International Journal of Intercultural Relations 60 (2017) 83–91

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Brief report

# Exploring the double-edged sword of cultural variability in interactions with family versus friends

Gail M. Ferguson[a,*], Jacqueline Nguyen[b], Maria I. Iturbide[a,1], Cagla Giray[a]

[a] Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Doris Kelley Christopher Hall, MC-081, 904 West Nevada Street, Room 2015, Urbana, Illinois 61801, United States

[b] Department of Educational Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Enderis Hall 795, 2400 E. Hartford Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53211-3159, United States

ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*
Cultural variability
Cultural identity
Ethnic orientation
Sociocultural adaptation
Immigrant
Emerging adulthood

ABSTRACT

Cultural variability (CV) refers to the tendency to vary/adjust the influence of a single cultural identity on one's social interactions and behaviors from day to day. CV has different influences on interpersonal interactions, positive for some interactions but with adverse effects for others; hence, we aimed to further explore these associations by considering immigrant status and ethnic orientation as potential moderators. Hierarchical regression using daily diary self-reports of U.S. emerging adults ($N$ = 242) revealed that cultural variability is a double-edged sword only for first- and second-generation immigrants rather than for nationals (3rd generation and later). That is, CV predicts positive family interactions for both groups, but negative interactions with close friends only for immigrants, especially those with strong ethnic orientation. Cultural variability adds a new dimension to our understanding of cultural identity as dynamic, domain-specific, and nuanced in its associations with adaptation.

Cultural variability (CV) refers to the tendency to vary/adjust the influence of a single cultural identity on one's social interactions and behaviors from day to day (e.g., 'playing up' Hindi language use with ethnic Indian peers one day and 'playing [it] down' in a multicultural group of peers the next: Ferguson, Nguyen, & Iturbide, 2016). A recent mixed-methods study with a multicultural sample of U.S. emerging adults demonstrated that CV can be a double-edged sword for interpersonal interactions: greater CV around family is associated with better quality family interactions, whereas the opposite is true for interactions with friends (Ferguson et al., 2016). The purpose of this brief report is to further explore the associations between CV and interaction quality in the United States by considering immigrant status and ethnic orientation as potential moderators. Relative to nationals,[2] first- and second-generation immigrant youth may have a greater need for CV to improve cultural fit with others in their social networks (Ward & Chang, 1997). It is also possible that strong orientation to one's heritage culture may accentuate the interpersonal effects of CV by providing more points of connection with parents (positive), but also more opportunity for friends to criticize CV as inauthentic (negative).

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* gmfergus@illinois.edu (G.M. Ferguson), nguyen39@uwm.edu (J. Nguyen), Maria.Iturbide@humboldt.edu (M.I. Iturbide), giray2@illinois.edu (C. Giray).
[1] Present address: Department of Psychology, Humboldt State University, Behavioral and Social Science Building #440, 1 Harpst Street, Arcata, CA 95519, United States
[2] Also referred to as the majority/mainstream or host country nationals.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.07.005
Received 4 March 2017; Received in revised form 15 July 2017; Accepted 21 July 2017
Available online 16 August 2017

## Cultural context of the United States

The complex sociocultural fabric of the U.S. has been woven by successive waves of immigrants over centuries. In the earliest waves of U.S. immigration in the 19th and 20th century, 90% of immigrants were European and mostly White (Pew Research Center, 2013). These third- and later generation immigrants[3] (henceforth "nationals") now comprise a shrinking majority in the United States relative to first- and second-generation immigrants (henceforth "immigrants") largely from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, who represent 26% of the current population and a projected 36% by 2065 (Ferguson & Birman, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015). There is also a hidden diversity to the U.S. White group: between 2000 and 2010, 2.4 million Americans of "Hispanic Some Other Race" origins changed their Census designations to "Hispanic White" (Liebler, Rastogi, Fernandez, Noon, & Ennis, 2014). U.S. nationals also include ethnic minority non-immigrants, such as indigenous Native Americans and individuals of African descent forced to the U.S. via slave trade.

Ethnic orientation,[4] meaning the "preference for maintaining one's heritage culture and identity" (Berry, 2005, p. 704) is also complex for U.S. immigrants and nationals. For immigrants, ethnic orientation may shift during acculturation (Berry, 2005; Ferguson & Birman, 2016). Because the immigration histories of most White U.S. nationals is distant and because U.S. society tends to emphasize national or "White" identity over unique ethnic group identities (e.g., German, Irish, etc.: Cornell & Hartmann, 2004), U.S. White individuals tend to have lower ethnic orientation than do people of color. This dynamic multicultural context sets the stage for CV.

## Cultural variability (CV)

In this section we will articulate our conceptualization of CV as a largely overlooked aspect of cultural identity, and describe its association with related constructs. First, aligned with existing perspectives, we view cultural identity as a type of social identity dealing with "the ideals and values of the cultural in-group with which the person identifies" (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006, p. 10). Although cultural identity encompasses ethnic and other social identities (e.g., gender), in this article we focus exclusively on ethnic-cultural identity. Second, we argue that the developmental period of emerging adulthood (18–25) is well-suited to the study of CV because cultural identity formation intensifies during this stage (Arnett, 2000). Due to record-high levels of migration and globalization, emerging adults in many countries, including the United States, now inhabit far more culturally heterogeneous societies than did previous generations (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). Therefore, CV captures the cultural flexibility and daily calibrations needed for adaptation to these multicultural environments (Markus & Kunda, 1986). CV may be a mechanism by which individuals can maximize cultural fit (Ward & Chang, 1997) with individual family members and close friends.

### *What is CV?*

CV is the *day-to-day variability* in how much influence one's cultural identity (*cultural influence*) exerts on interpersonal interactions and behaviors. This conceptualization of CV resonates with the growing appreciation of cultural identity as dynamic, flexible, and domain-specific (e.g., Bauer, Loomis, & Akkari, 2013; Ferdman & Horenczyk, 2000). More scholars are assessing not only identification/orientation towards one's ethnic culture, which is thought to be relatively stable save for a possible shift following migration, but also changes in one's experience of ethnic or cultural identity across days and settings (see Noels & Clément, 2015; Yip, 2005).

Practically speaking, CV is operationalized by computing the standard deviation of self-reported cultural influence scores across multiple days, or by multilevel modeling the within-person variability of daily cultural influence scores nested within individuals. Ferguson et al. (2016) daily diary study of 242 U.S. emerging adults found evidence of CV among both first- and second-generation immigrants (e.g., self-reported cultural identities: 'Chinese', 'Mexican', 'Asian', 'Black') and also among nationals, most of whom had distant immigration histories (e.g., 'French', 'German', 'Caucasian', 'Jewish'). Moreover, CV occurred in two domains − family interactions ($CV_{Family;}$ e.g., ways of interacting with parents/siblings) and personal behavior/peer interactions ($CV_{Behavior/Peers;}$ e.g., dress/appearance, language, ways of interacting with friends) − and $CV_{Family}$ exceeded $CV_{Behavior/Peers}$ (48% vs. 22% within-person variation). Ethnic minority youth experienced greater $CV_{Family}$ than White peers and ethnic identity search positively predicted $CV_{Family}$ (Ferguson et al., 2016). Findings from a mixed-methods cross-validation sample of 245 U.S. emerging adults confirmed that CV is agentic/purposeful as evidenced by a mean score of 3.12 on a 5-point scale when asked "How much did you intentionally control the amount of influence your cultural identity had on your life today?". Results from this cross-validation sample also revealed that CV can be motivated by positive (group pride), neutral (course assignment), or negative (discrimination) reasons (Ferguson et al., 2016).

### *What isn't CV?*

Although related to other constructs in the areas of ethnic and cultural identity, CV is unique in important ways. CV is distinct from alternating/frame-switching between different cultural identities (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) because it focuses on

[3] Third and later-generation immigrant groups − once immigrants, now settled − are also referred to as 'ethnocultural groups' (Berry, 2005).

[4] Also referred to as cultural maintenance and cultural continuity, sometimes including contact with same-ethnic others (Sam & Berry, 2016).