What Effect does Multi-Cultural Background have on Identity?

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Abstract

This paper is a report on the thematic analysis of four semi-structured interviews based around the topic of culture and identity. The purpose of the investigation was to look for the effect of multi-cultural experience on identity. Three of the interviewees were classed as multi-cultural so a fourth interviewee from just one culture (uni-cultural) was added to provide balance. The analysis was conducted as a piece of coursework by the researcher to be submitted towards an MA qualification through Roehampton University Online. A literature review relevant to the research question was conducted before a thematic analysis was conducted on the interviews. The four transcripts were read and possible themes elicited. The themes were then coded and the transcripts searched for evidence. Occurrences were tallied in a table of results. Eleven themes were gathered from the data and were discussed. The paper concluded by applying the findings of this paper with the literature review and suggesting further areas of research.

Keywords: Multi-cultural experiences; Thematic analysis; Decision-making

Introduction

This study aimed to examine the effects of multi-cultural experiences on identity and how cultural background can dictate personality, decision-making and belief. It is hoped this paper adds to the literature on cultural influence and will be useful to other researchers. Ideally, it would give individuals an understanding of cultural influences and allow them to use that knowledge for their well-being.

Many theories apply to this investigation. Social identity theory [1] and culture membership can affect attitudes towards other cultures. Social cognitive theory [2] examines role modelling and how parental cultures can be passed down. Triandis's [3] found that individualistic participants accessed the private self and collectivistic participants accessed the collective self, suggesting different identities.

Leung & Chiu [4] investigated multi-cultural experiences and identified a positive relationship between extensiveness of exposure and creative performance. Replicating Hong's [5] study, Benet et al. [6] discovered that bi-cultural participants with backgrounds in two compatible cultures interpreted culturally specific events comfortably through the appropriate culture (Asian or Western). However, bi-cultural participants from two incompatible cultures (as defined by the participants) reacted in the reverse and felt conflicted.

Berry et al. [7] conducted an analysis of acculturation stress finding a large variety of factors (sex, age and education) are connected to levels of stress felt by immigrants moving to new cultures. Kosic et al. [8] found immigrants entering new countries acculturate quickly, and suffer less stress, if they have close relationships with members of the new culture. Particularly relevant is that this leads to a weaker maintenance of the original culture.

Swim et al. [9] also discovered that individualistic cultures tend towards sexism more than collectivistic cultures.

Linville et al. [10] reported that individuals with more contact and experience with other cultures perceive those cultures as varied and complex and those with less exposure perceive the culture simplistically.

These findings will be related to the findings of this paper in the conclusion.

Methodology

Design

Research question: What effect does multi-cultural experience have on identity?

This qualitative study used thematic analysis to gather rich data to be inductively coded. This method was used due to course requirements and because there were no preconceived expectations of results. A research question was formed, but no hypothesis created as no quantitative testing took place.

Data collection

Skype-based interviews regarding culture and identity were conducted by Roehampton online MA Psychology students in May 2017 and made available to all course members. Interviews were semi-structured with deviation from the script encouraged. The interviewers were not professional interviewers. Interviewees were informed of their ethical rights at the beginning and end of the interviews and were not paid for their time. Participation was voluntary. In many cases, the interviewer and interviewee reversed roles to conduct the interview. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.

After reading all transcripts, the four interviews selected were chosen because the participants were from multi-cultural backgrounds plus one uni-cultural interviewee for balance.

Participants

Participants were of varying ages, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. Most personal details were removed for confidentiality. Cultural backgrounds were retained due to their relevance to the research topic. Participants 1-3 considered themselves multi-cultural; participant 4 was uni-cultural.

- Interviewee 1: Eritrean, raised in Sweden, living in Holland. (Female)

- Interviewee 2: Egyptian, raised in Kuwait, identifies with American culture. (Female)

- Interviewee 3: American, raised in America, moved to Germany. (Unconfirmed gender)

- Interviewee 4: Sint Eustatiusian (Female).

Analysis

The four transcripts were downloaded and read five times each. Notations were used to summarise content, views and ideas (Appendix A, B, C and D). A general notes sheet was made (Appendix E) and notations analysed for recurring themes. A coding framework was devised to identify occurrences (see Appendix F for more information). Transcripts were re-read and number of occurrences of coded themes recorded. Inter-rater reliability to check for subjective interpretations was not possible. Themes and sub-themes with evidence are presented in the results section in no specific order.

Results and Discussion

Table of coded themes (Table 1)

See Appendix E and F for detailed coding information.

Exposure to multiple cultures

Exposure to more cultures allows individuals to adapt to new situations

There was strong feeling on this theme throughout all the transcripts. Two interviewees expressed opinions that exposure to other cultures allowed them to be successful in life. They believed their experiences helped them to adapt to situations, communicate and relate to others more effectively than if they had not been exposed to multiple cultures.

- 'you can easily adapt to situations' (Transcript 1, 84).

- 'It's beneficial to experience different cultures because you learn how to adapt in different situations' (Transcript 3, 132).

There were opposing beliefs in transcript 2.

- 'if different cultures have different answers to the same situation. You feel lost and in agony.' (Transcript 2, 158-160).

This was important for interviewee 2 who strongly felt the conflict between cultures caused issues in reaching a balanced identity.

Table 1 Table of Coded Themes * 6 instances of interviewee focusing on smaller cultures.

Theme	Number of Occurrences
Focus on country, not smaller cultures	11 (-6)*
Exposure to multiple cultures allows individuals to be more adaptive	8
We take the positive and reject the negative aspects of cultures	9
The role of the media in spreading cultural values	6
Culture is a vital component of gender identity	15
Our awareness of the effects of our original culture change over time	19
The effects of language on culture and identity	5
We outgrow our original culture and look down on those who haven't	19
The impact of family on culture and identity	13
Exposure to multiple cultures makes us open-minded	10
Conflict exists between cultures and can shape identity	14

Exposure makes individuals more open-minded to other cultures

All interviewees felt exposure to other cultures made them more aware and open-minded of other cultures, although this was expressed in different ways.

- 'I am more open-minded... I am willing to be influenced by other cultures.' (Transcript 1, 130-131).

- 'openness and that open attitude towards success' (Transcript 3, 96-97).

Interviewee 2 felt their exposure to American culture helped them develop values of appreciating differences and being accepting of others.

- 'loving people for who they are…even though they might be different' (Transcript 2, 64-65).

Focus on the culture of the country, not smaller cultures

Most participants considered culture from a country-based perspective. There was some consideration of school culture, but participants mainly viewed their identity as being shaped by country-wide cultural factors rather than smaller cultures such as the workplace.

- 'Eritrean culture is very community-based…Dutch culture is very selfish' (Transcript 1, 66-67).

- 'growing up in Germany gave me an insight into….not…. just the German culture but Europe as a whole' (Transcript 3, 46-47).

Interviewee 1 considered that different regions within countries would have different cultural expectations. Interviewee 2 considered the school environment (and considered Hollywood a sub-culture of America) but generally viewed these as country representations rather than unique cultural systems. Interviewee 4 was very focused on their 'small island community' as compared to the mainland Dutch culture.

Selecting cultural influences

Individuals are products of their culture but awareness and choice increases through aging

All interviewees expressed the idea of original culture being important in developing values and social skills. They believed there exists a lack of control over the assimilation of original culture and how it shapes identity. As individuals grow older, they become aware of the influences and can be active addressing that influence.

- 'When we grow up, it is easier to realize and choose whether I want culture to impact me or not and which culture.' (Transcript 2, 175-176).

- 'As you get older you decide….which one you're gonna choose for your life.' (Transcript 4, 190).

Interviewee 3 had a different perspective in that original culture was helpful in moving and adapting to a new culture.

- 'Culture... plays a significant role when experiencing a move from one place to another at a relatively young age' (Transcript 3, 44-45).

Individuals select the aspects of culture they wish to adopt

All interviewees felt being exposed to different cultures allowed them to pick the positive aspects and reject the negative aspects of those cultures. They viewed themselves as consciously deciding which aspects to retain or discard and what to assimilate into their identity.

- 'You kind of pick and take what you want' (Transcript 1, 26-27).

- 'You take bits and pieces' (Transcript 2, 245).

Conflicts regarding individual growth

Out-growing a culture or moving on to better things

Two interviewees felt superior to those who have not experienced new cultures. The implication was they have grown beyond their original culture and developed into more rounded individuals. There were signs of slight disdain or pity for those who have not had similar experiences.

- 'So other people were not kind of ready.' (Transcript 1, 110).

- 'I am not following my culture blindly and they are (laugh)' (Transcript 2, 293-294).

Family instrumental in maintaining original cultural ties

Three interviewees considered family a strong influence in maintaining culture and a source of conflict. They stated family expectations follow traditional aspects of the original culture and the interviewee is required to fulfil cultural obligations to keep the family happy whilst balancing their changing identity due to exposure to new cultures.

- 'It was a difficult balancing to do' (Transcript 1, 116).

- 'My family, my friends…all wanted me…to get married' (Transcript 2, 177-178).

- 'I rebelled…starting to find who I am and who I want to be' (Transcript 4, 177-178).

Effects of language on culture and identity

Interviewees 1 and 4 expressed the idea that language is an integral part of culture and identity. They explained the issues that arose between with their parents when speaking the language of their new culture.

- '(parents were) afraid that you are forgetting the language we taught you' (Transcript 1, 114)

- 'influence comes from different languages.' (Transcript 4, 118-119)

Culture is a vital component of gender identity

Two interviewees were very concerned about the effects of culture on how females are perceived and treated. They focused on the negative aspects of cultures in the treatment of females and how that behaviour becomes part of the identity of most people within that culture. They expressed appreciation for cultures that they believe have addressed this imbalance and criticise their own cultures for this issue.

- 'just because you were a girl it didn't mean that you would not do as well as boys. So that's why I would single out the Swedish culture.' (Transcript 1, 56-57)

- '(In Egypt) not very fair to women at times while in America women have a better chance of being equal to men' (Transcript 2, 271-272)

Interviewees 3 and 4 made no comment about on gender issues.

Conflicts between old and new culture

There was some difference of opinion regarding conflict between old and new cultures. Two interviewees felt that exposure to different cultures helped them grow and develop as individuals. Interviewee two, however, stated they frequently felt distress at trying to balance their old and new culture.

- 'I am betraying one of my cultures' (Transcript 2, 164)

- 'the combination of the two gave me a very good framework' (Transcript 3, 75)

Interviewee 4 was very concerned with the effects of the influx of immigrants causing changes within their culture.

- 'a bit of a threat to our security.' (Transcript 4, 51)

Media

Role of the media in culture and identity

Interviewee 2 strongly identified with American culture and believed this stems from the ubiquity of American media. They cited specific films and songs that have been influential. The interviewee felt the American culture has a lot of positive attributes missing from their own culture and based this belief almost solely on media representations. Hollywood was mentioned many times throughout the interview as an influence and American culture was viewed as replacing the original culture.

- 'It's always been America…the only explanation…is the impact of Hollywood movies and the media' (Transcript 2, 84-85)

Conclusion

Relevant here are the Hofstede Country Ratings taken from https://geert-hofstede.com [11] that indicate whether a country is collectivistic or individualistic (see Appendix E).

Examples of social identity theory, social learning theory and the effect of individualistic and collectivistic influences on identity are throughout all the transcripts. Individualistic/collectivistic differences are highlighted by differences between the American interviewee and the others. Family was not mentioned by the American interviewee, whereas it was a large part of the other transcripts. This falls in line with collectivistic cultures being more concerned about family and groups whereas individualistic cultures are more involved with themselves. In light of Triandis [3] interviewee 2 (collectivistic) was more conflicted than the others, suggesting a struggle between their collective identity and their individual identity.

Gender was not considered an issue by the American, going against Swim et al. [9] findings. However, their gender is unknown so being male may account for the lack of awareness of the difficulties faced by females in different cultures, particularly from an individualistic (self-centred) culture.

Support for Benet et al. [6] bi-cultural findings can be seen in the conflict shown by interviewee 2 who has adopted two conflicting cultures – a collectivistic and individualistic culture. The American bi-cultural interviewee comes from two individualistic cultures and states no such conflict. Interviewees 1 and 3 seem more balanced than interviewee 2 (based on their conflict score) and they have both been exposed to more cultures, supporting Leung & Chiu's [4] thoughts that more cultural exposure leads to less of a need for security. However, interviewee 4 is also well balanced having been exposed to just one culture, although this is quite an isolated culture.

Interviewee 2 might provide support for Kosic et al. [8] through their weak link to their original culture, however there is not enough detail about the initial move to a new culture to be able to be definitive. Interviewee 4 may support this with the perceived issues of new workers arriving in their small community.

Support for Linville et al. [10]comes from interviewee 2 having a simple notion of American culture gained almost solely through the media, whereas the other interviewees demonstrate more depth of understanding about their cultures.

Further areas of investigation could include the role of religion and the impact of an influx of immigrants, two issues which were raised in transcript 4 but not followed up due to word limitations.

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