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# Advancing acculturation theory and research: the acculturation process in its ecological context

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Continued intercultural contact leads to challenges and changes. As part of this process, the acculturating individual deals with acculturative stressors whose negative effects on well-being can be buffered or exacerbated by coping reactions. A second component of the acculturation process involves the acquisition, maintenance, and change of cultural behaviors, values and identities associated with heritage and settlement cultures. Both acculturative stress and acculturative change unfold in an ecological context. Within the family, acculturation discrepancies between parents and children affect acculturation trajectories and outcomes. At the institutional level, the school and workplace exert significant influences on the acculturation of young people and working adults, respectively. At the societal level attitudes, policies and prejudice affect the acculturation experiences of sojourners and immigrants and influence their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation.

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Although originally considered the domain of anthropology [1], psychological studies of acculturation have a long history, with theory and research evolving over the last five decades [2]. Acculturation refers to changes in an individual's 'cultural patterns' (i.e., practices, values, identities) resulting from sustained first hand intercultural contact and subsequently affecting the individual's psychological well-being and social functioning [3–5]. Although it is now widely recognized that acculturation involves change and is affected by environmental factors, relatively few studies have systematically examined acculturation as a dynamic *process* and how this process

is affected by its *ecological context*. This paper elucidates the process of acculturation, its psychological and socio-cultural outcomes and the influence of context on the acculturation-adaptation link. Although the core process of acculturation can be examined across a wide range of peoples experiencing intercultural contact, including ethnic majority and minority groups and native peoples, the research described here is primarily focused on sojourners and immigrants (for a discussion of Current Opinions on biculturalism see [6]).

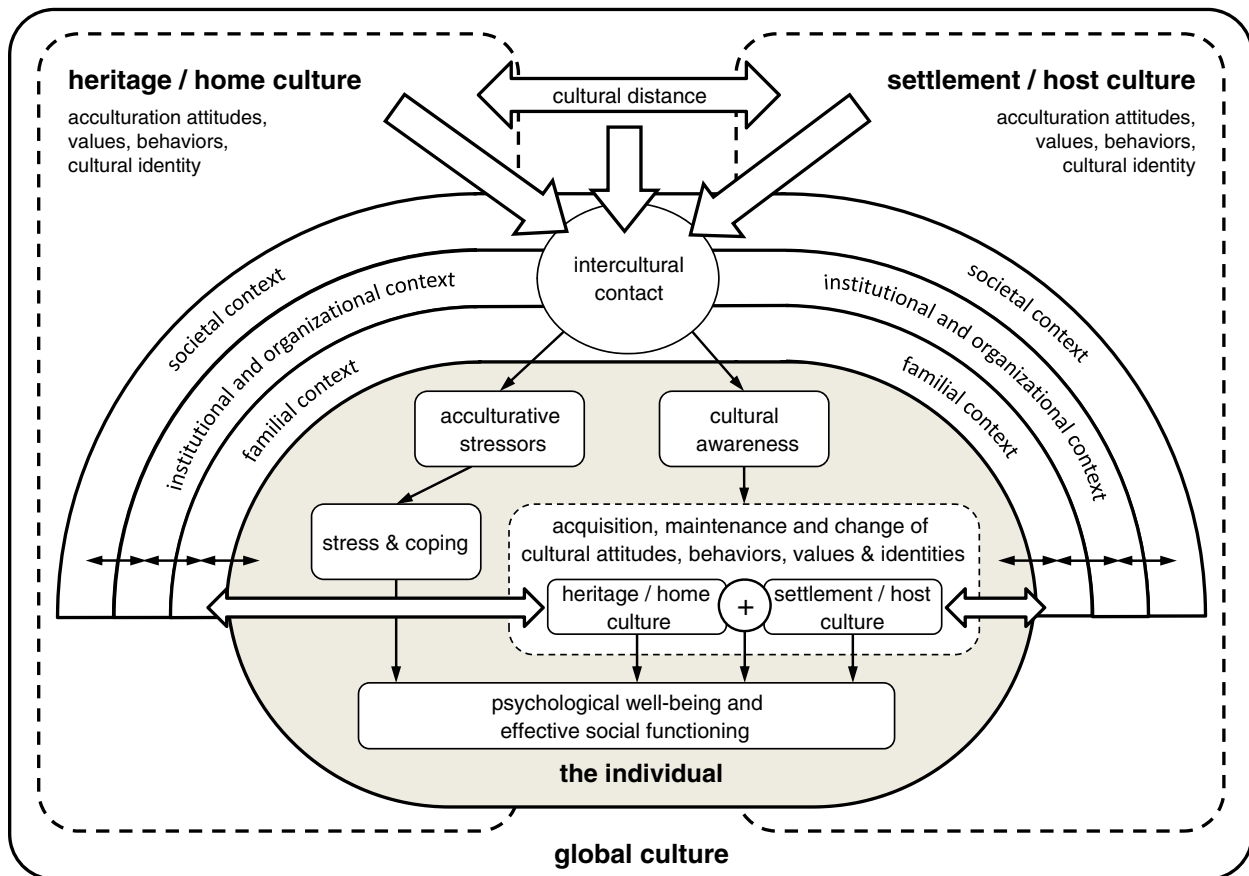
## Conceptualizing and measuring acculturation

Shedding one's heritage or home culture and shifting toward the values and behaviors of the settlement or host culture is one form of acculturation (i.e., assimilation), but this uni-dimensional conceptualization is not adequate to capture the richness and variety of acculturative changes, nor to explore the relationship between acculturation and adaptation [7<sup>\*</sup>,8–11]. Instead, an individual's orientation to both the heritage and settlement cultures needs to be considered [12<sup>\*\*</sup>,13], either as independent orientations or in interaction (heritage x settlement cultures) to delineate the four acculturation categories proposed by Berry [3,4]: integration (strong orientation to both cultures), assimilation (stronger orientation to settlement culture), separation (stronger orientation to heritage culture) and marginalization (weak orientation to both cultures). The interaction approach to categorization, however, requires dichotomizing individuals as weak or strong on both heritage and settlement culture orientations by splitting at the median, mean or scalar midpoint. Consequently, the resultant classification and distribution of individuals across acculturation categories are highly variable and not strictly comparable across studies [9,14].

More recently, latent class analysis has been used to uncover how heritage and settlement culture orientations are combined and change over time. This line of research [15<sup>\*\*</sup>,16–19] has largely failed to replicate the four-category model proposed by Berry [3,4]. Integration/biculturalism and separation regularly emerge, and assimilation is frequently observed among the two (e.g., stable and increasing cultural identities) to five (e.g., separated, assimilated, and low, high and separated biculturals) classes reported. In contrast, marginalization occurs so infrequently that its viability as an acculturation strategy has been questioned [20].

In addition to latent class analysis, novel qualitative and mixed method approaches to assessing and elucidating

Figure 1



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Acculturation process and context: framework for studying immigrants and sojourners.

acculturation are also being explored. The Cultural Day Reconstruction Method linked to diary studies [21] has been used to investigate the range of cultural engagements identified by individuals in culturally diverse societies. At the same time, identity maps [22,23] permit acculturating individuals to express themselves in their own terms by creating pictorial descriptions of their identities rather than being confined to quantifying the strength of their orientations to heritage and settlement cultures.

### A process model of acculturation

Acculturation research commonly relies on cross-sectional surveys conducted with a single acculturating group. However, we argue that acculturation is a dynamic process and this needs to be reflected in both empirical (i.e., longitudinal studies) and theoretical approaches to our research on acculturative *changes*. As the acculturation process begins with intercultural contact (Figure 1), it is fundamentally important to understand the nature and characteristics of the heritage or home culture and the settlement or host culture, including their compatibility

or 'distance.'<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that increasing distance or dissimilarity between cultures not only makes it more difficult to achieve integration, but also increases acculturative stress and negatively impacts psychological and socio-cultural adaptation [5,24].

Support for the cultural distance hypothesis [25] depends to a large extent on how distance is conceptualized and measured, whether in terms of perceptions or with respect to more objective criteria. The hypothesis has received substantial support when perceived distance is assessed as a continuous variable via comparisons of home and host cultures by research participants or when national groups are assigned to categories (e.g., low and high distance) by researchers on the basis of impressionistic criteria or geographical proximity [26–28]. Recently, however, more objective measures, such as differences in

<sup>3</sup> Independently of the distance between the cultures, the heritage or home culture and the settlement or host culture may themselves vary internally along a continuum of cultural homogeneity (e.g., Japan)–heterogeneity (e.g., Canada).

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