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TRANSCULTURAL

**Revista Semestral da Associação Portuguesa
de Psicologia e Psiquiatria Transcultural**

VOLUME VI
NÚMERO 1
2014

Número temático

Health for All – H4A

Carla Moleiro & Jaclin Freire
Coordenação

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FICHA TÉCNICA:

Título: Transcultural – Volume VI – Número 1 – 2014
Propriedade do título: Associação Portuguesa de Psicologia e Psiquiatria Transcultural
(www.psitranscultural.pt)
© Edições Sílabo, Lda.
Capa: Pedro Mota
Imagen da capa: *Azenhas*, Amadeo de Souza Cardoso
1ª Edição – Lisboa, janeiro de 2015
Tiragem: 400 exemplares
Impressão e acabamentos: Cafilesa – Soluções Gráficas, Lda.
Depósito Legal: 213056/04
ISSN: 1645-9555

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R. Cidade de Manchester, 2
1170-100 Lisboa
Tel.: 218130345
Fax: 218166719
e-mail: silabo@silabo.pt
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Transcultural identity The future self in a globalized world

Christin-Melanie Vauclair

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS, Lisboa, Portugal

Justine Klecha

Catholic University of Applied Sciences of North Rhine – Westphalia, Cologne, Germany

Cristina Milagre

Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, Lisboa, Portugal

Bárbara Duque

Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, Lisboa, Portugal

INTRODUCTION PAPER

Abstract

The era of globalization brings about an increasing number of people that migrates and adapts to different cultures not only once, but multiple times in their lives. One of the central questions for social psychologists is how these different cultural experiences are processed and integrated into a person's cultural identity. To date, social psychology has mainly examined this issue from a biculturalism perspective. However, this does not correspond to the reality of multiple cultural experiences which assumingly all have an effect on people's self-conception as cultural beings. In this paper it is suggested that a transcultural perspective is better fitted to respond to these new forms of multiculturalism. The present paper clarifies what this concept is and to what extent a transcultural identity is distinctive from a bicultural identity. A study conducted within a Master thesis project is briefly presented which aimed to examine the meaning of transcultural identity. This work has been conducted in partnership with a member of the Health for All (H4A) research group at CIS-IUL and the High Commission for Migrations (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, ACM). A selection of the preliminary findings is briefly presented as well as implications of transculturalism for future research and applied areas.

Keywords: Transcultural identity, Transculturalism, Multiculturalism, Globalization.

Corresponding Author: Christin-Melanie Vauclair

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Edifício ISCTE, Cis-IUL.
Avenidas das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal (Email: melanie.vauclair@iscte.pt).

Introduction

The 21st century is an era of globalization, *i.e.* an increased international connectedness, in areas such as economy but also culture (Steger, 2003). A growing number of people is – at various points in their lives – travelling, studying, and working in places outside their home country. Portugal is a good example of people's international mobility: 40% of all Portuguese are emigrants and live in a foreign country.¹ Their intercultural experiences are accompanied by adaptation processes which can alter to some extent their cultural worldviews and values (Berry, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). International migration also gives rise to more cross-cultural relationships and marriages. For instance, intermarriage rates between spouses of different ethnicities doubled between 1980 (6.7%) and 2008 (14.6%) in the United States (Pew Research Center, April 2011).

International migration and the formation of increasingly culturally diverse families open up a number of intriguing questions for social psychologists. One central question is how different cultural experiences and heritages are integrated in a person's cultural identity. Social psychology has usually studied this issue from the perspective of biculturalism (*e.g.*, Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), *i.e.* individuals who have been raised in two different cultures since birth. Bicultural individuals may either mix the two cultures (alike combining the best of both worlds) or switch between the two cultural frameworks depending on the context (*e.g.*, Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Yet, very recently some researchers have pointed out that in our globalized world, individuals are not always socialized into different cultures from birth, but can go through multiple cultural experiences throughout their lifespan which should have an effect on how they deal with cultural differences (Lücke, Kostova, & Roth, 2013). It has been suggested that multicultural experiences can give rise to new cultural forms, not found in either of the cultures in contact (Berry, 2003). Theorists within the social science disciplines of philosophy and cultural studies have referred to this as transculturalism (*e.g.*, Epstein, 2009) and see the formation of transcultural identities as the future selves in a globalized world. However, social psychology has largely neglected to study transcultural identities as a social psychological phenomenon.

In this paper, we will present work by a member of the Health for All (H4A) group who has supervised a master thesis from the Westfalen Catholic University of Applied Sciences (Cologne, Germany) in the area of Social Work. This research has been conducted in collaboration with the High Commission for Migrations (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, ACM) in order to examine the meaning of transcultural

⁽¹⁾ <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Portugal-MIGRATION.html>

identities for people with multicultural experiences who are currently residing in Portugal. We will first define the concept of transcultural identity, then present the aims and goals of the current project and finally provide a hint of the preliminary findings. We will also highlight future research avenues and implications of the transcultural identity concept for applied areas such as Social Work. We conclude with an outlook on this promising new cultural identity concept.

Transcultural identity

Culture shapes the way people think, how they make sense of their environment and who they are. Culture is usually defined as a shared meaning system, in terms of values and beliefs, among members of a cultural group who have been subjected to the same cultural socialization experience (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). When it comes to the issue of multiple cultural experiences and how they are integrated into a person's identity, social psychology has mainly focused on biculturalism.

Biculturalism examines how individuals develop an understanding and competencies in two cultures (*e.g.*, Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). It usually focuses on the ability to speak fluently two languages and/or to behave appropriately in two different cultural settings. Individuals who have grown up under the exposure of two cultures may develop a bicultural identity, *i.e.* they strongly identify with both cultures. Hence, they internalize the two cultures through *early* socialization by peers and caregivers and their value structures and beliefs are *stable* over time.

Transculturalism can be seen as an extension of biculturalism in that it refers to individuals with multicultural experiences; yet, it also has some important particularities that render it inherently different from the notion of biculturalism. The term transculturalism was introduced as early as in the 1940s by social scientists in order to refer to the emergence of new cultural forms as a consequence of intercultural contact or 'metissage' in culturally diverse populations such as in Canada and the United States (Cuccioletta, 2001/02). It refers to the notion that people can develop an understanding of culture that *transcends* or goes beyond specific cultures by combining elements of more than one culture. In the following years, transculturalism has been discussed by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural theorists as a phenomenon accompanying globalization.

Intercultural contact which refers to the situation in which individuals with different cultural backgrounds, communicate and interact with each other (Cushner & Brislin, 1996), is an important prerequisite for transculturalism to develop. Much research in Social Psychology has dealt with the difficulties and cultural misunderstandings that

these situations may cause. Yet, it is also an important learning environment in which individuals may acquire new cultural knowledge and skills and therefore engage in a form of cultural learning. The main idea of transculturalism is that this form of cultural learning can result in new insights that would not be possible without intercultural contact. These insights do not pre-exist in any culture as part of the original meaning system, but they resonate with the various cultures (cf. Lücke *et al.*, 2013). They develop out of the necessity to process multiple cultural experiences and to engage in meaning-making of different cultural forms as well as possible cultural conflicts and inconsistencies.

In terms of identity, transculturalism results not so much in a social, but a personal identity based on the multiple intercultural contact experiences that can have a long-lasting effect on a persons' values and worldview (*i.e.*, the set of assumptions about life and the physical and social worlds, Koltko-Rivera & Mark, 2004). We propose that these effects are inherently unique for three reasons: first, individuals differ in the kinds of multiple cultural experience they go through; second, they differ in terms of how they learn from an intercultural contact situation and how they process any conflicts and inconsistencies; third, they differ in regard to their choice of cultural elements they want to integrate into their selves. Hence, contrary to a bicultural identity in which significant others (*e.g.*, caregivers) usually play a crucial role in the development of a bicultural identity, transcultural individuals autonomously and consciously choose the cultural elements they want to internalize so that they become part of who they are. It is therefore a *dynamic* or so-called *fluid* form of identity (cf. Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012) in the sense that cultural elements that are integrated into the self-concept can change constantly through new intercultural experiences. In sum, it is rather a personal than a social identity because multiple cultural experiences result in a self-definition in terms of personal beliefs, norms and values rather than in identification with a particular group (*e.g.*, in terms of nationality) that indicates group belongingness and differentiation from dissimilar others (cf. Deschamps & Devos, 1998).

Previous theorists have compared transculturalism as well as multiculturalism to a mosaic-like pattern (*e.g.*, Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014; Cuccioletta, 2001/02). Both perspectives use the mosaic metaphors to illustrate what individuals with multiple cultural experiences have in common and to what extent they are different from others. A mosaic is a pattern produced by the arrangement of small pieces such as tiles. The small pieces may illustrate the different cultural elements that have been internalized. Yet, a mosaic is also more than the sum of its parts since the arrangement of all parts creates a new pattern. This is comparable to the individual's transcultural identity which is made up of different, but interconnected cultural elements that form a new identity. Hence, what is common in transcultural individuals is that their identity

is a ‘patchwork’ of different cultural elements due to multiple intercultural experiences. However, they differ in regard to the actual cultural contents that make up their identity. Alike a patchwork or mosaic, the result is something new and very unique which is at the focus of the transculturalism perspective. In contrast, the multiculturalism approach in social psychology focuses more on how individuals develop a sense of national, cultural, ethnic, and racial group membership despite the patch-work of culturally diverse experiences (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014).

More recently, a cognitive connectionist perspective of multiculturalism has been offered which is fully compatible with the concept of transculturalism put forward here. Lücke and colleagues (2013) proposed that the experience of multiculturalism results in the internal representation of multiple cultural meaning systems which can take the form of five different stylized cognitive patterns: compartmentalization (separate cultural cognitions), integration (interconnected cultural cognitions), inclusion (enhanced home cultural cognitions with added foreign culture elements), convergence (merged cultural cognitions consisting in overlapping schemas), and generalization (new cultural cognitions of meta-cultural schemas). The latter resembles very much the transculturalism concept advocated here since it refers to the emergence of new cultural cognitions. Generalization is based on learning from many cultures, but it involves the active and self-initiated generation of new cultural content that is less contextual and therefore universally applicable – or in our words, it *transcends* specific cultures. Lücke *et al.* (2013) called this cognitive pattern *generalization* since new non-culture specific metacognitions are created that allow operation *across* different cultural contexts. Hence, this allows cultural understanding and interpretation in many, even unfamiliar, cultural contexts. From a cognitive connectivist perspective, which is fully consistent with our conceptualization, individuals with a *generalized* cognitive pattern are not so much characterized by their knowledge and skills regarding various cultures (*i.e.*, culture content), but by a multicultural cognitive structure that represents the interconnectedness of different cultural schema (*i.e.*, cognitive structure). For instance, multicultural managers with a generalization pattern are unlikely to have a highly elaborated cultural understanding within and across different cultural contexts; however, they should have a potential for new insights and innovation. They can be seen as the individuals with a bird’s eye view when it comes to understanding cultural differences and similarities. A crucial difference to this cognitive perspective and our transcultural concept advocated here is that identification with the new non-culture specific meta-cognitions is not expected; however, we suggest that people may integrate them into their conception of who they are as cultural beings which opens up other avenues for research which can be more focused on social psychological issues.

One of the reasons why this form of cultural cognition or the idea of a transcultural identity has not been researched yet in social psychology might be due to the fact that it is not characterized by stable cultural elements (e.g., knowledge about culture-specific meaning systems), which renders it somewhat more difficult to assess with psychometric methods. Nevertheless, it should be in the realm of individuals' experience if it is indeed a psychological phenomenon and not just a theoretical construct. In order to probe into the question of what transculturalism means to individuals with multicultural experience, a project was developed within the scope of a Master thesis and with the partnership of the High Commission for Migrations (ACM) in Portugal.

The current project

A new concept raises many intriguing questions, for example, about its correlates with other psychological constructs. It could be that people with transcultural identities are more culturally sensitive and competent when they deal with people from different cultures. In order to assess these kinds of questions empirically, it is often very useful to develop questionnaires in which individuals' traits can be assessed as well as any other relevant constructs, so that associations between them can be examined. However, there is a dearth of research on transculturalism in personality and social psychology and contrary to the concept of bicultural identity, there is no instrument to date that assesses the construct transcultural identity. Hence, the main goal of the present study was to examine how laypeople with multicultural experiences (defined as having lived for at least 3 months in more than 2 different cultures), and who might regard themselves as transcultural, make sense of the concept transculturalism. We were also interested in examining what kinds of characteristics emerge that they deem as relevant for a person with a transcultural identity. The final objective was to extract items out of these reflections that could be part of a scale assessing transcultural identity.

Within the scope of the current project, a total of three focus groups (with up to 5 participants in each group) were conducted. One focus group was composed of students with multicultural experiences and the two other included members of ACM with multicultural backgrounds and who also interact with people from different cultures on a daily basis due to their work. Focus groups are discussion groups in which people are asked about their perceptions and opinions about a particular issue. They allow participants to interact with each other and stimulate each other's thoughts which can produce new insights that would not be possible without the interaction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This is highly beneficial for the investigation of more abstract

and difficult topics such as transculturalism. The focus group session in this study started with a brief introduction and was followed by a presentation about multiculturalism and the main concepts as derived from the literature (e.g., bicultural and transcultural identity). Participants were then asked to write down answers to some key questions in regard to the main topic (e.g., do you see yourself as a transcultural individual? If so, why?) which was followed up by a group discussion. The aim was to examine to what extent participants shared an understanding of transculturalism as proposed by the literature and whether they could provide personal and concrete examples of what *transcultural identity* means to them.

The preliminary results showed that participants largely agreed with the definition of transculturalism as suggested in the literature. For instance, they regarded it as a lifelong learning process that ultimately leads to a unique identity. However, there were also aspects mentioned that are usually not part of the definition of transculturalism. One example that was strongly voiced was the risk of experiencing identity confusion for people with transcultural identities. The social psychological literature has already suggested that processing multiple cultural experiences and integrating them into the self can be experienced as highly stressful (cf. Ward, Stuart, & Kus, 2011). Whether this aspect is part of developing a transcultural identity or rather a consequence of it, still remains to be answered. Nevertheless, this study provides some new insights into what transculturalism means to laypeople and how they experience a transcultural identity.

Implications for research and practice

The concept of transculturalism opens a number of new possibilities for research. Since transcultural individuals develop new non-culture specific meta-cognitions in an autonomous and conscious way, it is conceivable that their cognitive structure allows for more creative thinking (Lücke *et al.*, 2013). In fact, research on biculturalism has already found evidence for the notion that bicultural experience enhances creative thinking (e.g., Maddux, Adam & Galinsky, 2010). Yet, we suggest that it may not be the bicultural socialization in the form of dual language proficiency or socio-cultural skills as such that facilitates creativity and innovation, but that underlying these results is a form of transculturalism that bicultural individuals may develop. The development of a scale that assesses transcultural identities, as it is the goal of the project presented here is a first step towards empirically assessing the relative predictive power of biculturalism *versus* transculturalism on creativity.

It has been suggested that individuals with a transcultural identity are characterized by special psychological characteristics and competencies such as perspective consciousness which is the ability to question constantly the source of one's cultural assumptions and ethical judgments, leading to the habit of seeing things through the eyes of others (Slimbach, 2006). This is a highly valuable characteristic in intercultural contact situations in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings. If future research ascertains that transcultural individuals show indeed this kind of psychological characteristic, a goal for culture competence trainings might be to stimulate the development of transculturalism or a *bird's eye perspective* on cultural differences and similarities.

Researchers dealing with acculturation processes have also suggested that adaptation to the host culture may involve *creative* forms of acculturation in the sense that new cultural forms can be stimulated that are not found in either of the cultures in contact (Berry, 2003). This resembles very much the transculturalism perspective advocated here, yet, to the best of our knowledge, no systematic social psychological research has been conducted to examine whether multiple acculturation experiences may in some instances yield something completely different than the acculturation strategies proposed in the literature. It might be that current acculturation models, such as Berry's (2003) two-dimensional model of origin cultural identity maintenance and host culture adoption, need to be re-conceptualized to do justice to the more complex reality of multicultural individuals.

From a more applied perspective, there are numerous questions that arise from this topic. For instance, psychologists and social workers working in the field need to adjust to a society that becomes increasingly globalized. Therefore, the likelihood to deal with migrants and different cultural backgrounds increases substantially. It might be that professionals who have a transcultural identity themselves adjust more easily to this diversity and find more innovative solutions to problems caused by cultural differences than mono-cultural colleagues. As a consequence, a goal in human resources management may become to select transcultural individuals for specific tasks that require transcultural competencies to ensure the best possible fit between a person and the task at hand.

These are just some of many examples that illustrate the potential of this new identity concept for future research and its implication for practice.

Conclusion

International migration has always been part of human history, yet the 21st century is special in the sense that industrialization and technological advancements have made it much easier, cheaper and quicker to go to different places around the globe. As a consequence, many migrants no longer live and work in just one foreign country, but have multiple acculturation experiences throughout their lives. In a similar vein, families become more common in which parents are from different countries and raise their children in a cultural context that is again different to their own cultural origin. These new migration and family models, which are characterized by multiple cultural experience and heritage, do not correspond well to the biculturalism perspective that is still so widely advocated in the psychological literature in order to explain the formation of cultural identities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005) and acculturation processes (Berry, 2003). We foresee the need of a paradigm change in order to respond to the new globalized reality and the emerging multicultural and psychological phenomena of our century.

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