Biculturalism, Team Performance, and Cultural-faultline Bridges ☆

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A B S T R A C T

This conceptual paper focuses on the relationship between biculturalism and team perfor-
mance. Building on Transactive Memory Theory, I argue that bicultural team members have
a latent potential to enhance the transactive memory systems and performance of their
teams. However, I propose that this potential is only fully realized when the characteristics
of the individual and team are synchronized. More specifically, I argue that biculturals may
have a different impact on culturally homogenous teams, culturally diverse teams, and teams
characterized by a deep cultural faultline, depending on whether the biculturals share neither,
one, or both of their cultures with other members of the team. In order to integrate these ideas,
I develop a dynamic, multi-level theoretical model that delineates the relationships in question.

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"It is possible and acceptable to participate in two different cultures… by alternating one's behavior according to the situation" (Matute-Bianchi, 1986: 89).

"… biculturals' greater levels of integrative complexity will lead them to have greater success in both creative and professional domains" (Tadmor et al., 2012: 523).

Bicultural individuals "will outperform their monoculturally competent peers" (La Fromboise et al., 1993: 409).
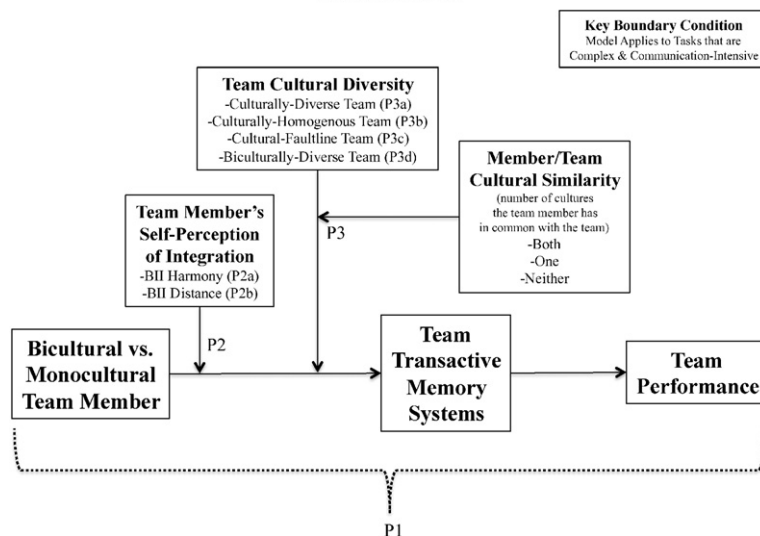
In an ever-globalizing world, bicultural individuals have become increasingly prevalent (Nguyen and Benet-Martínez, 2013; Haritatos and Benet-Martínez, 2002). Such persons have internalized or integrated two cultures (Berry, 1990, 2005; Furusawa and Brewster, 2015; Lakshman, 2013; Hong et al., in press). Cross-cultural management is one of the main realms where

biculturalism may have an important impact (e.g., Friedman and Liu, 2009; Kiesel and Haghirian, 2014; Lucke et al., 2014), because the rise in bicultural individuals has been echoed by a rise in bicultural employees (Fitzsimmons, 2013; Tadmor and Tetlock, 2006). Indeed, research has suggested that, "given the changing patterns in the world's workforce it is increasingly the case that more employees and managers are bicultural" (Brannen and Thomas, 2010: 5). This topic is particularly relevant for international business research and practice, as international companies are typically exposed to a number of cultures (Brannen and Peterson, 2009; Tung and Verbeke, 2010), and bicultural personnel may play an important role in such organizations (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015), as well as in cross-cultural teams within those organizations (Hong, 2010). Although statistics indicating the percentage of the global population and labor force that identify themselves as bicultural are scant, other data provides indirect evidence of their increased prevalence, especially in developed countries. For instance, about 14.3%, 20.7%, and 27.7% of the population of the United States, Canada, and Australia, respectively, is foreign born (United Nations, 2013). Similarly, in the United States, approximately a third of the population is made up of ethnic minorities and about one fifth uses a foreign language (i.e., not English) in their household (US Census Bureau, 2013).

However, the study of biculturalism in the international management literature has been relatively limited. Indeed, a search for the term "bicultural*" in all titles and keywords of academic articles across business fields generates 29 results (Business Source Complete, 2014). The biculturalism research that does exist in the business literature is spread quite thinly among several disciplines (e.g., accounting, management information systems, marketing, consumer behavior), which makes it harder to uncover overarching themes. Moreover, the extant literature on biculturalism has focused primarily on identifying and testing its characteristics and antecedents (e.g., Nguyen and Benet-Martínez, 2007, 2010), but less so its effects (e.g., Fitzsimmons, 2013; Lee, 2010). That is, it has sought to understand first and foremost what a bicultural is, how to measure biculturalism, and under what circumstances biculturalism is more likely to arise. These are important and necessary questions in order to allow research in the field to advance, but it is also important to understand the outcomes of biculturalism. More specifically for the purpose of this study, the relationship between biculturalism and team performance has been largely overlooked in both the team literature and the emerging biculturalism literature. Furthermore, although attention has been given to the study of the effects of cultural diversity in teams (Stahl et al., 2010), highlighting how "throughout the world, the workforce is becoming more diverse in cultural background" (Pieterse et al., 2013: 782), less attention has been given to how biculturals may affect the dynamics between team cultural diversity and performance. This is unfortunate because this topic is not only relevant for cross-cultural management scholars (e.g., Tung and Verbeke, 2010), but also for managers wishing to maximize the performance of teams in their organizations.

In this conceptual paper, I seek to address this gap in the extant literature by studying the impact of biculturalism on team performance. I do so by examining how this relationship is contingent on the interaction between the characteristics of the individual team member and those of the team. I argue that bicultural individuals have a latent potential that may allow them to contribute to the development of stronger transactive memory systems (TMS) (Lewis and Herndon, 2011; Ren and Argote, 2011; Wegner, 1987, 1995) and ultimately to enhance the efficacy and performance of their teams. This is because biculturals possess a more sizeable cognitive tool kit consisting of knowledge from two different cultural frameworks as to how to act and respond in different situations (Cheng et al., 2014; La Fromboise and Rowe, 1983; La Fromboise et al., 1993; Tadmor et al., 2009, 2012; Thomas et al., 2010). This in turn allows them to more easily relate to and communicate with other team members and to improve intra-team coordination and cooperation (c.f., Kozlowski and Klein, 2000; Stewart et al., 2005; Yuan et al., 2005). Exposure to multiple cultures also promotes creativity (Leung et al., 2008; Maddux and Galinsky, 2009; Tadmor et al., 2012), which can be

Fig. 1. Theoretical model.