Brief report

Bicultural identities: The interface of cultural, personality, and socio-cognitive processes

Jana Haritatos and Verónica Benet-Martínez *

Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

Abstract

This paper presents recent work examining the meaning and impact of individual variations in the way bicultural individuals organize their two cultural identities, a construct that we call Bicultural Identity Integration (BII). While biculturals high on BII describe their two cultural identities as ‘compatible’ (fluid and complementary), biculturals low on BII experience them as largely ‘oppositional’ (i.e., conflicting and disparate). We first report experimental evidence for how variations in BII moderate biculturals’ socio-cognitive behavior, specifically, the way in which bicultural individuals process cultural knowledge and use it to interpret social behavior. We then report structural equation modeling findings that elucidate some important personality, contextual, and performance predictors of BII. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of how the study of bicultural identities provides an ideal ground for the integration of cultural and personality psychology.

© 2002 Published by Elsevier Science (USA).

1. Introduction

“Being ‘bicultural’ makes me feel special and confused. Special because it adds to my identity: I enjoy my Indian culture, I feel that it is rich in tradition, mo-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jharitat@umich.edu (J. Haritatos), veronica@umich.edu (V. Benet-Martínez).

0092-6566/02/$ - see front matter © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science (USA).

PII: S0092-6566(02)00510-X
rality, and beauty; Confused because I have been in many situations where I feel being both cultures is not an option. My cultures have very different views on things like dating and marriage. I feel like you have to choose one or the other.”

19-year-old 2nd generation Indian-American (source: Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2002)

A large portion of the work done in cross-cultural and cultural psychology has focused on cross-cultural comparisons, seeking to identify differences between distinct (and supposedly homogeneous) cultural groups on a particular variable or construct. However, in today’s exceedingly global world, it is increasingly common for individuals to have internalized more than one culture, speak multiple languages, live in culturally mixed environments, and maintain transnational ties. In short, there is an increasing need for psychological work on the experiences of multi-cultural or bicultural individuals. At the same time, the study of biculturalism is relatively new and there is little consensus among researchers about how bicultural identities are cognitively and interpersonally negotiated, and what impact this process has on individuals’ lives (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). For instance, although some studies suggest that biculturalism brings positive outcomes for the individual (e.g., Lang, Munoz, Bernal, & Sorenson, 1982; Szapocznik & Kur-tines, 1980), others indicate that this type of identity is often filled with contradiction, tension, and social strain (e.g., Lee & Cochran, 1988; Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). One possible reason behind these mixed reports may be the lack of consensus among researchers about how to conceptualize and measure biculturalism. However, these contradictory findings may also reflect unrecognized complexity and variation in the way bicultural individuals experience and organize their cultural identities, variations that themselves may be associated with positive or negative affective experiences.

As the opening quote illustrates, biculturalism can involve feelings of pride, uniqueness, and a rich sense of community and history, while also bringing identity confusion, dual expectations, and value clashes. In this paper we show that, far from falling into simple categories, bicultural individuals differ considerably in the way they subjectively organize their dual cultural orientations, and that these variations are associated with different patterns of contextual, personality, and performance variables. We first introduce the construct of Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) as a framework for organizing and understanding individual differences in the way biculturals perceive the intersection between their mainstream and ethnic cultures. We then report experimental and structural equation modeling findings that elucidate the role of BII in the acculturation process, as well as some of BII’s psychosocial antecedents.
2. Bicultural identity integration (BII)

Traditionally, the acculturation literature has failed to recognize that while a person may desire to maintain positive ties with both cultures (i.e., may support an ‘integrative’ or bicultural acculturation strategy; Berry & Sam, 1996), particular psychosocial pressures (e.g., national/regional assimilationist vs multi-culturalist policies, racial/cultural make-up of one’s living community, personal experiences of discrimination) and individual variables (e.g., personality dispositions, linguistic proficiency, etc.) may lead to significant variations in the process, meanings, and outcomes associated with this effort. Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, and Morris (in press) recently conducted a review of the limited (and mostly qualitative) literature on bicultural identity and introduced the construct of BII as a framework to organize the different meanings and experiences associated with being bicultural. Specifically, individuals high on BII perceive their cultural identities as generally compatible, tend to view themselves as part of a combined, or “third” emerging culture, and find it relatively easy to integrate both cultures into their everyday lives. Biculturals low on BII, on the other hand, report difficulty in incorporating both cultures into a cohesive sense of identity, tend to perceive the two cultures as highly distinct and oppositional, and frequently describe feeling as if they should just choose one culture over the other.

Recently, Benet-Martínez and her colleagues (Benet-Martínez et al., in press) have investigated the impact of BII on behaviors for which there is strong evidence of cultural effects, namely social attributions. This study and its conclusions are discussed next.


Extensive research has shown that Westerners are more inclined to explain social events in terms of internal, stable causes (e.g., traits, attitudes, etc.), whereas East Asians are more likely to explain such events in terms of external factors such as social roles, group pressures, and cultural expectations (Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). Recently Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martínez (2000) have extended this work to biculturals, demonstrating that Hong Kong and Chinese-American biculturals make characteristically Western attributions when shown, or “primed with” Western cultural cues, and characteristically East Asian attributions when primed with East Asian cues. This study provides compelling evidence that cultural meaning systems guide socio-cognitive processes, and that biculturals can move between different interpretative lenses rooted in their dual cultural backgrounds, a process that Hong and her colleagues call cultural frame-switching.
Given the previously discussed differences in bicultural identity, a natural next step was to explore whether individual differences in BII moderated the processes involved in cultural frame-switching. Using a priming methodology similar to that used in Hong et al.’s (2000) study, Benet-Martínez et al. (in press) conducted a series of three studies in which first-generation Chinese-American biculturals were randomly assigned to one of three priming conditions: an American condition which used American cultural icons as primes (e.g., pictures of the Statue of Liberty, Mickey Mouse, etc.); a Chinese condition which used Chinese cultural icons as primes (e.g., pictures of the Great Wall of China, Chinese dragon, etc.); or a neutral condition which used non-cultural primes (e.g., pictures of natural landscapes). Shortly after seeing these pictures, participants were shown an ambiguous social display of a single fish swimming in front of a group of fish, and asked to explain why the single fish and the group of fish were swimming apart—participants were asked to provide both open ended explanations and ratings on scales tapping internal and external attributions (e.g., internal: the one fish is swimming ahead because of some personal trait such as independence, personal objective, or leadership; external: the one fish is being chased, teased, or pressured by the others). Finally, participants’ degree of Bicultural Identity Integration was assessed with a preliminary, single-item scale developed for this study (Bicultural Identity Integration Scale-Pilot, BIIS-P; Benet-Martínez et al., in press).

Benet-Martínez and her colleagues predicted that biculturals high on BII, by virtue of being unconflicted about their two cultural orientations and seeing them in fluid, non-oppositional terms, would provide prime-consistent attributions to the ambiguous social display (i.e., give stronger internal attributions in the American condition and stronger external attributions in the Chinese condition). Biculturals low on BII, on the other hand, who perceive their two cultural orientations in opposition to each other, were expected to provide prime-inconsistent attributions to the social display (i.e., give stronger internal attributions in the Chinese condition and stronger external attributions in the American condition); in other words, low BIIs were expected to exhibit a contrast effect. In justifying this hypothesized pattern for low BIIs, Benet-Martínez et al. (in press) argued that the cultural conflict and opposition that underlies low BII leads to specific perceptual and cognitive processes (e.g., hyper-vigilance about cultural cues, seeing cultural cues as highly valenced) which themselves are commonly associated with reverse-priming or contrast effects (Stapel & Winkielman, 1998). Benet-Martínez et al.’s (in press) reasoning for the hypothesized contrast effect among low BIIs was also based on their review of the popular media and literature on topics such as immigration, cultural clash, and biculturalism (e.g., Chavez, 1994; Mehta, 1996; O’Hearn, 1998; Roth, 1969), where inner cultural conflict is often described as leading to behavioral and/or affective “reactance” against the cultural expectations embedded in particular situa-
tions (e.g., in Roth’s novel, the protagonist finds himself feeling and acting particularly Jewish when traveling to the Midwest, and feeling/acting conspicuously American when visiting Israel).

The findings from Benet-Martínez et al.’s (in press) research consistently supported the above hypotheses and showed that BII is a stable individual-difference moderator of the process of cultural frame-switching (see interaction residuals displayed in Figs. 1–3). Interestingly, the hypothesized trends for high and low BIIs were not apparent for neutral (non-cultural) primes, indicating that low BIIs reactance is specific to culture-laden situations.

The studies described above were useful in identifying BII as a key moderator of the acculturation process and raised interesting questions regarding the possible multi-dimensional nature of BII, the kinds of contextual and individual factors that predict variations in BII, and the possible impact of BII on overall adjustment. To address these issues, Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2002) conducted a series of studies that examined the structure, antecedents, and consequences of BII. This work, which relied on correlational and structural equation modeling methodology, is described in the next section.

4. BII: Components, dynamics, and psychosocial correlates

Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2002) studied five different bicultural samples varying in ethnic composition, professional/educational status, geographic location in the US, and generational status. Participants provided detailed demographic information on their familiarity and competence with both American and ethnic cultures (e.g., years lived in the US and other countries, linguistic proficiency, etc.), as well as self-reports on the following measures: acculturation attitudes (preference for integration, separation, assimilation, or marginalization strategies; Berry & Sam, 1996); identification with mainstream and ethnic culture; Big Five personality dimensions (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998); and overall adjustment (anxiety and depression), among others. Participants also completed new multi-item measures of BII and acculturation stress (the later tapped the following domains: discrimination, work and linguistic strains, conflict in intercultural relations, and cultural isolation) developed for the purposes of this study (see Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2002; for detailed information on these two measures).¹

¹Space limitations make it impossible for us to summarize all the findings obtained in this multi-study (which included five samples and three sets of path analyses); therefore, we limit our discussion to those results which seem to be of most relevance to personality psychology (Study 2 in Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2002), and omit a discussion of BII’s generational differences and links to anxiety and depression.
Factor analysis of the new BII measure yielded two orthogonal and reliable dimensions: cultural conflict (vs harmony) and cultural distance (vs blendedness), each representing different aspects of the dynamic intersection between mainstream and ethnic cultural identities in bicultural individuals. As the items defining each dimension in Table 1 reveal, cultural conflict captures the experience of feeling torn between two cultural orientations, and encompasses a more emotion-based, subjective element of bicultural identity dynamics than is typically described in the acculturation literature. Cultural distance, on the other hand, taps the perception of having non-overlapping, compartmentalized cultural identities. Interestingly, the psychometric independence of cultural conflict and distance suggests that BII is not a uniform and linear process where perceptions of clash and dissociation (vs harmony and overlap) with regard to one’s two cultures go hand-to-hand. Rather, this pattern suggests that a bicultural individual could perceive his/her ethnic and mainstream cultural orientations to be relatively dissociated but not feel that they clash with each other; or alternatively, subscribe to a combined or hyphenated identity but also feel that the two identities are somewhat conflictual.

Fig. 1 summarizes the main results from a series of path analyses conducted to explore the unique contribution of some of our acculturation (bicultural competence), personality (Big Five), and contextual (acculturation stress) variables in predicting BII. As the figure indicates, BII’s cultural

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cultural Distance</th>
<th>Cultural Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am simply a Chinese who lives in North America</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I keep Chinese and American cultures separate</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel Chinese-American</td>
<td>-.73</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel part of a combined culture</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am conflicted between the American and Chinese ways of doing things</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like someone moving between two cultures</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel caught between the Chinese and American cultures</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not feel trapped between the Chinese and American cultures</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Bicultural competence is a dummy variable differentiating between these two types of bicultural individuals: (1) those who were highly involved with both cultures (in terms of both linguistic proficiency and level of identification), and (2) those who were EITHER significantly more involved with one of the two cultures OR were involved with both cultures but only moderately so.
conflict and distance components have a unique pattern of antecedents, which helps explain why very different phenomenological experiences of bi-culturalism are possible. Cultural conflict is heightened by having an anxious disposition (high neuroticism), and three specific types of acculturative threats: discrimination, strained intercultural relations (e.g., being described by ethnic peers as being too American and vice versa), and linguistic concerns (e.g., being self-conscious about one's accent). Cultural distance, on the other hand, is heightened by having a close-minded disposition (i.e., low openness), low levels of bicultural competency, and two acculturative threats: linguistic concerns and living in an environment that is culturally limited, particularly with regard to one's ethnic group (i.e., feeling culturally isolated).

Several personality variables, most notably neuroticism and openness to experience, emerged as antecedents of BII's cultural distance and conflict, as

Fig. 1. Bicultural Identity Integration (BII): components (cultural distance and conflict) and antecedents (personality dispositions, acculturation orientation, and acculturation stressors); N = 133 first-generation Chinese-American biculturals; all path coefficients were significant at a p value of .05 or lower; numbers in parenthesis are path coefficients obtained when the Big Five personality dispositions were not included in the model. Fit statistics for the model: $\chi^2/df = 1.65$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .07 Source: adapted from Fig. 1 in Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2002).
well as other variables in the model. Overall, neuroticism and low openness appear to put bicultural individuals at risk of experiencing the negative aspects of acculturation. Neurotic biculturals (probably because of their higher levels of vulnerability, rumination, and emotional rigidity) were more likely to feel caught between their two cultural identities, and also more prone to experience stress in the linguistic and intercultural relations domains (experiences that, in turn, predicted conflict). Closed-minded biculturals, on the other hand, were more likely to see their identities as dissociated, and also more prone to experience linguistic stress and be less biculturally competent (variables that, in turn, predicted cultural distance). Perhaps the experiential rigidity of low openness makes biculturals both less willing to acknowledge the flexible boundaries between cultures and less ‘permeable’ to new cultural ideas and life styles, characteristics that, in turn, may lead to the belief that their two identities cannot come together (i.e., high cultural distance), as well as lower levels of bicultural competence.

The interpersonal traits of agreeableness and extraversion also played a role in the acculturation processes depicted in Fig. 1. Agreeable biculturals, probably because of their easy-going nature, were less likely to experience and/or report stress in their intercultural relationships. Extraverted individuals, perhaps because of their interpersonal resources and the gains associated with being sociable and outgoing, were less likely to feel strained in culturally isolated (i.e., non-multicultural) social environments. Lastly, conscientiousness had no effects in our model, a finding that suggests that this personality disposition does not play an important role in the present acculturation and identity processes. Overall, the pattern of relationships depicted in Fig. 1 highlights the complex, multi-dimensional nature of BII, and suggests that variations in this construct, far from being purely subjective identity representations, are psychologically meaningful experiences linked to specific dispositional factors and contextual pressures.

5. Conclusion

As cultural and cross-cultural psychology moves beyond a focus on documenting cultural differences toward an interest in how culture and the psyche mutually constitute each other (Markus & Kitayama, 1998), the need for complex and process-oriented studies that acknowledge the interplay between cultural, socio-cognitive, personality, and adjustment variables has become more critical. The present research applied such an integrative approach to the understanding of individual variations in bicultural identity integration or BII. We hope that this work has demonstrated the importance of studying biculturalism for the understanding of how culture (and multiple cultures) affects individual behaviors and adjustment outcomes. We also hope to raise a broader point about the need to integrate work on person-
ality and cultural psychology and move away from the idea that these two
disciplines represent independent forces on the individual. Rather, these dis-
ciplines can inform each other about the different ways in which individuals
construct meaningful identities as members of their (often complex) cultural,
national, and local communities.

References

Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2002). *Bicultural Identity Integration (BII): Components,
dynamics, and socio-personality correlates*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan,
submitted.

groups: Multitrait-multimethod analyses of the Big Five in Spanish and English. *Journal of
Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 729–750.

Cultural frame-switching in biculturals with ‘oppositional’ vs. ‘compatible’ cultural
identities. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

Kagitcibasi (Eds.), *Handbook of cross-cultural psychology: Social behavior and applications


dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition. *American Psychologist, 55*, 709–
720.

LaFromboise, T., Coleman, H., & Gerton, J. (1993). Psychological impact of biculturalism:

Lang, J., Munoz, R., Bernal, G., & Sorenson, J. (1982). Quality of life and psychological well-

Counseling, 22*, 202–211.


Mehta, B. (1996). Emigrants twice displaced: Race, color, and identity in Mira Nair’s
*Mississippi Masala*. In D. Bahri & M. Vasudeva (Eds.), *Between the lines: South Asians and


York: Pantheon Books.


target similarity, distinctness, and dimensional relevance. *Personality and Social Psychology
Bulletin, 24*, 634–646.

Cuban Americans. In A. M. Padilla (Ed.), *Psychological dimensions on the acculturation

Vivero, V. N., & Jenkins, S. R. (1999). Existential hazards of the multicultural individual:
Defining and understanding “cultural homelessness”. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority