Beyond the differences: Transcultural business research in a flattening world

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ABSTRACT

Whereas much previous culture-related business research has focused on cross-cultural differences among various groups, this special issue departs from this trajectory through a focus on transculturalism. It examines various aspects of transcultural issues in business research, that is, business-related concepts that *transcend* the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and other cultural dimensions. In this overview article, the authors reflect on the conceptual development of transculturalism, its application in business research and practices, and the papers in this special issue. Future directions in transcultural business research are provided.

Culture plays a crucial role in business practices. A large body of culture-related business research has to date focused on contrasting or mitigating cultural differences among various groups (Adamopoulos & Lonner, 2001). Many of these studies took a transfer-test-discovery approach (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992), which started with identifying a principle or model established in an originating (usually 'Western') culture, then testing it in different cultures, and finally discovering factors or mechanisms not previously observed in the originating culture. This special issue attempts to break free from this established trajectory. It deals with various aspects of transcultural issues in business research, that is, business-related concepts that *transcend* the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, religion and other cultural dimensions (Brink, 1999). A transcultural perspective views culture as fundamentally dynamic and contextual, but also as hybridized and deeply entangled, and seeks out commonality across culturally diverse groups.

1. Mono-, inter-, multi- and transculturalism

First coined in 1940 by Fernando Ortiz in his anthropological study of Cuba's colonized past, transculturalism was used to explain the formation of a new culture (Cuccioletta, 2002). Between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, African slaves were brought to Cuba to work on plantations (Barcia-Paz, 2012). Over time, the African slaves took on traditions of European plantation owners and, vice versa, such that the new resulting culture could no longer be explained by either group alone (Allolio-Nacke, 2014). This transmutation process of different cultures, through which a new common one is created (Allolio-Nacke, 2014; Cuccioletta, 2002; Onghena, 2008; Welsch, 1999), is what was originally referred to as transculturalism.

However, transculturalism did not gain widespread prominence until fairly recently (Allolio-Nacke, 2014). It resurfaced mainly in 1999 when philosopher Wolfgang Welsch introduced the term into both psychology and sociology discussions about interculturality and multiculturality (Allolio-Nacke, 2014). Interculturality and multiculturality are deemed as progression from the classic concept of single cultures (Welsch, 1999) or monoculture, which refer to a single homogenous culture that de-emphasizes diversity (Mejia & Navarro, 2008). Interculturality explains the existence of cultures as distinct spheres such that they will always clash unless ways are sought for them to exist together (Welsch, 1999), whereas multiculturality refers to the co-existence of different cultures within the same society or community (Turner, 1993). Yet, neither of them could explain the impact brought about by globalization. As a process that creates flows and connections that transcend territorial boundaries, continents and civilizations (McGrew, 1998), globalization has resulted in increased world complexity with cultures subject to the interpretation of one another (Welsch, 1999). This continual networking of different cultures has led to further interconnectedness and entanglement such that the hybridization of all different cultures involved characterizes emergent cultural aspects, a phenomenon aptly termed transculturalism (Welsch, 1999).

Transculturalism focuses on similarities that transcend all human cultures (Brink, 1999). It breaks down the rigid and naturalized features of culture so as to impart flexibility and new compatibility to elements of different cultures (Epstein, 2009). In contrast to a cross-cultural focus that is concerned with *differences* across cultures, transculturalism seeks out *commonalities* between culturally diverse groups, which are defined by not just nationality, or other geographical boundaries, but also boundaries of ethnicity, religion, subculture and/or social class. Transcultural experiences may occur at 'home' or afar. By emphasizing these commonalities and how they come about, transculturalism conveys not only a sense of dynamism but also, that of synthesis through hybridization.

2. Hybridization of cultures

Hybridization espouses the interaction of cultures and it features prominently in post-colonial studies, or the study of the cultural legacy of colonialism (Strongman, 2014). In his post-colonial work, Bhabha (1994) argues that racial identity does not always confirm to the then-prevailing binary perspective of the 'oriental world' (i.e. the colonized culture) versus the 'western world' (i.e. the colonizer). According to this binary perspective, 'orientalism' is explained as a "western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority" (Said, 1978, p. 3) over 'oriental' or other colonized cultures. However, such a perspective masks the hybrid nature of both the colonial encounter as well as post-colonial conditions (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006). Instead, Bhabha posits that hybridization occurs in a "third space which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211) through the fusion and mutual effects of the colonized and colonizers (Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006). This third space thus supersedes the constituent histories but continues to bear traces of feelings and practices that it informs (Rutherford, 1990).

Cultural hybridity as proposed by Bhabha's body of work is noteworthy in suggesting that the articulation of each culture is important, as opposed to subversion to the colonizing or dominant party (Bhabha, 1994; Hollinshead, 1998; Kraidy, 2005). Cultures are not the simple merging of two or more different cultures (Clothier, 2005), regardless of their respective roles of colonizer or being colonized. Instead, the negotiation and re-negotiation of spaces and temporality with the 'other' takes place (Bhabha, 1994; Hollinshead, 1998; Martínez-Echazábal, 1998) to result in changes to all parties (Martínez-Echazábal, 1998).

A discussion on cultural hybridization is incomplete without consideration of a corresponding line of discourse on acculturation-deculturation that straddles the disciplines of anthropology and psychology. After all, initial interest in acculturation-deculturation also started with post-colonial studies and was subsequently extended to explain immigrant adaptation into their host countries (Berry, 2008). Acculturation occurs when individuals from different cultures come into first-hand contact such that subsequent changes happen in either or both groups that are in contact with each other (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). For acculturation to take place, deculturation of the past first happens for the non-dominant and/or dominant groups through the partial unlearning of their respective native culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2008). Individuals then acculturate by creating their own culture in which they live (De La Garza & Ono, 2015; Kerckhoff, 1953; Padilla, 1980) or through integration (or multiculturalism), assimilation (or melting pot), separation (or segregation) or marginalization (or exclusion), depending on whether the process takes place from the perspective of the non-dominant (or dominant) group (Berry, 2009). A limitation in acculturation research is that it traditionally relies on a 'bidimensional acculturation lens' that assumes there is a dominant and non-dominant cultural group, which is increasingly not the case in 'hyper-diverse' cities, such as Montreal (Doucerain, Dere, & Ryder, 2013).

Evidently, a key underlying tenet of the acculturation-deculturation process is the unlearning or 'loss' of native culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2008). However, a recent stream of research shows that unlearning of one's native culture does not necessarily happen. In studies involving Peace Corps volunteers (Callahan & Hess, 2012) and Christian missionaries (Callahan, 2010), individuals who returned to the United States after prolonged stays in different cultural context(s) were shown to have retained their native cultural competencies. In other words, they did not deculturate even as new cultures were absorbed.

In contrast, cultural hybridization advocates the retaining of the native cultures by individuals, including those from non-dominant and dominant groups. Indeed, the dynamic view of culture argues that individuals can hold or internalize two (or more) cultural orientations, and may switch their mindsets when "primed" by certain social or cognitive signals (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Cultural hybridity further stresses the importance of the fusion and mutual involvement of the different groups involved. Changes in the resulting common culture comes about as a result of the interaction of the cultures involved instead of being caused by a loss or subversion, which is the case for acculturation-deculturation. Although some forms of hybridization may conceivably result in greater differences between the groups, it is the interactions that make them more alike that defines transculturalism.

3. Transculturalism in business practice

The very nature of international business lends itself to transculturalism, particularly through globalization. Globalization via the traversing of sovereign national borders by various transnational actors, including but not limited to corporations, non-governmental organizations and diasporas (Beck, 2015; McGrew, 1992), has resulted in greater flow of cultural elements involving diverse people, goods, knowledge and wastes. This flow effectively provides the interactive opportunity for transculturalism to happen such that traces of other cultures exist in every other culture (Kraidy, 2005) and across all different aspects of life, ranging from business norms to social mores. Here, we highlight two such instances.

In the area of corporate management, companies with international subsidiaries have devoted resources to the transfer of organizational processes and practices across countries. This includes the use of various negotiation processes which leads to the local hybridization of home practices to suit local teams (Poutsma, Ligthart, & Veersma, 2006) as well the adoption of local capabilities and resources that are desirable to the parent company (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). In doing so, firms gain greater external legitimacy by becoming 'isomorphic' (Poutsma et al., 2006, p. 513) — i.e. more similar — with their multiple environments. Taken together, transculturalism clearly has a place in corporate management.

Transculturalism is also evident in how businesses try to cater to a broader, wider globalized market. Both foreign media and marketers effectively utilize transculturalism to forge affective links between their products/services and local communities (Kraidy, 2005). In the case of contemporary South Korea popular culture, its media products, such as cinema, television drama and music, have circulated globally since the late 1990s (Joo, 2011; Ryoo, 2009). By focusing specifically on South Korean blockbuster movies, the hybridization dynamics of transculturalism are used to explain how the country's popular culture — in particular, masculine traits of male protagonists — have evolved with global elements so as to become even more popular globally (Jung, 2011).

4. The papers in this special issue

This special issue contains three papers presented on the "Transcultural experiences within and beyond home" track of the 2016 Global Marketing Conference held in Hong Kong from July 21–24, 2016. During its preparation, we received tremendous supports from the authors, reviewers, JBR editors and publisher, and all participants to the conference presentations, to which we are truly grateful. These three papers epitomize the unique insights transcultural studies can bring to business research.

In the first paper, Cruz, Seo and Buchanan-Oliver attempt to demonstrate how religion fuels transcultural dynamics. In particular, their findings highlight the role of religion in facilitating individuals' entry into and mutual entanglement within multicultural marketplaces. While most studies