

OUPblog / October 17, 2021

Can you have more than one cultural identity?

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Forming our identity is an important developmental process that begins at birth. We acquire our identity through our interactions with individuals and groups in the social worlds to which we belong, including our caregivers, peers, friends, teachers, ethnic heritages, formal and informal groups, and social media. One critical component of our identity is our cultural identity, and one important aspect of our cultural identity is a sense of belonging.

What is our cultural identity?

According to Oxford Reference our cultural identity broadly connects to how we categorize ourselves across factors that include ethnicity, nationality, age, religion, and gender. Our cultural identity helps us identify and validate our membership in a group with which we share symbolic meanings, customs, practices, language, and norms of behavior. We form our cultural identities from the sense of belonging we experience through our social interactions and relationships with those who share our language, ancestry, cultural values, beliefs, and practices. We don't acquire our identity in a vacuum—rather it is an active process in which we construct our identity through our interactions in the cultural contexts in which we exist. It seems reasonable to suggest that our cultural identities are fluid and not fixed.

Why is achieving a cultural identity important?

Our cultural identity gives us a sense of belonging. This emotional need motivates us to establish relationships and gain acceptance with individuals with whom we share cultural worldviews, values, and practices. In their work, Helen Neville and colleagues found that for indigenous Australians, a sense of belonging is a multidimensional experience that connects to passing cultural knowledge across generations, a shared language and cultural practices, peoplehood, place, acceptance, and pride. Learning about your culture and being proud of your cultural heritage is empowering; it connects to positive outcomes such as psychological well-being and academic success.

Achieving a well-defined and stable cultural identity and sense of belongingness is important, as group membership provides us with a sense of security, acceptance, support, inclusion, and pride. This process may be stressful for many individuals living in multicultural social worlds. For example, many immigrants may need to navigate their cultural heritage and identity formation while adjusting to their receiving country and new home. As Quan and colleagues note,

for many immigrants, particularly young children and teens, the process of acquiring a cultural identity may occur alongside acquiring a new national identity. This leads to the question, “can you have more than one cultural identity?”

Can you have more than one cultural identity?

Globalization, modernization, migration, and inter-ethnic/faith marriages are increasing cultural diversity and intergroup contact worldwide. Because of this expanded cultural contact, many individuals may have ancestries that include more than one cultural heritage. Indigenous, first generation, second generation, and mixed heritage or faith individuals, and “third culture kids (TCK)” —children raised outside of their caregiver’s place of birth—are likely to have multiple cultural identities. These individuals will learn to navigate the cultural values, worldviews, and practices of their cultural memberships across different contexts. For example, a Filipino American may activate their Filipino cultural identity when celebrating the Feast Day of Santo Niño and participating in the Sinolog Festival whereas the same individual may activate their American cultural identity when having a picnic to celebrate Independence Day on the Fourth of July.

The circumstances of peoples’ lived experiences may encourage or require multiple cultural identities. Voluntarily or involuntarily migrating to a new home is one of these experiences. When people migrate in search of a new home, many people encounter a disconnect between their cultural heritage and practices, language, and religious beliefs and those of their new home. This is particularly true in contexts where immigrants experience hostility, discrimination, and prejudice. For children and teens forming their cultural identity, this disconnect can be particularly problematic and produce stress and tension.

For example, many indigenous and immigrant children are bicultural and must transition between different cultural settings—their home culture and mainstream culture at school. These children often experience cultural dissonance—a disconnect between conflicting cultural identities when cultural expectations at school are incompatible with those at home. Programs such as KEEP (Kamehameha Early Education Program) and The Bridging Cultures Project are successful educational interventions that acknowledge and are respectful of children’s cultural heritages and strive to help all children achieve academic success. Many of these children develop multiple cultural identities.

In the United States, migration and increasing population diversity has led to concerns over preserving an American national identity. The fear of losing what defines one as an American for contemporary immigrants leads to pressures to assimilate to mainstream American culture and gives rise to hostility and tensions toward immigrants particularly those of the Latinx community as this

community represents the greatest percentage of twenty-first-century immigrants residing in the US.

In their work, Christophe and colleagues explored cultural identity formation among Latinx communities in the US. For Latinx children and youths, acquiring a cultural and national identity can be an arduous process. As a group, most Latinx communities support cultural values and practices that promote familial obligations, respect for elders, community assistance, and collaborative problem solving. This emphasis upon the family and the interdependent nature of relationships often conflicts with mainstream American values that emphasize individual freedoms and the self as unique and separate from others. How immigrants adjust to their new home and the ethnic socialization messages caregivers provide for their children connects positively to children's cultural identity formation.

Many caregivers must balance their desire for maintaining their cultural heritage with helping their children acquire new skills and abilities to become successful and find their place in their new home. For example, when caregivers integrate with mainstream society and preserve their cultural heritage, their children benefit from their multicultural experiences by developing multiple cultural identities. This has positive outcomes for children and teens navigating their cultural identity formation. Yampolsky and colleagues suggest that having multiple identities helps children adapt to the demands of and navigate the different cultural worlds in which they live, along with acquiring the skills and abilities necessary for success in those contexts. As bicultural individuals with multiple cultural identities, these children and teenagers will be better prepared to dispel notions of what it means to be an American through a mainstream American lens.

Immigrants in Canada also develop multiple cultural identities. Quan and her colleagues investigated cultural identity development among Chinese-born youths now living in Canada. These authors highlight how Asian individuals living in Canada, and broadly North America, navigate their Chinese identity and their Canadian identity as well as their gender identity. They found that engaging in cultural behaviors positively connected to identity formation. They offer recommendations for both caregivers who desire to preserve their cultural heritage and receiving countries that include providing opportunities for children and teens to participate in ethnic behaviors to help children and teens develop both a cultural and national identity.

Our cultural identity is a complex tapestry of our social experiences. Whether you have one or multiple cultural identities, forming a stable, coherent cultural identity has many positive benefits and developmental outcomes. These include how well people adjust to a new cultural setting, protection from mental health issues, general well-being, academic success, civic engagement, and a commitment to social justice. Wherever different cultural groups come into

contact and coexist, it is likely that individuals living in these settings may possess multiple cultural identities. For indigenous, immigrant, first and second generation, refugee, and multiple heritage individuals, and third culture children, possessing multiple cultural identities is beneficial in helping them navigate the numerous cultural settings in which they interact. By providing opportunities for individuals to engage in cultural behaviors and intergroup collaborative activities, individuals, schools, institutions, governments, and countries can work together to make all citizens experience a sense of belonging, acceptance, and pride in who they are.

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