



## Modernity and Multicultural Identities

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**Abstract:** *The present paper discusses issues related to modernity and multicultural identities. Modernity seems to have inevitably led to a human world of globalized character in all the significant dimensions: economic, political, cultural, educational, etc. For the first time in the history of the world, a patchwork of technology and organization has made possible simultaneous interpersonal and intercultural communication. Human connections through communication have made possible the interchange of goods, products, and services as well as the more significant exchange of thoughts and ideas. Accompanying the growth of human communication has been the erosion of barriers that have, throughout history, geographically, linguistically, and culturally separated people.*

**Key Words:** modernity, multicultural, identities, Modernity, inevitably, globalized, character, significant.

A new type of person whose orientation and view of the world profoundly transcend his or her indigenous culture is developing from the complex social, political, economic, and educational interactions of our time. The various conceptions of an "international," "trans-cultural," "multicultural," or "intercultural" individual have each been used with varying degrees of explanatory or descriptive utility. Essentially, they all attempt to define someone whose horizons extend significantly beyond his or her own culture. Whatever the terminology, the definitions and metaphors allude to a person whose essential identity is inclusive of different life patterns and who has psychologically and socially come to grips with a multiplicity of realities. We can call this new type of person multicultural because he or she embodies a core process of self-verification that is grounded in both the universality of the human condition and the diversity of cultural forms. We are speaking, then, of a social-psychological style of self-process that differs from others.

The multicultural person is intellectually and emotionally committed to the basic unity of all human beings while at the same time recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating the differences that exist between people of different cultures. This new kind of person cannot be defined by the languages he or she speaks, the number of countries he or she has visited, nor by the number of personal international contacts that have been made.

Nor is he or she defined by profession, place of residence, or cognitive sophistication. Instead, the multicultural person is recognized by a configuration of outlooks and world-view, by how the universe as a dynamically moving process is incorporated, by the way, the interconnectedness of life is reflected in thought and action, and by the way, this woman or man remains open to the imminence of experience.

The multicultural person is, on the one hand, involves being the timeless "universal" person described again and again by philosophers through the ages. He or she approaches, at least in the attributions we make, the classical ideal of a person whose lifestyle is one of knowledge and wisdom, integrity and direction, principle and fulfillment, balance and proportion. In his embodiment of the universal and the particular, the multicultural person is a descendant of the great philosophers of both the East and the West.

On the other hand, what is new about this type of person, and unique to our time, is a fundamental change in the structure and process of identity. The identity of the "multicultural," far from being frozen in a social character, is more fluid and mobile, more susceptible to change, and more open to variation. It is an identity based not on a "belongingness" which implies either owning or being owned by culture, but on a style of self-consciousness that is capable of negotiating ever new formations of reality. In this sense, the



multicultural person is a radical departure from the kinds of identities found in both traditional and mass societies. He or she is neither totally a part of nor totally apart from his or her culture; instead, he or she lives on the boundary. To live on the edge of one's thinking, one's culture, or one's ego, suggested by Paul Tillich (1966), is to live with tension and movement. "It is in truth not standing still, but rather a crossing and return, a repetition of return and crossing, back-and-forth--the aim of which is to create a third area beyond the bounded territories, an area where one can stand for a time without being enclosed in something tightly bounded." Multiculturalism then is an outgrowth of the complexities of the twentieth century. As unique as this kind of person may be, the style of identity that is embodied arises from the myriad of forms that are present in this day and age. An understanding of this new kind of person must be predicated on a clear understanding of cultural identity.

The concept of cultural identity can be used in two different ways. First, it can be employed as a reference to the collective self-awareness that a given group embodies and reflects. This is the most prevalent use of the term. Used in its collective sense, the concept of cultural identity includes typologies of cultural behavior, such behaviors being the appropriate and inappropriate ways of meeting basic needs and solving life's essential dilemmas. Used in its collective sense, the concept of cultural identity incorporates the shared premises, values, definitions, and beliefs and the day-to-day, largely unconscious, patterning of activities.

A second, more specific use of the concept revolves around the identity of the individual in relation to his or her culture. Cultural identity, in the sense that it is a functioning aspect of an individual personality, is a fundamental symbol of a person's existence. It is in reference to the individual that the concept is used in this paper. In psychoanalytic literature, most notably in the writing of Erik Erikson (1959), identity is an elemental form of psychic organization which develops in successive psychosexual phases throughout life. Erikson, who focused the greater portion of his analytic studies

on identity conflicts, recognized the anchoring of the ego in a larger cultural context.

Cultural identity is the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared. In its most manifest form, cultural identity takes the shape of names that both locate and differentiate the person. When an individual calls himself or herself an Indian, a Buddhist, a woman, or Johnson, that person is symbolizing parts of the complex of images that are likewise recognizable by others. The deeper structure of cultural identity is a fabric of such images and perceptions embedded in the psychological posture of the individual. At the center of this matrix of images is a psycho-cultural fusion of biological, social, and philosophical motivations; this fusion, a synthesis of culture and personality, is the operant person.

All human beings share a similar biology, universally limited by the rhythms of life. All individuals of all races and cultures must move through life's phases on a similar schedule: birth, infancy, adolescence, middle age, old age, and death. Similarly, humans everywhere embody the same physiological functions of ingestion, irritability, metabolic equilibrium, sexuality, growth, and decay. Yet the ultimate interpretation of human biology is a cultural phenomenon: that is, the meanings of human biological patterns are culturally derived. It is a culture that dictates the meanings of sexuality, the ceremonials of birth, the transitions of life, and the rituals of death. The capacity for language, for example, is universally accepted as a biological given. Any child, given unimpaired apparatus for hearing, vocalizing, and thinking, can learn to speak and understand any human language. Yet the language that is learned by a child depends solely upon the place and the manner of rearing.

The interaction of culture and biology provides one cornerstone for an understanding of cultural identity. How each individual's biological situation is given meaning becomes a psychobiological unit of integration and analysis. Humanity's essential physiological needs -- food,



sex, avoidance of pain, etc. -- are one part of the real pattern of cultural identity. Another part consists of those drives that reach out to the social order. At this psychosocial level of integration, generic needs are channeled and organized by culture. The needs for affection, acceptance, recognition, affiliation, status, belonging, and interaction with other human beings are enlivened and given recognizable form by culture. We can, for example, see clearly the intersection of culture and the psychosocial level of integration in comparative status responses.

It is the unwritten task of every culture to organize, integrate, and maintain the psychosocial patterns of the individual, especially in the formative years of childhood. Each culture engineers such patterns in ways that are unique, coherent, and logical to the conditions and predispositions that underlie the culture. This imprinting of the forms of interconnection that are needed by the individual for psychosocial survival, acceptance, and enrichment is a significant part of the socialization and enculturation process. Yet of equal importance in the imprinting is the structuring of higher forms of individual consciousness. Culture gives meaning and form to those drives and motivations that extend towards an understanding of the cosmological ordering of the universe. All cultures, in one manner or another, invoke the great philosophical questions of life: the origin and destiny of existence, the nature of knowledge, the meaning of reality, and the significance of the human experience.

A conceptualization of cultural identity, then, must include three interrelated levels of integration and analysis. While the cultural identity of an individual is comprised of symbols and images that signify aspects of these levels, the psychobiological, psychosocial, and psycho-philosophical realities of an individual are knit together by the culture which operates through sanctions and rewards, totems and taboos, prohibitions and myths. The unity and integration of society, nature, and the cosmos are reflected in the total image of the self and in the day-to-day awareness and consciousness of the individual. This synthesis is modulated by the larger dynamics of

the culture itself. In the concept of cultural identity, we see a synthesis of the operant culture reflected by the deepest images held by the individual. These images, in turn, are based on universal human motivations.

Like the culture-bound person, the multicultural person bears within him or herself a simultaneous image of societies, nature, personality, and culture. Yet in contrast to the structure of cultural identity, the multicultural individual is perpetually redefining his or her maze way. No culture is capable of imprinting or ingraining the identity of a multicultural person indelibly: yet, the multicultural person must rely heavily on culture to maintain his or her own relativity. Like human beings in any period of time, he or she is driven by psychobiological, psychosocial, and psycho-philosophical motivations; yet the configuration of these drives is perpetually in flux and situational. The maturational hierarchy, implicit in the central image of cultural identity, is less structured and cohesive in the multicultural identity. For that reason, needs, drives, motivations, and expectations are constantly being aligned and realigned to fit the context he or she is in.

The flexibility of the multicultural personality allows great variation in adaptability and adjustment. Adjustment and adaptation, however, must always be dependent on some constant, on something stable and unchanging in the fabric of life. We can attribute to the multicultural person three fundamental postulates that are incorporated and reflected in thinking and behavior. Such postulates are fundamental to success in cross-cultural adaptation.

1. Every culture or system has its own internal coherence, integrity, and logic. Every culture is an intertwined system of values and attitudes, beliefs, and norms that give meaning and significance to both individual and collective identity.
2. No one culture is inherently better or worse than another. All cultural systems are equally valid as variations on the human experience.
3. All persons are, to some extent, culturally bound. Every culture provides the individual with some





sense of identity, some regulation of behavior, and some sense of personal place in the scheme of things.

The multicultural person embodies these propositions and lives them on a daily basis and not just in cross-cultural situations. They are fundamentally a part of his or her interior image of the world and self. What is uniquely new about this emerging human being is a psycho-cultural style of self-process that transcends the structured image a given culture may impress upon the individual in his or her youth. The navigating image at the core of the multicultural personality is premised on an assumption of many cultural realities. The multicultural person, therefore, is not simply the one who is sensitive to many different cultures. Rather, this person is always in the process of becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context. He or she is a formative being, resilient, changing, and evolutionary. There is no permanent cultural "character" but neither is he or she free from the influences of culture. In the shifts and movements of his or her identity process, the multicultural person is continually recreating the symbol of the self.

**Conclusion-** The indefinite boundaries and the constantly realigning relationships that are generated by the psychobiological, psychosocial, and psycho-philosophical motivations make possible sophisticated and complex responses on the part of the individual to cultural and sub-cultural systems. Moreover, this psycho-cultural flexibility necessitates sequential changes in identity. Intentionally or accidentally, multicultural persons undergo shifts in their total psycho-cultural posture;

their religion, personality, behavior, occupation nationality, outlook, political persuasion, and values may, in part or completely, reformulate in the face of new experience.

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