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Challenges in the study of adolescent and acculturative changes[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two recurrent themes in the study of acculturation in adolescence that challenge progress of the field. First, we often work with low-dimensional, trait-like models of acculturation that cannot deal with modern types of acculturation that are often characterized by multidimensionality and domain specificity. Second, acculturative change in adolescence is undertheorized and there is a need to integrate developmental tasks and models of acculturation. It is argued that approaches that have been adopted in the study of identity (with their models that range from generalized traits to situated approaches and their adoption of both quantitative and qualitative methods) are highly suitable for the study of acculturation. A more contextualized approach would also facilitate the study of the interaction of contextual conditions and acculturative changes in adolescence.

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The articles in the special issue illustrate the interest and importance of acculturation studies in adolescence. I will describe recurrent themes in the articles that may thwart the advancement of the field. As will become evident in the remainder of this commentary, these issues are not unique for acculturation studies of adolescents, but they are common for the intersection of developmental and acculturation studies. The two issues are: (1) we often work with simplified, trait-like models of acculturation although we are aware of the simplistic nature of these models; (2) acculturative change in adolescence is undertheorized and we need an integration of developmental tasks and models of acculturation.

Before presenting my argument, a caveat about terminology is needed. The acculturation field uses two concepts that are defined, implicitly or explicitly, in multiple ways. The first one is integration. Psychology is probably the only field where integration refers to a combination of mainstream and ethnic cultures and where the concept not only refers to outcomes but also to orientations to the mainstream and ethnic cultures (Berry, 1997). The Merriam-Webster uses the word “amalgamation” for this combination of cultures (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acculturation>). In many fields, being integrated means being adjusted and accepted as full member of the new society; an integrated immigrant is then a person who is well adjusted to and accepted in the new cultural context. In the present special issue, both meanings (i.e., being adapted and being bicultural) can be found. The question can be asked whether we should continue to use integration in the

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sense of being bicultural when psychology seems to be largely the only discipline using the term in this way. The term “bicultural” does not have this ambiguity. The second term with a befuddled meaning is acculturation. In a scientific approach, acculturation refers to changes due to intercultural contact (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). This definition has two problems; first, acculturation is also about cultural maintenance. It is one of the achievements of acculturation research that there is now more interest in cultural maintenance and its ramifications for outcomes like well-being. There is no term available that describes both adaptation and maintenance other than the term “acculturation” itself. Clearly, there is a terminological problem. Second, the term does not completely correspond with the everyday meaning, which can lead to misunderstandings. In everyday speech, an acculturated immigrant is often taken to be a well-adapted immigrant, which does not refer to cultural maintenance. It can be concluded that the terminology of the acculturation field suffers from a persistent problem in that prevailing terms, notably acculturation and integration, are often taken to be synonymous to adjustment, where psychology has garnered convincing evidence that this perspective needs to be complemented but has been unable to find a clear and apt terminology that found widespread acceptance.

1. On the nature of acculturation

Historically, three types of acculturation models have been developed (Van de Vijver, 2015). In a nutshell, my argument is that these models follow the changing global trends in migration. The first model was mainly based on experiences with European immigration to the United States in the 19th and early 20th century. Acculturation meant adjustment here; an acculturation process started with a fully unadjusted migrant and ended with a fully adjusted migrant. These models were called one-dimensional or unidimensional as acculturation trajectories involved moving along the dimension of adjustment. There was a rather popular view, found both among laypersons and scientists, that the adjustment process took three generations and that the first generation moved, the second generation had both cultures, and a third generation was fully adjusted to the new cultural context (e.g., Portes & Hao, 2002).

After some time, it was realized that not all acculturation processes end in adjustment and that there are ethnic groups that maintain their original culture across multiple generations. Examples are groups of Chinese in various places such as Singapore. Another example is the maintenance of religion by many Muslim groups in the diaspora across multiple generations. Therefore, complete immersion is neither the inevitable nor the desired outcome for all immigrants. Models in this tradition are called two-dimensional (or bidimensional). The most influential two-dimensional model of acculturation has been proposed by Berry (1997). The two-dimensional model has become popular in psychology and many assessment procedures have been developed within this framework (Celenk & Van de Vijver, 2014). The main advantage of the model is the independent consideration (and assessment) of maintaining the heritage culture and adopting the culture of the country of settlement. Many studies have shown the preponderance of integration as a preferred way of dealing with the home and host culture.

Since its inception, the problems of the model are becoming clearer. The challenges to the two-dimensional acculturation conceptualizations come from three areas. First, the meaning of the concept is not always clear. Does integration mean that immigrants combine cultures all the time (usually called blending; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993) or that they alternate between the cultures and oscillate between states of displaying the home and host culture? Does integration mean that both cultures should be equally represented? What does integration mean in domains where a combination is hard to achieve, such as religion or choice of a marriage partner? Second, the two-dimensional model seems to be tacitly based on the view that acculturation preferences are traits that are consistent across time and situations. There is empirical evidence that acculturation preferences can differ considerably across domains. For example, Turkish-Dutch prefer to maintain their ethnic culture in the private sphere but are more inclined to adjust to the Dutch culture in public life (e.g., Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; see also; Snauwaert, Soenens, Vanbeselaere, & Boen, 2003). Finally, many immigrants deal with more than two cultures. Many large cities have neighborhoods that harbor multiple cultures, called super-diversity by Vertovec (2007). We found in a neighborhood in Antwerp (Belgium), that immigrants living in such a highly diverse neighborhood developed a rather strong cosmopolitanism (Van de Vijver, Blommaert, Gkoumasi, & Stogianni, 2015). The sense of belonging of the community members was based on the identification with their very multicultural neighborhood (an inclusive identity). Finally, work by Ferguson in different countries, including Jamaican adolescents, suggests that they adopt specific features of the American culture (music and dance play an important role), although few of these youngsters ever visited the United States (Ferguson, Bornstein, & Pottinger, 2012); she calls this remote acculturation. It can be concluded that we need to develop models of acculturation that can accommodate various modes and intensities of contact that have emerged in the last decades.

These changes are better represented in the third type of acculturation model, so-called multidimensional models of acculturation. Identification with multiple cultures (“polyculturalism”; Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015) is becoming more common. Global, multiple, and inclusive identities are all examples of concepts that cannot be adequately captured in a two-dimensional acculturation framework. Yet, the multicultural view is nowhere near to a full-fledged model of acculturation. We will need to rethink our conceptual models and assessment procedures to accommodate the transition to multidimensional and typically domain-specific models. The extension requires a profound knowledge of the local context so that we know which cultures and which domains of these cultures are important (e.g., music, dance, communities on social media, and religion). We need more cafeteria-like models where acculturating individuals are more eclectic in what they (do not) adopt from other cultures. Internet and social media can play a tremendous role here, as these enable continuous exposure to

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