The Effect of Biculturalism on Responses to Mixed Emotional Experiences

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We investigate how differences in exposure to acculturation experiences and feelings of conflictedness about their cultural duality relate to biculturals’ responses to mixed emotional experiences. We found that mixed emotional experiences are associated with greater discomfort for biculturals who feel more (vs. less) conflicted about their cultural duality and for those who have relatively limited acculturation exposure. Among biculturals with greater feelings of conflictedness and more limited acculturation, availability of coping frames significantly lowers their negative evaluation of a message that elicits mixed emotions. This is the case because coping frames help these biculturals resolve the discomfort with mixed emotions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Mixed emotions arise in a variety of situations. People report feeling both happy and sad during important milestones (e.g., planning one’s wedding: Ottes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997) as well as everyday events (e.g., watching a movie: Larsen, McGraw, & Caccioppo, 2001). They also often experience oppositely valenced emotions when confronting issues close to their hearts such as those dealing with abortion and capital punishment (Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002). Simply put, mixed emotions are part of everyday life (e.g., Diener, Larsen, Levine, & Emmons, 1985).

The ubiquity and complexity of mixed emotions continue to intrigue scholars from several disciplines. In psychology and related fields, the focus mostly has been on identifying conditions under which people tend to experience mixed emotions (e.g., Diener, Colvin, Pavot, & Allman, 1991), resolving the debate over whether happiness and sadness can truly be experienced simultaneously (e.g., Larsen et al., 2001). When they do, feelings of discomfort often arise as a result of such a mixed emotional experience (e.g., Priester & Petty, 1996). Research also shows that when both positive and negative emotion systems are activated and accessible, the resultant mixed emotions (Newby-Clark et al., 2002) motivate individuals to either avoid the uncomfortable experience altogether (Nowlis, Kahn, & Dhar, 2002) or find ways to rid the discomfort once it is felt (Ramanathan & Williams, in press). Moderators of the aforementioned relationships recently have been identified as well. Findings reveal that older (vs. younger) adults and people of an East-Asian (vs. Western) cultural orientation respond more favorably to mixed emotional appeals due to their heightened propensity to accept duality (Williams & Aaker, 2002).

The present research builds on the existing knowledge of differences in responses to mixed emotional experiences by focusing on how bicultural experiences could help develop coping resources for managing mixed emotions. Many people nowadays have been exposed to and are influenced by more than one culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). For example, Asian Americans have been shown to possess both interdependent and independent selves due to being extensively exposed to and influenced by Eastern and Western cultures (Yamada & Singelis, 1999). Importantly, for many minority biculturals in the United States, experience of mixed emotions is a major part of their everyday phenomenology (Hong, Wan, No, & Chiu, in press). As such, successful management of mixed emotional experiences is a hallmark of ethnic minorities’ competence in adjusting to the mainstream culture. However, as we will discuss, not all bicultural individuals have the same level of bicultural expertise, or expertise in managing their dual cultural identities. Such expertise develops as bicultural individuals become submerged in the culture and develop an integrated (vs. compartmentalized) bicultural identity. We propose that the successful experience of constructing an integrated cultural identity could lead to the development of coping resources for managing mixed emotions.

If bicultural expertise contributes to effective coping of mixed emotions, in the absence of other coping resources, biculturals with higher levels of bicultural expertise would respond more favorably to mixed emotional experiences. However, when additional coping resources are available, biculturals with lower levels of bicultural expertise will benefit from these resources. Hence the effect of bicultural expertise on responses to mixed emotions would be attenuated. Interpretive frames for managing mixed emotional experiences, hereinafter referred to as coping frames, have been found to moderate receptiveness to mixed emotional experiences (Braun, 1999). These coping frames help to appease the discomfort felt among individuals who otherwise would react negatively to mixed emotional experiences.

Study 1 investigated attitudes toward an advertising appeal that elicited mixed emotions as a function of bicultural types (integrators or alternators) and availability of coping frames. Study 2 sought to replicate Study 1 results using acculturation exposure as a proxy for expertise in managing dual cultural identities and further examined the mediating role of felt discomfort in the relationship between acculturation history and responses to mixed emotional experiences. Finally, Study 3 provided a direct test of the hypothesized relationship of bicultural types and acculturation exposure (both as proxies for expertise in managing cultural duality) with responses to mixed emotional experiences.

Findings from the three studies indicate that biculturals with relatively greater acculturation exposure also tend to experience lower levels of conflictedness about their cultural duality. Moreover, both factors seem to contribute to expertise in managing cultural duality. More important, reactions to mixed emotional experiences differ according to how much expertise biculturals have in dealing with their cultural duality. In particular, mixed emotional experiences are associated with greater discomfort for individuals feeling more (vs. less) conflicted about their cultural duality and with more limited acculturation exposure. Further, biculturals high in cultural conflictedness and with limited acculturation exposure responded more favorably to a mixed emotional appeal with than without a coping frame. We argue and show that positive coping frames help those with lower levels of expertise in managing cultural duality resolve the discomfort that arises when appeals elicit mixed emotions. The current research therefore adds to the coping literature by showing that positive message frames can be used to help individuals cope with and appreciate experiences they otherwise may seek to avoid (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Millar & Millar, 2000).