



Complex Identity: An Intersectional Framework for Organisations and Researchers in the United Kingdom

Working Paper

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About the Institute

The Coram Institute is the only think tank dedicated to the future of children, working to inform and influence best policy and practice, and collaborating with relevant partners to deliver solutions to the challenges children and young people face for this and future generations. At the time of publication, the Institute is in a development phase and will be launched in early 2025.

The Youth Insight group sits within the Institute, with the role of incorporating lived experience into policy. It provides a pathway to young and emerging researchers, offering them the opportunity to develop their skills and undertake rigorous research projects that turn experience into insight, and insight into impact.

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Executive Summary

Young people in the UK are growing up in an increasingly globalised world. The UK is the most ethnically diverse it has ever been, and with residential segregation between demographics decreasing, young people are living in a fusion of cultures, foods, traditions, music, families, languages, and friends². In these crucial years of personality development, they are rejecting and redefining traditional markers of identity.

One of the enduring needs for young people is identity: to know themselves, to be recognised by others, and to belong in a community³. As such, organisations must pay attention to the sophisticated ways young people are defining themselves⁴. In response, organisations and researchers are using intersectionality and peer research to understand their target communities. Both approaches help them understand how social categories such as race, gender, disability, and more combine to create unique forms of oppression and power relations for marginalised groups⁵.

This paper argues that analysing *between* categories is insufficient to address the identity needs for certain groups. Traditional conceptions of identity have a simplistic understanding of one identity per social category e.g. British → Nationality. This limited lens obscures the lived experience of communities in mixed-heritage, care-experience, migration, bisexuality, and more. The zoom needs to be increased: there are individuals with multiple identities *within* a single social category.

These individuals construct and negotiate their sense of self in the face of traditional narratives on community⁶. They benefit from a diversity of cultural upbringing, with significant flexibility in social situations and a richness of cultural experience. However, located at the cultural fringes of their community, these individuals can find themselves inhabiting multiple worlds, but struggling to belong to any of them. This can lead to feelings of grief, loneliness, low self-esteem, and even marginalisation from their community.

² Office for National Statistics, *Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021* (2022), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021>.

³ Peter Hopkins, *Young People, Place and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁴ Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, Alison Halford, and Kusha Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*, Coventry University (Coventry, 2024), <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final-Report-Expressions-of-Self.pdf>.

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

⁶ David C Pollock, Ruth E Van Reken, and Michael V Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs* (Hachette UK, 2010).

Grounded in the UK equality and peer research context, this paper reviews the global literature on culturally mobile identities. Examining academic and grassroots sources in mixed-heritage, Third Culture Kid, border studies, and transracial care-experience, it acknowledges difference while finding structural similarities in their lived experience. With this evidence base, the paper introduces the Complex Identity framework, a way of representing the multiple identities that individuals can possess. Neither exhaustive nor authoritative, it aims to 'speak nearby' these communities, creating space for others to detail their lived experience.

By ignoring the reality of identity complexity, many organisations are not supporting the needs of marginalised individuals within their communities, while also neglecting the potential of young people with sophisticated viewpoints on identity and belonging. Organisations need to raise awareness of complex identities, and practice cultural humility and sensitivity in their service provision. Moreover, they can provide opportunities for young people to express their identity needs in research and policy.

Accordingly, this paper calls for greater representation of lived experience in organisations, as well as funding for grassroots organisations at the cutting edge of lived experience support. Going beyond the individual, this framework will support organisations to engage in a nuanced, compassionate and authentic way with the world, its employees, and target community.

Researchers providing evidence bases for policy and practice have a responsibility to represent the needs of marginalised groups in their work. This paper calls for more intersectional approaches to social problems, as well as greater acknowledgment of researcher positionality on data collection. Moreover, more accounts of complex identity in other social categories not covered in this paper are needed. By accurately conceptualising the needs of marginalised young people, the hope is that support for identity can reflect the complex reality of 21st century Britain.

Introduction

'The overarching principle of the research is to position children and young people...as the makers of meaning and negotiators of identity'—Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, Alison Halford and Kusha Anand⁷

The UK population is becoming increasingly globalised. The UK is the most ethnically diverse it has ever been, net migration is higher than pre-pandemic levels, and the number of biracial relationships and mixed-heritage children is increasing^{8,9}. Consequently, residential segregation between demographics is decreasing, meaning that young people encounter a wider set of cultures and ways of life from a younger age¹⁰. What it means to be British is changing, and future generations will possess an alternative sense of national identity to those of the past.

Alongside these demographic changes, individuals from the global majority are present in powerful British institutions. Rishi Sunak is the first non-white and British Asian prime minister, and Meghan Markle is the first non-white, biracial Duchess in the royal family. Similarly, more than half of the England football team at the 2020 Euro final had a grandparent born outside of the UK¹¹. Immigrants and people of colour are no longer secondary characters, but occupy meaningful positions of power, even if oppression and class dynamics persist at a structural level¹².

Structural changes are important because they can precede movements of group identity formation. For example, Francis Fukuyama argues that anxiety surrounding the industrial revolution, alongside the development of a national education system, contributed to the rise of German Nationalism in the 20th century¹³. He describes this kind of identity as ethno-nationalism, where in-group membership is defined by a common ethnicity and language. Nowadays, the mismanagement of globalisation has produced similar anxieties about British identity, with control over borders highlighted as one of the main reasons for the Brexit vote. It is unclear what a post-global British

⁷ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*, 14.

⁸ Migration Observatory, *Net Migration to the UK*, University of Oxford (Oxford, 2024), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

⁹ Office for National Statistics, *Population of England and Wales* (London, 2022), <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest/#data-sources>.

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, *Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021*.

¹¹ Migration Museum, *Football Moves People* (London, 2021), <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/footballmovespeople/>.

¹² Hardeep Matharu, "Rishi Sunak is "Living Proof" a Prime Minister of Colour is No Evidence of a Britain Beyond Racism'," *Byline Times* (London) 2024, <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/03/01/rishi-sunak-is-living-proof-a-prime-minister-of-colour-is-no-evidence-of-a-britain-beyond-racism/>.

¹³ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books, 2018).

identity will look like, but any successful attempt will require reimagining the politics of identity to describe genuine lived experience, foster connection between communities, and advance social justice.

Identity is important because it embodies a sense of dignity and self-worth. Facilitating the continuity of the self, it connects the inner life of an individual to a community around them, providing a sense of belonging. A person is not born with an innate sense of identity: it is constructed in their relationships with their various communities and environments. The privilege that accompanies it often unnoticed when working as intended. But for many marginalised groups, it is a critical area of interest and daily struggle.

For them, identity also is a route to political empowerment. Described as 'strategic essentialism', marginalised groups can form a political identity based on shared attributes to represent and mobilise their community¹⁴. For example, political scientist Jose. E Cruz argued how Puerto Rican identity functioned as 'a code that structured their entrance into mainstream society and politics'¹⁵. Similarly, UK activists in various equalities have secured meaningful victories for their communities, such as the legalisation of gay marriage and the 2010 Equality Act. In a political climate where the term 'identity politics' is used to dismiss opposing viewpoints, it's important to remember that identity recognition is a means for personal and political freedom.

For young people, these questions of identity and fairness are at the front of their minds. The 2021 Big Ask survey, the biggest of children and young people in the UK, noted that they 'spoke about fairness, about caring for people who might suffer from prejudice, about equality across racial, sexual, and gender-identities'¹⁶. In the launch event for a report on care-experienced young people's identities, Professor Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor emphasised that¹⁷:

Our traditional identity categories—religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality— young people don't even want them! They want other categories: categories that are new and different and which they feel align better with who they are and the care they want.

Adolescence is a period of self-discovery as a person explores who they are outside of their home environment. Young people in the UK must construct their identity in a context of increasing cultural complexity, with a reluctance to fit into categories that do not reflect their lived experience. These

¹⁴ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

¹⁵ Jose Cruz, *Identity and power: Puerto Rican politics and the challenge of ethnicity* (Temple University Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁶ Children's Commissioner For England, *The Big Answer* (London, 2021), 23, https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2021/09/the_big_ask_the_big_answer_09_2021.pdf.

¹⁷ Nuffield Foundation, "Launch Event: Expressions of self: supporting minoritised children's identity," (Dartington: Research in Practice, 2024/01/16 2024). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UW91Ete6Tbo>.

identity needs will only intensify as Britain becomes more diverse, and it's important that young people have the tools to express themselves fully, to relate to others, and to include rather than exclude.

Alongside the care-giver, organisations working in the youth and equality sector have an important role in facilitating the healthy growth of young people's identity. Motivated by treaties such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, organisations are using peer research to centre young people in discussions that are relevant to them^{18,19}. This change acknowledges that merely consulting or collecting data is not enough: communities need to be involved in the research process that informs the policy affecting them.

However, organisations must ensure that they do not reproduce the inequalities that marginalise the most vulnerable in their research and service provision. In response, researchers and organisations are using intersectional approaches to acknowledge the complexity of social problems²⁰. By examining issues through multiple social categories such as class, gender, disability, and more, organisations can adjust their policy and practice to better understand the needs of the most marginalised in their target communities.

Intersectionality is a welcome addition to the youth sector, but this paper argues that approaches that only analyse the relationship *between* social categories are insufficient to meet the identity needs of several marginalised groups. The structural changes caused by globalisation have produced a consciousness of complexity in young people's identity and the social categories they relate to. This paper fills the gap by examining the heterogeneity of identity *within* these categories, as well as providing a way for communities and individuals to relate to each other's lived experience.

Firstly, this paper collects several accounts of identity complexity in communities in mixed heritage, Third Culture Kid, border studies, and transracial care-experience. Presented from an intersectional perspective that recognises that individuals can be located in multiple cultures, it mitigates previous issues of ever-increasing labels, instead highlighting features common to all communities. This will function as a resource for grassroots groups and individuals who are looking to form personal and political networks across difference.

¹⁸ Laura Lundy, "'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child," *British educational research journal* 33, no. 6 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>.

¹⁹ "Lived Experience Policy," Mind, 2024, accessed 14/05, 2024, <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/13817/lived-experience-policy-22-1.pdf>.

²⁰ Ashlee Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*, School of Social and Political Science, The University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 2021), <https://www.intersectionalityinpractice.ed.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Intersectionality-in-practice.pdf>.

Secondly, it maps these accounts into a framework based in the UK equality and peer research context. Introducing the Complex Identity framework, it advances that certain individuals can have several identities in a social category such as (but not limited to) race, nationality, disability, and sexual orientation. It also notes some shared features for these individuals, such as the ability to access multiple cultures, the societal compression of their identity, and the ability to connect with others across social categories.

Amidst this complexity of identity, the core human needs of self-understanding, acceptance, and belonging remain universal. For individuals with lived experience, this framework allows them to relate their inner world to the wider society they inhabit, giving them a sophisticated language to integrate the parts of themselves that might seem impossible to reconcile. For a transracial adoptee, to integrate the cultural upbringing of their adoptive family with their ethnic origin; for an immigrant, it may be the dual allegiance to multiple nations, or the parts of themselves that are found in the languages they speak.

For organisations and researchers, this paper raises awareness of the lived experience of certain communities they encounter in service provision and research. It provides a map for talking about identity with young people in a complex yet grounded way. It also presents several recommendations to address the identity needs of young people, engage with grassroots campaigners, and represent lived experience in their organisational structure.

In summary, this section has demonstrated the need to produce sophisticated frameworks of identity for young people, due to the demographic changes of the UK population. The next section explains the intersectional approach of this paper, situating it in the equality and peer research context of the UK. The literature review follows, outlining several grassroots and academic sources of the lived experience of living between multiple cultures and worlds. Then, this paper presents the Complex Identity framework, highlighting the lived experience of individuals with multiple identities in a single social category. Finally, the paper outlines several recommendations for organisations and researchers to embed a more sophisticated view on identity in their research, policy, and practice.

Research Design

'Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience'—Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge²¹

This section details the research approach of this paper. Firstly, it introduces intersectionality as a lens for appreciating the complexity of social problems. It explains why it is a suitable approach for the framework of complex identities, grounding it in the current practice of third sector equality organisations in the UK. Then, this paper will locate itself in the peer research context, examining its utility to reframe policy issues, acknowledging the author's positionality, and noting the limitations of the research.

Intersectional approach

Intersectionality is a contested term used by many different groups in different contexts. However, the underlying premise is that analysing the social problems of communities through a single category such as class, race, gender, disability, and more is insufficient to fully understand and explain them²². Examining a single category assumes that the community is a homogenous mass, ignoring the complex interactions of oppression for less privileged individuals within the group.

For example, class-only explanations of poverty tend to obscure the needs of vulnerable groups such as women, disabled people, and people of colour, who have their own particularised structures of oppression. Systems of power are always influencing individuals, communities, and each other, and so researchers need to examine several axes of social division to address the needs of the most marginalised groups.

Intersectionality is heavily associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term in her 1989 paper describing the ways black women were discriminated against by the US legal systems²³. However, US women of colour groups practiced intersectionality from the 1960s. These groups presented these ideas in non-academic forms such as poetry, pamphlets, art, and essays, but the common theme was that the oppression they faced could not be solved via a class-, race-, or gender-only approach.

²¹ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2.

²² Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

²³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989).

As the term 'intersectionality' is not itself a research method, but a collection of approaches with several different modes of expression, no single blueprint of intersectional research exists. However, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge highlight several key ideas of intersectional approaches that informed the direction of the literature review and the framework of complex identities²⁴.

Firstly, intersectional approaches examine power relations. Power relations are 'about people's lives, how people relate to one another, and who is disadvantaged within social interactions'²⁵. Power is played out through several domains: structural (laws and regulations), cultural (ideas and narratives), disciplinary (social conformity: what is normal/deviant), and interpersonal (everyday interactions). Intersectional analyses emphasise that power is constructed and shaped by many different factors. Later, this paper will explain how power relations affect the identity development of marginalised groups in the UK context.

Secondly, these analyses occur within an overall context. It's important to consider that the particular historical, economic, and political context in which an individual operates shapes how they think and act. On a structural level, power relations and social inequality will have different permutations depending on the time and context. Acknowledging this social context grounds the intersectional analysis, making it relevant and useful to the groups involved. In this case, the context is the UK and its particular demographic changes, equality framework, and cultural mood regarding social problems and identity. While acknowledging this context, this paper also argues that the themes described are applicable to other contexts that share a western conception of identity.

Thirdly, intersectional approaches seek to develop relationships across social categories and communities, moving from an *either/or* binary perspective to a *both/and* perspective. The former focuses on what distinguishes or delineates entities from one another e.g.: a 'man' versus a 'woman', or 'British' versus 'French'. Grouping individuals based on a common "essence", this approach characterises historical approaches to identity. Conversely, intersectionality focuses on the overlaps of identity within and between communities. This paper seeks to describe how certain individuals are located in multiple cultures, which aligns with the latter concept of belonging.

In the UK, organisations are increasingly using the term in their policy and practice²⁶. The legal foundation is the 2010 Equality Act, which consolidated previous anti-discrimination legislation into

²⁴ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2.

²⁵ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 7.

²⁶ Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*.

nine protected characteristics: disability; sex; religion or belief; age; sexual orientation; race; gender re-assignment (i.e. transgender status); pregnancy and maternity; and marriage or civil partnership. Placing obligations on organisations to eliminate direct and indirect discrimination for these equalities, the act raised awareness of certain individuals possessing them multiply. Specifically, initiatives centered around two or more equalities qualify as intersectional e.g. Black women's groups. It's important to note that the way the Equality Act conceptualises inequalities presents challenges and opportunities for intersectionality. Likewise, some communities covered in this paper, such as refugees and care-experienced individuals, aren't recognised.

In her overview of UK intersectional practice in the third sector, Ashlee Christofferson explains that each approach produces different consequences for intersectionally marginalised groups. Therefore, there is a 'pressing need for organisations, practitioners and policymakers to be much more specific about which particular concept of intersectionality they mean when they use the term.'²⁷ This paper adopts a 'pan equality' approach, which conceptualises intersectionality as common issues facing several marginalised groups. Focusing on the systems of power that shape identity and oppression, it addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of inequality. Crucially, it helps to avoid a siloed mentality, which is thinking that each equality area is fundamentally separate from the other²⁸. Generated by the competitive funding environment in the equality space, it creates zero-sum discussions on which inequality is more discriminated against and therefore deserving of funding.

In contrast, a pan equality approach does not imply that separate communities coincidentally experience the same issue. Rather, all their issues are interrelated, because any given social category and community contains all other communities. For example, the adoptee community includes (among many others) black adoptees, female adoptees, disabled adoptees, intercountry adoptees, and bilingual adoptees, as well as adoptees who may be black, female, disabled, bilingual and with an experience of intercountry adoption. The black community includes black women, disabled black people, black intercountry adoptees, and bilingual black people. Removing the common descriptor, the disability community includes black people, women, and people who are bilingual, and so on. Extending out to all possible communities shows that social categories and communities are interlinked like a series of Venn diagrams, and so are their issues and needs.

²⁷ Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*, 42.

²⁸ Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*.

This paper has two limitations from an intersectional perspective. One limitation of the pan equality approach is that it flattens differences between groups. As Christofferson writes, 'the specific agendas of groups of intersectionally marginalised people may be lost when pan equality intersectionality is used on its own; common issues may be watered down in content to the lowest common denominator'²⁹. This paper acknowledges this limitation, but maintains that the advantages of facilitating connections and knowledge across communities outweigh the drawbacks. This author welcomes more research that accounts for the agendas of a community group within a complex identity framework.

The second limitation is that this analysis of marginalisation is limited to social identity and does not analyse the economic dimension of oppression. This matters because the communities involved have different levels of socioeconomic privileges. For example, some parents of Third Culture Kids are in military or ambassadorial roles, which enables them to travel overseas. In other words, an individual with a complex identity may be marginalised in their identity, but simultaneously possess greater economic privilege compared to other marginalised groups. Again, future research may build on the framework offered by this paper by analysing the relationship between complex identity and economic privilege/oppression.

Peer research context

This paper is not only intersectional, but also is an example of peer research, an increasingly influential form of research used in the youth sector. Motivated by their legal and ethical obligations to address young people's needs and perspectives under the UN rights of the Child, organisations are involving their target community in some or all of the research process^{30,31}. Examples include the 'Staying Put' report, which showed the positive effects of allowing care leavers to remain in foster care upon turning 18, and the 'City within a City' report, which trained young researchers to investigate the needs and experiences of young people living in Westminster^{32,33}.

A key idea of this research philosophy is that communities have access to their own forms of knowledge, generated by their proximity to issues that affect them. Several researchers note that

²⁹ Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*, 18.

³⁰ Lundy, "'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child."

³¹ The Young Foundation, *Positioning Peer Research in a Policy Context* (London, 2020), <https://www.youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TheYoungFoundation-LivedExperience-v2-singles-1-1.pdf>.

³² Emily R Munro et al., "Evaluation of the Staying Put: 18 Plus Family Placement Programme," (2012).

³³ Young Westminster Foundation, *A City Within a City* (Westminster, 2017), https://www.youngwestminster.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/YWF-Needs_Analysis_Report.pdf.

young people are particularly suited to point out social problems³⁴. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge write that:³⁵

Children, teenagers, and young adults have a special vantage point...race, class, gender, and citizenship categories disadvantage many groups...yet, because age straddles all these categories, young people's experiences of social problems are more intensified.

However, there are justifiable concerns over non-academics being involved in the research process. Issues highlighted include lowered data quality, a lack of best practice models, and a tendency for researchers to 'make it up as they go along'³⁶. Like all research methods, the suitability of peer research depends on the context, and misapplication can produce suboptimal results. This author is aware of these limitations, and has opted for a descriptive, exploratory paper to raise awareness and promote further research. They are using peer research to reframe the policy issue in a way that encourages organisations to reconceptualise the needs of marginalised communities.

This author's positionality is a mixed-heritage adoptee, who at the time of writing is 24—a 'young person' under the definition of several youth organisations. As an intersectionally marginalised individual, they possess direct experience of the structural features outlined in this paper. However, they lack many of the lived experiences explored in the literature review. Even within their own experience, the intention of this paper is not to speak *for* individuals, but to speak *nearby* them, encouraging others to add to the conversation. As filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-Ha describes the concept in her work:³⁷

The issue raised is, of course, much broader than the questions generated by any of the specific work I've completed...speaking about and nearby serve as a point of departure for a cultural and cinematic reflection.

The purpose of this framework is to start a conversation, encouraging individuals, communities, organisations, and researchers to explore identity in a deeper, more sophisticated way. Research in this sense is building theory "from the ground up", and thus has natural links with intersectionality and activist scholarship³⁸. Rejecting the distinction between scholar and activist, this approach views scholarship and practice as linked and mutually informing. Several fields that view theory and

³⁴ Hopkins, *Young People, Place and Identity*.

³⁵ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 117.

³⁶ The Young Foundation, *Positioning Peer Research in a Policy Content*, 9.

³⁷ Nancy N Chen and Trinh T Minh-Ha, "Speaking nearby," in *Visualizing theory* (Routledge, 2014), 6.

³⁸ *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles Hale, 1 ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pncnt>.

practice as interconnected, such as social work, criminal justice, public health, and youth work, implicitly possess this view on research³⁹.

To conclude, this section detailed the approach to the literature review and framework. Locating the paper in an intersectional lens, it then explained the context of intersectional practice in the UK equality space. Finally, it explained the motivation of this paper as a piece of peer research, acknowledging the positionality and limitations of the research design.

³⁹ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

Literature Review: Complex Identities in...

'The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian, in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view.'—Gloria Anzaldúa⁴⁰

Until now, this paper has focused on complexity between overlapping social categories of identity, but what about complexity *within* a social category? The next two sections outline the term 'complex identity', describing the experience of possessing multiple identities within a social category. To build an evidence base for the framework and subsequent policy recommendations, this section examines several case studies, exploring the lived experience of mixed-heritage, Third Culture Kid, transracial care-experience, and borderland communities. Neither exhaustive or authoritative, these case studies will illuminate the interpersonal and structural dynamics that characterise living with a complex identity.

The author has endeavoured to refer to papers based on populations within the UK. Due to the cross-cultural nature of the topic and the desire to acknowledge forerunners in this research, some of the case studies are international, and their insights will be translated to the UK context. As well as outlining the literature on specific social categories, each case study focuses on a specific aspect of the Complex Identity framework, highlighting that each community has its own set of challenges and opportunities.

Definitions of identity are contested, context-dependent, and fluid. Therefore, it's important to disambiguate terms to avoid confusion. In this paper, the term 'social category' refers to a concept such as disability, race, class, gender—synonymous with 'inequality' in the legal perspective. An identity is how an individual describes themselves regarding this category, and is also influenced by the way other people perceive them. For example, 'British' is an identity within the social category of 'nationality'.

Research suggests that young people implicitly consider identity as a possession of multiple 'subjectivities': aspects of oneself that they construct depending on the situation⁴¹. These are flexible properties which are constructed, carried out, and modified in social interactions, with certain aspects emphasised over others in the long-run⁴². Although this paper focuses on identities within

⁴⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 101.

⁴¹ Hopkins, *Young People, Place and Identity*.

⁴² Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*.

race, ethnicity, and nationality, any social category that is meaningful to an individual could have the same analysis. Similarly, identity can include (and is not limited to) accent, food, fashion, sports team, and cultural traditions, reflecting the complex nature of social interaction.

Race/Ethnicity: Mixed-heritage

This section explores the lived experience of individuals with multiple ethnic/racial backgrounds inherited from their parents. Sitting within the social categories of race and ethnicity, this paper will use the term 'mixed' or 'mixed-heritage' interchangeably, with the collective term 'mixed individuals' reflecting the variation within the identity. This case study illustrates the empirical reality of a complex identity; acknowledging the multiple identities of an individual has observable effects on their performance. Also, it demonstrates the explanatory power researchers can benefit from when examining identity from a more precise unit of analysis.

Also known as mixed-race, biracial, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic, mixed individuals form 2.9% of the UK population, with white-Asian and mixed-other at 0.8% each, and white-black at 1.3%⁴³. With a Median age of 19, nearly half of mixed individuals are children: the youngest of all ethnic groups⁴⁴. Overall, nearly 10% of British Children in the UK are of mixed identity, and it is expected to grow as Britain becomes more ethnically diverse⁴⁵.

It is important to acknowledge the multiple forms that mixed identity can take. Grassroots organisations such as *MixedRaceFaces* focus on the variety of mixed narratives, but a common issue is the over-focus on narrow definitions of mixedness within a white-black spectrum⁴⁶. Natalie Morris describes this as the "right" type of mixed: 'a combination of black and white that translates tidily onto your physical features'⁴⁷. This is related to colourism, a harmful dynamic where society privileges lighter skin tones and Eurocentric features over darker skin tones and non-Eurocentric features⁴⁸.

Meanwhile, the experiences of those who are 'minority-mixed' —with multiple non-white heritages — are excluded. Marginalisation occurs not only through cultural narratives, but also through structural power: the census lists three options for white-other mixed individuals, but minority-mixed

⁴³ Office for National Statistics, *Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021*.

⁴⁴ Office for National Statistics, *Ethnic group by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021* (London, 2023), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicgroupbyageandsexenglandandwales/census2021>.

⁴⁵ Sarah E. Gaither, "'Mixed' Results: Multiracial Research and Identity Explorations," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414558115>.

⁴⁶ "Mixedracefaces — About section," 2024, <https://mixedracefaces.com/what-we-do>.

⁴⁷ Natalie Morris, *Mixed/Other: Explorations of Multiraciality in Modern Britain* (London: Trapeze, 2021), 121.

⁴⁸ Nadia Craddock et al., "Understanding colourism in the UK: development and assessment of the everyday colourism scale," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 10 (2023/07/27 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2149275>.

individuals are lumped in the mixed/other category⁴⁹. Their stories offer alternative narratives of mixedness: many have a different relationship to the legacy of colonialism compared to white-other individuals. Conversely, accounts of 'passing'—the tendency for certain individuals with non-white ethnic backgrounds to be perceived as white—demonstrates the precarity of privilege and the possible denial of belonging to their non-white culture.

The UK government first acknowledged mixed identity on the census in 2001, highlighting the modernity of this category. This option appears on forms alongside traditional ethnic groups such as 'Indian', 'Caribbean', or 'Arab'. However, many mixed individuals do not have the traditional sense of community possessed by monocultural communities. Mixedness is characterised by the fusion of multiple cultures, rather than a homogenous 'mixed' culture: the mixed experience is ultimately a structural experience. Many mixed individuals have monoracial/ethnic parents, and receive two streams of culture upbringing, reinforcing that each way of life is distinct from the other.

Recently, mixed identity in the United Kingdom has received attention since Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, described herself as biracial⁵⁰. Books such as Natalie Morris' *Mixed/Other* have mapped out the subject from a lived experience perspective⁵¹. Common themes are the debunking of myths around mixed individuals being "lost" or "confused", rejected by both cultures that they belong to, embodying the 'tragic mulatto' trope in cinema. In reality, research suggests that mixed individuals possess identity flexibility, meaning that they have considerable agency in adapting to social environments⁵².

Sarah Gaither, a social & development psychologist in the US, conceptualises mixed identity empirically from a *both/and* perspective⁵³. In a study, she compared the cognitive flexibility of two groups of multiracial individuals: the first were reminded of their multiple racial identities, and the second of their dominant racial identity. As Gaither writes, 'multiracials reminded about their multiple racial identities solved significantly more creativity problems compared to the other groups. Thus, activating a multifaceted self-concept boosted flexible thinking for multiracial participants because they had a naturally existing multiple identity'⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ Morris, *Mixed/Other: Explorations of Multiraciality in Modern Britain*.

⁵⁰ Nora Fakim, "Celebrating mixed-race identity," *BBC News* (London) 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/celebrating_our_mixed_race_identity.

⁵¹ Morris, *Mixed/Other: Explorations of Multiraciality in Modern Britain*.

⁵² Gaither, "'Mixed' Results: Multiracial Research and Identity Explorations."

⁵³ Sarah E. Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking," *Self and Identity* 17, no. 4 (2018/07/04 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1412343>.

⁵⁴ Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking," 7.

This suggests the ontological reality of a *both/and* perspective in identity research, with tangible effects on behaviour and performance. The framework presented in this paper responds to Gaither's comment that 'the influence stemming from the intersectional nature of having multiple identities simultaneously has been completely underestimated', aiming to accommodate a more sophisticated understanding by adopting a *both/and* perspective.⁵⁵

Nationality: Third Culture Kids

This section concerns the lived experience of individuals who spent part of their childhood in another or several countries, due to the lifestyle of their parents. Thus, the appropriate social category to apply this to is 'nationality'. Formal conceptions define group membership through possession of a passport and/or citizenship from a particular nation state. This paper, however, chooses a definition that is more inclusive of the lived ways that individuals and communities engage with their national identity. Nationality is therefore expanded to encompass meaningful time spent in another country that impacts the identity of an individual.

This time spend abroad often forms a crucial part of an individual's sense of self. Many grassroots organisations document this experience, such as *Culturs* magazine (tagline: 'Embrace your cultural in-between') and *TCKidNOW*—a community for culturally mobile communities^{56,57}. However, David C. Pollock and Ruth Van Reken have been the dominant researchers working in this area for over 40 years⁵⁸. Their work focuses on Third Culture Kids: individuals who spent a significant period of their developmental years in a different country to their parent's passport country. This section will outline their work, which forms part of the theoretical foundation for the Complex Identity framework.

Ruth Hill Useem, an American sociologist, coined the term 'Third Culture Kid' in the late 1950s. Based in India, she studied how Americans missionaries, foreign service officers, aid workers, and others interacted with the local population in the years following independence. She called the interaction between the communities the 'third culture', and the children of these expats 'Third Culture Kids' (TCKs), noticing how the time abroad affected their sense of self.

⁵⁵ Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking," 9.

⁵⁶ "Culturs: The Global Multicultural Magazine," Colorado State University, 2024.

<https://www.cultursmag.com/>

⁵⁷ "TCKidNow," 2024. <https://www.tckidnow.com>.

⁵⁸ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

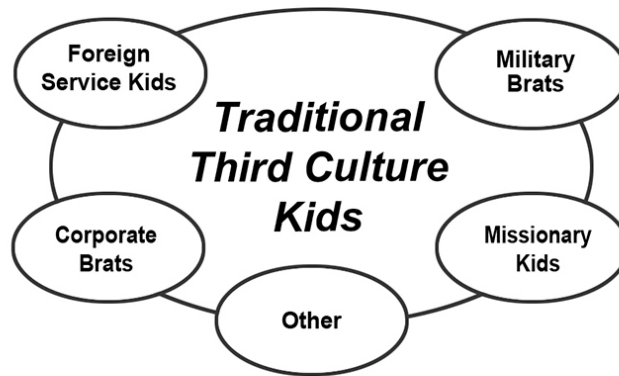


Figure 1—Ruth Hill Useem’s Traditional TCK communities

This ‘third’ or ‘interstitial’ culture refers to a way of being that is produced by a highly-mobile and cross-cultural childhood. Traditional conceptions of culture have defined it by content e.g. food, dance, music, traditions etc. However, the ‘third’ culture is neither like the home culture of the parents, nor the host culture where they travelled to, but is a lifestyle with many common experiences. This duality could form a positive *both/and* perspective of the TCK’s cultural backgrounds, but for many young people forming their identity, this instead produces a *neither/nor* perspective, with feelings of loss, grief, shame and not belonging to either culture.

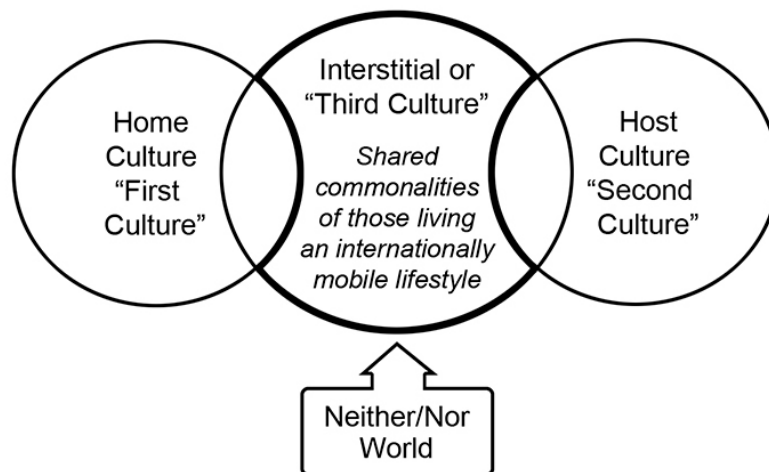


Figure 2—The Third Culture Model

Pollock and Van Reken highlight this dual-nature of the TCK experience: a TCK can view aspects of their experience through a positive or negative lens. For example, due to their experience of living in multiple countries, TCKs benefit from an expanded worldview. They learn to appreciate different

perspectives, identifying similarities and differences between their home and host cultures, combining them in unique ways. As TCK Rachel Miller Schaetti writes:⁵⁹

A child growing up abroad has great advantages. He [or she] learns, through no conscious act of learning, that thoughts can be transmitted in many languages, that skin colour is unimportant...much of the sociology, feeling for history, geography...that our friends' children try to understand through textbooks, my sisters and I acquired just by living.

However, this characteristic could be viewed negatively by TCKs who feel confused about their loyalties and where they belong. Having a stake in multiple cultures can involve conflicting opinions on politics, patriotism, and values, as well as more general ways of life. This is especially true for TCKs whose cultural ties are conflicted on the world stage e.g. ex-colonial countries or countries with poor diplomatic relations such as the US and Russia. This lack of integration creates issues that the individual may be able to resolve internally, but may always create difficulties in certain social interactions.

Building on Useem's work, Pollock and Van Reken developed a holistic framework charting structural, temporal, and personal aspects of the TCK experience⁶⁰. They identify two essential realities of a TCK childhood. Firstly, that TCKs are raised in a genuinely cross-cultural world: interacting directly with different ways of life, friends, and customs instead of watching or analysing them. Secondly, TCKs are raised in a highly mobile world. Either they or the people around them are constantly moving back or forth: interrupted relationships are a constant factor. Both realities produce a unique psychological profile that persists independently of the countries they lived in, the makeup of their families, and the cultures they interacted with. This explains the global nature of the TCK community, which connects people by the psychological experience they share rather than the cultural context in which they were raised⁶¹.

A constant refrain is that regardless of where these TCKs grew up or are from, something about their experience connects them. They write: 'This is perhaps one of the most amazing things about the TCK experience—that someone from Australia who grew up in Brazil can understand the inner experience of someone from Switzerland who grew up in Hong Kong (or any other combination of host and passport countries)'⁶². This contradicts conventional thoughts on community and belonging,

⁵⁹ Rachel Miller Schaetti, "Great Advantages," in *Notes from a Travelling Childhood*, ed. Karen Curnow McCluskey (Washington DC: Foreign Youth Publication Service, 1994).

⁶⁰ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

⁶¹ Aldine, "Culturs: The Global Multicultural Magazine."

⁶² Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*, 31.

which requires a common location or set of customs for individuals to connect⁶³. Yet, this is not the case for these individuals, who connect across social categories to find belonging in a psychological way of life.

Over time, Van Reken encountered individuals who didn't identify with the TCK definition, yet resonated with the TCK profile. Simultaneously, as the world became more globalised, previous assumptions about monocultural parents and their reasons for moving overseas began to change. Keen to maintain the established TCK community, Van Reken developed the concept of the Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) to include a greater range of individuals that identified with the TCK profile.

Van Reken describes a CCK as 'a person who is living/has lived in—or meaningfully interacted with—two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during the first eighteen years of life'⁶⁴. This CCK definition included groups seemingly as disparate as children of immigrants, refugees, international adoptees, and children of minorities, seen in figure 3.

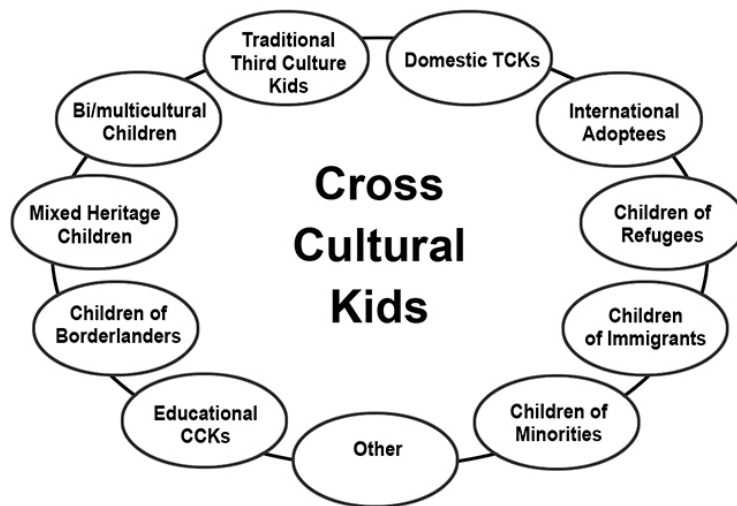


Figure 3—CCK Communities

To illustrate the complexity of a CCK profile, they use the example of former US president Barack Obama. He was born to a white American mother and a black Kenyan father and raised in Hawaii until he was 7. After his parents divorced, his mother married an Indonesian man and they moved to Jakarta, where Obama attended a local Indonesian school. Four years later, he then moved to Hawaii with his maternal grandparents. Clearly, Obama is not only ethnically mixed, but also culturally mixed. CCKs arose out of the recognition that the layers of cultural complexity are endless, and that

⁶³ Fukayama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*.

⁶⁴ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*, 27.

these cross-cultural realities will apply to many different communities that do not seem related at first glance.

Why is this relevant to the UK context? Van Reken's challenge in handling an increasing number of definitions highlights the ability of language to obscure similarities between communities. For example, the term 'Third-Culture Kid' is less well known in the UK than an 'immigrant'. Originally, the difference between the two communities is that immigrants traditionally made a permanent shift to the host culture: TCKs were always expected to return to the parent's home country. However, the differences between the two experiences are narrowing as more migrants return regularly to see family⁶⁵.

Therefore, this discussion is relevant to the UK context when one considers that as of 2022, 14.8% of the UK population was not born in the UK⁶⁶. As the TCK/CCK experience is rooted in structure rather than content, this experience could apply to many individuals living in the UK with a cross-cultural background: see figure 3 above for examples. Van Reken chose to focus the majority of her work on TCKs, but invited others to expand on the CCK framework. This paper accepts this invitation, considering the CCK framework a precursor of this Complex Identity framework, and similarly CCKs to individuals with complex identities.

Nationality: Border Studies

This case study also focuses on nationality, but less on the experience of movement and more on how borders and statehood impact the identity of individuals. Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is the earliest source found that explores a complex identity in an intersectional framework⁶⁷. It demonstrates the importance of decentralising traditional western narratives of identity, instead looking towards how individuals and communities construct their identities.

Authors within the field of border studies analyse the relationship between formal state boundaries and the informal social dynamics that result from them⁶⁸. The field has been reanimated in the last few years in response to increased globalisation and the growth of borderless areas for capital and people such as the European Union. Fixed, political borders rarely align to the daily lives of the people

⁶⁵ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

⁶⁶ Migration Observatory, *Migrants in the UK: An Overview*, University of Oxford (Oxford, 2021), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-in-the-uk-an-overview/>.

⁶⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Kolossov and James Scott, "Selected conceptual issues in border studies," *Belgeo. Revue belge de géographie*, no. 1 (2013).

living close to them, and so authors often explore the process of *bordering*, the othering of communities, people, and ways of life that has characterised the 20th century nation-state.

As a work, *Borderlands* exemplifies the multiplicity of identity in the story it tells. With roots in the field of women's studies, chicana studies, spiritual activism, and border studies, it is transdisciplinary, crossing academic boundaries in English literature, Spanish literature, history, anthropology, and political science. Written in Spanish, English, and Nahuatl (an Aztec language), the work reflects the multiple spaces and identities in which the author's community inhabits.

Anzaldúa's subject is the US-Mexico border, and the histories, peoples and movements located there. Northern Mexico was absorbed into the United States in 1848, and as such, the area is neither fully Mexican, American, nor the Aztecan civilization that lived there prior to colonisation. Indigenous gods, traditions and rituals replace post-Cortesian, Catholic customs, with Anzaldúa rewriting classic narratives of Mexico in the memory of the old Aztec deities that were smothered by the Azteca-Mexica Patriarchs and the Christian colonisers.

The agent in her writing is the *mestiza*, a growing population whose identity and lived experience lies *between* both sides of the border, recognising it as socially constructed. The disruption of the border produces inner conflict that the *mestiza* must reconcile: 'Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la *mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.'⁶⁹ This external boundary generates a similar internal dynamic, leaving the *mestiza* confused as to where she belongs. Anzaldúa comments on the mental anguish and grief felt at '*El Choque*', the cultural collision of the worlds she needs to integrate: 'internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness'⁷⁰.

Nepantla, a Nahuatl (Aztec) word meaning 'in-betweenness', is a foundation of this framework of complex identity. *Nepantla* is a space where multiple forms of reality can be viewed simultaneously, and is a descriptive precursor to having multiple identities in the same category. Describing the border as a 'third country', it can be compared to the 'third culture' described in the previous section. *Mestizas* can be anachronously considered to possess complex identities in their Mexican, American, and indigenous heritage, as well as the multiple historical narratives and ways of being they inhabit. In

⁶⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 100.

⁷⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 100.

addition, they speak multiple languages, which has been shown in several studies to be important to an individual's sense of identity⁷¹.

Anzaldúa's 'third country' is not a product of traditional national dynamics:⁷²

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out, yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.). I am cultureless...yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.

The third country is built with the hard work of self inquiry and social activism. The *mestiza* requires flexibility, rejecting western rationality for a 'more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes'⁷³. She explains, 'In attempting to work out the synthesis, the self has added a third element that is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness: a *mestiza* consciousness.'⁷⁴

She describes this consciousness as hermeneutics and epistemology, a way of interpreting the world, knowledge, and identity. The work of the *mestiza* is to break down dualities that serve to imprison women—both gender- and sexuality-based—describing herself as both man and woman as a Chicana lesbian. The *Mestiza* is a woman without an official history and someone who constructs her own legacy. The summit of identity incorporation is a place of higher spiritual and political consciousness. Upon finishing this inner journey, their mind becomes suited to social justice.

Overall, Anzaldúa's work is a call to action for individuals in a society which defines them singularly. Like the TCK section above, Anzaldúa independently formulates a third culture, which shows the importance of borders for an individual's sense of identity. Her account reflects the interconnectedness of social categories for many people's lived experience—the author's queer, national, and gender identity are all integral to her sense of self. Written primarily for individuals with lived experience, the account offers a sense of agency for anyone who relates to the *mestiza's* position, showing them a path forward for healing and purpose.

⁷¹ Jean Mills, "Being Bilingual: Perspectives of Third Generation Asian Children on Language, Culture and Identity," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 4, no. 6 (2001/12/31 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050108667739>.

⁷² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 103.

⁷³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 101.

⁷⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 101-02.

Race: Transracial and International Care-Experience

This final section of the literature concerns individuals with transracial or intercountry care-experience, and the cross-cultural changes they experience when moving from a birth environment of one culture to a foster/adoptive setting of another. Care-experience is an umbrella term including several groups such as children in care, care-leavers and adoptees, with currently over 100,000 children in care and 45,000 care leavers aged between 17-21⁷⁵. Almost 16,000 children were adopted in the last 5 years, although the number has been decreasing year-on-year⁷⁶.

Each community has a legal definition, with children in care and adoptees defined by having a care or adoption order respectively. A transracial placement is when an individual is placed with a caregiver(s) of a different race, and an international or intercountry adoptee is an individual who in the process of adoption was moved from one country to another.

Initially, this author conceptualised 'care-experience' as an identity within the social category of 'family'. Accordingly, a young person in care would have a complex identity through possessing multiple family identities: birth and foster. However, the framework developed in this paper suggests that 'family' is not a social category compared to nationality and race, but is instead the context in which the young person formulates their identity.

This literature review found that research with samples featuring mostly same-race placements do not highlight the themes of cultural flexibility or in-betweenness mentioned in the above sections. They focused more on care/adoption specific issues, such as reconnecting with birth families, accessing records, and educational outcomes^{77,78}. This suggests that not all care placements are necessarily cross-cultural placements, but further research is needed to investigate complexity in other aspects of same-race care experience, as race can often dominate intersectional discussions of adoptee lived experience.

Nevertheless, the experiences of transracial or intercountry adoptee did match those found in other complex identity case studies. International studies in Italy and New Zealand mention international

⁷⁵ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoptions*, Department for Education (London, 2023), <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions>.

⁷⁶ Department for Education, *CLA who were adopted and who were the subject of a special guardianship order - LA' in England between 2019 and 2023*, Department for Education (London, 2023), <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/b4a936f1-ec35-4596-248d-08dc65d23c5f>.

⁷⁷ Adoption UK, *The Adoption Barometer: A stocktake of adoption in England*, Adoption UK (Banbury, 2024), <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=88cf796d-c179-4fe1-8f9a-8f0ec0c47301>.

⁷⁸ Marsha Wood and Julie Selwyn, "Looked after children and young people's views on what matters to their subjective well-being," *Adoption & Fostering* 41, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575916686034>.

adoptees' experience of 'living between worlds'^{79,80}. Lived experience campaigners such as the Adult Adoptee Movement highlight the lack of belonging: 'This is the paradox of being an intercountry adoptee. We don't belong to either society and never will.'⁸¹ The number of international adoptions has steadily decreased, with less than 100 adoptions taking place each year in the UK⁸². Yet, it's clear that these experiences have profound and life-long impacts on identity for the people involved.

This demonstrates that only focusing on the family change obscures the lived experience of transracially-placed young people. Their experience could include a move across borders, cultures, races, and religions. International adoptees are featured in the CCK framework: alongside reconciling their adoptive narrative and trauma, being raised in a distinctly different cultural environment requires them to draw on many sources to find a sense of belonging⁸³.

In the UK, a sophisticated account of care-experienced identity formation is *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*⁸⁴. They interviewed 26 care-experienced young people from black, south Asian, and mixed-heritage backgrounds. Three participants described themselves as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, meaning that they were separated from their parents and looked after the local authority while their claim is processed. Like this paper, the aim of the report is to help practitioners and researchers provide more effective and nuanced support to young people from minoritised backgrounds, who form 28% of looked-after children⁸⁵.

Also set in an intersectional framework, this report directly acknowledges the cross-cultural environment that minoritised young people must negotiate: They write⁸⁶:

⁷⁹ Rosa Rosnati and Laura Ferrari, "Parental Cultural Socialization and Perception of Discrimination as Antecedents for Transracial Adoptees' Ethnic Identity," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 140 (2014/08/22/ 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.393>.

⁸⁰ Maria Haenga-Collins and Anita Gibbs, "'Walking between worlds': the experiences of New Zealand Māori cross-cultural adoptees," *Adoption & Fostering* 39, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575914565082>.

⁸¹ 'Debbie' [Last name not given], "Return to Seoul," *Adult Adoptee Movement* (London) 2023, <https://adultadoptee.org.uk/return-to-seoul/>.

⁸² Peter Selman, *Statistics based on data provided by receiving States 2004–2022*, Hague Conference on Private International Law (Newcastle, 2024), <https://assets.hcch.net/docs/a8fe9f19-23e6-40c2-855e-388e112bf1f5.pdf>.

⁸³ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

⁸⁴ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*.

⁸⁵ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England including adoptions*.

⁸⁶ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*, 28.

In forming their identities, children and young people in care mediate the different cultures that are inherent to their journeys through care. They also need to forge a unique sense of self that allows them to manage the challenges of adapting to new family dynamics and acknowledge their religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage.

Their model of 'identities in flux' captures the constructed and malleable nature of the participant's identity depending on the external situation. For example, describing Laxmi's story, a South Asian-heritage adoptee placed with white adopters, they write⁸⁷:

Laxmi's sense of identity constantly varies. She spoke about feeling very white on certain days and on others feeling very South Asian...As a profound statement of her negotiations between her biological and adopted heritage. Laxmi finds herself caught in a veritable tug of war of identities.

Laxmi's account bears similarity to the cognitive flexibility expressed in Gaither's and Anzaldúa work. Her multiplicity of cultural upbringing is represented psychologically in her fluctuation between a white and a South Asian identity. Conflict is also a feature of her identity formation, again reinforcing this sense of 'in-betweenness' described in other accounts.

However, these care-experienced individuals are not passively surrendering to their circumstances. Although these young people grow up in a context where major life decisions are made on their behalf, their identity flexibility is an example of agency. Another adopted South Asian woman says:⁸⁸

At times, I felt like I didn't belong to either culture, but as I grew up, I realized that this difference was actually a strength. It allowed me to bring the best of both worlds and create a unique identity.

The paper resists interpretations of young people being powerless, instead making the best of their situation despite the difficulty of the events that happened to them. Overall, the category of transracial care-experience highlights the variety of ways that individuals can develop complex identities, reinforcing the need for an open mind when considering narratives of culture and belonging.

⁸⁷ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*, 28.

⁸⁸ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford, and Anand, *Expressions of Self: Race, Religion and Representation of minoritised children and young people in the British Care System*, 27.

Other categories: Disability, Sexual orientation, and beyond

Although this paper has covered several case studies in race and nationality, this does not mean that complex identities exist only in these categories. Alongside these case studies, the literature review found several experiences in other social categories that resembled the experience of a complex identity, reflecting that complex identities are not limited to geographical and racial communities. Limited by time and lived experience, the following paragraphs note several pieces of scholarship this author considers to be productive anchors for future research.

In the category of disability, Oya Ataman argues that the identity dynamics of hearing Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) may be better viewed in a cross-cultural lens⁸⁹. They show how the TCK model can apply to members of the CODA community, who during childhood bridge the gap between the deaf world and the hearing world, which are culturally, socially, and linguistically distinct. This 'cultural paradox' can lead to others viewing the CODA as disabled, rather than as experiencing a clash between two ways of life. Ataman's reframing provides a way for the CODA to acknowledge both the benefits and challenges of their lived experience, without regressing to prejudice and disdain towards either the hearing and deaf community.

In the category of sexual orientation, the author found evidence of complex identities from both academic and grassroots sources. Empirical research shows that bisexual university students have higher degrees of cognitive flexibility compared to exclusively heterosexual or homosexual couples, echoing Gaither's research for mixed-heritage individuals⁹⁰. Cognitive flexibility in this sense means a willingness to adapt in social situations and having multiple options to present oneself.

However, a BBC news article on bisexuality reveals themes of invisibility, marginalisation, and not belonging to either the heterosexual or homosexual culture⁹¹. For example, Lailah, one of the castmates for the BBC's *I Kissed a Girl*/TV series, noted that 'bisexuality was questioned...people were either like "you're straight or you're gay"'. The article adds that 'being bisexual [for Lailah] was a double strain, with neither her gay or straight friends able to fully understand what she was going through'⁹². Moreover, her castmate Meg references the in-between space, saying that 'I felt a confusion of being in between and not knowing which way to go'. A survey by LGBT charity Just like

⁸⁹ Oya Ataman, "Growing Up in the Deaf Community: Coda, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Childhoods as a Third Culture Kid Experience," 2015, <https://signsandwords.com/2015/08/01/wfd-2015-growing-up-in-the-deaf-community-coda-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-childhoods-as-a-third-culture-kid-experience/>.

⁹⁰ Julie Konik and Mary Crawford, "Exploring normative creativity: Testing the relationship between cognitive flexibility and sexual identity," *Sex Roles* 51 (2004).

⁹¹ Ruchira Sharma and Samuel Spencer, "As a bisexual, there's no-one you can really relate to," *BBC News* (London) 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/articles/c88z6ggdyjpo>.

⁹² Sharma and Spencer, "As a bisexual, there's no-one you can really relate to."

Us showed that 54 percent of bisexual individuals feel lonely, highlighting similar mental health issues for this community⁹³.

To conclude, it is crucial to emphasise that experiences that do not have established communities can produce a complex identity. Pollock and Van Reken describe individuals who have moved within countries but have experienced culture changes within them, such as a Canadian woman who as a child moved from the city to a First Nation Reservation⁹⁴. Likewise, they argue that children of divorced parents switch cultures every time they move to the other parent's house, as the rules for what is or isn't allowed are different. These examples illustrate that complex identities extend far beyond traditional categories that are deemed more consequential for identity formation. Cultural complexity may be difficult to conceptualise and understand on paper, but that does not diminish its reality for those who experience it on a daily basis.

⁹³ Just Like Us, "Growing Up LGBTQ+: The impact of school, home, and coronavirus on LGBTQ+ young people," (2021), <https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

The Complex Identity Framework

'How about, instead of society obsessing over whether we are more of one thing or another, we instead develop a better understanding and acceptance of what it means to sit between the two; to belong to both or neither Categories?'—Natalie Morris⁹⁵

Based on the literature review above, this section introduces the Complex Identity framework for the UK youth and equality sector. It then explains the psychological features of people with complex identities, and the framework's utility to organisations and researchers.

Within a set of data, cardinality refers to the relationship between two entities. For example, in a school database, each student has one student ID number, and each ID number relates to one student—this is a *one-to-one* relationship. This paper argues that generally speaking, the current societal framework of identity in the UK assumes a *one-to-one* relationship between an identity and the social category it is located in (race, gender, class, languages spoken and more). For many individuals and communities, this suffices for a sense of personal identity and belonging. An individual who has lived in Britain all their life only needs to put down a British nationality. This paper will refer to individuals with *one-to-one* relationships as possessing monocultural identities.

The Complex Identity framework advances that some individuals have a *many-to-one* relationship for an identity in a given social category. For example, a mixed-heritage individual possesses multiple identities in the category of ethnicity. An immigrant may have multiple identities in the category of nationality, being or having been citizens of multiple countries. This framework refers to the experience of having multiple identities in a single social category as a 'complex identity'.

The table below shows several examples of complex and monocultural identities within their given social category. The groups included range from established communities to individuals who have undergone a transformative experience. Some are defined legally, such as care-experienced individuals, as well as less-defined communities such as children of immigrants. Even experiences such as first-in-family students are included, as this experience may include a change in class. This shows that a complex identity is not referring to a community, but to a psychological experience of one's identity existing in multiple spaces simultaneously.

⁹⁵ Morris, *Mixed/Other: Explorations of Multiraciality in Modern Britain*, 19.

| Social category | Monocultural examples | Complex identity examples |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Race/ethnicity | Asian, Black, Eastern European, Argentinian, Cambodian | International care-experienced, Mixed-heritage, Transracially care-experienced |
| Nationality | British national, Ghanaian national | Children of Immigrants, Immigrants, International care-experience, International students, Refugees, Third-Culture Kids, |
| Class | Working-Class, Middle-Class | First-in-family students |
| Sexual orientation | Gay, Lesbian, Heterosexual | Bisexual individuals |
| Disability | Deaf community | Children Of Deaf Adults |

Table 1—Examples of Monocultural communities and their Complex Identity counterparts

Individuals may have complex identities in some categories, but monocultural identities in others. For example, an immigrant who does not identify as disabled will have a complex identity in nationality, but a monocultural identity in disability (non-disabled). Some individuals will have complex identities in multiple social categories, such as a transracially adopted individual with mixed-heritage. There may be magnified challenges for the healthy identity formulation of such individuals.

Complex identities challenge traditional definitions of community. The Oxford English Dictionary defines community as 'A body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity'⁹⁶. However, complex identity narratives are multiple and disrupted: ideas about the adoptee community, mixed-heritage community, or Third Culture Kid community do not point to a single group of people located in a certain place with a single historical narrative. This generates a sense of identity and community that is qualitatively and structurally different to monocultural communities.

⁹⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, "community, n," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Lived experience of a complex identity

Drawing on the case studies, this paper identifies several themes that persist independently of the cultural context of an individual. This does not imply that two people within or across communities have an identical experience: the lived experience of someone who has moved countries may be very different to a mixed-heritage individual who grew up in London. However, this cross-cultural experience has a tendency to produce several features of experience that appear across social categories.

Cultural flexibility

By having multiple identities in a single social category, individuals with complex identities possess flexibility in manoeuvring through 'cultures'—in the widest sense of the term. Whether it's changing countries, families, accents, languages, behaviour, cooking, music taste, or cultural practices, these individuals inhabit multiple worlds with different patterns of friends, customs, locations, foods, historical narratives, and traditions. This experience of moving between multiple contexts or codes of expression is known as 'code-switching', a term which originated in linguistics but has been usefully applied to the experiences of those with multiple racial, cultural, or linguistic identities.

This affords them several benefits: firstly, individuals with complex identities can gain a sense of perspective and richness of experience. In accessing many spaces, they can achieve a sense of cultural diversity, appreciating the differences and similarities in each. They may also be more flexible in their self-presentation, able to draw on a range of meaningful modes of expression and fusing diverse ways and experiences of life into an integrated whole.

In-between space

Interacting and crossing many cultural borders and spaces generates a psychological liminal space, described in the literature review as a 'third culture', '*Nepantla*' ('In-betweenness'), existing 'in-between worlds' or 'In-between lines'. A reflective perspective on the cultures, it exists independently of their content. As such, it is a neutral space, and can embody a *neither/nor* or *both/and* perspective, depending on the individual.

The *neither/nor* perspective is what Van Reken describes as cultural marginality: the experience of having access to multiple cultures but not belonging to any of them⁹⁷. This generates feelings of guilt, loneliness, and grief, and is exacerbated when an individual is marginalised for their non-conformity to the monocultural community. However, Anzaldúa's account suggests that with time, self-work,

⁹⁷ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

and community, the *Nepantla* space can become a source of agency for individuals⁹⁸. Moreover, research and grassroots accounts of mixed identity suggest that societal narratives of confusion could be overstated, emphasising that it must be the individual's choice to identify with this feature.

Marginalisation

Individuals with a complex identity are affected by society's tendency to reduce the complexity of identity to a *one-to-one* relationship through several mechanisms of power:⁹⁹

In the structural mechanism, rules and regulations reduce complexity for the purposes of categorising individuals. This idea is embodied in government forms offering only one identity option for various social categories. Not only do these forms often conflate ethnicity, race, and nationality—which are interrelated but not identical—this one-dimensional view of identity misrepresents the multiply located nature of these individuals¹⁰⁰. For example: the 'White-Asian' mixed community is a different *kind of* community to either the 'Asian' or 'White' community—which themselves possess many subgroups. It is the combination of two cultures, two narratives, two ways of being, and so this option is a flattening of this mixed reality.

The cultural domain refers to the importance of ideas and narratives in explaining belonging and group membership. One example of marginalisation is the experience of German footballer Mesut Ozil, who played for Germany in the 2018 world cup. The grandson of Turkish immigrants, his statement that 'I am a German if we win, but an immigrant if we lose.', reveals the precarious nature of group acceptance for complex identities¹⁰¹. Following criticism of his decision to appear in a photo with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which was later blamed for the German team's early exit, he withdrew from the national team, denouncing the racism that would not accept his duality. This example shows that identity and belonging is not only defined by the individual, but by the structures and groups around them.

The disciplinary domain refers to social normality and deviance in behaviour and speech, relating to ways of being that fall outside established societal norms. On the cultural fringes of their monocultural groups, individuals with complex identities can defy cultural norms and consequently face discrimination. For many transracial adoptees, the disruption of their upbringing can result in

⁹⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

⁹⁹ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

¹⁰⁰ Hannah Manzur, Niels Blom, and Estela Capelas Barbosa, "(Mis)Representing Ethnicity in UK Government Statistics and Its Implications for Violence Inequalities," *Social Sciences* 13, no. 5 (2024), <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/13/5/235>.

¹⁰¹ Maykel Verkuyten et al., "To Be Both (and More): Immigration and Identity Multiplicity," *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 2 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12324>.

appearing ethnically as their birth identity, but behaving culturally as their adoptive identity¹⁰². This can result in bullying and racism for not acting as expected: one account featured on a BBC news article explained: 'I've been told things like, "you have white parents, so you're not really Asian" or "why don't you know how to cook curry?"'¹⁰³. Both the cultural disruption of adoption and societal stigma produce identity issues for individuals, leading to embarrassment and shame.

Regardless of the intention, society exerts pressures to reduce the complexity of identity, marginalising complex identities in the process. This reduction is an expression of the *either/or* lens attributed to membership in a group: 'you can't be simultaneously in two groups; you are one or the other'.

Connection across categories

Regardless of the cultural setting, individuals with complex identities can connect with each other despite growing up in different countries and cultures, defying traditional norms of community¹⁰⁴. The evidence suggests two reasons for this: the first is similarity in the content of life experiences. For example, an international adoptee, a Third Culture Kid, and an immigrant all have the experience of travelling across countries. Upon meeting, they would be able to find some common ground, alongside common human experiences such as childhood, education, navigating relationships, work, and finding community.

Secondly, individuals with a complex identity can recognise the characteristics explored above—cultural flexibility, existing in-between cultures, and marginalisation—in others. This has not been adequately researched, but grassroots initiatives such as *In-Between Lines* has highlighted this feature¹⁰⁵. This recognition promotes empathy and understanding in others who until the moment of contact have felt alone and unseen.

For example, a mixed individual and an immigrant, despite not seemingly sharing lived experience, can connect on several themes of their experience. Both can appreciate the liminality of accessing multiple spaces, and the loss of connection as a result of not belonging to any. Also, they face the reduction of their multiplicity to a singularity: the immigrant's citizenship, and the mixed individual

¹⁰² Colleen Butler-Sweet, "'Race isn't what defines me': exploring identity choices in transracial, biracial, and monoracial families," *Social Identities* 17, no. 6 (2011/11/01 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2011.606672>.

¹⁰³ Simi Jolaoso and Hayley Westcott, "Transracial adoption: 'I bit my hand hoping my skin colour would change'," *BBC News* (London) 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-53429651>.

¹⁰⁴ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

¹⁰⁵ In-Between Lines, "Creating a Space for People Who Find Themselves Between Cultures and Identity," *Byline Times* (London) 2023, <https://bylinetimes.com/2023/06/16/creating-a-space-for-people-who-find-themselves-between-cultures-and-identity/>.

being usually viewed as a member of their minority culture. Although two people may not have multiple identities in the *same* social category, they can connect through the experience of *having* multiple identities in a social category, and their daily negotiation of a *both/and* perspective in an *either/or* society.

Why is this framework useful?

Better conversations with young people

This framework provides language for the lived experience of some of the UK's most marginalised communities. Knowledge of the cross-cultural worlds that an increasing percentage of young people inhabit can give practitioners the tools to have sophisticated conversations with young people that actually reflects their lived experience. Organisations that can validate and support the identity development of these individuals will experience higher levels of rapport and be better placed to deal with problems as they arise. Current frameworks that do not recognise multiplicity will ignore or misinterpret young people's lived experience, because the unit of analysis is not granular enough to notice the issues they experience.

Promotes connection across difference

Intersectional approaches often draw criticism for dividing communities into ever-smaller interest groups¹⁰⁶. Because this framework groups individuals by common experiences rather than by community, it promotes connection across difference. Each social category holds several communities, highlighting the overlapping lived experience across them. An intercountry adoptee, an immigrant, a Third Culture Kid, and a refugee all have experience of moving across borders, despite being in communities viewed very differently in a political and interpersonal sense. By defining people by their similarities, this framework facilitates understanding of shared issues and allows emerging communities to join in the future.

Shares knowledge across sectors

When focusing on the differences between individuals and communities, it's easy to assume that they lack anything in common. However, this paper has shown that many of these communities share common experiences. Acknowledging their structural similarities expedites progress: no longer having to independently create a framework from scratch means that knowledge and resources can be shared between them¹⁰⁷. Simultaneously, examining the shared features also reveals issues that

¹⁰⁶ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

¹⁰⁷ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

are specific to each community, allowing the uniqueness of each group to be celebrated and respected.

Unfortunately, equality organisations often suffer from a 'siloed mentality', where specific communities and inequalities are viewed in a separate, isolated way¹⁰⁸. This is reflected in the structure of many organisations as well as the 'third sector' in general. The intersectional approach of this framework recognises that social categories and communities are fundamentally linked: each community contains all other communities. Therefore, the issues that they face are also interrelated and frameworks must be adopted which encompass and encourage this interrelation.

More insight for researchers

Finally, increasing the zoom on identity allows researchers to examine the relationships within them. For example, a white-black mixed individual may have a coloniser-colonised relationship between their two ethnicities, whereas a minority-mixed individual may have a more equal power-relation, which could explain their relationship to their racial and overall identity. Looking at one identity per social category is too coarse an analysis to address the psychological needs of individuals with complex identities, and this has consequences for policy and social justice.

¹⁰⁸ Christofferson, *Intersectionality in Practice*.

Implications for Organisations and Researchers

'[I]f...efforts...began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit...placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action'—Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁰⁹

Having outlined the framework, this section offers several recommendations to organisations and researchers in considering complex identities in their policy and practice.

For organisations

Raise awareness

Awareness of complex identities is helpful for young people to know that their feelings and struggles are legitimate. Understanding the structure of their identity can help practitioners to help them in developing and navigating their sense of self. To do this, organisations need to equip their employees with a deeper understanding of complex identities within their target community. When young people feel understood and listened to, they are more likely to develop a positive relationship with the practitioner and organisation.

Practice cultural humility

Cultural humility is a process of ongoing self-reflection and critique on the part of the adult, and being sensitive to the identity needs of the young person. Rather than a cultural competence approach of "knowing" the cultural background of a young person, practitioners must suspend judgement and be open to how a young person presents in the moment.

Individuals with complex identities can struggle with the conflicting behavioural norms of their different identities e.g. how to be respectful to adults. Supporting them could look like noticing the aspects of a young person's identity that they most embrace or reject, and acknowledging the validity of a young person's perspective. It is important to pay attention to what is *not* said by a young person, because of a perceived fear of punishment or belittlement.

Practitioners can avoid unintentional marginalisation of identity by reducing 'where are you from'-type questions, or being open to alternative narratives of group history and identity. In addition,

¹⁰⁹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," 30.

organisations can adjust surveys and forms to allow young people to self-describe, reducing the structural compression of a young people's identity.

Validate mental health difficulties

The case studies above describe confusion, loneliness, and grief for individuals who feel that they lack a sense of belonging and wholeness, in addition to any discrimination that their dominant identities face. Although these difficulties can be mitigated and overcome with time, young people are likely to be at the start, rather than the end of this journey. Therefore, organisations must acknowledge and validate the mental health difficulties that young people with complex identities may encounter.

Awareness of cultural upbringing in the therapeutic community has grown in recent years, with a book by Lois Bushong being the first on counselling children raised outside of their parent's home culture¹¹⁰. Organisations need to resist depictions casting entire communities as troubled and confused; simultaneously, they need to recognise the particularised needs of young people on a case-by-case basis.

Foster connections

The sense of community that individuals with complex identities possess is different to traditional conceptions, because many of them grew up in monocultural environments. This lack of proximity to others like them can cause feelings of loneliness and isolation¹¹¹. To know that they are not alone and that they can connect with others across difference is an important part of their healing process, and organisations need to facilitate these connections in their service provision.

Large organisations can support intersectional working by funding grassroots organisations that are supporting marginalised young people and filling an important societal need. They can also signpost others to other organisations, digital communities, and resources that are age-appropriate for young people. Importantly, they can include young people in decision making and peer research, giving a sense of responsibility and appreciation of their concerns. This forms part of a larger call to move away from the siloed mentality of working within one category/inequality, and forming networks and coalitions across inequalities.

¹¹⁰ Lois J. Bushong, *Belonging Everywhere and Nowhere: Insights Into Counseling the Globally Mobile* (Indiana: Mango Tree Intercultural Services, 2013).

¹¹¹ Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock, *Third Culture Kids: The experience of growing up among worlds: The original, classic book on TCKs*.

For researchers

Researchers have an important role to play in developing an understanding of the identity complexities of marginalised young people, because their work forms the evidence base for policy and funding for marginalised groups. The research paradigm and approach they employ will have tangible effects on the data they collect, with meaningful impacts for social justice.

Consider identity from a *both/and* perspective

To conceptualise the needs of intersectionally marginalised communities, researchers must consider an *both/and* concept of identity. This means providing ways for research participants to locate themselves in multiple spaces depending on the social category of analysis. Traditional conceptions have focused on in-group/out-group definitions of belonging i.e.: you are either a woman or not a woman¹¹². While this may make collection and analysis easier, an increasing body of research is acknowledging that individuals have multiple social identities that fluctuate over time and context, with measurable outcomes on cognitive performance.

This is especially the case for complex identities: researchers must acknowledge the cultural flexibility of these individuals who have been unseen in research for so long. Because social categories encourage individuals to choose one option, the one presented on a form or in small talk many not express the fullness and multiplicity of their identity. Therefore, the researcher needs to look beyond the initial presentation of the participant, and consider fully what it means to live between cultures.

Acknowledge positionality

Qualitative researchers need to acknowledge their positionality and its effect on the research design and data collection. The researcher is not a neutral observer: their own life experience affects their interactions with research participants, as well as the way they interpret and analyse data¹¹³. If a participant's identity enables them to see unique forms of oppression, then it follows that the researcher also has a particularised gaze that will privilege certain interpretations and narratives of behaviour. This is not to say that individuals with lived experience are the only ones capable of producing valid research about their community, but that researchers should be transparent about power dynamics and not claim an "objective" perspective.

Directions for future research

To develop this framework, this author encourages grassroots and academic accounts by individuals

¹¹² Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking."

¹¹³ Linda Finlay, "'Outing' the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity," *Qualitative Health Research* 12, no. 4 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>.

in as many social categories and communities as possible. This paper serves as an introduction to this research paradigm, but many more perspectives and narratives need to be heard. Due to the exploratory nature of this paper and the variety of communities and sources explored, the literature review focused on case studies that best confirmed the existence of this way of life. However, to firmly establish complex identities within the UK population, more systematic reviews of evidence, with a detailed plan and search strategy for each community, are required.

In addition, this paper calls for exploration of the relationship between a complex identity and mental health. Many of the case studies mention the experience of grief, confusion, and marginalisation that can accompany a complex identity in a monocultural world. Specific topics could include the formation of the in-between space, and the interactions between a complex identity and neurodiversity: particularly regarding 'masking', the phenomenon of hiding one's behaviours and feelings to blend into society. Similarly, exploring the relationship between complex identities and early trauma would be vital for care-experienced individuals in forming a healthy sense of self.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has highlighted the lived experience of several communities whose sense of identity extends to multiple spaces within a social category. Raising awareness of a similar psychological profile of individuals whose perspective spans multiple cultures, their opportunities for connection persist across community lines and social categories. By placing them in a loose framework and providing a set of recommendations, this paper hopes that organisations and researchers can support young people in these communities to gain an integrated sense of identity and belonging that will benefit them long into adulthood.

Firstly, this paper highlighted the demographic changes and self-created identity categories that are creating a consciousness of complexity for young people. Secondly, it highlighted the intersectional design of this research, and the positionality of the author with the peer research context. Thirdly, it highlighted several case studies, drawing out several themes of cross-cultural experience for communities based in the UK. Fourthly, it positioned these experiences within a framework of complex identity, noting the common themes of cultural flexibility, in-between space, marginalisation, and connection across categories. Finally, it offered recommendations to organisations and researchers for interacting with and facilitating spaces for complex identities, as well as a call for future research in this research paradigm.

Young people with complex identities have the power to work through their problems, provided they are given support and space to explore them. Far from being powerless to their marginality, this paper suggests that these individuals are innovatively using their access to multiple spaces, navigating life and relationships in a flexible, culturally rich way. By acknowledging the fullness of their identity, organisations will benefit from their multi-cultural perspective, and support them in their transition to adulthood.

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