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A new perspective on the link between multiculturalism and creativity: The relationship between core value diversity and divergent thinking

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ABSTRACT

Recent theorizing suggested that the experience of cultural accountability might be an important mechanism explaining the often found heightened creativity among individuals with a multicultural background. In the present paper, participants completed a survey including two new scales – the value diversity scale and the value conflict scale – and took additional measurements of multicultural experiences, and personality. Results revealed an interaction effect between perceived value diversity and cultural conflict, such that value diversity predicted higher divergent thinking scores, only among participants who reported higher value conflict.

1. Introduction

We are living in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world (Putnam, 2007). Studies indicate that increased cultural contacts are associated with inter- and intragroup tensions (Fu & Chiu, 2007; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). For example, compared to homogeneous groups, heterogeneous groups have reduced cohesiveness (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Terborg, Castore, & DeNinno, 1976), and experience more conflicts and misunderstandings (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). Some governments, as a response to these societal tensions, advocate increasingly stricter assimilation policies aimed at reducing cultural differences (Phinney et al., 2001).

In stark contrast with these societal developments, positive effects of multicultural exposure at the individual level have been reported in the literature as well. Studies for example showed that multicultural experiences enhance cognitive flexibility and heighten creative thinking (Antonio et al., 2004; Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009; Maddux, Leung, Chiu, & Galinsky, 2009; Storme et al., 2016). It seems that learning from and coping with opposing cultural value systems may lie at the heart of increased creativity (Maddux, Adam, & Galinsky, 2010). Indeed, considering that one's specific lifestyles choices, including the upholding of traditions and customs, are often reflections of culturally shaped core values (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010), multicultural experiences are in part experiences with value diversity. Specifically, it has been proposed in the literature that social accountability pressures challenge and destabilize routinized and culturally constrained responses and value systems, and via this route increase creativity (Leung et al., 2008). Based on this literature, in the present paper we focus specifically on a specific aspect of multiculturalism that relates to the experience of core value differences, and we investigate whether interpersonal differences and disagreements in core values may be a source of cognitive growth and specifically creative thinking abilities. A second contribution of this paper is that, with our focus on individuals' experiences with core value differences, we move beyond a dichotomous approach on multiculturalism, and at the same time propose a conceptual focus for existing scale approaches to multiculturalism that often measure a variety of multicultural experiences (see for example the Multicultural Experiences Scale developed by Leung & Chiu, 2010).

1.1. Creative thinking and cultural incompatibility

Creativity is defined as the ability to usefully connect distant and seemingly unrelated and incompatible concepts, ideas, and knowledge structures into new and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996; Mednick, 1962; Sternberg & Lubart, 1996). Contemporary views consider human creativity to be the result of the same fundamental cognitive processes that underlie general human cognition (Ward, Smith, & Finke, 1999). One of the core processes involving creative cognition is the *generative process* (Ward et al., 1999), or divergent thinking (DT) as described by Guilford (1950); the ability to generate many ideas and solutions to the same problem. Creativity cannot be equated with DT (Runco, 1991), but is generally accepted as a good estimate of the potential for creative achievement (Kim, 2008; Runco, 1991; Wallach, 1970).

According to some researchers repeated exposure to foreign cultures benefits DT because it makes the incompatibilities and conflicts

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between cultural practices and values less intimidating and available to draw inspiration from (Leung & Chiu, 2010). According to Gocłowska and Crisp (2014), experiences of cultural conflict are even a necessary precondition for cognitive growth. In elaborating on, and deeply processing the norms and values of two cultural groups that are in conflict, culture-specific assumptions are questioned, and routinized and culturally constrained responses are destabilized (Leung et al., 2008).

Destabilizing routinized knowledge structures is one of the main processes of creative thinking, and is theorized to be associated with enhanced conflict resolution skills (Leung et al., 2008). Studies, for example, reported enhanced performance on the Stroop color word test, among more creative individuals (Benedek, Franz, Heene, & Neubauer, 2012; Groborz & Necka, 2003; Zabelina & Robinson, 2010), and bilinguals seem to have an enhanced ability to resolve conflict and/or ambiguity as well (e.g Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Costa, Hernández, & Sebastián-Gallés, 2008; Kessler & Quinn, 1981).

The acculturation complexity model (ACM, Tadmor, Tetlock, & Peng, 2009) suggests how this effect may come about by drawing on cognitive-consistency theories (e.g. Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Tetlock, 1986). According to the model, the more the individual feels accountable towards individuals of different and incompatible cultural backgrounds – i.e. the more there is the need, or requirement to justify one's actions and core value's towards others – the more one experiences cognitive dissonance and needs to resort to effortful, integratively complex solutions. Integrative complexity is the capacity to hold and integrate competing perspectives on the same issue, and is related to creativity (Suedfeld & Bluck, 1993; Tadmor et al., 2009; Tuckman, 1966).

From the above, we derive that individuals with extensive cultural diversity experiences, who regularly find themselves in situations in which they are challenged by others to negotiate their values and lifestyle – i.e. who experience social pressure to account for their way of life – should benefit more from their diversity experiences, than individuals who are challenged less. This is because social accountability pressures and the ensuing core value conflicts may act as a cognitive challenge to one's culturally shaped knowledge and belief systems and increase creative supporting cognitive skills like DT. This is an interesting thesis that has yet to be investigated, as empirical studies that directly test the relation between core value conflict and creative potential are still lacking. The aim of the present study is to fill this gap in the literature.

1.2. Value diversity and value conflict

To define and operationalize core value conflict we rely on the notion of cultural conflict, and its relation with culturally shaped core values. Cultural conflict is a situation in which disagreements exist between culturally, ethnically, or racially identifiable groups due to different conduct norms for the same situation (Appleton, 1983; Tomer-Fishman, 2010). For example, the Hispanic Stress Inventory (Cervantes, Padilla, & de Salgado, 1991) probes for the existence of interpersonal conflicts due to different belief systems and personal goals within the family among immigrants. Central to cultural conflicts are thus disagreements about culturally shaped core values.

Values are generally shared, abstract notions of what is viewed as good, right, and desirable in a society. Several studies revealed that there are universally recognized values; they are beliefs pertaining to modes of conduct that guide the selection and evaluation of behavior, people, and events (Williams, 1970). Values are ordered by importance relative to other values to form a value hierarchy (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rohan, 2000; Rokeach et al., 1973; Schwartz, 1992, 1994).

Studies show that value disagreements can be intense and can sometimes lead to conflicting interpersonal interactions (Laursen & Collins, 1994). This is because values are central to people's worldviews, and basic notions of justice (Aquino & Reed, 2002); threats to one's worldview can elicit strong existential fears (Greenberg et al., 1990). Moreover, it is impossible to pursue all values simultaneously (Schwartz, 1992). Actions taken in the pursuit of certain values have psychological and social consequences that may conflict with the pursuit of other values (Schwartz, 1992). For example, pursuing personal freedom is universally recognized as mutually exclusive with pursuing conformity and social harmony (Schwartz, 1992).

Nevertheless, the extent to which value diversity – i.e. differences in adherence to core values – in social groups leads to social accountability pressures and value conflicts, in theory, could depend on a variety of factors, like attitudes of peers, colleagues and family, and more general socio-cultural factors like government policies, the general political climate and public opinion on minorities (Phinney et al., 2001). Cultures and social contexts may thus differ with regards to how much diversity in value expressions they tolerate (Citrin & Sides, 2008; Huntington, 2004). In so called 'loose'(vs. 'tight') cultures (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006), and 'weak' (vs. 'strong') situations (Kwaadsteniet, van Dijk, Wit, & de Cremer, 2006) there are few binding norms and expectations. In such cultures (or situations), individuals can freely express their personal values in their lifestyle without encountering much intolerance. This means that it is important not to equate value diversity, with *active interpersonal* value conflict. Thus, two individuals confronted with the same level of diversity regarding value adherences in their direct social environments, may nevertheless experience differing levels of interpersonal value conflicts.

As mentioned before, in focusing on value diversity and value conflict, we emphasize that multiculturalism is not reserved exclusively to ethnic and/or cultural minorities. Nowadays, negotiating (culturally shaped) values is an everyday practice on the many internet media (Rheingold, 2008), and many individuals, (demographically) multicultural and monocultural individuals alike, have multicultural experiences when it comes to experiences with core value diversity. Because sometimes stronger value differences can exist between groups that belong to the same ethnicity and/or nationality, than between nations, we take on this broader definition of what constitutes multiculturalism, and go beyond national borders and ethnicities. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that there will be a weak, but positive, correlation between experiences of value diversity and value conflict and having a multinational background. Thus, we expect that individuals with an immigrant background, for example, are more likely to experience higher levels of value diversity and value conflict, than individuals with a non-immigrant background.

1.3. Present study

We test the general thesis that regularly and actively interacting with individuals who are intolerant towards diversity in value adherences and demand conformity, could especially trigger the deep engagement in cultural differences described by Gocłowska and Crisp (2014) that is essential for cognitive growth and creativity. We specifically expect that individuals who are confronted with value differences in their direct social environment, *and* who regularly find themselves in situations in which they are actively challenged by close others to negotiate and defend their values and lifestyle, should benefit more from their diversity experiences in terms of creativity, than individuals who are challenged less. This is because value disagreements revolve around right and wrong and can trigger strong personal involvement (Kouzakova, Ellemers, Harinck, & Scheepers, 2012), rendering common conflict resolution strategies like negotiating mutual interests often futile (Barki & Hartwick, 2001; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Value conflicts may instead, require higher order complex reasoning to find mutual ground and resolve the conflict.

To test our idea, we designed two new scales that tap into subjective experiences of value diversity and interpersonal value conflicts in individuals' direct social environment. As a main hypothesis we expect an interaction effect between value diversity and interpersonal value conflict on divergent thinking. Specifically, we expect that the experience of value diversity will be more strongly and positively related to divergent

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