Intercultural On-line Forums for Grounded Theory Development:
An Analysis of Barcelona 2004’s Virtual Dialogue on Cultural Identity

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For scholars of intercultural or international communication, the benefits of making comparisons across cultures are readily apparent. The most important benefit is that research conducted across cultural and national boundaries encourages the development of theory that is not plagued by “naïve universalism” nor “unwitting parochialism” on the part of the researcher(s) (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990, p. 309; see also Burrowes, 1989; Kincaid, 1987; Wiarda, 1985). Simply put, when we can identify similarities and differences in concepts, relationships, behaviors, or processes across a broader range of cultural systems, we are in a better position to seek explanations for them.

Communication scholars also know that international work is not without its challenges. Research conducted in different cultural settings can be rife with practical, political, conceptual, and methodological problems (Johnson & Tuttle, 1989; Narula & Pearce, 1990). To date, meaningful theory development in international and intercultural work, if it can be accomplished, requires the often costly and time-intensive process of conducting successive within-culture studies and then comparing results across situations. But even this approach confronts potential pitfalls in the form of the lack of equivalence of key concepts or samples, as well as a host of methodological biases, as researchers move from one cultural setting to the next (Hui & Triandis, 1985; Johnson & Tuttle, 1989). As discussed by Marin and Marin (1991), research problem formulation in international and intercultural work is best accomplished using a “de-centering” process where the central
concepts that emerge are not culture-specific but are instead derived through an iterative conceptualization process.

The Internet and New Opportunities for Culture-General Research

With the global reach of the Internet and WWW, communication scholars now have the opportunity to access multicultural groups with greater ease. It is now commonplace to find individuals from all over the world join in Internet discussions on a fantastic array of topics. Some of these are grassroots gatherings where individuals “find each other” in cyberspace and create discussion spaces focused on shared interests, beliefs, or hobbies. Other on-line discussion forums are designed and sponsored by host organizations hoping to attract people to post opinions, share ideas, or discuss products. At the same time, software developers are busy in their efforts to improve the mechanics of on-line dialogues through the development of web-based systems designed for specific types of interaction, such as collaborative decision making, intercultural negotiation, dispute resolution, or problem-solving using the Internet (see, for example, Kersten & Noronha’s, 1999, research on INSPIRE). Likewise, the Virtual Forum, the host organization for the dialogue used in the present study, has been actively testing different on-screen formats to encourage smooth flowing dialogue and to incorporate efficient language translations that facilitate multilingual participation.

In this paper, the authors suggest that the organization of on-line intercultural dialogues--if ethically approached--provides opportunities for researchers to engage in more culture general and cost efficient international and intercultural theory development. In addition, the study of these types of cyber-focus groups also requires a methodological approach that can de-center the dialogue output successfully (i.e., remove it from its
application to a particular culture). Although it is impossible for any research to proceed without some degree of cultural and intellectual subjectivity, the authors attempt to demonstrate in this paper that concept mapping may be a productive analytic tool for investigating intercultural dialogues for the purposes of grounded theory development.

Concept Mapping as a Tool for Grounded Theory Development

Concept mapping is a technique used for representing knowledge in visual form. According to Lanzing (1997), concepts maps may be used to generate ideas, design or communicate complex structures or ideas, aid learning, assess understanding, plan or problem solve. Gaines and Shaw (Concept Maps) offer a brief review of the diverse ways in which concept mapping has been employed across many disciplines. These range from formally structured, computer-based applications that detail complex semantic networks to free-hand representations of an individual’s understanding of an idea or the architecture of an argument.

Joseph D. Novak at Cornell University is credited by some for developing the concept mapping technique in the 1960s in conjunction with his interest in student learning processes. According to Novak (The Theory Underlying Concept Maps, ¶ 1-3), a concept map starts with the identification and presentation of key concepts shown in visual form (e.g., labeled within a box or oval). To accomplish this, he suggests that it is best to create a concept map with a specific problem or question in mind. Novak defines a concept as “a perceived regularity in events or objects, or records of events or objects, designated by a label.” In addition, the concept map will typically display the hierarchical and network (or cluster) relationships among concepts (through the size, shape, and/or placement of concepts relative to each other).
A concept map also contains *propositions*. Propositions link two or more concepts in a way that expresses a meaningful relationship. This relationship is denoted using a line to connect concepts and may include a word or words that describe the nature or type of relationship. In addition, the visual representation may express a number of characteristics of that proposition (e.g., hierarchy, frequency of relation, nature of relationship, directionality). Propositions help to identify *domains*, which reflect meaningful clusters of concepts. Finally, concept maps include *cross-links*, defined as expressions of relationships between different domains of the concept map. According to Novak, cross-links help us see how different domains may relate to each other in ways not made evident until the map is near complete. As such, cross-links often represent creative leaps on the part of the map producer that may offer theoretical or philosophical propositions for consideration.

There are two points of interest to this study concerning the application of concept maps to on-line intercultural work. The first point is the obvious compatibility between the processes of concept mapping and descriptions of grounded theory (for example, see Charmaz, 2000). In her comprehensive overview of grounded theory as methodological approach, Charmaz describes how “grounded theorists” essentially combine the data collection and analysis process. As they interact with data, the theorists simultaneously pose questions, make comparisons, and seek to identify and order relationships among emergent concepts. Citing Glaser (1978), Charmaz (2000) argues that in grounded theory development concepts must “earn” their way into the analysis by emerging from rich, often diverse, data sources to form patterns and shapes of relationships in a way that--hopefully--offers new perspectives useful for theory development. The process of identifying
concepts, propositions, domains, and cross-links as part of concept mapping allows for such theoretical emergence.

The second key point of interest is Trochim’s (1999) argument that concept mapping is an ideal approach for determining how groups of people structure and think about the world around them. He defines concept mapping as “a structured process, focused on a topic or construct or interest, involving input from one or more participants, that produces an interpretable pictorial view (concept map) of their ideas and concepts and how these are interrelated” (Concept Mapping, ¶ 4). According to Trochim, concept mapping is particularly useful for working with a multiplicity of input from diverse participants for the purposes of planning and evaluation, problem identification, and problem solving. In Trochim’s view, the researcher is more of an “administrator” asking participants to employ concept mapping procedures themselves, as a group exercise, in order to arrive at joint solutions to problems. This is in contrast to Novak where the concept map functions more as a representation of the mapmaker’s process of understanding based on the collection of data.

We suggest that a combination of Novak’s and Trochim’s perspectives on concept mapping may be an optimal approach for researchers seeking more culture general results in international and intercultural work. Prompted by an intellectual problem or question, a researcher can efficiently harness the benefits of cultural multiplicity and diversity through the organization of an on-line intercultural dialogue. Instead of comparing participants’ individual inputs, the researcher--using concept mapping procedures--deconstructs and de-centers the conversation by focusing on the talk across situations, then re-constructs the dialogue into a single data “map” in order to highlight key concepts (also referred to in the
paper as “concept groups”), *propositions* (relationships among concepts), *domains* (clusters of related concepts), and *cross-links* (observations regarding relationships between domains). Ideally, the ability to view a snapshot of a complex set of data and its relationships encourages new theoretical insights.

To offer an illustration of concept mapping’s theory-building potential, and to add to the body of research on cultural identity (e.g., Banks & Banks, 1995; Collier, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998; Hegde, 1998; Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tanno & Gonzalez, 1998), the authors sponsored an on-line intercultural dialogue guided by the research question, “What is Cultural Identity in this Global Age?” The following section outlines the dialogue and analysis procedures.

**Method**

**An Intercultural On-line Dialogue: Forum Barcelona’s Club2004**

The Universal Forum of Cultures is an ambitious global event planned for Barcelona in 2004 (www.Barcelona2004.org). It is intended to be a gathering not of nations but of cultural groups from around the world to engage in debates, performances, and other activities designed to promote awareness and problem-solving in regard to three thematic arenas: peace, sustainable development, and cultural diversity.

The interactivity offered by the World Wide Web factors prominently into the plans for Forum Barcelona 2004. In particular, the Virtual Forum (a sub-group of the event’s planning organization) has been supporting and promoting the upcoming event by hosting a series of intercultural, on-line web dialogues surrounding the Forum’s main themes (called “Club2004”). Club2004 has hosted a large number of intercultural, on-line dialogues, each lasting anywhere from one to six months and on diverse topics such as climate change,
designing cities for peace, mass media and the promotion of a sustainable society, and the role of public art. At the time of this research (Summer, 2001), there were approximately 15 different intercultural dialogues in progress.

Club2004’s dialogue format is asynchronous, web-based, and easy to navigate. At the time of this project, participants could post, and read, the messages in a dialogue in three languages: English, Spanish, and Catalan. Translations of each message are made by Virtual Forum translators and available for participants to view within 24 hours of the original message post.

Club2004 encourages people from around the world to propose and sponsor dialogue topics. If a proposal is accepted, the Virtual Forum staff provides technical support, tips on moderating, and translation services. For this study and with the permission of the Virtual Forum, the authors sponsored a dialogue with the theme, “Cultural Identity in a Global Age” which ran for approximately five months, from April 1, 2001 to September 10, 2001. The dialogue description, posted at the Club2004 website, stated:

Cultural Identity in a Global Age:

Many people suggest that having a distinct cultural identity offers people an important source of security and stability in a world of constant change. Our cultural identity provides a foundation of values, behaviors, and beliefs to guide daily life. In this global age, however, the stability and "boundaries" of our cultural identities may be challenged. The reach of global news media, economic interdependency, and increased intercultural interaction through migration and travel are just some of the ways many of us are exposed to more "others" on a daily basis. In what ways does this interaction (both face to face and through technology) influence who we are and how we communicate? The purpose of this dialogue is to explore questions of cultural identity in a global age.
This overarching dialogue theme was organized into two sub-topics (see descriptions below) and presented as distinct, but related, dialogue discussions. In reality, however, the participants tended to cross over and the discussions merged quickly in terms of thematic emphasis. For that reason, the postings on the two dialogues were combined for analysis and treated as a single dialogue (and will be referred to as such from this point forward).

A graduate research assistant acted as a moderator for both dialogues with instructions to intervene as little as possible in the discussions but to post messages as necessary to keep the discussion going. After the initial postings, shown below, the moderator only intervened on one other day during the five months. The moderator’s postings were not included in the analysis.

**Topic 1: The Elements of Cultural Identity**
In an age of globalization - and as some fear - possible homogenization, discussions about the role and importance of cultural identity have become more prevalent. However, in order to better understand any threats to or opportunities for the promotion of cultural identity in a global age, we must first define it. What does cultural identity mean to you? What are its core elements?

**Topic 2: Changes in Cultural Identity**
With increases in migration, economic interaction, tourism, communication flows and more, some places are experiencing rapid cultural change. Do you see changes in cultural identity occurring in your life? In your community? In your country? What are they? What do you see as the primary forces of creating cultural change?

The on-line dialogue attracted 19 participants from Spain, France, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, USA, and Oman. No other information about the participants is made available by the Virtual Forum except that all participants can see what original language each participant chooses to post his/her message in. Although it was a small
collection of participants who signed up for this dialogue (and the geographic bias was apparent in the results), the mixture of participants and perspectives still worked well for this illustration. The dialogue participants were also self-selecting in that they (1) were “members” of Club2004; (2) chose a dialogue on cultural identity as a topic of interest; and (3) have the educational and economic means to be active Internet users. The dialogue was not advertised outside of Club2004.

Over the 5-month period the participants engaged in a slow moving, but thoughtful discussion regarding cultural identity. In total, there were 74 messages posted to the dialogue with 63% of the participants offering their views at least two or more times. Of these messages, 68% were originally posted in Spanish, 23% in Catalan, and 9% in English. Because the English version of the dialogue was used for analysis, 91% of the messages were translations of the original text. To check the reliability of the Virtual Forum staff translations, 5% of the postings were randomly selected and the authors had independent translations made. The result was considered “excellent” by the authors in terms of the conceptual integrity and accuracy of the Virtual Forum’s translations of dialogue postings from both Spanish and Catalan into English.

Because a typical message posted by a participant involves multiple ideas, the “statement” was used as the unit of data collection. A statement was defined, for the purposes of this study, as a distinct idea, opinion, or information offering presented by a participant. In this way, more than one statement could be derived from a single sentence or several sentences could combine into a single statement. Whenever possible statements were recorded verbatim. However, because the concept mapping process treats a statement as an independent data unit, each statement must be understandable outside of the context.
of the original message. This required minor alterations not to the meaning of the statement, but how it was written. For example, one participant wrote:

Some of the elements [of cultural identity] could be: the ethnic group to which one belongs and the national, regional and local area, which translates into one’s living space. It could also be a shared religion and a mother tongue. But I would like to say that when it refers to identity, it would seem to be necessary to refer to diversity.

This message was broken down into five, “stand-alone” statements:

1. One element of cultural identity could be the ethnic group to which one belongs.
2. Another element of cultural identity is geography as a common living space.
3. Shared religion is an element of cultural identity.
4. Language is an element of cultural identity.
5. It is necessary to refer to diversity when we talk about cultural identity.

To check for the reliability of statement identification, the two authors and a graduate research assistant each coded a random selection of 10% of the dialogue postings for the presence and form of statements. This was done one posting at a time, with a discussion after each message was deconstructed, until a consensus emerged that the process of statement identification was consistent and reliable. One coder then proceeded to create the full list of statements, with subsequent review and some refinement by the authors. A final reliability check on an additional 10% of randomly selected statements reflected a 90% agreement on statement identification. Using the above approach, the 74 messages posted to dialogue broke down into a final list of 232 statements made by the 19 participants over the 5-month period. Because the dialogue format caps message length at about 120 words, the typical posting included two to four statements.

The statements were then entered into the concept mapping software for a three-step analysis. The first step was to identify concepts. To do this, the statements were sorted
manually into thematic “piles” (related and recurring statements identified as a concept group) within the intellectual context of investigating cultural identity. No statement could stand alone in a pile nor could a “miscellaneous” group of non-related statements be created. This sorting process resulted in 21 distinct concept groups, ranging in size from 3 to 40 constituent statements. The authors conducted a validity check on the statement groupings, and refinements were made to the concepts and their contents through discussion.

The results of this first step are shown in two dimensions on Figure 1. The frequency in appearance of related or recurring statements is shown through the relative size (not exactly to scale) of each concept and included as part of the label (for example, **US hegemony** [20]).

The second step in the mapping procedure was to *identify propositions* or relationships and draw links between concept groups. To do this, the authors reviewed each statement within a concept group to determine if it was also conceptually “connected” to another concept group. For example, the participant statement, “We must maintain linguistic diversity” was placed in a primary concept grouping labeled **language and cultural identity**, but we determined that it was linked conceptually to another thematic grouping: **value of diversity and peaceful co-existence**. Through this process, the frequency (shown as line thickness), directionality where appropriate (shown as arrows), and the nature (shown as a text label) of the primary conceptual relationship, or propositions, between concept groups emerged and are represented on Figure 1. The process of linking concepts and positioning them in a way that enhances map readability also results, logically and naturally, in the appearance of **domains** or clusters of concept groups that have
thematic kinship. Domains are designated in Figure 1 by four large and labeled boxes containing a specific set of concepts.

The final step in the mapping procedure—and perhaps the first significant step in the process of grounded theory development—was to look for cross-links or observations one might make regarding relationships among various domains of the map as a whole. This was done by the researchers separately first. We then compared and better articulated our observations through extensive discussion with one another.

Results

All statements posted in Club2004’s on-line intercultural dialogue on “Cultural Identity in a Global Age” were analyzed using the concept mapping procedures described above. The process of statement identification (232 statements) resulted in 21 concept groups that clustered into four general domains and two stand-alone concepts groups, as shown in Figure 1. These are defined briefly and described in terms of their key propositions below.

Domain 1: The Context for Cultural Identity: Globalization and Inequity (29 percent of statements).

Throughout this 5-month conversation about cultural identity, there was keen attention given by the participants to the global context within which all cultural groups exist. This context, and the domain for which it was named, was characterized by the challenges of globalization, and the persistence of inequity, where some cultural and political groups seek to dominate others: politically, economically, socially, and linguistically. The behaviors of a U.S. hegemony served as a model for the (largely) negative attributes of globalization and inequity, which were seen to challenge the vitality
of cultural groups around the world and give rise to conflict and resistance as groups feel they must fight to preserve their identities in the face of dynamic change. Although the dialogue portrayed globalization as neither wholly good nor bad, it was presented as inevitable. And with it, fundamental changes were at hand, such as challenges to the nation-state system and current global governance structures, such as the United Nations.

One particular area of concern was that of human rights. Specifically, an interesting thread woven throughout this domain was recognition of the tensions between respecting cultural difference and trying to build a common, ethical--and global governance--system based on a universally acknowledged core of human rights (i.e., gender equality). We placed this concept here, as the emphasis of statements regarding human rights was within a global context. Nonetheless, it also links in important ways to another domain, which we detail below and that pertains to a more general concern with issues of value. Overall, however, the domain of Globalization and Inequity reflects a concern expressed among these participants that issues of cultural identity cannot be separated from the larger global context in which they occur. Theorizing about contemporary cultural identity must be done within the constraints and opportunities of larger global issues.

Domain 2: Processes of Education and Cultural Learning (13 percent of statements)

The second domain we found through concept mapping represented a set of themes that ran throughout the dialogue and suggested the dynamic and learned quality of cultural identity for these participants. There were a number of ways that “learning processes” were brought into the conversation. Within this domain, however, the modes of learning were seen as leading most importantly to cultural self-awareness and recognition. That is, social psychological precepts regarding the importance of cultural group self esteem in identity
formation and maintenance (see Tajfel, 1978, 1981) were presented as important outcomes of learning and as prerequisite to successful (and equal) intercultural exchange (linking to another domain found in this study).

Most of the talk in this domain revolved around education, whether in the form of school, media, and family (with older generations cited as an important part of the teaching/learning process) and the idea that cultural identity is created largely by or through those education forces. At the same time, respect for cultural diversity was identified as something that also needs to be taught (i.e., it is not “naturally occurring”). Although there was clear articulation of the importance of education systems in creating strong identities and respect for others, they were also critiqued in this dialogue as currently contributing more to global inequity than intercultural respect. Overall, however, the concern with education and learning process not only provides justification for current theorizing that suggests a socially constructed identity process (e.g., Collier, 1998) but also suggests that there may be a global imperative for fostering positive social identities that help encourage constructive intercultural encounters and international policies.

Domain 3: The Values of Diversity, Peace, and Cultural Exchange (15 percent of statements)

Both of the preceding domains included components suggesting the importance this group placed on larger human values. Most notably, the statements in this dialogue reflected an adamant viewpoint that somehow--within the globalizing structures of economy and governance--cultural diversity must be preserved. The importance of cultural diversity and peaceful co-existence embodied the ideas that embracing diversity promotes richness in cultural perspective that will pave a more optimal path for social growth and
development. Peaceful co-existence and mutual respect were presented as values to be nurtured.

At the same time, cultural exchange should be encouraged. Specifically, communication between and learning about other cultures were portrayed as means to cultural self-enrichment. Simultaneously, however, and as one participant noted “cultural exchange gives rise to fears about social change.” In general, however, even globalization was portrayed in this domain as something that could bring opportunities for enrichment. Such sentiment was counter to views expressed in the domain of Globalization and Inequity. Nonetheless, these participants saw intercultural exchange as one form of helping to encourage the continuity of existing cultural identities while also working to broaden and enrich them. The tensions between contact as potentially harmful to identity (through domination of one way of being over another) and potentially fruitful, as described here, need also be part of theorizing about identity issues.

Domain 4: The Nature of Cultural Identity (21 percent of statements)

In addition to the first domain we discussed, Globalization and Inequity, this final domain was particularly notable for what it suggests about the nature of cultural identity for these participants. The elements and indicators of cultural identity that appeared throughout the dialogue ranged from tangible products (e.g., architecture, music, food) to behaviors (e.g., customs, habits) and beliefs (e.g., shared fate, values, religion). To some, cultural identity is central in such an elemental or transcendent way as to not even be expressed in terms of elements or attributes (e.g., “Our lives create our identity”).
If there was a key attribute of cultural identity expressed in this dialogue it was that it is dynamic and changing. Identity was expressed as a complex and continual process of change influenced by historical era, specific situations and needs, and technology. The dialogue was conflicted, for example, on its view of territory as an aspect of cultural identity, reflecting both traditional and new views of how people organize. In fact, the other key attribute in addition to change was that of the multiplicity of cultural identity. As the world gets more complex and connected through migration, globalization, and technology, so do our cultural identities. For example, there was an important acknowledgement of a pressing need for people to hold both global and local identity orientations (be “human” and “cultural”) despite the often-conflicting nature of global needs and local beliefs. Overall, however, the dialogue offered evidence for nearly all the conceptualizations of cultural identity discussed in previous theorizing (e.g., Collier, 1998; Philipsen, 1998; Tanno & Gonzalez, 1998) and suggests that a more comprehensive theory must find a way to incorporate a range of perspectives often thought of as competing.

Stand Alone Concepts

In addition to the four domains or clusters of concepts we found in these data, our concept map revealed that some concept groups stood alone (or rather, could be equally distributed across the above four domains). Importantly to communication theorists, the two concepts were language and cultural identity (17 percent of statements) and technology (4 percent of statements). It is not surprising for participants in an on-line intercultural dialogue to see technology (specifically the Internet) nearly exclusively in a positive light as a tool to give voice to marginalized groups, allow for cultural learning and exchange, and encourage new types of cultural identities to form. Thus, within our sample of
statements, technology was portrayed as a useful means through which to encourage diversity and positive intercultural exchange, as a helpful mode of teaching about identity and culture, and as one of the means through which identity’s dynamic quality can be augmented and displayed.

The most compelling topic to emerge in this dialogue on cultural identity—in part explained by the inclusion of a significant number of Catalan and Spanish participants—was that of language and its myriad roles. As an expression of cultural identity, language linked to all domains and was often the lens or orientation through which many of the domain themes were introduced. To emphasize this point, all of the language related links are shown in a different color (green) on the map. In particular—and again appropriate to the Catalan situation—the threat of globalization, the suffering causes by dominant languages, the politics of bilingualism, language as a human right, and related issues were at times passionately raised as global, not only local problems. Calls by some dialogue participants for language preservation at any cost were balanced by other participants’ appeals that for increased multilingual abilities in order to enrich our cultural identities and act as better global citizens.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper is primarily methodological (to show the efficiency and utility of analyzing intercultural on-line dialogues using concept mapping techniques). As noted above, the final step of the concept mapping process and is to identify cross-links, or domain relationships, that may be of interest to scholars of cultural identity. This demonstration ends by offering a set of cross-links drawn from the results of the Club2004 dialogue on “Cultural Identity in a Global Age.” We acknowledge the limitations of this
particular dialogue in terms of sample size and constitution (see Methods section discussion regarding this). Nonetheless, it was possible to identify four primary cross-links—made apparent by the mapping process—that we believe may have import for scholars engaged in theory building in regard cultural identity.

**Cross-link 1:** Cultural identity awareness (of both self and others) is not just learned; it is taught and as such is political. For that reason, it cannot be conceptually or functionally separated from broader structures of globalization and inequity.

Many theorists of cultural identity acknowledge immediate context as a key variable in identity construction and situational behaviors, yet fewer attempt to link cultural identity negotiation to the context of globalization (Belay, 1993). This dialogue was persistent in its placement of cultural groups within a political and economic context characterized by inequity. These data suggest to us that cultural identity must be understood as having implications well beyond the individual (i.e., that a person’s cultural identity is derived from a set of larger social practices) and cannot be understood without reference to other forces that may work to change it.

**Cross-link 2:** Any theory of cultural identity must rectify group members’ need for psychological security, esteem, and stability with the highly dynamic nature of group identity and intercultural exchange.

The participants in this dialogue placed a premium on the maintenance of a strong sense of group self-awareness and esteem (through education) as a way to maintain cultural identity in the face of globalization. At the same time, a key attribute of cultural identity was that of change and enrichment through intercultural exchange. When perceived through a lens that views social group esteem as important to positive intercultural
exchange, the needs do not run counter. When exchange is viewed as being asymmetrical, with one “side” in the exchange having more power than the other, the two positions may be tensional. Both versions of these dual needs provide opportunities to expand our understanding of cultural identity in an intercultural environment.

Cross-link 3: The importance and influence of different aspects of cultural identity varies across situation, cultural context, and over time.

Language offered an excellent example in this dialogue of how different cultural perspectives and experiences not only frame one’s understanding of identity generally, but cue behavior (in this case, modes of talk about identity) within a given situation. While language as a reflection of cultural identity is important worldwide, it was particularly so for this group of participants, some of which had first hand experience with language conflict and discrimination. For many natives of Catalonia, an autonomous nation within Spain whose language was outlawed under Franco, the ability to speak their native language is not just important, rather it is their cultural identification. For another--or broader based--configuration of participants, other aspects of identity may have loomed larger in this dialogue (e.g., religion or territory).

In this dialogue, when language was discussed as an element of cultural identity, the conversation oriented toward a relatively benign view of identity (i.e., as a list of enactments). When it was changed just slightly to talk about languages as tied to particular understandings and histories, it instead instigated dialogue about politics and conflict, both regional and global. Talk about languages “dying” redirected the conversation toward the dynamic and changing nature of cultural identity. In all of these cases, the orientation toward language offered in a participant’s statement had the potential to create a new, and
sometimes apparently contradictory, perspective on what counts as cultural identity. Theorizing about cultural identity may be informed by these shifts in talk by realizing that cultural identity can be multiple processes simultaneously.

This dialogue also hinted at some changing aspects of cultural identity over time. For example, there was a clear difference of opinion that emerged in terms of the import of nationality and territory as aligned with cultural identity, which may have been influenced by the Internet-savvy nature of the dialogue participants. Only a group comfortably conversant about shifts in our ideas of space and time made possible through technology might willingly predict the demise of territoriality and nationality as key cultural identifiers. In any event, however, cultural identity—and what is important within it—changes across time and contexts.

Cross-link 4: The promotion of cultural diversity and exchange as a value is linked conceptually to three levels of activity and interactivity (enrichment of self, the development of society, and the ability to solve global problems).

This dialogue embodied the view that cultural preservation, societal growth, and global unity are not mutually exclusive ideas. Diversity in this dialogue was embraced as a value that—when accompanied by mutual respect—could lead to enrichment and an enhanced ability to creatively problem solve at all levels of human interaction. However, if not seen as a value, then it is this very clash of cultural difference that is the source of many personal, societal, and global problems.

Caveats

The main goal of this paper was to promote the use of intercultural on-line dialogues, combined with techniques of concept mapping, as an efficient and effective
means to collect data for grounded theory development in a way that is more de-centered--
or more cultural general--in design and execution than through comparative country
analysis. Within this larger goal, we offer several important caveats.

The first caveat is that this type of approach must address the ethical issues of
permissions, confidentiality, and disclosure. The process described here is not the same as
“lurking” on established discussion groups for the purposes of research (the ethics of which
are currently being debated). The proposal is more akin to setting up a multicultural focus
group, and as such the researcher must reveal any biases in the participant selection process
or sample and obtain the necessary permissions.

One advantage to concept mapping as an analytical tool is that it ultimately treats
the dialogue, rather than participants, as unit of analysis. In that way, individual
participants are never named nor identified as expressing a particular viewpoint. The data
are presented as if the “dialogue” spoke rather than participants from specific countries. On
the other hand, by de-linking the statements from their sources, researchers run the risk of
losing grasp of the statements’ intended meaning. This is a danger that is important to
address during the statement identification step.

Second, and common to the majority of international and intercultural work, is the
challenge of working with translations. For this project, the authors needed to rely on the
translators hired by the Virtual Forum, but we were unusually pleased at the quality of the
English translations when tested for reliability. At the same time, because this particular
dialogue format only allowed participants to post messages in three languages, it may have
limited participation or constrained certain participants’ ability to express themselves (e.g.,
if their native language was German, Russian, or Chinese). To improve the possibilities of
the type of work suggested here will also mean developing better ways to provide for
timely, far ranging, and quality translations so the dialogue itself can “flow” better, and the
data analyzed will more accurately reflect the messages posted. Club2004’s vision of
allowing participants to converse, relatively seamlessly, in all the UNESCO official
languages in the dialogues by 2004 is a noteworthy goal.

Third, despite the emphasis placed in this paper on the importance of de-centering
and striving for cultural general approaches to theory building in international work, we
hold no illusion that research – in its formation, execution, interpretation, or presentation –
is in any way culture free. Instead, along with Marin and Marin (1991), we would argue
that the process of de-centering better incorporates culture by re-distributing the power
balance among the ideas presented. It is a process that encourages researchers to at least
attempt to “listen equally” and without too many pre-conceived notions concerning what
they hear.

Conclusion

In our attempt to “listen equally” to intercultural dialogue about cultural identity, we
were able to identify 21 concepts revealed in the statements we investigated. Through
concept mapping, we identified four domains and two interconnected but stand alone
concepts that helped reveal some important considerations for these participants and,
ultimately, for international and intercultural scholars interested in understanding more
fully the nature and processes of cultural identity. Looking across these domains, we were
able to identify at least four overarching assertions, or cross-links, that appeared important
in the conceptualizations of identity presented. We hope that these assertions will be
usefully incorporated into future theorizing about the complexities of cultural identity.
References


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\(^1\) It’s common to see different labels used for these same characteristics of a concept map proposed by Novak (e.g., “nodes” instead of “concepts”; “links” or “interrelationships” for “propositions” and so forth). The authors chose to use Novak’s labels.

\(^{ii}\) A companion paper to this by the same authors, Manusov, V. & Rivenburgh, N. (2002) “Our Lives Create Our [Selves]”: Conceptualizations of Cultural Identity from an International On-line Dialogue, provides a review of current theoretical perspectives regarding cultural identity. This paper’s focus is methodological and, as such, will limit its references to that literature to the results discussion. Please contact the authors for a copy.

\(^{iii}\) Catalan is the national language of Catalonia, of which Barcelona is the central city. The Virtual Forum staff hopes to add the remaining UNESCO official languages as dialogue options by 2004 (French, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese).

\(^{iv}\) The World Trade Center terrorist tragedy on September 11, 2001 dramatically shifted the dialogue discussion, so the authors stopped their data collection for this project at that time.

\(^{v}\) Membership only requires one time sign up giving your country of citizenship. There is no payment involved. The purposes of Club2004 – to offer dialogues and information about global issues of peace, diversity, and environmental sustainability – would by nature only attract certain types of Internet surfers.

\(^{vi}\) The dialogue was analyzed using a concept mapping software program, the Concept System\(^{\text{Tm}}\). The final map shown in Figure 1 was re-drawn for presentation using Inspiration\(^{\text{Tm}}\) in order to include some additional visual features.

\(^{vii}\) The companion paper to this one, referred to in endnote ii, offers a more detailed analysis of the dialogue content itself, including sample statements for each concept group. Please contact the authors for a copy.

\(^{viii}\) Of course, certain types of research problems and questions require extensive in-country analysis and data collection – particularly where a comparison is the point (e.g., comparative law or policy research).