

## **Cultural Identification, Cultural Identity and Communication**

**Ling Chen**

*Hong Kong Baptist University  
Hong Kong*

**Shiwen Pan**

*Guangxi Normal University  
China*

Cultural identification and cultural identity describe two different but related concepts. The concepts refer to two interrelated sociopsychological processes constructed and manifested through communication. In this essay, we discuss the interrelation and distinction between the cultural identification and cultural identity. The focus is on their construction, expression, or communication.

### **Cultural Identification**

As a type of identification, cultural identification is internal to an individual. From a sociopsychological point of view, identification is a phenomenon where one cannot separate oneself as an entity from the environment or from part of it. The environment may be another individual, a collective of individuals, a physical location, or a combination of any or all of these or just the idea of them. One entity is identifying with another when boundaries between the two become blurred or indistinct. This ambiguity of boundaries may be between two entities, between attributes or properties of two entities or between one entity and attributes/properties of another. Identification with another is not necessarily in totality or entirety and, yet, no less intense, nor is the object of identification necessarily something substantive. Indeed, identification can be “grounded in fantasy, in projection and idealization” (Hall, 1996, p. 3) and be the stronger because of this.

Similarly for cultural identification, when a person identifies with a culture, there is boundary ambiguity between this individual and a particular cultural environment, or between this individual and some parts of that cultural environment. The individual is bound to this culture and is part of it. Thus, cultural identification is characterized by a conscious or not so conscious state of mind or, rather, a state of heart, whereby there is a strong, insuppressible desire or wish to be recognized and accepted as a member by a target culture. There is also a feeling of belonging to that target culture and, thus, being part of what that culture represents. To identify with a culture is to resonate with the culture, in part and/or in whole, to be emotionally, almost involuntarily and inextricably attached to that culture.

Cultures differ in the degree, to which there are boundaries between an individual and the environment he or she is in. Still, a culture stipulates how to draw the lines between self and others. This, however, is a topic for another time. What we discuss next is expression or manifestation of cultural identification.

### **Expression of Cultural Identification**

Being an internal state of affairs, cultural identification is rather personal and private, and subjective, which may be shared to become intersubjective and public, and be recognized, acknowledged and identified. This transformation of the internal state to an external one is communicative in nature and necessary for it to be a social process. Some even argue that cultural identification is a discursive process of construction (e.g. Hall, 1996). Communication of cultural identification displays the internal state in verbal or nonverbal ways and takes many forms. A most common expression of cultural identification is for one to hold oneself in such a way as to be deemed behaving as a member of a culture in question by others who are members of that culture. Cultural identification is the communicative process in which individuals or groups behave in ways that mark them out as belonging to a certain target culture. One walks, talks, and holds oneself in ways that are expected of everyone in the culture under the circumstance. In other words, one does not stand out, or attract notice by other members, as behaving differently. Cultural identification, in a sense, expresses in social conformity at the most mundane and fundamental levels. All the routines that one performs in a day, getting up at certain hours, dressing and feeding in certain ways, going to work and exchanging greetings with those one encounters, addressing certain others in certain ways, all are expressions of one's identification with a target culture rather than with some other. These routines are communicated to and also understood as such by others inside and outside the target culture.

Cultural identification may be seen in demanding others to also behave in culturally appropriate ways. When deviation in behavior by others evokes displeasure, resentment or an urge to correct and/or sanction the deviant, such feelings are often driven by cultural identification. This is because deviation communicates difference and separation of identity, which contradicts what cultural identification is, or the feeling of being part of a culture. At the same time, the displeasure, resentment, and the desire of rectifying the deviation express and communicate a desire to belong to and be part of an integral culture. To maintain integrity of one's culture and, thus, the oneness of oneself by association, one needs to keep the culture the way one thinks it should be. One does so by correcting the deviation and by drawing the line between what is and what is not one's culture. Seen in this light, such matters as the request for using the native language properly, the sense of social propriety, and the like are all individual or collective expressions of cultural identification. This is the same force that is behind the demand for cultural adaptation of prospective members,

such as immigrants. Cultural identification, then, is a phenomenon propelled by a force for cultural convergence, for homogeneity and for similarity. It involves a relationship between a part and a whole, the longing of a part toward the whole concurrent with the demand by the whole on the parts.

### **Cultural Identification and Cultural Membership**

Although cultural identification is often a natural outcome of the individual's socialization, i.e., one naturally identifies with one's native culture, it may also be a product of conscious choice. The latter is seen in those who, for one reason or another, turn their back on their native culture and adopt another culture as their own (Kim, 1996). There are also circumstances when individuals embrace and identify with more than one culture with equal or varied intensity. Regardless, expression of cultural identification often corresponds to the individual's cultural membership status. Put it another way, it is reflection of the stage of socialization or acculturation. For nonmembers or new members of a culture, who are not or not yet completely socialized or acculturated, cultural identification is more often expressed in behavioral terms in more ostensive ways. When one has an interest in learning the language of the target culture, in interacting with native cultural members, in knowing about the cultural rituals, in getting involved in local social events, in keeping up with the domestic current affairs and community activities, one is communicating cultural identification. These and many similar expressions, each on its own, may indicate a simple curiosity or a personal interest, but combine to express an unmistakable desire to be accepted and to belong. However, the sincerity of the desire is a different matter, while the presence of such a desire is not a necessary condition.

For members native to a culture or to seasoned members who are well socialized or acculturated, cultural identification may be more of a matter of emotional reaction. To cultural members in this category, behavioral aspects are a matter of routine completely taken for granted. Behavioral practice is part of their personhood as an unquestioned cultural member, who knows the cultural way and who, in a way, represents the culture. These members are so totally at one with the culture that the culture is firmly rooted in their identity as part of whom they are. The feeling of being inextricably connected to one's culture, to its past, its present and its future, and to the honor and disgrace it experiences even when it does not concern one personally, is the ultimate expression of cultural identification. Cultural identification is expressed when one is proud of the achievements of fellow countrymen, outraged by the wrongs done to them, frustrated at the potential social harms that follow as consequences of their actions, and saddened by their losses or setbacks. It is communicated when one joins in the cheers, participates in protests, goes to demonstrations, and signs petitions, all in the name of one's culture or cultural group. Communication of

cultural identification, as mentioned above, is communication of a relationship between the individual and a culture in the context of the culture in question.

### **Cultural Identity**

A closely related concept of cultural identification is cultural identity, referring to a process against the background of cultural identification. The two are related in such a way that there is no cultural identity without cultural identification. On the one hand, unlike cultural identification, cultural identity involves placement of an individual, in comparison to others, in the map of cultures, by the individual him/her-self or by others. As such it involves a relationship of the individual with self or, in the latter case, a relationship of the individual with the society, i.e., social ascription. On the other hand, like cultural identification, cultural identity is also an internal affair (Devo, 1993). It is one of the many identities that constitute the core of the individual, the essence of what makes one who one is. Also like cultural identification, cultural identity is, thus, in need of an external outlet, to be expressed or communicated, be known, and be recognized, or accepted.

As cultural identity may originate from the individual concerned or others around, it involves two parties and is a more complicated process than is cultural identification, which involves only the individual in question. To make matters more complicated still, the second party in the process may be from one's own culture or from other cultures, while the ascribed cultural identity may or may not correspond with the cultural identity that one avows. The complication is significant, in a communicative sense, if not a sociopsychological sense, for it deals with intercultural matters, directly or indirectly (Belay, 1996). When the ascription is inconsistent with the avowed identity, negotiation or contestation follows until one version is recognized and confirmed. Communication of cultural identity, including presentation, negation, and contestation, may also take many forms and be done in many ways. Choice and use of language and paralinguistic in communication are common nonverbal ways of cultural identity expression. Choice and use of terms and vocabulary, and of conversational topics, are important verbal means to communicate cultural identity.

### **Language and Cultural Identity**

Each language carries identity traits of the speakers. It enables people to obtain information common to a particular social group. This is especially true about a minority language that has had little contact with other languages. A language can thus serve as an identity marker that differentiates one group from the rest and may evoke identity stereotypes of those who have come in contact with this group. These cultural stereotypes are cultural identity information that is ethnical, territorial, socio-economical or professional. The linguistic features pertaining to a particular variety of the language significantly help people to identify its speakers. For instance, a conversation in French on a New York Street may inform passers-by of visitors from French speaking Quebec or

France. Shanghainese heard on the streets of Beijing informs passers-by that the speakers originally came from Shanghai or its neighboring counties. Other identity information associated with the social group is then evoked.

However, a more prestigious language, like English, may entertain a vast population with diverse cultural backgrounds, and the linguistic cues themselves may not portray cultural identities of its speakers as accurately as those of a minority ethnic language does. The greater the size of this membership group, the greater the difficulty in associating the language with the identities of all its speakers. As a 'favored' language is normally widely used and learned as a second language or used as a lingua franca in a multi-lingual society, it cannot define a clear geographical border to confine its increasing number of speakers. The influx of new members from other cultural and linguistic groups has made each language less pure than it used to be. The cultural identities of its speakers could be so complex that they are not readily reflected by the language itself. Under this circumstance, other linguistic and extralinguistic sources may help present the identities of the speaker.

### **Identifying through Language Choice**

Individuals in various cultures are in a constant struggle to identify themselves in different social contexts. In reality, the society has given an individual a variety of identities and he/she may simultaneously belong to social groups of different cultural heritage. An individual's sense of cultural identity could be so complex that he/she may assume each of the identities at different times.

Language sometimes is an effective means to convey cultural messages and people learn to portray themselves by using languages at their disposal. One common strategy employed by individuals is that they consciously alternate or choose languages appropriate to portray themselves in a particular social context.

In a dominant but hostile culture, to favorably identify oneself is a necessity that is decided by situation rather than personal free will. An ethnic identity could be a stigma in one culture while a source of pride in another. For example, the identity of a mainland Chinese used to be stigmatic in Hong Kong society, thus a Chinese multilingual would normally speak Cantonese or English instead of Putonghua, the latter being associated with negative stereotypes of poverty, ignorance, ill-manner, etc. However, inside China, where the negative stereotypes are non-existing, the same speaker may choose Putonghua for better communication and appropriate identification. The languages thus mirror individuals' varied self-images in different settings.

In a society where a minority identity does not normally bring up the benefits to its members that a dominant one does, individuals who strive for positive social identities to enhance their self-esteem may intentionally choose to give up the minority identity and language. In the long run, the migration of speakers from the minority cultural groups to the dominant cultural and

linguistic group threatens the very existence of the minority culture and language.

However, not all minority cultures and languages are so ill fated. In places where ethnicity and diversity are valued, or where programs are underway to revitalize minority cultures and languages, people are not so eager to assimilate to the mainstream culture and language. In Hawaii, the language immersion programs have attracted both native and outsiders to rehabilitate the Hawaiian Polynesian culture. In Norway and Finland, speakers of the minority languages of Sami and Kven think it an advantage to show their ethnic identities. Speakers of these minority languages do not need to intentionally cover up their identity traits, but instead they feel proud to identify themselves as cultural and linguistic minorities (Fishman 1999).

### **Speech Accommodation as an Identifying Process**

Speech accommodation is another strategy that a speaker employs to show identification and to achieve communication efficiency. Speech accommodation is a social psychological process in which an individual negotiates a cultural identity by emphasizing linguistic and stylistic similarities or differences. By doing so, the individual either departs from or draws near to the target group. The range of strategies can be discussed mainly in terms of convergence and divergence.

Speech convergence has been discussed as an effort to accentuate linguistic similarity between the speaker and listeners when the speaker seeks to be identified as an in-group member. This linguistic similarity could be phonological, lexical, rhythmic, syntactic, and stylistic. Convergence usually occurs in one direction, yet it could also be bi-directional; i.e., speakers may accommodate to each other at the same time that they both like to show closeness to or esteem of their interlocutor. When two people meet, they tend to sound more alike in their language, accents, and style (Giles, 1977). In New York City, speakers of the two major Mandarin varieties, i.e., Putonghua and Taiwanese Guoyu, show a tendency to converge to the other variety of Mandarin. The more willingness one shows to understand and accept the speakers of the other Mandarin variety, the more linguistic changes he/she is likely to make towards the other variety of Mandarin.

When linguistic modification occurs, value and status connotation of the speaker is thus betrayed. Convergence to the other's speech style is a direct result of the speaker's favorable and cooperative sentiment toward the receiver. It enables the receiver to perceive an optimal sociolinguistic distance from his or her own speech patterns.

Language divergence, on the other hand, stresses an identity difference from the listener whose cultural identity the speaker does not like to associate with. Divergence may be considered as a relatively rare tactic employed by a speaker. A speaker of a dominant language and culture tends to differentiate

linguistically from the listeners who have a relatively lower social or cultural status. In Beijing, for instance, indigenous Mandarin speakers rarely compromise the standard Putonghua to any other Mandarin varieties nor do the average Beijing residents have the same zest to learn another Chinese dialect as other speakers do to converge to standard Putonghua.

Divergence may be employed by speakers of minority language and culture. There are occasions on which a speaker of a minority language may dissociate from his/her receivers by accentuating identity differences. The speaker could belong to a less privileged social group that has been taken advantage of politically or economically by the receiver group in the past. The speaker may either realize his/her speech convergence is not welcome or want to manifest the identity gap with the receiver.

### **Identity Crisis and Language Death**

The last century witnessed vigorous nationalist movements and advances of science and technology, especially communication technology. All this has greatly helped the rapid spread of a few chosen standard languages and cultures in various countries and regions. Cultural dominance has caused heavy damage to ethnic minorities whose members became assimilated to the dominant culture by giving up their traditional cultural and linguistic heritage. This identity crisis is vividly described in an account of the Ugong speakers in Thailand:

*When David Bradley, the language researcher, went in search of this endangered Tibeto-Burman language in western Thailand, a number of Ugong speakers he encountered felt so shamed to admit to being able to speak Ugong, but they claimed Thai identity instead. He was then directed by them to villages where other Ugong descendents were living, but there the regular Ugong speakers refused to speak Ugong to him as they also claimed Thai identity (Fishman 1999).*

Great majorities of human languages are spoken by relatively small numbers of people and have no official status. They receive little institutional support for maintenance and development. The past century recorded the greatest number of these languages disappearing from the Earth. The endangered languages in the world nowadays are encountering a bleaker prospect for their mere existence in the new century that glorifies IT and globalization. Each year, dozens of endangered minority languages are dying out when their last speaker passes away. Opportunities go mainly to speakers of the national language standard; people from a minority group normally do not want to admit their minority background nor do they want to stick to their mother tongue.

China has faced similar challenges ever since Mandarin was officially promoted as the language standard last century. The popularization of Putonghua has virtually changed the majority of younger generations of Chinese minorities into bilinguals of Putonghua. As Putonghua has been successfully

made the lingua franca of the nation, many of the regional minority language variations have gradually lost speakers or disappeared totally. Take Tungusic language varieties in northern China, for example; about half a dozen of these languages are currently hanging on the edge of extinction. With new generations from these languages joining the mainstream Han culture, their speaking populations have shrunk to sizes from a few dozen thousand to a few thousand. It is doubted that this group of minority languages, together with many others in other parts of China, will have the luck to survive in this new century.

### Conclusion

Cultural identification and cultural identity, in conclusion, are processes in which members of cultures interact and communicate among themselves and with one another in efforts to orient themselves, position themselves, and find a footing for themselves in the cultural space. Every encounter activates anew the same processes, as occasions of intra- and intercultural communication. It is contestation and negotiation of identity and brings something different and something new to the individual member and to the collective of members that constitute the cultures involved.

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