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THE EFFECTS OF COSMOPOLITAN CULTURE, COMPETITIVENESS, AND NEED FOR COGNITIVE CLOSURE ON CREATIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

A growing literature indicates that multicultural experiences enhance individual creativity (e.g., Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). According to the creative cognitive approach, the acquisition of different knowledge systems is precursory to the generation of creative ideas (Finke, Ward, & Smith, 1992; Ward, Smith, & Vaid, 1997). Being exposed to cultures that are different from one's facilitates the acquisition of new cultural knowledge systems and provides a seedbed for individual to combine multiple perspectives (Leung et al., 2008) or an opportunity to integrate ideas from different cultures (Cheng, Sanchez-Burks, 2008; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). However, it is argued in this paper that the multiculturalism-creativity link is not straightforward; it can be disrupted if individuals are afraid of losing out to others (i.e., feeling so uncompetitive or has the general tendency to be afraid of losing out). By examining this possibility, the present paper is among the first that establishes the boundaries of the multiculturalism-creativity link.

In past research, multicultural experiences are usually defined in two ways: a. the total amount of time an individual spent in a country/culture other than their own (e.g., Maddux & Galinsky, 2009), and b. exposure to foreign cultures measured by an individual's foreign language speaking ability, contact with foreign cultures via foods, music, and friends (e.g., Leung & Chiu, 2010, Study 2-4). While multicultural experiences are typically operationalized as exposure to foreign cultures in the current literature, another type of multicultural experiences possessed by individuals who were born and raised in a single but diverse culture such as a cosmopolitan culture, is under-investigated. To fill this knowledge gap, the present paper sought to test the boundaries of the multiculturalism-creativity link by examining the influence of multicultural experiences from a cosmopolitan culture on individual creativity.

Studying a cosmopolitan culture is important because many cosmopolitan societies and cities (such as New York, Berlin, Barcelona) are populated by people from diverse cultural background, living side-by-side in a close space. Icons from multicultural cultures are juxtaposed with each other. To the extent that different cultures provide people with different perspectives to see the world, exposure to diverse culture in a locale should enhance creativity. Therefore, these cosmopolitan societies and cities should be the seedbeds for creative ideas and practices. Unfortunately, people from diverse background living side-by-side can also breed competition among the groups (Kieth, 2005). This heightened competition can hamper creativity. However, it is hard to examine the relatively "pure" effects of competitiveness as intergroup relations between cultural groups (e.g., Jews and Muslims) are often embedded in long, complicated intercultural history that is loaded with intense negative emotions (e.g., hatred, fear, anger). To avoid the confound of intense negative emotions between cultures, we sought to test the effects of a competitive mindset as a boundary condition for multiculturalism-creativity link in a cosmopolitan society where diverse cultural groups live peacefully side-by-side – Singapore is a case in point. On one hand, Singapore is known as a peaceful multicultural country: most Singaporeans speak two or more languages, and undoubtedly have extensive multicultural

experiences in their daily life. On the other hand, Singaporean culture is stigmatized as being highly competitive; many Singaporeans endorse a culturally prevalent mindset called “Kiasu,” i.e., fear of losing out. As such, Singapore is arguably an ideal context to study how a competitive mindset hampers the link between multiculturalism and creativity.

Multicultural Experiences in Singapore

The population in Singapore is composed of ethnic Chinese, Indians, Malays, Eurasians and other ethnic groups. In order to embrace cultural differences in this country, multicultural policies and social practices are adopted, including the usage of four official languages (Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English, Republic of Singapore Independence Act, 1997) and designating multiple festivals celebrated by the different ethnic and religious groups as national holidays (Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 2011). In today’s highly global and mobile world, it is not uncommon for people to have lived in multicultural enclaves and to identify themselves with multiple cultures (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). For individuals who were born and raised in multicultural enclaves like Singapore, their daily experiences are multicultural. With a peaceful intergroup context such as in Singapore, would multicultural experiences gained from a cosmopolitan culture enhance individual creativity? The answer may not be simple because, ironically, Singaporeans are often not seen as very creative individuals (Lau, 2007; McElhinney, 2008). A possible undermining factor may be the widely held competitive mindset (“Kiasu”) among Singaporeans.

The Mindset of Kiasu—Extreme Competitiveness

“Kiasu” is a word of Hokkian (a Chinese dialect) origin, the literal translation being “the fear of losing out” (c.f. Ho, Ang, Loh, & Ng, 1998). Kiasu literally means “fear of losing”. However, its actual usage would imply a meaning that is similar to that of “dog in a manger”, and yet not quite. It is often used to describe the social attitudes and values of people, especially those in the South East Asian society. “Kiasuism” (a concocted noun of the adjective “Kiasu) is an excessive form of competitiveness in which an individual tries to get the most out of every interaction (Kirby, Kirby, Bell, & Schafer, 2010). Kiasuism is hailed as a national fixation in Singapore but this mindset is not only restricted to Singaporeans. Research indicates that Kiasuism can be found in Hong Kong (Chua, 1989), Australia (Ho et al., 1998), and the United States (Kirby & Ross, 2007). While Kiasuism exhibits both positive and negative impacts on individual performance (Huang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002), this mindset is not ideal for facilitating creativity. Creativity research shows that competition for prizes hinders children’s creativity performance (Amabile, 1982). Also, research has shown that this Kiasu mindset contributes to Singaporean’s lower creativity score in comparison to other two Chinese societies, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Li & Karakosky, 2002). Research in industrial innovation shows that failure avoidance, which is part of the Kiasu mindset is one of the major barriers for innovation in Singaporean organizations (Ng & Bligh, 2010). In short, the Kiasu mindset could present an obstacle when Singaporeans try to use their multicultural experiences to enhance their creativity.

Multicultural Experiences, Kiasu, and Creativity

Drawing upon previous literature of knowledge activation and cultural frame switching, it is predicted that Singaporeans' multicultural knowledge will contribute to creativity when they are primed to think of their culture. Social psychology research showed that individuals do not always exercise the knowledge they possess. Instead, individuals apply knowledge when it is made salient (activated) and perceived as applicable (Higgins, 1996). In addition, individuals switch between different frames of reference and use the one at the forefront of the mind to guide their thoughts and behavior (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). If Singaporeans do indeed possess multicultural knowledge from their diverse culture, their creativity shall be boosted up when they are primed to think of their culture. However, this cultural priming effect will be neutralized when the Kiasu mindset is activated. The hypothesis below will be examined in Study 1.

Hypothesis: Singaporeans who were born and raised in Singapore will exhibit higher creativity when primed to think of their culture. This effect will be neutralized if the Kiasu mindset is also activated when the Singaporean culture is primed.

STUDY 1

Methods

To test the proposed hypothesis, one hundred and eighty-seven Chinese Singaporeans (born and raised in Singapore) with less than one year of experience of living abroad were randomly assigned into three priming conditions: a. priming of Singaporean culture, b. priming of Singapore as a country; and c. priming of one's favorite sports. The latter two priming conditions were included as comparisons in order to discern whether the priming effects of Singaporean culture are the same as those of the nation per se and those of an irrelevant topic, respectively. Since Kiasu is a signature cultural mindset of Singaporean culture, it is expected that a significant group of Singaporeans will recall the Kiasu mindset when thinking of their culture. Based on the contents of the description in the cultural priming condition, those who mentioned Kiasu and those who did not mention Kiasu were further divided into (recalling) Kiasu and no Kiasu conditions. Next, participants completed the RAT, a commonly used creativity task (Mednick, Mednick, & Mednick, 1964). Each correct answer was given 1 point. Four scores including the total number of correct answers in RAT (i.e., total RAT score) as well as the total number of correct answers in each level of difficulty (i.e., easy RAT score, moderate RAT score, and difficult RAT score) were calculated.

Results

A one-way ANOVA with the four priming conditions (describing culture: Kiasu vs. no Kiasu, country, and favorite sports) as IV and the total RAT score as DV was conducted to test the hypothesis. The results revealed a marginally significant main effect of the priming conditions. The means of the four conditions indicated that, as predicted, the highest total RAT score was exhibited in the culture describing-no Kiasu condition. When replicating the same ANOVA analysis with the other three RAT scores respectively, no significant main effects was found with the easy RAT score and the moderate RAT score. A significant main effect of the priming conditions was found with the difficult RAT score. Post-hoc comparisons using Fisher

LSD test showed that, as predicted, participants in the culture describing-no Kiasu condition exhibited significant higher difficult RAT score than the other three conditions while there was no difference between any pair of the three conditions.

Discussion

Given that the activation of the Kiasu mindset in the culture prime condition was coded as the participants' description of their culture, individual difference in the Kiasu tendency is implied. It is likely that those who have higher Kiasu tendencies tend to mention Kiasu when thinking of their culture due to higher accessibility to this mindset. Furthermore, if personal Kiasu tendency influences individuals' reaction to Kiasu cues in their environment, individuals' need for cognitive closure (NFCC) might also play a role in this process. The reason for this is that individuals' NFCC has been found to influence the degree to which people fall back to their cultural habits and follow cultural conventions (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000). Furthermore, recent research also showed that one's NFCC moderated the relationship of multicultural experiences and individual creativity (Leung & Chiu, 2010). Specifically, individuals tend not to utilize their multicultural knowledge when they have a high need for cognitive closure. In Study 2, the influence of Kiasu cues, personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC on individual creativity will be further examined.

STUDY 2

The theory of motivated cultural cognition proposed that individuals view ideas from different cultural traditions as intellectual resources and selectively recruit ideas from different cultures to address their current concerns (Chiu, Morris, Hong, & Menon, 2000). The need for cognitive closure (NFCC) has been identified as a motivator for cultural conformity (Chiu et al., 2000; Fu et al., 2007, Ip, Chen, & Chiu, 2006). For individuals who have multicultural experiences gained from exposure to foreign cultures, high NFCC inhibits creative potential because individuals rely on conventional ideas in their own culture and resist ideas from foreign cultures (Chiu & Hong, 2005; Leung & Chiu, 2010) due to a heightened preference for firm answers and avoidance of ambiguities (Fu et al., 2007). Therefore, given that Kiasuism is a salient cultural convention in Singapore (as half of the participants in the cultural prime condition in Study 1 thought of "Kiasu" when asked to describe Singaporean culture), it is likely that high NFCC individuals would rely on Kiasu as a cultural convention when the Kiasu mindset is primed; this reliance would be accentuated if the Singaporean participants also personally endorse Kiasuism.

In sum, it is proposed that Kiasu cues, personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC will interact to influence Singaporeans' creativity performance. Specifically, it is proposed that when the Kiasu mindset is primed, those who have high Kiasu tendency and high NFCC will abide to the Kiasu cues and exhibit lower creativity than those with low personal Kiasu tendency or those with low NFCC because the Kiasu mindset is considered to be the cultural convention to fall back on. In contrast, those who have low Kiasu tendency will not rely on the Kiasu mindset due to the mismatch with personal tendency; also those who have low NFCC will not seize and freeze on cultural convention even when the Kiasu mindset is primed. In comparison, when the Kiasu mindset is not primed, those with higher Kiasu tendency will exhibit lower creativity than those with lower Kiasu tendency while NFCC will not exhibit any moderating effect. Reason being

that there is no salient cultural convention to fall back on for those with high NFCC and therefore NFCC has no effect in this condition.

Hypothesis: There will be a three-way interaction of the Kiasu prime, personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC on individual creativity. In the Kiasu priming condition, there will be a significant two-way interaction of personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC on creativity. Those who have high personal Kiasu tendency and high NFCC will exhibit lower creativity than those with low personal Kiasu tendency or those with low NFCC. In the no Kiasu priming condition, there will be a significant main effect of personal Kiasu tendency. Those who have higher personal Kiasu tendency will exhibit lower creativity while there is no interaction effect between personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC for creativity.

Methods

One hundred and ninety-one Chinese Singaporeans with less than one year experience of living abroad were randomly assigned to evaluate six pictures on how colorful and likable each of the pictures were on a 5-point Likert scale. In the Kiasu priming conditions, the even numbered pictures were related to the notion of “Kiasu”. In the no-Kiasu priming condition, the contents of the even numbered pictures corresponded to those in the Kiasu priming condition without the notion of Kiasu and the odd numbered pictures are the same as in the Kiasu priming condition.

Next, the participants worked on a gift idea task adopted from Leung and Chiu’s (2010) research. Participants were asked to write down the first six gift ideas that came to their mind if they were to prepare gifts for school alumni. The results were coded as followed: First, all different responses, except for those that reflect minor variations in inflection (e.g., mug and mugs) and responses that were close synonyms of others were coded as distinct gift ideas. Secondly, for each gift idea, the number of participants who listed it was counted. This score is referred to as the output dominance score (Ward et al., 2002). Third, each gift idea’s ordinal position on its author’s list was recorded and the average output position across all participants who had listed this gift idea was taken to form its rank. Last, the dominance score of an idea was divided by its rank to yield a dominance/rank score. An idea with a high dominance/rank ratio is one that many participants generated, implying that it is less creative.

Participants then completed a 16-item measure of NFCC (Krulanski & Webster, 1996) as well as three questions regarding “Kiasu” on a 5-point Likert scale. The three “Kiasu” questions were used to evaluate personal Kiasu knowledge, perception of typicality in Singapore, and personal Kiasu tendency respectively.

Results

A regression model was used to test the proposed hypothesis. In the first step, gender, age and Kiasu knowledge were regressed on the uncreative score. No significant effects were revealed. In the second step, priming condition (Kiasu condition was coded as 1 and no Kiasu condition was coded as -1), NFCC (mean-centered), Kiasu tendency (mean-centered), all three two-way interaction terms, and the three-way interaction were further regressed on the uncreative score. The results showed that the main effect of the Kiasu tendency was significant,

such that the more the participants' Kiasu tendency, the lower their creativity was. As predicted, the three-way interaction of the Kiasu priming condition, NFCC and Kiasu tendency was significant.

To further examine the proposed hypothesis, the data was split into Kiasu prime and no-Kiasu prime conditions and the same regression analysis was applied. The results showed that in the Kiasu prime condition, only a significant two-way interaction was revealed. The results indicated that individuals with high NFCC and high Kiasu tendency exhibited the highest uncreative score among the four conditions when they were primed with the Kiasu mindset, as predicted.

In the no-Kiasu prime condition, the results revealed only a significant main effect for the Kiasu tendency. This result again supported the proposed hypothesis and showed that when the Kiasu mindset was not primed, those who have high Kiasu tendency exhibited lower creativity but NFCC did exhibit significant effect on this relationship.

Discussion

The interaction effects of Kiasu cues, personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC in Study 2 showed that psychological motives such as personal Kiasu tendency and NFCC should be taken into account when examining the effects of the cultural mindset, "Kiasu" in the multiculturalism—creativity link in Singapore and in other cultural context. NFCC moderates the relationship of personal Kiasu tendency and individual creativity only when the Kiasu mindset is made salient. Contextual cues exhibit significant influence on creativity only when individuals' motives (i.e., high NFCC and high personal Kiasu tendency) fit with the direction of the contextual cues (i.e., Kiasu primes). Future research needs to examine how the activation of multiculturalism as a cultural convention will interact with the three studied variables to influence individual creativity.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of the two studies extend the previous understanding of the multiculturalism and creativity link by examining a different type of multicultural experiences—exposure to a cosmopolitan culture. The results showed that it can enhance individual creativity similar to those gained from exposure to foreign cultures found in prior research. However, this effect could be neutralized when a competitive mindset, Kiasu (i.e., extreme competitiveness and fear of losing out) was recalled in conjunction with cultural primes. Furthermore, Kiasu cues, personal Kiasu tendencies and NFCC interacted to influence individual creativity. Those with high personal Kiasu tendency and high NFCC exhibited lower creativity than those with low personal Kiasu tendency or those with low NFCC. In comparison, when "Kiasu" was not primed, only those with high Kiasu tendency exhibited lower creativity but NFCC did not exhibit any effect on individual creativity. Findings in these two studies provide new perspectives to the relationship of multiculturalism and creativity and the related psychological motives.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR