

An Effect of Online and Offline Social Capital on Japanese Immigrants' Acculturation to American Culture

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ABSTRACT

Online (through social interactive media) and offline (face-to-face) social capital have a synergetic effect on immigrants' acculturation process. This cross-sectional survey study examined the relationship between social capital and acculturation to American culture among a sample of 380 Japanese immigrants who lived in Texas. The study revealed that Japanese immigrants with more online and offline contacts tended to be better acculturated to American culture. The findings have practical implications for social work practice in terms of the use of immigrants' social capital, both online and offline, to enable them to better integrate in the country of immigration.

Keywords: Online social capital; offline social capital; acculturation; Japanese immigrants

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is not a one-time event but, rather, a long-lasting and cumulative process (Berry, 2005; Portes, 1997). The cross-cultural transition requires adjustment on a variety of psychosocial levels, and, for optimal adaptation, a wide range of social resources, emanating from the society of origin as well as from the new society, are needed. The social support system that is nurtured in human relationships and benefits an individual's well-being is often referred to as social capital (Portes & Landolt, 2000). This study examined the role of social capital that emerges from both online (through social interactive media) and offline (face-to-face) contacts on the lived experiences of Japanese immigrants in Texas, in terms of their acculturation to American culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Acculturation is the interactive process of psychosocial change with daily intercultural encounters (Cassaba, 2003). When in contact with another culture, immigrant individuals selectively apply a certain way of acculturation, whether to maintain the original culture and identity and establishing relationships with a new society, depending on their life circumstances and available resources (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2006; Berry, 2005). Such resources, as a result of the continuous process of building social ties, are called social capital and known to accrue various psychosocial outcomes at the individual level (Loeffler et al., 2004; Pope, 2002). Two types of social capital, bonding and bridging, have been discussed in the literature (Granovetter, 1983; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), and both types of social capital are important social resources for immigrants (Portes, 1998). Bonding social capital usually derives from an immigrant's original society and from people with similar backgrounds or cultural heritage, including family and friends.

On the other hand, bridging social capital is usually derived from new friends of diverse backgrounds in the context of a new society (Portes & Landolt, 2000).

Technological advances have made it possible for social capital to develop in both offline and online settings (Williams, 2006) and have influenced how immigrants adapt to a new society (Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, 2012). The socially interactive media, as an adjunct to traditional face-to-face interactions, enables immigrants to span physical distances and time zones, to sustain long-distance relationships, and to provide links between new people (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; Wellman, 2001; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, & Haythornthwaite, 1996). Through both offline and online settings, immigrants have an opportunity to maintain pre-existing ties with family and friends back home and to develop new ties with people in a new society. Instead of being assimilated into the host society, immigrants can utilize social resources for an optimal way of acculturation. Developing these types of social capital (bonding and bridging, as well as online and offline) can play a synergistic role in immigrants' acculturation to the host culture (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Wellman et al., 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The cross-cultural transition can be a life-challenging process for immigrants because it potentially involves both a disruption of well-established social networks and a reestablishment of new ones. Several studies provide evidence that social capital is related to immigrants' acculturation to the host society (Portes, 1997; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). In particular, social connection has been identified as vital to maintaining and promoting social and interpersonal ties, which result in social capital that can help individuals to become better integrated into society (Viswanath, 2008).

The way immigrants utilize their social capital can influence their life experiences upon relocation to a new society. Kashima and Loh (2006) studied Asian sojourners in Australia and found that those with diverse social ties, both local and international, were more likely to be better acculturated to the host society than those with less social interaction. This finding is in keeping with the classic Kuo and Tsai's (1986) research, which found that successful reestablishment of social ties upon relocation, can buffer psychological distress and social isolation among Asian immigrants. Moreover, Bhattacharya (2011) found informational, instrumental, and emotional roles that ethnic-based social capital could serve in an acculturation process among Asian Indian immigrants.

Early researchers of the acculturation of immigrants (e.g., Park, 1922) observed that immigrants who made more use of ethnic resources, such as ethnic newspapers, tended to have stronger ties with their communities. The effect of online and offline social capital on immigrant adaptation is a focus of recent research. Online and offline social capital have been found to have a "magnifying glass effect," resulting in better life outcomes among immigrants (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2002, p. 422). Maintaining old ties through online means is as important as creating new networks through both online and offline means. Individuals with more online connections are more likely to have higher levels of belongingness to community. In this regard, the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians (2012) reported that recent immigrants are more active users of social technology than is the overall U.S. population.

Cemalcilar, Falbo, and Stapleton (2005) noted that, among immigrants, socially interactive media serve two major functions. One is to communicate with those back home and the other

is to provide social support tools in the new society. In a study with Chinese sojourners, Ye (2006b) found that perceived support from family and friends living close or far away through online and offline interaction decreased the likelihood of experiencing social difficulties in the U.S. Perceived support from long-distance social networks (bonding ties) was positively related to psychosocial adaptation. Ye (2006a) found that the sojourners also utilized the Internet to communicate with their family and friends as a means to cope with unpleasant feelings during the process of acculturation. This finding supports the notion that successful cross-cultural adaptation relies on communications with members of the host culture and on participation in the new society and is encouraged by bonding/bridging and online/offline social capital (Chen, 2010; Croucher, 2011).

METHOD

Procedure

This exploratory cross-sectional study used a survey method to examine the relationship between social capital and acculturation to American society. First-generation Japanese immigrant adults (i.e., long-term sojourners, legal permanent residents, and naturalized U.S. citizens) who lived in a metropolitan area in northeastern Texas were the target population for this study. After approval of the study by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at Arlington, participants were solicited through face-to-face contacts and a mailing to a Japanese school and cultural and religious organizations as well as through advertisements in newsletters and newspapers distributed in the Japanese community. A cover letter, informed consent form, 12-page self-report questionnaire, and stamped, addressed return envelope were delivered either in person or by mail from the researcher to interested individuals. Completed surveys were returned to the researcher either in person or by mail.

Participants

A total of 550 packets were distributed to potential participants between June 1 and July 31, 2009. A total of 469 Japanese immigrants completed a survey, which represented an overall response rate of 85.3%. After the inspection and cleanup of the data, a total of 380 cases were used for the final analysis.

Approximately two-thirds of the participants were female (61.8%, $n = 380$). Nearly 70% of the sample were in their 30s and 40s, and the mean age was 39.22 ($SD = 10.17$). A majority were married (74.2%, $n = 376$) and had children (65.8%, $n = 379$). This was a highly educated sample; 90% ($n = 380$) had attended or completed higher education, including college, graduate school, or professional training. Accordingly, the socioeconomic status was fairly high; (64%, $n = 347$) had an annual household income of greater than \$60,000, and 60.7% ($n = 347$) were employed either full or part time.

The average length of stay in the U.S. was 10 years ($SD = 9.04$, $n = 380$). The participants came to the U.S. for a variety of reasons, including an academic or business sojourn, research, intermarriage, or to accompany a spouse. Approximately two-thirds of the participants (67.9%, $n = 379$) were initially looking forward to living in the U.S.; however, close to one-half (45.4%, $n = 380$) had an intention or desire to go back to Japan immediately or ultimately. Although the participants were more likely to be in a workplace or school with U.S. colleagues, they had more interactions with Japanese friends in their everyday lives. Telephone and email were the two most common methods of communication, and a majority (77.2%, $n = 241$) utilized social networking sites to stay connected with their family and friends who lived in the U.S. or Japan.

Measures

The Scales for Social Capital (SSC) were developed by Williams (2006) to measure the level of social capital that individuals enjoy in their everyday lives. SSC consists of the Scale for Online Social Capital and the Scale for Offline Social Capital (a total of 40 items), which assess social capital that is formed in face-to-face and online settings. Horizontal and vertical social ties with people are called bonding and bridging social capital, respectively. The items are answered through the use of a 5-point Likert scale, for which higher scores indicate more social capital. Social capital was the variable with four indicators, online bonding and online bridging, and offline bonding and offline bridging.

The Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA), developed by Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus (2000) was used to assess levels of acculturation to the original and the mainstream cultures. VIA consists of 20 items that pertain to three domains of acculturation: values, social relationships, and adherence to traditions. A subset of 10 items that pertain to the level of acculturation to the American culture was used for analysis. The items are answered through the use of a 9-point Likert scale, for which higher scores indicate higher levels of acculturation.

Translation of the Survey Materials

With permission from the authors, the measures of SSC and VIA were translated into Japanese from English through the direct translation method. With the study sample of 380, the translated versions of the measures were able to yield either adequate or exceptional reliability (Cronbach's alpha of .942 for SSC and .834 for VIA). Thus, both measures were considered accurate and met the needs of the study. In addition, the demographic questionnaire, cover letter, and informed consent form were furnished in Japanese, as it was required that the native language of potential participants be Japanese.

RESULTS

The main analysis was conducted in two steps: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the measurement models (social capital and acculturation to American culture), followed by a path analysis. First, CFA was conducted to assess the construct validity of measurement models of SSC and VIA. Second, the path models were evaluated to examine the direct relationships between the constructs of social capital and acculturation to American culture.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; version 17.0) and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS; version 17.0) software were utilized for the statistical analyses. The following criteria were used to evaluate the model fit: (a) factor loadings $> .3$; (b) the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) $> .90$; (c) the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) $> .05$; (d) 90% RMSEA between .05 and .10; and (e) a non-significant chi-square statistic. Although the non-significant chi-square indicates the goodness of fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data, its values are extremely sensitive to sample size; hence, it needs to be interpreted with caution.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Measurement Models

The CFA revealed that both measurements were reliable and valid, with a few re-specifications. Social capital was indicated by four variables: online bonding, online bridging, offline bonding, and offline bridging (a modified model, with CFI = .996; TLI = .978; RMSEA = .069; 90% RMSEA between .000 and .171; $\chi^2 = 2.811$, $df = 1$, $p = .094$; Figure 1).

Acculturation to American culture was indicated by ten items from VIA (a modified model, CFI = .932; TLI = .905; RMSEA = .079; 90% RMSEA between .063 and .095; $\chi^2 = 107.108$, $df = 35$, $p < .05$; Figure 2). The CFA of each measurement model yielded some re-specifications of the models by connecting some error variances.

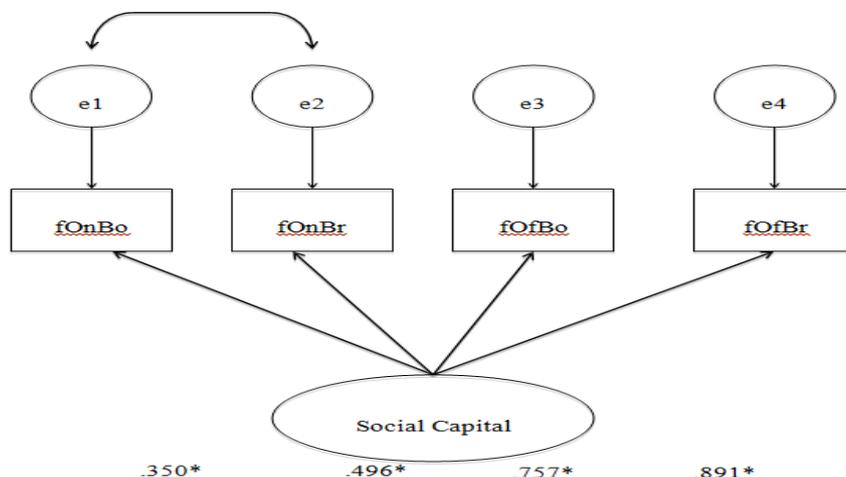


Figure 1. Measurement Model of Social Capital

Note: OnBo = online bonding; OnBr = online bridging; OfBo = offline bonding; OfBr = offline bridging. e = error variance. * $p < .05$.

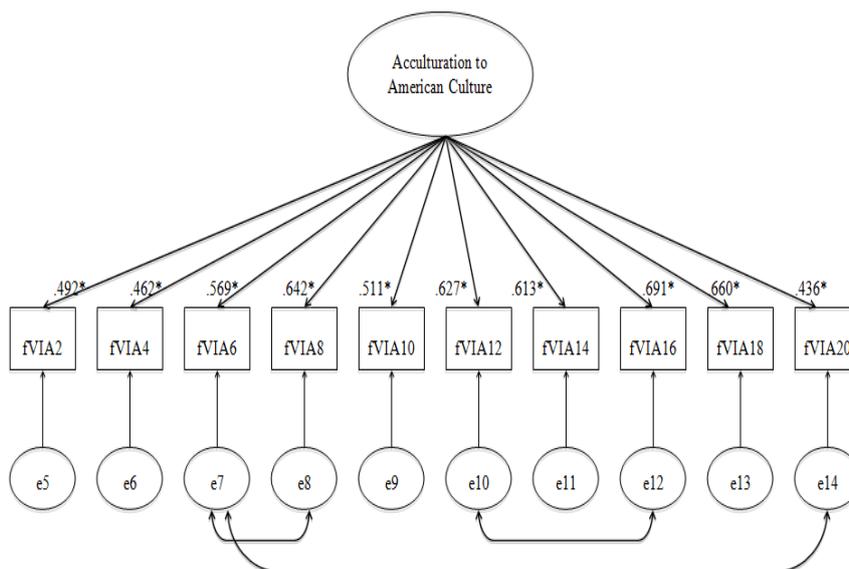


Figure 2. Measurement Model of Acculturation to American Culture

Note: VIAs = even-numbered items from *Vancouver Index of Acculturation* as indicators for the latent variable Acculturation to American Culture. e = error variance. * $p < .05$.

Path Model

A path model specifies direct relationships between latent variables. Once the measurement models are tested, the paths between the constructs are assessed for their fitness (McDonald & Ho, 2002; Schreiber, Stage, King, Nora, & Barlow, 2006). The goodness-of-fit indices for the path between social capital and acculturation to American culture were CFI = .919, TLI = .897, RMSEA = .072, and 90% RMSEA = .061-.083, with $\chi^2 = 213.337$ ($df = 72$; $p < .05$; Figure 3). Although the TLI indicated a mediocre fit, the other two measures yielded an

adequate fit between the model and the observed data. The standardized regression weight for the path was .530 ($p < .05$).

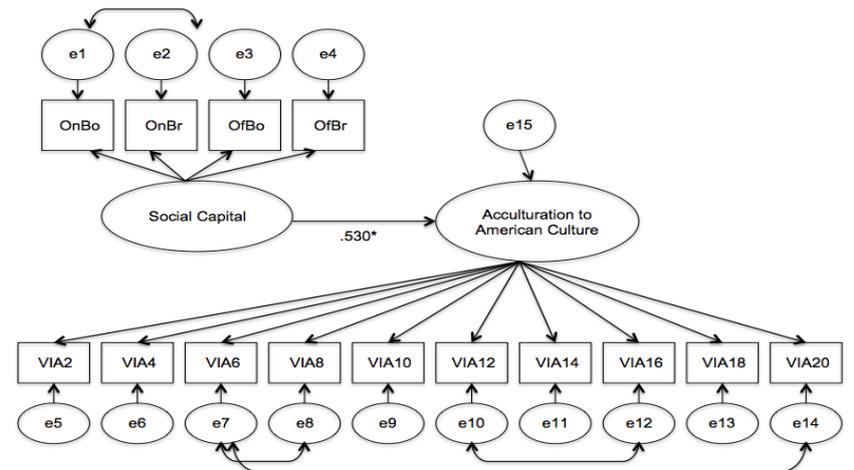


Figure 3. Path from Social Capital to Acculturation to American Culture

DISCUSSION

The results of this study were consistent with the earlier research. Social capital appears to accrue positive psychosocial outcomes among the sample of Japanese immigrants. The findings of this study suggested that maintenance of preexisting social ties, along with the creation of new ones through face-to-face and online contacts, had positive and maximizing effects on immigrants' acculturation process to American culture (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Wellman et al., 1996). Bonding and bridging social capital are strengthened by online and offline contacts and immigrants who benefit from such social resources are better adjusted than those socially isolated in the country of immigration (Chen, 2010; Croucher, 2011).

The results of this study have implications for social work practice. In particular, the results indicate that acculturation to American culture can be promoted by social capital and that social capital can be developed both offline and online. The results of this study show that social workers cannot ignore the impact of social interaction that occurs online. Virtual connection can be as real and critical as face-to-face contacts when immigrants are striving for success in a new country. Thus, professional services and support should be provided in online venues in addition to conventional, face-to-face services. For example, social service agencies can develop a virtual space (e.g., agency website, online chatting with case workers) where immigrants can use the Internet to find information and to seek help. In addition, a physical office can be equipped with a computer room that clients can use to stay connected with people in their home country. Overall, social workers can promote acculturation to American culture by helping immigrants strengthen their existing social ties and to create new relations that are mediated by both offline (face-to-face) and online contacts.

This study has major strengths. First, the study had a large sample size. Despite the high number of missing cases, the study still yielded significant results. Second, construct validity was established on two measurement models of social capital and acculturation to American culture, and the path between these two constructs was found to be statistically significant. Additionally, both measures were found to be reliable. This indicates that the theoretical framework is supported by the empirical data.

Despite the intriguing findings and promising strengths, several limitations were associated with the methodology. First, the use of only hard copies of the survey packet limited the number of participants who could receive the packet and the researcher's efforts to collect the completed packets. A hard-copy version was chosen primarily due to the presence of questions about Internet use as aspect of the measurement of social capital levels. Use of a web-based survey runs the risk of excluding people who do not have access to the Internet or who did not utilize it regularly. Nevertheless, the distribution of the survey packet on a face-to-face basis yielded an extremely high response rate. The use of both a hard-copy and a web-based survey, however, may have yielded an even greater sample size, which is necessary for a sophisticated statistical analysis.

Second, there was a large amount of missing data. A total of 469 survey packets were returned; however, due to the presence of missing data in the major variables under study, the final number of useable packets was 380. To reduce the occurrence of missing data, participants could have been reminded to answer all items. Finally, because the study focused only on one sample of Japanese immigrants in a metropolitan city in Texas only, the findings may not be generalizable to other Japanese living in different U.S. cities, Asian, or other immigrant groups. In addition, this study included Japanese immigrants, sojourners, and naturalized U.S. citizens in one analysis. Future studies should examine variations in psychosocial outcomes as related to different geographical location of immigration, immigration status, and immigrant groups.

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