Identity in Multicultural Societies
Who do we think we are?

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Abstract: This paper examines identity issues in multicultural Australia. In its extreme, negative form, assumptions that certain characteristics apply to all members of an ethnic group can be attributed to racism. However, the belief that individuals who share the same ethnic background have similar needs, interests and perceptions is also reflected in business, government policy and academic research. Often, ethnic groupings used for research and policy formulation are very broad and fail to take into account within-group differences. The criteria used to assess an individual’s membership of an ethnic group can be problematic. Criteria based purely on objective measures such as country of birth or ethnic ancestry do not take into account acculturation processes or the degree to which individuals consider themselves to be ‘ethnic’. These objective measures are complicated further as individuals may have ethnic roots from multiple countries depending on their family composition over several generations. This theory-focused paper proposes that ethnic identity should be viewed as a subjective phenomenon where individuals are likely to align themselves with the ethnic background to which they most identify. This has implications for research and policy making in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Multicultural Societies, Subjective Ethnic Identity

Introduction

An increase in immigration and therefore, diversity within many countries presents new challenges to researchers that have not been addressed in any great detail by cross-national studies of ethnicity. This paper examines identity issues in multicultural Australia. In its extreme, negative form, assumptions that certain characteristics apply to all members of an ethnic group can be attributed to racism. However, the belief that individuals who share the same ethnic background have similar needs, interests and perceptions is also reflected in business, government policy and academic research. Often, ethnic groupings used for research and policy formulation are very broad and fail to take into account within-group differences. Measures of ethnic identity are complicated further as individuals may have ethnic origins from multiple countries depending on their family composition over several generations. The criteria used to assess an individual’s membership of an ethnic group can be problematic. Criteria based purely on objective measures such as country of birth or ethnic ancestry do not take into account acculturation processes or the degree to which individuals consider themselves to be ‘ethnic’. For immigrants arriving in a multicultural society, acculturation processes are likely to affect the way in which they perceive their ethnic identity over time. One-dimensional theories of acculturation assume that immigrants will relinquish aspects of their previous culture in exchange for new cultural paradigms in their host country. However, recent times have seen the emergence of hybrid, bicultural individuals who are more inclined to retain their original cultural framework and switch between their ethnic identity and those of their host country as the situation warrants.

This theory-focused paper proposes that ethnic identity should be viewed as a predominantly subjective phenomenon at an individual rather than a group level and as a construct where individuals are likely to align themselves with the ethnic background to which they most identify. This has implications for research, business and policy making in multicultural societies.

The Nature of Identity

Fearon’s (1999) description of social identity and personal identity helps to make sense of the broad array of identity definitions currently available. Social identity is concerned with the characteristics and expected behavior of individuals in the context of their membership of a group. Ethnic identity is seen as a type or category of group identity along with gender, religion, class and sexuality among others. Personal identity consists of ‘some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable’ (Fearon 1999:2).
The Nature of Ethnic Identity

Terms such as culture, ethnicity, identity, ethnic identity and race are complex and often interchanged; partly because of the broad range of definitions available and also due to the lack of consensus on a single definition for each. These definitions are often context dependent, taken from a variety of epistemological viewpoints, and depend on the purpose for which the term is to be used. For the sake of simplicity, ethnicity and ethnic identity are the terms of choice for this paper.

Multicultural Societies

Increasing cultural diversity is a global trend that is reflected in population statistics from Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA. As highlighted in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Increase in Proportion of Permanent Ethnic Residents by Country</th>
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*While the proportion of immigrants in the Australian population has barely changed, the composition of nationalities has become more diverse, and so too has their reasons for migrating (ABS & Hugo 2002).

Research opinion on the value of multicultural societies is divided. Globalization, increased immigration, and a more mobile population, suggest that multicultural societies are a fact of life in many countries and the trend is likely to continue.

The Evolved Multicultural Society

Shearer's (2003) dissertation on intercultural personhood proposes that an immigrant and long term residents of a host country mutually experience a form of 'Intercultural Personhood' where the cultural exchange between the two parties results in psychological change or adaptation by both. This process supports Harris' (1990) notion of a 'mature relational multicultural society' in which there is harmony between old and new cultures and between minority and majority cultural groups (Harris 1990, in Shearer 2003:10).

The idea of a harmonious culturally diverse society is also implied by Ang et al. (2006) when referring to Australia's multicultural society as a "work in progress" (Ang et al., 2006:25). However, there is general agreement in the literature that intolerance of cultural diversity continues to exist as an everyday experience for many (Runnymede Trust 2003; Ang et al., 2006). This is not an exclusively white Anglo versus minority group problem but includes racism between ethnic groups as well (Ang et al., 2006).

Ethnic Identity in Multicultural Societies

Newly arrived immigrants are the easiest members of a multicultural population to arbitrarily categorize into an ethnic group. By taking into account the values, beliefs and practices inherent in an immigrant's country of origin, a set of characteristic behaviours can be assumed. The national characteristics referred to here are commonly derived from cross-cultural values research.

Values are considered to be important in guiding the behaviour of individuals (Chun-Tung Lowe 1998). Values research, in a cross-cultural sense, has been heavily influenced by Hofstede's (1980) national dimensions of culture. Hofstede's seminal work entailed the following five indices of culture that could explain the work related values across many countries: Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity and Long-term orientation/Short term orientation (Hofstede 1980). The Collectivist-Individualist constructs have been the most widely used (Church & Lonner 1998; Caprara et al. 2000; Merritt 2000; Benet-Martinez et al. 2003; Van Herk et al. 2004; Bond et al., 2004; Johnson et al. 2005) in a variety of contexts (Merritt 2000).

As the majority of values research has focused on a country by country level, it lacks the detail and the understanding of cultural differences at a local in-country level (Chung & Fischer 2001; Leung & Moore 2003). Research suggests that the characteristics attributed to individuals in their country of birth may change when they immigrate to another country. Acculturation in a host country affects how immigrants see themselves (personal identity) and how closely their values, attitudes and beliefs align with the generally accepted characteristics of a particular ethnic group in a multicultural society. Therefore, an understanding of the acculturation process is an essential
prerequisite for understanding ethnic identity and cultural diversity issues in general.

**Acculturation Effects on Ethnic Identity**

Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936 in Stevens et al. (2004) provide a succinct definition of acculturation as 'a process that entails contact between two cultural groups, resulting in numerous cultural changes in both parties. In effect, however, the contact experiences have much greater consequences for the non dominant group members' (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits 1936 in Stevens et al. 2004).

Berry’s (1992, 1997) seminal acculturation model is quoted frequently in the literature (Laroche et al. 1996; Nesdale et al.1997; Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999; Chung & Fischer 2000; Euler et al. 2001; Ben-Shalom et al. 2003; Snauwaert et al. 2003). The model outlines four possible acculturation strategies that can result in an immigrant either: Integrating, Assimilating, Segregating or Marginalizing. Immigrants orient their own acculturation process through their level of involvement with members of other [local] cultures. Assimilation refers to a displacement of an original ethnic identity and the adoption of characteristics of the host culture. Integration implies that the immigrant possesses knowledge and understanding of the host country but does not relinquish aspects of their own ethnic identity (Kurman & Ronen-Eilon 2004).

A summary of acculturation studies by Berry (2001) helps to illustrate the complexities of the acculturation process. Early assimilation approaches to acculturation have fallen out of favour (Birman & Tricket 2001), with researchers preferring a more flexible acculturation model (Laroche et al. 1996; Laroche et al. 1998; Chung & Fischer 2000; Knafo & Schwartz 2001; Quester & Chong 2001; Ben-Shalom et al. & Horenczyk 2003; Davies & Fitchett 2004). This involves immigrants developing their own unique cultural styles through a blending of their old culture and the host culture (Wallendorf & Reilly 1983, in Chung & Fischer 2000; Quester & Chong 2001).

**Bicultural Identity**

Abdelal et al., (2001) purport that individuals simultaneously hold multiple identity types (religion, gender, ethnicity) but typically will only possess one variety within each type (e.g. one religion, one ethnicity). While Abdelal et al. 2001 acknowledge that there are exceptions, other researchers have identified the emergence of individuals who possess dual cultural identities that enable them to engage in cultural frame switching (Hong et al. 2003) in which they ‘move between different cultural meaning systems in response to situation cues’ (Benet-Martinez et al. 2002:493). Bertone and Leahy (2003) refer to this phenomenon as ‘intersectionality’, while others use the term ‘hybridity’ (Runnymede Trust 2003; Ang et al. 2003).

**Social Operations of Ethnic Identity**

In a qualitative study of Australian-Lebanese youth, Noble et al., (1999) found that the meaning of being Lebanese varied significantly depending on the situation. The ability to weave in and out of culturally diverse situations could describe an individual who is perhaps a ‘global’ citizen. However, Noble et al., (1999) purport that ‘globalization and mass migration have encouraged new forms of ethnic identification which emphasize localism and “bounded” cultures’ (Hannerz 1990, in Noble et al., 1999:30).

The emergence of unique cultural styles suggests that the ability to predict the collective behaviour of an ethnic group, where characteristics from a prior country of origin are assumed, may be less than ideal. The effects of acculturation and bicultural identity were explored in a study of ethnic identity as a variable for market segmentation (Kennedy & Hall 2006). Attempts to predict behaviour on the basis of ethnic origins, particularly within a multicultural society was considered problematic for the following reasons:

- The actual behaviour of consumers cannot be attributed specifically to ethnic characteristics alone as other factors such as demographics may be involved (Pires 1999; Johnson & Garbarino 2001; Lindridge & Dibb 2002), and
- The experiences associated with acculturation are very individual and as such, the effects of acculturation are difficult to apply to homogenous groupings (Davies & Fitchett 2004).

On that basis, ‘it is not valid to assume that a person’s culture of origin comes with a set of distinct attitudes, or that stereotypes about lifestyle and belief can be drawn around particular cultural groups’ (Ang et al., 2003:6).

**Reasons for Continuing to Measure Ethnic Identity**

The findings of Ang et al.’s (2003) study of over 3,500 participants from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, suggest that continued exploration of ethnic identity in multicultural societies is important for the following reasons:

- There are a substantial number of individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds who do not
feel a complete sense of cultural belonging in their community despite being born in-country;
- There are a large proportion of individuals who prefer to describe themselves according to their ethnic background. The majority within this group preferred not to use hyphenated ethnic identities (e.g., Vietnamese-Australian); and
- There are a large number of the Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) sample group who indicated that family background and ongoing maintenance of their cultural heritage is very important to them. (Ang et al. 2003).

Current Indicators of Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity has been used as a variable for analysis in sectors such as business, education, health and social wellbeing with mixed success. A variety of ethnic identity markers have been used in research, including:

- Affiliation with others of the same cultural/ethnic group through a formally structured ethnic association or organisation (Suinn et al. 1992; Laroche et al. 1996; Tsai et al. 2000);
- Language of the culture used at home (Mendoza 1980; Laroche et al. 1996; Tsai et al. 2000);
- Participation in cultural related activities that represent the cultural group (Laroche et al. 1996; Tsai et al. 2000);
- Selecting a spouse from the same ethnic background or wanting children to marry a partner from the same background (Laroche et al. 1996; Nauck 2001);
- Mass media consumption in the language of the culture concerned (Laroche et al. 1998);
- Physical representations of the culture (objects, artefacts) (McIntosh et al. 2002);
- Preference for food of the particular cultural origin (Laroche et al. 1996; Tsai et al. 2000);
- Level of emotional attachment to icons representing the culture (Fung 2001; McIntosh et al. 2002); and
- Pride in being a member of the cultural grouping per se, rather than a formally recognized group or association (Laroche et al. 1996; Tsai et al. 2000).
- Cultural life views such as ecological sensibility, equality, harmony, spirituality, gift giving (Kramvig 2005);
- Attitude toward in-group/out-group culture (Laroche et al., 1996);
- Ethnic orientation of family members (Laroche et al., 1996); and
- Consumption of music (Kramvig 2005).

Recent research on the way individuals negotiate their lives in a multicultural Australia (Ang et al. 2003, 2006) raises some doubts about the continued usefulness of a number of markers of ethnic identity. For example:

- Affiliation with others: Involvement in cultural organisations was not high among NESB study participants. Socialisation with people from different cultural backgrounds was higher amongst NESB groups in the sample than the mainstream population (Ang et al., 2003);
- Language use: 18% of the NESB sample were multilingual and spoke more than one non-English language at home (Ang et al., 2003);
- Spouse selection: Only 30% of the sample married within their same cultural background (Ang et al., 2003); and
- Media consumption: Media consumption practices showed greater differences between age groups than between cultural groups (Ang et al., 2006).

These findings suggest that observable/objective indicators such as language use, media consumption, affiliation with an ethnic association or group and spouse selection may no longer be reliable markers of ethnic identification and affiliation (Ang et al. 2003). Further research may be needed to determine the continued effectiveness of these and other markers of the strength of ethnic identification.

Group Level of Analysis

The choice of whether to conduct ethnic identity research at the individual or group level depends on the purpose of the research. For social and political science purposes for example, group level analysis allows researchers to predict the behaviour of social movements and organizations, predict ethnic conflict, understand voting behaviour, and measure relationships between government, society and business, among other applications (Abdelal et al., 2001).

Government approaches to the gathering of statistics on ethnic identity have been limited to basic 'country of birth' type data for many years. Recently, census categories in the USA, UK, Australia, and Brazil have been broadened to include multiple categories for ethnicity to take into account multiple ethnic identities (Greico & Cassidy 2000; ABS 2001a & 2001b; Runnymede Trust 2004). Others, such as Japan and France still use the more traditional country of birth, country of origin categories of ethnicity (Manna & Scaramellia 2002; Kottak 2006). However, there are still conceptual problems with the use of data on ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are generally treated as homogenous, exhaustive and mutually exclusive (Noble et al. 1999; Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Ang et al. 2003; Runnymede Trust
Individual Level of Analysis

It is clear that an ethnic label cannot be arbitrarily applied to individuals with the expectation that their values, attitudes and beliefs will correspond to such a categorization. Ethnic self-labelling, as described by Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind (1999) is a subjective phenomenon that is best explored at an individual level of analysis.

Ethnic Self-labelling

Brubaker and Cooper (2001) suggest that identity should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a fixed condition (Brubaker & Cooper 2000:17). Indeed, the concept could be viewed as having two components each possessing different levels of stability. The ethnic labels that an individual attributes to themselves are relatively enduring (Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind 1999). However, the meaning attributed to that identity can change substantially over time (Phinney 1990). Clearly, some aspects of ethnic identity are not stable, 'people can be many things at the same time...[and] can move between different social and cultural domains in the course of their daily lives' (Ang et al., 2006:30). It would seem that predicting the behaviour of a population using easily defined, stable and homogenous groupings on the basis of ethnicity may no longer be feasible in a contemporary multicultural society.

The relatively enduring nature of self-appointed ethnic labels purported by Jasinskaja-Lahti and Liebkind's (1999), makes intuitive sense. The ethnic self-labelling of a first generation immigrant can be quite evident. However, attempting to determine the ethnic identities with which second and third generation individuals align themselves is more complex and less obvious to the researcher. For some, ethnicity is not considered part of their repertoire of identities on which they draw in their search for social belonging (Noble et al. 1999; Chung & Fischer 2001; Bertone & Leahy 2003; Ang et al. 2006). Even within the same family some siblings may have a strong ethnic orientation and others barely at all (Perkins 2004:197). A study of US college student responses to a race category question on college forms found that there had been a 100% increase in omissions in response to the question compared to previous years (Smith et al. 2005). Reasons for not responding to the ethnic category question included a dislike for the terminology of the available categories, finding the choice of categories insufficient to describe their individual circumstance, and not wanting to be victims of positive discrimination or tokenism in college programs (Bell 2005).

Individual Subjectivity

The measurement of constructs such as the intensity, meaningfulness and attachment to an ethnic identity are best undertaken at the individual level (Abdelal et al. 2005; Shearer 2003; Davis 1999). Davis (1999) lends support for subjective measures by suggesting that categories for identifying attachment to ethnic identity should not be selected a priori but through the use Q-Sort methodology, allowing study participants to determine ethnic identity categories and characteristics that are most meaningful to them.

Kwan and Sodowsky's (1997) study of Chinese American immigrants examined the relationship between 'internal' and 'external' ethnic identity and their influence on the salience of ethnic identity overall. Internal [subjective] ethnic identity refers to cognitive, moral and affective dimensions such as a sense of belonging and attitudes towards one's ethnic group. External [objective] ethnic identity refers to observable social behaviours such as language usage, ethnic group membership and media consumption (Kwan & Sodowsky 1997). The study found that the 'inner-directed [subjective] focus of internal ethnic identity may tend to perceive, analyze and reflect on issues of physical salience and visibility more than the outer-directed focus of external ethnic identity' (Kwan & Sodowsky 1997). This study lends support to the importance of subjective measures of ethnic identity.

Meaningful Ethnic Identity

As with any other social category, those who include ethnic identity as part of their overall set of identities do so because they derive some form of psychological meaning from it. The salience of ethnic identity can develop as a result of external conflict where a person's ethnic identity presents as problematic in some way (after experiencing racism, for example). This can prompt the individual to embark on an exploration of their ethnicity in greater depth as a way of resolving the conflict and subsequently lead them to 'value their racial, ethnic, or minority group membership and integrate it with
other identities (e.g. ethnicity may become the most important identity or one of several salient identities) (Frable 1997:147). This process suggests that over the long term, the salience of ethnic identity can increase, depending on significant experiences the individual may encounter in their lifetime.

There are some aspects of ethnic identity that could be considered extremely stable, such as the need to develop an identity; Heine et al., (1999) propose that 'human development has much to do with the individual constructing his or her own identity as a meaningful cultural entity' (Heine et al., 1999:767). A need to connect with others and obtain a sense of belonging is also fundamental and universal. The ability to form relationships with those of like mind, a sense of belonging and of being understood by those with similar background and experience seems a good fit with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Relatedness construct; provided the form of belonging that refers to ethnic identity can be isolated from other forms of belonging. Ang et al., (2006) describe a sense of belonging as being multi layered to suit a variety of individual purposes. This can include the symbolic, the affective or just a state of mind for some individuals (Ang et al., 2006).

**Ethnic Identity as a Variable for Analysis**

One of the requirements in using any variable for analysis is its stability over time thus allowing some predictability in subsequent behaviour of a population (Tonks 2001; Pires 1999). For this reason, identity is often conveniently viewed as 'a somewhat fixed condition’ (Brubaker & Cooper 2000:17). However, predicting the day to day behaviour of individuals with multiple ethnic identities may be difficult. At this level of analysis, ethnic identity can be extremely fluid, as Noble et al. (1999) has illustrated.

While some elements of ethnic identity are variable, other aspects are somewhat more stable. By exploring ethnic identity in its widest sense, from the universal need to construct identity through to its day to day expression, a greater understanding of the construct may be possible. Table 2 illustrates the various levels of ethnic identity and the stability characteristics of each, as identified in the literature presented thus far.

**Table 2: Ethnic Identity Levels of Stability**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ETHNIC IDENTITY LEVEL</th>
<th>STABILITY</th>
<th>REFERENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to construct an identity</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Heine et al. (1999); Shearer (2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting ethnicity as one of the forms of identity available to the individual</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Brubaker &amp; Cooper (2000); Abdelal et al. (2001, 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self labelling from a limited range of ethnic heritage choices (family background ethnicity)</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Jasinskaja-Lahti &amp; Liebkind (1999).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External /objective/peripheral ethnic identity (observable behaviour, friends, language, media usage. Some ethnic identity markers may no longer be valid)</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Kwan &amp; Sodosky (1997); Noble et al., (1999); Lindridge &amp; Dibb (2002); Ang et al., (2003, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic appropriate behaviour in social situations</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Noble et al. (1999); Hong et al. (2003); Jamal (2003), Ang et al. (2003, 2006); Benet-Martinez et al. (2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnicity, as a form of personal identity, can be viewed from a number of levels, each possessing different stability characteristics. Of these, the day to day social operation of ethnic identity is the most fluid and difficult to harness for statistical analysis. The higher order levels however, may present opportunities for alternative measures of ethnic identity as a construct. The ability to predict behaviour on the basis of ethnic identity is becoming increasingly difficult but ethnic identity, as a social construct, is ever present in contemporary multicultural societies. How it is measured and used
in beneficial ways is open to much needed exploration.

Approaches to Measuring Ethnic Identity

To manage the complexities of ethnic identity research, it is important to firstly decide which level of analysis is the most appropriate to use. Either group or individual levels of analysis have merit for different purposes, as discussed earlier in this paper. However, obtaining an understanding of the meaningfulness or strength of ethnic identity is best done at an individual level. A combination of objective and subjective measures can be useful. This may mean a departure from traditional methods of data gathering and analysis. Abdelal et al. (2001, 2005), through the Harvard Identity Project (WFCA 2006), suggest ways of measuring identity so that this can be achieved. There are also interesting approaches in social science research. Lambert (2002, in scourfield 2005) proposes transforming a large collection of commonly used ethnic identity markers such as language use, pride in ethnic identity and so forth into a single quantitative index that can be used as a variable for quantitative analysis that represents a 'continuous measure of ethnic difference' (Lambert 2002, in Scourfield 2005:8).

Research Design

In measuring ethnic identity and subsequent levels of strength, intensity, and level of connectedness, the following aspects of research design should be considered:

- Some individuals will not consider ethnic identity to be a part of their overall repertoire of social identities and therefore should be screened out of the sample;
- The remaining respondents are likely to select from a number of ethnic identity possibilities based on their ethnic heritage and each of these need to be identified;
- Respondents’ level of connectedness with each identity are unlikely to be viewed equally, therefore weightings for each will need to be determined;
- Some objective and subjective ‘markers’ of the ethnic identity (e.g. food, music, language) will be rejected as unimportant and others will hold some value to the individual;
- The intensity of each ethnic identity marker should be determined; and
- The circumstances in which each marker becomes salient could be measured at two levels; the immediate social circumstances that cue a sense of connection to the marker, and a particular stage in the person’s life where the marker is particularly salient (e.g. having a family):

Researchers need to be mindful of the cognitive demands placed on respondents in the data gathering process. It is not expected that all of these aspects will be included in a single research instrument. They merely serve to highlight some of the issues involved in measuring ethnic identity in multicultural societies in light of the literature outlined in this paper.

Summary

Ethnic identity is one of many forms of identity that individuals use to express themselves, create a sense of self, and to negotiate the social environment. Not everyone finds meaning in the concept of ethnic identity, even though their cultural lineage may entitle them to do so. Traditional methods of ethnic categorization have relied on the assumption that ethnic groups are bounded, mutually exclusive entities that are accompanied by a set of characteristics from which their behaviour can be predicted.

Acculturation processes of immigrants and their successive generations have led to the emergence of individuals who hold multiple ethnic identities that allow them to switch cultural frames of reference and behaviour according to the demands of the social situation. Individuals are increasingly self-styling their cultural identities and negotiating complex social environments to develop and maintain a sense of connectedness and belonging.

This provides new challenges for identity researchers and presents opportunities to take a fresh perspective on the concept of ethnic identity, its measurement and subsequent application in multicultural societies. A perspective that Perkins (2004) suggests is an emerging field of 'mixed race studies' (Perkins 2004:178).

Further Research

The literature examined in this paper has highlighted the following potential areas for further research:

- Development of an efficient rapid means of identifying individuals who include ethnic identity in their repertoire of identities and those who do not;
- Testing the continuing validity of existing ethnic identity markers in light of changing characteristics of multicultural societies;
- Extending existing research on identifying circumstances when ethnic identity is likely to be cued and when it is likely to be suppressed;
- Developing improved methods of measuring the salience of ethnic identity; and
• Determining whether particular life stages can cue the salience of ethnic identity.

Conclusion
The increasing complexity of multicultural societies in many countries suggests that it is timely to review the way in which ethnic identity has been measured and used as a variable for analysis and subsequently applied in a variety of settings. This paper has presented a synopsis of the current literature in relation to:

• The nature of identity, ethnic identity and bi-cultural identity in multicultural societies;
• Reasons for continuing to measure ethnic identity;
• Current indicators of ethnic identity;
• Group and individual levels of analysis;
• Ethnic identity as a variable for analysis; and
• Approaches to measuring ethnic identity in multicultural societies

The paper proposes that ethnic identity should be viewed as a predominantly subjective phenomenon at an individual rather than a group level, and as a construct where individuals are likely to align themselves with the ethnic background to which they most identify and from which they derive meaning. It is only when ethnic identity can be effectively conceptualized and measured is it possible to understand the true nature of multicultural societies.

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