

Marginals as Global Leaders: Why they might just excel!

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Marginals are individuals who are simultaneously cultural insiders and outsiders. This contradictory identity has led them to be overlooked as positive contributors to organizations. Indeed, most of the evidence indicates that marginals usually experience worse outcomes than other biculturals. However, there is consistent evidence indicating that this picture may be incomplete. Under certain conditions, marginals may possess certain advantages that facilitate their potential to excel as global leaders.

In today's global economy, organizations are progressively seeking leaders who are capable of handling the increased complexity, diversity, and uncertainty involved in their world-wide operations. In our view, marginals, or individuals who belong to more than one culture, yet do not identify strongly with any of them, are a source for global leaders that is largely ignored.

The notion of a marginal global leader might perhaps seem like an oxymoron. Global leaders have been described as internationally-oriented, well-adjusted, and adept at managing relationships¹, whereas marginals have been rather described as poorly adapted to their environments, psychologically overwhelmed, and socially weak². Marginals are further described as caught between two cultures and never fitting into either one³. T.E. Lawrence (more familiarly known as Lawrence of Arabia)—an Englishman who lived extensively in the Middle East in the early 1900s, described his experience of trying to live with both his English and Arab identities 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."*⁴

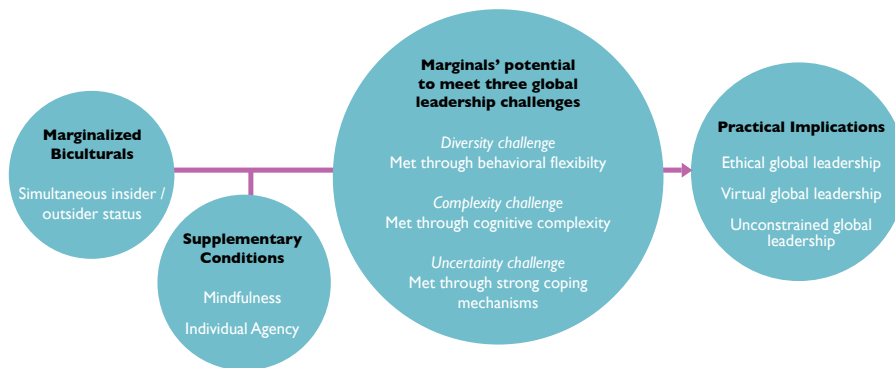
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Based on the above descriptions, marginals might seem indeed like poor candidates for global leadership positions. However, researchers have found consistent evidence indicating that this picture may be incomplete⁵. For example, positive psychological outcomes are found to be related to marginality in some studies⁴, such as cognitive complexity and social ties across cultural boundaries. The benefits are usually disregarded as anomalies, but enough evidence now exists to merit an examination into why marginalized biculturals *sometimes* excel in global settings. We propose an explanation for the outliers from the average marginalized experience, that under certain conditions, marginalized individuals may possess certain advantages that facilitate their potential to excel as global leaders.

Why some marginals have the potential to become global leaders

Marginals are individuals who are both included and excluded from their cultural groups; they are simultaneously cultural insiders and outsiders. Individuals can belong to more than

Figure 1: How some marginals excel as global leaders



one cultural group through immigration (themselves or parents) or sometimes through marriage or other long-term international relocation. Challenges and potential opportunities for marginals all stem from this essential tension between marginals' status as both cultural natives, and outsiders looking in.

Global leaders must face three challenges to a greater degree, compared to domestic leaders. Global leaders need to handle a heightened level of *diversity*, *complexity*, and *uncertainty*⁶. 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 in their work. 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. Finally, *uncertainty* is seen as an inevitable reality of global business. These three challenges do not represent a new model of global leadership, but instead exemplify global leadership challenges that highlight marginals' potential advantages. Ahead and in figure one, we explain how marginality can be one of the paths toward global leadership relating to these three challenges.

Diversity. Diverse teams have been found to be less satisfied and experience more conflict than homogeneous teams, but effective team leaders can mitigate these negative effects by finding common ground and emphasizing team-oriented

processes that facilitate collaboration⁷. Because marginals are on the periphery of their cultural groups without identifying strongly with them, they are often less attached to cultural categorization and thus able to move *in* and *out* of cultural groupings with some immunity to this type of identity problem. This flexibility increases their suitability to the challenge of leading a diverse team. In other

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words, they may be able to draw on their marginalized experience to understand and accommodate diverse and often contradictory behaviors and perceptions. As a result, some marginals may be particularly apt in handling diversity embedded in global leadership roles.

Complexity. Research has found that marginals have the potential to develop higher levels of cognitive complexity than other biculturals, based on marginals' unique simultaneous insider/outsider status⁸. Cognitive complexity makes it easier for leaders to consider behavior as multidimensional, such as the complex role demands of global leaders, rather than enacting only a small set of the roles global leaders are expected to play. 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. People are often drawn towards their in-groups when experiencing uncertainty, especially if the uncertainty reflects or threatens their self-concept⁹. However, without a clearly defined and distinctive identity, marginals have had to develop other mechanisms to cope with uncertainty. In fact, by not identifying strongly with any culture, research shows that some marginals may continually restructure their identities. In other words, when they face unfamiliar cultural or business cues, rather than automatically taking a defensive stance, marginals may be more willing and able to explore, embrace and even integrate new cultures into their self-concept. Thus, those marginals who excel as global leaders likely do so by developing strong coping mechanisms for dealing with uncertainty, based on their experience coping with the uncertainty inherent in their status as marginals.

In sum, we consider such insider/outsider tensions as the key factor that gives marginals the freedom to behave flexibly in the face of diversity, develop cognitive complexity, and cope with uncertainty, all while still understanding their own cultures as natives. However, we do not contend that all marginals ought to excel as global leaders. In fact, evidence indicates the opposite, that is, marginals are more likely than other biculturals to have worse psychological, social and adjustment outcomes¹⁰. When we analyze such phenomena with a bigger picture that incorporates more relevant pieces of the puzzle, this seeming contradiction can be resolved. More specifically, as we suggest below, when supplementary conditions are met, marginals may be able to leverage their marginalized experience and develop global leadership skills.

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 here. Supplementary conditions likely explain why marginals often have a difficult time drawing on their marginality for performance gains, despite the potential to do so. We suggest that marginals only excel as global leaders when they also exhibit mindfulness and personal agency, because these two conditions allow some marginals to overcome their internal tension as both cultural insiders and outsiders. In the process of coping with and overcoming the tensions of being on the periphery, it is possible that such marginal ‘outliers’ actually develop global leadership characteristics without knowing it.

Mindfulness. Some marginals are highly mindful, or aware, of the tension involved in their simultaneous insider/outsider status. Being mindful means that they consciously *reflect* upon their identities in often ambiguous and challenging multicultural contexts. Those who are highly mindful spend a lot of time thinking about their experiences, and as a result, they also commonly find the experience difficult, such as the following Indian-American female:

“I identify as a mixed, confused, Oreo cookie. I have this one Indian friend who’s straight from India, and he makes fun of me all the time. He doesn’t see me as an Indian, and my White friends say I’m not like them because of my family or whatever. Then what the hell am I? I sometimes wish that if I was going to be born Indian, I wish I was born in India, that way I wouldn’t know any better. If I had to be born here, I wish I was born White.”¹¹

In contrast, other individuals in the same study were less mindful about their situations as marginals. As a result, they tended to find the experience less painful than individuals in the first group. 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”¹¹.

Whereas a lower level of mindfulness can reduce the suffering of marginalized individuals, it may also deprive them of the possibility to benefit and learn from their experiences. Thus, the degree of mindfulness may differentiate between individuals who experience performance gains as a result of marginality, versus those who experience performance losses.

Individual agency. In general, marginality is not a pleasant experience, and is commonly associated with negative consequences such as feeling powerless, isolated, and insecure. When experiencing some of the unpleasant outcomes of marginality, some marginals respond by actively constructing meaning

for themselves. In other words, they are not only mindful of their marginalized experiences, but also consciously *manage* their identities. They create a state of dynamic in-betweenness, as a result of conscious and deliberate choice making. On the contrary, other marginals, who do not enjoy much sense of agency or control, are more likely to succumb to feelings of powerlessness and suffering. We argue that the former group is hence more likely to overcome the negative outcomes common for marginals, and instead develop the potential to become effective global leaders.

In sum, the way one pays attention to (i.e., being mindful) and interprets (i.e., exercising personal agency) the experi-

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ence of marginality may determine whether one can reap the potential benefits. It is likely that these conditions may be beneficial not only for marginals but also for leaders in general to assume global leadership roles, regardless of cultural background. Instead of claiming that these conditions are exclusively relevant for marginals, we emphasize their particular importance for marginals to overcome the difficulty of living with internal tension and opposition. If marginals are able to overcome these challenges, those who also demonstrate mindfulness and personal agency may develop into global leaders.

Practical implications

If marginals are able to draw on mindfulness and individual agency to overcome the challenges of marginality, they might be able to apply their unique status as both cultural insiders and outsiders to excel as global leaders. Specifically, they might be especially skilled 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.

Marginalized biculturals as ethical global leaders. Ethical global leadership requires considering the perspectives of varied and culturally diverse stakeholders. 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 take less for granted, and

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instead notice things that others who are embedded in their cultures do not notice. Examples include faulty assumptions about other cultural groups, or decisions based only on the dominant culture's ethical code.

Marginalized biculturals as virtual global leaders. One of the key challenges for leaders of global virtual teams is developing team cohesiveness across cultures, distance and time¹². 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. However, acting as a 'cultural bridge' may be easier for individuals who have experience moving into and out of cultural groups, as a natural consequence of a multicultural background. 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.

Marginals may be able to draw on their internal contradictions and tensions to behave flexibly in uncertain situations.

Marginalized biculturals as unconstrained global leaders. Marginals may be able to draw on their internal contradictions and tensions to behave flexibly in uncertain situations. This relationship can be understood as analogous to that of a female foreign correspondent, reporting on events in traditionally male-dominant societies. In an award acceptance speech, Stephanie Nolen, foreign correspondent for the Canadian Globe and Mail, said that as a female correspondent, she can 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 roles¹³. Instead, she can switch in between acting as a man and acting as a woman, depending on whom she is trying to reach. In the same way, marginals may have the advantages of being as unconstrained as a foreign correspondent (through their status as outsiders), but also possess the deep local understanding of a local correspondent (through their status as insiders).

Conclusion

Global leaders can be selected, or they can be trained. Current trends tend to focus on training global leaders. However, these programs are usually costly, lengthy and yield uncertain success rates, in part because the key characteristics are difficult to train. Organizations should invest just as much time – if not more – into finding people who already have these skills. The often hidden skills of marginalized biculturals are a good place to start looking, instead of assuming this group has low potential to become global leaders. 

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