Friendship and Identification on Multicultural Fields

Fred Lewis

Abstract

American missionaries assume that friendship is the relational basis of a multicultural field (MCF). Field is preferable to team because the metaphor of team privileges an American conception of the group above how field members from the Global South may conceive of it. Given the inherent diversity of a MCF, it is unlikely the individual identities and interests of U.S.-Americans will overlap extensively with the collective identities and interests of MCF members from the Global South, making identification problematic. Identification is possible through application of the Social Identity Approach (SIA): All field members share a common social identity as believers.

Key Words: collectivists, friendship, identification, identity, individualists, Social Identity Approach

Introduction

A friend is someone who gets you, who understands you better than others. We have old friends, best friends, church friends, baseball friends, and other types of friends. Perhaps you realize an acquaintance is your kind of person – a new friend – when you agree that finding the perfect dessert is a quest worth the cost! Friends have things in common.

Friends identify with each other. *To identify with* means to put in the same category or be in the same class. U.S.-Americans generally make friends when there's an overlap of one or more aspects of each other's identities (Brewer and Gardner 1996:86). Although identity is conceptualized in many ways (Cornelissen, Haslam, and Balmert 2007:S3), we conceive of identity as personal or individual, expressed as statements or convictions in answer to the question, Who am I? For U.S.-Americans, an answer usually comes out of a sense of each person's unique, inner distinctiveness, her attributes, traits, preferences, attitudes, and thoughts (Markus and Kitayama 1991:226).

Metaphors Matter

Which brings us to multicultural fields. In this article, I treat multicultural and intercultural as full synonyms, stipulating that at least three cultures must be represented on a field for it to be labeled multicultural. I prefer using field instead of team because team is an American metaphor, when by definition a multicultural team *isn't* and *can't* be an American group. In addition, using the metaphor of team privileges an American conception of a multicultural field (MCF) above how fellow field members of the Global South may conceive of it.

Several years ago I visited a field that was composed of three kinds of North Americans: missionaries from Puerto Rico, from Canada, and from the U.S. A relative of the Puerto Rican couple visited them on the field. The Puerto Rican missionaries naturally assumed that their visiting relative was a full field member. An inference was that the Puerto Rican couple conceived of the field as an extended family. Their relative was everybody else's relative, too. Canadian and U.S. missionaries naturally objected to the inclusion of a relative as a field

member. She didn't qualify, because she hadn't jumped through the hoops necessary to be considered a field member. The underlying metaphors of the Puerto Rican missionaries and their U.S. and Canadian counterparts of what the field really was were different. Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2002:4-5) explain that the metaphor employed to describe a group of people frames both how individuals think about the group and the role expectations group members have of each other.

Consequences of Individualistic Cultural Assumptions

Previously I noted our (U.S.-American) individualistic conception of identity. We also have an individualistic conception of group. John Turner (1984) writes that for individualists "'group' is merely a convenient label for the individuals that comprise it and nothing more" (519). Obviously, then, a group can't have its own, distinctive identity. Moreover, we believe that individual needs and interests are more important than group needs and interests. Individualists look after themselves and ignore "group interests when they conflict with personal desires" (Gundlach, Zivnuska, and Stoner 2006:1608). However, working with others towards the achievement of group goals is fine, as long as doing so furthers one's own, personal self-interest (Chen, Chen, and Meindl 1998:290).

I find these descriptions uncomfortable and chilling. It is also disheartening to read (Gundlach et al. 2006) that an extensive "body of research has shown that, even when other team-related variables are taken into consideration, individualism–collectivism has a significant and unique influence on team performance, and that *individualistic team members negatively influence team performance*" (emphasis added) (1604).

Several years ago I was included in a Skype conversation with an agency's leaders. There was general agreement that their missionaries were failing to identify with their MCTs, and that their lack of identification was the source of many problems. The purpose of this article is to help American missionaries identify with their MCFs. An aid to identification includes gaining a better understanding of collectivists' viewpoint to promote more realistic expectations in intercultural encounters. The Bible also has a contribution to make towards identification, as does the Social Identity Approach.

Culture, Friendship, Group, and Identity

As a step forward, we return to friendship. U.S.-Americans want to make individual friends with other field members. Thus, it came as a surprise when I learned that the Russian word for friend (*drūg*) meant life-long friend, the kind of friend you can call at 3 a.m., and it's ok. Russian has another word (*znakomy*) that means acquaintance. I served as a missionary in Ukraine and Russia for eight years. It was more likely I could be a *znakomy* (acquaintance) than a *drūg* to a Russian man. Ukrainians and Russians were inevitably disappointed by innocent U.S.-Americans who failed to meet the high expectations they unwittingly raised by presumptuously calling acquaintances *friends*. On a MCF, if friendship is to be the basis of relationships – which is our American assumption – whose definition of *drūg* do we use?

Collectivistic Assumptions about Group and Identity

In contrast to our individualistic, pop-in-and-out style of friendships, Chen et al. (1998) write that collectivists "are more likely to form and stay in a few, stable, and closely knit groups" (298). Like my Russian example of friendship, a collectivist's friends are usually people she's

known a long time. It is noteworthy, then, that the U.S. scores perhaps the highest on individualism of any country in the world. Comparing online country information is a simple, accessible way of verifying the pervasive character of U.S. individualism (Hofstede Insights 2020).

Rather than our U.S. culturally based assumption that the individual is primary – our individualistic assumptions about life aren't written into the fabric of the universe – a collectivist's culturally based assumption is that the group is primary. A collectivist asks, Who are we? Identity is conceived of socially or collectively (Ellmers 2004:461; Gundlach et al. 1996:1609-1610). Thus, a group has its own identity distinct from the individuals who comprise it (Hogg et al. 2004:251). The needs and interests of the group outweigh the needs and interests of the individual (Chen et al. 1998:289). A true collectivist monitors and adjusts her inner desires, emotions, and goals to maintain the harmony of the group (Markus and Kitayama 1991:227). Similarly, while individualists tend to conceive of teamwork as simply the sum of individual efforts, collectivists see it as an expression of the natural interdependence of persons and of interpersonal relationships (Gundlach et al. 1996:1614). Individualists want to receive individual recognition; a collectivist wants the group to shine (Gundlach et al. 1996:1610).

Can We Be Friends?

Therefore, given the inherent diversity of a MCF, it is unlikely the individual identities and interests of U.S.-Americans will overlap extensively with the collective identities and interests of MCF members from the Global South. It will probably be harder for the latter to find very many individuals on a MCF who are ready-made to become their friends.

Does this mean that U.S.-Americans can't have any friends at all among collectivists on a MCF? No. However, it is unrealistic for U.S.-American missionaries to think they will *quickly* make friends with MCF members from the Global South, nearly all of whom are collectivists. Indeed, it may take longer to develop a friendship with a MCF member from the Global South than most are accustomed to or expect. While a friendship may be forming, it would be prudent not to mistake friendliness for friendship. Over a period of time, friendship with a collectivist can be built on shared experiences *after* arrival on the field and on newly created shared interests.

What is the Relational Basis of a MCF?

Previously I asserted that U.S.-Americans assume that friendship is the basis of relationships. It follows that we view friendship as the basis of community, also. In my experience with U.S.-American believers, when meeting a new person we make overtures to friendship first, and then later talk about Christ or Christian things. It seems we implicitly believe that a group is formed, maintained, and grows through the interpersonal attraction of one individual to another. As Turner (1984) says, the unity or cohesiveness of a group "tends to be equated with interpersonal attraction, i.e. attraction to individual members" (519).

Yet the basis of a MCF conceived of as a *Christian* community cannot be friendship. Why? There are just too many differences in personal histories, identity concepts, and cultural assumptions between collectivists and individualists.

Scripture provides a way forward. Paul's ministry certainly brought different people groups into close and repeated contact with each other in local churches. To simplify, his rhetorical strategy to overcome differences was to call attention to what they had in common in Christ: all believers

have Abraham as their father (Gal. 3:6-7); Jesus is elder brother of us all, and all believers are siblings (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:11, 17a); we all are parts of the one Body of Christ (Rom. 12:5); we all have equal standing in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). God in Christ is bringing about the reunion of humanity, whose disunity God decreed in response to sin at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:7-9; Eph. 2:14-15). Perhaps Paul's argument in Rom. 14:1-15:13 was a call for *Jews and Gentiles* conceived of as two distinct groups in the church in Rome to stop judging each other? "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.... Christ has become a servant of the Jews ... to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God" (Rom. 15:7a, 8, 9a). Old Testament quotations about Gentiles and Messiah follow in Rom. 15:9b-12.

Observe that in the third sentence of the above paragraph *before* the colon ("... strategy to overcome differences was to call attention to what they had in common in Christ") I referred to people groups, while what *follows* the colon ("all believers...") individualists would naturally understand in an individualistic way. Yet none of the peoples who were living in the Eastern Mediterranean region in the first century C.E. were culturally Westerners in any sense of the word, and none of them were individualistic U.S.-Americans. Malina (2001) speaks of "the nonindividualistic, strongly group-oriented, collectivistic self-awareness that seems to have been typical of the first-century people in our New Testament" (60). David deSilva (2000) writes that a "conception of people of God as kin takes a particularly Christ-centered focus [and] gives the early church *a sense of shared identity* and binds the members together *in the solidarity of the kinship bond*" (emphasis added) (200).

What Paul says is obviously true, but there's a catch. Although his words resonated with collectivistically-minded members of people groups in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first century CE, often enough they do not resonate with individualists. As individualists, our first identity move is to separate ourselves from others. We rarely go looking for a sense of *shared* identity with anyone or any group. We accept Paul's statements as true in a formal sense but may not allow his words to disturb our sense of individual identity. It is not that we never feel a sense of group or shared identity with believers of other cultural, ethnic, and theological traditions; it is just not the norm.

Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not thinking about a MCF when he wrote *Life Together* (1954), his words are helpful here: "I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me.... Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community.... Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us" (25).

What a man is in himself sounds a lot like how we conceive of individual identity, for example our unique, internal traits and interests. Such assumed individualism, however – if we apply what Bonhoeffer says to a MCF – is *not* what constitutes the basis of community for a MCF. Yet that is exactly what many U.S.-American missionaries who serve on a MCF try to do – and it doesn't work, can't work.

What seems to happen is that we – probably with little or no reflection – try to build community on other bases and values. To build a "real team," must we first all agree to be guided by the Western values of egalitarianism and efficiency? Must we first affirm commitment to the same philosophy of ministry? Agree on the proper role of women? Agree on how money should and should not be used in field ministries? Must we first agree on a common set of procedures and

priorities? If the answer in practice is yes, then Christian community is not built on Jesus but on agreement regarding those other things *and* Jesus or *instead of* Jesus.

It might be that some at this point may object. Aren't I misunderstanding or perhaps even mischaracterizing the purpose of getting agreement when a group forms regarding the issues I just named? Isn't the goal of getting agreement about those and similar matters one of avoiding or at least minimizing conflict? Doesn't a community have to agree on how to go about various activities? Aren't we talking about believers who are already committed to Christ? Well, yes.

However, I am not talking about the development of a MCF nor how they may jell as a group. I am not talking about group cohesiveness, nor am I talking about how a MCF may function in its ministries. I am talking about the basis of a special kind of Christian community, a MCF. What every MCF member has in common with all other MCF members is *Jesus*. *He* is the basis of community, and everything else is secondary. Jesus through His Spirit binds us together, not similar philosophies of ministry, not similar backgrounds or interests, not theological agreement on the finer points of doctrine, not a common language or culture – although any one or many of these elements may be included in a person's individual identity and may be very important for a whole MCF.

For a MCF to work, it is not enough that *individual* believers are committed to Christ. Saying it that way merely repeats an individualistic bias that groups are no more than a collection of individuals. Although we know intellectually that Jesus connects us to each other (Rom. 12:5b), our socialization as U.S.-Americans predisposes us to base relationships on shared secondary characteristics, a practice that works against identification.

Identification through Application of the Social Identity Approach

What might help us to resonate with the truth of Rom. 12:5b? What can be done so that we may become a positive influence on a MCF instead of a negative one? The Social Identity Approach (SIA) offers a way forward. SIA consists of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). SIT says that individuals have social identities as well as individual identities.

What might it mean for U.S.-Americans to have *social* identities? About ten years ago my wife first attended the International Congress on Language Learning in Colorado. When she came home, she told everyone that she had found her people group! That is, she met a group of people who like her ate, breathed, talked, and dreamed language learning. Her missionary experience was wrapped up in learning Lukonjo (the language of the tribe we worked with in Uganda) and Russian, spoken where we lived in Ukraine and Russia. Merely learning those languages led to teaching others how to learn any language for missionary service, as well as coaching language coaches to better help their language learners. One of my wife's social identities is that of ICLL member.

The fact is, we belong to several groups at the same time, and not all of them are professional associations. Church member and mission agency member are social identities, even if the sending agency is a local church. Perhaps 20 years ago my wife and I were visiting a supporting church. A member of that church said that conservative theology and conservative politics go together. In 2016 an estimated 80% of evangelicals voted for Trump. For many U.S.-American evangelicals, their political identity grows out of or is attached to a theological, social, and perhaps denominational identity. All of these are examples of social identities.

U.S.-American social psychology has typically focused on the individual, while European social psychology has been more interested in how people interact with each other in groups (Hogg 2006:114). SIT "attempts to explain large-scale, shared uniformities in social behavior" (Turner and Oakes 1986:240), recognizing that individuals "derive a part of their self-concept from the social groups and categories they belong to" (Hogg and Reid 2006:9). The social identities of U.S.-Americans are real and influential (Reicher et al. 2010:12), even though they are not a primary source of identity like they are for collectivists. Our social identities do not erase or supplant our individual identities: rather, *we add them to* our individual identities (Hogg 2006:115).

Where SIT studies social identities, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) focuses on how individuals come to consider themselves to be group members. Turner and Oakes (2006) say that reckoning yourself as a member of a group is "a cognitive grouping of the self" with others perceived to be like or similar to yourself (240). The similarities between the self and existing group members are overlapping *social* identities, which may or may not include overlapping individual identities.

While we tend to assume that friendship with an existing member of a group precedes joining it, SCT recognizes that at least sometimes friendship among group members may be a result of group membership. SCT says that categorizing yourself as a member of a group is a conscious choice (Hogg and Reid 2006:12), while individualists believe that people join groups as a result of interpersonal attraction, or liking. If joining a group really comes out of liking someone already in a group, then it is an emotional process or decision, not a deliberate or cognitive one.

Emotions and Identification

At this point, implicit beliefs about emotions become relevant. For example, if I am not naturally drawn to others on a MCF, then it is not my fault if I am repelled by them. After all, "I can't help how I feel." If identification with a MCF is governed by emotions – which I may implicitly believe to be beyond my control – then I am not obliged to identify. When I recognize that my individual identity overlaps very little with the social identities of those from the Global South, then I do not have to continue trying. I can, instead, make friends with fellow Westerners, if not among fellow U.S.-Americans only.

Recent findings of cognitive neuroscientists offer a more accurate picture, clearly indicating that thinking and feeling, cognition and affect, work together in the brain (Barrett 2017:17-22; Damasio 1999:xv-xvii;). In other words, there is more emotional content in a decision to categorize oneself as a member of a group than SCT may seem to suppose. There is also more cognitive content in a decision to join a group than we U.S.-Americans may characteristically perceive. What is needed is the practice of emotion regulation, which is not a matter of controlling or subduing unruly or irrational emotional impulses. Emotion regulation recognizes that we can indirectly modify how we feel by changing how we think (Elliott 2006:38; Linehan 2015:318-415).

Application

We can change how we feel about social identities by changing how we think about them. Becoming aware that we already have multiple, already-existing social identities *that matter to us* in addition to our individual identities is a first step. One of those social identities is as a

member of Christ's Body or of God's Family. MCF members from the Global South share these social identities with us. In fact, those social identities in fact existed between U.S.-American believers and those from the Global South from the time they came to Christ.

So then, ask new U.S.-American missionaries to add MCF member to their current list of social identities. It is a choice. Ask American missionaries to name which social identities are in fact more important than others. Who does the asking? Agency leaders in the States, field leaders, field members. Individualists and collectivists can identify with each other, based on the reality of a shared social identity in Christ. That is a solid basis for a Christian community. These truths or realities need to be repeated and alluded to at appropriate times for feelings to change.

In addition, although many U.S.-Americans do not place a high value on ceremonies as such, a simple ceremony of welcome and inclusion – "now you are one of us" – may encourage new missionaries to identify with their MCF. Instead of waiting for new missionaries to make the first move to include themselves in the group, reach out repeatedly to include them. Talk about who everyone on the MCF already had in common before they even met.

Sometimes saying things out loud prompts emotions to accompany the words. Perhaps we might modify Ruth's words to Naomi in Ruth 1:16 as an aid to identification?

> *Where these people go, I will go,*
> *Where they stay, I will stay.*
> *These people will be (or are) my people,*
> *Their God is my God.*

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