

Causes of alternating cultural identities, and their outcomes



RESEARCH

‘What makes people alternate cultural identities, and what are the consequences?’

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Background

Research has shown that bicultural individuals have different ways or styles of managing their cultural identities. One style is to alternate cultural identities depending on the circumstances. For instance, a Chinese New Zealander may be very Chinese at home with her family, but very Kiwi when socializing with friends.

Studies have also shown that the use of the alternating styles increases when biculturals perceive discrimination. In turn, alternating cultural identities can lead to greater identity conflict and lower levels of wellbeing. As anti-Asian discrimination has been increasing in some countries with the spread of Covid-19, it is important to better understand how this affects the way that Asian immigrants manage their cultural identities and the implications for wellbeing.

As part of the requirements for a Master’s thesis, Ben Hooper, supervised by Professor Colleen Ward and Dr Ágnes Szabó, designed an experiment to test whether discriminatory comments caused changes in the extent to which Chinese Americans use the alternating identity style.

Participants were shown fictitious Facebook posts about Chinese Americans at a citizenship ceremony. The posts either contained comments hostile to Chinese people or neutral comments unrelated to culture. After exposure to the comments research participants were asked to complete a survey about their cultural identities and wellbeing.

Main research findings

Despite what we expected, there was no significant difference in the use of the alternating style between those exposed to discriminatory versus neutral comments; however, participants who read discriminatory comments did report significantly more psychological symptoms, such as feeling sad or worried.

In line with related studies, alternating identities predicted identity conflict, which in turn predicted poorer psychological wellbeing; however, alternating identities were also found to positively predict life satisfaction – a new finding in research on cultural identity styles.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

With one in four residents being born overseas, and around 41.2% of the country’s population being visible minorities, this research can bear relevance to biculturals in New Zealand.

The study found alternating identities are connected to both poorer wellbeing through identity conflict, but also greater life satisfaction. This suggests biculturals can manage their identities in different ways, which in turn have differing outcomes for their health and wellbeing.

Learning more about how biculturals alternate identities can help us find ways of promoting better wellbeing outcomes for those who come and live in New Zealand, such as using policy to curb the effects of discrimination, especially with the ongoing effects of Covid-19.