2014

Bicultural identity and international careers

Javier Agudo, London School of Economics and Political Science

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/javieragudo/10/
WEEK 7 Bicultural Identity and International Careers

The possibility of achieving a bicultural identity, that is, an individual successfully identifying with two cultures and internalizing the associated cultural schemas (Brannen and Thomas, 2010) has not always been supported. Two initial second-culture acquisition models (assimilation and acculturation), negated the possibility of successfully combining origin and host cultures (LaFromboise et al, 1993). These approaches inevitably implied the marginalization of the individuals that retained their cultures or the elimination of the minority culture. To overcome these negative effects, three integrative models (multiculturalism, alternation and fusion) were conceived and have been developed over the years.

The efforts by Berry (1997), have allowed the development of a multicultural approach that reconciles the two culture framework (original/minority culture vs. host/dominant culture). According to Berry, there is a tension between two elements in the acculturation process: the degree to which the identification with the culture of origin is preserved and the extent to which an individual identifies with the new dominant culture. Four distinct outcomes might emerge from this conflict: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Berry argues that integration is the most desirable outcome, as it enables cultural diversity and fosters tolerance and acceptance. Although encouraging, the weakness of Berry’s multicultural acculturation model is that it does not enter into the internal psychological processes that explain how individuals might integrate both cultures.
To understand how an individual manages two cultures at the same time, LaFromboise et al (1993) argue that it is necessary to adopt an alternation model perspective. They introduce the concept of “bicultural competence”: an individual is biculturally competent when feeling comfortable with two cultures both from an identification and a behavioral perspective. Thus, to be biculturally competent, an individual must develop on one hand a cultural identity in accordance with the two cultures (through knowledge of values and positive attitudes towards members of the two cultures) and in the other hand a sense of self-sufficiency or *bicultural efficacy* (through communication ability and role repertoire). The strength of LaFromboise and her colleagues’ approach is that they establish a series of factors that help an individual to become biculturally competent. However, it can be noted that they focus on individual skills that can be acquired. Personality antecedents are not taken into consideration, as well as the deep cognitive processes that allow an individual to switch from one cultural framework to another.

The idea of going deeper into psychological identity processes is suggested by Stryker & Burke’s (2000) “identity theory” examination. According to them, identity, that is the meanings that persons attach to the roles they perform, must integrate socio-structural factors that shape social behavior with internal self-processes that express the identities. From the biculturalism perspective, dealing with multiple conflicting identities might trigger considerable stress for the individual. In order to further study this conflict, they suggest that priming procedures could be used to measure the salience of identities. This is the procedure used by Hong et al (2000), who establish the concept of “cultural frame switching”. The process, similar to code-switching theories in bilingualism, explains how individuals are able to switch between different cultural frames in response to cues in the social environment. Hong et al research showed that is
possible to undertake experimental studies on cultural issues. However, their study did not analyze how individuals with different levels of bicultural abilities might differ in their response to stimuli.

To overcome this limitation, Benet-Martinez et al (2002), apply the framing technique to analyze disparities in frame switching capabilities between individuals with different levels of bicultural integration. “Bicultural Identity Integration” (BII) is defined as the perception that bicultural individuals have on the compatibility or opposition of their cultural identities. In the experiment, high BII responded in a cultural consistent way with the priming icons, while low BII responded in an oppositional way. Thus, one can conclude that the possible outcomes of acculturation proposed by Berry might be influenced by the individual’s internal processes. The BII construct has also allowed researchers (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005) to establish personality and acculturation antecedents that facilitate or obstruct bicultural integration. To understand the effects of antecedents, first the authors show that BII can be divided in two independent psychological constructs: cultural distance (a feeling of how different two cultures are) and cultural conflict (how irreconcilable they are). They conclude that from the personality point of view, low openness is associated with higher cultural distance, and neuroticism with higher cultural conflict. From the acculturation perspective, lower bicultural competence and higher cultural isolation are correlated with cultural distance, while linguistic limitations and intercultural relations problems correlate with cultural conflict. Hence, it is possible for an individual to feel large cultural distance but no cultural conflict, which further reinforces the idea that cultural integration is highly dependent on individual internal processes. While the work of Benet-Martinez and colleagues provide valuable insight in how the acculturation occurs at the psychological level, the implications are limited by the experimental nature of the
“frame switching” study. As it would be argued below, cultural primes are rarely isolated in real life, were individuals are exposed to simultaneous cues from different cultures.

A non-experimental approach in the psychological dynamics of alternation between cultures has been undertaken by Molinsky (2013). In a longitudinal study, he distinguished two methods of “cultural retooling” (integrative and instrumental) to face cultural conflict. In the same vein as Berry, Molinsky considers that, in the long term, only an integrative approach would allow the development of an authentic bicultural identity. The longitudinal character of Molinsky’s research makes it very valuable, because it shows how individuals pass through different phases in the process (conflict, ambivalence and authenticity) and how they progress, regress or stagnate between them. However, an important limitation is the role of language in the transformation process, as native-level English speakers achieved consistently a higher progress. As the author recognizes, the influence of language must be further studied, as it might exacerbate the challenges of cultural retooling.

Up to this point, the focus has been on models that deal with conflicts between two separate and distinct cultures. However, as argued by early proponents of “fusion models”, the effects of interaction between cultures must not be neglected. A few decades ago, real life examples of “melting pots” were too limited to analyze their effects on second-culture acquisition processes (LaFromboise et al, 1993). However, it could be argued that the acceleration of globalization in the recent years is making the issue of fusion an emerging topic. Firstly, traditional bicultural models might be limited in the context of globalization because a global culture has emerged (Arnett, 2002). Secondly, this global culture facilitates the emergence of a cosmopolitan identity, based on a multicultural core, which transcends biculturalism (Lee, 2013). New groups of
multicultural individuals are emerging, such as “global nomads” or cosmopolitan elites, which enrich the varieties of cultural integration. As a consequence, researchers are not looking just at the problem of minority integration but at other issues such as management of international careers, especially at the pressing issue of repatriate retention. Research shows that multinational companies are struggling to keep in house highly trained individuals who return from overseas assignments (Kraimer et al, 2012). After enjoying high levels of responsibility and creating new social networks overseas, individuals develop an “International Employee Identity” that cannot be matched with what the home organization has to offer. Furthermore, Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) argue that the organization cannot solve the problem simply by offering repatriates higher financial benefits or responsibilities. In many cases, the individuals themselves proactively look for new challenges and career opportunities elsewhere to satisfy their aspirations. This has important implications, as it suggests that companies should focus on mechanisms to repatriate knowledge rather than individuals or resort to alternatives such as hiring competitor’s repatriates.

This new body of research is of outmost importance because it studies new phenomena that may become the norm in the near future. While traditionally migratory movements were leaded by low skilled workers, it is foreseeable that in the future mobility will be more prevalent between high educated workers. Low-skilled jobs would be progressively substituted by machinery, while high-added value positions will require human capital from all over the globe. Despite its relevance, it can be argued that current research on cosmopolitanism and international career management is limited because it is generally based on cross-sectional surveys. In the case of cosmopolitanism, further experimental research would be needed to measure the actual multicultural ability of the different groups, particularly the “cosmopolitan citizens”
(Lee, 2013) that view themselves as cosmopolitans but have no multicultural demographic characteristics. In the case of repatriates, Kraimer et al (2012) affirm that longitudinal studies would be needed to verify that employees’ accounts of their overseas experiences are accurate.

**Future research**

A new idea for future research will be proposed to tackle two outstanding issues: firstly the experimental limitations of priming methods of research and secondly the lack of research in the role of socio-economic status in bicultural identity integration.

As mentioned before, frame switching research has been conducted using primes (American and Chinese iconic images) in two separate groups (plus a control group with no priming). Individuals were randomly assigned to each group, one group being subject to American primes and the other to Chinese primes (Hong et al, 2000; Benet-Martinez et al, 2002). The problem is that, in real life, there could be many situations were both cultural constructs could be invoked simultaneously from social cues. For example, one can imagine that a Mexican teen living in America could behave accordingly with Mexican values at home, and switch to the American framework at high school. However, often what happens is that both cultural frameworks mix, for instance if the Mexican teen decides to invite some American classmates home for dinner. It could be argued that these situations could lead to high levels of discomfort because, as Hong et al (2000) mention, while conflicting constructs can be simultaneously possessed by an individual, they cannot simultaneously guide cognition.

A possible approach to take the aforementioned issue into consideration would be to modify the priming experiment so that individuals are exposed to simultaneous cues from conflicting cultures. That is, American primes could be combined with
Chinese primes at different intensities. For instance larger and smaller images from one or the other culture could be used, or even images from one culture could be combined with music from the other culture. These variations could be applied to individuals with different levels of BII to analyze their response. This experiment would allow to further explore the psychological processes that individuals undergo in negotiating cultural identities. As Stryker and Burke (2000) affirmed, emotional outbursts during social interaction may be very helpful for analyzing possible conflicts between identities.

Finally, the priming experiment should be completed by introducing socio-economic status as a moderator. According to LaFromboise et al (1993) the role of socio-economic status has been relatively unexplored in acculturation studies. As discussed, modern patterns of globalization are creating new social groups (global nomads, highly skilled international professionals) that do not respond to the typical profile of minority belonging biculturals. These individuals might not suffer the same level of cultural conflict in the host countries, as they might feel “above” cultural issues. A measure of socio-economic status could be average annual income. It could be hypothesized that the response of these individuals would vary compared to individuals with lower socio-economic status but similar levels of BII. For instance, low BII but high economic status individuals might not respond in such an oppositional way to social cues from the conflicting culture. This research would allow to further categorize new emerging groups of biculturals and to better understand the psychological processes that lead to integration or marginalization in modern societies.

Word count: 1952
References

Arnett, J. J. (2002). 'The psychology of globalization'. American Psychologist, 57(10), 774-783.


