

COMMENTARY

Employees' mindset matters: Leveraging cultural mindset to harness the benefits of organizational polyculturalism

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Valenzuela and Bernardo (2023) discussed various implications of diversity ideologies, including colorblindness, multiculturalism, and polyculturalism in organizations, with a focus on polycultural ideology at the organizational level. Extending this perspective, in this article we explore further how to harness the benefits of a polycultural organization more fully through a crucial lens of individuals' mindset about culture. We provide three potential pathways through which cultural mindset may play an important role in a polycultural organization. By shedding light on the intersection of organizational polyculturalism and individuals' cultural mindset, we hope to provide scholars and practitioners with a more comprehensive view of the potential precondition and ways in which organizational polyculturalism influences individual and organizational outcomes.

An important missing piece: Individuals' cultural mindset

Mindsets, or implicit theories and lay theories, are beliefs about whether some attributes are fixed or malleable, for example, a person's personality, ability, or social group to which they belong. In the context of culture, lay people hold different beliefs about the nature of culture and cultural differences across groups of individuals (Kung et al., 2018). Some people hold more strongly a *fixed cultural mindset* (aka. essentialist beliefs). They believe race and ethnicity, and the group differences associated with it, are immutable and a reflection of deep-seated qualities that are often biological (e.g., due to genetic differences). On the other end of the continuum, other people hold more strongly a *malleable cultural mindset* (aka. social constructionist beliefs). They believe race/ethnicity is a malleable concept and view each person's cultural background in context. That is, characteristics shaped by culture are socially constructed, learned, and fluid throughout life (rather than fixed). Albeit nascent, an emerging body of studies has started to emphasize that cultural mindset orients individuals to navigate cultural diversity in social and organizational life. For example, theoretical reviews suggested that among various individual differences, cultural mindset could play an especially important role in determining whether multicultural exposure results in positive or negative outcomes (Chao et al., 2015; Chao & Kung, 2015).

To be clear, cultural mindset and diversity ideology are two related yet conceptually distinct concepts. For instance, as Valenzuela and Bernardo suggested, multiculturalism's basic tenets do not involve the assumptions that cultures have to be separate and fixed, and yet it often and

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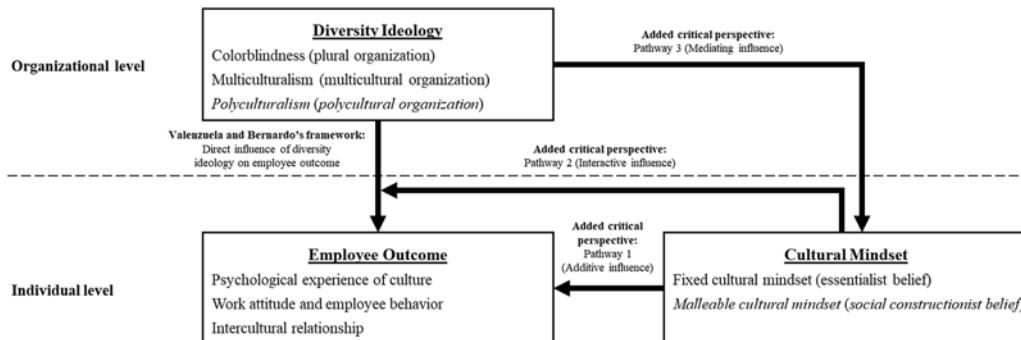


Figure 1. An extended organization–person framework of diversity ideology (polycultural organization) and employee outcome.

unintendedly implied and results in a message that different cultures are separate and unchanging (potentially inducing fixed cultural mindset as a mechanism). Moreover, cultural mindset and diversity ideology operate at different levels of analysis. Whereas diversity ideology is an organization-level construct describing the prescribed approach of policy and appropriate behavior within an organization, cultural mindset is personal—it resides in individuals' personal belief system. Further, cultural mindset should not be treated simply as an individual-level representation of diversity ideology. As discussed earlier, cultural mindset includes assumptions that go beyond one's approach to culture and involves beliefs about the *nature* of culture, such as whether culture has a biological origin. Organizational polyculturalism and cultural mindset can function independently, coexist, and interact in various ways. For example, an organization endorsing polyculturalism may have employees with a fixed cultural mindset. Scenarios like this are important to be considered both theoretically and practically.

Leveraging the role of cultural mindset in polycultural organizations

Focusing on polyculturalism, we extend Valenzuela and Bernardo's framework by proposing three additional pathways that integrate cultural mindset perspectives. These pathways systematically illustrate how individuals' cultural mindset can play an important role in determining the outcomes of a polycultural organization (see Figure 1).

Cultural mindset and polyculturalism jointly affect intercultural outcomes

Valenzuela and Bernardo suggested that polyculturalism may address potential cultural conflict by fostering connections and learning between different cultures through more intercultural contact and dialog. We add to the argument by suggesting the possibility that cultural mindset works in parallel with polyculturalism in intercultural interactions. Intercultural outcomes in organizations are predicted not only by the organization's polyculturalism but also by individual employees' cultural mindset (i.e., Pathway 1 in Figure 1).

Emerging research has shown that a malleable cultural mindset is associated with varied positive attitudes and behaviors in intercultural interactions. Kung et al. (2018) discovered that individuals with a more malleable (vs. fixed) cultural mindset had higher trust in their negotiation partners from different cultural backgrounds. Those intercultural dyads with a more malleable cultural mindset also achieved higher joint gains in negotiation, indicating more cooperation behaviors. In another field study with engineers in multicultural teams, Kung et al. (2020)

observed that those with a more malleable cultural mindset also possessed more positive attitudes toward intercultural interactions and showed higher competency working in the teams.

Theoretically, these effects of cultural mindset could take place in tandem with the impact of polyculturalism. For example, in a global organization with employees from different cultural backgrounds, a polycultural ideology could encourage employees to make more intercultural connections (e.g., implementing diversity team policies to ensure intercultural learning). Meanwhile, as employees with a more malleable cultural mindset have more positive attitudes toward other cultures, they may also proactively seek opportunities to form intercultural connections (e.g., crafting their jobs to learn new knowledge from colleagues from other cultures). Because these two processes take different approaches (top down vs. bottom up) but can complement each other, we suggest that diversity ideologies and cultural mindset can work in conjunction to create positive intercultural outcomes.

Cultural mindset moderates the effects of polyculturalism

Cultural mindset can also interact with organizational polyculturalism to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors (i.e., Pathway 2 in Figure 1). Individuals' cultural mindset may moderate the effects of organizational polyculturalism, such that a mindset that complements polyculturalism will amplify its benefits ("fit"), whereas a mindset that conflicts with the assumptions of polyculturalism will undermine its impacts ("nonfit").

Emerging research supports this potential fit effect between diversity ideologies and cultural mindset. Kung *et al.* (2023), for example, found that individuals with a malleable (vs. fixed) cultural mindset showed more support for diversity and reacted more positively to multiculturalism (vs. colorblindness). Such evidence highlights the importance of a fit between organizational ideology and individual mindset, as cultural mindset may determine the effectiveness of diversity ideology. Extending this work, we thus conjecture that endorsing a malleable (vs. fixed) cultural mindset is likely to further the merits of organizational polyculturalism. This is because the fundamental assumption of a malleable mindset—cultures can be construed and redefined based upon social situations—echoes the core premise of polyculturalism that cultures are constantly changing and fusing through interracial connections.

However, the favorable effects of diversity ideology might reverse when employees' mindset does not fit such ideology. Whereas polyculturalism encourages people to engage in intercultural connections, intercultural interactions do not end up with the same outcomes. The quality of intercultural interaction processes and outcomes depend on individuals' cultural mindset (see Chao *et al.*, 2015). For individuals holding a fixed cultural mindset, a polycultural organization that facilitates constant intercultural interactions may backfire and unintentionally cause more negative reactions (e.g., less support for promoting diversity). As Chao and Kung (2015) summarized, such negative reactions associated with a fixed cultural mindset in an intercultural setting are likely due to heightened perceived incompatibility among individuals from different cultural backgrounds and increased intercultural animosity and avoidance.

In short, although polyculturalism can have positive workplace benefits in theory, its fit with individual employees' cultural mindset needs to be carefully considered. Forcing a polycultural ideology with the ultimate goal of learning and connecting with distinct racial/ethnic groups for cultural fusion in the workplace might represent a cultural threat, particularly to employees with a fixed mindset, undermining the quality of intercultural experiences at work.

Polyculturalism shifts outcome via influencing cultural mindset

Finally, polyculturalism may effect change in intercultural attitudes and behaviors by influencing people's cultural mindset (i.e., Pathway 3 in Figure 1). Specifically, as polycultural organizational

policies and activities promote dynamic learning and connection among different cultures, when given enough time, the organization may gradually shift employees' mindset.

As prior mindset training research suggests, mindsets, relative to most personality variables, can be effectively induced situationally and changed (Murphy et al., 2011). An organization adopting a polycultural ideology may help employees come to realize that cultures are socially constructed and malleable. Although the notion that polyculturalism can shape employees toward a malleable cultural mindset has yet to be tested directly, previous studies suggest its plausibility. For instance, a longitudinal study by Pauker et al. (2018) showed that living in a racially diverse environment was related to White individuals' decreased endorsement of a fixed cultural mindset, which was further associated with increased cognitive ability to think flexibly. More direct evidence shows that the priming of multicultural ideology in an organization affects individuals' fixed cultural mindset (Study 2 in Kung et al., 2023). As exposure to certain situations is shown to change individuals' cultural mindset, it is reasonable to assume that an organization's environment has the power to shift employees' cultural mindset. In conjunction with our proposed first pathway, polyculturalism can offer employees beneficial outcomes and positive experiences of diversity at work via shifting them toward adopting a malleable cultural mindset.

Implications and conclusion

In sum, cultural mindset is an important factor to consider in the context of organizational polyculturalism. To effectively manage diversity, a comprehensive approach should take into account both organizational diversity ideologies as well as individual cultural mindset. From a practical standpoint, the understanding of the pathways between cultural mindset and diversity ideology can further inform recommendations for organizational and policy changes to address diversity issues. Training employees to have an adaptive cultural mindset is an example. This approach may not only strengthen positive intercultural relationships but also sustain and reinforce the effectiveness of polyculturalism in organizations. Mindset training can be inexpensive and efficacious. In the future, it is important to develop mindset training in the context of polyculturalism and assess its effectiveness. Without considering the interplay between polyculturalism and cultural mindset, our theory and practice would be limited in our ability to harness the benefits of organizational polyculturalism for individuals and organizations.

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