
Demystifying the myth about marginals: implications for global leadership

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Abstract: Marginals are a type of bicultural (or multicultural) individual who have internalised more than one culture, yet do not identify strongly with either or any of them; they are simultaneously cultural insiders and outsiders. This duality has led them to be overlooked as positive contributors to organisations. On average, marginals have been found to experience worse psychological, social and adjustment outcomes than other biculturals. However, in this paper, we argue that new evidence challenges this view. We propose a conceptual explanation for the outliers from the average marginalised experience, to contend that under certain conditions, marginals may possess certain advantages that facilitate their potential to excel as global leaders.

Keywords: cultural identities; marginals; biculturals; multicultural individuals; global leadership; international management.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Fitzsimmons, S.R., Lee, Y-t. and Brannen, M.Y. (2013) 'Demystifying the myth about marginals: implications for global leadership', *European J. International Management*, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp.587–603.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'Demystifying the myth about marginals: implications for global leadership' presented at the 'EJIM Pre-publication Conference', IMD, Lausanne, Switzerland, 11–12 November 2011.

1 The myth about marginals

As business activities become increasingly globalised, global leaders – those who can effectively manage multiple imperatives and cultural diversity in a fast changing world (Bird et al., 2010, Mendenhall et al., 2008) – are in high demand. Global leaders have been described as internationally-oriented, well-adjusted, and adept at managing relationships (Bird et al., 2010). In contrast, marginalised biculturals – individuals who have internalised more than one culture, yet do not identify strongly with either or any of them – have been described as poorly adapted to their environments, psychologically overwhelmed, and socially weak (Berry et al., 2006). T.E. Lawrence (known as Lawrence of Arabia) described his own experience of living as a marginalised Arab-Bedouin-Englishman as close to madness:

“In my case, the efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time, I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin; it was affectation only ... Sometimes these selves would converge in the void, and then madness was very near, as I could believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments. (Lawrence, 1966)”

Based on the above descriptions, marginals seem poorly suited for positions as global leaders. However, consistent patterns of findings indicate that this picture may be incomplete (Rudmin, 2003). For example, 10% of studies in a meta-analysis found positive psychological outcomes of marginality (Rudmin, 2003), and marginals

outperformed individuals who identified primarily with one culture, on both cultural appropriateness and communication effectiveness, during expatriate assignments (Lee, 2010), and on cultural complexity (Tadmor et al., 2009). The benefits are usually disregarded as anomalies, but enough evidence now exists to merit an examination into why marginalised biculturals can excel in global settings (Brannen and Thomas, 2010). Although most of the past literature indicates that, on average, marginals experience worse psychological, social and adjustment outcomes than other biculturals (Berry et al., 2006, Phinney et al., 2001), in this paper, we propose a conceptual explanation for the outliers from the average marginalised experience. We contend that under certain conditions, marginalised individuals may possess certain advantages that facilitate their potential to excel as global leaders.

2 Marginals, biculturals, cosmopolitans and global identity

Drawing from psychology, sociology, and anthropology, there are two distinct views of marginality. The first is rooted in psychology and understands marginals as individuals who have internalised more than one culture, yet do not identify strongly with any of them (Berry, 1980). The second is rooted in sociology and anthropology and understands marginals as individuals who identify with their cultures of origin, yet occupy an emotionally more remote space at the periphery (Goldberg, 1941). We describe each approach in detail, then compare marginality to related concepts, such as cosmopolitanism and global identity.

Psychology-based theories of acculturation that focus on the process of acquiring another culture are often used to differentiate among different types of biculturalism. Berry (1997, 1980) has surfaced four distinct types of acculturation strategies and corresponding identity configurations of biculturals based on the degree to which they identify with ‘home culture’ – one’s original culture – and ‘host culture’ – the new culture that one is in the process of acquiring. The patterns include *integration* (identifying with both home and host cultures), *assimilation* (identifying with host but not home culture), *separation* (identifying with home but not host culture), and *marginalisation* (not identifying with either home or host culture). Although individuals within each of the four acculturation strategies vary in the degree to which they identify with their cultures, in order for them to become bicultural, they must have internalised at least two cultures. Thus, marginals are distinct from the other three types because they alone have internalised two or more cultures, while simultaneously dis-identifying with both or all of them. Integration is often associated with the most favourable psychological and adjustment outcomes (Chen et al., 2008, Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, 2005, Tadmor et al., 2009), as well as management-related outcomes (Aycan, 1997, Sanchez et al., 2000, Ward and Kennedy, 1994), leading many to dismiss the potential for other approaches, such as marginality.

In contrast to the psychological explanation of marginals, both anthropological and sociological theories emphasise the peripheral aspects of marginality. The marginal man was first conceived by sociologists (Park, 1928, Stonequist, 1937). The concept originated from the anthropological concept of a ‘marginal area’, meaning a region where two cultures overlap and the dominant group takes on aspects of both cultures (Goldberg, 1941). Individuals within this region are at the periphery – at the margins – of both their cultures, in contrast to those who are wholly embedded in one or the other. For modern

anthropologists, marginality is the challenge of ambiguous belonging (Brodwin, 2003). As such, marginals are seen as 'insider-outsiders' who experience ambiguous belonging at the periphery of one or more groups, such as peoples from political entities that are part of the USA, but are not US states themselves, such as Indian reservations and Puerto Rico (Phillips, 2005).

A current business example of this form of marginality involves the relationship between subsidiary and headquarter cultural identity in global organisations. In a recent business case, Tesco Plc, the third largest global food retailing company, understood the potential value of an insider-outsider view in reinvigorating its core operations. Tesco put together a global team representing all of its six Asian subsidiaries to cast fresh eyes on its British home operations, in order to leverage best practices and enhance Tesco's global competitiveness as well as in Britain.¹ The global team's charge was to surface the essence of Tesco UK and compare and contrast this with their local Asian operations. Among other selection criteria, the managers were chosen on the basis of having at least six years' tenure at Tesco, making them 'insiders' to the Tesco corporate culture, a strong culture made explicit by 'The Tesco Way', with commonly shared artefacts, values, and assumptions throughout its worldwide operations. While being insiders to the Tesco corporate culture, these Asian subsidiary managers were marginals at the periphery of the UK national culture and to a lesser extent to their own home cultures due to their long-term employment in a foreign subsidiary. Thus, as insider-outsiders, the Asian managers were able to see what others who were fully embedded in the British Tesco culture took for granted; they were able to cast fresh eyes on the home country operations and help to reinvigorate it by leveraging Tesco's global footprint.

Together, both conceptualisations of marginals are characterised by individuals who are both included and excluded from their cultural groups; they are simultaneously cultural insiders and outsiders. Challenges and potential opportunities attributed to marginals all stem from this tension between marginals' status as both cultural natives, and as outsiders looking in. Psychological, sociological and anthropological conceptualisations of marginality share the assumption that it is essentially a negative experience associated with undesirable outcomes. Indeed, some research applies the term 'marginal' as though it were synonymous with 'downtrodden' (Stewart, 2006). It is worth noting that we do not intend to make claims about the relative likelihood for marginals versus others (i.e. other biculturals, monoculturals) to excel as global leaders. Instead, we identify the theoretical rationale why some individuals are able to draw on marginality as an asset to become global leaders, in contrast to the multidisciplinary body of literature that largely ignored such potential. In other words, the objective of this paper is to establish a more balanced view about marginals and shed initial light on the long ignored potential of marginalised individuals to become global leaders. Drawing on the essence of this conceptualisation of marginals, it is related to but distinct from concepts such as cosmopolitanism and global identity.

First introduced by Gouldner (1957), cosmopolitanism is characterised by the 'willingness to engage with the Other... openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity' (Hannerz, 1996, cited in Levy et al., 2007). It often refers to the global elite, who are frequent travellers, consume cultural artefacts from many different countries, and are open to culturally novel experiences and people (Levy et al., 2012). Starting from Glaser (1958), authors have speculated about marginals as potential cosmopolitans (Lee, 2010, Gillespie et al., 2010). In fact, marginality may be one of the important (yet often ignored) paths to reach such cosmopolitan identity, as

some marginals may take on a global or cosmopolitan identity to compensate for rejecting their culture-based identities. However, although cosmopolitans are globally-oriented, they do not necessarily share with marginals the tension between being simultaneously insiders and outsiders. That is, although they may be comfortable travelling or passing sojourns in many countries, they are not necessarily cultural natives in any of them, with internalised assumptions, values, and behavioural norms associated with those cultures. Thus, the key difference is whether or not an individual can simultaneously draw on cultural content as a 'native'.

Global identity is differentiated from marginality for similar reasons. It refers to a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture or to the human species as a whole (Erez and Gati, 2004). Similar to cosmopolitanism, having a global identity emphasises the global orientation without simultaneously emphasising local embeddedness in two or more distinct cultures. Conceptually, it is possible that marginals may develop global identities as they look for a higher level of belonging beyond their internalised cultures. However, it is also possible that marginals stay *encapsulated* in their set of internalised cultures, meaning they do not construct a unified global identity (Bennett, 1993). In sum, cosmopolitanism and global identity both emphasise only one side of the cultural insider-outsider tension that characterises marginality.

3 Evidence for the hidden benefits of marginals

Drawing from social identity theory, marginalised individuals refer to those who have *low* identification to both or all of their cultural groups (Berry, 2001, Phinney et al., 2001). As a key component of self-concept, identity is one of the most significant regulators of cognition, affect, and behaviour (Hogg and Terry, 2000, Toh and DeNisi, 2007). Moreover, it mediates a wide range of intrapersonal processes (e.g. information processing, affect regulation) and interpersonal processes (e.g. social perception, interaction strategy; Markus and Wurf, 1987). As a result, we contend that holding a specific identity structure such as marginality will have profound and enduring effects on an individual's personal as well as professional life.

There is extensive evidence that the experience of marginality is difficult. Particularly in immigration studies, marginals are often described as caught between two cultures and never fitting into either one (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999). This experience, also referred to as *cultural homelessness*, is often associated with rejection, confusion, and isolation (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999). Individuals may undergo negative emotions such as pain, loneliness, and even self-blame as a result of such marginality. Moreover, on average, marginals have exhibited poorer social and psychological adaptation as expatriates, higher levels of acculturative stress (Berry et al., 2006), and even an elevated risk of schizophrenia (Bhugra et al., 2010). Most studies also assume that marginals exhibit lower performance on work-related outcomes (Tung, 1998). However, negative relationships between marginality and work performance have primarily been identified when marginality was operationalised as difficulty in life, and poor performance operationalised as stress (Rudmin and Ahmadzadeh, 2001). Given these very specific measurements of each construct, it is not surprising that significant relationships were found, but they cannot be used to imply a general relationship between marginality and poor work performance.

Despite this evidence, the picture about marginals is not as clear-cut as one would expect. Curiously, in one of the earliest works on marginals, Park (1928) had already described marginals as “not merely emancipated, but enlightened” (p.888), such that they have the potential to become wanderers who are not bound by local proprieties and conventions. Instead, Park described them as free, characterised by “the keener intelligence, the wider horizon, the more detached and rational viewpoint” (Park, 1950, cited in Vivero and Jenkins, 1999, p.8). Certain scholars have offered a more refined understanding of marginality, suggesting the existence of different types of marginality (e.g. encapsulated vs. constructive marginality, Bennett, 1993; anomic vs. individualist, Bourhis et al., 1997). The former pair refer to marginals who are unable to construct a unified identity versus those who actively construct boundaries for their identities (Bennett, 1993), while the latter pair refer to marginals who actively reject both groups versus those who define themselves as individuals, separate from any group (Bourhis et al., 1997). Whereas encapsulated and anomic types tend to result in negative consequences, constructive and individualist types may in fact be beneficial.

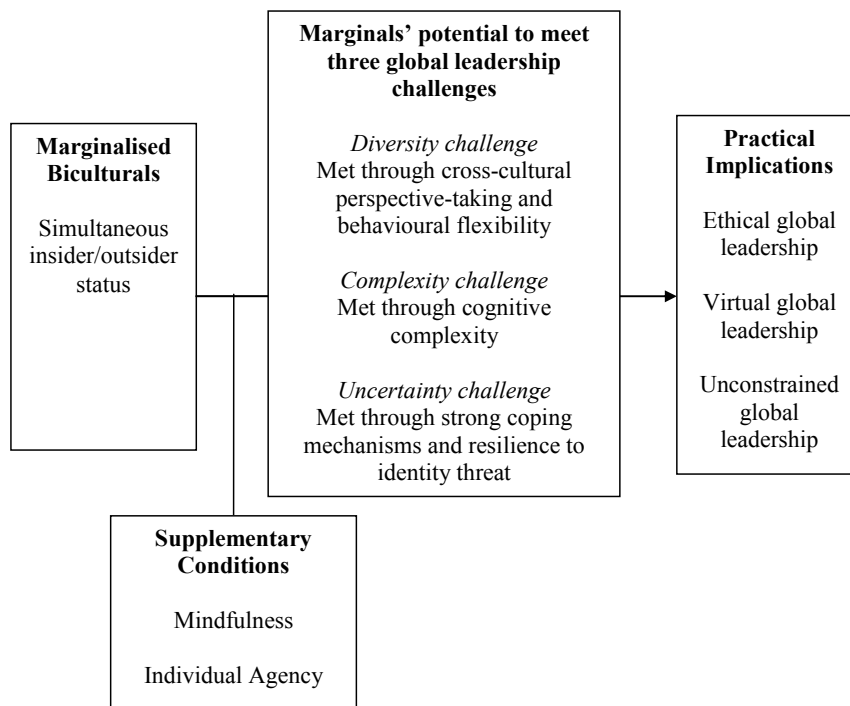
Several recent studies provide evidence that marginals can yield higher performance outcomes than separated biculturals through both direct and indirect paths. For example, two studies of Asian-Americans found that marginals were more cognitively complex than both separated and assimilated biculturals, although the difference was only significant compared to separated biculturals (Tadmor et al., 2009). The same pattern appeared in a study of Swiss managers, where marginalised biculturals outperformed separated and assimilated biculturals, on both communication effectiveness and cultural appropriateness (Lee, 2010). Among Mexican managers in multinational organisations, marginals and integrated biculturals were more likely to be represented in upper management, compared to separate and assimilate biculturals (Gillespie et al., 2010). Taken together, these studies suggest that some marginalised individuals may possess unique advantages in global and cross-cultural domains. Yet the myth that marginals consistently have the worst performance in personal and global work settings persists because there is no theoretical explanation for overturning the myth. To fill this gap, the following sections of the paper aim to elucidate *why* and *when* some marginals are able to draw on their unique background to excel as global leaders.

4 Theoretical underpinnings for marginals as global leaders

Global leadership is ‘the process of influencing others to adopt a shared vision through structures and methods that facilitate positive change while fostering individual and collective growth in a context characterised by significant levels of complexity, flow and presence’ (Mendenhall et al., 2012, p.500). Based on this definition, we examine three challenges that global leaders must face to a greater degree, compared to leaders at the local level: heightened levels of *diversity*, *complexity*, and *uncertainty* (Mendenhall, 2006, Morrison, 2000). Specifically, global leaders need to embrace higher levels of diversity because the global nature of their function includes a larger variety of cultural, geographical, and ethnic differences (Morrison, 2000). Second, global environments that transcend national boundaries generally involve higher levels of complexity, requiring correspondingly higher levels of complexity in strategic thinking and problem-solving

for global leaders (Boyacigiller, 1990, Mendenhall, 2006, Petrick et al., 1999). Finally, uncertainty is seen as an inevitable reality of global business (Jokinen, 2005, Morrison, 2000). These three challenges do not represent a new model of global leadership, but instead are exemplary of global leadership challenges that highlight marginals' potential advantages. Building on recent research elucidating the role of identity on leadership (Hannah et al., 2009, Hogg and Terry, 2001) and global leadership (Kohonen, 2005), we develop the theoretical underpinnings that explain how marginality can be one of the paths toward global leadership, as it relates to these three challenges (Figure 1).

Figure 1 How some marginals excel as global leaders



4.1 Becoming marginal

Prior to becoming a marginalised bicultural, individuals must go through a transition period, similar to the concept of liminality, during which identity is reconstructed (Beech, 2011). In many cases this is the result of negotiating the *existential angst* (Brannen, 1994) associated with constantly confronting disparate cultural schemas. Identity is dynamic (Markus and Wurf, 1987) such that people constantly compare environmental inputs with a set of self-meanings and react with behaviour that maintains a congruent self-concept (Burke, 1991). During this process, marginals form, maintain or revise their personal identities in relation to their cultural groups (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Specifically, a case study examined employees undergoing the process of liminality in

their work identities (Beech, 2011). They *experimented* by trying on new versions of the self, *reflected* by questioning their reactions to external influences, and *recognised* their identities shifting over time, although sometimes recognition only occurred once a particular shift was complete. Compared to other biculturals, this process for marginals is especially characterised by simultaneous push-pull mechanisms, where individuals are both drawn to their cultures, and pushed away from them. These opposing mechanisms may facilitate even deeper levels of experimentation, reflection and identity recognition, resulting in the potential for more profound levels of understanding about culture's influence, compared to those whose identity construction process is more unidirectional. Thus, we argue that when individuals go through the process of becoming marginalised, regardless of whether the process is concluded, this experience may contribute to their ability to handle global leadership challenges related to diversity, complexity, and uncertainty discussed ahead.

Another way to examine the process of becoming marginal is through the lens of a *fundamental human change*, referring to a profound experience leading to a distinct shift in thinking patterns (Osland, 1995). Osland found that a fundamental human change was essential to develop the global competencies that allow expatriates to succeed. Once expatriates had experienced a fundamental human change, they could take their new skills and abilities with them throughout their lives. In the same way, we argue that once individuals have undergone the process of constructing a marginalised identity, they may be able to take their new skills and abilities with them, even if they later move on to other identity states.

4.2 *Why some marginals have the potential to become global leaders*

When individuals internalise a culture, they internalise the associated cultural schema, composed of a set of knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, habits, and domain-specific self-schemas (Markus, 1977). Given that the essence of marginality is the tension between simultaneous insider and outsider status, marginals experience a disconnect between their internalised cultures and their cultural identities. Although most biculturals represent their internalised schemas by identifying with their corresponding cultures, this is not the case for marginals, who have weak or nonexistent identification with their cultures. This unique state can help to explain why some marginals are particularly capable at coping with the diversity, complexity and uncertainty challenges of global leadership.

Diversity: Differences in values, norms, and working styles across individuals elicit different social categorisation processes as well as different information and decision-making processes (Van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007), often triggering cognitive and emotional tensions (Park and DeShon, 2010, Klein et al., 2011). For example, diverse teams have been found to be less satisfied and experience more conflict than homogeneous teams (Klein et al., 2011). Because marginals are members of their cultural groups without identifying with them, they may be able to more easily move *in* and *out* of cultural groups, boosting immunity to this type of problem, and increasing their suitability to the challenge of leading a diverse team.

With respect to behaviours, weak identification with both cultural groups may help marginals avoid automatic behaviours triggered by cultural stereotypes (Bargh et al., 1996). Hence, marginals may be able to simultaneously hold contradictory and diverse

norms and values (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999), enjoying freedom and flexibility beyond their specific cultural scripts. With respect to perceptions, the mechanism may be similar to the effect that perspective-taking has on cross-cultural negotiators. In an experiment, negotiators who were especially skilled at considering the world from another person's viewpoint identified more creative bargaining solutions, due to their ability to see how their own positions or tactics may be perceived by others (Galinsky et al., 2008). In the same way, some marginals may be especially skilled at understanding how their own cultures are perceived by others, compared to other types of biculturals, due to marginals' status as simultaneous cultural insiders and outsiders. It follows that marginality may facilitate the development of general cultural skills for global leaders, including behavioural flexibility and cross-cultural perspective-taking (Bird and Osland, 2004, Thomas et al., 2010). As a result, some marginals may be particularly apt in handling the diversity embedded in global leadership roles.

Complexity: Leveraging their insider/outsider tension, marginals may also have the potential to develop higher levels of cognitive complexity, a commonly-identified characteristic of global leaders (Petrack et al., 1999). For example, Tadmor et al. (2009) found that marginals developed higher levels of cognitive complexity than separated or assimilated biculturals, and argued that it was because the marginals experienced stronger dissonance, and as a result, learned to see the world in more complex terms. Cognitive complexity helps leaders construe social behaviour as multidimensional, rather than enacting only a small set of the roles global leaders are expected to play (Hannah et al., 2009). Normally, when individuals categorise themselves as a member of a group, they see themselves as an embodiment of a group prototype or standard, containing the societal meanings and norms that guide their behaviour, and processing information through that group's filter (Turner et al., 1987, Hogg and Terry, 2000). As simultaneous cultural group insiders and outsiders, some marginals may avoid these self-categorisation pitfalls, through heightened levels of cognitive complexity, facilitating simultaneous self-categorisation into multiple cultural groups. Thus, marginals who excel as global leaders are likely to do so by drawing on their opposing identities to develop higher levels of cognitive complexity.

Uncertainty: According to uncertainty reduction theory, people seek identification with their groups when they experience uncertainty, especially if the uncertainty threatens their self-concepts (Hogg et al., 2007). Without a clearly defined and distinctive entity to identify with, marginals have to develop other mechanisms to cope with uncertainty. In fact, by not identifying strongly with any culture, marginals may be more likely to experience an on-going identity-restructuring process than other biculturals. When they face unfamiliar cultural or business cues, they may not automatically take a defensive stance by retreating to a familiar cultural identity, but may be more willing to explore and comprehend such novelty and integrate it as part of a new self-concept. Marginals may have a higher level of tolerance for uncertainty because, being constantly in a state of *in-betweenness* (Bennett, 1993), they are used to the absence of a stable reference system (Vivero and Jenkins, 1999). They may be more willing to adapt the meanings and standards in the control system of their identity process (Burke, 1991) so as to restore feelings of congruence and reduce the stress invoked by uncertainty. Hence, some marginals may draw on their internal contradictions and tensions to enhance their capacity to handle uncertainty.

In addition to marginals' potential to handle uncertainty due to contradictory reference systems, marginals may also be less susceptible to identity threats (i.e. potential harm to the value, meanings, and enactment of one's identity; see Petriglieri, 2011), because they are not fully identified with their cultural groups. Usually, when identities are under threat, such as when subordinates question their leader's cultural loyalties, the leader's response draws down volitional resources, leaving them vulnerable to subsequent threats (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). In comparison, marginals' distance from their cultural groups may mean that identity threats are less likely to deplete their volitional resources, equipping them to face the cognitive and emotional challenges associated with heightened levels of uncertainty. Thus, those marginals who excel as global leaders likely do so by developing heightened resilience to identity threats and strong coping mechanisms for dealing with uncertainty, based on their experience coping with the uncertainty inherent in their status as marginals.

In sum, insider/outsider tension has the potential to give marginals cognitive, affective and behavioural freedom to behave flexibly, take perspectives, develop cognitive complexity, and cope with uncertainty and identity threats, all while still understanding their associated cultures as natives. Although these theoretical arguments seem to imply that marginals ought to excel as global leaders, most of the evidence indicates that the opposite is more likely to be true (Berry et al., 2006). Ahead, we reconcile these contradictory claims by introducing supplementary conditions that allow some marginals to defy the average marginalised experience and instead develop global leadership skills.

5 Supplementary conditions

Not all marginals will become global leaders. Indeed, the most relevant challenge for marginals is that most of them do not seem to live up to the potential identified in this paper. Supplementary conditions may explain why negative outcomes are most common in research on marginals, and why they often have a difficult time drawing on their marginality for performance gains, despite theoretical potential to do so. We suggest that marginals only excel as global leaders when they also exhibit mindfulness and personal agency, allowing them to overcome their internal tensions and develop global leadership characteristics.

Mindfulness: As mentioned earlier, Bourhis et al. (1997) divided marginals into anomic and individualists, where the first group actively rejected both cultures, while the second group preferred to define themselves as individuals, separate from any group. They found that anomic marginals were more likely to suffer from adjustment or performance issues, compared to individualist marginals. Tadmor et al. (2009) posit that individualists may be driving the performance gains for marginals because they exert more active cognitive effort in controlling their own acculturation process. This corresponds to the importance of self-concept clarity in leadership situations (Hannah et al., 2009). Based on these explanations, the dividing factor among marginals may be the degree of mindfulness they exhibit about the tension involved in their simultaneous insider/outsider status.

A study of Indian-Americans and Korean-Americans illustrated varying degrees of mindfulness among marginals (Dhingra, 2007). Some marginals were conscious about not fitting in with either of their cultures, and highly mindful about their situations. They spent a lot of time thinking about their experiences, and as a result, found the experience difficult. In contrast, others were less mindful about their situations as marginals, and tended to find the experience less painful. For example, the following Korean-American male responded to a question about whether he preferred associating with Korean Americans or Whites during his childhood: "Honestly, I don't think that there was much of a preference. I was comfortable either way ... I guess I really just didn't care" (Dhingra, 2007, p.77). Whereas a lower level of mindfulness may reduce pain, it may also deprive marginalised individuals of the possibility to benefit from their experiences by developing heightened capabilities to cope with diversity, complexity, and uncertainty. Thus, mindfulness may enable individuals to experience performance gains as a result of marginality.

Individual agency: In general, marginality is not a pleasant experience, and is commonly associated with negative consequences such as feeling of powerlessness, isolation, anxiety, insecurity, malaise, and self-doubt. According to Bennett (1993), these problems are mostly related to *encapsulated* marginals, who disintegrate in shifting cultures, experience alienation and conflicting cultural loyalties, and are unable to construct a unified identity. They do not enjoy much sense of agency or control, and are more likely to succumb to feelings of powerlessness and suffering. However, it is also possible to create *constructive* marginality out of the marginalised experience, where individuals maintain control of choice and the construction of boundaries; consequently, they create a state of dynamic in-betweenness, as a result of conscious choice making. When experiencing some of the unpleasant outcomes of marginality, constructive marginals are more likely to respond through self-differentiation and assuming responsibility for choosing and actively constructing meaning for themselves. This latter form of marginality allows individuals to benefit from their unique state, in particular by developing stronger coping mechanisms, as described in the section dealing with uncertainty. We argue that it is individual agency – being in control as marginals – that determines whether marginality is experienced as constructive or encapsulated. Therefore, marginals who exhibit higher levels of individual agency may be more likely to overcome the negative outcomes common for marginals, and develop the potential to become effective global leaders.

It is worth noting that individuals may not choose whether or not to become marginal. For example, children of expatriates or diplomats may need to move with their parents to different countries and are forced to experience the process of acculturation and marginality several times in their life. However, they may choose how to interpret their marginal status. In order to turn the marginal experience into a potentially beneficial one, marginals may need to proactively create positive meanings of their life events, regaining congruence in the identity system (Burke, 1991). Even if one does not choose to be a marginal in the first place, individuals can proactively accept marginality (instead of rejecting it), and strive for ways to re-construct meaning and self-concept clarity around it. Only when such individual agency is involved, can individuals avoid the dark side of marginality and instead reach out for its brighter potential. In sum, the way one pays attention to (i.e. being mindful) and interprets (i.e. exercising individual agency) the experience of marginality may determine whether one can develop global leadership skills.

6 Practical implications

For marginals who have overcome the challenges of marginality, drawing on mindfulness and individual agency as discussed above, there are two potential challenges to marginals' practical achievement of global leadership positions. First, from the organisation's perspective, it is difficult to select individuals based on marginality, due to relatively small numbers of marginals and the challenge of identifying them. Asking candidates whether they see themselves as marginalised may be merely intrusive or outright prohibited by law. Marginals make up around 22% to 26% of bicultural individuals (Gillespie et al., 2010, Berry et al., 2006), indicating that they make up an even smaller percentage of the general population. Therefore, the chances of finding a qualified marginal leader for any one particular position may be slim. However, there are many more people who have passed through the experience of being marginal, compared to the number of individuals who are currently in a state of marginality. This expands the candidate pool for selecting marginalised leaders, consistent with our arguments in the section on becoming marginal.

The second challenge is that marginalised leaders may not be aware of the potential benefits they bring to leadership positions as a result of their marginalised status. Since most research on marginals frames it as a disadvantage, there is no theoretically-grounded basis for marginalised leaders to articulate how their marginalised status may be an advantage for global leadership positions. To this end, we explain how marginals might be able to apply their unique status as both cultural insiders and outsiders to three leadership roles: ethical global leaders – related to the diversity challenge of global leadership; leaders of global virtual teams – related to complexity; and unconstrained global leaders – related to uncertainty.

Marginalised biculturals as ethical global leaders: Ethical leadership refers to demonstrating behaviour appropriate to the situational context, organisation or stakeholders involved, and promoting similar behaviour to followers (Brown et al., 2005). Within the global domain, ethical leaders must consider the perspectives of varied and culturally diverse stakeholders. As described previously, marginals may be able to meet the diversity challenge of global leadership by honing their perspective-taking skills. Culture is often likened to the fish in water analogy, wherein the fish takes for granted the importance of water to its existence until it is taken out of the fishbowl. Marginals have the unique experience of living simultaneously inside and outside their cultural 'fishbowls', and as such, they may have the ability to notice things that others who are embedded in their cultures do not. Examples include faulty assumptions about other cultural groups, or decisions based only on the dominant culture's ethical code. By emphasising their perspective-taking skills, marginals may be able to excel as ethical global leaders.

Marginalised biculturals as virtual global leaders: One of the key challenges for leaders of global virtual teams is developing team cohesiveness across cultures, distance and time (Jenster and Steiler, 2011). Leaders of global virtual teams are often expected to be the 'glue' that holds the team together, by initiating relationships among team members, and encouraging members to participate more fully in team activities (Jenster and Steiler, 2011). However, acting as a 'cultural bridge' may be easier for individuals who have experience moving into and out of cultural groups (Richter et al., 2006).

Marginals, in particular, may be able to draw on their higher levels of cognitive complexity to excel as virtual global leaders, by building closer connections among culturally diverse team members. As described previously, marginals may be able to meet the complexity challenge of global leadership by embracing the contradictions associated with a marginalised identity. This may enable them to better connect with people from various backgrounds and lead diverse virtual teams.

Marginalised biculturals as unconstrained global leaders: Marginals may be able to draw on their internal contradictions to enhance their capability to behave flexibly. We argued earlier that marginals may be able to meet the uncertainty challenge of global leadership by remaining in a state of *in-betweenness* (Bennett, 1993), allowing them more flexibility than individuals embedded fully in each of their cultures. This relationship can be understood as analogous to that of a female foreign correspondent, reporting on events in traditionally male-dominant societies. One such correspondent reported that she can often get access that others cannot (for example, to senior officials), and she is not necessarily expected to conform to either women's or men's roles (Nolen, 2010). In the same way, being a marginal may be beneficial because marginals may not be expected to conform to the usual cultural roles they would play in society. Compared to individuals who are deeply embedded in one culture, marginals may have the advantages of being as unconstrained as a foreign correspondent (through their status as outsiders), plus having the deep local understanding of a local correspondent (through their status as insiders).

7 Conclusion

Global leaders can be selected, or they can be trained. Current research tends to focus on training global leaders. However, these programmes are usually costly and yield uncertain success rates, potentially because many of the requisite characteristics are difficult to modify (Caligiuri, 2006). In terms of knowledge, skills and abilities, and personality characteristics, only knowledge can be easily influenced through training. Skills and abilities can be developed, but only after significant investment of time and capital, and personality characteristics may not change, even after significant investments (Caligiuri, 2006). Consequently, organisations should invest just as much time – if not more – into assessing and acknowledging the often *hidden* skills sets of marginals as potential global leaders. When organisations start with the right people, their training programmes may be more successful at developing truly effective global leaders. Although we recognise that the potential benefits identified here may not accrue to all marginals, those who are able to overcome the usual challenges of marginality may be especially well-suited to global leadership positions. Based on the research and theoretical explanations presented here, we propose that organisations should pay more attention to marginals as unique contenders for global leadership positions.

Acknowledgements

The work and contribution of the second author to this paper is supported by the funding of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (No. ECO2010-18816).

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Note

- 1 This project was led by the third author as the academic advisor for Tesco around creating an ethnographic methodology to be deployed by a bicultural global team.