Acculturation patterns and education of refugees and asylum seekers: A systematic literature review☆

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ABSTRACT

The global refugee crisis has resulted in the widespread resettlement of forcibly displaced peoples into foreign cultures. These refugees are forced into new and sometimes very different cultures, and thus must undertake the psychological process of acculturation as a result of this resettlement. Research has begun to focus on how host cultures can facilitate this adjustment, and a body a growing evidence suggests that factors related to education can facilitate or hinder this process of acculturation. This systematic literature review synthesized the evidence that has explored patterns in the relationships between the acculturation strategies of refugees and asylum seekers and education-relevant outcomes. We conducted a systematic search across five databases for English language journal articles and dissertations that present evidence on this topic. A meta-synthesis of 19 articles revealed that a majority of the existing research provides evidence for psychological acculturation (increasing identification with the host culture, independent of identification with the home culture) being related to the level of education, school adaption, school attachment, academic achievement, and social/school support. Specifically, we found evidence that relationships exist between positive education-relevant outcomes and both integration and assimilation strategies (although the latter to a lesser degree). Importantly, the research also showed that a lack of identification with the host culture was associated with lower levels of these education-relevant outcomes. These findings suggest that schools and tertiary institutions could play a vital role in the integration of refugee and asylum-seeking students.

1. Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced from their home in 2015. These statistics represent the largest number since displacements during World War II, and are the highest in recorded history (UNHCR, 2016b). A large proportion of this displacement has resulted from recent conflict and war, leading to disruption in the lives of civilians. Displaced individuals are often characterized by their vulnerabilities and associated with some form of disruption (i.e., natural disasters, political risk, or civil unrest; UNHCR, 2017). They are different from other kinds of migrant groups, such as skilled-migrants, expatriates, and sojourners, because they are forcibly displaced (displacement can be either internal [i.e., forced to other parts of the country] or external [i.e., forced outside their country]; Hollifield, Martin, & Orrenius, 2014). Typically, this displacement results in broken family structures and interrupted education. Of the 65.3 million globally displaced individuals around the world, 38% are externally

displaced, being either asylum seekers (externally displaced individuals who are yet to be granted refugee status) or refugees (legally settled in a host country following forced migration). For the purposes of this review, the term refugee(s) will be used over-inclusively to refer to all externally displaced people.

Migration in any form is associated with many challenges, including exposure to a foreign lifestyle and culture shock. Moreover, simultaneous exposure to multiple cultures has the potential to result in conflicting attitudes, values, and behaviours, which in turn gives rise to related issues including distorted cultural identity, cultural adjustment difficulties, and mental health issues (Bhugra, 2004; Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Refugees who have been displaced because of war and conflict may have pronounced effects of culture shock because these individuals are usually unprepared to leave their countries, have greater risks of mental health issues (e.g., there is often trauma associated with the departure and travel), and they have not had the opportunity to organize places to stay or work in the new country (Hocking, Kennedy, & Sundram, 2015).

Relevant to this paper are the challenges to (and potential benefits from) participating in a foreign education system, and in particular the difficulties around academic adjustment – a term encompassing academic achievement, adjustment to the local student lifestyle, management of expectations, and motivation (Anderson, Guan, & Koc, 2016). Time spent in education and the social relationships formed through educational institutions are also outcomes of academic adjustment (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). The relationship between education and acculturation is bi-directional, and potentially cyclical, in that acculturation may facilitate education, but that education may also facilitate acculturation. This literature review aims to synthesize the available research that has attempted to identify and describe the nature of this relationship with a specific population group of forced migrants. We undertake this review with the hope that a systematic synthesis of the available evidence will help guide researchers and policy-makers in their decision making with an informed understanding of the acculturation-education relationship.

2. Acculturation

2.1. Theoretical conceptualizations of acculturation

Acculturation is a process whereby identity change occurs as a result of exposure to simultaneous multiple cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). It can also be theorized as outcomes of the cross-cultural engagement between multiple cultures, or the changed behaviour or psychology of an individual (or group) as they negotiate the cultural juxtaposition (Berry, 1990). Preliminary models of acculturation were unidimensional (e.g., Gordon, 1964) – these theories posit that individuals adjusting to cross-cultural contact can be conceptualized on single cultural identity-based continuum ranging from identifying entirely with one's home culture to identifying entirely with the host culture. This model has been criticized for being too simplistic, but more so for failing to recognize an individual's ability to maintain complex multiple identities (Dion & Dion, 1996; Phinney, 2003). Criticism of the unidimensional model led to the development of several other models, which encapsulate a dual-dimensional approach of cross-cultural contact (Ager & Strang, 2008; Berry, 1997; Birman, Trickett, & Vinokurov, 2002; Kramer, 2013; Leong, 2014).

One of the most prominent theoretical models in this field was developed by John Berry (e.g., 1997), who theorized that there are two orthogonal dimensions associated with cross-cultural contact – the first reflects strength of identification with the host culture (including the extent of desire to interact with the host culture) and the second reflects the strength of maintenance of the home culture. Thus, he posed a quadrant model to reflect four possible acculturation 'strategies' (also referred to as acculturation attitudes) to classify individuals who are newly-arrived to a culture based on the strength of their concurrent identification with their host and home cultures (e.g., Berry, 1997, 2005, 2008). Berry's model also emphasizes the importance of examining psychological acculturation[1] in addition to cultural and behavioural acculturation which many models fail to do. This allows acculturation to be studied from a psychological perspective since the process is not solely dependent on social or cultural structure as studied by sociologists and anthropologists, respectively (Berry, 1977). The model's quadrants are: *assimilation, integration, separation,* and *marginalization.* Integration has previously been identified as the most desired outcome for acculturating individuals, as it is associated with least amount of social difficulty, and marginalization is the least favored strategy since it is associated with the likelihood of developing other

problems including mental health issues (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Each of the four possible combinations are detailed below.

Assimilation reflects de-identification with the home culture and its active replacement with the host culture (Ward, 2008). This was the acculturation strategy that was historically expected of people changing cultures during times like colonialism and the slave trade era (Montiel, 1977; Rowley, 1970), and arguably still exists today.[2] *Integration* comprises acquiring identification with the host culture while maintaining identification with the home culture.[3] Integration attenuates the negative effects of culture shock and could also lead to better psychological outcomes such as lower rates of depression (e.g., Virta, Sam, & Westin, 2004). Individuals who do not adopt the host culture become *separated* (only retain an identification with the home culture, without identifying with the host culture) or *marginalized* (do not identify with the host culture, but become non-identified with the home culture too). These two strategies are often associated with negative outcomes, such as depression and lower self-esteem, respectively (e.g., Sarwikar & Hunt, 2005; Virta et al., 2004).

2.2. Education and acculturation

Many factors have been identified that influence a group or individual's strength of cultural identification, and thus their acculturation strategy and acculturation-relevant outcomes. The outcome of interest to this paper is how acculturation co-varies with education – for example, formal education such as schooling (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006) or informal education like vocational English language community programs (Refieyan, Orang, Bijami, Nejad, & Eng, 2014). The acquisition of education can take various forms; however, the emphasis tends to be on access to formal education with qualifications in the hope of attaining employment/income (Hopkins & McKeown, 2002), as opposed to informal education such as non-accredited courses, or peer-based learning. For these reasons, it is not surprising that researchers are becoming increasingly interested in how education can impact (and is impacted by) the ways in which people adjust to new cultural environments. There has been plenty of qualitative and correlational research that has empirically linked these two domains (e.g., Gupta, Kumar, & Stewart, 2010; Lopez & Yamashita, 2017; Sheikh, Anderson, & Koc, 2018), although it is worth highlighting that this has not been documented as a causal relationship.

3. The current study

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization has classified education as a human right (UNESCO, 2016), yet research has found that refugees and asylum seekers often struggle to access education in a new country. For example, the UNHCR (2016a) has previously reported that only 50% of refugee children were enrolled in primary schools, 22% in secondary school, and only 1% of young adult refugees attended universities. This might be for a variety of reasons, including insufficient resources and support, lack of language skills, unfamiliarity with the foreign system, or conflicting demands (Hebbani, Obijiofor, & Bristed, 2012). In extreme instances, this might be attributed to refugees being denied study rights (even though this is in direct contravention to the *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*; United Nations General Assembly, 1951). Each of these reasons might be associated with (or even caused by) outcomes of the acculturation process. With this knowledge, one could also assume

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[1] Psychological acculturation refers to the visible changes in behaviour attributed to an acculturated thought-process or attitude for the action. This is different from merely changing behaviour to 'fit-in' (Berry, 1977; also see Padilla & Perez, 2003).

[2] Pertinent examples of modern assimilation expectations pertain to Australian citizens expecting refugees to become 'Australian'; Haslam & Holland, 2012 – for more on the role of national identity, (see Anderson & Ferguson, 2017; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2017).

[3] Also referred to as 'biculturalism' by some theorists, for example Benet-Martinez and Haritatos (2005), and LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993).