

Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World

reviewed by [Suniti Sharma](#) – July 20, 2016

Title: Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World
Author(s): Sergio Salvatore, Alessandro Gennaro & Jaan Valsiner (Eds.)
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Theories, methodologies, and epistemologies grounded in mainstream psychology privilege the experimental method across disciplines to center the normative, generalizable, and universal in the study of human behavior. Nowhere is this grand narrative more visible than in education where theories of child development, behaviorism, and psychometrics dominate the field. Sergio Salvatore, Alessandro Gennaro, and Jaan Valsiner's edited volume *Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World* comprises a diverse collection of global scholarship that disrupts some of the major tenets of the grand narrative of mainstream psychology. The text advances the idiographic turn in the qualitative study of human behavior with implications for a wide range of disciplines such as education.

The book is well organized, the language is accessible to readers outside psychology, the table of contents and index are useful guideposts, and the chapters can be read individually. Readers are immediately drawn in through an overview of the disruptive premise of the book outlined in four themes: a) identity as a semiotic device, b) processes that give rise to identity as a semiotic process, c) the type of semiotic device constituting identity, and, d) identity as a semiotic device that "regulates and orchestrates one's sentiments, understandings, and embodied knowledge relevant to a social position" (p. x). Many educators and researchers will relate to the thirteen chapters that follow as the authors build upon the four themes using a range of theoretical frameworks and research methods to explore multicentric identities and validate the qualitative study of human behaviors.

The volume is resonant with phenomenology, autobiographical inquiry, narrative inquiry, and autoethnographic research in education. The first theme of the book establishes the critical place of lived experience as "meaningful expression of one's being in the world" (p. xii) and constituting the "walking-talking human being" mediated by context, culture, and history (p. xii). One chapter on this theme includes the use of participant narratives to challenge the notion of gender as a fixed category of analysis and explores how intersexual identity is mediated on the personal, cultural, political, and ontological level. Another chapter examines the use of I-narratives as a methodological tool to unsettle the centrality of motherhood in the formation of a normative female identity. A third chapter includes a case study of an anesthesiologist's dialogic interactions between personal and professional experience. Each author provides powerful evidence of identity as a process of negotiation contingent upon experience and context rather than a natural or universal condition.

If the first three chapters position identity as a decentered cultural process of the lived experience of the self as it attempts to negotiate the world in specific contexts, the following four chapters engage the reader with the performative nature of identity within organizational contexts such as professional workplace, social networks, and virtual environments. The authors challenge the ontological status of organizational identity as fixed and support the theory that organizations like hospitals are multicentric "processual and fluid phenomena" (p. 93) constantly being negotiated at the individual, group, and organizational levels over time and across multiple contexts. Their findings have implications for schools as organizations constantly evolving and opening possibilities for transformative change.

The third theme of the book investigates "what types of semiotic device is identity" (p. x). Several authors argue identity is both a sign pointing to the static, universal, and taken for granted social construction signifying the self and the symbolic interpretive lived experience of meaning making of the subject, I-text, and context. Building on this theme is an examination of how Estonian students develop their professional identities navigating the "inconsistency between the role expectations and a personal culture" (p. 118) and how identity is negotiated as generational change. Readers from the field of education and researchers studying identity, culture, and diversity would find meaning in the claim that "identity functions as a compass in the landscape of multiple (professional) choice" (p. 131) and that "culture works like a mental software in which information is decoded, interpreted, and behavior coded" (p. 138).

The final six chapters of the book explore the decentering of identity in hybrid spaces. For example, one chapter comes from an "idiographic epistemological perspective" (p.182) to reveal the self as negotiating the borderless geography of virtual reality. Another chapter describes a case study of a Colombian immigrant navigating the complex process of change when it is impacted by immigration. The book also includes an ethnographic study exploring the hybrid identities of second generation Indian American Muslim youth. A multicultural study looks at the role of territorial identity across European immigrants in one chapter. Still another chapter examines the dynamics of change in the identities of refugees. Each study included in these six chapters presents a unique portrait of identity in diversity. The book collectively engages educators and researchers with the fourth theme: how the *I* plays out as an interactive and dynamic cultural process, how identity can be understood as a semiotic device, and how identity as "a semiotic device regulate[s] and orchestrate[s] our being in the world" (x). In sum, this collection describes the idiographic turn in the study of human behavior as a movement toward social justice.

Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World is positioned in the field of cultural psychology. However, as a teacher educator the book's implications for educational theory, research, and practice are timely and powerful. As classrooms in the U.S. continue becoming multicultural, multilingual, and multicentric the changing dynamics of race, ethnicity, and culture combine with the rapid changes caused by globalization. As a result, education and teacher education continue to struggle with complex issues in the field. In this context, what makes the book critical for educators is how a field like psychology wielding enormous power in educational decisions offers critiques of overreliance on behaviorism, standardization of knowledge, and psychometrics. The text urges educators to look outside the grand narrative of theories of child development dominating teacher education, teacher preparation, and K-12 teaching and learning. The book prompts examination of the state of teacher education with its Eurocentric bias, cultural assumptions, and deficit assumptions of diversity. These challenges are prevalent among some educators and underscore the need to revise the theories, methods and, methodologies we use to prepare future teachers for globalized classrooms.




In terms of research, *Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World* expands qualitative inquiry by offering idiographic tools, methods, and methodologies for exploring and understanding identity in rapidly changing globalizing contexts. Educational researchers committed to understanding diversity, questioning their assumptions and beliefs, and developing culturally responsive pedagogies will find relevance in the notion that lived experience, subjectivity, and identity are internalized as "values, beliefs, and cultural ideologies are a coping response" (p. 45) to external events and contexts. Equally important to educational researchers are major debates raised in the book such as the dialectics on the methodological divide between the objective researcher and the actual lived experience of researching participants, the tension between theory and the semiotics of sign/symbols, theory/practice, research/participant, and the patient/physician gap as constantly mediated by the lived experiences of the dialogic *I*.

As a reader and reviewer, two limitations of the book come to my mind. The commentary at the end of each section adds little to the issues researched in the preceding chapters while some of the chapters could speak to an interdisciplinary audience by referring to fields outside psychology. Overall, the editors have compiled an insightful collection in *Multicentric Identities in a Globalizing World* offering new perspectives on identity construction to open possibilities for rethinking identity and diversity in innovative and differentiated ways. Teacher educators, preservice trainees, and inservice teachers will benefit from this book while educational researchers will find value in the complexities of research frameworks and methods as we continue producing knowledge for addressing some of the most urgent issues in education: meeting the needs of multicentric student populations in an increasingly globalizing world.

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SUNITI SHARMA is an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia. She teaches ESL pedagogy, instructional techniques for social studies and English Language Arts, and assessment and evaluation. Her research interests focus on the education of at-risk youth, preparing teachers with multicultural competencies and international field experiences for preservice teachers. Her autoethnographic research has been published as an authored book, *Girls Behind Bars: Reclaiming Education in Transformative Spaces* (2013). She has also co-edited a book, *Internationalizing Teacher Education for Social Justice: Theory, Research and Practice* (2014); and published in peer reviewed education journals such as *Teachers College Record*, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, and *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. Her current research projects include, a) a study of the literacy practices of youth in the public school and juvenile justice system; and, b) a study of how preservice teachers engage with social justice. Sharma's current writing projects include a co-edited book *Internationalizing Teaching and Teacher Education for Equity: Engaging Alternative Knowledges across Ideological Borders* (Information Age Publishing) and an authored book, *Fractured Epistemologies: Divergent Research Methods in Education* (Sense Publishers).