



Choosing the best of both worlds: The acculturation process revisited



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the acculturation process with particular attention to how individuals navigate, evaluate, negotiate, adopt, and integrate various cultural aspects. A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with Americans in Sweden and Swedes in the U.S. was employed to gain a nuanced and in-depth understanding of how the process is experienced at different stages and what role cultural, societal, and interpersonal factors play. Results emerging from a grounded theory analysis revealed a selective process involving identification of cultural differences and evaluation of host-culture aspects as complementary, superior, inferior, necessary, or unnecessary compared to home-culture ones. Culture-specific features are treated as additive, integrative, or mutually exclusive. Host-culture interaction and home-culture contact influence the process in important ways. Home-culture core values are rarely abandoned in favor of host-culture ones and the latter are not simply added. Bicultural competence is achievable; however, retention of a firm home-culture identity is a likely acculturation outcome.

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1. Introduction

With more than 190 million people worldwide living outside their country of birth or citizenship (Martin & Zürcher, 2008), intercultural adaptation is becoming an increasingly common experience for people across the globe. Sojourners take residence abroad for various reasons, but whether they stay short term or long term, their ability to function in their host culture rests on some degree of adjustment and cultural change, a process referred to as acculturation. Underlying much of the early acculturation research among immigrants was a unidimensional view of the process. It was assumed that immigrants had to unlearn their home culture and assimilate into their host culture in order to achieve high levels of host-culture competence (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Kim, 2001).

More than 30 years of acculturation research has demonstrated, however, that immigrants prefer to retain their home culture while acquiring host-culture competence. Increasing evidence that it is possible to internalize more than one cultural schema and be well adjusted in multiple cultures (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; Cheng, Lee, & Benet-Martínez, 2006; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000), has led to Berry's (1990, 1997) bidimensional model becoming the predominant paradigm in acculturation research (Nguyen and Benet-Martínez, 2013; Ward, 2008).

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Acculturation studies conducted across several disciplines have generally defined culture as a complex set of inter-related variables or as a system of components including identity, behavioral norms, and values that are corporately shared yet individually internalized (Zane & Mak, 2003). However, most researchers have treated culture as a single composite variable. Since culture has been operationalized in a number of different ways, it is difficult to compare research results. Also, a large number of studies involve Asian-American and Latin-American immigrants and biculturals, leaving other cultural pairs under-represented.

Acculturation research to date has identified independent variables such as age, generational status, language proficiency, and political climates across a wide range of cultures (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Ward & Kus, 2012) along with factors aiding or hindering host-culture adaptation (Berry, 1990; Cools, 2006; Kim, 2001; Lee, 2006; Somani, 2010) and acculturation outcomes such as social and psychological adjustment and levels of host-culture adoption and home-culture retention (Hong et al., 2000; Ward, 1996). Less is known about the actual process of acculturation, including exactly how individuals evaluate, negotiate, organize, and move between cultural orientations. The affective, cognitive, and behavioral variables involved when managing dual cultural identities and frameworks are not yet clearly understood. Some of the questions left unanswered were aptly articulated by Ward (2008):

The process elements have been largely overlooked. For example, what does integration really mean, and how is it achieved? Do people integrate by fusing their orientations to home and host cultures? Are their identities situational so that sometimes they are 'traditional' and sometimes 'modern'? Why do people assimilate or separate? Is it because they choose to or because they do not have the skills and abilities to integrate? How does marginalization occur? Does it arise from constraints and deficits or is it a genuine option? Do acculturation orientations change over time? (p. 107).

Recognizing a degree of uniformity in acculturation research that has stalled theory-building; Portes (1997) emphasized the need for conceptual innovation. Voicing similar concerns, Sackmann and Phillips (2004) advocated using contextual analysis, Chirkov (2009) argued in favor of diverse methodologies and multidisciplinary perspectives, and Hong et al. (2000) recommended using qualitative methods to examine the specific cognitive-affective responses to real-life cultural transitions.

Following these recommendations, this study sought to revisit the acculturation process by examining the nature of bicultural integration in greater depth and detail, with particular attention to how acculturating individuals navigate, evaluate, negotiate, adopt, and integrate various aspects of their host and home cultures. A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with Americans living or having lived in Sweden and Swedes living or having lived in the United States was employed in order to gain a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of individuals at different stages in the acculturation process and the cultural, societal, and interpersonal factors that influence how bicultural individuals integrate their two cultural frameworks. The use of the terms Swedish and American home and host cultures does not imply that cultural variation within each country was overlooked or disregarded or that culture was simply viewed as aligning with the concept of nation.

2. Review of literature and rationale

As background for the study, literature on acculturation and cultural integration was reviewed. Leaning on a definition provided by Benet-Martínez et al. (2002), culture was conceptualized as a framework that includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that enables people to orient themselves in relation to one another and the rest of the world and to experience and interpret the world in similar ways. This definition agrees with Hofstede's (1984) assessment that culture undergirds every aspect of human activity. It also lines up with Berry's (2009) description of culture as consisting of both concrete features, i.e. artifacts and institutions, and abstract features, i.e. representations, ideas, and symbols. Furthermore, it recognizes that culture exists simultaneously as a socially shared, external reality and as an internal reality, incorporated in each individual's psychological makeup.

2.1. The process of acculturation

The literature on cultural adaptation is vast with most recent research recognizing two acculturation dimensions: home-culture maintenance and host-culture participation, the interplay of which results in the four distinct acculturation strategies of assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization proposed by Berry and Sabatier (2011). This model was originally designed to gauge attitudes toward the two cultures, but was later changed to incorporate identity, language, social behavior, and motivations (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). The two dimensions have been operationalized in a number of different ways; however, most measurements focus on social interactions with home- versus host-culture members (Ward & Kus, 2012). Berry and Sabatier (2011) noted that participants classified as using an integration strategy varied from 82% in studies that emphasized intercultural contact to 37% in studies that emphasized adoption of culture and 10% in studies that emphasized cultural identity. They concluded, "It appears that this more internal way of becoming linked to the national society (identification with it) is somehow more difficult or less salient than the more external or behavioural ways" (p. 667). Ward and Kus (2012) reported similar findings and Matsudaira (2006) argued that the emphasis on attitudes, social

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