Social markers of acculturation: A new research framework on intercultural adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The research examines the social construction of acculturation and naturalization from the perspectives of both native and immigrant citizens in Singapore. More specifically, what and by how much must immigrants do in order to be considered a full participating member in the adopted society? The convergence and divergence of viewpoints will illuminate the perceptual gaps between native and immigrant communities. In addition, the composite score of the markers will provide a measurement of social inclusiveness; it reflects the depth of psychological barriers imposed by the individual in preserving the distinct boundaries of citizenship. Multivariate analyzes showed that the two groups reacted differently to the challenges and benefits from immigration. Surprisingly, naturalized citizens were more sensitive to the impact of perceived immigrant threats and contribution even though they imposed fewer barriers to the new arrivals in becoming a part of the mainstream society. The definition of socio-economic confidence and how it may moderate acculturation attitude will also be discussed.

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1. Introduction

Acculturation refers to changes in attitudes and behaviors arising from first hand contact with members from another ethno-cultural community (Redfield, Linto, & Herskovits, 1936). Immigrants face two distinct but related questions pertinent to intercultural transition and adaptation (Berry, 2010): First, how important is it to preserve the identity and characteristics of the original culture? Second, how important is it to engage members of the recipient society? The combination of answers to the two questions yields four acculturation orientations (Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization), each representing a different facet and process to intercultural contact.

Integration is characterized by a concurrent commitment to both the heritage identity and the dominant culture practiced in the recipient society. Separation attitude reflects the strong desire to maintaining an individual's heritage of origin but having little or no intention to embrace the culture practiced in the country of settlement. Immigrants who adopt an assimilation attitude prefer to engage recipient culture only. Lastly, immigrants who adopt a marginalization attitude display little or no interest in maintaining their native identity, nor a desire to engage members from the dominant group.

The four types of acculturation orientation predicted different socio-psychological and behavioral outcomes, although integration is generally known to be associated with the best adaptation, such as lower acculturative distress (Scottham &

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Dias, 2010), higher self-esteem (Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Nigbur et al., 2008; Wang, Schwartz, & Zamboanga, 2010), more pro-social behaviors (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007), positive workplace well-being (Peeters & Oerlemans, 2009), improved life satisfaction (Pfafferott & Brown, 2006), and reduced likelihood of substance abuse and aggressive behaviors among adolescent migrants (Fosados et al., 2007; Sullivan et al., 2007).

This dual dimensional perspective is widely seen as the de facto framework in intercultural contact and it also provides a conceptual lens for acculturation research from the viewpoint of the host society or dominant group (Berry, 2010; Berry, Kalin, & Taylor, 1977). The host acculturation framework is charted by two questions on cultural contact and ethnic retention: Should immigrants acquire the culture practiced in the host society? Should immigrants maintain their heritage culture? The intersection of the two dimensions produces the taxonomy of host expectations indicating multiculturalism, melting pot, segregation and exclusion. These are mirror attitudes to immigrants' perspectives on integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, respectively.

Recipient nationals who embrace multiculturalism believe immigrants should maintain their cultural identity even as they immerse themselves in the culture of the adopted country; those who embrace melting pot attitude think that immigrants should relinquish their original culture and participate wholeheartedly in the recipient community; those who prefer segregation believe it is in the interest of the larger community for immigrants keep to their own and not become a part of the mainstream society; and those want exclusion think that there should be fewer immigrants.

Acculturation attitudes between the migrant communities and recipient nationals do not always converge (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998; Zagefka & Brown, 2002); most immigrant communities favor integration but for some host societies assimilation is the preferred strategy (Arends-Toth & van de Vijver, 2003; van Oudenhoven et al., 1998; Zick, Wagner, van Dick, Petzel, 2001). The concordance model of acculturation (Piontkowski, Rohmann, & Florack, 2002) posits that differences in acculturation orientations between dominant and non-dominant groups are linked to perceptions of intergroup threats and attitudes. Increase divergence in acculturation orientation is correlated with greater intergroup animosity (Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006) and it reflects cognitive biases against the outgroup, like negative stereotypes, perceived resource scarcity and zero-sum competition (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012). In situations where immigrants and host nationals share the same acculturation orientation (e.g., integration–integration), the intergroup relationship is said to be consensual (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997). When the two acculturating groups hold different engagement perspectives (e.g., assimilation–separation), the relationship is conflictual and is said to be a source of tension and distress for immigrant adolescents (Santisteban & Mitrani, 2002). Members of non-dominant group who deviates from the dominant acculturation attitude expressed lower life satisfaction and a poor quality of social engagement with the hosts (Pfafferott & Brown, 2006).

1.1. Social markers of acculturation

While Berry's models offer a robust framework for acculturation research, there is a recent call among researchers to think beyond this approach (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010; Ward, 2008). This framework assumes that cultural retention and host engagement are orthogonal and each exerts comparable influence on intercultural relations. In practice, the socio-political context and other culture-specific values often determine the social representation of acculturation where some attributes are known to have a stronger influence on the outcome of intercultural contact (Schwartz et al., 2010). One example is the controversy surrounding the use of head scarf in France. The veil is considered an important religious symbol among the French Muslim women, but the public display of it is seen as an offense. The cultural hallmark of one group becomes a contested behavior for another.

Clearly, some unique cultural features matter more than the others. But neither Berry's taxonomy nor the concordance model of acculturation would differentiate these characteristics in terms of relative importance. There is thus a need to appraise if both dominant and non-dominant culture groups share the same thematic view on the meaning of acculturation. More critically, even as acculturation ideologies such as integration are promulgated as 'the preferred approach' by many, it is not realistic to find an accommodative stance in *every* situation. The onus will fall on the immigrants to embrace key national characteristics, be that language, customs, or jurisprudence, at the expense of their original culture. In essence, selective 'assimilation' in some aspects of intercultural contact and change. This point is also echoed by Navas et al. (2005) in which they recommended using a multi-domain approach for acculturation research; depending on public or private space, the appropriate acculturation strategies can be aligned to host expectations to suit the different context/domain.

The current research proposes a framework that examines the social construction of acculturation. In a nutshell, *what* and *by how much* must immigrants do in order to become a naturalized citizen of a country? Instead of looking at individual's orientation to heritage maintenance and intergroup contact, the proposed framework focuses on how acculturation is conceptualized and operationalized. Singapore, the place where this research was conducted, is historically a plural society. The question of acculturation is no longer if integration is preferred but *what* should be the shared attributes. More importantly *how much* should future immigrants do to become part of the mainstream?

This methodology offers an overarching framework to study the convergence of attitudes and/or identify the gaps in intercultural relations. In areas where the two groups converge are shared consensus and a space where a common ingroup identity can be forged. In areas where the two groups are at odds reveal the different perspectives to acculturation. These are the potential flash points, or the "what" characteristics.