

A psychology of globalized identities: Where are we headed, and why

Our social and psychological reality is increasingly shaped by globalization—the increasing interconnectedness of societies, economies, and cultures. Neither good nor bad, globalization contributes to global crises (e.g., rising inequality, climate change), but also provides many opportunities for greater human growth and development. This review discusses some of globalization's double-edged effects on our social and psychological well-being.

We explore three types of social identifications affected by globalization: those based on the local culture, on globalized-Western culture, and on humanity in its entirety. Each of these sources of identification is analyzed in terms of its emerging psychological meaning and potential for increasing global cooperation. While people have always identified with their local cultures, these are changing because of exposure to the new globalized-Western culture. *Globalized-Western culture* reflects many contemporary American political and economic social structures, which define people mainly as individual consumers who can peruse their desires within a framework of a "free market" of products and ideas. Within this framework, people are supposedly judged not based on their membership in ethnic, gender or religious groups, but on the basis of their individual achievements. This type of social arrangement, called *meritocracy*, has been shown by social-psychological research to make people less likely to object to the social order. Even those defined by this order as inferior are likely to accept this position, because they are supposedly fully responsible for it, and can change it if they only work hard enough and conduct themselves correctly. The problem is that while this ideal is presented as universal, opportunities to realize it and enjoy the "good life" are not evenly distributed. People in less affluent circumstances may thus aspire to something they cannot reasonably hope to achieve.

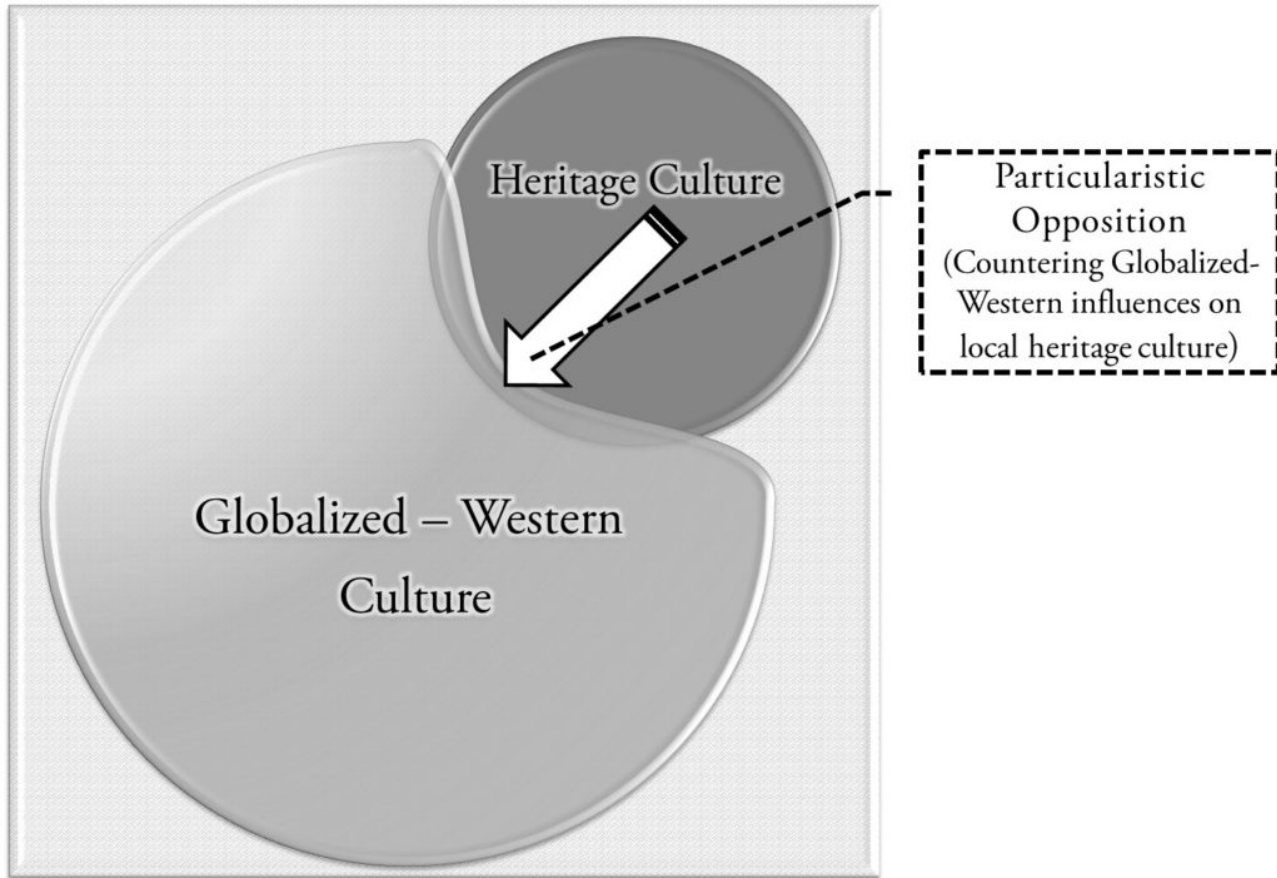


Fig. 1.

Nevertheless, some people and groups do reject this new globalized culture. For some, this culture is too exclusive; promoting certain Western ideals, thereby challenging local social hierarchies and values. This type of *particularistic rejection* of Globalized-Western culture often leads to a fundamentalist reaction, which entails a return to, and reinvention of, the most stringent form of the local heritage culture (Fig. 1). This perceived threat of assimilation may also lead to the adoption of other forms of globalized cultures, which may compete with the ideals of Globalized-Western culture. Examples of this include global communities of the faithful, such as the "Ummah" – the worldwide community of devout Muslims.

People also oppose the influence of Globalized-Western culture because it supports a very unequal power structure, privileging the rich (both individuals and countries) at the expense of the poor. This *universalistic rejection* of contemporary globalized culture and its social order often coincides with still-wider forms of global identities, such as identifying with humanity, or the entire world (Fig. 2). Social-psychological research has shown that these identities are psychologically meaningful, and motivate people to act on behalf of even the most remote others. However, they

potentially carry the risk of covering up real disparities and lingering prejudice under blanket-statements emphasizing shared humanity. This harmful potential has been documented by research on the similar ideology of the "color-blind" treatment of people in America.

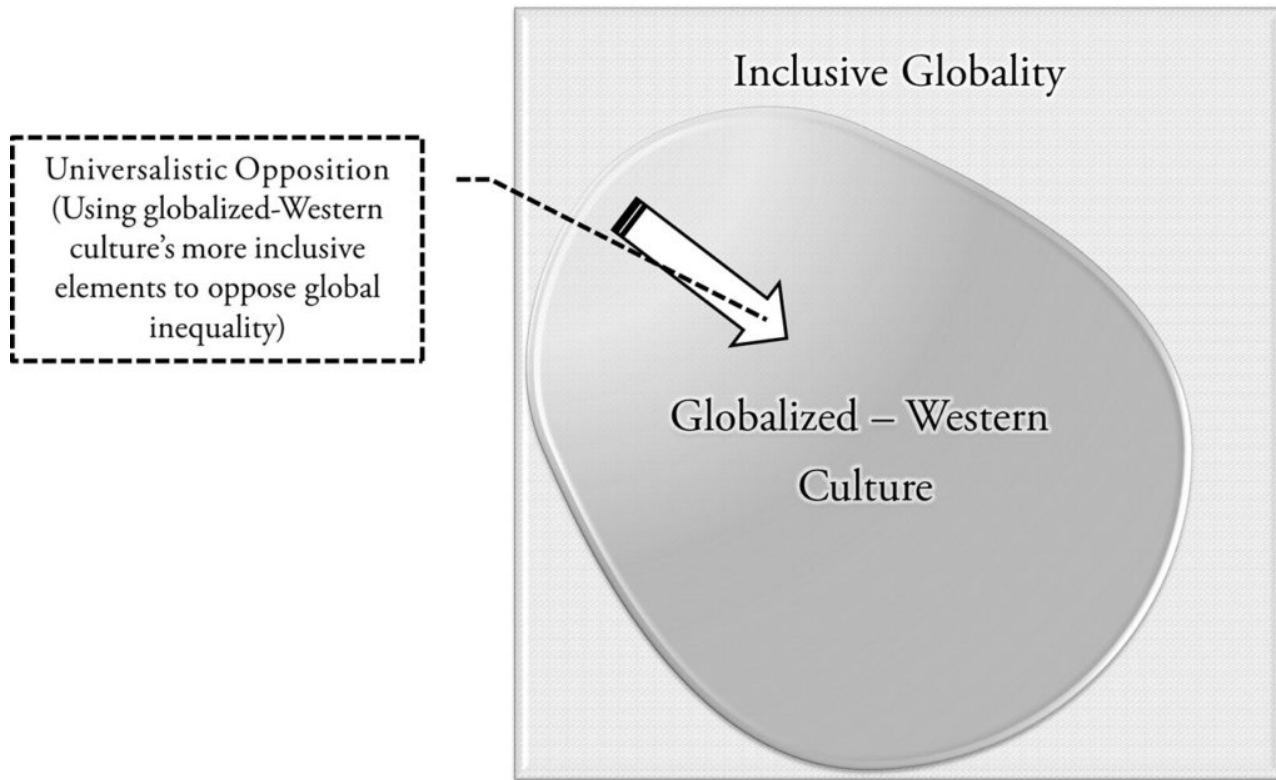


Fig. 2.

As globalization processes accelerate, people are becoming more interdependent than ever before. This is true not only on a social psychological level, but also in regard to our planet's deteriorating environment, and the globality of economic growth vs. recession cycles. To successfully seize the opportunities presented by our globalizing world, and rise to its challenges, there is an urgent need for the development of fully inclusive, multiculturally sensitive global identities. We conclude our review by discussing how such identities may be cultivated by appeals to humanity's shared fate, and by contrasting ourselves not from one another, but from how we were in the past, and how we might be in the future.

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