

How to Tap the Advantages of Being Bicultural

by Louise Rasmussen - September 22, 2014

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There are numerous advantages of being bicultural. [Studies have shown](#) that biculturals are more creative and enjoy greater professional success.

One reason for the many advantages of being bicultural is that exposure to diverse beliefs and worldviews enables biculturals to [consider different perspectives](#). This can help them come up with new ways to solve problems and respond to tricky situations.

But, hold your horses. Research has also shown that merely having deep exposure to a new culture doesn't necessarily buy you these advantages. There are different ways to be bicultural, and not all of them help.

Figure out If You're a Confused or Well-Adjusted Bicultural

For some having diverse cultural influences in their life can be a source of enlightenment. For others, it just adds confusion.

Researchers Verónica Benet- Martínez, Janxin Leu, and Fiona Lee from the University of Michigan along with their colleague Michael Morris from Columbia University have studied biculturals for years.

They noticed that some biculturals seem to be less at ease with belonging to two different cultures than others. It is almost as if they are torn between two opposing ways of thinking and being.

Confused biculturals often feel like they have to choose one culture or the other. Other biculturals seem to identify with both cultures equally.

How can you tell if you're confused or a well-adjusted bicultural?

Benet- Martínez suggests that you can take a look at how you describe yourself. For example, I can either describe myself as a Dane in America or a Danish-American.

According to Benet-Martínez if I think of myself as a Dane living in America, I might be keeping my two cultural identities separate. If I think of myself as a Danish-American that means my two identities have been integrated into one.

When that happens I am less likely to feel conflicted about the different cultures I belong to. And more likely to enjoy the advantages of being bicultural.

Why Your Thoughts about Your Cultures Matter

Benet- Martínez and her colleagues conducted a set of studies to figure out if people who [negotiate their cultural identities](#) differently enjoy the same cognitive advantages of being bicultural. They published their findings in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*.

Essentially, the researchers wanted to see if biculturals who feel torn were able to switch between thinking like a member of each of their cultures as easily as biculturals who are at ease with their cultures. This is an advanced form of [cross-cultural competence](#).

They conducted three studies with Chinese-Americans who had all lived in each culture for at least five years. In each study half of the participants were primed to think like an American, and the other half to think like a Chinese. To this end they were shown pictures of either American icons such as Superman, Marilyn Monroe, and the U.S. Capitol building or Chinese icons such as a Chinese dragon, Stone Monkey, and the Great Wall.

Then the participants were asked to interpret an ambiguous social event.

Benet-Martínez wanted to see if putting the Chinese-American participants into either a Chinese or an American frame of mind would influence them to respond as a member of that culture.

The researchers found that integration matters. Only the Chinese-Americans who had found balance between their two cultures switched smoothly to a way of responding that was typical for the culture they had been primed for.

The participants who were confused about their cultural identity reacted the opposite way. They responded in a more American way when they had seen Chinese icons and in a more Chinese way when they had seen American icons.

Set Aside Your Cultural Differences

Benet- Martínez' study shows that confused biculturals adopt a cultural mindset that is in opposition to the cultural cues they see around them.

This suggests that there may be an advantage to embracing and identifying with all your cultures.

Doing so makes it more likely you will [behave in a way that is consistent with the culture you find yourself in](#). This in turn makes it easier for you to build relationships and widen your networks. The wider networks you have the more likely it is you will be exposed to new and different perspectives.

Knowing there are different ways to look at things will help allow you to [generate more creative solutions](#) to problems.

Benet-Martinez, V., Leu, J., Lee, F., & Morris, M. (2002). Negotiating Biculturalism: Cultural Frame Switching in Biculturals with Oppositional Versus Compatible Cultural Identities *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33 (5), 492-516 DOI: [10.1177/0022022102033005005](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022102033005005)

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