



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Identity and Intercultural Communication

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

#### Understanding Identity

*Identities Are Created Through Communication*

*Identities Are Created in spurts*

*Identities Are Multiple*

*Identities Are Influenced by Society*

*Identities Are Dynamic*

*Identities Are Developed in Different Ways in Different Cultures*

#### Social and Cultural Identities

##### Identity Development

*Minority Identity Development*

*Majority Identity Development*

*Characteristics of Whiteness*

##### Multicultural Identity

*Multiracial People*

*Identity and Adaptation*

*Living "On the Border"*

*Post-Ethnicity*

#### Identity, Language, and Intercultural Communication

##### Summary

##### Building Intercultural Skills

##### Activities

##### Endnotes

### STUDY OBJECTIVES

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to:*

1. Explain how identities are developed through our communicative interaction with others.
2. Identify some of the ways in which people communicate their identity.
3. Explain how the context of the larger society contributes to the formation of identity.
4. Identify some of the major social and cultural identities that are manifest in our communication.
5. Explain differences in how identities are developed for minority versus majority group members in the United States.
6. Explain identity development of multiracial people.
7. Describe the relationship between identity and language.

### KEY TERMS

age identity

class identity

constructive identity

core symbols

culture shock

encapsulated identity

ethnic identity

gender identity

global nomads

hyphenated Americans

identity

labels

majority identity development

minority identity

development

multicultural identity

national identity

norms

personal identity

physical ability identity

racial identity

regional identity

religious identity

sexual identity

U-curve theory

Whiteness

*The year I studied abroad in France was crucial to developing my identity. Not only was I interacting among French people, but I also dealt with other international students and American exchange students. I developed a new identity and achieved a complete transformation of self. All my intercultural experiences have helped me to become a more competent and understanding person.*

—Maggie

*What does it mean to be Dutch? Before I came to America I thought it meant little to me that I was Dutch. I have never been nationalistic or overproud of my country when I was in Holland, but now that I am here, I realize it definitely does matter to me. I like telling people that I am from Holland, and I like to explain some things about my country to other people. Furthermore, I brought some typically Dutch things like the wooden shoes on our keychains to show to the people we meet.*

—Marina

Identity plays a key role in intercultural communication, serving as a bridge between culture and communication. As Maggie and Marina tell us, it is through communication with our family, friends, and others (sometimes people from different cultures) that we come to understand ourselves and our identity. And it is through communication that we express our identity to others. Knowing about our identity is particularly important in intercultural interactions.

Conflicts may arise when there are sharp differences between who we think we are and who others think we are. For example, Mario, one of our students, has been living on his own since he was a freshman and considers himself an independent adult. But when he goes home, he says, his parents still treat him like he's a child, imposing curfews and questioning his lifestyle choices. Cassandra, a student with disabilities who is often in a wheelchair, tells us that she gets irritated when people ignore her in conversations and talk with other people she's with. And Sam, a fourth-generation Chinese American, informs us that he's not sure how to answer when people ask him, "Where are you really from?" He is American and has never been to China. In each case, the person's identity is not confirmed but is questioned or challenged in the interaction.

In this chapter, we examine the relationship between communication and identity, and the role of identity in intercultural communication. After we define identity, we focus on the development of specific aspects of our social and cultural identity including those related to gender, age, race or ethnicity, physical

### Surf's Up!



What do you consider to be your identity? Look at what other students said in response to the question "Who are you? Please describe your cultural identity" ([www-learning.berkeley.edu/AC/archive/other/identities/identities01.html](http://www-learning.berkeley.edu/AC/archive/other/identities/identities01.html)).

ability, religion, class, and nationality. We then turn our attention to culture shock and cultural adaptation, and to multicultural identity, which refers to individuals who live on the borders between several identities and cultures. Finally, we discuss the relationship between identity, language, and communication.

## UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY

How do we come to understand who we are? What are the characteristics of identity? Essentially, **identity** is our self-concept, who we think we are as a person. Identities are created through communication, and they develop not smoothly but in spurts, over a long period of time. Further, we have not merely one identity but multiple identities, which are influenced by society and are dynamic. And the way identities develop depends on one's cultural background. Let's look more closely at these five aspects of identities.

### **Identities Are Created Through Communication**

Identities emerge when communication messages are exchanged between persons; they are negotiated, cocreated, reinforced, and challenged through communication.<sup>1</sup> This means that presenting our identities is not a simple process. Does everyone see you as you see yourself? Probably not. Janice, a student of ours from Canada, is proud to be Canadian and gets tired of students in the United States always assuming she is U.S. American.

Different identities are emphasized depending on whom we are communicating with and what the conversation is about. In a social conversation with someone we are attracted to, our gender or sexual orientation identity is probably more important to us than, say, our ethnic or national identities. And our communication is probably most successful when the person we are talking with confirms the identity we think is most important at the moment. For example, if you are talking with a professor about a research project, the interaction will be most successful if it confirms the relevant identities of professor and student rather than other identities—for example, those based on gender, religion, or ethnicity.

### **Identities Are Created in Spurts**

Identities are created not in a smooth, orderly process but in spurts. Certain events provide insights into who we are, but these are framed by long periods during which we may not think much about ourselves or our identities. Thus, we sometimes may feel that we know exactly who we are and our place in the world and at other times may be rather confused.

Communication is crucial to the development of identity. For instance, our student Amanda felt confident of her religious identity until she married into another faith. Following long discussions with her in-laws about issues of spirituality, she began to question this aspect of her identity. As this example suggests, we

may occasionally need to take some time to think through identity issues. And during difficult times, we may internalize negative identities as we try to answer the question of who we are. For example, Judith didn't tell any of her friends in high school that she had an Amish background, because she was embarrassed and thought that her friends would look down on her if they knew. Not until she became an adult would she disclose her religious background. Similarly, our student Shawna didn't want her friends to know that her mother was White and her father was Black, because she was afraid it would affect the way they felt about her.



### What Do You Think?

Sherry Turkle argues that computers are making our identities more fluid and fragmented. She points out how people take on multiple fictional identities while interacting with others on the Internet. Have you ever done this? Microsoft's latest version of Outlook Express, their e-mail program, has a system for managing multiple identities so you don't accidentally send an e-mail from the wrong self.

### Identities Are Multiple

It makes more sense to talk about our identities than our identity. Because we belong to various groups, we develop multiple identities that come into play at different times, depending on the context. Thus, in going to church or temple, we may highlight our religious identity. In going to clubs or bars, we may highlight our sexual orientation identity. Women who join social groups exclusive to women, or men who attend social functions just for men, are highlighting their gender identity.

### Identities Are Influenced by Society

Our identities are formed through communication with others, but societal forces related to history, economics, and politics also have a strong influence. To grasp this notion, think about how and why people identify with particular groups and not others. What choices are available to them? The reality is, we are all pigeonholed into identity categories, or contexts, even before we are born. Many parents give a great deal of thought to a name for their unborn child, who is already part of society through his or her relationship to the parents. Some children have a good start at being, say, Jewish or Chicana before they are even born. It is very difficult to change involuntary identities rooted in ethnicity, gender, or physical ability, so we cannot ignore the ethnic, socioeconomic, or racial positions from which we start our identity journeys.

To illustrate, imagine two children on a train that stops at a station. Each child looks out a window and identifies their location. One child says that they are in front of the door for the women's room; the other says that they are in front of the door for the men's room. Both children see and use labels from their seating position to describe where they are; both are on the same train but describe where they are differently. And like the two children, where we are positioned—by our background and by society—influences how and what we see, and, most important, what it means.<sup>2</sup>

For example, many White students, when asked what it means to be an American, talk about the many freedoms they experience, but members of minority groups and international visitors may not have the same experience. As one of our Dutch students said, "I think that Americans think that being an

American means having a lot of freedom. I must disagree with that. Measuring it with my own experiences, I found America not so free at all. There are all those little rules I don't understand the meaning of." By "rules," she meant all those regulations that U.S. Americans accept as normal but Europeans are surprised at—for example, enforced drinking ages, leash laws, prohibitions against topless bathing on most beaches, and no-smoking ordinances.

The identities that others assign to us are socially and politically determined. But how are certain identities created by popular culture? For example, the label "heterosexual" is a relatively recent invention, less than a hundred years old.<sup>3</sup> The word originally referred to someone who engaged in sexual activity with a person of either sex; only relatively recently has it come to mean someone who engages in sexual activity only with members of the opposite sex. And the term has had different social and political meanings over the years. In earlier times, the rules governing heterosexual behavior emphasized procreation and female submissiveness and passivity. There were even rules about when sex could happen; it was a sin for a man to "love" his wife too much. In World War II, the military devised a series of tests to determine the "true" sexuality of men, and those who failed the test were rejected from service. In this way, sex became a fixed identity, like race, with political implications.

When we think about how society or other people create ideas about our identity, we might try to resist those attempts to pigeonhole us and thus try to assign other identities to ourselves. Agusia, a Polish student of ours, counters "Polish jokes" by educating joke-tellers about the origination of the term *Polack*, which simply means "Polish man." The negative connotation came about during a period of U.S. history when there was intense hostility toward immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. By educating people about Polish immigration history, Agusia "resists" the negative, stereotypic identity that society places on her.

Similarly, people with disabilities often have the experience of being stereotyped as helpless. Many people with disabilities view themselves as public educators—determined to redefine people's perceptions concerning disabilities and resisting stereotypes. For example, they sometimes humorously refer to nondisabled persons as "TABs" (temporarily able-bodied), reminding people that no one is immune from disability, or they may redefine an assisting device, such as by calling a cane a "portable railing."<sup>4</sup>

How do societal influences relate to intercultural communication? Basically, they establish the foundation from which the interaction occurs. Recall Sam, a Chinese American student of ours, who is occasionally asked where he is from or whether he is Chinese. The question puts him in an awkward position. He does not hold Chinese citizenship, nor has he ever lived in China. Yet the questioner probably doesn't mean to address these issues. It sometimes seems to Sam that the person who is asking the question is challenging Sam's right to his identity as an American. In this sense, the questioner seems to imply that Sam holds some negative identity.



### Pop Culture Spotlight

In one scene from *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, Bruce Lee is attacked by White youths who mistake him for a Korean. One youth's father was killed in the Korean War. After he wins the fight, Lee says, "Sorry about your father. But that was Koreans. I'm an American." If someone were to ask you about who you are, what would you say first? What is the most important part of your identity to you?

### Identities Are Dynamic

The social forces that give rise to particular identities are always changing. For example, the identity of “woman” has changed considerably in recent years in the United States. Historically, being a woman has variously meant working outside the home to contribute to the family income or to help out the country when men were fighting wars, or staying at home and raising a family. Today, there are many different ideas about what being a woman means—from wife and mother to feminist and professional. Similarly, the emergence of the European Union has given new meaning to the notion of being “European.” Some Europeans are embracing the idea of a European identity, while others are rejecting the notion; the idea is dynamic and changing. For example, some Europeans prefer to be identified as “French,” “Italian,” or “German,” instead of “European” since “European” does not communicate their strongest feelings of identification. In the future, do you think that “European” may become more important than these national identities?

As another example, think about how identity labels have changed from “colored,” to “Negro,” to “Black,” to “Afro-American,” to “African American,” with a significant number of people still preferring the label “Black.” Although the labels seem to refer to the same group of people, the political and cultural identities associated with these labels are different.

#### Surf's Up!



Choose “MUDs, MUSHes, and MOOs,” from the Yahoo! menu of Internet games ([dir.yahoo.com/recreation/games/computer\\_games/internet\\_games](http://dir.yahoo.com/recreation/games/computer_games/internet_games)). These are Internet-based role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. In these games, you create an identity, or an “avatar,” and then play the game as that character. Thus, if your character is an elf, you must try to act and talk like an elf. While that may seem strange to many of us, how different is it from, say, sitting in a classroom and acting like a student?

### Identities Are Developed in Different Ways in Different Cultures

In the United States, young people often are encouraged to develop a strong sense of identity, to “know who they are,” to be independent and self-reliant. This stems from the value of individualism, discussed in Chapter 2. However, this individualistic emphasis on developing identity is not shared by all societies. In many African, Asian, and Latino societies, the experience of childhood and adolescence revolves around the family. In these societies, then, educational, occupational, and even marital choices are made with extensive family guidance. As Andrea, a Mexican American student, explains, “Family is the sole source behind what it means to be Hispanic. The role parents play in our lives is an ongoing process that never ends. It is the complete opposite of America where the child turns 18 and is free of restriction and authority. Family is the number-one priority and the basis of all that is to come.” Thus, identity development does not occur in the same way in every society. Many African, Asian, and Latino societies emphasize dependency and interdependency among family members. So, in some cultural contexts, it makes more sense to speak of a familial or relational self than the self-creation of one’s personal identity.<sup>5</sup>

However, if the dominant idea of individual identity development is presented as the only alternative, it can make members of some cultural groups in the United States feel inferior or even question their psychological health. For example, Manoj, an Indian medical student in New York, attended a lecture on adolescent development by a very well known scholar. In his lecture, the professor said that unless a person went through a rebellious stage as an adolescent, it

was impossible to achieve a healthy identity. Manoj searched within himself for any sign of rebellion he had felt against either of his parents when he was growing up in India or against any other parent figure. When he couldn't recall any such experience, he concluded that he must be abnormal.<sup>6</sup>

## SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

People can identify with a multitude of groups based on such things as gender, age, and ethnicity, as well as on occupational interests, sports (as spectators or participants), leisure activities, and special abilities. One of our friends belongs to a special car club—all owners of 1960s and 1970s “muscle cars.” And all these groups help shape our identities and affect our communication to some degree. In this section, we identify those identities that most affect our cultural perceptions and influence how we communicate cross-culturally.

### Gender Identity

We often begin life with gendered identities. When newborns arrive, they may be greeted with clothes and blankets in either blue or pink. To establish a **gender identity** for a baby, visitors may ask if it's a boy or a girl. But gender is not the same as biological sex. This distinction is important in understanding how our views on biological sex influence gender identities.

We communicate our gender identity, and popular culture tells us what it means to be a man or a woman. For example, some activities are considered more masculine or more feminine. Similarly, the programs that people watch on television—soap operas, football games, and so on—affect how they socialize with others and come to understand what it means to be a man or a woman.

As a culture changes, so do notions of what is masculine or feminine. Even the popular image of the perfect male body changes. In the 1860s, the middle-class view of the ideal male body type was lean and wiry. By the 1890s, however, the ideal male body type was bulky with well-defined muscles.<sup>7</sup> These popular notions of the ideal male (or female) body are largely determined by commercial interests, advertising, and other cultural forces. This is especially true for women. Advertisements in magazines and commercials on television tell us what it means, and how much it will cost, to be a beautiful woman. As one of our students explained, “I must compete with my fellow Americans for external beauty. As an American, I am expected to project a beautiful appearance. Perfection is portrayed at every stage in life—whether it is a beautiful doll little girls are given to play with or perfect-looking supermodels in fashion magazines. It is no secret what is expected and accepted.” Our expression of gender identity not only communicates who we think we are but also constructs a sense of who we want to be. We learn what masculinity and femininity mean in our culture, and we negotiate how we communicate our gender identity to others.

Consider, for example, the contemporary trend against body hair on men. Today, the ideal male body type is sleek, with little body hair. Many men view



### Pop Culture Spotlight

Have you seen the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*? In it actor Hilary Swank plays Teena Brandon, or Brandon Teena, an individual experiencing a gender identity crisis who befriends a group of strangers in a small Midwestern town. Debates and attitudes about issues of sex, gender, and sexuality are highlighted in the film, which has often been labeled controversial, due to its use of language, depiction of drugs, and graphic scenes of rape and murder that occur near the end. If you witness discussions about the main character by people who have seen the film, you may find many argue about the “true” identity of Brandon/Teena. You might hear others refer to her/him as a cross-dresser, a lesbian, a woman posing as a man, and so on. Considering that experts say sex is biological or innate and gender is a social construct, discuss with a friend or group whether you think it is possible to have a “true” gender identity.

their own bodies in relation to this ideal and decide to change themselves accordingly. Of course, at one time, a hairy body was considered more masculine, not less.

Or think about the controversy over whether certain actresses, like Calista Flockhart, are too thin. The female models appearing in magazine advertisements and TV commercials are very thin—leading young girls to feel ashamed of any body fat. It was not always so. In the mid-1700s, a robust woman was considered attractive. And in many societies today, in the Middle East and in Africa, full-figured women are much more desirable than thin women. This shows how the idea of gender identity is both dynamic and closely connected to culture. Society has many images of masculinity and femininity; we do not all seek to look and act according to a single ideal. At the same time, we do seek to communicate our gendered identities as part of who we are.

There are implications for intercultural communication as well. Gender means different things in different cultures. U.S. students who travel abroad often find that their movements are more restricted. For example, single women cannot travel freely in many Muslim countries. And gender identity for many Muslim women means that the sphere of activity and power is primarily in the home and not in public.

### **Sexual Identity**

Our **sexual identities** should not be confused with our gender identities. Sexual identity is complex, particularly since different cultures organize sexualities in different ways. While many cultures have similar categories for male/female and masculine/feminine, many cultures have very different definitions of sexualities. For example, in the United States today, we often think of the categories heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual; yet the development of these categories is largely a late-19th-century invention.<sup>8</sup>

The difficulty that researchers have had with sexual identity across cultures is reflected in their own difficulties categorizing and understanding other ways of organizing sexualities. Rudi Bleys has attempted to demonstrate the ways that Western researchers have attempted to understand sexualities across cultures and how those understandings have shifted over time. It is important to understand that the ways we categorize sexualities today may not be the same as other cultures in other times may have organized sexualities.<sup>9</sup>

The way we organize sexuality, however, is central to the development of sexual identities. If nobody identifies as “gay,” then there can be no “gay rights” movement. If nobody identifies as “heterosexual,” then there can be no assumption that anyone is only attracted to members of the opposite sex.

The language we use to self-identify can also complicate sexual identity. For example, someone who has not yet engaged in any sexual activities with anyone might identify as “gay,” while someone else may identify as “heterosexual” but occasionally sleeps with members of the same sex. How might these categories be more complex than they first appear?

Sexual attraction, of course, makes sexual identities even less categorizable. Not only are sexual desires quite complex, but they are also influenced by attraction to those of other cultures, racial/ethnic backgrounds, ages, and cultural identities. Our language is full of terms for people who desire others who are quite different from themselves. How do these terms communicate meaning about sexual identities? How do they communicate value judgments about other sexual identities?

As you encounter people from around the world, do not assume that your framework for sexual categories is universal. Nor should you assume that the ways that sexuality is handled in public is the same as in your hometown. Sometimes people from other countries are shocked that U.S. Americans speak so openly to strangers about being in their second marriage. Others do not understand the public interest and uproar over President Clinton's activities with Monica Lewinsky, which they may see as part of private—not public—life.

### **Age Identity**

As we age, we tap into cultural notions of how someone our age should act, look, and behave; that is, we establish an **age identity**. And even as we communicate how we feel about our age to others, we receive messages from the media telling us how we should feel. Thus, as we grow older, we sometimes feel that we are either too old or too young for a certain “look.” These feelings stem from an understanding of what age means and how we identify with that age.

Some people feel old at 30; others feel young at 40. There is nothing inherent in age that tells you that you are young or old. Our notions of age and youth are all based on cultural conventions—the same cultural conventions which suggest that it is inappropriate to engage in a romantic relationship with someone who is far older or younger.

Our notions of age often change as we grow older ourselves. When we are quite young, a college student seems old. But when we are in college, we do not feel so old. The relative nature of age is only one part of the age identity process; social constructions of age are another. The meanings that our society holds for different ages is an important influence in age identity. Often these are intimately connected to gender identity. A recent study of U.S. Americans shows that almost “a third of unmarried American women in their 40s through 60s who date are going out with younger men.”<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, men were expected to be the same age or older than the women they dated. Does age play a role in your dating experiences? Gender and age also work together as we age. A male colleague of ours who is in his late 40s recently purchased a new silver convertible. A female colleague in her 40s colors her hair. How do these purchasing decisions help both of them negotiate their age identities? What do they communicate about their identities?

Age identity, however, is not simply about how you feel about your age. It is also about how others treat you based on your age. Due to the practice of discrimination against older workers, the U.S. government enacted the Age

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Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, which protects people who are 40 and older from employment discrimination. Aside from employment, are there other areas in society where people are treated differently based on their age?<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, while in the United States old age is demeaned, in other societies it is revered. An example of this is in East Africa, where words for old persons are used endearingly to refer to any respected person in the community. These different views on aging have implications for intercultural communication. For example, in one cultural exchange program between the People's Republic of China and the United States, Chinese administrators were offended because the United States sent young adults as the first exchangees. The Chinese, wanting to include some of their best and most revered citizens, sent scholars in their 50s and 60s.

### Racial And Ethnic Identity

**Racial Identity** In the United States today, the issue of race seems to be pervasive. It is the topic of many public discussions, from television talk shows to talk radio. Yet many people feel uncomfortable discussing racial issues. Perhaps we can better understand the contemporary issues if we look at how the notion of race has developed historically in the United States.

Cultural traditions like the celebration of Kwanzaa often strengthen groups' sense of ethnic and/or religious identity. Kwanzaa, a December holiday observed by many African Americans, promotes group solidarity, cooperation, and unity, and harmony with nature.



The roots of current debates about race can be located in the 15th century, when European explorers encountered people who looked different from themselves. The debates centered on the religious question of whether there was “one family of man.” If so, what rights were to be accorded to those who were different? Arguments about which groups were “human” and which were “animal” pervaded popular and legal discourse and provided a rationale for slavery. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the scientific community tried to establish a classification system of race based on genetics and brain size. However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Most scientists now agree that there are more physical similarities than differences among so-called races and have abandoned a strict biological basis for classifying racial groups. Instead, taking a more social scientific approach to understanding race, they recognize that racial categories like White and Black are constructed in social and historical contexts.<sup>12</sup>

Several arguments have been advanced to refute the physiological basis for classifying racial groups. First, racial categories vary widely throughout the world. In general, distinctions between White and Black are fairly rigid in the United States, and many people become uneasy when they are unable to categorize individuals. By contrast, Brazil recognizes a wide variety of intermediate racial categories in addition to White and Black. This indicates a cultural, rather than a biological, basis for racial classification.

Second, U.S. law uses a variety of definitions in determining racial categories. The 1982 Susie Phipps case in Louisiana reopened debates about race as socially created rather than biologically determined. When Susie Phipps applied for a passport, she discovered that under Louisiana law she was Black because she was one thirty-second African. (Her great-grandmother had been a slave.) She then sued to be reclassified as White. Not only did she consider herself White, as she grew up among Whites and attended White schools, but she also was married to a White man. Because her children were one sixty-fourth African, however, they were legally White. Although she lost her lawsuit, the ensuing political and popular discussions persuaded Louisiana lawmakers to change the way the state classified people racially. This legal situation does not obscure the fact that social definitions of race continue to exist.<sup>13</sup>

Third, as their fluid nature indicates, racial categories are socially constructed. As more and more southern Europeans immigrated to the United States in the 19th century, the established Anglo and German society initially tried to classify some of them (Greeks, Italians, Jews) as non-White. However, members of this group realized that according to the narrower definition they might no longer form a majority and therefore would lose some power. So the notion of who was White was expanded to include all Europeans, while non-Europeans were designated as non-White.<sup>14</sup>

**Racial identities**, then, are based to some extent on physical characteristics, but they are also constructed in fluid social contexts. The important thing to remember is that the way people construct these identities and think about race influences how they communicate with others.



### What Do You Think?

What ethnic label do you prefer for yourself? In an essay in the collection *Our Voices*, Dolores Tanno describes what the labels “Spanish,” “Mexican American,” “Latina,” and “Chicana” mean to her. She concludes by saying that each of these terms, with its own unique meaning, describes a part of her. Which aspects of yourself do your preferred terms describe?


**Info Bites**

*Ethnicity*, which refers to racial and cultural background, comes from the Greek words *ethnos* and *ethne*. These terms describe nations of people, linking them with the lands they are from, but they also were used to refer to heathens or pagans or other non-Christian individuals. Thus, even from the beginning, *ethnicity* was a judgmental, divisive term.

**Ethnic Identity** One's **ethnic identity** reflects a set of ideas about one's own ethnic group membership. It typically includes several dimensions: self-identification, knowledge about the ethnic culture (traditions, customs, values, behaviors), and feelings about belonging to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic identity often involves a common sense of origin and history, which may link members of ethnic groups to distant cultures in Asia, Europe, Latin America, or other locations.<sup>15</sup>

Ethnic identity thus means having a sense of belonging to a particular group and knowing something about the shared experiences of group members. For example, Judith grew up in an ethnic community; her parents and relatives spoke German, and her grandparents made several trips back to Germany and often talked about their German roots. This experience contributed to her own ethnic identity.

For some Americans, ethnicity is a specific and relevant concept. These people define themselves in part in relation to their roots outside the United States—as “**hyphenated Americans**” (Mexican-American, Japanese-American, Welsh-American—although the hyphen often is dropped)—or to some region prior to its being part of the United States (Navajo, Hopi, Cherokee). For others, ethnicity is a vague concept; they see themselves as “American” and reject the notion of hyphenated Americans. (We’ll discuss the issues of ethnicity for White people later in the chapter.)

The question remains, What does “American” mean? And who defines it? It is important to determine what definition is being used by those who insist that we should all just be “Americans.” If one’s identity is “just American,” how is this identity formed, and how does it influence communication with others who see themselves as hyphenated Americans?<sup>16</sup>

**Racial Versus Ethnic Identity** Scholars dispute whether racial and ethnic identities are similar or different. Some scholars emphasize ethnic identity to avoid any racism inherent in a race-centered approach; others reject this interpretation. On the one hand, discussions about ethnicity tend to assume a “melting pot” perspective on U.S. society. On the other hand, discussions about race as shaped by U.S. history allow for racism. If we talk not about race but only about ethnicity, we cannot fully consider the effects and influences of racism.

For most White people, it is easy to comprehend the sense of belonging in an ethnic group. Clearly, for example, being Amish means following the *Ordnung* (community rules). Growing up in a German American home, Judith’s identity was characterized by seriousness and a lack of expressiveness. This identity differed from that of her Italian American friends at college, who were much more expressive.

However, what it means to belong to the dominant, White culture is more elusive. It can be difficult to identify the cultural practices that link White people together. For example, we should think of Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July as primarily White holidays.

Our sense of racial or ethnic identity develops over time, in stages, and through communication with others. These stages seem to reflect phases in the

development of our self-understanding. They also depend to some extent on the types of groups we belong to. For example, members of many ethnic or racial groups experience common forces of oppression and so adopt attitudes and behaviors consistent with the effort to develop a strong sense of self—and group—identity. For many groups, these strong identities have served to ensure their survival.

### Physical Ability Identity

We all have a **physical ability identity** because we all have varying degrees of physical capabilities. We are all handicapped in one way or another—by our height, weight, sex, or age—and we all need to work to overcome these conditions. And our physical ability, like our age, changes over a lifetime. For example, some people experience a temporary disability, such as breaking a bone or experiencing limited mobility after surgery. Others are born with disabilities, or experience incremental disability, or have a sudden-onset disability (waking up quadriplegic).

The number of people with physical disabilities is growing, constituting as much as 19 percent of the population and forming the largest minority group in some states.<sup>17</sup> In fact, people with disabilities see themselves as a cultural group and share many perceptions and communication patterns.<sup>18</sup> Part of this identity involves changing how they see themselves and how others see them. For people who become disabled, there are predictable stages in coming to grips with this new identity. The first stage involves a focus on rehabilitation and physical changes. The second stage involves adjusting to the disability and the effects that it has on relationships; some friendships will not survive the disability. The final stage is “stigma incorporation,” when the individual begins to integrate being disabled into his or her own definition of self. As one woman said, “I find myself telling people that this has been the worst thing that has happened to me. It has also been one of the best things. It forced me to examine what I felt about myself. . . . confidence is grounded in me, not in other people.”<sup>19</sup>

Communication related to issues of identity often is difficult between the able-bodied and those with disabilities. Able-bodied people may not make eye contact and otherwise restrict their communication with people with disabilities. For their part, people with disabilities struggle to convey a positive identity, to communicate that their physical ability (as is true for everyone) is only one of their many identities. As one young man said, “We need friends who won’t treat us as weirdo asexual second-class children or expect us to be ‘Supercrips’. . . . We want to be accepted the way we are.”<sup>20</sup>

### Religious Identity

**Religious identity** is an important dimension of many people’s identities, as well as a common source of intercultural conflict. Often, religious identity gets confused with racial/ethnic identity, which means it can be problematic to view religious identity simply in terms of belonging to a particular religion. For example, when someone says, “I am Jewish,” does this mean that this person practices



### What Do You Think?

In August 2002, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was in the midst of controversy over a religious text assigned to incoming freshmen and transfer students enrolled in their summer reading program. The book *Approaching the Qu’ran: The Early Revelations* included excerpts called suras, which are poetic forms of scripture often compared to the Psalms of David in the Christian Bible. The university, having made the reading of the text a requirement, was promptly sued by three students who were identified as Jewish, Evangelical Christian, and Catholic. They were represented by a conservative Christian law firm, known as the American Family Association for Law and Policy. The plaintiffs alleged in part of the suit that the reading requirement violated their First Amendment rights to freedom of religion. Read more about the case at the website—<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week551/news.html>. How do you think the courts should have decided this case? What would you have done if you were a student in this situation?



### Pop Culture Spotlight

In 2003 HBO released a documentary film called *Born Rich*, which reflected the lives of 10 of the United States' most wealthy heirs and heiresses. The film is directed and narrated by pharmaceutical conglomerate Johnson & Johnson heir, Jamie Johnson. One claim from the film is that often the parents of those who are born rich advise them to never talk about money with individuals outside of their immediate family network. Why do you think their parents would give such advice?

Judaism or views Jewishness as an ethnic identity? When someone says, "That person has a Jewish last name," does this confer a Jewish religious identity? Historically, Jews have been viewed as a racial group, an ethnic group, and a religious group. Drawing distinct lines between various identities—racial, ethnic, religious, class, national, regional—can lead to stereotyping. For example, Italians and Irish are often assumed to be Catholic, while Episcopalians are frequently seen as belonging to the upper classes.

Intercultural communication among religious groups also can be problematic. Religious differences have been at the root of conflicts from the Middle East, to Northern Ireland, to India/Pakistan, to Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the United States as well, religious conflict forced the Mormons to migrate from New York to Ohio and Illinois and then to Utah. The traditional belief is that everyone should be free to practice whatever religion they want to, but conflict can result from the imposition of one religion's beliefs on others who may not share those beliefs. Recently, Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore was found in violation of separation of church and state for his refusal to remove a monument to the Ten Commandments from the Alabama Supreme Court Building. When one religion is acknowledged over other religions in public places, controversy can ensue.<sup>21</sup> Religion traditionally is considered a private issue, and there is a stated separation of church and state. However, in some countries, religion and the state are inseparable, and religion is publicly practiced. Some religions communicate and mark their religious differences through their dress—for example, Hassidic Jews. Other religions do not mark their members through their clothes; for example, you may not know if someone is Buddhist, Catholic, Lutheran, or atheist based upon their dress. Because these religious identities are less obvious, everyday interactions may not invoke them.

Even though religious convictions (or the lack thereof) are viewed as private matters in the United States, they have implications for intercultural communication. One of our students described his experience in a discussion group made up of people of faith and those (like him) who considered themselves spiritual but had no particular religious convictions:

It became very clear that many of the beliefs held were strong ones. It is as if two different cultures were meeting. The two groups act very differently and run their lives in very different ways. I have learned that many of the stereotypes that I have labeled religious people with are false, and I would hope that this group eliminated any stereotypes that religious people may have labeled someone like me with.

### Class Identity

We seldom think about socioeconomic class as an important part of our identity—especially those in the middle class. As with race, there is invisibility associated with this dominant or normative **class identity**. Whereas members of the middle class rarely think about class, those in the working class are often reminded that they do not belong to the middle class. Class plays an important role in shaping our reactions to and interpretations of culture.

In our everyday language, terms like “trailer park trash” and “White trash” mark these class differences. Given their negative associations with members of the working class, not surprisingly, many Americans identify themselves as “middle class.” But many people do not like to discuss class distinctions, as these conversations can range dangerously close to discussions of money—a topic to be avoided in “polite society.”

Yet class identities are an important aspect of our identities in the United States, and even more so in some other societies. People use various strategies to locate individuals in the class hierarchy, as directly asking someone may be seen as impolite and may yield inaccurate information. Certain foods, for example, are viewed as “rich folks’ food”: lamb, white asparagus, brie, artichokes, goose, caviar. A lack of familiarity with these foods may reveal something about one’s class background. People might ask where you went to college as a clue to your class background. Other signs of your class background include the words you use, the magazines you read, and the drinks you consume.<sup>22</sup>

This lack of overt recognition of social class in the United States has several consequences. Despite evidence to the contrary, a popular belief is that, with hard work and persistence, individuals can improve their class standing.<sup>23</sup> One result of this myth is that when poverty persists the poor are blamed. That is, they are poor because of something they did or didn’t do, or were lazy, or didn’t try hard enough, or were unlucky—a classic case of “blaming the victim.” The media often reinforce these notions.

Working-class individuals who aren’t upwardly mobile are often portrayed on TV shows (*The King of Queens*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Simpsons*) and in the movies as happy but unintelligent or unwilling to do what they have to do to better their lot in life. And members of the real working class, showing up increasingly as guests on talk shows like *Jerry Springer*, are urged to be contentious—verbally and sometimes even physically aggressive toward each other. Thus, the images of working-class people that are served up to the mass viewing audience are hardly positive.<sup>24</sup>

Race and class, and sometimes gender, identities are interrelated. For example, being born African American, poor, and female increases one’s chances of remaining in poverty. At the same time, however, race and class are not synonymous; there are many poor Whites and increasing numbers of wealthy African Americans. So it is important to see these multiple identities as interrelated but not identical. In any event, the lack of understanding about class differences and the stereotypes perpetuated in the media often makes meaningful communication between classes difficult.

### National Identity

Among our many identities is a national identity, which should not be confused with racial or ethnic identity. **National identity**, or nationality, refers to one’s legal status in relation to a nation. Many U.S. citizens trace their family history to Latin America, Asia, Europe, or Africa, but their nationality, or citizenship, is with the United States.



### What Do You Think?

Benedict Anderson has written a book called *Imagined Communities*, in which he argues that nations are fictions. That is, they are imaginary constructs not directly linked to the land that supposedly contains them. Thus, we base parts of our identities on these fictions. What parts of your identity may be based on fiction?

What does it mean to be an American? When we ask our students this question, they respond in many ways. Some mention only positive things: freedom, the ability to do what one wants (within reason), economic opportunity, entertainment, and sports. Others mention unhealthy eating habits, obsession with diets, pressure to make lots of money, media determination of what is glamorous or accepted, more tax dollars spent on prisons and sports facilities than on education, and random violence on the highway and in the neighborhoods and schools. And yet, almost every student is proud of his or her national identity.

Our national identity certainly influences how we look at the world and communicate with people of other nationalities. As one of our students observed:

The more I do to expand my cultural horizons, the more amazed I am at the way I look at life as a result of being American. There are so many things we take for granted as the only way of doing something or thinking. Like the whole individualism thing and all the behaviors and values associated with it. And there are types of people and personalities that I just never imagined before.

National identity may be especially complicated when a nation's status is in doubt. For example, the Civil War erupted over the attempted secession in the mid-1800s of the Confederate States of America from the United States. More recently, bloody conflicts resulted when Eritrea tried to separate from Ethiopia, and Chechnya from Russia. Less bloody conflicts also involving nationhood led to the separation of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Contemporary nationhood struggles are being played out as Quebec attempts to separate from Canada, Corsica and Tahiti from France, Scotland from Great Britain, and Oaxaca from Mexico. Sometimes, nations disappear from the political map but persist in the social imagination and reemerge later; examples include Korea, Poland, the Ukraine, and Norway. In all of these cases, people identify with various ways of thinking about nationality.

### Regional Identity

Closely related to national identity is the notion of **regional identity**. Many regions of the world have separate but vital and important cultural identities. For example, the Scottish Highlands region of northern Scotland is distinctly different from the Lowlands to the south, and regional identity remains strong in the Highlands.

Here in the United States, regional identities remain important. Southerners, for example, often view themselves and are viewed by others as a distinct cultural group. Texas advertises itself as "A Whole Other Country," promoting its regional identity. And people from New York are often stereotyped as brash and aggressive. These stereotypes based on regional identities often lead to difficult intercultural interactions. Our colleague Joyce's college roommate, Linda, was from southern Virginia. She told Joyce she had no desire to visit New York City because she had heard how unfriendly and aggressive people were there. After



People in the United States are often proud of where they live—whether town, city, state, or region. As this sign advertising “bewitching” Salem, Massachusetts, shows, these regional identities often are promoted in tourist publicity.

the two roommates got to know each other better, Joyce persuaded Linda to accompany her to the city. While the visit didn’t dispel all her stereotypes, Linda did come to appreciate the energy and vitality of New York and New Yorkers.

Some regional identities can lead to national independence movements, but more often they are cultural identities that affirm distinctive cuisines, dress, manners, and sometimes language. These identities may become important in intercultural communication situations. For example, suppose you meet someone who is Chinese. Whether that person is from Beijing, Hong Kong, or elsewhere in China may raise important communication issues, because there are many dialects of the Chinese language, including Mandarin and Cantonese.

### Personal Identity

Many issues of identity are closely tied to one’s notion of self. Each of us has a **personal identity**, but it may not be unified or coherent. While we are who we think we are, we are also who others think we are. In other words, if you think you are incredibly attractive, but others do not, are you attractive? Sometimes our personal identity is largely defined by outside forces.

At other times, how we behave and communicate to others helps construct our personal identity. If you are trustworthy and reliable, others may come to see you as trustworthy and reliable, which reinforces your personal identity.

Sometimes, however, our personal identity can come into conflict with other identities. For example, not all gay men are sharp dressers and knowledgeable about fine foods, yet they often feel as if they should be. Television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* often reinforce these stereotypes. As another



### What Do You Think?

According to Alan Watts, “Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth.” Stuart Hall says, “You know firmly who you are only by leaving out three-quarters of the most interesting parts of the story.” What do you leave out when you tell the story of your identity?

example, some people raised in very religious families may not feel similarly about their religious identity. They may feel caught between their family's traditional religious beliefs and their own personal identities. They may feel obligated to uphold their family's traditional ways, yet not feel comfortable with those beliefs. Along the Arizona-Utah border, a number of families belong to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. When members' personal identities do not match religious identities, conflicts often result:

David Bateman, 19, said he had been in hot water with the church leadership since he stopped attending services two years ago. Word got out that he was going to movies in nearby St. George and listening to rock groups like Creed at home. "They really treat you bad if you don't conform to their way of thinking," Bateman said. "People drive by your house and flip you off. Others give you stares and dirty looks. I had two young kids on bicycles ride by me on the street. One of them yelled, 'Hey, faggot, what are you doing here?'" The other one called me an SOB."<sup>25</sup>

The solution is often to be forced to choose.

Who we think we are is important to us, and often to those close to us, and we try to communicate that to others. We are more or less successful depending on how others respond to us. Sometimes those responses can be harsh. We use the various ways that identity is constructed to portray ourselves as we want others to see us.

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

### Minority Identity Development

As mentioned previously, minority group members in the United States tend to develop a stronger sense of racial and ethnic identity than do majority group members. Whites tend to take their culture for granted; although they may develop a strong ethnic identity, they often do not really think about their racial identity.

In its four stages, **minority identity development** focuses on racial and ethnic identities but may also apply to other identities such as class, gender, or sexual orientation.<sup>26</sup> It is important to remember that, as with any model, this one represents the experiences of many people, but not everyone moves through these stages in exactly the same way. Some may spend more time in one stage, may experience a stage in different ways, or remain stuck in one of the early stages.

**Stage 1: Unexamined Identity** This stage is characterized by the lack of exploration of ethnicity. Minority members may initially accept the values and attitudes of the majority culture, including negative views of their own group. They may have a strong desire to assimilate into the dominant culture, and they may express positive attitudes toward the dominant group. In this stage, their

### Info Bites

Who do you have to be to participate in the "Latin music explosion"? Does it matter that Marc Anthony's first albums were all in English? If he is from New York and his native language is English, does he have the right kind of "identity" to be a Latino movie star?

ideas about identity may come from parents or friends—if they have any interest in ethnicity. As one writer put it, “We were all color-blind in our relationships and remained so until our parents assigned the colors that were supposed to have meaning and made them ugly.”<sup>27</sup>

**Stage 2: Conformity** In this stage, individuals have a strong desire to assimilate into the dominant culture and so internalize the values and norms of the dominant group. These individuals may have negative, self-deprecating attitudes toward themselves, as well as toward their group in general. One Jewish woman recalls that in college she had a real aversion to associating with Jewish women whom she believed fit the negative social stereotype of a “materialistic, whiny people.”<sup>28</sup> Later she came to see this as her own buying into racism. People who criticize other members of their own group may be given negative labels such as “Uncle Toms” or “oreos” for African Americans, “bananas” for Asian Americans, “apples” for Native Americans, and “Tio Tacos” for Chicanos. Such labels condemn attitudes and behaviors that support the dominant White culture. This stage often continues until the person encounters a situation that causes him or her to question the dominant culture attitudes, which then starts the movement to the next stage: an ethnic identity search.

**Stage 3: Resistance and Separatism** Many kinds of events can trigger the move to the third stage, including negative events, such as encountering discrimination or name calling. Sometimes, a growing awareness that not all the values of the dominant group are beneficial to minorities may lead to this stage. Suppose, for example, that someone who has been denying his or her racial heritage meets another person from that racial group who exhibits a strong cultural identity. A student of ours, Amalia, recounted her experience of going to college and meeting other Chicano students for the first time who had strong ethnic identities and were proud to be Mexican American. She hadn’t thought about her heritage very much up to that point, so this was an important experience for her. She became interested in learning about the history of Mexican Americans in the United States, and she developed a stronger sense of her own identity. For Max, an African American, this awareness happened suddenly. He describes his awareness that the Cinderella in his childhood coloring books was White. He was also deprived a part in a school play because of his color and was forced into pre-algebra class despite exceptional talent in math. This caused a rage and fury, and he became certain he was “destined for failure.”<sup>29</sup>

This stage may be characterized by a blanket endorsement of one’s group and all the values and attitudes attributed to it. At the same time, the person may reject the values and norms associated with the dominant group. For example, at this stage, individuals may find it important to join ethnic clubs like MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiante de Chicanos d’Aztlán*), the Black Students Union, or other groups where they can discuss common interests and experiences and find support.



#### Info Bites

“Chicano” was once considered a derogatory term referring to immigrant farm workers. But due to the efforts of people like Cesar Chavez and other members of the farm workers’ movement, the word has been redefined. Now, Mexican Americans use the term to help define their political struggle to participate fully in American society.

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Group identities are often expressed and strengthened through communication. Which identities are being expressed and affirmed by these students' being together?



**Stage 4: Integration** According to this model, the ideal outcome of the minority identity development process is the last stage, an achieved identity. People who reach this stage have a strong sense of their own group identity (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on) and an appreciation for other cultural groups. In this stage, individuals realize that racism and other forms of oppression occur but try to redirect any anger from the previous stage in more positive ways. A Latino writer describes how he entered this stage. It happened when he shared a college apartment with students from Taipei—persons who were foreign to the United States and its prejudices and who were interested in his background. “As I spoke to them of the history of my people—something I’d always known but never before thought about—I began to internalize that history. In a sense their curiosity sparked my own. Never again could I deny it, never again would I care to.”<sup>30</sup> The end result is a confident and secure identity for a person who wants to eliminate all forms of injustice, not just oppression aimed at his or her own group.

### Majority Identity Development

Two influential educators/scholars describe **majority identity development** for members of the dominant group. The following model differs somewhat from the minority identity model in that it is more prescriptive. That is, it doesn’t represent exactly how White people’s identities develop, but rather how they might move in unlearning the racism (and other isms) that we unconsciously acquire as we grow up.<sup>31</sup>

**Stage 1: Unexamined Identity** The first stage is the same as for minority individuals. People may be aware of some physical and cultural differences, but they do not fear other racial or ethnic groups or feel a sense of superiority. As our student Jenny said, “I remember in kindergarten my best friend was African American. We did everything together at school. We never even thought about the fact that we were of different races.” Communication (and relationships) at this stage is not based on racial differences.

**Stage 2: Acceptance** The second stage represents the internalization and acceptance of the basic racial inequities in society. This acceptance is largely unconscious, and individuals have no conscious identification with the dominant White culture. However, some assumptions, based on an acceptance of inequities in the larger society, are subtly racist (minority groups are culturally deprived and need help to assimilate; White culture—music, art, and literature—is “classical”; works of art by people of color are folk art or “crafts”). There is also an assumption at this stage that people of color are culturally different, whereas Whites are individuals with no group identity, culture, or shared experience of racial privilege.

At this stage, communication with minorities is either avoided or patronizing—or both. As one of our White students, Kortni, said, “I never thought about it until I took this class how I don’t have any friends who aren’t White. I came from a small town, and I just never really felt comfortable around people who weren’t White.”

Some people never move beyond this stage. If they do, it is usually the cumulative result of a number of events. Perhaps they become good friends with people of color, or they participate in a class or workshop that deals with issues of White privilege or racism. For our student Jenny, it was an undergraduate course in ethnic relations: “The professor had us read really interesting authors who talked about their experiences of growing up as people of color in the United States. I realized how little I knew about the experiences of those who aren’t White.” She described it as an eye-opening experience that prodded her to the next stage.

**Stage 3: Resistance** This stage represents a major shift, from blaming minority members for their conditions to blaming the social system as the source of racial or ethnic problems. Resistance may be passive, with little behavioral change, or active—an ownership of racism. Individuals may feel embarrassed and ashamed at this stage, avoiding or minimizing their communication with other Whites and seeking out interactions with persons of color. This is what happened with Rina, a White student of ours who started dating an African American. According to one of her friends, “as she got to know this man she started to really reject the White culture that she was from. She criticized her family and any White person. She got an attitude that her Black friends had an exclusive right to anything that related to style or music or dance. She rejected her own culture and

immersed herself in the culture she had discovered.” She also started to speak up about racism when she saw it. Whites who resist are often criticized by other Whites, who may call them “race traitors” or “reverse oreos”; they may jokingly warn other Whites about dating African Americans, since “once you go Black, you never go back.” This type of communication condemns attitudes and behaviors that resist dominant White culture.

**Stage 4: Redefinition and Reintegration** In the fourth stage, as in minority identity development, people begin to refocus their energy to redefining Whiteness in nonracist terms and are finally able to integrate their Whiteness into all other facets of their identity. It is not clear why some Whites achieve this stage while others do not. Whites in this stage realize they don’t have to accept the definition of White that society imposed on them. They can move beyond the connection to racism to see positive aspects of being European American and to feel more comfortable being White. They not only recognize their own identity as White but also appreciate other groups. Interestingly, at this stage, there is no defensiveness about racism; individuals don’t say, “I’m not prejudiced.” Rather, there is the recognition that prejudice and racism exist and that blame, guilt, or denial won’t help solve the problem. There is also a recognition of the importance of understanding Whiteness and White identity. However, it is a big challenge to identify what White identity is for several reasons. First, because Whiteness has been the norm in U.S. society, it is often difficult to see. Next, what it means to be White in the United States is changing. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, Whites are becoming more aware of their race and express this awareness in a variety of ways—from affinity for White supremacy groups to Wiggers (White youth adopting or co-opting Black culture) to those rejecting White privilege. These recent changes demonstrate that one single model of White identity development probably does not exist and presents a number of challenges for Whites in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

### Characteristics of Whiteness

What does it mean to be White in the United States? What are the characteristics of a White identity? Does some unique set of characteristics define Whiteness, just like other racial identities? Consider the following dialogue between Victor, who is African American, and David, who is White, in the film *The Color of Fear*, produced in the early 1990s:

VICTOR: What I hear from White people is, they talk about being human. They don’t talk about themselves as White people. What I want to know is what it means to be White.

DAVID: We don’t look at ourselves as part of an ethnic group. I think that’s what you’re looking for, and you’re not going to find it.

VICTOR: Do you know that that means something? The fact that you have no answer to that?

It may be difficult for most White people to describe exactly what cultural patterns are uniquely White. However, there are at least three common characteristics of **Whiteness** in the United States: (1) an advantage of race privilege, (2) a standpoint from which White people view themselves, others, and society, and (3) a set of cultural practices, largely unrecognized by White people.<sup>33</sup>

**The Advantage of Race Privilege** White people in the United States enjoy many benefits of race privilege. Some are economic in that Whites, on average, still have higher incomes than members of minority groups; others are more social.<sup>34</sup> For example, Whites can wander through stores and be fairly sure no store employees will track their movements; they are rarely asked to speak for their entire race; and they see people who look like themselves most places they go.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, while being White in the United States is linked with privilege, the two are not synonymous. All Whites do not have power and do not have equal access to power. At times during U.S. history, some White communities were not privileged and were viewed as inferior—for example, the Irish in the early 20th century and German Americans during World War II. There are also many poor White people in the United States who have no economic power.

There is an emerging perception that Whiteness is not equated with privilege, particularly as demographics change in the United States and as some Whites perceive themselves to be in the minority. For example, when White students at Temple University in Philadelphia were asked to estimate the ratio of Whites to Blacks on campus, many reported that they thought the ratio was 30 percent White and 70 percent Black; they perceived themselves as in the minority. The actual ratio was 70 percent White and 30 percent Black. These students' perceptions affected their sense of identity, which, in turn, influenced intercultural communication.<sup>36</sup> And when they were asked what they thought about being White, many of the students, mostly from working-class families, said they were very aware of their Whiteness. Further, they felt that being White was a liability, that they were being prejudged as racist and blamed for social conditions that they did not cause and were denied opportunities that were unfairly given to minority students.

In addition, as U.S. corporations downsize and more U.S. jobs are located overseas, increasing numbers of middle-aged White men fail to achieve the economic or professional success they had hoped for. They sometimes attribute their lack of success to immigrants who will work for less or to the increasing numbers of women and minorities in the workplace. In these cases, Whiteness is not invisible; it is an important aspect of the White individuals' identities.

The point is not whether these perceptions are accurate—and, indeed, many are not accurate. The reality is that most of the wealth, leadership, and power remains in the hands of Whites in the United States. Given that identities are negotiated and challenged through communication, and that people act on their perceptions and not on some external reality, perceptions related to racial identity make it difficult for Whites and Blacks to communicate effectively.



### Pop Culture Spotlight

What is the ethnic identity of white rap artists like Eminem and Kid Rock? Are they simply confused? Or are they, as some critics have argued, merely the latest in a line of musicians, from Pat Boone, to Elvis Presley, to the Backstreet Boys, who have copied African American musical styles and movements? If ethnicity is not the same as race, how should we categorize these musicians?

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*A Standpoint from Which to View Society* Some viewpoints are shared by many Whites, and opinion polls frequently reveal significant differences in how Whites and Blacks see many issues. According to one poll, 24 percent of Whites think “about the right amount” of attention is paid to race and racial issues today, compared to only 14 percent of Blacks.<sup>37</sup> How can the perception of race relations be so different for Whites and Blacks? Something about being White, and something about being African American, influences how people view the world and, ultimately, how they communicate.

In one research study, women were asked about their Whiteness and about White culture. Some reported that they viewed the culture as less than positive—as artificial and dominant, bland and sterile, homogeneous, and less interesting and rich than non-White culture. Others, however, viewed it as positive—as representing what was “civilized,” as in classical music and fine art.<sup>38</sup> White identity often includes some ambivalence about being White. As these women note, there may be some elements of White culture to be proud of and others that are more problematic.

*A Set of Cultural Practices* Is there a specific, unique “White” way of viewing the world? As noted, some views held consistently by Whites are not necessarily shared by other groups. And some cultural practices and values, such as individualism, are expressed primarily by Whites and significantly less by members of minority groups. These cultural practices are most clearly visible to those who are not White, to those groups that do not share in the privileges enjoyed by Whites.<sup>39</sup> For example, the celebration of Snow White’s beauty—emphasizing her pure white skin—is often seen as problematic by people who are not White. Perhaps it is easier to see why Snow White is offensive if one is not White.

### MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY

Today, a growing number of people do not have clear racial, ethnic, or national identities. These are people who live “on the borders” between various cultural groups. While they may feel torn between different cultural traditions, they also may develop a **multicultural identity**—an identity that transcends one particular culture—and feel equally at home in several cultures. Sometimes, this multicultural identity develops as a result of being born or raised in a multiracial home. Table 4.1 shows the U.S. states with the highest percentage of multiracial people. Why might these states have the highest percentages? Which states might have the lowest percentages? At other times, it develops as a result of living in different cultures for extended periods of time.

#### Multiracial People

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, the United States had an estimated 6.8 million multiracial people—that is, people whose ancestry includes two or more races—and this number is increasing.<sup>40</sup> The development of racial

**TABLE 4.1 Mixed Race: States with the Highest Percentage of People Who Self-identified as More Than One Race**

|               |                |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1. Hawaii     | 6. Texas       |
| 2. Alaska     | 7. Florida     |
| 3. California | 8. Illinois    |
| 4. Oklahoma   | 9. New Jersey  |
| 5. New York   | 10. Washington |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/000441.html>)

identity for multiracial children seems to be different from either majority or minority development.<sup>41</sup> These children learn early on that they are different from other people and that they don't fit into a neat racial category—an awareness-of-differentness stage.<sup>42</sup> Take our student Maureen, for example. Her mother is Korean and her father is African American. When she was 5, her family moved to a small town in northern New Mexico that was predominantly White. She recalled:

I soon realized that I wasn't the only person who was different; the town had a large population of Hispanic and Native Americans. Yet, I also realized that I was still different from the rest of the children. It seemed that Hispanic children stayed with Hispanic children, White children with White children, Native American children with Native American children, and Asian children with Asian children. There weren't any Black children, and there definitely weren't any Black and Asian mixed children. The grouping of these children helped me realize that I was very different from all the children I went to school with. This realization left me confused and depressed.

Maureen's experience is typical of the first stage in the identity development of multiracial children.

The second stage involves a struggle for acceptance, in which these children experiment with and explore both cultures. They may feel as if they live on the cultural fringe, struggling with two sets of cultural realities and sometimes being asked to choose one racial identity over the other. This happened to Maureen. She was frustrated by the forms she had to fill out at school that asked her to indicate her ethnicity, because there was no space for multiracial ethnicity. She recalled, "It was explained to me that I needed to choose. I asked them if there was a possibility I could represent both, but I was firmly told that it would be a nuisance to try to identify with two different cultures for the rest of my life." As happens with some multiracial children in this stage, she chose one: "It was on this day that I officially became an African-American."

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There are increasing numbers of multi-cultural families in the United States and other countries. The children in these families may feel torn between various cultural patterns and traditions, but they also may develop a multi-cultural identity and feel equally at home in several different cultures.



Whereas monoracial identity usually progresses toward one end state—one either resolves or doesn't resolve identity issues—biracial adolescents may resolve their identity status in several ways: they may identify with one group, both groups, or a new group (for example, biracial people). In the final stage, self-acceptance and assertion, these children find a more secure sense of self. This exposure to more than one culture's norms and values often makes difficulty for biracial children—they may find themselves rejected alternately by both groups (not Black enough or White enough). The family and neighborhood play a huge role in biracial children's identity development. Strong family role models and a supportive neighborhood can lead to a flexible and adaptable sense of identity—a multicultural identity. Table 4.2 summarizes the stages of minority, majority, and multiracial development.<sup>43</sup>

### Identity and Adaptation

Other people may develop multicultural identities for other reasons. Examples include **global nomads**, who grow up in many different cultural contexts because their parents moved around a lot. The families of missionaries, international business employees, diplomats, and military personnel often are global nomads. People who maintain long-term romantic relationships with members of another ethnic or racial culture also tend to develop multicultural identities.

**TABLE 4.2 Stages in Minority, Majority, and Multiracial Identity Development**

| STAGE                     |                                |                               |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Minority</i>           | <i>Majority</i>                | <i>Multiracial</i>            |
| Unexamined identity       | Unexamined identity            | Awareness of difference       |
| Conformity                | Acceptance                     | Struggle for acceptance       |
| Resistance and separatism | Resistance                     | Self-acceptance and assertion |
| Integration               | Redefinition and reintegration |                               |

There seem to be some common patterns of adaptation to a new culture, described as the **U-curve theory** of adaptation. In this model, migrants go through three fairly predictable phases in adapting to a new cultural situation. In the first phase, they experience excitement and anticipation, especially if they moved to the new culture voluntarily (study-abroad students, missionaries).

The second phase, culture shock (the bottom of the U-curve), happens to almost everyone in intercultural transitions. **Culture shock** is a relatively short-term feeling of disorientation, of discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of surroundings and the lack of familiar cues in the environment. However, people who are isolated from the new cultural context may experience culture shock minimally. For example, U.S. military personnel and diplomatic personnel often live in compounds overseas where they interact mainly with other Americans and have little contact with the indigenous cultures. Similarly, spouses of international students in the United States may have little contact with Americans. By contrast, corporate spouses may experience more culture shock, because they often have more contact with the host culture: placing children in schools, setting up a household, shopping, and so on.

During the culture shock phase, individuals experience disorientation and perhaps an identity crisis. Because our identities are shaped and maintained by our cultural contexts, experiences in new cultural contexts often raise questions about identities. One student in a study-abroad program in Mexico described her feelings of culture shock:

I want to be at home—nothing feels familiar here—I'd like to be on a bus—in a theater—on a street—in a house—on the phone—**ANYWHERE AND UNDERSTAND** everything that's being said. I love my family and miss my friends. I'm lonely here—I'm unable to be me—conversations either elude me or make me sound like I'm 3 years old—I'm so different without my language. . . . I just ask for something simple—**TO SPEAK—TO BE ME**. Yet, as I think now, as I write, I see how much more than language it is—it's history—what's familiar—a lifetime—my lifetime—my home—and now I'm here—**SO FAR AWAY**.<sup>44</sup>



### Info Bites

“The sun never set on the British Empire” because at one time Britain controlled enough colonies that it was always day somewhere in the Empire. How important is your national identity to you? Are you patriotic? Would your answer change if your nation was not a nation but a colony of another country?

Notice that the challenge of language is often a big part of culture shock. The problem is the feeling that one can't really be oneself in another language—which is part of the identity crisis in cultural adaptation.

The third phase is adaptation, in which individuals gradually learn the rules and customs of the new cultural context. They may learn the language, figure out how much of themselves to change in response to the new context, and decide to change some aspects of their behavior. But they may also want to retain a sense of their previous cultural identities; each sojourner has to decide to what degree he or she wants to adapt. The student who wrote about her culture shock experiences later wrote, “Perhaps it was the rain—the downpour and the thunderstorm that preceded it. I feel good about Mexico now. The rainslick streets, the *torta Cubana* [a pastry]—the windy busride in the pitch-dark night. It’s a peaceful beauty—I’ve regained a sense of self and space.”

Although the U-curve seems to represent the experiences of many short-term sojourners, it may be too simplistic.<sup>45</sup> It might be more accurate to think of long-term cultural adaptation as a series of U-curves, where one alternates between feeling relatively adjusted and experiencing culture shock. Over time, the feeling of culture shock diminishes.

Culture shock occurs to almost all people who cross cultural boundaries, whether they have done so voluntarily or not. Most individuals then experience a long-term process of more or less adapting to the new culture. However, for many individuals, the long-term adaptation is not easy. Some actively resist assimilation in the short term, as is the case with many immigrants. Others resist assimilation in the long term, as is the case with religious groups like the Amish and Hutterites. Some would like to assimilate but are not welcome in the new culture, as is the case with many Latin American immigrants to the United States. And some adapt to certain aspects of the new culture but not others. In short, many people who adapt to new cultural contexts also develop multicultural identities.

### What Do You Think?

Gloria Anzaldúa argues from what she calls the borderlands between two cultures. She also links this with racial issues involved in being *mestiza*, or of mixed heritage, as many Latinos and Latinas are. Other theorists have seized upon this notion of hybridity as something to be proud of; it also represents a rejection of years of denigration of biracial people. Do you experience living on cultural borderlands?

### Living “On the Border”

The multicultural person is someone who comes to grips with multiple cultural realities, whether from being raised in a multiracial home or through adaptation to a new culture. This multicultural identity is defined not by a sense of belonging but by a new sense of self.<sup>46</sup> Multicultural individuals may become “culture brokers” who facilitate intercultural interaction. However, it is important to recognize that there are stresses and tensions associated with being multicultural. These people may confuse the profound with the insignificant, lose sight of what is really important, feel fragmented, or feel a lack of authenticity.<sup>47</sup> Lucia, a Yaqui college student, described some of the challenges of living “on the border” between her Yaqui community and the college community:

I get caught in the in-between. This is who I am: I’m Native American, and my belief system is to follow my Creator, walk the walk of the red road, and be aware of all things in nature around me. And then I look at

the other—that is, going to school, which is geared more to the fast lane, a school of achievers. . . . When I go back to my village, I'm very special in one sense. In another sense, it makes me too smart. They still love me, but I notice I'm not like them anymore. I get sad, and it closes off communication; they don't talk to me. They think, "Now she's too intellectual."

Some people, trapped by their own multiculturalness, become "encapsulated"; others who seem to thrive on living on the border could be labeled "constructive."<sup>48</sup> Multicultural people with an **encapsulated identity** feel torn between different cultural identities. They have difficulty making decisions, are troubled by ambiguity, and feel pressure from both groups. They try to assimilate but never feel comfortable or "at home." As one multiracial student of ours said:

In high school, I was the only Black student and was often left out, and when I got to college, I was thrilled that I was no longer the only Black girl, but I was different. I couldn't understand why they would want to exclude me. College has left me even more confused than elementary, junior high, or high school. I don't know if I will ever understand my culture since I am often left out of it, whatever it may be.

By contrast, multicultural people with a **constructive identity** thrive in their lives on the margins of two cultures. They see themselves, rather than others, as choice makers. They recognize the significance of being "in between," as many multicultural people do. April, a Korean American student of ours, explained:

I still believe that I am, for lack of a better phrase, a hyphenated American because I grew up Korean in America. I am not truly Korean or American; I am somewhere in between. Yet I cannot deny that my beliefs about life stem from both my cultures. I hold many Korean notions very near my heart. Yet I am also very American.

Even so, this identity is constantly being negotiated and explored; it is never completely easy. April went on to say, "My American selfishness fights with my Korean selflessness, my boisterous nature with my quiet contentment, my freedoms with my respect. I have had to find a way to mix those two very different cultures in my life."

### Post-Ethnicity

Recently, a new approach to racial/ethnic identity called post-ethnicity has emerged. In the post-ethnic United States, identities are very fluid and driven by personal identity preferences. As two writers for the *Washington Post* recently observed, "Post-ethnicity reflects 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."<sup>49</sup> The freedom to cross cultures is a relatively recent phenomenon. As shown in



### What Do You Think?

The debate about whether the Confederate flag should fly over the South Carolina Statehouse has been raging for years. For the supporters of the flag, it is a symbol of regional identity, a symbol of the spirit of Confederate rebellion. For African Americans, it is a symbol of a slave system enthusiastically supported by the South under that flag. What does the Confederate flag mean to you?

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Chapter 3, enormous social and legal barriers that prevent post-ethnicity are a part of everyday life in the United States. As these same two writers noted, however, “We aren’t quite there yet.”<sup>50</sup> What might be some reasons that we are not living in a post-ethnic society?

On October 7, 2003, California held an election in which most of the media coverage focused on the recall of then-California governor Gray Davis and the many candidates running to replace him. In that same election, however, voters had to decide on Proposition 54; if passed, it would forbid California cities, counties, and state agencies from collecting data on race and ethnicity. Opponents argued that the lack of data on racial/ethnic disparity would prevent schools, for example, from addressing financial inequities and disparities in performance. Two UCLA professors offered some examples of the value of collecting these data:

[I]n 2002–03, high schools with predominately Latino and African American students had four times as many uncertified teachers and twice the proportion of new teachers as schools with the lowest concentration of these students. . . . Schools with majority Latino and African American students had greater shortages of textbooks and instructional materials.<sup>51</sup>

Why does race continue to reflect disparities in the allocation of resources? How far are we from really reaching a post-ethnic society?

### IDENTITY, LANGUAGE, AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

We express our identities to others through communication—in core symbols, labels, and norms. **Core symbols** tell us about the fundamental beliefs and central concepts that define a particular identity. For example, core symbols of African American identity might be positivity, sharing, uniqueness, realism, and assertiveness.<sup>52</sup> Individualism is often cited as a core symbol of European American identity.

**Labels** are a category of core symbols. They are the terms we use to refer to particular aspects of our own and others’ identities (African American, Latina/o, White, European American). The labels that refer to particular identities are an important part of intercultural communication. Communication scholar Dolores Tanno describes her own multiple identities reflected in the various labels (Spanish, Mexican American, Latina, Chicana) applied to her.<sup>53</sup> The label “Spanish” was applied by her family and designates her ancestral origins in Spain. “Mexican American” reflects two important cultures that make up her identity. “Latina” reflects cultural and historical connectedness with others of Spanish descent, such as Puerto Ricans and South Americans, while “Chicana” promotes political and cultural assertiveness in representing her identity. She stresses that she is all of these, that each reveals a different facet of her identity: symbolic, historical, cultural, and political.

Stuart Hall, a West Indian writer, describes the variety of labels he’s been given: “coloured,” “West Indian,” “Negro,” “Black,” “immigrant”—sometimes

spoken in a friendly manner and sometimes in an abusive way. But he reminds us that, in fact, he is not one or another of these ways of representing himself but is all of them at different times and to varying degrees.<sup>54</sup> These and other terms construct relational meanings in communication situations. The interpersonal relationships between people are important, but so are such terms' social meanings. So there is no set, easy-to-understand identity that is "you." We have multiple identities that are dynamic and complex and that can only be understood in relation to the contexts and cultures in which we live.

Finally, some behavioral **norms**, or common patterns of behavior, are associated with particular identities. For example, women may express their gender identity by being more concerned about safety than men. They may take more precautions when they go out at night, such as walking in groups. People might express their religious identity by participating in activities such as church services or Bible study meetings.

Identity has a profound influence on intercultural communication processes. Sometimes, we assume knowledge about another person's identity, based on his or her membership in a particular cultural group. We may ignore the individual, but we need to recognize and balance both the individual and the cultural aspects of another's identity. As Tom put it: "The question here is one of identity: Who am I perceived to be when I communicate with others? . . . My identity is very much tied to the ways in which others speak to me and the ways in which society represents my interests."<sup>55</sup>

Think about the assumptions you might make about others based on their physical appearance. What do you "know" about people if you know they are from the South, or Mexico, or Australia, or Pakistan? Or think about the times that people have made erroneous assumptions about you based on limited information—assumptions that you became aware of in the process of communication. Focusing only on someone's nationality, birthplace, education, religion, and so on can lead to mistaken conclusions about the person's identity.

Given the many identities that each of us negotiates for ourselves in our everyday interactions, it is clear how our identities and those of others make intercultural communication problematic. It is important to remember that while identities are somewhat fixed they are also very dynamic. For example, the wide array of communication media available multiply the identities we must negotiate. Consider the relationships that develop by e-mail, for example. Some people even create new identities as a result of online interactions. We change who we are depending on the people we communicate with and the manner of our communication.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we explored some of the facets of identity and the importance of identities in intercultural communication. Identities do not develop as a smooth process and are created through communication with others. Also, they are multiple and develop in different ways in different cultures. They are dynamic and may be created for us by existing social contexts and structures and in relation to

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group membership. When these created identities conflict with our sense of our own identity, we need to challenge, resist, and renegotiate those identities.

We also examined how identities are multiple and reflect gender, age, race, ethnicity, physical ability, religion, class, nationality, and other aspects of our society and culture. Identities develop in several stages in relation to minority and majority group membership as well.

Finally, we discussed multicultural identities, emphasizing both the benefits and the challenges of living on the border between two or more cultural realities. Identity is expressed through core symbols, labels, and norms of behavior. It is important to try to minimize making faulty assumptions about other people's identities in intercultural interactions. We need to remember that identities are complex and subject to negotiation.

### BUILDING INTERCULTURAL SKILLS

1. Become more conscious of your own identities and how they relate to your intercultural communication. In what contexts and in which relationships do you feel most comfortable? Which aspects of your identity are most confirmed? Which identities do you most resist? Practice resisting those identities people assign to you that you're not comfortable with. Also practice communication strategies to tell people which identities are important to you and which are not.
2. Become more aware of how you assign identities to other people. What assumptions do you make about others' identities? About poor people? Older people? White people? People with disabilities? How do these assumptions influence your communication? Notice how you communicate with them based on your assumptions.
3. Practice communicating with others in ways that affirm their identities.
4. Talk about identities with your friends. Which identities are most important to them? Which identities do they resist? Which identities do they affirm?

### ACTIVITIES

1. *Stereotypes*: List some of the stereotypes that foreigners have about Americans.
  - a. Where do you think these stereotypes come from?
  - b. How do these stereotypes develop?
  - c. How do these stereotypes influence communication between Americans and people from other countries?
2. *Stereotypes and prime-time TV*: Watch four hours of television during the next week, preferably during evening hours when there are more commercials. During the commercials, record the number of representatives from different identity groups (ethnic, racial, gender, age, class, and so on) that are in-

cluded and the roles they are playing. Report on this assignment to the class, answering the following questions:

- a. How many different groups were represented?
- b. What groups were most represented? Why do you think this is so?
- c. What groups were least represented? Why do you think this is so?
- d. Were there any differences in the roles that members of the cultural groups played? Did one group play more sophisticated/glamorous roles than others?
- e. In how many cases were people depicted in stereotypical roles, such as African Americans as athletes or women as homemakers?
- f. What stereotypes were reinforced in the commercials?
- g. What do your findings suggest about the power of the media and their effect on identity formation and intercultural communication?

**THE ONLINE LEARNING CENTER** at [www.mhhe.com/experiencing2](http://www.mhhe.com/experiencing2) features self-quizzes, flashcards, and crossword puzzles based on the chapter's key terms and concepts.

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