

Our *human identities* involve those views of ourselves that we believe we share with all other humans. We need to keep in mind that “people and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women, with men and women of another culture, another creed, another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we shall not recognize it in ourselves” (Fuentes, 1992, back cover). To understand our human identities, we have to look for those things we share in common with all other humans.

Our *social identities* involve our views of ourselves that we share with other members of our ingroups (Turner et al., 1987). Ingroups are groups that are important to us, with which we identify, and for whom we will make sacrifices (Triandis, 1988). Our social identities may be based on the roles we play (e.g., student, professor, parent), our demographic categories (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, social class), our membership in formal/informal organizations (e.g., political party, religion, organization, social clubs), our avocations or vocations (e.g., scientist, artist, gardener), or stigmatized groups to which we belong (e.g., being disabled, being homeless, having AIDS).

The degree to which we identify with these various groups varies from situation to situation. To illustrate, while I am a U.S. American, I do not think about being a member of my culture much in everyday life. When I visit another country, however, my U.S. American identity (my cultural identity) becomes important. I think about being a U.S. American, and my cultural identity plays a large role in influencing my behavior.

Our *personal identities* involve those views of ourselves that differentiate us from other members of our ingroups—those characteristics that define us as unique individuals (Turner et al., 1987). What we generally think of as our personality characteristics are part of our personal identities.¹⁴

Our communication behavior can be based on our personal, social, and/or human identities. In a particular situation, we may choose (either consciously or unconsciously) to define ourselves communicatively mainly as unique persons or as members of groups. When our communication behavior is based mostly on our personal identities, interpersonal communication takes place. When we define ourselves mostly in terms of our social identities, in contrast, intergroup communication occurs. It is important to recognize, however, that our personal and social identities influence all of our communication behavior, even though one predominates in a particular situation. When our social identities have a greater influence on our behavior than our personal identities, there is an increased chance of misunderstandings occurring because we are likely to interpret strangers' behavior based on their group memberships. In order to overcome the potential for misunderstandings that can occur when our social identities predominate, we must recognize that we share common human identities with strangers. At the same time, we must acknowledge our differences and try to understand them and how they influence our communication.¹⁵

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