

# The Academy of Management Review

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## DIALOGUE

### **Integrating Ambiculturalism and Fusion Theory: A World with Open Doors**

In his presidential address, Ming-Jer Chen (2014), former president of the Academy of Management, calls for an “ambicultural” research agenda. In essence, Chen asks us to embrace a diverse, multicultural approach to research in our field that draws on the strengths emerging from the diverse cultural influences within the Academy. On an autobiographical note, Chen explains that the core to his career path involved combining Chinese philosophical tradition with Western standards for social science. As such, his journey constitutes an example of how ambiculturalism represents an ability to adopt the strengths of different cultures while overcoming their weaknesses.

In this dialogue piece we expand on two aspects of Chen’s (2014) address, referring to prior studies by Chen and Miller (2010, 2011). First, we argue that the narrow theme of East-West may benefit from widening the context to include ontological and epistemological positions that exist *outside* the sphere of North America and China. Second, while Chen offers a unique perspective on duality, we argue that this can be extended beyond an East-West paradigm. In particular, we seek to take Chen’s concept further by integrating it with what Ashkanasy (2012) calls “fusion theory.” Moreover, we argue there is a need to extend the idea of ambiculturalism beyond its traditional focus on the individual level of analysis to include aggregated levels of analysis, such as the organization.

Chen (2014) tackles the ambitious challenge of providing meaningful insights to the 2013 Academy theme, “East Meets West,” intended to incorporate both differences and commonalities. While Chen’s ideas are largely targeted toward an analysis of China and the United States, the theme also implies there is a need for in-depth discussion of the important role played by other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, southern Asia, Australia, Europe, and South America, each having differing perspectives

(Ashkanasy, 2012; Cappelli, Singh, Singh, & Useem, 2010; Collet & Vives, 2013; McCann, 1964).

We find at least two directions that are promising. On the one hand, research in different regions has generated theoretical foundations that have the potential to inform each other. For instance, Ashkanasy (2012) outlines how fusion theory emerged from an Australian world view that differs radically from the Northern Hemisphere perspective. In this regard, fusion theory may inform an ambicultural research agenda by allowing us to understand multicultural, international, transnational, global, and multinational contexts. Its very idea rests not only on individual managers who combine the strengths of activities drawing from two (or more) cultures but on people with inter- and multicultural experience and ambicultural competence who combine their capacities and design new business practices.

On the other hand, different ontological and epistemological backgrounds provide scholars with different ways of thinking. More than two millennia of thought development within regional contexts have produced variation about the understanding of our philosophical roots that potentially inform research on ambiculturalism through fusion theory beyond a more narrow view of “East versus West.”

Analyzing research traditions across the world, we can see that different philosophical directions affect today’s thinking: “Eastern” Chinese and Indian (Vedic Sanskrit) philosophy, “Western” philosophy derived from ancient Greece and Rome, and Arabic philosophy (as a mixture of Ancient Iranian and Islamic philosophy). As House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman (2002) point out, most of our religions and streams of modern philosophy have their roots in one or more of these philosophical directions, and have found unique ways to affect not only the scholarly tradition in each region but the overall culture of regions. By adopting a Procrustean view that shrinks these differences into East and West, however, scholars run the risk of neglecting reality.

Despite this, we acknowledge that ambiculturalism and the related concept of (East-West)

duality are suitable analytical units to initiate a discussion about the increasing importance and blending of cultural influences in business practice and theory. In this respect, duality is a central characteristic that Chen (2014) sees as necessary to understand ambiculturalism. Duality (expressed in Eastern notions, such as yin and yang) finds its Western counterpart in Descartes' dualism (separation of mind and body). While both terms express separation, duality relies on opposing elements that are essentially part of one dynamic motion and stages that are naturally reached within the flow of time (Chen & Miller, 2011). As such, dualism refers to a separation of opposing elements in a paradoxical fashion (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

As a consequence of separating duality and dualism, Chen (2014) identifies how Eastern and Western philosophies differ in terms of behavioral (experience) and cognitive (abstraction) orientation. In particular, from the traditional Chinese viewpoint, a behavioral orientation includes the normative dimension of "being good" (Chen & Miller, 2011). In this regard, Kissinger (2011) compares Western and Chinese ancient war strategies that illustrate the differences between the behavioral and cognitive orientation. China's predominant weapon traditionally was its sophisticated administrative structures. Kissinger points out that, despite this, and unlike the West, China's imperialistic (and consequently military) *ambitions* were weakly developed. He goes on to provide examples in which China eventually integrated other regions through its superior administrative procedures, despite losing the (military) war. These developments are in stark contrast with European and American history, where power and repression often played a primary role. Broadly, in Kissinger's view, "Eastern" philosophy has focused on (behavioral) inclusion, whereas "Western" philosophy has been based on (cognitive) separation.

The practice of university teaching provides another example where similar differences can be seen (Bolton & Nie, 2010). Chinese school education traditionally focuses on experience and imitation. European education practice focuses on abstraction and comprehension, ultimately leading to a separation of theory and practice. Although disputed (Navarro, 2014), one achievement of American business schools might be the integration of behavioral (experience/imitation) and cognitive (abstraction) orientations with

tools that bridge both elements, such as case study teaching (process orientation).

Moreover, scholars have recently begun to disentangle the complex process of learning by using the data sets available through massive open online courses (MOOCs). Results promise faster learning by identifying the needs and learning styles of high numbers of students. MOOCs are attended from a heretofore never seen diversity of students of all ages and backgrounds from all over the world, where learning traditions shaped by cultural norms become less important while the individual becomes more and more the focus of pedagogical excellence (Clarà & Barberà, 2013). In addition, new technological capabilities and a new understanding of education facilitate the integration (or fusion) of all three cultural elements (abstraction, experience, and process).

We argue that learning plays an important role in both ambiculturalism and fusion theory. In this regard, Chen and Miller (2011) point out that this is because learning plays a crucial role in identifying and implementing ambicultural management. It is not enough to experience one or two different cultural settings. Ambicultural learning starts when the learner begins to understand his or her own culture. Curiously, this learning step is often initiated by being exposed to other cultures. Chen's (2014) personal story and the way he contributed to the field of competitive dynamics by combining Chinese and Western thinking illustrate this point. In Chen's view, only those who understand the differences between their own cultural background and those of others can succeed in combining the fruits of two or several cultures and their advantages. In this respect, Boxenbaum and Rouleau (2011: 272) refer to the concept of understanding and combining readily available elements to explore and seize new or expanded mental representations as "bricolage." While bricolage is distinct from what we refer to as "fusion," we acknowledge that it nonetheless may play an important role in the knowledge acquisition and learning process for becoming ambicultural or, in essence, being able to "perform" fusion.

Chen (2014) argues further that although ambicultural management is not easy to acquire or implement (Chen & Miller, 2011), it is valuable when well executed. These attributes make it a potential source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Chen & Miller, 2011; Peteraf, 1993).

Drawing from the strengths of cultural differences requires a deep understanding of cultures. More often, however, it can lead to misinterpretation, conflict, or myopia (Levinthal & March, 1993; Weick, 1993).

On an organizational level, successful ambicultural ventures and applications of fusion theory have the potential to go well beyond Ashkanasy's (2012) example of Härtel and Arndt's (2012) article on international reviewer practices. For instance, successful companies that have overcome the challenges of multiculturalism have drawn advantages from their diversity at their inception and, thus, represent "born globals" (Madsen & Servais, 1997: 561).

Our idea that ambiculturalism applies to organizations as well as to individuals is supported by Teece (2014), who formulated the principles of a capability theory in the context of the multinational enterprise. Teece shows that, well beyond traditional theorizing based on contract theory, resources and particular nontradable assets such as ambiculturalism play a crucial role in building a firm's competitive advantage. It is important, therefore, to understand fusion theory in the context of the multinational firm and what it means for its boundaries, complexity, and sources of rents. Thus, in today's semiglobalized world (Ghemawat, 2003), fusion theory adds important insights on how capabilities that enable firms to operate in different cultures produce above average rents for firms far beyond profits from arbitrage. Fusion theory therefore has the potential to guide inquiries that disentangle the quest of the where of market entry, the integration or separation of international subsidiaries, and the logic of local and global ecosystems.

In conclusion, we seek in this dialogue to extend Chen's (2014) view of ambiculturalism in three ways. First, by linking ambiculturalism with fusion theory, we explain the distinct challenges of ambicultural learning and demonstrate its potential as a source of learning and competitive advantage. Second, we recognize the importance of broadening the concept geographically to include the world outside of China and North America. Third, we argue that the concept can be applied at the organizational as well as the individual level. Our hope is that these points will serve to broaden directions for future inquiry into the nature and role of ambiculturalism.

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