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# In search of a cultural home: From acculturation to frame-switching and intercultural competencies☆

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ABSTRACT

Current immigration societies consist of a growing number of culturally different immigrant groups and fading majority groups (Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). The present paper states that, as a consequence of this new composition of societies, immigrants and native inhabitants will use increasingly more individualized ways of approaching members of the growing number of available different cultural groups. Specifically, there will be a shift from acculturation strategies to identity strategies such as biculturalism, and toward applying personality-based intercultural competencies.



## 1. Introduction

Western immigrant-receiving countries have experienced significant transformations in the last five to six decades. After World War II, Canada and the United States received large groups of immigrants from European countries. Later, immigrants from other continents followed. In the 1960s, Spanish, Turkish and Moroccan guest workers started to emigrate to Northwestern European countries. When the numbers of immigrants were still small, immigrants had to decide to what degree they would assimilate to an overwhelming majority culture of the native population. In the following decades, growing numbers of immigrants representing a variety of ethnic origins and cultures started to arrive. Examples are Chinese in the United States and emigrants from former colonies in Western Europe. At the same time the native population was confronted with a growing immigrant population size, and showed in general a preference for the assimilation and – to a minor degree – for integration of these groups of immigrants (Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998). Currently, due to an even more expanding number of immigrants, societies are becoming more multicultural, with less dominant majority cultures and sometimes fading majorities (Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013).

At the same time, biculturalism has become an option for immigrants and their children, as these individuals can switch between different cognitive and behavioral frames tied to their different cultural identities. Members of the native, majority population – to a different degree – may also become able to switch between different cultures, one representing their native identity and the other tapping either a more global, multicultural identity (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008) or a culture capturing different elements of the minority cultures. The degree to which they are able to do that depends very much on

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their intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is the – largely personality based – ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures.

### *1.1. Acculturation strategies*

For decades John Berry has inspired policy makers and immigration researchers with his model of four acculturation strategies. According to Berry (1997) immigrants are faced with two fundamental questions: "Is it of value to maintain my cultural heritage?" and "Is it of value to maintain relations with other groups?" On the basis of the answers to these questions four acculturation strategies may be distinguished: (a) integration (it is important to maintain both cultural identity and to have positive relations with other groups); (b) assimilation (only positive relations with other groups are important); (c) separation (only maintaining the own cultural heritage is of importance) and (d) marginalization (neither cultural identity is important). An important finding is that the integration strategy appeared to be the most desirable acculturation strategy, in particular for immigrants. While acculturation strategies are considered as individual behavioral choices of immigrants, they are directed toward other cultural groups, both native and immigrant groups.

### *1.2. Increasing diversity*

As already mentioned, due to the large numbers of immigrants worldwide, we see an increasing diversity in the types of immigrant groups present in the host societies. These receiving nations have to deal with a larger variety of cultural groups, while the native groups form a smaller proportion of the population. One consequence of this diversification of immigrant groups is that native citizens may know less well which cultural group an immigrant belongs to and may know less of the respective cultures, and might therefore approach immigrants more as co-citizens who happen to be culturally different.

At the same time, growing numbers of immigrants and their children are choosing to be bicultural or even multicultural. These individuals can switch between different cultural frames and identities (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). Obviously, cultural frame-switching (CFS) is easier when these cultural identities are compatible (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). However, CFS might not be a skill or behavior unique to immigrants and cultural minorities. But, as mentioned earlier, members of the native, majority population may also become able to switch between different cultures (e.g., between the majority, local culture and a more mixed one capturing different elements of the minority cultures). We posit that both natives and immigrants can more easily switch from one culture to another if they enhance their intercultural competence, and that enhancing individuals' intercultural competence is an effective strategy to deal with the challenges of a multicultural society. Before elaborating on this idea, we will next discuss biculturalism, a concept that stresses the role of identity in intercultural adaptation.

## 2. Flexibility of identity switching: biculturalism

New cultural situations may be perceived by some as threatening; more specifically, it has also been suggested that switching between the cultural identity of the old and the new culture may be stressful (Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998). Individuals manage their multiple cultural identities in different ways. Some find it easy to integrate their multiple cultural identities into a coherent sense of self while others feel strained in their loyalties and the norms associated with their different cultures (Benet-Martínez, 2012). As an expression of a culturally complex identity and behavioral repertoire, LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993) and Benet-Martinez and colleagues (e.g., Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Hong et al., 2000), among others, introduced the term *biculturalism*. Biculturals are individuals who have been exposed to and have internalized two or more sets of cultural meaning systems. They navigate between their different cultural orientations by engaging in cultural frame switching or CFS. Biculturals' self-label, for instance Mexican-American, often reflects their cultural dualism, although not always (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). Accumulated research indicates that *biculturalism* is helpful for aspects of intercultural and intra-personal adaptation such as developing cross-group social networks, well-being, and achievement (Benet-Martínez, 2012; Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014). Research has also supported the role of general traits like neuroticism and openness to experience as antecedents of biculturalism. Individuals high on neuroticism are more inclined to perceive a clash between their native and host culture, whereas individuals high in openness tend to perceive a smaller distance between native and host culture (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). A preliminary study by Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) helped to distinguish among different types of biculturals. Using qualitative interview data from 46 Mexican-American and 52 African-American adolescents, these researchers found empirical evidence for three bicultural types: *blended* biculturals, *alternating* biculturals, and *separated* biculturals. Blended biculturals affirm their biculturalism, express pride in their ethnic background, and consider themselves equally ethnic and mainstream in their cultural orientations. They see the mainstream and ethnic cultures as different but not in conflict, and they are reluctant to choose one culture over the other. In comparison, alternating biculturals find it more difficult to have two cultures at the same time. They perceive the mainstream and ethnic cultures as more disparate, with distinct values, ideas, and norms, and they report experiencing some conflict between the two. The way they see themselves (more ethnic or mainstream) changes in response to the situation. For alternating biculturals, their cultural identification is less stable. Rather, it switches in response to contextual demands. The last type in Phinney and Devich Navarro's (1997) study, *separated* biculturals, comprises individuals who are not truly bicultural as defined by their psychological identification and attachment; they do