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The impact of diversity on institutional longevity☆

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary societies, culturally diverse families and blending processes are expected outcomes when accommodating different cultural backgrounds. Manifestations of creolization processes are studied within the context of Thanksgiving celebrations, as the authors analyze how family diversity leads to blending processes that spur innovative outcomes and institutional change, and inevitably contribute to institutional longevity. Photographic and menu data, gathered from 76 Thanksgiving celebrations across three types of households, are supplemented with data from over 30 depth interviews. It is in this context of ritualized consumption that the authors examine what happens when resilient consistency meets increasing diversity and inevitable change. Findings indicate that family composition, shared conceptualizations and context matter and provide a different perspective on the links between diversity, tradition, creolization and institutional longevity.

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1. Introduction

Growing cultural diversity in the U.S. and elsewhere has been attributed to increasing globalization as opportunities for communication, travel and relocation have escalated worldwide. Data show that the number of immigrants in the U.S., as measured by the size of the foreign-born population, reached 31.1 million in Census 2000, tripling the 1970 figure of 9.6 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). As of 2006, a mere six years later, the foreign-born population in the U.S. grew an additional 20% to 37.4 million. Population projections from 2005 to 2050 by the Pew Research Center note that given current trends, the U.S. population will increase to 438 million by 2050, with 82% of the increase (approximately 117 million) due to immigrants (67 million) and their U.S. born descendants (50 million).

The implications of this increasing diversity have been heralded in the popular press as historically positive for U.S. society. Social science researchers and managers have long argued that cultural diversity is a powerful force; a positive phenomenon to be valued and encouraged in teams, organizations and the wider society. Thomas McCraw, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, notes that it has been argued that immigrants are innovative and well poised to be so, since they rely less on tradition and connections, and through their endeavors, break up old traditions while creating new ones. This argument prevails despite recent hyperbole in the U.S. popular press by prominent societal figures, focusing less on the economic benefits of immigration, and more

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on the social risks. Indeed, a November 2014 Presidential memorandum on immigration reform points out that immigrants or the children of immigrants have founded more than 40% of Fortune 500 companies; companies which collectively generate annual revenues of \$4.2 trillion and employ more than 10 million people worldwide (Obama, 2014). McCraw (2012) contends that it is not just the immigrants, but also the blended population of immigrants and the native-born whose innovations have historically spurred U.S. economic growth.

There is a growing literature on cultural diversity in the wider society (Alba, 1990; Cross & Gilly, 2014a, 2014b; Hall, 1959; Hofstede, 1983; Peñaloza, 1989, 1994; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1986, 1999; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983; Waters, 1990; Webster, 1994, 2000), as well as sociological and organizational focused research on hybridity (e.g., Canclini, 1995, 2001) and co-creation (e.g., Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). However, researchers have focused primarily on the link between diversity, innovation and change within the organization, ignoring the importance of these links within other social institutions and the wider society. Research shows that diversity contributes to creativity and innovation in organizations (Bassett-Jones, 2005; Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010), and discussions of innovation and change typically revolve around organizations like Google and Bloomberg Philanthropies (the top two on *Fast Company's* World's Most Innovative Companies list (Safian, 2014)). We have yet to fully examine the impact of the increasingly diverse “mishmash of cultures” (Chula, 2006) on wider societal blending processes that stimulate creativity, innovation and institutional change in other contexts.

This research examines the links between cultural diversity, creolization processes and institutional longevity and change resulting from diverse family consumption practices. We argue that incremental innovations occur on a smaller scale, and through different processes, in households and other social contexts everywhere (Moreau & Dahl, 2005). Even if a boy marries the girl, or boy, next door, he will find that his expected way of doing things is not always shared by his spouse. One spouse can defer to the other, or they can create a new way that is different altogether; a new way that disrupts the old, tacit traditions and norms. In culturally diverse families, blending processes are more likely to be expected and overt. Yet, these blending processes not only spur change and incremental innovations, they also simultaneously help to sustain traditions and foster institutional longevity.

Our context is a dearly held, iconic social institution in the U.S. — Thanksgiving celebrations. We posit that, given the universal and historic significance of this ritualized consumption celebration in the lives of American consumers (Appelbaum, 1984; Pleck, 1999), Thanksgiving offers a relevant context for examining what happens when resilient consistency meets increasing diversity and inevitable change. Both the Gallup and the Scripps Research Polls show that over the past 2 decades, between 87% and over 90% of Americans plan to actively celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday, joining family and friends for a Thanksgiving feast (Gillespie, 2000; Hargrove & Stempel, 2004). According to a more recent 2015 Harris Poll, Thanksgiving ranks 2nd behind Christmas on the list of America's favorite holidays; approximately 88% of Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving day, with 79% stressing the importance of leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast (Lyles & Roberts, 2015; The Harris Poll, 2015a, 2015b). As a national institution in an increasingly culturally diverse society, “Thanksgiving changes, but it [also] endures” (Appelbaum, 1984, p. xi).

Rook (1985) defines a ritual as a symbolic, expressive activity, typically repeated over time, composed of multiple behaviors occurring in a fixed, episodic sequence. He notes that variation does occur, but it tends to be slow and often encounters considerable resistance. In their study of the consumption rituals and meanings of Thanksgiving Day, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991, p. 13) view this quintessentially American holiday as a “collective ritual... a discussion and negotiation carried on symbolically through consumption.” They propose that a systematic study of the celebrations and rituals of Thanksgiving Day provides a medium in which to investigate the ways in which consumption actively constructs culture, thus viewing consumption as an active and dynamic force in the formation of culture. If we think of Thanksgiving as a social structure that has gained a high level of resilience, which Scott (1995) essentially defines as an institution; an institutional theoretic framework provides a provocative lens for understanding the simultaneous persistence and modification of this particular social structure.

Food consumption has been described as a key cultural expression (Peñaloza, 1994) and researchers have shown that there is a close link between cultural expression and identity (e.g., Alba, 1990; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983). The link between host and home culture norms and practices, particularly in food consumption, has often manifested itself in unique combinations of food consumption behaviors; hybrid practices that show varying levels of resistance to conformity, or deviation from, home and host culture influences (Cross & Gilly, 2014a; Ergin & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2010; Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1986; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983). Hence, the ritualized consumption practices among culturally diverse families in the U.S., manifested in Thanksgiving meals, provide an ideal venue for investigating the processes and outcomes stemming from the intermingling of diverse cultural groups.

In addition, the family has always been, and still is, one of the most important consumption units and cultural institutions in the U.S. There is a rich established literature in family decision-making (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Davis, 1970; Davis & Rigaux, 1974; Putnam & Davidson, 1987; Qualls, 1982; Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975; Spiro, 1983; Wolfe, 1959); however, Commuri and Gentry (2000) point out that the focus had been on a narrow set of issues, with not enough emphasis on the processes and the complexity of family dynamics.

Epp and Price (2008) address this concern with their framework of family identity interplay in consumption practices, focusing on those critical processes and relational identity bundles within families. They emphasize the complexity in competing consumption practices within family identity formation. In their review of the constructs and relations important to understanding the complexity of family dynamics, they discuss the interplay of family identity bundles (family, relational, individual), communication forms (including rituals), symbolic marketplace resources, and the factors that moderate these relationships. Epp and Price (2011) point out another gap in the family decision-making literature: the collective and relational goals of families. They argue that, instead of considering families as made up of individuals competing for influence, marketers should recognize that families negotiate and create solutions that meet the needs of the collective.

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