

I have a faint idea what it is like to be alive.

— William Saroyan

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“New research shows that reducing brain activation can increase creativity.”

Keith Sawyer, Ph.D.



## Life as a Bilingual

The reality of living with two (or more) languages  
by Francois Grosjean, Ph.D.

### Advantages of Being Bicultural

Biculturals show greater creativity and professional success  
Published on April 19, 2013 by Francois Grosjean, Ph.D. in Life as a Bilingual

Biculturals take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two or more cultures. They adapt their attitudes, behaviors, and values to these cultures and they combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved (see [here](#)).

It has long been known that there are many advantages to being bicultural such as having a greater number of social networks, being aware of cultural differences, taking part in the life of two or more cultures, being an intermediary between cultures, and so on. Recent research shows that biculturals are also characterized by greater creativity and professional success.

In a recent paper, comprising three studies, researchers Carmit Tadmor, Adam Galinsky and William Maddux compared the results of bicultural participants to those who were not bicultural. In the first study, MBA students at a large business school in Europe who had lived abroad for an average of four years were given a creative uses task. They were shown the picture of a brick and were given two minutes to write down as many creative uses of it as they could think of. When three components of creativity were examined, the biculturals exhibited more fluency (they generated more ideas), more flexibility (they generated a greater number of ideas), and more novelty (they were more creative in their suggestions).

In a second study, the researchers examined how biculturalism affects real-world innovations in a group of MBA students at a business school in the United States. Here again the participants had lived abroad and came from different countries of origin. The study examined how many new businesses the participants had started, how many novel products or services they had invented, and how many breakthrough process innovations they had created. Biculturals once again did better than the other participants.

Finally, in a third study, the question asked was whether being bicultural leads to professional success (as measured by the rate of managerial advancement), and to an increase in managerial reputation (as judged by peers). This time, the group of participants were Israeli professionals in the United States who had worked on the West Coast, primarily in Silicon Valley, for slightly more than eight years on average. What was found is that biculturals achieved higher promotion rate and had more positive reputations than those who were not bicultural.

The authors of the study explained this enhanced creativity and professional success in biculturals by means of a psychological mechanism, integrative complexity, which is the capacity and willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of competing perspectives on the same issue, on the one hand, and the ability to forge conceptual links among these perspectives, on the other. It is a capacity that involves considering and combining multiple perspectives.

According to the authors, biculturals have an enhanced ability to carefully



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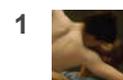


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weigh the merits of alternative perspectives. They view things from these different perspectives and integrate them into a coherent whole. They also recombine different existing ideas to make novel connections between concepts.

The enhanced integrative complexity that biculturals show has implications for a number of tasks such as effective information search, greater tolerance for ambiguous information, less susceptibility to information overload, and so on.

As a bicultural myself, and always interested in pursuing alternative perspectives, I wrote to the senior author of the paper, Dr. Carmit Tadmor of Tel Aviv University, to enquire whether one can't develop integrative complexity by remaining monocultural. I felt I had experienced one way of doing so in my English school during my youth by taking part in the debates that took place once a week. We were given the task of defending or opposing a particular position without being able to choose the side we were on. Thus we often spoke in favor of a point of view that was not ours and hence we were forced to see both sides of an issue.

Carmit Tadmor replied that you can indeed achieve higher levels of integrative complexity in a number of ways such as the one I had mentioned to her, among many others. Biculturalism is one such way but not the only way. I came away from our exchange, feeling relieved for monoculturals and happy for biculturals—an optimal best-of-both-worlds situation!

Photo of a [group of students](#) from Shutterstock.

Reference

Carmit T. Tadmor, Adam D. Galinsky & William W. Maddux (2012). Getting the most out of living abroad: Biculturalism and integrative complexity as key drivers of creative and professional success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103, 3, 520-542.

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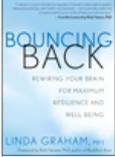
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