



Review

Understanding the divergent effects of multicultural exposure[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Cultures, as shared meaning systems, facilitate coordination and provide members within a given society with a sense of epistemic security. They enable us to comprehend our social and physical environment. As globalization draws people with diverse cultural meaning systems together, some individuals open their minds to embrace diversity while others turn their backs on it. In this review, we present the divergent effects that multicultural exposure has on individual psychology and discuss their implications on intercultural relations. On the one hand, multicultural exposure equips individuals with diverse perspectives, enhances their creativity, and reduces their biases toward the different others. On the other hand, it results in more rigid thinking style and more intergroup biases. After examining the divergent effects of multicultural exposure, this review explores the boundary conditions that influence the outcomes of multicultural exposure and discusses future directions.

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Globalization brings people from different cultural background together. Research has started to examine how multicultural experience influence individuals in the last decades. Some studies suggested that multicultural experiences provide individuals with diverse and stimulating ideas. Such experiences destabilize mundane thinking style and induce a more flexible mindset (see DiMaggio, 1997). Other studies found that in the face of cultural diversity, individuals become more closed-minded and are more likely to show exclusionary reaction against foreign cultures (e.g., Chiu & Cheng, 2007; Morris, Mok, & Mor, 2011). The current paper reviews this literature and examines the divergent effects of multicultural exposure. As culture, society, and the individual mutually constitute each other, culture imparts individuals with a sense of meaning, which in turn facilitates coordinated activities within a society. This meaning provision function is particularly apparent in intercultural contexts, in which individuals from different societies with diverse cultural representations and meaning systems come into contact with each other. The extent to which individuals adopt, manage, and integrate multiple cultural systems has important psychological and social implications in the increasingly globalized world (e.g., Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). In this review, we begin by examining the functions that culture serves for the individuals and the society. Then, we investigate the divergent social and psychological impacts of multicultural exposure to intercultural relations. Finally, we explore potential boundary conditions that result in the diverging findings and discuss potential future research directions.

1. Culture as shared meaning system

Culture has been conceptualized as a shared meaning system. The tradition can be traced back to early discussions in anthropology, psychology, and sociology (see Rohner, 1984). Culture consists of representations such as norms, values, symbols, and behavioral scripts that are shared by individuals within a given society (also see Chiu & Hong, 2007). Such representations are often embedded in daily news, arts, folk stories, and cultural icons, and are actively constructed and reconstructed by individuals. Humans are cultural animals. We rely on culture to impart a sense of meaning (Baumeister, 2005). Culture helps connect individuals to the society—individuals as members of a society share similar cultural representations, and such consensually shared knowledge facilitates the organization of a society (Rohner, 1984). As such, culture gives rise to a stable and enduring pattern of relationships between the individual and the collective, and between individuals within a collective. Such relationships constitute the foundation of a society (Kashima, 2000).

1.1. Facilitate social coordination

Culture imparts individuals with a sense of meaning. Meaning shared within a culture can be concrete or abstract (Chao & Kesebir, 2013; also see Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004). The concrete and abstract meaning embedded in culture, such as norms, values, and behavioral scripts, helps individuals make sense of their surroundings and facilitate coordination in the society (see Baumeister, 2005; Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller, 2004). Concrete meaning refers to cultural heuristics and behavioral scripts that help us to comprehend our social and physical environment. For example, when we hear the utterance, “Would you like to have dinner with me on Friday?” we know that dinner is a meal of the day and that Friday is the day after Thursday. This aspect of culture helps us to coordinate daily activities almost effortlessly. Shared meaning can also be abstract. It has to do with a broader sense of significance and worth. It connects individuals to something larger than the self and transpires individuals beyond their physical existence through such entities as social traditions, values, and beliefs that provide a sense of worth to our everyday existence (see Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004). Concrete and abstract meaning reinforces each other among people within a given society, guiding our daily activities and helping us to make sense of the social and phenomenological world. In line with this idea, Holtgraves and Kashima (2008) suggested that meaning, in a concrete sense, is shared in joint activities to provide a common ground for social collaboration. The common ground, once established, can be generalized across contexts, influencing the abstract representation of meaning among people within a collective in the long run. The accumulation of collective representations facilitates social coordination by allowing individuals to know what to expect and what they would be expected of in collaborative activities.

Culture, as a social coordination device, also serves social control function. It transcends self-interest and promotes common good within a society (Chiu & Chao, 2009). In everyday life, individuals are often confronted with the social dilemma of acting selfishly or acting cooperatively (Dawes, 1980; Kollock, 1998; Schroeder, 1995). From the perspective of an individual, being selfish is tempting because it enables oneself to take advantage of those who are cooperative, and at the same time protects oneself from being exploited by those who are selfish; however, from the standpoint at the collective level, societies that are dominated by selfish choices would fail to coordinate and would unlikely be sustainable (Sober & Wilson, 1998; Wilson & Sober, 1994). Norms and accountability systems are evolved as an integral part of culture to sanction behaviors that are deemed disruptive to the society (Chao & Chiu, 2011a; Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2008; Gelfand et al., 2011). For instance, a common social control practice is to hold wrongdoers personally responsible for engaging in acts that violate the code of conduct. Culpability is judged according to the relative contributions of personal causality and environmental damage. Individual would be held personally accountable to different extents, increasing from mere association to foreseeable

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