

## What Is Cultural Identity?

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).

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.

### **ACTIVITY:** Exploring Cultural Identity

**With a colleague or in a small group, discuss the following questions:**

- *What is your cultural identity? Describe it.*
- *Do you remember a time when you felt a connection with someone who shared your cultural background? Describe that feeling. What made you feel connected to that person?*
- *What kinds of issues related to cultural identity (either your own or your students') have come up for you as a teacher?*

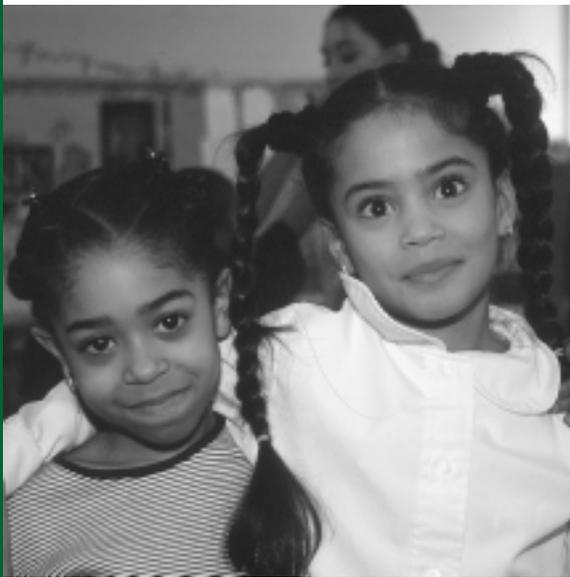
## ***Definitions of Culture and the Invisibility of One's Own Culture***

In your discussion with a colleague it is likely that both of you had different ideas about what constitutes culture. 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)

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.

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. 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.





## ACTIVITY: Exploring Values, Beliefs, and Ideas

Think about the values, beliefs, and ideas that are prevalent in your culture. Then, speculate on how those values, beliefs, and ideas may have emerged from the conditions members of your culture faced in the past. Use the table below to record your thoughts.

VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	WHERE IT CAME FROM
<i>EXAMPLE: Education is the most important thing in life.</i>	<i>Asian Indian parent's experience about how to achieve success in the United States.</i>



Now, think of some prevalent values, beliefs, and ideas of your culture that are currently being challenged by members of the cultural group. How have conditions changed for members of the group since the old values, beliefs, and ideas were formulated?

HISTORICAL VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	CHALLENGE TO THE VALUE, BELIEF, OR IDEA	CHANGED CONDITIONS THAT MAY HAVE LED TO THE CHALLENGE
<i>EXAMPLE: Parents arrange their children's marriages.</i>	<i>People should marry for love.</i>	<i>Increased education and individual pursuit of work; the feminist movement.</i>

Trumbull et al. (2001) contrast individualism and collectivism as they may play out in school settings. The following table draws from their work with immigrant Latino families. Keep in mind that cultures, and individuals within cultures, will vary in terms of where they fall on the collectivist-individualist continuum, so their perspectives on schooling will vary as well.

**TABLE 1**

INDIVIDUALIST PERSPECTIVE	COLLECTIVIST PERSPECTIVE
<i>Student should “achieve her potential” for the sake of self-fulfillment.</i>	<i>Student should “achieve her potential” in order to contribute to the social whole.</i>
<i>Student should work independently and get his own work done. Giving help to others may be considered cheating.</i>	<i>Student should be helpful and cooperate with his peers, giving assistance when needed. Helping is not considered cheating.</i>
<i>Student should be praised frequently. The positive should be emphasized whenever possible.</i>	<i>Student should not be singled out for praise in front of her peers. Positive feedback should be stated in terms of student’s ability to help family or community.</i>
<i>Student should attain intellectual skills in school; education as schooling.</i>	<i>Student should learn appropriate social behaviors and skills as well as intellectual skills; education as upbringing.</i>
<i>Student should engage in discussion and argument in order to learn to think critically (constructivist model).</i>	<i>Student should be quiet and respectful in class because he will learn more this way (transmission model).</i>
<i>Property belongs to individuals, and others must ask to borrow or share it.</i>	<i>Most property is communal and not considered the domain of an individual.</i>
<i>Teacher manages behavior indirectly or emphasizes student self-control.</i>	<i>Teacher has primary authority for managing behavior, but also expects peers to guide each other’s behavior.</i>
<i>Parent is integrally involved with student’s academic progress.</i>	<i>Parent believes that it is teacher’s role to provide academic instruction to student.</i>

**ACTIVITY:** Exploring Individualist and Collectivist Orientations

Read **TABLE 1** on page 25. Then, discuss the following questions:

- *What makes sense to you about the expectations in the “Individualist Perspective” column?*
- *What makes sense to you about the expectations in the “Collectivist Perspective” column?*
- *Elaborate on some of the expectations and explain why you agree or disagree with them as a teacher. What factors from your own cultural background might influence your opinions?*
- *What kinds of conflicts might occur in a classroom because of these different cultural values? How might you deal with such conflicts? What might you do in your classroom to allow for different cultural values?*