



On the need to broaden the concept of ethnic identity



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ABSTRACT

We argue that the traditional split between ethnic identity and mainstream identity as core identities of immigrants can no longer describe the multiple allegiances of many immigrants. Ethnographic and survey methods should be combined to study (the broader concept of) social identity in a context of multiple allegiances that can undergo quick changes. We illustrate the multidisciplinary approach in a study in a highly diverse neighborhood in Antwerp (Belgium). We first present an ethnographic description of the area, followed by a mixed-methods study of identities of the inhabitants of the area. In the survey part we administered various social identity measures (including ethnic, national, and cosmopolitan identity) and asked open end self-descriptions. A factor analysis of these data revealed two factors (identity and belongingness). We conclude that such a multidisciplinary and multimethod approach is needed to understand the immense complexity of highly diverse neighborhoods and their psychological ramifications.

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1. Introduction

We are interested in identities of persons with more than one cultural background. Our thesis is that traditional models of identity, such as social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and collective identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004), provide useful frameworks; yet, applications of these frameworks often fall short on three accounts to understand the identities mentioned. First, traditional models of identity and acculturation are based on a distinction of two identities: host culture and ethnic culture identities (mainstream and ethnic identity). However, there is increasing evidence that this dichotomy cannot describe the identity of groups in culturally highly diverse areas. A recent example of an approach acknowledging this shortage is the tridimensional model of acculturation (Ferguson, Bornstein, & Pottinger, 2012). Caribbean immigrants in the United States deal with three cultures in the acculturation process: they acculturate to the mainstream European American culture, to African American culture, and they maintain their heritage Caribbean culture. The model is interesting as it extends current bidimensional models and by acknowledging that a target culture of immigration can even be a remote culture. Relatively few Jamaican adolescents have visited the US but they are often exposed to American culture in everyday life. So, they are influenced by a culture to which they are mainly exposed by media, such as U.S. television series and consumer goods. Second, immigrants typically have many more identities that are salient for them in their old and new

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cultural context, such as family, religious, and linguistic identity that are related to but cannot be reduced to their ethnic identity. Third, identity models are often studied in a decontextualized manner (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006; Berry, 2006). Notably when studying identity in highly diverse and quickly changing areas, the context is crucial in understanding identity; in other words, an ethnographic account should be part and parcel of a study of identity. In the present article we explore and illustrate how identity can be studied in such a paradigm.

1.1. Identity in times of superdiversity

There is ample space and reason to rethink some of the most basic concepts in social science – notions such as community, identity, and indeed citizenship. The reason for this is that since the early 1990s, some fundamental changes have taken place in the ways in which all of these notions take shape in real life. Vertovec (2007, 2010) has described these changes as a transition from “diversity” to “superdiversity”, a diversification of diversity due to changes in the migration patterns worldwide. People from more places now migrate to more places, causing unprecedented forms of social and cultural diversity especially in the large urban centers of the world (for an early appraisal, see Cohen, 1997, pp. 507ff). Many large Western cities harbor individuals from most countries on earth. Many of these immigrants live in neighborhoods with majority group members and immigrants from many countries, thereby creating a diversity that these cities never faced before. Adding to this complexity, the emergence and global spread of the Internet, other forms of mobile communication technologies (synchronous with the new forms of migration), and unprecedented work-related migration around the globe have created a “network society” (Castells, 1996) in which people live and act in relation to long-distance, “virtual” peers in sometimes enormous online communities. Taken together, these two forces have re-shaped social life around the world, generating identities and social relationships far more *complex* than what was hitherto observed (or assumed) in social research, and further characterized by an intense *dynamics* of change with and *mobility* as a key functional characteristic: new phenomena are triggered *by* mobility of people, their behaviors and forms of meaningful conduct, and operate *for* mobility, as instruments for organizing mobile lives.¹

The legacies of structuralism, still pervasive in the methodological core vocabulary and instrumentation of social sciences and humanities, often fail to adequately and accurately capture the complex, dynamic, and mobile characteristics of such phenomena. Reiterating and summarizing a generation of critique, there is, in one corner of our disciplines, a persistent emphasis on limited sets of clear categories deployed in an “a-temporal” (“snapshot”) model of social time, in which the juxtaposition of several Saussurean “synchronies” as a substitute for investigating *change*. In another disciplinary corner, the momentary and contextualized (“observed” and/or “discursive”) synchrony is offered as a generalization-in-se, and processes of change observed within that synchrony are reduced to features of a static and timeless systemic essence. The authors of this text very much carry along the methodological residues of both corners – one situated within cross-cultural psychology saturated by quantitative methodologies, the other in linguistic anthropology fixed on the ethnographic synchrony – and are very much aware of the intrinsic descriptive and explanatory shortcomings of both.

So, on the one hand, the ethnographic approach focuses on the here-and-now, with an emphasis on qualitative methods, thereby insufficiently addressing the continuities and changes over time and the ramifications of contextual factors for individual functioning. On the other hand, the conventional cross-cultural approach tends to focus on psychological factors, thereby neglecting to link individual functioning to relevant contextual factors. Contextual analysis is too infrequently employed in cross-cultural psychology. In our study we set out to reduce this gap by combining the ethnographic and psychological perspective on diversity; we examined *identities* and how they are affected by larger social contextual conditions and developments.

What follows represents an attempt toward overcoming these shortcomings and designing a research approach in which the *strengths* of both traditions can be brought to bear on a specific case (cf. Blommaert & Van de Vijver, 2013). The case – identity dynamics in a superdiverse neighborhood in Antwerp, Belgium – is introduced later. First (Section 2), we briefly sketch the methodological challenges. In Section 3, we provide the ethnographic “snapshot” of the case, followed, in Section 4, by the description of a psychological study of identity in the area. The concluding Section 5 integrates both sets of findings and reflects on the methodological opportunities offered by this integrated approach.

2. Combining ethnographies and surveys: the methodological challenge

Studying identity in a rapidly changing environment creates many challenges as it involves many ethnic groups with immigration histories that can be short or long and can refer to multiple countries of past residence. Paramount in our approach is a combination of an ethnographic understanding of the neighborhood and a psychological understanding of identity. It is the integration of these two perspectives that is crucial.

¹ One of the most sensitive indexes of these transformations is the emergence and development of new forms of human communication – the social transformations go hand in hand with sociolinguistic transformations yielding degrees of complexity hard to imagine previously, and prompting an escalation of new terminology to describe them: languaging, polylinguaging, transidiomatic practices, metrolingualism, supervernacularization, and so forth (for a survey see Blommaert, 2013; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011).

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