Two contrasting approaches have dominated the conceptualization and study of culture within the field of psychology, those of cross-cultural psychology and cultural psychology. Although they generally agree that culture plays an essential role in human behavior, their view of that role and of the ways of studying it differ. In cross-cultural psychology, culture is seen as antecedent to behavior, and research is typically comparative, across two or more cultures; this approach is closely linked to the empiricist tradition, with an emphasis on identifying universal processes. In contrast, cultural psychology emphasizes the interdependence of culture and the self, and much of the research focuses on cultural processes within a given society; this approach is typically associated with the constructivist or interpretivist view (Kashima, 1998).

Both these traditions assume, to varying degrees, that cultures are discrete entities that exist within more or less defined territorial boundaries and can be described in terms of values, attitudes, or practices that characterize them. However, in the contemporary world, it is increasingly problematic to think of cultures as based in particular geographical locations (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). As the world becomes smaller, there is a vast increase in the amount of contact among different cultures. Most of the world’s inhabitants have some degree of exposure to cultures other than their own. Some of this exposure is direct, through travel, migration, conflict, and commercialization, but even more is indirect, through movies,
television, and, increasingly, the Internet. As a result of such contact, many societies today are becoming multicultural. In addition, historical changes within and across cultures present individuals with cultural transformations that require choices and adaptation (Dien, in press; Moghaddam, this issue). For many people, it is no longer necessary to leave home to encounter cultural difference.

**HYBRIDIZED CULTURES**

Because of the connections among people and the transfer of information, cultures are becoming hybridized, as they are mixed with each other and transformed into new combinations (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). This contact and interpenetration among cultures has been acknowledged by some psychologists, but it is rarely dealt with explicitly in research. For researchers, the methodological problems of studying such processes are far more complex than those of studying or comparing discrete cultures. Because of the mixing of people and cultures, it becomes difficult both to classify individuals as members of particular groups and to identify particular values, attitudes and practices as belonging to one culture.

However, this situation provides the opportunity for an intercultural approach that has exciting implications for the field, for it is at the points of contact that culture is most salient. People generally are unaware of their own culture and of cultural differences until they are exposed to other ways of being or doing things; without such contrast, culture is virtually invisible. At points of contact among cultures, individuals and groups experience directly the clashing, overlapping, and mixing of cultures. Such areas of contact offer a laboratory for examining cultural meanings as they are experienced. An intercultural approach highlights aspects of variability among human groups at the moments when such differences are most directly meaningful for individuals.

The study of contact among cultures has been pursued largely in the fields of...
intercultural communication and training. Research and programs in these areas have provided valuable information and assistance for foreign travelers and sojourners. However, the focus has been largely on the immediate or short term implications—the shocks, misunderstandings, and social blunders that occur in situations of contact. Over the longer term, as people continue to have contact with other groups, they become aware of more subtle aspects of culture. They try to integrate their intercultural experiences in terms of the meaning of such experiences for themselves.

**The Need for Group Identity**

Across the variability of human populations, one constant in all contexts is the need for human beings to make sense of their environment and their place in it, that is, to form an identity as a member of a particular community or ethnic, national or cultural group. Group identities are much more than categorical designations; rather, they encompass one’s sense of belonging to a group and the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that accompany such membership in the group (Phinney, 1990). A group identity provides an internalized perspective from which to view others.

Group identities are meaningful only in situations of contrast. In self-contained, traditional, static societies, including those of the past and a few isolated contemporary groups, there is little or no awareness of alternative ways of being, and cultural identity has little meaning. An individual’s place in the community is clearly defined, and there are few choices to be made regarding identity. However, such cultural isolation is increasingly rare. Most people in the world today are confronted with dramatic changes that challenge their sense of who they are (Baumeister, 1986). Exposure to a wide range of cultures, values, religions, and life styles inevitably results in the questioning of existing norms and presents individuals with many choices. As individuals struggle to understand these differences and construct a coherent identity, their experience provides clues to the complexities of cultural meaning in today’s world. The study of the meanings of group identity at the interface of cultures provides a way of linking the individual and the culture and of examining cultural contact and change.

Social psychologists have furnished detailed information on the ways in which group membership creates feelings of “us” and “them,” based on real or imaginary contrasts. Such feelings can provide a sense of stability and security, of knowing who we are and who we are not. Yet with the increasing overlap of cultures, the lines become blurred. In reaction, some people create ever more rigid boundaries and seek to vilify (or worse) those who threaten the boundaries; such conflicts are most often over issues of power and control. On the other hand, increasing numbers of people find that the conflicts are not between different groups but between different cultural
values, attitudes, and expectations within themselves. These sorts of internal cultural conflicts are occurring throughout the world, in developed and developing countries, among dominant and subordinate groups within multicultural societies, and even in isolated traditional cultures.

**Immigrant Identity**

Within multicultural industrialized nations, issues of cultural contact and the resulting identity conflicts are most obvious among immigrants and the children of immigrants, who on a daily basis face exposure to differing cultural expectations. Children of immigrants are confronted with the task of constructing an identity by selecting or combining elements from their culture of origin and from the new culture in which they are growing up. This process is often complicated–or clarified–by exposure to the cultures of other immigrant groups in their communities, as when two immigrant youths in the U.S., one from Mexico and one from China, find they have more values in common with each other than with European Americans.

Members of immigrant families deal with cultural meanings directly, on a day-to-day basis and their struggles highlight differences. In our research with immigrant families (Phinney, 1999, May), we met parents struggling to be American while retaining their traditional values. A Vietnamese father was required to attend parenting classes because of his adolescent son’s misbehavior. The father was accustomed to giving orders, and he expected obedience without discussion; the son, seeing other families that negotiated disagreements, rebelled and carried his rebellion into other aspects of his life. The father learned that as an American he needed to communicate in a more open and responsive manner with his son. In other examples, many children and adolescents in immigrant families grow up knowing that there are different expectations at school and at home; they learn to be “Mexican at home, and American at school” (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). As they establish their own adult identities, they are likely to blend the different values and expectations into new combinations.

Another reality in multicultural societies is the increasing number of mixed marriages and children from mixed ethnic or cultural backgrounds (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996).
Children whose parents are from different backgrounds face day-to-day issues of who they are and where they fit. Throughout their lives they deal with the need to forge an identity from two differing cultural backgrounds.

**Majority Group Identity Conflicts**

Contact with other cultures also raises identity issues for members of a majority group within relatively homogeneous industrialized societies. Japan has historically been a country with a distinctive culture that supported a clear sense of the meaning of being Japanese. This sense is being challenged by cultural contact from without and within. Children of Japanese business leaders often spend extended periods in one or more foreign countries; on returning home, as high school or college students, these young people are confronted with learning to be “Japanese.” Increasing numbers of Japanese undergraduate and graduate students spend extended periods studying in Western countries and return to face similar issues. For both these groups, the differences they become aware of on their return to Japan provide direct, immediate evidence of current cultural contrasts. In addition, within Japan, the small Korean minority is becoming more vocal and raising issues of diversity within a previously homogeneous country. The study of Japanese identity in these situations has the potential to capture key aspects of the meaning of culture.

Another example of cultural contrast within an industrialized society is seen in the issue faced when Israeli youth, raised on a kibbutz, complete their required military

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**About the Author**

Jean Phinney is a developmental psychologist at California State University, Los Angeles. She became involved in ethnic and cultural issues in psychology as a result of finding herself in one of the most culturally diverse universities in the most diverse region of the United States. In addition to continuing the study ethnic identity, she has recently become interested in the ways in which adolescents in families with strong interdependence values balance their own needs with those of their families as they form an identity.

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service (Wiseman & Lieblich, 1992). They have been exposed to the individualist values of Israeli society in the military, but retain their roots in the kibbutz. They wrestle with the decision about whether to return to the secure but confining communal life of the kibbutz or establish a new and more independent identity in the society at large.

In another context, inhabitants of Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union are dealing with cultural contrasts between the collectivist values of the Communists and the individualist values of the West (Reykowski, 1994). As individualist attitudes clash with normative collectivist beliefs, people face conflicts among alternative ways of constructing their identities. They may hold on to the communist values of the past, with the accompanying idea that the state will take care of them; they may incorporate individualist Western values and the understanding that everyone must take care of him or herself; or they may try to achieve some form of “ensembled” individualism that includes high individualization together with concern for the social well-being of others. A similar contrast between competing cultural values has been described in Turkey, where increasing earning power of young people leads to a decline in economic interdependence in the family, but not necessarily at the expense of emotional interdependence (Kagitcibasi, 1996).

**Even highly traditional societies are exposed to ideas and information from “outside” that challenge their established ways of being.**

**Traditional Societies**

Even highly traditional, isolated societies are exposed to ideas and information from “outside” that challenge their established ways of being. In traditional village culture in Nepal, women are becoming aware of alternative social structures in which women have greater freedom to shape their lives; as a result they are searching for ways to develop identities that give them more personal opportunities, without directly confronting the existing order (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998).

In cases such as these, the contrasting implications of individualism and collectivism can be seen in situations of direct contact. The meanings of these two constructs have been widely debated at the theoretical level (e.g., Matsumoto, in press). In the abstract, the concepts are perhaps too broad to be of value in pinpointing the role of culture. However, their specific implications can be examined empirically through individuals' experiences as they deal with specific manifestations of these values.

In summary, in many settings throughout the world, individuals are experiencing...
cultural differences at the point where they impact their lives personally and directly. The ways in which they make choices and construct an identity provide a window into the processes of cultural contact and change. In today's increasingly multicultural world, cultural dichotomies are problematic (Matsumoto, in press). Research needs to focus more on the contact zones among cultures than on cultures as separate entities (Hermans & Kempen, 1998).

**Methodological Problems**

The study of these processes poses complex methodological problems for researchers. Because of the variety of situations in which cultures are in contact, it is impossible at this point to develop models that might apply generally. The early stages of research on virtually any phenomenon can benefit from descriptions of particular cases and contexts. Narratives and case studies are one approach that can provide insights into the range of issues individuals must deal with in constructing an identity at the interface of cultures (Phinney, in press). Other qualitative methods, including interviews and anthropological approaches, are illustrated in some of the studies cited earlier. As information accumulates regarding this complex process, we can begin to develop models and hypotheses, as well as the quantitative methods needed to test them (Greenfield, 1997). At this point, there is room, and the need, for researchers interested in cultural contact from a variety of perspectives. Because the study of cultural contact and identity provides an exciting opportunity for the field, there should be many people willing to take up the challenge.

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