National Identity as a Source of Knowledge: Implications for Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper aims to answer the following question: What are employees' experiences with their national identities in the context of a geocentric organizational culture?

> *Transnational processes and identities will be among the major social, political, and economic phenomena of the twenty-first century.*
> *(Gossen, 1999, p. vii)*

Each individual belongs to many social groups (e.g., gender, age, profession, race, or familial status) and, hence, has "multiple *potential* social identities" (Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2001, p. 73). Therefore, today's organizations represent a kaleidoscope of identities. Organizations are composed of groups that are formed around professions, geographic locations, functional divisions, and employee age, experience, gender, or religion, among many others (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Corley, 2007). These identities coexist simultaneously, overlap or compete; the significance of each of these identities to an individual depends on the context (Nkomo & Stewart, 2006; Sen, 2006). The context of international business, where employees from different national backgrounds interact daily, brings sharp awareness to one's national identity (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003). National identity refers to one's "self-location in a group and … feelings of closeness to and pride in one's country and its symbols" (Citrin et al., 2001, p. 74). National identity cannot simply dissolve or be dropped (Dahles & Hees, 2004). In the context of international business, the meaning of national identity to employees has been studied in the context of international mergers (e.g., Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003), strategic alliances (e.g., Marrewijk, 2004), and multinational companies (e.g., Jack & Lorbiecki, 2007). The meaning of national identity to employees has not been studied in the context of global corporations, which represent the fourth and the last phase in a company's global status evolution (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2000). This paper reports findings from a larger phenomenological study that examined how employees with different national identities experience a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation. In particular, this paper discusses the study findings round the following question: What are employees' experiences with their national identities in the context of a geocentric organizational culture?

Social identity

Contemporary research on social identity within psychology, sociology, and organization studies is based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). This group identification process consists of three components: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional. The cognitive component involves one's recognition of the group membership. The evaluative component refers to some value one decides to attach to this recognition. The emotional component refers to "an emotional

investment" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 2) in the recognition and evaluation. The three components make the multidimensionality of the concept of social identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).

National Identity

National identity involves "feelings of closeness to and pride in one's country and its symbols" (Citrin et al., 2001, p. 74), "ways of being and sense of place and belonging" (Byrne, 2007, p. 509). National identity is constructed through lived experiences, everyday practices, and stories and myths. National identity is more symbolic than related to a nation's political ideology (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Political ideology does not affect people's deep and all-encompassing love for their country. Regardless of political changes, people maintain their deep attachment to their homeland. People with strong national identity engage in activities to improve their country's present and future. For example, they pay more attention to politics, stay abreast of current national news, and are more likely to vote.

"National identity does not merely imply the embodiment of a cognitively constraining cultural outlook, as cross-cultural writers suggest, but is itself a flexible cultural creation into which people impute variable and fluctuating meanings" (Ailon-Souday, & Kunda, 2003, p. 1075). The meaning and significance of national identity, like other social identities, depends on the context. National identity does not dominate most people's every day lives; however, certain circumstances bring sharp awareness to national identity, its complexity and ambiguity.

Recently, research on international migration has challenged the traditional research on national identity, which argues that one person can have strong ties to only one country, recognized the flexibility and fluidity of some people's identification with a country, and started developing a concept of a transnational identity. A transnational identity results from "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement…[thereby] build[ing] social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders" (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994, p. 8). These immigrants live, work, make decisions, and develop identities within networks that simultaneously connect them to more than one country (Goldin, 1999). Due to the ties to more than one country, people have increased self-awareness (Nowicka, 2006) and are constantly re-constructing and renegotiating their national identities (Goldin, 1999). Their national identities are fluid and flexible. Their loyalty to more than one country might be conditional, depending, for example, on their satisfaction with economic opportunities or social acceptance in their new countries (Smith, 2007). Some may chose not to identify with any country at all.

National Identity and International Business Context

Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003) conducted a one year ethnographic study to understand the significance of national identity during a merger of an Israeli and an American company. Employees of the Israeli company utilized their national identity for two symbolic struggles to differentiate themselves from their American counterparts and to establish their superiority in the merger. Marrewijk (2004) studied the role of national culture in a strategic alliance of a Dutch telecom company and its two partners in former Dutch colonies, the Netherlands Antilles and Indonesia. The role of national culture was conceptualized as "ethnicization [or] the process of social construction of an organizational identity based upon a notion of shared national identity and shared cultural values" (p. 304). The partners in the former Dutch colonies used ethnicization as a strategic response to ethnocentric strategies employed by the dominating Dutch

company. Jack and Lorbiecki (2007) examined relationships between national identity and corporate identity at three British multinational organizations. These three organizations "have very publicly distanced themselves from their associations with British national identity" (p. 79). For example, one introduced a new logo on its product; another abbreviated its name to erase the word "British." The response from the employees of these companies in regards to the national identity was complex and contradictory.

Method

Phenomenological research aims to understand "how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Twelve participants were selected using criteria, convenience, and snow-ball sampling strategies. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. Data was analyzed inductively, using Moustakas's (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data.

The participants were born in different countries and regions, including North America, the Caribbean, Central and South America, Europe, and Asia. Eleven of the twelve participants attached their national identity to one or more country. Nine participants attached their national identity only to their country of birth. One participant attached his national identity to both his country of birth and to the country of residence and work. One participant did not attach his national identity to his country of birth and described himself in terms of the country of residence and work. One participant said that he did not identify himself with any one particular country.

Findings

The 12 participants in this study experienced their national identities as sources of knowledge about (a) the culture of their native countries and (b) self.

Knowledge about their Native Countries

The participants felt that their familiarity with the culture and language of their native countries, or the region, represent a source of knowledge. They felt that this knowledge is rather unique and, hence, distinguishes them from many other employees who do not have this knowledge (Kelman, 2001). The participants also shared that due to their cultural background, they have certain unique characteristics that are beneficial for their work in a global company. This unique knowledge and characteristics ultimately give them an advantage in terms of what they can contribute to the corporation.

For example, Miguel, who is Columbian, feels that his knowledge about his country and other countries in the region helps him to do his job better, for example, to attract customers. He said this knowledge helps him be "like a chameleon" (line 108). He explained, "you have to behave yourself depending on where you are right now working" (line 109). Miguel is responsible for eight counties, including Panama. He told a story about how he has to be a chameleon when talking to potential customers in Panama. Miguel knows that Panamanians do not like to be considered Central American, but Miguel's business card said that he represents the Central American region of Corporation A. Miguel has to politely apologize for that to potential customers and assure them that he knows Panama does not belong to Central America:

> If you talk to a Panamanian, [he/she says] "No, we are not Central American." [Miguel responds] "Well, can I give you my business card?" and it says "Central America and Caribbean" And they say "Central America and Caribbean, and where is Panama? We are not Central America; we are different." So you have to be very careful, "I am sorry, I

mean, it's a misunderstanding, everybody says that you are a part of Central America; I know you are not a part of Central America. Sorry about that. It's industry standards, they have to put it in my business card." (line 128-143)

Miguel added that knowledge of the region gives him "an advantage" (line 143) because he knows how to sell to different customers and, hence, he feels in his "comfort zone" (line 142).

Haans, who is Dutch, also thinks that his knowledge of the Dutch islands gives him an advantage. As an example, a potential customer in one of the Dutch islands did business with a company in the Netherlands for 25 years. Haans' corporation wanted to take this customer from their Dutch competitor. However, the client did not want to do business either with the U.S. or Latin America. He explained, "They fear that people from the Unites States would come in, and the United States are so big and the island is so small and there is no understanding" (line 447-449). The client refused three times and then Haans stepped in:

I showed up and I introduced myself and I said I live in the United States; they didn't want to do business with the United States. "I am from the United States, and it's a part of the South American region". They didn't want to do business in the South America, "Let's speak Dutch, I am originally from Holland." And they loved that. And we agreed that I'd take a special care of this island, that people are treated well, and they get what they pay for and that everyone understands them. (line 439-444)

Marie thinks that the fact that she is French and worked for her corporation in France prior to coming to work in the U.S. helps her and her team a lot. She gave an example of a recent project that also involved "the central team that is located in France and it turned out that I knew the key people in this central team in France, so I was able to contact them in France" (line 343-345).

Knowledge about Self

The participants also experienced their national identities as sources of knowledge about self. Working for global companies provided the participants with a multiplicity of interactions and relationships as a catalyst for reflection on the feelings, assumptions, and behaviors they have or had as nationals. This reflection leads to the participants' learning about self and changes in feelings, assumptions, and behaviors. For example, Eva said that working for her corporation raised her "awareness of how Brazilians behave". She explained that she used to have an attitude like other Brazilians: "Brazil is big enough, so we don't need to look at anybody else". She said when she lived in Brazil she wanted to do business only with Brazilians and only for Brazilians, "without asking 'Why?', 'Why can't you look outside?'". Now when she meets people with similar attitudes, she thinks, "Oh my goodness, I was exactly like that before".

Jose said that working for his corporation made him better understand himself. He said "[I became] more aware of who I am and more conscious of who I am". He added that "some of the things that [I do] I believe come from my Mexican background, but I don't think I would have this perspective if I did not have a chance to put myself in some other's shoes" (lines. Working for the global company gives him a "better reference point". He added

It has to do with the fact that this is a global company, so on any given day I am on a phone call or interactions with people that don't speak English as a first language, people from Europe, South America, Asia, India, other parts. So that's interesting.

When Nick started working for his corporation, "Everything was U.S.-driven; we [Americans] were taking the lead on everything; I think it was an American company; we are no longer". Working for a corporation that is no longer American made Nick realize that he does

not have "any type of authority or the edge or more influence than anybody else". He added, "it's been a wake up call, it's been very, very healthy". Nick said he can now see "arrogance" in others. Bob also realized that he was not the only one with the right answer. He said, "I have to kinda readjust my thinking as I engage other countries, and say [to myself] 'my method may not be the best method'".

Brian said that traveling in other countries helped him better appreciate his connection to his country, the U.S. As he put it, "[I] appreciate feeling safe, general security in the systems that we have to take care of ourselves, economic system, the transportation systems, you know, just getting your daily life done". At the same time he also realized that he and his colleagues have the same thing in common: They are far from home and their relatives and trying to do the best for their families. He explained:

> That's the thing about this office is that everyone is an outsider … everyone is in the same boat. They didn't grow up in Seattle, but they might grow up in Bogotá, and they are missing their families, just like I am, and essentially it's roughly the same travel time to go home there. Even there are differences in terms of where they grew up, there is that common thing: we are working here, we are away from our families, we are trying to make the best of it …but it's not the same with how we grew up.

Implications for Adult Education

Adult educators across the world work in different for-profit and non-profit contexts that bring together adult learners from various national backgrounds. The findings from this study can assist these adult educators in understanding how national identities of their learners and of the educators themselves shape the learning and teaching processes.

This study showed that one's national identity represents a source of knowledge about self. Working for the global companies provided the participants the multiplicity of interactions and relationships where they could reflect on some of the feelings, assumptions, and behaviors they have or had as nationals of their home countries. Therefore, an examination of students' national identities in an adult education classroom can help foster adult learners' "perspective consciousness" (Hanvey, 1976, p. 85). Perspective consciousness refers to the understanding that one's perspective on the world may not be shared by others and that this perspective has been shaped by forces that one cannot always know or realize. Facilitating perspective consciousness helps adult learners see beyond their immediate communities and acquire a more global perspective on their learning, working, and living.

This study also showed that one's national identity represents a source of knowledge that people bring with them to their workplace. Therefore, adult educators can examine their national identities to learn how their national identities shape what and how they teach. "How we understand the self shapes how we conceptualize learning, and that, of course, sets the parameters that define adult education as a field" (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 103). Understanding how their national identities influence their knowledge, values, experiences, and the learning context can help adult educators expose and challenge the dominant understanding of adult learning as "a depoliticized and decontextualized process" (Grace, 2001, p. 264). Such understanding can also foster adult educators' understanding their roles as educators in today's global world and connections to their diverse learners.

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