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# Ideology, Identity, and Intercultural Communication: An Analysis of Differing Academic Conceptions of Cultural Identity

Young Yun Kim

*Cultural identity is a ubiquitous concept in intercultural communication and across social science disciplines. Based on a review of a broad range of literature addressing issues of cultural identity, this article describes how the pluralistic turn in ideology in American society at large and the blurring of boundaries between academic research and social activism have influenced how cultural identity has been defined and conceptualized in recent decades. Employing the author's analytic framework of "ideological circle" consisting of assimilationism, pluralism, integrationism, and separatism, the author examines implicit or explicit ideological messages emanating from various conceptions of cultural identity. The results reveal five different basic themes of cultural identity: (a) an adaptive and evolving entity of an individual; (b) a flexible and negotiable entity of an individual; (c) a discrete social category and an individual choice; (d) a distinct and communal system of communicative practices; and (e) a discrete social category and a non-negotiable group right.*

**Keywords:** Ideology; Identity; Intercultural Communication

## Introduction

Cultural identity has occupied a central place in social sciences, particularly in communication and social psychology. A substantial amount of work has addressed issues of cultural identity directly or indirectly, offering a wide array of views on

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cultural identity in intercultural contexts, and how it should be best investigated. The varying, and sometimes divergent, academic conceptions are closely linked to the ideological shift in recent decades from the traditional “melting pot” perspective on intergroup relations in the United States toward a more pluralistic perspective on ethnicity, race, and culture. This ideological change is reflected in a clear pluralistic turn in academic inquiry into cultural identity, along with an increasing salience of “critical” scholarship adding its voice to, and challenging, the mainstream “disciplinary” social scientific conceptions of cultural identity. Some of the more salient identity conceptions of cultural identity are examined in this article. They are compared according to respective implicit or explicitly articulated underlying assumptions. The aim in this analysis is to discern and explain how investigators vary widely, and sometimes intensely, as to what cultural identity is, what it means in the context of intercultural-intergroup relations, and how it is to be researched. The analysis will reveal a close correspondence of differing academic conceptions of cultural identity to the societal trend of ideological turn since the 1970s toward pluralism.

### *Working Definitions*

Given the wide range of differing conceptual and methodological approaches being examined, the term *cultural identity* is employed broadly to include related concepts such as subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial identity. Cultural identity also designates both a sociological or demographic classification, as well as an individual’s psychological identification with a particular group. Both sociological and psychological meanings of cultural identity are regarded as two inseparable correlates of the same phenomenon. Likewise, the term *intercultural communication* is used to represent various related terms, such as interethnic, interracial, and intergroup communication, that refer to encounters in which individual participants differ, and/or perceive themselves to be different, in group-based experiential backgrounds.

Similarly, the term *ideology* is also used in this work as a multidimensional concept. At the macro-societal level, ideology is employed to mean what Billig (1991) referred to as “lived ideology,” or “a latent consciousness or philosophy” that is largely shared by people within a society as “a society’s way of life” or “what passes for common sense within a society” (pp. 27–29). At the individual level, ideology refers to a set of intellectual beliefs of thinking individuals that are stimulated, substantiated, and constrained by the shared beliefs of the society at large. Here, individuals are regarded as formulating and expressing their opinions by invoking socially shared beliefs as their own. Even in making remarks that are self-serving or internally contradictory, individuals are assumed to consider their argument reasonable or even persuasive in the eyes of a rational audience.

*Analytic Framework for Ideological Messages*

In examining ideological messages, either implied or advocated in academic writings, the author utilizes four interconnected positions with respect to culture and intercultural relations: *assimilationism*, *pluralism*, *integrationism*, and *separatism*. These four positions have been identified in an earlier qualitative-interpretive analysis (Kim, 1999, 2006), based on a qualitative-interpretive analysis of a variety of data that includes publicly communicated messages concerning ethnicity, race, and culture made by political and civic leaders, activists, academicians, and ordinary citizens. Some messages are naturally occurring while others are in the form of personal reflections and testimonials. Together, the four ideological positions represent the diverse and often divergent opinions voiced in contemporary American society and beyond, criss-crossing many conventional social categories such as ethnicity, race, and political party affiliation.

*Assimilationism* is best expressed in the dictum, *E Pluribus Unum*—the principle behind the American ethos that seeks to transcend a tribal, ancestral, and territorial condition. Rooted in the political philosophy of classical liberalism, assimilationism espouses *individualism*, a cultural mindset that celebrates individual identity, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. This mindset is extended to immigrants and cultural minorities in the form of a degree of “Anglo-conformity” in public spheres of life (Gordon, 1964), consistent with the old folk wisdom, “When in Rome, do as Romans do.” In contrast, *pluralism* stands for an ideological position that is born out of the inevitable gap between the ideals of assimilationism and the reality of everyday life not measuring up to the ideals. The seed for the contradiction is the awareness that the ideals of classical liberalism are not always applied to those of non-dominant group backgrounds. A natural response to such discrepancies has been a movement that challenges the status quo, replacing individualistic beliefs and the melting-pot metaphor with contrary claims of *group identity* and newer metaphors such as “mosaic,” “quilt,” and “salad bowl” that emphasize distinctiveness of each group.

Straddled between the assimilationism-pluralism ideological poles is *integrationism*, which emphasizes the need to moderate the often tortured reality of identity politics and to search for some kind of *reconciliation*. Integrationist voices often escape media attention or get lost in the midst of more conspicuous messages of committed ideologues. This is a position that sociologist Wolfe (1998) asserts as occupying “the vital center,” the “middle” America. It reflects the struggle of mainstream Americans to seek mutual accommodation and balance, as well as their ambivalence and contradiction. Integrationists may, for example, support bilingual programs, but only if they are short-lived and not used as a political instrument of power demanded by every group for its own separate slice of the political pie.

The full spectrum of American public discourse on interethnic relations further includes the marginal, but persistent, voices of *separatism*, often characterized

as views of so-called “extremists.” Whereas messages of assimilationism, pluralism, and integrationism commonly adhere to the societal goal of interethnic integration (while disagreeing on specific visions as to how to achieve this goal), extremist messages advocate, or at least suggest, a preference for a maximum ingroup-outgroup distance. Often, the rigidity with which cultural identity boundaries are drawn galvanizes Americans into “us-against-them” posturing. In some cases, the claims of equal and distinct identity tends to manifest itself in tendencies of collective self-glorification and denigration of other groups, and, at times, even violence and terror. Although not always explicit, separatist views can be inferred from the inflammatory rhetorical devices employed to condemn or scapegoat an outgroup or position the ingroup as innocent “victims.”

These four ideological messages—assimilationism, pluralism, integrationism, and separatism—are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they form an ideological circle, in which each position defines, and is defined by, the other. The circle highlights the ideological polemics that play out in everyday public discourse in the United States and beyond. The vision and principles embodied in *E Pluribus Unum* continue to be voiced in the form of assimilationism, while being vigorously challenged by the counter-themes of pluralism advocating the primacy of group identity, along with the reconciliatory efforts to promote ideological balance and moderation in integrationism, as well as separatism of the extreme right and the extreme left, closing the circle (see Kim, 1999, 2006 for a more detailed representation).

### **Inquiry in Cultural Identity**

Systematic investigations of cultural identity can be traced back to psychologist Erickson’s (1950, 1968) groundbreaking theoretical work. Erickson described the process of identity development as one in which the two identities of the individual and of the group are merged into one. Erickson placed cultural identity at the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his or her “common culture.” Erikson’s early identity conception has been echoed in subsequent academic writings about cultural identity. For De Vos (1990), for example, cultural identity provides “a sense of common origin, as well as common beliefs and values, or common values” and serves as the basis of “self-defining in-groups” (p. 204). For Yinger (1986), ethnic attachment is a “genuine culture” that forms the person’s “basic identity” and offers “a sense of historical continuity and embeddedness and a larger existence in a collectivity of one’s group” (p. 21).

#### *Cultural Identity as Social and Individual Concepts*

Given the inseparability of the personal and the social in an individual’s identity, cultural identity has been approached at both levels. Cultural anthropologists (e.g., Nash, 1989) typically view culture and ethnicity as a kind of temporal continuity or common tradition linking its members to a common future, which is

fostered by the communal life patterns and practices associated with language, behavior, norms, beliefs, myths, and values, as well as the forms and practices of social institutions. In sociological research, culture is commonly treated as a social category that is an element of ethnicity, defined by membership that is differentiated from other groups by a set of objective characteristics, qualities, or conditions such as national and/or geographical origin, language, religion, and race. This is the way, for instance, sociologists such as Glazer and Moynihan (1975) investigated the phenomenon of “ethnic stratification” in the United States.

Psychological studies, on the other hand, typically approach cultural identity in terms of “the subjective orientation of an individual toward his or her ethnic origins” (Alba, 1990, p. 25). Terms such as cultural identity, ethnolinguistic identity, or ethnic identification are often exchangeably used to replace ethnicity per se in most social psychological studies of intergroup behavior. From the perspective of the influential social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), cultural identity is seen as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The social identity theory and many experimental studies based on this theory (e.g., Brewer & Miller, 1988) further illuminate the interplay of the two dimensions of personhood, the personal and the social. That is, identification with a social group is rooted in the basic human tendency of cognitive categorization, and the membership in, and identification with, an ethnic group renders the individual an emotionally significant aspect of the individual’s self-concept.

### *The Pluralistic Turn and Activism in Identity Research*

Increasingly, collective group interests have become of concern to the individual, above and beyond their implications for personal self-interest. As Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) observe, cultural identity, in effect, has been deemed by many social researchers an extension of the self, indicating “a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person” (p. 50).

The emphasis psychologists have placed on group-level cultural identity has been a dominant voice in academic discourse in recent decades. Idealized or essentialist conceptions of cultural identity parallel the ideological shift toward greater pluralism in the ideological landscape of the United States, beginning with the “new ethnicity” movement prompted by the civil rights movement in the 1960s in the United States. In their early work, Glazer and Moynihan (1963) concluded a sociological analysis by stating, “The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen” (p. 290). Others, such as Novak (1971), argued against assimilation and advocated “equal ethnicity for all.” Novak pointed to the feelings of alienation held by one large ethnic group, Poles, who had been drawn to “ethnic power” movements in the competition for jobs, respect, and attention. In this pluralistic turn in cultural identity, the primacy of individualism and individual identity has been challenged

by contrary claims of group identity and the associated attempts to elevate group distinctiveness over a larger, societal identity.

Side by side with the pluralistic turn, there has been an increasing trend of departure in research addressing issues of cultural identity from the traditional representational stance of value-neutrality to the primacy of political advocacy and other forms of practice. This politicization of academic inquiry has been largely motivated by the increasing number of traditional social scientists who find the value-neutral stance of the traditional scientific approach less than satisfying (cf. Diesing, 1991; Hammersley, 1995; Thornton, 1996). Arguments have been made by some social scientists for a redistribution of power and resources to overcome inequalities in group status (e.g., Hacker, 1992), and for a greater diversity of the university curriculum by replacing it with one “that would focus on the achievements of marginalized peoples and on the sins of the nation’s founders” (Traub, 1998, p. 25).

The shift in emphasis from realism-based “disciplinary” theory to more idealistic social activism has been fueled by non-traditional scholars of various postmodern philosophical schools such as “critical theory,” “cultural studies,” and “muted group and standpoint theory,” among others (cf. Hammersley, 1995, p. x). Vigorous arguments have been mounted to gear research directly to “emancipatory” political goals of eliminating “white racism” at home and countering Western/American “imperialism” abroad. Indeed, pressure has been felt by many traditional researchers who find the field too political, so much so that a given theory, along with the credibility of the theorist, appears to be dismissed by some, not based on the validity of the knowledge claim in representing the reality in question, but simply based on the implied question, “Whose side are you on?”

### **Ideology and Basic Themes in Academic Conceptions of Cultural Identity**

Intended or not, then, social researchers have been participants in the ideological polemics of American society and elsewhere. A close examination of academic writings across disciplines reveals five basic themes of cultural identity generally reflecting or supporting one or more of the four ideological positions in Kim’s (1999, 2006) ideological circle described earlier: (a) cultural identity as an adaptive and evolving entity of an individual; (b) cultural identity as a flexible and negotiable entity of an individual; (c) cultural identity as a discrete social category and an individual choice; (d) cultural identity as a flexible and negotiable entity of an individual; and (e) cultural identity as a discrete and non-negotiable social category and group right.

#### *Cultural Identity as an Adaptive and Evolving Entity of an Individual*

Social scientific theories since the 1930s have been predicated on the premise that adaptation of immigrants and other cultural minorities is an important and desirable goal for the individual as well as for the society as a whole. This affirmative

view of cross-cultural adaptation is consistent with the widely held assimilationist view that calls for convergence and fusion among alien or minority cultures into a coherent system of ideas and practices of the society at large (Postiglione, 1983).

Numerous empirical studies document the assimilative trend (see Kim, 2001, for an extensive literature review). Sociological studies have investigated minority-majority relations in which minority groups are structurally integrated into the political, social, and economic systems of the society at large. The assimilative trend is even more definitively evidenced in cross-generational studies, including Page's (1994) study of the Japanese and their children in Brazil. According to Page, the Japanese first immigrated to Brazil in 1908 as contract workers for coffee plantations and strongly resisted assimilation, and yet the present third-generation Japanese-Brazilians are on the whole fully integrated into Brazilian society, entering into racially mixed marriages as freely as other Brazilians. Lind (1995) documents that the European immigrant groups in the United States began as distinct groups at the beginning of the twentieth century and have almost completely assimilated. According to Lind, four-fifths of Italian-Americans, half of American Jews, one-third of Hispanics, and one-half of Asian-Americans have married outside their officially designated categories since 1950. Lind further reports that the number of children born to black-white marriages quintupled between 1968 and 1988, and a growing number of mixed-race Americans are now lobbying for their own "multiracial" category.

The assimilative trend is further documented in a study by the American Jewish Committee, which shows a significant increase in the members' merging into non-Jewish organizations and a substantial decrease in their Jewish identification (Zweigenhalf, 1979–1980). Masuda, Matsumoto, and Meredith (1970) similarly demonstrate that the cultural identity of Japanese-Americans in the United States gradually has decreased across the generations. Triandis, Kashima, Shimada, and Villareal (1986) and Suro (1998) independently report that long-term Hispanics showed diminished Hispanic "cultural scripts" in their judgments and increased social interactions with non-Hispanics. Namazi (1984) likewise observes an assimilative trend among Mexican, Cuban, and Middle Eastern immigrants. In Canada, McCauley (1991) reports decreasing traditional forms of behavior in the French and English Canadian populations of Penetanguishene in southern Ontario. In a study of language maintenance and shift, Morgan (1987) reports that Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic have shifted, over time, from their native language, Creole, to the host language, Spanish.

Emerging from these and many other empirical findings is the nature of cultural identity that is, over time, dynamic and evolving, and not static and categorical. This basic reality of assimilation is explained in Kim's integrative communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988, 1995, 2001, 2005a). Defining adaptation as a natural process of individuals striving to establish a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment, the theory explains that, through extensive, intensive, and cumulative experiences of intercultural communication, an individual's original cultural identity undergoes

a gradual transformation. This identity transformation is described as an emergence of an “intercultural identity,” that is increasingly more “universalized” and “individuated” in self-other orientation, one that is more flexible and less rigidly bound by group categories.

While consistent with the “melting-pot” view of cultural identity, Kim’s theory also addresses pluralists’ concerns for the maintenance of original cultural identity. It does so by emphasizing that intercultural identity development does not come about without “costs.” The adaptation process is explained in terms of the “stress-adaptation-growth dynamic,” a process filled with ambivalence and internal conflict between one’s loyalty to the original identity and a necessity to embrace a new one. Yet, according to the theory, it is the stressful experience that “pushes” individuals to restructure their existing internal conditions to regain an internal equilibrium. This functional interrelatedness of stress and adaptation describes the process of organizing and reorganizing oneself, bringing about psychological “growth” at a higher level of self-integration. Furthermore, the theory disputes the pluralist view that the long-term identity evolution toward assimilation necessarily entails “giving up” or “discarding” the original identity. The author thereby rejects the dichotomous view that individuals have to choose either one or the other, and proposes the concept, intercultural identity, as a viable self-other orientation that facilitates social integration and discourages unwarranted divisiveness along group lines.

#### *Cultural Identity as a Flexible and Negotiable Entity of an Individual*

A number of intercultural communication theories offer conceptions of cultural identity that can be characterized as integrationist in ideological position. In Imahori and Cupach’s (2005) *identity management theory*, for example, identity is conceived categorically as a given society’s (or subsociety’s) way of life embodied in each individual as an interpretive frame for experience, provides expectations for behavior and motivates individuals’ behavior. At the same time, this theory presents a more complex and refined identity conception that recognizes that individuals have multiple identities, of which cultural (as well as relational) identities are central to interpersonal relationship development with culturally dissimilar others. The central argument made in this theory points to the importance and necessity of flexible “identity management” in dealing with others whose cultural identities differ from one’s own. This, according to Imahori and Cupach, is because aspects of individuals’ identities are revealed through the presentation of “face” (e.g., situated identities individuals claim) and the ability to maintain face in interactions is one indicator of individuals’ interpersonal communication competence in both intracultural and intercultural contexts.

Similarly categorical, but flexible, identity conceptions are offered in Ting-Toomey’s (1993, 2005) *identity negotiation theory*, that an individual’s ability to negotiate one’s cultural identity (or regulate one’s identity boundary) is at the center of “communicative resourcefulness” (or the knowledge and ability to apply

cognitive, affective, and behavioral resources appropriately, effectively, and creatively in diverse interaction situations). Also, Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005) in laying the groundwork for a *communication theory of cultural identity*, conceptualize cultural identity as one of the four levels of “identity frames” that serve as the “interpretive context” of a communication context, identified as: personal (individual characteristics), enacted (emergent in social behavior and symbols), relational (emerging in relationships with others and are “jointly negotiated”), and communal (something held by a group of people which, in turn, bonds the group together). The notion that cultural identity is not fixed, but a flexible and individually variable entity also underlies Kim’s (1997, 2005b) *contextual theory of interethnic communication*. In this multidimensional theory focusing on the “associative” and “dissociative” intercultural communication behavior of individuals, Kim incorporates cultural identity into a broader identity orientation of a communicator, and identifies its two main factors, “identity inclusivity/exclusivity” and “identity security/insecurity,” as influencing the communicator’s associative/dissociative behavior when dealing with culturally and ethnically dissimilar others.

#### *Cultural Identity as a Discrete Category and an Individual Choice*

Whereas the conceptions described so far highlight, implicitly or explicitly, the evolving or flexible and negotiable nature of cultural identity, other conceptions emphasize that cultural identity is a discrete social category, but that individuals choose to identify themselves with one or more categories through an act of voluntary identification. Phinney and Rosenthal (1992), for instance, describe “cultural identity development” in minority adolescents by emphasizing the importance of achieving a secure sense of themselves as cultural group members and a “commitment” to one’s cultural identity. Not achieving such a commitment to one’s own group is viewed as resulting in significant detriment to the individual’s psychological and social functioning. Phinney (1993) also discusses the possibility for some minority adolescents to develop a “bicultural identity.” Suggested in this conception of cultural and bicultural identity development is a mixture of integrationist and pluralistic ideological messages. The main insight one can draw from this theory is the paramount importance for individuals associated with a minority culture and cultural group to develop a clear sense of commitment to that group. At the same time, it allows for the possibility of moving beyond one’s original identity by observing that, for some adolescents, a secure cultural identity can be one that integrates at least two cultural identities.

Integrationist-pluralist conceptions of cultural identity have been offered by many other social researchers including Stonequist (1964) and Berry (1980, 1990). Stonequist argued that immigrants would follow one of three distinct paths mainly as a function of individual choice: (a) assimilation into the dominant group; (b) assimilation into the “subordinate” group; or (c) some form of accommodation and reconciliation of the two societies. Similarly, Berry’s psychological model of

acculturation is built on two key questions concerning the subjective identity orientation: “Are cultural identity and customs of value to be retained?” and “Are positive relations with the larger society of value and to be sought?” By combining the response types (yes, no) to these two questions, the model generates four acculturation modes: (a) “integration” (yes, yes); (b) “assimilation” (no, yes); (c) “separation” (yes, no); and (d) “marginality” (no, no). These theories are constructed on the premise that, although cultural identity is a discrete category, individuals do have some choice in forming their own cultural identity.

### *Cultural Identity as a Distinct System of Communal Practices*

To many ethnographic researchers, cultural identity is conceived as a communally shared system of communicative practices that is unique to the community and enduring over time, a phenomenon that cannot and should not be understood either as a discrete variable or an individual choice.

Rooted in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition and applying Geertz’s (1973) framework of the interpretation of culture, Philipsen and his associates (Philipsen, 1992; 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005) have developed an interpretive theory of cultural communication. This theory offers a foundational framework for ethnographic studies that are aimed at identifying, describing, and illuminating the essential cultural features of communication that differentiate one community from another. An extensive body of original field studies grounded in this perspective have contributed to a deepening understanding of the conversation patterns and other communication practices unique to a given cultural or subcultural community. Among the notable works are an examination of the cultural meaning of the word “communication” in some American speech (Katriel & Philipsen, 1990), recognizable Indian ways of speaking in Native American communities (Pratt, 1998; Wieder & Pratt, 1990), Russian “cultural pragmatics” in the context of Russian-American encounters (Carbaugh, 1993), Finnish silence and third-party introduction (Carbaugh, 2005), and interpersonal communication and relationship patterns in Columbia (Fitch, 1998), to name only a few.

Directly or indirectly, ethnographic descriptions of cultural identities provided in studies end to emphasize the enduring and communal nature of cultural identity—the shared life patterns, practices, and symbols connoting a common tradition and common future. In emphasizing distinctiveness and consistency of cultural communication practices, they suggest a pluralistic “we-and-they” ideological perspective, one that is largely silent on individual variations in identity orientations (related to identity adaptation and change in individuals and identity negotiation and choices).

### *Cultural Identity as a Discreet and Non-Negotiable Social Category and Group Right*

The most explicit and unambiguous pluralistic messages have been presented by “critical” scholars, including some whose writings connote a sense of separatism. Critical scholarship has been a salient and productive intellectual force

in intercultural communication in recent years (e.g., Collier, 2005; Gonzalez & Tanno, 1997; Nakayama & Martin, 1998; Young, 1996). The critical inquiry is by no means internally homogeneous, with different conceptions and competing lines of thought variously represented in “postimperialism,” “postcolonialism,” “muted group and standpoint theory,” “critical pragmatism,” and “cultural studies,” among others (cf. Hammersley, 1995, p. x).

Nevertheless, this author observes some ideologically-grounded common threads running through many critical conceptions of cultural identity, in varying degrees. Among them is the argument that authors of social scientific theories fail to address the predicaments in which members of traditionally underprivileged groups find themselves as “victims” of systematic oppression, thereby serving to reproduce the status quo of the dominant cultural ideology (Hall, 1989). In introducing an anthology of essays presented largely from a critical perspective, for example, Gonzalez, Houston, and Chen (1994) stated their goal of presenting the perspective of the authors’ own cultural experience “instead of writing to accommodate the voice that is culturally desirable by the mainstream Anglo standards” (p. xiv). Critical researchers tend to be united in their opposition to the traditional normative-representational-disciplinary social research. Critical researchers see this social science tradition as serving to reproduce the status quo of the dominant ideological construct, assimilationism. Young (1996), for example, even goes so far as to characterize social science research as a “universal” science that serves as “the beholders of cultural individualism” of European societies whose work “has led to a theory of politics about individual power” neglecting the “battles of cultural politics” (p. 148).

Reflecting these pluralistic and, to a degree, separatist ideological positions are the conceptions of cultural identity that have been articulated by a number of intercultural communication researchers. Hedge (1998), based on interviews with 10 Asian Indian women in the United States, characterizes the adaptation experiences of these women in light of their “struggle” and “displacement.” These experiences are attributed by Hedge to the “contradictions” between their internal identity and external “world in which hegemonic structures systematically marginalize certain types of difference” (p. 36). A similarly suggested opposition to assimilation of “members of marginalized communities” is claimed by Flores (2001). From a “Chicana feminist” perspective, Flores appears to dismiss assimilation as a “myth” and, instead, argues that members of “marginalized communities,” including “those of us in academia,” produce “oppositional readings of dominant or mainstream texts” as a “strategy of resistance” (p. 27).

A related common thrust in critical scholarship is the conception of cultural identity as a discreet, largely monolithic, and non-negotiable social category. Tsuda’s (1986) goes close to a separatist ideological perspective when he criticizes Western ideological domination as the genesis of “distorted intercultural communication” around the world. Tsuda argues, in particular, that the dominance of the English language imposes an overt restriction on non-Western peoples’ freedom of expression and damages their identity. Likewise, Young (1996) presents his criticism

of Western “cultural imperialism” by depicting today’s global reality as one of power asymmetry between communicators rooted in “oppressive” and “imperialistic” Western cultural-institutional systems. Characterizing his view as a “moderation” or “middle-path between imperial universalism and separatist cultural relativism” (p. 4), Young offers a vision of “true intercultural communication” in which “there is joint interest, a common interest, so that one is eager to give and the other to take” (p. 183).

On the whole, critical scholarship gives little attention to the possibilities of identity adaptation, transformation, flexibility, negotiation, and individual variations or choices. At least one possible exception to this observation is *co-cultural theory* (Orbe, 1998; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Orbe and Spellers (2005) frame this theory as a critical theory designed to explain how individual members of a traditionally “muted social group” orient themselves to members of a dominant group. Within this framework, however, Orbe and Spellers go on to suggest individual variations and choices when they offer a theoretical typology that explicates specific “co-cultural communication strategies”—from “avoiding,” “mirroring,” “embracing stereotypes,” and “censoring self,” to “educating others,” “bargaining,” “attacking,” and “sabotaging others.”

## Synthesis

Though far from being complete or precise, the present analysis has been an attempt to identify common themes underlying various academic conceptions of cultural identity and the ideological underpinnings thereof. Together, the five themes—from the most dynamic, adaptive, and transformative to the most categorical and non-negotiable—illustrate some of the points of contention as well as of convergence in the on-going debates with respect to the nature of cultural identity and its role in intercultural communication within and across societies. Intended or not, and implicit or explicit, the ideological messages emanating from the literature are consistent with or support one or more of the four positions: assimilationism, integrationism, pluralism, and separatism.

Through this analysis, the author has come to a tentative understanding of the identity polemics in social research, both within and outside the field of intercultural communication, as being fundamentally rooted in two very different versions of what an ideal society or an ideal intercultural relation should be and how cultural (along with other) differences must be managed. At the assimilationist and integrative side of the debate are views that are built on the premise of the primacy of individual identity, a universalized vision of citizenship, and mutual accommodation. At the pluralistic and separatist side, arguments are made to open ourselves to possibilities of constructing a society that keeps faith with the principle of *Pluribus*, the primacy of group identity as a basic and profound right of individuals.

### *Philosophical-Methodological Challenges*

The ideological divergence described above is most acute along the lines of traditional representational scholarship and critical scholarship. The main research aim for traditional social scientific research is accurately describing and explaining a given reality as is, regardless of particular opinions of individual investigators. Although varied along (neo)positivist, systems, and phenomenological-interpretive in methodological details, there is a general agreement as to the importance of maximally removing from the conduct of research the researcher's own social or political agenda. In this broad philosophical-methodological framework, social scientists have made a range of knowledge claims about cultural identity that emphasize different degrees of complexity, flexibility, and individual variations. On the other hand, critical researchers' advocacy of pluralistic ideals is reflected in the conception of cultural identity as largely ascription-based and monolithic entity. Some of the writings even suggest a sense of "cultural identity at any cost"—an implicit message that gives cultural identity a non-negotiable moral and political imperative. This pluralist-separatist moral presupposition tends to overlook the potential "dark side" of a rigid, categorical adherence to cultural identity, that is, the tendencies of collective ingroup glorification and outgroup denigration.

As fellow investigators striving to better understand the nature of cultural identity, both traditional social scientists and critical researchers are confronted with the fundamental question about what constitutes an acceptable and legitimate knowledge claim. Philosophical-methodological divergence, indeed, has presented an intellectual barrier that cannot be easily reconciled and bridged. Efforts have been made by some to either merge (e.g., Collier, 2005), or embrace the inevitable tension in a dialectic relationship between oppositional paradigms (e.g., Martin & Nakayama, 1999). It is yet to be seen whether or not the fundamental philosophical-methodological differences can be bridged or reconciled. For now, there is clearly a need for intercultural communication researchers to acquire deeper knowledge of differing philosophical-methodological systems. It is through expanded methodological literacy that divergent perspectives may be better understood and even appreciated, so as to be able to compare and contrast differing perspectives and to seek consensus regarding some basic requisite criteria for assessing the soundness of all knowledge claims and research practices. As well, all researchers of all methodological-ideological orientations can benefit from engaging in rigorous self-reflection and cross-examination, so as to form a clearer understanding of the varied methodological-ideological underpinnings in their own work and each other's work.

### **Conclusion**

We live in the post-9-11 era of clashing identities. Tightly knit communications technologies and transportation systems continue to bring together differing languages, religions, cultures, races, and nationalities closer than ever before in a

web of interdependence, conflict, and a common fate. Paradoxically, the very forces that diminish physical, social, and cultural boundaries exacerbate group rivalries, rendering a deeply fractious and unsettling landscape of today's world. The seemingly innocent banner of cultural identity is now a compelling sore spot galvanizing many into "us-against-them" posturing. Some of the most passionate domestic and international conflicts headlining the daily media involve differing cultural identities. From long-festered prejudices, discriminations, and hatreds to the more recent acts of violent rage and terror, we are seeing in all corners of the world so many angry words, hurt, and destruction.

Although the future is fundamentally uncertain, one thing is clear. For the foreseeable future, issues pertaining to cultural identity will continue to be a salient and politicized phenomenon. In this global context, this author proposes some basic questions to be considered by other researchers seeking to make knowledge claims about cultural identity. Is rigid adherence to the ethnicity of our youth feasible or desirable? At what point do we cross the line from rightful and constructive claims for group identity to disastrous collisions with undue prejudice directed against one another? How can a society of multiple cultural identities such as the United States support and give confidence to all groups, while upholding the communal values and responsibilities that transcend allegiance to each group?

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