Chapter 2

Foreign Language Acquisition, Bilingualism, and Biculturalism: A New Theoretical Avenue for Organizational Research

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ABSTRACT

Biculturals (i.e., individuals who have experienced and internalized more than one culture) are recognized as a growing demographic, and as such will become important stakeholders in organizations. An emerging stream of research from psychology and organizational studies indicates that bicultural individuals have a particular set of cognitive skills and competencies that can contribute to the performance of international teams. However, research on biculturals in organizations is facing conceptual and methodological limits due to the complex nature of the construct of culture. While the constructs of culture and language are distinct, they are undoubtedly interwoven; hence, the latter may become a tool to analyze the phenomenon of biculturalism. In this chapter, the authors analyze the literature on social identity, foreign language acquisition, and bilingualism to find potential solutions for these critical challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

The progressive liberalization of trade and international migration policies has led to a significant surge in the numbers of bicultural individuals, i.e. people with more than one ethnic identity (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007). It is estimated that biculturals are the largest ethnic group in Canada and by 2020 the largest ethnic group in the United States will be culturally mixed (Brannen & Thomas, 2010). This trend is also noticeable in Australia (21% of population is foreign born) and in Europe. The growing number of people of mixed cultural background provides organizations operating internationally with ‘an unacknowledged opportunity to better bridge across cultural contexts and integrate and meld knowledge from around the world’ (Brannen, Garcia, & Thomas, 2009: 207). Research evidence from psychology and sociology indicates that biculturals exhibit personal skills that could be of great importance to international organizations and may contribute positively to organizational performance (Brannen & Thomas, 2010). Hence, it should come as no surprise that the phenomenon is gaining significant traction in the international business (IB) and cross-cultural management literatures.

However, biculturalism research in organizational context is not free of conceptual and methodological limitations. For instance, while language is an important element of culture (Gomez-Mejia & Palich, 1997), the relationship between bilingualism and biculturalism and its impact on individual and team performance remain by and large unknown. Furthermore, research on language acquisition shows that the time when second language is learned plays a critical role on developing particular linguistic skills (e.g., Flege, Mackay, & Piske, 2002), but research on biculturalism is yet to develop a potential critical period hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967).

In this chapter, the authors draw on existing literature on bilingualism and foreign language acquisition to propose new avenues for research on biculturals in the organizational context. The chapter develops as follows: first, the authors review the existing literature on biculturalism, the relationship between language and culture, and social identity theory, as these are the founding blocks for our subsequent theorizing. Second, potential research avenues using biculturalism and bilingualism relations, including: (1) a typology of individuals based on their biculturalism and bilingualism; (2) a typology of biculturals based on the time of second culture acquisition; and (3) methodological advantages of using bilingualism as a proxy of biculturalism, are discussed. This chapter ends with a call for more conceptual and empirical research at the confluence of biculturalism and bilingualism.
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