



# Adolescent acculturation experiences: A meta-ethnography of qualitative research



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## ABSTRACT

Acculturation occurs when people of different cultural backgrounds come into continuous, firsthand contact, as occurs following migration. Adolescents and young adults make up a large proportion of international migrants, yet there is little qualitative research available on their experiences when engaging with the process of acculturative change. This meta-ethnography synthesizes published qualitative studies of adolescent acculturation to draw together findings on this important developmental issue. A literature search was conducted to identify qualitative studies that have investigated acculturation among adolescent migrant youth. Eleven different studies were identified, most of which involved immigrants to the U.S. These were reviewed using the meta-ethnographic research process. We identified four themes to represent how adolescents engaged with the process of acculturation, integrated using a line-of-argument. While broadly consistent with existing acculturation frameworks, our findings highlight domain-specificity, structural and socio-historical challenges, personal meaning-making, and opportunities for personal growth as emergent features in the qualitative literature. The line-of-argument is used to critique and extend the dominant conceptual frameworks on acculturation from a contextual perspective.

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## 1. Introduction

One consequence of migrating to a new country is the experience of acculturation. Although contested in meaning, most theorists accept that acculturation involves change occurring as a result of interactions between cultural beliefs, expectations, and practices. This study is concerned with acculturation as experienced by youths who have migrated to another country, guided in its focus by one of the most frequently cited definitions of acculturation, the “dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). This study is concerned with acculturation at the individual level, as it focuses on how the subjective experience of acculturation among adolescent immigrants has been represented to date.

Acculturation has become particularly salient in relation to adolescents due to increasing international mobility among youth. Fifteen per cent of all international migrants are under the age of 20, and the majority of these migrants in developed countries are aged between 10 and 19 years of age (UN Population Facts, 2010). For migrant adolescents, acculturation coincides with a life span phase critical to personal and social identity development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Acculturative changes are thought to have an adaptive function in that they serve to allow an adolescent to meet the task of growing up in the midst of multiple cultures (Sam & Opedal, 2003). In this study, we further knowledge in this area by synthesizing the

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findings of existing qualitative research, using the process of meta-ethnography to explore how acculturating adolescents adapt to life in a new country.

Our understanding of acculturation among adolescent international migrants is hampered by issues relating to the categorization of migrant adolescents in terms of generational status. The term 'first generation immigrant', has been applied to adolescents who have immigrated, as well as to the children of immigrants, who have also been referred to as 'second generation immigrants' (Rumbaut, 2004). Researchers have also classified acculturating individuals according to voluntariness (whether 'intercultural contact' has been sought out or has been enforced as is the case with refugees), migration (whether individuals have migrated or not) and permanence (whether individuals intend to remain permanently or for a temporary period) (Berry, Poortinga, Bruegelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011). Even these distinctions are not sufficiently clear (Berry et al., 2011), for example adolescents may migrate as a result of parental wishes rather than their own volition and may not know whether the move will be permanent or temporary. In this study voluntariness or permanence are not used as criteria for identifying relevant research, but we do restrict our focus to adolescents who have migrated to a different country. Nor do we include the children of immigrants, as evidence suggests that this group may experience acculturation in a distinctive manner (Rumbaut, 2004).

### 1.1. Why conduct a meta-ethnography of research on adolescent acculturation?

Proponents of a 'critical psychology of acculturation' (e.g. Chirkov, 2009) have called for more widespread use of qualitative methods to understand the process of acculturation from an interpretative paradigm. Interpretivism aims to understand subjective meanings, in contrast to the dominant positivist orientation, which has sought to identify universal laws governing the process of acculturation (Berry, 2009; Howitt, 2010). With the field proceeding along these lines, researchers need to establish how best to synthesize the uniquely contextual body of research that is emerging from qualitative findings on youth acculturation. The term meta-synthesis has been applied to the synthesis of qualitative research, with the goal of interpretation distinguishing it from quantitative meta-analysis where the objective is the aggregation of findings (Finfgeld, 2003).

Meta-syntheses of qualitative studies have proved useful in fields such as health psychology where qualitative research has proliferated in recent years (Shaw, 2011). Three complementary, overlapping purposes of meta-synthesis have been described, namely theory building, theory explication, and descriptive (Finfgeld, 2003). The focus of this study is explication, working within the concept of acculturation to represent the experience of immigrant adolescents.

Various methods of synthesizing qualitative research have been proposed; most reflect either an integrative or interpretative approach to synthesis. Meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) represents an interpretative approach and has emerged as an important strategy for collating and interpreting findings across studies, for identifying methodological trends and quality issues, and to target future research priorities (Atkins et al., 2008). As the name suggests, meta-ethnography was devised as a means to synthesize ethnographies. However, it has since successfully been applied to a variety of qualitative studies and its strength lies in its attempt to retain the interpretative properties and contextual embeddedness of primary data (Campbell et al., 2003). This is particularly relevant for studies of adolescent migrant acculturation, given that a change in international and local contexts results in the need to acculturate.

Meta-ethnography extends existing knowledge by deriving original interpretations from the process of synthesizing different empirical studies (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2005), and a body of supporting literature has emerged on the use of the method (e.g., Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002). Drawing on these resources, we adopt a meta-ethnographic, interpretive design with the aim of synthesizing existing qualitative research on how first generation immigrant adolescents experience acculturation.

### 1.2. Current issues in acculturation research

Contemporary research on acculturation psychology has been critiqued in detail elsewhere, most notably in a special edition of this journal (Chirkov, 2009). Much of this critique focuses on Berry's frequently-cited model of acculturation and on research inspired by it (Berry, 1997, 2003). In turn, Berry has responded in journal articles and other writings on cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al., 2011; Berry, 2009; Van de Vijver, Chasiotis, & Breugelmans, 2011). These debates about conceptualizing and assessing acculturation frame the context and need for a research synthesis.

Early models of acculturation (e.g. Gordon, 1964) described a unidimensional process, whereby individuals relinquished the attitudes, values and beliefs associated with their heritage culture as they adopted those of the host culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). This perspective continues to exert an influence with survey studies frequently utilizing proxy measures of acculturation status, such as generational status or years lived in the new country (e.g., Liu, Probst, Harun, Bennett, & Torres, 2009). The assumption being that host culture identification increases monotonically with the duration of time spent there. However, evidence suggests that identification with one culture may be independent from identification with a second culture (Ryder et al., 2000).

Bi- or multi-dimensional models of acculturation accommodate identification with multiple cultures. Berry's (1997) model is the most widely cited of these and offers an account of human behavior in which individuals engage in a process of adaptation to ecological, cultural, and biological conditions (Berry et al., 2011). An individual's orientation toward the host and heritage cultures are seen as independent dimensions, whose intersection results in four possible

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