



## FlashReport

## An upside to bicultural identity conflict: Resisting groupthink in cultural ingroups

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## ABSTRACT

Bicultural individuals differ in the degree to which their cultural identities are integrated versus conflicting—Bicultural Identity Integration (BII). Studies of judgment find that biculturals with less integrated identities (low BIIs) tend to defy salient cultural norms, whereas those with highly integrated identities (high BIIs) conform. This study examined biculturals' judgment in a group decision-making context, focusing on individuals' reactions to consensus in cultural ingroups. Results showed that low (vs. high) BIIs are more likely to resist the group consensus when it is incorrect, but not when it is correct. These findings suggest that contrarian impulses of low BIIs can be channeled towards facilitating constructive conflict—resisting groupthink that results from cultural homogeneity. Implications for bicultural identity, motives, and organizational behavior are discussed.

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Research has portrayed bicultural individuals as chameleons who conform to cultural norms (e.g., Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Recent studies emphasize that biculturals' responses to cultural cues depends on their identity structure, such as the degree to which their two cultural identities are integrated versus conflicting—Bicultural Identity Integration (BII; Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Studies of private judgment (e.g., Benet-Martinez et al., 2002) find that individuals with integrated cultural identities (high BIIs) assimilate to norms of the primed culture, whereas those with conflicting cultural identities (low BIIs) contrast against them.

Accumulating evidence suggests that the contrast responses of low BIIs reflect identity-related motives (e.g., Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martinez, 2008). Mok & Morris (2009) proposed that low BIIs resist assimilating to cultural norms in order to not neglect their other cultural identity. Conversely, high BIIs can assimilate to cultural norms without leaving their other cultural identity behind. Research has focused on the processes that give rise to cultural contrast as a function of BII (e.g., Mok & Morris, 2009) yet has not delineated any boundary conditions. We propose that low BIIs contrast within the bounds of reason. We used a task with correct answers; contrasting from correct answers would be illogical.

We studied contrast (vs. conformity) to cultural norms in reactions to consensual judgments in cultural ingroups. We propose that lower BII engenders contrast more when the consensus is incorrect versus correct. According to theories of motivated reasoning, wishful thinking is bounded by epistemic concerns. People reach wished-for conclusions only when they can construct suitable justifications for them (Kunda, 1990). If low BIIs are motivated to defy cultural norms,

they may do so more when the group is inaccurate since this can be justified in terms of accuracy. Yet when the group is accurate, low BIIs would be unable to justify a contrasting response and hence be less likely to exhibit one. This study would inform whether low BIIs' contrast tendencies are motivated.

We examined this dynamic in a social conformity paradigm (Berns et al., 2005). Bicultural Asian-Americans were asked to judge as part of a team, whether pairs of three-dimensional objects were the “same” or “different” after mental rotation. Cultural norms were created by presenting participants with the responses of three “teammates” who together gave right or wrong answers roughly half the time. The cultural background of the ingroup was varied—teammates had Asian or American surnames. Prior studies found that low BIIs contrast against the norms of both of their cultures (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Hence, we expected that low BIIs would be more likely to challenge the group consensus regardless of the group's culture and this would be more prevalent when the consensus was incorrect.

Apart from BII, general individual differences may affect cultural conformity. Agreeableness (John, 1990) or need for closure (Fu et al., 2007; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) could drive individuals to think in consensus with their ingroup. To provide a stringent test of our hypothesis, we assessed the effect of BII beyond agreeableness or need for closure.

## Method

## Participants

Fifty Asian-Americans (ethnicity: Chinese,  $n = 39$ , Korean,  $n = 11$ ; 15 men; 25 first-generation, 25 second-generation; mean age: 22.92 years,  $SD = 5.58$ ) at Columbia University participated for \$7. Identification with American and East Asian culture, rated on a scale

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of 1 (*very weak*) to 7 (*very strong*) was 5.28 ( $SD=1.14$ ) and 4.94 ( $SD=1.43$ ), respectively. Ethnicity, sex and immigrant-generation did not affect the results, so they were dropped in the analyses.

### Materials and procedure

The study was computer-based. Participants were first asked to type their first initial and last name. Then they read the following study description:

In organizations, work assignments are often complex and require team effort and collaboration. We are interested in how people work in teams on complex tasks. To simulate complex assignments, you will be presented with pairs of 3-dimensional objects. Your task is to judge whether the objects can be rotated to match each other (hence called “same”) or no rotation can make them match (hence called “different”).

Then, participants were presented with two examples of object pairs that were the “same” or “different” after rotation. The 3-dimensional objects were from Shepard and Metzler (1971). Participants were asked to contact the researcher if they needed clarification of the answers or the instructions.

Next, participants learned they would be assigned to work as a team on the task. They were told their teammates were students who had previously participated in the study, and who had already viewed the objects and made their response. Before engaging in the task with their team, participants were asked to do five practice questions on their own. This was designed to exercise their accuracy in decision-making. In each question, participants were presented with a pair of objects and asked, “Are the objects below the same (can be rotated to match) or different (no rotation can make them match)?” Participants indicated their answer by clicking a box marked “same” or “different”, and were allowed as much time as they needed. Afterwards, the team assignment was made. Participants were told, “Please wait while we access the server for your teammates’ information.”

To enhance the credibility of the team assignment, a delay of 10-s was programmed before the process was completed. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the Asian or American condition. In the Asian [American] condition, participants read that their teammates were “T Chung,” “j. lee,” and “P. Hong” [“T Collins,” “j. lewis,” and “P. Holt”]. Participants were instructed to work with their team on the next 30 questions.

In each question, participants judged whether a pair of objects was the “same” or “different” as in the practice questions. An important

modification was that the responses of teammates appeared next to the objects, along with participant’s name, as recorded at the beginning of the study. This was to enhance the realism of the group manipulation, such as one’s responses being accountable to the team.

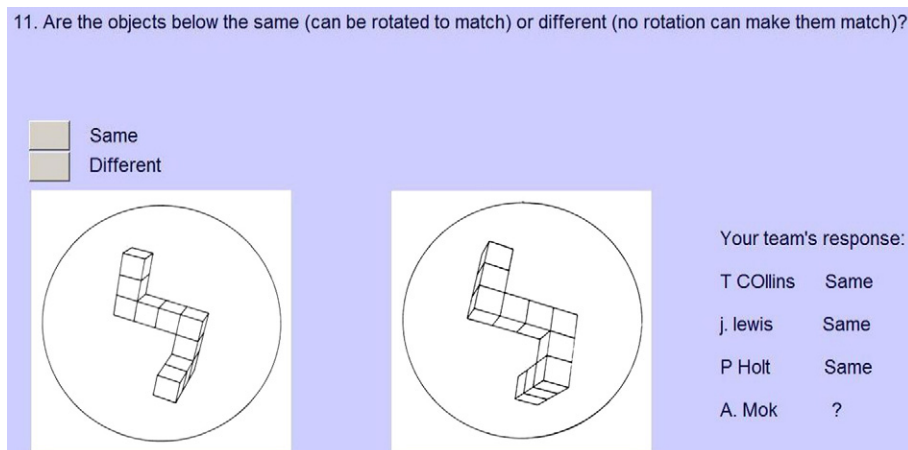
We used object pairs with angles of disparity ranging from 100 to 180 degrees (mean 137 degrees) for moderately difficult stimuli (Berns et al., 2005). Thus, incorrect responses by teammates would not appear strongly contrived. Out of the 30 questions, there were 12 trials in which the team was unanimously incorrect, 14 trials in which the team was unanimously correct, and 4 split-decision trials which were inserted as fillers to maintain believability about the team (e.g., 2 teammates answered “same,” whereas 1 answered “different”). Unanimous team answers were evenly split between “same” or “different.”

Afterwards, participants rated their task performance and that of their teammates on a scale of 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*very good*). They also rated their own overall accuracy and that of their teammates’ on a scale of 1 (*extremely inaccurate*) to 7 (*extremely accurate*). Ratings of self-accuracy and performance were correlated,  $r(50)=.78, p<.01$ , and averaged to measure perceived self-competence. Ratings of teammates’ accuracy and performance were correlated,  $r(50)=.82, p<.01$ , and averaged to assess perceived team competence. Participants also indicated how much effort they exerted and how difficult the task was on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Then, participants completed the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) using a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*); agreeableness was calculated by reversing and averaging the appropriate items. They also completed the 42-item Need for Cognitive Closure Scale ( $\alpha=.84$ ; NFCC; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). To assess BII, participants rated 4-items that tap harmony versus conflict between their bicultural identities (e.g., “I feel torn between Asian and American cultures”; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005), on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A BII composite was formed with higher scores reflecting higher BII ( $\alpha=.83$ ;  $M=4.36, SD=1.29$ ). Lastly, participants completed a demographic survey.

### Dependent measures

We focused on participants’ response to unanimous team answers. The proportion of contrast (vs. conformity) was computed for each condition—when the group was incorrect ( $M=.29, SD=.31$ ; see Fig. 1 for a screenshot) and correct ( $M=.05, SD=.08$ ).



**Fig. 1.** An example question in the mental rotation task with the group (American condition). Participants’ name (e.g., “A. Mok”) was presented with those of teammates to induce peer pressure. In the example shown, the objects are different but the group has unanimously said they are the same. If the participant responds “different,” it was coded as contrast (here the consensus was incorrect). If the participant responds “same” it was coded as conformity.

## Preliminary considerations

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. Ratings of task effort and difficulty were 5.10 ( $SD=1.11$ ) and 4.82 ( $SD=1.14$ ), respectively, suggesting that participants took the task seriously. Ratings of team competence ( $M=4.51$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) were above the scale midpoint,  $t(49)=4.16$ ,  $p<.01$ , suggesting that teammates' answers were considered reasonable. Perceived self-competence, team-competence, task effort or task difficulty did not vary by cultural condition or BII. Hence, task ability or motivation is unlikely to explain the results below.

## Results and discussion

To assess whether the BII effect on contrast is moderated by the accuracy of the ingroup, we fitted the contrast proportions to a consensus (incorrect vs. correct; within-subjects)  $\times$  BII (continuous) GLM, controlling for the culture of the group (Asian vs. American). (Initial analysis showed that culture of the group did not interact with any variables, so contrast was not more prevalent in one cultural group than another.) There was a main effect of consensus,  $F(1, 47)=20.19$ ,  $p<.001$ , indicating that participants were more likely to oppose an incorrect than a correct consensus. There was a main effect of BII,  $F(1, 47)=7.09$ ,  $p<.05$ , revealing that lower BIIs were more likely to contrast. It also showed the predicted interaction of consensus and BII,  $F(1, 47)=8.57$ ,  $p<.01$ , indicating that the effect of BII on contrast varied by the accuracy of the consensus.

To further understand the interaction, we computed the partial correlation between BII and contrast for the consensus conditions together and separately, controlling for the culture of the group. Individuals with lower BII contrasted more overall,  $r(47)=-.36$ ,  $p<.05$ . Qualifying this pattern, lower BIIs contrasted more when the consensus was incorrect,  $r(47)=-.39$ ,  $p<.01$ , yet not when the consensus was correct,  $r(47)=-.02$ ,  $p=.88$ . Controlling for agreeableness or NFCC did not affect the results, and these variables were unrelated to contrast. This speaks to the robustness of BII in influencing contrast, and discriminately such as when the cultural norm is inaccurate, *not* when it is accurate.

## General discussion

Under what circumstances might biculturals challenge norms in cultural ingroups? We find that contrast from ingroup norms or

consensus depends on biculturals' identity integration and the group's accuracy. Lower BIIs were more likely to contrast, and only when the group was incorrect. This response was unaffected by the culture of the ingroup, or by general conformity motives, such as agreeableness or need for closure.

### Theoretical implications

Our findings are novel in several ways. First, while our proposed direction of effects is consistent with past studies of cultural priming and BII (e.g., low BII engenders cultural contrast), those studies measured private, perceptual judgments (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). We show effects of BII, for the first time, on public choices and interpersonal interactions.

Second, we examined a role of BII in cultural contexts where there is a definitively accurate answer (cf. Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Consistent with the idea that people reach motivated conclusions within the bounds of reason (Kunda, 1990), low BIIs' contrast was unique to incorrect group judgments. Low BIIs may contrast more when the group is incorrect as this response is favored by their contrarian motives and can be justified in the name of accuracy. Correct group judgments, however, are likely to constrain low BIIs' desire to contrast because opposing the consensus would be difficult to justify. We identify a boundary condition of contrast as a function of BII (based on epistemic concerns). This link to motivated reasoning extends the evidence that low BIIs' contrast reflects motives (Zou et al., 2008) rather than perceptions of primes as self-discrepant (Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martinez, 2006).

Third, we reveal that contrast by low BIIs can yield adaptive consequences, such as resisting groupthink in cultural ingroups (e.g., Janis & Mann, 1977). Past studies have documented low BIIs' contrast in contexts that seem dysfunctional (Mok, Cheng, & Morris, 2010); the current research shows that this is not inherently so. Diversity research suggests that surface-level (e.g., ethnicity) and deep-level (e.g., values) differences in groups promote dissent from the majority (Phillips & Loyd, 2006; Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006). Although biculturals are always "half-different" from the two cultural groups with which they are associated, our research implies that not all biculturals resist conformity pressures unless they have low BII. Thus, deeper-level characteristics such as identity structures can influence contrast from ingroup norms.

Studies comparing conformity in Asian versus Western cultures have mixed findings (Bond & Smith, 1996). Our participants were not

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
(1) Culture of ingroup (1: Asian, 2: American)	–	–															
(2) Sex (1: Male, 2: Female)	1.70	.46	.04														
(3) Immigrant-generation	1.50	.51	.04	.22													
(4) American identification	5.28	1.14	.07	.08	.35*												
(5) Asian identification	4.94	1.43	-.13	-.09	-.10	-.15											
(6) BII	4.36	1.29	-.22	.19	.22	.27	-.21										
(7) NFCC	3.67	.45	.04	-.20	-.18	-.29*	.03	-.22									
(8) Agreeableness	4.74	1.03	.04	.11	.18	-.31*	.28*	-.02	-.01								
(9) Perceived self competence	5.29	1.28	-.06	-.26	-.17	.07	-.02	-.13	-.06	-.37**							
(10) Perceived team competence	4.51	.87	-.13	-.02	-.22	.10	.07	-.21	.02	-.15	.23						
(11) Task effort	5.10	1.11	.13	.18	.09	-.15	.08	-.07	.23	.16	.14	-.09					
(12) Task difficulty	4.82	1.14	.23	.17	.23	.12	.13	.17	-.05	.19	-.51**	-.29*	.21				
(13) Baseline performance	4.40	.93	-.18	.19	-.04	.03	-.12	.30*	.06	-.10	.06	-.27	.24	-.20			
(14) Contrast to incorrect consensus	.29	.31	-.08	-.02	-.25	-.02	.06	-.36*	.06	.11	-.15	.33*	-.25	.09	-.67**		
(15) Contrast to correct consensus	.05	.08	.18	.06	.28*	-.06	.07	-.06	.13	.20	-.31*	-.28*	-.19	.29*	-.49**	.21	
(16) Overall contrast	.16	.16	-.02	-.01	-.15	-.03	.07	-.34*	.10	.15	-.22	.22	-.28*	.17	-.75**	.96**	.47**

Note.  $N=50$  Bicultural Asian-Americans.

\* $p<.05$ .

\*\* $p<.01$ .

more conforming to Asian versus American peers. Our findings are more consistent with research that BII influences cultural (non) conformity and low BII relates with contrasting against the norms of both cultures (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Low BIIs may resist assimilating to cultural norms because conformity risks leaving behind their other cultural identity. High BIIs, with integrated cultural identities, could enter situations calling for one cultural identity without neglecting their other cultural identity (Mok, 2010).

### Practical implications

Low BIIs' tendency to challenge incorrect group consensus may be vital to enhancing group performance. In work teams, low BIIs may be effective in playing the devil's advocate or the whistle blower. They might be more comfortable with dissenting than high BIIs, and voice their different perspectives or disagreement with the group more often. Diverse opinions or a minority view helps improve the quality of group decision-making (Moscovici, 1976; Surowiecki, 2004; for exceptions, see De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). Work teams with low BIIs may likewise gain competitive advantage because they are more willing to express divergent ideas (Mok & Morris, 2010) or share unique information. This could enhance team creativity and innovation.

In organizations, low BIIs could have particular advantages in oversight roles such as compliance and risk control. A chronic problem is that overseers become captured by social ties to the people they monitor. When auditing international offices of a global organization, for example, low BIIs could be less likely to accommodate to local cultural norms, especially when investigating potential wrongdoing.

Future work should investigate biculturals conformity to groups with culturally dissimilar members. Research could also elucidate the mechanisms by which BII influences group conformity, for example, whether cost-benefit evaluations of one's behavior mediate the relationship (Louis, Taylor, & Douglas, 2005).

### Conclusion

Conformity is a pervasive part of human experience. Whether conflict is experienced in one's cultural identities has implications for resisting the group consensus when it is incorrect. This reflects the notion that "human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted" (King, 1963, p. 100).

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