EMBRACING AMERICAN CULTURE
Structures of Social Identity and Social Networks
Among First-Generation Biculturals

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This study examines the relationship between bicultural individuals' identity structure and their friendship network. A key dimension of identity structure for first-generation immigrants is the degree to which the secondary, host-culture identity is integrated into the primary, ethnic identity. Among first-generation Chinese Americans, regression analyses controlling for cultural identification strengths show that more integrated identity structures are associated with larger and more richly interconnected circles of non-Chinese friends.

Keywords: bicultural identity structure; social networks

Past research has linked immigrants' strength of host-culture identification to their number of host-culture friends (Gudykunst, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1981). Yet psychological research suggests that cultural identifications vary in *structure* as well as strength (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003). Some Chinese American immigrants integrate their American identity into their primary Chinese identity and some do not. Are these integrated identity structures reflected in their friendship networks?

In the immigrant acculturation context, biculturals are individuals who identify strongly with both their primary ethnic culture and their secondary host culture (Berry, 1990). Within this category, there are individual differences in bicultural identity integration (BII)—the degree to which ethnic and host-culture identities are blended versus separated (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002). High BII individuals identify with the statement "I am Chinese-American," whereas low BII individuals identify with the statement "I feel like a Chinese in America." The present study focuses on first-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States (cf., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Because they were raised in Chinese households and lived in Chinese societies prior to the United States, their Chinese identity is primary and their American identity is secondary. Thus, identity integration entails bringing their American identity into their Chinese identity. We argue that immigrants who accept the host culture into their subjective identities accept the host culture into their social networks.

STRUCTURES OF IDENTITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Past research suggests that subjective identities mirror objective relationship struc-tures. Sociologists (e.g., Coleman, 1988) have emphasized that an actor's relationships convey an identity both to that actor and to external observers. Conversely, psychologists (e.g., Swann, 1987) have found that individuals need to verify their subjective identities and hence negotiate their identities in part through relationships. Bailey, Finney, and Helm (1975) argue that our subjective identities constrain our friendships more than other relationships.

Prior research has suggested that an immigrant's identification strength influences with whom they interact; those with strong ethnic identification have more ties to co-ethnic indi-viduals (Gudykunst, 2001). Ting-Toomey (1981) hypothesized that Chinese Americans who identified strongly with both Chinese and American culture should have networks evenly divided between Asian and Caucasian friends, yet her results did not support this predic-tion; the composition of friendship networks varied widely. This suggests a need to look beyond identification strength to identity structure. Chinese Americans with a more inte-grated identity structure should verify their identities through interactions with more host-culture members (non-Chinese). Hence, we propose the following:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Among first-generation immigrants, BII is positively related to the number of
>   friends from the host culture.

Past research has also linked subjective identity to the density of a network. Coleman (1988) argues that dense networks facilitate the internalization of an identity because of reinforcement through multiple social channels. Podolny and Baron (1997) found that employees with ties to disconnected others were undermined by conflicting identity demands, whereas those whose associates were more connected met more congruent demands. Yet a causal relationship in the opposite direction can also be proposed. Chinese Americans with a more integrated identity structure could interact with several non-Chinese friends together, to verify their embracing of American culture (Swann, 1987). That is, high BII individuals should have a more interconnected circle of non-Chinese friends. Thus, we propose the following:

> *Hypothesis 2*: Among first-generation immigrants, BII is positively related to the density of
>   interconnections between their friends from the host culture.

Our two hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 111 first-generation Chinese Americans (49 men, 62 women; mean age = 24.9) residing in a large, upper Midwest college town in the United States. Participants were recruited through campus and community fliers to complete a survey in English and included undergraduate and graduate students, visiting scholars, and their spouses. They explicitly identified themselves as "bicultural" and had lived at least 5 years in both the United States (*M* = 9.8, *SD* = 4.2) and in a Chinese country (e.g., China, Hong
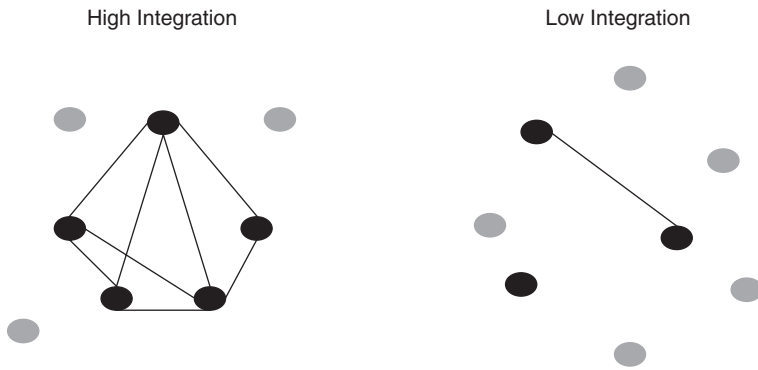
Figure 1:   Hypothesized Friendship Patterns Resulting From High and Low Identity Integration

NOTE: Black circles represent host culture (non-Chinese) friends. Links between nodes represent close ties between these friends. Higher bicultural identity integration is expected to relate to more non-Chinese friends and richer connections among non-Chinese friends.

Kong, Taiwan, Macau, or Singapore) ($M = 14.1$, $SD = 8.6$). Mean levels of identification with American and Chinese cultures were 3.7 ($SD = 1.3$) and 4.6 ($SD = 1.2$), respectively, and self-reported ability in English and Chinese languages were 4.4 ($SD = .8$) and 4.0 ($SD = 1.0$), respectively. Participants were paid $12.

PROCEDURE

Participants rated their strength of identification with Chinese and American culture on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very weak*) to 6 (*very strong*). Following Benet-Martínez et al. (2002), BII was assessed through their level of agreement with the following vignette on a scale of 1 (*very false*) to 5 (*very true*):

> "I am a bicultural who keeps American and Chinese cultures separate and feels conflicted about these two cultures. I am simply a Chinese who lives in America (vs. a Chinese American), and I feel as someone who is caught between two cultures."

An egocentric network survey was used to examine participants' social interactions in the past year. Participants were asked to write the initials of five of their closest friends, and the initials of five other people with whom they interacted most closely as classmates, coworkers, or colleagues. Participants then indicated on a grid whether a close relationship existed between each pair of initialed others. They also indicated by numeric code the ethnicity of all the others in their network (1 = *European/Anglo-American*, 2 = *African/ African American*, 3 = *Latino/Hispanic*, 4 = *Chinese*, 5 = *Other Asian*, and 6 = *non-Asian/ Other*). Afterwards, participants provided demographic information regarding their age, sex, and years lived in the United States and in a Chinese country. They rated on 5-point scales their Chinese and English language proficiency (1 = *little knowledge* and 5 = *perfectly fluent*). Other variables from this survey were reported in Benet-Martínez and Haritatos's (2005) study, which sampled 133 first-generation Chinese American biculturals. Our sample excluded 22 participants because they did not provide complete information on their social networks, such as the ethnicity of their friends.

RESULTS

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Participants' BII scores fell on a bimodal distribution, suggesting that high and low BII could be treated as two discrete types. Only four participants rated themselves along the midpoint of the scale, so they were excluded from being categorized into either the high ($n = 58$) or the low ($n = 49$) BII group. We reverse coded ratings on the (low) BII scale so that a higher score on BII indicates higher identity integration. On the demographic variables, high BII individuals had significantly higher American identification ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 1.3$) and English-language ability ($M = 4.6$, $SD = .6$) than low BII individuals ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.2$), $t(105) = -4.1$, $p < .01$ and ($M = 4.2$, $SD = .9$), $t(104) = -2.9$, $p < .01$, respectively. The high and low BII groups did not differ in age, years in the United States, or in a Chinese country, Chinese identification, or Chinese-language ability (all ps > .05).

Checking our assumptions about identity structure, we found that BII was significantly correlated with American identification, $r(111) = .37$, $p < .01$, but not with Chinese identification, $r(111) = -.11$, $p = .26$. We log-transformed the bimodal BII scores to satisfy regression assumptions of normality. Regression results using mean-centered predictors show that log-transformed BII predicts American identification, controlling for years in the United States (see Table 1, Model 1). Furthermore, an interaction effect shows that BII moderates the effect of years in the United States on American identification (see Table 1, Model 2). Specifically, high and low BIIs identified with American culture to a similar extent when the number of years in the United States was relatively low (1 *SD* below the mean= 5.5 years). However, with longer time spent in the United States (*1* SD above the mean= 14.0 years), American identification rose more steeply for high than low BIIs. These results fit our view that an integrated identity structure involves a stance of embracing American identity into Chinese identity.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

We derived two measures of participants' social networks: (a) number of friends who are non-Chinese and (b) density of the non-Chinese friendship network. Density was computed as the number of ties between participants' non-Chinese friends, as a proportion of the possible number of ties between their non-Chinese friends. The latter was computed as the number of non-Chinese friends × (the number of non-Chinese friends – 1) / 2. We tested our hypotheses using two-tailed independent samples *t* tests to compare BII groups and also regression equations to examine the unique contribution of BII and the controls, namely American and Chinese identification strength and English- and Chinese-language ability (see Table 1 for regression results).

NUMBER OF HOST-CULTURE FRIENDS

Hypothesis 1 states that BII should be positively related to the number of friends from the host culture. Supporting Hypothesis 1, BII was related to the number of non-Chinese friends, $r(111) = .29$, $p < .01$. Specifically, high BII individuals ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.8$) had more non-Chinese friends than low BIIs ($M = 1.6$, $SD = 1.8$), $t(105) = -3.04$, $p < .01$. Regressions indicated that higher BII was marginally related to having more non-Chinese friends ($p = .08$), even when controlling for American and Chinese identification strength

TABLE 1
Predicting American Identification, Number of Host-Culture Friends, and Density of Host-Culture Friends From Identity Structure and Strength Variables

		American Identification		No. of Non-Chinese Friends	No. of Ties Between Non-Chinese Friends[a]
	Step and Variable	Model 1[b]	Model 2[b]	Model 3	Model 4
1	BII[a]	.33**	.28**	.16[†]	.11[†]
2	Years in the United States	.39**	.52**	—	—
3	Years in the United States × BII[a]		.39**	—	—
4	American identification			.03	.02
	Chinese identification			−.09	.13*
	English-language ability			.22*	−.03
	Chinese-language ability			−.31**	.04
5	Number of possible ties between non-Chinese friends				.84**
R^2		.29	.42	.29	.69
Overall F		21.60**	25.44**	8.21**	37.64**
df		2, 108	3, 107	5, 103	6, 102

NOTE: Entries represent standardized coefficients. BII = bicultural identity integration.
a. The log transformation of this variable was used.
b. Variables in Models 1 and 2 were mean centered.
[†]$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

and English- and Chinese-language ability (see Model 3). The effects of the two language abilities were significant.

NETWORK DENSITY OF HOST-CULTURE FRIENDS

Hypothesis 2 predicts that BII is positively related to the density of interconnections among friends from the host culture. Supporting Hypothesis 2, BII was related to the network density of non-Chinese friends, $r(76) = .27$, $p < .05$. Compared to low BII individuals ($M = .2$, $SD = .3$), high BIIs ($M = .4$, $SD = .4$) had a denser network of non-Chinese friends, $t(73) = –2.16$, $p < .05$. We log-transformed the number of existing ties between participants' non-Chinese friends to correct for positive skew and regressed it on BII while controlling for American and Chinese identification strength, English- and Chinese-language ability, and the number of possible ties between their non-Chinese friends. Results revealed that BII was positively related to the number of ties between their non-Chinese friends (see Model 4) or a denser network of non-Chinese friends. The effect was marginally significant ($p = .06$).

DISCUSSION

We examined the novel question of how biculturals' identity structure relates to the pattern of interactions with their host-culture friends. Among first-generation Chinese immigrants, we found that an integrated identity structure implied bringing the secondary, host-culture identity into their primary, ethnic identity. To the extent that bicultural immigrants accepted the host

culture in their subjective identities, we proposed that it would be mirrored in their inclusion of host-culture (non-Chinese) friends in their social network, in both number and density. Our findings supported this: Although the effects of BII only approached significance, American and Chinese identification strength had limited predictive power. Further analyses revealed that BII was also positively related to the number and density of non-Asian friends (both $p <$ .06). Hence, our study shows that at least among first-generation immigrants, identity integration is fairly related to embracing the host culture in both the self-concept and social interactions. We are not implying that separated identities are less desirable overall (see Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006). Instead, low (versus high) BII may imply greater difficulty to take in the host culture because of its relation to lower openness to experience and higher acculturation stress (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

We suggest three areas for further study. First, whereas this study was cross-sectional, longitudinal data would clarify the causal link between BII and social networks. Second, whereas participants could be considered a minority in the survey site, potentially affecting the formation of interethnic relationships, future studies could consider other locations. Last, whereas our focus was on first-generation biculturals, researchers might consider whether the results vary by generation or type, such as those born in the host culture or of mixed parentage, respectively.

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