

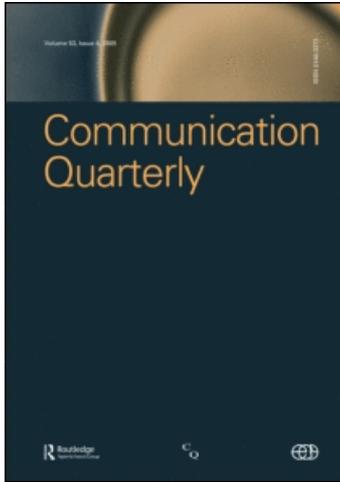
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Cultural Contracts Theory: Toward an Understanding of Identity Negotiation

Ronald L. Jackson II

This essay introduces a nascent paradigm for exploring identity shifting and identity negotiation. Cultural Contracts Theory metaphorically explains the attitudinal and social predispositions interactants have when relating to others within and without one's own culture

KEY CONCEPTS conflict, cultural contracts theory, difference, identity negotiation

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In 1903, W.E.B. Dubois accurately predicted in his now-famous thinkpiece *Souls of Black Folks* that the principal conundrum of the twentieth century would be that of the color line. Now, one-hundred years later, I can assert without the slightest reservation that the primary crucible of the twenty-first century will be that of identities. It would be nice to think that as we speak we are simply exchanging information, but even in casual contact with others, we are constantly exchanging codes of personhood, worldview, indeed our identities.

The challenge is that multiple, changing, and confounded identities reflect difference. With this variegated difference comes conflict. It is what we do with that difference and incumbent conflict that is most critical to the development and sustenance of identities. Do institutions or individual interactants seek to manage, contain and control the difference and/or conflict? If so, does this activity constrict or crystallize identities? Furthermore, for what purposes or to what end do we seek to manage identities? These are all social, political and ontological questions that represent some of the intricacies of identity negotiation in everyday interaction with others.

The "negotiation of identity" is a general concept that has been in existence for as long as there have been intergroup and interpersonal differences; however, the terminology as we know it today first emerged in the field of communication via the work of Stella Ting-Toomey (1986). In 1986, Ting-Toomey created the identity validation

model (IVM), which consists of three dimensions, one of which is communication. Communication is described as a critical dimension, which is the actual "identity-negotiation process between the self and relevant others" (p. 123). This identity negotiation paradigm refers to the careful selection of one among several role identities to engage within a particular communication context. Ting-Toomey (1999) continues and expounds on this line of thinking in her subsequent book-length explication of identity negotiation as a theory. In this remarkable monograph, she asserts that identity negotiation is about the choices cultural interactants make in securing their self-image or saving face.

Ting-Toomey's identity validation model and the subsequent identity negotiation theory are among the first interpretive frameworks found in the literature which not only indicate that identity is relational but also explicitly note that identity is constructed via a negotiation process. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) is the basis upon which Ting-Toomey's research on initial interaction is founded. However, negotiation was only considered a general phenomenon and not an actual construct in Berger and Calabrese's formula. Ting-Toomey (1986) proposed that future research examine the relational dilemmas and paradoxes that arise from members of two cultures "as they attempt to reach out and hold back at the same time, to seek for mutual validation, and yet at the same time to protect their own vulnerability" (p. 126). Ting-Toomey's work provides the primary impetus for cultural contracts theory. Like Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation paradigm, cultural contracts theory derives from personal experiences in the U. S. and dealing with almost-everyday episodes that represent a racial chasm between Whites and non-Whites.

Previous studies support the idea that human beings carry their undetachable identities into every cultural and conversational encounter (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003). Some of these parts of our cultural identities, usually the core, are highly secured and virtually immovable, while others may shift during a persuasive dialogue or sustained relationship. One of my concerns is how we select who is worthy of a sustained relationship in the first place. So, in part, cultural contracts theory also is inspired by uncertainty reduction theory, which concerns itself with initial interaction and beyond. From the time we are born and given a name by our parents, we are inextricably dependent on others to play a part in how we define ourselves and why we define ourselves as we do. Consequently, our identities are shaped and molded during interactions with others. We use others as guideposts for normative behavior and we also set up implicit and sometimes explicit "contracts" with others (individuals and groups), which indicate how we will progress with our relationships. Fisher (1998) posits that because every human being is different, humans are naturally incompatible. So, every relationship is met with conflict at some point; again, it is how the interactants manage that conflict that becomes key. Keep in mind that conflict does not have to be negative and neither does difference; it just means that two ideas or components are not parallel or the same. Valuation of difference begins with this premise.

Many studies recognize that conflict emanating from difference is the centerpiece of intercultural and interpersonal communication research. From Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural variability, Brislin's (1983) "managing" and Cronen, Chen and Pearce's (1988) "coordinating" to Collier and Thomas' (1988) "coherent managing", Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey's (1988) "bridging" and Jackson's (1999) "negotiating" of cultural difference, it has become clear that difference is not okay as is, but that something must be done with it. As both studies by Berger and Calabrese (1976) and Giles & Johnson (1987) point out, most human beings prefer to reduce uncertainty

within social contexts.

Negotiation of cultural identity is just one strategy for reducing conflict. Ting-Toomey (1999) further developed her earlier use of the term cultural identity negotiation in order to coherently explain how public self-images are affected within human interactions via giving or losing face and by being mindful communicators. Ting-Toomey's concern for face in cross-cultural encounters makes sense given her interest in interpersonal communication and Korean-United States interactions. My early (1999) use of the term evolved from studying Black-White interactions in the United States; hence, it is much more directly aligned with the current study. The negotiation of cultural identity is defined as

A bargaining process in which two or more individuals consider the exchange of ideas, values, and beliefs.... *Negotiation of cultural identity* is a process in which one considers the gain, loss, or exchange of his or her ability to interpret their own reality or worldview. (p. 10)

The present explication of cultural contracts theory sees that earlier work as a variation of "negotiating cultural identity" and as a metatheory that explores the exchange of cultural values and commitments; hence, "cultural contracts" theory is a rubric of this. Cultural Contracts paradigm is based on the idea that intercultural relationships may or may not be coordinated, depending upon the dynamics involved (such as power, boundaries, cultural loyalty, group identification, maturity, etc.). This coordination is initiated after an initial negotiation with the self. That is, identities, whether social, cultural or otherwise, have meaning for the individual when they are first negotiated personally. Although an individual may be aware of an ascribed racial identity that defines her as Black, that identification referent takes on significance when its meaning is negotiated within the self. That process is sometimes subconscious and/or happens quickly. After intrapersonal adjustments are made to accept, reject or compromise one's worldview or portions of it, then this ontological orientation is carried into relationships with others, where difference becomes paramount. Difference in an intercultural relationship does not have to be conflictual, but often times, just as in a new marriage, interactants must come to terms with value distinctions if the relationship is to be successful.

The proliferation of cultural identity studies in recent years has produced a peculiar inclination to see contact between cultures as conflictual (Fisher, 1997; Hecht, 1998; Singer, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Difference is perceived as interaction between divergent, disengaged, or unique positionalities anchored in a set of norms or standards that humans identify as culture. Consequently, efforts to define and discuss intercultural communication have often begun by exploring difference, while accenting competent understandings and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

This study accepts the challenge advanced by Ting-Toomey (1999). I strongly believe that identities are both highly complex and naturally occurring. One way to explicate how identities shift is by utilizing the "cultural contract" and "identity negotiation" metaphors. My goal here is quite simple. Within this essay, I will simply reintroduce the cultural contracts theory with its assumptions and propositions. It was created in 2001, and has since appeared in several manuscripts (Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003; Jackson, 2002, in press; Jackson & Crawley, in press; Jackson, Morrison & Dangerfield, 2002; Jackson & Simpson, in press; Onwumehili et al., in press; Tierney

& Jackson, 2002). Its core structure re-appears here with altered examples.

CULTURAL CONTRACTS PARADIGM AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

The I-Other dialectic that is implicit in the exploration of racially and socially asymmetrical identities can best be accounted for by examining the notion of cultural contracts as manifested products of identity negotiation during communication with others. As previously explained, with all identity negotiation, the assumption is that cultural difference translates into cultural conflict and therefore, something must be done with conflict. As a result, identity negotiation is about coordinating one's identity to match, compliment or not resist the presence of other cultural identities. As with any relationship, if others do not coordinate relationships with us in a fair, equitable manner, relational possibilities may dissolve. However, if one feels coerced and his/her life possibilities, financial means of survival or some other major factor is at stake, certain cultural contracts may be more appealing despite coercion.

Although seemingly simple in explanation, the cultural contracts paradigm was established to make sense of identity effects or outcomes as necessary end products of identity negotiation. This is accomplished by describing three contract typologies: ready to sign contract (assimilation), quasi-completed contract (adaptation), or co-created contract (mutual valuation). The tragic reality is that most people neither understand all of the contracts they have signed nor all of the implications of having signed them.

Generally, identity negotiation refers to a conscious and mindful process of shifting one's worldview and/or cultural behaviors, so it is possible to be cognizant of a choice to assimilate without understanding that assimilation might have a direct effect on future choice-making, such as in the case of a personnel manager who decides to hire someone based on a subconscious preference for the applicant who behaves similar to the manager.

Identity negotiation is about alterations in worldview. A shift in any one or any part of one of the cultural aspects of rural African American cultural identities constitutes the "signing" of a cultural contract. Everyone has "signed" at least one cultural contract in his/her life, and with every significant encounter, one or more of those cultural contracts is negotiated. As with the nigrescence model (Cross, 1971;1978; 1991), it is possible that a Black person matriculates through a process at the end of which s/he becomes culturally Black. Although this idea of becoming "culturally Black" seems essentialist, what it suggests is that a person who has assimilated or adapted his/her cultural identity can, over time, become divorced from his/her indigenous cultural ways of knowing. Eventually, this would disable him/her from ever signing what you will come to know as a co-created contract, because mutual validation only occurs among relational interactants who value themselves first.

It is important to note that the word "cultural" in cultural contracts is deliberate. It is impossible to exist without culture. Even if one is unable to articulate the particularities of the cultural value system to which he or she subscribes, there are still cultural patterns of interaction, rules, and norms that guide everyday behavior. So, with this cultural contracts paradigm, there is no such thing as a non-cultural or culturally generic contract and everyone has at least one cultural contract.

Everyone has identified or aligned him or herself with others throughout his/her life. This alignment is usually behavioral and cognitive. The Cultural contracts paradigm is most concerned with sustained alignments, whether short or long-term. As with any negotiation, one can either choose to abide by an existing contractual ar-

rangement or sign another contract. Although the concept of identity negotiation is simple, it is not always clear what is being negotiated, especially since identities are non-material. The cultural contracts paradigm has been introduced to make sense of what is actually being negotiated. The fundamental principles of cultural identity negotiation are summarized in the following list of theoretic assumptions and propositions of cultural contracts.

CORE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

Assumptions 1-5

In assumptions 1-5, the rudiments of initiating a cultural contract are outlined. Think of negotiating a material item such as a house or an automobile. The first exposure one has to the item up for negotiation is usually via a one-way communicative venue such as advertising. So, if you are a prospective buyer, you contact the person with the product you want and begin to talk about points of sale. In human interaction processes, and particularly as it relates to cultural communication, the process is holistically the same, but differs in form. Instead of seeing an advertisement, the body, voice or written message becomes the mediated stimulus. Our bodies signify racial meaning and our minds comply with social meaning that is culturally constructed. So, in a rural community, an African American cultural identity is signified via the body as a visual cue and secondarily by the values, norms, behaviors and practices that constitute cultural understanding. As human beings, we ritualistically enact these cultural practices and our social perceptions facilitate everyday living. They give us a sense of belonging and attachment. This is especially important among minorities who are marginalized and treated as abnormal because of their difference. Their attachment to culture is a matter of survival and yet there is always a need for marginalized persons to seek centrality and to associate with members of the dominant and mainstream culture. Doing so is healthy, but frequently deleterious, because it reproduces the same anxieties and reinforcement of social positioning when their cultural identities are not treated as normal, legitimate, or okay. In the latter case where they are not dialectically approved by the dominant other, marginalized group members must make a choice to resist assimilation and maybe a certain measure of life satisfaction or to sign that ready-to-sign contract in the absence of mutual validation. The assumptions are as follows:

- Assumption 1:* Human beings cannot exist without culture; culture is the basic organizing unit of social processes (Ting Toomey, 1999).
- Assumption 2:* Cultural contracts are necessary for the sake of preserving, protecting, and defining the self, hence everyone has at least one. (There is no such thing as not having one, although you may not be aware of what your contract requires you to do. All contracts have fine print that may be overlooked without careful reading).
- Assumption 3:* Cultural contracts can be either temporary/episodic or long-term/enduring.
- Assumption 4:* Cultural difference among human interactants presupposes a need for coordination, which is manifested in cultural contracts (Cronen, Chen, & Pearce, 1988).
- Assumption 5:* Although important, there is not necessarily a mutual interest

in relational coordination, identity negotiation or intercultural competence among all human interactants (Jackson, 1999). With these persons, "signing" is not the goal.

Assumptions 6-11

Assumptions 6-11 are designed to address the means, modes and functioning of cultural contracts as a communication product. Identities are communicated everyday in multiple ways. It would be nice to presume that we are simply exchanging ideas or just living without any need to deal with culture, but the reality is that we are all cultural beings and this gets accented every time we come in contact with cultural others. Their identities help them to make sense of the world. This is not new; Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf talked about this almost fifty years ago. They suggested that language determines thought. That is, the words, sounds and structure of language in a given culture help a person to articulate what they are experiencing. The typical example is that there are cultures where there are over one hundred words describing snow. That culture sees and understands snow much differently than North Americans who might have about ten words for snow. The language is not the only feature of culture that helps form identities. History is another. Personal and cultural histories offer a baseline for social cognition. Without history, one becomes confused about what to do in a given situation. They seek to reduce uncertainty and gain some control over how they will proceed. Rural African American identities are in a state of flux, as stated earlier in this essay. The duality is embedded in the Africanity of African American culture and the effect of being an African ancestor forcibly brought to the American context. So, there is both an African American resistance to and move toward being White, which means being a normal U. S. citizen. The resistance is due to a perceived need to maintain some attachment to the cultural community that supports African Americans and other minority rural inhabitants when dominant cultural others will not. The assumptions 6-11 are listed below.

- Assumption 6:* Identities are dynamic, not static; and they are influenced during interaction with others (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003).
- Assumption 7:* Every time people communicate, they are communicating their identities by expressing how they see the world (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003; Ting Toomey, 1999).
- Assumption 8:* Communicators' personal histories and antecedent interactions influence the degree to which they are open to entering into identity negotiations with others (Jackson, 1999; Jackson & Crawley, in press).
- Assumption 9:* Because multiple identities are functioning simultaneously within communicative contexts, they may also be negotiated simultaneously (Collier & Thomas, 1988).
- Assumption 10:* The attempt to function as a "free agent" and "join" another culture is not always as profitable as it sounds; it is often stressful, shocking and isolating (Ting-Toomey, 1999).
- Assumption 11:* A contract will only be completed or "tendered" if there is a strong desire or perceived need for it, even if it is forcibly signed for the sake of survival (Jackson et al, in press).

Propositions 1-3

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the rural south was in an uproar due to rural African Americans who could tolerate their secondary social positions no longer. The movement ended with some who forfeited their lives for the cause and others who lived to continue the legacy. Nonetheless, the movement was a lesson in the politics of identity and cultural contract negotiation. Asymmetrical power does not always translate into inferiority. Civil rights protestors proved that if principled protest is sustained, organized and lawful, results will be obtained. However, those who placed their locus of control externally never saw liberatory change. Returning to the negotiation of a material item such as a car, if you are emotionally invested or tied to a certain price for the car, it is highly unlikely you will sell it at a discount price. This example is not to illustrate that identities have price tags, but that if one is strongly committed to and strongly values one's own culture, there will likely be a greater sense of self-efficacy and a reduced desire to assimilate or adapt. Propositions 1-3 are below.

- Proposition 1:* When there is unequal power among interactants, strategic communication will take place (Giles & Johnson, 1987).
- Proposition 2:* There is a direct and proportionate relationship between power and self-efficacy (Orbe, 1998; Ting Toomey, 1999).
- Proposition 3:* If there is no perceived need to relationally coordinate, then there will also be a greater resistance to co-creating cultural contracts (Orbe, 1998). (These persons will either expect you to sign their contract or have none at all.)

Propositions 4-7

Propositions 4-7 are the final statements related to the cultural contracts typology. Given that we have already discussed power as a variable that contributes to signing a cultural contract, with all other things being equal, one's cultural loyalty or ethnolinguistic vitality, especially in a rural community will be high if living in close contact with members of the same culture. For example, no matter whether it is Creoles and Cajuns of New Orleans and its rural communities, Geechi and Gullah speaking communities in Georgia or South Carolina or Black Appalachians in Pennsylvania, linguistic communities are perpetually faced with the survival of language. As a result, their use of non-mainstream English, as African American rural inhabitants, represents a contract breach. Their lives, in part, depend on adaptation, but assimilation is heavily resisted and co-creation is not a first option, because it implies that their cultural identity is being called into question and may be eventually dissolved. The propositions 4-7 are below.

- Proposition 4:* As cultural loyalty and power increases, so does the likelihood that "ready-to-sign" cultural contracts will be prepared for other cultural relationships in advance (See Giles, et al. discussion of ethnic vitality).
- Proposition 5:* There are at least three types of cultural contracts: "ready-to sign," (i.e. not budging; closest to win-lose) co-created (i.e. win-win and interdependent self-construal), and quasi-completed.
- Proposition 6:* If contracts are breached, there are penalties associated with this "rule" violation, one of which may be the cost of com-

munity ostracism. (Of course, there are “escape clauses” in fine print).

Proposition 7: When a breach or violation occurs, one of three actions will take place in varying degrees: termination or rupture of the relationship, tendering of a new or revised contract, or settling without penalty due to perceived high value of the relationship and low assessment of damage.

Cultural Contracts Theory is an innovative, interdisciplinary paradigm that can be used to assess identity issues that are rhetorical/discursive, organizational, interpersonal, or mass mediated. It is one lens through which we are able to examine how identities take shape and are retained on a daily basis. Often times, diversity experts seek to examine the possibilities in a world where differences are ignored and not valued. Truly, the most important challenge is not to determine what we can do without differences; it is to imagine what we can accomplish with them!

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