consider how the two are interrelated. Spencer-Oatey (2007) argues, “Certainly, face entails making claims

about one's attributes that in turn entail the appraisal of others, so in this sense the notion of face cannot be divorced from social interaction" (p. 643). Spencer-Oatey explains that while face reflects positive attributes as deemed by the person, identity can include a person's negative as well as positive attributes, as judged by others during interaction.

Cultures often differ in the conception and utility of face. For instance, Ting-Toomey (1988) describes the individualistic face as focusing on the "I," whereas collectivistic cultures emphasize social connections in the presentation of face. Ting-Toomey argues that the more collectivistic view of face might encourage one to be more concerned about the face of the other person than would a more individualistic view.

REMEMBER...

- *Face* refers to the image of self that we project to others.
- *Facework* includes the communicative actions we take to project our face, maintain the face of self and others, or even threaten another person's face.
- Facework is an interpersonal communication issue; the portrayal of one's face is an inherently communicative act that is an extension of one's identity.
- Identity and face are related, yet distinct, constructs.

THEORIES AND MODELS OF IDENTITY

We have already discussed what the self is in relation to identity, as well as the role of identity in facework. We now move on to more complex explanations of identity and its significance in culture and communication. The theories and models discussed below represent different approaches to understanding and capturing the nature and function of identity.

SELF-ASPECTS MODEL OF IDENTITY

We previously talked about how identity is inextricably linked with notions and portrayals of the self. Simon's (2004) **self-aspects model of identity** goes into more detail about how the self is conceptualized and identifies the different characteristics that make up one's self-concept, which really reflects beliefs and attitudes about the self. More specifically, according to the self-aspects model of

identity, the self encompasses one’s perceived abilities (or deficiencies), personality traits, physical features, behavioral characteristics, ideologies or belief systems, social roles, languages, and group memberships. Table 3.1 illustrates how various self-aspects can help a person make sense of who he or she is, and how to convey that self to the rest of the world.

TABLE 3.1 Examples of a person’s self-aspects, according to the self-aspects model of identity

Self-Aspects of Martha	Corresponding Attitudes of Martha	Corresponding Communicative Behaviors of Martha
Personality traits	“I’m rather shy.”	Does not participate much in class; is quiet during classroom discussions
Abilities	“I’m an excellent cook.”	Likes to have friends over for dinner
Physical features	“I’m too fat.”	Wears large T-shirts to hide body features
Behavioral characteristics	Stays up late at night and finds it hard to rise early in the morning	Does not answer phone before 11:00 a.m.
Ideologies	Republican	Posts conservative memes on social media sites
Social roles	Project manager at work	Speaks to subordinates in terms of giving directions and orders
Language affiliation(s)	Fluent in English and Spanish	Speaks English at work and Spanish at home
Group memberships	Member of local Baptist church	Wears a cross pendant

IN YOUR

life

How do religious or ethnic affiliations relate to your identity, if at all? In other words, are there specific affiliations that help shape who you are?

Not all self-aspects are pertinent or salient to each individual. In fact, some aspects carry more weight or importance than others. For instance, you might be able to speak both Spanish and English fluently, but you might not have a need to speak both languages a great deal of the time, especially if your first language is English and you speak it at home and with your closest friends. Individuals also vary in how much their self-aspects overlap or integrate with one another. For some people, their religious and ethnic affiliations are closely linked, and for others they might be seen as merely coincidental. For instance, Jewish people who practice Orthodox Judaism embrace not only their Jewish ethnicity but also the religious aspect, as opposed to other ethnic Jewish individuals who are not as religious.

According to Simon (2004), four concepts describe how we perceive and evaluate our self-aspects. One of those concepts is **valence**, or positive and negative feelings.

Not all our attributes are held in the same esteem; rather, we might have positive valence (feelings) toward some and negative valence toward others. For example, Martha, the person described in Table 3.1, might feel good about her ability to cook and speak multiple languages but bad about being overweight.

Another way we view our self-aspects is **centrality**, which is the extent to which a self-aspect is crucial or central to how we describe ourselves. For instance, Martha might see her political affiliation or church membership as the most important aspect of her identity, rather than her ability to cook or her day-to-day schedule. Simon describes some aspects as **core** (central, most important) or **peripheral** (not as important, hardly noticeable). For instance, Martha's religious affiliation might be important enough to her that it comes out in the things she says to others (e.g., "God bless you") or in the cross pendant she wears around her neck. Her physical attributes, such as her curly hair, might not be something she thinks much about in terms of who she really is.

Currency, another perceptual concept, refers to how we see certain aspects fitting in time. In other words, some aspects that were important in the past are not so salient now; in the future, other aspects will take on more importance as we continue to define our identity. For instance, Martha might place a lot of personal emphasis on her personality traits while she is in college, but after graduation and upon entering the workforce, she might think more about how she spends her waking and evening hours (behavioral characteristics).

Finally, **actuality** is the distinction we make between characteristics we possess and those we aspire to have. Martha already holds some characteristics, such as being an early riser and knowing how to cook; however, there are others she wishes she had or would like to work on, such as being less shy and more outgoing. Martha might feel as though these desired aspects can help her more accurately convey her true personality.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory is sometimes called the social identity of intergroup relations, and it takes the perspective that identity is a function of one's social groups. Human beings are innately social beings, and they establish aspects of the self through social interactions with influential others. According to the theory, the social categories into which one falls help define that person and his or her characteristics (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, those characteristics are based on the social groups.

Women devotees applying sindhoor to each other's foreheads for a festival.



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Society identity theory has two underlying mechanisms: categorization and self-enhancement. **Categorization** helps an individual decide which characteristics represent the group of which he or she is a member, and in turn reveals to that person the characteristics that can help define him or her on an individual basis. So if a person wants to enhance her Hindu identity and heritage, she might seek out Hindu groups and notice how the members talk to one another, pray, and socialize. The specific characteristics attributed to this group might be what this person takes on to reaffirm her own Hindu identity. **Self-enhancement** assumes that people want to see the positive aspects of themselves in relation to their groups. Self-enhancement of these positive characteristics might encourage one to compare one's own group with out-group members who might not possess those characteristics. The awareness of such positive attributes can be affirming to one's self-concept and self-esteem. For example, the Hindu woman in our example might perceive Hindu women to be very beautiful, even more beautiful than some other groups of women. This perception might feed into her self-esteem as a Hindu woman.

An extension of social identity theory is **self-categorization theory** (Turner, 1985, 1987, 1991; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which takes a more psychological approach to capturing the self. Self-categorization implies that the self-concept is the cognitive element of the self that comprises several representations available to a person (Turner, 1987). Specifically, the self-concept

contains some levels of abstraction, which include the over-arching level of self as human, the intermediary level of categorizations that help define an individual as a member of one or more groups (e.g., “woman,” “middle class,” “American”), and the individual level that differentiates a person from other members of a group (e.g., being the youngest of a group of professional, educated women). These levels of self-conception influence our choices of group membership and with whom we form relationships (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992).

We have explained that self-enhancement can make differences between the in-group and out-group more noticeable to the perceiver. Along the same lines, self-categorization can compel one to exaggerate the positive qualities of one’s group membership and even amplify the negative qualities of out-group members. For example, if a woman who identifies as feminist believes that women are less aggressive than men are, she might hold an exaggerated view of men as generally aggressive. She might even go further to downplay the differences among women, particularly feminists, and overlook some instances in which women can also be aggressive. In general, categorizing people as in-group or out-group members reaffirms one’s own identity (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

The **communication theory of identity** proposes, among other things, (a) that people maintain different, overlapping identities within one cultural group, and these may vary in salience and intensity, and (b) that there can be different ways of expressing or experiencing a single cultural identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). From the perspective of this theory, cultural groups are fluid and constantly changing because these groups are created through communication. It stands to reason, then, that people create their group memberships and their identities through communication.

One characteristic of communication theory of identity is **salience**, or the importance of one identity in relation to others. For example, a person might identify as Christian, Asian, and a resident of the West Coast but see the Asian self-aspect as the most important. Moreover, the importance of such identities varies from person to person (Collier & Thomas, 1988). This means that another person who is Christian, Asian, and from the West Coast might embrace his or her Christian self-aspect most.

Some people identify quite strongly with some self-aspects, but their **intensity**—the degree to which one expresses the identity—might vary. The expression of

one's ethnic characteristics might not occur often or strongly, or might vary in how vocal one is in identity expression. For instance, Liesel is aware of her German heritage and has heard stories from her grandparents, but she does not talk about her German background to her friends, has no desire to learn German, and does not care if she never gets to sample a dish of schnitzel and spätzel.

The communication theory of identity is based on three assumptions about how identities are communicated and created. First, people have multiple identities that overlap and even contradict one another. For instance, a person might identify strongly as a Democrat and, at the same time, hold views not typically associated with the Democratic party (e.g., being pro-life). The second assumption pertains to fluid identities. Because identities are created through communication, they can always change. As an example, you probably know a few people who started college with a particular political ideology; then, after interacting with others and discussing certain issues, their ideologies had changed by the time they graduated college. Third is the notion of emerging identities. Because we are constantly negotiating our identities through communication, just one conversation might compel someone to move between identities. For example, a heated discussion with your friend about immigration reform might compel you to pay more attention to your ancestral heritage and perhaps convey that aspect of your identity more in future interactions. A fourth important assumption is that there is a distinction between avowed and ascribed identities. An **avowed identity** is one you claim for

Identities can be ascribed to you, without your even knowing, based on appearances.



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yourself; an **ascribed identity** is one given or assigned by others. For example, the term *Hispanic* is often used to refer to people of Latin American origin. However, this term was originally used by the U.S. government for census purposes and has not been linked to any label used by members themselves, who might prefer *Latino/Latina*, *Chicano*, *Spanish*, or any other label. Therefore, the term *Hispanic* can be viewed as an ascribed identity (one assigned to an ethnic group). If, however, a Mexican national wants to use the term *Mexican American* as a self-label, then that term is an avowed identity because it was self-chosen.

Identities have both content and relational dimensions, so two people who hold the same identity might have different feelings toward this identity. Also, identities manifest in one or more of four frames that overlap and emerge within the same interaction or situation (Hecht, 1993). The **personal frame** is an identity construction based on how one views himself or herself (e.g., funny, chronically late for events). The **enactment frame** reflects the communicative behavior symbolic of one's identity (e.g., assertive vs. introverted). The **relational frame** represents the identity constructed through interaction with others (e.g., sister, classmate), and the **communal frame** is reflected in identity shared with members of the group to which one belongs (e.g., Asian American; Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). We should not assume that these frames are constant, however. We sense and express our identities at many levels—personally, relationally, and in groups—but, ultimately, the communication theory of identity argues that identities are fluid and negotiated contextually through interaction.

There are practical implications to understanding how people construct their identities, especially in specific contexts, such as the doctor's office, where the patient and provider come from cultures that differentiate them professionally, on an educational level, and even in terms of power (with the doctor usually taking a more powerful role in the interaction). Scholl, Wilson, and Hughes (2011) applied the communication theory of identity to explore how patients and providers communicated with someone from another culture and the potential health-related consequences of their identity portrayals. Their findings suggested that both physicians and patients often tried to mask the importance of their ethnic identity in communication situations, frequently citing language as the only difference they experienced. More specifically, intensity of ethnic identity might have been diminished when patients' or providers' talk was used to mask their identities. At the same time, they still reported finding ways to portray their identities as important parts of who they were, either as patients or physicians.

IN YOUR

Life

How, if at all, do you communicate your identity to others? Can you think of specific examples in your life of others communicating their identities to you?

Intercultural communication research on identity salience might reveal more detailed aspects of how we construct our identity. In their research examining the impact of ethnic identity on conflict styles, Ting-Toomey and colleagues' (2000) findings expanded the notion of identity salience. In particular, they discovered four dimensions of ethnic identity. **Ethnic belonging** refers to the level of comfort one has with one's ethnic group, as well as the sense of attachment. The **fringe** dimension describes the clarity (or confusion) one has about his or her ethnic identity. Another dimension is **intergroup interaction**, which reflects how much one is oriented toward communicating with members of other ethnic groups. Finally, **assimilation** refers to how much members of an ethnic group identify and blend in with the mainstream culture (e.g., U.S. culture).

Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) differentiate ethnic identity (self-described membership in a group characterized by a common language, nationality, or ethnic group) and **cultural identity** (identifying with the larger mainstream culture, such as the United States) among African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and Latino(a) Americans. They found that African Americans were generally stronger in their ethnic identity than in their cultural identity; the opposite was true for European Americans. In terms of their findings on conflict styles, people who had a stronger cultural identity tended to compromise and be more emotionally expressive than did those who had weak cultural identities. In addition, those with strong ethnic identities tended to use more integrating or collaborating approaches to conflict resolution.

REMEMBER...

- According to the *self-aspects model of identity*, the self encompasses several different facets, including perceived abilities (or deficiencies), personality traits, physical features, behavioral characteristics, ideologies or belief systems, social roles, languages, and group memberships.
- *Social identity theory* takes the perspective that identity is a function of one's social groups. Humans are innately social beings, and they establish aspects of the self through social interactions with influential others and self-categorization.
- The *communication theory of identity* claims that identity is created and negotiated through communication, and is fluid and ever changing.

IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

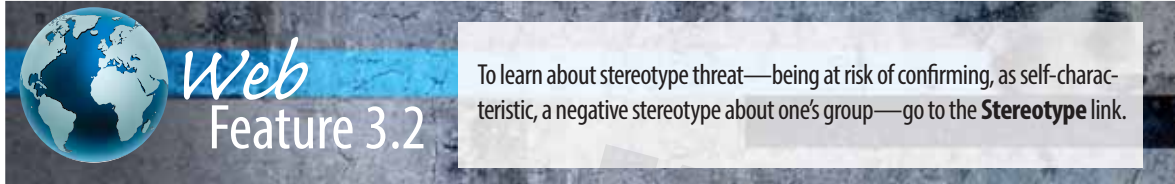
ETHNIC IDENTITY

While uncertainty plays a prominent role in cultural encounters (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987), another variable that affects the nature and progression of interpersonal interactions is **ethnic identity**, which is “the depth of commitment to certain shared patterns of communication, underlying beliefs, and philosophy of life with a particular cultural group” (Ting-Toomey, 1981, p. 383). Commonly spoken language is another distinguishing characteristic of an ethnic group, perhaps the most important one in some instances. However, it is not enough simply to speak the language and “look like” those in one’s avowed ethnic group. Because an ethnicity is something with which one can choose to identify, it is something into which one is usually socialized. As we have already explained, a great deal of one’s identity is social (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992), and adoption of an ethnic identity is definitely a social experience. Use of certain symbolic behaviors, patterns of talk, and expressions of belief or ideas are a big part of fitting in or socializing into a group. Put another way, while race might be something you are born *with*, ethnicity is something you *become*. Once you start to act and talk like those in your ethnic group, you start to become more socially aware of who you are and your affiliation with such groups.

Individuals who highly identify with a particular ethnic group tend to utilize a communication style and belief system that strongly reflects that cultural group. To illustrate, Gudykunst and Hammer (1987) compared the communication styles of African American and white individuals, as well as their perceptions of communicated identities. They found that the ethnic heritages of African American people and white people had an influence on the use of question-asking, self-disclosure, nonverbal affinity seeking (i.e., seeking closeness), and behaviors conveying attraction or liking. This finding suggests that when people from two different cultures interact, they tend to communicate using styles that reflect their traditions.

It is understandable that preconceived notions and stereotypes come into play when people interact with diverse others, especially if they come from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002a, 2002b). These cultural and ethnic stereotypes, which sometimes stem from faulty identity perceptions, can hinder cultural communication and the relationships that emerge from such encounters. Despite what we know about the harm and inaccuracies often associated with stereotypes, many people still seem to rely on them when making judgments of and engaging in facework with others. Such stereotypes are often grounded

in perceptions of the other's identity, for better or for worse. Furthermore, such identity perceptions can shape the way we interact with the individuals we are stereotyping.

A graphic banner for a web feature. On the left is a blue and white globe. To its right, the text "Web Feature 3.2" is written in a white, stylized font. Further right, a white rectangular box contains the text: "To learn about stereotype threat—being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group—go to the **Stereotype** link."

Even when stereotypes are not an issue, our ethnic identities can flavor the way we interact with others, especially when we perceive those others to be different. Collier (1988) examined the role of identity as it influences people's ability to communicate competently within and outside of their cultural groups. In her study, participants who identified as Mexican American were the least likely to use different sets of standards for communicating intraculturally and interculturally. This means that, according to the findings, Mexican Americans were the least likely to adapt

their own interaction rules and communication expectations of others. Instead, they basically expected the same kinds of behaviors whether they were talking with someone who was similar to or different from them. On the contrary, black Americans and white Americans tended to use different communication rules when interacting with diverse others. In other words, these individuals tended to have one set of communication expectations for those similar to them and a different set for out-group members.

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Stereotypes can hinder communication.

Adopting particular ethnic or cultural identities allows people to group themselves with people who face similar goals, beliefs, and challenges. Salience and intensity can help explain how and why people identify with certain groups (Hecht et al., 1993). When diverse individuals intermingle, they interact according to the prescribed ways people from their ethnic groups communicate. By acting according to these norms and adhering to the personal, enactment, relationship, and communal frames, interactants enact their identities with particular groups.

Adoption and expression of an ethnic identity is not always taken as authentic. In other words, the expressed identities of some ethnic minorities might be questioned by members of that culture. This is sometimes the case among American Indians.

Pratt (1998) talks about instances in which the verbal and nonverbal cues of cultural members lead others to question whether they are truly members of that group. Pratt observes that identifying as American Indian can be troublesome for Indians who leave the reservation and make contact with members of other tribes, as well as with non-Indians; these individuals are referred to as contact Indians. When contact Indians interact with grassroots Indians (those who rarely leave the reservation and interact only with other tribal members), their experiences with getting an education or working outside the reservation make them more likely to be questioned about the authenticity of their Indian identity. It is often the case that, in an interaction between two American Indians, one interactant might not take the other's identity for granted and might even question his or her authenticity as an Indian.

When an American Indian's identity is called into question, **razzing** might be used to test the other person's legitimacy (i.e., his or her "Indianness"). According to Pratt (1998), **razzing** is similar to "sounding" or "playing the dozens," which is verbal dueling often done by African American youths in urban areas. Razzing assumes that both parties are skilled at humor and verbal sparring, that they have an audience, and that both parties know the rules involved. Razzing is a ritual with specific rules. For example, one can razz someone else about something done or said, but one should never razz someone about her or his family. Pratt describes one incident in which two Indians within the same university office were asked if they knew each other. One of them said, "I don't think we've met before, but I heard your name mentioned a lot. I guess you owe a lot of people money" (p. 70). As is typical of the Indian culture, "Indianness" is not something you simply are but something you eventually become (Pratt, 1998), and razzing is a ritualized form of humor that enables members to affirm and express their identities through interpersonal banter.

Judgment of the authenticity or realness of another person's identity might be tied to the tendency to impose labels or identities on others, which might not be accurate. As was mentioned with communication theory of identity, assigning a label to someone else is ascribing or assigning an identity to that person. Gudykunst and Kim (1992) warn that when we force labels on others, such labels might not be what those people wish to use to describe themselves. Not too long ago, the term *Oriental* was often used to refer to Asians or Asian Americans; however, this term is offensive to many individuals of Asian heritage. This term has not been traditionally avowed by members of this ethnic group, and it also goes back to the time of European explorers, who used it in reference to anything coming from the

East or Asia, which was often viewed as “primitive” or “inferior” (Chan & Lee, 2009). Assigning a label to someone who does not accept that label is running the risk of offending.



ETHICAL CONNECTION

Brittany is a college graduate who just recently began her first job working as a pharmaceutical sales representative for a major corporation. After receiving splendid reviews through her orientation and training, Brittany began giving her own presentations to different hospital administrations and medical doctors. After several lackluster sales presentations, Brittany was approached by her superiors, who informed her that her personal appearance was offending potential customers; she was told either to change her hairstyle or to leave the company. Brittany, whose family comes from a North African background, has always worn a traditional hairstyle not commonly seen in the United States. After spending several days contemplating a decision, Brittany decided to leave the company and search for another job.

Questions to consider:

1. Were Brittany’s superiors justified in demanding that she change her hairstyle? Could they have considered any other alternatives?
2. Do you agree with Brittany’s decision to leave the company? How would you react in her position?
3. How does this scenario exemplify the conflicts that can arise between maintaining self-identity and still meeting a particular culture’s or society’s expectations?
4. Is it ever possible to maintain a completely honest self-identity when living or interacting within a different culture?

AGE

Many cultural identities and self-aspects are more stable and not likely to change often throughout one’s life (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, gender). Also, the boundaries between cultural groups are not very malleable, leaving little possibility for crossover (unless for transgendered individuals, for example). On the other hand, age group is a cultural category that is very fluid; all of us will pass through

several age categories before we die. For instance, being 20-something has different implications than does being middle-aged or in later life.

Age identity is often driven by discussion of intergenerational differences, such as comparing baby boomers with Generation Xers or Millennials. Common stereotypes of age groups, particularly of older adults, also feed into communication with such individuals (Hummert & Ryan, 2001). Such instances involve talking to older adults in a patronizing tone or assuming that they are deaf or mentally incoherent.

The **communication predicament of aging model** (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) can help explain how age identity can lead to communicated stereotypes. The model proposes that perceived characteristics of an older adult can trigger stereotypes, even misconceptions, which lead to the kind of speech that might come across as patronizing or belittling (Hummert & Nussbaum, 2001; Hummert & Ryan, 2001). The harmful implications come in when an older adult avoids future interactions because of the desire to avoid further patronizing speech. This also can lead to the internalization of such stereotypes as being feeble-minded or childlike. In essence, receiving patronizing speech and avoiding future interactions as a result can feed into negative impressions of one's age-related identity.

People can also manage their age identity when engaged in interpersonal communication. One example might be the disclosure of one's exact age, which Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1989) call disclosure of chronological age. This can serve a couple of functions. First, it fulfills what Coupland and colleagues call a disjunctive function, meaning that it might allow a person to present a physical or health status in contrast to that person's actual age. You might know someone who looks incredibly young for his or her age, and that person might even disclose his or her actual age to affirm this youthful appearance. Second, disclosure of chronological age serves an accounting function, providing an excuse or explanation for a negative state. Perhaps you have taken walks with a grandparent and were told, "Hey, slow down, youngster. I'm not as young as I used to be." Although both these functions imply a decline in ability or function due to advanced age, they also both serve as a presentation mechanism, enabling older adults to assert that they are doing quite well despite their chronological age.

Our perceptions and stereotypes about age might also be influenced by media images. Robinson, Skill, and Turner (2004)

Ageism toward the elderly can perpetuate age-related stereotypes.



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note a lack of media representation of older people, which might contribute to the decreased value often attributed to this group. When individuals from this group are portrayed, it is often in a negative light, thus perpetuating stereotypes about older adults.



Web Feature 3.3

Watch this short film at the [Ageism](#) link to learn about ageism and get information about current initiatives and ageism in the news.

GENDER AND SEX

The terms *gender* and *sex* are often used interchangeably, in both normal conversation and even academic writing. For purposes of clarification, we refer to **sex** as possessing the biological characteristics that make one male or female, or having the biological male or female sex organs. **Gender**, on the other hand, is a more fluid identification, implying not biological but socialized behaviors. Moreover, gender encompasses psychological, social, and cultural qualities that are generally associated with a particular sex (Canary, Emmers-Sommer, & Faulkner, 1997). In this sense, gender refers to being masculine, feminine, androgynous (exhibiting neither feminine nor masculine characteristics), or any other variation of these identities. For many people, gender is the most significant aspect that shapes who we are, or who we think we are (McCornack, 2013).

Unlike biological sex, which is something we are born with, gender is learned. Our sense of being female or male, or feminine or masculine, likely has been shaped from a very young age. For example, if you are a woman, as a child you might have been told to “act like a lady.” Some boys have been warned to keep some of their emotions hidden and told that “boys don’t cry.” These notions of what it means to be a boy or a girl, a woman or a man, have been taught to most of us. The practice of teaching girls to be sensitive to their emotions and the feelings of others, and nurturing and compassionate is well documented. Boys are discouraged from being so open with their feelings and are pushed to be more assertive and competitive (Lippa, 2002; Tannen, 1990). As a result of being taught how to be a girl or boy, each of us has been set on a long road of gender socialization, which has had a significant influence on our self-concept and how we continue to develop and express it to the world. For instance, for some men, taking on seemingly masculine characteristics in nonverbal cues and speech might enable them to view themselves more as men or to “perform” being a man in social life. The same can be said for many women. However, being a woman or man does not require one to be exclusively feminine or masculine, and not all men and women adopt identical

masculine and feminine identities, respectively. In reality, many women and men “appreciate and embrace both feminine and masculine characteristics in their self-concepts” (McCornack, 2013, p. 46).

Another construct often linked with gender and sex is **sexual orientation**, which is a romantic or sexual attraction to others, whether of the same sex (homosexual), opposite sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual) (McCornack, 2013). Identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual can open one up to discrimination and prejudice, despite relatively recent advancements in civil rights for sexual minorities. The act of disclosing one’s sexual orientation, or “coming out of the closet,” can be a defining moment for a person, and it usually happens not just once but several times throughout one’s life as one comes out to family, various friends, and new acquaintances.

Coming out of the closet can be a symbolic way for a person to align one’s private self with one’s public self or identity. However, some individuals engage in physical relationships in their private lives but do not publicly adopt the identity that would typically be associated with that private self. In some cases, this is out of fear of stigma, hate, or discrimination. In other cases, individuals draw a clear distinction between their private physical relationships and their expressed public identity. For instance, Boellstorff (2011) explores the history of “men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay” (p. 287). This particular type of self-concept might reflect a difference between a self-avowed straight identity and a behavioral pattern that some might not find consistent with a straight identity. However, others might view sexual activity as just one aspect of one’s identity, thus supporting the notion that one’s gay, straight, or other identity is a multifaceted identity that includes a variety of thoughts, choices, and cognitions that make up one’s sexual preference.



What experiences, if any, have you had communicating with others about sexual orientation in your life?

NEGOTIATING BETWEEN IDENTITIES

What happens when a person feels compelled or pressured to manage two or more personal identities? How does one accomplish this in a society where one has to straddle the fence between two cultural identities? This situation is faced by many people who sojourn or emigrate from one country to another. Upon arrival in the new culture, the person must balance the desire to fit into the mainstream culture with the desire to maintain certain aspects of the culture of origin. Hegde (1998) asserts that migrating individuals already see themselves as “other” just by being in a foreign land or culture, and they tend to cling to certain symbols and artifacts from their old culture to maintain a nostalgic connection with their past. Such symbolic behaviors might include keeping religious artifacts in the house, wearing some articles of traditional dress, or speaking their own language when around family or others of their ethnic group.

Hegde (1998) writes about the dilemma of Asian Indian women as they struggle to deal with the contradictions between their individual identity and the one they are expected to adopt in the United States. The choice of Asian Indian women to maintain and practice traditional female roles is a significant way members retain a connection to their heritage. In their traditional cultures, Asian Indian women follow their husbands to the new country; in fact, they usually have no say in the decision to emigrate. At the same time, many of these women face the challenge and pressure to conform to expectations for women in the United States, which include more independence for women, enacting more fluid gender roles, and even becoming more “Americanized.” This clash makes many Asian Indian women feel conflicted between these two worlds: Dress more like the mainstream, but don’t look too American or you won’t attract a husband. Maintain strong expressions of the Hindu religion and culture, but if you do you might face racist comments and isolation. Hegde describes this as a “trapeze act replete with precarious swinging from the demands of one world to another” (p. 35).

This need to straddle the line between two identities is likely to be more salient to an individual who identifies as an ethnic minority in relation to the larger mainstream or host culture. It can be more pronounced when one is trying to claim one’s culture after being deprived of it for years. Shaver (1998) describes a Cherokee family who, over the years, experienced a loss of their language, heritage, traditions, and identity to assimilate into U.S. culture. Family members’ communication patterns revealed how they attempted to adapt to European American cultural demands, and how this created a great deal of internal conflict as they attempted to regain aspects of their lost culture years later.

REMEMBER...

- A variable that affects the nature and progression of interpersonal interactions is *ethnic identity*, which is an individual’s commitment to communication patterns, beliefs, and philosophies shared by a particular cultural group.
- Your age represents a fluid cultural identity, and you will pass through several age categories before you die. In addition, age is a significant determinant of how others view you and how you convey your identity and self to others.
- The distinctions of *sex* and *gender* are perhaps the most noticeable and influential dimensions of cultural variation.
- Some people find themselves in the dilemma of having to negotiate between two or more cultural groups, feeling pressure to conform to different cultural identities that might conflict with each other in some ways.

SUMMARY

From the moment of your birth, you have been taught and socialized into an identity, and your sense of self is something you will develop and negotiate for the rest of your life. It is virtually impossible not to communicate some aspect of your identity when you are in the presence of others. In this chapter, you learned what identity is, as well as what influences identity construction. You also learned the functions of identity and how it affects your communication with others. Next, you learned about face theory and its connection with identity. This chapter also explored the self-aspects model of identity, social identity theory, and communication theory of identity. Finally, you explored issues and implications of the construction of identity through ethnicity, age, and gender and sex.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is an identity? What functions does your identity serve?
2. What is the connection between identity and face?
3. What are the similarities among the self-aspects model of identity, the social identity theory of intergroup relations, and the communication theory of identity? What is the unique contribution of each of these theories to our understanding of identity?
4. What is unique about age as a dimension of your identity? How might age be connected with other dimensions, such as individualism and collectivism or gender and sex?
5. What does it mean to negotiate between two identities? What problems might someone from another country experience when immigrating to the United States?

KEY TERMS

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