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# Open- and closed-mindedness in cross-cultural adaptation: The roles of mindfulness and need for cognitive closure<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Individuals who are high, relative to low, in mindfulness are more open when ascribing meanings to new experiences and more resilient under stress, suggesting that mindfulness may play an important role in cross-cultural adaptation. In contrast, those high in need for cognitive closure (NCC) seem to close one's mind to new cross-cultural experiences. We tested these contrasting effects of mindfulness and NCC by examining Asian international students ( $n = 233$ ) who study at an Australian university using several measures of psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The study found that more mindful sojourners develop greater sociocultural skills and superior knowledge of a unique local culture. The role of need for cognitive closure (NCC)—closed-mindedness spurred by a desire for clear-cut understanding—was found primarily in the domain of psychological adjustment. The results highlight the importance of these dimensions of open- versus closed-mindedness during cross-cultural adaptation.

## 1 Introduction

The role of personality in cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural effectiveness is increasingly acknowledged. In particular, personality variables relevant to the notions of open- and closed-mindedness have attracted much research attention. For instance, openness, flexibility, non-judgmental perspectives and sensitivity have often been considered as facilitating factors, whereas rigidity, ethnocentrism and authoritarianism, as impeding factors during cross-cultural transition (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Church, 1982; Kobrin, 1984; Locke & Feinsod, 1982; Matsumoto et al., 2001; Matsumoto, LeRoux, Robles, & Campos, 2007; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000; Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2012). Presumably, more open-minded people are able to adjust more efficiently in the multicultural environment (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013) because they are more eager to experience novel cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Matsumoto et al., 2001) and are more tolerant of different perspectives (Fischer, 2011; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2013). These personal qualities are sometimes referred to as experiential openness, and equated with the Big Five trait of openness/flexibility (McCrae, 1996; Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004; Woo et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the popularity of the view that open-mindedness facilitates cross-cultural transition, exactly how open- and

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closed-minded people differ in their responses to novel cultures is not well understood. To address this question, we presently focus on two personality variables that are broadly concerned with the notions of open- versus closed-mindedness but also more specifically, the manner in which people engage with their informational environment. These personality variables are *mindfulness* and *need for cognitive closure* (NCC). To the best of our knowledge, the concept of mindfulness is new in the area of cross-cultural adaptation although prior research exists for NCC (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Kashima & Pillai, 2011; Kopic, 2002; Kopic, Kruglanski, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2004; Ramelli, Florack, Kopic, & Rohmann, 2013). In the next sections, we will introduce these concepts and elaborate on their potential roles in acculturation.

### 1.1 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a rich concept originating from Buddhist philosophies (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Some consider mindfulness as a ‘way of life’:

‘Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationships to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally, our relationship with ourself as a person.’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; p. 5).

Still, mindfulness is also considered by many as a ‘metacognitive skill’:

‘a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of nonelaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance’. (Bishop et al., 2004; p. 234).

Integrating these perspectives, mindfulness is seen as a mind-state involving keen awareness of on-going experiences and events (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Langer, 2000; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). An individual high in mindfulness tends to be highly aware of the present moment, granting full attention to his or her thoughts, emotions, sensations, surroundings, and actions. A mindful individual also allows raw experiences to enter cleanly into his or her awareness and are free from a need to compare, categorize, or evaluate them according to pre-established concepts. This mindful mode of processing has been described as an ‘open or receptive awareness and attention’ (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822) and a person who practices this mode as one who is ‘open to admit whatever enters experience’ (Segal et al., 2002; p. 322). Brown, Ryan, and Creswell (2007) also refer to *pre-* or *para-conceptual* modes of processing (p. 213), suggesting that mindfulness defies the attribution of preconceived meanings to new experiences and thus promotes openness of interpretation.

Although empirical research on the role of mindfulness in cross-cultural adaptation has been limited, mindfulness is expected to play an important role in this context (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Langer, 2000; Segal et al., 2002). Ting-Toomey (1999, 2015) suggests that mindfulness promotes intercultural competence as it helps us shifting our frame of reference by attending to the other’s behaviours, cognitions, and emotions, which is essential in new cultural contexts. According to the recent research, mindfulness is characterised by five features: *observing*, *describing*, *acting with awareness*, *non-judging*, and *non-reacting*. Being a careful observer and being good at putting experiences into words, highly mindful individuals might be able to notice and extract more features of the new culture they enter into, including tacit as well as explicit norms, attitudes, stereotypes, and communication styles of the locals (e.g., Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). By promoting non-judging and non-reacting, high mindfulness may facilitate making new friends in the new culture (e.g., Tucker, Bonial, & Lahti, 2004), adjusting better to new life circumstances (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Nilsson, 2014), regulating emotion and behaviour efficiently (Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007), and achieving better well-being in general (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). It therefore seems likely that mindfulness will facilitate both culture learning and psychological adjustment during cross-cultural transitions.

### 1.2 Need for Cognitive Closure (NCC)

In contrast to mindfulness being a mode of open-mindedness, need for cognitive closure (NCC) is a mode of closed-mindedness. NCC refers to a desire for an epistemic closure—gaining a definite answer or ‘any knowledge as opposed to confusion and ambiguity’ (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; p. 450) that can reduce the sense of subjective uncertainty. The desire for epistemic closure is particularly high when the cost of lacking an understanding and the benefit of achieving a certainty are both high; the environment that involves unfamiliar culture and language is a primary example of the context that heightens NCC (Gudykunst, 2005; Kashima & Sadewo, 2016).

NCC varies across individuals as well as situations. Those who are high in NCC tend to detest disarray and chaos as well as desiring order and structure in their lives (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). When situations are ambiguous or when one’s understanding is challenged by inconsistent information, those with high NCC tend to feel strong discomfort. During cross-cultural transition, those with high NCC are therefore likely to feel a heightened need for closure and experience greater stresses than their low NCC peers. Consistent with this expectation, previous research has found international students who are high in NCC tend to experience greater acculturative stress (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Moreover, Kashima and Pillai (2011) found high NCC international students show a tendency to form friendship ties with those who are more similar to themselves such as conational students. This tendency may influence their sociocultural adjustment further. Indeed, Kopic et al. (2004) reported that immigrants with high NCC tend to acculturate more quickly if they form a reference group that consists of local residents upon arrival, whereas they tend to acculturate more slowly if they form a reference group that consists mostly of conationals. Conversely, low NCC immigrants’ acculturation speed was unrelated to the cultural background of the immigrants’ reference group. Research by Ramelli et al. (2013) further showed that high NCC immigrants (but not low NCC immigrants) in an early stage of their settlement tend to have more positive attitudes toward

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