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Why We Need Diverse Methods for Assessing Cultural Identity: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue on diverse methods for cultural identity, we begin by addressing the evolving complexities of defining oneself amidst modern globalization and immigration. We then preview the current collection of papers, which collectively showcase the complexity of cultural identity by exploring how people, especially adolescents and young adults, navigate a plethora of cultural influences—whether through direct migration or the pervasive impact of global cultures—as they psychologically manage diverse and sometimes conflicting allegiances and worldviews. The studies featured in this issue employ a range of methodologies, from qualitative analyses to mixed-methods approaches, to expand our knowledge of the constitution of contemporary cultural identities beyond common quantitative metrics of self-categorization and group belongingness. For instance, research on Jamaican American adolescents highlights how cultural identity is formed through reciprocal socialization processes and systemic factors such as racism. Similarly, studies involving Hmong American youth and Guatemalan adolescents reveal tensions and creative harmonizations in identity management, challenging notions of a homogenized global culture. We conclude by underscoring the need for future research to take a nuanced, intersectional approach to the study of cultural identity, to explore creative measurement tools that are sensitive to local meaning-making among diverse groups around the world, and to attend to the impact of power dynamics in shaping one's sense of self in relation to their cultural group(s).

Keywords

Cultural Identity, Mixed Methods, Qualitative Methods, Globalization, Multiculturalism

Modern globalization and immigration have rendered cultural identity development more complex than it has ever been, as people around the world navigate multiple cultural streams whether or not they have traveled beyond their hometown (Ferguson et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2011; Manago & Pacheco, 2019; McKenzie, 2019, 2020; Ozer et al., 2017). If cross-cultural psychologists wish to see and scientifically interact with the complexity of cultural identity in contemporary times, we must expand our methodological repertoire beyond questionnaires—tools that, when used exclusively, can flatten and render static our understanding of a remarkably dynamic psychological process. This special issue showcases a range of creative methods—from auto-photography to collective case

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studies to cultural identity mapping, and more—that collectively enrich our understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of cultural identity development in this sociohistorical moment.

The remainder of this introduction is organized according to two sections. First, we discuss what cultural identity is and why it is important. In this section, we spotlight special issue contributions and situate them alongside historical thinking about and treatment of cultural identity in our field. Next, we draw attention to what we view as critical future directions for cultural identity research. These critical future directions are inspired both by perspectives that are, and are not, represented in the current special issue.

What Is Cultural Identity and Why Is It Important?

Identity is one of the most important topics in psychology. It is the lens through which we understand reality, the seat of our agency, the foundation for our socioemotional well-being, and the glue that binds us to our social worlds. One of the founders of psychology William James described the self as both an object that is known (the "Me" self) and the subject that perceives, interprets, decides, and acts (the "I" self). The two are inextricably intertwined such that our beliefs and feelings about who we are in the world, including our belongingness to cultural groups based on heritage and participation, constitute our subjective and collective awareness and agency.

The three theoretical frameworks that are most commonly used to study cultural identity in psychology—Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the Acculturation Model (Berry, 1997), and the Ethnic Identity Development Model (Phinney, 1992)—define cultural identity as self-categorization and belongingness, usually to racial/ethnic, religious, and national groups (Ward & Szabó, 2023). In these cases, belongingness is based on quantitative measures of individuals' assessments of various aspects (attitudes, behaviors) of their membership in cultural groups—for example, the degree to which they participate in a group's activities or the degree to which they feel the group is central to who they are (e.g., Sellers et al., 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Research with these kinds of quantitative scales, including studies in our special issue (i.e., Doucerain et al., 2024), consistently demonstrates that positive, committed, and coherent subjective views of cultural group belongingness (the "I"), promotes positive well-being and adaptation.

Less is known about the content of cultural identities (the "Me")—the actual feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and habits that make up what it means to be a member of a particular cultural group or multiple cultural groups. As studies in our special issue confirm, the ability to harmonize multiple cultural identities and use one's knowledge and perspectives to switch fluidly to adjust to different contexts is increasingly necessary to adapt to our globalized multicultural contexts (Doucerain et al., 2024; Ferguson et al., 2024). Critical work examining how the macro-level is embedded in the micro-level of human development is beginning to show that this negotiation depends on the particularities of the worldviews, experiences, and power dynamics associated with the cultural identities in question (Rogers & Way, 2021). Accordingly, one of the goals of this special issue was to showcase expanded methodologies aiming to capture the diversity of meanings and lived experiences of contemporary multicultural identities.

The papers in this special issue represent new possibilities for a variety of methods that can bring cultural perspectives and experiences into the conversation about how multicultural identities are developed and negotiated—both among minority group members (i.e., Doucerain et al., 2024; Ferguson et al., 2024; McKenzie et al., 2024) and majority group members (i.e., Gibbons et al., 2024; Ozer et al., 2024). Ozer and colleagues (2024) bring in cultural content by combining experimental priming of global events, such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID pandemic with interpretive phenomenological analysis of Danish adults' meanings of being Danish, European, and global citizens. Their study demonstrates differences in worldviews associated

with each of these nested cultural identities, and how they are dynamic, shaped by ongoing global and political events, global streams of ideologies, and personal intercultural experiences. Socialization as a context for everyday lives of development comes to the foreground in Ferguson et al.'s (2024) study, which explores Jamaican American adolescents' cultural identities through interviews with their mothers about their parenting practices around food and media. The authors relate their reflexive thematic analysis of mothers' interviews with standard quantitative measures of cultural identity administered to adolescents, finding that adolescents' diverse strategies for assimilating to the majority culture are products of reciprocal socialization processes with their mothers mediating macro-level influences, such as systemic racism.

Two additional studies in our special issue illustrate the importance of qualitative methods for adding nuance and complexity to data from commonly used quantitative measures of multicultural identity. McKenzie et al. (2024) use a cultural mapping exercise with Hmong American emerging adults to aid them in visualizing and articulating their perspectives and experiences of cultural group belongingness, finding tension and conflict, rather than the harmonious integration described in many studies—even when youth report having high levels of ethnic identity coherence on the typically used Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure. The authors' qualitative analyses also reveal how systemic stereotypes are experienced in the micro-level of Hmong Americans' cultural identities, creating challenges to personal coherency. In contrast, the relatively economically privileged group of Guatemalan adolescents in Gibbons et al.'s (2024) study, who express their perspectives and experiences of cultural identity through auto-photography, harmonizes individualistic global values and ambitions with community values and interdependent self-construal. Adolescents' hybridized collective and individualistic cultural identities are not captured by the way they responded to the quantitative acculturation scales. These two studies suggest that significant variation and creativity exist around the world in psychologically managing multiple cultural identities depending on locally situated meanings, constraints, and opportunities, which critically challenges notions of a flattened homogeneous world (Friedman, 2005) arising from globalization where identities are all becoming uniform, largely Westernized, and individualistic.

What Are Some Critical Future Directions for Cultural Identity Research?

Because cultural identity is typically studied from a quantitative, etic, hypothetico-deductive approach, there has been an over-reliance on dominant theoretical approaches that constrain the types of questions we ask and the way we approach data collection. These common practices, we argue, have effectively stunted the development of other theories of cultural identity. One-dimensional knowledge recipes based on self-report Likert-type scales simulate psychological processes without really uncovering how the mind works in terms of constructions of meaning and choice. We argue that qualitative inquiry is vital to conceptual development that can account for the co-constitution of culture and mind and help us understand why people think and behave the way they do. We must continue to innovate on new modes of inquiry that are grounded in people's lived experiences and perspectives to create new intelligibilities for documenting fluidity, nuances, and contradictions of human psychology in contemporary social times.

Qualitative, experience-near methods, combined with quantitative assessments or on their own, are fundamental for appreciating people's rich cultural lives and how they are psychologically managed (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). From anthropology comes the idea of "custom complexes" that represent the characteristics of people's sociohistorical environments, including models for behavior and frameworks of meaning, that are brought to bear in their behaviors and perspectives as members of cultural groups (Whiting & Child, 1953). Future research should continue to elaborate

on methods for documenting ecocultural environments in participants' everyday lives, which would allow researchers to more accurately address links between systemic beliefs, values, practices, narratives, and power structures and individuals' agency and outcomes. The daily diary method for capturing "cultural entropy" (balancing multiple identifications in daily interactions) introduced by Doucerain and colleagues (2024) in this special issue, for instance, focuses on quantitative assessments, but could also be harnessed through additional qualitative methods to document behaviors, beliefs, and values experienced in social interactions when managing different cultural identities. This kind of approach could help us better understand, for example, why some multicultural identities in certain social ecologies might be easier to balance and integrate than others.

The research we are calling for also requires trans- and multi-disciplinary work with fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, indigenous studies, and literature to explore how individuals internalize, reject, and construct new kinds of cultural identities. This work requires explicit incorporation of intersectionality—an increasingly important framework brought into psychology from legal studies (Crenshaw, 1991), sociology (Collins, 1990, 2019), and social justice activists (The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977) that spotlights how systemic power and oppression are embedded in individuals' experiences and identities. An intersectional framework allows us to see how individuals' group-based identities are multidimensional, deriving from the ways their membership in multiple social groups—including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on—intersects to produce unique configurations of privilege and marginalization, which likely influences their navigation of multiple cultural identities. With intersectional perspectives, we can begin to interrogate the power structures in the cultural content of privileged cultural identities, such as White European Americans who are often depicted as the default, devoid of culture, and emblematic of the prototypical experience (Causadias et al., 2018; Rogoff, 2003). Recent work on the Whiteness Pandemic (Ferguson et al., 2022) and how White Supremacy culture (Moffitt & Rogers, 2022) shapes adolescent identity development provides new possibilities for making visible often unacknowledged privileges experienced at the individual level that perpetuate systemic inequalities. As globalization increasingly brings multiple cultural groups into contact, it is more important than ever to examine how multicultural identity negotiations may be products of systemic power structures embedded in the micro-level through beliefs, values, ideologies, narratives, and practices.

Of course, diverse samples at various levels of privilege and exploitation around the world are necessary for cultivating a deeper understanding of these processes of cultural identity in contemporary times. Studies in this special issue largely reflect a persistent tendency in the field of psychology and even cross-cultural psychology to focus on relatively privileged samples in high-income economies (Henrich et al., 2010). This fact limits both understanding of contrasting perspectives of those experiencing privilege and marginality, and the rich tapestry of cultural psychological material we have to analyze how cultural identities evolve with globalization and innovations in social technologies to express and manifest cultural identities. As the process of being and acting in the world as a member of a cultural group becomes increasingly mediated by social technologies and artificial intelligence, cultural identities are likely to become more dynamic and multifaceted. Psychology as a field will be left behind in addressing cultural changes without diverse samples and methods for understanding this complexity.

To conclude, the studies in this special issue illustrate that the world is not becoming more homogeneous with globalization; rather, people's negotiations and experiences of themselves as members of cultural groups are becoming more diverse, complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. We hope this work will inspire new approaches and theories for broadening and deepening our understanding of the "cultural" in cultural identities to better account for the development, construction, and maintenance of cultural group belongingness in everyday lives.

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