Intergroup Cultural Adoption: When Is It Appropriation?

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Abstract

In some circumstances, attempting to celebrate diversity and difference can inadvertently cause harm. Cultural appropriation is one such form of harmful cultural adoption that involves "taking—from a culture that is not one's own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge" (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p. 1). However, there are a range of competing definitions and perspectives on cultural appropriation. In the present review, we give an overview of psychological and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives and highlight empirical work that supports or conflicts with these perspectives. To better clarify the components that influence perceptions of an act as appropriative versus benign adoption, we discuss how the form of cultural approaching (i.e., how someone engages) and the identities involved (i.e., who engages) impact whether a behavior is appropriative or not. Finally, we discuss the underlying psychological mechanisms that have the potential to explain the harms of cultural appropriation for minoritized groups.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, cultural exchange, multiculturalism, intergroup relations, culture, race/ethnicity

Intergroup Cultural Adoption: When Is It Appropriation?

In diverse societies, the general public increasingly emphasizes the importance of celebrating diversity and difference (Kirby, Russell Pascual, et al., 2023; Russell Pascual et al., 2024). People report trying the cuisines of other cultures, engaging in cultural activities, and adapting their language and clothing to other racial and cultural groups (Haugen & Kunst, 2017). In the psychological literature, these forms of cultural adoption or adaptation have most often been examined when minoritized cultural groups adopt or assimilate to dominant group culture (Berry, 2001; Kunst et al., 2021; but see Lefringhausen & Marshall, 2016). Dominant or powerful cultural groups can also adopt minoritized cultural practices, however. These behaviors sometimes elicit concerns about cultural appropriation, or "the taking—from a culture that is not one's own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge" (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p. 1).

Crucially, appropriation theorists have made a distinction between cultures merely borrowing from each other (termed *benign cultural adoption* in this review) and between taking a cultural practice for one's own purposes, often without permission or reciprocity (Lenard & Balint, 2020; Rogers, 2006). However, there are a range of competing definitions and perspectives on cultural appropriation – in the present review, we give an overview of psychological and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives and highlight empirical work that supports or conflicts with these perspectives. We use the term *cultural approaching* as an umbrella term to reflect any form of interaction with or use of an outgroup cultural practice. We use the term cultural adoption to reflect more active taking of another cultural group's product (see Figure 1 for a breakdown). Within this, we distinguish between different forms of adoption that are and are not likely to be labeled as appropriative. Ultimately, we provide information to help scholars consider when cultural approaching might be appropriative and when it may reflect non-appropriative forms of cultural

engagement. We do not intend to advance any single theoretical perspective, but to highlight the range of current perspectives and what evidence exists (or not) for those perspectives. Nonetheless, we provide a tentative framework—incorporating common perspectives on appropriation—that scholars could consider for distinguishing different forms of cultural approaching (Figure 1). Because the majority of empirical research has been conducted from a US perspective, much of what we cover will also focus on that context.

What Is Cultural Appropriation?

In 1948, a struggling hamburger stand owner in California began noticing long lines of people flowing out of the cafe across the street from his stand. He began eating there, and the owners eventually taught him their signature taco recipe. The man then used this recipe to open his own taco restaurant across the street. In 2023, his taco restaurant has become infinitely successful and has over 7,000 locations (Kautz, 2023)—the person was Glenn Bell (a White American man), and the restaurant was Taco Bell (Farley, 2021; Renee, 2022). The original taco cafe, Mitla Café—owned by Mexican immigrants, Lucia Rodriguez and Vincente Montanõ—still only has a single location.

As exemplified by this profit imbalance, cultural appropriation can have profound consequences for people from minoritized cultures (Fryberg et al., 2008; Kautz, 2023; Mosley & Biernat, 2021). At the extreme, dominant groups profit from minoritized groups' practices and ideas, sometimes erasing the originating culture. Dominant group members may even fully take on the identity of minoritized groups. For example, in 2015, Rachel Dolezal was infamously "outed" as a White woman who had been actively passing herself as Black American for several years (Johnson et al., 2015). Everyday instances of cultural appropriation can be less extreme (and more ambiguous), however, such as the increased presence of straight, cisgender people at

Pride and other LGBTQ+ events. Although these latter behaviors can reflect mere allyship or benign forms of cultural adoption, people may perceive them as more appropriative when dominant group members feel a strong sense of entitlement to these cultural celebrations, allowing their presence and voices to dominate LGBTQ+ spaces. Relatedly, although cultural appropriation is most often discussed as a phenomenon rooted in nationality, race, and ethnicity, many identity groups have a sense of culture, or shared norms, belief systems, and experiences— like the LGBTQ+ community—and may feel group-level ownership over their practices.

Although all acts of cultural appropriation involve *taking ownership* of cultural elements that are not one's own, these elements can take diverse forms. For example, three types of cultural appropriation have been identified in the arts (Young, 2010): object appropriation, content appropriation, and subject appropriation. Object appropriation occurs when outsiders take tangible cultural artifacts, such as land, human remains, or artworks. For example, the presence of non-Western artifacts in Western museums, often acquired through colonization or war, exemplifies object appropriation (Sevencan, 2016). Content appropriation involves the use or adaptation of intangible cultural elements, such as music styles or motifs, by outsiders. An example is the appropriation of Indigenous mascots for team names. Subject appropriation refers to outsiders representing a cultural group's experiences, such as writing books or making films about them, without being part of that culture.

This demonstrates the wide range of actions that may be appropriative. Empirical research has yet to establish a clear boundary between what constitutes cultural approaching and adoption versus appropriation, however. Ambiguity seems to exist in public discourse as well. For example, people accused of appropriation often attempt to reframe actions as mere cultural

appreciation and exchange, even when those actions are perceived as appropriative by the target

cultural group (McDermott, 2021; also see Mosley, 2025).

Despite ambiguity about the definition of appropriation, scholars have theorized

extensively about it. Lenard and Balint (2020) have argued that there are four necessary

conditions for an act to be appropriative: (a) A cultural practice or symbol must be taken, (b) The

taken element must hold significant meaning for the source culture, (c) The element must be

taken knowingly or with culpable ignorance, and (d) The cultural element must be contested or

claimed by those being appropriated. Taking is an active process, so merely being exposed to a

cultural practice would not constitute appropriation (as demonstrated in Figure 1; Rogers, 2006).

These requirements have not been tested empirically, but some may appear self-evident

and uncontroversial (e.g., the requirement that something is taken). Others are more

controversial. For instance, the notion that an element must be taken knowingly or with culpable

ignorance conflicts with most scholarly perspectives focusing on the impact of cultural

appropriation, rather than on intent. In other words, it is possible to appropriate without

awareness.

Nonetheless, these requirements provide a useful starting point to help differentiate

behaviors that may be similar to appropriation, but reflect a distinct behavior. For example,

whitewashing in film (i.e., when a minority character is instead played by a white actor) involves

physically encompassing a role that would normally be a minoritized identity (Nishime, 2017).

No cultural product is being taken, however, except in the case where a minoritized writer's

cultural perspective is distorted. Therefore, the act of transforming the character into a white one

is similar to appropriation in the sense that it erases Black people or Black culture. But at its

core, it may reflect discrimination (i.e., passing over a minoritized actor who would be the best

fit) rather than a negative form of cultural adoption. By contrast, this same behavior may be appropriative if a white actor plays the character *as a Black character* (i.e., Blackface; see example in Mosley & Biernat, 2021).

According to Lenard and Balint (2020), two other types of behaviors involve cultural approaching and wrongdoing, yet do *not* constitute cultural appropriation. The first one, cultural offense, refers to insulting an outgroup's culture. Because insulting or mocking a culture does not necessarily involve *taking*, it also does not meet the criteria for cultural appropriation (Lenard & Balint, 2020). Accordingly, it may be important to disentangle the desire to take ownership of a cultural practice from mocking another culture, as mocking likely has different motivations than cultural adoption (see Burns et al., 2023). Mocking may also be a version of distancing from a culture, rather than the approaching that happens when taking from a culture. Another form of cultural wrongdoing is cultural misrepresentation, according to Lenard and Balint (2020). It describes the act of depicting a culture in a misleading way, often stereotyping and oversimplifying the culture. For example, contemporary Cinco de Mayo celebrations may be seen as a misrepresentation of Mexican culture, reducing it to sombreros, and overlooking the complexity of the culture.

Although cultural offense and misrepresentation can be distinct from appropriation (Lenard & Balint, 2020), we argue that they can also co-occur. A framework where offense and misrepresentation are mutually exclusive from appropriation may not reflect the real world, where a wide range of actions are labeled as appropriative, with varying levels of harm and offense. For example, Lenard and Balint (2020) argue that Blackface is not appropriative because it does not involve taking a cultural practice; instead, it promotes an offensive caricature

of a group. Black Americans consider Blackface appropriative,[1] however (Mosley & Biernat, 2021), suggesting that a physical embodiment of a cultural group may also be appropriative and that the offense may inform the decision to label it as appropriative.

Psychologically, it is important to distinguish reactions to cultural adoption that are based on the offensive or racist nature of that action from those that are based on the appropriative nature of the action (if possible). But this raises the possibility that a behavior can be (a) racist and appropriative (e.g., Blackface), (b) only racist (e.g., making a joke that mocks an outgroup culture), (c) only or primarily appropriative (e.g., an outgroup member creating rap music), (d) neither racist nor appropriative (i.e., benign cultural exposure, such as going to an outgroup cultural fair). Labeling behavior "a" as offensive and not appropriative, rather than as both, creates murkiness about the core psychological components of appropriation, given that some instances of cultural offense and misrepresentation also involve taking from outgroup culture. In empirical research, harm to the source community is a crucial facet that determines the extent to which people label a behavior as appropriative (Mosley, Heiphetz, et al., 2023).

Because of the nature of power relations—discussed in the sections below—it would also be valid to argue the opposite: Any appropriative act is also an inherently racist or prejudiced act (i.e., behavior "c" above is invalid). In other words, we currently argue that racism and appropriation can co-occur, but other scholars might argue that racism and appropriation *always* co-occur by definition. For better conceptual clarity, it would be fruitful to establish whether this is the case empirically (e.g., are there actions that marginalized racial groups label appropriative, but not racist?). To better clarify the components that influence perceptions of an act as

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[1] Mosley and Biernat (2021) did not directly test if participants significantly agree with the notion that Blackface is appropriative. However, the mean rating of appropriation fell above the midpoint for this scenario, and Black Americans consider scenarios such as Blackface more appropriative than do White Americans.

appropriative versus benign adoption, in the next sections, we will discuss how the identities involved (i.e., who engages) and the form of cultural approaching (i.e., how someone engages) impact whether a behavior is appropriative or not.

    The Role of Identity in Definitions of Appropriation. Social discourse on cultural appropriation largely centers around dominant group members taking cultural elements from marginalized groups (e.g., Buescher & Ono, 1996). This is consistent with the arguments of many scholars. Rogers (2006) divides cultural appropriation into four categories: Cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and transculturation. Cultural exchange occurs when different cultures share symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, or technologies on relatively equal terms. Cultural dominance is when a dominant culture imposes its elements on a subordinated culture, sometimes leading the subordinated group to adopt these elements as a form of resistance. Cultural exploitation refers to instances where a dominant culture takes aspects of a marginalized culture without substantive reciprocity, consent, or compensation – this is the form most commonly labeled as appropriation in the critical studies literature (Rogers, 2006) and by the general public in empirical research (Katzarska-Miller et al., 2020). Lastly, transculturation describes the blending of cultural elements from multiple sources to the extent that pinpointing a single origin becomes difficult, often emerging through globalization and transnational capitalism, resulting in hybrid forms of culture.

    This typology suggests that the impact of cultural appropriation is primarily determined by social context rather than individual intent (Rogers, 2006)—a perspective that is common among appropriation scholars, but that conflicts with perspectives that define appropriation as requiring awareness on the part of the appropriator (Lenard & Balint, 2020). That is, group status and power dynamics shape perceptions of cultural appropriation. Philosopher Kwame Anthony

Appiah (2018) also emphasizes the importance of power inequities in the context of cultural interaction, even as he advocates for a transcultural or cosmopolitan approach. Specifically, cultural ownership claims oversimplify inherently fluid interactions between cultures, suggesting instead that the actual harms—exploitation, disrespect, or trivialization of sacred symbols—arise primarily from underlying power imbalances (Appiah, 2018). Thus, while Appiah's cosmopolitanism resists overly simplistic accusations of cultural appropriation, it nonetheless aligns with Rogers' (2006) typology by highlighting how unequal power dynamics shape whether cultural adoption becomes harmful.

Consistent with this, in empirical research, U.S. Americans in general are more likely to spontaneously define cultural appropriation as a dominant group taking from a minoritized group, rather than other configurations of identities (Katzarska-Miller et al., 2020). Even politically conservative U.S. Americans—who acknowledge appropriation less—label acts as appropriative more frequently if first they learn about historical power imbalances (Lin et al., 2023). Additionally, Black Americans label cultural adoption behaviors as more appropriative and harmful when a White American adopts Black culture than when a Black American adopts White culture (Mosley & Biernat, 2021). People from India respond more negatively to appropriative behaviors when they imagine their country as lower compared to higher status in the world (Finkelstein & Rios, 2022)—more directly highlighting the role of status and power in perceptions of appropriation.

Despite the clear centrality of power dynamics in perceptions of appropriation, it remains unclear whether appropriation is restricted to acts by a dominant group or whether any group can enact appropriation under certain circumstances. Lenard and Balint (2020) have argued that unequal power or status between two groups is an amplifier that exacerbates the harm of

culturally appropriative acts, rather than being an essential component of appropriation. This notion has not been directly tested in empirical research. However, Black Americans report similar amounts of negative emotion toward an Asian American who takes their cultural practice as compared to a White American (Kirby, Gündemir, et al., 2023). Given that Asian Americans are perceived as higher status than Black Americans (Zou & Cheryan, 2017), this finding does not refute the crucial role of status asymmetries. It suggests, however, that people with minoritized identities can also be perceived as appropriating, perhaps especially if that minoritized group has relatively higher power or status. Questions remain about the nuances of how power and intergroup relations play a role in cultural appropriation. Because many scholars have already highlighted the crucial role of power in cultural appropriation, we will not review it in further detail here. Instead, in the next section, we will focus on what components might be crucial for an act to be considered appropriative—a topic that may have even more open questions.

The Nature of Cultural Approaching

How someone engages with a culture also shapes whether the behavior is appropriative or not. Whether an act is harmful is one core predictor of appropriation judgments in the general public (Mosley et al., 2024). Specifically, U.S. Americans across racial groups are more likely to judge cultural taking as appropriative the more it is also judged as harmful to the source community. This does not necessarily suggest that a behavior *must* be particularly harmful or offensive to be appropriative, however. Some scholars have taken a broad definition of appropriation and consider most acts of cultural taking to be appropriative (Rogers, 2006), with some arguing that certain ways of appropriating merely *amplify the harm* of appropriation rather than being a core component that determines whether an act is appropriative (Lenard & Balint,

2020). Overall, whether harm is necessary for taking to be appropriative is an unanswered

empirical question. Because harm has been used both as a predictor of (Mosley, Heiphetz, et al.,

2023) and an outcome of appropriation (Lenard & Balint, 2020; Mosley, 2024; Mosley &

Biernat, 2021) across empirical work, a better understanding of its exact role in theoretical

models would be fruitful in further empirical and theoretical work. In other words, research

should distinguish whether harm is part of what makes something appropriation or is instead a

potential outcome of appropriation.

      Harm may also be so central to participant judgments of appropriation because it is a

broad measure that potentially encompasses other attributes that reflect the more specific harms,

such as financial exploitation. Scholars theorize that cultural appropriation causes harm to the

source community because it transforms cultural properties into commodities, often without

proper reciprocity and consent (Lalonde, 2021). Empirical findings confirm that exploitation is

key to participant judgments of appropriation. In a nationally representative U.S. sample, when

asked to define cultural appropriation, 42.1% of respondents explicitly mention exploitation,[2]

broadly defined as using another culture for personal gain (Lin et al., 2024). Similarly, both

White and Black participants perceive cultural adoption as more appropriative when the actor

profits financially (Mosley et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Among Black participants, financial

profit predicts higher perceptions of cultural appropriation, but not higher perceptions of racism

(Zhang et al., 2025), suggesting that it may uniquely contribute to an understanding of

appropriation.

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[2] The term cultural exploitation has been used by Rogers (2006) to specific cultural adoption with unequal power relations. We instead use exploitation here to denote instances of cultural adoption where a group's practice is used for financial profit or similar goals. We make this distinction in order to separate the identity of the appropriator from the exact nature of the behavior. Nonetheless, these are difficult components to fully disentangle because more powerful groups are more likely to have the capacity to successfully exploit less powerful groups.

Scholars have also argued that exploitation may serve as an "amplifier" of cultural appropriation, however (Lenard & Balint, 2020). In other words, exploitation is not necessary for an act to be considered appropriative, but it can make the act more harmful. Exploitative appropriation can be particularly egregious because it can take visibility and profit away from the originating culture, often giving it to someone from a less marginalized culture. Empirical research also does not have a clear answer as to whether exploitation is a core component of appropriation or an amplifier of its harm. However, a content analysis of news coverage on cultural appropriation reveals that most reported instances involve exploitative uses of culture (Lin et al., 2024; also see Toper, 2022). This could suggest that exploitation is an inherent part of appropriation, but it may instead suggest that it is a particularly harmful form and therefore most likely to be highlighted publicly. To better understand these questions, research will need to determine whether an act can simultaneously be viewed as appropriative but not as exploitative (e.g., financially unprofitable).

Other aspects of how people engage may also predict whether people consider cultural adoption to be appropriative. For example, scholars have argued that people can appropriate in ways that represent cultural degradation, which removes a cultural element from its native context and distorts its meaning and content (Rogers, 2006). Such cases often occur when minority cultural artifacts are absorbed into dominant mainstream culture. Similarly, people may appropriate in a way that denies the recognition of a cultural group (i.e., "nonrecognition"; Lalonde, 2021; also see Fryberg & Eason, 2017). Nonrecognition occurs when appropriative acts render a cultural group invisible and voiceless, such as using a cultural element without proper recognition of the originating culture. For example, in 2007, the fashion company Dior received positive attention for using Japanese fashion, such as kimonos, as inspiration for its new fashion

line (Maiorescu-Murphy, 2021). The lack of explicit acknowledgment rendered the originating culture voiceless and constituted a form of nonrecognition.

A related form of appropriation involves misrecognition. This is when the culture *is* seen and acknowledged, but it is also essentialized or stereotyped (Lalonde, 2021). This causes harm to the cultural group by contributing to pervasive social stereotypes. This form of appropriation maps onto our arguments above that an act can be both appropriative and racist (e.g., mocking a culture) and may elicit distinct psychological reactions. Empirical research has yet to clearly test the distinct reactions to these forms of appropriation; however, the use of Native mascots—one form of cultural misrecognition—leads Native Americans to experience lower self-worth and more restricted self-concepts (see Fryberg et al., 2008). Black Americans also perceive cultural adoption as more appropriative when it misrepresents or distorts their culture (Zhang et al., 2025).

Beyond the theoretical frameworks covered, empirical research also shows additional nuance in how appropriation may be defined by perceivers. When asked to define the term "cultural appropriation," U.S. Americans most frequently mention disrespect as central to the definition (Lin et al., 2024). Misrecognition and nonrecognition may be some of the types of disrespect considered by participants, although this was not directly tested. Additionally, being invited to participate in a culture predicts lower likelihood of labeling a behavior as appropriative (Lin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). Finally, U.S. Americans across racial groups express stronger negative emotions and lower interest in purchasing from brands when the brand claims to improve the original cultural product (Lin et al., 2024). This final finding may confirm theoretical perspectives about degradation of cultural products.

In conclusion, *how* someone engages with a cultural practice affects the extent to which it is perceived as appropriative. While existing research has yet to fully disentangle the defining features of appropriation from factors that amplify its harm, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into the forms of cultural adoption that the public considers more appropriative. Future research could more clearly determine whether factors such as disrespect and harm are essential components that define appropriation or whether these are merely outcomes of appropriation. In the next section, we take a broader lens and consider the psychological mechanisms of cultural appropriation perceptions in more detail, which may help inform future attempts to define and theorize about appropriation.

Psychological Mechanisms and Impact on Marginalized Cultural Groups

We have discussed theorizing and findings relevant to cultural appropriation specifically, but the psychological literature suggests the possibility that cultural appropriation is a specific form of broader processes. People in general, including those from dominant groups, feel ownership over physical objects, spaces, hobbies, and many other entities (Beggan, 1992a, 1992b; Gelman et al., 2012). Psychological ownership can occur at the group level as well, with social groups having collective ownership over shared products (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2017). Consistent with this, people value shared products more than those not associated with their identity (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010). For example, Israeli people value physical spaces associated with important Israeli historical events more than spaces not associated with their collective cultural history (Ledgerwood et al., 2007).

People feel threatened when non-group members attempt to take their collectively owned products or objects (e.g., Nijs et al., 2022). For example, when Dutch adolescents imagine that a group of people is taking over their friend group's physical hang-out space, they experience

ownership threat compared to imagining that the group is uninterested in their space. Specifically, they express more concern about the space being taken from them, as well as interest in physically marking the space (e.g., a sign marking it as *their* space). In this sense, cultural appropriation may reflect a broad collective ownership reaction, but a specific instantiation where the dominant group or a more powerful group takes from a minoritized group (i.e., consistent with Rogers' (2006) distinction between cultural exchange and exploitation based on power differentials).

This collective ownership perspective would be consistent with a social identity framework for appropriation, where groups are concerned with us versus them boundaries and preserving positive perceptions and the dignity of their own ingroup (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, groups engage in behaviors that preserve the distinctiveness of their social identity (Gerard & Hoyt, 1974). Consistent with this notion, among Black Americans, learning about appropriation of their cultural practices increases concerns about distinctiveness (Mosley & Biernat, 2021). Additionally, creating concerns about their own racial group's distinctiveness leads White Americans to label behaviors as appropriative at a higher rate than they would otherwise. Thus, psychological reactions to cultural appropriation may be partially explained by concerns about preserving us versus them boundaries.

Recent research suggests that collective ownership threat and preserving us versus them boundaries may not be *sufficient* to understand the complexities of cultural appropriation, however (Kirby, Gündemir, et al., 2023). Specifically, the research varied the racial/ethnicidentity of a person appropriating Black American culture, with the reasoning that (a) similar reactions to appropriators of different racial groups would suggest that appropriation is driven by a relatively straightforward us versus them, or ownership threat, reaction, (b) a negative reaction only to White appropriators would suggest a "traditional oppressor" account, whereby appropriation is defined

by the dominant group taking from a minoritized group (consistent with some theoretical accounts of appropriation; Rogers, 2006), (c) more complexity in the reactions would suggest that a more nuanced understanding of intergroup hierarchies, shared experiences, and histories is essential to understanding cultural appropriation. Ultimately, findings were in line with the third perspective: Black Americans report more negative emotions toward White Americans than Latine Americans who appropriate their culture. Negative emotions toward Asian American appropriators are between that of White and Latine Americans, without significantly differing from either.

Nonetheless, these findings do not preclude the possibility that cultural appropriation still reflects a form of ownership threat, in addition to other psychological underpinnings. For example, if Black Americans express less distinctiveness threat in response to a Latina appropriator, this could reflect fewer concerns about the Latina actor infringing on distinctiveness (e.g., due to the relatively less power Latinas hold in U.S. society or believing that the Latina actor would respect and preserve the original cultural practice). In other words, cultural appropriation could be a form of ownership and distinctiveness threat that is responsive to erasure potential, a concern that shifts in magnitude when considering different historic relationships and power differentials. Although previous research instead suggests that more negative perceptions of White compared to Latina appropriators could be driven by weaker feelings of similarity with White people (Kirby, Gündemir, et al., 2023), similarity is a broad construct that may encompass a range of different forms of similarity, such as similar historical experiences. Additionally, some inconsistencies across those findings suggest that more research may be needed to clarify these relationships.

Because appropriation has been discussed as a way of re-enforcing unequal power dynamics (Buescher & Ono, 1996; Matthes, 2019), people may be especially sensitive to these ethnocultural boundaries being violated in the face of strong power differentials. One reason may

be because groups with higher power are more able to erase the originating culture or take credit

for a group's cultural practice – theoretical accounts of appropriation often discuss distortion of

the original cultural practice or erasure of the originating cultural group (Lalonde, 2021; Mosley,

2024, 2025; Rogers, 2006; Ziff & Rao, 1997). For example, rock and roll music originated in Black

American culture, but has become mainstream and "whitened," no longer associated with the

original culture (Rodriquez, 2006). In addition to concerns about distinctiveness, related concerns

about erasure and dehumanization are central in Native Americans' concerns about appropriation

(Dai et al., 2021; Eason et al., 2021; Fryberg et al., 2021; also see Lalonde, 2021).

This erasure is consistent with the notion that cultural appropriation may be a way of

enacting colorblind, or identity-blind, ideology. Identity-blindness is a broad ideology that

downplays the importance of group identities, particularly race, sometimes in order to deny

discrimination and inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Kirby et al., 2020; Wolsko et al., 2000; Zhang

& Kirby, 2024). White Americans are more likely to see Black Americans' cultural adoption as

more appropriative than White Americans' same actions if they are higher in white identification

and assimilationism—ideologies that may reflect a colorblind worldview (Mosley, Biernat, et al.,

2023). Given that cultural appropriation is a form of erasure of minoritized groups, identity-blind

ideology may play a key role in motivations to appropriate, as well as in reactions to appropriation.

A better understanding of both the psychological mechanisms explaining the harms of cultural

appropriation and of the motivation to appropriate will be crucial in future research.

Conclusion

Despite interest in fostering harmonious, multicultural societies, intergroup tensions and

misunderstandings persist, particularly between dominant group and minoritized group members.

Most interdisciplinary theorizing about cultural appropriation has provided a rich historical and

critical lens to understanding these acts. Bringing a psychological lens to cultural appropriation

creates an additional opportunity to understand the broader explanatory mechanisms that explain perceptions of appropriation. This review highlighted theoretical and empirical insights into how people, particularly minoritized groups, perceive cultural appropriation and the psychological processes that underlie these judgments. Cultural appropriation is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both *who* adopts the culture and *how* they adopt. For example, factors such as financial exploitation, disrespect toward the culture, and (lack of) permission to engage with the culture predict higher perceptions of appropriation. People of color also show complex reactions to different outgroup members who appropriate, suggesting that sensitivity to group similarities, social hierarchies, and intergroup power may influence definitions of appropriation.

The existing research provides a strong foundation for beginning to understand cultural appropriation perceptions. Much of the research and theoretical perspectives currently focus on a US context, however. The limited empirical research with an international perspective (i.e., Indian people's perceptions of appropriation by Westerners) similarly shows that status is core to people's judgments of appropriation (Finkelstein & Rios, 2022). Thus, similar processes may exist in other contexts, although appropriated groups are likely to be sensitive to the specific nature of past oppression they have faced within and beyond their own country.

Additionally, questions remain about the core differences between appropriation and more benign cultural approaching and adoption. For example, acts that are more exploitative and harmful are rated as more appropriative (Mosley et al., 2024). However, that does not necessarily imply that financial exploitation is *necessary* for a minoritized group to view an act as appropriative. Similarly, some acts of adoption may not necessarily be considered appropriative. We encourage scholars to carefully examine the boundary conditions of appropriation perceptions, which will shed more light on the psychological mechanisms underlying the harms of

appropriation. It will also permit a better practical understanding of intergroup harms and how to engage with different identity groups productively.

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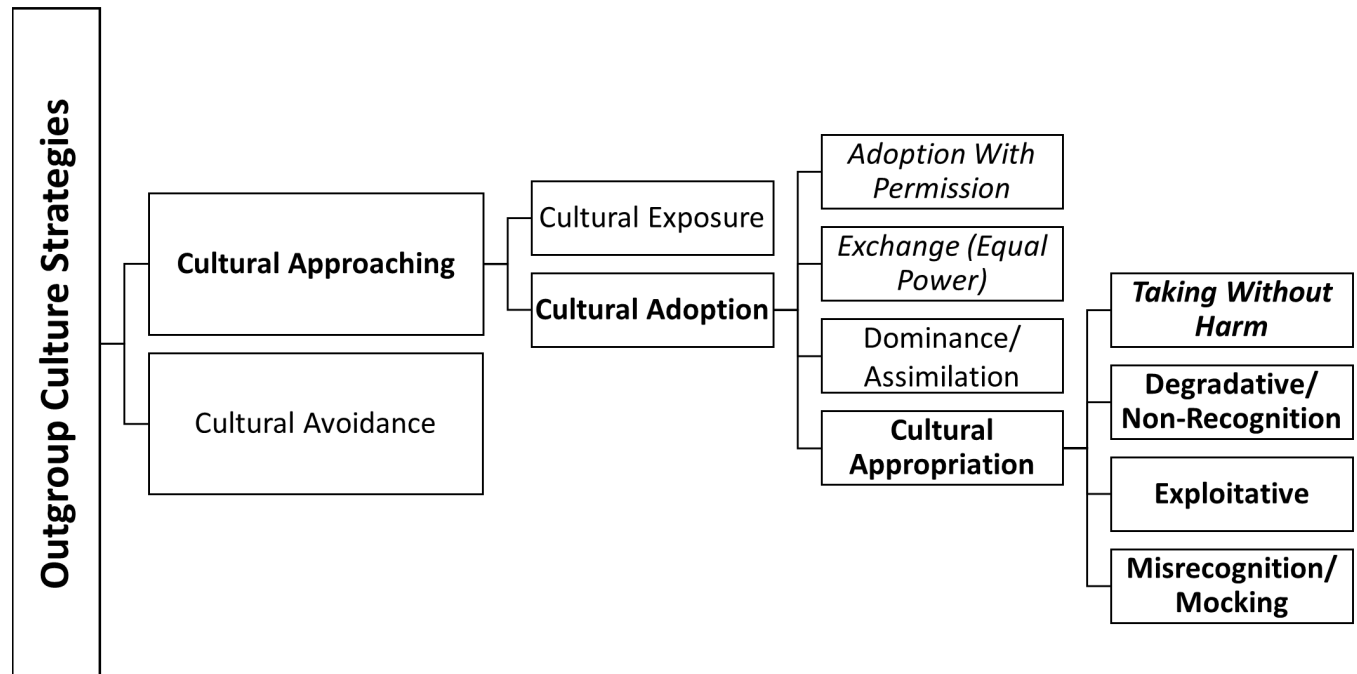*83*(5), 1732–1747. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01806.x

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Figure 1

Components of Cultural Approaching and Avoidance

Note. Some aspects of the figure are not discussed in detail in the text (e.g., cultural avoidance) because they are not central to our focus on cultural appropriation. However, we include a broader figure to provide a starting point for researchers to attempt to isolate different forms of cultural approaching. Bolded components highlight those that are directly relevant to appropriation. Italicized components reflect those that are particularly ambiguous in terms of where they should be categorized. For example, taking a cultural practice "without harm" is italicized because it is unclear whether it should be categorized as appropriative. Some scholarly perspectives suggest that any taking of outgroup minoritized culture is appropriative (e.g., a white person performing hip hop as a hobby, but without profit or clear degradation of the cultural practice), but this remains an empirical question. Additionally, it is unclear whether a cultural practice can ever be *taken* without causing some form of harm.