

Acculturation attitude and its effect on work engagement: a case of professional Chinese immigrants in Australia

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Abstract. Based on Berry's seminal work on acculturation process, this study investigates the individual differences of professional Chinese immigrants in terms of their attitudes toward acculturation, and the relationship between acculturation attitudes and work engagement of professional Chinese immigrants in the Australian workplace. Our survey on a sample of 220 professional Chinese immigrants reveals that those immigrants have a predominant preference to maintain their home culture. The professional Chinese immigrants adopting assimilation attitude have significantly higher level of work engagement than those who adopt separation and marginalization. This study provides useful information for organizations to manage immigrant employees via effective acculturation programs.

Keywords: Acculturation, Australia, Chinese immigrants, work engagement, professionals

1. Introduction

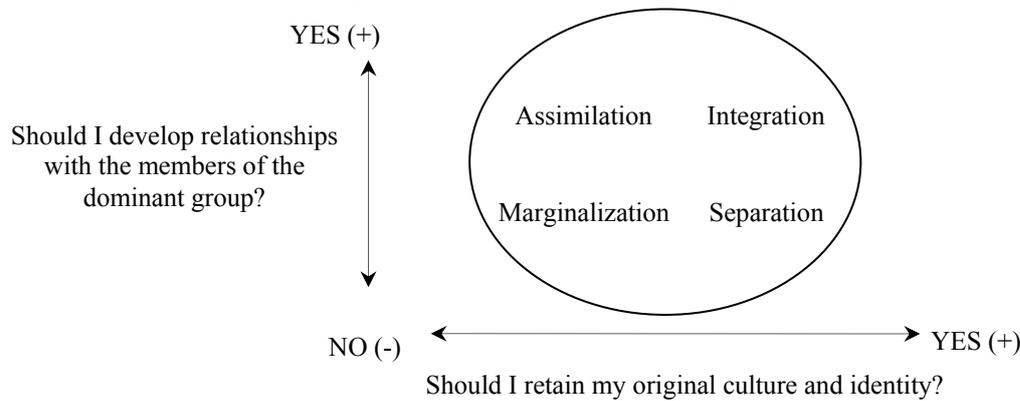
With people from more than 200 countries speaking about 300 languages making up the Australian community, Australia has one of the most cosmopolitan populations in the world and has already benefitted enormously from the diverse people, drawn from a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds [1]. According the 2006 Census, there were more than 206,000 Chinese immigrants in Australia in 2006. Percentage-wise this amounted to 4.7 per cent of the total overseas-born population [2]. Though relatively a small portion of the total Australian population (1%), the Chinese is among the largest non-English speaking minority in Australia today [3]. Many scholars repeatedly argue that diversified immigrants, like a rich ore, contain a large pool of potential resources in terms of expertise, connections, creativity, and innovation capacity [4-6]. Such diversity could only be effectively managed after understanding the immigrants' acculturation experience and the role of individuals' acculturation attitudes on work-related outcomes such as employee's engagement, commitment, and job satisfaction [7-9]. This paper fills a void in the literature by studying the relationship between professional Chinese immigrants' (PCIs') acculturation attitudes and work engagement. To do so, we first present the theoretical background for the research model and related hypotheses. After a description of the research method, the key findings are provided.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

In multicultural societies, ethnic groups and their individual members, in both the dominant and non-dominant situations, must deal with the issue of how to acculturate, which is carried out by working out two issues. These two issues involve *cultural maintenance* (to what extent the cultural identity and good relationship with the native culture should be maintained) and *contact and participation* (to what extent the host cultural identity and good relationships with the host groups should be developed) [10-12]. When the two questions are considered simultaneously, an integrated model is generated to posit four acculturation attitudes (Figure 1).

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In Figure 1, these two relevant issues are addressed using attitudinal dimensions represented by bipolar arrows. Generally positive or negative responses (“yes” or “no” responses) to these questions intersect to define four acculturation strategies of *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization*. According to Berry [10, 13], when individuals do not want to maintain their original culture and aim at complete absorption into the host culture, they are hiring the *assimilation* strategy. By contrast, if individuals strongly retain their cultural identity and view the relationships with host culture as unimportant, they are adopting the *separation* strategy. When people are interested in maintaining their original culture during daily interactions with the host cultural groups, the *integration* strategy is their option. Finally, when individuals lose their original culture without establishing ties with the new culture, *marginalization* has occurred.



Source: adapted from Berry, 1997

Fig. 1: Acculturation attitudes of immigrants

Compared with the overwhelmingly negative bias of psychology, increased attention has been paid to what is coined as *positive psychology*: the scientific study of human strength and optimal functioning [14]. Supplementing the traditional focus of psychology on mental illness, this approach is considered to be relevant for organizational behavior and psychology [15]. Bakker and Schaufeli [16] also point out the need for positive organizational behaviour research and claim that one of these positive traits and states is work engagement, which should be addressed but unfortunately still under researched. They note a large discrepancy between academic research and corporate interest in work engagement and call for more empirical studies on work engagement.

Work engagement is a burgeoning research field which is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by *vigour*, *dedication*, and *absorption*” [17]. Engaged employees have high levels of energy and effective connection with their work activities, are enthusiastic about their work, and instead of stressful they look upon their work as challenging and see themselves as able to deal well with demands of their jobs. Various studies have obtained associations of work engagement with meaningful organizational outcomes including task and contextual performance [18], in- an extra- role behaviours [19], financial turnover at the end of the work shift [20], intention to quit and organizational commitment [21], and service quality as rated by customers. Given that work engagement is an important indicator of occupational well-being for both organizations and employees, more research attention should be given to the level of employees’ engagement as well as its antecedents to facilitate more favourable organizational outcomes. However, research on engagement has just started and there are many questions that still need answering [22], especially in the area of immigrant employees’ work engagement. After an extensive literature review, even no one existing single study addressed immigrant employees’ work engagement was found, let alone the potential relationship between acculturation attitudes and work engagement. More acculturated immigrant employees was assumed to have more positive job attitudes [23], whereas work engagement was found to be moderately and positively correlated with traditional job attitudes [18]. Thereby, it is assumed that more acculturated PCIs will have higher levels of work engagement.

Hypothesis 1: PCIs who adopt *assimilation* attitude have higher level of work engagement than those who adopt *separation* attitude and *marginalization* attitude in the Australian workplace.

Hypothesis 2: PCIs who adopt *integration* attitude have higher level of work engagement than those who adopt *separation* attitude and *marginalization* in the Australian workplace.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

A thousand and fifty PCIs residing in Australia were invited to complete a questionnaire survey. A total of 220 usable questionnaires were obtained, resulting in a response rate of 21 per cent. All participants were first generation immigrants who were born and raised in mainland China. Most participants (88.5 per cent) came from Melbourne and Sydney where the Chinese immigrants increasingly congregate [1, 2]. Sixty-four per cent of questionnaires were completed in English, while 36 per cent were completed in Chinese. The average age of the respondents was 43 years old with 72.8 per cent falling in the 31 to 50 age group. The majority of participants immigrated to Australia before 35 years old.

3.2 Procedures and data collection

Data were collected from October 2009 to February 2010. A non-probability sampling method was adopted. Individual participant was selected via the respondent-driven sampling (RDS) method among PCIs who live and work in Australia. The seed participants in this study were mainly recruited via friendship groups of the researchers and accessible Chinese associations in Australia. Individual PCIs were initially approached by email with a brief explanation of the research. Once they expressed an interest in participation, survey packets including a survey statement, an English-version questionnaire, and a Chinese-version questionnaire were sent to them. Respondents were encouraged to choose freely to complete the survey in either English or Chinese. Questionnaires were collected by one researcher in person, by e-mail or mail.

3.3 Measures

Demographic information: This part collected the participants' demographic information such as age, age at migration, sex, marital status, education and working experience in China and Australia, length of residence in Australia, and organizational tenure.

Acculturation strategy scale: This scale was adapted from the Acculturation Attitudes Scale developed by Kim [24]. The original scale consisted of two set of subscales (16 items per subscale), one was used to explore the Korean-born immigrants' desire toward developing relationships with the Americans, and the other was used to examine the Korean immigrants' strategy towards maintaining Korean culture. In this study, the original scale was adapted through changing the word Korean to Chinese. Six items were selected to assess attitude toward traditional culture (*culture maintenance*), and seven items were selected assess attitude toward developing relationships with the host groups (*relationship development*). Participants were asked to express their attitude through a 5-point Likert-type scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The alpha coefficient for *relationship development* was .74 and *culture maintenance* was .78.

Work engagement scale: This study employed the 9-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova [15]. All the items were scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The scale examines three aspects of work engagement including vigour, dedication, and absorption. Coefficient (Cronbach) alpha was calculated to be .92.

4. Results

4.1 Classification of acculturation attitudes among PCIs

When *culture maintenance* and *relationship development* scales are subjected to a bipolar split, classification of the four acculturation attitudes could be achieved: low *culture maintenance* -high *relationship development* scores indicates *assimilation*, high *culture maintenance* -high *relationship*

development scores signifies *integration*, high *culture maintenance* -low *relationship development* scores represents *separation*, and low *culture maintenance* -low *relationship development* scores points to *marginalization*. Sample median split procedure was utilized to code subjects into four acculturation attitudes. The results of acculturation attitudes categorization were the same for using medians and means as the split points (Table 1). These results indicate that most (30.0%) of the PCIs preferred to maintain their traditional culture without developing relationships with the members of the host group, identifying *separation* as the most popular acculturation attitude among PCIs, followed by *integration* and *marginalization*.

Table 1: General Acculturation Attitudes among PCIs

Acculturation attitude	M (SD)				Total (N = 220)	Md
	Assimilation (N ₁ = 41)	Integration (N ₂ = 58)	Separation (N ₃ = 66)	Marginalization (N ₄ = 55)		
Culture maintenance	2.91 (.44)	3.83 (.32)	3.77 (.28)	3.01 (.33)	3.43	3.50
Relationship development	4.33 (.23)	4.30 (.27)	3.56 (.27)	3.47 (.37)	3.88	3.86
Percentage (%)	18.6	26.4	30.0	25.0	100	

4.2 The effect of acculturation attitude on work engagement

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was performed to investigate acculturation attitude groups difference in work engagement. Values of skew and kurtosis were firstly calculated for the distribution of scores for work engagement. The value for skew (-.037) was divided by the standard error of the skew (0.17), yielding a z-score (-2.23) which was interpreted to be significant as it exceeds an absolute value of 2. A similar procedure was conducted for kurtosis where the value for kurtosis (0.22) was divided by the standard error of kurtosis (0.33). This yielded a z-score (0.67) which was interpreted to be not significant as it did not exceed an absolute value of 5. The score for this variable were first reflected, and then a square-root transformation was applied, and, to maintain the rank order of the original raw scores, was again reflected, to produce a new variable (*engage_sq*). Following the same general procedures, values for both skew (0.12, $p > .001$) and kurtosis (-0.17, $p > .001$) of the transformed scores were found to be not significantly different to those of a normal distribution. The transformed variable was used in ANOVA to represent the concept of work engagement. Normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, and multicollinearity were checked with no serious violations noted. Levene's test was not significant, $F(3, 216) = 0.86, p > .05$, indicating the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated. Statistically significant differences in work engagement levels across the four acculturation attitude groups were found, $F(3, 216) = 4.45, p < .05$. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test indicated that PCIs who adopted *assimilation*, $M = 1.52, SD = .29$, displayed significantly higher mean ratings of work engagement than PCIs who adopted *separation*, $M = 1.34, SD = .29$, and PCIs who adopted *marginalization*, $M = 1.36, SD = .27$. Thereby, hypotheses 1, stating that PCIs who adopt *assimilation* attitude would have higher level of work engagement than those who adopt *separation* and *marginalization*, was supported. The mean ratings of PCIs from *integration* attitude group ($M = 1.42, SD = .24$) and *marginalization* attitude groups were found to not significantly differ from each another, resulting in the rejection of hypotheses 2.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Dawning on acculturation theory and previous studies of immigrants' acculturation, this research has explored the individual differences in PCIs' acculturation strategies in terms of *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization*, and the relationship between these strategies and their job satisfaction. The findings lead to two main conclusions. First, PCIs have a predominant preference to retain their heritage identity and maintain strong relationships with Chinese culture. Second, acculturation strategies do influence individual PCI's level of work engagement. The findings of this study suggest that companies should develop acculturation-related programs to help native-born employees and managers to increase their cultural sensitivity, awareness, and competence in working with and assisting immigrant employees. This is

because immigrant employees' acculturation attitudes could also be impacted by the majority's inclusion tendency and organizational climate [25, 26]. Immigrant employees could feel being accepted in the workplace if they are given the message that their distinct characteristics and cultural values are valued, which will result in positive psychological outcomes and work-related attitudes [8].

6. References

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