Finding a "home" beyond culture: The emergence of intercultural personhood in the globalizing world

Young Yun Kim *

Department of Communication, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73072, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This theoretical essay presents intercultural identity development and the emerging intercultural personhood as an adaptive response to the increasing interface of differing cultural traditions. Based on the integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988, 2001, 2005), extensive and prolonged intercultural communication experiences are explained to render a gradual psychological evolution from a largely mono-cultural to an increasingly "intercultural" way of relating to oneself and others. Underpinning this internal transformation are two interrelated processes of individuation and universalization in identity orientation, by which conventional, ascription-based cultural identity plays a diminishing role in a person's daily existence. Samples of direct and indirect research evidence supporting the present theoretical claim are provided from studies of immigrants and sojourners, along with three individuals' personal narratives offering a concrete insight into the reality explained by the theory. The essay ends with an examination of intercultural personhood as a constructive way of engaging oneself in the globalizing world and as ultimately a matter of choice for those intercultural communicators who are open to the possibility of being changed by the experiences of new cultural learning.

1. Introduction

"You cannot step into the same river twice, for fresh water is forever flowing towards you," observed Heraclitus of Ephesus, Greek philosopher of the late sixth century BCE. This ancient insight into the human condition is relevant today more than ever before. Ever since the first camel caravan ventured afield, humans have been crossing group boundaries and weaving cultural connections. What is different now is the speed and scope of such occurrences. Physical distance no longer dictates exposure to the images and sounds of once distant cultures. In many urban centers, the natives are routinely coming in face-to-face contacts with newly arrived non-natives of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We are, indeed, in the throes of a worldwide integration of cultures, a tectonic shift of habits and dreams called "globalization"—the process of integration of the world in which many facets of human affairs that used to be bounded by locality now play out on the world's stage, bringing differing cultural traditions together in an increasing interdependence. "We are all migrants," as Pieterse (2000, p. 385) aptly noted.

Ours is also a world of clashing traditions and identities, as people around the world struggle to make sense of a life of ever-present uncertainty and complexity. Conflicts along ethnic and national lines render alarming daily news headlines and

* Tel.: +1 405 325 1587.
  E-mail address: youngkim@ou.edu

a deeply unsettling landscape of collective identity claims. The very forces that diminish physical boundaries exacerbate what Steigerwald (2004) referred to as "culture's vanities" and "the follies of cultural determinism" (p. xi). The seemingly innocent banner of group identity is now a compelling sore spot galvanizing people into us-against-them posturing, manifested in so many angry words and even acts of violent rage and terror. Lost in the identity polemics are the ideals of diversity and multiculturalism, that is, people with different roots can coexist, learn from each other, and look across and beyond the frontiers of group boundaries with minimum prejudice or illusion.

Yet, beneath the daily news headlines of clashing group identities, there is another reality—the reality of people around the world whose daily communication experience extend beyond the familiar world of their home culture and who have been adapting themselves to the stresses of crossing cultures, and creatively and resourcefully crafting their own ways of life that transcends cultural categories. A case in point is Tan Dun, a Chinese-born composer who is best known for his Oscar-winning film score to the film, *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*. Tan Dun was exposed to Western classical music for the first time in 1973 as a young student of traditional Chinese music at a concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra in Beijing performing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Right there and then, he decided to become a composer himself and found his way to come to New York City in 1986. He has since established himself as a composer renowned for his unique musical creations that combine both Chinese and Western musical traditions and, at the same time, cannot be classified as either Chinese or Western (*Composers Datebook*, September 11, 2014).

Clearly revealed in this story of Dan Dun's transformation as a composer is an understanding of "both-and" and the human capacity to adapt to, and participate in, the depth of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experience of others. Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie, in his book *East, West* (1994), speaks to this transcendence of the culture of one's childhood upbringing in the voice of the book's narrator: "I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. . .I do not choose between you. . .I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose" (p. 211). Indeed, modern history presents ample cases of immigrants and sojourners who have demonstrated extraordinary openness and resilience. Their experiences demonstrate that going through adaptive challenges of crossing cultural boundaries bring about a personal transformation beyond the boundaries of any single culture and beyond "either-or" characterization.

The above-described grassroots-level phenomenon of personal transformation beyond one's "home" culture is the focus of this theoretical essay. Based on the integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988, 2001, 2005), the author seeks to capture and illuminate this phenomenon by presenting a systematic way of understanding it. Employing the key terms, "intercultural identity development" and "intercultural personhood," the author puts forth a theoretical claim that: (1) through extensive and prolonged experiences of communication across traditional cultural boundaries, people undergo the process of cross-cultural adaptation; (2) over time, the adaptive responses to new cultural experiences bring about a gradual transformation in a person's identity orientation and personhood in the direction of an increasingly "intercultural" nature; and (3) the two key facets of intercultural identity development and intercultural personhood are individuation and universalization in self-other orientation. This three-part theoretical claim is made with the practical aim of projecting a path of creatively and constructively engaging oneself in the world of intensifying interface of differing, and often divergent, cultural traditions.

2. The integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation

Communication across cultures is inherently stressful as it challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions. Since our cultural habits are acquired and internalized from early childhood, they generally elude our awareness, except when we encounter people whose cultural scripts are at variance with our own. The experiences of interactional incongruity and accompanying stress inherent in intercultural encounters, in turn, provides us an impetus for new learning and adaptive change in our cultural habits. Despite, or rather because of, its potential difficulties, the process of intercultural communication spurs adaptive responses in individual participants, as has been amply demonstrated by numerous immigrants, refugees, and even temporary sojourners. Uprooted from the familiar home culture, some of their experiences can be devastating because they have to separate themselves from something that has been an important part of their identity. Yet, cultural uprooting, "should you survive it, can be the greatest of philosophical gifts, a blessing in disguise. . .[it] gives you a chance to break free. All that heavy luggage of old 'truths,' which seemed so only because they were so familiar, is to be left behind" (Bradatan, 2014, p. SR12).

The long-term transformative effect of intercultural contact and communication is addressed in the integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988, 2001, 2005). Plasticity, or the ability to learn and change through new experiences, is regarded in this theory as one of the most profound characteristics of the human mind and as the very basis upon which individuals acquire an identity and personhood. Built on this basic premise, the theory presents a systemic account of the dynamic person–culture relationship from a general systems perspective (Bertalanffy, 1956; Ruben, 1972). The theory explains that, as an open system, each person adapts to, and co-evolves with, the environment through all forms of communication, from mere observations to intense social engagements and from face-to-face and technologically mediated social encounters to public mass-mediated communication. As such, cross-cultural adaptation is defined in this theory as *the entirety of the dynamic process by which individuals who, through direct and indirect contact and communication with a new,*