At this point, you are probably aware of the cultural groups to which you belong (i.e., “I am a Latino, middle-class, (almost) college-educated male”). Do you remember the process of coming to awareness of your cultural identity—when did you know you were white and what that meant? Was it during childhood, as a teenager, or reading this chapter? Has your understanding, or acceptance, of your racial heritage changed during the course of your lifetime? For most people it does. Just as Piaget organized the growth of children according to various stages of development, cultural scholars have similarly organized racial awareness along models and stages. Before explaining the various models, let us make a couple general comments about models. One, a model is not the thing it represents. Is the model car you played with as a child the same as the actual automobile? What were the differences? Size, time, maneuverability, details? These same kinds of differences exist between the model of racial identity development and the actual personal process. But just like the car model gives a fairly accurate picture of the actual automobile so do the racial identity models. Two, these models are general and not meant to fit perfectly to every individual’s experience. With that said, let us examine the process of coming to an understanding of our racial identity.

To better understand this complex process, and in recognition of the above discussion regarding the distinctions in experiences for various cultural groups, we will present four racial identity models—Minority, Majority, Bi-racial, and Global Nomads.

Minority Identity Development

Because people who identify as members of a minority group in the United States tend to stand out or get noticed as “other” or “different,” they also tend to become aware of their identity sooner than individuals who are part of the majority group. Since White is still considered normative in the United States, White people may take their identity, and the corresponding privilege, for granted. While we are using the following four stages of development to refer to racial and ethnic identity development, they may also be useful when considering other minority aspects of our identity such as...
gender, class, or sexual orientation (Ponterotto and Pendersen). Moreover, there is no set age or time period that a person reaches or spends in a particular stage, and not everyone will reach the final stage.

- **Stage 1: Unexamined Identity.** As the name of this stage suggests, the person in stage one of Phinney’s model has little or no concern with ethnicity. They may be too young to pay attention to such matters or just not see the relationship between racial identity and their own life. One may accept the values and beliefs of the majority culture even if they work against their own cultural group.

- **Stage 2: Conformity.** In stage two the individual moves from a passive acceptance of the dominant culture’s value system to a more active one. They consciously make choices to assimilate or fit in with the dominant culture even if this means putting down or denying their own heritage. They may remain at this stage until a precipitating event forces them to question their belief system.

- **Stage 3: Resistance and Separation.** The move from stage two to stage three can be a difficult process as it necessitates a certain level of critical thinking and self-reflection. If you have ever tried to wrestle with aspects of your own belief system then you can imagine the struggle. The move may be triggered by a national event such as the case of “Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on August 9, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, MO (Buchanan). Learn more about the case [here](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Communication_(Paynton_and_Hahn)/…). It may be fostered on a more individual scale such as enrolling in a Women’s Studies class and learning about the specifics of women’s history in America. Martin Luther King Jr. moved to this stage around age six after the mother of King’s White neighborhood...
friends told them that he could not play with her children anymore because he was Black. A person in this stage may simply reject all of their previously held beliefs and positive feelings about the dominant culture with those of their own group, or they may learn how to critically examine and hold beliefs from a variety of cultural perspectives, which leads to stage four.

- **Stage 4: Integration.** The final stage is one where the individual reaches an achieved identity. They learn to value diversity; seeing race, gender, class, and ethnic relations as a complex process instead of an either/or dichotomy. Their aim is to end oppression against all groups, not just their own.

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**Majority Identity Development**

The following model was developed by Rita Hardiman in 1994 and contains some similarities with Phinney’s minority identity development model.

- **Stage 1: Unexamined Identity.** This stage is the same for both minority and majority individuals. While children may notice that some of their playmates have different colored skin, they do not fear or feel superior to them.

- **Stage 2: Acceptance.** The move to stage two signals a passive or active acceptance of the dominant ideology—either way the individual does not recognize that he or she has been socialized into accepting it. When a White person goes the route of **passive acceptance** they have no conscious awareness of being White although they may hold some subtly racist assumptions such as “[p]eople of color are culturally different, whereas Whites are individuals with no group identity, culture, or shared experience of racial privilege.” Or, White art forms are “classical” whereas works of art by people of color are considered “ethnic art,” “folk art,” or “crafts” (Martin and Nakayama 132). People in this stage may minimize contact with minorities or act in a “let me help you” fashion toward them. If a White person in this stage follows the active acceptance path then they are conscious of their White identity and may act in ways that highlight it. Refusing to eat food from other cultures or watch foreign films are examples of the active acceptance path of this stage.

- **Stage 3: Resistance.** Just as the move from stage two to stage three in the minority development model required a great deal of critical thought, so does this juncture. Here the members of the majority group cease blaming the members of minority groups for their conditions and see socioeconomic realities as a result of an unjust and biased sociopolitical system. There is an overall move from seeing one’s station in life as a purely individual event or responsibility to a more systemic issue. Here, people may feel guilty about being White and ashamed of some historical actions taken by some White people, they may try to associate with only people of color, or they may attempt to exorcise aspects of White privilege from their daily lives.

- **Stage 4: Redefinition.** In this stage, people attempt to redefine what it means to be White without the racist baggage. They are able to move beyond White guilt and recognize that White people and people of all cultures contain both racist and nonracist elements and that there are many historical and cultural events of which White people can be proud.

- **Stage 5: Integration.** In the last phase individuals are able to accept their Whiteness or other majority aspects of their identity and integrate it into other parts of their lives. There is a simultaneous self-acceptance and acceptance of others.

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**Bi- or Multiracial Identity Development**

Originally, people thought that bi-racial individuals followed the development model of minority individuals, but given that we now know that race and the meanings about race are socially constructed, it makes sense to realize that a person of mixed racial ancestry is likely to be viewed differently (from both the dominant culture and the individual’s own culture) than a minority individual. Thus, they are likely to experience a social reality unique to their experience. The following
five-stage model is derived from the work of W.S. Carlos Poston.

- **Stage 1: Personal Identity.** Poston’s first stage is much like the unexamined identity stage in the previous two models. Again, children are not aware of race as a value-based social category and derive their personal identity from individual personality features instead of cultural ones.

- **Stage 2: Group Categorization.** In the move from stage one to two, the person goes from no racial or cultural awareness to having to choose between one or the other. In a family where the father is Black and the mother is Japanese, the child may be asked by members of both families to decide if he or she is Black or Japanese. Choosing both is not an option in this stage.

- **Stage 3: Enmeshment/Denial.** Following the choice made in stage two, individuals attempt to immerse themselves in one culture while denying ties to the other. This process may result in guilt or feelings of distance from the parent and family whose culture was rejected in stage two. If these feelings are resolved then the child moves to the next stage. If not, they remain here.

- **Stage 4: Appreciation.** When feelings of guilt and anger are resolved the person can work to appreciate all of the cultures that shape their identity. While there is an attempt to learn about the diversity of their heritage, they will still identify primarily with the culture chosen in stage two.

- **Stage 5: Integration.** In the fifth and final stage the once fragmented parts of the person’s identity are brought together to create a unique whole. There is integration of cultures throughout all facets of the person’s life—dress, food, holidays, spirituality, language, and communication.

**Global Nomads**

People who move around a lot may develop a multicultural identity as a result of their extensive international travel. International teachers, business people, and military personnel are examples of global nomads (Martin and Nakayama 138). One of the earlier theories to describe this model of development was called the U-curve theory because the stages were thought to follow the pattern of the letter U. This model has since been revised in the form of a W, or a series of ups and downs; this pattern is thought to better represent the up and down nature of this process.

- **Stage 1: Anticipation and Excitement.** If you have ever planned for an international trip, what were some of the things you did to prepare? Did you do something like buy a guide book to learn some of the native customs, figure out the local diet to see if you would need to make any special accommodations, learn the language, or at least some handy phrases perhaps? All of these acts characterize stage one in which people are filled with positive feelings about their upcoming journey and try to ready themselves.

- **Stage 2: Culture Shock.** Once the excitement has worn off or you are confronted with an unexpected or unpleasant event, you may experience culture shock. This is the move from the top of the U or W to the bottom. Culture shock can result from physical, psychological, or emotional causes often correlating with an unpleasant and unfamiliar event. When individuals have spent most of their lives in a certain country, they will most likely experience culture shock when they travel overseas. The differences in cultural language, customs, and even food may be overwhelming to someone that has never experienced them before.

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Communication_(Paynton_and_Hahn)/…

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Case In Point
Digital nomads travel the world while you rot in your office.

Todd Wasserman explains the benefits of the increased presence that digital technologies have in our lives. People have realized that they can do their work from anywhere that provides wifi, thus creating a new population of individuals that opt to travel the world while doing the same work that they could have been doing in a home office. To find out more, click here.

- **Stage 3: Adaptation.** The final stage at the top of the U and W is a feeling of comfortableness: being somewhat familiar with the new cultural patterns and beliefs. After spending more time in a new country and learning its cultural patterns and beliefs, individuals may feel more welcomed into the society by accepting and adapting to these cultural differences.

After exploring the identity development models for minority, majority, bi-racial individuals, and global nomads, we hope you have some understanding that a person’s identity development is a process, occurs in stages, and is specific to the individual and cultural groups. We also hope you noticed that identity development is a social process—it occurs within our relationships with other people and the larger society. Not surprisingly, language is a key factor in shaping our own self-perception as well as the attitudes and beliefs we hold about other cultural groups. In the next section, we will explore the role that language plays in intercultural communication.

**Language Shapes Cultural Perception**

Saying that language plays a vital role in intercultural communication and relationships probably seems obvious to you at this point. But do you know how and why? Let us now turn to a more detailed explanation of the power of language. Specifically, we will discuss ascription and avowal, the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis, labels and stereotypes, and reclaiming.

As you have been reflecting on your own identity, do you think it matches up with how others see you? The way people present themselves is referred to as the avowal process. The opposite of that is ascription, how others see us: the qualities or attributes that are ascribed to us. Part of your avowed identity is probably that of a college student and you
hope that others see you this way too. Perhaps one of your hobbies is fashion and you enjoy paying attention to your
clothes. You may then see yourself as fashionable and stylish. But do others? Might some of your classmates think you
trendy, superficial, or fiscally irresponsible? The qualities that others may ascribe to you based on your fashion sense
may in turn affect how you see yourself. This is yet another way that identity is shaped through communication in a
social context.

In Part I of this book you were introduced to the idea that language shapes reality; the vocabulary we use to discuss an
idea or person influences how we think about our subject. Likewise, if we have no words for a phenomenon then we are
discouraged from talking about it or bringing it into our reality. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf believed that the
structure of language was a necessary component for producing thought. You have probably heard that Eskimos have
numerous words for snow. How many do you have? Snow. Ice. If you ski or snowboard then you probably have a few
more. Powder. Moguls. Depending on the extent of your snow vocabulary you can look at the frozen water and perceive
it in numerous ways. But if your vocabulary is limited then so is the way you can think and talk about snow. If you have
studied languages such as Spanish or French then you are familiar with the concepts of a formal and informal “you.”
Depending on the relationship between you and your audience you will use a different word for “you” and consequently
conjugate your verbs accordingly. If you are talking with a child, for example, you would use the informal version, but if
you were speaking with someone of higher social status such as your Professor you would use the formal “you.” As you
speak and write, this language structure demands that you be consciously aware of social relations. This awareness
then becomes part of your social reality.

If you have ever been on the receiving end of a stereotype or derogatory label in reference to your culture, religion, race,
gender, sexual orientation, or other aspect of your identity, then you are acutely aware of the power of language. You
know that such language is not a neutral conveyor of ideas, but is designed to alter and shape the way the audience
thinks about a particular person or group. Think about the list of terms that historically have been used to refer to
persons of African descent—African, Colored, Negro, Black, Afro-American, African American, and the harshest, the N-
word. When you read each term, what are the different images or connotations connected with them? Do they bring up
different historical periods, varying degrees of sociopolitical power, a variety of relationships to the dominant group? The
range of emotions and images that each of these terms produces is further testament to the subjectivity of language as
well as its temporal nature.

A more recent linguistic strategy among historically oppressed groups is called reclaiming. When a group reclaims a
word they are attempting to take it back from the dominant group. If the dominant group has used a word or phrase as
an insult then the oppressed group reclaims it for their own, positive meaning. Can you think of some examples? How
about “bitch,” “queer,” “nigga,” or “cunt”? Hopefully, you are thinking, “hey, those words may still be insulting to some
people; they’re not necessarily positive.” True. Part of the process in reclaiming is that only certain people can use them
in a reclaimed fashion, most simply, the members of the oppressed groups at which the term was designed to hurt. If a
woman is walking down the street and a man yells out, “Hey Bitch, watch where you’re going!” that is not reclaiming as
the term is used as an insult. However, the magazine, BITCH: A Feminist Response to Popular Culture, is reclaiming
this term. Here is a YouTube Video where the Bitch Media’s co-founder Andi Zeisler talk about the the word.
Case In Point

Language shapes more than our cultural perspective, it also shapes our senses! See how in this article from the New York Times, *Can't Place That Smell? You Must Be American: How Culture Shapes Our Senses*

Also, visit the website [www.bitchmedia.org](http://www.bitchmedia.org) to learn more. Can all words be reclaimed? Here is one perspective about the word “slut” from Feministing, “an online community run by and for young feminists” (www.feministing.com). [A Few Words About Reclaiming 'Slut'](#)

Contributions and Affiliations

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