ACCULTURATION AND ADAPTATION OF IMMIGRANT YOUTH

ABSTRACT

Acculturation is a process of learning to live in new social and cultural contexts after one has become socialised into an earlier one. There are important variations in the ways that groups and individuals engage this process, and in their adaptations to these changes. Evidence of systematic relationships between *how* individuals acculturate and *how well* they adapt suggest that double cultural involvement (in both one's heritage cultures and the society of settlement) is the most positive strategy.

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John W. Berry received his B.A. from Sir George Williams University (1963), his Ph.D. from University of Edinburgh (1966) and honourary doctorates from University of Athens and Université de Genève (2001). He is a Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology and the International Academy for Intercultural Research. He has published over 30 books in the areas of cross-cultural, social and cognitive psychology. His main research interests are in the areas of acculturation and intercultural relations, with an emphasis on applications to immigration, educational and health policy.

Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that involves learning to live in new social and cultural contexts after one has become socialized into an earlier one. This process takes place for many kinds of people, including immigrants following their migration. It also takes place among the dominant groups with whom they are in daily contact in the larger society. That is, acculturation is a mutual and continuous process that involves everyone who lives in culturally diverse societies. The examination of acculturation has become a core issue in understanding intercultural relations in culturally plural societies (Berry 2005, Sam and Berry 2006). Although acculturation is a continuing process, there are usually some long-term outcomes; individuals and groups settle into some ways of adapting to life in their evolving societies. Such adaptations are often thought of in terms of two distinct qualities: personal well-being (psychological adaptation) and social competence (sociocultural adaptation).

Much of the early research was carried out with acculturating adults; however, the recent focus has been on youth who are themselves immigrants (first generation) and who are children of immigrants (second generation). This newer focus has come to the fore for two reasons. First, it is obvious that in many cases it is families with children (not only individual adults) who immigrate and, second, immigrant youth experience a more complex acculturation process, requiring features of their heritage family and community cultures to be sorted out of on the one hand, and those of their peers and institutions of the larger society on the other hand.

Recent international research with immigrant youth (Berry et al. 2006) has examined two fundamental questions: *How* do immigrant youth acculturate and *how well* do they adapt? If there are variations in how they seek to live in their new societies, and variations in how well they manage to adapt, a third question can be posed: Is there a "best way" to acculturate in order to achieve success in their new lives?

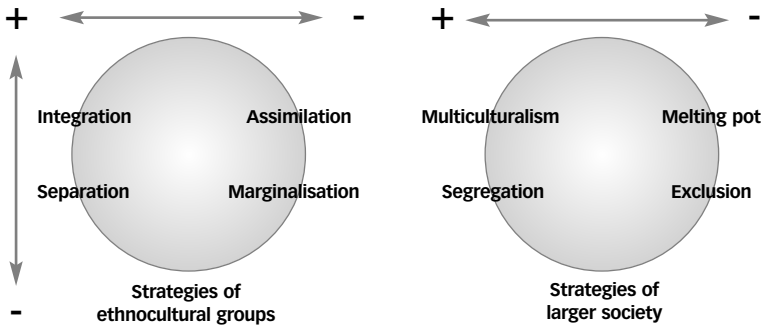
How do immigrant youth acculturate?

With respect to the first question, it is now well established that not everyone seeks to acculturate in the same way; both individuals and groups adopt strategies that guide their acculturation. Four acculturation strategies have been derived from two basic issues facing all acculturating peoples. These issues are based on the distinction between orientations towards one's own group and orientations towards other groups (Berry 2005). This distinction is rendered as 1) a relative preference for *maintaining* one's heritage culture and identity and 2) a relative preference for having *contact* with and *participating* in the larger society along with other ethnocultural groups. It has now been well demonstrated that these two dimensions are empirically, as well as conceptually, independent from each other. This two dimensional formulation is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Issue 1 : Maintenance of heritage culture and identity

Issue 2 : Relationship sought amongst groups



These two issues can be responded to on attitudinal dimensions, shown as varying along bipolar dimensions, rather than as bald (positive or negative) alternatives. Orientations to these issues intersect to define four *acculturation strategies*. From the point of view of non-dominant ethnocultural groups (on the left of Figure 1), they are referred to as *acculturation strategies*. The first strategy is when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures; this defines the *assimilation* strategy. In contrast, when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, this defines the *separation* alternative. When there is an interest in maintaining one's original culture while in daily interactions with other groups, *integration* is the option. In this case, there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained while the person seeks at the same time, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network. Finally, when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then *marginalization* is defined.

From the point of view of members of the larger society (right-hand side of Figure 1), these strategies have two aspects: the *acculturation expectations* that the dominant group has for the way the non-dominant group should acculturate and their own *willingness to change* themselves during the acculturation process (Berry 2005). With respect to expectations, when assimilation is sought by the dominant group, it is termed the *melting pot*. When separation is forced by the dominant group, it is *segregation*. Marginalization when imposed by the dominant group is *exclusion*. Finally, for integration, when diversity is a widely accepted feature of the society as a whole, including all the various ethnocultural groups, it is called *multiculturalism*. With respect to willingness to change, research has also been carried out with members of the larger society examining the process of mutual accommodation. This aspect has been termed *multicultural ideology* (Berry, Kalin and Taylor 1977). Finally, it is important to note that the concepts of assimilation and integration have often come to be used as synonyms, particularly in Europe and the United States. In the present usage (widely accepted in Canada), these are clearly distinct, based on the different emphases on the value placed on cultural maintenance.

In a recent international study, using cluster analysis with a sample of more than 5,000 immigrant youth settled in 13 countries, we found that there are four ways of acculturating. A number of intercultural variables were assessed: acculturation attitudes (preferences for integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization); cultural identities; language knowledge and use; and social relationships with peers (the latter assessed with respect to both the youth's heritage group and the national society). The most preferred way of acculturating was *integration*, defined as being oriented to both the heritage culture and the new society (36% of the sample exhibited this pattern). In this group, there was a positive attitude toward integration, positive identities with both cultural groups, knowledge and use of both languages and friendships with members of both cultures. *Assimilation* was least preferred (19%); youth here exhibited a pattern on these variables of being oriented mainly to the new national society. *Separation* was in second place (23%) with a pattern of being oriented mainly to the heritage culture. *Marginalization* was in third place (22%); these youth were uncertain how to acculturate, had negative identities with both cultural groups, had poor national language facility and had few friends in either group. Other factors were related to how immigrant youth acculturate, described below.

Gender: The proportion of boys and girls differed significantly across profiles, with girls more often showing the integration profile and boys showing the marginalization profile.

Length of residence: The profiles were analyzed for differences in relation to length of residence. The profiles showed a clear pattern of differences across the three length-of-residence categories: the integration and assimilation profiles were more frequently found among those with longer residence; the proportion of integration and national profiles found among those born in the new society or with 12 years or more of residence was more than double that of those with six years or less of residence. In contrast, the marginalization profile was

dramatically less frequent in those with longer residence: over 45% of those with six years or less residence showed a diffuse profile, while only about 12% of those with the longest residence showed this profile. On the other hand, the separation profile was almost equally frequent in all length-of-residence categories. Thus, among the most recent arrivals, the marginalization profile dominated, while the assimilation profile was very low. For those who lived in the society of settlement from birth or from their early school years on, the integration profile dominated, and the assimilation profile was second in frequency.

Neighbourhood ethnic composition: Acculturation profiles were also related to neighbourhood ethnic composition. Results showed that the integration profile was most strongly represented in neighbourhoods where residents were equally balanced between members of the adolescents' own group and others; the separation profile dominated in communities made up entirely of the adolescent's own ethnic group, while neighbourhoods with a larger proportion of residents who were not from one's own group tended to have a higher proportion of assimilation profiles than those with more same-group residents.

Societies of settlement: The profiles differed depending on whether the society of settlement had been established largely by immigrants ("settler societies" such as Australia, Canada and the U.S.) or whether immigration was a more recent and less common phenomenon (e.g., European countries). In the settler societies, over 50% of the adolescents showed an integration profile. The integration profile was generally less common in European countries, typically between 30% and 40%. With respect to the cultural identity component, there is a parallel finding: youth in settler societies.

With respect to cultural identities, the mean scores on ethnic identity are numerically higher than those for national identity in all societies in the study. However, the difference is greatest for youth in settler societies compared with non-settler societies. With respect to the relationship between the two identities, a similar result can be found. In settler societies, the correlation between ethnic identity and national identity are usually positive, while in non-settler societies it is negative. That is, it appears that youth in settler societies have worked out that it is possible to be attached to both cultural groups (their heritage group and the national society), while in non-settler societies, there is a choice to be made between them.

How well do immigrant youth adapt?

Adaptation was assessed by two variables: *psychological well-being* (self esteem, life satisfaction and lack of psychological problems, such as being sad or worrying frequently) and *sociocultural adaptation* (school adjustment, and lack of behaviour problems in the community, such as vandalism and petty theft).

We examined how well immigrant youth were adapting in comparison to national youth. It is important to note that the comparison yielded no significant difference. That is, overall, national and immigrant youth had similar levels of both psychological and sociocultural adaptation.

Adaptation among immigrant youth varied with only one demographic variable: gender. Immigrant boys had slightly better psychological adaptation scores than immigrant girls, while immigrant boys scored lower on sociocultural adaptation compared with immigrant girls. No relationships were found between adaptation scores on the one hand and age, length of residence, neighbourhood ethnic density and parents' level of education on the other hand. Among national youth, boys had higher scores than girls for psychological adaptation but lower scores for sociocultural adaptation.

Of some interest is the relationship between the two forms of adaptation. In a structural equation model, the best fit was obtained when sociocultural adaptation preceded psychological adaptation, rather than the other way around. That is, dong well in school and the community leads to better psychological well-being.

Acculturation is a mutual and continuous process that involves everyone who lives in culturally diverse societies. The examination of acculturation has become a core issue in understanding intercultural relations in culturally plural societies.

Relationship between how immigrant youth acculturate and how well they adapt

Of greatest importance for policy formulation was the finding that there were important differences in both forms of adaptation depending on how immigrant youth were acculturating. There were substantial relationships between *how* youth acculturate and *how well* they adapt: those with an integration profile had the best psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes, while those with a diffuse profile had the worst. Falling in between these two groups were youth with an ethnic profile: they had moderately good psychological adaptation but poorer sociocultural adaptation. Those with a national profile had moderately poor psychological adaptation and slightly negative sociocultural adaptation. This pattern of results was largely replicated using structural equation modelling.

Of particular importance for our discussion is not only the relationship between how youth acculturate and how well they adapt, but also another variable, *perceived discrimination*. This is important because the experience of such discrimination is the best indicator of the degree to which immigrant youth are permitted to participate equitably in the life of the larger society. As noted above, those in the integration cluster reported experiencing the least discrimination, and those in the diffuse cluster reported the most; in between these two, national cluster

youth had moderately low discrimination and ethnic cluster youth had moderately high discrimination. And in the structural equation model, the single most powerful variable predicting poor psychological and sociocultural adaptation was the degree of discrimination perceived by immigrant youth. Thus, the degree to which immigrant youth experience discrimination corresponds with their preferred acculturation strategy and has a direct impact on their adaptation.

In summary, it appears that immigrant youth do better, both psychologically and socially (including at school), when they are able to achieve a balance in their relationships and in their developed competencies in both their heritage cultures and the new society in which they are now living. In contrast, marginalized youth are in a very difficult position, experiencing substantial discrimination and attaining poor psychological and social outcomes. Public policies that encourage and support balanced relationships and competencies in intercultural situations are thus superior to other arrangements that may be proposed by politicians or practised by public institutions. Public schools in Canada have a key role in achieving this balance, since we have no other integrating public institutions. The multicultural movement within schools (and now being advanced in other public institutions, such as media, health care and justice) appears to be the most appropriate way to engage in intercultural relations in our culturally plural societies and neighbourhoods.

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Immigration and Diversity in Francophone Minority Communities

Special issue of:
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The Metropolis Project and the Association of Canadian Studies have produced a special issue of the magazine Canadian Issues on immigration and diversity in Francophone minority communities. The issue (spring 2008) presents a range of perspectives on Francophone immigration and diversity in Canada. For the last ten years or so, Francophone minority communities have considered these issues to be critical to their economic, social and cultural development. The edition features an introduction by Chedly Belkhodja of the Université de Moncton and over 30 articles by knowledgeable policy-makers, researchers and non-governmental organizations.

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