The Psychology of Multiculturalism: An Individual Difference Perspective

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Multiculturalism is typically thought of as a characteristic of an individual’s ethnic background or prior living experiences; that is, individuals who have parents of different cultural heritages, or those who have lived in different cultures, are generally considered multicultural. However, recent psychological research suggests that multiculturalism can also be conceptualized as a stable, enduring individual difference with trait-like properties. Here, multiculturalism is defined as a general tendency for individuals to see multiple cultures as compatible. Some individuals, despite having been exposed to different cultures, tend to perceive their different cultural identities as disparate, separate, conflictual, and unable to co-exist at the same time. Other individuals with similar demographic characteristics or backgrounds tend to perceive their different cultural identities as highly compatible; these individuals believe that despite their difference, their various cultural identities can co-exist. There is research suggesting that, conceptualized this way, individual differences multiculturalism tends to be stable over time, and is correlated with other personality traits such as openness and neuroticism (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005).

There is further evidence that stable, individual differences in multiculturalism (or people’s general tendency to perceive multiple cultural identities as compatible) are related to particular skills and competencies. Multiculturals have been shown to have more culturally diverse networks (that is, their networks include people from more varied cultural backgrounds), and they hold more strategic positions within these networks
Multiculturals exhibit higher levels of creativity, especially in tasks with cultural relevance (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, & Lee, 2008; Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). Multiculturals tend to hold more complex views of social issues (Tadmor & Tetlock, 2009), and demonstrate greater flexibility (Chiu & Hong, 2004).

However, a closer look at the empirical data suggests that individual differences in multiculturalism are also related to negative outcomes. Multiculturals have been shown to exhibit lower levels of perceptual acuity and openness to multiple perspectives (Brannen, Thomas, & Garcia, 2009; Hanek, Lee, & Brannen, 2012; Thomas, Brannen, & Garcia, 2011). They are less cognitively complex when describing cultural topics (Benet-Martinez, Lee & Leu, 2006), have lower levels of cultural metacognition (or awareness that cultural differences matter and a capability to monitor and regulate their behaviors in cross cultural situations; Brannen, Thomas, & Garcia, 2009), and are less likely to go against the group consensus when the group was wrong (Mok & Morris, 2010).

I will discuss studies that examine how stable, individual differences in multiculturalism influence processes and outcomes related to cultural adaptiveness and task performance. One study uses qualitative and quantitative data to examine individuals with high and low levels of multiculturalism in work settings. Another study uses a survey to measure individual differences in multiculturalism. Both studies reveal that individuals show systematic and stable differences in multiculturalism. Further, both studies show that this individual difference predict close-mindedness to cultural perspectives different from one’s own.

References
Components and psychological antecedents. *Journal of Personality, 73*, 1015-1050


