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REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY IN AN INCREASINGLY INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

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Introduction

This article is a short think piece on some of the many issues related to identity today as the world becomes increasingly interdependent, and as the great diversity of humanity – different races, cultures, civilizations, ethnic groups, religions, and nationalities – increasingly interacts with each other, and where the boundaries between all these different identity groups that humanity has traditionally belonged to are increasingly blurred. Indeed, it is argued that identity is a fascinating and increasingly complex issue today for these very reasons.

This article looks at what identity is, at some of the many factors – including a number of cultural factors – influencing our sense of identity, making us increasingly complex, multileveled beings, and discuss a number of cultural examples showing how identity has indeed become more complex in our increasingly interdependent world. This article concludes with three different scenarios for the future, based on whether we deal effectively with all the complex influences on identity today, in our increasingly interdependent world, or react from fear to these factors and retreat into our old cultural identity groups, avoiding interaction with, and judging those who are different from ourselves, or engage in conflict or even violence and war against those we view as too different from ourselves.

What Is Identity?

First, what is identity? Identity deals with who we think we are, and what gives meaning to our lives, as well as how other people see us. There are thus both external and internal aspects of identity. External influences on identity include when people impose an identity on us by our looks, i.e., our skin color, sex, languages spoken, dress, or other apparent looks (which can be deceptive), or when we are socialized into a particular culture, race, ethnic group, religion, or nationality, often over many years, from whom we learn aspects of our identity (including beliefs, values, lifestyles, even histories, and a sense of belonging to one or more groups). We also develop an internal sense of identity re: who we think we are, what groups we identify with, and what values are important to us and that motivate our behavior – though often more invisible to others.

Broader Evolutionary Layers Influencing Identity

In earlier writing, this author has argued that there are different stages in the unfolding drama of evolution in our universe, and that all these different aspects of evolution (physical, biological, cultural, technological, and consciousness) all work through us as human beings, making us complex, multileveled beings (Groff, 2005a), with all these layers also impacting our identities in varying ways and degrees, as follows. Our bodies are made up of the atoms and "starstuff" of the universe – our physical/atomic level of identity. We also have drives and automatic body processes that we share with the animal kingdom – our animal level of identity. Next we create culture (defined below) via new ideas that someone gets and tries to manifest in the world – and we are products of culture and learning, which is what makes humans unique and different from the animal kingdom – our culturally-learned level of identity. As technology (an outgrowth of culture) continues to rapidly evolve in many areas, our lives become increasingly intertwined with technologies that can also influence our identity. And finally, one can argue that we have the spark of divinity or consciousness within us, which allows us to "wake up" and become conscious of all these other layered influences on our identity, so that we can then begin to consciously transcend those unconscious, programmed influences as we use our creativity and intuition to become conscious co-creators – along with the evolutionary forces at work in the universe – of our future, rather than just responding unconsciously to physical, biological, cultural, or technological factors programming our behavior (Groff, 2005a).

As all the different cultures of the world increasingly interact with each other today, one can also argue that this is forcing people to examine their identities more consciously, rather than just accepting the cultural programming that they received in the past. In short, identity is becoming more complex as people no longer interact with their own cultural group only, but increasingly interact with individuals from other cultural groups who can also influence their behavior and values. For some people, their spiritual identity and an evolving consciousness is also an important part of who they are, while for others, it is not.

Cultural Influences on Identity

We are all products in varying degrees of culture and learning, which helps form our sense of identity (we also have individual personality differences, as well as certain universal human aspects of identity). Culture here is defined in the broad Anthropological sense of all of our socially-learned behavior, which is reflected in technology and tools, social organizations of all types (political, economic, family, education, media, religion, etc.), and beliefs, ideas, and underlying values. It is often difficult to see how we are products of, and influenced by, our own cultural conditioning and learning, unless we leave our own culture, experience another culture, and then come home and are able to see things in our own culture for the first time, because we now have some basis for comparison.

Before that, when one has never left one's own culture, it is often difficult to see how much one has been influenced by different aspects of that culture, which become part of one's identity and like second nature. Once one becomes more sensitive to different cultures and their different underlying values and accepted behavior patterns, one begins to learn the difference between the map (one's particular cultural conditioning and learned reality frameworks) and the territory (ultimate reality, which we can never totally know, but which the world's spiritual traditions all seek to connect to in various ways). We are also not born with culture; we start learning culture – in all areas of life – once we are born.

The key question with culture is whether we are unconsciously acting out the cultural programming we have received, or whether we can become more conscious of how we have been programmed by our culture (or other cultures we've come in contact with) and consciously choose which aspects of culture we want to live by, so that we can also begin acting more consciously in the world, from an inwardly-derived sense of identity then, rather than just from external programming.

It is also important to recognize that when one is from a minority culture within a larger, more dominant culture, that one often has to function in both worlds in somewhat different ways, probably also making one more aware of the influence of the different cultures on one's life than someone who has never experienced more than one culture.

Identity in Individual Identity Cultures versus Collective Identity Cultures

Identity is to a great extent culturally learned and thus it can differ in more individualistic cultures, such as the U.S. or Europe, versus in more collectivist cultures, such as Japan and many non-Western cultures. In an individualistic culture, one is socialized from the day one is born to express oneself – including what one thinks and feels as an individual, which thus reinforces the development of individual identity. In a collectivist, group culture, in contrast, although each person is indeed different, the culture socializes one to subordinate one's own individual needs to the needs of the group, and thus group identity develops more, where one's identity is seen to be connected to the different groups that one belongs to, and whether those groups do well or not. Thus, in such group cultures, a clear, socialized or learned sense of a separate individual self and identity may not even exist, unless of course, one has also lived in the West for a period of time. (These comments come from being from the U.S., but also living in Japan for one year and another time for four months.)

Cultures can be rated on a spectrum from more individualistic to more collectivist, or anywhere in between (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, Chap. 5, pp. 51-69), with different identities resulting from each.

Howard Gardner has written about seven or eight types of intelligence, one being "interpersonal intelligence" (understanding other people well) and another being "intrapersonal intelligence" (understanding your self and your inner nature well). While people in all cultures need some interpersonal skills, it is largely Western culture that develops intrapersonal intelligence and a separate sense of self or individual identity. (Gardner, 1983, and later books) Indeed, in Japan, for example, a common idea is that "the nail [or individual] who stands out [and promotes oneself] is nailed down" [i.e., not accepted by a more collectivist, group culture, where there is more pressure to conform to the needs and norms of the group].

What is really interesting today is how identity is changing as people from both more individualistic/Western and more collectivist/Eastern cultures increasingly interact with each other in today's world. There are certain creativity advantages that can occur in cultures valuing individual self-

expression, and certain cooperative advantages that can occur in collectivist cultures. Perhaps in future we will be able to combine both and find a way, as Abraham Maslow (a humanistic psychologist) once envisioned, to create a "synergistic society," where the needs of the individual and the needs of the group can both be met, with identity, behavior, and values also being similarly impacted. (Goble, 1970, Chapter 13, pp. 111-115)

Renaming One's Identity by Minorities within Larger, Dominant Cultures

Another interesting aspect of how identity changes over time is how different minority groups – at least within the larger, dominant U.S. culture – have been traditionally labeled with names by the more dominant culture, but later the minority culture asserts itself and decides to take back its own identity and to name itself. What is most interesting here is that the label they often choose to call themselves is something that was previously considered derogatory – such as "Black" or "Chicano" – but they take this term and make it into a positive term reflecting pride in their cultural-racial-ethnic heritage and traditions. Thus "Blacks" were originally "Negroes" (a "White" term), and later decided to call themselves "Blacks" or "African Americans," while "Mexican-Americans" took an originally more negative term, "Chicano" (originally referring, it is believed, to Mexican immigrants to the U.S.) and adopted it to call themselves.

Humor as a Vehicle for Minorities to Express Their Cultural Identity and Confront the Dominant Culture More Directly

Because humor is based on building up tension and then releasing tension, it has proven to be a great vehicle by which people from different minority groups within the U.S. have been able to express their particular cultural identities, as well as the difficulties they've experienced – both historically and today – in expressing themselves within the larger, dominant culture. Some of the most notable Black comics in the U.S. include: Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Bill Cosby, Woopie Goldberg, and many others. A current Mexican-American comic who deals with stereotypes of all different cultural-ethnic groups in the U.S. – is Carlos Mencia and his "Mind of Mencia" comedy routine. And now with the constant news about Middle Eastern conflicts and terrorism, a Middle Eastern-American comedy group has emerged which fittingly calls itself "The Axis of Evil" (after George W. Bush's famous use of the term in his annual State of the Union Presidential speech to Congress in January 2002, in which he named Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as all part of the "axis of evil" in the world).

Identity-Based Conflicts

There are different types of conflicts, but one type of conflict that has recently received a fair amount of attention is "identity-based conflicts" (Rothman, 1997), where strong group identities exist on both sides of the conflict – often based on long historical experiences and hardships suffered as a group of people, which often create grievances against their perceived opponent or "enemy" in these conflicts – making such conflicts more entrenched and difficult to resolve, since people's collective identities become associated with their collective group histories and suffering.

A good example of identity-based conflict is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has created a "community of pain" where both sides have strong emotional attachments for very long periods of time to the same land – in this case the "holy land," making compromise difficult on both sides, since people's group identities are very tied up with the same land and history, though in different ways. Hard liners or extremists on both sides can keep such a conflict going via ongoing violence against each other, which only tends to increase the grievances on both sides. Jay Rothman, who has done conflict resolution work in the Middle East, has developed an ARIA model (Antagonism, Resonance, Invention, and Action) to

help move the parties on both sides forward (Rothman, 1997), but when violence gets too extreme on both sides, ongoing communication can become much more difficult and even totally break down for periods of time. Here the influence of an outside power to help mediate the conflict, help set up a series of "confidence-building measures" on both sides, and also give economic and political incentives to both sides, could help. The United States played this role in the Israeli-Egyptian peace talks earlier, and needs to play such a role again in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, if anything substantive is to result.

Globalization and Identity: Increasing Homogenization of Identity, or More Complex Identity Issues?

It is a common view and concern by many that with increasing globalization, we are creating a more homogenized global culture based especially on Western values and lifestyles. (Indeed, the Islamist reaction to what it perceives as the excesses of Western materialist culture is part of what is driving current conflicts in the world, though the issues are more complex). Along with this is a danger that non-Western cultures are being overrun by more dominant, materialistic Western cultures. While these concerns are real, and need to be addressed, identity is, it is argued, more complex.

This article presents an alternative hypothesis about the effects of globalization and increasing interactions between peoples of multiple diverse backgrounds on identity. People used to refer to the United States as "the melting pot," implying that people coming to the U.S. would all become homogenized and "American." The intercultural communication field now refers to the U.S. as "the salad bowl" – being a culture honoring BOTH our unity, as well as our diversity. There is one salad, but it has many diverse parts, which also makes for a better salad or whole. It is proposed herein that identity is likewise more complex, including on a global level today, where on a certain superficial level, we are creating a global culture, but underneath the surface, much cultural diversity remains.

We are all products of our life experiences and learning, which includes not only what has influenced us from our own original culture(s), but also from other cultures that we have interacted with in our lives – including from particular Western, Eastern, and/or indigenous cultures worldwide, as well as in our own local communities. Thus instead of the whole world becoming more homogenized and the same, especially with Western values only, an alternative hypothesis is that we will each become a unique synthesis of all the different cultures that have influenced us and how we have each struggled within ourselves to make sense of these different influences and create some kind of an integrated and multifaceted sense of internal identity within. For many people these identity issues can be complex and evolving questions.

As noted, this article argues that on a certain superficial level, a global culture is being born, but on deeper levels, people still hold onto important aspects of their own cultures. Indeed, as the world increasingly changes and moves rapidly into the future (often driven by rapid technological change, with many of these technologies originating in Western cultures), people also increasingly go back to their roots to hold onto what is important and meaningful from their cultural roots, which are the important things that have formed and molded their traditional sense of identity.

The attraction of Western cultures to the non-Western world, especially to young people, is the freedom it offers to become your own person and to explore your own individual identity, in ways that a total group culture would traditionally not condone. Western technology and "toys" are also often attractive to people. Whether one can accept Western technology without Western values and lifestyles that go along with that is a fascinating question, and a path that China has tried to walk. The attraction of non-Western cultures to the Western world also exists. Here, people who have had a number of their basic material needs met, in Western culture, then find themselves attracted to Eastern, traditionally more spiritual values, or to indigenous traditions that feel connected to the earth and value stewardship of the

earth. So cross-fertilization between cultures is happening all the time today and impacting people's sense of identity in many different ways. (A separate article discusses how these different value priorities also contribute to different aspects of peace, leading collectively to an evolving, holistic, integral view of peace, with important input from all the world's peoples and their cultures.) (Groff, 2002)

Adding Larger System Levels of Identity Doesn't Require Eliminating Previous Levels of Identity

Over time, humanity seems to organize at ever larger system levels, requiring new levels of identity to emerge. For example, in Paleolithic, Old Stone Age, prehistoric times, people organized in bands and then tribes that migrated around in search of food. Then in the Neolithic, New Stone Age (still prehistoric), agriculture began, as people realized they could plant a seed, and grow and harvest food later, and thus stay in one location, leading to the rise of villages. Later Ancient Empires and Civilizations arose, as technology evolved and people were able to study the stars, create mathematics and astronomy, and produce more than they needed to survive, making conquest of others more attractive, leading to ancient empires and slavery too. Later, Western civilizations arose, which were furthered by the industrial revolution, which then led to colonial empires abroad as more developed, industrialized countries sought resources in less developed areas of the world.

It is also a common misperception or fear, among some people, that as the world becomes more interdependent that people will have to give up precious national and ethnic or tribal levels of identity in order to add larger regional or global levels of identity on larger system levels. This is not correct. Instead, we really have layers of identity, and adding a layer of "planetary citizen" today does not mean one has to give up one's national and ethnic identities. One can instead look at these different layers of identity as systems within systems within systems, with each system being part of a larger system and level of identity. In short, one ends up with nested identities.

Changes in Religious Identity Over Time, as Views of How Divinity Is Portrayed Also Changes

People's religious beliefs and practices also changed through each of the above periods, which no doubt also influenced that aspect of their identity in each period. In Paleolithic times, people worshiped Mother Earth and nature sprits in everything living – whether streams, rivers, mountains, or whatever. In Neolithic times, the fertility of the soil was equated with the fertility of females, who gave birth, and the goddess was venerated (at least in the view of some). In Ancient Empires (such as Ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley, and Central American Civilizations later), people worshiped both gods and goddesses, with both the male and female principles represented, and with the concept of One God emerging behind all the different gods and goddesses (which could be viewed as each representing different attributes of that One God). Then with the rise of Western civilizations, and the monotheistic religions, people worshipped One God, who was portrayed as "God the Father." Today, there is an interest is finding both the male and female aspects of divinity again, and honoring the divine union of male and female. (Campbell, 1990; and Groff, 2005b, Part III)

Expanded Consciousness Experiences That Transform Identity

Many people say culture is about all our (layers of) socially-learned behavior, while the spiritual path is about unlearning or peeling off all those layers of socially-learned behavior and identity, which keep us within more limited boxes or frameworks in regard to our identity and who we think we are. Through prayer, meditation, other psycho-technologies, or even sometimes spontaneously, a person can become so open that they can experience a peak experience (where everything seems to flow effortlessly), or a sense of union with the whole, or even on much rarer occasions, one can tap into other dimensions of reality –beyond this physical plane. These direct experiences of expanded consciousness and connection to something much bigger than oneself (that transcend the five senses) are what mystics from all religions

have always talked about. Such experiences can totally transform a person's life, and totally expand their sense of identity from their limited ego frameworks to something much greater. (See, for example, Burke, 1901; and Yogananda, 1998.)

One example of such experiences is the astronaut Edgar Mitchell, who in space experienced being connected to the whole cosmos, which he also experienced as having purpose and great beauty in it, which put him into a very calm, peaceful inner being state. This experience so transformed his life that he founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) in San Francisco, California, after he returned from space, to support ongoing research on such expanded states of consciousness as the deepest layer of identity available to humanity. (Mitchell, DVD, 2006)

Examples of How Identity Has Become More Complex Today

Short of the mystical, expanded consciousness experiences noted above, there are many examples of how the culturally-learned aspects of identity have become much more complex and often multileveled today, as the increasing diversity of humanity increasingly interacts with each other in today's world. One aspect of this is that we live in systems or layers of identity (as noted previously). For example, we belong to different racial-ethnic-subcultural groups within larger dominant cultures and nationalities, which are furthermore interacting with each other on larger regional and global levels today, as well as within countries, as people increasingly migrate to other countries for educational, employment, or survival purposes. In addition, our identity is further influenced by our sex, as well as our sexual orientation, our roles in families – as parents, spouses, siblings, children, etc., and by our jobs and roles at work, or as students in educational situations. A few examples of how cultural identity has become more complex follow:

* More and more restaurants – especially in larger cities – have items on their menus which come from different cultures, or which are truly "fusion" or of "mixed" cultural influences.

* Increasing numbers of people have parents from two or more different cultures, races, and/or religious backgrounds, raising important questions for such parents about how to raise their children and whether to educate them into both backgrounds or largely one. Likewise, children who are raised with parents from two different cultures may or may not be raised with equal familiarity with both cultural traditions, or languages spoken by each parent. Similarly, children raised by parents from two different religious backgrounds may be raised in one or the other religion, neither religion, or both religions today, and the children's identity will be impacted as a result.

* Many people in the U.S. are of mixed racial backgrounds, but don't always know this. According to the crazy legacy of slavery and racism in the U.S., any child of mixed racial background who has any Black (earlier Negro) blood in them, will be labeled "Black," even though they are really of mixed background. It is also interesting that many "Blacks" in the U.S. have not only "White" blood, but also Native American or "Indian" blood in them, but are also still labeled (until the most recent census) as "Black."

* The last United States Census added a category of "mixed" which one could check off as one's racial-ethnic-cultural background. Increasing numbers of people are of mixed backgrounds today and don't like being forced to select only one of their ethnic-racial backgrounds as on the old Census form. A good example is Tiger Woods, who has a Thai mother and a Black-American father. He himself is now married to a European-American, so if they have children, they will be a mixture of Asian, African, and European American stock. It is also noteworthy that some political activist groups also objected to this new "mixed" category, since it would reduce the number of people saying they were of a particular ethnic or racial background, instead saying they were "mixed," thus reducing the possible funding available to such

groups.

Alternative Scenarios on How Humans Deal with Identity Issues in Our Increasingly Interdependent World

Best Case Scenario:

People increasingly accept that although the world is filled with diverse races, cultures, ethnic groups, nationalities, and religions, that we are in it together. War is not really in anyone's interests today (not yet recognized by everyone), because we no longer live in isolated communities, and what happens anywhere, increasingly effects everyone everywhere. This means we are creating a global system level of integration today, where isolation is no longer an option. With time, more and more people begin to add another larger system level of identity to their already existing racial-ethnic-cultural, and national identities, namely a sense of also being "planetary citizens." This will require, however, that globalization is increasingly seen to benefit not only elites of countries, but also people in their everyday lives and in their local communities. Corporate and governmental elites increasingly realize that this must occur and begin adopting policies more favorable to non-elites, not just elites, in their respective countries. This reduces people's resistance to globalization.

Worst Case Scenario:

Globalization continues to be seen by too much of the world's peoples as benefiting only elites and not ordinary people, middle class people, or the poor. Outsourcing of jobs from developed countries to developing countries, where labor is cheaper and labor and environmental standards are weaker, by corporations, with government acceptance, continues to fuel the anti-globalization movement in developed countries. At the same time, while cheaper paying jobs are created in many developing countries, child labor, long hours, cheap pay, and poor working conditions, in often unhealthy situations, makes people wonder how globalization is also benefiting them, which fuels continued resistance to globalization, except by elites who largely benefit from it. Anti-globalization – whether in developed or developing countries – also becomes part of one's identity, including one's political identity.

In certain situations, Western materialistic and sexually overt culture is also seen as threatening traditional values in non-Western cultures, which along with poverty, and lack of educational or job opportunities, fuels a sense of hopelessness and anger, creating ongoing breeding grounds for terrorism as well.

Mixed Case Scenario – The Most Probable Scenario:

The most likely or probable future scenario is a mixture of some of the factors from both scenarios above. Thus, globalization continues, but anti-globalization also continues. The more developed countries realize, however, that aiding educational and job opportunities, and job training, in developing countries, rather than spending so much money on military activities to fight terrorism, will lead the masses of people in developing countries to begin to realize sooner that they will benefit from globalization, which will also lessen their resistance to it. In short, globalization alone is not enough. Coupled with globalization must be an attention to localization and to local needs also being met, including finding ways to hold onto important elements of one's traditional identity, while being open to adding new elements from their global interactions and interdependence.

Final Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The world is currently very polarized, with much anti-Americanism resulting from an overemphasis on military spending and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars at the expense of foreign aid for economic development, educational opportunities, and even attention to global climate change issues – of concern to many other countries. In certain developing countries, identity is still more on tribal or ethnic grounds, not yet on national grounds, making nation-building still a needed focus, before expecting people to add a global level of identity. However, in more developed countries, especially amongst educated elites with opportunities to travel for work or leisure activities, this global level of identity is being added.

As these different levels of identity are added to different people's lives, their own identities become more multilayered and complex, and as all the world's diverse peoples increasingly interact with each other, all kinds of new, creative mixes of internally-generated senses of identity will emerge, which will help take humanity into the 21st century with much new energy and creative ideas as a result – if only we can remain open to learn from each other, and not come from fear or violence, which results from fear and which is currently dominating the world way too much.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

o *Dr. Groff's article refers to technology as "an outgrowth of culture." How would the present state of technology be different if various regions of the world (and their cultures) had been dominant during the past 300 years?*

o *Technology facilities cross-cultural interaction via communication and travel. During the next decade, will the primary impact of cross-cultural interaction be increased understanding*

and acceptance of other cultures, perhaps resulting in their learning from one another? Or will technology-enabled cross-cultural interaction tend to result in deculturation, cultural hegemony, and/or cultural clashes?

o   *The article refers to a global culture on a superficial level, with much cultural diversity remaining under the surface. In addition, it refers to cross-fertilization among cultures, Eastern and Western. To what extent will the various diverse cultures influence the values, lifestyles, and general evolution of the global culture? Or, will the global culture develop a life of its own (as has the US business culture), nearly independent of the under-the-surface cultures? In what ways will the cross-fertilization impact global business culture?*

o   *The article refers to influences on our identity – ethnicity, gender, family roles, and jobs and roles at work. Add socioeconomic group, political affiliation, and position on contentious political issues. In the US, when people meet for the first time, a common question is "What do you do?" This can be considered identity-by-counterpoint – "You know who you are in terms of people who are not like you." Will dichotomy-based identity continue to be a primary source of identity in 2025?*

o   *Is the Eastern holistic way of thinking categorically better than the Western binary us-them mindset for ensuring that the best-case scenario, as described by Dr. Groff, is realized? (For example, sensitivity to the fact that greenhouse gas emissions can impact people who are far away?) Why or why not?*

o   *"Fission" vs. "fusion"! Some people derive their identity from large groups (for example, one's nation), and others seek identity with ever-smaller groups (e.g., a tribe, clan, or minority ethnic group). Other sources of identity include religions, political parties, professions, employers, professional societies, socioeconomic groups – and even street gangs. Is there a limit as to how large a group can be as an effective source of identity? Consider the tribal-based conflict in various parts of the world – "Me against my brother, but me and my brother against my cousin, etc." Can most people identify with all of humanity as global citizens? Or can they identify with a nation or anything else that is large and seemingly impersonal? If not, is this driving identity with smaller groups (ethnic groups, cause-oriented groups, etc.), or are other factors involved?*

o   *According to Howard Gardner (as Dr. Groff points out), intrapersonal intelligence and a separate sense of self and individual identity are found primarily in Western cultures – and in Japan, for example, which is a group culture, one who promotes himself/herself is "nailed down." By contrast, self-promotion is more acceptable in some other cultures such as the US, and not surprisingly, leaders emerge in different ways in group- vs. individual-oriented cultures. As these cultures intermingle and transact international business, what are the implications for the ways that leaders of the future will emerge?*