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Theorizing identity in transnational and diaspora cultures: A critical approach to acculturation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the various ways in which the concept of "diaspora" has important implications for rethinking traditional notions of acculturation in Psychology. In this paper, we argue that the idea of a fixed, invariant, and apolitical notion of acculturation dominates much of Psychology, and as such it needs to be revised and reexamined in light of transnational migration and global movements. Drawing on our previous and current scholarship on acculturation and identity [Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2001). Rethinking "acculturation" in relation to diasporic cultures and postcolonial identities. *Human Development*, *44*, 1–17; Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2004). Culture, hybridity and the dialogical self: Cases from the South-Asian diaspora. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *11*(3), 224–241; Bhatia, S. (2007a). *American Karma: Race, culture, and identity and the Indian diaspora*. New York, NY: New York University Press; Bhatia, S. (2008). Rethinking culture and identity in psychology: Towards a transnational cultural psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, *28*, 301–322], we provide a counterargument to models of acculturation that claim that all immigrants undergo a universal psychological process of acculturation and adaptation. More specifically, we show how members from the Indian diaspora reexamined their acculturation status after the events of 9/11. We use interdisciplinary research to critically examine the role of race in the acculturation process. In addition, we provide a new analytical framework to understand the larger structural forces that shape the acculturation and assimilation process of transnational and diasporic migrants.

1. Introduction

In Bharati Mukherjee's (1989) well-known novel, *Jasmine*, the female protagonist is an illegal immigrant woman from India. Plotting a linear trajectory, the novel traces the "progress" of Jyoti to Jase and finally to Jane Ripplemeyer as she evolves from a barely educated Punjabi village girl to the lover of a rich Iowan banker comfortable in cooking pot roast and attending Lutheran church quilt exhibitions. This is a narrative of adaptation and assimilation. By decontextualizing and dehistoricizing the migrant experience, Mukherjee offers a tale of serendipity and survival. The Indian immigrant woman is reinvented as cosmopolitan and western, apparently having very little difficulty casting off any trappings of cultural identity. The story of Jasmine parallels much of mainstream acculturation research, where the migrant experience is presented in terms a series of phases that must culminate with a successful incorporation into the host culture. In this article,

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we reconsider mainstream acculturation research in the light of the recent emerging literature on diasporas. Using interview narratives as cases we demonstrate alternative ways to think about the distinct but related concepts of "acculturation" and "immigrant identity." Our aim is to highlight the larger socio-cultural and political contexts that get implicated in both the dynamics of acculturation and the formation of immigrant identity. Consequently, we call for a shift from conceptualizing acculturation and immigrant identity as an individual process to a more broad, contextual, and political phenomenon.

Traditionally, mainstream psychology has been primarily occupied with developing universal, linear models and theories of immigrant identity, acculturation and adaptation. For instance, cross-cultural psychologists have studied topics such as acculturation and acculturative stress (Berry, 1998), socialization and enculturation (Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997) and bicultural identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1998). This body of cross-cultural research, though commendable for bringing issues of immigrant identity to the table, has largely presented migration as a series of fixed phases and stages that do not account for the specific culturally distinct and politically entrenched experiences of newer, non-European, transnational immigrants. Given that currently one-fifth of all children in the U.S. are immigrants (Hernandez, 1999), questions related to acculturation, culture, and identity are central to the field of Psychology. Furthermore, questions about migration and the construction of identity are paramount today as the rate of immigrants in the U.S. rapidly increased in the 1990s to "nearly a million new immigrants per year" (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 55). Rethinking acculturation research so that it includes the varied, sometimes contradictory, often racialized and politicized experiences of these newer immigrants provides a very valuable site from which psychology has an opportunity to remake itself as a field that continues to be relevant in a world that is rapidly becoming transnational, diverse, and global.

Prominent in psychology is the model of acculturation strategies proposed by Berry and his colleagues (e.g., Berry, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1997; Berry & Sam, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989). Their prolific output and the fact that several major introductory books on psychology (for example, see Halonen & Santrock, 1996; Tavris & Wade, 1997; Westen, 1997) cite them extensively, indicate that their model of acculturation strategies is one of the most influential on the subject of acculturation as developed in cross-cultural psychology.

Acculturation strategies refer to the plan or the method that individuals use in responding to stress-inducing new cultural contexts. A fourfold classification is proposed which includes "assimilation," "integration," "separation," and "marginalization." Berry and his colleagues suggest that *assimilation* strategy occurs when the individual decides not to maintain his or her cultural identity by seeking contact in his/her daily interaction with the dominant group. When the individuals from the non-dominant group "place a value on holding on to their original culture" (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 297), and seek no contact with the dominant group then these individuals are pursuing a *separation* strategy. When individuals express an interest in maintaining strong ties in their everyday life both with their ethnic group as well as with the dominant group, the *integration* strategy is defined. The fourth strategy is *marginalization* in which individuals "lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society" (Berry, 1998, p. 119). The optimal acculturation strategy for immigrants is integration which "appears to be a consistent predictor of more positive outcomes than the three alternatives" (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 318).

Integration implies both the preservation of home culture and an active involvement with the host culture. Central to the theory of integration strategy is the assumption of universality. Berry and his colleagues take up the position that although there are "substantial variations in the life circumstances of the cultural groups that experience acculturation, the psychological processes that operate during acculturation are essentially same for all the groups; that is we adopt a *universalist perspective* on acculturation" (emphasis in original, Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 296). In other words, immigrants' acculturation strategies reveal the underlying psychological processes that unfold during their adaptation to new cultural contexts. Such a position has dominated current research on acculturation and also provided an important theoretical basis for much research carried under the larger rubric of cross-cultural psychology (see Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998).

Drawing and developing upon previous research, Berry and his colleagues maintain that other psychological processes such as "behavioral shifts," "culture shedding," "culture shock," and "acculturative stress" are also experienced in varying degrees by an individual undergoing acculturation (Berry, 1998; Berry & Sam, 1997). So what are these universal psychological processes? What does it mean to say that all groups manifest the same kind of "psychological" thinking during the acculturation process? What is the basis for analytically separating the psychological from the cultural? Are the "psychological processes" similar for individuals who migrate to the U.S. from Western European countries such as England and Germany, as opposed to, say, individuals who migrate from previously colonized countries such as India and Kenya?

In contrast to these psychological models of acculturation, the notion of "diasporas" have become increasingly utilized to understand immigrant experiences and in the last decade there has emerged a distinct area referred to as "diaspora studies" (for a review, see Tölöyan, 1996). The idea of the diaspora refers to immigrant communities who distinctly attempt to maintain (real and/or imagined) connections and commitments to their homeland *and* recognize themselves and act as a collective community. In other words, people who simply live outside their ancestral homeland cannot automatically be considered diasporas (Tölöyan, 1996). Examples of diasporic immigrants in the United States are Armenian-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Asian-Indians, Latino/a and Chicano/a communities in the U.S., and so on. However, while we do have immigrants with German or Swedish ancestory, we might not necessarily have a distinct German diaspora in the United States. Moreover, diasporas are usually formed when the immigrant community in question does not find its culture represented in the mainstream host culture and they experience the erasure and silencing of their culture by the host culture. In other words, there are inherently political ramifications at play in the formation of diasporas. Furthermore, non-European/non-white diasporic communities bring into sharp relief the sense of constantly negotiating between here and