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Think outside your box: Enhancing creativity through multicultural interactions

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Placing Asian antiques within a New York loft could add a creative, postmodern touch. Similarly, the fusion of rap music with rock music could produce a unique music genre. Angela Leung, an assistant professor of psychology at Singapore Management University's (SMU) School of Social Sciences, notes that creative ideas are often the result of two or more seemingly non-overlapping concepts. In the paper, "Multicultural Experience, Idea Receptiveness and Creativity", co-authored with University of Illinois psychology professor Chi-yue Chiu, the authors contend that people's exposure to multiple cultures increases their readiness to sample ideas from foreign cultures, thereby increasing their level of creativity.

Creative Influences

In cognitive terms, creativity involves adding seemingly irrelevant concepts to an existing concept. Culture consists of learned routines that we use to guide and understand our experiences. People who have had extensive multicultural experiences are more able to retrieve and integrate ideas from differing cultural sources spontaneously. This allows them to expand a concept more creatively and to go beyond their mental periphery.

Increasing our exposure to different cultures and experiences increases the pool of ideas from which we can sample from. When people are exposed to diverse normative views over time, they are more prepared to accept differing opinions. Bilingualism research, for instance, has shown that people who are competent in two languages tended to perform more creatively, compared to monolinguals. It was also found that creativity increases at the societal level when civilisations open themselves to external influences.

While exposure to foreign cultures inspires creativity, people do not receive cultural influences passively. According to the theory of motivated cultural cognition, cultural cues are processed as "intellectual resources" - ideas that are drawn selectively, based on a person's motivation at the time. If the situation demands for a person to conform to cultural norms, for example, that person will be likely to respond by resisting foreign ideas.

People are motivated to conform when they desire cognitive closure - the need for firm, decisive answers so as to achieve predictability and order. Such people adhere strongly to their heritage and traditions, even within foreign environments. Immigrants who fall into this category might find it harder to assimilate into their host country, for instance.

Conformity is also desired where there is existential terror - a situation where the idea of death is pronounced. "When people are reminded of death, they will want to adhere more strongly to their cultural ideals and live up to the cultural standards, because doing so will boost their self-esteem," Leung explained. People cling to their own cultural conventions in a symbolic effort to achieve a sense of immortality. It is a coping mechanism, such that even though our bodies may perish, our cultural values may live on. "People literally seek eternal life by embracing things that will not die," she added.

Tapping on multicultural experiences

To demonstrate the link between a person's exposure to foreign cultures and his level of creativity, the authors conducted a study in which participants were placed in one of the five different environments. Each environment served to provide a different cultural induction, in the form of a 45-minute presentation. The participants were college students of European American descent and they were randomly assigned to one of the five groups: (group 1) no presentation shown, (group 2) a slideshow depicting American culture only, (group 3) a slideshow depicting Chinese culture only, (group 4) a slideshow depicting both American and Chinese cultures, and (group 5) a slideshow depicting a fusion of Chinese-American culture, e.g. the concept of rice burgers. Following the presentation, participants were immediately tasked to complete a creativity test. About a week later, they returned to complete a second creativity test. Both tests did not require any knowledge of Chinese culture.

Participants in groups 4 and 5 performed better at the tests compared to those in groups 1, 2, and 3. This shows that there are creative benefits to be gained from multicultural exposure. "Evidence suggests that multicultural experiences may activate a creative mindset - individuals under the influence of this mindset tend to think more unconventionally and be more receptive to ideas from foreign cultures," the authors noted. However, the study may not provide a complete picture. After all, multicultural exposure was "manipulated" in the experiment to prove a point. It would also be important to examine the effects of organic multicultural experiences on creativity. An

individual assessment survey to measure a person's degree of real-life multicultural experience could do the trick.

Using the Multicultural Experience Survey (MES), the authors set out to study the link between the extensiveness of multicultural experiences and the likelihood of generating creative ideas. Participants in the study were tasked with an idea-generation test. Their test performance was then cross-referenced with their individual MES scores, which evaluate the degree of multicultural experiences. As Leung and Chiu had anticipated, the study showed that people with a greater degree of multicultural experiences would indeed be more likely to think outside of the box.

While it was shown that multicultural experiences can promote creativity, the authors believe that people's receptiveness to foreign ideas is another important creativity-enhancing factor – that people can receive greater creative benefits when they are open-minded. To demonstrate this, the authors observed how a group of European American undergraduates would go about sampling ideas from a range of scholars - comprising American scholars, as well as foreign scholars. Their idea receptiveness was measured by their willingness to sample ideas endorsed by foreign scholars (as opposed to American scholars).

The authors found a positive relationship between the extent of participants' multicultural experiences and their tendency to sample foreign ideas. Those with a greater number of multicultural experiences tended to be more open to foreign ideas. Correspondingly, there would be a higher tendency for these individuals to reap greater creative benefits.

Limiting creative potential

Our receptiveness to new experiences diminishes when we are pressed to act or take a stand quickly. Such situations increase our desire to get cognitive closure - to make decisions quickly without considering alternatives. Past studies have shown that when people are placed under stressful conditions, such as time pressure, they crave firm answers and detest ambiguities. In this state of mind, creative thinking is likely to be inhibited.

To test this idea, Leung and Chiu set out to examine the effect of people's need for cognitive closure on creativity. Participants were split into two groups. Both groups had to complete an idea sampling task - a gauge of their receptiveness to foreign ideas. One group was placed in a high time pressure condition while the other group was given plenty of time to complete the task. Results were then referenced with the participants' MES scores.

The authors found that given the luxury of time, those highly exposed to multicultural experiences were more motivated to recruit foreign ideas, compared to those with fewer multicultural experiences. However, under time pressure, the tendency to sample foreign ideas diminished significantly, due to a heightened need for cognitive closure.

Another condition that could affect our receptiveness is when we face existential terror – a reminder of our mortality. Eager to examine the moderation effects of existential terror, the authors placed a group of participants into one of the two conditions. Half of the participants were asked to describe their physical bodies as they die – an established mortality salience manipulation technique; the other half were asked to describe dental pains. Participants then completed an idea sampling task, the results from which were then analysed in relation to their MES scores.

In the dental pain control condition, participants with rich multicultural experiences evaluated the American ideas significantly less positively and the foreign ideas significantly more positively than those with less multicultural experiences. In the mortality salience condition, amount of multicultural experiences was not related to the relative evaluation of ideas from foreign (vs. American) cultures.

This is consistent with past findings - that the need for cognitive closure and mortality salience provoke conformity to cultural norms, thus impeding people's creative potential. Intercultural interactions in war zones, for instance, will unlikely foster creative problem solving, as soldiers are often required to follow firm orders, and at war, the idea of death is omnipresent.

Harnessing creativity


Through conducting the series of studies, the authors came to realise several important implications on multicultural learning. "When individuals are aware of the differences among ideas, they would want to arrive at a deeper, more complex understanding of these ideas through comparison, differentiation and identification of commonality," the authors wrote, noting that where dissimilar ideas were presented simultaneously, creative mindsets were activated.


Practice makes perfect. When people are cognitively engaged with various ideas and cultures over time, they become more "cognitively complex". A rich exposure to varying cultural experiences also makes them more capable of "organising their received cultural representations from multiple interpretative frames". On top of that, their cultural sensitivities are heightened - they become more adept at deploying culturally competent behavioural strategies to meet environmental demands.

The authors also noted the merits of placing various ideas in juxtaposition. An optimal multicultural learning

environment should be one where dual cultures or a fusion of cultures come to mind, they suggested. "Our results showed that when the multicultural learning environment exposes individuals to ideas from two or more cultures simultaneously and encourage individuals to synthesise seemingly non-overlapping ideas from these cultures, even a one-hour encounter with multiple cultures can yield significant creative benefits."

So how may organisations harness the creative potential of their employees? According to Leung, diversity and inclusion programmes could be a step in the right direction. "If workforce diversity programmes can effectively help employees learn about multiple cultures and appreciate the different perspectives presented by their ethnically diverse co-workers, it is probable that these programmes can facilitate individual creativity and organisational innovation," she added.

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