



## Exploring Layers of Identity Through Interviews

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### Audience

This exercise would be appropriate for either:

- Undergraduate or graduate students in intercultural communication courses, or
- Participants in professional development or intercultural training sessions with a focus on developing self-knowledge regarding the complexities of cultural identities.

### Goal

The primary goal of this activity is to guide participants in reflection on the complexities of cultural identities. To achieve this, the four layers of identity from the Communication Theory of Identity will be introduced, followed by pair work that allows participants to reflect on each layer of identity.

For learning outcomes, by the end of this activity participants will be able to:

- Summarize the four layers of identity in the Communication Theory of Identity.
- Reflect on cultural identity(ies) through guided interview questions.
- Synthesize the experience through a summary discussion.

### Description

#### 1. Introduction: Four Layers of Identity (10 minutes)

To set up the interview, the four layers of identity need to be presented through a brief lesson with a description of each layer and specific examples. You can present as much or as little detail as you'd like; the focus is on having participants understand each layer before they begin the interview activity. Here is an overview of the theory:

The Communication Theory of Identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Shin & Hecht, 2018) presents identity not as a static entity, but as a dynamic, communicative process that includes both





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internal and external factors. The main premise of this theory is that identity resides in four layers: personal, enactment, relational, and communal.

- *Personal*: How someone defines their identity. This layer of identity is how someone would answer the question “Who am I?” and can include personal characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, along with personal attributes, such as being shy or extroverted. This layer makes up someone’s self-concept or self-esteem.
- *Enactment*: How someone communicates or performs their identity. This layer emphasizes that what someone talks about, how they talk about it, or how they behave is actually identity; identity is located in the act of communication. Through communication, we internalize our sense of identity and reinforce the externalization of how others see and respond to our identity.
- *Relational*: How someone perceives their identity in relation to someone else. This layer examines the impact relationships have on identity by considering the roles we hold in relationships (family member, friend, romantic partner, co-worker). Identities can develop through a specific relationship we have with another (e.g., how I see myself as a daughter to my mother versus how I see myself as a romantic partner) and can also develop as a sense of ascribed relational identity (How do others view who I am?).
- *Communal*: How someone locates their identity within the broader community context. This layer emphasizes a collective sense of identity, the development of a sense of “who we are” in society. This can include awareness of beliefs or stereotypes held by a collective (both those others hold about us and those we hold about other groups).

These layers of identity can be considered independently (as they are presented in the following interview questions), but they are also fully interdependent. For example, my personal layer of gender identity is developed as I make communicative choices on how to enact that identity, as well as being informed by my awareness of social norms connected to gender. If there are inconsistencies between the layers, these are called “identity gaps.” For example, there is a personal—enactment identity gap if someone believes they are an extrovert and yet finds that, in social situations, they become quiet and do not initiate conversation with new people.

### 2. Interview Activity (15 – 20 minutes per interview; 30 – 40 minutes total)

Place participants into pairs. Have them prepare for the interview questions by asking them to choose just one of their cultural identities to consider. You can guide this as narrowly or as





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openly as you'd like (e.g., If you want the group to focus on race, you could ask them to use their racial identities for the entire activity. If you want to allow more choice, you can open it up to an identity of their choosing). To facilitate the activity, you can give participants a specific amount of time (i.e. 20 minutes) and let them know you will indicate when it is time to switch who is the interviewer/interviewee.

Here are the directions for the activity:

- Choose one of your cultural identities to consider for these questions.
  - It could be an involuntary identity: race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, socioeconomic class, age.
  - It could be a voluntary identity: university major, hobby, profession, etc.
- Make sure to choose an identity you are comfortable discussing with a partner and the rest of class.

Decide who will interview the other first. Have the interviewer go through the entire list of questions for the interviewee (In other words, do not take turns asking and answering the questions). Give time and space for someone to reflect and provide answers. Once you have completed the entire interview, then switch roles and work through the entire list of questions again.

### *Interview Questions:*

What identity have you chosen to discuss?

#### Personal Frame (How you define or avow this identity to yourself)

- Why did you choose this identity to consider?
- What does this identity mean to you?
- In what ways are you proud of this identity?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses connected to this identity?

#### Enactment Frame (How you communicate this identity to others)

- In what ways do you talk about this identity to others?
- In what ways do you consciously/unconsciously demonstrate this identity to others?
- How does context or situation impact your communication of this identity to others?
- Have you experienced challenges in communicating this identity to others? If so, what are they? If not, can you consider why that is?





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### Relational Frame (How this identity exists and emerges between you and other people)

- What are the ways this identity shows up in specific relationships? (Can you name a few relationships, such as family, friends, co-workers, etc. and consider how this identity is formed with those people?)
- How does this identity shift or change when you are with different people? Are there ways this identity doesn't shift or change in relationships?
- In what ways do individuals support/not support this aspect of your identity?

### Communal Frame (How this identity exists within the larger cultural group)

- Do you have a sense of belonging to a broad community with this identity? If so, please explain how this collective identity developed. If not, consider why you don't feel connected to others.
- How do you feel people in the general population view this specific identity? What messages have you received from others about this identity?
- How much do you work to fit in/ conform to the broad idea of this identity?
- How do other people's ideas of this identity influence the other layers of identity?

### 3. Summary Discussion (10 minutes)

Once participants have had time to work through the interview, it is helpful to bring the group together to synthesize their experiences. Here are suggestions for the summary discussion:

- What was your experience going through the interview? Can you describe your process?
- Were there certain questions (or even a specific a layer of identity) that were more difficult for you to answer? Which one(s)? Can we brainstorm as a group why this might have been challenging to answer?
- Did anyone discover any identity gaps (i.e., any inconsistencies between two layers)? What were these identity gaps? How do you feel about these identity gaps? Is there a way to lessen the gap?
- The interview worked through each layer of identity one at a time; however, these layers of identity are interdependent or co-exist with each other. Through this interview process, in what ways did you experience how the layers of identity overlap with each other?
- Does anyone want to share what they learned about themselves or their specific identity during this activity? What did you learn about your partner?
- What did you learn about cultural identities (in general) by completing this interview activity?





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## Time Required

This activity can be completed in an hour (time estimates are included in the description above), though it can be adapted to be slightly shorter (by reducing the number of questions). If you have a group of thoughtful, reflective participants, this can also be expanded. More time could be given for participants to engage in the interview; the final discussion could also take more time if there are many participants who are open to sharing with the large group.

## Hints for Success

I use this activity in a university course more over halfway through the term; this allows for students to be familiar discussing intercultural topics with each other. The effectiveness of having participants be open and vulnerable talking about their identities occurs if there is some sense of comfort that has been established. While this could be used with a group of participants who are new to each other, there might be less depth of reflection if participants are not sure how their identity expressions will be received.

When introducing each layer of identity, I provide multiple examples (often from my own identities or I elicit examples from students) to make sure they understand the unique focus of each layer. Not only does this provide clarity for each layer of identity, it also sets the tone for openness and the expectation that we can learn from each other.

It is helpful to let participants know there is no “right” or “wrong” answer for any question, so there shouldn’t be pressure when answering. Participants can skip any question in the interview if it’s hard for them to answer.

You can encourage those in the interview role to go beyond the listed questions. They can ask follow-up questions for clarity, probe more in depth, or ask for specific examples or narratives from their interviewee. While the focus of the activity is to learn about cultural identity, you can also encourage participants to engage in active listening when they are the interviewer.

## Supplies Required

- Whatever materials are needed to introduce the four layers of identity (a PowerPoint slide, a handout, or a way to list the layers and possible explanations on a board).
- A handout of the directions and interview questions for each participant (I prefer a paper handout so each person can easily view the questions. While the questions could be presented in a presentation slide, when this happens there is a lot of cranking of





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heads back and forth to read the question and then look back at the person being interviewed. A handout creates a more immediate connection between the pairs.)

### Resources

Jung, E. & Hecht, M. L. (2004). Elaborating the communication theory of identity: Identity gaps and communication outcomes. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(3): 265-283. DOI: 10.1080/01463370409370197

Shin, Y. & Hecht, M. (2018). Communication theory of identity. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The International encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (pp. 289 – 297). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

### Source

The theory information comes from the sources listed above. I created the interview activity and questions based on the theory to allow university students to explore layers of identity in more depth.

