“What Is Cultural Identity?”
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1 Children begin to develop a sense of identity as individuals and as members of groups from their earliest interactions with others (McAdoo, 1993; Sheets, 1999a). One of the most basic types of identity is ethnic identity, which entails an awareness of one’s membership in a social group that has a common culture. The common culture may be marked by a shared language, history, geography, and (frequently) physical characteristics (Fishman, 1989; Sheets, 1999a).

2 Not all of these aspects need to be shared, however, for people to psychologically identify with a particular ethnic group. Cultural identity is a broader term: people from multiple ethnic backgrounds may identify as belonging to the same culture. For example, in the Caribbean and South America, several ethnic groups may share a broader, common, Latin culture. Social groups existing within one nation may share a common language and a broad cultural identity but have distinct ethnic identities associated with a different language and history. Ethnic groups in the United States are examples of this. . . .

Definitions of Culture and the Invisibility of One’s Own Culture

3 Anthropologists and other scholars continue to debate the meaning of this term. García (1994) refers to culture as [T]he system of understanding characteristics of that individual’s society, or of some subgroup within that society. This system of understanding includes values, beliefs, notions about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and other socially constructed ideas that members of the society are taught are “true.” (p. 51)

4 Geertz (1973) asserts that members of cultures go about their daily lives within shared webs of meaning. If we link García and Geertz’s definitions, we can imagine culture as invisible webs composed of values, beliefs, ideas about appropriate behavior, and socially constructed truths.

5 One may ask, why is culture made up of invisible webs? Most of the time, our own cultures are invisible to us (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1996; Philips, 1983), yet they are the context within which we operate and make sense of the world. When we encounter a culture that is different from our own, one of the things we are faced with is a set of beliefs that manifest themselves in behaviors that differ from our own.

6 In this way, we often talk about other people’s cultures, and not so much about our own. Our own culture is often hidden from us, and we frequently describe it as “the way things are.” Nonetheless, one’s beliefs and actions are not any more natural or biologically predetermined than any other group’s set of beliefs and actions; they have emerged from the ways one’s own group has dealt with and interpreted the particular conditions it has faced. As conditions change, so do cultures; thus, cultures are considered to be dynamic.

Individual Differences Within Cultures and the Dynamic Nature of Culture

7 Individual cultural identity presents yet another layer of complexity. Members of the same culture vary widely in their beliefs and actions. How can we explain this phenomenon? The argument for a “distributive model” of culture addresses the relationship between culture and personality (García, 1994; Schwartz, 1978). This argument posits that individuals select beliefs, values, and ideas that guide their actions from a larger set of cultural beliefs, values, and ideas. In most cases, we do not consciously pick and choose attributes from the total set; rather, the conditions and events in our individual lives lead us to favor some over others. In summarizing Spiro’s concept of “cultural heritage,” García (1994) draws a distinction between “cultural heritage” and “cultural inheritance.” Cultural heritage refers to what society as a whole possesses, and a cultural inheritance is what each individual possesses. In other words, each individual inherits some (but not all) of the cultural heritage of the group.

8 We all have unique identities that we develop within our cultures, but these identities are not fixed or static. This is the reason that stereotypes do not hold up: no two individuals from any culture are exactly alike. While living inside a culture allows members to become familiar with the total cultural heritage of that society, no individual actually internalizes the entire cultural heritage. In fact, it would be impossible for any one person to possess a society’s entire cultural heritage; there are inevitably complex and contradictory values, beliefs, and ideas within that heritage, a result of the conditions and events that individuals and groups experience. For example, arranged marriage has long been a cultural practice in India based on the belief that the families of potential spouses best know who would make a desirable match. More and more frequently, however, individuals reject the practice of arranged marriage; this is partly due to the sense of independence from family brought on by both men’s and women’s participation in a rapidly developing job market. The changing experience of work is shifting cultural attitudes towards family and marriage. These different experiences and the new values, beliefs, and ideas they produce contribute to the dynamic nature of culture.